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## Rambling Through England's Lake District

# BEATRIX POTTER COUNTRY

Article and Photograph  
by Eric Minton

**B**eatrix Potter did not write pure fantasy.

Potter, who created and illustrated the popular Peter Rabbit series of children's books, actually knew a Peter Rabbit. She also had the pleasure of meeting Benjamin Bunny, Mrs. Tiggy-winkle, Jemima Puddle-duck, Pig-wig, Hunca Munca and most of the other characters that have enchanted nurseries since *The Tale of Peter Rabbit* was published in 1901. Granted, animals do not generally talk, wear clothes or take tea, but Potter gave her characters personalities and wardrobes that seem perfectly appropriate.

All of Potter's characters were based on animals that can be found in the woods and mountains of England's Lake District, which is where Potter drew inspiration for the settings of her tales. Today her fans can see those same settings, relatively unchanged, in the county of Cumbria, tucked under the Scottish border.

Potter's upper-middle-class family first visited the area in 1882, and the 16-year-old Beatrix quickly embraced the land of her grandparents. "My brother and I were born in London because my father was a lawyer there," she once wrote. "But our descent—our interests and our joy—was in the north country." Except for *The Tailor of Gloucester*, all of Potter's tales were inspired from her Lake District wanderings.

### Introduction to the Lake District

Every year thereafter, the family



The town of Hawkshead provided inspiration for Potter's *Tale of Johnny Town-mouse*

rented mansions in the north country for summer-long vacations. Beatrix took advantage of these trips to draw and study plants and animals, becoming a keen naturalist by her early 20s. Sexism in the all-male scientific community derailed her way to a career in botany and zoology, but routed her to immortality in the nursery. Her scientific sketches would later lend uncommon authenticity to the illustrations of her children's books.

As soon as she started making a living as a writer/illustrator, Potter bought two pieces of property—a small tract of land and a farm called Hill Top—in Near Sawrey, a village above the west bank of Windermere, England's largest lake and the heart of the Lake Dis-

trict. She paid frequent visits to Near Sawrey but didn't move there permanently until 1913, when she married William Heelis, the solicitor who negotiated her purchases.

Near Sawrey is the heart of Beatrix Potter country and Hill Top her shrine, since she used it so often for settings. The frontispiece of *The Pie and the Patty-pan* features the house's exterior, as do the garden illustrations in *The Tale of Jemima Puddle-duck*, *The Tale of Tom Kitten* and *The Tale of Pigling Bland*. Hill Top's fictional residents included Mrs. Tabitha Twitchit, her son Tom Kitten and the rat Samuel Whiskers from *The Roly-Poly Pudding*. Visitors can compare the book's illustrations with the house's interior and exterior as they exist today. Hill Top also has a dollhouse that contains the props Potter used in *The Tale of Two Bad Mice*.

Potter depicted other places in the area, the most conspicuous being the *Tower Bank Arms Inn*, where Kep the collie enlisted the help of two fox-hound puppies in *The Tale of Jemima Puddle-duck*. The cozy pub, with its wood and daub interior, glowing fire and friendly company, is an ideal venue for lunch or dinner. The menu features tongue-blistering hot homemade entrées and fresh vegetables, and service is prompt. Guests can overnight in one of the inn's two double rooms for £26 (US\$44) per person, inclusive of breakfast. The proprietors recommend that rooms be reserved several months

in advance.

Potter devotees will find more stately lodgings at *Ees Wyke Country House*, a Georgian-style hotel at the north end of the village. The Potter family rented the estate, then known as Lakefield, for the summer of 1896, which is when Beatrix was first introduced to Near Sawrey. She kept her menagerie of pets, her study and studio in the house's loft, now one of the hotel's bedrooms, and she painted several watercolors of the grounds and the landscape.

The hotel's lounge and dining room overlook Esthwaite Water, Potter's favorite of Cumbria's 16 lakes and the setting for *The Tale of Mr. Jeremy Fisher*. The road from Near Sawrey across Esthwaite Water passes the spot where Jeremy shoved off on his boat to fish for minnows, only to narrowly escape from being snatched up by a trout. As Potter knew from personal experience, the lake yields excellent brown trout, along with pike and perch.

