

The Rex Wailes collection has arrived at the Mills Archive (33 years after he died)

Liz Bartram and Nathanael Hodge

“It is given to few to have the breadth of knowledge and experience called for in the making of such a survey. Mr Wailes’s life-long study of mills and milling has made him pre-eminent in this particular field.” (SPAB)

This 1963 endorsement supported Rex’s appointment as the lead consultant in the government survey to identify historical sites worthy of preservation under the Planning Acts. For this work he was later awarded OBE. However, our story starts 40 years earlier.

In 1923 the Newcomen Society asked 22-year-old Rex, apprenticed to a Lincolnshire engineering firm, to record the windmills in Lincolnshire. By 1929 he was technical adviser to the new SPAB Windmill Section. He became the leading British authority on mills and the driving force behind the windmill rescue and repair movement.

In a 1966 lecture to the Newcomen Society, he advocated a specialist archive for mill drawings and photographs, emphasising the need for proper indexing and storage in suitable conditions. Exactly half-a-century later the Mills Archive became a nationally accredited repository – Rex Wailes’s wish had come true.

It is therefore particularly pleasing that we can announce the transfer in July of his collection from the Science Museum to the Mills Archive; a move of which he would have approved.



Mildred unloading the collection on arrival.

We now need to ask all Section members to consider giving us some financial assistance so we can provide public access to these vital records on windmill repair.

“When Mildred raised the idea of an archive for mills 20 years ago, I was convinced and motivated by a comment from Luke Bonwick, who was frustrated as a young researcher by the inability to access Rex’s collection locked away and inaccessible.

“Two decades later we care for more than 250 collections, all freely available for consultation and research. As the specialist accredited archive, we have been able to reclaim this vital piece of our milling heritage.

“Now we need to work at making the collection fit for public use, which is not a simple or cheap process.”

Ron Cookson, Mills Archive Trust Chairman

Rex and his contribution

100 years ago, English windmills were rapidly falling into disuse and being demolished. By the late 1920s it was felt that some attempt should be made to record this vanishing aspect of the English countryside. Rex drove this movement and transformed it, building on and enhancing public concerns to preserve and protect our windmill heritage.

As SPAB technical adviser he visited numerous mills and gained entry to many with his camera, obtaining vital interior images at a time when little was recorded. He was also offered valuable material from mill owners. As a result his collection contains a great deal of unique, historical information.

His influence was considerable. In *The English Windmill* (1954), he identified Saxtead Green, Sibsey and Berney Arms mills as three of the most important of their type in the land. Of Saxtead Green he wrote “Repairs to be carried out will put the mill in first-class order as a landmark and... we have now preserved for the nation one of the finest post mills in the world”. Similarly in Lincolnshire “of all the six-sailed mills, Trader Mill, Sibsey was the finest” and again in the Suffolk Broads “The finest drainage mill of all in this area is High Mill, Berney Arms.”

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A modest fraction of his work has been published in several books and more than 30 Newcomen Society papers. Much more remains to be discovered in the thousands of documents, drawings and images we have just received.



Nathanael performing an initial inspection.

Now we are at last in a position to celebrate Rex's legacy, we need your help. He died in 1986 and we do not want to wait another 33 years for his work and invaluable records to become available!

The importance of the Collection

Shortly after Rex's death in 1986, Alan Stoyel rescued the collection, stored in a garden shed, from near destruction by damp and mould. He painstakingly dried it out and lodged it, as Rex desired, with the Science Museum. Since then very little has been done with it.

Rex's wide interests covered all types of mill. He published in-depth surveys of windmills in different English counties and detailed papers on mill machinery such as sack hoists and brake wheels. He reported on mills overseas, notably in the United States, Finland, Barbados and Sweden. His voluminous diary of a 1929 transatlantic voyage is being featured as a weekly blog on our website and contains many personal views, not just about mills:

"They have a vile H.M.V. electric reproducer with remote loud speaker for dance music, and it's going as I write."

The collection is large, detailed and authoritative, containing much unique material; it occupied several cubic metres at the Science Museum and will require a lot more space as we work through it.



Part of the collection.

For more than 30 years it has been inaccessible, a source of frustration to mill researchers and more pertinently those wishing to repair windmills or to understand specific details of their structure and condition in the period 1930-75.

The SPAB chose the right technical adviser; not only a good photographer, he ventured into many mills that were in a parlous state, recording them and suggesting priorities for attention. As a result his collection is a time capsule of photographs, glass plates, large technical drawings, notes and correspondence. It immortalises these fascinating

"23rd July 2019 was a momentous day for the Mills Archive. The Science Museum had released, after long negotiations, probably the most important mill collection of the 20th century.

"The mills world should be pleased and excited by this development, although archivist Nathanael now has his work cut out to organise and list the contents of more than 40 boxes, together with all the many large drawings.

"Personally, having met Rex and talked about the mills on Anglesey, I was quite moved to see all his research notes, photographs, drawings etc arrive."

Mildred Cookson, SPAB Trustee, Mills Archive Trustee

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structures, the development of the windmill protection and repair movement, the people involved and the landscape that they shaped.

This collection represents the life's work of the pioneer of mill repair. Rex took photos wherever he went, and documented mills and other monuments in meticulous detail in notebooks, correspondence and drawings. It will take a lot of work to sort, order, list and catalogue the many boxes of material, but the treasures brought to light in the process will make it all worthwhile.



