

The Rex Wailes Collection

Ups and downs of the old type millwrights

by Nathanael Hodge, The Mills Archive Trust

In the Rex Wailes collection at the Mills Archive there is a file of correspondence between Wailes and John Bryant (1861-1944), in his own words an “old type millwright” who saw his line of work gradually disappearing as the advent of roller milling drove the traditional wind and watermills out of business.

In 1881 an exhibition was held in Islington, London, which was for many millers their first experience of the new roller mills. It led to the rapid adoption of the new technology in the UK, but as John Bryant later lamented, “it struck a death blow to us old type Millwrights, although we could hold our own against the best engineers of the country.”

In 1936, on his 75th birthday, Bryant wrote some of his memories of “the ups and downs of the old type millwrights.” He remembered a hair-raising experience on “a terrible dark and stormy night” in an old watermill worked by the tide. Tide mills had to be worked as the tide was going out, whatever time of day or night. Just as Bryant and the miller’s apprentice were sitting down to enjoy bread and cheese and half a gallon of porter after a hard night’s work “...there was a terrific crash. The

whole floor of the mill seemed to heave up and the old mill shook and groaned.

“It put the wind up us for a time... we both agreed we had enough for one night, so took our old horn lantern and went home to bed. In the morning the problem was solved, the sea was full of porpoises and we came to the conclusion that a large one was chasing the fish down the channel under the mill and when he rose struck the mill floor.”

Another alarming escapade happened when Bryant was working on the sails of a large windmill. He was busy at work when the miller, forgetting he was there, set the mill working.

Luckily the movement of the shutters in the windmill sails had trapped Bryant’s hands and one leg, otherwise he would have been flung off, but as it was he was whirled around.

Fortunately, the baker was looking out of the bake house window, and seeing the mill moving he rushed to drop the brake. Bryant was left hanging head downwards, but after turning the sails around he was rescued, and a drop of brandy seemed to put everything right!

