

Milling industry stalwart Roger Butler, who began his career cleaning hessian flour sacks aged 14, has become the new president of the National Association of British and Irish Millers (nabim) the trade association for UK flour millers. Mr Butler, 59, takes over from George Marriage this month, having previously served as the association's vice president. Currently chairman of Whitworth Brothers and Carr's Flour mills, his appointment comes as the UK flour industry continues to face unprecedented challenges due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

Roger, you've been in the milling industry all your working life. What differences do you see from what it was like in the milling industry when you joined to where you feel we are today?

From when I started in the milling industry we are now in a different world and things have evolved and we have to found many different ways to produce flour.

You can see that technology is changing the way we work. Virtual meetings are not just on a computer screen, you are surrounding yourself, selecting your background and joining meeting-room tables for an overall experience. How long will it be before we have our corporate offices in our homes. The milling industry is evolving also. We have to be open minded.

How did you come to be in the milling industry in the first place?

My father worked for Cadge and Coleman, which was part of Whitworth Holdings. He was a flour miller himself but sold flour After the Second World War he worked in the screen room and on the roller floor as an assistant mill manager. When we had the first wave of Asian sub-continent people arriving, they wanted Chapati flour and my father went out and found what these customer wanted, which was alien to the UK market, and then he set up the mill to produce and it and then he sold it. That was in the early to mid-1960s.

Did that have a big impact what you wanted to do?

It was natural for me. I got taken to the mill to do something useful. I started in the mill at 14 packing hessian flour sacks and cleaning and all the jobs no one else wanted to do, including elevator boots below the water level.

I did that until I left school at 16-17 and went to Allied Mills at Uxbridge as a flour packer but ended up covering shifts and becoming a second miller and running the intake, the lab and anything else. Then on my 18th birthday Allied asked if I wanted to Canada. I immigrated and became a permanent resident of Canada and went to work for Sooline Mills in Winnipeg, which was one of the Western Mills as a miller shift worker! I had already got my City and Guilds first and second years before I'd even left school. At 16 I was doing City and Guilds and not working towards A levels.

Then I ended up in Papua New Guinea. A long story but I'd come back from Canada to the UK for the winter and went to work at Pledges Flour Mill Ashford in Kent, which was a milling business that had asked the institute for any spare millers and I was free so I went to run the mill.

It was only a two-tonne an hour mill and I was walking down Ashford High Street one afternoon, I saw in an job agency window an advert for a flour miller wanted in Papua New Guinea. Next minute I'm on the phone to Gillespie-Goodman-Wattie who had asked nabim millers for a mill in Lae as parts of the Australian-backed Commonwealth aid package to P&G to make sure there was food for the population. The mill had just been commissioned. It was a Robinson mill and I went there as a mill supervisor to run and train millers and ended up running a feedmill and a dock and all sorts of things that went with it as well.

We produced flour for Navy biscuits, which were shipped up into the Highlands and the by product went into our feed mill to produce chicken feed. That was between 1982-85.

And other places you worked in?

In 1987 china to commission Henry Simons first mill in rural china 80 miles up river from Wuhan at Wangshie and one of the first mills in China.

From there to Kirkcaldy in Scotland to work at Robert Hutchison remodelling that mill and running the operations before it was bought up by Meneba. I also did a lot of work in Russia with Perestroika with the Knowhow Fund and the CIS to keep the mills in St Petersburg and north of there in terms of wheat supply.

Then ended up coming down to Whitworth Brothers in 2000. We started building mills and investing and this is where we are today..

Did you settle down in 2000? You're back in the UK

No it was after China. That absolutely knocked the travel bug out of me. I wanted to go there and see China and spent six months in the mid 80s in New Zealand with a visit to Northern Roller Mills while on holiday.

What are the points that stand out in your mind as being key to the development of milling?

Thinking out of the box and challenging the status quo. Taking the best ideas and best practice and reinventing them and not forgetting them. An practical example, is putting cables on the outside of a mill. You can keep the snakes and mice out if you build a concrete frame for the cables to go through but fill with gravel. Nothing can get through that. No using flashing or mastic. It's the best pest control and hygiene junction.