A typical jumble of mill pictures.

One favourite so far is a large photograph of Went's Mill in Peldon, Essex. It is annotated on the rear: 'The Mill House after the Earthquake (Colchester Earthquake 1884). Given to Rex Wailes 12-3-56 by Mrs E Went.' Her husband was the schoolboy with the black armband. His father had died shortly before and his eldest brother, next to him, was running the business.



Went's Mill, Peldon.

We are now in the early stages of preparing the work on this large, disorganised and very vulnerable collection. Once the records are organised and stabilised, we will start making available technical and photographic information of direct relevance to the restoration and interpretation work of windmills.

We hope members might wish to become associated with this project by making a financial contribution to the cost of conservation, cataloguing and making accessible the contents of Rex's collection.

The size and state of the collection

Part of the collection is housed in more than 100 boxes with the larger drawings stored in bundles. Of more than 1,000 drawings, we have already identified over 200 that need conservation. We are applying to the National Manuscript Conservation Trust to fund professional conservation to rescue and repair the most egregious faults. Once the items are stable they will be digitised and catalogued.

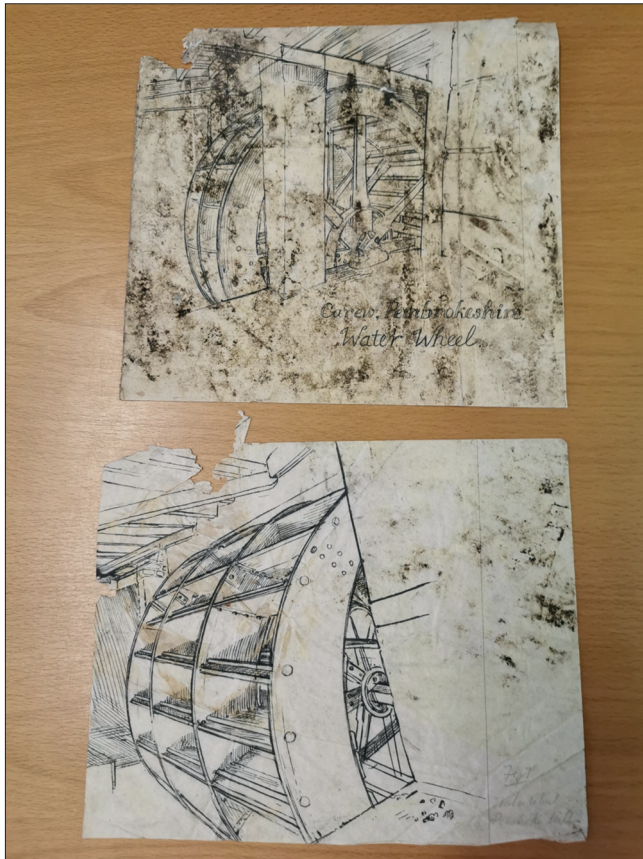


Brake wheel, Union Mill, Cranbrook 1927 glass plate negative.



Some of the many glass plate negatives.

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Mouldy waterwheels.

The bulk of the collection will be properly organised and repackaged in archival packaging and box lists will be created to outline their content. Although access to the collection is not possible for some months during the initial processing, we will invite interested parties to come to the Archive in Reading to talk about the collection, see some examples and discuss views on priorities for more detailed treatment. We aim to process the collection and make much publicly available by January 2021. We think 35 years after Rex's death is long enough!



A face mask can be useful when items are particularly encrusted in dirt and mould.

“The overall condition of the selected items is poor with extensive stability issues requiring conservation intervention to allow the material to be used. There are several overall recurring condition themes:

Mould residue, often severe, and softening to the substrate;

Extensive surface dirt and staining;

Storage folds, tears, losses and crumpling/crushing, particularly of paper substrates;

Loss of colour and surface characteristics on drafting cloth items in particular through water damage;

Media degradation and offsetting;

Pressure-sensitive tape and tape residue causing localised staining and embrittlement;

Metallic residues and substrate browning through contact with degradative components”.

Victoria Stephens, Conservator

The need for support

As we have no institutional support, our priorities and the speed at which we can work are influenced by the extent of grant support and donations from individuals. To do justice to Rex's material we need to raise about £25,000. For the first time this invaluable material on the structure and repair of windmills is in the hands of a nationally recognised repository that understands and values this information. More importantly it will mean we can work



A few of the many rolled drawings, some in great need of conservation.

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Bourn Windmill on very fragile paper.



Large Lancaster Burne drawings in a poor state.

to provide public access to vital details essential to enable proper understanding of specific mills.

We would be very grateful if you feel able to make a financial contribution. For details on how to contribute online go to millsarchive.org/appeals/rex.

Alternatively please send us a cheque payable to:

The Mills Archive Trust at:
Watlington House,
44 Watlington St,
Reading RG1 4RJ

Just a few examples of how you can help

£2,400 would allow us to train and employ a young intern for a short period to accelerate public availability of less damaged items

£1,600 would finance the preparation of vital appeal literature to spread the word about the importance of the collection and encourage more people to support the work

£175 would fund permanent storage in archival conditions of a large container holding 20 files (the collection will require approximately 100 such containers)

£50 could fund careful digitisation of three very large and vulnerable drawings ensuring that the information they contain is never lost (we need to do this for about 400 such items)

£25 could provide an archival box for 15 large drawings (we need 200 of these)