Stride into autumn with our Great British Walk!

TRAILBLAZERS
Toyah Willcox and others step out for our walking festival

TRACING OUR PAST ROUTES
Why our paths have the power to ground us

LINGER IN THE LAKES
Emma Thompson follows in the footsteps of Beatrix Potter

WIN!
A foodie break away and a Trust holiday
Dip into... Our selection of special reader offers
Editor’s letter

Autumn 2012

When I climb a hill or explore a remote valley, a deserted stretch of coast or a hidden dell, I start to operate to the beat of a different clock…’

So mused the DJ and writer Stuart Maconie (a man who at 16 thought walking was for ‘weirdos in bobble hats’), when we met him on the Clent Hills near Birmingham.

We’d asked Stuart – and Toyah Willcox, Coast presenter Miranda Krestovnikoff and the novelist and poet Ben Okri – to talk to us about where they like to roam and why, to help us launch our big autumn walking festival. ‘I love the views, the lake and cakes,’ said Toyah of her favoured ramble site, Croome, in Worcestershire, while for Ben ‘to walk’ is simply ‘to wonder’. Well, we wonder if their stories will spur you and your family and friends to stroll, amble or swing into a lively tramp with us at one of the 3,000 walking events being held at 350 Trust sites, between now and 4 November? Do join us, and if on your day out you discover a new walk, we’d love to hear about it. Tap into www.nationaltrust.org.uk/gbwalkmag, or tweet about it using #GBwalk to share the details.

If the lure of the outdoors features strongly on the pages inside, we’ve also found room for some fascinating interiors stories too. You could slip between the sheets with broadcaster and Chief Curator at Historic Royal Palaces Lucy Worsley, for her tale of our state beds. Or you might enjoy delving – digitally – into the Trust’s new online curiosity cabinet. False eyeballs, stuffed boxing squirrels and curvy corsets: they’re all there! Meanwhile, for our Director-General Dame Fiona Reynolds’s farewell feature (turn to page 66) we visited one of her favourite properties, the Elizabethan Newark Park in Gloucestershire, to photograph her there. Fiona is leaving after 12 years at the helm of the Trust and her insight into that time makes for a colourful read.

This leads me to a farewell of my own. After seven years as Editor the time has come for me to move on to a new challenge. It’s been a joy to work on each issue since 2006, but I have to say I’ve enjoyed the surprises and stories that have come from your letters and emails most of all. Thank you, especially to my regular correspondents (you know who you are!) – and keep them coming for the new Editor. For now, from all of us on the magazine team, we hope you find time to down tools, relax and enjoy some great days out with the Trust this season…

Sue Herdman
Editor
Such was Beatrix Potter’s love of the Lakes that she not only drew on the region as a rich source for her books, but also purchased farms, houses and land there, which she then gave to the National Trust. 110 years after the publication of *The Tale of Peter Rabbit*, we review the story of her life in the Lakes, and meet actress and screenwriter *Emma Thompson*, who marks the book’s anniversary with a work of her own
Beatrix Potter was one of the National Trust’s best-known benefactors. Her connection with Cumbria was forged as a teenager on her first visit to the region, and developed over her lifetime. On her death in 1943 she left 1,600 hectares (4,000 acres) and 15 farms to the Trust. ‘Beatrix’s foresight was pivotal for us,’ explains John Moffat, the Trust’s General Manager of the South Lakes. ‘She was passionate about keeping working farms here going and so bought land and farms to protect their future; later she was to leave them to the Trust. Today, we look after one quarter of the Lake District National Park; without her, this simply would not have been the case.’

It was on a family holiday that Beatrix first discovered the Lake District. Each summer the family – Rupert, Helen, their two children Bertram and Beatrix and Beatrix’s pets (often a rabbit or hedgehog) – would decamp from London for a three-month break in the countryside. Scotland was their usual destination but, in 1882, when Beatrix was 15, their regular accommodation was unavailable, so they strode out for Cumbria. They stayed in Wray Castle (now in Trust care) on the western shore of Windermere and it was here that they befriended Canon Hardwicke Rawnsley, who went on to become one of the Trust’s three founders.

