





ARE PRIVATE ZOOS SAFE?

*LYNN BARBER
visits some of Britain's
privately owned zoos,
including John
Aspinall's, where
12-year-old Robin
Birley was mauled by a
tiger on Easter Monday*

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John Aspinall is anxious to demonstrate the size of his male Siberian tiger. Not that anyone is belittling it for a moment: the knot of spectators gathered outside the cage are all quite ready to sign affidavits, if necessary, that the tiger is the biggest they have ever seen. But Mr Aspinall maintains you cannot judge the size of a tiger when it is merely prowling around, and he is going to make this one stretch to its full height on its hind legs. Worse, Mr Aspinall plans to get *underneath* the tiger to give a human scale of comparison. We all hold our breaths.

Mr Aspinall enters the cage alone, unlocking and relocking the complicated series of safety doors. The male tiger and his almost equally large mate prowl curiously round him, knocking him occasionally with their vast flanks. A keeper has meanwhile appeared with a hunk of bloody meat, half a carcase, at the end of a long pole. At a signal from Mr Aspinall, the keeper

holds the pole up against the outside of the cage, so that the meat rests on the top bars. Aspinall walks toward it, followed by both tigers. The male sees the meat but is wary – this is an odd way of feeding – and sniffs curiously at Mr Aspinall. But at last he realises that the food is there for the taking, if he jumps. He eyes the meat, measures distance, paces back and forward again, and at last with a colossal spring leaps up to snatch it. As the tiger poises in mid-air, Mr Aspinall steps forward and, for a camera-shutter blink, is caught under the tiger's outstretched belly. Beam of satisfaction from Aspinall: gasps of relief from the spectators.

