

# The History of Colchester Zoo Information Pack

This pack is aimed at people who require in depth information for coursework, homework and may also be of general interest to anyone. It can also support learning during a visit to Colchester Zoo.

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# Before Colchester Zoo

Before Colchester Zoo existed stood Stanway Hall stood a small estate just outside Colchester. The current Hall still stands and was built in 1880 on the site of the former hall which was built in 1731, however a manor or hall has stood on this site since 1002. Though the 1731 hall no longer stands, several original features from the 1731 hall still exist, such as fireplaces and wood panelling within the current building.

Stanway Hall is still used today, not as a family home but as offices for the Zoo.



Stanway Hall early 1960's

Along with Stanway Hall, stands All Saints Church. Built in the 13<sup>th</sup> century and enlarged in the 15<sup>th</sup> century it was then downsized in the 17<sup>th</sup> century to a private chapel, All Saints Church now lies as a listed ruin following its disuse from the 1800s.

However, even as a ruined church, All Saints was used to house animals in the early days of the Zoo, being a home for rheas (*Rhea pennata*). Today the church now forms part of the grounds by the outside viewing area of the orangutans and the interior is no longer accessible to visitors outside of special events.



Darwin's rhea (*Rhea pennata*)  
date unknown © Peter Zwitter



All Saints Church in 2022



# The Farrars

The origins of Colchester Zoo Started in Northern England when Frank and Helena Farrar met in Southport, Lancashire, when Frank was an estate agent and Helena came in to view a flat.

As a teenager, Frank worked with his father at the short-lived family-run zoo in Scarisbrick, Southport in Lancashire which opened in 1924. In 1940, Frank joined the RAF as a pilot and saw combat in World War Two. After the war, Frank joined the effort to rebuild Britain after the Nazi air raids before becoming an estate agent for the Southport area.

Helena did not start life in Southport but in Sydney, Australia. The youngest child of Dutch and Australian parents, Helena would spend her childhood exploring the Australian bush and was the one who was sent out to clear the outside toilet of snakes, spiders and scorpions, even though she was the youngest child!

At some point in the late 1940s Frank had bought a lioness cub called Sammy, from a local pet shop, which meant when Helena married Frank in 1950, the lioness joined them! Thankfully, Helena was no stranger to wild animals, and was not fazed by the unusual house pet.

In the early days of their marriage, they took unwanted animals into their home, parrots, armadillos, a fully grown bull in the garden and, in the greenhouse, a cobra.

In 1953 the Farrars opened up Southport Model Zoo, which their neighbours were very pleased with. However, Helena did still keep some animals at home before moving them to Southport Zoo when they grew too big. One such animal was an Asiatic lion called Rajah (AKA Big Boy). Helena bought Rajah from a department store in Liverpool. This cub soon grew to be over 113kg (25 stone). Alongside Sammy and Rajah, there was leopard called Chief Horrible Noise or Chiefy.



Rajah with Helena Farrar (left) Frank Farrar (right) and local radio host (centre) late 1950s  
©Fred & Joan Honisett

# The Farrar's Time at Southport Zoo

As was common in the 1950s & 1960s, animals would be taken to appear on films and TV shows and were used in publicity events. As the Farrars had kept big cats in their home since the 1950s, they were well behaved and house trained, and they become well known within the TV and film industry.



Film actor Stewart Granger with Chiefy the leopard at a film premiere in the 1960s. ©Fred & Joan Honisett

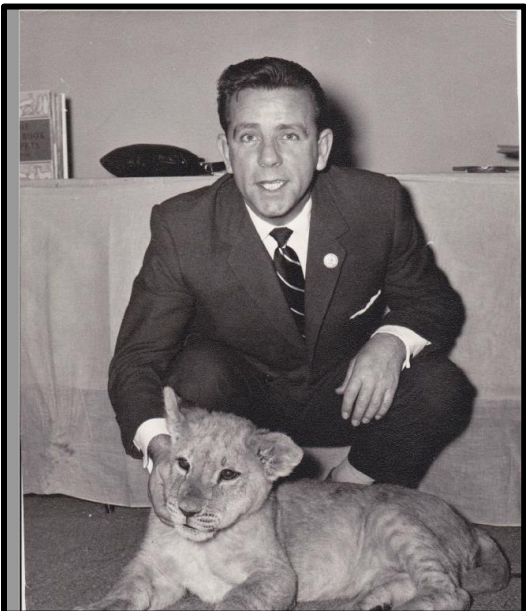


Helena Farrar with Bengals tiger cubs, Tank and Rebel on kid's TV in the mid-1960s ©Fred & Joan Honisett

Due to the Farrars involvement with the show biz industry, Hollywood actor Kirk Douglas gave the Farrars a lioness cub called Queen, who would later meet film and TV stars of the 1950s and 60s.



Hollywood actor Kirk Douglas with Queen the lion cub. ©Fred & Joan Honisett



Film and TV actor Norman Wisdom with Queen the lion cub. ©Fred & Joan Honisett

# The Move Down South

By this time Southport Zoo was doing very well with tourists, however the plot of land was only 4 hectares (10 acres) and there was no room to expand along the sea front. The Farrars had looked into relocating the Zoo, but unfortunately, the possible purchase of a country house and grounds in Warwickshire near Rugby had fallen through.

