

THE FATE OF NUMBER THREE

As most aficionados are aware, by the time of George Wombwell's death in 1850 his eponymous menagerie had grown to such a prodigious size that, for practical purposes, it had been divided into three still sizeable independent parts. Number 1 (the original) was operated until 1865 by his widow, Ann (although there's still some debate as to whether she was really his girlfriend), who in turn handed it over to his niece, Mrs. Edmonds; in time a nephew named Alexander Fairgrieve managed it - then in 1872 it came under the auctioneer's hammer in Edinburgh. This sad event has been very well chronicled, largely on account of the dramatic way in which the prime purchase - Maharajah, the bull Asiatic Elephant - was walked all the way to his new home at Belle Vue but, rather surprisingly, the reasons for the somewhat sudden sale have never been made really clear, whether it was due to financial difficulties, family discord, illness or what. As things stand after getting on for a hundred and forty years we can but speculate.

The Number 2 collection, or "The Late G. Wombwell's No.2 Menagerie", was destined to become famous as "Bostock and Wombwell's", due to Emma Wombwell, another of George's nieces, having married one James Bostock, who had joined the show as a horseman and driver, in 1852; by all accounts he had previously lived on a farm near Leek, in Staffordshire, before settling into a new way of animal-care extremely well. This was the menagerie that finally came off the road early in 1932, when most of its stock was purchased by the Zoological Society of London for its infant Whipsnade.

So far so good, but what of the smallest subsidiary - Wombwell's Number 3 menagerie? This is the one we read, hear, know about least - in fact it's been tersely recorded that "it rapidly declined and was sold" - but as far as I can gather it had quite an interesting story to come, so I've tried to gather together what seems to have been recorded about it, although I readily admit it isn't much.

It was bequeathed to George's nephew, George Wombwell, who was born at Stoke Newington, then a village outside London, in March 1822, and who had married one Fanny Kinton. Despite being the smallest of the three menageries it nevertheless employed over twenty staff to start with. In early 1851, just after they had set out on the road, an Elephant "crushed" a member of staff named Thomas Burrows, who fortunately recovered from his injuries. At this juncture we're left to speculate whether this was a deliberate attack or an accident; there have been so many cases of Elephants killing people by "crushing" them - a move that can look so very innocent - but these have been mainly in zoological gardens, doubtless because in such places there are high and firm walls handy; in a circus or menagerie tent it's far more difficult to do a proper job in this way!

On one occasion he was cleaning out a black Tiger's den when it suddenly attacked him, before being successfully beaten off with a broom handle, leaving him unharmed - which brings up an interesting point. As you know, a melanistic Tiger appears to be just about the world's rarest animal - in fact there's debate as to whether there's ever been an authenticated sighting of one - yet old George, and others of his family, not infrequently refer to those travelling in their collections, indeed it would appear from my own researches that they owned no fewer than four of these rarest-of-the-rarities at various times! Then, while perusing some

statements attributed to young George, the "mystery" immediately became crystal clear! He said the most interesting animals he'd ever owned were three black cubs, the progeny of one of these black Tigers and a Leopardess: they were "black all over but with darker spots" - so obviously they were melanistic Leopards, or "Black Panthers" to the bloody-minded! In any case, there has never been an authenticated instance of a successful mating between a Tiger and a Leopard; one or two abortions, yes, but never a living cub.

For a time Number 3 did well - in fact it's recorded it was by no means unusual for it to take over £200 a night in cash, which was a vast sum then - but during 1855 things began to go seriously wrong, beginning at Edinburgh, when one violently stormy night gale force winds blew over no fewer than six of his beast waggons on a hillside; it isn't recorded whether any animals were killed or hurt, or indeed how such structures were righted again. Shortly afterwards, in Peebles, his Horse-tent caught fire and thirty Horses burned, twelve of which had to be destroyed.

