Highlights of the year included the Park featuring on BBC’s Springwatch programme, with our part in the White Storks’ UK re-introduction project. Then in October, BBC Gardeners’ World featured the Park and presenter Adam Frost sang the praises of our gardens. To top off the year, Ruby gave birth to our sixth Rhino calf in as many years, named “Stella”!

The Park’s Director Reggie Heyworth and Head Keeper Mark Godwin witnessed Stella’s birth on 7th September 2019. After just fifteen minutes of labour, a new baby joined the crash (the collective noun for a group of Rhinos). Mark caught the birth on film, along with Stella tentatively taking her first steps within forty minutes of being born. The video can be seen on our You Tube channel.

Ruby and Stella walked out of the stall, giving lucky visitors a glimpse of a baby White Rhino

Soon after the birth, Ruby and her new calf walked out of the stall into the sunshine of the yard, giving a few lucky visitors a glimpse of a baby White Rhino less than two hours old. Stella is doing well and Ruby has proved once again to be an exceptional mother. Having another female calf is really important for the European Breeding Programme of this iconic but endangered species.

White Rhinos have always been an important species at the Park, which was founded by John Heyworth (1925-2012) in 1970. He had a soft spot for these great creatures and would have been delighted at the birth of our sixth baby Rhino in time for the Park’s 50th Anniversary in 2020.

Our previous calves born in late 2017, Alan and Belle, are now independent of their mums Ruby and Nancy and will probably leave us at the end of 2020 to join unrelated Rhinos in other zoos, as part of the European captive breeding programme for this species.
Baby Boom!

Being a farmer at heart, John Heyworth would have been delighted at all the breeding successes at the Park in 2019.

Boulder and Shrimpy
Our African Porcupine Hannah gave birth to twin boys named Boulder and Shrimpy in February 2019. Hannah had only recently arrived at the Park and was paired with the Park’s breeding male – a Porcupine called Prickle. Keeper Estelle Morgan takes up the story: “As soon as Hannah was introduced into the enclosure, they immediately began grooming each other and establishing their monogamous pair-bond. They were seen mating not long after. Hannah gave birth overnight and I found the babies running and squeaking at each other in the morning.”

Bill and Corky
Two Emu chicks hatched on 21st and 23rd June (pictured with Keeper Issy Wright). Their young parents had laid two eggs randomly in their enclosure near the car park, but showed no interest in sitting. Keepers decided to take the eggs for artificial incubation. After hatching, the chicks were successfully hand-reared by the Bird team.

Lightning Stripes
The Park welcomed an energetic female Zebra foal who attracted the attention of visitors with her incredible speed. When she was just a few days old, the newborn was galloping around the paddock. Keepers usually name newborns, but pop royalty – Spice Girl Geri Horner (née Halliwell), visited the Park in the summer and was given the rare honour of naming the foal. She decided to call her Geri!

Snap, Crackle and Pop
This was our first litter from our new pair of Dwarf Mongoose, natives of East Africa. The triplets have been named Snap, Crackle and Pop by their keepers.

Ripley and Newt
The Park welcomed two Penguin chicks. Ripley is pictured left with mum Polly and has a purple/pink/white identification band, visible at the base of the left flipper. Newt has a purple/turquoise/white identification band (right).

More 2019 Babies
Other births included two Northern White-faced Owlets and a litter of Naked Mole Rats.

Best Friends
Diablo and Fig
Later in 2019 Keeper Estelle hand-reared a baby Porcupine named Diablo. He was rejected by his mum Hannah, because he was born too soon after her previous duo of Boulder and Shrimpy. When Diablo was just a few days old, Estelle introduced him to her sausage dog puppy Fig for some company and for some essential social interactions to help his development; the pair soon became best friends. “When Diablo gets excited, he will do a buckaroo-style run, where he thrashes his head around and jumps up in the air. They run around the garden and jumps up in the air. They run around the garden and jumps up in the air. They run around the garden and jumps up in the air.”

