

# Walter Rothschild, 2nd Baron Rothschild

**Lionel Walter Rothschild, 2nd Baron Rothschild, Baron de Rothschild**,<sup>[1]</sup> FRS<sup>[2][3]</sup> (8 February 1868 – 27 August 1937), was a British banker, politician, *zoologist* and scion of the *Rothschild family*. As a prominent *Zionist* leader, he was presented with the famous *Balfour Declaration* which pledged to a Jewish national home in *Palestine*. Rothschild was the President of the *Board of Deputies of British Jews* from 1925 to 1926.

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## Biography

Walter Rothschild was born in London as the eldest son and heir of Emma Louise von Rothschild and *Nathan Rothschild, 1st Baron Rothschild*, an immensely wealthy financier of the international Rothschild financial dynasty and the first *Jewish peer* in England.<sup>[4]</sup>

The eldest of three children, Walter was deemed to have delicate health and was educated at home. As a young man, he traveled in Europe, attending the *university at Bonn* for a year before entering *Magdalene College, Cambridge*. In 1889, leaving Cambridge after two years, he was required to go into the family banking business to study finance.

At the age of seven, he declared that he would run a zoological museum and, as a child, he collected *insects*, *butterflies* and other animals. Among his pets at the family home in *Tring Park* were *kangaroos* and exotic birds. As a boy, Rothschild was once dragged off his horse and assaulted by workmen while on a hunting ride near Tring, an experience that he personally attributed to *antisemitism*.<sup>[5]</sup>

At 21, he reluctantly went to work at the family bank, *N M Rothschild & Sons* in London. He worked there from 1889 to 1908. He evidently lacked any interest or ability in the financial profession, but it was not until 1908, at the age of 40, that he was finally allowed to give it up. However, his parents established a zoological museum as a compensation and footed the bill for expeditions all over the world to seek out animals.

The Right Honourable  
**The Lord Rothschild**  
 FRS



**Member of Parliament  
 for Aylesbury**

**In office**  
 1899–1910

**Preceded by** Ferdinand James von Rothschild

**Succeeded by** Lionel Nathan de Rothschild

**Personal details**

**Born** Lionel Walter Rothschild  
 8 February 1868  
 London, United Kingdom

**Died** 27 August 1937  
 (aged 69)  
 Tring, United Kingdom

Rothschild was 6 ft 3 in (1.91 m) tall, suffered from a speech impediment and was very shy,<sup>[6]</sup> but he had his photograph taken riding on a giant tortoise and drove a carriage harnessed to four zebras to Buckingham Palace to prove that zebras could be tamed.

Though he never married, Rothschild had two mistresses, one of whom bore him a daughter.<sup>[6]:98</sup>

## Zoological career

Rothschild studied zoology at Magdalene College, Cambridge.<sup>[7]</sup> Meeting Albert Günther sparked his interest in the taxonomy of birds and butterflies.

Although Rothschild himself travelled and collected in Europe and North Africa for many years, his work and health concerns limited his range and beginning while at Cambridge he employed others – explorers, professional collectors and residents – to collect for him in remote and little-known parts of the world. He also hired taxidermists, a librarian, and, most importantly, professional scientists to work with him to curate and write up the resulting collections: Ernst Hartert, for birds, from 1892 until his retirement at the age of 70 in 1930; and Karl Jordan for entomology, from 1893 until Rothschild's death in 1937.

At its largest, Rothschild's collection included 300,000 bird skins, 200,000 birds' eggs, 2,250,000 butterflies and 30,000 beetles, as well as thousands of specimens of mammals, reptiles and fishes. They formed the largest zoological collection ever amassed by a private individual.

The Rothschild giraffe (*Giraffa camelopardis rothschildi*), a subspecies with five ossicones instead of two, was named after him. Another 153 insects, 58 birds, 17 mammals, three fish, three spiders, two reptiles, one millipede and one worm also carry his name.

Rothschild opened his private museum in 1892. It housed one of the largest natural history collections in the world and was open to the public. In 1932 he was forced to sell the vast majority of his bird collection to the American Museum of Natural History after being blackmailed by a former mistress.<sup>[8][9]</sup> On his death in 1937, the museum and all its contents were given in his will to the British Museum (of which the Natural History Museum, London was then a part), the greatest accession which that institution has ever received.<sup>[10]</sup> The Walter Rothschild Zoological Museum at Tring is now a division of the Natural History Museum.<sup>[11]</sup>

Following a visit to Hungary in 1902, Rothschild brought six live edible dormice (*Glis glis*) back to Tring. Some of them escaped and started breeding successfully in the wild. They have now become a localised pest over an area of approximately 200 square miles in a triangle between Luton, Aylesbury and Beaconsfield; there are estimated to be at least 10,000 of them. Even though considered an invasive species, they are protected under the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981.<sup>[12]</sup>