Rawnsley and Beatrix became close allies – he encouraged her creativity and in time she came to share his concern for the future of the Lake District landscape. They wanted to protect it from unsuitable development and in particular the building of ill-considered holiday accommodation. The scenery, especially that around Windermere and Derwentwater, infused many of Beatrix’s stories, including *The Tale of Squirrel Nutkin* and *The Tale of Mrs Tiggy-Winkle*. She was not, of course, the first literary figure to have found this region inspiring. Its valleys and views stirred Coleridge, Southey, Ruskin, Ransome and Wordsworth. ‘And no wonder,’ muses John Moffat, ‘for we have England’s highest mountain and its deepest lake. Beatrix loved this place and it was a wonderful thing for the region that she used her success to protect it. I have no doubt, too, that her gifts to the charity must have provided great confidence at a time when it was still finding its feet.’

Beatrix’s first and most famous purchase was Hill Top, bought with funds from the sales of her first four books. Although the house was never her actual home, she stayed often and wrote there. Today the cottage is displayed just as she left it, with her belongings in place and each room containing something that appears in one of her ‘tales’. She went on to buy farms around Coniston, Sawrey and Troutbeck. She also acquired the Monk Coniston Estate and managed land on behalf of the Trust for many years, doing so with confidence and great skill, despite comments from a Major H.M. Heyder, the Trust’s honorary Forestry Adviser at the time. ‘I have always thought it odd’, he said, ‘that a lady, who has a perfectly competent husband, should insist on managing every detail of farms’ and woodland problems herself.’ Beatrix’s response – if indeed she knew of this – is not known. She was too busy becoming an expert judge and breeder of Herdwick sheep (a native Lake District breed) and working to conserve the species. A recent Sheep Trust report states that 95 per cent of all Herdwicks are now found within 14 miles (23km) of Coniston.

Beatrix wanted everyone to enjoy the countryside and to keep traditional farming methods alive, and this, as John Moffat reveals, is something the Trust is working hard to ensure still happens today. ‘We can offer visitors Mongolian yurt camping, canoeing, hiking and wildlife walks,’ he says, ‘and we’ve also opened the first National Trust-run pub, where people can savour a pint and a “Herdy Burger” (made from Herdwick meat).’ And he recommends autumn as being an ideal time to head for the hills: ‘It’s more tranquil at this time of year, and still so beautiful, especially with the seasonal colour.’ So, why not follow in Beatrix Potter’s footsteps? Visit the farms and estates she passed on to the Trust, savour the scenery, especially that around Windermere and Derwentwater, and develop over her lifetime. On her death in 1943 she left 1,600 hectares (4,000 acres) and 15 farms to the Trust. Today the Trust looks after one quarter of the Lake District National Park – without Beatrix’s help this simply would not have been the case.
Help us save!
Claife Viewing Station, Far Sawrey
Part of the original tourism industry in the Lake District, visitors would have come here to soak up the picture-perfect views of Windermere. Now this 18th-century Grade-II listed building is in danger of collapse; the Trust wants to restore it and recreate the early visitor experience. To find out more or to donate visit www.nationaltrust.org.uk/lakedistrictappeal

Escape to the Lakes

Visit

Hill Top, Hawkshead
Full of Beatrix’s furniture and belongings, this pretty cottage is displayed as if the writer had just popped out. Children can borrow a copy of The Tale of Samuel Whiskers to use as an alternative guidebook, as most of this story was set here. Call 015394 36269 or consult your Handbook for more details.

The Beatrix Potter Gallery, Hawkshead
Previously the offices of William Heelis, Beatrix’s husband, this 17th-century building houses her illustrations and drawings. A new exhibition is displayed each year and you can catch the current show of ink drawings, from the first privately published The Tale of Peter Rabbit, until 4 November. Call 015394 36355 or check your Handbook.

Wray Castle, Ambleside
The National Trust has now opened most of the rooms in this mock-Gothic castle. Although empty, visitors can picture just how life at this former holiday home would have been, thanks to the photographic work of Beatrix’s father, Rupert Potter, which is on display. Call 015394 41456 or tap into www.nationaltrust.org.uk/wray-castle/ to learn more.

