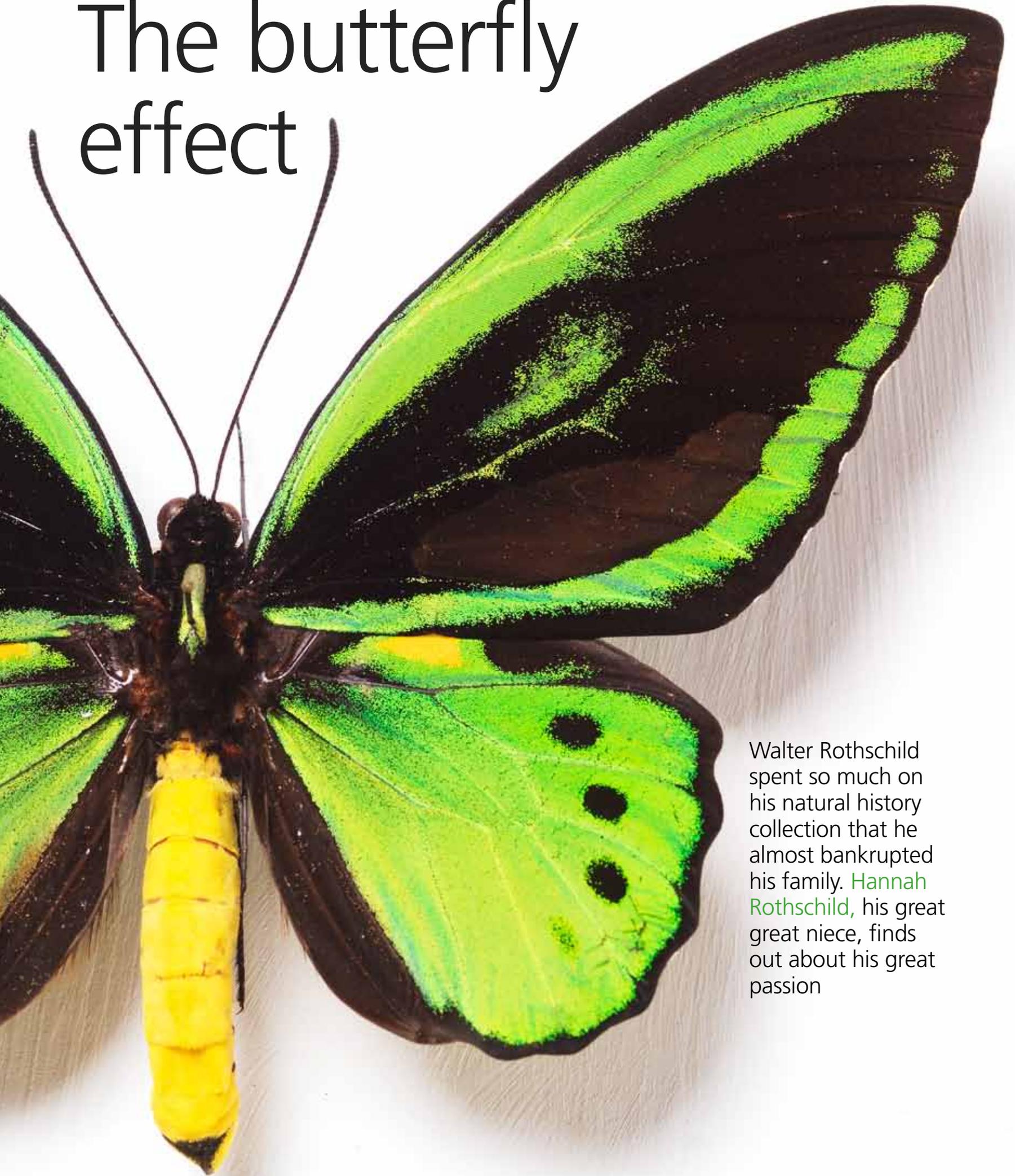


# The butterfly effect



Walter Rothschild spent so much on his natural history collection that he almost bankrupted his family. [Hannah Rothschild](#), his great great niece, finds out about his great passion



My great great uncle, Walter Rothschild, was supposed to have followed in the family tradition of becoming a banker, but his great passion was natural history. Using the Rothschild fortune and a huge amount of determination, he amassed the greatest collection of animals ever assembled by one man. This included more than two million sets of butterflies and moths, 144 giant tortoises, 20,000 birds eggs, 30,000 bird skins and other rare and fabulous specimens ranging from starfish to giraffes. Together they form an important part the collections of the Natural History Museums in London and in the United States.

