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Archives in Action: Protecting and Advocating for Renewable Energy Records Locally, Nationally and Globally

A case study from Elizabeth Bartram, Director of The Mills Archive Trust

Background Information

The Mills Archive Trust is an independent accredited archive service and registered charity. Founded in 2002 it exists to protect, promote and share the history of milling as well as wind and waterpower. With some 3 million records and 10,000 books and journals, the Trust serves 130,000 digital visitors per year. Its audience is made up of milling enthusiasts, as well as family, industrial and social historians, academics interested in a range of subjects including engineering and energy, architects and tradespeople.

To ensure the Trust's own sustainability by appealing to a wider and larger range of audiences and in response to the widespread need to preserve the history of renewable energy, the team has begun to develop stories and themes based around this history. The synergy already exists: the Trust's records show how wind and waterpower have been developed over hundreds of years including for the generation of electricity.

Overview

As part of the Trust's Strategic Plan for the past several years, the team is actively examining its collections through the lens of renewable energy history, for which much of its holdings are relevant. This has led to the acquisition of several key renewable energy collections, which particularly reflect the developments in technology and attitudes from the late 1960s onwards. These collections build on and complement the older collections cared for by the Trust, including records documenting the invention and development of early 20th-century wind

turbines in the UK by pioneer Edward Lancaster Burne. The Trust's specialist library is also strong on renewable energy history, including a growing number of books relating to electricity generation published over a span of more than 100 years.



Image 1: Burne Windmill in Thatcham, Berkshire. Taken in the 1920s, this photograph shows a Lancaster Burne wind turbine design, which was sold to private buyers and erected throughout

the UK (with one example also located in Australia). The Mills Archive Trust, REXW-ELB-GPN-04

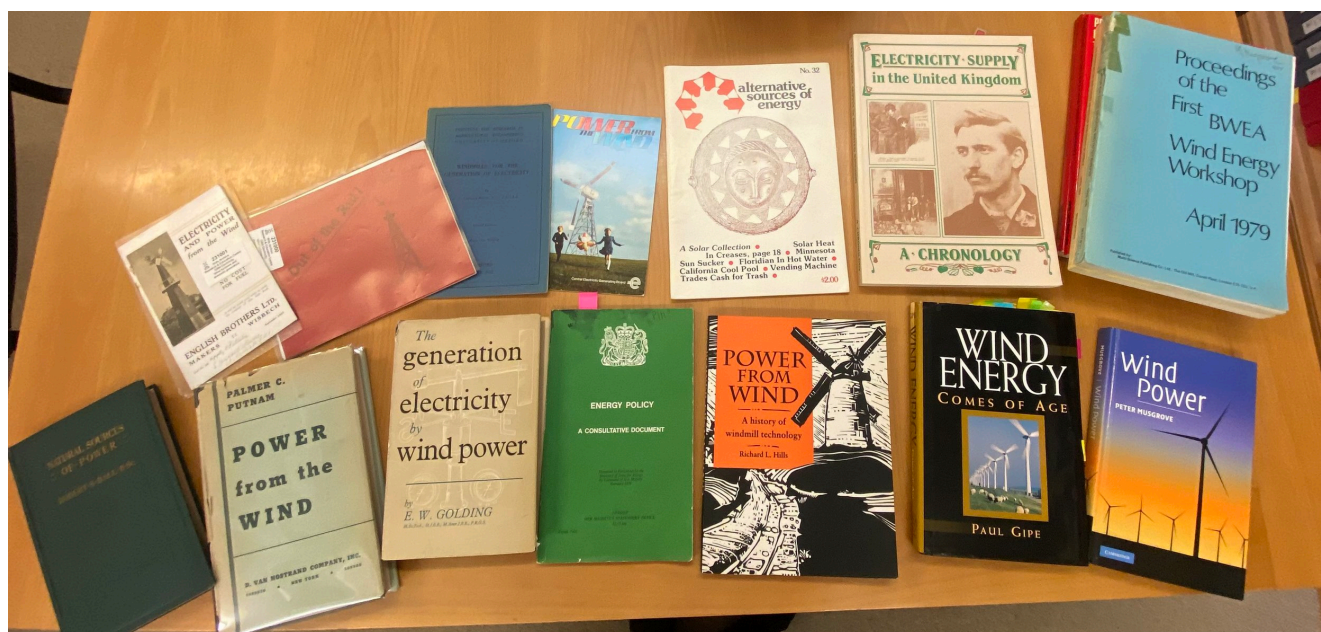


Image 2: A sample of books relating to renewable energy in the Mills Archive Trust's library

Funding

Commission through their European Heritage Days initiative, for a joint project with the Trust, Kolya and WWEA called 'Mills to Megawatts: The Story of Wind Energy Across Europe'.



