

Graft and grind

Renovating a dilapidated watermill in Mayenne has been a labour of love for expat Mick Watson, as **Gillian Harvey** finds out

Nestling among the trees, its moss-covered and partially dilapidated roof visible through the undergrowth, Moulin de Gô - a 13th-century watermill, situated close to St-Pierre-sur-Erve in Mayenne - was gradually falling into ruin; its overgrown grounds and dried-up tributary making it reminiscent of an enchanted building from a fairy tale.

It was this magical atmosphere which Mick Watson was drawn to when he first saw the building in 1989. "I was captivated from the start," he says. "I was in France buying properties for renovation and sale, but this purchase was made with my heart rather than my head."

"I first fell in love with France when I was about 18 after spending some time in the south building swimming pools, so it was always my ambition to live here eventually," he explains.

While Mick, a builder, purchased five other properties for investment and resale during his trip, Moulin de Gô was bought in the hope that he could restore it to its former glory. "I was fascinated by the history of the mill - thought to have one of the earliest waterwheels in France - and bought it with the intention of restoring it authentically," he says. "One of my dreams had always been to have a river at the bottom of my garden, so to actually have the chance of owning a watermill, even in the state it was in, was amazing. At around £28,000, there was no way I could have acquired anything like it in the UK," he says.

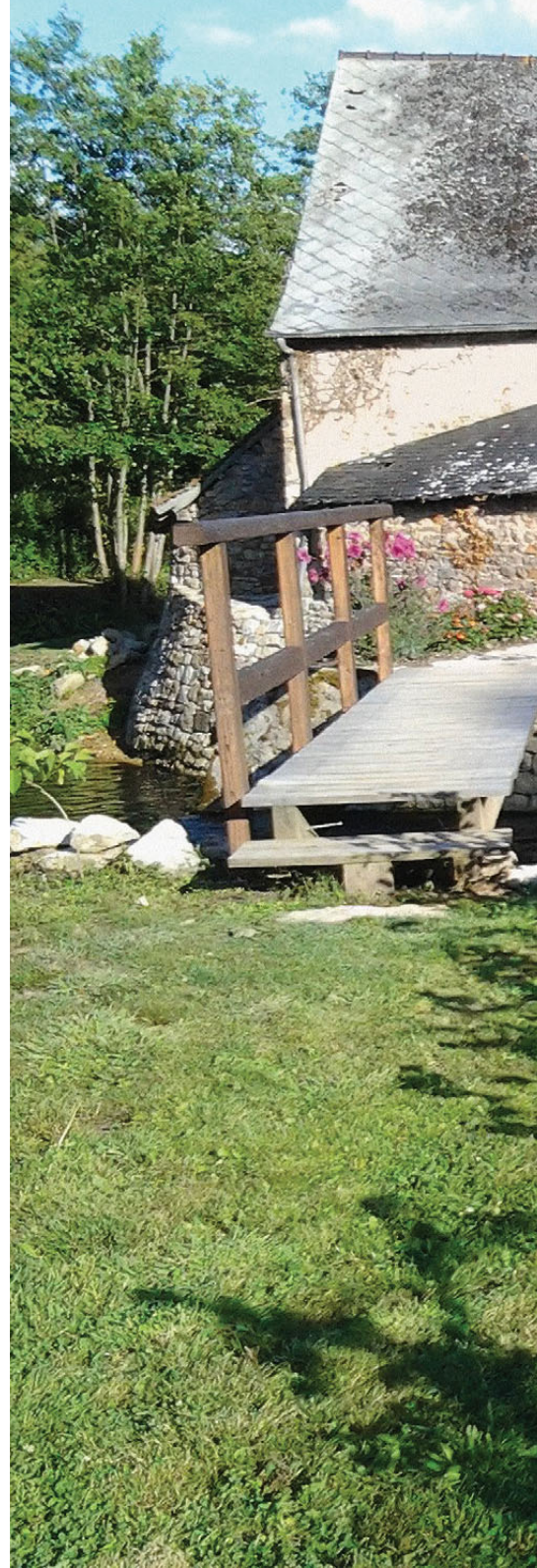
Unfortunately, Mick, 65, who owned a

building company in the UK at the time, fell victim to the recession shortly after his purchase. "I had to focus on keeping my company in the UK going, so everything else got put on the back-burner," he admits.