Among the animals named in Walter's honour are a giraffe, an elephant, porcupine, rock wallaby, hare, fish, lizard, cassowary, rhea, bird of paradise, a Galapagos finch and an improbable fly whose female sex carries its eyes on the end of large stalks. Walter, in turn, named some of his discoveries about those he admired such as the Swallowtail ~~xxxxx~~, named in honour of Queen Victoria and Princess Alexandra whom he visited at Buckingham Palace in his zebra-drawn carriage.

A huge stuttering bear of a man, Walter weighed more than 20 stone and, according to his nieces, could keep the whole house awake with his thundering snores. He never married, though he did have two mistresses, one of whom bore him an illegitimate daughter, the other who blackmailed him for most of his life. His two great loves were his mother, Emma, and his animals, dead or alive. That branch of the family lived at Tring in Hertfordshire, and my great aunt Miriam told me about the

**“The cassowaries had disgraced themselves so they were put into part of the park we no longer walked in”**

excitement and terror of the children's daily walk in the great park with Walter's animals. “There were fallow deer in the park. There were kangaroos, there were emus and rheas and cassowaries although the cassowaries had disgraced themselves so they were put into part of the park we no longer really walked in. And the emus were the birds which frightened me the most because they made a curious drumming sound with their feet and followed the prams because they hoped to get food. They had nasty gimlet-like eyes and long beaks and they terrified me.”

Walter, as Lord Rothschild, was the recipient of the famous Balfour Declaration, the letter written in 1917 by the British Government acknowledging that it viewed with favour the establishment of a national home – in Palestine – for the Jewish people. But though interested in Judaism and Israel to an extent, nothing really got in the way of Walter's first passion, even though his love of collecting animals got him into financial trouble. There have been many notable Rothschild collectors: his cousin, James, loved books; Henri liked têtes-de-mort; Edmond loved precious stones and engravings; Ferdinand favoured works of art and objets de vertu. Although these Rothschilds also had access to the tremendous family

