

Histories

Want to buy a rhino? (1684)

How did Mr Langley lose his shirt?

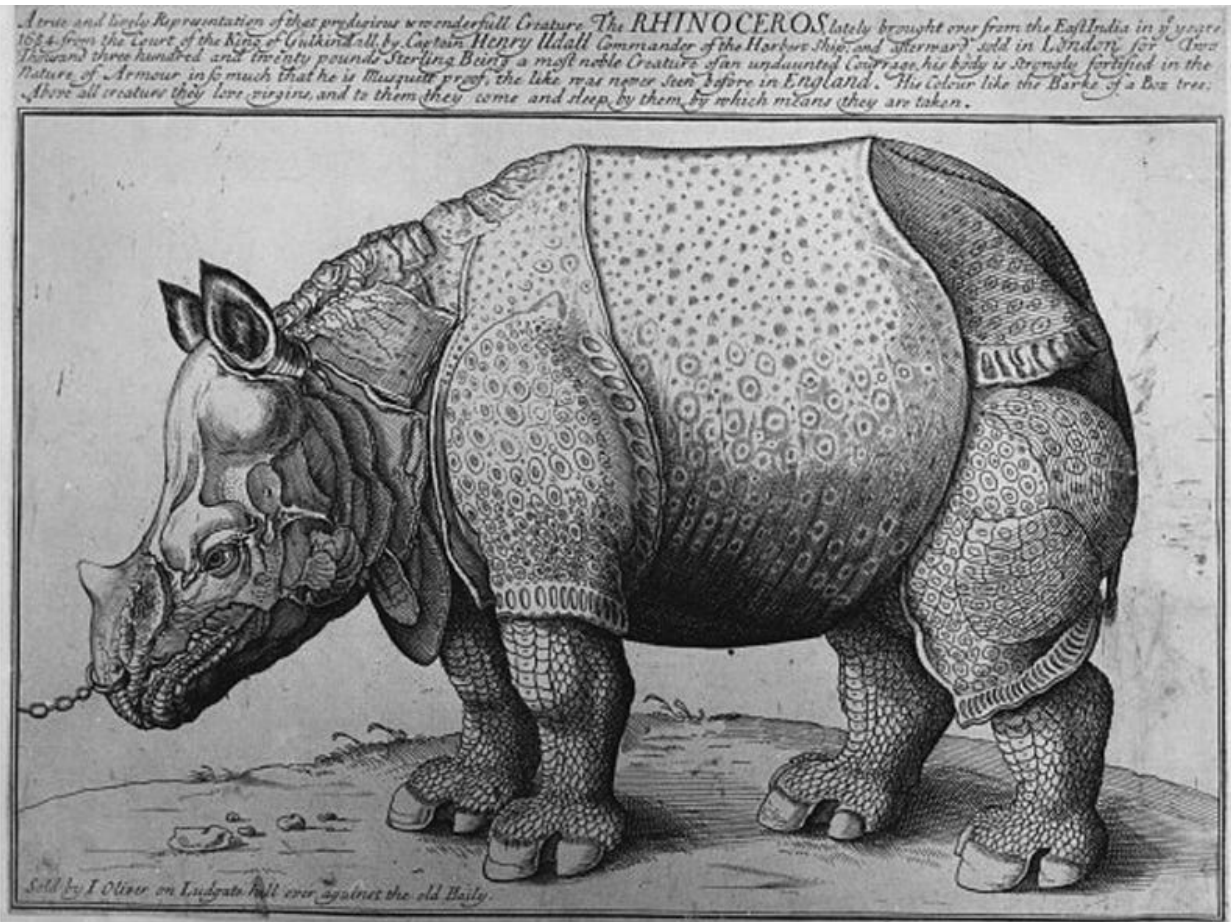
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A rarity so great, that few men, in our country, have, in their whole lives, opportunity to see so singular an animal...

Recently one of my kids told me about a David Attenborough documentary that mentioned a rhinoceros called [Clara](#) which toured Europe in the 18th century, and ultimately died in London. This of course piqued my curiosity – surely there must be accounts of her British visit? Glenys Ridley’s book [Clara’s Grand Tour](#) tells this whole story, but alas the final London leg is only mentioned in advertisements (“To be seen at the Horse and Groom in Lambeth Marsh”), and a later German poster sadly appends: “It is 21 years old, and died in London on 14th April 1758.”

But this led me down the rabbit (or rhino) hole, and thanks to the amazing resources at the [Rhino Resource Centre](#) compiled by Dr Kees Rookmaaker, and some obsessive rhino-hunting of my own, here instead is the story of the first rhino in Britain. As usual I’ve lightly edited original accounts to modernise spellings – but I couldn’t resist leaving in all the differently wrong ways of spelling *rhinoceros*...



