

'THE most DELIGHTFUL LOUNGE in the METROPOLIS': LONDON'S ZOOLOGICAL GARDENS from 1825-2000
by Ruth Guilding

Until early this century, the London Zoo was generally known as the 'Zoological Gardens', but the design of its buildings has almost always taken precedence over the landscape. Other factors which have shaped it are visitor circulation, the progressive developments in zoological husbandry, and its relationship to the Regent's Park, within whose leafy compass it lies.¹ The Zoo's annals are littered with unrealised proposals for ambitious re-developments of its site. Instead, change has been piecemeal, but a succession of designers or patrons - Decimus Burton, Captain Swinton, Mr. J. Newton Mappin, Sir Hugh Casson and Lord Snowdon - have stamped the site with surviving landmarks. Almost nothing of Burton's small-scale picturesque layout is left, but now, as then, the animal enclosures continue to map out the landscape of the Zoo.

Founded in 1825 by the maverick empire builder Sir Stamford Raffles and Sir Humphrey Davy, the inventor of the miners' safety lamp, the Zoological Society of London was planned as a small and exclusive establishment. Its founders intended it to be more than a scientific offshoot of the older Linnaean Society, but there were no suitable models for pioneering zoological gardens other than continental examples such as the *Jardin des Plantes*. Consequently it was taken for granted that what the Society would create would be a 'garden laid out in aviaries, paddocks for deer, antelopes etc.', mingling Reptonian landscape garden features with those of a *ferme ornée*.²

The first layout of the Gardens was dictated by the kind of stock it held. Raffles had hoped to 'go far beyond the *Jardin des Plantes* in Paris', but the first development which the Society took up was Davy's pet concern of 'acclimatisation'. This was a truly Imperialist initiative whereby numerous new breeds were to be added to the indigenous species of the

country following trials to determine their relative suitabilities: bipeds and birds which could be farmed for meat, new species for draught animals, and ornamental breeds for the 'practical and immediate utility to the country gentleman' (who stood for the majority of the Society's first members). Early records show a great demand for exotic bipeds which might look well grazing an English park, for Chinese pheasants and ornamental waterfowl. Non-utilitarian species were to be collected on a museum basis, 'so as to afford a correct view of the Animal Kingdom at large in as complete a series as may be practicable...'³ The Zoological Gardens' stocks of these were greatly increased when in 1830 William IV donated all the specimens in the Royal Menagerie to the Gardens, followed by those from the Tower Menagerie.

The Informal Layout

The first Gardens were laid out on five acres in 1827, on a small triangle on the south side of what is now the Outer Circle, and opened to Fellows of the Zoological Society the following year; another strip on the north side of the road bounded by the Regent's Canal (later known as the *Middle Gardens*) was left undeveloped. The landscaping was park-like, an intersecting informal arrangement of serpentine paths, shrubberies, grass plots, and cages and enclosures. (fig. 27) Within a year of opening, the Gardens were receiving favourable notices:

The grounds are daily filled with fashionable people ... The gardens independent of their Zoological Attractions, are a delightful promenade, being laid out with great taste, and the parterres boasting a beautiful display of flowers.⁴

The decade that followed was an optimistic time for the Society. The Gardens expanded on all sides to encompass a total of about thirty acres, laid out in a series of '*petites surprises*' with isolated cages and enclosures dotted about between grassy plots. Decimus Burton was appointed as the Society's architect and the East Tunnel was built under the Outer Circle to link the two halves of the Gardens.⁵

