

The Rex Wailes Collection

Rex as photographer and mill recorder

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In our digital world, it is easy to forget the debt we owe to photography. Records of our 19th and 20th century milling heritage are enriched by photographs such as those in this issue of the owners of Leighton Buzzard Mills and their mill. The images are carefully arranged and typical of that period, no doubt requiring large equipment mounted on a tripod.

Rex Wailes demonstrated that the person behind the camera was equally important. Not only was he an engineer interested in mills, he was keen on using his more portable camera to take interior shots highlighting details of mill machinery. These records from the 1920s onwards are often unique and now form an important part of his legacy.

He was a forceful and quite brave character, persuading owners of sometimes quite dangerous structures to allow him access to mills that were already well on the way to disappearing.

Fortunately, he made often detailed accounts of what he had recorded and now we have his collection at the Mills Archive we can start to make these available to the public. They provide a meaningful account of the people and machines of our milling past. They are already proving to be of immense interest. Not only mills in the UK,

but also those taken abroad during his many travels. They show us both mills still standing and perhaps even more important for researches, mills that have disappeared, through neglect, demolition, fire etc.

On nearly all the images of Rex he is smiling particularly when meeting people. On those of him recording a mill or piece of machinery he is seen to be concentrating on the task. The camera was his trusty friend, and we must be thankful that he was such a good photographer as we can now see looking at the wealth of



images, many of which were captured on glass plates. His philosophy is captured in poem he frequently mentioned, found in a Sussex mill at the start of the 20th century.

The windmill is a Couris Thing,
Completely built by art of man,
To grind the corn for man and beast,
That all alike may have a feast.
An unknown Sussex windmiller