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Jumbo

The Unauthorised Biography of a Victorian Sensation

Written by John Sutherland

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JUMBO

The Unauthorised Biography of a Victorian Sensation

John Sutherland

Aurum Press

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To the Last Living African Elephant

Contents

‘I AM BECOME A NAME’
(Alfred Lord Tennyson, *Ulysses*)

A Note on the Text

This is not a biography of the world's most renowned elephant nor of its famed owners, the London Zoo and Phineas T. Barnum. Those things have been expertly done elsewhere, and I am grateful and indebted to them. What is offered here is, to borrow a term from the first time I 'saw the elephant' (on screen, that is), a kind of fantasia. Call it elephantasia.

Acknowledgements to a number of authors whose work I have drawn on will be found in the endnotes. But, at the outset, I must express particular thanks to Paul Chambers's *Jumbo: This Being the True Story of the Greatest Elephant in the World* (2009). What follows here does not aim to supersede his masterly biography; my intentions are more free-ranging and egotistical. As has anyone who has opened its pages, I have been consistently delighted and instructed by F.C. Sillar and R.M. Meyler's *Elephants: Ancient and Modern* (1968).

Jumbo: Private Passion, Local Pride

In AD 34 Colchester – 'Camulodunum', as the recently invading Romans called it – was holding out remarkably successfully against the mightiest empire in the world. The invaders had been attracted to the damp, cold, unwelcoming, irritatingly wineless country for its mines and slaves (*non angli*, *sed angeli*, etc). A rag-bag of blue-arsed warriors, under Caratacus, were keeping the legions at bay outside the ramparts. The town was important to the resistance, the capital of the Catuvellauni tribe. Tribes have always been big in Colchester.

It was the battle which would turn the war. The Emperor Claudius (later to be immortalised by Robert Graves) was impatient. Although not in terrific physical shape he came himself to England. (If you want something done, do it yourself.) With him came reinforcements, artillery (the boulder-hurling kind) and thirty-eight 'war elephants'. Not since the distant prehistoric days of the hairy mammoth had a pachyderm hoof shaken British soil. I myself have seen a train of sad circus elephants attract virtually the whole gawping population of Colchester as they trooped through the High Street to their tents in the Castle Park, the luckless fellow with the big shovel and bucket following. God knows what the goggle-eyed Catuvellauni thought when they saw these monsters. Morale collapsed.

Colchester fell in days, the British tribes surrendered *en masse*, Claudius awarded himself the title Britannicus and went home, leaving the tedious mopping up to his generals and the man with the shovel and bucket. What happened to the elephants was not recorded, although some bones found at the nearby port of Harwich (where boats left for Rome) suggests that at least one did not make it back for the triumphal parade through the capital (some spoilsport palaeontologist claims they are mammoth bones, which I prefer to disbelieve – it would be nice to think my town could claim at least one 'kill').

Civilisation had come to Colchester (subsequently named, oddly, after old King Coel – another story). It had come borne on the back of the largest, most fearsome beast on earth. To this day brochures urge the tourist to 'Visit Colchester, Britain's oldest recorded town and soak up its history. Walk through the Roman streets where Emperor Claudius once rode triumphantly on an elephant'. It's a bit of a stretch that he actually came in perched on the thing, like Sabu the Elephant Boy – but vivid, and it draws in the punters.

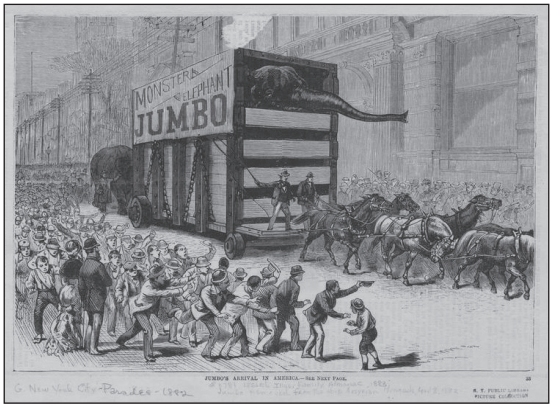
The Romans stayed some 300 years before the tribes, on every frontier, drove them out again. They left behind a castle (later taken down and rebuilt, with the original material, by the Normans), whose defensive walls still substantially stand to this day (I myself, in my barbarous childhood, loved to climb them) and which served the town excellently in its great Civil War siege, coins, and huge amounts of shards and shells. The Romans were particularly fond of the Mersea oysters, for which the town is still famed, and whose world-beating quality it celebrates annually and guzzlingly with the Oyster Feast.

Had the Romans stayed, Colchester would have remained the country's capital, rather than Londinium. Colcestrians are still sore about that, as they are that their football team rarely

makes it out of the Third Division and that envious bureaucrats appointed Chelmsford the Essex county town. A certain rueful frustrated gigantism lingers – elephantiasis of the soul.

In 1883, in the great late-Victorian urban boom, the town erected its huge four-legged water tower, at the crest of one of the two large hills on which the town's centre rests. It is (and was) the second-largest water tower in Britain. Over a million locally baked bricks went into its massive construction.

