

# The World of Beswick and Beatrix Potter

## with Price Guide

By Sophie Jackson

**I**t is almost unthinkable to imagine anyone not knowing who Beatrix Potter was. She might not have been the most obvious person to become a beloved children's writer and illustrator - her first written work was a scientific paper on the germination of fungi - but Beatrix's love of the natural world, along with her enjoyment of fairy tales and fantasy stories, created a strange amalgamation of lifelike animals and quaint tales in her books that still appeals today.

### Beatrix's World

Beatrix's early life was traditional for a young Victorian lady. It has been said she was kept secluded, but many middle class Victorian ladies lived similar lives. There was the problem of her families' unconventional religious beliefs (they were English Unitarians) which resulted in some discrimination, but Beatrix was not trapped indoors all the time. She was well-educated, her last governess being Annie Moore for whose children Beatrix would later write many of her early stories, sending them in the form of illustrated letters. Beatrix had a rapacious appetite for knowledge and studied every branch of the natural sciences aside from astronomy.

In 1893 Beatrix wrote the *Tale of Peter Rabbit* (under a different title) in a letter to Annie Moore's oldest son Noel. She had run out of news to write and decided to tell him a story about 'four little rabbits whose names were Flopsy, Mopsy, Cottontail and Peter.' Seven years later Beatrix re-evaluated the story and decided to get it published. She failed to find a publisher and in 1901 published the book privately at her own expense. A family friend, Canon Hardwicke Rawnsley took up the challenge of getting the work published to a wider audience and managed to rouse the interest of Frederick Warne & Co. who earlier rejected the book. In 1902 they published the 'bunny book' as they affectionately knew the *Tale of Peter Rabbit* and it was an instant success. Beatrix would publish 23 little books. As early as 1903 the potential was realised for subsidiary sales through merchandising. This was a new idea for publishers, but Frederick Warne & Co. latched on to it quickly, licencing a range of products from a Peter Rabbit doll to china sets, wallpaper, painting books and board games.

### Lucy Beswick's Suggestion

Beatrix Potter passed away in 1943, but her children's books were too popular and, arguably, too timeless to fade away. Potter left her Lake District home to the *National Trust* and in 1947 Lucy Beswick, wife of the managing director of the Beswick Pottery, paid a visit to the house. She was inspired by Potter's home, including some of the drawings from her books and suggested to her husband that Beswick Pottery should begin making Beatrix Potter figurines. Lucy hardly realised how important her idea was to become.

Beswick Pottery was known for its life-like animal figurines, particularly of famous horses and champion show dogs. The company was established by James Beswick in 1892 and passed to his grandson John in 1921. By the 1930s increased competition meant John Beswick needed new ideas to revitalise the Pottery. Lucy's suggestion came at the right time. Under licence from Frederick Warne & Co. Beswick produced 10 Beatrix Potter figurines in 1948, the first being Jemima Puddle-Duck, sculpted by chief modeller Arthur Gredington who was also responsible for the popular '190 rearing horses' series.

The initial figures were joined by more characters. Some, like Jemima and Peter Rabbit, were so popular they survived until 2002. Others failed to appeal to the public. The model of 'Duchess', a little black dog from *The Tale of the Pie and the Patty Pan* never sold well. The figure 'Anna Maria', the rat from *The Tale of Samuel Whiskers* or *The Roly Poly Pudding* was also unpopular, not least because she was the villain of Beatrix's story and looked ratty compared to the cuteness of the usual figures. This disinterest is a boon as they are now rare and valued at between £75 to £1,900 compared to the usual £20 to £50.