Whilst Helena was having a conversation with a friend, Joan Honisett, who was originally from Essex, showed Helena a Colchester Town newspaper Joan's mother had sent her as a reminder of home.

When looking through the paper Helena noticed an advert for the sale of a manor house with grounds called Jacques Hall near Manningtree. However, when a planning proposal was submitted the local people were concerned about safety and blocked the proposal.

Furthermore, Jacques Hall would not have worked well as a location for a zoo as the area was too far from a major town or holiday destination like Southport. At this time, not many people owned a car, which meant a zoo in the middle of the countryside with no large settlement nearby would struggle to get visitors.

Even though these options fell through the goal was to find a larger area to build a brand new zoo. Consequently, in 1962 when on a promotional tour in Cambridgeshire with a bear for the National Coal Board, for which the bear was the mascot, Helena decided to have a look around northern Essex.

Whilst exploring north Essex, Helena happened across a "for sale" sign for Stanway Hall and the adjoining land which included lakes, a large country house to set up home, and even a ruined medieval church. It met all the requirements. Frank came down to join Helena soon after to view the property and around New Year's Day 1963 the contracts were signed and Frank and Helena Farrar became the new owners of Stanway Hall.



Front of Stanway Hall in the 1963

© Grist



# Stanway Hall Zoo Park

Stanway Hall was just over 10 hectares (25 acres) and offered the Farrars the opportunities to build a larger zoo and expand.

After one of the worse winters on record, with the lowest temperature recorded in Colchester at -35° C, the Farrars started employing their first keeping staff. Ronald Physick was the first keeper, having already worked at Paignton Zoo in Devon. Ronald was followed by Tony, Douglas, Sheelagh, and Patience.

By May 1963, the new zoo was ready to move in the animals from Southport to Colchester. The biggest move was the lions. Sammy had passed away by this point but Rajah and Queen (who was now an adult) made the move to Colchester. Helena travelled with them as Queen was not used to travelling, unlike Rajah who was not concerned about the long drive after years of travelling to be on film sets such as Tarzan.

Before the zoo opened, Frank Farrar had a vision for the zoo and what he and Helena Farrar wanted to achieve.

*“Stanway Hall offers me the opportunity of helping in the preservation of animals”.*

*“Preserving Stanway Hall and grounds in their historical appearance whilst presenting for visitors a unique collection of wild animals in natural surroundings”.*

**Frank Farrar**  
May 1963



Frank Farrar.  
©Fred & Joan Honisett



Helena Farrar  
©Fred & Joan Honisett



Frank and Helena Farrar.  
©Fred & Joan Honisett

# Stanway Hall Zoo Park

The purchase of the Stanway Hall Estate was the realisation of a lifetime's ambition for the owners. Helena Farrah acted as the zoo curator during this period, becoming one of the first female curators in Europe.

When the zoo opened for the first time on Sunday the 2<sup>nd</sup> of June 1963, an estimated 12,000 people visited across the Sunday and the Monday. On the Sunday morning before the zoo opened at 10am, staff were still putting up animal information signs at the enclosures.