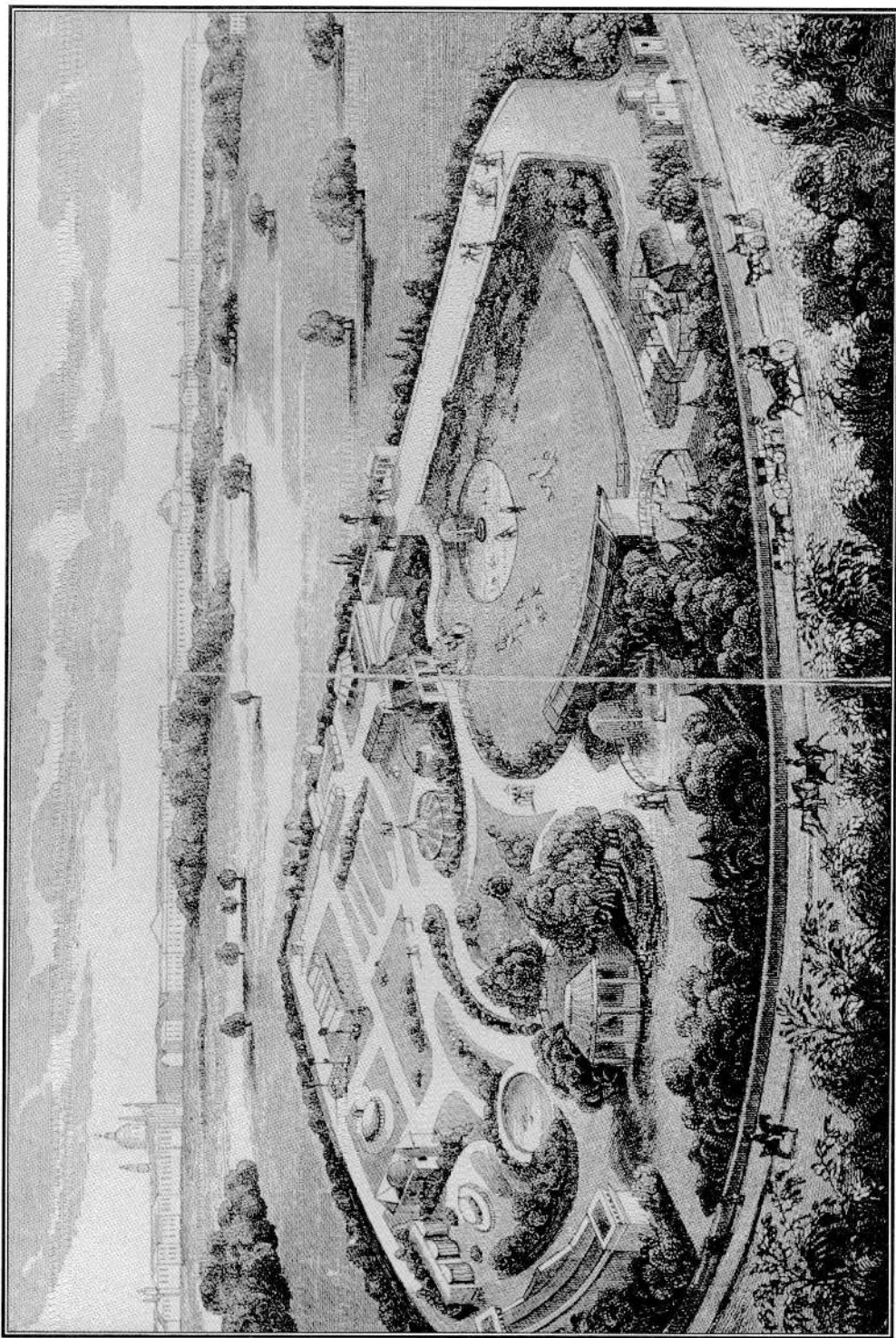
3. Holloway, p. 4.

4. *The Mirror*, 6 September 1828.

5. *Saturday Review*, 1 May 1867.

