

## HOW LONDON ZOO ACQUIRED ITS SECOND PAIR OF KOMODO DRAGONS

**Nick Thompson**

*Sumbawa*, one of the first pair of Dragons to arrive at London Zoo in 1927, achieved fame with the public, much as Obaysch and Jumbo the Victorian pachyderms had done, and Guy the gorilla and Chi Chi the giant panda would in the future. In his case it was because he became extraordinarily tame for a creature with such a fearsome reputation in the wild; the apparent contradiction fascinated people. We can only imagine the shock then when the keepers arrived to find him unexpectedly dead on the morning of January 29<sup>th</sup> 1934. This bombshell would have reverberated around the Zoo in a very short time, causing universal dismay and distress.

One man, however, seemed to be looking beyond this present disaster to the future: Lord Moyne. After a few months, he proposed not only that this was the time for the Zoo to obtain more Komodo Dragons to join the remaining *Sumba*, but that he would sail in his private yacht to the Dutch East Indies to trap them and bring them back alive himself! There is no better example of the old adage, 'the right person, in the right place, at the right time,' but who was Lord Moyne?

**Lieutenant Colonel Walter Edward Guinness, 1<sup>st</sup> Baron Moyne, DSO & Bar**  
The story of London Zoo's second pair of Komodo Dragons cannot be told fully without discovering more about this extraordinary man and how it was possible for him to play such a key role in their capture. Before he was ennobled as 'Baron Moyne of Bury St. Edmunds in the County of Suffolk' on 21<sup>st</sup> January 1932, he was better known as Walter Edward Guinness, formerly Member of Parliament for Bury St. Edmunds from 1907, until the Conservatives lost the 1931 election and he lost his seat. His name will probably have suggested to the reader that he was part of the extremely wealthy Guinness dynasty, which indeed he was, benefitting from that wealth as one of the firm's directors. However, he was probably more worthy of note for his many personal achievements in a very full life, starting with his distinguished service both in the second Boer War, and then in World War I. He was celebrated too for his achievements in his political career, both as a Member of Parliament, but more notably for the various high offices he held under his good friend, Sir Winston Churchill, as an active Member of the House of Lords. Lord Moyne was sufficiently well known throughout society for him to be the subject of a popular pun, "Moyne's a Guinness." Sadly, he was to become better known to the British public following the appalling manner of his death in Cairo, in 1944, when Jewish terrorists assassinated him.

All of the above is easy to research in much more detail, but his life-long interest in the natural world and particularly in anthropology has received less attention. Indeed it had been his original wish to study biology as an undergraduate at Oxford, but it was not to be, as he believed he should serve his country which was heavily embroiled in the Second Boer War in South Africa from late 1899 to 1902, so firstly enlisted in The Loyal Suffolk Hussars as a second lieutenant, and then volunteered to serve in the war effort. He emerged from that war in 1902 as a Captain with a distinguished record. It is worth mentioning here that he was also later to serve with distinction in the First World War, in which he gained the reputation of being a fearless adventurer, as his war diaries seem to confirm.

Following the Boer War, it was natural that Walter Guinness should enter into public life, offering himself as a Member of Parliament, and succeeding at his second attempt to win the Seat at Bury St Edmunds in 1907. In his leisure time, however, he was able to pursue his

interests in activities such as exploration and big game hunting, a legitimate and exciting sport for the very rich at that time, not to mention fitting in marriage during 1903.

By 1934 he was in possession of his third private cruise ship, which he re-named, giving it the name of his third child, *Rosaura*. The *Rosaura*, like his daughter, was his pride and joy. This was his third private yacht; his first he still possessed, but the second had been shipwrecked off the west coast of Ireland in 1933, thankfully without loss of life. Undaunted by this loss, he had within a few months bought himself a replacement. British Transport's 700 ton passenger ship, the *S.S. Dieppe*, had served as a cross-Chanel ferry between Newhaven and Dieppe since 1905, but the ferry company now needed a larger vessel. Lord Moyne could see its potential for conversion into a luxury cruise ship, and immediately replaced the triple screw steam turbine engines, which were capable of delivering speeds up to 21 knots, with twin screw Atlas diesel engines, which could only manage a speed of 15 knots per hour. This decision was not as perverse as it sounds, as diesel oil had several advantages over coal, but the main one for him was much greater capacity for fuel storage, which considerably increased the ship's range, giving Guinness improved access to the Far East, Australasia and the remote Pacific Islands, where he could pursue his main interests of studying primitive, previously undiscovered, possibly cannibalistic, and therefore 'unspoilt' tribes, as well as discovering new animal species.

At 83 metres long it would always be one of the longest and most impressive private cruise yachts in any harbour at that time, and, whilst it was described as a 'graceful' craft, it was the interior which really impressed in its opulence. Conversion into a luxury private cruise ship involved the creation of eight large, en-suite staterooms, each with a large bathroom, so that up to 12 guests would not feel overcrowded. In addition there was an extensive library (no doubt including the best natural history reference books of the day), sports deck with collapsible swimming pool and a music room, with piano and phonograph. Of course it was 'very beautifully furnished' throughout. You could assume that 'Wally' regarded you as a true friend if he saw fit to invite you, and perhaps your partner, to join one of his privileged and luxurious cruises, fully serviced by a crew of 26, under the command of Captain Laidlaw, the most experienced and reliable of seamen. We can only imagine such an extravagant setting for the *haute cuisine* they must have enjoyed when I tell you that the Prince of Wales and Mrs Wallis Simpson were the first guests following the yacht's conversion, when he treated them to a Mediterranean cruise in August of 1934. Wallis would recount that it was on that cruise she fell in love with the Prince...