Newspaper report, 1963



## STANWAY HALL ZOO PARK

NOW OPEN — 10 a.m. until dusk

3 Miles from Colchester on the Tiptree Road

A unique collection of animals and birds in near natural surroundings

CAFETERIA : ULTRA - MODERN COFFEE BAR

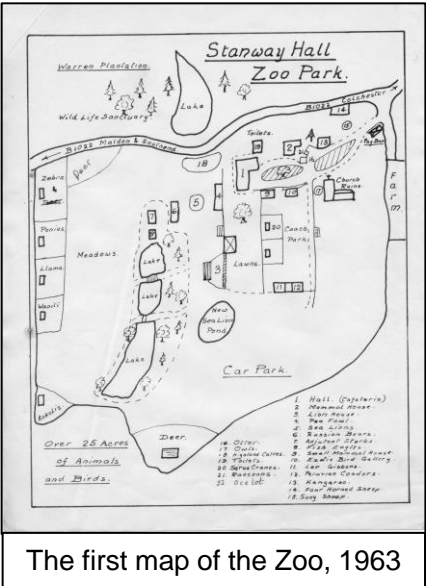
10-ACRE PICNIC AREA : FREE CAR PARK

COACHES CATERED FOR

Admission: Adults, 3/- Children under 14, 1/6

EAST ANGLIA'S OWN ZOOLOGICAL PARK

Newspaper advert, 1963

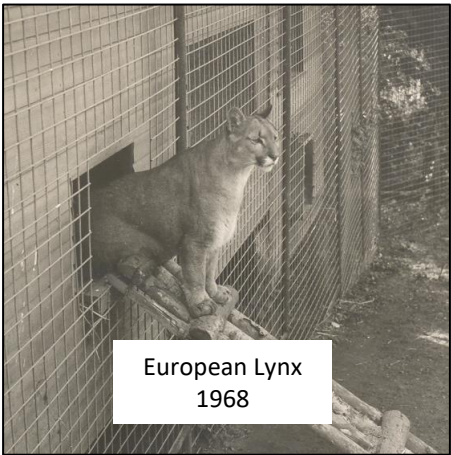
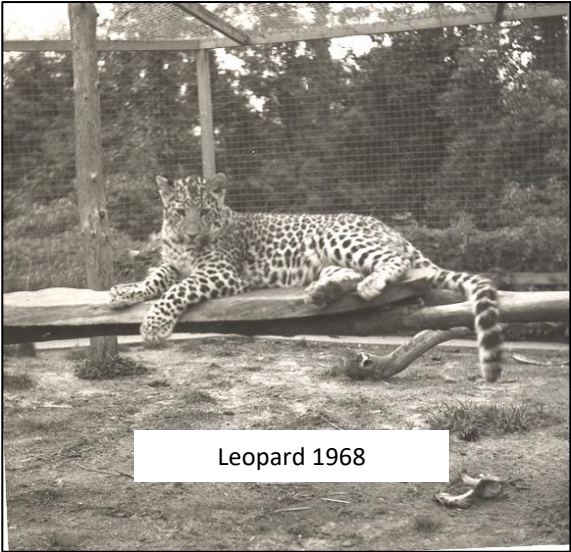
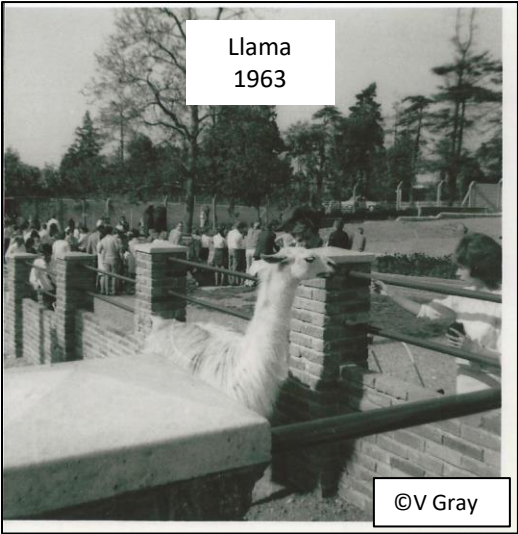


The first map of the Zoo, 1963



# Stanway Hall Zoo Park

Under the ownership of the Farrar's, Stanway Hall Zoo Park was home to a variety of animals, some species we still have today and others we no longer have. This could be because the enclosure was deemed unsuitable, they were not part of conservation action, or they passed away and there were no individuals in other zoos to replace them.



# Tough Times

Stanway Hall Zoo Park had become a popular destination for people in East Anglia and a place of pride for the citizens of Colchester.

However, the 1970s saw the economic situation in the UK decline. Protests and strikes in the public sector were regular, and power cuts were commonplace. Colchester, like many towns at the time was also facing troubles, with unemployment at it's highest in decades. However, despite all of this, the zoo at the beginning of the 1970s was still seen as a family day out worth the price and regarded a good thing about the town.

Unfortunately, this did not last. The situation in UK was only getting worse and Colchester Zoo now faced more competition than ever, with Clacton Pier opening a dolphin pool and the zoo actively losing visitors to Clacton-on-Sea.

Furthermore, car ownership had increased, and people were able to travel further much more easily, which meant zoos that in the past were too far away were now easy to get to. Zoos such as Banham Zoo in Norfolk, Linton Zoo in Cambridgeshire and even Woburn Safari Park in Bedfordshire had all opened and were drawing in visitors..

By the mid-70s the zoo was looking tired and, with a lack of investment, visitors started to stay away. It was also at this time that the Farrars went into semi-retirement, which meant they were spending less time on site and their focus shifted away from the zoo.

By the late-70s public opinion of the zoo had changed. It was seen as a neglected place, with old buildings, unkept grounds and outdate enclosures, and for the first time local people started to publicly voice their feelings.

Beverly Austin wrote to the Essex County Standard, about the conditions at the zoo, suggested that the zoo was under-staffed and that there was litter everywhere.

Comments on the state of the enclosures were becoming more common: Mrs J.A. Pinney said the zoo had an "air of neglect".



# A New Era

In 1983 Colchester Zoo was bought by Dominique and Angela Tropeano. Dominique Tropeano now Dr. Dominique Tropeano, OBE, still owns the zoo today.

Angela Tropeano was the niece of the Farrars and spent her childhood at their previous zoo in Southport in Lancashire. Dominique Tropeano had grown up on a livestock farm in France.

When the Tropeanos bought the zoo, there were eight full-time keepers, one part-time office worker, a gardener and one person on maintenance. The number of visitors averaged 100,000 per year. Furthermore, the Tropeanos discovered that there was no formal record keeping with no written record of, annual turnover, what animals had been at the zoo, or even what animals they currently had at the zoo.



