Charles Waterton was born in 1782, and lived at Walton Hall with his parents, Anne and Thomas. Charles was taught at home until he was 9 years old, and spent much of his time climbing trees. He was sent to boarding school in Durham but was very unhappy because he was punished for doing the same there.

At 14, Charles went to Stonyhurst College in Lancashire, which he loved. Stonyhurst was surrounded by countryside and Charles was able to study nature. He was given the job of rat-catcher! He liked his school uniform so much that he wore it for special occasions until his death in 1865! He even went back to the College every Christmas to join the boys and teachers in their festivities.

The Waterton family owned sugar plantations in South America, which Charles visited. He was fascinated by the jungle wildlife so went exploring with native Amerindians. He walked barefoot in the jungle and wrestled with a cayman.

He could walk on his hands, climb trees like a monkey, and scratch his head with his toe – when he was 80 years old!
As a young boy, Waterton climbed trees to watch birds and animals in the wood and park around his home. Between his wanderings in the jungle, he returned to Walton Hall, and started to make his estate into a nature reserve. Many of his friends and neighbours thought he was eccentric for getting angry about the shooting of birds. While most of the landed gentry were shooting them and other animals, Waterton was protecting them.

He built a stone wall all the way round his estate. It was 3 miles long and cost about £9000 to build (which would be around £3 million today). From his drawing room, he could watch birds using his telescope – but this was not close enough to nature for Charles.

**Watchtowers**

In the grounds of Walton Hall, Waterton built stone watchtowers like this one, from which he could view wildlife on his estate. He also built nest sites for sand martins, owls, herons and starlings. Old tree stumps were made into homes for owls.

He planted his favourite evergreen plants – ivy, holly and yew – all around his estate to give protection to birds all year round.

He opened his house and parkland to the public, as he wanted local workers and their families to see the beauties of nature. He also invited groups from the lunatic asylum to visit.

Waterton introduced the little owl to Britain from Italy; sadly, they did not breed. However, little owls were introduced again in 1889 and, if you are lucky, you might see one in the Wakefield area today.
Charles Waterton

Traveller & Writer

1802 Charles went to Europe and stayed with relatives in Spain, where he learnt to speak Spanish. He had to ‘escape’ during an epidemic of yellow fever.

1804 He sailed across the Atlantic to Guiana, South America, to oversee the sugar plantations.

1806 Charles visited the Caribbean Islands and sailed up the Orinoco River, looking at exotic birds, snakes and monkeys.

1812 On his first Wandering into South America, Charles ventured into the jungle of Guiana with Amerindian natives to collect samples of the deadly poison – curare – which the natives used on their arrows.

1816 On his second Wandering, Charles collected 200 species of birds to preserve.

1817 When he travelled to Rome to see the Pope, he got into trouble for climbing the dome of St Peter’s.

1820 The third Wandering was when he captured a 3m caiman by jumping on its back!

1824 The fourth Wandering took him to the USA and Canada as well as Guiana.

1828 When he was 47 years old, Charles married a 17-year-old girl called Anne from Guiana, the daughter of his best friend.

1830 Charles’ wife Anne died after the birth of their son, Edmond. From this time, Charles only travelled around Europe.

During his travels, Charles Waterton started writing essays on natural history – plants, birds, reptiles and other animals of the jungle. He also wrote reports on the religion of the natives, black slaves and European settlers.

A book was published about his “Wanderings in South America”.

Charles Waterton died in May 1865. He had chosen a spot on the bank of the lake at Walton Hall to be buried. His funeral procession crossed the lake in black barges.
Charles Waterton

Taxidermist & Scientist

All his life, Waterton was curious about nature and wildlife.

Around 1810, Charles devised a unique method of taxidermy – instead of stuffing specimens, they were preserved hollow.

He collected hundreds of specimens, mainly birds, preserved them in a life-like way and displayed them in Walton Hall.

His most impressive piece of work was a cayman. This, and many others, can be seen in Wakefield Museum.

Curare

Waterton brought “wourali” (now known as curare) back from South America, where Amerindians used it on the tips of their arrows when hunting.

He was convinced it could be a cure for rabies, and gave samples of curare to anyone who was interested in experimenting with it.

In 1814, at London’s Veterinary College, he injected three asses with curare to show how it could be used to cure, not kill.

One survived the experiment and lived for 25 years at Walton Hall.

She was called ‘Wouralia’.

Curare is now used in anaesthetics.

Charles had a wicked sense of humour, and used to create joke creatures such as this one, which he called ‘John Bull and the National Debt’. It can be seen in Wakefield Museum.

He studied sea birds on the cliffs at Flamborough Head to try to understand their breeding habits.

In Canada, a national park in the Rockies was named after him – the Waterton Lake National Park.
Walton Hall was built on an island in a 17 acre lake in 1767. The outward appearance has hardly changed over 230 years and it is still only accessible across a narrow cast-iron footbridge.

In 1829, to make bird-watching easy and interesting for his new young wife, Waterton had the trunk of a felled oak dragged to the top of a bank overlooking the lake. It was roofed with slate, draped with ivy and divided into two stumps, the upper for owls and the tower for love-birds.

Squire Waterton

‘THE FIRST GREEN HERO’

Charles Waterton built a stone wall all the way around his estate to protect birds and animals and to keep out poachers. It was completed in 1826 and was 3 miles long and 9 feet high. It cost about £5000 to build.

Part of the wall can be seen today in New Park Wood, accessible from New Park Lane in Wintersett and also from Walton.

Owl-House & Seat

Waterton planted holly and ivy around the waterpairs, giving extra protection for small birds to build their nests.

Some time after the wall was completed, Waterton had five or six watchtowers built, to enable him to shelter as he watched wildlife in the protected park.

By 2000, only one watchtower remained standing. This was refurbished in 2006 by Wakefield Rotary Club as part of their Millennium Project.

It is now open to the public as it is situated in the former area of New Park Wood, off New Park Lane, Wintersett.

Waterton’s watch tower and a section of the wall can be seen in New Park Wood, Wintersett, which is managed by Wakefield Countryside & Conservation Service.

For more information contact:

WATERTON COUNTRYSIDE DISCOVERY CENTRE,
Anglers Country Park, Haw Park Lane, Wintersett, Wakefield WF4 2EB
Tel. 01924 393900
Visitor Centre is open every day except Monday - Admission FREE.

Haw Park Wood is open to the public every day.

The Waterton Collection is on display at:

_WAKEFIELD MUSEUM_
Wood Street, Wakefield WF1 2EW
Tel. 01924 305356
Open every day - Admission FREE.