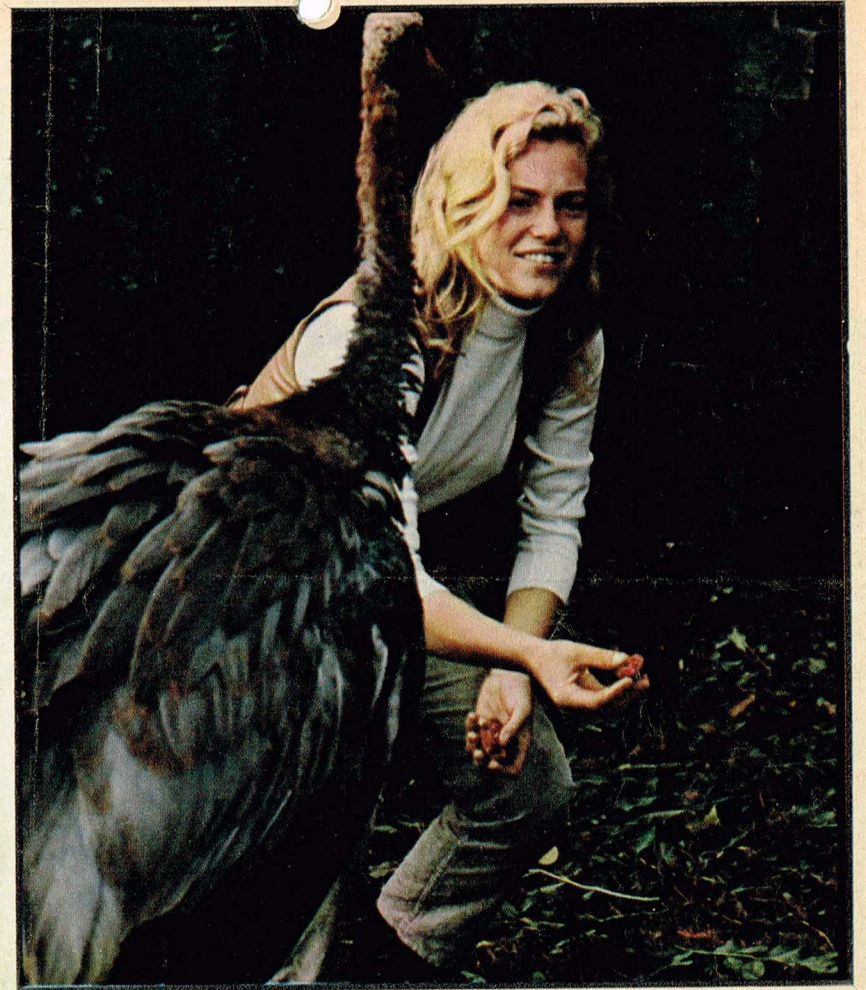
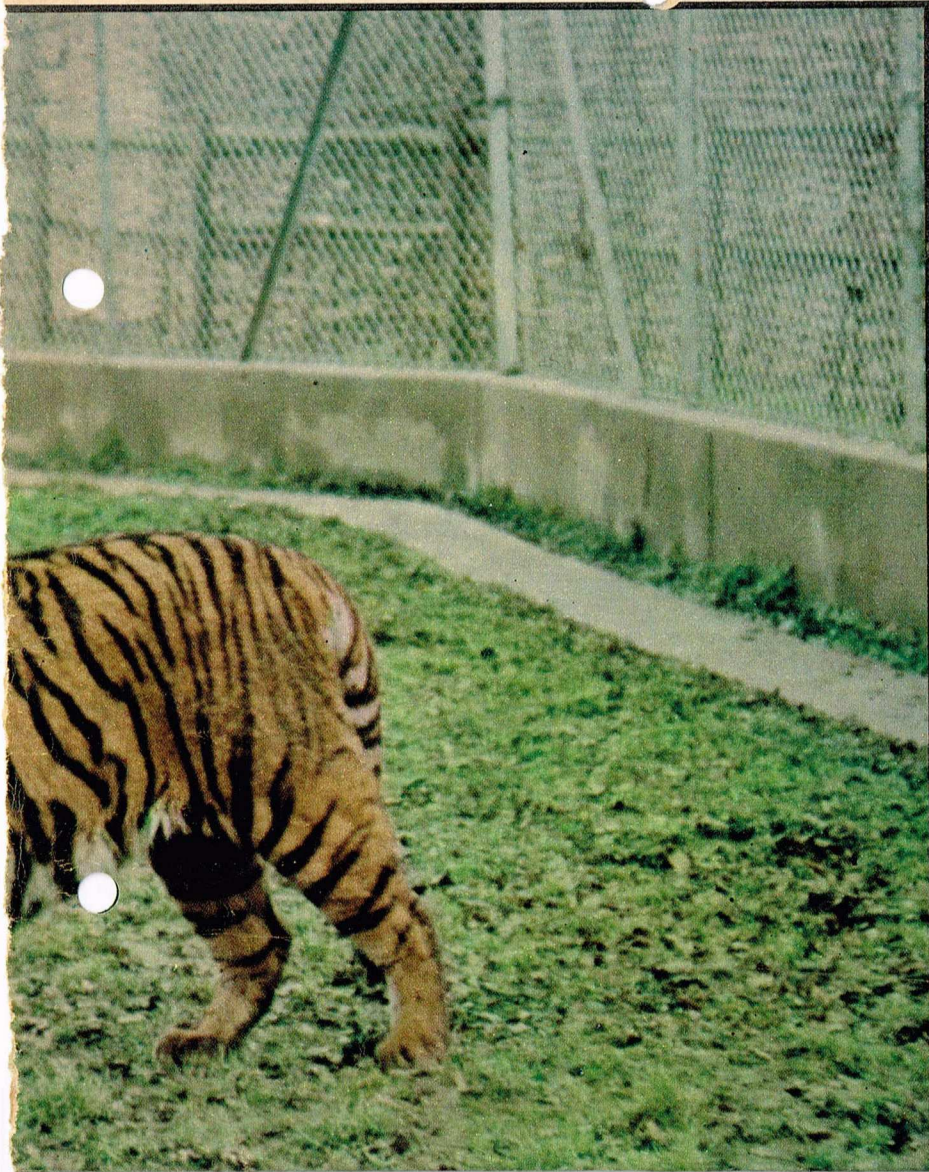
John Aspinall, former member of the Mayfair set, organiser of private gaming parties, and now owner of the Clermont Club, keeps 14 tigers, along with gorillas, wolves, boar, deer and bison on his 50-acre estate at Howletts near Canterbury. His private zoo is by far the largest and most opulent

in the country, but it is not the only one closed to the public.

