

The Rex Wailes Collection

Printing blocks in the Rex Wailes Collection

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In these days of digital communication, it is sometimes a surprise to realise how time-consuming it used to be to prepare papers for publication. As Rex Wailes was a prolific author, we now have in our possession a large number of printing blocks for the illustrations he used. The blocks were engraved as a negative image and when caught in certain lights they show up very clearly.

Close inspection of an individual block shows how the image was captured as small dots, usually on a zinc or copper surface. The halftone photo engraving of the French Cavier windmill shown here has developed white spots, not showing a starry, starry night, but betraying the use of magnesium as a base, one that corrodes more quickly than zinc.

Photo-etched onto zinc, mounted on blocks of wood cut into standard sizes and given a coat of ink, they were run through a press to provide a positive image on the page.

Early blocks were created by line engraving on a flat sheet of copper, thick enough to be rigid when taking impressions. The outline of the subject was first traced on the copper, and then the engraver guided a triangular tool called a burin or graver along the traced outline. By varying the pressure, a groove of varying depths was cut into the metal, forming either a coarse or fine line on the finished impression. Until about 1820 line engravings were done mainly in copper, although occasionally brass, zinc, iron and even silver were used. Thereafter copper slowly lost its popularity in favour of steel, a harder metal that yielded a greater number of impressions before deterioration of the image.

Some of the blocks, such as the one of Bidston windmill have an eerie appearance when properly illuminated. No longer of practical use, these beautiful wood and metal print blocks, depicting mills and their processes, always attract attention at our exhibitions. Sadly, they are now becoming collectors' items, some attracting £50-100 on EBay.

We would be grateful of gifts of mill-related blocks from the first part of the 20th century or earlier. You can be sure that the Mills Archive would not only look after them, but ensure they were shared with the general public both in displays and on our website.

