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Charmouth landslide - February 2009

Going with the flow

Charmouth artist and geologist Geoff Townson has an eye for the eroding Jurassic Coast. After a recent landslide in his home town he's been exploring the tide line and cliff tops as inspiration for his next painting.

Dorset artist Geoff Townson has been looking to the eroding Jurassic Coastline in Charmouth to help spark new ideas for his next painting.

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Having studied geology and after making a career for himself in the oil industry, Geoff's enthusiasm for eroding and ever evolving landscapes, has never kept him far from his love of art.



Local artist Geoff Townson on Charmouth Beach

'Slipping and flowing'

Geoff particularly enjoys painting the seascapes of Dorset.

Of his hometown, Charmouth, Geoff says: "The rocks are sliding, slipping and flowing all the time. It really does show the passage of time.

Geoff adds: "It is exciting and it is also normal - it's been going on all the time.

"[The shore] is constantly working its way back - maybe a metre each year on average."

Mist of time

Using charcoal, oils and acrylics, Geoff likes to depict this movement and set the mood of the scene. He believes the changing weather conditions, as much as anything else, help to emphasise the varying colours and textures of the rock.

This is how Geoff described the mist of a February afternoon: "It is picking out these buttresses of clay and shale rather beautifully and you can see at the top some of the trees, as they gracefully teeter on the crest of the cliff.

"When it's a stormy day you'll certainly see that the wind and the sea are extremely powerful in making this [process] continually mobile."

Mind your step

Although this movement may provide inspiration for Geoff's artwork, having suffered several landslips in the last two or three years,

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Charmouth's walkways up to the cliff tops have been damaged.

Geoff explains: "The new fence is down 50 foot. The new stiles? - it's all gone."

And of the heap of land now down on the shore, which once formed part of the cliff face, Geoff says: "You wouldn't want to walk across that, it's just gloop mud."



Golden Cap from Charmouth Beach - Geoff Townson

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Despite these warnings it hasn't stopped the tourists and local explorers trudging through in different types of footwear from the unlikely choice of sandals, to a more substantial Wellington boot.

Down tools

But next time you're on a fossil hunt for ammonites in Charmouth, Geoff suggests you leave your tools at home.

He says: "The easiest way to find them is just walk along the beach and look at your feet. Hitting them with a hammer is amusing, but I don't think it's the best way for a casual visitor to pick up any fossils!"



Geoff holding one of the colourful rocks

Geoff sees the combination of his painting and a passion for geology as something that comes naturally to him, but he still relies heavily on inspiration:

"About 20 percent of the total time is actually painting. Eighty percent is about finding something that really grabs me.

"If I was to paint this [the recent Charmouth landslip] I wouldn't be depicting nature - I would be painting my response to what I am seeing.

"If you look at my work and get a similar response then I have achieved the aim of it all."

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