

# Home

is where the heart is

Article and photography by Jessica Charleston

Sometimes a house is more than just bricks and mortar. A home is a vessel of memories and stories, personal belongings and collections, a physical vestige of the people who live inside. Visiting the homes of our favourite authors can reveal new perspectives and layers of context that change our interpretation of their texts.

Discover two women whose homes - 17,000km apart - inspired their own creative works and remain an important part of their enduring legacies.

## Beatrix Potter and Hill Top

Near Sawrey,  
English Lake District

Beatrix Potter's storybooks have been treasured by children for over a century. *The Tale of Peter Rabbit* (1901) has alone sold more than 40 million copies around the world, making it one of the most popular and beloved stories ever written.

The story of Beatrix Potter herself is captivating in its own right. It is the tale of an inquisitive young girl who turned her love of the natural world into a legacy that continues to protect

and conserve the landscape that she loved most; the English Lake District.

Beatrix Potter was born in 1866 and raised in South Kensington, London. She was a creative child who progressively transformed the confines of her nursery and home classroom into a whimsical world where her imagination could flourish. Beatrix and her closest childhood companion, younger brother Bertram, shared a love of art and nature from a young age. The two children collected a menagerie of animals and reptiles – including a dormouse, lizards, newts, snails, tortoises, a hedgehog, and a rabbit - who all became objects of careful study and observation. These animals formed the basis for her much-loved storybook characters.

For more than a decade the Potter family spent three months of the year on holiday in Perthshire, Scotland. Beatrix filled her summer days sketching local flora and fauna, studying mushrooms and toadstools, and finessing her art and watercolour skills. It was here, surrounded by vast landscapes, rolling green hills and woodlands that Beatrix felt a sense of ease and liberation from her sheltered life in London, where she was often unwell.

When Beatrix was sixteen, the Potter family spent the first of many summers on the shores of Lake Windermere in the English Lake District. For the next twenty years Beatrix returned to the lakes each year, staying in various





Beatrix Potter in 1913.

Image courtesy of Frederick Warne & Co.

locations. In stark contrast to the stifled life she led in London, Beatrix thrived in the north country both emotionally and creatively – however, an unmarried woman in her thirties without any income could hardly dream to relocate to the lakes permanently.

Beatrix's road to literary triumph was hardly an overnight success. Despite the beautiful illustrations and enchanting story, publishers were reluctant to publish a little book about a rabbit in a blue waistcoat and she faced numerous rejections. With some commercially driven tweaks, the publisher Frederick Warne & Co eventually agreed to a print run of 8,000 copies, and *The Tale of Peter Rabbit* remains a top-seller over 100 years later.

In 1905, with the proceeds from *Peter Rabbit* and a small inheritance from an aunt, Beatrix Potter purchased Hill Top, a 17th century house and 34-acre farm in the small village of Near Sawrey, an idyllic hamlet close to Esthwaite Water in Cumbria.

Although Beatrix was 39 years old at the time she could not settle at Hill Top permanently. She continued to travel back and forth between London and Sawrey to appease the wishes of her parents.

Beatrix sought to learn all she could about farming and hired a property manager to stock the farm with cows, pigs, ducks and chickens. Here Beatrix also committed to maintaining traditional and local farming practices such as breeding and keeping Herdwick sheep, a native Lakeland breed, known for their thick woolly double-coat.

In the same year as the purchase Beatrix Potter became engaged to her editor, Norman Warne, who died suddenly a month after she accepted his marriage proposal. Nursing a broken heart, Beatrix worked fervently to produce and publish a series of new books, with many of her stories set at Hill Top and around Near Sawrey. To name a



few occasions of her art imitating life, *The Tale of Jeremy Fisher* (1906) was set on nearby Esthwaite Water, her house and garden are recognisable in *The Tale of Tom Kitten* (1907), and *The Tale of Jemima Puddleduck* (1908) was based on a real runaway duck at Hill Top Farm.

Beatrix Potter forged a friendship with William Heelis, a solicitor from the neighbouring village of Hawkshead who assisted her with the purchase of a second farm, Castle Farm, and the pair married in October 1913 when Beatrix was 47 years old. As a married woman, Beatrix could justify her need to settle permanently in the north. Beatrix and William moved into Castle Farm and Hill Top was saved as a studio and a place for Beatrix to write.

Beatrix Potter went on to publish 23 little books, and despite her notable career in the literary world she was content with a quiet life out of the spotlight. Her writing naturally slowed down as she enjoyed success managing her farms, breeding and keeping Herdwick sheep, and turning her attention to local conservation issues in the Lake District.

*In her eyes, it was more than just a little farmhouse in the Lake District – it was her symbol of freedom.*

- Margaret Lane in her 1968 biography of Beatrix Potter.

Beatrix Potter was a long-time friend of Canon Rawnsley, one of the co-founders of the National Trust and a devoted advocate for the protection of the region. In the 1920s, Beatrix Potter campaigned actively to save the Windermere foreshore from development, selling drawings to the burgeoning American market to raise funds and save the land. She continued to purchase strategically located farms and vast acres of land, independently and in partnership with the National Trust, to prevent inappropriate development taking place.

