

The Rex Wailes Collection

The Restoration of Cranbrook Mill

by Hayden Francis-Legg,
Rex Wailes Collection, UK

The Rex Wailes collection at the Mills Archive contains a substantial number of photos that detail the restoration of Union Mill at Cranbrook, Kent, in the late 1950s and early 1960s. The mill was described as ‘the finest smock mill in all of England.’

Rex, at this time, was the Technical Advisor to the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings (SPAB) and reported to the society in 1952 that the windmill was in a dire state. On Rex’s recommendation, and because there was a lack of millwrights in England, the SPAB contacted the Dutch millwright Christiaan Bremer from Adorp in Groningen.

In 1957, the SPAB received an estimate from Bremer for the repair work at Cranbrook that totalled around the sum of UK£2535 (27,030 Dutch Florins/US\$3434). It was agreed that Rex would order the materials for Bremer’s company to complete the work.

However, a series of misfortunes meant that Bremer could not begin repairing the mill until 1958. Bremer travelled to England in September of 1957 to inspect the mill alongside Rex, and together they laid out a specification for the repairs needed.

In a worse state than first thought

In June of 1958 the Bremer brothers and their team of millwrights finally travelled to England to begin the repairs. The biggest repair they made was to fit the new steel sail arms that they had made in Holland and had shipped over to Cranbrook. The millwrights were due to complete some of the work in 1958 and return the following year, however they found the mill in a worse state than first thought.

The brothers, after discussion with Rex, proposed to the SPAB that additional work was needed to restore the mill to working order. However, by this time the brothers had completed the work originally agreed on and had returned to the Netherlands. Issues with funding and payment, as well as miscommunication, left the Bremer brothers with little time to return in 1959 and they assured the SPAB that they would complete the work in 1960. After raising enough to complete the repairs, the Bremers returned to the mill in the summer of 1960 and finished the repairs first planned three years earlier.

In all, the restoration of Cranbrook seemed a stressful yet fulfilling project for all involved. As technical advisor to the SPAB, Rex played an important part in the repairs. He attended the mill at the weekend whilst the repair work was being carried out, balancing this with running his own business, George Wailes and Co, as well as writing reports about the mill for the SPAB.

In a letter from the secretary of the SPAB on September 12, 1960, Rex’s work at Cranbrook was acknowledged: “As you know we all feel it was extremely good of you to do this work which enables us to say that all we undertook to do to the mill is now complete.”

His work was key in the restoring and repairing of Cranbrook as he worked as a middleman between the Dutch millwrights and the SPAB during the repairs. Rex described and illustrated Cranbrook mill as one of the four mills in his book ‘The English Windmill’.

