

## DESMOND MORRIS

Desmond Morris was a major influence on my lifelong interests in animals, and zoos in particular. I used to rush home from school just in time to catch the opening of 'Zoo Time' the Granada tv programme beamed direct from a studio that had been purpose-built in London Zoo (near the Bird House) and presented by Desmond Morris, then Curator of Mammals at London. Even in those days of only having two television channels there was often an overlap of timing of the BBC's 'Animal Magic', there was no choice – for me at least – for Zoo Time to have priority. Desmond Morris was informative, respected the animals and the keepers who brought them into the studio and did not speak-down to viewers. And you never knew what was going to be shown next, or what would happen; viewers were used to seeing live productions and it was not until later years that we appreciated how skilled the whole team must have been and how key the presenter was to make the show work within a tight 25-minute slot. The previous Curator, George Canadale, had taken animals to the BBC Studios with all the issues associated with taking animals – and keepers – out of the Zoo. When Desmond Morris started at London in 1956, he insisted that a studio was created within the Zoo, and that was done enabling a far wider range of animals to be used. To my surprise, on checking some facts, Zoo Time, that was first screened in 1956, only ran until 1959 before it became the 'Animal Show' initially presented by Harry Watt – who I cannot recall at all – and then Chris Kelly. But it was Desmond Morris who had made the impact and was synonymous with the programme.

Desmond Morris was a talented man with diverse interests, he was a surrealist painter, worked at the Institute of Contemporary Art, even became Vice-Chairman of Oxford United Football Club. He had studied Zoology at Birmingham University, where he refused to experiment on animals, writing his thesis on the ten-spined stickleback which became the subject of his first book. Whilst at London Zoo his interests in the mentality of primates, and chimpanzees in particular, developed leading towards the phasing-out of chimpanzee tea parties and the development of intelligence studies on chimpanzees, with an observation study-centre built in the then Children's Zoo and exploration into the chimpanzees' (and an individual named Congo in particular) concept of creative art, spawning a book and papers that controversially split opinions. But this was not to be as controversial as the book he wrote in 1966 (*The Naked Ape*, publ. 1967) which examined man in the eyes of a zoologist in a way he would any other animal, and not as an anthropologist would. The late 1960s was the perfect period for such a book; it split the critics, upset many, and was loved by the masses and became an international best seller and probably was a prime reason why he left the Zoo and bought a huge villa in the Mediterranean where he was able to indulge in writing and painting.

Of his – about 60 – books, *The Mammals* remains in the top ten of my favourite animal books; published in 1965, its lists of mammalian species is far removed from current taxonomy but it was the only easily accessible book for me that included all the then considered mammalian species (except rodents and bats) while the choice of species selected by Morris to focus page profiles on reveal little-known facts that I still reference today. When I mention this to Tim May he provided this anecdote. Tim had been to a Natural History Book Fair at Kew Gardens, in London, where he purchased two early copies of the *International Zoo Year Book* and, when he turned round, Desmond Morris was standing behind him. "I was the editor of those editions" he said; he was very friendly and entered into a conversation and kindly signed both books for him.

In 1971 Desmond Morris returned to Oxford as a Research Fellow. He remained in Oxford until his wife Ramona died in 2018 and he moved to Ireland to live with his son until his death, aged 98.

Finally, a thought that could be a lesson to us all. When Desmond Morris started as Curator at London Zoo there was said to have been differences of opinions between him and David Attenborough, but that soon changed and they became close friends. One time, when they were both aged in their 80s, they were discussing the fact that they both continued full and active working lives and Morris asked Attenborough if he had ever been to a gym, exercised, or ate healthily. From both of them the answer to all three questions was 'no' so Morris conceded that it was their youthful, undimmed, curiosity that kept them both going.