It was 23 years before Mick had the opportunity to turn his attention to the mill again. "I moved to France full-time, on my own, in 2006, and was working on a renovation in the south, when I got a call out of the blue from a resident of St-Pierre-sur-Erve named Jean-Claude. He loves watermills and had been motivated to find out who owned the one near his village. He suggested that we form an *association*, which would enable him and other willing volunteers to work on the site without payment, simply just for the opportunity to be part of such a historical project."

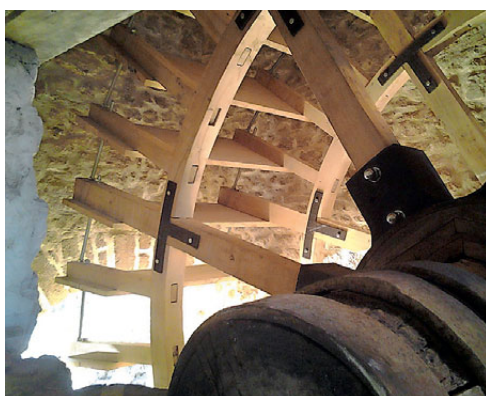
At first, Mick was reluctant to accept. "I've always paid my way," he says. "So the idea of people working for free wasn't one I warmed to immediately. However, Jean-Claude, the most enthusiastic of the volunteers, persuaded me. His passion for the project was infectious." Soon afterwards, the non-profit-making association Les Amis du Moulin de Gô was formed.

As part of the project, Mick, together with his volunteers, ran a series of open days to giving curious locals and members of the public access to the site, and the move proved a popular one. "I hadn't been near the property for years, so everything was completely overgrown. There were trees growing through the walls! We cleared the back and opened within three months, with 300 people attending over the course



Above: Moulin de Gô in Mayenne has been restored to its former glory by Mick and a group of enthusiastic volunteers

Right: The waterwheel is assembled



VOLUNTEERING IN FRANCE

- There are many organisations for which you can volunteer within France, such as local animal shelters, children's clubs or committees.

- As with most activities in France, the best place to find out about suitable groups in your area is at your local *mairie*, which will be able to provide information and contact details.

- There is also a wealth of charities aimed at English speakers throughout France. Some examples include:

- The Salvation Army (L'Armée du Salut): armedusalut.fr

- The British Charitable Fund: britishcharitablefundparis.org

- SOS HELP crisis line: soshelpline.org

- Cancer Support France: cancersupportfrance.org



MICK'S TIPS FOR RENOVATING IN FRANCE:

- When buying an old property, make sure the *notaire* checks whether there are any restrictions on what changes you can make to the property before signing.
- While certain reports are provided at the point of sale, it may be worth commissioning your own private surveyor's report if works are likely to be extensive.
- Go to the *mairie* with your ideas before you start any work and get them on your side.
- Employ a French-registered electrician as you may have problems getting things approved if you do it the English way.
- If you cannot do the work yourself, try to use local companies, as it will help you to integrate with the local people.

Clockwise from top left: Mick operates the waterwheel, which has been completely rebuilt and is dedicated to his parents; the digger hard at work; how the doorway looked before and after renovation

of the weekend. We would never have been allowed to open it in that condition in England, but it was great that we were able to show the public what the building was like from the outset."

Since that initial opening, the team has run a further eight open days, with visitors each time numbering in the hundreds. "I'd say we average around 200 visitors every time," says Mick.

As an experienced builder, Mick has taken on much of the stonework himself, together with Jean-Claude, one of the remaining volunteers. "As with many projects, some of the volunteers have dropped out over the years," he says. "But Jean-Claude has remained throughout, and we've become great friends."

As the mill is historically important, Mick had to approach ANABF (L'Association Nationale des Architectes des Bâtiments de France), the French equivalent of English Heritage, in order to get permission to make the changes he wanted. "We gave them photos of the mill and photoshopped the changes on," he explains. "This helped them to see exactly what we wanted to do."

