

Britain:

The first rhino in Britain

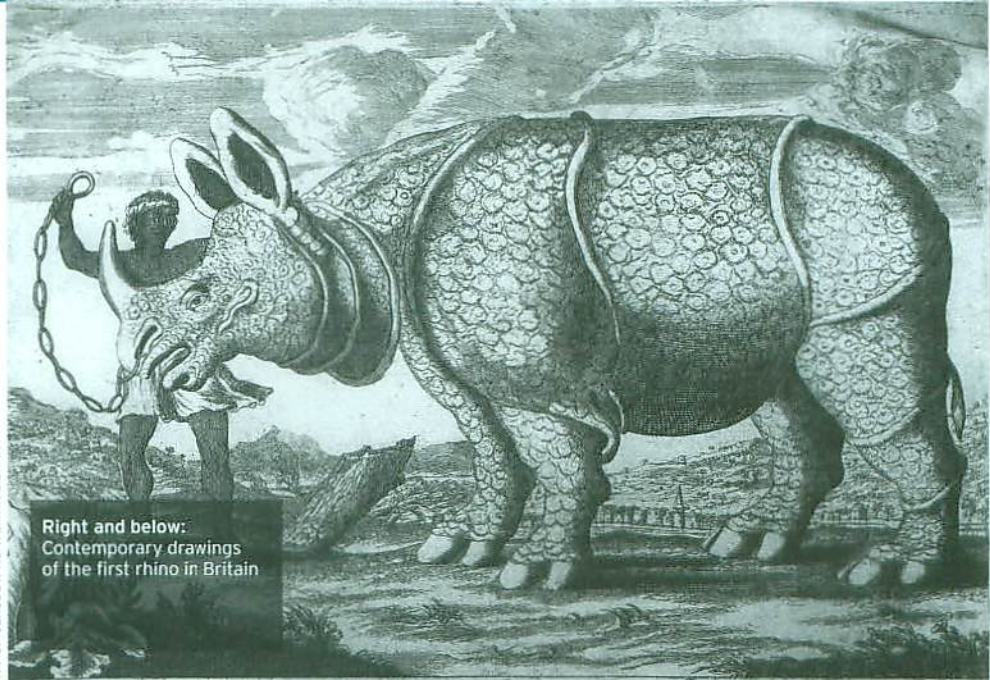
“To be seen in London: a very strange beast, called a Rhynoceros, lately brought from the East Indies.”

Kees Rookmaaker
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A gentleman sitting by the fire would have been able to find this statement in a small advertisement in the London Gazette on 10 October 1684. The strange beast was unusual indeed, being the first rhinoceros ever seen in England, and only the third ever to set foot on European soil.

The first rhino in Britain had been brought from India on board an East India Company ship, the *Herbert*, a sailing vessel of 750 tons which made three journeys eastwards between 1682 and 1689. Between 9 February 1683 and 23 July 1684, the *Herbert* had been on a voyage to the Bay of Bengal under the command of Captain Henry Udall, who was killed in a rebellion at Macasser in 1686. It was certainly not usual for seamen to return home with the ship's decks laden with exotic animals, but it is one thing to carry a parrot or a tortoise to be sold at home. To transport a living rhinoceros is quite a different kind of proposition. We may imagine that the rhino was quite young and therefore not yet too

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 Inn on Ludgate-Hill, from Nine a Clock in the Morning till Eight at Night.



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Right and below: Contemporary drawings of the first rhino in Britain

The Exact Draught of that famous Beast the RHINOCERUS that Lately came

large when it was obtained in India. Exactly when and where the Captain obtained the animal is not recorded, but it must have been in the harbour of Calcutta, because it was an Indian rhinoceros, which was then (as now) found in West Bengal and Assam.

An over-ambitious bid

Captain Udall hoped to sell the rhinoceros quickly to somebody who would be able to exhibit it to the public for profit. Apparently, there was less interest than expected and the animal was put up for sale by auction in August 1684. A Mr Langley, a merchant of mineral water, came forward and his bid of no less than £2,320 was accepted. The fact was advertised in the title of a two-page pamphlet “printed for S Libourn” in 1684, entitled: “A Description of the Rhinoceros lately brought from the East-Indies, And sold the 25th of this Instant August, to Mr L for 2320£.” By an unfortunate turn of events, Langley was unable to raise the capital and lost his £500 deposit.

A political animal

The caretakers of the rhinoceros immediately went ahead to make arrangements to show the animal themselves to get at least some income to pay for its upkeep. When the October advertisement appeared in the newspaper, the public was directed to the Bell Savage Inn on Ludgate Hill, very close to the site where St Paul's Cathedral was then being rebuilt after the great fire of 1666. The

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rhinoceros could be seen from 9am to 8pm, but we are not told how whether it was kept inside or in the courtyard. Among the visitors was Francis North, the first Baron Guildford, who in his capacity as Lord Keeper was one of the most prominent citizens of London. When his political rivals heard of his excursion, they circulated the rumour that he had taken a ride on the rhinoceros, with one opining that “a more infantine exploit could not have been fastened upon him.” True or not, the fact that the Lord Keeper had seen the rare animal must have been good for business.

The rhinoceros may have remained in the Bell Savage Inn for a while. A newsletter circulated on 28 September 1686 stated that it had died during the previous week. The owners of exotic animals in the 17th century often found it difficult to cater for them, but the first rhino in Britain had found fame in London.

Representation of that prodigious & wonderful Creature the RHINOCEROS, lately brought over from the East-Indies to Europe, by the Ship the Herbert, which arrived in London the 23rd of July 1684. It was sold to Mr Langley, a Merchant of Mineral Water, for 2320£. The Rhinoceros is a very large Beast, and is found in the Mountains of the East-Indies, where it is used for the same purpose as the Elephant in the West-Indies. It is a very strange Beast, and is not yet known in any other part of the World. It is a very large Beast, and is found in the Mountains of the East-Indies, where it is used for the same purpose as the Elephant in the West-Indies. It is a very strange Beast, and is not yet known in any other part of the World.

