



Charles Waterton (1782–1865), the pioneering naturalist and explorer, was born and died at Walton Hall. He enclosed the park and turned it into what is widely acknowledged as the first nature reserve in the world, and is also often credited with the invention of the bird hide and the nestbox.

His books inspired Charles Darwin and Alfred Russell Wallace. Among his other achievements were the introduction of curare to Europe, and he also had a hand in the first breeding of the modern English Mastiff dog. He was a devout Catholic and a popular if eccentric figure-head among the locals.



Waterton's Wall (D) was built in 1821–26. The Friends of Waterton's Wall website (see QR code above) has more information.

It cost £10,000 to build (piecemeal as funds allowed, hence its inconsistent height and construction). Waterton, a committed teetotaler, observed that "it was paid for by the wine I do not drink".



Waterton's Watchtower (E) is one of at least five stone towers built by Charles Waterton for the purposes of watching the wildlife in the park, effectively the first bird hides in the world.

The tower was restored by Wakefield Round Table in 2005, with financial assistance from English Heritage, though its conical cap was placed on the ground next to the tower for structural reasons.

The tower once stood within a sizeable heronry, with up to 40 nests. A wooden figure of 'Squire Waterton' lurks inside.



Anglers Country Park was created on the site of one of the deepest opencast coal-mines in the UK. The 'Room on the Broom Trail' features characters from Julia Donaldson's well-loved children's story and the visitor centre displays provide more information about Charles Waterton.



Walton Hall's Sundial (F) was made by local mason George Boulby in 1813 and shows the time in various cities around the world.



Charles Waterton's Grave (G) stands in a peaceful, though hard-to-find, spot deep within the wooded park he so loved.

history and circular walks from



Waterton's Grave
 1½ miles: fairly easy
 A short wooded stroll to the peaceful final resting place of a pioneering conservationist.

Waterton's Wall & Anglers Country Park
 4¾ miles: fairly easy
 A walk to a neighbouring lake, passing several reminders of Charles Waterton's environmental innovations.

A brief history of Waterton Park

The area around Waterton Park may once have been owned by an Anglo-Saxon chieftain known as Alric of Cawthorne, who held land in South Yorkshire as a tenant of William the Conqueror; he is mentioned by name in the Domesday Book of 1086.

In 1435 the estate passed by marriage to Richard Waterton, who built a fortified hall with a moat. The Watertons were a Catholic family, and hence lost favour during the Reformation, though they managed to retain Walton Hall. In 1645 the L-shaped timber house was damaged by Parliamentarians during the Civil War siege of nearby Sandal Castle, which was a Royalist redoubt in the Civil War. Only the gateway or watergate (A) remains of the medieval house.

In the latter part of the 18th century the moat was enlarged into a lake, and in around 1767 the present-day Walton Hall (B) was built in the Georgian style on the island by Thomas Waterton (1742–1805). The house was described by a contemporary writer as “elegantly situated...standing on a rock in a very fine sheet of water”. The cast-iron footbridge (C) leading to the island, and the house itself, are Grade II* listed.

Thomas’s son Charles, Walton Hall’s most famous resident, was born in the new house in 1782. In his twenties he travelled to British Guiana (now Guyana) to help oversee his uncle’s sugar plantations near Georgetown. Although the labour force was made up of slaves, Charles seems to have held enlightened views for the time: he called slavery “the Devil’s invention” and in 1825 wrote “slavery can never be defended; he whose heart is not of iron can never wish to be able to defend it.” He sold the plantation and did not own slaves nor receive compensation after the abolition of slavery. While in South America, Charles explored the hinterland and finally debunked a long-standing legend, first ascribed to Sir Walter Raleigh, that the area contained a huge lake, Lake Parime, the site of the fabled city of El Dorado.

His lifelong interest in nature, and fascination with the exotic animals he encountered in South America, led him to develop new techniques in taxidermy. In Guyana, Waterton befriended the Scots planter Charles Edmonstone and his wife Helen, who was half Scottish and half Arawak. Waterton taught his preservation techniques to one of Edmonstone’s slaves, John, who later went to Scotland with his master. As a free man, John Edmonstone set himself up as a professional taxidermist in Edinburgh, and may have passed on his techniques to a young Charles Darwin, who was studying at the University at the time. Waterton’s book *Wanderings in South America* is also said to have inspired Darwin, who in later life visited Walton Hall as a guest of the ageing Waterton.

Waterton had inherited the Walton estate on his father’s death in 1805. He began enclosing the park to keep poachers and foxes out and wildlife in. Waterton’s three-mile wall (D) was built in stages as finances allowed, and was complete by 1826. Boating on the lake was

suspended, and the park’s gamekeepers and their dogs were forbidden from entering vulnerable areas, during the bird-nesting season. Waterton also built a number of watch houses – used for shelter and protection from poachers – one of which (E) has been restored. He favoured mixed planting of trees to encourage birds, and turned dead stumps into nesting sites – perhaps the world’s first nestboxes. He also fought a long-running court case against Edward Simpson, the owner of a nearby soap works that was causing severe pollution on the estate.

‘Squire’ Waterton’s other additions to the estate included an unusual sundial (F), a multi-faceted ashlar construction with gnomons indicating the time in various world cities including Demerara in Guyana. It was made by George Boulby, a local stonemason, in 1813 and still stands at the rear left of Walton Hall.

In 1829, the 47-year-old Waterton married his young god-daughter Anne Edmonstone, the daughter of Charles and Helen, his old friends from Guyana. Sadly, Anne died just a year later at the tender age of 18, shortly after their son Edmund was born.

