

# RIPERTOLI: *home of the Blues*

How music came to a 1000-year-old Tuscan farmhouse

**N**IGEL TULLY was once an Oxford physics scholar with a gift for coaxing sweet sounds from his electric guitar. As a 1960s troubadour he made his first Italian journeys, making friends and winning hearts. An everlasting love affair with Italy and the Italian way of life began in 1963 when he met a troupe of Italian girls learning French in Paris.

From that moment, Italy never lost its fascination for him. He visited Naples, Venice, Rome and Turin whilst reading the classic travel books on Italy by HV Morton. In his own words, 'I slowly homed in on Tuscany'. Never a half-measure man, he watched the *Palio di Siena* twelve times.

Nigel was a high achiever as Sales Director at IBM and switched three years ago to a new career as company mentor, currently advising BT executives. By night he leads the Dark Blues, a six-piece party band he founded as a student over forty years ago. They play a hundred gigs a year, including Royal birthdays and corporate bashes, weddings, country picnics and even the Lord Mayor's Ball. He finds time to chair the Jazz Committee of the Worshipful Company of Musicians, served as Master for a year and often promotes and comperes jazz concerts.

## A PEACEFUL RETREAT

Within Ripertoli, his Tuscan farmhouse built almost a thousand years ago, Nigel finds a tranquility impossible to achieve anywhere else. Bookshelves overflow with the latest prize winning novels, Nobel and Man Booker, next to vintage mystery stories, finely bound sets of Trollope, Austen and Proust and illustrated volumes devoted to Italian Old Masters. Ripertoli is within easy driving distance of Florence, Siena and Arezzo, pinnacle of the Piero della Francesca fresco pilgrimage.

Bedrooms and living rooms are stacked with audio-visual equipment, tapes and jazz CDs galore. Nigel describes his laid-back Tuscan persona in disbelief, 'I can even stop in the market square for a coffee if I meet a friend, unthinkable in London.'

After renting holiday houses during the 1970s he began to think of 'putting down roots'. A chance encounter in a restaurant led to a musical friendship with the jazz violinist proprietor, who introduced him to Sandro Francois, a local wine producer and owner of the Castello di Querceto, a mere 10 miles from Ripertoli. A close, real friendship followed.

Sandro was the key to success with the purchase and restoration of Ripertoli. He recommended agents, builders and accountants. Nigel played his guitar for parties up at the Castello. Together they drank Chianti Classico and feasted on pasta in the local *trattorie* and *cantinette*.

## A WOMAN'S TOUCH

Nigel's late wife Prue, who studied design at St Martin's School of Art, was a talented interior designer and gardener and energetic organiser. She looked at 29 houses. In January 1988 her first sight of Ripertoli, number 30, was a romantic vision. Snowfall had powdered the almond blossom, the two ruined barns were 'passable', there was water from a spring, a share in the aqueduct and working electricity.

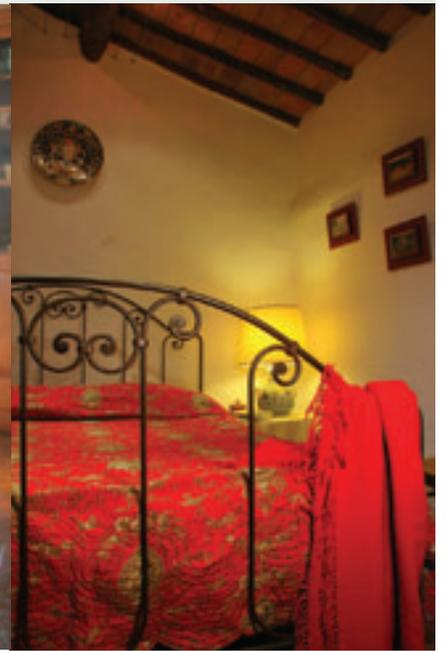
Negotiations began with the owners – two brothers – and inevitably movie-style family feuds followed, but Nigel bought



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Ripertoli in 1988 for £250,000, a special price not including the vineyard. He managed to pay for it in three stages, thanks to a friendly bank loan, and then with furious activity from Prue and himself began the long task of restoration and furnishing, deciding to recoup their costs by renting their house to family visitors.