Commented Estelle. Diablo would follow Estelle around her kitchen and come to her for reassurance. Diablo has now moved to a new collection when he was weaned, to make porcupine friends.
Aiming to showcase in the museum, it is my hope that by displaying these items to our visitors it will help to fuel their interest and passion for the animal kingdom and its amazing diversity. Alongside conservation, one of the key roles of a modern-day zoo is education and raising awareness after their death. For this reason, I decided to start preparing skulls of education and raising awareness after their death. We keep at the Park couldn’t continue their vital role should it was that some of the fascinating creatures that we could put them on display.

Having a taxidermy animal right next to its skeleton works well and really helps to bring the skeletons to life in the visitor’s eyes. There are a variety of skulls and fully articulated skeletons on display in the museum, as well as some taxidermy pieces. Having a taxidermy animal right next to its skeleton works well and really helps to bring the skeletons to life in the visitor’s eyes. This is what we are aiming to do. There is also a “Whose Poo” display where visitors are encouraged to try and match animal species to examples of their poo! In addition to display items in cases there will also be lots of items that visitors can handle and interact with under the supervision of the volunteers.

The project aims to release captive bred birds from netted pens in Sussex in the hope they will once again become a breeding bird in the UK.

At the Park, our focus is on breeding birds we have received from rehabilitation centres in Poland. Working with Warsaw Zoo, we have so far imported over 150 storks. These birds are generally not fully fit for release, so the birds we breed here from these rehabilitated adults will form the basis of the release programme. At the Park, we keep 25 pairs in a large netted pen where the birds are given the highest standards of care to facilitate successful breeding. 2018 saw us produce eight chicks – quite a surprise bearing in mind these storks are generally very young and most of the pairs formed were inexperienced. Storks can take a while to settle and select mates, so the signs for the future of this project were good.

To maximise chick survival, we “assist” fed the chicks on the nest, placing small food items within easy reach of the chicks to ensure all received the correct amount, whilst still being fed by the adult storks. Care was taken not to desensitise the chicks to the presence of humans, something that would be vital to their long-term survival in the wild. Once fledged, these young “bonus” birds joined other rehabilitated storks in the Sussex pens awaiting release.

In 2019 almost all our pairs began nestbuilding. Although some adults were still too young to breed successfully, we raised 24 chicks ready for release. Once fully fledged and separated from the adults, the birds were weighed, sexed and microchipped. They were also fitted with highly visible leg rings (with the obligatory British Trust for Ornithology identifiers) to make them easily identifiable after release. Eight of these birds were also fitted with GPS trackers to allow us to follow their movements further afield.

August 2019 was a momentous month. These 24 youngsters were transferred to a temporary pen at Knepp Castle Estate in West Sussex to familiarise themselves with their surroundings and 2 weeks later the moment came to open the netting and watch these young birds take their first steps into the wild. At the time of writing, many of these birds have left Knepp and have been regularly sighted and appear to be doing well. One bird in particular, nicknamed “Marge”, has even made its way to Africa, enjoying the warmer climes of Morocco! This was a triumphant moment for the Park and all involved in this fantastic project. We eagerly wait to see what the future holds for these birds and we look forward to more progress in 2020.
In the Beginning...

We are celebrating our 50th anniversary in 2020. The Park was the brainchild of one man, John Heyworth, who wanted to rescue the decaying Manor House he grew up in. With the help of gardeners and keepers he turned a bramble-strewn wilderness into a beautiful zoological collection. Over the past five decades millions of visitors have enjoyed the beauty of nature at the Park. John’s son Reggie now runs the Park and continues his father’s work.

The success of this wildlife park has depended more than anything on the goodwill and team spirit of all those who work here. Without their help, and their dedication, none of this would ever have been possible. John Heyworth in an article for the Witney Gazette, 1970

Rhinos on BBC Gardeners’ World

It’s not every day you see Rhinos on Gardeners’ World. We were thrilled to be featured on BBC Gardeners’ World on 18th October 2019 in their series finale. Catch up on BBC iPlayer (until Oct 2020) when Adam Frost finds out about some surprising planting schemes designed with animals in mind (episode 32).

