



A snow goose chase

There are intriguing connections between naturalist Peter Scott, 'The Snow Goose' by Paul Gallico and Sutton Bridge

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Opposite: Wildfowl flying off the marshes towards The Wash

Below: Part of the Peter Scott Walk

Insignificant amongst the other volumes on our bookcase at home, hides a slim, slightly foxed Penguin paperback. Its humble appearance certainly disguises its fame. Written in 1941, 'The Snow Goose' by Paul Gallico, became a world-wide best seller. A true classic, this moving tale of Dunkirk has, over the years, captivated the hearts of many - adult and child alike.

In the story, Philip Rhayader, an outcast, comes to live at an abandoned lighthouse, where he works as an artist. One November afternoon, he is brought a wounded snow goose by a young, timid girl and thus begins a magical story of their friendship and devotion to the bird, in the shadow of the encroaching war.

Although the tale is set on the Essex coast, some readers may already be aware of its connections to the area around the Wash in Lincolnshire. It is well established that the main character (Philip

Rhayader) was based on none other than the late Peter Scott, naturalist, painter and conservationist, who lived in the East Bank Lighthouse at Sutton Bridge for six years in the 1930s collecting and taming wildfowl. Certainly at the beginning of the story, Peter Scott is only lightly disguised.

'In the late Spring of 1930 Philip Rhayader came to the abandoned lighthouse at the mouth of the Aelder. He bought the light and many acres of marshland and salting surrounding it. He lived and worked there alone the year round. He was a painter of birds and of nature' 'The Snow Goose' by Paul Gallico.

In 1932, when Peter Scott was in his early twenties and looking for a home in the countryside, amongst the birds, he was particularly drawn to the stretch of saltings between Kings Lynn and the River Nene. The whole area around the



Wash was familiar to him from his student days in Cambridge, as at that time he still enjoyed wildfowling in his sea-going punt 'Kasarka'.

Two ornamental lighthouses had caught his attention. Sited one on each bank of the River Nene, they had been constructed at the end of the eighteenth century to commemorate the artificial cut, which still brings the river out into the Wash today and which was a final stage in the draining of the Great Fen. These lighthouses had always been a landmark to Peter Scott on his visits to the marshes, and he had often thought how ideal one would be, if only initially for storing his gear on wildfowling weekends.

In 1933, Peter was lucky and was granted the lease to the East Bank Lighthouse from the Nene Catchment Board at a rent of £5 a year. It wasn't long before he saw its potential as a permanent home, but at that time, it was still in use as a 'hailing post' of H.M. Customs and Excise. Two officers, stationed at Sutton Bridge, would arrive and depart half an hour before and half an hour after high water, hailing any ship by megaphone, entering or leaving the river. Fortunately for Peter Scott, other arrangements were eventually made, leaving the lighthouse perfect for his purposes.

Although the East Bank Lighthouse had, in fact, been in use earlier as a dwelling-house, it had been condemned as too damp and had been empty for several years. Peter took it over, re-pointing the brickwork and lining the walls inside to make it drier. He lived there until the beginning of the Second World War, making various improvements, including the addition of a flat-roofed studio which overlooked the marsh.

It was during this time that he began to paint seriously. Brimming with enthusiasm, he worked all day and often into the night. The light in the Fens is one of the qualities which make it so appealing to artists and photographers alike. In each season of the year, its influence over the landscape is different. Keeping an image in mind of what he had seen whilst out on the marshes, Peter would return to the lighthouse, painting from memory and translating it, with his own artistic licence.

He would sail the tidal creek and estuaries and out to sea, and would be gone for days at a time, looking for new species of birds to photograph or sketch, and he became an adept at netting them to add to his collection of tamed wildfowl in the pen near his studio that formed the





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nucleus of a sanctuary.’ ‘The Snow Goose’ by Paul Gallico.

It was also at this time that his attitude towards wildfowling changed. It began with a desire to catch birds alive and to start a collection of tame wildfowl on the marsh surrounding the lighthouse. This change in outlook was gradual, but slowly it began to seem strange to him that he could have ever taken delight in killing geese. He was later to write in his autobiography: ‘When a bird crashed with a thud to the ground, how could I ever have thought the sound satisfying, even though I had not then heard the noise which follows an unopened parachute.’

In the 1930s, the River Nene had a rise and fall of about thirty feet and land reclamation schemes had not taken the farmlands further out into the Wash. Spring tides would surround the East Lighthouse on three sides, submerging the great expanse of salt marsh to the foot of the bank. By enclosing an area of about three acres of salting, Peter Scott’s collection of many species of ducks and geese soon grew.

In those early days, he was assisted in the care of the birds by Kenzie Thorpe, an unusual character, well known to the area as ‘Kenzie the Wild Goose Man’. A middle-weight boxer and a skilled wildfowler, as well as a local poacher, he knew a great deal about wildfowl and Peter Scott liked him. Some of his adventures included clashes with the Royal Gamekeeper at Sandringham and at a later date this interesting character was visited at his council house by Prince Charles, leading to the street being renamed ‘Royal Close’.

This first collection of wildfowl around the East Bank Lighthouse would initiate Peter Scott’s future travels in search of

birds and confirm to him the certainty of what he wished to do above all. It would shape his future life and later result in his foundation of the Wildfowl Trust and in scientific research and conservation at Slimbridge in Gloucestershire.

It was, however, not until after the war, when he came out of the Navy and was no longer living at the lighthouse, that he became aware of Paul Gallico’s best seller. It came as something of a surprise to him when he first learned of the story, a copy, published in America, having been sent to him by his old friend, James Robertson Justice.

Scott had met Paul Gallico some years before and certainly recalled telling him about his life and painting at the East Bank Lighthouse. Gallico must have been intrigued and suitably inspired to create the character, Philip Rhayader. The publishing of the book obviously rekindled contact between Gallico and Scott, and as a result, an agreeable proposition was taken up. There was to be an English edition and Peter Scott was asked if he would undertake the illustrations. Thus, in 1946 illustrated editions of ‘The Snow Goose’ began to appear in English bookshops and have been selling well ever since.

Today, as a small tribute, a plaque on the lighthouse records Peter Scott’s stay there in the 1930s. In April, 1989, shortly before his death, he opened the Peter Scott Walk. This linear walk runs beside the salt marshes and tidal flats, so important to the wildlife and birds he had loved all his life. From the lighthouse to West Lynn, along the top of the outermost sea bank for much of the route, it drops below the bank on a good track at the Ongar Hill End. Most walkers, however, may choose simply to walk out as far as they wish along the bank and return by the same route. As a wetland area of international importance, it has been designated a Site of Special Scientific Interest.

‘It is one of the last wild places of England, a low, far-reaching expanse of grass and reeds and half-submerged meadowlands ending in the great saltings and mud flats and tidal pools near the restless sea.’ ‘The Snow Goose,’ by Paul Gallico.

Bibliography:

Paul Gallico: ‘The Snow Goose.’
Peter Scott: ‘The Eye of the Wind.’
Edward Storey: ‘The Solitary Landscape.’
Brett Collier: ‘Waterside Walks in Lincolnshire.’
Lincolnshire Village Book, compiled by the Lincolnshire Federation of Women’s Institutes.

Below top to bottom: A blue plaque commemorates Peter Scott’s time at the lighthouse; Peter Scott loved the remote location of the East Bank lighthouse

