

JUMBO



THE GREATEST ELEPHANT IN THE WORLD

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To my Auntie Freda

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PREFACE

“Jumbo landed in safety. He celebrates his arrival in a bottle of whiskey.”

Thus ran the *New York Times*’s headline on 10 April 1882. The announcement ended weeks of nervous speculation and offered reassurance to readers that the world’s first international animal superstar had survived the sea voyage from London and arrived safely in the United States. A few hours later Jumbo, the largest elephant in the world, disembarked on American soil; he did so in front of the largest crowd ever seen in New York. The streets were lined with thousands of people who cheered and waved as the elephant made his way along Broadway toward Madison Square Garden. The scenes were unprecedented in the United States—yet they were no less spectacular than the send-off that Jumbo had been given in London a couple of weeks earlier.

Many predicted that the blaze of publicity surrounding the elephant would soon burn itself out and that the “Jumbo craze” would be a short-lived affair. Such pessimism was unfounded: this humble elephant was to end up so famous that his name is still a household word used to describe any big object. Throughout his life—and beyond—Jumbo was the subject of adulation across the world.

In a remarkable career spanning three decades Jumbo not only thrilled countless people and bore children without number on his massive back but rubbed shoulders, metaphorically, with the likes of Queen Victoria, the Prince of Wales, the young Winston Churchill and P.T. Barnum. His fame spread across Europe, the entire United States, Canada, and even reached southern Africa and the Indian subcontinent. But sadly, like many of the stars, both human and animal, who have come and gone since his day, Jumbo was to pay a high price for the greatness that was thrust upon him.

PART ONE



AFRICA

CHAPTER 1

The Elephant Hunters

“I believe that I am the oldest acquaintance of Jumbo, as I knew him in his early youth.” So wrote the explorer Samuel White Baker, whose unkempt hair, flowing white beard and double-barrelled rifle marked him out as something of an eccentric character in Victorian Britain. Baker had spent over 30 years exploring Africa and Asia, during which time he had accumulated several volumes’ worth of anecdotes and adventures, but it was his association with Jumbo, the world’s most famous elephant, that persuaded the retired explorer to write to the newspapers to proclaim his long-term friendship with this animal superstar. We must be grateful to Baker, for if he had not chosen to break his silence, the world would never have learned anything of Jumbo’s traumatic introduction to human society.

Baker first met Jumbo in February 1862, in the remote desert highlands that straddle the border between eastern Sudan and Abyssinia (now Eritrea). This area was about as far from civilization as it was possible for an English gentleman to get: there were no roads, railways or even permanent rivers and, aside from the harsh climate and wild animals, Baker had to contend with hostile tribes, flash floods and bush fires. It was the prospect of adventure that drew people like him to the African interior, and for several months he had been in Sudan exploring the Setite basin in the hope of finding a connection to the River Nile. So it was pure chance that while making his way along the dried-up bed of the River Royan he stumbled across the camp of a party of Hamran tribesmen.

The Hamran were Arabians and, as a fluent Arabic speaker, Baker was able to offer a friendly greeting to the group’s leader, Taher Sheriff. Pleasantries were exchanged and Baker was invited to spend the night with the Hamran. Given the dangers present in the area, such as lions, hyenas and the aggressive Basé tribe, Baker happily accepted the offer, and he was taken on a tour of the camp.

Taher Sheriff’s appearance told the explorer that he was an Aggageer, or elephant hunter. Much revered in Sudan, the Aggageers could be distinguished from other tribesmen by the extraordinary length of their hair, which was arranged in long ringlets and always parted straight down the centre of the head. Their renown came from their ability to hunt large animals, including elephants and rhinoceroses, using just a horse, a two-edged sword and a small shield. Death and serious injury were common, and it was said that a true Aggageer would die not peacefully in his bed but beneath the feet of a rampaging elephant.

