



NatSCA

Natural Sciences Collections Association

<http://www.natsca.org>

NatSCA News

Title: Walter Potter (1835-1918) and his Museum of Curiosities

Author(s): Morris, P.

Source: Morris, P. (2005). Walter Potter (1835-1918) and his Museum of Curiosities. *NatSCA News*, Issue 5, 4 - 8.

URL: <http://www.natsca.org/article/300>

NatSCA supports open access publication as part of its mission is to promote and support natural science collections. NatSCA uses the Creative Commons Attribution License (CCAL) <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.5/> for all works we publish. Under CCAL authors retain ownership of the copyright for their article, but authors allow anyone to download, reuse, reprint, modify, distribute, and/or copy articles in NatSCA publications, so long as the original authors and source are cited.

Walter Potter (1835-1918) and his Museum of Curiosities **- Pat Morris, West Mains, London Rd, Ascot SL5 7DG**

Walter Potter was a country taxidermist of no great expertise, but he and the little museum he created became very widely known, being featured in countless newspaper articles and later on television. His fame was re-ignited in 2003 when his collection was put up for sale for the last time. This article is an attempt to collate what little is known about the man and briefly to document the history of his museum before its dispersal by auction.

Potter was born on July 2nd 1853 and spent the whole of his long life in the Sussex village of Bramber, where he still rests in the village churchyard. He was well known locally, being a churchwarden and one of the Parish overseers. He left school at the age of 14 to help his father by working in the local inn and in his spare time taught himself how to preserve birds and animals. His first bird, his own pet canary, was mounted when he was just 19 and its wiring was done in a manner typical of contemporary taxidermists, using the 'bind up' method, with wires pushed through a body core made of fibrous material as shown in 19th century taxidermy books. However, he seems to have changed this quite soon and practically all his later birds have the central wire pushed through the body, bent round and pushed through again, before being bent a second time and thrust back into the body core. X- rays therefore show a double loop of wire through the centre of the body, a distinctive feature that was not in contemporary books. Potter's fame soon spread and he was able to earn his living through taxidermy, although his work was mostly rather crude by modern standards. He had a tendency to create very boggle-eyed birds (especially birds of prey) and many of his mammals also have the eyes wide open and bulging too much, probably as a consequence of putting too much padding into the orbits before fixing the glass eyes in place. Despite the use of arsenical soap in preserving his specimens, which he made up for himself, he lived to the ripe old age of 83.

Potter was a skilled model maker, creating furniture for his animals out of cigar boxes, and he also painted the scenic backgrounds to his cases, often using diluted oil paints. This too was unusual as most taxidermists used watercolours or tints based on powder paints. Similar oil painted scenes also characterised the work of two other relatively local taxidermists, Kidd and Stafford of Godalming, although there is no known connection between them and Walter Potter.

Walter was the son of the local Innkeeper and his specimens soon attracted many new customers, so he was encouraged to build up his collection. This he did, concentrating on creating his famous 'anthropomorphic tableaux', depicting groups of animals behaving as though they were tiny humans. This speciality may well have been inspired by a visit as a 16 year old to the Great Exhibition of 1851. Children were encouraged to visit the Crystal Palace and marvel at the exhibits, among which were some groups of animals brought to London by the German taxidermist Hermann Ploucquet. He displayed foxes, re-creating some famous 18th century illustrations of the story of Reynard the fox. He also exhibited frogs having a shave and kittens serving tea; tableaux that amused Queen Victoria and pictures of which subsequently appeared in the 'Illustrated London News'.

Walter Potter quickly became the leading British exponent of this kind of humanised ("anthropomorphic") taxidermy, which formed the most significant element of his collection. His work expanded sufficiently to require a special Museum building across the road from the Inn in Bramber, first occupied in 1880. This flint and brick building, set in a pretty little garden, still exists a few metres off the main road through the village. By now, Walter was married to Ann Stringer Muzzell, who came from West End Farm in neighbouring Henfield. In time she produced three children, Walter (jnr), Annie and Minnie. They lived in a house adjacent to the Museum, specially built by the brewers who now owned the Inn, astutely recognising the value of Potter's work in attracting customers to Bramber.

Potter's Museum featured an aggregation of curiosities, ranging from spears to a man trap, Siamese pigs in formalin and a menu from the siege of Ladysmith, but the prime exhibit was his recreation of *The Death of Cock Robin*, featuring 98 British birds, some with glass tears in their eyes, and including four species now rare or extinct in Sussex (red backed shrike, curl bunting, wryneck and hawfinch). The sparrow was there with his bow and arrow, the rook with his book and the fish with his dish, just as in his sister's book of nursery rhymes that had inspired Potter to build this churchyard scene.



Centrepiece of *The Death of Cock Robin*, the model bull tolling the bell as Robin's coffin approaches the rook with his book.

It took him nearly seven years to create in his spare time, finishing in 1861.

