

# ARTHUR RANSOME

## *an East Coast celebration*

He was an author, journalist, secret agent, artist and now a new photographic exhibition at Pin Mill reveals Arthur Ransome was a photographer too. **Anne Gould** talks to Anthony Cullen who has helped bring his images to light

**F**or many people, Arthur Ransome is all about the very best books of childhood. Reading *Swallows and Amazons* was the first time I experienced that peculiar delight of loving a book so much that you don't want it to end. But then being thrilled in finding there was a lot more reading to go – *Secret Water*, *We Didn't Mean to Go to Sea*, *The Picts and Martyrs*... twelve volumes in all. So discovering that he lived and wrote in Suffolk for part of his life and that two of his books were based locally, made those stories feel much more tangible and real.

After all, we've all experienced those banks of fog he describes that sweep in from the North Sea and envelop the estuaries in an other-worldly greyness. His local drawings of the River Orwell too, are recognisable even today, unchanged in more than half a century.

And now there are his photographs, which are likely to entrance local historians, literary fans, photographers and classic boating types in equal measure.

The exhibition at Anthony's Cullen's Pin Mill Studio is part of a year of celebrations and events organised by the Shotley Peninsula Tourism Action Group to celebrate 50 years since Ransome died, 80 years since the publication of *We Didn't Mean to Go to Sea* and 20 years since the formation of the Nancy Blackett Trust. It has been sponsored by the Heritage Lottery Fund and will be on permanent show.

The pictures, explains Peter Willis; president of the Nancy Blackett Trust, were discovered by a researcher some years ago in the Brotherton Library in Leeds, home to the Ransome archive.