There is no way of knowing exactly how many private zoos exist, because they do not have to be registered, but the RSPCA believes that the number is growing. Exotic animals are now cheap and easily obtainable: local pet shops quite commonly stock monkeys or alligators or bush-babies at less than £20 a head, and specialised importers like Ravensden at Bedford offer bigger game "off the peg". Thus private zoo-owning is no longer the prerogative of the very rich, and the RSPCA's nightmare of "tigers in every suburban backgarden" is increasingly plausible.

How safe, in fact, are the private zoos? On Easter Monday 12-year-old Robin Birley, son of Mr Mark Birley, owner of the London nightclub Annabel's, was mauled by a tiger, at Mr Aspinall's zoo. And last September a 19-year-old model was also mauled at Howletts.

Exotic animals already crop up in the most unlikely places. In the three



***JOHN ASPINALL** (far left) spends most of his weekends playing with the Siberian tigers in his private zoo at Howletts, the house near Canterbury he and his wife Min (together, left) bought when gorillas and a tiger grew*



too big and boisterous for a London flat. Aubrey Buxton, Director of Anglia Television, "livens up the landscape" of his Stansted estate with rare birds. Above: His daughter Lucinda tries to feed a nandu, a South American ostrich. John Knowles (below left), 40-year-old managing director of the Anglian Food Group, plans to open a wildlife park at his home near Winchester. Meanwhile his collection is housed in a former racing stable



Photographs by John Benton Harris

cellars of his house at Surbiton, Surrey, Capt. J. E. ("Alligator") Edwards keeps 62 tanks of fishes and amphibians, plus 22 cages of reptiles, and an alligator. The only restrictions on back-garden zoos are peripheral ones: "public nuisance", if the neighbours complain; "cruelty to animals", if reported to the RSPCA; planning permission for large cages; and quarantine restrictions if specially imported.

Even within these laws there are many loopholes, illustrated by the case of Bill Foyle, of Billericay, Essex. Mr Foyle was a slaughterer by trade, and when a travelling circus brought him their elderly lions to kill he decided to keep them instead. He quite properly applied for planning permission to build them a den, but after much bureaucratic consternation the council replied that lions' dens were not on their planning list and permission was not required. In the next few years Mr Foyle added peacocks,

racing pigeons, a llama, a baboon, monkeys, bears, eagles, buzzards, foxes and a palomino stallion to his collection. When he decided to build a big new aviary for his birds, of the same dimensions as his lions' den, he did not bother about planning permission. But the council descended in force: aviaries were on their list. Mr Foyle responded by moving the birds into the lions' den and the lions into the new aviary, but unfortunately this ruse failed and his zoo has now been disbanded.

People seem to start zoos in the most haphazard manner. Mr Aspinall started his 11 years ago, when he was still living in London. He bought a tigress and two baby gorillas, and he would take the tigress for walks in Eaton Square, but as she grew bigger this became impracticable, so he bought Howletts and went on from there. All zoo-owners agree that a zoo, once started, is bound to grow, and Mr Aspinall explains why: "Once you get

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PUBLIC access is allowed to some private zoos. One is the bird collection maintained by Aubrey Buxton among old gravel pits and a dammed stream at Stansted

are given the best in harmless educational toys – building bricks, a top, a swing, even a pedal motorcar – and Mrs Aspinall spends most of her time with them. For the last few months she has even been sharing their nursery bed because they pine and might die if left alone.

Running a zoo is an expensive hobby and Mr Aspinall reckons to spend all his income ("apart from holidays and the odd painting") on his animals. The tigers, he considers, are "very cheap to maintain. They only cost £1,000 a year for all 14 of them – that's half the cost of having one racehorse in training. A rich man could afford to keep 200 tigers." They live on fallen stock sent in by 15 local

two lions. Grahame Dangerfield's collection currently costs £2,000 a year to run (£1,000 on staff wages, £1,000 on food) despite such economies as buying in bulk from the knacker instead of the butcher, and filling out diets with tripe and pellet foods. Unlike Aspinall, he rarely has to buy an animal because so many are given to him by friends and local people (his golden pheasant was found sitting on the bonnet of a parked car in Harpenden and never claimed). When he did a regular television show he used to get 500 appeals a year to take in pets which their owners had tired of: "This happens all the time and on this the foreign pet trade survives. It ought to be stopped."



