

The Recent History of Mill Study and Recording.

A. A. Bryan.

Introduction.

From archival material the author has been able to trace the events related to the development of the S.P.A.B. Windmill, and later, Wind- and Watermill Section over the past 50 years.

Reports relating to events and activities of other societies and organisations mentioned in the S.P.A.B. annual reports has given additional information about the study and conservation of mills.

Progress

Prior to 1945, most of the attention of mill researchers was directed at windmills; usually on a county basis. A lot of high quality exterior photography was done, but little effort seems to have been made to analyse and catalogue the internal machinery of mills.

After 1950 the much neglected study of watermills began with some urgency. Perhaps it was felt that there was a need to catch up with the work already done on windmills.

It is noteworthy that one person has been actively mentioned with both wind- and watermill studies since at least 1930 - Rex Wailes.

The work of several (mainly photographic) recorders is mentioned. Several are now deceased and their records deposited with others for safe keeping and study.

The highly detailed and technical study of mills using report forms and associated photographs began in about 1955 and hopefully will continue into the future with fresh workers.

The study of mills on a county basis is an old idea which has recently had something of a revival. County authorities are being given more responsibility by central government and are starting to show a responsible to all forms of historic buildings. A good report on the mills of a county can be used as evidence to persuade local authorities to accept conservation plans for carefully selected mills.

The increasing presence of Mill Groups and Societies working in the counties and regions is a further stimulus to public interest in mills and has produced many examples of restored and possibly working mills.

Future.

There is an urgent need to index ALL mill sites, to classify them and describe what exists on the site at the present time. We will then at least have details of the magnitude of the field work which could be undertaken, so that it could be planned, and others persuaded to assist with it.

Co-ordination of field work on a county basis to avoid duplication of

effort does not seem to be too much of a problem. Local area groups could undertake or advise on the field work tasks.

However, on a large area or national basis of study there is much duplication of effort in the absence of liaison and with a fair amount of secrecy. This is where the Mills Research Group could be of great use to other societies and individual field workers.

Most field workers seem to possess a modern camera of adequate performance for mill recording, but the results obtained often leave much room for improvement. There is an urgent need for photographic training. The techniques of interior photography have developed a lot during the past thirty years and the availability of low cost wide angle lenses and high power transistor flash guns has made things much easier.

Summary of events.

The main events in the period described are set out in tabular form in the following pages. [Printed after the Discussion; Ed.]

Discussion

TURNER Running through all this is the matter of preservation. It began back in the 1860s - Bidstone Windmill, or something - and in those days it was possible to go round and see mills in working order. You could enter into that world if you wished with all the people around; into a life that was continuing. The opportunities for that have become absolutely minimal now. In the days when I first did his sort of thing, you would be going round collecting what you could feel nobody knew anything about. You could easily do original basic work which was right on your doorstep, that was just simple mill recording. The opportunities for that sort of thing have departed, except in certain specialised areas, and we have to treat it rather differently. This is all part of the question of where do we go from here.

JONES When I first did systematic field recording, I would ask the miller, or occupier, how things worked, what they were for, etc, and usually I was told. A year or so ago, I realised with some surprise, that it had practically ceased. When I visit a mill today, people ask me these things! It is now rare to find a mill in the hands of anyone who has worked it, or even knows anything about it. This points out dramatically how one major source of information has almost gone. Even when you can get first-hand information, it is from the dying end of the trade, when the mills were not being used for exact work they were designed to do.

PLUNKETT I find that where a mill is still working, the people there do not call attention to it. It is not that you can't get in; you just don't get to know that the thing exists. Yet these people are a mine of information, but they are very wary about giving any, unless you have a specific question. We have two in Hampshire. With John Ellis for instance, until recently I didn't realise the depth of his knowledge. He is actually collecting information; doing the same sort

of things we are doing, but to a different format, for his own use.

A.BRYAN It is as well that people like us do bang on their doors now and again and ask to look at their mills, because otherwise the first person to see inside is likely to be the demolition contractor who has gone there on the instructions of a house converter.

TURNER Mr Bryan has asked us a question, but does he include himself; does he see the way this activity is going?

A.BRYAN I think we urgently need to make lists of all the substantial mill remains; where and what they are. We can't do this soon enough, at the present rate of loss.

JONES Where the drive and organisation exists, it is remarkable what can be done. The Dorset survey is a good example. It was made by a three man team in just over a year, with some initial guidance from us. The results are comprehensive, and most impressive.

A.BRYAN Is it to be published soon?