He started back towards England, but while crossing the snowy Pennines between Huddersfield and Manchester an appalling, in fact haunting, tragedy struck, when the Elephant waggon became inextricably stuck in a snowdrift; after twelve days its unfortunate inhabitant died. We can but imagine this horror - the desperate attempts to pull, drag and push the vehicle free, the obviously unsuccessful attempts to keep the Elephant warm and protected from the northern winter, its gradually weakening condition... For all we know now the waggon might have been jammed at some sort of angle, which would have made the suffering even worse. In short it's a scenario distressing to visualise or contemplate. Ironically, George had been offered no less than £650 for this Elephant only a short time before: I relate this simply as it suggests it must have been a very fine animal indeed.

The final straw came when the show was at Hackney - not far from where George was born - when many of his animals fell victim to "an epidemic and died one after the other." At this juncture it's difficult to suggest what this might have been, particularly as another source implies it affected only his big Cats. If this is so, I'd suggest the trouble could well have been Infectious Feline Enteritis (I.F.E.) - which is still about but not really a problem as today such animals are almost automatically inoculated against it - but of course the veterinary services of the 1850s can barely be equated with those of today. If, on the other hand, whatever it was had broken out among the stock generally, I'd suspect gastro-enteritis, which wouldn't have been so difficult to treat, even then. Things are complicated, though, by another report that said it was the carnivores that were affected by - a "specialist" said - a form of rinderpest. To the best of my knowledge, this disease (which is straight German for "Cattle Illness") affects only ungulates!

Anyway, George fell into debt, and what was left of the collection had to be sold at auction. The prices raised were disappointing, to say the least. For example, five nearly new beast waggons fetched on average £8 apiece; the animals included a Jaguar, a pair of Leopards (presumably spotted!), a Nylghai, a Hyena, a Jackal, "six Monkeys", an Alpine Wolf, a Baboon, a Civet, "some birds", a "Russian Bear" and two "Esquimaux Dogs". However, there were scarcely any buyers, with the Bear raising £3.15.0, the Monkeys from 5/- to 10/- each and the Dogs 4/- and 6/- respectively - in fact the whole sale raised not much above a hundred pounds. George's loss was not far short of £5,000 and he was bankrupted.

At this juncture it will be interesting to contemplate the animals that were left at the end; as you see, there were some good ones among them, which suggests the show in its entirety must have been well worth visiting.

One is forced to wonder whether the five waggons were the only ones left (it was said the amount they raised wasn't the original cost of their springs!) - and note the Nylghai; as I've pointed out before it was quite astonishing how this, the largest Asiatic Antelope, was a popular subject in travelling shows and seemed to do well in the narrow confines of a beast waggon. We are left to speculate on the species of the Hyena, Jackal, Monkeys and Civet, while "Alpine Wolf" and "Russian Bear" were then popular names for the European Wolf and Brown Bear respectively, although it's interesting to bear in mind that Russian Bear was being used by the showman Frank Farrar, founder of Colchester Zoological Garden, as recently as the 1960s. The "birds" would have been chiefly Parrots, plus possibly a Pelican and even a Crane, while Esquimaux Dogs were Huskies - then rather topical subjects at a time when serious polar exploration was getting under way.

For some considerable time George earned his living playing the cornet in various circus bands but eventually, in old age, he was reduced to playing solo on street corners and outside pubs for coppers that passers-by tossed into his cap. By the end of the 19th Century, in utter penury and with Fanny in an infirmary (dementia? incurably ill?) a national newspaper tracked him down to his regular London pitch and wrote up his life story. A relief fund was launched (and well supported by readers from all over the country) but it was only a temporary respite. Things went from bad to worse, despite his uncle, E.H. Bostock of menagerie fame, learning of his predicament and sending him 10/- each week, and eventually he was forced to seek assistance from the parish - a move made only by the desperate and destitute due to it being regarded as the epitome of degradation at the time.

He died at Tottenham - again not far from his birthplace - on 26th February 1909, aged 87.

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