

Brian Shingler 1941 -2014

It is sad to report the death of Brian Shingler, a long term member of the society, who actively encouraged interest in milling and hydro power in the South West.

Brian grew up in Ashford Carbonell, near Ludlow, where his father ran a bakery. He loved watching his father weighing out the dough and kneading it into loaves, one in each hand. A great place to explore was the little river that ran through the property, and the small field with their cow, pigsty and chicken houses. He was a practical boy with a love of being outdoors, which meant that sometimes Brian had to be physically dragged up the village to school.



The move to Gants Mill came when Brian was nine, in 1949 – a time well before the days of factory farming when a small, 50-acre farm could provide a living for a family. There were many journeys to Bruton in his father's open-sided American jeep, with Brian wedged in the right-hand passenger seat behind a couple of hay forks; no seat belts in those days. The trip with the hives of bees was particularly memorable, when some escaped.

He attended Reading University to read Agricultural Science. His first year was taken up with work, bell ringing and running. In his second year he met Alison, also a ringer at that time.

After graduation he began lecturing at Seale Hayne Agricultural College in Newton Abbot. After Alison had also graduated, they married and moved to Teignmouth. Later after a short period in Australia, Brian returned to his old job as a Nutrition Chemist, before Brian's parents decided to retire from farming.

The family returned to farm at Gants Mill in 1979, where their three children grew up.

Brian made a succession of major projects happen. In 1995, after interminable wrangling and battles with the various authorities, he completed the restoration of the then dangerously decrepit Gants Mill, built as a woollen mill in 1740 and later extended as a silk mill in 1812, before becoming a corn mill in 1840. The roof was completely rebuilt, a bulging wall stabilised, and floors made safe.

Brian kept the mill in superb working order. Gants Mill has one of the oldest Armfield turbines still regularly working, installed 1883 to replace a cast-iron overshot wheel; he used it to grind barley for animal feed and for open-day demonstrations.

Soon afterwards the project to build the garden began, with Brian and Alison doing all the hard landscaping themselves over a two to three-year period, building pergolas, welding up arches, making paths, digging ponds. All Brian's handyman skills were needed and Alison followed his lead.

In 2001 Brian was key in getting together a group of Somerset mill owners to promote hydropower. He led the way by installing a new turbine at Gants Mill alongside the working Armfield turbine, to generate electricity and took a hands-on role in positioning the new turbine in the old waterwheel pit.

Brian continued as Secretary of what is now the South Somerset Hydropower Group, and ran hydropower tours for mill owners all over the country, to help them overcome the hurdles and get generating.

Brian's interest in local history led him to teach himself Medieval Latin so he could translate the early Gants Mill documents. He researched and gave talks on Bruton history. He was also a member of the Wessex Mills Group, The Somerset Industrial Archaeology Society and the Mills Section of SPAB.

His final great project was the augmentation and re-hanging of the bells in Pitcombe church, completed in May this year. Well in advance he had trained ringers for the day that the three bells became six, and his pleasure in the sound of the new ring was enormous.

I first met Brian when I was a teenager, avidly interested in visiting and learning all I could about mills. I visited Gants Mill to see Brian and his father, and get a tour of the mill; Brian's knowledge about Armfield turbines (which is what I have here at Hinton) was invaluable, and his generosity inspirational. I know from first-hand experience how much practical help and support he was able to offer to budding hydro projects and mill owners.

He will be missed by the Wessex Mills owners and Hydro enthusiasts who he has inspired and encouraged over the years.

Gants Mill & Garden, Bruton, Somerset is open for the National Gardens Scheme on one day a year. The date is shown on www.gantsmill.co.uk.

Alison Shingler and Stephen Bartlett