

BEATRIX POTTER TOUR NOTES

BP BACKGROUND AND HER VERSION OF THE TOG. Beatrix lived at a time when a lot of educated people were doers and thinkers. Her parents were Unitarians and thus so was BP. Radical thinking like this not widely accepted in Victorian England and was instrumental in ensuring that the Potters, although extremely wealthy, were not widely accepted in London society. This didn't bother BP one jot, she and her brother were expensively privately educated, and she developed a keen analytical mind that lead her to become an accomplished artist, architectural illustrator and mycologist (the study of fungi).

Given her serious nature it is perhaps surprising that she wrote so many light-hearted works such as the TOG. However, as we shall see, the TOG is a Victorian morality tale, featuring the triumph of good over the less than good as Simpkin the Tailors' cat realises that his actions were initially bad.

BP lived in London but took holidays with her family in the Lake District and Scotland. When Beatrix came of an age to travel unescorted (in 1894, aged 28) she would visit her cousin Caroline Hutton who lived at Harescombe Grange near Gloucester with her family. Caroline's father was a circuit Judge who tried cases in Gloucester and elsewhere in the county.

Caroline told Beatrix the local story about the Tailor of Gloucester whose work was completed during the night by fairies. It sparked Beatrix's interest and she saw the potential for a children's' story. Her research was thorough. She wandered around the streets of the city to get the right atmosphere and got inspiration from local buildings to illustrate the later version of her story. she changed the fairies for mice, altered some locations (she placed the tailors shop in Three Cocks Lane at first but moved it to College Court in 1903), wrote the story in manuscript form and gave it to Freda, the daughter of her former governess as a Christmas present. Writing picture letters for the children of friends was something she often did.

As she progressed to becoming an established author, she retrieved the story from Freda and published it herself, as a private venture, in 1901. The manuscript version features lots of rhymes and a slightly different story line. For example, Simpkin discovers some rats having a big party in the Mayors shop cellar, they are pictured drinking port and brandy and having a high old time. This scene and the rhymes were left out of the version of the story published by Warnes to make the story more marketable and in case rats drinking wine and spirits offended the public. Beatrix researched items of clothing appropriate to the era of the story and found what she wanted in a cartoon entitled 'Noon' by William Hogarth. She also discovered a genuine waistcoat of the period in the V&A museum in Kensington which she copied for her story. Visitors will be able to see a likeness of it in the TOG shop at the end of the tour.

THE TOG STORY Beatrix made this building (the BP shop and Museum) the Tailor's little house; he was so poor he only rented the kitchen area which he shared with his cat Simpkin who kept house for him. His shop was in Westgate St which we will see later. The Tailor had been commissioned by the Mayor to make him a fine set of clothes, including a very fancy waistcoat, to wear at his wedding on Christmas Day. This was to be no ordinary waistcoat, but one made of the finest silks etc. The Tailor duly set to work and had cut out all the pieces ready to be sewn together. However, he lacked a skein of fine cherry-coloured silk twist to finish the buttonholes- he had run out of 'twist'.

It became too dark to work and the Tailor made to go home, locked and shuttered the door and trudged home through the snow to his little one-room house in College Court. He was greeted as he entered by his cat Simpkin who, although he kept house for the Tailor, also terrorised and captured, the mice that that lived in the house- as they did everywhere in Gloucester.

The Tailor was feeling weak and feeble and he sent Simpkin out with the last of his money to buy milk, sausages and bread; with the last penny Simpkin was entrusted to purchase one Penn 'Orth of cherry coloured silk for the Mayor's fancy waistcoat.

While the cat was out on his errand the Tailor ruminated to himself about the Mayor's clothes and what he had to do to complete the task. The thought made him feel quite poorly and he sat before the fire to rest. While drowsing he heard a tapping noise coming from the sideboard- he traced the noise to a thimble and when he picked it up a little lady mouse was revealed, she curtsied to him and scuttled away. The same thing happened with other crockery and utensils until the Tailor had released several mice who all thanked him by bowing or curtsying for their release. These mice were to have been Simpkin's supper! The Tailor lamented to himself about the work that he had still to do and that he lacked the energy and the means to complete the job. Unbeknownst to the Tailor the mice listened to his lament, whispered together for a while and then disappeared.

Simpkin returned from shopping and immediately saw that his captive mice had been freed so, in retaliation, hid the cherry coloured twist in a teapot. The Tailor asked the cat about the twist but Simpkin only spat and growled at the Tailor as if to say 'where are my mice'. The Tailor realized that without the twist he was undone and took to his bed with a fever.

We pick up the story on Christmas Eve, by which time, the Tailor had been lying ill for three days. Everyone else in Gloucester had made all their preparations for Christmas, buying turkeys and geese and baking their pies etc but the Tailor and Simpkin had not been part of this happy scene.