### **The long voyage to the East Indies and beyond**

In September that same year it was the turn of Winston and Lady Clementine Churchill to be invited as guests of honour with others on a cruise around the eastern Mediterranean, sailing from Marseille, and visiting Athens, Cyprus and the southern coast of Turkey. A large series of photographs by Lady Vera Broughton documenting the trip can be viewed freely on the internet, and they show a group of people enjoying a fabulous holiday. It was clear to all that Clementine found the whole experience personally liberating, to the extent that Lord Moyne invited the Churchills to join him for his forthcoming trip to the Far East and beyond at the beginning of 1935. Clementine leapt at the opportunity, but Winston was not so keen, having enjoyed cruising less than his wife, but also he wanted the time at home to continue the biography of Marlborough that he was working on. However, he gave his blessing to her going without him, eager to join in their quest for Dragons and other treasures.

As with most of Guinness' previous journeys he was particularly keen to find tribes of primitive people in hitherto unknown locations, so that he could photograph them and describe their lives to the outside world. For this latest trip he had already promised the British Museum that he would collect as many artefacts as possible from the indigenous peoples of the Far East and Australasia. Similarly he would hope to bring back living specimens of animals to be presented to the Zoological Society of London, of which he was not only a Fellow, but a

Member of the Council, its governing body. The aim always included the capture of species new to the Society, and better still, those new to science. In 1932 he had brought back four Marine Iguanas from the Galapagos Islands, which sadly only survived a year or two in spite of daily deliveries of fresh seaweed from Cornwall!

At that time everyone in the zoo world wanted Komodo Dragons, along with Okapis, Gorillas and the Duck-billed Platypus. Such rare exhibits conferred considerable kudos on the zoo that acquired them, and, more practically, could earn them hugely increased revenues at the gate, always welcome to fund large new projects. But everyone also knew that you couldn't get them for love nor money, the protective regulations developed in the Dutch East Indies having become prohibitively strict. Once the idea of collecting dragons on this pre-arranged trip had been conceived I think we can safely assume that this Peer of the Realm would have made arrangements to discuss his plans with the Dutch Ambassador to Britain for advice, if not letters of introduction. Possibly he would have been directed to arrange top level discussions with Government officials in the Netherlands as well as the Dutch East Indies, if he was to stand any chance of circumventing the strict ban on the hunting and export of Komodo Dragons. If anyone was in a sufficiently elevated position in society to conduct these, it was Lord Moyne. However, the Dutch authorities, as they progressively tightened the rules and ordinances that protected the dragons and other exotic species from their islands, always acknowledged that there was a paradoxical view to be considered; that is that these beasts had diplomatic value, and there was also their moral duty to fulfil their international obligations of friendship and research. Not only did remote high level officials need to be satisfied of a collector's claims, there were local assistant governors on the ground involved too, who were not only charged with agreeing numbers and issuing licences to capture or kill specimens, but were obliged to supervise and record the process directly. At times tribal leaders would also be involved, especially if native labour would be needed. Is it any wonder then that money might also discreetly change hands on occasion to 'oil the wheels', though, of course, such transactions were seldom documented, but are certainly implied in some of the accounts. At a more practical level, it was also agreed for London Zoo's Works Department to build a large timber and wire-netting trap according to Lord Moyne's specifications, suitably decorated with camouflage paint, to be delivered to his yacht in Southampton at the end of the year.

After a family farewell from Victoria Station on the 27<sup>th</sup> December, 1934, Clementine Churchill travelled overland for several days, joining the *Rosaura* at Messina in Sicily. The other guests were Mr and Mrs Lee Guinness, a cousin of Lord Moyne and a very keen naturalist, and Mr Terence Philip a successful Bond Street art dealer with whom, it was rumoured at the time, she might have become quite infatuated during their long voyage together. But where was their host, Lord Moyne? He didn't join the cruise until the yacht reached Rangoon in Burma after being at sea for twenty days, but he and his companion, Lady Vera Broughton, had flown the notoriously hazardous journey from England to meet up with the cruise, where at this point the Guinness couple disembarked. It was not unusual for him to miss the beginning and end parts of cruises due to his political commitments.

Vera Broughton was Walter Guinness' companion on most of his expeditions, when she would adopt the role of official photographer, making particularly valuable records of his encounters with primitive tribes around the world. Both of their marriages had failed, and she was well known for her liberal views on morality (and for smoking French cigarettes!), indeed some said that prolonged contact with Vera on this voyage left Clementine with a less narrow moral compass than before. Vera had also enjoyed big game hunting at the turn of the century, but gradually shifted her interest to big game fishing and the capture of large animals on camera, for which she had a recognised talent. The long-term affair with Walter was well known within the circles in which they moved, but it did little to tarnish their personal reputations. In 1940 it was she who divorced her unfaithful husband, Jock, who re-married within a few months.

