

The story of British zoos



Where the wild things are

The British public have been visiting zoos since Elizabethan times.



Driven by changing public attitudes, zoos have evolved from places simply of spectacle and scientific research to focus more on conservation and animal welfare.

11th century

Royal beasts of Britain

William the Conqueror established a royal menagerie at Woodstock Manor near Oxford, including lions and camels. They were seen as symbols of power.

This tradition was kept by his successors, who received exotic animals as gifts from foreign rulers. The animals provided entertainment to the king and his court.



16th century

Lions go on show to the public

The public was first allowed to view the royal menagerie by Queen Elizabeth I.

It had moved to the Tower of London, where visitors could pat the younger lions that played in the grounds. Free entry was given to anyone who brought a dead cat or dog to supplement the animals' diets.



Commercial menagerie opens

To compete with the royal menagerie, showman Gilbert Pidcock opened his own animal collection at the Exeter Exchange on the Strand in central London.

Pidcock promoted his collection with eye-catching newspaper adverts.

In one he assured the public his wild animals were "so well secured, that the most timorous may approach them in safety."

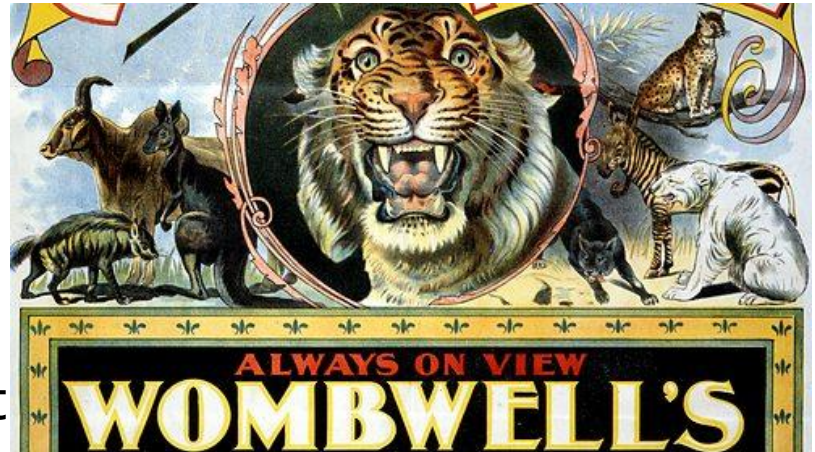


1810

Wild animal shows travel around Britain

One of the first travelling menageries was founded by shoemaker George Wombwell, who realised people outside of London would pay to see wild animals.

By 1839 his menagerie had 15 wagons of animals and a brass band. It received a visit from Queen Victoria at Windsor Fair in 1847. The menagerie inspired circuses to start using animals in their shows. Impresario George Sanger even invited Wombwell's lion trainer to perform at his circus.



“Two nights ago I saw the tigers sup at
Exeter ‘Change...”

Lord Byron, 1813



1828

Britain's first scientific zoo opens in London

London Zoo was founded for the study of animal species thanks to a growing Victorian interest in natural science.

It acquired many animals when the Tower menagerie closed. The zoo was run by The Zoological Society of London (ZSL) in Regents Park and was only open to members. But its large collection of animals was costly to feed and maintain, so in 1847 it opened to the general public. Bristol Zoo, Edinburgh Zoological Gardens and Belle Vue Zoo near Manchester were also founded around this time.



