

GEORGE WOODS

Photographs from the 1890s

Irene Rhoden
Steve Peak



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MIDNIGHT
P R E S S

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank the many people who have generously helped with the preparation of this book and of the travelling exhibition on which it is based, Irene Rhoden's 'George Woods'.

We are particularly grateful to: Victoria Williams and the staff of the Hastings Museum, Brion Purdey and the staff of Hastings Public Library, David Burton, Ann Kramer, David Dine, Maureen Martin, Dorothy Rant, Noah Lee, Charlie Haste, Barry Funnell, Charles Hayward, Imogene Dorey, Marjorie Lucil, Marion Ogden, Sadie Ward and the staff of the Institute of Agricultural History at Reading, Arthur Gill, Brian Coe, Morris Newcombe, the staff of Berkshire Record Office and the staff of Berkshire Central Library, Reading.

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The Authors

Irene Rhoden is a professional photographer, working for the Department of the Environment. After graduating from the Slade School of Fine Art in 1976 she taught there until 1981, and then worked as a photographer at the National Gallery, British Library and Tower of London. In 1983 Irene received a bursary from Kodak to compile an exhibition of the George Woods quarter-plate negatives in Hastings Museum, and since 1984 the exhibition has travelled widely. *Steve Peak* is a journalist and author, with a particular interest in the past and present of Hastings; his previous books include 'Fishermen of Hastings', published in 1985.

First published in 1987 by Midnight Press, 28 Collier Road, Hastings,
East Sussex TN34 3JR.

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ISBN 1 85360 000 8

Design and artwork by Midnight Press (cover design by Graphic Ideas, Hastings). Set in 10/11 Else Roman and 9/10 Else Italic by Geoff Hutchinson, Brede. Laser separations by Praeger Blackmore, Eastbourne. Text paper 160gsm white coated cartridge. Printed and bound by Unwin Brothers, Woking, Surrey.

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Two Hastings fishermen.

Introduction



George Woods.

George Woods was an outstanding Victorian photographer, and yet until now his work has remained largely unrecognised. He was a highly skilled and dedicated amateur who specialised in taking pictures of holidaymakers at a leading seaside resort, a community of beach fishermen and life in the southern English countryside. Taken in the 1890s, the photographs reflect a unique combination of interests. This, together with Woods' remarkable abilities as a photographer, has produced a fascinating portrait of late Victorian life.

Most of the photographs in this book were taken in or around the Sussex fishing port and seaside resort of Hastings, where Woods lived for the latter two-thirds of his life. The remaining pictures were taken in other parts of the rural south, including probably Berkshire, his home before he moved to Hastings in the late 1880s.

But these are not so much photographs of places as they are images of the Victorians at work and play: the crowded, varied life of a major resort, fishermen struggling to make a living in small sailing boats, and the slow, traditional way of life in the country just before the internal combustion engine changed the face of rural England for ever.

Strangely, although George Woods was such a prolific photographer — more than 2,000 of his pictures are known to have survived — his work has not been widely known. This is because he seems to have made no attempt to publish or exhibit his pictures during his lifetime, while after his death in 1934 at the age of 81 his negatives and prints were simply preserved by his widow Ethel. He also worked alone, taking his photographs out of an intense personal interest in his subjects, and apparently without joining any photographic societies that would have brought his work before a wider audience.

It is only in the last few years that the full historical and photographic significance of Woods' pictures has been realised. In 1983 Kodak awarded Irene Rhoden a bursary to produce a travelling exhibition of his photographs, and the interest this generated, along with the value of the pictures for Hastings local history, prompted the production of this book, the first to be devoted specifically to Woods' work.

It is not known for certain just why Woods took these photographs, or even when and where some were taken, for little written data by Woods survives with them. Most of the pictures reproduced here appear to date from the early 1890s, possibly the years 1891-94 (other photographs in Woods' collection were taken later, up to 1899 or 1900, and it is possible that some pre-date 1891). Because his own notes are absent, nearly all the information in this book has been compiled by detailed modern research through Victorian street directories, guides, rating lists, books and manuscripts. In the end, however, it is the photographs themselves that must speak for Woods; fortunately for us their language is rich, detailed and informative.