Mick and his team also had to get permission from the *mairie*, but this process turned out to be extremely straightforward. "We just had to show them what we wanted and get a letter from them," he explains. "So far, everything we've wanted to do has been okay, probably because we're actually trying to restore the mill to its original state. We're taking a lot of concrete out!"

Although funding is available for similar projects in France, under the current legislation, Mick would need to employ builders rather than carry out the work himself. This would actually make the project more expensive for Mick, who currently pays for the materials but carries out the work himself or with volunteers. As a result, he is looking for ways to make the near-complete project pay.

"Last summer we had a duck race along the river," Mick says. "The local children really enjoyed it and I'm hoping it becomes an annual event. We've also got a car club coming next year - they're going to use the grounds for a picnic."

One huge achievement for Mick and Jean-Claude is the fact that they have now

managed to restore the mill to working order, a project which necessitated a complete rebuild of the waterwheel as well as reinstatement of the mill race; the mechanism that turns it.

Despite the back-breaking and intricate work, Mick, with his keen interest in the mill and its history, found the project thoroughly enjoyable. "It was one of the most interesting things I've done in my life," he admits. "When we'd finished the wheel it didn't turn, and my heart sank. But Jean-Claude put some grease on the mechanism and we finally saw it move for the first time; we were just over the moon! Neither of us are touchy-feely, but Jean-Claude grabbed me in a bear hug when we realised that our restoration had worked and swung me around!"

Once the enormous stones, which were originally employed to grind wheat and corn into animal feed, were turning, Mick was able to produce the first flour in April 2015. A local baker used the flour to make a loaf of bread. However, it may be a while before the mill can produce flour for the public. "We'll have to find out the legislation with regard to producing flour for sale before we can start grinding regularly," he says. "We need to ensure it's fit for public consumption. In the meantime, we grind flour on open days and people can have a look at how it all works."

Eventually, Mick, who is also currently restoring a 300-year-old bread oven found at the site, hopes to produce bread and pizzas from the mill's flour in the ancient stove. "We're hoping to serve the food on open days," says Mick. "This will be a great achievement, and also another source of income for the mill."

Since the wheel began to turn again, the project has gained some new fans - this time of the feathered variety. "Shortly after the wheel started turning again, a couple of ducks turned up, and they've remained close ever since. They're both pure white, and both female. They've produced some delicious eggs too. I'm thinking about getting a drake - it would be lovely to have ducklings here," laughs Mick.

Happily, news of the project's success has also reignited public interest, and Mick has now begun to receive donated materials. He is also hoping to run music and art nights at the site, and has contacted the local events committee to see whether any other local fêtes or shows can take place in the grounds.

While many would be overwhelmed by a project of this magnitude, especially as there are now only two men working regularly on site, Mick is optimistic about the future of the mill. "I'm pretty fit and strong for my age," he says. "And I'm full of ideas for the future as well, perhaps even getting other mills around the world involved in the project through twinning."

Despite having put in three years of hard graft, and with many stone walls yet to point, Mick remains extremely positive about his project. "I hope eventually to build a small apartment within the mill so that I can live there full-time," he says. "For now, I'm living a couple of kilometres away. Even so, I can't think of many mornings I've woken up reluctant to go to work - a world away from the stresses and strains I had in England. It's a real labour of love." ^{LF}

For more information or to volunteer, please contact mickwatson8@gmail.com



ASSOCIATIONS IN FRANCE

- Forming a non-profit-making *association* such as Les Amis du Moulin de Gô enables members to run a club or enterprise legally within France.
- The running costs of such *associations* are often covered by the members themselves, or via fundraising events throughout the year. Often *associations* are formed in aid of charities or for sports or leisure activities.
- Forming an *association* means that proper insurance can be obtained, and any profit is not subject to income tax, as it is ploughed back into the project.
- In order to form an *association*, you need to obtain and complete forms at the *préfecture*, after which you will receive an *association* number. This should be given to your *mairie*, along with copies of your completed forms, after which insurance can be arranged.