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### Back-to-Back

Due to the long period over which many of the figurines were made, serious collecting involves getting to know the various back-stamps Beswick used to mark its ornaments. There are too many to fit here, but may be studied at: [http://www.blackcatcollectables.com//acatalog/Information\\_on\\_Beatrice\\_Potter\\_backstamps.html](http://www.blackcatcollectables.com//acatalog/Information_on_Beatrice_Potter_backstamps.html) or with identification photos at: <http://www.boxofporcelain.com/Beatrix/Backstamps.htm>

The earliest stamps are the most important. These fall into two series, the BP1 and the BP2 series. There are two versions of the BP1 stamp, both issued between 1948 and 1954, making them desirable. BP1a has the words *Beswick* and *England* forming a circle in gold, while BP1b has them in parallel lines. The BP1 stamp is thought to have been used on only nineteen models. The BP2 stamp again has two versions and was used between 1955-1972. BP2a has the words *Beswick* and *England* forming an oval in gold. The BP2b stamp had restricted use between 1971-1972 and is considered a transitional stamp between the BP2 series and the BP3 series (1973 to 1988). The BP2b stamp had the name of the character and 'Beatrix Potter' in gold with the remaining words in brown. Due to its short run the BP2b stamp raises a figure's value, as does the initial BP3a stamp which came after and was only used between 1973 and 1974. The difference a stamp can make to the value of a piece can be seen when comparing the same figurines. The popular ornament of Squirrel Nutkin can be worth as little as £24, but with the BP2a back-stamp, rises to £90.

Knowing stamps is an important element of collecting Beswick Potter if you wish to specialise in the most valuable and sought after pieces. If you want to collect the set of figurines regardless of value, then stamps are less important. Beware fakes, of which Beswick attracts large numbers. Identification stamps are rather basic and easy to copy. Unsurprisingly the internet carries most of the fraud. Here unscrupulous traders offer supposedly genuine rare examples at cheap prices. A healthy dose of common sense is needed when shopping for Potter figures on the web.

### The Rare and the not so Rare

A number of factors can make a Beatrix figurine rare. The first nine models with the earliest back-stamp are obvious candidates, but in fact, as they were made in such large numbers they have limited value. A first edition Peter Rabbit can be worth as little as £20. It is the more unusual figures that attract larger prices. A good example is 'Little Piglet Robinson Spying', who comes from Potter's last published book based on the poem *The Owl and the Pussycat*. Piglet Robinson is usually found in a walking pose, but there is also the 'spying' version, where he is sitting in a wicker chair with a spyglass to his eye. This model can be worth £125-£175. Another expensive pig is the heroine from *Pigling Bland*, Pig-Wig. She perhaps suffers from the same fate as Duchess the dog of being painted a dark black which masks her features and makes her appear frightening to children - or perhaps pigs were less popular than squirrels and rabbits! Today she is a boon to collectors being worth up to £200. Unfortunately the prices for even rare figures is subjective. At a recent auction a figure of the dog Pickles from *The Tale of Ginger and Pickles* holding his red credit book and pencil and with a BP2 back-stamp sold for £130. On a collectibles website the same figure with a BP3 back-stamp was selling for £180. There is variance in the value of Potter figurines, but while they may cause headaches for auctioneers when it comes to pricing, they can be a charming and affordable hobby. There is a style and beauty to the Beswick figures which the modern Royal Doulton models fail to capture, and you never know, along your 'Potter-ings', you may come across an early version of poor Duchess the dog and find yourself holding an unloved figurine worth a smallish fortune.

**Editor's Footnote:** The £2,900 hammer price shown for *Duchess with Flowers* in 2005 resulted from a bidding war between two women and does not reflect average prices, currently between £950 and £1,200.



Beswick model of Beatrix Potter's Duchess with Flowers. Brettells, Newport. Jul 05. HP: £2,900. ABP: £3,422. See Footnote.



22 Beswick Beatrix Potter figures, brown back stamp, 13cm high maximum. Locke & England, Leamington Spa. Mar 09. HP: £260. ABP: £306.



Beswick Beatrix Potter characters: Pigling Bland, Jemima Puddleduck and Peter Rabbit, all with gold oval stamps, Benjamin Bunny (a.f) & Foxy Whiskered Gentlemen with silver oval stamps and Old Mr Brown with brown line stamp. Gorringes, Lewes. Mar 03. HP: £250. ABP: £295.



