

Riviera Dreaming

VILLAGE PEOPLE



By Jacqueline Elmore

Aldous Huxley once said: 'Here all is exquisitely lovely. Sun, roses, fruit, warmth. We bathe and bask'.

Writers such as Fitzgerald, Wharton and Louis Stevenson have at some point dipped their literary toes into the sparkling emerald waters of the Côte d'Azur. In their fervour they have all captured the beauty of the French Riviera and, as a result, parts of the Riviera are now immortalised in literature.

Today, local writer Maureen Emerson follows this tradition with her new book *Riviera Dreaming, Love and War on the Cote d'Azur* published recently in hardback by IB Taurus.

I meet Maureen at her home in the village, and when she opens the door to greet me she is dressed in a crisp white shirt, her hair and make-up are immaculate - classically elegant - and she speaks in a soft, eloquent voice.

I am taken into a beautiful parlour filled with antiques, a grand fireplace and a large, almost floor to ceiling window with what looks like a 'Phoenix Canariensis Roebelenii' (an Art Deco potted palm) tucked away neatly in the corner: perhaps a verdant reminder of those warm breezes and balmy nights sat by the ocean on the Côte d'Azur?

We sit at an old oak dining room table and Maureen begins to tell me her story. "When we bought the house it needed so much work, so we had to do everything to it. It didn't even have skirting boards! It had been owned

by two men who had taken over the pub next door. My husband spent almost a year working hard to get the house back to the way it once was."

Maureen first discovered Cuckfield in 2000 having spent much of her adult life in far-flung places such as Singapore, USA and the South of France where she lived in the hills above Cannes for 25 years.

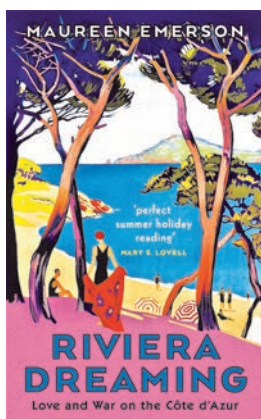
"I had always dreamed of eventually returning to England and living beside a church, so when we found this house in the village I knew it was for us."

Having just returned myself from visiting a friend near Monaco, I take the opportunity to ask Maureen more about her life in the South of France, her book writing and how wonderful it must have been to have lived there at a time just before the landscape began to change.

"We moved there in 1977. We couldn't believe our luck. You just had a glimpse of what life had been like earlier. Some of the villas down there were like small castles. I knew a lot had been written about the Murphys, the Fitzgeralds and all 'that business' but what about the people that

no one had heard of?"

Soon after moving to France, Maureen became fascinated by some of the expatriates that had once lived in the area, particularly those who lived there during the first part of the 20th century. This is what led her to write her first book, *Escape to Provence*, in 2008.



"It's a true story about two women who lived in the hills of Provence, how they spent their lives, and how war and Vichy France had affected them."

I learn that the book also has three chapters on wartime Sussex, based on the adventures of one of these women, who took refuge in an old woodsman's cottage on the Stonehurst estate in Ardingly.

"Winifred Fortescue, the author of *Perfume* from Provence and one of the main characters in my first book, and my heroine, lived in a place called The Colline Des Anglais (The Hill of the English) which was in the next village to ours in France. When I first started my research I discovered that she had also lived, during the war years, in the next village to ours in Sussex!"

I ask Maureen what it was she did when she first arrived in France and she tells me a little bit about the work she was involved in whilst living there.

"I worked for the television festivals for the likes of CBS and NBC in Cannes and Monte Carlo. I helped to organise big parties, making appointments and looking after them, that sort of thing."

Maureen's latest book, *Riviera Dreaming – Love and War on the Côte d'Azur*, moves away from the hills of Provence to the coast and focuses on the privileged few who commissioned and were once lucky enough to own some of the houses on the Riviera.

Maureen's main subject is a young American architect called Barry Dierks who designed many of the homes in the 1920s and 1930s at the height of the Jazz Age. Dierks built over 70 of the Riviera's finest properties and in doing so captivated the people that lived there.

"His most famous masterpiece is the Villa Aujourd'hui, a sinuous white house in the Cap d'Antibes, but he could also design really traditional farmhouse styles too."

I ask Maureen what she intends to do with her time now that she has completed her book.

"I'm enjoying trying to develop our small garden into a miniature version of one of those wonderful creations that you see on visits in Sussex under the National Garden Scheme. I wanted to create an English country cottage garden or that's what I've tried to do."

At which point I turn off my voice recorder and ask Maureen if we can take a quick photo. As I scan the room I spot a tall blue delphinium staring back at me through the kitchen window and turn to ask Maureen if she'd like to show me some of the work she has done to create her cottage garden.

Outside is a quintessential Victorian walled garden. It is certainly not a small space by any stretch of the imagination. It's a place that Frances Hodgson Burnett would be proud of had it belonged to her. There is a huge well right in the middle which is surrounded by an array of borders that are filled with foxgloves, campanulas, and there's an abundance of sweet smelling honeysuckle while rambling roses cascade the fragmented walls.

Knowing that Maureen had been settled in the South of France for so long, I wonder what it is that keeps her from rushing back to the olive groves of the Mediterranean.



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"If I've been out for the day and drive around the bend, swing into the High Street and into the village... I feel I'm home."

When I think of the French Riviera I often picture golden sunsets, lemon trees, glory days and heady nights where bobbing boats dazzle and shine. However, standing here with Maureen, in my reverie I see something quite different. I see a cottage garden, a glittering spire, a crackling fire and a village high street. Right here in Cuckfield. There really is no place like home.

Maureen Emerson will be taking part in a session on publishing and self-publishing at the Cuckfield Book Festival on 6th October. You can find her new book in any good high street bookshop or online.