

Keen locals

BUSINESSMAN Mick Watson from the Pays-de-la-Loire was delighted when a group of villagers called by and offered to do up his old watermill free of charge. He says this solidarity and passion for local heritage is typically French.

by SAMANTHA DAVID

AN EIGHTEENTH century watermill in the Pays-de-la-Loire is having a new lease of life thanks to the generosity of French locals who have taken it in hand free-of-charge.

Abandoned for decades, it is planned that the mill in Saint-Pierre-sur-Erve will become functional again, milling flour which will be made into bread in an original oven on site.

The story goes back some time.

Twenty years ago, its owner Mick Watson and his then business partner bought half a dozen French properties, planning to do them up and start a company running fishing and walking holidays. One of the properties was the old mill, which he thought might eventually become the headquarters for the scheme.

They were both enthusiastic about the project but the economic crisis arrived and the project was shelved. Instead Mr Watson worked on a series of building contracts in the Channel Islands.

However France was in his blood and the project was never completely abandoned. He had fallen in love with the country when he first arrived at the age of 21 to build swimming pools on the Riviera. Even then he wanted to make a permanent move, but "It was very complicated back then," he said.

"You had to have French people part-owning your company. Before the EU you couldn't just move where you liked and I was young, I wanted to do my own thing."

Once the pools were finished he went back to the UK, but he always had the idea in the back of his head that he would move to France in the end. "I was going to do it when we bought the houses," he said.

"The idea was that my business partner would run the UK side and I would deal with everything out here."

It was six years ago that he finally managed to move to France on a permanent basis. "I was 56 and it was the best thing I ever did," he said. "I've never looked back. I love it here. I've still got my one-way ticket on the wall."

A builder by trade, Mr Watson started gradually doing up the houses that he had bought so many years ago, always wondering about the ruined water mill.

He was unsure how to tackle the project. According to records, a mill had been on the spot since the 13th century and the current one had been there at least since 1760; but it had not been used since the late 1960s and was in a bad state of disrepair.

Originally a flourmill on the river Erve, the course of the river had been changed and it now stood beside a dry riverbed.

However the problem was unexpectedly solved this summer when some strangers from the village came to his house to ask if they



Above, Mr Watson works near the mill; inset, the wheel; above right, the mill building; bottom-right, a meeting of Mr Watson and volunteers including (centre-left) mill association vice president Christian Le Plat

could renovate it. They had a meeting at my house and I hesitated, to be honest.

"I just couldn't see why they would want to do it for nothing. People don't really normally work like that."

"They explained that it was a local heritage project. The stretch of river here is 70km long and at one time it had 70 mills on it but now there are only five left and mine is the only one that isn't renovated."

Mr Watson signed a letter authorising the renovation. "That was the Friday and they started work the following Tuesday," he said.

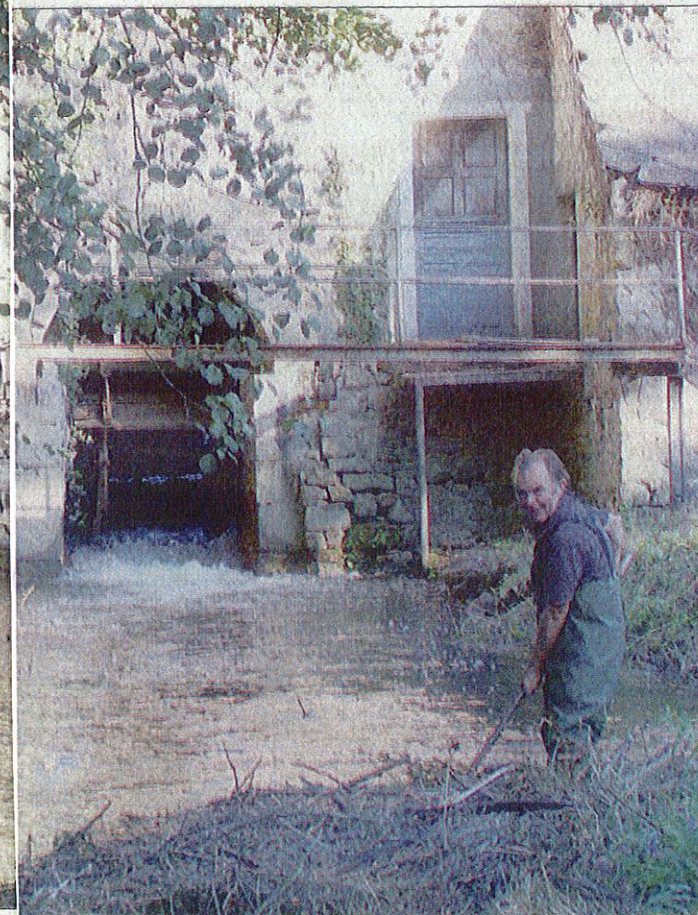
"They just turned up and started clearing overgrown plants away. 'I've never seen anything like it. They worked as if they were being paid.'"