Rothschild was awarded an honorary doctorate by the University of Giessen in 1898, was elected a Trustee of the British Museum in 1899 and was elected a Fellow of the Royal Society in 1911.<sup>[2][3]</sup>

## Political career

Walter Rothschild was a Conservative Member of Parliament for Aylesbury from 1899 until he retired from politics at the January 1910 general election.<sup>[10]</sup>

## Military activities



Rothschild with his famed zebra (*Equus quagga*) carriage, which he drove to Buckingham Palace to demonstrate the tame character of zebras to the public



Lord Rothschild on a giant tortoise

Despite his health, Rothschild served part-time as an officer in a Territorial Army unit, the Royal Buckinghamshire Yeomanry, where he was a captain from July 1902,<sup>[13]</sup> promoted to major in 1903 and retiring in 1909.<sup>[14]</sup>

## Zionism and the Balfour Declaration

As an active Zionist and close friend of Chaim Weizmann, he worked to formulate the draft declaration for a Jewish homeland in Palestine. On 2 November 1917 he received a letter from the British foreign secretary, Arthur Balfour, addressed to his London home at 148 Piccadilly. In this letter the British government declared its support for the establishment in Palestine of "a national home for the Jewish people". This letter became known as the Balfour Declaration.

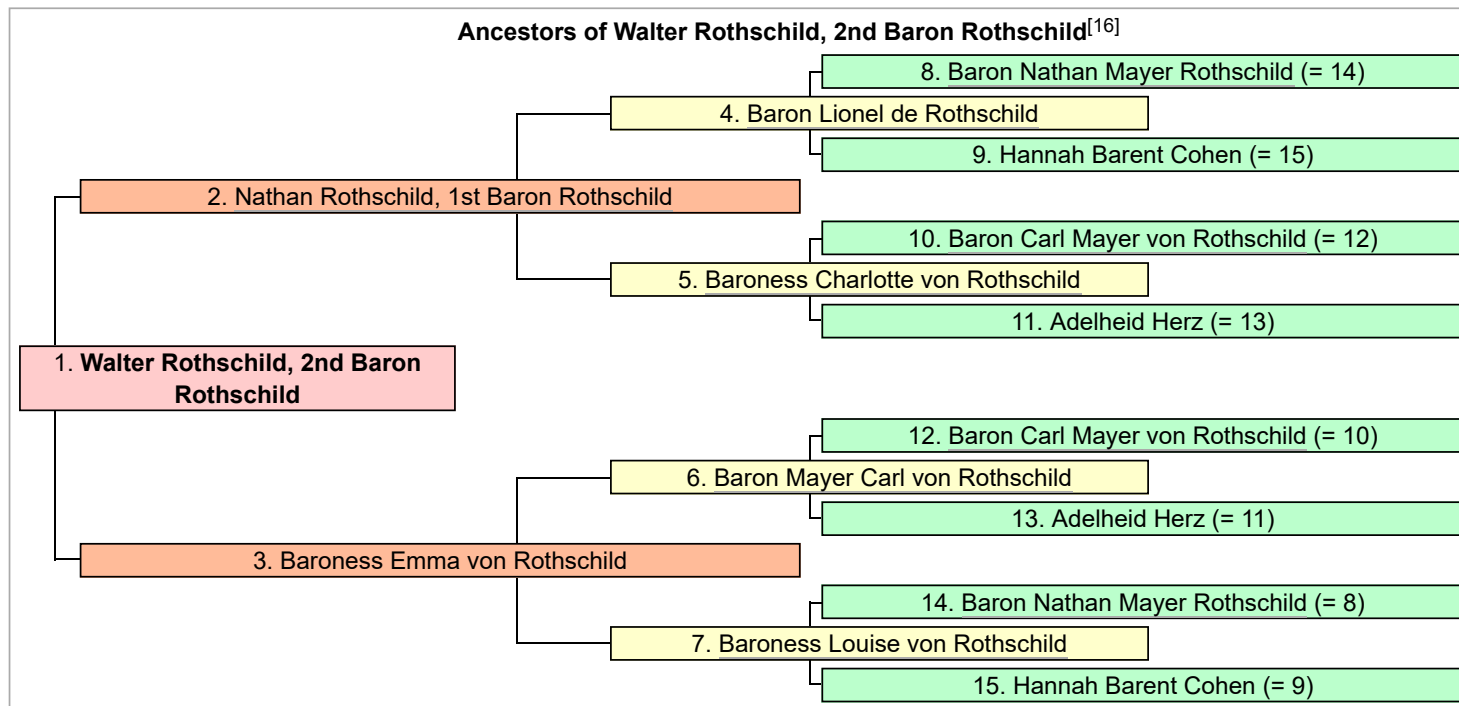
## Peerage

Walter inherited the British peerage title "Baron Rothschild" from his father Nathan Mayer Rothschild, 1st Baron Rothschild in 1915. He died in 1937 at Tring Park, Hertfordshire, aged 69, and was buried in Willesden Jewish Cemetery, London. He had no legitimate children and his younger brother Charles Rothschild had predeceased him, so the title was inherited by his nephew (Nathaniel Mayer) Victor Rothschild.