1. The slang term *zoo* was coined as early as 1867. See S. Holloway, *The London Zoo* (1976), p. 19.

2. M. Batcy, quoted in *Regency Gardens*, Shire Garden History (1993), p. 76.



27. London Zoo from the north in 1829, from *The Zoological Keepsake* (1830)
(ZOOLOGICAL SOCIETY OF LONDON)

An elevated terrace running over the Tunnel, which gave views over the whole of the Gardens,⁶ offered the added attraction of observing the other visitors. With this improved access the northern 'Middle Gardens' could now be developed, although then (as now) they presented a contrastingly more 'natural' landscape than that of the Southern Gardens:

There the elegant flower beds and broad gravelled walks appeared as if cut out of a large grassy lawn; and the eye, at once, took in an extensive and varied scene; here, something more of the appearance of woodland presented itself with much more limited scenery.⁷

Three Island Pond and a raised walk along the canal's south bank survive from Burton's landscaping during this period, but the many exotic animal houses he designed such as a thatched Elephant House with a 'Hindoo' style portico, and a Soaneian barn with baseless Tuscan tree-trunk columns for the Brahmin bulls, were ephemeral. In 1834 a necessarily more substantial building, the Carnivora Terrace, was put up to house the big cats from the former Royal menageries, and this long single-storey structure incorporating rows of cages was also given an elevated roof terrace commanding views over the site of the Zoo, and to the park beyond. In the following year, the Bavarian artist George Scharf published his picturesque lithographs of the Gardens which he sold at the gates. Ten years after its foundation, it was boasted that,

The Zoological Gardens in the Regent's Park, for picturesque beauty, far surpass the Jardin des Plantes of Paris ... The Gardens are extensive, and their own attractions are heightened by the neighbouring amphitheatre of Highgate and Hampstead Hills.⁸

All this was purely for the private delight and edification of the Fellows of the Society and their guests: for the rest, entry was still 'privileged' as a ticket had to be endorsed by a Fellow of the Society, although there was a black market trade. (figs. 28, 29) With the admission of the general public in 1847, the character of the Gardens was to be hugely changed. Once the masses were within the gates and attendance figures rocketed, the need for novelties such as band concerts, and for larger grounds became pressing, and with-

in two years the Zoo's stock of animals was increased from 800 to 1,300 specimens. Today it is hard to reconstruct the Zoo's huge appeal for a metropolitan public whose pleasures were limited in an age before car and train travel. The Gardens were rated one of the principal attractions of London, preferred even to the rival pleasures of pubs, tea-gardens and skittle alleys.⁹ Hundreds of proselytising descriptions appeared in print, all of them couched in terms of novelty, excitement and pleasure. Favourable comparisons were made with the waning eighteenth-century pleasure grounds of Ranelagh and Vauxhall, all venues where a cross-section of society could mingle more closely and with greater license than elsewhere. The only difference was that the Zoological Gardens catered for all conditions of man - young, old, solitary, gregarious, ignorant, learned, melancholy, cheerful.¹⁰ (fig. 30) Even the exclusive Fellows' Day had been democratised:

The two or three thousand who find their way here on a Sunday afternoon comprise a good many from all classes ... many of the regular habitués of the place see very little of the animals. They lounge and gossip and quiz the passers-by or promenade up and down and show their dresses.¹¹

The social mix and gaiety of the Gardens now received as much notice in the press as the habits of the animals:

If you visit the gardens on a Monday - a sixpenny day - you will find crowds of honest people realising from living forms what they had hitherto known only from picture books, but Saturday is essentially a lounging time; music and zoology on that day join hand in hand; the senses of sight and hearing are both gratified, all at the cost of one shilling.¹²

One of the attractions was that contact with the animals could be much closer than today: the bears could be fed or prodded, the elephants ridden, and some of the exotic animals even had 'native' keepers dressed in versions of national costume.¹³ For the rest of the century, the Gardens continued to be hailed as a fashionable resort, independent of their zoological attractions, 'the most delightful lounge in the metropolis', a 'delightful promenade,

6. *Eliza Cook's Journal*, 1850-3.

7. J. Bishop, *A Visit to the Zoological Gardens in Regent's Park*, c. 1850.

8. *The Penny Magazine*, 16 December 1837.

