

The Rex Wailes Collection

With the windmillwrights in fen and marsh

by Nathanael Hodge, The Mills Archive Trust

Another interesting find in the Rex Wailes collection at the Mills Archive is a typescript entitled 'With the windmillwrights in fen and marsh'. It is an account of the adventures of Douglas Reid in the marshes and fenlands of Lincolnshire, England, accompanying millwrights as they went to work.

In November 1931, Mr Reid accompanied Hunt Brothers of Soham to Cattell's corn mill, Willingham. He describes the scene:

"I arrive to find that Tom and Jack Hunt have been given sole charge of the undertaking. Tom, who has been disconnecting and removing the long iron 'striking' rod that tunnels the wind-shaft and automatically operates the sail shutters, is now aloft enjoying a few minutes rest. His position seems decidedly precarious.

"Mind you don't fall Tom' calls Mrs Cattell. But Tom only smiles. He is standing on the sail buck which has been rotated into the horizontal position. True, he steadies himself with one hand, but later will be holding on to nothing save the heavy hammer with which he strikes, using both hands, on the great bolts uniting the 'clamps' to the back. For in this mill there are additional timbers or clamps on each side of the back which besides strengthening it help to prevent slipping in the eye.

"... On the following day the back is removed. And now it is that the miller assembles his friends. And as it is a great occasion his daughter must hurry and fetch the cat and the kitten! The miller is



Lowering the 'back' of the sail

very proud of his cat and its mousing exploits at the mill.

"We make a merry party as we pull on the 'anti bump' rope attached to the lower end of the back. We resemble a tug of war tea heaving then giving way for a moment so that the back swings backwards and forwards. This seesawing has the effect of snaking the beam downwards through the eye."

A keen photographer and lover of the Fenland area

Douglas Reid was born in 1881. He was a keen photographer and a lover of the Fenland area and its traditions, and would have known Rex Wailes from the involvement of both in the Cambridge Antiquarian Society Photographic Survey. Reid worked at the Cambridge University School of Anatomy, but his life came to a sad end when, after losing his job, he committed suicide in 1934.

The typescript appears to have been sent to Rex Wailes for possible publication. Sadly after 31 pages the text breaks off and the remainder is missing.

We are fortunate however that this fascinating account was preserved among Rex Wailes' papers and has now come to light.



The Hunt Brothers' Waterside Works, Soham



Tom Hunt on the sails of Cattell's mill