The voyage was to include Singapore, Borneo, Celebes (a large island now known as Sulawesi), and eventually New Guinea, before travelling south along the great Australian Barrier Reef and arriving in Sydney on February 6<sup>th</sup>. They then travelled around the remote islands of the South Pacific, of which Clementine wrote: *We are quite out of touch, the waters round some of these islands are uncharted, they are surrounded by cruel coral reefs and often no bottom can be found. Captain Laidlaw is a tower of strength for which I magnify and praise the Lord daily.*

They finally arrived off the island of Komodo on the 18<sup>th</sup> of March, and immediately set about landing the large trap in sections, catching a goat to act as bait, and locating the trap in front of a cavern where dragon tracks seemed to lead inward. Walter and Vera would lie in the grass for hours watching either the bait or the trap, hoping for good photographs, but they discouraged Clementine from spending too long in the sun, as they judged her to be rather too delicate, but this did not prevent her from getting caught up in the excitement of the week spent at Komodo, as her letters home to Winston revealed. Fortunately she did spot one large dragon herself on a stony beach while it was looking for crabs on one occasion, and she was generally entranced by the beauty of the place.

The story is taken up by Vera Broughton in the article she wrote for the *National Geographic* of September 1936, illustrated with her own photographs and entitled: *'A Modern Dragon Hunt on Komodo: An English Yachting Party Traps and Photographs the Huge and Carnivorous Dragon Lizard of the Lesser Sundas'*. (Komodo and other islands form part of an archipelago or island chain known as the Lesser Sundas.)

*One of the most prized inhabitants of the London Zoo had died - a dragon lizard from the island of Komodo. As the zoo was eager to replace this interesting creature, rare in captivity, Lord Moyne, who had visited Komodo some years previously, agreed to revisit the island last year with the object of securing specimens. I had the good fortune to be one of Lord Moyne's guests on his yacht Rosaura and to have opportunity to take the accompanying photographs.*

### **Survivors from Prehistoric Age**

*It was only in 1912 that the Komodo dragons (*Varanus komodoensis*) first became known to zoologists. These large carnivorous reptiles, of a kind that crawled the earth millions of years ago, have been hidden away for ages in remote islands of the Netherlands Indies. Although *Komodoensis* is only one of the existing species of *Varanus*, it is by far the most spectacular, because of its great size and its general appearance which vividly suggests the fire-breathing dragon of legend.*

*The creatures are found at the western end of the large island of Flores in the Lesser Sundas, and on smaller islands of the same group, notably Komodo and Rintja, which lie between Flores and Soembawa. Strong currents rush northward through the straits, past the dragon islands, at a speed which in former times must have discouraged ships from attempting a landing.*

*We anchored in the great sweep of Telok Slawi, a bay off one of the two small villages of Komodo. The scenery is of extreme beauty. Steep, green slopes of fantastic shapes run up with many curves and contortions to the rocky saddles which divide up the island*

*The Netherlands Resident of Timor, responsible for the government of these islands, kindly came to Komodo in his yacht with several of his officials while we were there, and our success in capturing the "dragons" was mainly due to the help of our obliging friends.*

*We spent about ten days on Komodo in our efforts to catch the largest possible specimens. We secured seven, but, as we had permission to bring back only three, we released the smaller captives whenever we could replace them by larger ones.*

*We used a trap which was constructed for the purpose by the zoo. Ten feet from front to back, it was built up of panels of strong wire netting and was so devised that, when the quarry pulled at the meat at the inner end of the cage, a door would fall behind it.*

**Trap is set near a dragon lair**

*This device we erected about a mile inland, just where a valley began to narrow into the foothills, and carefully camouflaged it with branches of trees. A great rock stood on a slope nearby, and beneath it were several holes with tracks at the entrances which proved them to be lairs of these reptiles.*

*Owing, no doubt, to the many tracks we had left on the ground, no dragons came to the trap during the first twenty-four hours. We afterwards found that, although so deaf as to be completely indifferent to the human voice or even the discharge of a gun, they are possessed of keen sight and scent.*

*Another reason for their absence during the first day was doubtless the fact that the meat had not begun to be odorous! Dragon lizards like it in a state of advance putrefaction.*

*During the second day, however, we found the bait gone. The door had fallen without catching the dragon, although the creature had left plenty of evidence of its visit inside the trap.*

*Disappointed with this initial trial of the trap, we thought it best to arrange for a watcher while we went off in search of other likely places where we could try our luck with meat baits and nooses.*

**A fighting captive**

*It was an exciting moment when our trap watcher came to report a catch! On reaching the trap we found that the dragon was of only moderate size but very fierce. As soon as anyone came near, it dashed itself against the wire sides of the trap, causing us extreme anxiety lest it should injure itself.*

*After a consultation as to the best method of getting it to the ship uninjured, we thought it best to collect a dozen natives and get the trap carried down to the sea on their shoulders. It would not be pleasant to be bitten or wounded by the powerful claws of these carrion-eating reptiles.*

*Fortunately, once on the ship, we found no difficulty in transferring them by attracting them from the darkened trap into the sunlit cage and quickly shutting the door between.*

*After this first capture, we established the trap near the beach where the lizards were being drawn by the lure of a putrefying dead pig which we had placed just out of their reach in a tree. The attraction of the bait seemed to be increased by laying trails of linseed oil, and after this we were able to catch dragons as fast as we could make cages in which to keep them.*

