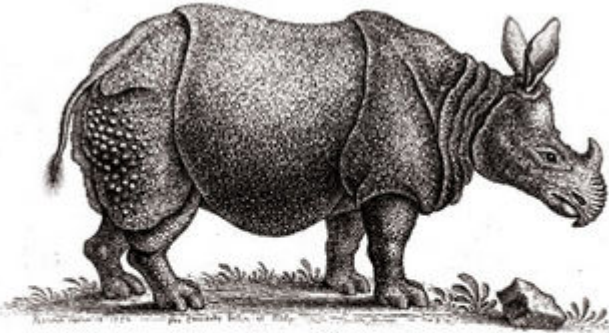


Fortean Times

http://www.forteanimes.com/features/articles/4603/a_rhinoceros_tale.html



*This Rhinoceros which I saw in 1752. was a female -
it was about 5½ feet in height, 22 feet in circumference,
and weighed 5000 weight. The carcer reckoned it about
14 years old.*

A Rhinoceros's Tale

18th-century Europe's exotic visitor

By Jan Bondeson October 2010

The inscribed print of the famous rhinoceros Clara, from her stay in London in 1752.

Supplied by Jan Bondeson

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In 1998, after attending a meeting at a London hospital, I went to have a look at a street market nearby. In a stall for old newspapers and magazines, I was surprised to see two old prints of rhinoceroses, one of which had a curious inscription dated 1752. I had no particular interest in these animals, but the magpie tendency asserted itself; confident that these prints would come in handy one day, I purchased them for £10.

Some years ago, I came across these prints when looking for something else, and decided to figure out which rhinoceros had been exhibited in London in 1752. This turned out to be surprisingly easy, since the life and career of this famous animal has been chronicled in far greater detail than those of most human beings of the period.

In 1741, the Dutch skipper Douwemout van der Meer had purchased a young female Indian rhinoceros in Calcutta. Clara, as this rhino was named, had been taken from her mother just months after birth, and raised in the household of a Dutch East India Company official. She was remarkably tame and could be fed like a dog at table. The captain took Clara with him on his ship, arriving back in Rotterdam, where she attracted much attention. In 1746, he set out from Leiden to exhibit Clara for money in Holland and Germany.

A living rhinoceros was a first-rate curiosity in those days. Travelling in a specially made, sturdy wagon, Clara slowly toured the German cities, earning good money wherever she went. People were amazed that this large, fearsome-looking creature was both tame and friendly. They were allowed to stroke and feed the rhinoceros, and to pour her some beer to drink. In Berlin, Clara was seen by Frederick the Great and his court. Empress Maria Theresa saw her in Vienna, being so delighted with the docile rhino that she made van der Meer a Baron.

The Baron did not put his rhinoceros out to pasture. Making clever use of the Rhine barges to avoid taking Clara on the slow-moving wagon, he continued touring Germany and Switzerland. In 1749, Clara was taken on an even more ambitious journey. The rhinoceros-wagon was taken to Rheims, and then to Versailles, where Clara was seen by Casanova, and where King Louis XV was said to have wanted to purchase her. The vagabond rhinoceros was then brought on to Paris and Lyons. In Marseilles, she embarked on a ship bound for Naples and Rome, before going on to Bologna and Venice. It was not until 1751 that Clara returned to her stables in Leiden.

Rhinoceros biographer Glynis Ridley, the author of *Clara's Grand Tour*, is uncertain what happened to Clara after her return from Venice. The *Gentleman's Magazine* for December 1751 reported the arrival of a female rhinoceros in London, and another source reproduced what was alleged to be a print of "the female rhinoceros, drawn from the life in London", but this animal was clearly a male, suggesting to Ms Ridley that it was wholly unclear whether Clara had made it to London in 1751 and 1752.

My inscribed print solves this problem, however, since the sex, measurements and age of the 1752 London rhinoceros tallies exactly with what is known about Clara. According to Dr LC Rookmaaker, author of *The Rhinoceros in Captivity*, the print is by George Edwards. My copy is likely to have been sold at the exhibition as a memento. Advertisements for the "noble Female Rhinoceros, or real Unicorn, to be seen at the Red Lion, Charing Cross", were published in the *Daily Advertiser* from 20 January until 30 April 1752, adding further evidence that Clara was really in London during this period.

The remainder of Clara's life was equally busy. In 1754, the Baron exhibited her in Warsaw and Krakow. Dispatches from Copenhagen reported in the *London Evening Post* of 26 June 1755 mention the arrival of a rhinoceros on 14 June, on a Dutch ship: "This Beast consumes daily 80lb of Hay and 30lb of Bread, besides a good Quantity of Wine and spirituous Liquors. They keep it in a great Cage set on Wheels." Several Danish sources agree that Clara was in town for a considerable period, and exhibited near the Vesterport with great success; she was even seen by King Frederick V and his court. According to the *Whitehall Evening Post* of 1 January 1756, the rhinoceros was still in Copenhagen at this time, coping with the climate with surprising ease.

The aforementioned rhinoceros chronicler Dr Rookmaaker also discusses a curious German print from 1758, which states that Clara died in London on 15 April the same year. This would seem somewhat dubious, however, because no London newspaper from that period

mentions the residence in London of any rhinoceros, living or dead. There is no mention of a living Clara after 1758, however; nor is it known what happened to her remains.

The print of Clara is a memorial of one of the most famous animals of the 18th century: a rhinoceros almost as widely known as the elephant Jumbo would become among the Victorians. At the time Clara was exhibited, many people viewed the rhinoceros as a mythical beast like the dragon, having only the vaguest idea what such a beast looked like; some doubted its existence altogether. To reproduce the sensation created by a living rhinoceros arriving in some sleepy German town, one would today have to come up with a pterodactyl, Bigfoot or extraterrestrial.