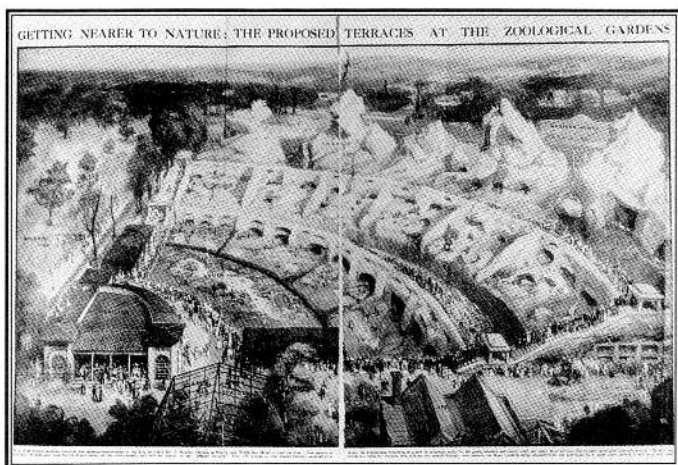
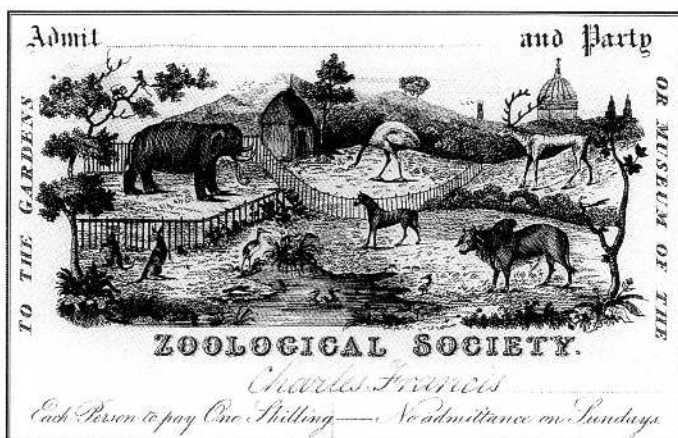
9. *Lloyd's Weekly London Newspaper*, 22 May 1853.

10. *The Penny Magazine*, 16 December 1837, pp. 484; *London*, no. 117.

11. *London*, no. 117, June 1843.

12. Holloway, p. 19.

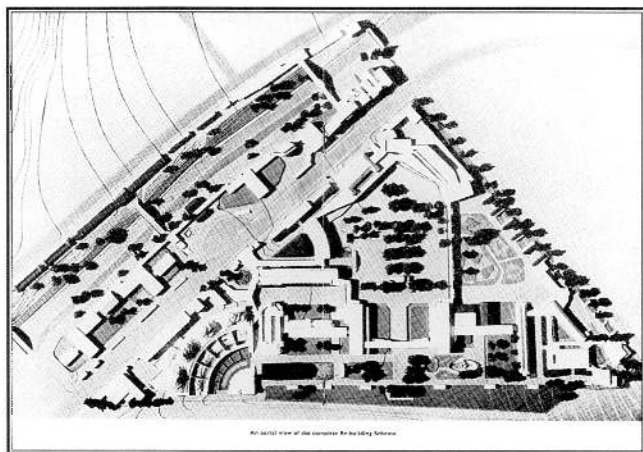
13. *The Leisure Hour*, September 1849, p. 552.



28. Entrance to the Zoological Gardens (1840)
(ZOOLOGICAL SOCIETY OF LONDON)

29. Early entrance ticket to the Gardens of the Zoological Society, London
(ZOOLOGICAL SOCIETY OF LONDON)

31. Aerial view of the Mappin Terraces (c.1960)
(ZOOLOGICAL SOCIETY OF LONDON)



30. 'The o.k. thing on Sunday, is walking in the Zoo'. Music-hall songsheet cover c.1867
(ZOOLOGICAL SOCIETY OF LONDON)
32. Franz Stengelhofen's proposal for 'a zoo on two floors' taken from his *Zoo Blueprint* (1950)
(ZOOLOGICAL SOCIETY OF LONDON)

being laid out with great taste, and the parterres boasting a beautiful display of flowers'.¹⁴ They were even recommended as a health cure, to be prescribed for cases of melancholia and hypochondria.¹⁴

Burton's picturesque landscape was a victim of the Zoo's commercial success, eroded by the increasing volume of visitors and animals. A new tract of wooded land, the 'North Gardens', was leased on the north side of Regent's Canal in 1869, and linked to the Middle Gardens with the construction of the East Footbridge in 1872. In the Southern Gardens, paths were widened, and larger, more utilitarian buildings were constructed on a geometric layout, following the fashion to accommodate whole species together.

