

# Where there's a mill...

**Mick Watson** was wary when strangers turned up offering to help him restore his historic mill, but he's so glad he said yes

It was a trip to see the Monaco Grand Prix in 1968 that sparked my love for France.

For a 19-year-old from the south coast of England it was a dream to be on the south coast of *l'Hexagone*. It was so tranquil and clean and, of course, there were lots of beautiful women!

That year I started my own landscaping and swimming pool company, which grew into a successful business over the next 30 years, and in 1971 I was lucky enough to have the chance to build two swimming pools on the Côte d'Azur - one in St-Tropez and one in Menton.

After my experiences on the Riviera, I decided I would like to move across the Channel for good. It took a few years to happen - well a few decades actually - but I have now been living in northern France full time for 13 years.

## THE GRAIN OF AN IDEA

It all began in 1989 (the same year *FPN* was founded) when I and my then business partner bought an old flour mill and four houses not far from Le Mans in Mayenne. The idea was to renovate them and run a walking and fishing holiday business, with the mill being the headquarters.

We chose Mayenne because it was handy for the ferry ports, being only two hours south of Caen. The location was the perfect setting for the holiday business we wanted to run; a valley just outside the pretty village of St-Pierre-sur-Erve, a *Petite Cité de Caractère*.

Then the recession hit. It took all my effort to keep my company afloat, and all my hopes of moving to France were

put on the backburner. In 2006 I decided that if I left it any longer it would never happen, so I purchased a one-way ticket and off I went with three of my workforce. I was 56 and it was the best thing I ever did. I still have my one-way ticket on the wall.

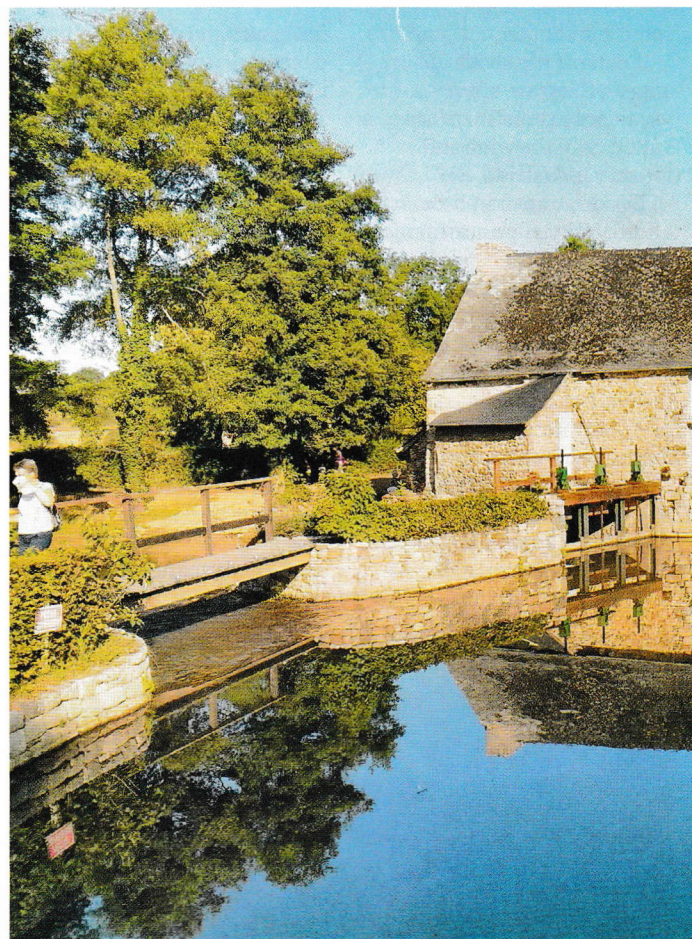
We renovated the house that I now live in, which is about 10 minutes' drive from the mill, and another which I sold (thanks to an advert in *FPN*). Then in theory I retired... although I did buy a three-hectare plot of 9,000 overgrown Christmas trees which I spent four years returning to a wildlife-friendly woodland and park.

## WHEELS IN MOTION

One day in 2013, seven years after I'd moved to France, I was approached by some villagers from St-Pierre. They were offering to volunteer to help renovate the mill and get it working again. I must admit I was wary. My French was still quite limited and I couldn't understand why they were offering to do the work for free.

It all seemed too good to be true, but they explained that it would be a worthwhile heritage project. At one time, some 60 mills had stood on this 70km stretch of river but now there were only five left, of which mine was the only one that had not been renovated. Called the Moulin de Gô, it is an important historic building with parts dating back to the 15th century.

Thank goodness I said yes because it has turned out to be an amazing experience. The volunteers got stuck in just days after I signed the contract



The 15th-century mill was precious to the local people



Volunteers making loaves to be baked in the bread oven

**"I couldn't understand why they were offering to work for free - it all seemed too good to be true"**





Jean-Claude digging 60 years of silt out of the millstream



The new wheel turning once again



Loaves are put in the oven using a paddle called a 'pelle'



Dear friend Jean-Claude's 70th birthday celebrations

and worked extremely hard. As you can imagine the mill and grounds had not been touched for about 15 years. You could only get in the grounds with a chainsaw and there were trees growing out of the mill walls. We started by clearing an area so we could make our way into the mill itself. Once inside, we found that over the years people had broken in and made off with a lot of bits and pieces, including all the *tomette* floor tiles from the bread oven room.

## NOSES TO THE GRINDSTONE

The first inside job was to work out how to rebuild the waterwheel, which had mostly rotted away over the years. This had to be built one piece at a time out of green oak. All the wooden teeth in the drive mechanisms had rotted as well. We made some on site and others were made by a local furniture maker.

To make sure we had enough water to run the wheel and the two grindstones, we had to empty the millstream. First, we cut it off from the main river by getting a barrage on the river lowered. Then, one of the main volunteers, a local man called Jean-Claude Portier, got in with a digger and dug out 60 years of silt. In some places, it was a metre deep.

It was a very emotional day when we let the water in and the wheel turned for the first time in over 60 years. We wanted to celebrate the occasion by having a proper opening, so Jean-Claude's wife Françoise managed to find the son of the last miller and ask if he would come and do the honours. He shed tears of joy to see it working again. He had been just 10 years old when he'd left the mill (seven people used to live in the bread oven room) and now he was a gentleman in his 70s!

Our next big challenge was to tackle the dead and dying large trees. We had to take down over 30 full-grown ones, which gave me plenty of firewood. Most difficult were the ones growing out of the walls. Then the rebuilding of the walls started.

The next exciting job was to uncover the ancient bread oven, which is attached to the