Baker was perfectly aware of the Aggageers' reputation and knew that they made a living from selling ivory, bone and hides from the elephants they killed. So he was somewhat surprised to see at their camp several temporary pens holding a variety of live wild animals, including three giraffes, several young antelopes, a juvenile rhino and two baby elephants. Baker had never heard of the Hamran taking the trouble to capture their prey alive, and as they all settled down to a dinner of wild partridge he asked his hosts what purpose the little menagerie could possibly serve.

Taher Sheriff explained that he and his men had been contracted to capture living animal specimens for export to European zoos. The man who had hired them was one Johan Schmidt, who lived in Kassala, a frontier military town about a hundred miles to the north. Schmidt was prepared to pay a few dollars for an antelope or bird of prey, up to \$20 for a good giraffe and as much as \$50 for an elephant calf. To the Hamran such sums were a fortune, so they had happily set off into the desert in search of live prey.

Baker had been to Kassala several times and knew Johan Schmidt to be a Bavarian who had come to Sudan in search of his fortune. However, Schmidt, who was a skilled carpenter, ended up working as an odd-job man for other Europeans, most of whom did not linger long in the area. In a region beset by war and political turmoil, he was considered an honest and dependable character whose word could be relied upon. Baker was able to assure his hosts that they were working for a good boss.

The presence of two elephant calves in the Hamran camp excited the Englishman. His travels in the region had imbued him with a passion for these large animals and he had taken delight in observing their behaviour in the wild, something few Europeans had ever had the opportunity to do. The specimens captured by the Hamran, however, were less than impressive in Baker's eyes. Both were smaller than a pit pony and looked severely undernourished. One was especially scrawny and was later described as having been a runt who had not been expected to survive for long after his capture.

It was the same scrawny runt that would become both the first living African elephant to reach modern Europe and the first international animal superstar. He would also grow to such an extraordinary size that he was hailed as the largest animal on Earth. This runt was Jumbo—a name he would not be known by for several years yet. At the time, in the fading light of day, the little elephant looked far from remarkable; terrified, he stood motionless inside the temporary corral, unsure where he was and where his mother had gone.

Taher Sheriff could answer this last question: both elephants' mothers were dead. As he explained to Baker, in order to secure the capture of any elephant calf, he had first to kill its mother. If he did not, then the female, or cow, would not desist from protecting her offspring—and there are few animals of any species more dangerous than a mother elephant bent on defending her calf.

The talk of hunting excited the Englishman, for although he enjoyed observing elephants in their habitat he also had a passion for shooting them. In common with many Victorian explorers, Baker viewed the African elephant—which is the world's

largest living land animal—as the ultimate hunting challenge. But while he preferred to blast at them with his trusty rifle, he knew that the Aggageers could achieve the same end using just a sword. To Baker it seemed an impossible feat and one that was surely fraught with danger. He pleaded with Taher Sheriff to be allowed to accompany the group on one of their elephant hunts.

The leader was pleased to oblige. “We will start before sunrise tomorrow,” he said, adding that they would be riding for a full day and that success was far from guaranteed. Baker did not care; his only desire was to bear witness to the manner in which the Hamran had hunted down and killed Jumbo’s mother. In doing so he became one of only a handful of Europeans who would ever witness the Aggageers’ traditional hunting methods, for in a few years’ time the gun would replace the sword as their weapon of choice.

As night fell the camp grew silent, except for the noise of restless shuffling from the pens as the elephants and other captive animals tried to make sense of the strange situation in which they found themselves.

Baker’s discovery of the Hamran’s camp was fortunate in occurring only a few days after Jumbo was captured. Had the explorer not come across it, Jumbo’s early history would have been lost in the desert sands of his birth. We can deduce much from Baker’s account of his stay. For example, he estimated Jumbo’s height to be around four feet, which, according to modern observations, would have made him just over a year old and approximately 500 lb in weight. This dates Jumbo’s birth to around Christmas 1860, which coincided with the start of the dry season in that part of Sudan.