The next ten years were spent on practical improvements and embellishment. Permission to dig a pool was not forthcoming and involved a Byzantine process of rule-changing and bending, but a pool being *de rigueur* for guests, they found a temporary solution in a monster size above ground American pool, marketing it as a 'safety measure'.

They added a terrace and walkway, converted a wine cellar into a ground floor bedroom and bathroom, called in a water diviner to work his magic and an 85-foot well was dug where his stick had allegedly trembled. Electricity supply was doubled and then doubled again to six kilowatts.

#### ATTENTION TO DETAIL

Nigel's mastery of idiomatic Italian won him loyalty and confidence from his project manager, Valerio Vanni, and his team of plumbers, joiners, masons and electricians. A *geometra* who worked out the



Tullys' precise plans was preferred to an architect and Nigel eloquently explains Tuscan devotion to craftsmanship. Even the finer points of a wrought iron outside lantern or a tile design must be discussed and perfected. No wonder he says, that the Renaissance began here – the home of Dante Alighieri, Michelangelo and Leonardo da Vinci.

Vanni might say firmly '*Non e giusto per la zona*' if a stone or colour was inappropriate, gently insist '*Facciamo una cosa*' (I'll tell you what we'll do) and '*Ci penso io*' (leave it to me). In fact Vanni will cogitate and ensure the job is properly and artistically done. Nigel has his own translation for workmen's '*Ciao*' which equals 'Hello mate, 'ow are you, all right?'

Nigel spent huge sums on appliances for his guests' (and his own) comfort which he has never regretted – even an ironing machine and professional-standard six-burner double oven. Cooking for seventeen could be a bit tedious on holiday but to enjoy the extraordinary fresh flavours of local produce prepared at home is surely part of the Tuscan dream. Nigel's housekeeper, Marisa, is a 'brilliant traditional cook' and is available to cook seven days a week for the largest parties.

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#### HELP FINDING HELP

- He carefully planned to seek out a family to maintain Ripertoli throughout the year and another chat to Stella in a local bar produced '*persone di fiducia*', people who could be trusted. The very next day along came housekeeper Marisa, her daughter Anna and husband Roberto. They have been looking after Ripertoli, its gardens and pool for almost twenty years, and paid a '*stipendio*' by the year, a clever improvement on the customary summer package.

Prue Tully lived to enjoy their Tuscan Arcadia until 1997, even through her last illness planting flower beds and helping to choose

blue and white tiles for the new pool. Final machinations eventually secured permission to dig the now magnificent pool. Nigel's second wife, radiologist Deborah Cunningham, was seduced by its calm and beauty, when Nigel's grief threatened their relationship. She bravely bought tapes to learn Italian, made tactful suggestions to improve the kitchen-dining room and supervised the conversion of the passable barns into charming 2-bedroom houses.

Over the years Nigel has played for many friends here in the heart of Tuscany and introduced the charismatic Dark Blues band to delight crowds in the squares of Greve in Chianti and Panzano near Ripertoli. Nigel's musicians are 'almost family' and their inspired concerts have won them a special place in local hearts.

One of Nigel's workforce, Gianni, has a pretty 17-year-old daughter who sang her favourite Anastacia song at a concert with the Dark Blues female singer last month.

Every guest arriving at Ripertoli will find a little surprise gift – tokens of two Tully passions. There will be a litre of olive oil from his grove of 600 trees, 300 newly planted, and a CD of his much loved Dark Blues. 

For more details visit [www.ripertoli.com](http://www.ripertoli.com) and [www.darkblues.co.uk](http://www.darkblues.co.uk)