JONES It will be. They are publishing a summary for general sale, and the detailed findings, which are too long for full publication will be copied and a few copies deposited here and there. The main survey results are on our record forms. We have been promised a copy. The others will go to libraries, etc.

A.BRYAN We must introduce that windmill form, too. It is the only constant format that will be available on that subject, and there must be more windmill enthusiasts about than watermill ones.

JONES But fewer windmills! Most complete windmills must be covered by now. The most important windmill record now must be the undramatic one of tracing old post mill sites. I suspect they were far more numerous than is generally believed.

A.BRYAN A lot of them are on the maps; the older O.S. maps show them.

JONES I believe we will have to go back to an even earlier time. When we do, I suspect we will be surprised by their density.

A.BRYAN It will be related to population as well. Where cereals were grown, they were ground, and people lived there.

JONES Surely, that turns the argument on its head. The conclusion of Laurence Turner's paper is that mills relate to population. People lived in most places, and had to be fed somehow.

McKean As mill researchers, we are in danger of getting too insular. We must look at it as part of a complex, including the village, and local history in general. Wherever we look in local history, we find the mill, and I think we must look at other aspects of that history. They will always come back to the mill.

TURNER Are the regional mill groups maintaining the work they began?

PLUNKETT It appears to be down to odd individuals in each area that are doing research, making surveys, etc. That doesn't mean it is being passed on, distributed around, etc. The point is, it is down to a few individuals, many of whom are members of the the Mills Research Group, I'm glad to say, but there are other people who collect and merely hoard. That is the problem, whether they belong to a group or not. Their collection keeps growing but never sees the light of day.

A.BRYAN Maybe that is because they intend to publish eventually.

PLUNKETT I don't think most of them even consider publication. They consider it may be useful to them, or perhaps they intend to eventually pass it on to a local historical society, but as for going farther than that, for most of them it something they may do when they retire, if they think of it at all.

JONES I always assumed that where material was being withheld, it was being held for publication, but I now agree with you; much of it is being gathered and kept confidential without any real aim. On the other question of what the other groups are doing; there are as many answers as there are groups. They are very individual.

P.BRYAN There could be more contact between the groups.

JONES There is a lot of overlapping membership; the really active people tend to join more than one. A COGS meeting is a good example - is quite arbitrary who is supposed to be representing which group, and the Mills Research Group could be represented by almost anybody.

McKEAN Does not COGS provide liason between the groups?

JONES It does, but it only meets twice a year, and it is not a meeting which can take decisions.

Year.	Wind.	Water.	Publications.	People.	Activities.
1929	SPAB at Buckingham St., Adelphi with approx 1000 members.				
1930	SPAB Windmill Committee formed.	some activity	English Windmills M.I.Batten	R.Wailes. M.I.Batten	Photography of Windmills on county basis.
1931	SPAB Windmill Section formed.				
1935	Windmill Certificates begun.				
1939	Second ----- World ----- War.				SPAB move to GtOrmond St.
1945	Wind & Watermill Section formed.				
1947					National Buildings Record begun
1948			Windmills in England R.Wailes		Newcomen Society. papers on mill subjects
1953	Watermill Conference. Deans Mill		Gearing in Watermills A.Jespersen.	H.E.Simmons	
1954	5 counties day tour.		English Windmill R.Wailes	A.Jespersen	Reception for A.J. Methods of Recording Mills.
1955	Conference at Science Museum.			D.Sanders E.M.Gardner K.C.Reid H. Ashley	
1957			Report on Watermills A.Jespersen.		
			Windmills & Millwrighting S.Freese.		Annual Mill day tours.

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1960				K.Major	Industrial Archaeology "new subject"
1965	West Midland Mills Branch formed.				
	T I M S Symposium			D.Jones	in Portugal Watermill Index.
1968	Seperate 1 day conferences.				Windmill Index
1970			Windmills & Watermills J.Reynolds. Discovering Windmills J. Vince.		
1972	County boundaries re-organised.				
	S.P.A.B. Wind & Watermill membership passes 700.				
1973			Windmills in Hertfordshire. A.C.Smith.		
1976	First week end mill tour - Northumberland.				
1979	Mills Research Group founded.		Watermill Certificates begun		
	C. O. G. S. started.				
1980			Watermill Record Form		Small computers used for data and documents
1981			Essex Windmills Millers & Millwrights Voll K.G. Farries.		
	Mills Research Group conference at Luton.				
1982	M.R.G. Mill Recording training course.				
1984	M.R.G. Mill Operators training course.				