

The Gardens' Menagerie

Imagine this sight! You are taking a stroll in the Gardens and admiring the beautiful flowers. But there sitting comfortably is an Orangutan sipping a glass of whisky and puffing on a cigar. Further on you notice two tiger cubs accompanying the Director of the Gardens on his daily walks. Then even more remarkable – you think you see a crocodile swimming in Swan Lake. Are these scenarios very far-fetched?

Well! Not if you were a visitor to the Gardens in the late 1890s when H.N. Ridley was here. As Director of the Gardens, he not only oversaw the management of the botanical collections, but also ran a small zoo.

The collection of living animals went back to the days of the Agri-Horticultural Society in 1859 – the precursor to our present Gardens. An annual report on the Zoological Collections in 1876 highlighted the presence of a rhinoceros, sloth-bear, kangaroo, and a collection of birds just to name a few. In its heyday, the zoo was even well-known around the world. In those days the first question that travellers asked was “Where is the menagerie?”

Most of the animals were donated by regular patrons of the Gardens or had been captured within the region – like the Malayan Honey Bears which were kept in bear pit - and handed over to the Gardens for upkeep. Once



Ridley as Noah, during a fancy dress party

common animals in Singapore (but rare now) like the porcupine or the scaly anteater were kept in cages. The menagerie even boasted an exotic collection of animals like the flamingoes from Egypt, various marsupials from Australia and even foxes from China. Ridley's zoo was also used as a temporary abode for many animals before they were shipped to faraway zoological gardens like London, Vienna and Calcutta.

Ridley made acute observations on the animals in the zoo. Regular activities were recorded in the Annual Reports of the Gardens. He even published a detailed account of the fascinating behaviour of the animals which included many funny anecdotes (H.N. Ridley, 1906, “The Menagerie at the Botanic Gardens”, in the *Journal Straits Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* 46: 133-194).

Remember the crocodile in Swan Lake? Well! That's not a tale at all. Ridley mentioned that one of the crocodiles escaped to the lake and grew to about 2 m long. It devoured waterfowls there and even tried to drag workers who were taking water

from the lake. When the lake was drained, it managed to hide in the mud and later escaped. Somehow it was never captured, nor seen nor heard of again.

Tigers were also kept in the collection. But it must have been dangerous to visit the Gardens back then. Ridley recorded that a wild tiger used to roam round the Gardens' Jungle for months in 1893! And another tigress, originally caught in Pahang, would be labelled “racist” nowadays. Apparently she was tame with Europeans but totally disliked the natives. So...the “Sarong Party Girl” concept was already present in those days. And the drinking, smoking Orangutans are no tale either. They really acquired the taste for sweet wines like port. Can you imagine them sitting on the verandah of Burkill Hall, merrymaking the days away with booze in one hand and cigars in the other? Ridley even recorded how a Malayan tapir and the rhinoceroses always dropped their dung on the exact same spot making housekeeping for them convenient.

Despite careful attention, many animals perished perhaps due to ignorance of their proper diet or lack of knowledge on their upkeep. There's a poignant story of two partridges (a male and a female) that were at first kept in separate cages but were united together as they kept calling for each other. But alas! Marital bliss was not meant to be as the male bird pecked the head of the female till she died. This was one male who didn't want to be henpecked at all! A number of animals also succumbed to illnesses and died during their stay in the Gardens or while on their onward voyage over the sea to distant lands.

Jeremy Purseglove



Many past directors of the Gardens resided in Burkill Hall including J.W. Purseglove, who was Director from 1954-1957. These old photographs, taken in the mid-50s, have been kindly provided by his son, Jeremy Purseglove. A young Jeremy is seen in the bottom picture, playing with his friends, Andrew (middle) and Gillian (far right), children of J.W. Ewart (see page 17 on the mention of J.W. Ewart). It was mentioned that there used to be bear pits in the background of this picture where Malayan Honey Bears were once kept.

When the Pursegloves lived in Burkill Hall, they kept ducks near their home. These ducks merrily enjoyed a swim in the orchid-watering tank located nearby. Notice a gravestone on bottom right of the top picture with the name "Susan" engraved on it. Besides overseeing the animals in the zoo, Ridley also had a pet dog, Susan. When the dog died, it was buried near Burkill Hall.

We are totally grateful to Jeremy for providing these personal family photographs.



The ducks at play and a reminder of Susan (1889-1902)



Jeremy (far left) with the Ewart children

Photos by Jeremy Purseglove



SBC Archives

The Gardens in the 60s, when long-tailed macaques were once common residents

Rarely were the animals purchased. After 1881, no funds were granted by the government for their upkeep. So expenses for feeding and housing the animals were paid out of what could be spared from the Gardens' vote. No large animals like the elephant could be kept on account of the expense. It was this perennial pecuniary problem that ultimately caused the demise of the menagerie. As its upkeep became too much to bear, the zoo was abolished in 1903 and the animals were gradually taken away.

So gone are the days of the menagerie. And no longer do the visitors ask "Where is the menagerie?" but instead "Where is the National Orchid Garden?" Our only zoological collections are the free roaming animals that are part and parcel of the Gardens. One might notice the occasional monitor lizard scurrying away on a flight to freedom, or the delicate green Oriental Whip Snake slithering away amidst the green *Murraya* hedges. But the common "zoo" residents like

squirrels, terrapins and parakeets or even our screeching cicadas are here to stay and make a visit to the Gardens all the more an entertaining one. Don't fret the next time you thought you saw the scales of a crocodile bobbing out of the murky waters of Swan Lake. It could be our long lost crocodile coming back for a visit or how would you like to see our Director walking around the Gardens with two tigers - Siegfried and Roy - as his bodyguards? Wouldn't that be a sight!!!



Derek Liew

One of our current resident zoological collections, the Oriental Whip Snake, which can be spotted now and then

Hassan Ibrahim
Herbarium