Elephants have one of the longest gestation periods of all mammals; Jumbo would have spent around 22 months in the womb before the contraction pains began. Elephantine birth is not a protracted affair; after pacing restlessly, but silently, back and forth for several minutes, Jumbo’s mother—still standing—would have given several final grunts as the calf dropped to the ground. Jumbo would have weighed around 265 lb and would have lain in a large puddle of embryonic fluid. The birth would most likely have taken place in the presence of several other elephants, including a bull (male) and one or more aunts. While Jumbo took his first breaths, the other elephants would have crowded round, protecting him from predators and nudging him with their trunks in an effort to get him on to his wobbly legs. Within hours Jumbo would have been an accomplished walker, capable of following his mother almost anywhere. Within weeks he would have been able to run, and after several months he would have started using his trunk to grasp plants and drink water.

Elephants have one of the most complicated societies in the animal world, although our understanding of their behaviour has many gaps. They are emotionally reliant on one another and display reassurance and affection by mutual touching, grooming and grasping with their trunks. They are also very vocal, capable of producing a wide

repertoire of noises, some of which are too low for human ears but can be heard many miles away by other elephants. The function of these sounds is little understood, but scientists are in the process of creating dictionaries of the elephantine language. Jumbo would have had little time to learn these communication skills or indeed the other complex behavioural traits of his family unit.

Whatever aspects of elephantine culture Jumbo did manage to absorb would have come mostly from his mother. As with humans, much time and effort is devoted to the task of parenting and for the first six months elephant calves are almost entirely dependent on their mother for food, protection and physical stimulation. After this period they start to gain some independence; by its first birthday the average calf can feed and groom itself, although it is still dependent on the nutrients in its mother's milk and remains so until it is at least two years old.

Jumbo lived in the security of his mother's protection until he was about a year old; in all this time he would not have strayed further than five yards from her side. So remote was the area in which they lived that they could conceivably have never seen a human being before. If so, their first contact with mankind was to be a bloody and brutal encounter. The day that Jumbo's family strayed into the path of Taher Sheriff's men was to have a profound effect not just on Jumbo himself but on the lives of millions of people across the globe. There is no first-hand account of the moment when the hunters separated Jumbo from his mother's care, but it is known how the feat was accomplished.

The morning after Baker first met Jumbo he was taken by Taher Sheriff to the area where the calf had been captured and was shown exactly how the Aggageers had killed his mother. The location, about 25 miles from the camp in a highland area at the head of a dry river bed, was very remote indeed. Baker describes the early part of the journey as passing through a magnificent landscape of lofty, overhanging rocks, wide tracts of fine forest and groves of enormous baobab trees. As the group moved further up the valley, so the river bed narrowed until it became a steep mountain gully where the rock surfaces had been worn smooth by flash floods. When the terrain started to become impossibly steep, they turned away from the river and into a wide, sandy valley lying at the foot of a mountain. Taher Sheriff explained to Baker that elephants would come to the valley in order to drink, and that by following their footprints it was possible to catch up with the herds.

The journey had already taken several hours, during which time the ambient temperature had become uncomfortably hot. It is not just humans that dislike the sun's direct heat; elephants also avoid it and often move about by night or at dawn or dusk, when the risk of sunstroke is greatly reduced. From mid-morning they seek out the shade of trees and rock overhangs; this makes the hunters' task easier as it allows them to track a static target. The dry season also helped the Aggageers as, according to Baker, it was usual for the Sudanese elephants to move in smaller clans or as

individuals rather than in larger herds.

Unintentionally demonstrating how Jumbo's mother had been killed, the Hamran tracked and confronted a lone elephant that stood drinking from a shallow puddle. "It was a fine bull," recalled Baker. "The enormous ears were thrown forward, as the head was lowered in the act of drawing up the water through the trunk; these shaded the eyes, and, with the wind favourable, we advanced noiselessly upon the sand to within twenty yards before we were perceived."