From Informality to Formality

At the start of the twentieth century there were the first rumblings of public dissent over the barrenness of the enclosures for the wild animals at the Zoo. In 1901 the press reported that conditions compared unfavourably with those in the rest of Europe:

The Zoological Society has done a certain amount of good work, and could do a great deal more. If it showed us all its animals, in something approaching their natural conditions, we could learn more, and we should go more often to the Gardens.¹⁶

A year later the bear pit, described as 'a relic of the Middle Ages', was demolished, but enclosures which could be described as 'approaching natural conditions' would not be built until the 1960s and 70s. Instead, changes inspired by continental practices were to produce buildings such as the Mappin Terraces, which were cosmetic in terms of animal welfare, but dramatic in terms of the Zoo's topology.

The Zoo's new Secretary, appointed in 1904, was Peter Chalmers-Mitchell, who set about a programme of restoration and redevelopment. The whole layout of the Zoo needed to be replanned, primarily in order to improve public circulation. In 1912 the Zoological Society's Garden Committee called in Captain G.S.C. Swinton (1859-1937), a planner with the LCC freshly returned from duties in Delhi with

Lutyens, as Chairman of the Town-Planning Committee of the new Imperial city. Swinton had designed New Delhi's grid-like layout and the siting of its buildings, and his brief was to provide the necessary sites for new buildings in the Zoological Gardens, based on the Committee's predictions for future needs:

Open space, broad paths and a more rational alignment of the routes are essential for the convenience of the public, for the proper display of the animals and for the economic working of the Gardens.¹⁷

Swinton's grandiose plan, published in 1913, supplied all this while obliterating what remained of the nineteenth-century informal layout. He proposed the removal of the Carnivora Terrace and the creation of a large formal open space at the heart of the Gardens, traversed by wide axial paths, lined with flower bedding and trees. A few components of his scheme were carried out, but the outbreak of war meant that much remained unexecuted and other elements were deferred until the 1920s.

At the same time, on new land to the south-west side of the Zoo, the Mappin Terraces were being constructed on the principles developed by Professor Carl Hagenbeck at Hamburg Zoo. (*fig. 31*) The craggy picturesque outline of the Mappin's reinforced concrete peaks dominates the view from the park to the south, and fulfills a requirement that 'certain parts of the Gardens should be visible to persons using the park, without paying for entrance to the Gardens'.¹⁸ Now their rough-finished cement-concrete surfaces seem the epitome of sterility, but in 1913 the Terraces were instantly hailed as a fashionable success, a 'natural' environment for animals, cages without visible bars and 'the greatest addition to the Gardens since the foundation of the Society'.¹⁹ Chalmers-Mitchell's dry riposte was that 'this innovation is for spectators rather than for the animals themselves. It will remove from our minds the idea of a prison, and give us a better view of the animals'.²⁰

17. Zoological Society of London, *Reports to the Council and Auditors of the Zoological Gardens for London for 1913* (1913), p. 32.

18. *The Spectator*, 25 January 1913. A strip of land along the southern boundary of the main Garden had also been granted in 1907 on the understanding that the animals kept on it should be visible from the park. J. Edwards, *London Zoo in Old Photographs* (1996), p. 19.

19. *The Spectator*, 25 January 1913.

20. *The Daily Express*, 27 August 1913.

14. *London*, no. 117, 24 June 1843, p. 257; *The Mirror*, 6 September 1828.

