**Christopher Marie St John** (born Christabel Marshall) (24 October 1871 – 20 October 1960)

**Event:** Visiting Smallhythe Place for the first time in 1900

**Places:** Smallhythe and Ashford in Kent

English writer, Christopher St John, was a bicycle-riding, cigarette-smoking, Oxford-educated New Woman, briefly an actress on the West End and in the United States, an ardent suffragette whose dedication to the cause led to her arrest and near-imprisonment, and an unabashed lover of women,

Although St John is today best known either as the one-time lover of author and gardener, Vita Sackville-West, or as a member of the “Smallhythe Trio” – her *ménage à trois* with the theatre director Edith “Edy” Craig and artist Claire “Tony” Atwood – she was a prolific writer whose work covered biography, suffrage and avant‑garde plays, experiments in life writing, and over thirty years of journalism for British newspapers and magazines, including *The Lady* and *Time and Tide* (then known as the “Sapphic Graphic”). Her writing spanned the late Victorian period through to the late 1950s and fits into the intersection of Victorian urban gothic fiction (with a particular focus on Oscar Wilde) and the introspection of modernist writers, such as Virginia Woolf.

St John maintained a flat with Edy Craig in London’s Covent Garden, from 1900, but she lived part of the year with Edy in the Priest’s House adjacent to Smallhythe Place, both of which had been purchased by Edy’s mother Ellen Terry, the noted English Victorian actress.

Kent locations feature in her fictionalised autobiography, *Hungerheart*, her many biographical works about Ellen Terry, and her essay about Edy in Eleanor Adlard’s collection of essays, “Edy: Recollections of Edith Craig”.

On Chris and Edy’s first visit to Smallhythe, sent to view the property by Ellen Terry. “We went there from London by road on our bicycles, spending the night at the Saracen, Ashford, on the way. …Edy was always quick to recognize the potentialities of a house, however dilapidated, however blemished by gimcrack repairs… I was charmed by the water-meadows round the farm, its beautiful out-houses, its vast canopy of sky, it’s authentic rural atmosphere, but when Edy said of a room upstairs, piled up to the ceiling with fleeces, ‘This will be mother’s bedroom,’ I gaped at her optimism.”

Smallhythe Place had a convivial atmosphere, and many literary, theatrical and artistic friends frequently visited, including the suffragettes Vera “Jacko” Holme and Sime Seruya, illustrator of the Rider Waite Tarot deck Pamela Colman Smith, playwright Cicely Hamilton, and the author, Radclyffe Hall and her life partner Una Troubridge.

Hall and Troubridge once considered building a home for themselves on land adjacent to Smallhythe Place, to be closer to their friends, but reconsidered because the fallout from Christopher’s brief, disastrous affair with Vita Sackville-West had destabilised the Trio to such an extent that even the usually unflappable Tony firmly reject the idea with, “We can’t possibly have a house out here!”

Chris made her home at Smallhythe Place until her death in 1960.

**Bibliography**

St John, C. (1948) “Close-Up”, Adlard, E.(ed) *Edy: Recollections of Edith Craig*. Frederick Muller Ltd.

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Author: Carla Danella