The bull elephant spotted the hunters and made off in the opposite direction at speed; this is the reaction of almost all elephants when confronted with a perceived threat. Jumbo's family would have attempted to flee as well, but with the small calf between her legs his mother would have become separated from the herd and so been easier to hunt. Faced with the Hamran and their horses, she would have turned to face them and become very aggressive in defence of her calf. This is what Taher Sheriff wanted: the Aggageers' hunting technique relied on riling an elephant to such a degree that it would charge at them in a blind rage. To Baker this seemed an odd idea: few people who witnessed an elephant charging at them lived to tell the tale. An enraged elephant will ram, gore and stamp on its victim until it is absolutely certain that all life has been extinguished. Baker knew this only too well, having watched a man die after being impaled on the tusks of a charging elephant. Even the Aggageers didn't always get it right—as evinced by the crushed and withered arm of one of Taher Sheriff's brothers.

The Aggageers always hunted on horseback and usually in a group of four men. They preferred to go after bull elephants, but if they wanted to capture a live calf they would have to engage its mother in battle and persuade her to attack them. In all probability little provocation was ever needed. Game hunters like Baker often observed that a cow elephant with a calf is a far more dangerous prospect than an elephant on its own. Even though an adult bull can stand 12 feet tall, weigh over five tons and attack extremely aggressively, hunters consider them to be predictable when alarmed, which makes it easy to avoid their headlong charges. However, a cow defending her calf is a different matter; she will tend to be younger and fitter than the bulls and more easily agitated. She may charge without warning and will sometimes refuse to break off an attack even if her pursuers are fleeing in the opposite direction. If severely threatened, she will become frenzied and attack anything within reach.

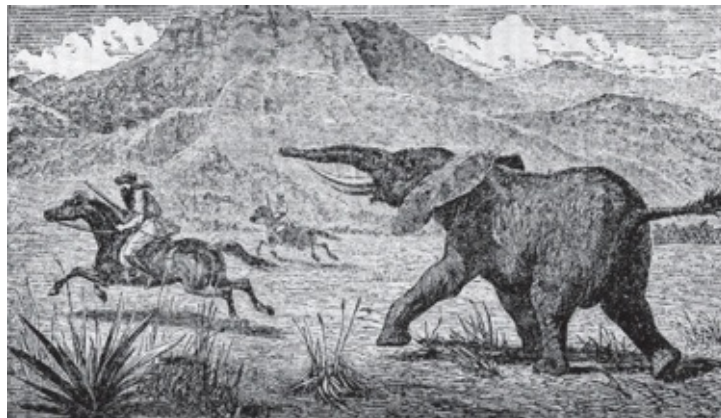
Jumbo's mother would have been goaded by the Hamran until, with a shrill scream, she ran at them in fury. It was at this point that the hunters would have entered the highly choreographed display of horseback hunting for which they were famed. Baker was lucky to witness the Aggageers at work and, by recording what he saw, he has given us details of how Jumbo would have become separated from his mother. What follows is his account of the Hamran hunting a bull elephant, but their technique would have been identical to that used to kill Jumbo's mother.

"The elephant stood facing us like a statue," wrote Baker in his memoirs; "it did not

move a muscle beyond a quick and restless action of the eyes, that were watching all sides.”

While the explorer watched from the sidelines, two of the Aggageers remained directly in front of the elephant, distracting its attention. As they did so, Taher Sheriff and his youngest brother, Ibrahim, positioned themselves about 20 yards behind the animal. With everyone in place, one of the two hunters in front of the prey started to ride slowly and purposefully toward its head. Baker held his breath, waiting for the animal to make its move: then he saw its eye twitch.

