

A Potted History of Llamas in the UK (1)

Part One - The Early Years – 19th century

It has proven impossible to find out exactly when the first llama, dead or alive, arrived on British shores. Where they came from (Argentina, Bolivia, Chile, Ecuador, Peru?), whether directly from South America or via other nations such as Spain, with what intention and for what purpose.

However, somehow and for whatever reason some unmistakably got here but probably in small numbers alongside other products shipped home from South America. Early references to llamas in the media include mention in the *Morning Post* (March 23, 1805) of a llama exhibited at *Brooke's Menagerie* in the Haymarket, Piccadilly London where visitors paid two shillings each to see these odd animals. An article in *The Observer* (6th April 1806) claimed these same 'Peruvian Sheep' to be the first imported into the UK. Shortly after, newspaper reports referenced llama appearances at agricultural fairs and shows such as at Norwich and Yarmouth (*Ipswich Journal*, 30th April 1814).

Possible next mention of a llama (referred to as an 'Elapho Camelus') is on a poster bill for Wombwell's Touring Menagerie, undated but thought, by virtue of a written note on it, to be 22 August 1825.

Whether these ones were one and the same llama(s), since there is more than one claim to be the first ever imported into the UK, I have failed to clarify but a further poster for Wombwell's Menagerie quoted in an article in *Llama Link* (Winter, 2011, p.10) by Tracey Glasspool, thought to be 20 August 1828, suggests there was more than one Elapho Camelus (note slightly different spelling) in the show.

What appears clear in these descriptions is that these animals were hitherto unknown to UK audiences and largely a novelty item appealing to natural human curiosity with no specific 'serious' purpose in mind at that point in time. They certainly aroused much interest and speculation as to their character, behaviour and care.

Goldsmith in his famous *History of Man and Quadriceps* (1838, p. 326) claims that George III had several llamas at Windsor Park but not were long lived. Perhaps the answer lies in what he writes:

'It appears formed for that indolent race of masters which it is obliged to serve: it requires no care, nor no expense in the attending or providing for its sustenance; it is supplied with a warm covering, and therefore does not require to be housed; satisfied with vegetables and grass, it wants neither corn nor hay to subsist; it is no less moderate in what it drinks.'

First mention of a llama in a zoo I found was at the London Zoological Society Gardens in 1829, only a year after it first opened. It was described as a brown and white one but photography had not yet been invented and so there are no other illustrations to give us a clue to what they looked like (*Guide to the Gardens of the Zoological Society* 1829, pp. 8-9). Unfortunately, for those of us who have grown to love and appreciate these animals, they were usually described negatively as morose and stubborn animals with an unpredictable mind of their own. It is probably out of ignorance, especially not being able to predict and understand their actions having not previously had the chance to get to know them. This is a trend that has continued to the present day in some circles and one can but

wonder if such early comments were responsible for tarnishing their reputation for the years that were to follow.



1- The Llama Hut was one of the earliest buildings on-site, it was designed by Decimus Burton. It was the first animal house to be built from brick and was completed by 16 May 1828. A clock tower was added in 1829. The building still exists today as a First Aid Centre

After independence came to parts of South America in 1820, Britain deliberately sought to replace the Spanish in economic and cultural affairs. Business men flocked in their droves to some of the new South American nations in response to their desperate call for foreign investment and trade. It seems reasonable to assume that this may have grown the interest and trade in llamas alongside other South American camelids (alpacas, guanacos and vicunas) and commodities.

Clearly they were growing in number and appearance. In 1835, the “*List of the Animals in the Liverpool Zoological Gardens*” tells us some thing about the llama and mentions it was donated by a Mr Charles Tayleur who kept them not far away at Parkfield, the Dingle, Liverpool. In fact, he had at least five of them which may or may not have been quite an odd site for the Dingle residents

Later that same year, a llama residing at the Liverpool Zoological Gardens was reported to be making it’s appearance in the town at the Christmas pantomime – *Blue Beard* (*Liverpool Mercury* November 27, 1835) which one might reasonably assume was the same one. The extent of llamas and alpacas nationwide is reflected in Robert Kemp Philip’s *The History of Progress in Great Britain*, Volume 1, (London: Houlston and Wright, 1859, p. 121) which suggests that in 1841 there were around 79 in the UK. Unfortunately, the balance of camelids (alpacas, guanacos, llamas, crosses) is not indicated and so we cannot rely on how many exactly were llamas.

