



*Much Ado About
Nothing, Pendley 2012
Photo: Adam Trigg*

The kings of Tring

The pretty market town of Tring is a name to put on your summer list of 'must-visit places', particularly this month, says Sandra Deeble

There are lots of hidden gems in Tring,' says Paul Kitching, sitting in a museum stuffed full of animals and birds, including a pair of fleas, dressed in matching outfits knitted by Mexican nuns. Head of the Natural History Museum at Tring and a zoologist, Kitching is no stranger to quirky delights. The tale of Tring Museum, he tells me, started with one small mouse.

At the age of seven, Walter Rothschild, whose aristocratic, banking family had a country retreat in Tring, watched as Alfred Minall, one of the estate workers and an amateur taxidermist, prepared a mounted skin of a mouse. It was a pivotal moment. Walter announced to his parents that he was going to have a museum and that Alfred Minall was going to work there. Walter's fascination with natural history grew over the years and in 1889, for his 21st birthday present, his parents gave him the

money and land to build a museum. Walter created the largest collection of natural history specimens ever assembled by one person and in 1892, opened his museum to the public. Alfred Minall was both caretaker and taxidermist.

'It's an incredible collection,' says Kitching. 'We have 4,000 different species of animal on display. The glass cases are floor to ceiling so it doesn't matter how tall or small you are. We have seven species of bear and 200 different species of snake. >

There is nowhere else where you would find this kind of diversity in one space.'

For families with children, the Myths and Monsters exhibition, open until September 6, is proving popular; while on September 25 there is a Science Uncovered event, when museum researchers bring out fascinating exhibits for close scrutiny.

The newly refurbished Rothschild Room tells the story of Walter's life in an engaging way. He famously kept zebras, wallabies, giant tortoises and rheas in Tring Park, part of his family's estate and across the road from the museum. It's a wonderful space that is now looked after by the Woodland Trust, and the perfect place for spotting red kites, buzzards and kestrels. In the park Walter trained zebras

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to draw his carriage and he drove a team of them to Buckingham Palace. He also rode his giant tortoise, and in the new gallery you can experience what this feels like for yourself.

While some of the exhibits are huge, particularly the polar bears, elephants and giraffes, one of the most popular exhibits is the smallest. 'Walter's younger brother Charles was an excellent entomologist with a particular interest in fleas,' explains Kitching. Charles bought a set of fleas - fully dressed in traditional ponchos and hats - in Mexico, which visitors can still view through a magnifying glass.

Kitching recommends two to three hours for a visit to the museum. For food and drink, there is the Zebra café on site, but you could also try the popular Espresso Lounge on the high street.

Band of brothers

Another gem in Tring is the Pendley Shakespeare Festival that takes place from August 5 to August 16 at Pendley Manor Hotel. This year, you can see Twelfth Night and Henry V, performed, in true British style, in the open air.

'I think people really enjoy the times when it rains,' says festival director William Edwards. 'Last year we had the worst rain we've had in 20 years.' Needless to say, the weather did nothing to dampen the spirits of either the performers or the audience.

'Our company is formed of young



The Natural History Museum at Tring houses the largest collection of natural history specimens by one person



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Photo: Rich Turner



ABOVE: The Rothschild Room at the museum
LEFT: *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, Pendley 2011



professionals,' says Edwards, 'and all company members are in both productions.'

The actors arrive at Pendley Manor towards the end of July and they all stay at the hotel while rehearsing and for the duration of the amateur theatre festival, which has now been going for 66 years.

'It started life as a private event run by (Pendley Manor owner) Dorian Williams in his own home,' says Edwards. 'The tradition has carried on, which is fantastic.'

Dorian Williams was the last family member to live in the manor where he opened up the house not only for theatre, but adult education courses including watercolour painting. He was also a BBC commentator for events such as the Horse of the Year Show.

Pendley Manor is taking bookings for dinner before the performances but you can also picnic in the grounds. You can of course stay the night in the hotel - and you might meet Henry V or Duke Orsino over breakfast.

This year, the festival also incorporates Pendley Plus, offering pre-show talks and post-show discussions. There are also new Sunday matinees.

'I love to try to encourage people to come to both plays because you can see how a relatively small company can transform from doing one of Shakespeare's funniest plays to one of his most poignant,' says Edwards. 'It's a brilliant opportunity for

'I encourage people to come to both plays because you can see how a small company can transform'

young professionals to flex their muscles.'

Some of the actors who performed at the festival when they were starting out include Steven Campbell Moore, Raza Jaffrey and Lynda Bellingham.

While Edwards says that over the last 66 years a huge loyalty and affection has developed towards the festival, there are many more people who are yet to discover what Tring has to offer. 'It's a tiny town that no-one knows about,' he says. ■

PLAN YOUR TRING TRIP

Natural History Museum at Tring
nhm.ac.uk/tring

Pendley Shakespeare Festival
pendleyshakespearefestival.co.uk



Photo: Adam Trigg



ABOVE LEFT: *Hamlet*, Pendley 2014
ABOVE: Sizing up a mountain gorilla at the Natural History Museum
LEFT: Museum founder Walter Rothschild took his team of zebras to Buckingham Palace