“Look out! He’s coming!” shouted Baker—and with that the elephant charged headlong at the rider, who turned his horse as though on a pivot and rode away at speed. “For a moment I thought he must be caught,” recalled Baker. “Had the mare stumbled, all would have been lost; but she gained in the race and kept the rider’s distance so close to the elephant that its outstretched trunk was within a few feet of the mare’s tail.”



Samuel Baker is chased by an elephant.

With the elephant chasing one of the men, Taher Sheriff and his brother started to chase the animal from behind. They caught up with it and positioned themselves right next to its hind legs. By now the animal was in such a blind rage that it did not even notice their presence. Baker takes up the story again: “When close to the tail of the elephant, the sword of Taher Sheriff flashed from its sheath. Grasping his trusty blade he leapt nimbly to the ground, while Ibrahim caught the reins of his horse; two or three bounds on foot, with the sword clutched in both hands, and he was close behind the elephant. A bright glance shone like lightning, as the sun struck upon the descending steel. This was followed by a dull crack as the sword cut through skin and sinews and settled deep in the bone, about twelve inches above the foot. At the next stride, the elephant halted dead in the midst of its tremendous charge. Taher vaulted back into the saddle with his naked sword in hand. The elephant’s foot was dislocated, and turned up in front like an old shoe. In an instant Taher was once more on foot, and again the sharp sword slashed the remaining leg. The great elephant could not move!”

While hanging from their galloping horses, the Sheriff brothers had sliced through the elephant's hamstrings, rendering it unable to even walk. Then they severed an artery and left the animal to bleed to death. This shocked even Baker, who begged to be allowed to shoot the elephant, but his host refused, saying that it would quickly bleed to death without pain.

Jumbo's mother suffered the same fate. She too would have lain helpless for several minutes while a fatal quantity of her 790 pints (450 litres) of blood—the amount the average elephant holds—drained from her wounded body and into the sandy soil beneath. This process takes about 20 minutes, and she would have heard Jumbo pathetically bellowing for help. She may even have had time to watch Taher Sheriff approach the stricken calf, throw ropes about his neck and secure him to one of their horses. With his mother prostrate, Jumbo would have been helpless, rooted to the spot and unable to move or act independently. Capturing Jumbo and leading him back to the camp would not have been a problem, although the distance probably called for a stay overnight *en route*.

After his return, Taher Sheriff had no further interest in the animals he captured. Jumbo would have been handed to one of the African helpers who had been hired to care for them. Although the young calf was capable of gathering and eating plants by himself, he was still dependent on the fat and other nutrition found in his mother's milk and was a year from being weaned. In the absence of milk, a calf will quickly weaken and die. Johan Schmidt was aware of this and had directed Taher Sheriff to take with him a large number of goats whose milk could be used to feed the unweaned captive animals. This, at least, was the theory; nobody had ever attempted before to capture and transport a young African elephant any great distance—let alone take one halfway across the world to Europe.

For all Baker's later enthusiasm about his desert encounter with Jumbo, his acquaintance was a brief one. Satisfied with his day's hunting, he soon took leave of Taher Sheriff's company and started to make his own way through the wilderness once more. He remained in the area for many months and was to meet Taher Sheriff again and, some time after this, even employed Johan Schmidt for one of his own expeditions. Schmidt was able to tell Baker what had happened to the two elephants after his departure and it is because of this, and other documentary evidence, that we can be certain that the miserable animal seen by Baker on the banks of the River Royan is the hero of our story.

After their brief encounter, the young elephant and the English explorer separated and for two decades followed their own destinies before eventually meeting again. The reunion did not take place in a parched desert landscape but in a colder, more formidable land where elephants were not hunted to death but worshipped by crowds of curious onlookers.

CHAPTER 2

An Exotic Commodity

To a Hamran tribesman the idea of moving desert animals 3,000 miles north to the cold, wet climate of Europe must have seemed very odd indeed. Despite explanations from people like Baker and Schmidt, the Aggageers could hardly have envisaged the gulf that existed between their nomadic lifestyle and the more rigid, urbanized existence of the average European citizen. It would have been especially hard to learn that in other parts of the world the elephant was such a rare and extraordinary animal that people would pay good money just to stand and stare at one.