The Life of George Woods

George Woods was born in St Albans, Hertfordshire, on 15 May, 1852. He was the son of William Windett Woods, from Norfolk, who ran a successful drapery business in St Albans.

George and his elder brother William also entered the drapery trade. In the 1870s they moved to Wokingham in Berkshire, where the business of 'William Woods, Draper and Grocer' was opened next to the Bush Hotel at 36 Market Place (since demolished, and now a large chemists). In 1878 George married a local woman, Mary Butler, whose family grocery business was just a few yards away from the Woods' shop. The couple lived in a small, brick-built terraced cottage at 29 Milton Road, which still survives. In 1879 Mary and George had their only child, Margaret, but



Rose Street, Wokingham.



Hastings town centre.

tragically for George both mother and daughter were to die relatively young, and he was to have no other children.

William Woods senior died in 1880, leaving his sons some share investments that were to prove very useful to George. In 1883 the Wokingham shop was sold and George's life seems to have begun to change. It appears that he began to develop a private income through dabbling in shares, reducing his need to work as a draper. This later allowed him to devote so much of his time to the photography that was to dominate his life in the 1890s.

In the late 1880s George and his family moved from Wokingham to Hastings. Their reason for moving is not clear, but they may have been prompted by Mary's poor health (at that time the seaside was still seen as having special curative powers for invalids). In 1883 and 1884 Mary's brother John had run a grocers shop at 9 George Street, Hastings, and this may have helped Mary and George decide on Hastings rather than any other resort. Their move to Hastings seems to have been spread over a lengthy period between 1887 and 1889, possibly with them starting off as convalescing visitors who then decided to make the town their home. These years overlapped with George's time at Wokingham, for he was also at that time on the committee of the Wokingham Institute, a literary society based at Wokingham Town Hall.

George Woods first stayed in Hastings at what was then number 117 (now number 19) Mount Pleasant Road, next to today's Post Office. Mount Pleasant at that time was a lower middle class area, and bordering the more up-market district of Blacklands. In 1891 the Woods family moved a few yards across the road to number 100 (now number 16), a solid brick-built terraced house on three floors, with a small garden. George made this his home for just over a decade.



The woman on the right is believed to be George Woods' first wife Mary and the girl his daughter Margaret, seen here on Hastings Pier.

The early 1890s was to be George's most productive photographic period, when he spent many hours taking pictures on Hastings beach and in the local countryside. But this was also a time of impending tragedy for the Woods family, for in 1893 Mary had an operation for breast cancer, an operation that could only postpone her death. She died in September, 1896, aged 49.

After Mary's death George and his daughter Margaret continued living at 16 Mount Pleasant Road. Margaret may well be the teenage girl seen in many of George's photographs in a variety of scenes.

In 1902, George, then 50, married 31-year-old Ethel Rant. Ethel came from a well-off family, her father having been in business at Abingdon in Berkshire. She lived with her parents in an imposing house called Banavie, overlooking Alexandra Park, in St Helens Park Road, on the Blacklands estate. Ethel was a religious woman, with an interest in missionary work and spiritualism. She may have met George at the Mount Pleasant Congregational Church, directly opposite his home, where she ran flower stalls at church bazaars in the 1890s.

Ethel seems to have brought some family money into her new life with George, for shortly after their marriage they moved, with Margaret, across Alexandra Park to 75 Priory Avenue, which was to be George's home for the remainder of his life. But again tragedy struck. In 1911 his beloved daughter Margaret developed a serious illness very reminiscent of her mother's. She was found to have a chest tumour, and after a prolonged and painful struggle she died, a spinster, in September, 1914, aged 35.