It is written in the old books that between midnight Christmas Eve and dawn on Christmas Day that all creatures can talk, although not many folks know what they say. This was no comfort to Simpkin who had been searching in vain for his mice so, in desperation, he went out of the Tailor's house as the Cathedral clock and bells heralded Christmas. He could hear the birds and beasts talking away as he made

his way in the snow and as he reached Westgate Street, he could here quite a lot of noise coming from the Tailor's shop.

He peeped in through the shutters and saw that all the mice from the Tailor's house were sitting inside singing songs and sewing the Mayor's clothes together. They wouldn't let Simpkin in of course when he scratched and mewed at the door; he had no key; it was under the Tailor's pillow. The mice teased him with their songs and continued sewing. Simpkin returned to the house to find the Tailor sleeping peacefully, the fever had abated. Simpkin thought long and hard about the good deed that the mice were doing for the Tailor and felt very ashamed of himself, so he took the skein of silk from its hiding place and placed it on the Tailor's pillow.

The Tailor awoke on Christmas Day and, to his joy and amazement, saw the silk on his pillow. He dressed quickly and rushed off to the shop with Simpkin running before him; as he went, he was wondering to himself if he had the strength to complete the Mayor's coat despite the reappearance of the silk. He unlocked the door to the shop and Simpkin went in first, looking for the mice, but the only thing to be seen was the Mayor's coat and waistcoat completely sewn together except for one little buttonhole, attached to it was a little note saying (in mouse sized writing) 'No More Twist'

The Tailor finished off the work quickly, delivered the clothes to the Mayor and it all ended happily; the Tailor grew rich and fat as his reputation reached far and wide.

THE TOUR. We start the tour from the Beatrix Potter shop/museum by telling BPs version of the story using the pictures and notes at the BP shop and then go out into the cathedral grounds via St Michael's Gate. This follows Simpkin's route initially but, whereas, the cat turns left to listen to the cathedral bells and then goes out via the Comfy Pew, we turn right and go via the Via Sacra into Northgate St passing St John's Lane where John Prichard's first shop stood at Number 10, the southern end of the former Citizen building. The shop would have looked like the little shops to the south of the church, so no need to walk up to Number 10.

At this stage of the tour, relate the real story of the TOG, John Prichard, 1877 to 1934, who is buried in Charlton Kings cemetery. He moved his shop from St John's Lane to Westgate St as business flourished. Around the late 1890s, John was given the job of making clothes for the Mayor's Procession from the Guildhall to Shire Hall. He worked on the Mayor's waistcoat but left the work unfinished on a Saturday afternoon and shut up shop for the weekend. He returned on Monday to find the work completed except for one buttonhole to which was attached a note 'No More Twist'. Puzzled, he said to himself, rather whimsically, the fairies must have done the job in his absence. As soon as he said it, he realized he had a valuable marketing tool to hand and capitalized on it by displaying a waistcoat in the window along with the logo 'Come to Prichard's where clothes are made by the fairies'. Legend born! and he grew wealthy and well-known as a result.

The truth about the waistcoat emerged much later, Prichard's apprentices stayed in town on the Saturday and had too much to drink so they let themselves into the shop to sleep it off. Next morning, they were fearful of appearing in public on a Sunday

unshaven and hungover, so they remained in the shop until later. To pass the time they completed the waistcoat except for the final buttonhole as they had run out of thread, so they left a note for John Prichard saying 'No more twist'. On Monday they didn't tell the tailor what they had done because they were ashamed and were not supposed to have a key to the shop.

Move on to the Oxbode, BP's Mitre St, compare the photo of the lane in Victorian times with BP's drawing and perhaps recite the Ox rhyme to demonstrate how narrow it was. Go on to the New Inn, show BP's sketches and give a brief history of the Inn. Walk up to the Cross, this would have been the Mayoral procession route from Guildhall to Shire Hall. On to Westgate St and, using the old photos, get the visitors to try to identify the Mayor's grocers' shop. Number 5 Westgate St was the address, but the numbers have all been changed over the years and its now number 9. It is opposite St John's Lane and was, at the time these notes were initially prepared, the offices of a building society. The sign of the Golden Candle outside Vickers Grocers in the book was inspired by the Golden Grasshopper that was once outside the shop that closed in 1960.

Look at 26 Westgate St, a possible source for BP's drawings and go on to the Sword Inn, the RHS of the building was Prichard's shop, show visitors Phil Moss's drawing. Walk past College Court and Street show BP's drawings and then go down to 3 Cocks Lane and Lower Westgate St and do likewise. End the tour here or walk the visitors back to BP shop and take them into the museum if required.

BEATRIX'S LATER LIFE. Beatrix was unofficially engaged to her editor, Norman Warne in 1905 despite the disapproval of her parents but he died soon afterwards of leukaemia. When she moved to the Lake District she married, at the age of 47, William Heelas a respected solicitor from Hawkshead. She was a prolific author, land manager, and supporter of the local community and, moreover, was an influential figure in the National Parks scheme. Beatrix died on 22 December 1943

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