† There have been several llamas and alpacas introduced at various times. In 1841 there were in England:—at the Earl of Derby’s, Knowsley Hall, Lancashire, 16; at the Marquis of Breadalbane’s, 6; Duke of Montrose’s, 3; Earl Fitzwilliam’s, 1; Zoological Gardens, Dublin, 6; Zoological Gardens, Regent’s Park, 2; J. J. Hegan’s, Esq., Harrow Hall, Cheshire, 7; Charles Tayleur’s, Esq., Parkfield, near Liverpool, 5; John Edwards’, Esq., Pye Nest, Halifax, 6; Mr. Stephenson’s, Olan, 6; Wm. Bennett’s, Esq., Farringdon, 12; Surrey Zoological Gardens, 1; Zoological Gardens, Liverpool, 3; travelling caravans, 4; total,

2 - Extract from The History of Progress

As can be observed from the narrative above, these were often associated with country estates (where it was fashionable to show off something ‘different’ or unique for purposes of conspicuous

consumption), zoological gardens and travelling fairs. The *Morning Post* (26/12/1851) suggested that Lord Derby had 21 llamas and alpacas (again not sure of the respective numbers) roaming his estate in Liverpool (today's Knowsley Safari Park). This was further described as being unrivalled in Europe, although this might have related to quality rather than number and possibly with a view to promoting a local sale event since this is a Liverpool based newspaper.

On Lord Derby's death in 1851, some of these were sold alongside other exotic animals from his menagerie at a sale and from here went to various countries of the continent and other parts of the UK including the estate of Sir Titus Salt in Yorkshire who was to go on and make his fortune from alpaca wool.

According to the *Morning Post*, '1 llama sold for £28 to Mr Atkins, Liverpool; 1 llama (old), past its best days sold for £26 to Jamrach, a German from Hamburg; 1 llama, females sold for £33 to Herring of London for Sir W. Fielding, Fenniscaule, Lancashire, 1 llama female sold for £30 to Mr Atkins for out of the country; 1 llama female (fawn) sold for £28 to Mr Vekeman, Antwerp Zoological Society'. Mr Fielding had a menagerie at his country estate in North Lancashire.

A passion for natural history : the life and legacy of the 13th Earl of Derby (edited by Clemency Fisher, Liverpool: National Museums & Galleries on Merseyside, 2002), gives us the first clue as to what these animals looked like.



2- Lithograph of llamas at Knowsley Hall drawn from life December 1844 by B. Waterhouse Hawkins, Plate LI

What these illustrate is quite a diversity and one supposes cross and hybrid breeding in their native settings.

Writing in 1836, Goldman (ibid) had mentioned the versatility of llamas when he wrote:

Their flesh is excellent food, their hair, or rather wool, maybe spun into beautiful clothing and they are capable, in the most rugged and dangerous ways, of carrying burthens , not exceeding a hundred weight, with the greatest safety.

Interest in these animals by industrialists like Sir Titus Salt marked a significant development in the history of camelids in the UK since it was now recognized they might have commercial possibilities. The great hope by now was that these hardy animals, along with alpacas, capable of surviving on bare scrub in the Andes could populate the moorlands of Lancashire and Yorkshire, the Welsh and Scottish mountains providing a ready, reliable, voluminous source of quality fibre for the burgeoning textile industry, especially now that techniques for processing at more specialist fibres had been invented. The idea was this would reduce the cost of importing raw fleece from South America and hence profitability. Numerous adverts appeared in the press for garments made of llama wool which were

described as warm and light and available in exclusive outlets. *The Scotsman* (11/12/1862) also carried an ad. for the sale of a stuffed female llama, presumably to grace a wealthy household.

Unfortunately, the llamas, alpacas and various cross breeds failed to prosper in the UK which was thought to be from a lack of suitable vegetation. In countries like Bolivia and Peru they flourished on coarse grasses (ichu and alfalfa) and clover (George Ledger *The Alpaca: Its Introduction Into Australia, and the Probabilities of Its Acclimatisation there* Melbourne: Acclimatisation Society of Victoria Acclimatisation Society of Victoria, 1861). It was for this reason Sir Titus Salt decided to send a breeding male and two female llamas to Adelaide, South Australia to see if they would fare any better on their vegetation and climate. He and others had already experimented with alpacas in this respect with some positive results. The successful rehabilitation of imported llamas later on suggests it may be more to do with the long and intrepid journeys (several weeks) and lack of understanding how to feed and look after them. One is reminded here of the fate of the Windsor Great Park llamas.

