

PREVIEWS

The Birdman of Wakefield

Wakefield squire Charles Waterton was a sort of upper class David Bellamy. RICHARD CATLOW has been talking to GORDON WATSON about the exhibition which has been set up to mark the bicentenary of the man who created what was probably the country's first nature reserve.



Charles Waterton.
National Portrait Gallery

The Pennine area is proud of its eccentrics – they are treasured in our folklore – but few have come so much larger than life than Wakefield squire Charles Waterton who was born 200 years ago, on June 3rd. Waterton was a man ahead of his time; so far ahead in fact that he'd still be to the fore today.

He created what was probably England's first nature reserve, employing a local poacher as a sort of gamekeeper in reverse, with the job of preserving, not exterminating, the wildlife around his home at Walton Hall. Among his innovations was a tower, which still exists, in which starlings could nest.

For some time now, Gordon Watson, keeper of social history at Wakefield Museum, has been researching

into Waterton's life and times. Now the result of his work can be seen in a fascinating exhibition at the museum which runs from Waterton's birthday to December 5th.

Waterton came from a staunchly Catholic family and was educated at Stonyhurst, the Roman Catholic public school in the Ribbles Valley. Mr Watson believes the Jesuits at Stonyhurst may have fired his imagination about their work in South America. After Waterton left school, family interests in the sugar plantations of Guyana gave him the chance to go out there.

Waterton made a series of journeys in Guyana between 1812 and 1824. He travelled virtually alone with native guides, his questing mind ever seeking out new wonders in the jungles. Among the items he brought back were samples of curare, a poison used by the Indians, and back in England, he conducted experiments into its use as an anaesthetic with Sir Benjamin Brodie and Francis Sibson. The full potential of the drug wasn't realised until the second world war.

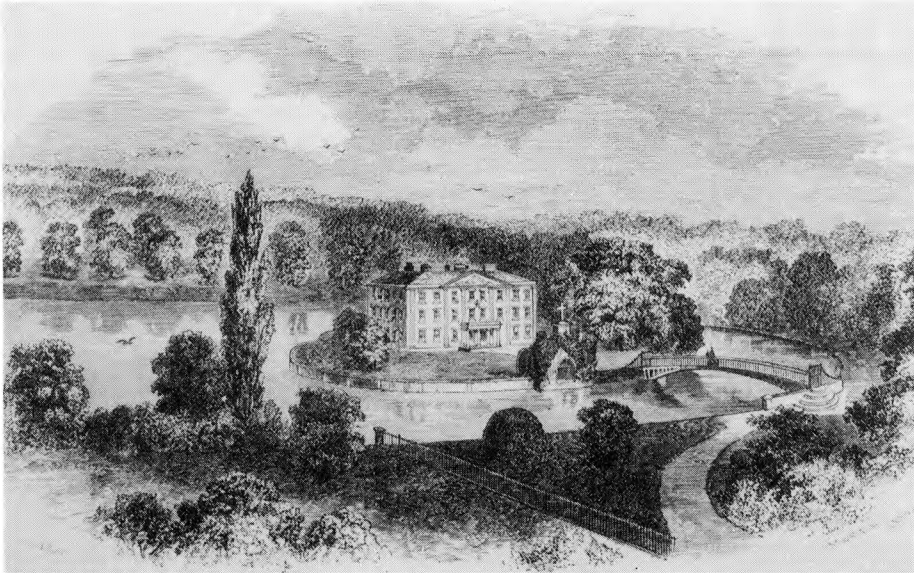
On his return from South America, Waterton produced a popular account of his journeys. His book "The Wanderings" was reprinted many times, but is unfortunately out of print at the moment.

Stuffed animals were all the rage in those days, but Waterton was dissatisfied with the results produced by the traditional method of supporting the carcass on a wire frame. He moulded his specimens into shape by washing and then drying them to produce a much more natural affect.

In England, Waterton spent the last 40 years of his life in the study and preservation of local wildlife. He published three volumes of "Essays on Natural History" and exchanged views on the habits of wildlife with such famous contemporaries as Audubon.

But this serious side of Waterton was always likely to be enlivened by one of his eccentricities. People thought of him not just as the naturalist who had been to South America, but as the man who rode on the back of a cayman (a type of alligator) while capturing it, as the man, who even at 80, would climb trees in pursuit of his feathered friends. A sort of upper class David Bellamy.

It can be imagined what the average landowner of his day thought when Waterton championed the cause of the weasel, or other creatures they thought of as vermin. The only animal he turned his hand against was the brown rat, because it preyed on birds' eggs and young nestlings. In 1839 he proudly proclaimed that he had driven every rat from his estate – the nine foot wall



Walton Hall in its heyday.

which surrounded the family parkland helped him here. Waterton called the animal the "Hanoverian Rat", claiming the first creature came to England aboard the ship which brought William III and the Protestant succession.

A particular favourite with Waterton were owls. He spent much time and effort in putting in a good word for them and trying to overcome the popular tradition that they were creatures of the Devil, because they came

out at night.

At Walton, Waterton planted hedges and shrubberies as cover for his birds, put up nest boxes and attracted thousands of wintering waterfowl to the lake. He even used drainage pipes to create nesting holes for a colony of sand martins.

But in later years Waterton had problems with a soap factory which set up near by. He had to fight legal battles, to prevent pollution of his

river, which was killing the fish and driving away his birds.

As his life drew to its close, he was worried what might happen to his precious reserve after he was gone. He died on May 27th, 1865. His funeral was as unusual as his life itself. A cortege of black-draped boats carried his coffin and the mourners from the hall to the end of the lake where the great naturalist was buried between two oak trees. The countryfolk said that flocks of his birds followed the boats and that a linnet sang above his grave.

The reserve was later to be sold to the soap manufacturer, who celebrated his victory by tree felling and destruction. Today the hall is a country club.

The Watertons had been at Walton since the later Middle Ages, but Charles's son Edmund squandered the family fortunes in amassing a huge collection of rings and the estate had to be sold. The rings are now one of the prize possessions of the Victoria and Albert Museum.

The exhibition includes Waterton's collection of more than 800 birds, animals and insects (on loan from Stonyhurst), portraits of the naturalist, an illustration of his unique method of taxidermy and the experiments with curare and a description of Walton Hall as a nature reserve. ■

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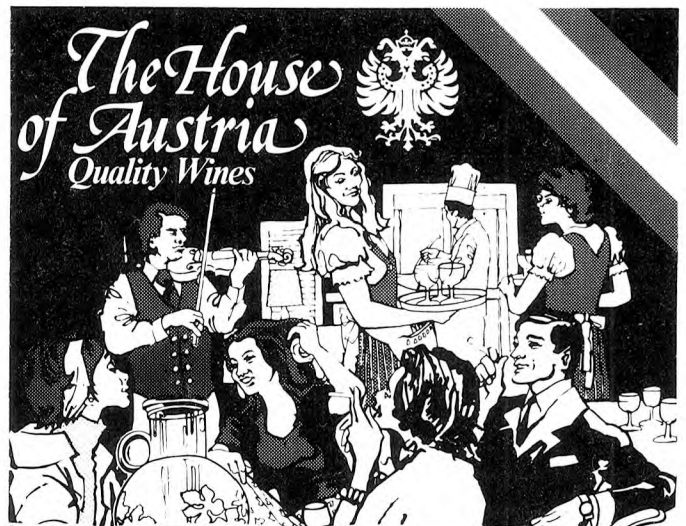
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