

## Wartime letters to the Cunninghams and Louie Choyce

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I am going to read some excerpts from Beatrix Potter's wartime letters written to the Cunninghams and Louie Choyce. I have read the letters and done some research on the facts and events Beatrix Potter wrote about in the letters during World War Two. Unfortunately, some of these events are quite horrid and unpleasant.

I start with the letters written by Beatrix to Mr and Mrs Samuel Cunningham and also to their son Knox and daughter-in-law Dorothy. The surviving letters were published by Miranda Tisdale in *Dear Mr. Cunningham* in 2012. Her great-grandfather was the Right Hon. Samuel Cunningham, who lived in Ireland, and she gave a talk about him and the letters at the Conference in July 2012 in Cumbria, published in *Studies XV Beatrix Potter: Some Friends and Relations*.

The letters were written between 17 February 1935 and mid-December 1943, a period of eight years and ten months. The correspondence started because of the trouble Samuel Cunningham was having with his sheep. Beatrix had written a letter to *The Times* newspaper in 1935 about the suitability of Herdwick sheep and Samuel responded to this letter. Later that same year he and his wife Janet, their son Knox and his wife Dorothy visited Beatrix in the Lake District. They became friends and they exchanged letters until Beatrix died in December 1943. The content of the letters was about books, farming, politics, the weather and, later, about the Second World War. I will read some of these letters.

It is generally considered that, in Europe, World War Two started on 1 September 1939, with the German invasion of Poland, and the United Kingdom and France's declaration of war on Germany two days later. The first time Beatrix Potter wrote about the war was on 11 September 1939: 'The war is too dreadful to discuss, besides we know nothing. I am afraid it may affect you and Mrs. Cunningham.'

On 30 December 1939, Beatrix wrote: 'May the next year bring peace to you and Mrs. Cunningham less anxiety. It is a time of strain'. Then she wrote about farming, '...I have a useful lot of grain, but it is so dirty I am afraid to use it since the chief object in ploughing amongst rough land is to get a clean sow-down. Oats were badly laid during the wet Summer and weeds grew through and ripened seeds along with the corn, so we are feeding crushed oats instead of part cake.

I read that your Government is buying the farm butter. If I may be permitted a very bad joke – that is indeed taking the cow by the horns. We have sheaves of notices about butter rationing, but no precise direction as to disposal of surplus butter after my infuriated consumers have been put off with ¼ lb pats. Whether one may sell to a neighbouring grocer? or whether all surplus must go to Ulverston or London? What a muddle.'

Beatrix ends the letter with: 'I hope you and Mrs. Cunningham are able to keep warm and well. William has a cold and I have lumbago – an absurd affliction, but tiresome. How we shall look forward to Spring weather and happier times.'

On 16 May 1940 Beatrix wrote: 'This is scarcely a time for flower gardening, yet we want any refreshment we can obtain. It has been a lovely spring....' Even in wartime she writes about flowers!

'It does make one sick to think of Holland.' The letter was written on 16 May. We know Beatrix had a radio (or wireless), so I assume she heard the sad news of the bombings of Rotterdam on 14 May. But I think this news would also have been in the newspaper. In those days the newspaper was the main source of all news.

Germany invaded The Netherlands on 10 May. On 14 May they bombed the city of Rotterdam for fifteen minutes and the whole city was destroyed. According to an official list published in 2022 at least 1,150 people were killed and 85,000 more were left homeless. The country was liberated, with help from the USA, Canada and also the UK in May 1945.

Here is a picture of the city of Rotterdam after the bombings:



In August 1940: 'My garden is full of young cabbages and weeds.' There is no mention of the war through the letter, only farming and her garden, but at the end Beatrix writes: 'I must not tell you of our military doings – the censor had examined your letter. I can say we feel well defended and confident, and no bombs have dropped within hearing. Invasion will be very unpleasant where it lands, but it is unthinkable that it could prevail. Let's hope we live to see the end of it.'

October 1940:

I have thought so often about Knox and Dorothy. Are they still occupying a flat in London? When we saw the pictures of the damage in the Temple! Even if they have safe shelter the damage must be heart-rending. We have a friend from Liverpool, who has gone back to work quite cheerfully after a fortnight's sound sleep; she is a district nurse. Merseyside has suffered much house damage and casualties – less spectacular than London – but all who come away complain of the noise and destruction of property. My friend says it is extraordinary how little damage has been done to the docks, only one ship hit and not seriously damaged. Up here the attacks are most erratic. Either they are very bad shots or else confused as to locality. The nearest bombs were 8 miles away in a lonely valley where they killed 2 sheep.

The first bombs fell on London on 25 August 1940. A little later, on 16 October 1940, there was a massive attack in the Temple area. The letter was written on 24 October 1940. We do not know which pictures she saw of the damage in the Temple, but this image gives you a feeling:



1941: 'Do be careful with lights. A farm house was blown to pieces in consequence of lights on a string of lorries on the main road – 11 killed, but the lorries not hit. Things are often blackest before improving.'

'I received a letter from Fernhill yesterday, and I feel I must write and say how extremely shocked and sorry we are to hear about Knox's accident – his father gave us no particulars but said he "is mending fast", so I hope there is no permanent injury or disfigurement. Such a good-looking young man has no business to get smashed on a miserable push-bike! It's wonderful what surgeons can do.'

[Editor's note in *Dear Mr. Cunningham*] When World War Two broke out, Knox was commissioned as a lieutenant in the Scots Guards. However his war service was dramatically cut short when he was severely injured during training manoeuvres in the south of England. His bicycle was struck by an army vehicle which resulted in Knox having to spend over a year recovering in various hospitals in England. He was eventually invalided out of the army in 1943 at which point he resumed his legal practice in London.

These were some excerpts from letters written by Beatrix during wartime to the Cunninghams.

Beatrix also wrote letters to Louie Choyce during wartime, published by The Beatrix Potter Society in 1994 in *The Choyce Letters*, edited by Judy Taylor. Miss Choyce first came to work for Beatrix Potter at Hill Top farm in 1916, during World War One. The two women became friends and kept a long correspondence with each other. Their correspondence started in 1915 and ended in November 1943.

On 9 December 1939, Beatrix wrote: 'My dear Miss Choyce, I do not wonder that you find the times depressing, and lonely in the evenings – the blackout is making it dangerous to go out after dark....' Beatrix has a clear opinion about Hitler. In other letters she wrote that Hitler can not destroy the beautiful Lake District and she was right. 'Hitler is an awful brute; and what a mad mistake to invite the Russians in. I think they are a rotten country....'

How accurate Beatrix writings of over eighty years ago are. We know now how brutish Hitler really was and the Russia is a rotten country today.