### Country Ramblings

A great one for walking, Potter rambled far into the countryside around Near Sawrey, taking her sketchbook with her. She frequented Hawkshead, a village four miles away, where her husband kept his office. Its cobblestone streets, timber-framed houses, fine shops, pubs with dining rooms and claim to fame in containing William Wordsworth's grammar school give Hawkshead a must-visit rating among Lake District guidebooks. So little has changed there over the years that Potter fans can easily identify the house Timmy Willie visited in *The Tale of Johnny Town-mouse* and Mrs. Tabitha Twitchit's shop in *The Pie and the Patty-pan*.

Twitchit's store, located next door to what was Heelis's office, is now a shop and information center for the National Trust, a preservation society that owns nearly a

quarter of the Lake District, thanks largely to Potter. She helped check tourism excesses by purchasing vast tracts of land, dozens of cottages and 15 farms with flocks of Herdwick sheep, staving off extinction for that breed. She left all of her property, including Hill Top, to the National Trust.

Long walks with her husband provided Potter with many of the landscapes through which the pigs in *The Tale of Pigling Bland* wandered. Colwith Bridge, situated on a turnoff from the Ambleside-Coniston Highway, is the same stone span that Pigling Bland and Pig-wig used in their escape from Mr. Piperson. This road still provides an escape for modern-day wanderers as it leads to the Langdales, one of Cumbria's best known but hardest to reach places.

From top to bottom, the Langdale Valley confounds the mind with its rugged magnificence. A sliver of pastureland lies at the foot of the imposing Langdale Pikes, two rocky peaks Potter illustrated in *The Tale of Mr. Jeremy Fisher*. Trailing up the steep hills are stone walls ranging in age from 10 to 1,000 years old, and the clouds and sun cooperate in shading the landscape in varying tones. If the scenery doesn't take one's breath away, the single-lane, winding road might. Visitors will still find the best of Cumbrian hospitality in Little Langdale at the award-winning *Three Shires Inn*, where bedrooms look out on the landscape across to Tilberthwaite Fells, the group of mountains where Potters' grandmother grew up.

### Lakes for Inspiration

While the drawings and settings of her later books were derived from Near Sawrey and the countryside west of Windermere, the backdrops for three of Potter's most famous tales—*Benjamin Bunny*, *Squirrel Nutkin* and *Mrs. Tiggy-winkle*—were inspired by the

homes her family rented around Keswick, 20 miles north of Ambleside on the north shore of Derwentwater, another gem among Cumbria's lakes.

The Potters spent one holiday at Fawe Park, site of Mr. McGregor's garden, which was raided by Peter Rabbit and his cousin Benjamin in *Benjamin Bunny*. The estate is closed to the public, but a footpath runs along a wall around the garden, the same wall over which the two rabbits climbed and on which Benjamin's father paced. The garden can be seen by peering through a fence adjoining the wall.

The little red squirrel named Nutkin lived less than a mile south of Fawe Park in the woods surrounding Lingholm, another estate the Potters once rented. A footpath through this tree-dense terrain continues down to Derwentwater's shore, where Nutkin and his friends embarked on rafts to Owl Island (actually St. Herbert's Island) in the middle of



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the lake. The shoreline scene Potter drew now lies near a pier for passenger launches that run from Keswick to points around the lake.

Mrs. Tiggy-winkle's home—"a door! straight into the hill"—might have been one of the mine shafts burrowed into the ridge of a hill called Cat Bells, above Derwentwater's southwest shore; but while her home remains a riddle, little Lucie's house without a doubt was a farmhouse in Skelwith. It stands today as a guest house, looking almost exactly as it did when Potter drew it. The real Lucie Carr, to whom Potter dedicated *The Tale of Mrs. Tiggy-winkle*, lived in a tiny hamlet called Little-town, the name Potter used for the Skelwith farm in the book. An invigorating walk links Skelwith with Little-town along the lower slopes of Cat Bells, providing spectacular views of Newlands Valley, the same views that Potter painted for the background in *Mrs. Tiggy-winkle*.

Other Lake District sites associated with Beatrix Potter are not specifically represented in her books but do help her readers understand the context in which she wrote and painted. Wray Castle, the Victorian mansion where the Potter family spent their first Lake District vacation in 1882 and returned to often, stands about six miles north of Near Sawrey. The mock castle now houses a naval training center, but the grounds down to the lake—where Beatrix first discovered Windermere's natural abundance—are open to the public.

