



Hill Top (above), in the Lake District, where Beatrix Potter (below) lived from 1905, has been open to the public with the National Trust since 1946



The very best of Beatrix

This July marks 150 years since the birth of Beatrix Potter. Here, Matthew Dennison celebrates Beatrix the woman, author and conservationist

BEATRIX POTTER once described herself as a woman capable of 'seeing my own fancies so clearly that they became true to me'. This absolute conviction proved fundamental to her vision as author and illustrator. It indicates strength of will and clear-sightedness, characteristics that marked her for much of her long life. On the printed page, and afterwards as a sheep farmer and conservationist, she possessed to an astonishing degree the ability—and requisite determination—to realise her own fancies.

Today, Beatrix Potter is one of a handful of Edwardian children's



Frontispiece from *The Tailor of Gloucester*, the author's favourite

‘I do so hate finishing books. I would like to go on with them for years,’

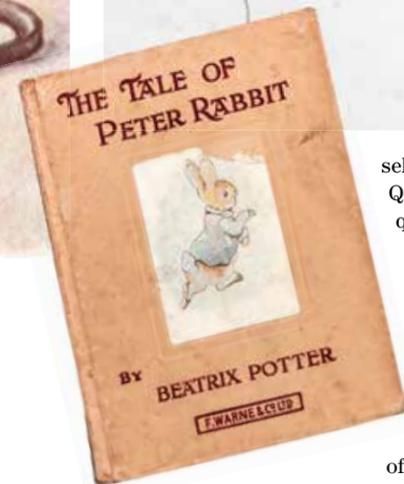
The National Trust Photolibrary/Joe Cornish/Alamy; Hulton Archive/Stringer/Getty Images; Frederick Warne & Co/V&A; Annie Eagle/Alamy; Frederick Warne & Co/The Lindner Collection

authors whose work remains as well known now as during their lifetime. Her 23 uniformly produced 'little books', published by Frederick Warne & Co, remain in print across the globe. To date, more than three million people have visited Hill Top, the Lakeland farm between Esthwaite Water and the western shore of Windermere, which Beatrix bought in 1905 with a family legacy and proceeds from her books.

Peter Rabbit cups, plates and mugs, produced by Wedgwood, have played their part on kitchen tables and at nursery tea for decades and hotly collectible are the china figures

of Potter animals manufactured by Beswick. Potter's 'fancies', once so clear to her, are part of the cavalcade of our national life.

As an outcome, it is simultaneously surprising and not. Beatrix was the elder child and only daughter of Rupert Potter and Helen Leech. Her London childhood was affluent and conventional, although, as the granddaughter of prosperous northern industrialists—on her father's side, a calico printer; on her mother's, a Manchester cotton merchant—she was excluded from the top drawer of Victorian society. Her mother craved social advancement and prided her-



Top right: An illustration from *The Awful Fate of Mr. Wolf*

Above: The book that sold a thousand Wedgwood nursery tea sets

self on her resemblance to Queen Victoria. Her father qualified as a barrister.

Deep in Beatrix's make-up was the imprint of her north-country roots: religious non-conformism, aspects of political radicalism, a belief in hard work and the importance of philanthropy.

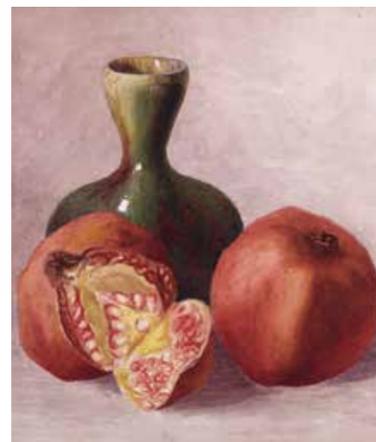
Her father's principal enthusiasm was not the law but art. In the sketchbooks he doodled in as a student at the bar is an image of a duck wearing a bonnet that would later find its echo in Beatrix's Jemima Puddleduck. His cultural interests were wide-ranging, from poetry and comic opera to paintings by Old Masters as well as modern artists and illustrators, among them Randolph Caldecott, whose drawings he collected.

