

Le Moulin de Gô

Ruth Andrews

Pictures by Mick Watson



Just before Christmas, ex-pat Mick Watson emailed HMG to ask if we would be interested to hear about the restoration of his derelict old watermill. Of course, we said yes.

The mill is at St Pierre-sur-Erve in Mayenne near Laval, and is not to be confused with Le Moulin du Got, at St Léonard de Noblat in Haute-Vienne near Limoges, which HMG visited in 1998.

This article is the result, based on the information he has sent.

Mick is a 'builder by trade' and he bought the mill some 25 years ago, along with several other properties, but was unsure how to tackle the restoration. However, in 2012 he was approached by a local villager Jean-Claude Portiers who said his family and friends wanted to volunteer to help renovate the mill as a local heritage project. They said that 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 this is the only one that isn't renovated. Mick said: "I just couldn't see why they would want to do it for nothing. People don't really normally work like that. That was the Friday and they started work the following Tuesday. 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." (*He's obviously never met the Heavy Gang!*)

The mill is just outside St Pierre-sur-Erve and was probably rebuilt between 1844 and 1847 on a site which dates back to at least 1772 and probably to the 14th century. Since this rebuild it does not seem to have undergone any important modifications, but it had not been used since the late 1960s, and was in considerable disrepair.

Aerial view by Eric Medard





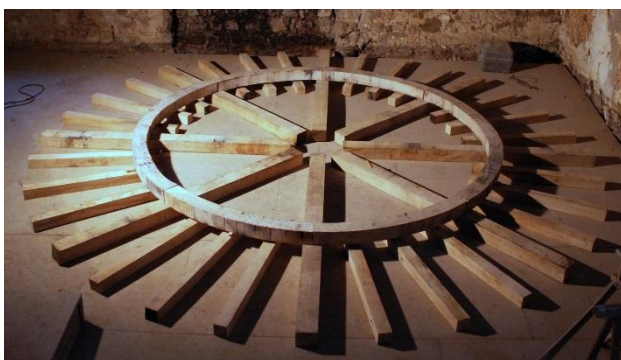
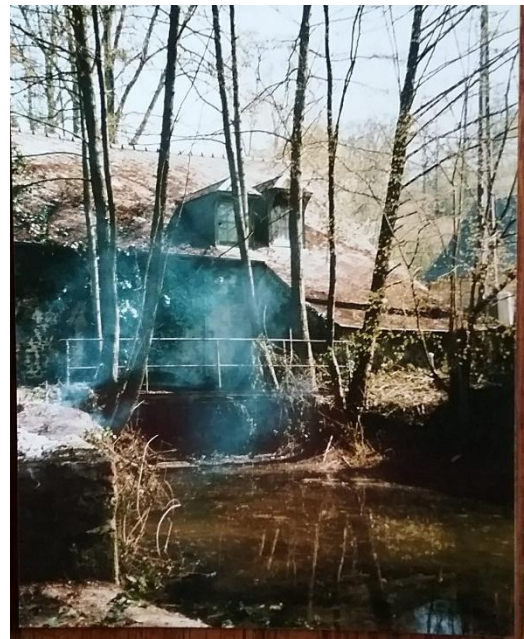
A description of the mill on its website (*as translated by Google!*) states:

"The mill takes place on a derivation of the Erve. On the ground floor, the poquerie contains the mill's transmission mechanism, with the pit wheel, the idler gear, and a large gear wheel that drove the axes of the three wheels. Above, the floor's floor joist is supported by cast iron columns resting on a stone chest, delimiting a quadrangular space. A wooden staircase provides access to the attic which still houses two pairs of millstones out of three, protected by wooden chests, archings."

Restoration work began in 2012 and as nothing had been done for over 20 years chain saws were needed to even approach the building, and the tree roots growing out of the walls had done a lot of damage. As Mick says ."I needed to rebuild a lot of walls". Within a month the sluice gates leading from the main river were open and the mill had water flowing through it once again.

At about this time the non-profit making association Les Amis du Moulin de Gô was formed to restore, maintain, and administer the mill.

Compare this picture with the restored building at the start of the article.



Late in 2013 a completely new waterwheel was constructed using green oak; this was finished by 2014.



After the wheel, the volunteers tackled the millstream, which needed dredging. It was over

400m long and in places the silt and vegetation had built up to over a metre deep. "After lowering the barrage on the river and letting out the water, Jean-Claude got in with the digger." Whilst clearing the millstream two World war 2 pistols and ammunition were found: locals think that these were hidden under an old bridge by the Resistance.



The next job was to sort out the drive mechanism. The rotten teeth on the metal pit wheel and crown wheel were replaced using acacia on the main drive wheel and cormier (*Sorbus domestica*, service tree) on the smaller gears. Cormier is very difficult to find, but luckily a furniture maker in Mick's local village had some, and made 250 teeth which were fitted by Jean-Claude.

The first flour was produced in 2015. A local baker used the flour to make a loaf of bread. However, it may be a while before the mill can produce flour for the public. "We'll have to find out the legislation with regard to producing flour for sale before we can start grinding regularly," Mick says. "We need to ensure it's fit for public consumption. In the meantime, we grind flour on open days and people can have a look at how it all works."



Since then Mick has also restored a 300-year old bread oven located in a large room at the back of the mill, which he hopes to use to produce bread and pizzas from the mill's flour.

At the end of 2018 the mill won a heritage prize for the renovation work so far from an organization called Sites et Monuments, which covers the whole of France



Mick says: "For any of your members on Facebook I set up a group called Watermill Enthusiast; if they can find it they are more than welcome to join. Or if you want to contact me or pay a visit to the mill my email is mickwatson8@gmail.com."

Compiled from information and articles supplied by Mick:

Graft and Grind by Gillian Harvey in *Living France* (April 2016),

Keen locals bring mill back to life by Samantha David in *Connexion France*
(<https://www.connexionfrance.com/Archive/Keen-locals-bring-mill-back-to-life/>),
Moulin de Gô at Saint Pierre de Erve by Susan Keefe in *The Good Life France*
(<https://www.thegoodlifeFrance.com/moulin-de-go-saint-pierre-de-erve/>),
The Moulin de Gô website www.moulindego.com, where you can find more information.



When I first saw the picture in this article of the poquerie (*repeated, above left*) I immediately thought of Soberton mill, which –as reported in Newsletter 120 – has a very unusual curved wall round the space which the pit wheel, wallower, and great spur wheel would have occupied (*above right*). The gears are long gone, but the stone spindle bearings are still in place on top of the wall to give a clue to the function of the structure. The prominent pulleys are part of the belt drive from the more recent turbine.