Jumbo, the world's most famous elephant, had a few months earlier been transported, in a large iron box and with country-wide protest, from London Zoo to New York.



England says goodbye to Jumbo

Colchester's water tower was duly named (what else?) 'Jumbo'. The animal had never actually come to Colchester but thousands of the town's children had (delirious with excitement) ridden on his back at the Regent's Park Zoo on days out to London.

Colchester was where, as Philip Larkin wryly puts it, my childhood was 'unspent'. Not a day went past when I did not look up fondly at Jumbo, on my walk to school, drinking for

years from its subterranean metallic trunkery. It was absurd but magnificent. Pevsner may well sneer; so does Wikipedia, which claims that the 'Jumbo' appellation is 'a term of derision'. It is not – I vouch for it – we Colcestrians were and are *proud* to call it Jumbo. It's the visible sign of the inner 'bigness' of Colchester.

Jumbo remains the town's dominant skyline feature but, alas, has now fallen into the 'white elephant' stage of architectural existence. As legend has it, the blanched beast (loaded with religious significance, requiring worship as well as care) was what an Indian prince would give a rival, sure in the knowledge that looking after the finicky animal and the attendant priests would lead to financial ruin. Or, at the very least, nervous breakdown.

Water is more efficiently supplied nowadays – from systems that do not require pumping the stuff 120 feet into the air so it can dribble back down again. Anglian Water sold Jumbo to a property developer in 1987. But so 'listed' ('Grade II', insultingly) is the elephantine structure – as one of the marvels of Victorian engineering – that its exterior cannot be defaced. On the other hand, brick buildings of this age are hugely expensive to keep up. Everything feasible has been tried, including making it a lofty fast-food restaurant (selling, inevitably, Jumboburgers).

Having bountifully slaked the thirst of Colchester for a century, Jumbo looks likely to suck out the town's lifeblood. Somewhere in the fields of Elysium Claudius must be laughing. How Jumbo will be safely pulled down is unclear. Where is George Orwell with his elephant gun when you need him?

Nonetheless the elephant remains close to the Colcestrian soul and always will. Colchester Zoo was founded in 1963 and its central attraction is described thus in one of its advertising flyers:

> Elephant Kingdom is one of Colchester Zoo's most impressive enclosures and is at the forefront of modern zoo design. The unique concept of our design allows all the elephants maximum sight, sound and physical contact and has specially designed night stalls, a roped off 'safe area' and spacious indoor bull elephant quarters.
>
> The elephants can be viewed in their large outdoor paddocks where they have access to a waterfall and pool area. You will usually find that Tembo, our bull elephant, will often be on his own in his paddock. Tembo is easily viewed by taking a ride on the UmPhafa road train accessed from Familiar Friends. In the wild, bull elephants tend to lead a naturally solitary life.

'Tembo'? Does one hear an echo? The flyer continues:

> Tembo is quite easily recognised. He is the largest of all our elephants at the zoo, he also has a much stockier build, thicker tusks and a very smooth rounded forehead in comparison to the three females. Tembo came to Colchester Zoo after being rescued from Chipperfield's Circus in 1998.

'Rescued'. How times change. Those 'sad elephants' mentioned earlier belonged to Chipperfield's travelling circus. Its week's stay was one of the high points of my year – particularly the 'elephant ballet' (inspired by the elephant dance to 'Dance of the Hours' in Walt Disney's *Fantasia*).

Colchester's intimate relationship with the elephant – Jumbo at its centre – usefully focuses the ambivalence we have about this wonderful beast and its omnipresence in our lives – if only as a multi-purpose epithet. It is terrifying (ask Caratacus);

it is, obscurely, holy (ask any Indian prince); it is awesomely big (ask any Colcestrian, gazing up, reverently, at their landmark building); it is as gentle in the flesh as Babar is on the storybook page (ask any child feeding Tembo a doughnut through the bars of Elephant Kingdom).

What follows could be seen as the chronicle of a benign haunting. 'Jumbo', and Jumbo's kind, have been with me for six decades – elusive, but inescapable, like Henry James's *The Beast in the Jungle*. The idea I have is, almost certainly, zoologically misinformed and incorrect. But Jumbo is always with me as I watch Jumbo Jets fly overhead (they should really be called 'Dumbo jets'), put on my stylish jumbo cords, or tuck into a jumbo-shrimp 'starter'. Perhaps he's with you as well.

Blazing the Trail for Jumbo

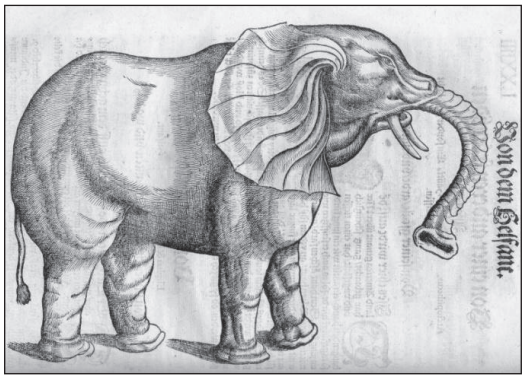
John Donne has a poem, 'Air and Angels', about loving a woman two or three times before he knew her face or name. He was ready for her. The British people, one can fantasise, before they made their first acquaintance with Jumbo, 'knew' his face and name. They were ready for him. When he arrived, in 1865, he slotted into a groove that had been long prepared for the greatest elephant in history.

