

= Walter Potter =

Walter Potter (2 July 1835 ? 21 May 1918) was an English taxidermist noted for his anthropomorphic dioramas featuring mounted animals mimicking human life , which he displayed at his museum in Bramber , Sussex , England . The exhibition was a well @-@ known and popular example of " Victorian whimsy " for many years , even after Potter 's death ; however enthusiasm for such entertainments waned in the twentieth century , and his collection was finally dispersed in 2003 .

= = Early life and popularity = =

Potter 's family ran The White Lion pub in Bramber , and as a teenager , his first attempt at taxidermy was to preserve the body of his own pet canary . At the age of 19 , inspired by his sister , Jane , who showed him an illustrated book of nursery rhymes , Potter produced what was to become the centrepiece of his museum , a diorama of " The Death and Burial of Cock Robin " , which included 98 species of British birds . This was so well @-@ received that in 1861 , he opened a separate display in the summer house of the pub . While satisfying the Victorian demand for traditional stuffed animals to earn a living , Potter continued creating his dioramas and expanded into new premises in 1866 , and again in 1880 . As his museum expanded , Potter married a local girl , Ann Stringer Muzzell , and they had three children , Walter , Annie and Minnie .

Amongst his scenes were " a rats ' den being raided by the local police rats ... [a] village school ... featuring 48 little rabbits busy writing on tiny slates , while the Kittens ' Tea Party displayed feline etiquette and a game of croquet . A guinea pigs ' cricket match was in progress , and 20 kittens attended a wedding , wearing little morning suits or brocade dresses , with a feline vicar in white surplice . " Potter 's attention to detail in these scenes has been noted , to the extent that " The kittens even wear frilly knickers under their formal attire ! " Apart from the simulations of human situations , he had also added examples of bizarrely deformed animals such as two @-@ headed lambs and four @-@ legged chickens . Potter 's collection , billed as " Mr Potter 's Museum of Curiosities " was to build into a " world @-@ famous example of Victorian whimsy " , with special coach trips from Brighton being arranged ; and the village and Potter 's museum were so popular that an extension was built to the platform at Bramber railway station .

= = Later life , death and decline of the museum = =

Potter suffered a stroke in 1914 , from which he never fully recovered , and died at the age of 82 ; he was buried in Bramber churchyard . His museum , which by that time contained about 10 @,@ 000 specimens , was taken over by his daughter and grandson . The Victorian enthusiasm for stuffed animals had waned by the museum 's later days , and it deflected claims of animal cruelty by displaying notices stating that all the animals had died naturally and that " in any case , they were all over 100 years old " . The " Kittens ' Wedding " scene , the last created by Potter in 1890 , was shown at the Victoria and Albert Museum in 2001 as part of " The Victorian Vision " exhibition .

= = Sale of the collection = =

The museum closed in the 1970s , and , after having been moved to Brighton and then to Arundel , was sold in 1984 to the owners of Jamaica Inn , Bolventor , Cornwall , where it attracted more than 30 @,@ 000 visitors each year . The death of their taxidermist and economic considerations sapped the venture of its viability , and , when a buyer to maintain the collection intact did not come forward , it was auctioned by Bonhams in 2003 , realizing over £ 500 @,@ 000 . " The Kittens ' Wedding " was sold for £ 21 @,@ 150 , and " The Death and Burial of Cock Robin " was the highest @-@ selling item of the sale , raising £ 23 @,@ 500 . Present at the auction were Peter Blake , Harry Hill and David Bailey .

A bid of £ 1m offered by Damien Hirst for the entire collection had apparently been rejected by the

auctioneers , and the owners sued Bonhams , arguing that this offer should have been accepted . Shortly after the auction , Hirst wrote to The Guardian citing some of Potter 's limitations as a taxidermist , saying " You can see he knew very little about anatomy and musculature , because some of the taxidermy is terrible ? there 's a kingfisher that looks nothing like a kingfisher " He also showed appreciation for the displays : " My own favourites are these tableaux : there 's a kittens ' wedding party , with all these kittens dressed up in costumes , even wearing jewellery . The kittens don 't look much like kittens , but that 's not the point . There 's a rats ' drinking party , too which puts a different construction on Wind in the Willows . And a group of hamsters playing cricket . " About the auction , Hirst said , " I 've offered £ 1m and to pay for the cost of the auctioneer 's catalogue ? just for them to take it off the market and keep the collection intact ? but apparently , the auction has to go ahead . It is a tragedy . "

The White Lion pub , home of Potter 's collection , has now been renamed The Castle Hotel .