Pin Mill by Anthony Cullen

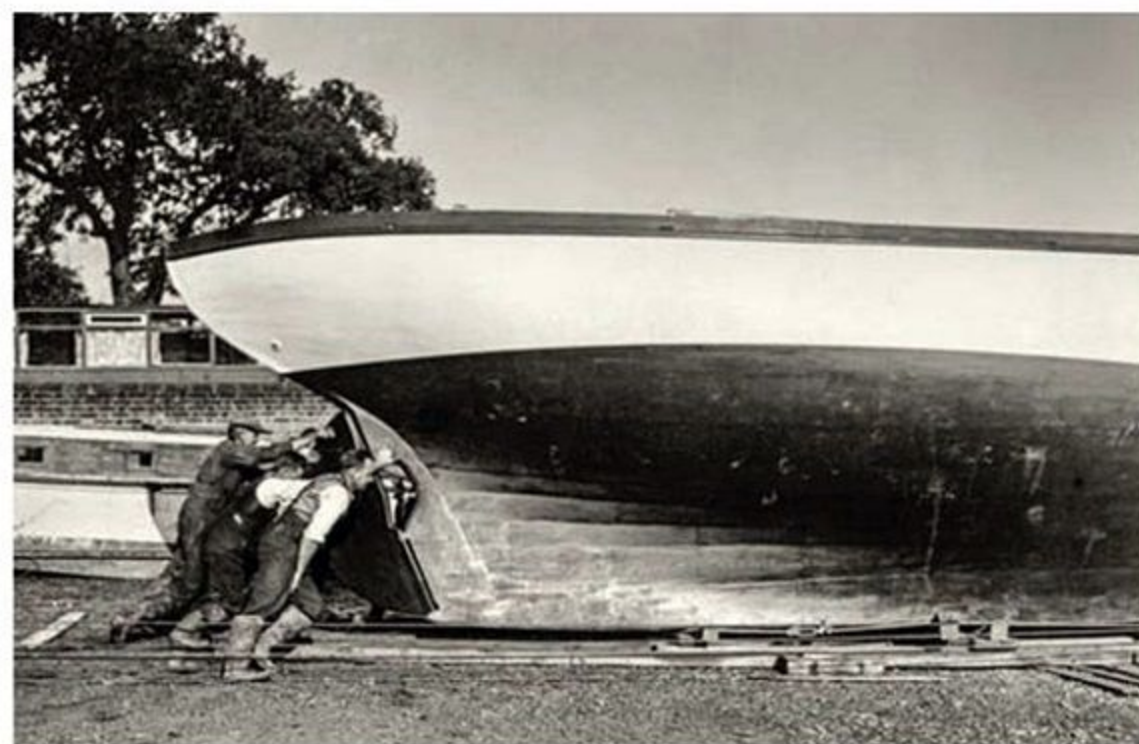




One of Arthur Ransome's restored images



Delivery of the keel of Selina King at Pin Mill



Pushing Selina King down the slipway at Pin Mill

They were not much bigger than an old cigarette card, were dark and in black and white but were part of a series which showed the building of a traditional wooden boat. Peter says that Ransome and his wife Evgenia moved to Suffolk in 1935 living in Levington and then Harkstead and had a selection of yachts which were moored at Pin Mill. These included the Nancy Blackett, on which *The Goblin* in *We Didn't Mean to Go to Sea*, was based.

But the pictures in the exhibition are of a boat he commissioned and loved; Selina King. Award-winning photographer Anthony Cullen said the images were scanned and sent to him from The Brotherton and he spent several months painstakingly re-mastering the collection to enable them to be printed in sizes large enough for an exhibition. "There were 80 images in all, taken in 1938 and they were all different sizes. They were scanned four times the original size and have been retouched to remove scratches, tea stains, hair and dust."

He has also worked his magic with these files to get a real sense of depth and contrast from the images and he says, as the layers were pulled back the pictures revealed something extraordinary. Pin Mill really hasn't changed much at all – even the short back and sides haircuts of all the men working on the boat don't look out of place with contemporary styles.

More extraordinary is that King's boatyard and shed, which featured prominently in Ransome's images, are still there today looking very much as if they're stuck in a time warp. Even the handprinted sign above the door is still in evidence. Anthony says "I chose 24 out of the 80 pictures I was supplied with because they formed a narrative about the building of Selina King. There are images of the keel arriving, the boat being pushed down the slipway and even the boat being 'christened' with a bottle of beer. ►



They also show Pin Mill's second pub, The Alma, next door to Anthony's studio and within a stone's throw of the Butt and Oyster. "At the time Ransome was living in Levington, although he later moved to Harkstead, and used to row or sail across the river to see how his new boat was coming along. It's obvious from these pictures that Ransome was a photographer, he had an eye for an image, the composition is good and I haven't cropped them at all," says Anthony.

Even to the untrained eye these pictures, revealing an unseen past, are of an incredible quality which poses the question what sort of camera were they taken on? Anthony said that at the time the Box Brownie camera was in common use, "But if you look at the quality of the image it suggests these pictures were taken with a really good lens." He's consulted a couple of camera experts and one has suggested these pictures may have been taken by a Leica III or IIIA because of the picture quality and the grain on the images. However, Malcolm Atkin, an expert in period cameras says, "It is difficult to be precise about what type of camera Ransome might have used and in large part it depends on how keen a photographer he might have been and therefore how

interested he was in keeping up with the latest technology. As a man in his 50s he was probably brought up on Box Brownies and these remained very popular as a domestic camera in the 1930s/1940s and could take very good shots. The newish 35mm cameras offered new potential for the keen photographer as being compact, used film cassettes, enabled easier composition and with the more expensive versions having rangefinders to assist focussing. The Leica is the most famous of those but was expensive and was by no means the only choice. A cheaper alternative was the Kodak Retina – a very nice camera in its own right."

Also part of the Arthur Ransome East Coast Celebration are walking and cycling trails, geocaching, a drama production, open air cinema, a Swallows and Amazon themed camp and sailing event, a Sea Shanty Festival and a Parade of Sail down the Orwell on June 4 with the Nancy Blackett.

### INFORMATION

[www.allaboutipswich.com](http://www.allaboutipswich.com) or on Facebook search for Arthur Ransomes East Coast

Evgenia Ransome at Pin Mill