As a young man, Potter conceived a passion for photography; in 1869, he was elected to the Photographic Society of London. He often worked alongside his friend the painter Sir John Everett Millais, for whom >

Timeline



Beatrix Potter was born in London on July 28, 1866, six years before her only sibling, Bertram. At first, brother and sister shared the nursery in the family home in Bolton Gardens. Their education was entrusted to a governess, Florrie Hammond. When Beatrix was 12, Miss Hammond recommended that she receive specialist art tuition. For the next six years, a Miss Cameron, engaged in November 1878, taught Beatrix painting, drawing, geometry and perspective



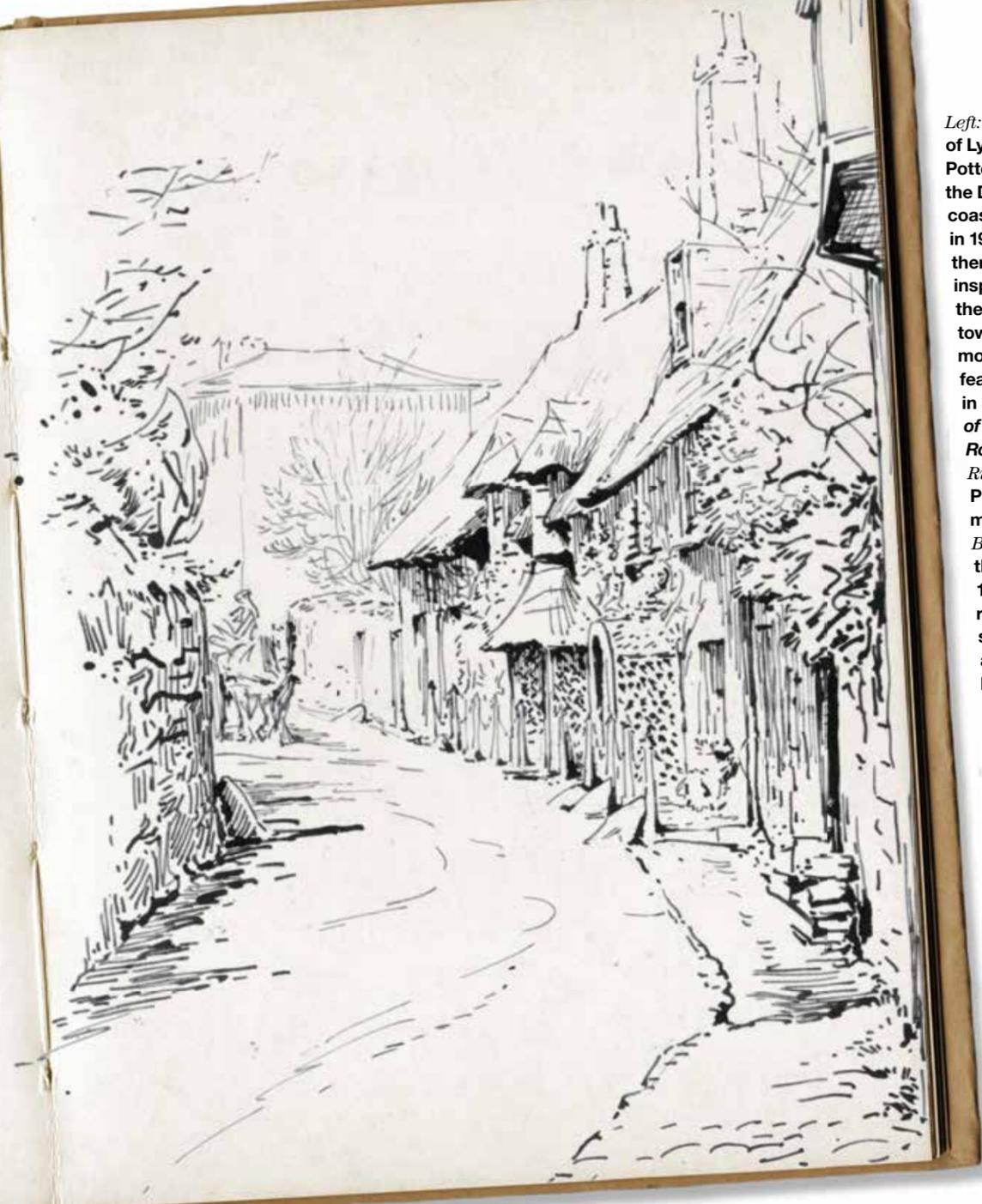
When Beatrix was 17 and Bertram 11, the latter departed for boarding school; Miss Hammond left Bolton Gardens that same year and Annie Carter was appointed Beatrix's new governess, providing lessons, for example, in German, until 1885



London-based, the Potters took annual seaside holidays and made lengthy summer sojourns in Perthshire (from 1877) and the Lake District (from 1882). For Beatrix, sketching and painting formed an important element of these holidays. In Scotland, she conceived her fascination with fungi. She went on to study fungi at the Royal Botanic Gardens in 1896 and, a year later, submitted a paper on the subject to the Linnean Society

In 1890, aged 24 and unmarried, Beatrix bought herself a pet rabbit, Benjamin Bouncer; he was succeeded by a second rabbit, called Peter. In 1893, Peter appeared in an illustrated letter and *The Tale of Peter Rabbit*, published in 1902. Over the next 20 years, Frederick Warne & Co issued all Beatrix's 'little books', ending with *The Tale of Little Pig Robinson* in 1930. By then, she was living in the Lake District as the wife of William Heelis

Beatrix had bought the 34-acre farm of Hill Top in 1905. Year by year, she added to her farmland, including, in 1929, the 4,000-acre Monk Coniston estate. Following her death in 1943, and that of her husband in 1945, the National Trust opened Hill Top to the public in 1946



Left: A view of Lyme Regis. Potter visited the Dorset coastal town in 1904 and there found inspiration for the fictional town of Stymouth, which features in *The Tale of Little Pig Robinson*. Right: Cecily Parsley making cider. Below: From the age of 12, Potter received specialist art tuition; Nature was always a passion





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he took ‘reference’ shots, either of sitters or backgrounds.

