

MONKEY BUSINESS IN WELLINGBOROUGH!

I wonder how many readers remember happy visits to Wellingborough Zoo?

One of the last private zoos' in the country, it was situated where the Borough Council Offices stand today, and some Doddington Road residents can still recall the jungle noises disturbing their sleep.....

It was entered by a narrow entrance halfway down Sheep Street, and was a small zoo, compared to such as Whipsnade. Once the lady in the kiosk had given out tickets, in exchange for one and sixpence for adults and sixpence for children, the visitors were soon inside the grounds, walking along the paths between the cages.

The large bear in particular, pacing patiently up and down in his enclosure, looked as if he'd prefer walking somewhere else! There were parrots and jolly cockatoos squawking greetings (we hoped), and lots of small animals to see.

I always thought the seals were luckiest, with a large lake to play in ; and when a bell rang (three times a day), the seals and visitors alike, crowded round the Keeper and his bucket, waiting for the fish to be thrown to the lake's inhabitants. I heard one visitor shout out " I'll have mine in batter, with chips"...Cheek!

Anyway, the little zoo was a favourite place with Wellingborough citizens, who liked to stroll around on sunny days, gazing at the animals and birds who gazed back. ("That's right, get your one and sixpence worth...")

Now.....I wonder who can remember that amazing incident which occurred one afternoon in July, about fifty years ago... A great talking point at the time! Well, having set the scene I will tell you more....

My friend Gladys and myself had a half-day off from work and were wandering around enjoying our ice-cream cornet, when suddenly we heard loud shouts behind us. "A MONKEY HAS ESCAPED".

Everyone froze where they stood. Though not for long in my case. I can tell you....

Suddenly my ice-cream went flying, and my hand was taken in a strong hairy grip! I found myself being dragged along, at ever increasing speed by the huge hand, which, when I managed to take a frightened look, belonged to the escaping monkey, and I was his hostage....

And WAS I scared!...

I could hear Gladys screaming, and the shouts of the other visitors as they began to give chase, but the sound faded as we quickly left them behind, I certainly left that zoo faster than I had entered it.

Out into Sheep Street, we careered. You may recall the traffic then was much less than today, and we had a clear road as we sped up the hill towards Wharton's Book Shop. This monkey wasn't in the mood for browsing among the shelves today. Not likely! "Wait till Johnny Morris gets this in his next book".... We raced on, past the Hind Hotel, where some jolly revellers actually cheered us on...and probably vaguely wondered if the ale was extra strong that day, or was that REALLY a girl and a monkey cantering by? "Hooray! Tallyho!.

Without pausing, the monkey turned abruptly into Market Street, past "Green and Valentines" (remember that lovely shop?) and scattering the crowds of shoppers as we dashed along. He was chattering angrily in monkey language at the people jumping out of the way. I was past caring....

Do you remember too – The Regal Cinema – that good old building on the Market Square? Well, that same day, and just at that time, the cinema-goers were leaving after the Matinee – and yes! It was a Tarzan and Jane film that week, so I suppose everyone around thought we were a publicity stunt, and they cheered too! (Were YOU one of them? Well, you should have known better....)

On and on we raced – my feet barely touched the ground. The County cafe (now Burton's) loomed up, and I wondered dazedly if the monkey would fancy a cup of tea and a bun, no such luck. --- He turned quickly right, and off we galloped down Midland Road. (I couldn't help wondering if the lady standing outside the cafe' was Mrs Sidney Cooke – a well known Wellingborough resident. Remember her in "The Archers" some years ago? (Arnold Peters certainly would).

Anyway, we were going downhill now, very, very, fast – past the row of Co-op buildings (remember THEM before Swansgate?) No time to window gaze today. We were flying....

BUT – did I but know – HELP was on its way! The zoo telephone must have been busy while we were on this mad journey, and to my great joy and relief I realised the Police Station lay ahead. Thank goodness, the monkey hadn't realised it.

Several men were hurriedly assembling a large net – and too late the monkey saw his last moments of freedom approaching.

Thankfully for me, the next chaotic minutes were blurred. But as things settled down, all the shouting faded, and I couldn't hear any more monkey noises, I became aware of a large policeman importantly approaching, notebook in hand, pencil poised.

He looked at the monkey, now glaring balefully from inside the net. He looked at me still sprawled , panting, on the ground: He solemnly licked his pencil, and spoke.

"Now then, wot's all this 'ere? I shall want your name and address. And are YOU in charge of this animal?" he asked.

"No" I replied (and I can remember it like yesterday), "Not guilty, Officer! The monkey was in charge of ME. Kindly arrest him on a charge of kidnapping, and causing a Public Nuisance. And if you will kindly arrange a lift back to my friend Gladys at the Zoo, I would rather NOT travel with the monkey." So there! Well, I did get another ice-cream later (courtesy of the zoo) and a ride back to Gladys, who was having one of her 'turns'.

But like I asked earlier – who might be able to remember this incident – the talk of the town for quite some time? Did anyone take a photo?

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