

Kenneth Major: heritage architect and author



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Kenneth Major was an architect who drew up the schemes that preserved for future generations many of the windmills and watermills that were in danger of disappearing for ever from the British landscape.

The British countryside was once dotted with thousands of windmills, as so many landscape paintings testify. Large numbers of these windmills fell out of use in the 19th century and, without upkeep, gradually fell into dereliction as they were buffeted by the winds they had once harnessed so fruitfully. Thousands were simply demolished. Watermills, meanwhile, were being converted into homes with little thought given to preserving the heritage of the building.

The revival of interest in working windmills and watermills from the early 1960s onwards owed much to the dedication of Major, who was one of the first people to whom the Government turned when it decided that it must start auditing the condition of Britain's mills with a view to preserving the best ones.

As a result of this initiative, Major designed some of the best working-mill restorations, such as Stainsby watermill in Derbyshire for the National Trust and the cast-iron water wheel and pumphouse, built by the firm of Bramah in the 1830s, at Painshill, near Cobham, Surrey, which involved the repair and restoration of its 36ft-diameter wheel. Other notable restorations included Sacrewell mill and miller's house in Peterborough, Cambridgeshire, and Gelli Groes mill in Gwent.

Major was particularly adept at this work because as an architect he was able to produce fine drawings of the mill building as it would be restored as well as mechanical drawings of the mill workings. This helped to convince many sceptics of the case for restoring the building to its former condition.

Added to this was his passion for the subject. He built up an impressive collection of photographs and other documents relating to mills. His encyclopaedic knowledge was vital for providing the missing links for the restoration of mills that were already dilapidated and missing much of their original workings.

He used his extensive collection to write six books on the subject, which are required reading for anyone who wants to know about Britain's mills.

John Kenneth Major (known to all as Kenneth) was born in Reading, Berkshire, in 1928. He studied architecture at Durham University after the war. His growing interest in heritage architecture was encouraged in 1952 when he was awarded the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings' Lethaby scholarship. This enabled him to travel the country for six months to study historic building repairs on site, visit quarries and meet craftsmen.

Having qualified as an architect in 1953 he got a job at Imperial College London in its planning department. He joined London Transport in 1956 and spent the next five years designing bus garages.

His enthusiasm for restoration work was encouraged in 1961 when he got a job as an assistant to the prominent heritage architect Louis Osman. However, the conservation movement had yet to really get going and there was not enough work to keep him and he left in 1963.

The market for heritage architecture began to improve after the public outcry — led by the poet (later Poet Laureate) John Betjeman — at the demolition of the original entrance to Euston station, the Euston Arch, in 1962. This marked a turning point in public policy towards the preservation of industrial architecture.

The Ministry of Public Works decided to carry out a national survey of industrial monuments and Major was engaged to carry out an examination of mills in Berkshire. He would later carry out similar surveys for the Isle of Wight, Wiltshire and Northumberland.

The 1965 Planning Act enshrined the protection of the best examples of historic industrial buildings and Major was invited to join the ministry's wind and watermill committee.

Meanwhile, he continued to work as an architect in London for Hammersmith Borough Council and then Westminster City Council, where he was assistant city architect until the department was closed down in 1984.

At this point he was finally able to put aside the day job and set up a private practice that concentrated solely on the restoration of mills and other historic buildings.

He would often be brought in as an adviser on listed building applications for mills and for the application of restoration grants to the Heritage Lottery Fund and other bodies.

He was an active member of the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings — serving as chairman of its mills committee — and was a founding member of the International Molinological Society.

His books on mills include Animal Powered Machines; Watermills and Windmills; Mills of the Isle of Wight; Victorian and Edwardian Windmills; Watermills from Old Photographs (with Martin Watts); and Fieldwork in Industrial Archaeology.

He carried on visiting mills in obscure parts of the country until the end of his life. He never learnt to drive but mastered the vagaries of using public transport in rural areas, loyally assisted by his wife, Helen, who survives him.

Major was a founding trustee of the Mills Archive and all his records have been donated to the archive at Watlington House, Reading, where his wife now works.

Kenneth Major, heritage architect, was born on October 21, 1928. He died on July 25, 2009, aged 80