John Milton, who almost certainly never saw an elephant, pictures one (as yet mate-less, it would seem) in *Paradise Lost* frisking about Adam and Eve, in their short-lived Edenic bliss, before it all went haywire for everyone and everything, including Jumbo's ancestor.

> Fair couple, linked in happy nuptial league,
> Alone as they. About them frisking played
> All beasts of the earth, since wild, and of all chase
> In wood or wilderness, forest or den.
> Sporting the lion ramped, and in his paw
> Dandled the kid; bears, tigers, ounces, pards,
> Gambolled before them; the unwieldy elephant,
> To make them mirth, used all his might, and wreathed
> His lithe proboscis.

Was the father of all elephants African or an Asian? Recent research by the Institute for Creation Research, conducted by Dr John D. Morris from close examination of entirely trustworthy Biblical sources, comes down definitively for the Garden of Eden being located somewhere around Ethiopia.[1] That would mean the Edenic elephant was an African bush variety – just like Jumbo.

One doesn't, to be frank, see a lot of gambol potential in the hugely popular and recycled early sixteenth-century prints of Pope Leo X's elephant Hanno, which may, along with other much-recycled pictorial imagery, have been in Milton's mind when he wrote the above. And there is a glum look about the eye which suggests Hanno may be thinking about the Fall of Elephant and whether his ancestor's bipedal, short-nosed playmate was entirely wise to eat that apple. Hanno, sadly, expired from eating an injudiciously administered laxative coated with gold.



Glum Hanno

Sir Thomas Browne, possessed of the most lovably curious mind in the annals of English literature, begins the third book of his *wunderkammer*, *Pseudodoxia Epidemica* (*Vulgar Errors*, 1642), with a scholarly cogitation on the elephant's strangely

wooden-looking legs (I omit the voluminous footnotes):

> THE first shall be of the Elephant, whereof there generally passeth an opinion it hath no joints; and this absurdity is seconded with another, that being unable to lie down, it sleepeth against a Tree; which, the Hunters observing, do saw it almost asunder; whereon the Beast relying, by the fall of the Tree, falls also down it self, and is able to rise no more. Which conceit is not the daughter of later times, but an old and gray-headed error, even in the days of *Aristotle*, as he delivereth in his Booke, *De incessu Animalium,* and stands successively related by several other Authors: by *Diodorus Siculus*, *Strabo*, *Ambrose*, *Cassiodore*, *Solinus*, and many more. Now herein methinks men much forget themselves, not well considering the absurdity of such assertions.

Browne was a man of his time and scholarly background who sought knowledge in the pages of books rather than the world around him. Oddly enough, he – the witty castigator of the vice – was himself in error here. Elephants sleep lying down. Or perhaps not. There are some unusual elephants who do, reportedly, sleep exactly as Browne describes. Bolivar (1859–1908), one of the meanest and most unpleasant circus animals ever to have trampled sawdust, having killed any keeper unlucky enough to have to deal with him, spent the last sixteen years of his life sleeping (or not sleeping) standing up.

As an observer noted:

> Four pronounced depressions in the asphalt floor of his apartment mark the spot where night and day the great

beast has shifted from one leg to another. Swaying from side to side and swinging his trunk with the motion like a pendulum of an ancient clock, he marks the flight of time by gradually wearing away the hard floor beneath him.[2]

Sleepless Bolivar

If there was a tree nearby one has no doubt Bolivar would have leaned against it, or, out of sheer grumpiness, pissed it to death. His wary keeper recorded that 'he snores at night'. Very loudly, one must suppose.

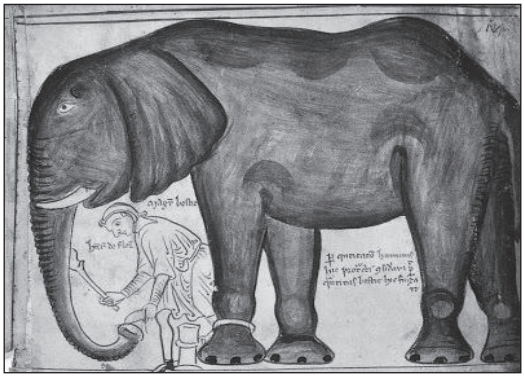
Sir Thomas Browne was also well off the mark in his comments on 'joints'. I quote from the Kruger National Park information manual. It was written by people who might not have been all that well up on Cassiodore and Solinus, and sadly lacked the florid Browneian-Ciceronian prose style, but had actually taken the trouble to look at an elephant:

> The joints that are perceived as 'knees', are in fact wrists. This is a common misunderstanding due to the belief that a leg joint that bends between the foot and the body must be a knee. The main difference between

> us and the elephants is that our foot bones and hand bones are separate, whereas those of the elephant are one in the same, and have evolved to suit this four-legged mammal.[3]

It would seem clear that Sir Thomas Browne, alas, is again in error – but not of the vulgar kind. And we still love him for his style.

