

TWO SHILLINGS TO RIDE THE RHINO

by CYRIL BLOOR

John Evelyn, the 17th century scientist, historian and diarist records seeing "a Strange Beast called the RYNNOCEROS", and having identified it with the mythical unicorn of fable, thought that it "more resembled a huge enormous Swine than any other Beast amongst us."

The RHININCEROUS had arrived at the London docks aboard an East Indiaman in August 1684, being valued at £2000, a very large sum of money at that time. An enterprising entrepreneur named Langley, who had recently bought Sadler's Well and Pleasure Garden at Islington, agreed to buy the RHINOCERAS for £2320. Securing the purchase with a surety of £500, he proudly announced that the animal would be shown at Bartholomew Fair for two weeks, commencing on the 24th August. Langley's proclamation was not fulfilled; unable to raise the balance of the agreed price he forfeited his deposit and the animal was offered for re-sale. We are told that "noe person bid a farthing" and, by the end of September, learn that it was to be "seen in the yard of the Belle Sauvage Inn at the foot of Ludgate Hill", the proprietors "taking as much as £15 a day at 12d a look, 2s a ride."

The RHYNOCERUS apparently continued to be a profitable attraction up to its death two years later, in September 1686, when the diary notes that "the severall proprietors having Ensured her life for £1200, the Ensurers are caught for much money."

Despite his difficulty in deciding on the correct spelling of rhinoceros, John Evelyn's lively interest in the many animals being exhibited in the London of his lifetime, is apparent from his detailed diary entries, one of which reads "I saw a tame lion play familiarly with a lamb..

.. he was a huge beast, and I thrust my hand into his mouth and found his tongue rough, like a cats." He tells also a seeing a "sheep haveing six legs"; five of which "he made to walk"; a four-legged goose is mentioned also. There are references to the true nature of which we can alas only guess, such as "A Muricio Dear (sic) one of the seven sleepers", "the noble Histix, from the West Indies" and the "Little Whifler, admired for his strong scent", which names, and spellings, may have been the fancies of the showmen exhibiting these animals whatever they were.

A contemporary of John Evelyn and fellow member of the Royal Society, Robert Hooke, was also a keen diarist, recording many animal exhibitions. In 1672 he notes, "saw India catt, Japan peacock, porcupine, upupa, vultur (sic), Great owl, three cassawaris (sic)"; he writes of "haveing paid 3s to see Elephant" in 1675, but "only paid 2d to see the Tygre (sic) at Bartholomew Fair" in 1677, where he also "saw The Dutch Woeman" (a giantess) noting that she was "very strange" and "The Boneless Child" who was "16 years old haveing been born in Cheshire".

In 1679 he writes of seeing an elephant "which exercised a musket, waved the colours, bent the knee and knelt on command." Whether this was the same elephant he had paid three shillings to see some four years earlier is not certain.

There were by this time, many animals on show in London's inn yards, salons and street corners, the result being that in 1697 it was deemed necessary to issue an edict which forbade the exhibition of "lions, lionesses, leopards or any other Beasts which are ferare natura" (naturally fierce) on the grounds that this was "a monopoly reserved for the Keeper of His Majesty's Lyons at the Tower". This proved ineffective and was largely ignored, few summonses were made by magistrates already overstretched with crimes of more serious nature.

Three years after the edict forbidding animal displays, Ned Ward in his broadsheet "The London Spy Compleat"

observed that tigers were "grown so common they are scarce worth mentioning"; in a later edition under the heading "Reports of...Rarities to be visited at a Small Expence"(sic) he tells those interested that at the Coach and Horses Tavern at Charing Cross "there is displayed two KAAMAS, male and female, lately arrived from the BEAR-BISHES, being the strangest creatures that ever was seen in Europe; being as tame as a lamb, haveing a trunk like an Elephant, teeth like a Christian, eyes like a Rhinoceros, ears with white furr (sic) round them like sable, neck and main (sic) like a Horse and skin as thick as a Bouffler, a voice like a bird, and haveing stranger feet than any other Creature that has ever been seen, living as well in Water as on Land.' (almost certainly these were Brazilian tapirs - Ed.)

The exhibition of animals at the London inns and taverns was apparently as commonplace then as Muzak and fruit machines are now. At the Duke of Marlborough's Head in Fleet Street, one could view a 'noble and Majestick (sic) Lion from Barbary" together with a "young specimen from Algiers so wonderfully tame that any person may handle him.", also "a Noble Panther, lately brought from Egypt, one of the Beautifullest Creatures in the World for variety of Spots of Divers Colours", completed with a "noble Pelican or Vulture, lately arrived from America ... the head like a Griffin, the Neck like a Swan".

Further along Fleet Street, at the White Horse Inn, early in the 1700's, there was a "little black Hairy Pigmy, bred in the Deserts of Arabia." This was said to be "two feet high, with a natural Ruff of Hair about His Face" walked upright and would "drink a glass of ale or wine." The language of the reporting was perhaps lurid, but the range of exhibits was certainly wide.