*Since the trapping was well established, I was glad to be able to spend my time procuring a series of pictures. Near the rock where the trap had previously stood, we tied up a dead goat and prepared a cover of green canvas and branches, from behind which I could watch and photograph the reptiles without being seen by them.*

*First of all I found that dragon lizards love the sun. They would not emerge from their lairs before the sun was high in the heavens. Perspiration fairly poured off me. The first day the lizards were suspicious and no large ones came down to my bait, though several watched all day at what they considered a safe distance.*

*However, the second day things were different. The goat carcass, by this time so nauseous to me, acted as a charm for them. The small dragons became fearless and seldom was the carcass without one gnawing at it.*

*The big dragons, throwing all caution to the winds, rushed down with surprising agility and speed, tearing and dragging large pieces of the meat away from the carcass to be eaten at leisure out of sight in the long grass.*

*All the time I kept myself carefully hidden from their sight, but, as other observers had reported that these lizards are stone-deaf, I did not trouble to keep quiet.*

**Undisturbed by a shotgun's roar**

*In fact, wishing to test this theory of deafness, I discharged a shotgun over their heads at a range of a dozen yards on more than one occasion. Neither this nor the rattling of plate holders nor the human voice seemed to make any impression on them, whereas they would notice any movement in an instant and make off.*

*That they are deaf to some sounds seems beyond dispute, but it is interesting to note that the specimens at the zoo very definitely hear the sound of the key turning in the lock of their cage. When the keeper goes to feed them, their attention is immediately arrested by this sound.*

**Reptiles never ventured to attack**

*In their wild state they are said to be dangerous, but I cannot support this statement. I spent days watching at close range, dragons of all sizes up to about twelve feet in length. I had no protection other than the small hedge of cut branches and leaves. At no times did the creatures show any signs of attacking me.*

*The natives would not go near the haunts of the dragons after dark and seemed in considerable fear of them even in daylight.*

*For the homeward journey we put our specimens in strong crates with bevelled slats on one face. Unfortunately, our carpenter sought to lighten the lids by inserting a panel of wire netting. When the yacht was some days out on the homeward journey, one of the dragons burst its way through the netting, and, as no trace of it was ever found on the ship, presumed it jumped overboard. The other two were safely delivered to the zoo and, in addition, our cameras had captured numerous others that are still free to partake of their odoriferous banquets on the hills and beaches of Komodo.*

Apart from the loss of one of the dragons, the journey home was uneventful, but their imminent arrival was quite eagerly anticipated by some of the newspapers:-

**RARE DRAGONS**

*Within the next few days more specimens of the rare "dragons" from the Island of Komodo in the Dutch East Indies are to be housed in the Gardens. Sumba and Sumbawa, the Zoo's famous Komodo dragons, were the first of these giant lizards to reach Europe alive, and although Sumbawa died a year ago, Sumba is still flourishing, though his temper has become soured through solitary confinement.*

*The Zoo has been anxious to acquire more examples of these interesting specimens, but there seemed no chance of this desire being fulfilled until last autumn, when Lord Moyne, who presented the Zoo with its rare marine iguanas from the Galapagos islands, promised to try to capture some dragons for the menagerie. Accordingly special traps, adorned with camouflage paint, were made for him, and now some of Sumba's relatives are safely housed on Lord Moyne's yacht and are on their way to London. (Sunday Times, 28/4/35)*

The Cambridge Daily News had expressed similar curiosity a couple of days earlier:-

**REAL DRAGONS FOR LONDON**

*There is lively interest at the Zoo in the approaching return of Lord Moyne, who is bringing home in his yacht Rosaura many rare beasts and birds which he has secured for the gardens.*

*The chief subject of lively speculation is as to whether the queer cargo includes some real dragons. The island of Komodo in the Dutch East Indies is now the only place where dragons may be found. Lord Moyne promised the Zoo authorities that he would go there to get one or two.*

*As the Rt. Ho. Walter Guinness he was in Parliament for Bury St Edmunds for twenty four years, and is remembered as a highly successful Minister for Agriculture. His yacht was once a cross-Channel steamer on the Newhaven-Dieppe route. He had her converted into a luxurious steam yacht two years ago. The King as Prince of Wales went on the first cruise she made in the Mediterranean.*

## The Bartlett Society

*For some months Lord Moyne has been on an extensive cruise, during which time he is understood to have obtained a large number of welcome specimens for Whipsnade and Regent's Park.*

The Rosaura docked at Southampton on Tuesday, 30<sup>th</sup> April, where Lady Clementine disembarked, Winston having arranged for a car and a lorry to meet her. She arrived home with more luggage than had she left with, including her pet Bali Pigeon, a special souvenir of the trip, and a pair of Australian Black Swans for the Chartwell estate.

The following day the zoological specimens were unloaded onto two lorries, to be carefully unloaded upon arrival into their waiting cages. The Zoological Society Annual Report recorded receipt of the following:- 1 Highland's Long-tailed Tree Mouse, 1 Ceylon Pit Viper, 4 Green Pit Vipers, 3 Brown Spotted Pit Vipers, 9 Helmed Lizards, 1 Indian Changeable Lizard, 3 Fan-footed Geckos, 1 Delande's Gecko, 4 Ceylon Terrapins, 5 Blue-rumped Parrots, 2 Tuatara, 2 Komodo Dragons, 2 Kagus; the last three species being the most prestigious of the collection.