1838

Darwin inspired by great apes in London Zoo

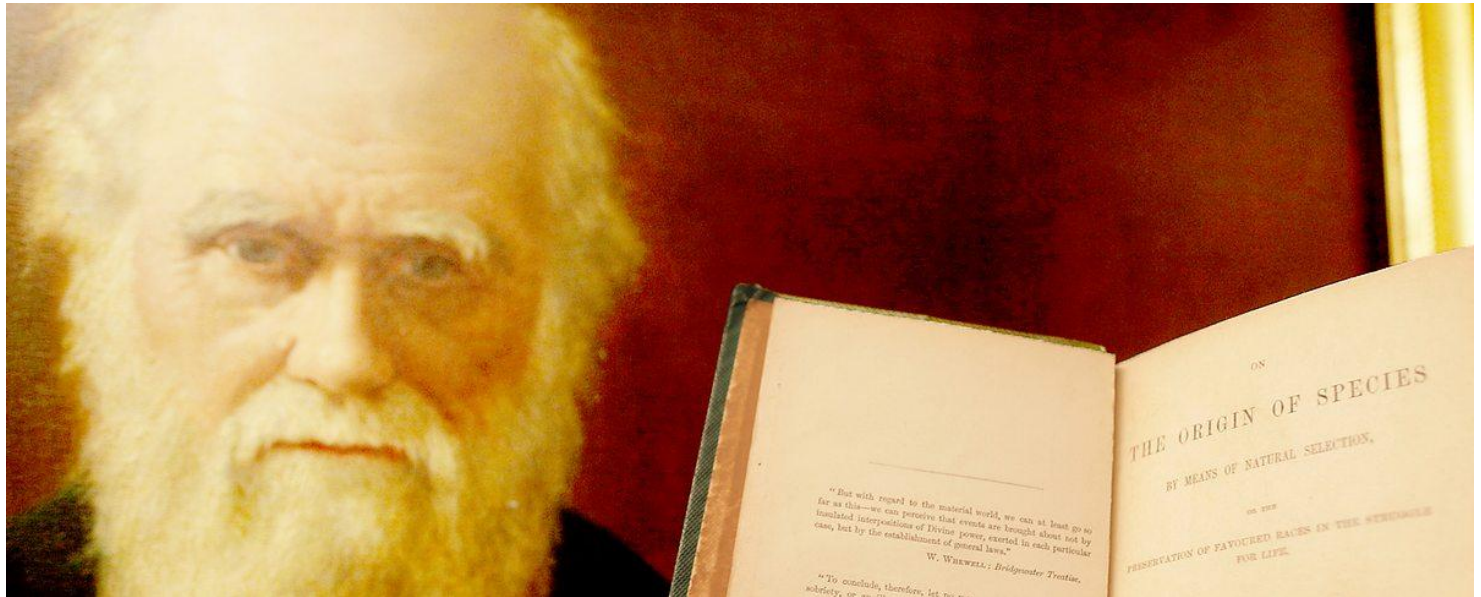
It was at London Zoo that Charles Darwin saw his first orangutan, called Jenny. He watched in amazement as she had a tantrum over a withheld apple.

The naturalist observed that Jenny's intelligence and emotional expression was similar to a human child. He was profoundly moved by the experience and it influenced his theory of evolution published 20 years later.



“Man in his arrogance thinks himself a great work... I believe true to consider him created from animals.”

Charles Darwin, 1838

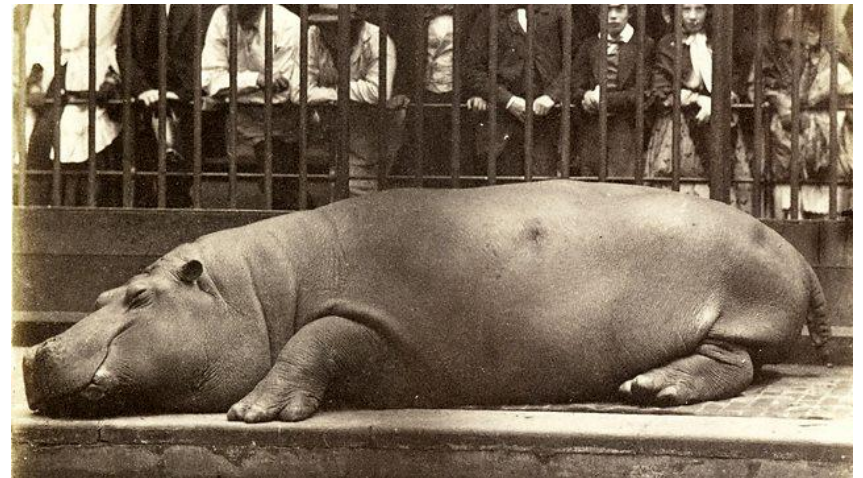


1850

Zoos acquire animal stars to attract visitors

London Zoo created a literal splash by exhibiting the first hippo in Europe since the time of the Roman Empire.

The young animal, called Obaysch, weighed 37st and attracted up to 10,000 visitors a day. The zoo then bought Jumbo the elephant who became the new star of the collection. Bristol Zoo acquired Zebi the elephant who entertained visitors by eating straw hats.



1917

The public buy tigers at Harrods

The public fascination with wild animals was such that Harrods opened an exotic pet store.

Wealthy customers could buy animals from tiger cubs to alligators. Many of these creatures were given to zoos after they grew too big or unmanageable for their owners.



1931

Zoos move out of cities

In the early 20th century zoos were inspired by Carl Hagenbeck's zoo in Hamburg, which gave animals more space to roam.

