



161

society, the Linnean Society, returned her finely illustrated ideas about fungi reproduction in 1897 - despite a man presenting them for her. (The Linnean Society apologised for her treatment one hundred years later).

Beatrix therefore concentrated on her art and writing, turning her story of four rabbits into an illustrated book. Rejection followed again but, like modern-day JK Rowling, Beatrix persisted and published privately in 1901.

Eventually British publisher Frederick Warne & Co accepted the 'bunny book'. Peter Rabbit was published one year later.

Beatrix had the business head to patent her designs. Peter Rabbit is probably the world's oldest licensed literary character! Some 22 other stories followed including Mrs Tiggy-Winkle and Jemima Puddle-Duck.

Another setback then changed her life. Frederick's son Norman proposed. Her parents disapproved of this tradesman. Beatrix nonetheless accepted but Norman died a month later of anaemia.

In solace she brought 17th century Lake District Hill Top farm and developed a life-long interest in farming, visiting

The Mice at Work Threading the Needle, The Tailor of Gloucester (above) 1902 artwork (photo: Tate)

Mrs Rabbit pouring tea (right) in The Tale of Peter Rabbit by Beatrix Potter (photo: Victoria and Albert Museum)

there when not caring for her elderly parents - as expected of unmarried women.

From 1909 she was courted by lawyer William Heelis who purchased her farm, keeping the relationship secret in case her parents disapproved of a 'country solicitor'. They still married in 1913 against parental wishes and moved to another Lake District farm, Castle Cottage.

Beatrix had finally escaped from London, 'her unloved birthplace', aged forty-seven!

Few people know about her subsequent preservation work with the fledgling National Trust (started in 1895), one of whose founders, Hardwicke Rawnsley, was a close friend.

She embraced Lake District crafts, supported traditional farming, became a notable sheep farmer and in partnership with the Trust protected many farms.

Marrying in her late forties she had no children. When succumbing to illness in 1943 aged seventy-seven, she left 4,000 acres of farmland and cottages to the Trust forming much of today's Lake District National Park. Her passion was undimmed at the last: her possessions included a walking stick with a microscope embedded in the handle to continue observing with failing eyesight.

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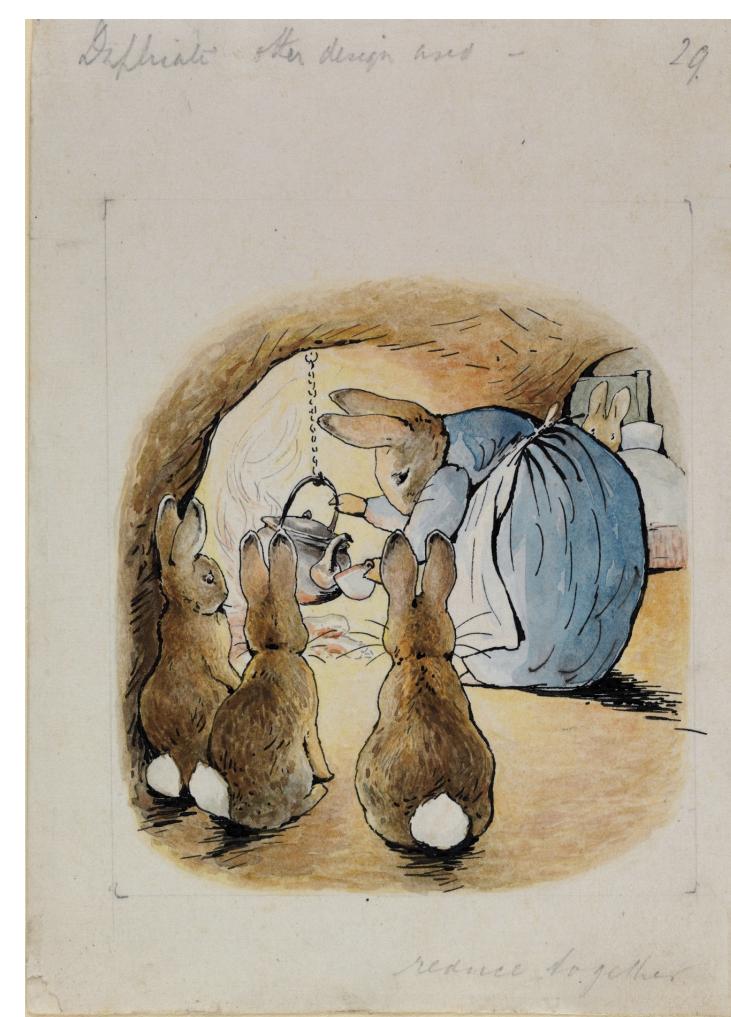
Exhibition details are at Beatrix Potter: Drawn to Nature - Exhibition at South Kensington · V&A (vam.ac.uk). The National Trust's Hill Top house can be visited in Windermere.

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