Beatrix Potter died in 1943, leaving fourteen farms and over 4,000 acres of land to the National Trust with a stipulation that they would continue to graze her farms with Herdwick sheep and that her most treasured home, Hill Top, would be preserved exactly as it once was for visitors to enjoy. As custodians of her legacy, over 40,000 female breeding Herdwicks are located on National Trust farms in the Lake District, on land mostly purchased by Beatrix Potter.

"I do not remember a time when I did not try to invent pictures and make for myself a fairyland amongst the wild flowers, the animals, funghi, mosses, woods and streams, all the thousand objects of the countryside; that pleasant, unchanging world of realism and romance, which in our northern clime is stiffened by hard weather, a tough ancestry, and the strength that comes from the hills."

- Beatrix Potter, in a letter to a friend in 1940.

**Hill Top Farm has recently re-opened to visitors daily from 10am to 4.30pm.**

**Visit the National Trust UK website for information: [nationaltrust.org.uk](https://www.nationaltrust.org.uk)**



## Joan Lindsay and Mulberry Hill

### Langwarrin, Mornington Peninsula

Mulberry Hill at Langwarrin on the Mornington Peninsula was the creative home of Joan Lindsay, author of *Picnic at Hanging Rock*, and her husband Sir Daryl Lindsay, a notable artist and former Director of the National Gallery of Victoria.

The Lindsay's lived at Mulberry Hill for over 50 years and the house endures as a living time capsule; perfectly preserved as if the owners had merely stepped out for a walk and left everything in its place, shards of soap still waiting in the master bathroom and clothes hanging in the wardrobes. Their presence lingers in the rooms, which have remained untouched since Joan's death in 1984, as if time has literally stood still in their absence.

Joan often said that clocks and watches stopped around her, and she was deeply fascinated by pioneering

scientific ideas about the nature of time. Ideas of parallel time, repetition and other dimensions are pervasive themes in her most famous novel, *Picnic at Hanging Rock*, and the title of her nostalgic memoir, *Time Without Clocks* (1962) is a reference to the unusual absence of clocks in her home at Mulberry Hill.

*Neither the kitchen clock nor the figured squares of the calendar could measure our first golden summers at Mulberry Hill. They were the timeless clockless summers of a dream.*

- Joan Lindsay

Mulberry Hill is listed on the Victorian Heritage Register as a place of architectural and historical significance. The unusual American colonial-style home was designed by Harold Desbrowe-Anneer and modified in 1926, using reclaimed and salvaged building materials.

A room at the top of the stairs contains the studio or 'scribbling room' where





Joan Lindsay's writing studio.



Joan wrote *Picnic at Hanging Rock* in a matter of weeks, with mural adorned walls, her typewriter, personal photographs, artwork, and a lambswool mat on the floor where Joan would sit.

*I write sitting on the floor, surrounded by sheets of paper in a sort of fairy ring. It's bliss.*

- Joan Lindsay

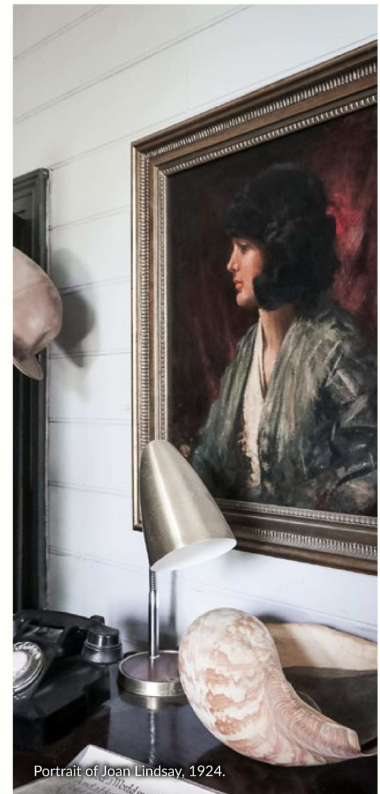
Daryl Lindsay's art studio is an eclectic space with large easels, paints and canvases on display. The walls are covered with works from his extensive art collection, which includes some of the foremost Australian artists of the twentieth century. There is a saddlery at the doorway, a long bookcase lining the north wall packed with books and decorated with personal ornaments, photographs, seashells and rocks. The central figure of the gallery wall is a large portrait of Daryl Lindsay (painted by George Bell in 1923) that watches over the studio, with a likeness of a young Joan Lindsay (painted by Sir John Langstaff in 1924) to his left.

Mulberry Hill was once a gathering place for creative and influential people, with guests such as Vivienne Leigh and Sir Laurence Olivier, Sir Robert Menzies, Dame Nellie Melba, and members of the Ballet Russe who inspired a series of artworks that line the stairwell at Mulberry Hill. The house is reminiscent of Charleston in East Sussex, the artistic home and studio of the Bloomsbury set, with whom the Lindsay's were acquainted.

Sir Daryl and Joan Lindsay both assisted in the founding of the National Trust of Australia (Victoria) prior to its formal incorporation in 1956 and Daryl was its founding president. Upon Joan's death in 1984, the house and their possessions, including many objects relating to the writing and publishing of *Picnic at Hanging Rock*, were left to the care of the National Trust of Australia (Victoria).

**Mulberry Hill is open to visitors on the second Sunday of the month from 11am to 4pm.**

**Visit National Trust of Australia (Victoria) website for more information: [nationaltrust.org.au/vic](http://nationaltrust.org.au/vic)**



Portrait of Joan Lindsay, 1924.