Image 3: With support from the National Lottery Heritage Fund, made possible by National Lottery players, we have held regular public exhibitions and events for people of all ages. We

have used art workshops, guided walks, talks and published materials to educate and engage the public in the history of renewable energy, showcasing the breadth of records in our care.

Stakeholders and beneficiaries

Stakeholders and beneficiaries include those in the renewable energy sector and its advocates, young people concerned about climate change, organisations and individuals with relevant archival records including national archives, museums and specialist groups, and students of renewable energy. Geographically, people local to the Trust as well as the wider UK and the rest of the world are able to benefit. Collaboration locally, nationally and internationally has opened up a wider range of stakeholders and beneficiaries.

Challenges

The main challenge has been having enough finance and human resources to progress the programme. It takes time to build relationships and pursue funding opportunities, and much of the initial legwork has been conducted either on a voluntary basis or with the indirect financial support of the organisations involved, which have invested staff time in the process.

The ability to react to or ideally anticipate collections that may be in need of a home sooner or later has been key, and some of these new collections present grey areas not yet faced by The Mills Archive Trust e.g. whether to accept materials on solar or nuclear energy.

Another important consideration is how to bring an organisation's existing audience and supporters with them and not alienate anyone, so the Trust is experimenting with providing tailored communications for different audiences that still dovetail with each other.

Collaboration can also complicate some matters, as the approach has been to reach consensus when taking decisions and adjusting to different ways of working and different industries.

Opportunities

The Trust's team and those it is working with genuinely want to make a difference in the world by helping to preserve the history of renewable energy and demonstrate its contemporary relevance. The successes of the programme so far have been encouraging, and a collaborative approach means a bigger impact.

The work is creating new opportunities to engage different audiences, including young people. For example, the Trust has attracted a wider range of student applicants for its internships. One

such student is now helping the Trust to engage young people concerned about climate change and sustainability, by running focus groups to understand their interest and what barriers they face in accessing archives. They have now established a self-governing youth network to participate more regularly in the work of the Trust and to become an influential stakeholder on behalf of young people.

Additional funding opportunities exist when operating in the sustainability area, and the objectives align well with those of funders such as the National Lottery Heritage Fund when considering local and national engagement and impact.



Image 4: Starting with focus groups, we have invited young people into The Mills Archive Trust to encourage wider access and break down perceived barriers. Several have subsequently formed a youth sustainability network to discuss topics and produce creative materials in response to issues including climate change and food sustainability.

Outcomes

More people are learning about renewable energy history and the work taking place in the present, particularly the contributions of small community-grown initiatives and pioneers of the past century.

More people are learning about the significance of renewable energy records (as well as the importance of archives in general), along with preservation and public access issues and archival best practice. This includes individuals with their own private archives and those in institutions deliberately or consequently collecting such records for preservation and public access.

We are also building a picture of the existence and condition of renewable energy archives and are exploring what support could be offered, in the form of a network, access to archiving advice and the identification of suitable repositories for long-term preservation and public access.

A wider range of people who might otherwise not have been aware of each other are now being brought into contact, such as the colleagues at the Mills Archive Trust, the WWEA and the German Windpower Museum, at which the three institutions met in April 2025.



Image 5: Delegates from The Mills Archive Trust and World Wind Energy Association met colleagues at the German Wind Power Museum to exchange knowledge of wind energy history and archive initiatives in their respective countries. This visit was funded by the Council of Europe and the European Commission.

The visibility of participating organisations is being enhanced through these activities, which is being measured and tracked over time to assess impact, hopefully paving the way for future funding opportunities.

The Mills Archive Trust team is learning more about interdisciplinary and international working and how to communicate key messages to different groups of people, including archivists, artists, engineers, trade association representatives, heritage custodians and renewable energy pioneers.

Future Plans

The Mills Archive Trust team will continue to preserve, share and advocate for the records of renewable energy and their contemporary as well as historical relevance. The Lottery and

European projects are due to be completed by the end of 2025, after which time new funds will need to be secured to continue the work.

The Trust, Kolya and WWEA will use the results of surveying and relationship building to explore the establishment of a network of renewable energy repositories, subject to funding.

Connections are being made with individuals and organisations across the world and it is hoped that these will continue to be developed into the future.

Archives and Records Association (UK & Ireland)

The Keep, Creech Castle, Taunton, Somerset, TA1 2DX

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