From the late 1920s George and Ethel employed a housekeeper, Helen Collins, who later recalled him as being a rather cantankerous old fellow, a perfectionist who wanted everything to be just so, but who was also very kind. He was quite tall, with a beard, and was sprightly when he was young. He loved talking to people, and spent many hours chatting with the Hastings fishermen while photographing them. He collected books, butterflies and medals. George and Ethel had a happy life together, and shared a passion for cycling, often pedalling long distances through the Sussex and Kent countryside. Ethel, a painter and lover of classical music, was a very fit woman, who took a cold bath every morning until she was in her late eighties. Helen Collins' daughter remembers Ethel as being very generous and helpful to her friends, and also recalls how Mrs Woods said she had received spiritualist messages from George after his death.

In 1930 George Woods developed prostate trouble, and after a four-year illness died on 4 April, 1934, aged 81, at his Priory Avenue home. Ethel lived for another 28 years, dying in 1962 at the age of 90, in a Hastings rest home.

George Woods the Photographer

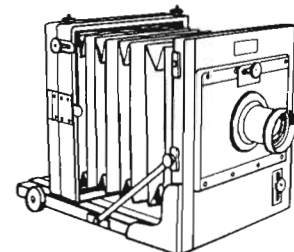
George Woods took all the pictures in this book using what were known as 'plate' format cameras. These differed from most modern cameras in that the image was captured on glass plates rather than celluloid film. This made photography with plate cameras hard physical work, for each negative required its own sheet of glass, while the camera itself was substantially built, usually of wood.

Glass negatives usually came in three sizes: whole-plate, measuring 8½" x 6½"; half-plate, at 6½" x 4¾"; and quarter-plate, measuring 4¼" x 3¼". Woods, however, also frequently used a non-standard size negative, 7½" x 5", producing a more oblong picture. Many Victorian photographs contain an exceptional amount of detail because of the sheer size of the glass negatives. A whole-plate negative is over 40 times bigger than the standard 35mm film used today, while even a quarter-plate negative is ten times as large. The size of the Victorian negatives is offset by the usually inferior technical quality of both the camera lenses and the sensitivity of the image-gathering emulsion on the plates compared with today's film cameras. But nonetheless many photographs taken with plate cameras a century ago — Woods' included — still possess a quality of detail unrivalled by today's equivalent popular formats.

Each size of negative at this time still needed its own camera, and half- and whole-plate cameras were usually so cumbersome and unwieldy that they had to be mounted on tripods. Quarter-plate cameras, on the other hand, were relatively portable and could be hand-held. A photographer with a hand-held quarter-plate camera was therefore likely to be more inconspicuous than one with a tripod-mounted bigger camera, and could produce more informal and candid pictures.



Ethel Rant, George Woods' second wife.



A plate camera.



Paul Martin's photograph 'The Swing', taken in 1896.



A similar picture by George Woods.

Woods used all sizes of plate camera. When he was in the Berkshire area he worked mainly with half-plates and larger; for his photographs of holidaymakers on Hastings beach he used quarter-plate almost exclusively, while for the Hastings fishermen and the rural scenes of eastern Sussex he employed all sizes interchangeably. The larger cameras Woods used were similar to those seen in some of his own seafront pictures, where professional beach photographers are shown arranging their clients. On pages 23-26 groups of holidaymakers are being posed beside the Lifeboat House and opposite Breeds Place, where can be seen a two-wheeled wagon belonging to George Berrecloth, a tintype portraitist (tintypes were one-off positive images formed on black enamel tinplate).

A famous photographer also taking photographs in Hastings in the 1890s was Paul Martin. One of his best-known Hastings pictures is 'The Swing', taken amongst the Hastings fishing fleet, which provides an interesting contrast in styles with a very similar photograph by Woods. Martin mainly tried to take spontaneous photographs, without his subjects being aware of his actions, using a lightweight Facile Hand Camera which resembled a parcel. Woods, with his more intrusive, often tripod-mounted equipment, achieved some of the same spontaneity with the Hastings fishermen through knowing them so well that they co-operated with him in taking the pictures he sought. Several fishermen are seen in different photographs, and were obviously well-acquainted with Woods. Elsewhere on Hastings seafront the large number of professional photographers at work there helped Woods merge with the background.