Tulip fever

On a bright November day in 2018, garden designer and TV presenter James Alexander Sinclair helped us plant 1000 pink Tulip “Caresse” bulbs, in aid of the charity UCARE, for which he is an Ambassador. UCARE is an Oxford based charity dedicated to urology cancer research and education. The pink tulip is the emblem of the charity and by buying and planting these bulbs the Park is helping to support and raise awareness of UCARE’s work.

The results of the gardening team’s hard work were spectacular. The Manor House Terrace was a sea of pink tulips and many visitors were heard to gasp when they came through the yew hedge and spotted the tulips, underplanted by forget-me-nots. During April this spot became the most photographed in the Park, with too many selfies on social media to count! We planted another 1,000 bulbs in November 2019, ready for another sea of tulips in April 2020. www.ucareoxford.org

John Heyworth remembers the early days, in an article for the Witney Gazette in 1978...

Good Friday in 1970 happened to be a fine day and large numbers of visitors, impelled by various motives of which the dominant one was doubtless curiosity, had decided to make it their big day out for the Easter Holiday.

Inevitably teething problems which could have been minor ones became major – ticket machines jammed, and our animal keepers found themselves selling tickets, their pockets bursting with loose change, and with ever lengthening lines of cars. The great British public took these setbacks in their stride and, apart from complete exhaustion, the staff survived the long weekend.

In 1980 we built the Tropical House which used to be three adjoining greenhouses, the first for rare hot-house plants and a fig tree, the third for nectarines and peaches. The main water supply came from a central well now covered over as a central flower bed.

There was a cricket pitch on what is now the grass car park and there were two grass tennis courts below the terrace outside what used to be the drawing room. Many years ago, there was also a private nine-hole golf course covering the Zebra paddock and adjoining area, but in the 1920s some of the parkland had reverted to brambles inhabited by innumerable rabbits.

So many changes, but our visitors can still see the Victorian gothic Manor House sitting as it has done for over two centuries among the trees and lawns surrounding it, and picture country life as it used to be.
In 1969, John Heyworth borrowed £40,000 to start the Wildlife Park. All his friends thought he was mad, but in spite of endless setbacks in the early days, he stuck at it and these are some of the happy moments!

1980 On 8th January 1980 the Park issued a First Day Cover to commemorate the tenth anniversary of its opening in 1970. A special cancelling stamp showing the Red Panda, the emblem of the Park, was prepared by the Post Office.


1982 1982 Breeding of Great Indian Hamsters in the UK.

1983 1983 appears on BBC’s “Live and Deadly”.

1984 The old cart barn, which had been used as a maintenance workshop, was converted into the Fun House. TV celebrity Rohan Hall and “Stella” opened the Fun House on 17th May.

1985 Red Pandas moved to enclosures by Manor House. New Reptile House and Aquarium opened in old stables. A pair of Leopards were introduced into new enclosures built from fork pokes. Refurbishment, shop and gift shop near Walled Garden completed.

1986 1986 Children’s Fairground created. AtTRActions from PeTr-Center enjoyed by children in the playground. The Factory was opened by Lord and Lady Ayres.


1989 1989 The ‘Treehouse’ and the Pond on the south front of the Manor House were constructed. Thanks to a bequest to the Park from Mrs Nancy Louise Ibbotson.

1990 1990 The Park’s next Persian Lion cub born, to mum Nancy. The Park’s next generation of Asian Lions, Saba, Tik and Nuka, were born.

1991 1991 The last pony rides were given in 1991.


1995 1995 The Animal Park’s 10th year featured on BBC’s “Springwatch” with our Tortoises.


1997 1997 Most successful week at the Park.


2003 2003 Walled Garden opened.

2004 2004 Walled Garden opened.


2007 2007 Railway Circuit of the Park completed. Bwrni the Reptilecurious Python appears on BBC’s “Blue Planet”.

2008 2008 Holly Max opens our new Multiscope Enclosure. TV Jellies “Ca”’s filming on ITV.

