

WHOM DID SBG VISIT AT THE CENTRE OF THE WORLD AND WHEN?

Raymond J. Scott

"What was the world coming to? The world - the centre of it - The Isle of Ely?"

The above is the opening paragraph of SBG's novel *Cheap Jack Zita*, a classic portrayal of 19th century farming life in the Black Fens. The novel's opening scene is in the front of the magnificent west porch of Ely Cathedral and within twenty yards of the Bishop's Palace. SBG describes the City of Ely as "the metropolis of the Fens" and goes on to say "There is not in all England - there is hardly in the world - any tract of country more depressing to the spirits, more void of loveliness, than the Cambridgeshire Fens as they are.

As one comes to expect from SBG there is no shortage of detailed local knowledge and flavour. The novel is one in which fact and fiction are expertly woven together to produce a thrilling story.

With the sudden death of her widowed father, a cheap jack trader selling from the back of his horse-drawn van, Zita is left alone to make her own way in this sometimes hostile environment. Vivid descriptions are given of the continuous battle against the elements even to exist, let alone profit, the digging of turf for fuel, the draining of the fens by windmills, claying or marling of the soil, with the freezing of dykes and rivers the subsequent expertise of the fen-man skater, the wide dependency of laudanum due to the ague - a form of malaria. People born and bred in these fens are proud to be called "Fen Tigers."

Several causes combined to produce discontent in the fens. Those who lived by fishing and fowling were angry because the improved drainage had destroyed their sporting grounds. The labourers were discontented because of low wages and the high prices. All these elements of dissatisfaction which combined at the period of this novel and the high price of wheat produced the explosion which resulted in the Ely and Littleport Riots of 1816 expertly woven into this story. The trial of the rioters came and judgment of death passed on thirty-four men, but only five were executed. Nine were transported for life and the rest served prison sentences.

The whole novel of both interest - particularly to me as a fen-man born and bred - and intrigue evolves around the village of Prickwillow, a tiny hamlet three miles east of Ely. The fens stretch around it like a sea, and in its great fertile fields are found celery, potatoes, sugar-beet and cereals. It is claimed that St. Peter's Church, Prickwillow is the only church in England erected on piles.

Cheap Jack Zita was first published in 1893 in three volumes and unfortunately, as yet, I do not own a first edition. What I do have is what is termed as a 'new edition' published in 1894, and a fourth edition published in 1896. The 1896 edition was the first SBG book I ever owned and at some stage of this book's life it had belonged to Claude D. Kingdon who was for 35 years, the vicar of Prickwillow. Written in the same hand on the inside cover were the words, "This novel was written in my study at Prickwillow."

I would be very interested if this were true and if so, where did SBG stay, and with whom? The book has been illustrated on the blank pages by numerous photographs of Prickwillow and farming views, also one of the church choir. They combine to give a vivid pictorial insight into this particular part of the world during very hard times.

I sincerely hope that my notes have been of interest and maybe someone will come up with the answer to my original question - Whom did SBG visit at the centre of the world, and when?

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