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Extracts from the chapter in The Saturday Book for 1953, a copy of which is in the possession of Crispin Paine, Director of the Area Museums Service for South Eastern England. Potter's Museum is now in Arundel after a brief interregnum on Brighton seafront.

Contrary to general opinion, the Great Exhibition of 1851 was not exclusively an affair of pompous solemnity, of which the funny side has been apparent only to our own generation. It actually included quite a lot of comic relief that was officially so intended. A good deal of this was provided by Herrmann Ploucquet, 'Preserver of Objects of Natural History at the Royal Museum of Stuttgart', who showed a number of humerous groups of stuffed animals. These were 'humanized' creatures placed in recongizably human situations, and they were so popular with visitors that David Bogue published a book of hand-coloured engravings of them, employed as illustrations for children's stories specially written for the occasion. *The Comical Creatures from Wurtemberg* quickly went into a second edition. 'Everyone, from Her Majesty the Queen down to the least of the charity-boys, hastens to see the Stuffed Animals from the Zollverein', declared the preface; 'everyone lingers over them and laughs at them as long as the crowd will allow; and everyone talks of them afterwards with a smile and a pleasing recollection'. They were described by the Queen as 'really marvellous'.

One of Ploucquet's most successful pieces was of a frog shaving another frog. Two others, lent by Lord Leigh to the 1951 commemorative exhibition at the Victoria and Albert Museum, show 'Longtail Teaching the Young Rabbits Arithmetic' (Longtail was a stuffed marten) and a group of five kittens seated round a tea-table listening to a sixth ('Miss Paulina') entertaining them with songs at the pianao. Certainly, Ploucquet was an accomplished taxidermist; his work, as the official Catalogue of the Great Exhibition commented, was remarkable for 'the precise expression of intelligence' which he gave to his animals. But, though he introduced Victorian England to the possibilities of 'humorous taxidermy', I do not think that Ploucquet reached the summit of achievement in this curious craft. That honour was reserved for an Englishman, Walter Potter, who spent his whole life in the village of Bramber, Sussex, stuffing birds and animals. Potter had not only an extraordinary gift for humanizing his creatures but a transcendent touch of genius that turned what might have been jokes in rather poor taste - and there is sometimes a feeling of strain in Ploucquet's attempts - into fantastic little poems worthy of de la Mare, minor works of art creditable alike to man and beast (or bird).

Walter Potter was born at Bramber on July 2, 1835, and was therefore a lad of sixteen at the time of the Great Exhibition. There is no evidence that he went up to London to see the Crystal Palace, or that a copy of *The Comical Creatures from Wurtemberg* ever fell into his hands, but I should be surprised if he was not somehow influenced by Ploucquet's *tableaux*, which he might have encountered in reproductions in papers like the *Illustrated London News*, or heard mentioned by visitors to Bramber. Young Potter was well placed to hear any gossip, for his parents owned the White Lion Inn (later re-named the Castle Hotel) and he left the village school at thirteen or fourteen in order to help them run the place. From an early age Walter had been interested in taxidermy. As the number of specimens he had stuffed continued to grow, he was soon given the loft over the stable to use as a storeroom and workroom.

Before he was twenty, Walter Potter had begun to plan his first *magnum opus*. He obtained his inspiration from a little book - *Peter Parley's Present*, published by Orlando Hodgson - belonging to his younger sister

Jane, which contained the stories of Cock Robin and the Babes in the Wood. 'The Original Death and Burial of Cock Robin', a churchyard *tableau*, composed with admirable taste, finished off with pre-Raphaelite fidelity and presented in a handsomely decorated case, took him seven years of intermittent work to complete. The whole story is here, from the Sparrow who killed Cock Robin with his bow and arrow to Parson Rook with his book and the Owl who dug the grave. The sorrowful cortege extends through the churchyard, up a sloping path and out of sight through an archway. Some of the birds in the tree have tears (made from glass beads) in their eyes. Altogether there are ninety-eight specimens of British birds in this case. One is not at all surprised that it created something of a sensation among the visitors to the White Lion, when it was displayed for the first time in 1861, in a summer-house behind the inn.

Henceforth, Potter had no lack of commissions for preparing those stuffed animals which were the pride of so many Victorian parlours, and he found that he was able to make a living as a taxidermist. But the creative artist in him was not satisfied by routine jobs, such as the stuffing of late lamented domestic Fidos and Tabbies, and from time to time he conceived and executed his own characteristic groups which he added to his personal collection. In 1866 his newly founded 'business' was moved from the summer-house and installed in a larger building next door; and in 1880 it was moved again, to a specially constructed building nearby, which was now officially designated 'Museum'. By this time Potter was married to Ann Stringer Muzzell who came from West End Farm at neighbouring Henfield, and was founding his family of three, Walter, Annie and Minnie.

The brewers who acquired the White Lion from his father were very keen that Walter Potter should stay in the village, and built a house for him to live in - they sensed that already he was a local asset. How right these brewers were! Eighty years later, 'Potter's Museum' still draws discriminating visitors to Bramber, although its founder died in 1918 in the adjoining house - a sort of Villa Wahnfried in a taxidermic Bayreuth....

The first impression of the interior of the museum is of a glorious Victorian jumble of odds-and-ends. Stuffed birds and animals abound, including a number of freaks. There is even an enormous Coypu rat, forty inches long, which was shot on a bank of the river Adur, near Bramber; as it is a native of South America, the supposition is that it disembarked from a boat carrying timber at Shoreham, and was exploring the neighbourhood. An alarming apparition! But I soon forgot the rat in the contemplation of some old musical instruments, a length of telephone cable, an albatross, a Siamese war saddle, butterflies, beetles, boomerangs, the front foot of an Indian elephant made into a waste-paper basket, and twelve engravings of the Wandering Jew by Gustave Dore. As the eye accustomed itself to the rich, inconsequential mixture, the major works of Walter Potter - about a dozen of them, in their show-cases - gradually detached themselves from their surroundings. I became aware of a whole new world of fantasy, in which kittens played croquet with fastidious enjoyment, squirrels gravely drank wine and ate nuts, and rabbits frowned over their slates in the village school....

In the early months of the 1914 war, Walter Potter suffered a stroke from which he never fully recovered. He died on May 21, 1918, and was buried in Bramber churchyard, close to the east end of the church. The gravestone, overlooking the village street, can be seen quite clearly from the front of the house in which he lived....