With the prospect of llamas providing a much in demand raw material to the textile industry, not surprisingly entrepreneurs started to spring up in all parts of the supply chain. Peru had imposed sanctions preventing the export of live animals in 1836 but Frenchman Eugen Roehn managed to smuggle a large number of selected animals from the northern slopes of the country through neighbouring Guayaquil, Ecuador and across land almost 4,000 miles to Panama. From here they were shipped to New York City aboard the steamer *Santiago*. The animals were detained in Aspinwall, Panama for three weeks whilst waiting for a shipping vessel to take them to Baltimore in the US. In the heat of the summer that year around 20 lost their lives to snakes, scorpions and poisonous herbage. The ship they ended up being transported in was inadequate for the number of llamas resulting in the death of another two cria. On arrival in New York, via the port of Baltimore, the 42 final survivors were in very poor condition due to the long trek and very confined accommodation on board ship (*New York Tribune*, 23 March 1857). They were wintered on Manhattan Island in an attempt to build them up for resale and also test their ability to deal with the harsh New York climatic conditions. Although most survived the heavy snow and freezing temperatures, they barely prospered as the keepers struggled to find suitable fodder. Hence the interest and sale price was disappointing for the agent. After exhibition at the Crystal Palace, New York they were auctioned at Dykman Farm on the 20th of March, 1858. (*The Sydney Morning Herald* Tuesday 3 August 1858).

Interest was very disappointing and many of the animal lots failed to reach their reserve. A newspaper report of the time suggested that the poor choice of venue and lack of promotion was partly to blame. Mr Benjamin Whitehead Gee, originally from of Acton (London) but currently living in New South Wales (Australia) and a representative of the NSW Agricultural Society, purchased the surviving 38 llamas (of which 23 were female) and had them shipped to Glasgow aboard *The City of New York* steamer where they were exhibited at the local agricultural show ground at a charge of 6d each and had as many as 1200 visitors. He then showed them in Birmingham on the occasion of Queen Victoria's visit before moving them onto London where they were pastured in Ealing (*Birmingham Daily Post*, June 17 1858). The idea no doubt was that this might stimulate awareness and interest adding to their re sale value. Eventually, he sold two to a Mr Patterson, two to a Miss Angela Burdett Coutts (who later became a major figure in the *RSPCA*) and ten to a Mr George A Lloyd of London who it is reported sold them on for more than twice the original £25 each. These

were shipped to Sydney in June 1858 and arrived on the 28th of November where they were sold for £600 and move to live in Moreton Bay. ((Robert Kemp Philip's *The History of Progress in Great Britain*, Volume 1, London: Houlston and Wright, 1859)

23 were purchased by Australian merchants Messrs McKinnon and Westgarth and shipped to Melbourne, Victoria, arriving in February 1859. (10)

.A Mr E. Wilson of Melbourne took the remainder of the herd at a rate of £23 per head

The *Illustrated London News* (July, 1858) carried an engraving of what these imported animals looked like but it is hard to tell what is what. Again, this is not helped by the fact that alpacas, llamas, guanacos and even vicunas were often referred to as one and the same or their names regarded as interchangeable and of course many were also cross breeds as herdsmen/farmers experimented with pooling the desired traits from several into the one animal. Llamas were traditionally bigger and therefore the potential to carry more fleece, alpacas and vicunas on the other hand generally had finer quality fibre without the coarser guard hair to separate. In principle at least, this made them overall more suited to the textile industry and is why they were imported in greater numbers. Interestingly, there is debate in the press of the time as to exactly what some of those bought by Mr Gee were. (alpacas, llamas, cross breeds). My best guess, supported by the illustration is that they were very much a mixed bunch. It is also known that indigenous Peruvians often tricked European merchants and sold them only old or hybrid stock.