2009 2009 “Ruby” the male White Rhino arrives from Knowsley Safari Park, and Rosalind “Nancy” and “Ruby” arrive from South Africa. Welcome.

2010 2010 The Red Gloves arrive on the Park’s 40th anniversary.

2011 2011 Bridge over lake installed. RHP’s “Snow and Mushy” filmed live at the Park with presenter Sue Arkelluck and David Stewart.

2012 2012 Road Bridge opens Insect and Reptile Exhibit.


2014 2014 The Paro’s first baby rhino born, to mum Nancy. The Park’s first generation of Asian Lions, Saba, Tik and Nuka, were born.


2016 2016 Addie the Park’s first baby rhino born, to mum Nancy. The Park’s first generation of African Lions, Azeem and Aladdin, opened by David Cameron.


2018 2018 Third year of the Park as a Royal Horticultural Society “Perfect Garden”.

2019 2019 Stu and Kiara born on 9th September. The Park featured on BBC’s “Springwatch” with Adam French, proceedings, and on BBC’s “Top Gear” with our White Stork breeding and re-introduction project with Knepp Castle in Sussex.

2020 2020 2020...
Curating the collection

The animal collection at the Park has changed dramatically over the past fifty years. Under the stewardship of six Curators, it has diversified and grown. The Curator oversees the entire collection and is responsible for the sourcing of animals and the breeding and conservation programmes. The Park’s first and current Curators share their experiences for this special 50th Anniversary edition of Wild Talk.

Brain Sinfelt was the first Curator at Cotswold Wildlife Park. Brian was responsible, along with John Heyworth, for the creation of the animal collection and was also instrumental in the Park’s original layout.

What was the first animal you remember working with at the Park? The first animals we got for the Park were a group of Wallabies. I remember driving up to Lancashire to buy them from a collector but they were not penned up and we had a right old do try to catch them in a small paddock. They were the first animals we installed.

What was your vision for the Park in those early days? How does that compare with the Park today? The vision that John Heyworth, I, and the first Head Gardener Les Scott had for the Park was that it would be the best, most interesting zoo park in the country, with happy animals and happy staff. We set out to make it so. What also, we thought, would make it special was the idea that we could mix gardens with animals. Whenever we designed a cage, pen or aviary Les Scott would surround it with lawns, shrubs or gardens. Other zoos did this of course, but not to the extent that we did. That I think was one of the main reasons for its success. The other was that we tried to emulate as near as possible the animal’s natural environment. Today that ideal has been realised a hundred-fold, and I think the gardens under Head Gardener Tim Miles and his team are world class.

What was the most memorable day of your curating life? The most memorable tend to be disasters so I will leave them out! Probably the sight of a newborn Rhino calf, six months earlier than the experts predicted, wobbling around in the paddock when we arrived at the Park for work – the first rhino calf we had ever bred. Astrid is now an adult and living happily in her own herd at Colchester Zoo.

Can you tell us about the animal you had the strongest bond with? I loved the Red Pandas, but my favourites I suppose were the White Rhinos. At that time, the general feeling was that White Rhino needed the stimulation of a group to allow them to breed. Well, it has taken a long time, but they have now bred here. Also, more than ever, the breeding of captive animals for possible re-introduction into the wild is vital in a world that is destroying habitats and therefore the lives of wild animals worldwide. The Park is at the forefront of this and doing an amazing job.

What is your proudest achievement during your time as Curator? I felt very strongly that once we had completed the “Madagascar” area that we would be in an excellent position to work in Lemur conservation. Our conservation efforts have grown and we are now involved in many projects. I am particularly proud of the White Stork rewilding project and our work with native species. I think this is an area in which we can excel in the future. I think the future for us is to display and breed species that suit the Park in beautiful surroundings and develop our role in conservation even further.

What was the most memorable day of your curating life at the Park so far? The most memorable tend to be disasters so I will leave them out! Probably the sight of a newborn Rhino calf, six months earlier than the experts predicted, wobbling around in the paddock when we arrived at the Park for work – the first rhino calf we had ever bred. Astrid is now an adult and living happily in her own herd at Colchester Zoo.

