

CHEAPJACK and The Allinghams 1934

By John R Crampton

Serendipity or something discovered by accident was part of my good fortune about two years ago when I had gone into Staines in Surrey to carry out a few menial tasks like restocking on ink at Rymans, grabbing a bacon roll for breakfast and paying a few bills. I'm a very early riser so I'm always parked up at least two hours before anything opens which is all part of my routine that I learnt from living in the Far East for a decade – a way of avoiding traffic and queues. It also gives me time to relax in the car and listen to LBC radio whilst browsing the pages of the *Guardian*. But this frosty November morning was going to be different.

I'm a fairly voracious consumer of good and bad literature and generally never take much notice of book reviews which probably explains why I've read so many bad books. Nonetheless I always look forward to finishing my journey with a stop at the bookshop *Waterstones*. Despite my ageing physique, God knows what my BMI is, I still manage to get on all fours in front of the non-fiction bookshelves and hunt for something different to take home and read. My last great find was *The Measure of a Man* by Sidney Poitier. On this occasion, after sniffing around like a wet spaniel, I found a solitary lean paperback in the corner of one of the bottom shelves titled along its spine, *Cheapjack*, Philip Allingham and *Golden Duck*. It immediately piqued my

curiosity and I grabbed it. It was as if I'd been thrown a calling card.

On the front cover was a slightly eccentric collage with a rudimentary cartoon like depiction of a man in top hat and tails surrounded by tents all coloured in a variation of mustards, beige, a maroon cranberry with black & ivory whites. I'd never seen anything quite like it and was excited to see what they had to say about Philip on the back.

Visually the colours hadn't changed but there was an image of the first edition published in 1934 but what I had in my hands was the reprint of it in 2010 courtesy of Julia Jones from *Golden Duck* publishing who is also the biographer of Philip's sister, the crime novelist Margery Allingham who created Inspector *Albert Campion* which the BBC produced into a mini-series.

I must respect the book and allow its back cover to speak to you directly:

The year is 1927. Philip Allingham aged 21 stares out of an office window near Piccadilly Circus musing on life's futility. He has tried his hand at pretty well every job his parents would consider respectable, and failed... 'Suddenly it dawned on me – and the relief at the discovery was extraordinary – that there was nothing at all to prevent me from earning my living reading the future in other people's hands'

So begins the career recounted by Allingham in this thrilling vivid and richly comic memoir. Or, rather, the series of careers. . . . Being the True History of a Young Man's Adventures as a Fortune-Teller, Grafter, Knocker-Worker and Mounted Pitcher on the Market-Places and Fairgrounds of a Modern but still Romantic England.

And in a sense so began my journey with *Cheapjack* the book and the life of Philip Allingham. I have found from reading and re-reading the book that my journey through life in some way mirrors his. I also must confess that I have found *Cheapjack* to be the most entertaining and lively book I have ever read and as a 49 year old who has worked with the *International Herald Tribune* and *South China Morning Post* newspapers amongst other publishing ventures, I'm fairly balanced when it comes to objectivity.

Philip (1906-1969) was born into a household of writers. His father Herbert wrote pieces on a number of different topics for popular magazines in the Victorian and Edwardian periods whilst his daughter, Margery became a fairly prolific

and successful author who was partly responsible for keeping the many pages of diary notes her brother Philip sent her, in order over a number of years.

The honest truth is that Philip really had no idea where he was going geographically or how he was going to make a living when he got there. In one instance he arrived at a place called No Name in Northern Wales trying to sell iron hair curlers to rugged Welsh farmers but the outcome wasn't as one would've expected. In a sense he was crossing new frontiers and once he had demonstrated the hair curlers on a young farm girl, all the farmers wanted a set to make their wives and daughters more beautiful. Remember this was the interwar period of the mid-1920's nearly 100 years ago.

Philip travelled by train much of the time and sometimes got a lift with friends and his trade changed depending on the mood of the village, town or city he was slumming in. In Manchester he went door knocking, selling frustrated tenants wooden door signs saying 'Don't Knock Here' – an idea he and his chums had come up with days before and with great success. Only previously being aggressively shunned entry at every household they knocked at with the misguided notion of selling paper and pencils, to a majority that couldn't read or write!

His travels also took him to Whitby where again he tried to sell hair curlers on a tourist boat in rocky seas – he agreed to split the profits with the captain for free passage. When the boat came ashore most of the women could see the advantage of the curlers as they tried to tidy their wind swept hair.

We think it was Philip's laissez-faire attitude and his jovial eccentricity dressed in his uniform of top hat and tails that spoke to people in almost every level of society. He was perhaps a little bit of a court jester who enjoyed entertaining the crowd with a purpose.

When he wasn't working he liked to socialize with a drink or two and his companions and friends were diverse – The Ugliest Woman in the World, The Darkie Kid, Peter the Whistler, Flash Jackson, Madame Sixpence, The Yiddish and Ezra Boss of the Romany's. Let's not forget that Philip was also keeping diaries of the people he met and of the many new words he learnt, many of them foreign to him as an Englishman from London.

He decided it would be necessary to write a glossary in the back of his book to explain to readers in 1934 what they meant – which



The original cover



Philip Allingham

have since passed into the common parlance of today.

Look up 'bevy' (to drink) or 'bird' (a jail sentence) or 'busk' (to perform in the street) in the *Oxford English Dictionary* – or 'punter' or 'one's tod' or 'gezumph'

(gazump) and you'll find *Cheapjack* cited as the source.

Philip married an Italian lady after a stint in the RAAF in WWII and sadly developed a type of stomach cancer and decided 1969 would be his last year on planet earth.

You know when a book is really good when you start turning the pages more slowly as one approaches the finale and dreads the time you have to read that last page? For me I just hoped there was a *Cheapjack II* but there isn't. I doubt *Allinghamaphile* is a word yet but the person who opened the doors into a greater understanding of the Allingham clan is a fantastic lady who I've mentioned earlier – by the name of Julia Jones. She has also introduced me to the *Margery Allingham Society* and been of great support with my screenplay in providing original source material.

A film, television production or DVD hasn't yet been made based on the book, so I took it upon myself to enrol with *Birmingham City University BCU* to learn how to write one which I've completed with success. I thank BCU for advertising in *Empire* magazine, a type of bible for all things related to film.

I chose after a lot of thought, to give my screenplay a name and decided that *The Journeyman & Word Whisperer* made sense – I wonder what Philip would think?

Cheapjack is more than an interesting curiosity and a lively read, it is an important historic record of a way of life that was in transition, a society that was secretive and one that would ultimately close its doors to outsiders by the 1940s.

The book went on sale in the United Kingdom and the United States of America in 1934 with great success and strong reviews by the *New York Times*, *Sunday Times*, *Morning Post*, *Observer* and many others to the point that it has been reprinted for you to read today.

As a type of tribute to Philip Allingham, with a kind donation by Ms Jones and a thanks to our readers we have five FREE copies of *CHEAPJACK* to give away to the first five respondents.

Please email me john.crampton4@btinternet.com with your name and postal address and any comments and we'll send you your copy. Heritage World Media www.HeritageWorldMedia.com