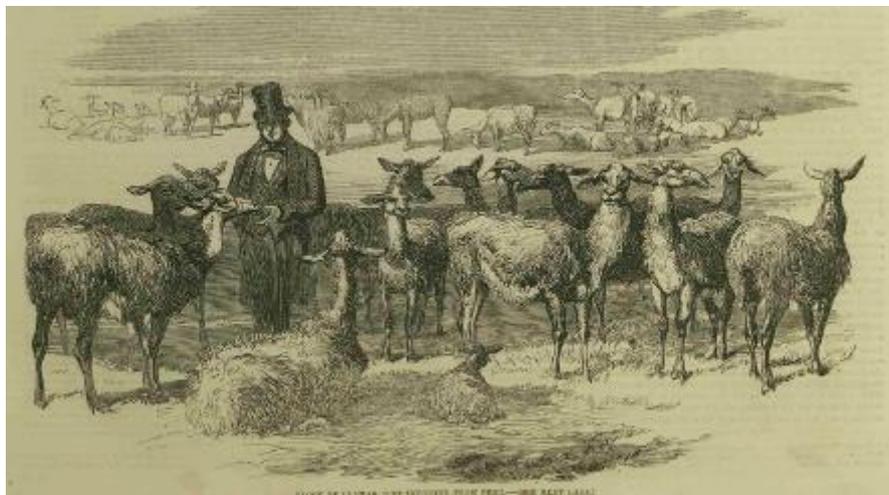


Fig. 8- Imported Llamas Illustrated London News, 29 May 1858

As already alluded to, problem in the early days had been transportation of live animals. Very few survived the long and torturous sea voyage over thousands of miles crossing the Atlantic Ocean. Worse still was the journey to the far off colonies of the British Empire. Of the two males and three females Sir Titus Salt sent to South Australia one of each sex died in transit although one also gave birth to what in those days they referred to commonly as lambs. Only 280 of the 322 alpacas and llamas shipped from Chile to Australia in 1858 survived the journey and 29 of the 42 llamas shipped to New Zealand directly from New York also died in transit but these were far more successful results than some of the earlier voyages such in 1842 when 270 alpacas aboard the Sir Charles Napier died

from inhaling guano fumes. In another expedition organised by Alexander Duffield only 1 out of 1,500 alpacas survived and another transportation in which all the 400 died in transit to Europe (Danson *ibid.*).

Helen Cowie, in her excellent book (*Llamas* London: Reaktion, 2017), mentions pioneering work by Liverpool scientist Alfred Higginson in understanding camelid metabolism. He was the first to professionally dissect an alpaca which led to a better understanding of camelid anatomy and physiology which in turn helped inform their dietary processes and needs. Discussion and debate between scientists and the farming community ensued in the *Liverpool Mercury*. Liverpool naturalist Thomas Atkins who had overseen llamas and alpacas at his Liverpool Zoological gardens wrote technical guidance notes on the welfare of these animals including during transit. Increased interest in these animals also led to even greater diversity in objectives for these animals and selective breeding to meet different needs.

Better informed naturalists also started to travel further afield and spread the word to shepherds in far flung parts of the British Empire.

As the textile boom of 19th century declined and processing moved overseas, interest in llamas also started to wane. Decline of the manufacturing industry also manifested itself in the decline of the aristocrats and *neuveau riche* who could no longer maintain their extravagant estates with menageries of exotic animals and walled gardens with their orangeries growing exotic fruits. Although a few have survived to the present day by opening their grounds to the paying public (eg. Knowsley Safari Park, Longleat, Woburn, etc.) many did not and ended up selling their exotic animals, including llamas, to zoos. Same too with travelling fairs. Glasspool (*ibid*) makes reference to auction of Wombwell's menagerie at this point owned by Alexander Fairgrieve, in Edinburgh in 1872 at which a llama was sold to a Mr Charles Jamach for £15. This was, in fact, the same German who bought at the 1851 sale mentioned earlier. He turns out to be a London based exotic animal dealer who often bought animals at auctions. His main competitor was a William Cross of Liverpool, who also imported quite a lot of llamas in the late 19C, though it is not clear who bought them.

- (1) This article is the first of 3 that have been abridged from an introductory chapter on 'Llamas: Past and Present' in a forthcoming book on llamas written by the author. A time line has been produced to accompanying this article indicating detailed sources of evidence and in some cases reproduced images at : <http://www.hillviewllamas.co.uk/chronology-of-dates.php>.