It's all about the way you can apply these techniques in different places to get the best out of the packages you're offering. It's about innovation, challenging technology.

A classic is machines sweating in mills. You get mould build up behind the feed gates and then you need a miller to be checking the feed gates. If you stop the mould build up you don't have to check the feed gates. It's cause and effect - get rid of problems at source rather than try to manage them.

A classic example is you've got a window in a mill building, the mill gets hot and all you do is open the window. What you're really doing is blowing cold air onto a bit of kit that is going to sweat and then end up with mould and rust issues. You have to bring the air in from somewhere else.

Another example from Canada is if you wanted pest control in an old wooden mill you just opened the windows and switch the machines off over a weekend. You had to heat the motors and sifters up with paraffin burners to warm the grease but its best way to kill moth eggs - by dropping the temperature below 10 degrees which will kill them.

Is it taking an idea from one place and adopting at another, where it might provide a different dimension?

That's precisely it and that's what the business has done. And that is what we have done with the latest mill we are building with Buhler and the Mill E3 technology which is going up at Whitney Bridge South. It's an exciting mill build and William my son is the project engineer who is putting it together with Mike Peters our MD who has overall responsibility.



Is this new build the best yet, and what is the standout feature as far as you are concerned based on your global experience of milling?

What is in this mill has not been done before. The amount of AI in it is phenomenal and a complete step change in milling technology. The machines had to be adapted so that they could talk to each other.

This is the new methodology. It provides a road. It's a bit like a satnav in a car. You get in and it gives you a route. Where it gets clever is that if the road is blocked it will provide an alternative and possibly more than one but in addition telling you how much fuel you'll need plus how much time it will take and what you will pass on the way.

It's the next layer of intelligence, not just the way its run but on what's going in background and linking everything together. It then it starts telling you which options to take giving you the reasons why.

The more data you collect the more intelligent you can be. This is what's going on in other industries whereas in the milling industry a roller mill is a roller mill. We have to put the information we have in driverless cars onto milling machinery.

This is the way the world is changing,. How it will evolve from what we are using today. It's a different world. We won't be able to keep up individually, but the younger generation is more demanding.

You've seen the wider world got a whole raft of experiences. how do you see transitional countries catching up?

Yes, in developing countries the milling industry provides basic food which is a top agenda item for most political bodies because they have to feed their population and therefore you'll find the milling industry is quite well invested.

Africa is pretty well invested in milling probably more so than parts of the UK because its so critical to population growth. If you look at Indonesia milling operations are very efficient because they have a big population to supply.

They are replacing mills in China continually and they are not that old. They are on it because they have to feed a lot of

people. More developed country have more choice if that makes sense.

What are the challenges these countries face?

The biggest challenge in many of these countries is water and power. Without a national grid they have to put in regional gas-fired power generators. At the dock they have well-invested engines built by Rolls Royce. They need that to discharge ships and to power the mills so they can send flour out to the population.

Do you think the milling industry is up to the challenge of providing food for a growing world population - 9.5 billion by 2050?

Oh yes. Absolutely. It's whether or not the raw materials supply can keep up and whether or not it will be the same raw materials. Will it be more wheat and less rice as has happening in China, which experienced limited rice production because of a lack of water. Rice is harder to grow and you can feed more people with wheat in the form of steam buns and noodles.

And it's not all about raw material supply. Location and size are important as well and being in the right location for the consumer. This is the same everywhere - it's a balance between your raw materials, where your customers are and an energy supply.

What is the way forward for the industry? Is it becoming a more global, more joined up and interconnected global industry?

I think so. Knowhow has changed dramatically over the years and it's now in fewer and fewer hands. But Covid-19 has thrown a spanner in the works of globalisation. If you look back two years to where we thought we were heading it would be resulting in fewer and fewer producers globally.

I now don't think we are going to get to the same level of travel and setting things up that we had and it's going to be harder to move between regions in terms of business models and businesses. That window we had in the 1980s onward might be harder to access post Covid-19. That's just a thought.