

The Rex Wailes Collection

The life of Rex Wailes

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

Rex Wailes was born in 1901 in Hadley Wood, Middlesex, to a family of engineers. After school he became an apprentice engineer to the firm Robey and Company in Lincoln, before joining the family firm George Wailes and Company in 1924. The firm had been started by Rex's grandfather in 1855 and manufactured a variety of machinery. Rex would remain there for the rest of his working life. But his interest in engineering was more than a job – it was his life's passion. So outside of working hours he devoted himself to researching and preserving the history of industry in the United Kingdom and worldwide – and central to that history is the story of milling. In 1929 Rex discovered that his pet hobby, windmills, had been making national news with an article in the Daily Mail in which the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings requested the public's help in saving mills. Rex was quick to respond. He was soon taking on the role of Technical Advisor to the SPAB, overseeing the repair of Arkley Mill in Hertfordshire and Stansted mill in Essex. In 1932 he became a founder member of the Windmill Section.

Rex met Enid Berridge through their common love of music – she was a professional violinist. They married in April 1930 and had two daughters, living in a flat in Hampstead in London until the Second World War, when Enid and the girls were evacuated to Argyllshire. Rex remained in London, living in the basement of George Wailes and Co and taking his place on fire watching duty at the weekends. The house they had lived in was destroyed, and after the war they moved out of London to a cottage at the bottom of the garden of Rex's parent's house. As soon as Rex's daughters were old enough he often took them on his mill hunting trips, usually over the weekend. They helped him measure the mills and count the cogs on the gear wheels, as well as sketching and taking photographs. The results of many years of studying and surveying windmills were published in *Windmills in England*, 1948, and the longer work *The English Windmill*, 1954. Rex didn't limit his work to the UK, but carried out surveys of mills in Spain, France, Barbados, Sweden and Finland.

After his retirement when the family firm closed in 1960, Rex was made consultant to the Industrial Monuments Survey for the Ministry of Public Building and Works. He continued in this role until 1971, carrying out surveys of Britain's industrial heritage. He was also Honorary Consultant to the National Trust and the Royal Commission on Historic Monuments. He was chairman of the SPAB Mills Section from 1971 to 1974 and was made its first president in 1978. He received an OBE in 1973.

Rex Wailes died at his home, Davidge Cottage, Knotty Green, Beaconsfield on 7 January 1986, aged 84.