Can you tell us about the animal you had the strongest bond with? There are a few but I would have to pick Youssou the Crowned Sifaka, who was our “poster boy” for Lemur conservation and a really laid-back character. I collected him from his former zoo and remember bringing him back on the ferry.

Jamie Craig has been the Park’s Curator since 2008, having joined as Section Head of the Walled Garden in 2006.

What is the first animal you remember working with at the Park? The first thing I remember is working with the birds, most notably the hand-rearing of Black Stork chicks. I also have fond memories of bringing my first animal in – the Cuscus who is actually still here despite his age!

What was your vision for the Park in your early days and what are your plans for the future? I was mainly dealing with the section I was running rather than the Park as a whole, but I had a real plan in my head for the “Madagascar” exhibit and for some of the weirder species that I thought would suit the Park, such as Wolverine and Ameereas. I felt very strongly that once we had completed the “Madagascar” area that we would be in an excellent position to work in Lemur conservation. Our conservation efforts have grown and we are now involved in many projects. I am particularly proud of the White Stork rewilding project and our work with native species. I think this is an area in which we can excel in the future. I think the future for us is to display and breed species that suit the Park in beautiful surroundings and develop our role in conservation even further.

What is your proudest achievement during your time as Curator? Probably beating Bristol Zoo 5-0 in the Zoological World Cup! I would have to say there are many proudest moments: the Madagascar exhibit, breeding Sifaka, Wolverine and Rhino, the launching of the Park’s conservation charity, the team hand-rearing “Belle” the Rhino calf after she was born with a damaged leg and the first release back into the wild of European White Storks, which we bred here. Most importantly I would say continuing to watch the Park develop and I hope go from strength to strength.

From that day we just seemed to have a connection. I also have to mention Nimbus, a Clouded Leopard I hand-reared – a beautiful, gentle and playful animal. When I had her at home as a very young cub, watching her bond with my children was something I will never forget, as well as her chasing them around the house!

What is your proudest achievement during your time as Curator? Probably beating Bristol Zoo 5-0 in the Zoological World Cup! I would have to say there are many proudest moments: the Madagascar exhibit, breeding Sifaka, Wolverine and Rhino, the launching of the Park’s conservation charity, the team hand-rearing “Belle” the Rhino calf after she was born with a damaged leg and the first release back into the wild of European White Storks, which we bred here. Most importantly I would say continuing to watch the Park develop and I hope go from strength to strength.

**Above:**
The Park’s first Curator, Brian Sinfelt, handling one of the Park’s first breeding successes, Rainbow Boa.

**Below:**
Brian making friends with the Park’s first Tiger.

Jamie Craig with Clouded Leopard cub Nimbus.
Memorable Animals at the Park

Over the past 50 years there have been many animal characters. Here are a few of our Keepers’ favourites.

**Jara the Lar Gibbon (1994-2014)**
She arrived at the Park from Helsinki Zoo in Finland in 1996 and instantly bonded with Sabu, a male from Chester Zoo. In 1999 she gave birth to two male cubs, Kashi and Thar, then in 2002 she gave birth to a male and female called Lucifer and Kalu. Akela may have had only four cubs, but they have gone on to produce over twenty grandchildren and many great grandchildren in zoos around Europe.

**Youssou the Crowned Sifaka (2007-2017)**
Youssou arrived at the Park in 2007 from Belfast Zoo and quickly became a firm favourite in our new Madagascar Walkthrough exhibit. He was an extremely laid-back character and was hugely popular with visitors and keepers alike. He arrived with his companion “Ma” a female Ring-tailed Lemur, and their enduring friendship lasted until he passed away in 2017 from age related health problems (Ma now has a new Sifaka friend!). Youssou was the catalyst for our work with Sifaka conservation and when he died, many keepers felt they had lost an old friend.

**Akela the Asiatic Lion (1994-2014)**
She arrived at the Park from Helsinki Zoo in Finland in 1996 and instantly bonded with Sabu, a male from Chester Zoo. In 1999 she gave birth to two male cubs, Kashi and Thar, then in 2002 she gave birth to a male and female called Lucifer and Kalu. Akela may have had only four cubs, but they have gone on to produce over twenty grandchildren and many great grandchildren in zoos around Europe.