After a week the newcomers were still not on display to the public, as evidenced by this item in the *Manchester Guardian* of 8/5/35:-

### **Komodo Dragons**

*Now Lord Moyne, who has recently returned from a yachting cruise embracing the group of islands east of Java of which Komodo is one, has presented the society two young and extremely active dragons. They are far from having attained the great bulk of Sumba, who is estimated to weigh something over two hundredweights, and they are at present wild and, it is reported quarrelsome.*

*But they seem well and seem to be in good condition, so they may carry on and improve upon the record already established. They are shortly to be exhibited in the Reptile House, but will not occupy the same den as Sumba. It is stated on good authority that the Komodo Dragon is not averse from a cannibalistic meal.*

Their first home was one of the familiar large central dens normally occupied by suitably large non-venomous snakes. All went well until the keepers installed a Sun Lamp in their quarters, as the *Daily Mail* for June 11<sup>th</sup> reported in the Zoo Correspondent's 'Happenings at the Zoo' column:-

### **DRAGONS REACH FOR THE "SUN" - And Crash to Earth With It**

*Last month Lord Moyne presented the Zoological Society with two Komodo dragons - the largest lizards in the world. Both comported themselves excellently until a few days ago.*

*It is not always an easy matter to induce reptiles to feed in captivity, but I understand that the dragons have taken kindly to their food. One, however, has a much better appetite than the other.*

*Special health-giving lights have long been used at the Zoo with gratifying results. It was decided recently to fit a lamp of this kind in the Komodos' compartment. All went well with the new lamp for a day or two. It was fixed to the roof quite solidly.*

### **SKILFUL CLIMBERS**

*Rising to within a foot or two of the lamp is a concrete archway over which timber was lodged for the benefit of pythons when they had the compartment. This timber has been removed and only the bare concrete remains. Up this structure it is customary for the dragons to crawl. They climb skilfully, using their tails for support as well as their legs and feet.*

*You cannot have your cake and eat it. It is no good reaching for the sun. The dragons reached for their sun and down it crashed.*

*Apparently the dragons climbed to the top of their "mountain" and threw out their front legs to the "sun." The lamp-shade supported them for a moment, and then down came dragons, sun and all.*

*The special lamp that is used not unnaturally exploded when it hit the ground. The dragons, unhurt, went and hid themselves under a large slab of stone like naughty children.*

It seems that news of the Dragons was spreading to the provinces, if only to provide an opportunity on the same date for this amusing journalist at the *Sheffield Telegraph* to poke fun at southerners:-

**To See the Dragon**

*When I went across Regent's Park to the Zoo this afternoon it seemed to me that half the people who had not gone into the country or Hampstead Heath had decided that they simply must see the Komodo dragon, the giant lizard from the Dutch East Indies, which is about the Zoological Society's most prized possession now.*

*There were Cockneys by the hundred shrieking to each other in their high-pitched voices, and here and there I could see a bewildered Yorkshireman longing for the deep speech of his fellows. The Zoo on a bank holiday is always worth seeing for the antics of the visitors and the condescending boredom of the animals. But the animals have one big advantage over the onlookers - they don't have to queue for three-quarters of an hour to get a ham sandwich and a glass of milk. (11/6/35)*

After initial reports surrounding their arrival at the Zoo there is very little press coverage of the new dragons' progress, apart from the occasional mention when the annual census took place at the beginning of January, to which reporters and photographers were generally invited.

Struggling to write something interesting for their readers, young 'hacks' might attempt to spice up their reports by discussing the dragons' high monetary value, along with that of the Zoo's latest celebrities, Mok and Moina, and Buta, the Okapi. I have found only one other mention of the dragons until the outbreak of War in 1939, and that was in the Zoological Society's own monthly publication, *Animal & Zoo Magazine*. This is in stark contrast to the interest shown towards the Zoo's first pair. Why? My personal view is that they seem never to have been given pet names at any time during their captivity that I can discover, which is quite unusual at that time, when such names were often included on the information label. I cannot help but wonder how the keepers identified each of them in routine management beyond its sex, which is occasionally used to identify one or the other, especially in official records. No name equates with no personality, which equates with not being interesting to reporters or the zoo-going public, who in general seemed to prefer the animals that could be anthropomorphised in some way or other, a trend which the Zoo at that time seemed keen to endorse.

To the British in 1939, War seemed inevitable, so preparations were being made around the country even before that dread announcement was made on Sunday, September 3<sup>rd</sup>, two days after Germany invaded our ally, Poland. The Zoo stayed open, with good attendances, all the usual animal rides, along with the Chimpanzees' Tea Party, right until 11.00am on that fateful day, when it was shut by order of the Government, although they were allowed to re-open on the 15<sup>th</sup> August. Of course, during this period there had been much planning behind the scenes for this event. Huge numbers of sandbags had been discreetly spread around the Zoo in situations potentially vulnerable to air attack, contingency plans for reduced heating costs and food bills had been made, and it was already decided that the 40 venomous snakes would be destroyed on the outbreak of war, and so they were on Friday, 1<sup>st</sup> September - what a hateful and potentially dangerous job for their keepers to perform. What was to become of the Komodo Dragons? Fortunately their lives were spared. The plan for them was to be transferred to the Tortoise House, which would continue to be heated, but would be closed to the public, along with the Aquarium which was virtually emptied, for the duration of the War, while the Reptile House heating was actually switched off, but stayed open to visitors until winter set in.



