

Millers' Tales

A Report on the presentation made by Luke Bonwick at the SPAB Mills Section Conference (London, November 2008)

Luke summarised the results of the Kent Millers' Tales Project, which began in 2005 and was launched at Cranbrook Windmill in September 2007. The project was a collaborative venture, managed by the Mills Archive in partnership with Kent County Council and the Heritage Lottery Fund.

The modern archivist is charged with the task of making available to the public as much historical material as possible. Information technology, and the powerful archiving tools it provides, allows a worldwide audience to gain access to archival information – provided the members of that audience have access to a computer connected to the internet!

Many researchers prefer to handle and examine the original archival materials at first hand. One of the design elements of the Millers' Tales project was to offer a gateway to local and national repositories that hold material relating to Kent mills, providing information for potential visitors to the different archive centres within the county, as well as other centres, like the Mills Archive, beyond its borders.

Following the success of the Kent Windmills Restoration Project which began in the late 1990s, the paperwork generated as a result and held by Kent County Council was at risk of being filed away and forgotten. The Millers' Tales project has resulted in a comprehensive index of these files, and the most interesting elements have been brought to the fore via the project's website.

Millers' Tales has provided an opportunity to digitise and catalogue more than 7,000 items relating to Kent mills. Many of the items come from the Mills Archive's own collections. We were fortunate, during the project, to receive 'windfall' donations of other large collections of Kent mills material, such as that of the disbanded Kent Mills Group – an example of how the original plans for the project needed to be modified as work on it progressed.

In addition to the alphabetical lists of mills, people and milling activities that an archive user might expect to find, the design of the project's own website offered the opportunity to group certain items together according to theme. The resulting 'tales' feature, as themes, the watermills of a particular river; the mills owned by the County Council; the mills connected to a prominent millwrighting firm, and the escapades of an individual who became better known for destroying mills than for caring for them! In response to the current trend for family history research, the project has emphasised the people behind the mills and their stories, which are often very entertaining and revealing as well as being informative from a milling perspective.

Naturally, the project's results have a strong educational focus and transmit the message that the subject has lots of interest to offer, both to 'Young Millers' and older millers alike. Educational activity packs, prepared by the County Council and tailored to each of the mills it owns, are available via the website. A library page features details of the many publications relating to Kent's mills that are held at the Mills Archive. Although some mills are inevitably better represented by the material than others, brief details of as many mill sites as possible have been highlighted.

The best way to browse the results of the project is to visit the website at www.millsarchive.com/kent. Activity at the Mills Archive continues apace; the cataloguing and digitisation of the Frank Gregory Collection is our current project, and voluntary help with this mammoth task is welcomed!