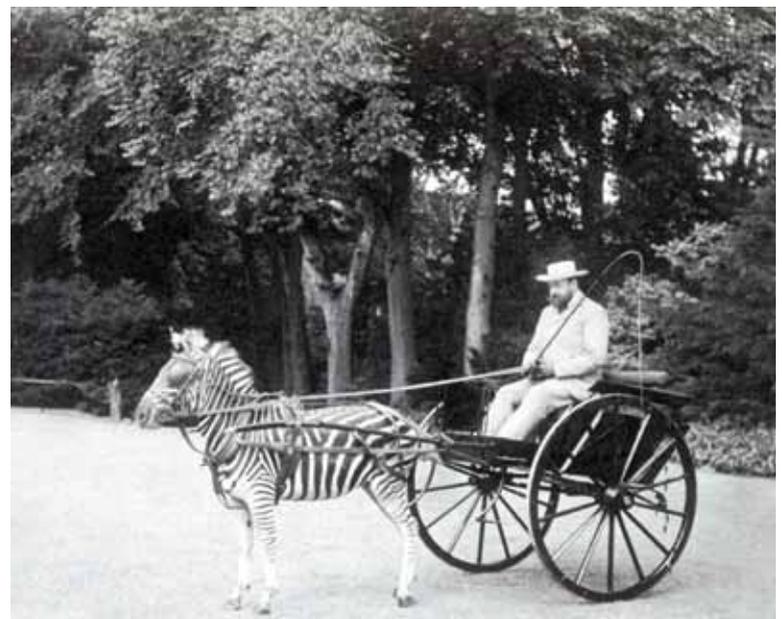


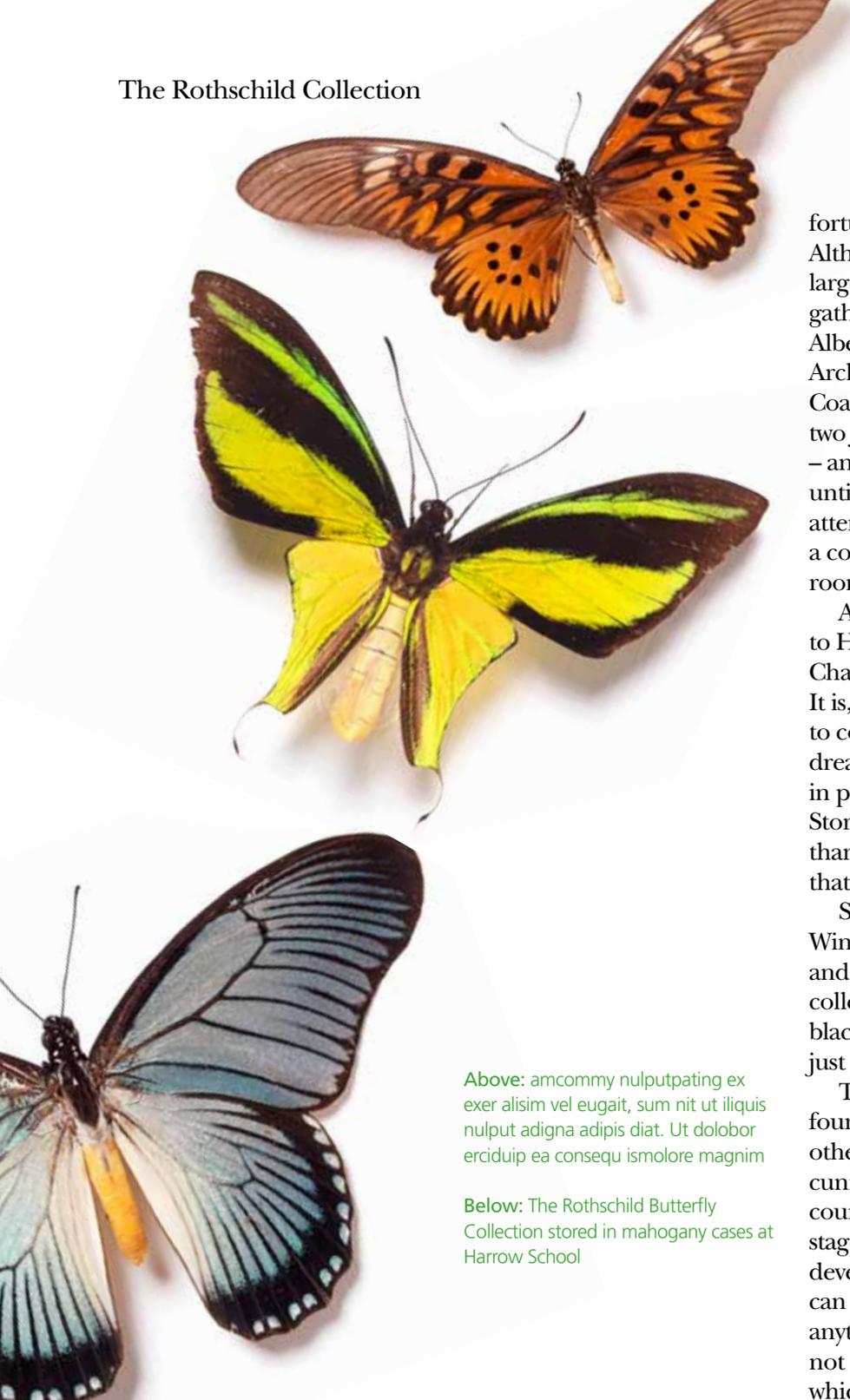
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Above: Walter, Lord Rothschild at the  
age of 69 with his Pyrenaean hound,  
Monné. His two great loves were his  
mother, Emma, and his animals

Below: Lord Rothschild broke his zebras  
in himself. He visited Buckingham  
Palace to see Princess Alexandra in his  
zebra-drawn carriage





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Below: The Rothschild Butterfly  
Collection stored in mahogany cases at  
Harrow School



fortune, none showed Walter's single-minded profligacy. Although his private team based at the Tring museum wasn't large, Walter employed collectors the world over to forage and gather. A normal roster of employees in one year included Albert Meek who was looking for birds in the Louisiade Archipeligo and in Queensland, Captain Gifford on the Gold Coast, Dr Doherty in the Sula Islands, Mr Everett in Timor, two Japanese men in Guam and Mr Waterstrade in Lirung – and this was only a few of the bird collectors. From 1899 until his death in 1937, butterflies were the main focus of his attention and those he couldn't catch, he bought. Walter was a compulsive shopper, combing the auction rooms and private rooms for treasures to augment his collection.

And what an extraordinary collection it is. It was bequeathed to Harrow School by two old boys: my great grandfather, Charles Rothschild, and his fellow entomologist, H.M. Peebles. It is, without doubt, the most exciting cache of rare butterflies to come onto the open market since 1966. It is a lepidopterist's dream: the most concise collection of swallowtails remaining in private hands, a set rivalled only in three major museums. Stored in glass drawers in handsome mahogany cases are more than 3,500 specimens of more than 300 different sub species, that will be offered at Bonhams in May.