With Mr Watson paying for fuel for the machinery, the volunteers cleared the area and opened the sluice gates leading from the main river and less than a month later, the mill had water flowing through it once again.

"It's so exciting," he said. "The wheel isn't actually turning yet, but it will. One of the men knows how to mend it."

"I'll just have to pay for the wood and other

bring mill back to life



inset, the wheel; above right, the mill building; bottom-right, a meeting of Mr Watson and volunteers including (centre-left) mill association vice president Christian Le Plat

"You wouldn't get people volunteering to do something like this in the UK. My French isn't very good, but our team is charming. People back in the UK are more money-oriented
Mill owner Mick Watson

materials. I'm sure we'll have it running again."

The wheel is stone but has an interior set of wooden cogs as part of the mechanism.

"Renovating it is a big job because the wooden cogs are rotten but a local man is going to do it, and it appears that the axle is all right."

When finished, everyone hopes to see the mill working again, milling flour and also generating electricity.

Mr Watson and the volunteers have now set up an association called the Friends of the Moulin de Gô which will maintain and administer it.

It will be open to the public and people will be able to get close and see how it works.

"The Association is going to charge a small

entrance fee so that we can cover the upkeep costs of the mill."

Mr Watson would eventually like to renovate the entire building which houses the mill and have a small flat in it, but he will have to do that himself.

He said: "Ever since I've owned the mill, I've always wanted to see it renovated so this is a dream come true. I'd like to live here, I just love the place. I'll never sell it."

He currently lives 20km away so this project brought him into contact with a new set of people. "You wouldn't get people volunteering to do something like this in the UK," he said.

"My French isn't actually very good but our team are really charming. People back in the

UK are more money oriented."

One of the volunteers, Christian Le Plat, a recent retiree with a technical background, said: "There's around 30 members of the association now, but there are five of us who are really working on it physically."

"This was my idea - I decided to do something about the mill in my village some years ago but years went by and I wasn't able to get hold of the owner - I was told he was in the UK. In fact he was already in France, but I met him, finally, and once he knew I was ready to help and to create an association, he gave his OK straight away."

"I love old things that are part of the history of our country and our local history. It was a shame to leave it abandoned, so I did what I could. This is a pretty village, with a 12th century bridge and a beautiful church and a chapel - plus the mill, which has lots of potential since all of its original hydraulic mechanism is still there."

"Phase one was to clean up the park around it - 2,000m² of 3m high brambles, thorns, trees and branches. We're about there, it looks presentable now."

"Now we will set up a little workshop inside

the mill with some woodworking machines, and over the next year or two we will restore the wheel and its wooden mountings and the whole mechanical system of cogs."

"Phase three, in around three years, will be to renovate an old bread oven on the site."

"We want to see it all functioning again, making flour and then cooking bread in the oven, with some little tables in the pretty park, which we will relay with turf, where people can try out the bread."

He added: "I found other volunteers quite easily, because we are very attached to our heritage here and it made us sad to see the mill abandoned like that."

Mr Watson says now the mill project is under way he may resurrect his long-delayed fishing holiday scheme.

"I'm thinking of putting a nice little wooden chalet on the river bank near the mill."

"I'm sure it would be a great place for fishing. Now the mill is being renovated it seems like anything might be possible."

■ For information about joining the Friends of the Moulin de Gô email mickael.watson@orange.fr