The zoo was in need of modernisation, which required money, however the Tropeanos had sold their previous businesses, a catering establishment and a fun fair in Lancashire, to fund the purchase of the zoo and had no private investors. Any money that was made went to pay off historical loans and meet running costs. On the surface it appeared there was little change in the zoo itself and for the first few years under the Tropeanos, the zoo's standing within Colchester and indeed the UK had not improved. However, all was not as it seemed; there was reinvestment going on and improvements being made.

It was clear from the start that the basic infrastructure had to be upgraded and expanded to the whole site along with improving the visitor facilities, as it is all very well having animals to see, but if you cannot find a toilet or a place to grab a drink, the visit is going to be very short and uncomfortable.

New toilet blocks, food outlets, and plumbing and electrical infrastructure were installed. Staff training, a new records system, and new management practices were established and developed during this time.

Once these were in place and the zoo started to generate more money and be a more efficient business, the Tropeanos could start making big changes and move the zoo forward.

This was achieved in 1988, when a new enclosure was built for two Diana monkeys (*Cercopithecus diana*). £15,000 (between £35-40,000 today) was spent on the enclosure.

This new enclosure set the bar for future enclosures, with a focus on larger more complex environments. The design pushed enclosure design forward, principally in the choice of glass as a barrier rather than the traditional mesh that was commonplace at the zoo's older enclosure.

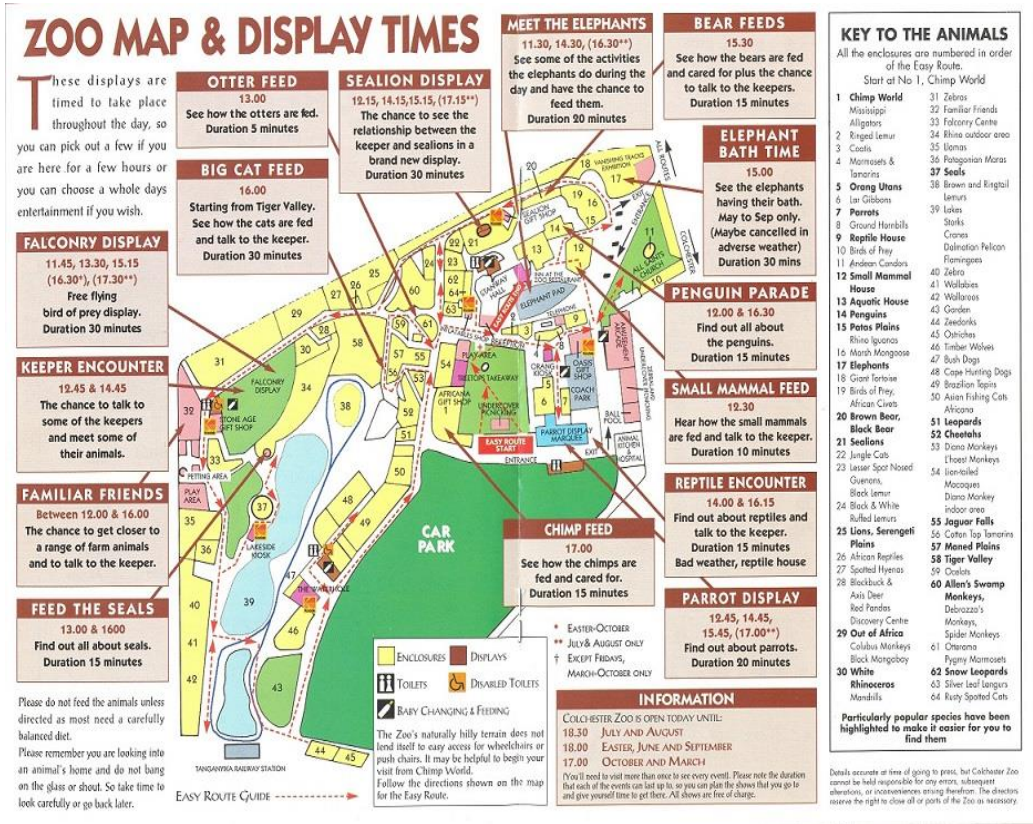




# The Rise

The 1990s saw the site redevelop at a fast pace, with new enclosures being built that better suited the animals' needs as well as improving the visitors' experience.

It was during this decade that a new entrance was built, which still stands today and has since been converted into the gift shop and the zoo's exit.



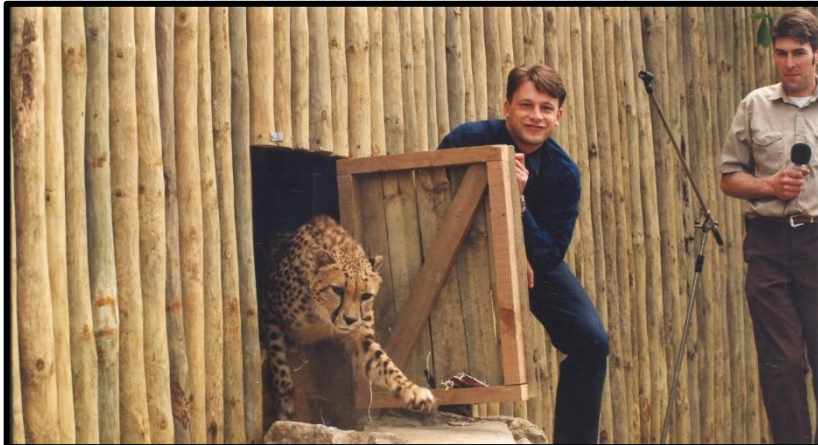
The Zoo map in 1994





# The Up and Up of the 1990s

Throughout the 1990s the zoo went on to build new enclosures for existing animals and for new species being brought in. It was not just new enclosures that were being built, but better visitor areas with interactive information signs and improved viewing opportunities.



