

The Telegraph – 26 March 2016

How the Lake District is celebrating the genius of Beatrix Potter

(Extract)

By Nigel Richardson, TRAVEL WRITER

To say it's been raining in the Lake District this winter is an under-statement. But over the dead body of Peter Rabbit himself will it rain on the big parade of 2016 - the 150th anniversary of the birth of the Lakes' favourite gal, without whom much of the area would not be ours to enjoy, Beatrix Potter. The actual date of her birth falls at the end of July but the anniversary is fuelling a more general sense of Pottermania - helped by the convenient discovery of a new "tale" (of "Kitty-in-Boots") to be published, with illustrations by Quentin Blake, later this year.

With Peter and his mates flying the flag it promises to be a bumper summer for a local economy that leans heavily on tourism and they are gearing up frantically, as I discovered on a visit exactly three months on from the big floods. It rained and snowed, of course, when I was there but the good news is that - frequent diversions aside - the Lakes are open for business, and anxious lest you think otherwise.

"We're all praying for a good Easter," said John Moffat, the general manager for the National Trust's properties in the South Lakes, which include Beatrix Potter's former home, Hill Top, at Near Sawrey, the Beatrix Potter Gallery in Hawkshead and the watery, billowy beauty spot of Tarn Hows. He was showing me around the gallery, which this year, for the first time, is displaying the pelt of the real Benjamin Bunny.

Moffat seemed slightly worried by how it might go down with Potter fans but in this scrap of fur-and-ears lies the genius of Beatrix - at once romantic and pragmatic (she skinned and boiled her former pet bunnies so she could draw their skeletons). "We try to get people to realise there's more to her than the rabbit in the blue jacket," said Moffat. "She wouldn't let sentimentality get in the way of anything - a very practical woman."

She was certainly no mere purveyor of fluffy little tales, as I was reminded earlier in the day when I strolled around the World of Beatrix Potter in Bowness and came face-to-face with a character who had haunted my infant dreams. The World of BP, a Lakeland institution for 25 years, takes you on a winding, enchanting path through models and tableaux from the tales - Jemima Puddle-Duck in full flight, Jeremy Fisher fishing on his lily pad and so on - but it wasn't until I turned a corner and came face-to-face with Old Brown that childhood terrors resurfaced. Old Brown, if you remember, is the owl in *The Tale of Squirrel Nutkin* whom Nutkin winds up once too often. Old Brown loses his rag and Nutkin his tail - a moment that chilled me with horror when my mother read this to me in infancy.

In the gallery in Hawkshead there's an original illustration from *Squirrel Nutkin*. "Many of Beatrix's tales combine fantasy with harsh reality," says the commentary. You can say that again - this is Tarantino for toddlers, which is precisely why Potter has endured. The theme of this year's exhibition in the gallery is *Romance and Realism* which describes her progression from artist/storyteller to farmer to conservationist - the royalties from her "little books" financed the purchase of Hill Top and, subsequently, 4,000 acres and 14 farms which she bequeathed to the National Trust. Today, thanks to her vision, the Trust is responsible for the upkeep and protection of

a quarter of the Lake District. Benjamin's undignified end was not in vain.



Hill Top Farm, where Beatrix Potter lived

As for the "little books", a tour of Hill Top, her dark and atmospheric farmhouse home, is a browse through the tales themselves. Many of the rooms, or the objects in them, feature in her exquisite illustrations. The parlour, for instance, is in *The Tale of the Pie and the Patty-Pan*, her doll's house, upstairs, is in *The Tale of Two Bad Mice* and, through the window, the winding lane leading to Moss Eccles Tarn is replicated in *The Tale of Samuel Whiskers*.

The gentle fells and silvery tarns between Coniston Water and Windermere - the very acres she secured for the nation - are scattered throughout the tales. Driving me around them John Moffat took a detour to the shore of Coniston to show me another National Trust institution, the Steam Yacht Gondola, which was being readied for the season at its home pier. The engine room of this Victorian pleasure cruiser was open, the machinery purring; there was a waft of oil and heat, an open box of very big spanners (the engineer had momentarily disappeared, leaving a friendly dog on watch) and I realised I was peering in on a fictional construct every bit as evocative as Beatrix's bunnies. For Gondola was, at least in part, the model for Captain Flint's houseboat in *Swallows and Amazons*.

Arthur Ransome's interwar novel of childhood is riding on the coat tails of the Potter anniversary, in the sense that a new film version is due out later this year, filmed in the Lakes and starring Rafe Spall and Jessica Hynes. My plan had been to take a kayak from the shore of Coniston Water to Peel Island, the original (again, in part) for Wild Cat Island in the novel - see where the crew of the Swallow drank grog, dived for pearls and generally saved the world. But the expedition was cancelled due to morning rain.



The Steam Yacht Gondola on Coniston Water

No matter. I took refuge in the Ruskin Museum, which styles itself “Coniston’s Cabinet of Curiosities”, and among the curiosities I found a copy of a postcard of the SY Gondola that Ransome had altered to the shape of the fictional vessel, as well as a sailing dinghy called Mavis - one of the boats in which Ransome taught the children of Ernest Altounyan, the inspirations for Able-Seaman Titty, the Boy Roger et al, to sail in 1928.

The real-life inspirations for Ransome’s Lakeland locations are not so clear-cut as with Beatrix Potter. His lake combines Coniston and Windermere, Wildcat Island is both Peel in the former and Blakeholme in the latter, while Captain Flint’s houseboat is an amalgam of the Gondola and the Esperance (in the Windermere Steamboat Museum which, incidentally, is closed for renovation until 2017). “Rio”, meanwhile, is probably Bowness, the Peak of Darien could be Friar’s Crag on Derwentwater, and so on. But Ransome’s real achievement is that the books capture the sheer, exhilarating freedom of being a child in the holidays, and how that is channelled by Cumbria’s fells and lakes and mysterious, mossy corners.

It’s a wonder, seeing as their dates in the Lakes overlapped, that Arthur and Beatrix never met (an event that surely would have been made into a BBC drama by now). But they shared a gift, of being able to recreate, to an almost supernatural degree, what Beatrix called “the spirit world of childhood”. I exorcised the ghost of a certain owl when I went up to the Lakes recently - and felt anew the thrill of being young

Part of Ransome’s former home, *The Cottage at Hill Top* (not to be confused with Beatrix Potter’s former home) near Lake Windermere, is now a two-bed holiday let: £750 for first week in May [2016].