At the time of Jumbo's capture elephants were a rarity in Europe and, as a consequence, zoological gardens and private menageries would pay handsomely to obtain one. In the industrialized world exotic animals had become a commodity that, like rice and tea, could be shipped in from foreign countries and traded for profit. Rarer and larger animals were difficult to obtain but they attracted large crowds and so were expensive to buy; this was why Schmidt had specifically asked Taher Sheriff to collect some young elephants. It was his hope that these animals would not only fetch a high price when sold, but would cause a stir among Europe's scientific community. He reasoned that, should either of his elephants make it to Europe alive, they would be the first of their species to be seen outside Africa for nearly 2,000 years.

Individual living elephants had been brought to Europe for centuries and were often to be found at various royal courts and in private menageries. Indeed, when Jumbo was taken from the wild there were around 20 captive elephants in various parts of Britain, France and Germany. However, none of these was African in origin but all had come instead from Asia and were a completely different species from any elephant that lived in Africa. Because of unreliable trade routes and the barrier presented by the Sahara Desert, African elephants had not been seen outside their native continent since the days of the Roman empire. It was for this reason that Jumbo's capture was so special and also why his new owners expected to make a small fortune from selling him on if he could be returned to Europe safely.

The Asian elephant that populated Europe's zoos in the nineteenth century is known to scientists as *Elephas maximus*; it is native to the Indian subcontinent, as well as many parts of the Far East, and has been domesticated by humans for millennia. Good trade links with Asia meant that for years zoologists, anatomists and other scientists had been able to observe Asian elephants at close quarters, both in the wild and as working animals. By the 1860s the biology of *Elephas maximus* was well understood, as were some aspects of its behaviour; specimens imported into European zoos

allowed further studies to be made and in some instances the animals had even been persuaded to breed. By contrast, the African elephant remained an enigma, so obscure that it did not receive a formal scientific name (*Loxodonta africana*) until 1797, some 40 years after its Asian counterpart. In the absence of specimens, living or dead, zoologists had to base their knowledge of the African elephant on descriptions given to them by nineteenth-century explorers, many of whose tales were exaggerated or lacked useful detail.

For example, Major Dixon Denham, who explored west and central Africa in the 1820s, was able to state (correctly) that the African elephant is taller, heavier and more aggressive than the Asian species. But his only other comments were that it could not be domesticated and that its meat was “better flavoured than any beef.” Explorers’ conflicting descriptions made separating fact from fiction very difficult; a popular encyclopedia of the day was able to devote two pages to the characteristics and habits of the Asian elephant but just a single paragraph to those of the African species and even that is erroneous, stating, for example, that “it is smaller than the Asiatic.”

The popular press did not know what to make of the African elephant either, but, in true journalistic fashion, explorers’ descriptions were fashioned so that *Loxodonta africana* became an oversized, bloodthirsty monster that could reach 16 feet in height, weigh 10 tons and rip up trees and buildings with its tusks and trunk. Like the shark today, the African elephant would crop up as the bad guy in sensational newspaper stories and cheap novels, giving the public an irrational fear of the animal.

“The enraged elephant instantly seized the unhappy huntsman with its trunk,” wrote Oliver Goldsmith in a posthumously published work, “flung him up to a vast height in the air, and received him upon one of his tusks as he fell; and then turning towards the other two brothers, as if it were an aspect of revenge and insult, held out to them the impaled wretch, writhing in the agonies of death.”

The notion of the African elephant as a gigantic, murderous beast increased its appeal to the many people who longed to see one of these remarkable animals in the flesh. Unfortunately the few attempts that had been made to transport elephants from the colonies in eastern and southern Africa had all ended in failure. Being confined in a hold throughout a long sea voyage was more than these animals could endure and at some point in the journey their carcasses would end up being dumped into the Indian or the Atlantic Ocean.