Brockhole, a turn-of-the-century mansion two miles north of Ambleside, presently houses the Lake District National Park administrative headquarters and museum, which contains "The World of Beatrix Potter," an exhibit of scenes from Potter's books in life-size tableaux. The estate's immaculate grounds also encompass the Squirrel Nutkin Nature Trail, a marked trail that

teaches children about the plant and animal life around Cumbria.

Beatrix Potter's purchase of Troutbeck Park Farm, just north of Windermere, helped to preserve a sizeable group of hamlets collectively known as Troutbeck. One of the hamlets contains Townend, a National Trust-owned 1626 farmer's house that Potter often visited. A stately home of its time, Townend boasts an antique interior to match.

**RESOURCES** England's Lake District is easy to reach. EuroAir offers direct flights to Carlisle, Cumbria, from London's airports and Manchester International Airport, 80 miles south of Windermere. British Rail now runs their daily Intercity service to both Kendal and Windermere. By car, Windermere is 270 miles northwest of London, a drive made easy on the six-lane M1 and M6 motorways.

Once in the Lake District, getting around takes patience. The most convenient mode of transportation is by car, though travel is often restricted by rugged countryside and the slow driving habits of area residents. Beatrix Potter herself made the journey to Near Sawrey difficult by helping to block road construction along Windermere's west shore. Depending on the time of day, the quickest way to get from Windermere to Sawrey is by ferry, a five-minute crossing running from dawn to 9 p.m.; however, the wait can take as much as an hour.

Hill Top is open March 26 to November 2; admission is £2 (US\$3.40) for adults and £1 (US\$1.70) for children in March, April, July and August, and £1.60 (US\$2.72) and 80 pence (US\$1.36), respectively, for the remainder of the season.

All types of lodging are available around Windermere. Basic overnight rates include breakfast; most hotels offer rates inclusive of dinner, too. For bookings at the *Ees Wyke Hotel*, which charges £17 (US\$28.90) per person for a double room, write Ees Wyke, Near Sawrey, Ambleside, Cumbria LA22 0JZ. The quaint *Three Shires Inn* earned a 1985 Inn of The Year award from the Automobile Association for its service, atmosphere and excellent food. The inn's rate of £15.75 (US\$26.78) includes a large

regional breakfast. Reservations can be made by writing Three Shires Inn, Little Langdale, Ambleside, LA22 9NZ.

At the south end of Windermere, the *Lakeside Hotel* stands next to the docks of Windermere Lake Cruises. The hotel particularly caters to children, with its recently remodeled Beatrix Potter decor and the Beatrix Potter Menu (featuring items like Appley Dapply's fruit cocktail and Mrs. Tiggy-winkle's toast chicken. Room rates start at £22.50 (US\$38.25). For reservations, write Lakeside Hotel, Newby Bridge, Cumbria LA12 8AT.

An excellent guidebook to the Lake District is Hunter Davies' *Good Guide to the Lakes*, \$2.95, published by Forster Davies Ltd., Calbeck, Cumbria. The Benjamin Bunny, Squirrel Nutkin and Tiggy-winkle trails around Derwentwater are detailed in "Lakeland Walks from Beatrix Potter," which is written by Wynne Bartlett, published by Frederick Warne & Co. and available at gift shops in Cumbria. The best current biography on Potter is Judy Taylor's book, published in 1986 by Warne.

The Tate Museum, Millbank, London SW1, is featuring a special exhibition of Beatrix Potter's artwork. The show runs until January 31, 1988.

From December to February, average temperatures in the Lake District reach highs in the mid 40s and lows in the mid 30s. In December, rain is heavy and frequent (one day in four, with accumulations up to seven inches), but by February, the rain diminishes to one day in 15. However, snowfall increases from once every two weeks during December (with accumulations of up to eight inches) to one day in six in February (with accumulations of up to 14 inches).

Currently one British pound equals US\$1.70; one U.S. dollar equals £.588.

For more information on the Lake District, write to the Cumbria Tourist Board, Ashleigh, Windermere, Cumbria LA23 2AQ, or call (096 62) 4444. For a copy of the booklet "Britain, Cumbria, English Lake District," contact the British Tourist Authority, 40 W. 57th St., New York, NY 10019, (212) 581-4708.

Freelance writer and photographer Eric Minton lives in Newmarket, England.

**Question:** Where was Napoleon lost in a maze?

**Answer:** St. Mark, Italy