Within a month or two the Zoo began to feel the pinch along with the rest of society, but its gates were open again. Then someone had the bright idea of raising funds by inviting members of the public to sponsor chosen animals by making a regular donation towards their upkeep. For example: to support a dormouse, one shilling (5p) a week, for a sealion or an okapi, one pound ten shillings (£1.50). Once the scheme was up and running it was reported to be raising up to £35 a week, a sizeable contribution to the overall food bill. There was the added bonus of sponsors being able to visit their adopted animal in person from time to time. The scheme was more successful than anybody had anticipated, as it really seized the public's imagination, however, there were certain animals that excited no interest whatsoever. Craven Hill, the 'Evening Standard Zoo Correspondent', takes up the story on the 4<sup>th</sup> of December:-

*So successful has been the Zoo's war-time "adoption scheme" that there are now virtually only two houses left in which none of the animals has found a patron.*

*The fact that neither of these houses has yet attracted a patron has surprised the Zoo staff as much as anybody.*

*As an official put it to me: "When you consider that the reptile house is normally one of the most popular Zoo buildings, being only outrivaled by the monkey house, it is strange that no one has yet come forward to adopt one of the more popular reptiles."*

#### **METHUSELAH THE TURTLE**

*"There are several which have long held the public's fancy - old George, the centenarian alligator, for instance, or Kai Lung, the Chinese alligator.*

*"There is also Methuselah, the turtle, who has been a reptile house inmate since the outbreak of the last war. And there are two Komodo dragons whose meal-times have been watched by vast numbers of people.*

*"None of these exhibits would cost much to maintain, but so far we have had no offers.*

*"There is too, the tigress Jean, who is the only one of her kind that we have been able to rear in the menagerie. She was born at Whipnade three years ago, and, as a cub, spent several months in the 'Children's Zoo'.*

*"Yet, popular as she was, and is, she still lacks a patron. She would not cost much to maintain - not more than a few shillings a week."*

I have not been able to find any further mention anywhere regarding the Dragons until after the war, in 1946, when this typical census report appears in the Star on the 9<sup>th</sup> February:-

#### **Dragon's Den**

*The Zoo has been stocktaking and has listed among its priceless possessions two real, live dragons.*

*They were only 4ft. long when they arrived from the Dutch East Indies about ten years ago.*

*They were then comparatively tame and would allow the keeper to touch them.*

*Now they live in a large double-roomed glass house, and liberty has developed their natural ferocity. Keeper Lanworn told me that often the reptiles go for him with open mouths when he enters their den.*

#### **Morning Walk**

*This keeper has been on war service, and he said the dragons had increased in girth and had grown at least 2ft. longer while he was away.*

*During the war, Sumbawa, the old dragon died. "He was as quiet as a dog." said the keeper.*

*"Every morning a collar was put round his neck and he was taken for a walk round the reptile house."*

*Dragons' diet consists mainly of flesh, but their favourite food is eggs. Possibly the reptiles have now forgotten what an egg is like.*

How ironic then, that keepers should find the male unexpectedly dead when they arrived for work, just one week later on Saturday, 16<sup>th</sup> February, 1946! The cause was found to be Pneumonia on autopsy and the poor creature's body was sent to the Natural History Museum, which is the last we hear of it. What did the newspapers make of the event? Absolutely nothing! This sad event in the life of the Zoo went unreported until just one small entry appeared in the *Sunday Telegraph* just over a fortnight later which read,

**Zoo's "Dragon" Dies**

*The London Zoo's Komodo Dragon died on Saturday, a few weeks after the death of its mate. They were both 6ft. in length.*

Yes, the female had now died too, on Saturday 9<sup>th</sup> March, just a fortnight after its mate, also sudden and unexpected. Its death was attributed to a more obscure cause - 'retention of necrosed ova.'

Her remains were also deposited in the Museum, as had been promised. It is hard to credit, after all the interest and enthusiasm aroused by their capture and arrival at the Zoo, that their passing should receive such scant attention from the media, who still cheerfully recorded happy and even less happy animal stories in the same old way. I cannot account for it.

Perhaps they should have given them names...

Komodo Dragons would not be seen again at London Zoo until the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

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**Footnote: How did Edinburgh Zoo come to receive two Komodo Dragons in 1937?**

To properly appreciate how Edinburgh Zoo came to acquire dragons in this pre-war period we need first to go back to 1933, to St. Louis Zoological Park in the American state of Missouri, where two volunteers in the Reptile House were inspired by the Curator of Reptiles there to make an expedition to the Far East to collect reptiles, including the Komodo Dragon. I can find no details concerning the outward journey taken by John Smith and Prentice Miles, but it is recorded that having arrived on the island of Java, they were able to negotiate the purchase of the largest of Surabaya Zoo's five Dragons for \$500. Admitted that was a lot of money at that time, but who would have thought it could be that easy? Their collecting trip continued, amassing 150 assorted reptiles before booking passage on a Dutch freighter, travelling from Singapore to Los Angeles. They were badly let down by the captain who, having promised to stay within warm waters, moored the ship off Alaska for some days, which killed many of the tropical snakes, and damaged the health of other reptiles, including the Dragon, which only survived for two weeks after its arrival in the zoo.