Apart from Claudius's trip to Colchester in the flesh, Britain's first experience of the elephant was in 1255 when Louis IX of France gave his brother-in-law Henry III an elephant for the Royal menagerie in the Tower of London. The beast was wonderfully commemorated in a design by the artist Matthew Paris, who noted: 'We believe that this was the only elephant ever seen in England.'[4]



Prisoner of the tower

(Paris did two designs – this shows the elephant being fed by its keeper, Henricus de Flor – evidently, from his name, brought along with his beast from France. Henricus seems to be giving it a loaf of bread with one hand, holding a cudgel in the other, ready to deliver a sharp whack on the snout, if necessary.)

The un-named animal was, supposedly, acquired by Louis during one of the many crusades in Palestine. It was brought by ship up the Thames and lodged in a specially constructed cage in the Tower of London. 'We command you,' Henry instructed the Sheriff of London, in his usual royal fashion, 'that ye cause without delay, to be built at our Tower of London, one house of forty feet long and twenty feet deep, for our elephant.' Would that one talk to one's own builder that way.

Henry already had an impressive personal menagerie at the tower. The elephant joined three leopards, and a Norwegian 'Polar' bear which is recorded as liking to take the occasional dip in the Thames – in that day teeming with wholesome fish. The spectacle doubtless allayed the gloom of the noble prisoners in the Tower, awaiting the executioner's axe. Now, alas, only the ravens survive to amuse the swarming tourists.

Henry's elephant did not survive long. It died within three years. The cause of death was given as a surfeit of red wine, for which, presumably, the animal had developed a dangerous predilection in France. It would be nice to think that, as with 'false fleeting' Clarence in Shakespeare's *Richard III*, a fellow occupant of a cell in the 'Bloody Tower', it was a 'butt of Malmsey' which did for Henry's elephant.

Henry's elephant's brief sojourn in England is commemorated on the swinging signboards of innumerable English pubs – most famously the Elephant and Castle (a few hundred yards away from the Tower) in south London. The Cutlers' Company adopted the elephant as their heraldic device – doubtless impressed by the scissor-sharp tusks (incisors, anatomically) which Paris depicted.

'Enough booze to kill a small horse', as the drinking man's slang describes a heavy session. But how much red wine would it take, one idly wonders, to kill an elephant? Given a body

weight of 5 tons, it's estimated that a lethal dose would be between half a gallon and a gallon of ethanol: neat alcohol, that is. That translates, by my reckoning, as between ten and twenty gallons of plonk. It must have been a very heavy session indeed that did for King Henry's elephant.

Over the following centuries there were touring fairs and small circuses showing off an elephant or two. But they had the big drawback that, unlike bears and bulls, there was little fun in 'baiting' them. Even the Roman mob, whose tolerance for such things was high, are recorded as being occasionally nauseated by the arena sand being covered with elephantine entrails and carcasses, too heavy to pull off easily, creating tiresome delays and stench[5]. They preferred the faster action of lions and Christians. One does rather wonder, though, how gladiatorial Russell Crowe would have handled an elephant.

The English nation's first serious relationship with the Elephantidae was a beast called 'Chunee'. He was an Asian elephant, brought from Burma around 1809, presumably just out of calfdom. Full-sized elephants are hard to transport even today and, by sail-driven cargo vessel, a trip of 8,000 miles would need at least 10 tons of food. Elephants, their digestion being so inefficient, die in days if they don't get their daily hundredweight or so.

Chunee had been imported for the booming theatre world around Covent Garden and made his stage appearance on Boxing Day 1811 in the pantomime *Harlequin and Padnamaba*, at the Theatre Royal in Drury Lane. It was not a success. He is recorded as 'rumping the audience' – the verb 'dumping' may be more appropriate. His theatrical career ended abruptly.[6]

Chunee was lucky. Elephants in circuses have always had it hard – their 'tricks' involve much behind-the-scenes brutality from trainers. Necessary, these professionals of the big tent

tell us, though they would rather we didn't look. When the audience is present, the symbolic whip and chair are all that is on show. Theatrical elephants have it a lot worse, their tricks being that much more protracted and necessarily intricate. In 1829 a female elephant, called Mademoiselle Djek, made something of a hit in a burlesque called *The Elephant of Siam and the Fire Fiend*. The Victorian novelist Charles Reade – who prided himself on writing 'fiction based on fact' – undertook considerable research into the way Mademoiselle Djek was treated to get her 'stage-worthy'. The novel he wrote on the basis of what he turned up, *Jack of all Trades* (1858), makes grisly reading (it is Mademoiselle Djek's trainer, the 'Jack' of the title, writing):

> I walked quickly up to her. I did not hesitate or raise the question which of us two was to suffer; I knew that would not do. I sprang upon her like a tiger and drove the pitchfork into her trunk. She gave a yell of dismay and turned a little from me; I drove the fork into her ear.
>
> Then came out her real character.
>
> She wheeled round, ran her head into a corner, stuck out her great buttocks, and trembled all over like a leaf. I stabbed her with all my force for half-an-hour till the blood poured out of every square foot of her huge body, and during the operation she would have crept into a nut-shell if she could. I filled her as full of holes as a cloved orange.

