

TWO "HAIRY" INHABITANTS AT LONDON ZOO

1- The Capture of Begum

This female hairy-eared Sumatran rhinoceros (*Dicerorhinus sumatrensis lasiotis*) was the type specimen of this sub-species and, of course, she lived in the old Elephant House at London Zoo for over 28 years. When she arrived in 1872 she was described as "a new species" or a "variety of the Sumatran rhino", and she was named "Begum". The animal was described as having a "thin hide unlike that of the Indian rhino, with none of the strongly-marked tubercles characteristic of the Indian species; there were some slight skin-folds about the neck and at the base of the limbs, a deep groove behind the shoulder blades and one, less conspicuous one on each flank". "The body was covered with long fine, reddish hair, with the ear-fringes having particularly long hair, the tail was short and hairy".

She was found by local people in 1868 stuck in quicksand near Chittagong (now the second largest city in Bangladesh). She was pulled free, after a great deal of effort, and tied to a tree overnight. In the morning the local people were alarmed at her struggles, they sent information about her capture and immediately requested help from the nearest British magistrates. Two English officers came to help bringing with them some more local people and some elephants, only to find by which time she had freed itself and escaped. They searched for the animal and when it was found they discovered that the elephants were "frightened by the strange beast". After some time spent calming the elephants down, one elephant was attached to the rhino by a rope. However the said elephant then bolted in terror, luckily the rope snapped otherwise the rhino would have been killed there and then. Two, more calmer, elephants were brought in and the rhino was lashed to these, one each side of the rhino, and by this method the rhino was safely transferred to the settlement, after walking for sixteen hours, before being sent to England. She was thought to have been at least two years old when she arrived on 14th February 1872, the Society bought her from the dealer Carl Jamrach for the price of £1,250¹.

Initially she was housed alone, but from 26th September 1899 she was kept with another female Sumatran rhino (*Dicerorhinus s. sumatrensis*) which had arrived from Cross – the Liverpool dealer. This second animal died on 13th February 1900 and Begum continued until she died on 31st August 1900 aged about 35. Only "Jim" the male Indian rhino had exceeded her longevity at the zoo.

Begum had apparently been "ailing for some time before her death", old-age was given as the cause of death and her skin and skeleton was said to have been sent to the British (Natural History) Museum for mounting.

2 - A Little Hairy Elephant²

In 1912 a very young female "Malaysian elephant² - at just over a yard in height at the hindquarters" arrived at London Zoo. This caused much excitement. She had been captured after having fallen down a tin-mine. "The little animal was thickly coated with long, coarse hair, black on the upper parts and lighter below, looking like a hairy mammoth". "It's ears were relatively larger than in the adult Indian species, to which it belongs, and in this respect, as well as in the more rounded forehead, it approaches the African type". "The trunk is relatively short, not quite reaching the ground when the animal is standing upright, and it is not yet used in drinking". "The little creature still lives chiefly on milk, mixed with sugar, and thickened with arrow-root, which it sucks out of a bucket through a rubber tube placed in its mouth".

References: Details of Begum's capture were gleaned from an old newspaper press cutting that I purchased, but the date and publication are unknown, whilst the Little Hairy Elephants is from a press cutting dated 1912. Edwards, J. - London Zoo from old photographs 1852 – 1914 (second edition) 2012.

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¹ £1,250 is equivalent to around £125,000 today, which gives some idea of the charges that the animal dealers could make and, indeed, the finances of ZSL. - Ed.

² The elephant was called Tryphaena and had been presented to George V. She died in October 1913, possibly from Bright's disease. See also John Edward's book. - Ed.