Cheetahs being let out into their new home by Chris Packham in 1995



Chimpanzee enclosure viewing area  
1992

1994 saw the opening of Penguin Shores with underwater viewing of the penguins as well as new interactive information signs and conservation messaging





# A Big Animal = A Bigger Home

In 1997, work started on a state-of-the-art elephant enclosure, which opened in 1998. This is largest building project in the zoo's history, with the house covering an area of 713.5m<sup>2</sup>, the outside areas covering an area of 7,488.4m<sup>2</sup> and a cost of over £750,000 (£1.3 million in today's money) making it the most expensive build at the time.



The house was also constructed as a breeding facility and, in 2002, the zoo's first elephant calf was born.

Kito was not only the first elephant born at Colchester Zoo, but was in fact the first elephant born in the UK through artificial insemination (AI) and at the time was only the world's fifth AI bred elephant.

In 2004, Kito became a big brother to his half-brother Jambo.

When old enough Kito went to a zoo in Czechia and Jambo went to a zoo in Spain to aid international breeding programmes.



Ultrasound scan of Kito



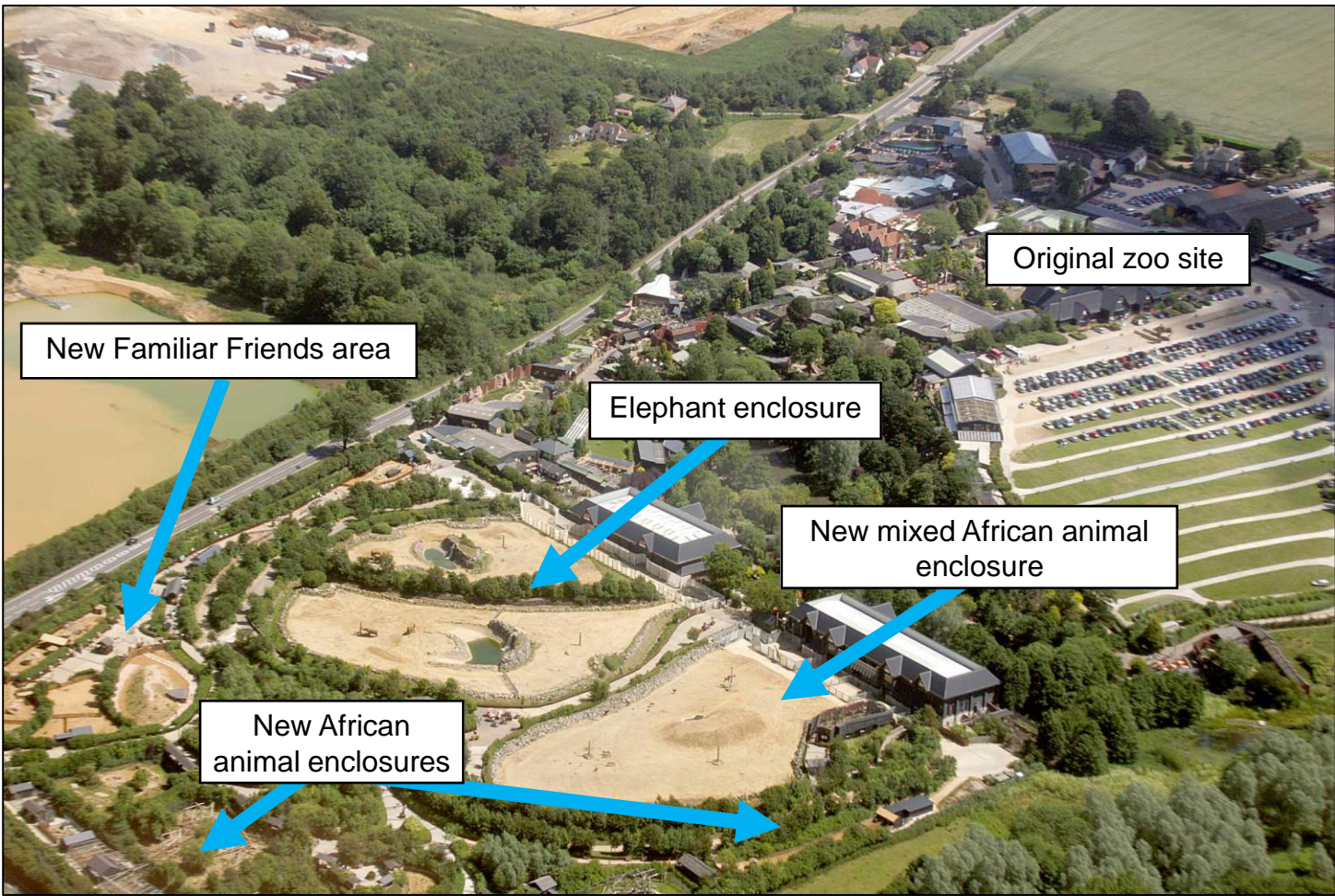
Kito at a few days old



# Full Steam Ahead into the New Century

The 2000s saw the new area around the elephant enclosure take shape and become home to a new Familiar Friends areas, containing recognisable domesticated animals along with less familiar animals such as mountain goats.