The image sticks in the mind. What Reade describes is, one suspects, what has always happened to elephants who are required to perform for spectators rather than merely be on display for the public. The cloved orange technique persists in circuses to this day, as PETA, and their earnest spokesman

the film star Alec Baldwin, will assure you. You'll find it on YouTube (a word which, like 'trunk call', has always strangely evoked Jumbo for me).

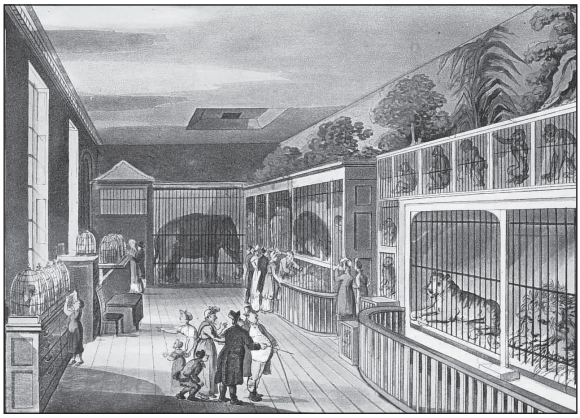
No elephant in captivity has it easy. But Chunee, for twelve years, had it easier than most. After his Theatre Royal debut and debacle he was acquired by Edward Cross (1774–1854), who was running what is historically regarded as England's first public zoo in Exeter 'Change, close by the theatre district on the Strand. The 'Change was a forerunner of the modern shopping mall, with arcades, and various shops and boutiques selling *bric à brac*. In 1773, a man by the fine name of Gilbert Pidcock had the bright idea of setting up a menagerie of 'wild animals' in the larger saloons, charging punters a (whopping for the time) one-shilling entrance fee.

Pidcock was inspired to go into the business, one guesses, by the crowds who gathered on 1 April every year to see the lions of the Royal Menagerie, half a mile down the river, go on annual display. Pidcock picked up various 'exotics' from sailors coming home from voyages to foreign parts, who knew that a parrot, turtle or a wombat would subsidise a few jolly nights in the taverns and houses of easy virtue along Limehouse. He also picked up tatty discards from the Royal Menagerie. Both it and his own menagerie had a high death toll and their animals tended to 'mange' very fast, denied fresh air, exercise, the company of their kind and their natural foodstuffs. But that was the condition for most Londoners at that time in the slums and 'rookeries' bordering the Thames, whose putrid, sewage-thick waters were no longer something a sensible polar bear would care to swim in. It was slums for everyone down at the river, where the 'cloaca maxima' (the 'Fleet' river, which gave its name to Fleet Street, spewing out a higher kind of sewage) debouched into Old Father Thames.

Pidcock's business was acquired by a resourceful Italian showman by the name of Stephano Polito (1763–1814). He had been touring England with a small tented circus and decided to settle down and let the customers come to him (although he still did a bit of touring in the summer). Cross, who had married into the Polito family, took over the running of the establishment and renamed it the Royal Grand National Menagerie (Cross was not one for understatement) in the early years of the new century. Polito died in 1814 and Cross became sole owner.

Over the thirty years before Chunee came along the successive proprietors had built up a handsome little zoo in the 'Change. It included, as the early 1800s advertisement boasted: 'Nero the largest Lion ever seen in the whole world, the Boa-constrictor and the laughing Hyena, Ourang Otang, Birds of Paradise, Ostriches and every living animal from the Jungles in the far East'.[7]

All this in a floorspace about the size of your local Tesco.



Chunee caged

Nero's days as top animal were over once Chunee appeared on the scene. After the shameful end of his theatrical career

Cross went the whole hog (so to speak – he did, actually have the odd hog) and bought the giant thespian for £1,000. A huge expense – and risky. How to look after elephants was a wholly unknown skill in London's West End. How to stable them, humanely and efficiently, in a space the size of an attic, without running water supply, was risky verging on reckless. But it worked out wonderfully – for Cross, at least. Chunee became, literally, the biggest 'show' in London. More to the point, unlike Nero the lion, irascible like all his big-cat kind, Chunee was a great trouper.

Celebrities of the day came and had private sessions (half a crown charge, minimum) with the great Chunee. Drawing on his theatrical expertise he would do his little turns. The most famous was to take a tiny sixpence coin (a 'tanner') from the customer's hand, then return it. In his diary for 13 November 1813, an impressed, despite himself, Lord Byron recorded:

> The elephant took and gave me my money again, took off my hat, opened a door, trunked a whip, and behaved so well, that I wish he was my butler.

