

Vendée Mills Visit

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Photos by Keith Andrews



In October 1995 eight HMG members spent a few days in the Vendée in western France looking at mills.

The trip was arranged for John Silman by Marie-Christine Chapalan of Angers University, president of la Société des Amis des Vieux Moulins de l'Ouest, who had a weekend cottage in the countryside where we stayed. I looked through the old HMG newsletters hoping to find a report of the visit, but there seemed to be no mention of it at all! That is a pity, as Keith and I have vivid memories of it and quite a few interesting photos. Fortunately Mick (Edgeworth) had given me a basic itinerary and Keith had conscientiously labelled our old photos, enabling him to locate some sites on the internet, so that I could put together this report. If any of the details are wrong please forgive me.

Marie-Christine had arranged a very packed and efficient itinerary for us, but she completely failed to stop us looking at other interesting sites on the way, and her navigation was very poor, so our visits got later and later. This was unfortunate because we didn't quite realise that she had also arranged two formal meetings with a town council and a commune council, the latter involving a député (MP) and the press.

Several other things stick in my mind, such as the very rustic nature of our accommodation in the cottage: those of us sleeping on camp beds in a barn with the lawnmowers were probably better off than Alison (Stott) in the main building, which was home to a few half-wild cats. (Alison likes cats, but they can go too far!) The only 'facilities' were in the cottage in a bathroom with two entrance doors and no locks, and a piece of old flypaper (complete with dead flies) over the bath. The highlight(?) of our first evening was an undercooked roast chicken, which reappeared at an American supper three days later, and was noticeably not gratefully received. Anyway, we survived, and here are some of the mills visited.

This hollow post mill in **Greze-en-Bouère**, *Moulin de la Guénaudière*, caught our eye before we had even started the visit proper. This type of mill is typically found in Anjou and is called a *moulin cavier* because the millstones are hidden in a cellar, in this case covered in a grass hillock. The Dutch call them *wipmolen*.



At this slightly similar mill at **St Saturnin** (*below left*) the miller was very pleased to show us round and demonstrate the Berton sails. After these two unscheduled visits, we met Marie-Christine in Angers and drove to her cottage near Secondigny.



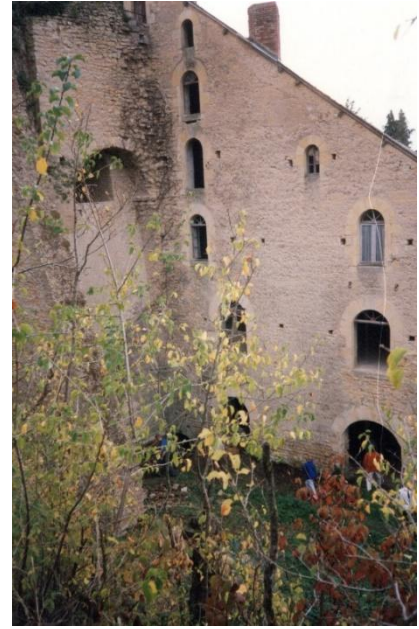
Our first full day started with a view of this tower mill (*above right*), *Moulin des Plaines*, at **Argenton-les-Vallées** which also has Berton sails (closed here) but its overall shape is more familiar.

After visits to two *dovecotes* our first watermill was at **Faye l'Abbesse**, *Moulin Aumont* (*right*), on the River Thouaret.

We were already late because we had had a lengthy detour when Keith refused to follow Marie-Christine's route down a very bad cart track.



After the visit our carefully-timed tour went spectacularly wrong as we spotted a stunning large and unusual *limekiln* at **Airvault**, and insisted on investigating it. It turned out to have an integral residence; fortunately Marie-Christine was able to introduce us to the bemused owners, and we spent a wonderful half-hour exploring and being plied with the owner's homemade brandy. In the pictures on the next page the bowl of the kiln is hidden by the wooden sheds in the foreground, and the multi-storey living area is on the right.



In consequence our next scheduled visit to *Moulin du Pont* (left) at **Gourgé** on the River Thouet was rather rushed.

After that, was a visit to an extensive site also on the River Thouet at **la Peyratte** which consisted of an *iron works* founded in 1645 and a mill which was added in 1860.

The watermill, *Moulin de Fumaille* (right), operated until 1920 and more recently has become a gourmet restaurant. It had a dairy and we were able to see the goats being milked and were given samples of goat's cheese to taste.

For information about the iron works see <https://www.lapeyratte.fr/la-forge-a-fer.html>



The following morning we began our tour by photographing the tower mill at **St Michel-Mont-Mercure**, *Moulin des Justices* (left), with Berton sails and then visiting the two mills with cloth sails at **Les Herbiers**, *Moulins des Alouettes* (right).