The area also saw new enclosures for African animals such as the hyenas and cheetahs as well as new animals such as red river hogs and aardvarks. The largest development was the mixed African paddock, which became a new home to Flossy and Simba, the zoo's two white rhino, the zebra and the ostrich. This new mixed enclosure also became home to a returning animal, giraffes, which had not been at the zoo since the 1970s.



Red river hogs  
(*Potamochoerus porcus*)



Aardvark (*Orycteropus afer*)



Mountain goat  
(*Oreamnos americanus*)

# Foot and Mouth Disease

In 2001 the UK faced a Foot and Mouth epidemic which resulted in 2,000 cases among cows, sheep and pigs resulting over 6 million animals being culled.

Less than a week after the arrival of the zoo's first giraffes since the 1970s, the first confirmed case was just 30 miles from the zoo.

To protect the animals, the zoo chose to close to the public which many zoos were also doing. The original plan was to close for a few days; ultimately this was not the case. Over the coming weeks, cases of foot and mouth were growing and getting ever closer to the zoo.

When a case was confirmed at a farm just two miles away, the zoo was ordered to close by the government. All staff footwear and vehicles had to be disinfected but the virus can be carried by the wind and thus all the animals had to be indoors, as even animals that can't catch the disease can transmit it. Checks on the animals took place every couple of hours to look for symptoms of the virus.



The Easter holidays were fast approaching and the zoo had now been closed for several weeks, resulting in a loss of £250,000, (£420,500 in today's money). If the zoo remained closed over the Easter holidays the loss would be £1 million (£1.6 million today). On top of this, as the Zoo closed voluntarily at first, the zoo was not entitled to financial support from insurers. To further compound the financial issues, the zoo's major building projects, including the new elephant enclosure and the half-finished African animal enclosure, had used most of the reserved funds.

There was also confusion of what would happen if foot and mouth was found in a zoo animal. Would all the animals need to be culled? Would endangered species be spared? There was even uncertainty about which exotic animals could get the disease; no one knew for sure if elephants could catch the virus for example.

The people of Colchester showed their support and since 1983 the zoo had turned its reputation around and the zoo was once again seen with affection. Many fundraising efforts took place to give money to the zoo and it was also a boost to staff morale to see the public rally round and offer their support.

By April, the cases were starting to drop and local parkland was allowed to reopen and on the 7<sup>th</sup> of April the zoo reopened with foot dips for visitors and the farm area closed. By the end of April the zoo was fully open again.

