

# Professor Mick Aston

*A Personal Tribute - by Martin Watts*

Some members may be wondering why this tribute is appearing in these pages. Apart from his face, wild white hair and stripy jumpers being well known to watchers of *Time Team*, what connection is there between an archaeologist with a particular interest in medieval landscapes and monasticism and our own pet subject of mills? In fact there are many points where Mick Aston's interests meet our own, or should do, if we remember that mills are part of a broad study area which touches on many disciplines.

In many of his articles and books, mills are mentioned, not simply in passing, but as a significant part of the investigation and understanding of a wider historical landscape. See, for instance, the references in *Interpreting the Landscape* (1985 and subsequent editions), in particular to the relationship between some mill locations and parish boundaries (pp 41-2), a theme recently the subject of research by Lesley Harding, a post-graduate student with whom Mick, Sue and I spent a day looking at sites in Gloucestershire last year. That was, sadly, one of the last occasions on which we met.

Knowing Mick's long-standing interest in mills - *Time Signs*, the pilot programme from which *Time Team* evolved over 20 years ago, was filmed in west Devon and included the sites of a corn mill and a fulling mill which had been excavated to prepare for their total loss by the building of Roadford reservoir - I first made contact with him in 2005, when I suggested that *Time Team* might like to investigate a mill site that I thought might reveal Domesday roots.

Dotton Mill, in the lower Otter valley in east Devon, had been demolished in the late 1960s, and a study of surface features on the site and background research had been carried out as an A-level archaeology project by Laura Whittock, who lives close by. Sue and I walked the site with Laura one bright February morning and, on looking at a copy of the tithe map, I was intrigued - and excited - to see that the parish boundary followed the course of the leat or headrace that fed the mill and also the upper part of the tailrace.

Dotton was formerly a very small parish which was incorporated into Colaton Raleigh parish in the late 19th century. When Domesday Book was compiled in 1086 Dotton was recorded as a small manor with a mill worth 5 shillings. The river boundary along the east side of the parish was basically defined by the head and tailraces of the mill, rather than the course of the river Otter, so it seemed to me that the mill site was likely to be of long establishment and definitely worth excavating. *Time Team* eventually took the bait and, after various preliminaries, I met Mick and the crew on a warm July evening for a briefing before site investigation began the following day.

The programme has been repeated often enough and I suspect that many members may have watched it and formed their own opinions of what was done and what was found. I can only say that it was a great experience and that all of the team worked hard to extract the maximum amount of information from the site in the three allotted days, although the skill and enthusiasm of the main personalities and of the diggers themselves is something that does not always come across in the programme which is broadcast in a 60-minute package.

I learnt a great deal over the course of the dig and was able to spend a lot of time discussing mills in general and the Dotton site in particular with Mick.

We even reconstructed the last waterwheel from bits of ironwork salvaged from the wheelpit, laying them out in a field to give

some idea of the size of the wheel and me a chance to explain what bits went where and why. That we didn't manage in the allotted time to dig deep enough or to explore other possible locations for an earlier mill site, may have been disappointing, but without *Time Team*'s three days, the site would probably never have been examined archaeologically at all. That is a point that Mick often made about the value of *Time Team*: who else could pour such resources and expertise into exploring a variety of sites and making the results available to a wide public?

It is also significant that a modest working building such as a watermill should be given the same level of treatment as any other historic or archaeological site. For those who are interested, the site report on Dotton Mill was professionally prepared by Wessex Archaeology, and is available to download online.

After the Dotton dig, I kept in touch with Mick, and in 2010 was invited to work with *Time Team* on another mill excavation, Buck Mill at Stoke Trister, in south Somerset. Once again the search for an early, possibly Domesday, mill was on, and once again we were disappointed! In some respects the dig and the nature of the finds were similar to Dotton Mill, which I think tells a story in itself. Sue and I also spent a fascinating day with Mick walking the mill sites and watercourses in his home parish of Winscombe in north Somerset, as part of a community archaeology project with which he was heavily involved latterly. We spent some time discussing a millstone fragment which had been found in a field in the parish and passed to him for comment, subsequently publishing jointly a short note on it in the Somerset Archaeology and Natural History Society's Proceedings. Mick was always interested in people finding things, in getting such finds properly analysed and interpreted and enthusing those who had found them.

As a personal tribute to Mick, who died on 24 June, a week before his 67th birthday, I would like to conclude by saying that I found him a genuine, enthusiastic and friendly man, generous with his time and his knowledge, and a good teacher. He had an extraordinary breadth of knowledge but was always interested in learning and understanding more about all aspects of the historic landscapes that he was so passionate about, including mills and watercourses. Through his writing and teaching, his influence has been wide and he will be remembered, and much missed, by those who were fortunate enough to spend time in his company. Although he was not a mainstream molinologist, mills have lost an interested and informed champion.



*Mick and Martin at Bibury Mill-May 2012  
Photograph - Sue Watts*

*Martin*