The story begins in Bengal in the Indian subcontinent, a region regularly visited by the global megacorp of the era, the East India Company. All ten rhinos known to have visited Europe before the 19th century were single-horned Indian ones, *Rhinoceros unicornis*. One Englishman who was there, in Calcutta (now Kolkata) in 1683 was the seafarer Edward Barlow (1642–c.1706), who kept a remarkable journal of his life,¹ including voyages to India, China, the Canaries and more. Basil Lubbock, who edited Barlow’s journals for a 1934 edition, observes: “How he managed to write and draw so beautifully in the dank, dark forecastles of ships, which rolled and tossed like barrels in even the slightest sea, is beyond my comprehension.”

In his journal for 1683, Barlow notes: “[i]n the country are bred the great beasts called the ‘*rhinosarus*’, and many wild and cruel tigers, it being a very level

country and full of woods and rivers”. On the next page, he included this quaint picture:



And next to it, he later added these words: “The emblem of *Risnosarss*, that was brought from Bengal in the year 1684 and sold at London for two thousand one hundred pound.”

Barlow himself arrived back in London, on a ship called the *Kent*, on 27 June 1684 – but not with a rhino aboard. The job of transporting this beast had fallen to Captain Henry Udall of the *Herbert*. Surviving log books reveal that he had been on a voyage to the Bay of Bengal from 9th February 1683 until 23rd July 1684. And we know he was the rhino ferryman from this caption to the first image above:

A true and lively representation of that prodigious & wonderful creature the Rhinoceros, lately brought over from the East Indies in the year 1684, from the Court of the King of Gulkindall, by Captain Udall, Commander of the *Herbert* ship; and afterwards sold in London for two thousand three hundred and twenty pounds sterling...

Further details of the unnamed rhino's arrival in London are to be found in news-sheets of the time sent to the businessman and politician Sir Richard Newdigate (1644–1710), and survive in his papers. Thus we learn...

23rd August: “On board one of the E[ast] India ships is come a *Rhininceros* valued at £2,000 at the Customs house; [it] will be sold next week by Inch of Candle.”

Candle auctions were popular in this era and were a way of limiting last-minute sniping (take note, eBay): the idea being that bidders had to place their bids before the flame expired, and nobody would know exactly when that would be. (Samuel Pepys mentions various candle auctions in his diaries, and on 3rd September 1662 picked up this tip from an expert: “here I observed one man cunninger than the rest that was sure to bid the last man, and to carry it; and inquiring the reason, he told me that just as the flame goes out the smoke descends, which is a thing I never observed before, and by that he do know the instant when to bid last, which is very pretty.”)

A news-sheet of **25th August** then explains that when the rhino came up for auction, it was bought for £2,320 by a Mr Langley, “one of those that bought Mr Sadler's Well² at Islington, & in a day or two [it] will be seen at Bartholomew Fair.”

However, Langley couldn't come up with the cash and lost his deposit:

30th August: “Mr Langley who bought the *rhinocerus* not being able to raise the money forfeited the £500 he paid in hand & this evening the Owners procured a Warrant from Sir James Smith and carried away Mr Langley and afterwards put up the beast for sale again by Inch of Candle for £2,000, but no person bid a farthing; so [it] lies upon their hands.”

Even the £500 was a lot of money in 1684! (The handy [Measuring Worth](#) website suggests that £2,000 then was the equivalent of at least £300,000 [\$420,000] today.)

However, it seems the owners – did this include Captain Udall?³ – went ahead and exhibited the rhino themselves. In the *London Gazette* (the oldest continuously published newspaper in the UK, still going) of **9th October**, we read:

A Very strange Beast called a *Rhynoceros*, lately brought from the East-Indies, being the first that ever was in England, is daily to be seen at the Bell Savage Inn⁴ on Ludgate-Hill, from Nine o' Clock in the Morning till Eight at Night.

And another contemporary newsletter reported: “The Rhinoceros is much visited at twelve pence apiece, and two shillings those that ride him. They get fifteen pound a day.”

The rhino attracted some notable visitors. The merchant Sir Dudley North (1641–91) and his brother Francis (1637–85), Baron Guilford and [Lord Keeper of the Great Seal](#), went to see it, as recorded by their descendant Roger North in his 1780 book *Lives of the Norths*:

A merchant, of Sir Dudley North's acquaintance, had brought over an enormous rhinoceros, to be sold to show-men for profit. It is a noble beast, wonderfully armed by nature for offence; but more for defence, being covered with impenetrable shields, which no weapon would make any impression upon; and a rarity so great, that few men, in our country, have, in their whole lives, opportunity to see so singular an animal. This merchant told Sir Dudley North, that if he, with a friend or two, had a mind to see it, they might take the opportunity at his house, before it was sold. Hereupon Sir Dudley North proposed to his brother, the Lord Keeper, to go with him upon this expedition; which he did, and came away exceedingly satisfied with the curiosity he had seen.

