

Many people know of Beatrix Potter as the author of the Peter Rabbit stories. Very few however are aware that she was also an accomplished naturalist. Every summer Beatrix would go for long walks while on holiday in the Scottish countryside and in the Lake District in northwest England. While out walking in the fields she would come across many different kinds of mushroom, which she found fascinating. At the age of twenty-two she began drawing the mushrooms she found. But it was when she met Charles McIntosh that Beatrix's love of mushrooms turned into serious research. McIntosh was the local postman where the Potter family spent their summer holidays in Scotland. He was a shy man, but he knew everything there was to know about mushrooms, and before long he and Beatrix became good friends. He encouraged her study of mushrooms, and she began to make precise and detailed records of their characteristics. She read all the books she could find about mushrooms, and became adept at using a microscope. In 1897 at the age of thirty-one, Beatrix wrote a paper based on her research, which she hoped to submit to an academic society in London. Unfortunately, in those days women were not given the same respect as men were, and her research findings were not accepted by the society. It must have been a most upsetting and distressing time for Beatrix, to have all her academic hard work rejected simply because she was a woman. As a result of this disappointment, Beatrix gave up her research into mushrooms and focused her attention on writing picture books. Many years later, Beatrix's research was belatedly given the respect it deserved, but perhaps if her work had been accepted at the time it was done, a certain blue-jacketed rabbit would never have seen the light of day.