

THE REX WAILES ARCHIVE

It was on the 7th of January 1986 that Rex Wailes, died. The executors of his will, made in 1976, were his wife Enid, Cecil Farthing, who had been the director of the National Buildings Record, and Michael Davis, Rex's solicitor. Once the basic terms of the will had been satisfied, the solicitor was no longer involved, and both Enid Wailes and Cecil Farthing were very elderly. Also in his will, Rex had appointed Rodney Law and Tom Paisley to ensure that particular bodies and individuals should benefit from relevant sections of his archive. At the time Rodney Law was deputy director of the Science Museum. Allegedly he collected some items, ostensibly for the Science Museum and Library, and then disappeared completely from the scene. Tom Paisley had sadly pre-deceased Rex. A portrait of Sir William Cubitt was destined for the National Portrait Gallery, and negatives and prints of British windmills, watermills and industrial archaeology were to go to the National Monuments Record. Items of general industrial archaeological interest, and particularly anything related to the Engineering firm of G. Wailes & Co., of 386-8 Euston Road, London, were to be deposited with the Science Museum.

It was generally assumed that Rex's archive had been distributed in accordance with his will, and that everything of value was in safe hands. However, on October 14th 1991, when I was living in Stanford-in-the-Vale in Oxfordshire, I was contacted by Enid, Rex's widow. She anticipated she might soon have to leave Davidge Cottage, Beaconsfield, Buckinghamshire, the family home. This would necessitate putting the property on the market, and she was concerned about what might still be there of possible mill interest. Realising the potential significance of this, I arranged to go over and assess what remained. On November 8th, I drove over to Beaconsfield, discussed the situation with Enid, and investigated what was still on the property. From a quick inspection it was clear that there was much of considerable molinological and industrial archaeological interest. Rex's office was basically a rather grand and well-equipped shed, close to the house, but there were three other sheds scattered through the large, wooded garden, in various states of repair. Enid was very sympathetic and helpful and was keen for me to go through any these sheds, salvaging what I could of relevant material that was worthy of retention. A few extremely important documents were salvaged from a waste bin straight away, and there was therefore a suspicion that other valuable material may well have been disposed of already.

Work started almost immediately. I would drive to Beaconsfield, spend the day working my way through the sheds, stopping briefly at midday to have lunch with Enid, and then pack the car with as much material as I could, before driving back to Stanford-in-the-Vale. I then unpacked it and stacked it in the former school-room. As soon as possible on my return I would open out everything and lay out to dry those items which required it. Rex's office was the first shed to be dealt with. This building was dry, and could be heated as needed, so it was a pleasure to sort through material here. Here, too, was the remainder of Rex's collection of mill books, and I was kindly allowed to purchase these. They are still with me, and I treasure them. After this shed had been dealt with in relative comfort, I moved on to the next shed, which was cold, but still dry, and I continued to salvage whatever was worth saving, before taking it back to Oxfordshire. After this, it was a matter of working my way through the other two wooden sheds further into the wooded portion of the property. As the distance from the house increased, so did the degree of dereliction, and it was tragic to see the state to which much original material had deteriorated. Some was just damp, but much was sopping wet. Mould was rife and a great deal was severely damaged by rodents and other forms of animal life. In some cases, mice had made their nests in papers, and the degree of destruction of some of the material was so bad that it could not be

rescued. It was a long, cold, wet, arduous and depressing task, but, by the end of February 1992, everything relating to industrial archaeology in general, and mills in particular, that could possibly be saved, was back in the old school-room at Stanford-in-the-Vale.

The Old School at Stanford-in-the-Vale is an attractive, mid-Victorian building of stone and brick comprising a large school-room and a small cottage, listed grade II. Latterly it had been used as the village hall. I purchased the building in 1983, and, by 1991, I had managed to bring the dwelling back into a delightful cottage, in which I was then living, but the school-room was still an open space stacked with a huge number of cardboard boxes, containing everything which could not be housed in the very small adjoining cottage. By good fortune this large space now became available as a warehouse for dealing with all the salvaged items. After initial sorting, anything which was in perfect condition was put aside, and the remainder was carefully laid out to dry. A certain proportion of the archive needed to be cleaned. Some of this was able to be done before the material dried, some could not be attempted before drying was complete. Some was beyond any cleaning and drying it out was all that was attempted.

This conservation process was carried on for over a year until I had amassed a large volume of treated and sorted material. I then contacted Robert Sharp, the archivist for the Science Museum Library and Archives, and explained the situation, and it was arranged that their van would come and collect it. On March 15th 1993 the van duly arrived. We loaded the archive and, as the van drove away, I heaved an enormous sigh of relief, never thinking I would see this material ever again! A small amount that was mill-related was left behind, for which I did not feel the Science Museum would be the best repository. At the time I wondered what would be the fate of the archive that had been taken. Nothing had been signed by Enid, her daughter Anthea, or me. I had not even seen any paper-work. On June 14th 1993 Enid visited my mill, Venn Mill at Garford in Oxfordshire. This was the last time I saw her, and she died on October 8th 1997. Davidge Cottage was finally sold early in 1998.

Time passed, and I would telephone Robert Sharp from time to time to find out what had happened to the collection, but it was always the same - merely in store. Years were passing, and apparently nothing was being done. It remained in store, with no further conservation measures being taken, no cataloguing and no public access. This was not what Rex would have wished. Furthermore, in 2007, the material was moved from the Science Museum to their store at Wroughton Airfield in Wiltshire, and here it remained, still un-catalogued and even more inaccessible to the public

The Mills Archive was formed in 2002 and, since I was one of the foundation trustees, I wrote to the Science Museum four years later suggesting the mill related portion of Rex's archive could be transferred to the Mills Archive. This would enable the material to be catalogued, conserved, and a significant part of Rex's legacy would be brought into the public domain at last. Anthea De-Barton-Watson, Rex's younger daughter was very much in favour of such a move, and she, too, wrote a letter early in 2007 supporting the idea. The points made by us both were that she was the successor to Rex's estate, her mother having died, and that no paperwork regarding the transfer of ownership of material to the Science Museum had been signed, by the Museum, by Anthea or by me. She and I agreed that, if the Mills Archive had been in operation when Rex was making his will, it would have been to that organisation that his molinological archive would surely have gone.

Unfortunately, the Science Museum was intransigent over the matter and refused such a proposal, and yet nothing was still being done with the stored material which I had rescued from Davidge Cottage. I was particularly concerned that no much needed conservation had been carried out since I had handed over the archive all those years before, despite the fact that some of it was in desperate need of attention. Furthermore, after all this time, no cataloguing had been done, and access to serious researchers was not permitted.

In September 2015 we were very fortunate in attracting Mike Evans, Head of Archive for Historic England, to become a trustee. This, together with the fact that the Mills Archive Trust succeeded in gaining fully Accredited status, gave us considerably more bargaining power. Now a fresh approach was made to the Science Museum, and, after considerable further discussion, it was agreed that a transfer of the molinological material from the Rex Wailes archive could be made from the Science Museum to the Mills Archive Trust. The transfer from Wroughton Airfield to the Mills Archive was eventually carried out on July 23rd 2019, twenty-seven years after I salvaged the material from the sheds in Rex Wailes' garden.

Alan Stoyel MBE
Document emailed to the Mills Archive Trust
15 January 2021