He went on create other tableaux, the second being *The Upper Ten* squirrel's club and later the *Lower Five*, a rats' den (the titles of these scenes were taken from a popular song of the day). These tableaux were keenly observed social commentaries with clear class distinction between the two. The 18 toffs in the squirrels club had a servant bringing champagne and drinks on a tray and a junior offering a packet of nuts to his lordly superiors. One group were in earnest discussion as to which cards to play while others disputed some matter of the day over a decanter of port with much animation and tapping of the table with fingertips. By contrast, the rather scruffy rats' den was depicted being raided by the local policeman, who sees gambling over a game of dominoes, with money on the table and one player obviously protesting at the way the game has gone. An injured rat hobbles across the room, perhaps only recently escaped from a trap or a fight, and some of his fellow members appear to have drunk too much.



The Upper Ten - two squirrels discussing the finer points of a hand of cards in their snooty club. In Potter's day, red squirrels were still abundant in Sussex and many were shot to reduce the damage done to trees.

By contrast, the 48 little rabbits in *The Village School* personified youthful innocence (Potter wanted 50, but couldn't get the last two!). He visited the local school for inspiration, then made all the slates, pencils and furniture himself, but asked his wife to create the tiny clothes. Four classes were shown in progress, sometime in 1888. One of the pupils in the writing class had blotted his copy book and was standing on the bench in tears, having been caned. One of his friends watches him sympathetically. The girls in the sewing class included one who had darned the heel of a sock and proudly showed it to her neighbour.



The kittens' wedding

Elsewhere the rabbits stood in a group reading a book about the opening of Westminster Bridge in 1862. There was cheating going on in the arithmetic class, where others were busy writing in chalk on their tiny wooden-framed slates. The whole scene reflects typical school life for children in late Victorian times. *The Kittens Tea Party* not only displayed feline deportment and etiquette at its most elegant, but also included obvious gossip among the 37 kittens at this important social occasion, as well as tiny tealeaves in the cups. *The Guinea Pigs' Cricket Match and Band*, Potter's third tableau, had 35 animals. The match, started in 1873, was frozen in time with the score standing at 189 for 7. One of the bandsmen was shown being ticked off by the conductor for paying too much attention to the game. Potter carved moulds out of chalk to cast in tine the instruments used by the band. Each took him up to two days to make, owing to the difficulty of getting the molten tin to reach all parts of the mould, telling a visitor "when I was in bed and asleep I worked them out in my dreams". *The Kitten's Wedding* (completed in 1898), had 20 kittens wearing little morning suits or brocade dresses, and even frilly knickers (although these are not visible), plus a feline vicar in a white surplice. The clothes were

made by a neighbour and by Potter's daughter Minnie. It was the only tableau in which the animals were dressed, although my own collection includes a case of Potter's squirrels, wearing Edwardian clothes and playing cards, evidently created for a customer.

Miniature cows and a cockerel, needed for other tableaux, were made by purchasing small toys and gluing on real feathers or hair. Other details were confided to a visitor who reported them in “The Idler” magazine for 1894-5 (pp559- 573), including the fact that some of the animals (notably rats and toads) were killed specially by Potter himself, contrary to many later magazine articles that censored this bit of information. Many other kittens were probably the unwanted product of local freely reproducing farm cats. It was customary to drown such litters at birth, but why throw them away if Mr Potter could put them to good use? Gamekeepers provided an endless supply of (red) squirrels (many from nearby Wiston Park) and the local farmers encouraged dogs to catch rats in abundance. A dog called ‘Spot’ belonging to one of Potter’s friends (Mr Charman). caught the rats for *The Lower Five* and ended up also being stuffed herself after a particularly eventful life that included being buried alive for 21 days under heaps of straw at threshing time and later being shot in mistake for a rabbit. Finally, Spot was injured jumping out of a hayloft window to chase a rat and had to be put down. Potter’s own pets were also added to his expanding museum, including his white cat, neatly attired in a red bow tie and large numbers of assorted species of birds and mammals. Many weird and interesting gifts were also added to the collection, including odd souvenirs from travellers all over the world, ranging from a piece of the Great Wall of China to flowers from Charles Darwin’s grave (now lost). He was also given freaks of nature by local farmers, including a three-legged piglet, a four-legged chicken (killed by a hailstone) and several examples of kittens born with supernumerary legs and even double heads. These proved particularly popular with visitors and at least four of the freaks exhibited were featured on postcards sold at the Museum.

At least a dozen tableau were created, but the last (a courtroom scene, featuring squirrels) was never finished. In 1914, Walter Potter suffered a minor stroke and he died on May 1st 1918. After this, his daughter Minnie (by then Mrs E W Collins) and then grandson, Mr Eddie Collins, maintained the Museum as a famous tourist attraction in Bramber. During the summer months, it was one of the standard daily outings offered by local coach companies from Brighton, with tourists attracted from far and wide by articles in the Press (even in *The Motor* magazine). Then in 1972 the widowed Mrs Collins sold the original buildings and the collection, which was moved in ten lorry loads to Brighton. It opened there next to the Palace Pier for its 112th season. Later, the new owner (James Cartland, a relative of the famous authoress) moved it all again to a more suitable location, the Old Post Office in Arundel, Sussex, where still more curiosities were added, to create an even greater jumble of taxidermy and amazing oddities.