Stay

National Trust holiday cottage
The Summer House, near Hawkshead
Get close to recapturing the Potters’ first family holiday in the Lakes by booking this former summerhouse, located in the old kitchen garden in the grounds of Wray Castle. The cottage offers views over much of the Lake District including Fairfield, the Langdale Pikes and the Central Fells. Sleeps four. www.nationaltrustcottages.co.uk/

B&B
Yew Tree Farm, Coniston
Still a working farm, Yew Tree was owned by Beatrix in the 1930s and the house stood in for Hill Top in the Miss Potter film starring Renée Zellweger. Now run by Trust tenant farmers Jon and Caroline Watson, you can book a room to stay there or order delicious meat fresh from the farm. Contact 015394 41433; www.yewtree-farm.com/

Camping
Connect with the great outdoors by pitching up in one of the Trust’s four campsites in the region. They make the perfect base for fell-walkers and climbers – yurts and pods are also available for those who like to camp in comfort. More at www.nationaltrust.org.uk/lakedistrictcamping

Eat and drink

The Sticklebarn, Langdale
Although the Trust owns some 62 bars, this is the first ‘in-house’ pub, and it opened this year. Food is sourced from local suppliers and a range of regional and national ales are available. A sanctuary for walkers and hikers, film screenings and music events are planned for this autumn. To find out more head to www.nationaltrust.org.uk/greatlangdale

Walk
The Monk Coniston and Tarn Hows ramble can be downloaded from www.nationaltrust.org.uk/gbwalk. This 3.5–5-mile (6–8km) walk offers some of Lakeland’s most beautiful views. Look out for huge redwood trees, as well as a mix of wildlife, including red squirrels, otters and deer.
The more I discover about Beatrix Potter, the more fascinating she becomes.

As a child, Beatrix Potter’s tales were a big part of my life. My father, Eric Thompson (the creator and narrator of The Magic Roundabout), used to read them to my sister and me, and we adored them. Reading them to my daughter Gaia several years ago made me appreciate Potter anew. She doesn’t patronise her readers – her vocabulary is often complex and the narratives dark – and her writing is brilliant; she has a universal appeal, like Dickens, Austen and Shakespeare.

Beatrix’s literary style and humour influenced the way I write. But I didn’t know much about the woman herself before I embarked upon this project to pen The Further Tale of Peter Rabbit. If Frederick Warne (the publishers) had sent me an official letter asking me to write another tale, I would have been too daunted to accept. But their invitation was so playful and in the spirit of Beatrix’s characters that I couldn’t refuse. They sent me a box with half-eaten radish leaves and a note from ‘Peter’ saying I was ‘cheeky’ like him and asking me to write another adventure.

I wrote the tale at our house in Scotland. My mother (the actress Phyllida Law) is Scottish and when growing up our holidays were spent at this house in Argyll, in a particularly beautiful part of the countryside. Now we – my husband (the actor Greg Wise), Gaia and our adopted son Tindy – holiday here. I began my research into Beatrix by reading about her time in Perthshire and her love of the Scottish landscape. This connection between the two of us became my inspiration for the book. I set the tale in Scotland and introduced a Scottish relative to Peter.

The more I discover about Beatrix the more fascinating she becomes. She was a skilled mycologist (someone who studies fungi), and she was an astute businesswoman. She didn’t just write children’s books, she researched the industry and the market. She created a brand – Peter Rabbit was the first patented soft toy, in 1903. Then in the later stages of her life she moved to the Lake District and became an expert on Herdwick sheep, to the point where she was breeding and judging them!

Beatrix’s love of the outdoors is where I feel the strongest connection to her. I can’t write for more than two hours before I need fresh air. I do worry about younger generations being indoors and in front of TV screens too much, especially when you read about youngsters today getting rickets. I think it’s absolutely right that the Trust is encouraging so many families and children to enjoy our countryside and to play outdoors. Beatrix would approve. Her books celebrate nature and inspire people to get outside.

The Lake District is special. I can see why Beatrix was drawn back time and time again. Visiting Hill Top was a great experience – it really does feel as if she was there and had just stepped out. The old wallpaper, the eclectic collection, it’s so Victorian. I think the Trust is brilliant at bringing places to life, rather than preserving them in aspic. It could go further though: why not have food and drink around, or paints and an easel, or muddy boots? Hire a set designer and get them to dress a suitable property. I’ve always thought it a great act of generosity that film crews are allowed to work in these amazing properties (albeit for a fee!). As an actress I find them wonderful to work in; it’s much easier to stay in character when the setting is so right.’

Read more of our interview with Emma, who was photographed in the garden at Yew Tree Farm, at www.nationaltrust.org.uk/magazine

Save £3!

Thompson on Potter

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