... the very next morning, a bruit went from thence all over the town... that his lordship rode upon the rhinoceros...

Did the grandee spend his two shillings for a ride, or was this just political teasing?

But the best account of this rhino comes from [our old friend](#) the diarist John Evelyn (and he'll be back in this newsletter another time). Here is his diary entry for **22nd October**:

Sir William Godolphin and I went to see the Rhinoceros (or Unicorn) being the first that I suppose was ever brought into England: It more resembled a huge enormous Swine, than any other Beast amongst us; That which was most particular & extraordinary, was the placing of her small Eyes in the very center of her cheeks & head, her Ears in her neck, and very much pointed: her Legs near as big about as an ordinary man's waist, the feet divided into claws, not cloven, but somewhat resembling the Elephant's, & very round & flat, her tail slender and hanging down over her Sex, which had some long hairs at the End of it like a Cow's, & was all the hair about the whole Creature.

But what was the most wonderful, was the extraordinary bulk and Circumference of her body, which though very Young, (they told us as I remember not above 4 years old) could not be less than 20 foot in compass: she had a set of most dreadful teeth, which were extraordinarily broad, and deep in her throat, she was led by a ring in her nose like a Buffalo, but the horn upon it was but newly Sprouting, & hardly shaped to any considerable point, but in my opinion nothing was so extravagant as the Skin of the beast, which hung down on her haunches, both behind and before to her knees, loose like so much Coach leather, & not adhering at all to the body, which had another skin, so as one might take up this, as one would do a Cloak or horse-Cloth to a great depth, it adhering only at the upper parts; & these lappets of stiff skin, began to be studded with impenetrable Scales, like a Target of Coat of mail, loricated like Armor, much after the manner this Animal is usually depicted: she was of a mouse Colour, the skin Elephantine.

Tame enough, & suffering her mouth to be open'd by her keeper, who caus'd her to lie down, when she appeared like a great Coach overthrown, for she was much of that bulk, yet would rise as nimbly as ever I saw a horse: T'was certainly a very wonderful creature, of immense strength in the neck, & nose especially, the snout resembling a boar's but much longer; to what stature she

may arrive if she live long, I cannot tell; but if she grow proportionable to her present age, she will be a Mountain. They fed her with Hay, & Oats, & gave her bread.

She belonged to Certain E. Indian Merchants, & was sold for (as I remember) above two-thousand pounds. At the same time I went to see a living Crocodile...

Feeding the rhino (especially on the sea voyage) must certainly have been a challenge. In his 1693 *Synopsis Animalium*, the naturalist John Ray (1627–1705) wrote of “The great beast that was paraded round England in the year 1684/1785. It fed on hay, turnip-tops and corn, of which it consumed a peck and a half a day by our standard.” (A peck is 16 dry pints or about 9 litres.)

On this feeding theme, the rhino enthusiast [James Parsons](#), who met the next one to visit Britain (in 1739), told the Royal Society in 1743: “He was fed here with rice, hay and sugar. Of the first he eat[s] 7 pounds to about 3 pounds of the sugar; they were mixed together, and he eat[s] this quantity every day, divided into three meals, and about a truss of hay in a week, besides greens of different kinds, of which he seemed fonder than of his dry victuals; and drank large quantities of water.”

Soon, plans were afoot to take our pachydermatous friend on tour. A *London Gazette* of **18th March 1685** reported: “the strange Beast called the Rhynoceros, will be sent beyond the Sea, and therefore will not be seen in this City after the 14th of April next, which it may be in the mean time at the Bell-Savage on Ludgate-hill.”

However, the beast was destined, like Clara 72 years later, to meet its end in London. On **28th September 1686**, another newsletter reported: “Last week died that Wonderful creature the Rhinoceros; the several proprietors having Ensured £1200 on her life the Ensurers are caughted for much money.”

It seems the owners made their money one way or another – but whether Mr Langley lived to regret missing out, we’ll never know.

A
DESCRIPTION
OF THE
RHINOCEROS,

Lately brought from the

East-INDIES,

And sold the 25th. of this Instant *August*, to
Mr. *L.* for 232^ol.

PS. If you love language and wordplay, check out [my friend Geoff's newsletter!](#)

1

Some pages from the original journal, at the Royal Museums Greenwich, can be [viewed online](#).

2

In other words Langley was an investor in the ‘musick-house’ that was to become Sadler’s Wells theatre, an institution that continues to this day. A Mr Sadler (different accounts have him as Richard, Thomas or Edward) had rediscovered lost medicinal wells in the course of his building work in 1683.

3

We do know that Udall was stabbed to death in the Makassar revolt of 1686 – see https://www.ayutthaya-history.com/Settlements_Makassar4.html.

4

The Bell Savage Inn has many of its own stories to tell. I’ll save those for another time!