Like his wife, his involvement in the daily minutiae of Beatrix’s childhood was limited: his predilection for drawing and sketching, and the artistic milieu to which Millais introduced him, impressed itself on Beatrix. From an early age, her nursery life was dominated by her love for drawing, which her father nurtured. From the outset, it marched hand in glove with her fascination with the natural world.

Long periods alone with her governess in the nursery at 2, Bolton Gardens, South Kensington, protracted illness and an absence of friends may suggest that Beatrix’s was an unhappy, frustrated childhood. Like many lonely upbringings, it served to sharpen her imagination. The origins of her books were epistolary: a letter written to one of her governesses’ children in 1893, when Beatrix was 27, included the germ of *The Tale of Peter Rabbit*, printed privately by Beatrix eight years later.

The following year, the story found a commercial publisher and the successful—and lucrative—partnership of Beatrix and Frederick Warne & Co began.

Late in life, Beatrix described herself as ‘a believer in “breed”’. Something of the steeliness that had propelled her recent forebears to manufacturing success evidently stiffened

Facing page:
The rural idyll: background to the frontispiece of *The Tale of Pigling Bland*

Above:
Familiar faces: Benjamin Bunny models a Tam O’Shanter; Mr Jeremy Fisher in his lily-pad boat; Jemima Puddle-Duck, sporting her fetching blue bonnet and pink shawl; Mr Tod, unintentional ally to rabbits; and Mrs Tiggy-Winkle with Tabby Kitten’s mittens

Beatrix’s backbone, too. Stubbornly, she resisted the art tutor who tried to steer her from painting in water-colour to oils: ‘I think and hope my self-will... will guard me,’ she confided to her diary.

Like many artists and writers, she oscillated between certainty and self-doubt. After buying a squirrel from a London pet shop to help her with what became *The Tale of Squirrel Nutkin*, Beatrix was seized by misgivings. ‘I undertook the book with very cheerful courage,’ she wrote, ‘but I have not the least judgement whether it is satisfactory now that it is done.’

More than half of her books carry dedications to children, yet she herself was undoubtedly among the beneficiaries of her creativity. Repeatedly, she described her bereftness once a new story was finished. On completion of *The Tale of Mrs. Tiggy-Winkle*, she told her publisher, Norman Warne: ‘I wish another book could be planned out before the summer... I always feel very much lost when they are finished.’ After *The Tale of Two Bad Mice*, she admitted: ‘I do so hate finishing books, I would like to go on with them for years.’

In fact, her books occupied her for little more than a decade. Afterwards, she involved herself closely in the spin-offs, which arose from their huge commercial success; she was an assiduous respondent to the many young readers who wrote to her from across the globe and she continued to paint for herself. However, her focus altered after her purchase of Hill Top in 1905.

In the same year, she had become engaged to Warne. Only four weeks into their engagement, he died from

leukaemia. Beatrix retreated to the Lake District and stayed there for much of the remainder of her life. Over time, she added to her land-holdings; she became a knowledgeable farmer and was elected first female chairman of the Herdwick Sheepbreeders’ Association. In 1913, she married a local solicitor, William Heelis.

At her death, 30 years later, and then that of Heelis in 1945, Beatrix’s estate, including 15 Lakeland farms, devolved to the National Trust. Thanks to that testamentary generosity, Beatrix’s legacy is not only that of an author and illustrator of genius, but of a significant benefactor of the British countryside and, indeed, country life. 🐿

Matthew Dennison’s biography of Beatrix Potter will be published by Head of Zeus on October 6

The Beatrix Potter code and legacy

○ Between 1881 and 1897, Potter kept a secret diary, written in code. Potter expert Leslie Linder broke the code in 1958 and, in 1966, the diary was published in full and offers invaluable insights, as does *Beatrix Potter 1866–1943: The Artist and her World*, first published in 1987 to accompany an exhibition at Tate Britain

○ Hill Top, recognisable from pictures in *The Tale of Tom Kitten* and *The Tale of Samuel Whiskers*, is an inevitable place of pilgrimage. The V&A owns extensive collections of Potter’s work and material relating to her work