We do not know if they were inspired by the above enterprise, but in 1934 two former graduates from Harvard University, Lawrence Griswold, archaeologist, and William Harkness, anthropologist, were planning their next possible adventure, the challenge of capturing some Komodo Dragons, if a zoo would pay for them. The New York Bronx Zoo authorities readily agreed to their proposition, though warned them they had set themselves a near impossible task. While Harkness began to gather some of the equipment they would require, Griswold travelled to Washington to meet the Dutch Minister there, who proved to be very non-committal, suggesting he should perhaps present his request at The Hague in the Netherlands!

So off they set, this accomplished and affluent pair, without any prior diplomatic approval or permission, travelling on ordinary commercial liners to their destination, Java, where they hoped to meet the top man there, Bonifacius Cornelis de Jonge, the Governor General of the Dutch East Indies. Graciously, he agreed to meet them, but told them "he also had no power to grant their request". But 'nil desperandum' - in that same city of Buitenzorg (now Bogor in western Java) were the Botanical Gardens, whose Director, Karl Dammerman, was also the founder of the Netherlands Indies Society for the Protection of Nature, but more to the point, he was the man appointed to have the final say on whether hopefuls might or might not collect any Dragons, and if so, how many! It was agreed they could collect four for themselves, (they had only wanted two!), on condition that they catch a further four for Surabaya Zoo in Eastern Java, whose officials were appointed to assist them, whilst also acting as the official observers of the exercise. A very entertaining account of their expedition is covered in several chapters of Lawrence Griswold's 1938 book, *Tombs Travel and Trouble*. However, no mention is made of some press reports that the Americans had been obliged to pay the Surabaya Zoo 10,000 guilders for each of their four dragons! This would have rendered the loss even more painful when one of dragons died in transit, though they managed to find a taxidermist en route to expertly skin the beast, to be stuffed and mounted later!

News of the relative ease with which the local authorities in Java had sidestepped the official ban on hunting dragons in these two cases must surely have encouraged Lord Moyne to try his luck, as he was scheduled to make a voyage to the South Seas via the East Indies in early 1935, whatever the outcome.

The Dutch press at home in the Netherlands, always interested in news from their colony in the East Indies, were also made aware of these inconsistencies in the enforcement of what should have been stringent conservation rules, pronouncing that the authorities tasked with protecting wildlife would "*Sell our natural resources, and also enrich themselves at the expense of Western prestige in an Eastern land*". The uproar over access grew even louder when it emerged that Lord Moyne had also made a high profile trip to Komodo, apparently with full government approval, and had been given every assistance in catching his readily agreed quota. Due to widespread and growing criticism of these last three expeditions something had to be done. Firstly Dutch officials reiterated that such expeditions were forbidden, and a new legal enactment of 1935 added further measures to protect the Komodo lizard. The Netherlands Commission for International Nature Reserves was also lobbying the government to take more decisive action, as one estimate (by Van Heuren) suggested that there might be only a few hundred left in the wild, whilst other groups suggested there were still thousands.

Against a background of strict, though apparently ineffective regulations, Dutch politicians were faced with a plethora of conflicting information and advice from various bodies committed to wildlife conservation, both local and beyond. It became obvious that only someone on the ground could provide sufficiently authoritative advice, someone who fully understood the local situation. Only one person met these criteria, Dr. Karl Dammerman, the Director of the Botanical Gardens in Buitenzorg, who was ultimately the person in charge of nature and nature protection in the Dutch East Indies. He would have to "*determine whether Komodo Dragons were actually endangered or not, and if its repeated capture could be sustained, and, if so, how to control and regulate it, and what type of access (if any) should be allowed to Komodo; and how to balance the benefits for all concerned*".

Dammerman in his turn had a decision to make, whom to send on a definitive fact-finding mission? He chose one of his staff, the herpetologist (reptile expert), J.K. de Jong, who had led an earlier expedition in 1929 to survey the lizards' numbers and range on the islands of Komodo and Rinca. Six weeks were earmarked for de Jong's team to complete their field study, commencing on 1<sup>st</sup> June 1937, after which he wrote a series of reports on the island conditions, plus recommendations for the preservation of the remaining dragons. Indeed his reports became the basis for all future plans for preserving and protecting the animal in its

natural environment. Amidst detailed observations and recommendations he concluded there had not been any observable population decline between his visits in 1929 and 1937, and if their habitat was maintained, there was little threat of extinction.

However, de Jong's Team, eager to set about their complex analysis, were no doubt perplexed to find themselves instructed first of all to capture 19 Komodo Dragons before their survey could begin, and this in spite of the Nature Protection Commission having been assured that the government would no longer endorse trapping licences for these lizards! assume the order came from Karl Dammerman, as such a decision was within his gift, but surely in the circumstances even he must have gained higher approval for such an apparently perverse decision. The lizards were to be sent to Jakarta Zoo on the coast of Java, and also the capital of the colony, as well as six foreign zoos and two foreign museums. The foreign zoos were in Rotterdam, Amsterdam, Antwerp, Philadelphia, Rome, and Edinburgh.