Swallowtails are the goliaths of the butterfly world. The Bird Wing, from Papua New Guinea is the largest known butterfly, and it was caught or, literally, blasted out of the forest by collectors using shotguns. Fetching more than £10,000 on the black market and now a protected species, the Bird Wings are just some of prizes in the forthcoming sale.

Though the majority of swallowtails are tropical, they are found in all continents except Antarctica. They differ from other butterflies in their distinctive shape – and or their cunning self-protective mechanisms. For example, in this country, the Tiger Swallowtail disguises itself at caterpillar stage by looking like a bird dropping and then with age it develops yellow spots to look like an unappetising snake. It can also squirt noxious gasses through horns on its head at anything that looks threatening. The adult female, though not poisonous, has evolved to look like the Pipevine butterfly which, when eaten, gives mammals severe indigestion and this imitation grants a degree of protection.

But the real thrill of the swallowtail is not its size but its looks. Nothing man-made – no painting by Ingres or Velasquez, none of the jewels of Catherine the Great nor the intricacies of Mughal art – can come close to the shocking beauty of these creatures. Each species of swallowtail is noticeably different and distinguished by its shape and its colour. A butterfly's wing is made up of thousands of tiny loosely attached pigmented scales which, individually, catch the light but together create a depth of colour and iridescence unmatched elsewhere in nature. My great aunt Miriam used to send out a Christmas card and got pleasure from correcting those who assumed that the image of swirling colours could be a lesser-known work of some famous Impressionist painter. You are looking at the greatly magnified reproductive organ of a butterfly, she would tell princes and statesmen with glee.

Though little is known about butterflies' eyesight, it is

known that the dowdier female's sex drive is stimulated by the brilliant colour of their partner's wings and by flashes of ultra-violet invisible to the human eye. But in order to really get their girl, the male, during courtship, dusts her with minute aphrodisiacal scent particles, which are secreted by specialist brushes at the end of his abdomen. This love dust is delicately perfumed and unique to each species. When pulling open drawer after drawer of extraordinarily coloured swallowtails in shimmering pinks, greens, yellows, reds and browns, it's hard to imagine any female resisting. But there is little romance involved with a good love dusting; male butterflies display a sexual ardour rarely met in the insect world and rape is a known feature of butterfly behaviour.

Walter's younger brother Charles was his star pupil and confidante – and the pair encouraged each other's obsession in the natural world. But although Charles was handsome and clever he, sadly, lacked emotional robustness and, in 1923, following a long and debilitating bout of encephalitis, took his own life. What surprised me the most about the forthcoming sale was not that Harrow had decided to dispose of the collection – it was housed in a storeroom for computers – but that Charles had decided to give anything to his old school in the first place. Charles was 21 at the time and the memory of his unhappy time must have been fresh in his memory. "If I ever have a son," he wrote when his wife became pregnant, "he will be instructed in boxing and Jiu-Jitsu before he enters school, as Jew hunts such as I experienced are a very one-sided



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amusement and there is apt to be a lack of sympathy between the hunters and the hunted." Not surprisingly perhaps, the hunters didn't record their memories, though his fellow pupil, the historian George Trevelyan confirmed his friend's intense unhappiness and his lasting memory of Charles mounting small animal skins or setting butterflies. Perhaps my great grandfather donated this collection in the hope that it would serve as an escape for other unhappy boys.

A recent Harrovian, Hitoshi Takano, stumbled on the collection in his first term at school and, at 13, put on an exhibition of the Rothschild swallowtails. Although sad that the butterflies are leaving his alma mater, he acknowledges that the collection deserves a wider audience and to be studied.

It was break time when I walked away from the school and hundreds of boys, dressed in blue coats and flat straw boaters, rushed through the streets. A sudden sharp gust of wind blew sweeping hats from heads and high into the air. I stood and watched as the boaters floated and twisted down to earth like a mass of pale yellow butterflies and was reminded of my gentle ancestors and their love of nature.

Hannah Rothschild is an award-winning documentary filmmaker. Her current project is a film about her xxxxxxxxxx.

Sale: The Rothschild Butterfly Collection  
 New Bond Street, London  
 Wednesday 27 May at 2pm  
 Enquiries: Camilla Seymour +44 (0) 20 7447 7425  
 camilla.seymour@bonhams.com  
 www.bonhams.com/?????