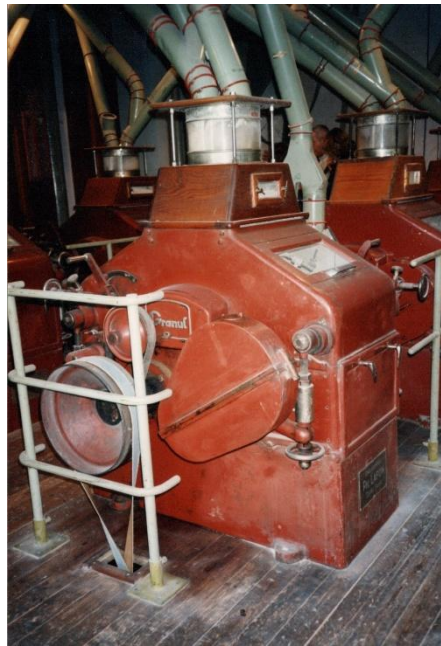
Then we drove to **Montaigu** and the imposing watermill and barrage at *Moulin de l'Egault* on the right bank of the River Maine. The foundations on this site possibly date to the 12th century, and it has a continuous history of milling. In 1824 naked swimming above the dam was forbidden!

For information about the mill see

<http://www.toponymes-archives.vendee.fr/toponyme-egault-moulin-de-l-36192>

We then continued to *Moulin de l'Ecornerie* at **Saint-Hilaire-de-Loulay**. For some reason we have no photographs of this mill. We were shown round by Jean Moreau who is still the miller there today. He had almost finished a long restoration and was very proud of this achievement. The internet has a long article by him on the skills of milling by millstones, but when they were demonstrated to us they produced a memorable smell of burning. He has clearly made some adjustments since then! For information about the mill see <https://fdmf.fr/moulins-de-france/liste-moulin/france/pays-de-la-loire/vendee/moulin-de-lecornerie/> and for Jean Moreau's article see <https://www.moulinsdefrance.org/publications/meule-livre-nous-tes-secrets/>

Our most important visit of the day was to a disused roller mill in **Fontenay-le-Comte**, *Minoterie du Moulin de la Roche*, accompanied by a large group of local councillors asking questions. It eventually became apparent that the English experts (us!) were going to be asked to give their opinions on the fate of the building and its perfectly complete and undisturbed machinery, which was installed in 1936 when the mill was rebuilt after a fire, and operated until 1992. Would it be feasible to turn it into a museum or should it be scrapped? It was a rather embarrassing situation for us and clearly involved local politics. Prior to the fire, the mill had 3 wheels, which were replaced by a turbine in 1928, replaced in turn in 1933 by a single cylinder horizontal engine. In 1979 this was superseded by a Unic truck engine, which was still in place. There is more information about the mill at <https://www.gralon.net/tourisme/monuments/info-minoterie-du-moulin-de-la-roche-a-fontenay-le-comte-85-fontenay-le-comte-22216.htm>



These photos show a spiral seed separator, two of the roller mills, and two of the plansifters.

At the ensuing planning meeting in the town hall with all the councillors and the mayor, we tried to look wise and be non-committal, so I don't think we added much to the final decision. From the internet, it does not appear to be a museum now, not being mentioned among all the many other tourist highlights of Fontenay-le-Comte.



The main activity on our final day was another publicity event. This time we were taken to admire a rather underwhelming improved embankment (*left*) and renovated sluice (*next page*) in **Azay-sur-Thouet** at *Moulin d'Ecorchard*, a former spinning mill.

Along with the local dignitaries, their wives in high heels and Sunday best, and the local MP, we tottered along the river bank to admire the new works, before looking round the interior of the mill. The French party were somewhat bemused when the Johns (Silman and Christmas) pulled up a trapdoor to go down and look at the turbine (*bevel gear shown below left*), followed by Alison in her floaty skirt. The mill was latterly used for storing apples in cold chambers (*below right*).

After the mill visit, we proceeded to the mairie (town hall) for a formal reception, with speeches and drinks.



We think Marie-Christine was hoping to see the mill revived as an industrial museum; the sluice and embankment repairs must have been the first step in arousing interest, but according to the internet, the mill is now the offices of a real estate company, not a museum.



This picture commemorating our visit appeared in the local press, publicising the hoped-for creation of the museum.



One of our final visits of the weekend was to *Moulin du Cerisier* at **Le Tallud** which was again rebuilt at the end of the 19th century when it had 3 pairs of millstones, but it was converted to a roller mill in 1927. It was electrified in the 1960s but ceased production in 1989. There was more alcohol on offer!

More information about the mill is at

<https://dossiers.inventaire.poitou-charentes.fr/le-patrimoine-industriel/notice.php?id=IA79002467>

The final event of the day and tour was the aforementioned American supper evening arranged by the local mills group at *Moulin de la Guirère* in **Boismé**. Even more alcohol was offered as the men brought out more and more of their prized old homemade brandies.

My final memory of the weekend is of 8 weary travellers – Tony and Mary Yoward were the two not so far mentioned – writing postcards home while leaning on our car bonnets on the bridge over the River Loire at Saumur, having had no earlier opportunity on our very intense itinerary to escape into the real world.