

The Rex Wailes Collection

Saving the Rex Wailes Collection

by Nathanael Hodge, Rex Wailes
Collection, Mills Archive, UK

When Rex Wailes died in 1986, he left behind him a lifetime's worth of diaries, notebooks, correspondence files, boxes of photographs and rolls of architectural drawings, crammed full of information about mills and other engineering topics. He had stated in his will that the collection should all be passed to the National Monuments Record and the Science Museum, but in the event only a small amount of material was transferred. The rest seemed doomed to be consumed by mould and damp in the sheds at the bottom of Rex and Enid's Garden.

After some years, Enid began to throw the material away in preparation for the sale of the property. We owe the rescue of the collection to Alan Stoyel, who took it upon himself to salvage what he could – in his words: “I acted as an unofficial executor, and worked my way through all the sheds, salvaging whatever relevant material I could find. Unfortunately, much of the material was damp, quite a lot was actually sopping wet and full of mould and small animal life, and some had been attacked by mice. I took a series of car-loads of material to my home in Oxfordshire, cleaned what I could, and laid everything out to dry. Unfortunately, some relevant material I found in the sheds was too far gone even to be salvageable.”

Alan spent many hours drying, separating, cleaning and sorting the material, some of which then made its way to the Science Museum. When the Mills Archive was formed in 2002, Alan agreed with Rex's family that this was the place Rex would have wanted his collection to go. Then in 2019, the Science Museum offered to pass those items it had been caring for over to the Mills Archive. At last the collection was together again. We now had over a hundred boxes of files, photos and crumpled papers, much of it shoved together in no discernible order, all in need of listing, sorting, cleaning, conserving, repackaging, cataloguing and digitising - separating the wheat from the chaff and make the gems of the collection easily accessible

A lot of the initial work was done by volunteer Guy Boocock, who made a painstakingly detailed spreadsheet listing of the entire collection, with details of contents, dates and related subjects and mill sites. Once this was compiled the themes covered by the collection could be discerned and the files assigned to categories. Now the items and folders themselves had to be rearranged into these categories and repackaged in archival boxes, as well all being numbered in pencil with reference codes to enable finding. Finally, the data from the spreadsheet was uploaded into our online catalogue. The lockdowns of 2020 delayed the process, but at last by the start of 2021 the catalogue was complete.

Meanwhile volunteers had been going through and digitising individual photographs and uploading them. This work is still ongoing, but there are now around 6100 items that can be viewed on our website, <https://catalogue.millsarchive.org>