The public’s desire to see an African elephant was so great that when a stuffed female specimen was exhibited in Britain at the Great Exhibition of 1851 crowds flocked to see it. This was the only African elephant on display anywhere in Europe and, despite being just nine feet tall, it attracted so much press attention that its origins became the subject of speculation. Some claimed that the animal had been part of a travelling menagerie; others that it had been the personal pet of one of the Great Exhibition’s officers which had died in mysterious circumstances. The truth was more mundane. A village museum in Saffron Walden in Essex had paid for the skin and

bones to be imported directly from Africa but had agreed to loan them to the Great Exhibition.

The hysteria that surrounded the stuffed elephant highlighted the public's fascination with the species. At the time there was fierce rivalry between Europe's zoological gardens, and the prestige of being the first institution to obtain a living African elephant became a matter of great importance, but nowhere was this urgency felt more keenly than at the Regent's Park Zoological Gardens in London.

The Zoological Society of London had been founded in 1826 in direct competition with the Jardin des Plantes in Paris, which was then considered to possess the finest menagerie in Europe. By 1828 the Society had opened its own Zoological Gardens in Regent's Park, which it populated with such novelties as giraffes, ostriches, hyenas, zebras and birds of prey. The venture was a success and in its first year of operation was visited by almost 200,000 people at a cost of 1 shilling. each. Before long commentators were saying that London Zoo, as the Zoological Gardens were popularly known, "far surpasses the Jardin des Plantes of Paris."

Most of the Zoo's early exhibits had been donated or borrowed from private menageries, but in time the Zoological Society routinely obtained its specimens from commercial animal traders, several of whom operated in London's East End. As the collection of animals grew, so did the Zoological Gardens, and by 1834 they were an impressive tourist attraction occupying 36 acres of Regent's Park. Keeping wild animals is an expensive business, and the Zoological Society soon realized that, in order to keep the paying public flowing through its gates, it would have to offer an ever-increasing selection of new and unusual animals imported from exotic and distant parts of the world. The problem was that finding such creatures was neither cheap nor easy.

Across the Channel the star attraction at the Jardin des Plantes was the Asian elephants, which were drawing large crowds to see them frolic about their enclosure. London Zoo was envious of its French rival but during its early years all its attempts to obtain an elephant were frustrated. Britain was home to several Asian elephants but these were all in private collections and unavailable for loan. As a result, in 1830 the Zoological Society reluctantly paid £420 (around £28,000 today) to a Captain Smith for an 11-year-old Asian bull elephant which was at that time resident in Madras.

The unfortunate animal had to endure a gruelling nine months on a ship which sailed to London the long way round the world, via the Pacific Ocean. After arriving at the East India Docks on 11 May 1831 the elephant was so pleased to be allowed to stretch his legs that he veritably trotted through the streets of the capital to his new home in Regent's Park. The Zoological Society had been given plenty of time to build, in the centre of the Gardens, a generous Elephant House and fenced enclosure, modelled on that in Paris, which included a sizeable bathing pond. The arrival of an elephant at the

Zoo was widely welcomed, and as one London journalist wrote: “In the Jardin des Plantes at Paris the elephant has long enjoyed advantages proportionate to his importance in the scale of creation. This example has been rightly followed in our Zoological Gardens.”

The Asian elephant, named Jack, soon became the star of the Zoo, bringing in thousands of new visitors. A few months later he was joined by a younger elephant, a present from the Governor of Ceylon, and from now on the Zoological Society strove to ensure that it had at least two elephants in residence.

