

## BRITISH ECCENTRICS

### Reading Comprehension (higher)

#### Task 1: READING

Read the following article and underline any examples of eccentric behaviour.

#### The Unusual Life of Charles Waterton

Just what do you do with a schoolboy who is disruptive, unruly and refuses to learn? The answer back in the late 1700s when applied to a ten-year-old called Charles Waterton would cause controversy among modern educationalists.

'They gave him a crossbow, a pack of hunting dogs and put him in charge of pest control. Basically, he was the rat killer,' says Jan Graffius, curator of Lancashire's Stonyhurst College. Charles took his duties so seriously he seems to have single-handedly eradicated the pine marten, from the Ribble Valley. So successful was he, that the fur of this unfortunate creature was used to make hats for his fellow pupils.

You would have expected such an upbringing to have produced an adult with an unhealthy interest in killing anything that moved. In fact, Charles grew up to be the David Attenborough of his day, albeit a rather more eccentric version. In fact, the television naturalist is a great admirer of Charles, who also inspired Darwin.

He was originally schooled in Liverpool where attempts to beat an education into him proved fruitless. In desperation, he was sent to Stonyhurst at Hurst Green to be taught by the Jesuits brothers. He loved the school so much that for the rest of his days he wore a version of the school uniform he had specially made.

After leaving school, Charles spent years studying wildlife while wandering through South America, especially in Guyana, where his family had an estate. During that time he built up an extraordinary array of birds, mammals, reptiles and insects many of which came to Stonyhurst to form a highly impressive collection. 'He was one of the first people to put forward the belief that man was put on earth to protect wildlife not to exploit and eat it,'

While the adult Charles built up a considerable following for his research, his strange behaviour often ruined his credibility in the scientific community. For instance,

his response to dull dinner parties was to scuttle around on all fours, barking like a dog and biting the ankles of his guests.

He also drew criticism for presenting what he claimed was a wild creature, half man, half beast. He eventually had to admit it was made from a monkey's bottom and bore a strong resemblance to a customs officer he'd argued with.

During his time in Guyana, he stunned Native Americans by dragging an 3.5m crocodile from a river and riding on its back. He refused to let them shoot it as it would spoil the creature for preservation.

The Waterton collection amounted to about 1,000 items - many still kept in the cases Charles had made for the purpose. 'Taxidermy then was very rudimentary and the results didn't look life-like,' she says. 'He devised a process using incredibly dangerous chemicals, which allowed animals to be modelled back into shape.' The results are remarkably realistic and completely hollow. They also remain dangerous and Jan has to wear protective clothing and a face mask when she works on the collection.

It's a job full of challenges for the curator. For instance, there is a tarantula which still has poisonous hairs on its back and a porcupine with razor-sharp quills.

While some regard Waterton as the first passionate ecologist it could have so different if a teacher at Stonyhurst hadn't taken him to one side on the day he was due to leave. 'We think you will be all right,' he was told. 'But you must never drink alcohol.'

He was a handful sober, once climbing up the lightning conductor above St Peter's in Rome much to the annoyance of the Pope. Just imagine what he would have been like drunk!

## Task 2: VOCABULARY

What do you think the following phrases might mean? Use the context to guess if not sure.

**To beat sth into sb**  
**to drag**

**to exploit sth**  
**to spoil**

**to bear a resemblance to sth**  
**to be sober**

**Task 3: DISCUSSION**

Do you think Charles Waterton would have been so successful if he had been born today?  
What factors might have caused his life to be different?

# BRITISH ECCENTRICS

## Post-session Comprehension

### Teachers' Notes

These activities have been designed to be used before the workshops as introduction and a way of getting students interested and a way to pre-teach vocabulary. You may also use the material as a follow up activity after the students have attended the event and see how much they remember!

#### **Vocabulary definitions:**

<b>To beat sth into sb</b>	<i>to force somebody to learn something/develop a habit</i>
<b>To exploit sth</b>	<i>to use something for one's own benefit</i>
<b>To bear a resemblance to sth</b>	<i>to look similar to something</i>
<b>To drag</b>	<i>to pull something roughly or with difficulty</i>
<b>To spoil</b>	<i>to ruin something</i>
<b>To be sober</b>	<i>the opposite of drunk</i>