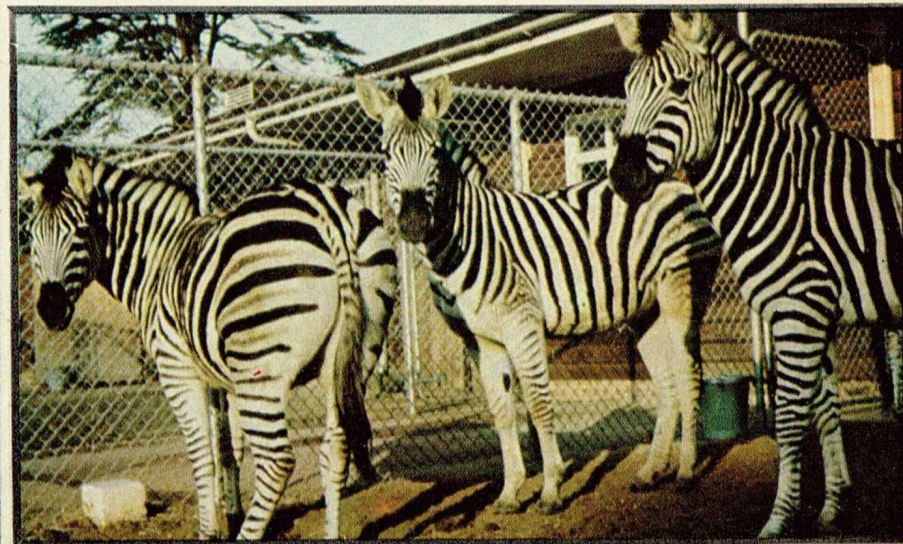
HORNES MENSWEAR STORES
IN LONDON AND IN
PRINCIPAL CITIES

meat a day. All his livestock are superbly fed and housed – “My gorillas don’t think they’re living in a cage: they think they’re in a palace and we’re the servants.” They have three keepers plus a full-time vet on the premises, and their pantry contains crates of mangoes, custard apples, grapefruit, aubergines, artichokes, melons, chicory, avocados, pineapple, peaches, courgettes, plus specially made mineral biscuits, bottles of dried cherries, cartons of Cadbury’s snack and Club chocolate bars, bottles of Ribena, and jars of peanut butter.

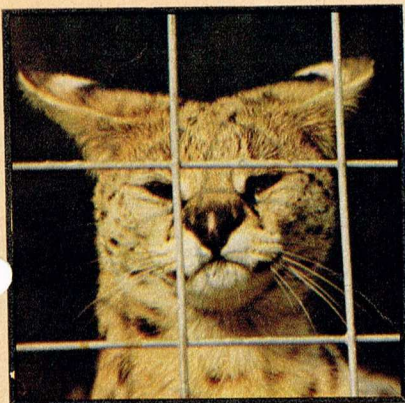
Bill Foyle’s animals at Billericay used to eat their way through £45 a week, £21 of which went on the

EVEN the best regulated zoos are liable to occasional escapes and accidents. I was almost involved in one myself when I visited a private collection at Sleaford, Lincs, belonging to 46-year-old James Dean, who is blind. He wanted me to meet the pride of his collection, a baboon called Baba, and he assured me she was docile. She lives in a largish outdoor cage reached via a safety cage.