Collection of 49 Beswick Beatrix Potter figures, all with brown Beswick stamps and including a scarce figure of 'Simpkin' the cat. D M Nesbit & Company, Southsea. Feb 03. HP: £1,150. ABP: £1,357.



Group of eight Beatrix Potter figures, a Royal Doulton Mr Apple and 3 Wade figures of the Butcher, Baker and Candle-stick Maker. Gorringes, Lewes. Feb 01. HP: £460. ABP: £542.



Beatrix Potter figure 'The Duchess with a Pie'. Denhams, Warnham. Oct 03. HP: £240. ABP: £283.



John Beswick Beatrix Potter model of Flopsy Mopsy and Cottontail. Ltd. Edn. 278/1500, modelled around a bowl, 3.75in. Gorringes, Lewes. Jul 09. HP: £160. ABP: £188.



Two Beswick pottery Beatrix Potter figures: Sir Isaac Newton, 3.75in high, and Mr Jeremy Fisher Digging, 3.75in high, both with brown back stamps. Canterbury Auction Galleries, Kent. Apr 06. HP: £140. ABP: £165.



Beswick Beatrix Potter figure of Mrs Rabbit, 4in. Gorringes, Lewes. Jul 09. HP: £170. ABP: £200.



Beswick Beatrix Potter figure group Flopsy, Mopsy and Cottontail, circular gold mark, 3.75in. Gorringes, Lewes. Jul 09. HP: £110. ABP: £129.



Beswick Beatrix Potter Figure, Little Pig Robinson Spying, BP-3c. Charterhouse Auctioneers, Sherborne. Jan 09. HP: £90. ABP: £106.



Beswick Beatrix Potter figure of Peter Rabbit, 1098/1, with dark blue jacket, designed by Arthur Gredlington, BP2a, 4.5 high. Halls Fine Art, Shrewsbury. Jul 05. HP: £50. ABP: £59.



Beswick Beatrix Potter Figure, Squirrel Nutkin, BP-2. Charterhouse, Sherborne. Jan 09. HP: £40. ABP: £47.



Beswick Beatrix Potter figure of Jemima Puddleduck 1092/1, designed by Arthur Gredlington, BP2a, 4.75 high. Halls Fine Art, Shrewsbury. Jul 05. HP: £40. ABP: £47.



Beswick Beatrix Potter figure, This Pig Had a Bit of Meat, limited edition 599/1500, on original wooden plinth, 4.5in. Gorringes, Lewes. Jul 09. HP: £440. ABP: £519.



Beatrix Potter figure 'Ginger'. Denhams, Warnham. Oct 03. HP: £240. ABP: £283.



Beswick Beatrix Potter figure 'Tommy Brock', base with gold back stamp. Denhams, Warnham. Apr 04. HP: £120. ABP: £141.



Beswick Beatrix Potter figure, Pigling Bland, BP-2. Charterhouse, Sherborne. Sep 09. HP: £80. ABP: £94.



Beswick Beatrix Potter figure of Hunca Munca 1198, wearing blue dress and white apron with pink blanket and straw cradle, designed by Arthur Gredlington, BP2a, 2.75 high. Halls Fine Art, Shrewsbury. Jul 05. HP: £40. ABP: £47.



Rare Beswick Beatrix Potter figure Jemima and her Ducklings BP8A. Potteries Specialist Auctions, Stoke on Trent. Nov 08. HP: £350. ABP: £413.



Three Beswick Beatrix Potter figures 'Pickles', 'Amiable Guinea-Pig' and 'Pig Wig', each with brown backstamps. (BP3 B) Bearn's, Exeter. Jun 05. HP: £180. ABP: £212.



Beatrix Potter figure 'Anna Maria'. Denhams, Warnham. Oct 03. HP: £110. ABP: £129.



Beswick Beatrix Potter figure, Pig Wig, BP-3b. Charterhouse, Sherborne. Sep 09. HP: £60. ABP: £70.



Beswick. Beatrix Potter, Mr Benjamin Bunny & Peter Rabbit. Kent Auction Galleries, Folkestone. Jul 05. HP: £30. ABP: £35.