Woods' style of photography is very distinctive. He always tried to ensure a balanced, slightly formal composition, while at the same time capturing the life and vitality of his subjects. His complete collection is perhaps most reminiscent of his contemporary Frank Meadow Sutcliffe, then at work in the area around Whitby in Yorkshire. Sutcliffe, a professional, was a member of the 'Linked Ring' group of photographers striving to achieve the highest artistic standard in photography. Although there is no evidence that Woods had any contact with the Ring, his style shows him to have at least been in tune with it.

Hastings in the Early 1890s

All the photographs in the first two sections of this book were taken by George Woods in the Sussex town of Hastings in the early 1890s.

Section One presents a vivid picture of a popular Victorian holiday beach, packed with trippers and the people who made a living from entertaining and selling things to them. The holidaymakers seen lying on the beach, strolling on the promenade and hunting crabs in the rocks are mainly ordinary working people from the London area, perhaps on their annual works 'beano', or enjoying a few days with the family in a seaside lodging house. Amongst them are the boatmen, fortune-telling dogs and birds, punch and judy shows, flower sellers, photographers, shoe-shiners, musicians, and hawkers of toffee apples, ice cream, seashells, tea and cakes. Towering above them all are the huge sailing yachts that took the visitors for trips on the heaving ocean.

The extraordinary variety of activity in the Section One photographs (pages 12-27) shows just how popular the seaside holiday was in late Victorian times. On a beach only three-quarters of a mile long (between Hastings Pier and the Lifeboat House) tens of thousands of visitors, hawkers and entertainers formed a living throng of continuous activity that came and went with passing showers, and ebbed and flowed with the tides.

Hastings had been one of Britain's leading resorts for many decades, but just at the time Woods was taking his pictures it was at a crossroads in its history. The town in the past had attracted many wealthier visitors, including the 'carriage folk' who came with their own horses and carriages to stay for months. In the 1890s, however, these better-off people were deserting Hastings for the fashionable continental holiday, or the more modern attractions of new resorts like Eastbourne and

Bexhill, a few miles west of Hastings. It was in the 1890s that Hastings had to choose between trying to stop the disappearance of the wealthier visitors by investing heavily in upgrading its ageing facilities, or instead moving 'down-market' to specifically cater for the masses of trippers, seen in Woods' photographs, who actually wanted to come to Hastings. Unfortunately for the town, Hastings Corporation made what can now be seen as the fundamental mistake of trying to lure the wealthy (but with very little new investment), while at the same time discouraging the trippers by passing restrictive byelaws against many of the beach activities that attracted them. When the wealthy failed to return to Hastings, the town lost its sense of direction as a resort and entered a major decline that is still being felt today.

By chance, George Woods was taking his photographs of Hastings beach in the early 1890s, just before these new byelaws began to be effective in 'quietening down' the seafront. His pictures therefore provide an invaluable record of Victorian seaside life at its liveliest and most fascinating.

The Borough of Hastings actually consists of two originally separate towns: Hastings and St Leonards. Hastings was very old and had for many centuries been an important fishing port until it acquired new fame as a resort in the late 18th century. St Leonards was established in 1828 as a completely new resort, a quieter, up-market rival to Hastings, then increasingly the scene of disturbing hostility between the native fishing community and the local authority. Although Hastings and St Leonards rapidly merged during the mid-19th century, there was still tension between the two towns in the 1890s, with St Leonards considering itself decidedly superior. This was reflected in the type of visitor each town attracted, with the better-off preferring the sedate, almost suburban St Leonards, while the boisterous daytrippers loved the more spontaneous and down-to-earth delights of Hastings. George Woods, too, considered Hastings far more interesting, and it is striking that he took almost no photographs anywhere in St Leonards. All Woods' seafront pictures were taken in Hastings, where the trippers found the cafes, pubs, amusements, quaint back streets, sea views, cliff-top walks and historic buildings that made Hastings stand out from most South Coast resorts.