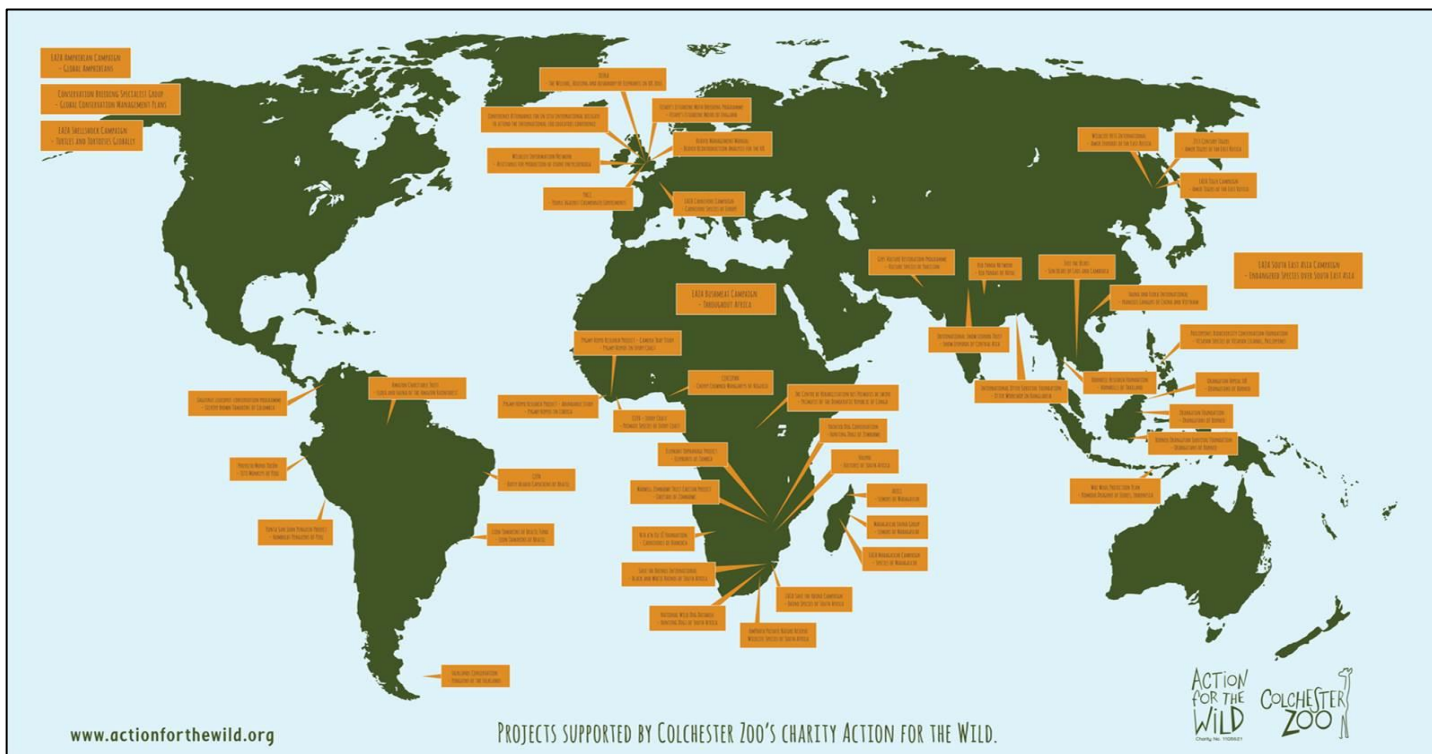


# Action for the Wild

By the 2000s Colchester Zoo had changed beyond recognition in many places including enclosure design, animal management, and visitor facilities. One area that the zoo has been involved in for many years is supporting conservation work and, in order to develop global conservation work, Action for the Wild was created and achieved charitable status in 2004.

Action for the Wild provides both financial and technical assistance and aims to raise awareness among local people in community conservation programmes, as well as supporting conservation research.

As of 2022, Action for the Wild has donated over £3 million and supported conservation work in the UK and around the world



### Past and current projects supported by Action for the Wild between 2004 and 2022

In 2005, Action for the Wild and Colchester Zoo established a private nature reserve in Colenso, KwaZulu Natal, South Africa called UmPhafa. The mission of the reserve is to create a sustainable future whilst maintaining social responsibility and promoting environmental regeneration and conservation.

The 6,000ha reserve was old farmland which had lost many of the native animal and plants after years of intense farming. The area has, and continues, a rewilding programme to support native animals and plants once more and is now home to several species such as various antelope species, giraffe and leopards.





# A New Decade

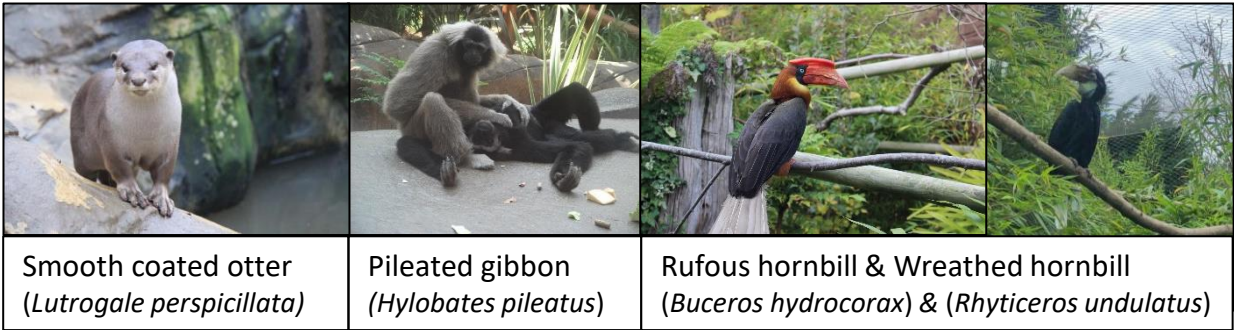
The 2000s not only saw the new African animal developments, the creation of Action for the Wild and UmPhafa Private Nature Reserve, but also a new sea lion enclosure in 2003 with Europe's longest underwater viewing tunnel at 24 metres long and in 2008 a new orangutan enclosure.

Upon entering the 2010s, development at the zoo did not stop and this decade saw not only new enclosures for existing animals but also the arrival of new animals.

In 2010 the zoo became home to two rescued sun bears, Jo-Jo and Srey Ya. Both bears were confiscated by government anti-poaching patrols in Cambodia in 2007 and 2008. Srey Ya, found in a village weighing just 300 grams was so young she had not yet opened her eyes when she was confiscated she was also suffering from pneumonia. Jo-Jo was rescued from a bar where he was being kept as a pet to amuse visitors at just 6 months old. In 2013 the bears moved to a purpose built enclosure at Colchester Zoo called Bears of the Rising Sun.