Mr Eddie Collins in the entrance hall to the Bramber Museum



James Cartland, in the Museum after its transfer to Brighton

The collection was sold again in 1986 and joined the Daphne DuMaurier memorabilia at the Jamaica Inn on Bodmin Moor in Cornwall (at a total cost of about £250,000). There the museum attracted some 30,000 visitors each summer, with some of them moved to complain about the animals for no logical reason. The new owners, John and Wendy Watts doubled the size of the collection by adding a lot more taxidermy, including animals from Gerrard Hire Ltd that had been familiar favourites of many films and TV programmes. These included the upright bear that was part of the clutter in Steptoe & Sons living room, Compo’s ferret from ‘Last of the Summer Wine’ and a horse’s head that featured in one of Hercules Poirot’s TV investigations (Morris, 2004). The Watts also added many other interesting items including domestic appliances, military badges, Queen Victoria’s bath and an old wooden butcher’s wagon, with a wax-work of Willi Brandt (the former German Chancellor) as its proprietor. They took good care of the collection, ensuring proper humidity control (for the first time in its history) and the whole museum was always immaculately presented under the keen eye of its custodian, Rose Mullins. A local taxidermists, Mike

Grace, was taken on to the staff at Jamaica Inn, with special responsibility for maintaining the collection, to which some of his own taxidermy was added.

A series of events around 2000-2001 required a review of the collection's future. Mrs Mullins and the Watts wished to retire and Mike Grace died. Moreover, the long-term development plan for Jamaica Inn envisaged using the museum building for additional accommodation. Despite attracting some 30,000 visitors per year, the museum was not the best use of space and the Inn needed more room. The announcement that the collection would be sold gained widespread national publicity. Bids were invited, but attracted only offers for piecemeal items. After more than a year in which nobody came forward to preserve the collection intact, Bonham's was instructed to auction it in September 2003. The sale at the Inn attracted unprecedented national and international publicity, probably the most high-profile event Bonham's had ever organised. At the last moment a famous artist was widely reported to be offering a million pounds to save it for the nation. Unfortunately this offer came too late and seems to have been made to the media, not to the owners, so the collection was sold by auction.

The sale attracted over 400 people, including dealers, media folk and collectors. The most famous of the tableaux (*The Death of Cock Robin*) was sold to the Victorian Taxidermy Company for over £20,000, the most expensive item in the sale. It has remained in Britain, in the hands of a private collector, but *The Kittens Wedding* went to America (for £18,000 plus buyer's premium) as did at least two more of the tableaux. The others fetched considerably less, and sold for well under £10,000 each. Subsequently, *The Guinea Pig's Cricket Match* was bought at Olympia for more than £15,000 and is rumoured to have gone abroad.

Potter's collection was no more. After 140 years of delighting and mystifying more than a million visitors, this unique assemblage was scattered across the country and over the Atlantic. Some have criticised the Watts for allowing this to happen, but the whole sorry business of dispersal could easily have happened at any of the earlier times that the collection had been sold. At least the Watts had cared for the collection better than any of its previous owners. If blame is to be laid at anyone's door, then why not the major institutions? The Victoria and Albert Museum, for example, actually borrowed *The Kittens Wedding* recently for a major display of their own about major aspects of the Victorian era (for which visitors were charged entry). Yet they did not express interest in saving the core of the Potter collection (and declined to accept my own taxidermy archive collection, even as a gift). Many other museums in private or public ownership might also have stepped in, but did not, apparently preferring to collect the folk artefacts of foreign countries rather than preserve a unique example of English whimsy that has delighted so many for so long. Perhaps their reticence was due to political correctness, but the whole point of museums (and art galleries) is to preserve examples that typify their times, not to attempt a retrospective censorship of things that become unfashionable. Perhaps in the future some regrets will be forthcoming, but it will then be too late. Already some of the Potter material has been sold on (The crocodile mummy, £1,900 at the auction, was sold by Sotheby's in 2004 for about double that. The two-headed lamb seen in so many postcards of Potter's museum, was offered on the internet in 2004 for £3,500). Several significant items have gone abroad, divorced from their cultural context, and cannot now be retrieved.

Although the sale as a whole raised over half a million pounds, the core Potter collection, including all the tableaux, was sold for barely £100,000. This amount would not buy even a modest oil painting, yet galleries frequently spend similar sums on works of art that are deemed to be of significance. However, no painting purchased for so little would attract so much publicity as did Potter's animals, nor would it have anything like the effect on an institution's visitor numbers. Doubtless Mr Potter would find the prices paid for his creations even more amazing than his own collection, but he would surely have been disappointed at the lack of vision shown by the official custodians of British heritage. It seems that taxidermy and its part in English social history is appreciated by some, but those with the strongest interest and commitment seem not to live here. What a pity.

References:

Morris, P.A. (2004) Edward Gerrard & sons – A Taxidermy Memoir (MPM, Ascot)



Walter Potter setting up a sparrow hawk in 1880, binding the freshly prepared bird so that the feathers will be held properly in place.



The rabbits' school



The guinea pig band



Potter at Bramber Museum, circa 1912



An 8 legged kitten, one of the most popular of the selection of animal freaks, illustrated on a museum postcard.