'Arry and 'Arriet, as the trippers were often called, brought much prosperity to Hastings, but not without causing some problems. Sensitive local residents frequently complained about their behaviour, particularly the amount of time they spent drinking noisily in pubs, the way they sang and danced along the seafront, the large numbers of them that would share one boarding house room (and bed!), and even about the undignified way they 'sprawled' on the beach. Some trippers were said to 'roam and roar like wild beasts', and eventually the police were given wider powers to bring them under control.

But not everyone agreed that the trippers were a nuisance. As one local newspaper said: 'In the aristocratic eyes of the West End (St Leonards) the tripper is an awful person, one who never washes, who drinks not wisely but too well, who sings rude songs and dances wildly in the streets, who votes quietness slow, and generally behaves in the manner known as 'rowdy'. The farther east one goes, however, the less unfavourable does the attitude of the local residents become, until east of Beach Terrace (opposite the Castle) the average person positively adores the tripper'.

That 'average person' was likely to be from a fishing family, as east of Beach Terrace lay the Old Town, the traditional home of the Hastings fishing community. George Woods found the Hastings fishing industry particularly fascinating, spending many hours there talking to the fishermen and



The fishermen's Stade at Hastings. The wholesale fishmarket is centre left, with the netshops stretching along under the East Cliff, and the fishing fleet on the brow of the beach.

taking the photographs that form Section Two of this book (pages 28-47).

The fishing industry occupied a stretch of foreshore only about 500 yards long in front of the Old Town, but here was an area of intense and unusual activity that attracted Woods at all seasons of the year. On this crowded beach, called the Stade, several hundred people made a living using their small fishing boats, as they had done for centuries and still do today. With no harbour to shelter the exposed Stade the fishermen launched and landed their lug-rigged sailing boats through the dangerous surf. The boats were hauled out of the sea and up the steep shingle by horses plodding round large capstans, while between fishing trips the craft were left balanced on the brow of the beach just above high-water mark. When the time came to go to sea the boats slid (or were pushed) down the beach across greased wood.

The fisherman's life was a hard and dangerous one. The most risky times were when the boats were landing or launching, as can be seen in many of Woods' photographs, while the fishermen might spend three days at sea in their frail craft trying to catch enough fish to make their trip pay. Once the fishermen were back ashore the fish were often auctioned on the beach beside the boat, and then carried up to the wholesale fishmarket on the open shingle opposite the High Street. From here the fish were shipped long distances, with herrings being salted and sent as far as Russia. Also at the top of the beach were the net shops, the tall wooden sheds, painted with tar, that are unique to Hastings, and which form the backdrop to many of Woods' photographs. Each fishing boat had its own net shop where its gear was stored, and around which the fishermen talked, worked, and passed the time between trips to sea.

The fishermen and their families lived in the Old Town, the most picturesque part of Hastings, with its mediaeval buildings and maze of narrow passageways and courtyards. But here too was found the worst poverty in the borough, with most of the fishing families packed into the overcrowded and unhealthy houses and tenements, earning just enough to live on in the summer, but facing starvation when the winter gales stopped the boats going to sea. Although Woods took almost no photographs in the Old Town itself, the poverty of the whole community is clear in the pictures of the children, dressed in patched and passed-down clothes, often helping earn an extra penny by doing odd jobs on the beach.

Despite being the fishermen's workplace, the Stade is also a public beach, thus allowing generations of inquisitive visitors and artists to closely observe one of the most unusual sectors of the British fishing industry. Woods spent so much time there that the fishermen came to accept and often ignore him and his cameras, while some even let him take pictures on board their boats. Again, Woods was recording scenes that were soon to change, firstly when an attempt was made to build a harbour on the Stade, and then, just before the First World War, when engines were installed in the boats and the old way of life based on sail-power disappeared forever.



Bourne Street, Hastings Old Town.

The Countryside in the 1890s

The photographs in Section Three of this book (pages 48-64) also record scenes that were soon to vanish, this time in the rural areas.

Hastings was the only town that George Woods photographed in any detail, for his first love was the countryside. The majority of his 2,000-plus surviving photographs are of the people, villages, churches, crafts, farms, sports and scenery of the rural areas around Hastings and his old home Wokingham. The country photographs on pages 48-60 all appear to have been taken around Hastings, while those on the final pages depict locations as yet unidentified.

