

Champion of change

Determined, dedicated and far-sighted: From national suffrage to saving the nation's watermills, the staff and volunteers of the Mills Archive Trust celebrate the campaigning zeal of Emilie Montgomery Gardner

Emilie Montgomery Gardner, known to the milling world as E M Gardner, remains an enigmatic character and one who deserves to be lauded as a great conservation pioneer. She made a substantial and significant record of historic buildings and campaigned for and critically drew the SPAB's attention to the vital contribution of watermills to our built heritage.

Gardner was born in New Haven, Connecticut, USA, in 1882, and moved with her family to England to further the business interests of her father who set up a company which manufactured steel and iron chains. Academically gifted, she won a scholarship to Newnham College, Cambridge, to study history. There she became a committed suffragist and joined the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies (NUWSS).

A campaigning spirit

In 1908 she travelled with suffragist friends from Newnham to Glasgow, from where they set off on an adventurous 1,380-mile journey, travelling by traditional caravan to Oxford. They made frequent stops en route where they campaigned for votes for women. A report in the *Lakes Herald* gives an indication of the determination and oratorical skills that would eventually persuade the SPAB to include the preservation of watermills in its remit some 40 years later.

It wrote of her and her fellow suffragist campaigners: 'Their powers of eloquence were such as would put to shame many a male speaker who has figured on a local political platform.'

This journey was soon followed by a similar one across Yorkshire where the campaigners promulgated their message about women's rights in towns and remote villages that were previously untouched by the fight for suffrage.

Gardner subsequently served as the Secretary of the Birmingham and Midland Women's Suffrage Society, taught at a London secondary school



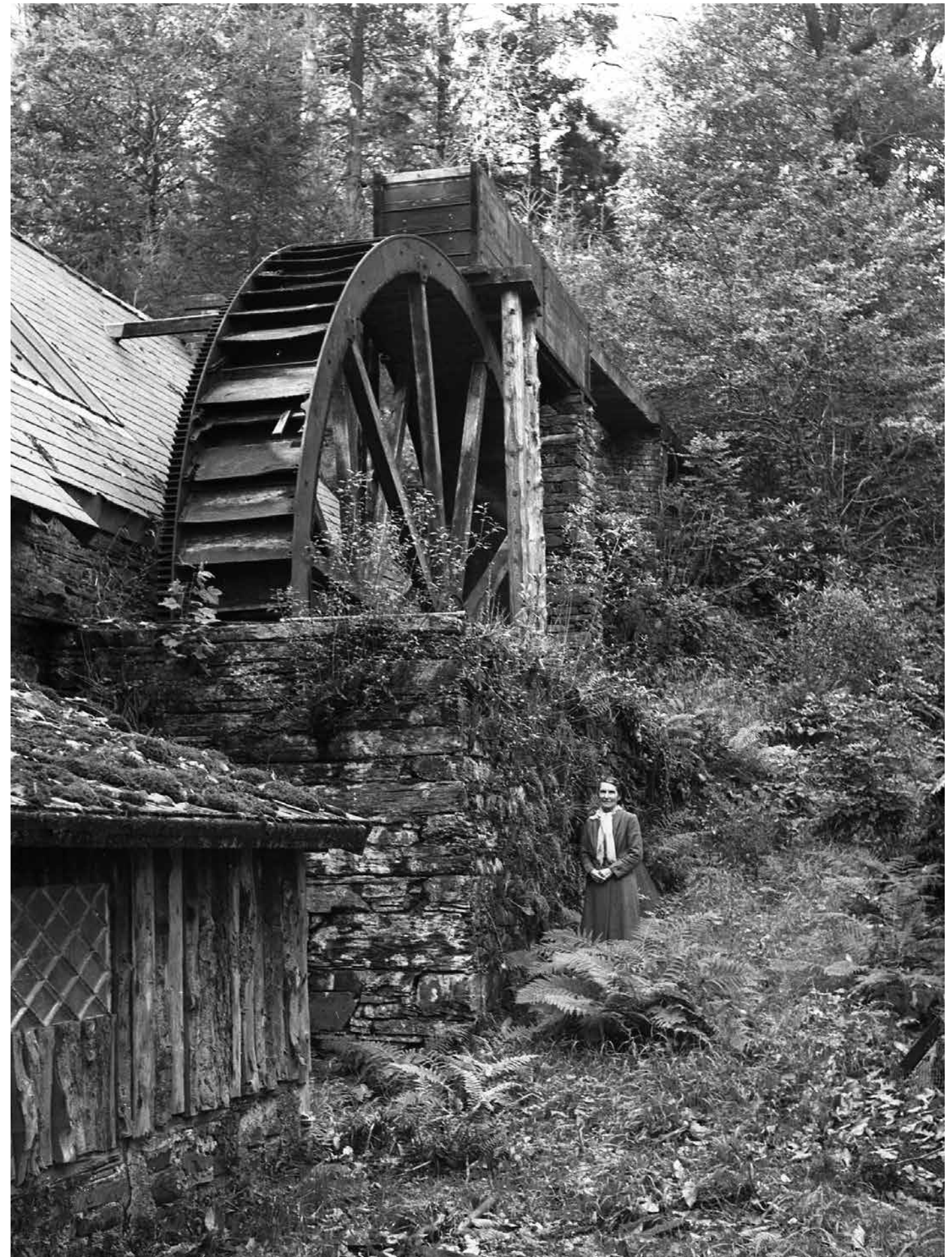
Above E M Gardner (far left), Ann Allen and G Margaret Robertson on a caravan tour campaigning for votes in Bridlington, 1908

and worked as a Red Cross nurse during the First World War. She later entered the Civil Service, working first as a District Officer in the Assistance Board. In 1942 she was awarded an OBE for her work.