Charles maintained the reserve at Walton Hall with Anne’s sisters Helen and Eliza until his death in 1865 at the age of 82, following a fall on the estate. His chosen resting place (G) was close to the site of the accident. The railings were added by Edmund at the insistence of his aunts – rather against his father’s expressed wishes to be buried amongst his beloved nature – and the concrete cross is a 20th-century replica.

In later life Edmund filed for bankruptcy and, by a cruel twist of fate, was forced to sell the Walton estate to Edward Simpson Jr, the son of his father’s great adversary.

The Barnsley Canal (H) opened in the 1790s to carry coal from the Barnsley collieries to the Aire and Calder Navigation, and runs through a rock-cut channel along the western edge of the park. Competition from railways and incidents of subsidence eventually led to its closure in 1953; a restoration group founded in 1984 campaigned for its restoration, but was disbanded in 2020. The towpath forms part of the Trans-Pennine Trail, and many of its bridges (I, J) are listed at Grade II.

Walton Hall was requisitioned as a maternity home during World War II and continued as such until 1966. Renovation as a country club began in the 1970s and the hotel has been privately owned since 1989. The Waterton Park Golf Club opened as a separate concern in 1995.

Charles Waterton’s pioneering efforts eminently justify his recognition as one of the world’s first environmentalists: Historic England describe him as “a pioneering naturalist, researcher and adventurer of the early C19, who believed in the need for, and benefit of, a harmonious balance between humans and the natural world, with a deep antipathy to the harming of wildlife (especially birds) by mankind.” In March 2024, the estate was added to the official register of parks and gardens as “the first dedicated nature reserve for the protection of native wild species in the world”.

Tracks on the golf course are for golf carts only. Please use only the public footpaths. There is no public access to the course and neither the golf club nor hotel are liable for an injury caused.

Waterton’s Grave 1½ miles: fairly easy

Allow 1 hour. Paths may be muddy and slightly uneven or overgrown in places.

1 From the end of the footbridge (C) walk to the right of the Grand Café. Keep right at the rear of the building. **2** Pass the end of a narrow path on the right (our return route) then, at a triangular junction of paths, bear right. **3** When you emerge onto a golfers’ track, turn left then immediately right. Climb the slope between trees until you meet another track at a T-junction. **4** Continue straight ahead along a narrow path that leads shortly to a gateway, your first encounter with Waterton’s Wall (D). **5** Go through the gate and turn right along the edge of the field. **6** At a kissing gate, take the right-hand path (signposted to Stubbs Wood), which winds through scrubland then follows a boardwalk between the wall (left) and a pond (right). **7** The path continues over further boardwalks into denser woodland, with the valley of a stream appearing to your left. **8** After 150m or so, for the there-and-back diversion to Charles Waterton’s grave (G), take a left turn onto a narrow path that descends to and crosses the stream. **9** At a crossroads of paths at the top of the far bank, turn right and follow another narrow path that descends to the simple cross and railed-off grave. **10** Return the way you came, recrossing the stream, and turn left to continue along the main Stubbs Wood footpath. **11** The path curves right when it reaches the swampy headwaters of the lake, then climbs away from, but still roughly parallel to, the water’s edge. **12** The path emerges from the trees and runs along the grassy bank with views over the lake to Walton Hall. **13** Beyond a junction of golfers’ tracks, continue ahead on a descending path. **14** At the next junction of tracks (by a sign reading ‘Next Tee’), cross straight over onto a narrow, unsurfaced path. **15** When you reach the rear of the Grand Café, turn left to the hotel.

Waterton’s Wall & Anglers Country Park 4¾ miles: fairly easy

4¾ miles: fairly easy. Allow 2–3 hours. Paths may be muddy in places.

Follows steps **1–5** of the **Waterton’s Grave** walk, above.

6 At a kissing gate, take the left-hand path (signposted to Anglers Country Park), which heads across the field in front of you. **7** At the far side, follow the boardwalk to the left of a marshy pond. Go through a kissing gate and cross a footbridge over a stream. **8** Follow the left-hand edge of the next field uphill, and continue beyond a hedge. **9** In the corner of the second field, go through a kissing gate into Anglers Country Park and join the main track around the lake.

To visit the bird hide, turn right then left after 70m. For a shorter walk, you can carry on round the lake anticlockwise and rejoin the described route at the visitor centre and car park (step 13).

10 Otherwise, turn left along the main track. After 500m, take a path on the right down to the lakeside. Bear left at the lake and when you rejoin the main track bear right. **11** Follow the track around the head of the lake, ignoring all paths to the left. **12** At the southern end of the lake, keep left to the visitor centre. **13** Exit the car park onto Haw Park Lane and turn right. **14** Continue beyond the barrier, with Winterset Reservoir to your left. **15** At a junction bear right, past another barrier (signposted Haw Park Wood). **16** Follow the track past a couple of fields (separated from the Wild Wood pet cemetery) until you reach Haw Park Wood at a metal gate and barrier. **17** Continue past a mounting block to a junction by a noticeboard and bench, where you keep straight on. **18** At a corner of Waterton’s Wall (D), a diversion (about 250m each way) leads to Waterton’s Watchtower (E): go through the kissing gate and walk along the edge of the wood with the golf course on your right, returning the same way. **19** To continue, follow the main track with Waterton’s Wall on your right. **20** After a sunken section, the path continues along the wall beside a field to the disused Barnsley Canal (H). **21** Turn right and follow the path between wall and canal until you reach the entrance to a house. **22** Cross the canal here via the Grade-II-listed bridge (I), then turn right onto a path that descends to meet the old canal towpath. **23** After quarter of a mile, leave the towpath before it passes under a second listed canal bridge (J) and climb a short flight of steps to the Waterton Park access road. **24** Turn right over the old canal and follow the drive for another quarter-mile back to the hotel.

Waterton Capturing the Cayman, by Captain Edwin Jones