I can only presume these zoos had been badgering Dammerman for some while to no effect and that, whilst he might have been sympathetic to their claims, he had placed their requests 'on hold', at least until matters should be resolved, rather than refusing them outright. He no doubt sensed that if he waited until after de Jong's report they would never get their Dragons. On the face of things it seems to have been a counter-intuitive decision. Did he act out of decency or diplomacy, or could it have been weakness? The latter seems unlikely, and we will probably never know.

*The Daily Express* of 13<sup>th</sup> September 1937 sheds only a little light on the matter:-

**RARE SPECIMENS FROM KOMODO**

*Two of the very rare and valuable monitors of Komodo, or dragon lizards as they are generally called, have just arrived at the Scottish National Zoological Park, Edinburgh.*

*These lizards are strictly protected by the Netherlands Government, and it is through the kindness of that Government that permission was given for a pair to be sent to Edinburgh. They travelled from Java to Amsterdam in a steamer of the Royal Dutch Mail Company.*

These two dragons arrived at Edinburgh Zoo on 9<sup>th</sup> September. The larger specimen was 8 foot long, and survived a year until the 6<sup>th</sup> September 1938, whilst the other one (at 7foot 6 inches) died 16 months after arrival, on 16<sup>th</sup> January 1939. There was still much to learn about maintaining these reptiles in captivity.

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**CHRONOLOGICAL LIST OF KOMODO DRAGONS EXHIBITED OUTSIDE OF INDONESIA, 1926-1939**

**Marvin L. Jones, (1928 – 4/4/77)**

(International Zoo News, 1964, pp 92-93)

	<b>Sex</b>	<b>Zoo</b>	<b>Arrival</b>	<b>Death</b>	<b>Remarks</b>
1.	?	New York Zoological Park	11/9/26	19/10/26	Captured on Komodo by Burden
2.	M	New York Zoological Park	11/9/26	14/11/26	Captured Komodo by Burden (8'4")
3.	M	Artis Zoo, Amsterdam	14/10/26	4/12/26	(reputed to be 9'9")
4.	M	Berlin Zoo Aquarium	--/6/27	17/1/44	Died at Leipzig. Fr. Rindja (2·42m)
5.	M	London Zoo	6/6/27	29/1/34	From Rindja, 'Sumbawa'
6.	M	London Zoo	6/6/27	23/10/39	From Rindja, 'Sumba'
7.	F	Frankfurt Zoo	--/9/27	18/3/44	From Rindja. Given to Robt. Mertons 26/6/27, 'Bubchen', (2·22m at death)
8.	F	Artis Zoo, Amsterdam	27/7/27	16/9/27	From Rindja, (1.90m at death)
9.	?	Artis Zoo → Antwerp Zoo	6/6/30	13/4/33	Sent to Antwerp 14/11/30
10.	?	Artis Zoo → Berlin Zoo	6/6/30		Sent Berlin 14/11/3, (death date ?)
11.	F	Antwerp Zoo	17/6/30	--/5/31	From Komodo
12.	M	Artis Zoo, Amsterdam	30/9/30	30/9/39	
13.	F	Artis Zoo, Amsterdam	30/9/30	4/2/33	Laid eggs at Artis
14.	F	Artis Zoo, Amsterdam	30/9/30	31/12/33	
15.	M	St. Louis Zoological Park	--/6/33	--/6/33	lived two weeks, (length 10'2")
16.	?	New York Zoological Park	12/5/34	27/5/34	From Komodo
17.	?	New York Zoological Park	12/5/34	27/9/34	(Length 7'7")
18.	?	New York → National Zoo	12/5/34	11/7/36	To Nat. Zoo Washington 20/6/34
19.	F	London Zoo	1/5/35	15/2/46	From Flores (young on arrival)
20.	M	London Zoo	1/5/35	8/3/46	From Flores (young on arrival)
21.	?	Rotterdam Zoo	6/9/37	--/--/39	Death date unknown
22.	?	Rotterdam Zoo	6/9/37		Death date unknown
23.	F	Artis Zoo, Amsterdam	6/9/37	23/4/39	
24.	?	Antwerp Zoo	9/9/37	1/1/39	
25.	?	Edinburgh Zoo	9/9/37	6/9/38	(8' on arrival)
26.	?	Edinburgh Zoo	9/9/37	16/1/39	(7'6" on arrival)
27.	F	Philadelphia Zoo. Gardens	9/37	29/5/39(	7'6" on arrival) Laid eggs
28.	M	Philadelphia Zoo Gardens	24/9/37	27/1/42	(7'6" on arrival)
29.	F	National Zoo, Washington	28/9/37	13/10/49	
30.	?	Rome Zoo	--/9/37		Date of death unknown
31.	?	Rome Zoo	--/9/37		Date of death unknown
32.	?	Copenhagen Zoo	--/5/38		Date of death unknown
33.	M	Antwerp Zoo	--/5/38	26/1/45	Killed in air raid. (2.5m)
34.	?	Stockholm → Gothenburg Aq	--/5/38	5/3/39	(transfer early '39) (2.53m)

(Japan occupied the Dutch East Indies from Mar 1942 until Aug 1945, when insurrection 'ruled', until independence in 1949.)

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**Dedication:**

This article is dedicated to the memory of **Laurie Murray, Roy Brookes, and Roy Edwards**, who were long-standing Members of the Bartlett Society and the finest of friends, each sorely missed.

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