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Above Tan y Bwlch Sawmill, Aberystwyth

ALL IMAGES UNLESS STATED: MILLS ARCHIVE



Top The House Mill, Bromley-by-Bow

Above EM Gardner with millstones, Llecheiddior, Gwynedd, in June 1951

of vulnerable historical sites. She supplied thousands of images to the National Buildings Record, which had initially been set up in 1940 to record architecture under threat from aerial bombing.

Her particular interest lay in watermills however, and she took hundreds of photographs and slides that recorded the buildings their locations, inventories, condition and whenever possible the millers who ran them.

Writing in London after the Blitz, she recorded of the House Mill, Bromley-by-Bow, a tidal mill dating from 1776: ‘Although The House Mill looks unchanged it was so weakened by the blast as to be unusable and its days are numbered; a sad pity, as it is a fine example of a late 18th-century mill.’

Gardner recognised that to prevent watermills from being lost or disfigured there needed to be a national organisation that would draw attention to their plight, campaign for their preservation and offer invaluable advice on their repair or potential adaptation to new uses. She turned to the SPAB, which had already established a dedicated Windmill Section with the expectation that they would embrace her idea. It seems surprising and even unthinkable now, but she met with resistance and a decided lack of enthusiasm to extend the remit of the Windmill Section.

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She went on to serve on the Mills Section committee from 1951–59 and chaired the Watermills Publication Committee for the first six issues of the *Watermill Booklets* and wrote the fourth of these, *The Three Mills, Bromley-by-Bow*. She also generously shared her knowledge and sought to widen the public’s appreciation of watermills. She wrote articles for *Country Life* on ‘Dutch watermills around Eindhoven’, and ‘Milling in the Shetlands’. This article was a precursor to the booklet on horizontal watermills she planned to write with P N Wilson but to which her contribution was cut short by her unexpected death following a routine operation in 1959. Wilson’s foreword to the book, *Horizontal Mills*, published in 1960, is poignant and

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describes her as ‘a woman of great character, humour and charm... how much better this work would have been had she written it’.

Legacy archive

Gardner left her comprehensive collection to the SPAB where it proved to be a vital in-house resource for many years. Since 2004, her work has been held by The Mills Archive Trust, which has catalogued the E M Gardner Collection and made it available to a wide audience of milling practitioners, enthusiasts, researchers and others. It comprises hundreds of photographs and negatives of watermills and windmills, and images of watermills from throughout England and Wales; 85 lantern slides which include cross sectional diagrams, hand drawn and watercolour illustrations and photographic images of watermills and mill machinery notably, water wheels, pit wheels, wallowers, spur wheels, flour dresses and sack scales. There are also watercolours, pen and ink drawings and sketches of mills made by Gardner and others.

In addition, the Archive includes her handwritten notes on an array of watermills throughout England and Wales made between 1947–55, that ▶



Top E M Gardner at Cleveley Mill, Enstone

Above Spur wheel and stone nut at Sapiston Mill, Suffolk



Top West Mill, Dorchester

Above left Horse Mill, Weyland Tedburn, Devon

Above right Barnard Castle, Co Durham

record details of the geographical locations and visual descriptions of the buildings and the extent to which the buildings had survived the test of time. The names of the present and past millers are also noted.

Twelve notebooks contain Gardner's comprehensive transcriptions of the inventories of mill properties from the 17th and 18th centuries, the wills

of millers dating back to the 17th century held at the Prerogative Court of Canterbury and the illuminating discoveries made by the 16th century antiquarian John Leland relating to the watermills of Lichfield.

Gardner also produced extensive notes on the precise locations of watermills drawing on Ordnance Survey and Tithe maps and detailed commentaries on the most up to date historiographical developments in the understanding of our milling heritage. She conducted a lively and purposeful correspondence with amongst others, Monica Dance, who was Secretary of the SPAB for 30 years and herself a leading figure in the post-war conservation movement and these letters also survive.

The cataloguing of her collection is ongoing, but this remarkable resource is accessible at the Mills Archive and, as more research is done, a much more rounded picture of Gardner has emerged.

Mills catalogue

There is no doubt that Gardner was a remarkable woman whose determination, drive and dedication to preserve and record the history of mills was formidable. The milling world owes an enormous debt of gratitude to her foresight and pioneering work. Her campaigning spirit lives on and reverberates through her Collection, which stands as a rich visual and written repository and a fine memorial to a truly inspirational woman.

Fortunately, through Gardner's campaigning and that of others, The House Mill, Bromley-by-Bow, did survive and is open to visitors. ■

housemill.org.uk/

Delve deeper into your industrial heritage

The Mills Archive Trust is the largest archive and library dedicated to milling history. Our shared industrial history is safeguarded within millions of records. To uncover more of your heritage and learn more about the work of the Trust, join our newsletter below.

new.millsarchive.org/#registerinterest