He also inherited the title "Baron de Rothschild" (*Freiherr von Rothschild*) of the Austrian nobility, which was an authorized title in the United Kingdom by Warrant of 27 April 1932.<sup>[15]</sup>

In 1838, Queen Victoria had authorized the use of this Austrian title in the United Kingdom.<sup>[1]</sup>

## Ancestry



Rothschild caricatured by Spy for *Vanity Fair*, 1900

## See also

- *Extinct Birds*
- History of the Jews in England
- Rothschild banking family of England
- Waddesdon Manor

## Publications

Rothschild is the author of around 765 publications. Of these 27 were co-authored with Ernst Hartert and 16 with Karl Jordan. He published 278 articles in the *Bulletin of the British Ornithologists' Club* and 318 articles in the *Novitates Zoologicae*,<sup>[17]</sup> a journal which he established in 1894 with himself, Hartert and Jordan as editors.<sup>[18]</sup>

His publication include:

- *The Avifauna of Laysan and the Neighbouring Islands : with a complete history to date of the birds of the Hawaiian possessions* (<https://biodiversitylibrary.org/page/44039309>). London: R.H. Porter. 1893–1900.
- *A revision of the lepidopterous family Sphingidae* (<https://biodiversitylibrary.org/page/9573047>). *Novitates Zoologicae*. Vol. IX. Supplement. Tring, Hertfordshire, UK: Self Published. 1903.
- "A monograph of the genus *Casuarus*" (<https://biodiversitylibrary.org/page/15139771>). *Transactions of the Zoological Society of London*. **15**: 109–148. 1900.
- *Extinct birds* (<https://biodiversitylibrary.org/page/43677161>). London: Hutchinson. 1907.

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10. "Rothschild, Lionel Walter". *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (online ed.). Oxford University Press. doi:10.1093/ref:odnb/35843 (<https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/35843>). (Subscription or UK public library membership (<https://www.oxforddnb.com/help/subscribe#public>) required.)
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## Further reading

- Gray, Victor (25 October 2006). "Something in the Genes: Walter Rothschild, Zoological Collector Extraordinaire: A lecture delivered at Royal College of Surgeons" ([https://web.archive.org/web/20070928061019/http://www.rcseng.ac.uk/museums/events/Docs/victor\\_gray\\_transcript\\_october06.pdf](https://web.archive.org/web/20070928061019/http://www.rcseng.ac.uk/museums/events/Docs/victor_gray_transcript_october06.pdf)) (PDF).
- Jordan, Karl (1938). *In memory of Lord Rothchild, Ph.D., F.R.S., J.P. born the 8th February, 1868, died 27 August, 1937* (<https://biodiversitylibrary.org/page/34053250>). *Novitates Zoologicae*. Volume XLI. Tring, Hertfordshire, UK: Zoological Museum, Tring. pp. 1–41. Pages 17–41 contain a list of Rothschild's publications.
- Rothschild, Miriam Louisa (1983). *Dear Lord Rothschild: Birds, Butterflies and History*. London: Hutchinson. ISBN 978-0-09-153740-1.

## External links

- Hansard 1803–2005: contributions in Parliament by Walter Rothschild (<https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard/people/hon-lionel-de-rothschild>)
- "Zoology and Zebras: Walter Rothschild and his museum" by Elle Larson (<https://waddesdon.org.uk/blog/zoology-zebras-walter-rothschild-museum/>)
- "The Rothschild Collection" (<http://www.nhm.ac.uk/our-science/departments-and-staff/library-and-archives/collections/rothschild-collection.html>). Natural History Museum, London.
- Works by Walter Rothschild, 2nd Baron Rothschild (<https://www.gutenberg.org/author/Rothschild,+Walter>) at Project Gutenberg
- Works by or about Walter Rothschild, 2nd Baron Rothschild (<https://archive.org/search.php?query=%28%22Walter+Rothschild%22+OR+%22Lord+Rothschild%22+OR+%22Rothschild%2C+Walter%22+OR+%22Baron+Rothschild%22+OR+%22Baron+de+Rothschild%22%29>) at Internet Archive

<b>Parliament of the United Kingdom</b>		
Preceded by <b>Ferdinand James de Rothschild</b>	<b>Member of Parliament for Aylesbury</b> 1899–1910	Succeeded by <b>Lionel Nathan de Rothschild</b>
<b>Peerage of the United Kingdom</b>		
Preceded by <b>Nathan Mayer Rothschild</b>	<b>Baron Rothschild</b> 1915–1937	Succeeded by <b>Victor Rothschild</b>
<b>Titles of nobility of the Austrian Empire</b>		
Preceded by <b>Nathan Mayer Rothschild</b>	<b>Baron Rothschild</b> 1915–1937	Succeeded by <b>Victor Rothschild (non-authorized)</b>

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