Mr Dean unlocked the outer door, escorted me into the safety cage, and then opened the inner door to let Baba join us. She came through, Mr Dean shut the inner door behind her and relocked the outer door so that we were all locked together in the



JOHN KNOWLES plans to open a wildlife park at his home near Winchester. Until Whipsnade-style enclosures are built for them his zebras live in corrals



TWO African wild cats are a cherished immigrant quota in the Dangerfield zoo

small cage. I stroked Baba and all went well initially, until suddenly she took offence and leapt at my hair. I screamed but Mr Dean, being blind, could not see what was going on and I spent some terrified minutes with Baba perched on my back, batting at my face and clawing my hair. Eventually Mr Dean was able to pull Baba away. But she was still making lunges at my head and I was no nearer getting out of the cage. Trying to keep hysteria down, I asked Mr Dean to let me have the outer door key so that I could let myself out. He handed me a keyring of about 100 almost identical keys. At last I found the right key and escaped, but I resolved never to try friendship with a baboon again.

Mr Aspinall, in his 11 years at Howletts, has had a fair number of

escapes, and recently there were the more serious mishaps when the model and Robin Birley were mauled. Mr Aspinall considers escapes an occupational hazard, and says he has fewer than, say, Whipsnade. His last one was a wolf which got out when the earth subsided under its cage, leaving a wolf-size tunnel. The local papers promptly set up a hue-and-cry, **HUNGRY WOLF TERRORISES KENT VILLAGERS**, and Mr Aspinall and his staff combed the neighbourhood. The wolf was loose for several days but Mr Aspinall reports proudly that it did not attack any local chickens or livestock, let alone humans, and eventually came trotting back to Mr Aspinall's whistle.

Dangerfield disagrees with Aspinall about the inevitability of escapes. He maintains: "It need never happen. The sort of time it does happen is when you're trying to save money on a cage and you're hoping to get away with it but you don't. Now I can't replace an animal very easily if I lose it - for instance, I've just got my first British red squirrel after 15 years, and if this one escaped I might have another 15 years to wait. If anything potentially dangerous got away one should definitely inform the police because, to be quite honest, if it really is a dicey thing, it ought to be shot on sight." This actually happened at his first zoo when his dingo escaped. Dangerfield was leading the dingo across the

yard to its cage, the dingo pulled on its lead, Dangerfield pulled to restrain it and the dingo leapt at his arm and tore it. The shock made him drop the lead and the dingo trotted off towards the open front gates. "There wasn't time to hang around wondering whether he might or might not attack someone. He had injured me once before. The front gates were open, there were children outside, so I grabbed a gun and - Bang!"

THIS is the unsentimental scientist talking, the side of Mr Dangerfield that prevails in running the zoo, but he admits weaker moments: "I suppose to some extent I am sentimental in that I will take in injured animals which I don't need or want, and, for instance, I will trap and kill sparrows to feed my owls and falcons but if a child brings an injured sparrow to the front door we do all we can to save it. People think we're mad, but I don't know - I think one has this trust."

Dangerfield and Aspinall both agree that captive breeding in zoos has an important part to play in natural preservation. Aspinall feels that the huge sum recently fetched by Stubbs's painting of a cheetah at auction could better have been spent on preserving cheetahs in the wild.

Aspinall prefers the higher mammals, the "lords of the jungle" which demand respect rather than pity,

and he dates this attitude from his early childhood. "I was born in India. And I had an uncle who kept two tame tigers and two tame elephants, and he was my hero when I was a child - I always longed to be like him. I thought that was one of the meanings of adulthood: to make friends with the animals - not to own them as exhibits or some damn thing, but to have a relationship with them, to be able to say, 'That great tiger is my friend.' I suppose it came from reading Mowgli too, and Ernest Thompson Seton, my favourite author as a child. I really respect and love the animals, that's what it's all about."

He carries this respect and love to almost mystical extremes: "I have told everyone here that if I am killed by an animal, the animal is not to be shot on any account. I want to be buried with the animals - all animals that die here are buried at the end of the avenue and so is my daughter, who died when she was three months old. Except hoofed animals, which are given to the tigers. I want to build a mausoleum, maybe just a simple obelisk. I have a strong historical sense, you see - everything is so ephemeral, families die out, prosperity vanishes. I would like to think that in 1,000 years' time, explorers will break through the undergrowth and see this obelisk and say: 'My God, 1,000 years ago gorillas lived here and a man and his wife and his family!'"