

The Rex Wailes Collection

Marjorie Batten, windmill preservation pioneer

by Elizabeth Trout, Mills Archive trust

Miss M I Batten is the author of English Windmills Volume 1 which was published by the Architectural Press in 1930. We have a copy in the Mills Archive Library available to visitors. However, it is only through our work on the Rex Wailes Collection that we are understanding how significant this book is and the part Marjorie Batten played in the preservation of windmills.

Marjorie Isabel Batten was born in Kensington in 1903, daughter of Holgate Batten, a land agent, and Jane Forbes of Scotland. Marjorie had two older brothers, John Forbes Batten and Stephen Alexander Holgate Batten. The family lived at Moorlands, Horsell, Woking but then moved to Folkestone, Kent by 1911.

She was an art historian by training and was elected to the Society for Protection of Ancient Buildings in 1928, possibly through her brother. In June 1929 the Windmill Campaign was launched when the Daily Mail asked Miss Batten to write an article about the plight of windmills.

As a result of the Daily Mail item, the organisation was inundated with correspondence and mill photographs which must have taken up a lot of Marjorie's time. In the correspondence files of the Rex Wailes Collection there are several letters sent to Rex Wailes from Miss M I Batten in her capacity of Honorary Secretary.

At the time Rex was just an engineer interested in mills but very involved in the Windmill Campaign. In a letter to Rex Wailes on November 29, 1929, Marjorie outlines a plan for the lecture which she had mentioned in a telephone call to him that day.

In 1930, she wrote two letters to Rex in a more informal style which hint at her personality and life outside SPAB. One gets the impression that she was an enthusiastic and intelligent woman. Miss Batten was very excited that she had found three illustrations of windmills earlier than the Luttrell Psalter. The Architectural Press had also offered to publish her book.

When the book was published, she asked Rex to approach The Sphere to publicise her book. This magazine had a wide circulation. Miss Batten's glamorous photograph (reproduced here) appeared in the edition of March 21, 1931 on a page of other notable women including a Duchess, a Countess, the actress Fay Wray, and Fraulein Margarethe Gussow, Germany's only female astronomer.

A last letter relates to when Marjorie handed over the Honorary Secretary role to Miss Lloyd, although she continued to serve the Windmill Committee until her marriage in 1934 to Col. Geoffrey Fairbank Webb.

She obviously liked to live well, inviting Rex to join her for a lunch of oysters at the Albemarle Club! This club was unusual in being a private members club for men and women and progressive in supporting women's rights. Members were aesthetes, artists and intellectuals.

Little seems to be recorded of Marjorie after her marriage. Her death was announced in by Windmill Committee in their 1961-62 report, in which her book was described as "a pioneer work of the utmost interest and lasting value".



AN EXPERT ON WINDMILLS: Miss Marjorie Batten has just published, on behalf of the Society for the Preservation of Ancient Buildings, an excellent first volume on the Windmills of this country

1. Marjorie Isabel Batten was born in Kensington in 1903.
2. M I Batten Letter written to Rex Wailes in 1930.
3. Miss M I Batten is the author of English Windmills Volume 1