Chris Moiser, Bartlett Society member from Devon, has been searching for references to Wombwell's menageries in local newspapers and has copied reports dating back to 1812. Space does not permit all to be copied, but the following are copied from editions of the "Exeter Flying Post". The photographs on the final page, showing animals arriving prior to the opening of Whipsnade Zoological Park, are reproduced courtesy of Miss Laura Beal, and complement the final press cutting from the "Northern Echo" dated 18th January 1932, submitted by Andre Verstraete.

7th May 1812

"The superb Menagerie of Foreign Beasts and Birds, from Exeter 'Change, London, the sole property of Mr. Polito, which has afforded such infinite satisfaction to the inhabitants of the different towns of Devon and Cornwall, through which he has passed, will be again exhibited in this city during the ensuing Fair, and no longer. Mr. Polito, we are informed, intends visiting Crediton on Monday next, the 17th instant, with his unrivalled Exhibition."

6th March 1845

"WOMBWELL'S ROYAL MENAGERIE - The grand menagerie of Mr. Wombwell - a collection that has not its equal in the world, is arrived in this city, in several vast caravans and is exhibiting near the Dispensary, in Queen Street. This consists of trained Lions, Tigers, and Leopards; there are also four Elephants and a Rhinoceros; besides beasts of other descriptions, rare and curious birds etc. Numbers have already visited it, and this place will become an interesting and popular lounge during the stay."

19th June 1945

- "NEWLYN - On Friday last we were highly honoured by Wombwell's Royal Menagerie paying us a visit, it being the first of its kind ever exhibited in this place. It was stationed near the centre of the Town, and gave it a very grand appearance, while the well-conducted Band filled the air with its merry and most delightful sounds. There were immense numbers of spectators to see the exhibition, which caused great admiration among the people generally and gave satisfaction to all; and we trust that the Managers were amply remunerated for their kindness in giving the country people an opportunity to behold the noble animals there exhibited; and we would beg leave to remind Mr. Wombwell, whenever he takes a tour into Cornwall, that Newlyn is a place fast growing into importance, and is situated about eight miles NNW of Truro. The Menagerie came from Falmouth and the West, and was proceeding to St. Columb and the North, having taken the South to come down."

28th April 1880

"BOSTOCK AND WOMBWELL'S MENAGERIE, the oldest and largest collection of beasts travelling in this country, arrived in Exeter on Monday, and will continue open to the public in a field near St. James's Church until Thursday night. The Menagerie is contained in eighteen caravans and consists of over 600 foreign beasts, birds and reptiles. Amongst the latest editions is true specimen of the gorilla. The collection is accompanied by Corando, a famous lion tamer, who goes through some daring performances in the dens of the lions, tigers, leopards and hyaenas."

1st August 1883

"WOMBWELL'S MENAGERIE. The oldest and most extensive travelling collection of beasts, birds and reptiles, known to many generations as Wombwell's wild beast show, and officially described as 'Edmon's, late Wombwell's. Royal Windsor Castle Menagerie', is once more on a visit to this city, after an absence of eleven or twelve years. During the summer Mrs Edmonds has been making a very successful tour through Devon and Cornwall, and arrived in Exeter from Staircross last Friday, the very day of the week and the month on which the menagerie entered the city when it was here before. The long procession of caravans, with their teams of powerful horses, headed by a superb band carriage drawn by three camels, made a very imposing display, and created a favourable impression as to the extent and interest of the collection. The exhibition was opened later in the day in St. James's field, where it is to remain until after Monday next, Bank Holiday. Several performances are given daily, and the exhibition has been liberally patronised. The collection altogether numbers several hundred specimens and includes many interesting additions recently made. Foremost amongst then is the group of war camels which did duty in the recent Egyptian campaign; the greatest novelty is probably the Vlak Vaarke, from Abyssinia, an extraordinary animal something like a pig, and the first of its species ever imported. Of lions there is an unusually fine collection, at the head of them is a magnificent specimen of the race named 'Wallace', and for which an offer of £500 has been refused. There are two lionesses with litters of cubs, and a fine young lion, a twelve month old which has been reared in the show by means of a feeding bottle, and is now living quite happily with a couple of young hyaenas. The monkey tribe is well represented, amongst the rarities being fine specimens of the hamadryads, or lions slayers, a young mandrill, or blue and red-faced gorilla, valued at £250. the birds include a couple of fine pelicans, a good specimen of the crowned crane, and a golden vulture. Delmonico, the famous lion tamer, after an absence of seven years, has accepted another engagement with Mrs Edmonds, and at frequent intervals entertains the visitors with his performances amongst the lions and leopards. The

collection is described at each performance by the keeper Mr Charles White, and is managed by the agent Mr. L. Bostock, under the personal supervision of Mrs J. Edmonds. The band is a great attraction, and the exhibition is altogether one that will be sure to give satisfaction to its many patrons. Special performances and an extra afternoon feed are arranged for Wednesday and Friday afternoons at three o'clock, and the public are also allowed to remain during the regular feeding times at half-past nine in the evening."

A later report of the above visit also mentions :
"..The tigers, four in number... a performing elephant...horned horses from Central Africa... Mr. John Cooper, a famous wild beast tamer, who astonishes the spectators by his feats amongst the lions and hyaenas."