In the last decade of the 19th century many traditional rural skills, crafts and industries were about to be swept aside by mechanisation and more intensive farming methods. Horses, and to a lesser extent oxen, were still the most important source of power, and the pace of rural life was dictated by the slow speed at which these animals worked. This meant that many villages were isolated and self-reliant, with their own distinct characters, while most jobs on the land and in the villages were labour-intensive, providing work for large numbers of people.

This 'traditional' country life — slow-moving, but full of people and activity — was steadily being undermined by the mechanisation of agriculture which had been gathering pace through the 19th century, with inventions such as reaping machines and traction engines. The most dramatic change was to come just after Woods took his photographs, when the internal combustion engine appeared on the agricultural scene in the form of tractors and lorries, rapidly displacing animal-power.

In the 1890s much of British agriculture was experiencing a depression, caused by cheap imports of agricultural produce, particularly wheat, undercutting the market for British products. Sussex farmers escaped the depression fairly lightly as they tended to practice mixed farming, including

sheep, dairying, poultry, hops, and fruit, and were therefore less dependent on arable crops. The farm labourers in many ways benefitted from the depression, because imported goods (particularly flour for making bread) became cheaper, reducing their cost of living. The labourers of the Weald were also lucky in the range of work available to them, particularly with the large acreage of woodland that provided many jobs in the hard winter months when farmhands were often laid off.

George Woods photographed many different aspects of rural life: ploughing, harrowing, and tilling the fields with horses and oxen, woodland crafts like hurdle-making, charcoal-burning, bark-stripping, broom-making and coppicing, cider-making, sheep-shearing, hand-reaping, hop-picking, hay-making and hunting (Woods seems to have been a keen follower of the East Sussex Hunt, based at Catsfield, and the Bexhill Harriers). Included in Section Three are several photographs of Rye Harbour and Rye, then still a busy fishing and trading port. The Rye fishing boats were very different from those at Hastings. They were much bigger, enabling them to tow a large beam trawl, and were gaff-rigged, a more complex system than the lug-rig found at Hastings, so that they could sail more easily in and out of Rye Harbour and the River Rother. Many sailing coasters were still trading from Rye in the 1890s, although these could not penetrate much further inland than Rye town, and so from here small sailing barges connected with villages and farms many miles inland on the local rivers. Many of the vessels seen in Woods' pictures of Rye were built in the town itself. The most famous shipyard was that of G & T Smith in Rock Channel, which specialised in building the biggest sailing vessels then used in the British fishing industry, the powerful deep-sea trawlers operating out of Hull and Grimsby, some of which still survive, a century later.

Sources

All the photographs in this book were taken by George Woods with the exception of the portraits of himself (page 5) and Ethel (page 6), and the Paul Martin picture (page 8). The Woods photographs come from three different sources: Hastings Museum, Hastings Public Library and the Harold Dine Collection.

When George Woods died in 1934 he left his photographic collection to his second wife Ethel. Woods had mounted most of the prints in albums, nearly all of which were donated to Hastings Museum by Ethel shortly before she died in 1962. The negatives at some time were acquired by local solicitor John E Ray, an enthusiastic collector of historical material. After his death the quarter-plate negatives joined the prints in Hastings Museum while the larger negatives were bought by Hastings Library, and now form the bulk of the John E Ray Glass Negative Collection. A set of 148 prints mounted on card were bought privately in the 1960s from another collector by Harold Dine (great-grandson of the William Dine seen with the telescope on page 27), and are now preserved by his son David as the Harold Dine Collection.

The majority of the photographs in this book come from Hastings Museum, with most of these being new prints made from the quarter-plate negatives. The remaining Museum pictures that have been used are new copies of Woods' own prints. The second largest group of photographs are new contact prints from Hastings Library's negatives, while the remaining pictures are new reproductions of prints in the Harold Dine Collection.



Homeward bound, with firewood and flowers.