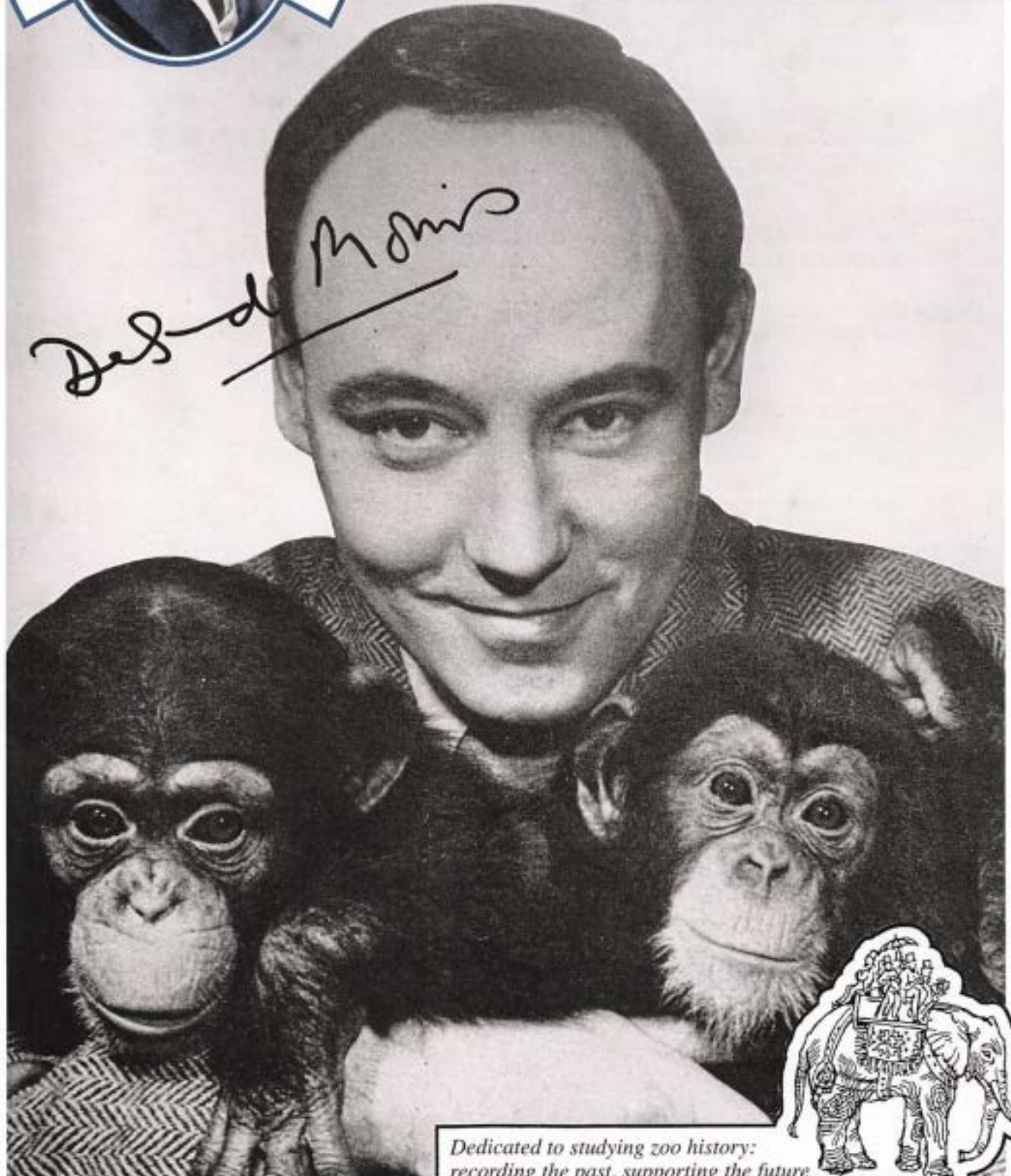
**John Adams**



# The Bartlett Society

## NEWSLETTER

No. 185 • May 2026



*Dedicated to studying zoo history:  
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FOUNDED BY C.H. KEELING ON 27<sup>th</sup> OCTOBER 1984

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*Front cover: Desmond Morris who died on the 19<sup>th</sup> April 2026 at the age of 98. See page 8.*