People delighted at the elephants’ tricks, such as spraying water from their trunks, and took even greater pleasure in sticking their hands through the railings to feed them with cakes and buns. Sadly, some abused this privilege by inserting pins and other foreign objects into the buns, which greatly upset, but fortunately rarely injured, Jack and his cohorts. To put a stop to the problem, one lucky woman was given the exclusive right to sell elephant buns outside the compound, and it was said that on a good day she would make as much as 36 shillings. (£120 today).

Over the years the Zoological Society bought and sold several elephants but it never dared to get rid of Jack, who was the public’s favourite of all the Zoo’s animals and much loved for his comic antics. “I gazed on the greatest brute under Heaven,” wrote one visitor. “His begging trunk before him conveyed every article within his reach into his mouth, regardless from whom it came. He yelled most hideously when refused contribution; he plunged into the unrippled bed of waters within his confines and raised a mimic storm there. He threw a mass of mud and dirt around him (much of which attached itself to his own back) and he quailed with evident terror when the lash was applied to his own shoulders.”

What Jack particularly enjoyed was to torment his neighbour, an Indian rhinoceros, by pressing him to the ground with his tusks. Unfortunately, this led to the rhino’s death when, as a result of a particularly vigorous pressing, one of its ribs fractured and pierced the animal’s lung. The playful, albeit lethal, Jack is credited by some with securing the early financial success of London Zoo; he was certainly an ambassador for the Zoo and generated much publicity.

For over 15 years Jack was the Zoo’s prize attraction, but in 1847 he began to show signs of age, and early on the morning of 6 June he sank slowly to the ground and lay with his legs stretched out, his trunk resting on one of his front legs. At exactly 7 a.m. Jack’s trunk relaxed and his head sank to the ground—the great elephant was dead. “The doors were all closed,” wrote one witness, “and the morning sun, which could struggle but dimly through a high window, rested gloomily on the dark, mighty form, which had lost none of its dignity in death.”

The most famous resident of the Zoological Gardens might have died, but the British public’s passion for elephants did not subside and a female given by King William IV in 1836 absorbed some of the affection that had hitherto been lavished on Jack, until she died of shock after a violent thunderstorm in July 1855. Over the years various

species of animal had come into fashion, and for a while a new exhibit could always be relied upon to pull in the crowds, but the popularity of elephants was constant. To Victorian tourists a trip to Regent's Park without seeing the elephants was like visiting the Tower of London without seeing the Crown Jewels.

Although popular, the mother and daughter that followed Jack lacked the impressive dimensions of the deceased star, who had been not only the largest elephant in Europe but also a magnificent "tuskier", the possessor of a full set of tusks. This deficiency was even more apparent when comparisons were made with the pair of magnificent Asian elephants then at the Jardin des Plantes, both bigger than their counterparts in London.

Obtaining large elephants was a tricky and expensive process but in the late 1850s the Zoological Society decided that its priority was to obtain a living African elephant as these were larger and more impressive than the Asian species. Size apart, the novelty of such a rare animal would be a crowd pleaser, but how should the Zoo go about acquiring one? In the absence of any other ideas, the Society's Council decided to contact the most famous African explorer of the day. "The Secretary be directed to write to Dr Livingstone," record its minutes in February 1858, "and authorise him to offer £150 on the part of the Society for the first elephant, and £150 for the first rhinoceros, brought down fit for shipment at Quillimane [in Mozambique], and £100 for the second animal of each species, provided it be of the opposite sex."

At this time David Livingstone, having just embarked on a long expedition starting at the Zambezi River, had more pressing matters on his mind. The trip was beset with problems and the explorer did not have the time to capture and transport elephants, even at £150 (about £10,000 today) each. The Society's offer was declined and its members, unsure where else to look, put on hold their plan to obtain an elephant. They resolved to wait for an enterprising animal trader to import one into Europe, at which point they would seek to buy it, no matter what the cost. But the Society and the Zoo's managers did not reckon on their rivals at the Jardin des Plantes, who also wanted an African elephant and were prepared to go to almost any lengths to get one.