15. *London*, no. 117, 24 June 1843, p. 265.

16. *St. James's Gazette*, 8 April 1901.

In wartime, the Zoo's flowerbeds were turned over to kitchen gardening, poultry and pigs, and some of the commoner animals which were expensive to maintain were used as food for others.²¹ Post-war, with attendances soaring again, more of Swinton's initiatives were introduced. The main walks were doubled in width, part of the Carnivora Terrace, which had given views over the Zoo, was dismantled, and the West Tunnel and an open court with the Pavilion and Regent Building were built, improving circulation and catering.

Other changes were a direct product of the new child-centred philosophy presaged by educational reform and the first school visits. A press report published in 1912 began with the premise that, 'the Zoo is a children's possession...but when did children acquire it?' It concluded:

There is not the slightest evidence that children were thought of at all when the Gardens were formed. Certainly one of the objects of the Society is to advance the Science of Zoology, but the idea that anything is to be gained in the advancement of anything by teaching children is of comparatively modern origin ...²²

After this, the change from Pleasure Garden to *Kindergarten* gathered speed, so much so that by 1930 the educative value of an elephant ride was defined in a legal judgement.²³ The first 'Children's Zoo' was laid out on the site in 1938, and in 1999 the Zoo's latest building, the 'Web of Life' - its design standing as a polemic for education and conservation - made an optimistic new landmark statement from the Park on the Zoo's eastern boundary, abutting the Broad Walk.

By the 1950s, Swinton's plans were deemed inadequate, for the Zoo now accommodated three times as many visitors as in 1912. Instead, between 1950-51, a modish 'Zoo Blueprint' which mirrored contemporary planning proposals for central London, was commissioned from Franz Stengelhofen, to 'weld the gardens into an artistic and attractive whole'. Stengelhofen proposed a revolutionary 'zoo on two floors' which would enlarge the space for visitors on the existing cramped site without reducing the garden area. (fig. 32) Animals

would be housed in two-storey blocks and visitors would move between them on raised walkways, many of them covered in so that winter visitors could see all the animals while remaining 'indoors'.²⁴ Plans for the green landscape were unadventurous by contrast, and dependent on the built environment:

The gardens no less than the buildings feature in the new plan. It is realised that the success of a zoological garden can depend quite as much upon the care given to the gardens as to the houses. All the open space in the zoo, therefore, will be planned so as to provide an attractive setting for the buildings. As far as possible existing trees will be left and further planting of trees and shrubs will be undertaken. Flower beds and lawns will add gaiety and colour throughout the season and many seats will be provided.²⁵

Lacking the finance for this scheme, in 1956 the Zoo's new Secretary, Solly Zuckermann, brought in Sir Hugh Casson as consultant architect and landscape architect Sir Peter Shephard, to modify the scheme, working alongside Stengelhofen. The result, published in 1958 entitled *A New Zoo*, returned to the principle of informality, and left buildings to be designed by individual architects. Casson had already designed the Elephant House in 1956, deliberately planned as another of the Zoo's landmark buildings, a 'landscape out-crop' for animals who were natural 'stars'.²⁶ The newest plan also capitalised on the previously underdeveloped northern parts of the Zoo's site. Here, in 1962-64, on a steep slope on the north canal bank, another landmark was created: the expressionistic aviary designed by Lord Snowdon and Cedric Price.

The design of the cliff face was based on a slate quarry he photographed in Wales and he wants the top of the cliff to look like some cliffs he saw from the Nile. 'It won't be right for a year or two. It has got to be much more overgrown. The idea is that people should be able to come and see the birds and to photograph them in as natural a setting as possible.'²⁷

Shephard's new planting eschewed decorative aesthetics for a new ethos of structural definition and screening. Shrubs and trees in and around the new Lion Terraces provided both cover for the animals and barriers; creepers were trained over buildings to mask hard

21. P. Chalmers Mitchell, *A Centenary History of the Zoological Society of London* (1929), pp. 163-4.

22. *The Westminster Gazette*, 17 January 1912.