The zoo also became home to a new species of otter: a family of smooth coated otters, the largest otter species in Asia, as well as pileated gibbons, rufous hornbills and wreathed hornbills.



In 2014 a new walkthrough enclosure was opened with free-flying rainbow lorikeets, providing the visitors the chance to not only see these colourful birds but to share the same space as them.



The 2010s not only welcomed new species to the zoo but saw the redevelopment of older enclosures. The former white tiger enclosure was redeveloped into a lemur walkthrough and the chimpanzee and slender snouted crocodile enclosure underwent major redevelopments in 2017.



# Covid-19 Lockdowns

2020 became a year for the history books with the outbreak of Covid-19 in the UK. Along with the rest of the country, the zoo had to close to the public.

Between March 2020 and April 2021, the zoo was closed for 207 days, partially open for 142 days (indoor areas closed, no shop and take away food options only) and fully open for 38 days. Pre-pandemic the zoo was open 364 days and closed for 1 day (Christmas Day).

Over 75% of the zoo's income comes from the day visitor: through ticket sales, buying food and souvenirs from the gift shop.

However, the local community helped the Zoo in whatever way they could.

## Go behind closed doors at Colchester Zoo's live fundraising event

 Sophie Barnett



Published: 7:00 PM November 25, 2020

Updated: 8:39 PM December 7, 2020



A live fundraising event for Colchester Zoo, called Bringing The Zoo to You, is being organised to help raise vital funds during lockdown. Picture: EJS PHOTOGRAPHY - Credit: EJS PHOTOGRAPHY

6th April 2020

**Fundraising campaign to help Colchester Zoo through coronavirus closure**

Aspiring zoo keeper aged five raises £5,000 to feed the animals

15th May 2020

**Animal lover dreams up month of fundraisers for Colchester Zoo**

18th March

**Colchester Zoo: Driving instructor takes on running challenge in aid of animals**

**Dad to mark 50th birthday by running 50 mile fundraiser around Colchester Zoo**



# The Zoo Now

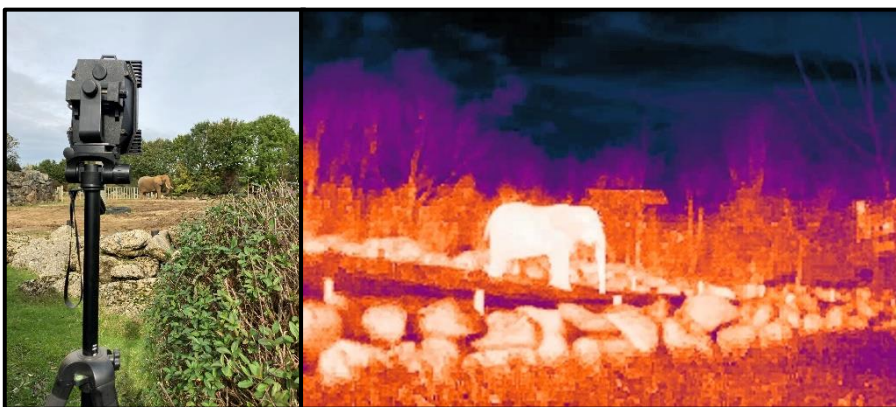
Today the zoo welcomes 1,000,000 visitors annually, is home to over 180 species of animals, is part of 67 international breeding programmes, and supports 11 conservation projects with more on the way. The zoo's education department teach over 30,000 students from reception to university level, raising awareness of conservation and their place in the natural world.

Over the last 60 years Colchester Zoo has achieved a lot. The first zoo in the UK to have an African elephant and a white rhino born through artificial insemination, the most successful breeding programme of armadillos in Europe, and one of the few zoos in world to breed Komodo dragons.

Colchester Zoos is also part of a local conservation project of the Fisher's Estuarine Moth (*Gortyna borelii lunata*). Working with Natural England, the Essex Wildlife Trust, National Trust and Tendring District Council, moths are bred at the zoo and caterpillars are released. Zoo staff also help with surveys to monitor wild populations of the moths.



Over the years the zoo has taken part in many research projects to further understanding and support conservation work. A recent study saw Colchester Zoo work with ZSL Whipsnade Zoo, Liverpool John Moores University and Arribada Initiative, to create an early warning system to alert farmers of wild elephant by using heat signature cameras. The cameras had to learn what an elephant looks like and ZSL Whipsnade Zoo trained the cameras to recognise Asian elephants and Colchester Zoo trained the cameras to recognised African elephants. Over 30,000 images were taken, which would have taken years to collect using wild elephants but only took a few months in the zoos. The cameras are now out in Africa and Asia as part of field trials.



The zoo has survived the economic hardships of the 1970's, the Tropeanos turned the zoo's fortunes around in the 1980s, garnered national and international respect in the 1990s, survived the foot and mouth outbreak in 2001, pursued major development and upgrades across the 2010s, and made it through the Covid-19 lockdowns of 2020 and 2021.

Though several planned developments have been delayed the zoo still has plans entering our 60<sup>th</sup> year and beyond, and it is safe to say the zoo won't stay standing still for long!



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<https://tinyurl.com/4ytzkf5a>