The elephantine Jeeves is a nice Byronic touch. It didn't necessarily cost common folk a shilling. Every Sunday, Cross and a keeper would take Chunee out for an amble down the Strand. More fun than the Lord Mayor's Coach – or matins.

Chunee became much loved over the years, as more and more people could claim to have seen him, or have enjoyed the silver tanner trick. But there was the occasional ominous tantrum. When he scraped his head on a nail carelessly hammered into the wall of his stall, Chunee suddenly turned on the offending keeper and, it seemed clear, would have killed the fellow had not other handlers stepped in with the

twelve-foot spears they prudently carried to keep the animal 'in awe'. (Circuses dealing with elephants today prefer the bull hook, one is told, which can usefully claw as well as poke). The animal clearly had a temper. Had Byron been injudicious enough, say, to stub his cheroot on Chunee's trunk the world may never have received *Don Juan*.

It's a nice Stoppardian scenario to imagine Byron meeting a demure little Miss from Hampshire – the anonymous lady referred to on the title page of *Pride and Prejudice* – at Mr Cross's establishment. The confessed Janeite and 'pachydermophiliac', Diana Birchall, astutely picks up a passing reference in *Sense and Sensibility* to children being taken 'to see the wild beasts on Exeter Exchange' and draws speculative conclusions.

Mr Cross's menagerie

In her engagingly skittish article on the subject, Birchall concludes: 'My feeling is that she did.' See the elephant, that is. Feelings, alas, don't carry much clout in the higher reaches of literary scholarship. She is, Birchall says, ever on the lookout for that smoking-gun letter from the novelist to her sister,

Dear Cassandra,

Henry and Eliza and I went to the Exchange today to see the wild beasts, and there was an Elephant that quite put me out of countenance,

Affectionately, Jane

Good luck to Birchall.[8]

Things went disastrously wrong on 1 November 1825. The tale is told most comprehensively by Richard D. Altick in his book *The Shows of London* (1978). Chunee's favourite handler, John Tietjen, came in as usual to clean the cage; he was accompanied by a colleague, carrying the de rigueur 12-foot spear, to keep the animal at bay while Tietjen got to work with the shovel, bucket and broom. Tietjen airily (and fatally) remarked to his fellow handler, 'Never mind the spear, the elephant knows me well enough.' He took the spear and threw it on the floor, and to prove the point that there was nothing to worry about gave Chunee a friendly whack on the rump with his broom. Bad move. Chunee promptly impaled the luckless Mr Tietjen on his tusks, like toast on the toasting fork, killing him instantly.

A coroner's inquest was held the same day. One witness testified that Chunee, in a fit of post-homicidal remorse, had

Chunee kneels for execution

trembled uncontrollably on seeing what he had done. Accidental death was recorded but the court imposed a nominal one-shilling fine on the menagerie. The money (what every customer paid on entry) was nothing, but clearly Chunee was now on probation.

The animal was still much beloved and was kept on public view. However, a little more caution in his interaction with the public was imposed. But things soon went from bad to worse – horribly much worse. For some years now Chunee – a mature elephant in 1826 – had been displaying annual outbreaks of 'musth'. This is the testosterone storm which impels bulls to mate – sometimes violently enough to kill the luckless dam who is the victim of their affection. Elephants are not gentle lovers. When musth happens it's a bad time to be around an elephant, particularly one in a very confined space standing 11 feet, with a 30-foot trunk reach, weighing, as the 27-year-old Chunee now did, 5 tons. The notion of him having a fit of priapic fury on some Sunday in the Strand didn't bear thinking about (another, less reliable, account records that Chunee did suffer just such a fit on his Sunday walk and killed his keeper – details are fuzzy).

Cross and his crew had put their faith, whenever the sinister symptoms of musth made their appearance (fairly unmistakeable: streams of goo down the cheeks, startlingly green urine and the emergences from the animal's bowels of a very large penis), in a home remedy, namely a barrel containing 55 lb of Epsom salts mixed, for palatability, with molasses. It worked for constipation on the human consititution. And Chunee's dose, some mathematically minded wag worked out, would give 4,000 of his Majesty's subjects the runs. And who thinks about sex in that condition?

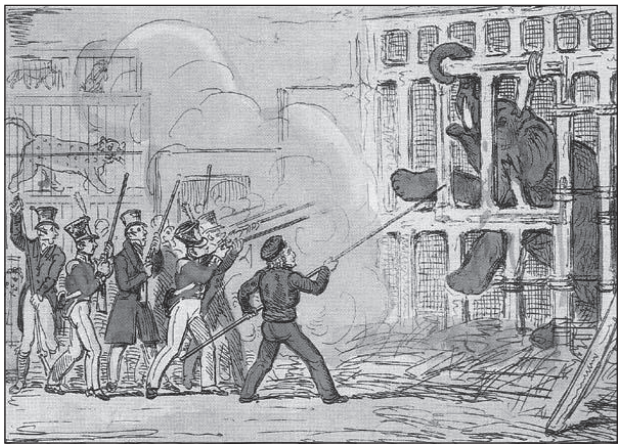
But, as the years passed, and Chunee's urges became stronger, it was clear that 'the salts' no longer worked for the male elephant's gigantic lusts. It reached such a pitch in

the elephant's spring 1826 'fit' that carpenters, remembering what had happened to poor John Tietjen, refused to go into Chunee's cage to strengthen it. It had cost Cross £350 to fortify the 'den' with oak beams and iron rods, but it was obvious, the way things were going, that Chunee would soon batter through them. What then? Massacre in the Strand.