23. S. Zuckermann, 'Evolution of a Constitution' in *The Zoological Society of London 1826-1976 and beyond* (1976), p. 10.

24. P. S. Street, *The London Zoo* (1956), pp. 209-13.

25. Street, p. 213.

26. Hugh Casson, *The Architect*, November 1981.

27. *The Times*, 28 May 1965.

outlines; and moats, a feature of Stengelhofen's first plan, were introduced around these new enclosures, backed up with low 'walls' of planting. Elsewhere man-made barriers, such as the high boundary along the canal bank, were generally demolished or disguised. Another concern was to 'soften' the Zoo's boundaries with the Park, 'so that park and Zoo may appear as one'.²⁸ By the Zoo's southern boundary, rubble cleared from bomb-damaged buildings which had been spread over parts of the Regent's Park after the war, had raised the ground level by 3 to 4 metres, creating a bank which continues to screen views of Zoo from Park, and Casson proposed replacing the Zoo's straight boundary railings here with a lake, to create an illusion of unity.

The last decades of the Zoo's history, since the 1970s, have been marked by a shortage of capital and a decline in visitors; landscape design has been overlooked, and no significant new structures were built until quite recently. A £10m rescue package offered by the Department of the Environment in 1988 included a plan to expand the site over another ten acres of the Park, which was trounced by formidable local opposition. Pundits declared that the Zoo had lost its identity, both as a centre of scientific excellence, and as an exciting day out: 'Unsure as whether to offer education, entertainment or endless messages about conservation, [the Zoo] sells itself as a peculiar amalgam of all three...'²⁹ For much of the 1990s it seemed certain that the Zoo would close. The landscape was also in distress, described in the new edition of Pevsner in 1991 as 'a confusingly crowded precinct, a welter of signs, and formless expanses of tarmac [which] conspired to distract from the interest of the individual buildings and their inhabitants'.³⁰ The following year, *The Times* declared that:

London Zoo, with its nine listed buildings, threatens to leave a ghost village on the edge of Regent's Park, a white elephant in the middle of London... The most logical change of use, while remaining within the park ethos, would be for the zoological gardens to be transformed into botanical gardens. The site of the zoo in Regent's Park, in other words, would make an ideal outpost of Kew Gardens.³¹

28. *The Builder*, 21 October 1960; 20 March 1959.

29. *The Guardian*, 18 July 1992.

30. B. Cherryard and N. Pevsner, *The Buildings of England, London 3: North West* (1991).

31. *The Times*, 18 June 1992.

A botanical garden stocked with empty Giraffe, Elephant and Gorilla Houses, and overhung by the barren slopes of the Mappins', would make a melancholy spectacle. Much better, then, that as it enters the twenty-first century London Zoo is pared-down, solvent and beginning to restore and refashion its inheritance of buildings and landscape. A return to the aesthetics of the Victorian pleasure ground is neither viable nor valid now, but the prestige of the London Zoo, one of the capital's greatest institutions, is intact again:

Zoos these days are increasingly regarded as saviours of endangered species, rather than as despoilers of them. There are animals breeding in zoos that have died out in the wild, or are about to. Zoos are modern arks, and they have to change their image to reflect that.³²

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LONDON'S EQUESTRIAN TRADITION

by Joyce Bellamy

The demand for riding facilities has had a profound effect upon the design and management of London's parks and open spaces over the past three centuries. The enjoyment of historic landscapes on horseback – fundamental to the appreciation of rolling English parklands by the families who created them – was not confined to country estates; the same families, visiting London for the season, expected to be able to ride in sylvan surroundings, irrespective of their change in residence. The ranks of riders were reinforced in the nineteenth century by the increasing number of prosperous households with incomes from trade, commerce or other professions, who resided permanently in London. Even if the older members of such families did not ride, they regarded the acquisition of equestrian skills as an important accomplishment for their children, not only as a social asset but also as a life skill for boys intending to make a

32. *FX*, April 1997, p. 74.