

Spotlight

This month - 'Egypt & the Holy Land' December 2009



Geezeh, the Sphynx and Great Pyramid c1857 643k

Nazareth, from the North West c1857 594Ek



The Francis Frith Collection was founded by the pioneering Victorian photographer Francis Frith in the 1860s. Although he is famous nowadays for the photographic record he began of Britain in the 19th century – a project that was continued by his sons, and later his grandson – in his own day he became a sensation for the series of very early photographs that he took of Egypt and the Holy Land. When he was only in his thirties, Francis Frith began a series of trips to the area which lasted from 1857 until 1860, recording in his memoirs that he wished to 'track the Sun back to his rising, and see the lands upon which his beams first fell'.

Francis Frith's images were widely seen in publications, and Frith went on to lecture extensively about the use of the new collodion process in hot climates. Frith's images were viewed by the public very much from a Biblical perspective, enthralled by the images of Egypt (the location of the Israelite's captivity and a place of refuge from the fleeing Holy Family), Jerusalem, Sinai and Nazareth, where Jesus grew up. We thought the December issue of our image feature would be a timely opportunity to bring you a few of Frith's images of Egypt and the Holy Land, to mark the season when Christians celebrate the birth of Jesus, who is also recognised as a prophet in the Islamic faith. We wish you all a happy, prosperous and peaceful New Year in 2010.

Each month we shine a Spotlight on a particular keyword, showcasing selected vintage photographs from the archives of The Francis Frith Collection.

Visit our website to view thousands more images of Britain in our archive.

Spotlight on 'Egypt & the Holy Land'



Nablous, Jacob's Well, near Shechem c1861 591



In his memoirs of his expeditions to Egypt and the Holy Land, Francis Frith appears to have been entranced by the people he encountered, and captivated by the mystery of the lands he travelled through. A devout Quaker, Frith was interested and tolerant of the different ways and beliefs he came across. Talking of the people he met, he wrote 'I have spent months, fearing no evil, amongst men whom we call real savages ... whose souls appear to be, if anything, rather more religiously enlightened than is the soul of an average, modern scientific professor', a remarkable departure from the viewpoint of many of his contemporaries who visited these lands.



Island of Philae, Pharaoh's Bed c1857 1820k



Island of Agilkia, Trajan's Kiosk 1997 A371002k

After the Aswan Dam was built, the island of Philae disappeared beneath the waters of the Nile, and the temple that stood on the island was moved to the island of Agilkia, which was reshaped to resemble Philae. Frith's photograph shows the original island of Philae with its temple in the 1850s, whilst in the modern image we see it on its new location.



Cairo, the Citadel Gateway c1857 12813k



Cairo, Citadel Gate 2004 c711004k

Of all the places photographed by Frith, it is arguable that Cairo has undergone the most obvious changes. The Citadel still dominates part of the Cairo skyline, although the sprawl of the modern city has now covered all the rock on which the Citadel is built. The Citadel gate shown in Frith's photo has now been tidied up and bypassed, and the main entrance to the Citadel complex is via the north or south gates.

Francis Frith used the collodion process for his photographic expeditions. This process used gunpowder dissolved in ether and alcohol. It provided a relatively stable bond in the form of a thin film between the light-sensitive chemicals and the glass plate, and allowed an image to be made which was as sharp as a daguerreotype, but which could be reproduced in the same way as a calotype. A further advantage was that it was more sensitive to light, allowing shorter exposure times. What makes the achievement of Francis Frith in Egypt remarkable is his reliance on water to produce a wet plate; in the extreme heat of the country, this is no small feat. The chemicals he used were also highly explosive. When we contemplate the photographer working in something like a mobile laboratory, dealing with very unstable chemicals in the heat of the Egyptian desert, we can feel nothing less than admiration.



Nubia, Colossal figure at Abou Simbel c1857 1793Ek

This was the toppled colossus which inspired Percy Bysshe Shelley to write his poem 'Ozymandias':

*'I met a traveller from an antique land
Who said: Two vast and trunkless legs of stone
Stand in the desert. Near them, on the sand,
Half sunk, a shatter'd visage lies, whose frown
And wrinkled lip, and sneer of cold command
Tell that its sculptor well those passions read
Which yet survive, stamp'd on these lifeless thing,
The hand that mocked them and the heart that fed.
And on the pedestal these words appear:
"My name is Ozymandias, king of kings:
Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair!"
Nothing beside remains. Round the decay
Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare,
The lone and level sands stretch far away.'*



Thebes, Osiridae Pillars and Great Fallen Colossus c1857 1850E



Gaza, the Old Town c1860 530Ek

For Francis Frith, Gaza's association with the Philistines was of some importance when he visited it, writing 'There is nothing more melancholy than the existence of a place, while its ancient inhabitants have become extinct. Gaza is still a city, but the Philistines have disappeared...,' but the place also has other Biblical links, notably with the story of Samson. Today, of course, it is part of the much disputed Palestinian Authority.

Jerusalem, entrance to the church of the Holy Sepulchre c1857 580k



Thebes, Hall of Columns interior c1857 1887k



Jerusalem, from the Mount of Olives c1857 566k



Frith Family c1885 578Ek

Francis Frith made his last visit to Egypt and the Holy Land in 1860. He recorded that 'Between times I had wisely fallen in love, but the girl was young; I would have one more grand spell of sunshine, and so finally brace up soul and body for the great events of life.' Here is Francis Frith and that 'girl', his wife Mary Ann, in later life with their children.

Jerusalem, Absalom's Tomb c1857 578Ek



Look out for our monthly Spotlight newsletter.

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