There was nothing for it. Chunee would have to be 'put down'. The most efficient way to do it was to call in the artillery. As Charles Reade gruesomely chronicles, Mademoiselle Djek had died by cannon ball, after she killed one member of the paying public too many (it seems they put some delicacy she particularly relished in the mouth of a cannon, then when she leaned in to fillet it out, let fly).

But the Strand was too built up, and too populated, for cannon balls to be flying around taking the heads off innocent bystanders as well as sex-mad elephants. Poison was a possibility, but elephants have half a million sense receptors in the trunk (half nose, half upper lip) which transfers food to their mouths, and they can smell and taste poison very astutely – a beast which eats 300 lb of vegetation a day has to be wary of all those toxic plants in the wild and avoid or spit out the ones which are a danger to it. On 1 March his keeper tried to feed him 'corrosive sublimate' (mercuric chloride) mixed with his hay, which Chunee wisely declined. In musth, typically, male elephants are, anyway, anorexic. They have other things on their mind than the day's hay.

The redcoats were called in. Two soldiers, from Somerset House (across the way) came, took up a point-blank firing position, and loosed 152 musket balls into their target. Chunee is reported to have knelt, at his keeper's command, to receive the fusillade. One rather doubts it, but it makes a pretty and rather pious picture:



Chunee Agonistes

British bullets may have won the day against Napoleon's Imperial Guard at Waterloo, but they didn't work on Chunee. In the end the musketeers, and handlers, had to stab him to death with long poles with sabres attached to them. Cold steel.

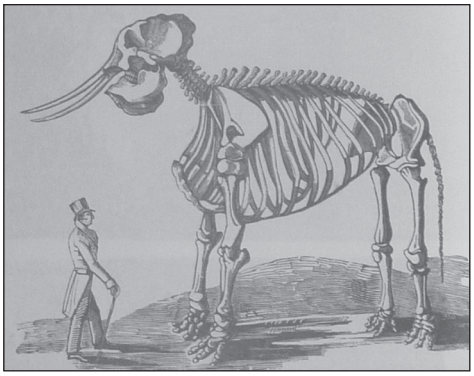
All this was happening with members of the public attracted by the sound of gunfire (the muskets were single-shot muzzle loaders, and the volleys went on, intermittently, for half an hour with calls out for more ammo) and – worse still – members of the press, whose newspaper offices were only a few hundred yards away. It was headline news. To spare the sensibilities of the public it was given out that it was toothache which had driven Chunee into his madness. Drastic dentistry, one might think.

As Altick drily puts it: 'As soon as the shooting was over and the elephant lay huge and silent in the blood-spattered wreck of his den, Cross understandably allowed his concern for his ledger books to overrule his feelings and admitted the public, at the usual charge, to view the grisly scene.'[9]

There was the trickier problem of disposing of 5 tons of fast-decaying elephant meat, bones and skin – preferably for profit. Thank God for the small mercy that it was freezing March. The Bow Street magistrates were quick to instruct Cross to dispose of the remains in a sanitary way, to safeguard public health. He had a week or so to do it. The magazine *London Society* chronicled the dissection, division and disposition of Chunee's mortal remains.

> The dissection of Chunee was a mighty labour: the body was raised by a pulley to a cross-beam, and first flayed, which it took twelve active men near twelve hours to accomplish. Next day (Sunday), the dissection was commenced, Mr. Brookes, Mr. Caesar Hawkins, Mr. Herbert Mayo, Mr. Bell, and other eminent surgeons being present; and there, too, was Mr. Yarrell, the naturalist, to watch the strange operations. The carcase being raised, the trunk was first cut off; then the eyes were extracted; then the contents of the abdomen, pelvis, and chest were removed. When the body was opened, the heart—nearly two feet long, and eighteen inches broad—was found immersed in five or six gallons of blood; the flesh was then cut from the bones, and was removed from the menagerie in carts. Two large steaks were cut off and broiled, and declared, by those who had the courage to partake of them, to be a fine relish. Spurzheim, the phrenologist, who was present, was anxious to dissect Chunee's brain, but Mr. Cross objected, as the crown of the head must then have been sawn off. The skin, which weighed 17 cwt., was sold to a tanner for 50/.; the bones weighed 876 lbs.; and the entire skeleton, sold for 100/., is now in the museum of the College of Surgeons, in Lincoln's Inn Fields.[10]

Cat and dog meat suppliers were traditionally called in when a large animal (too large to throw in the gutter or the Thames) died – pets being less fussy about putrefying flesh. Sometimes, one must suspect, meat traders followed the gothic example of Sweeney Todd. Who, to this day, knows what is in a meat pie or hamburger?