George Mottershead opened Chester Zoo in the Cheshire countryside where there was plenty of room to expand. In the same year ZSL opened the first wildlife park at Whipsnade, inspired by the vast nature reserves in Africa.



“It is so important... to try very hard to keep the animals as near to their natural life as possible.”

George Mottershead, founder of Chester Zoo



1939

Animals put down in World War Two

When the war broke out there were fears that wild animals could escape during air raids.

Some zoos responded by putting down animals such as poisonous snakes and lions. Others moved their animals to safer places. Bristol's big cats were evacuated to Chester.



1954

David Attenborough presents his first nature programme

Attenborough spent three months in Sierra Leone looking for wild animals to put in zoos.

The project was sponsored by the Zoological Society of London and featured in the TV programme 'Zoo Quest.' The public now saw what life was like for animals in the wild compared to captivity.



“My first natural history series... brought to the screen places and animals that had never before been seen on television or in the cinema.”

David Attenborough



1959

Pioneering zoo puts conservation first

A new wildlife park was set up in Jersey with the founding principle of preserving endangered species.

Owner Gerald Durrell was deeply affected on his travels when he observed animals losing their habitat and struggling for survival in the wild. He made it his zoo's mission to save species from extinction.



“You cannot begin to preserve any species of animal unless you preserve the habitat in which it dwells.”

Gerald Durrell, 1966



1966

First safari park opens

The first safari park allowed visitors to drive past animals in the grounds of Longleat House in Wiltshire.

It was set up by the former circus-owner Jimmy Chipperfield and the Marquess of Bath. This was the heyday of British zoos with a number of suburban zoos and safari-style parks opening their doors.



1975

Fighting for animal rights

In the 1960s and 1970s there was a growing unease about how animals were treated in captivity.

Philosopher Peter Singer reflected this concern in his book, *Animal Liberation*. In it he argued that animals could suffer just as much as humans and therefore their interests were worthy of equal consideration. He argued humans were guilty of species prejudice. These ideas inspired the nascent animal rights movement.



1981

British zoo laws introduced for animal welfare

The Zoo Licensing Act 1981 set standards for animal enclosures in Britain.

It also required zoos to focus on conservation and education. Zoos began to breed animals in captivity rather than taking them from the wild. Soon afterwards animal rights charity Zoo Check was set up to help protect the welfare of captive animals.



“Zoos must... provide each animal with an environment well adapted to meet the... needs of the species to which it belongs.”

The Zoo Licensing Act, 1981



1991

London Zoo almost closes

In the early 1990s zoos were in crisis with many suffering a significant drop in visitors.

Surveys of the time suggested three quarters of Britons were opposed to keeping animals in captivity. At one point London Zoo was months from closure after government funding cuts.



“The zoo's financial problems have led to fears that it will be forced to close within a few months.”

New Scientist, 1991



1995

Captive gazelles released back into the wild

Zoos began to shift towards better animal care and conservation in response to the crisis.

One of the first signs was zoo involvement in breed and release programmes for endangered animals. London Zoo worked with the Saudi Wildlife Authority to release 100 sand gazelles in Saudi Arabia.

It was the world's largest release of captive-bred mammals.



1999

Bristol Zoo opens £3million enriched enclosure

Bristol Zoo invested in 'Seal and Penguin Coasts', which included deep pools fitted with wave machines, beaches and islands.

It marked a shift among big zoos towards building 'showstopper enclosures' from Spirit of the Jaguar at Chester to Gorilla Kingdom at London.



2004

Pioneering keyhole surgery saves giraffe

Sapphire was the first giraffe to have keyhole surgery to mend a fractured jaw. The operation at Edinburgh Zoo saved her life.

It marked a new willingness by progressive zoos to treat individual animals with the latest technology. At Bristol Zoo a gorilla called Romina underwent a ground-breaking cataract operation.



2011

Chester Zoo launches Borneo conservation project

Progressive zoos were now becoming home-bases for animal conservation work across the world.

One example was at Chester Zoo, where staff built bridges linking up pockets of orangutan habitat in Borneo.

Orangutan populations had become increasingly isolated from one another as their habitat was threatened by palm oil plantations, roads and villages. Zoos were now as committed to animals in the wild as those in their care.



“If you want to save jaguars and hummingbirds the only way to do so is to save the places where they live.”

David Attenborough, 2012





to be continued

Today



Thank you for your attention!