Skeletal Chunee

There is no question that in death Chunee was a huge boon to veterinarian and zoological science, dying, as he did, near any number of metropolitan institutions devoted to the 'March of Mind' (not least London University – now known as University College London – set up that same year). There were general lamentations and criticism in *The Times* about Cross's care of his livestock. Bad poems were penned and a play was put on at Sadler's Wells dramatising the event, *Chuneelah; or, The Death of the Elephant at Exeter 'Change*. One is told it had a good run.

The grisly end of Chunee was an important event for Jumbo, forty years later. It proved, beyond question, you could not keep wild animals in converted shop premises for commercial gain – however eager the paying public might

be to see them. There had to be regulation and some other arrangement. The explosion of research that Chunee's massive cadaver inspired led, as day follows night, to the highly regulated establishment of the Zoological Society of London, a few months later, in Regent's Park. It would exfoliate, at a later date, into London Zoo, which would be Jumbo's home for 17 years (oddly the same period of time Chunee had spent in Exeter 'Change). Sometimes change needs 152 bullets. But for twenty years the ZSL, mindful of Cross's money-grubbing menagerie, was chary of paying customers. Until 1847 you could only see the animals in the ZSL enclosure with a signed 'order' costing a shilling. The hindrance was a direct consequence of the shameful things that had happened at Exeter 'Change.

What was left of Cross's menagerie went to the ZSL when he sold up, as he did in short order. The 'Change itself was pulled down in 1829. The Strand Palace Hotel now stands where the Royal Grand National Menagerie once stood (do guests, one wonders, hear mournful spectral trumpetings, and faint gunshots, of a late-February night?). Chunee's skeleton came to a sad end in the 1941 Blitz. A direct hit destroyed it, along with most of the Royal College of Surgeons' Hunterian Collection of unusual bones. Shot in life, bombed in death. There should be a very blue plaque for the sad, much-loved, hugely abused elephant.

The death of Chunee left a lasting wound on the English psyche. Young Abraham Bartlett, the man with direct charge of Jumbo thirty years later, when he became superintendent of London Zoo, was physically present at the slaughter of Chunee, and was traumatised by it for the whole of his life. Much as he loved wild animals, he would always be a stickler for propriety in the care of them and, above all, taking no risks.[11]

Dickens, I'm fairly sure, was also there. He was fifteen years old and all eyes and ears for anything that was going on in London. His *Sketches by Boz* essay 'Gin-Shops', written virtually on the tenth anniversary to the day of Chunee's execution, opens:

> It is a remarkable circumstance, that different trades appear to partake of the disease to which elephants and dogs are especially liable, and to run stark, staring, raving mad, periodically. The great distinction between the animals and the trades, is that the former run mad with a certain degree of propriety – they are very regular in their irregularities. We know the period at which the emergency will arise, and provide against it accordingly. If an elephant runs mad, we are all ready for him – kill or cure – pills or bullets, calomel in conserve of roses, or lead in a musket-barrel.

The details in that last sentence (calomel is mercurous chloride, which is very similar to the poison unsuccessfully offered to Chunee), and the remark about 'periodic madness' suggest to me that young Charles either saw the shooting or was an eyewitness to some part of the aftermath. What is more significant is that it imbued the image of the elephant for him with indelible sadness. It surfaces in the wonderful description of Coketown, in Dickens's *Hard Times* (a novel, on one of its many levels, about travelling circuses and the animals in them):

> It was a town of red brick, or of brick that would have been red if the smoke and ashes had allowed it; but as matters stood, it was a town of unnatural red and black like the painted face of a savage. It was a town

> of machinery and tall chimneys, out of which interminable serpents of smoke trailed themselves for ever and ever, and never got uncoiled. It had a black canal in it, and a river that ran purple with ill-smelling dye, and vast piles of buildings: full of windows where there was a rattling and a trembling all day long, and where the piston of the steam-engine worked monotonously up and down, like the head of an elephant in a state of melancholy madness. It contained several large streets all very like one another, and many small streets still more like one another, inhabited by people equally like one another, who all went in and out at the same hours, with the same sound upon the same pavements, to do the same work, and to whom every day was the same as yesterday and to-morrow, and every year the counterpart of the last and the next.[12]

'Melancholy madness': the state of every elephant in captivity. They 'weave' and 'nod' their heads, like pious Jews 'dovening'. It's an astute observation.

What happened on 26 February 1826 was momentous. With the death of Chunee – and the huge publicity (not to say disgust) it provoked – the exhibition of animals in England split into science-based zoos and entertainment-based circuses. If you wanted to see animals you went to the former. If you wanted to see animals perform you went to the latter. Jumbo, when he arrived, would preside, majestically, over both worlds.