**Barney (1997-2015)**
Our 21-foot-long (6.4 metres) Reticulated Python Barney appeared on BBC’s “Blue Peter” in March 2007, as he was believed to be the biggest snake in any UKzoological collection. Barney lived in our Reptile House with his mate Tikki, who was a mere 18 feet long! Barney died in 2015 aged 18.

**Bella the White Rhino (1969-2003)**
Bella arrived at the Park in May 1972 from South Africa. She was instantly recognisable because of her very long horn and lived with our other Rhino Bull, eventually succumbing to old age in 2003. The Park’s train is named in her memory.

**Gertie the Spider Monkey (1970s-2008)**
She arrived at the Park on 1st August 1970 and had a habit of ‘chattering’ when someone she recognised was nearby. She was one of the Park’s most popular characters and a great favourite with staff and visitors.

Two of the Park’s early media stars were ‘Rocky’, the hand-reared Rockhopper Penguin and ‘Cocky’ the Citron-crested Cockatoo who regularly featured on Johnny Morris’s BBC “Animal Magic” series in the 1970s. Rocky and Cocky assisted Johnny Morris in the studio and commented on the other animals featured in the programme each week. (Pictured, Johnny Morris opening our Insect House with the help of Cocky).

Percy was hatched at the Park on 14th April 1989, and it was not until much later we discovered she was a female (after she had been named Percy). She was a weak chick and the dedication of keeping staff and her fighting spirit kept her going. During 1989-90 there was an outbreak of avian malaria causing the death of all our Penguins except Percy. She remained our only Penguin for 6 months, during which time she became extremely attached to her keepers (and vice-versa) and became a minor celebrity in the press. She lived until 26th November 1992, when despite all efforts her medical problems overcame her.

**Bella**
Bella arrived at the Park in May 1972 from South Africa. She was instantly recognisable because of her very long horn and lived with our other Rhino Bull, eventually succumbing to old age in 2003. The Park’s train is named in her memory.

**Youssou**
Youssou arrived at the Park in 2007 from Belfast Zoo and quickly became a firm favourite in our new Madagascar Walkthrough exhibit. He was an extremely laid-back character and was hugely popular with visitors and keepers alike. He arrived with his companion “Ma” a female Ring-tailed Lemur, and their enduring friendship lasted until he passed away in 2017 from age related health problems (Ma now has a new Sifaka friend!). Youssou was the catalyst for our work with Sifaka conservation and when he died, many keepers felt they had lost an old friend.

**Jara**
Jara was born at the Park to parents Winston and Purdy on 29th October 2004. Unfortunately, when she was four years old, she lost both of her parents in the same year – they were both 30 years old, so a good age for a Lar Gibbon. Jara was a very timid, gentle Gibbon and would carefully take pieces of food from the keepers, and would happily allow them into her enclosure, even if she would swing down and knock their hat off! So that she wasn’t on her own, a ‘male’ was brought in from another zoo as a companion. Topof had a completely different personality and also turned out to be female! They lived happily together for around seven years, before relationships broke down. In 2016 we had the opportunity to send Jara to a zoo in South Africa, where she has settled well, and after a rocky introduction to a new male, she has had a baby of her own.
Interview with Tim Miles, Head Gardener

What’s changed since 1970 in the gardens department? The climate has become a lot more friendly in the Cotswolds. The 1980s were generally much colder during winter, so we have been able to grow plants that Les Scott the first Head Gardener (1970-1998), wouldn’t have been able to grow. However, we came a cropper in 2009-2010 when we had three hard winter spells, which did a lot of damage.

How big is the Garden Team? When I started in 1998 there were five full-time gardeners and now, we have the equivalent of 13 full time gardeners and grounds staff.

What’s the biggest challenge gardening at the Park? Gardening with the animals! We work with the keepers to develop the landscapes and planting in the enclosures which is always a fun challenge, then combine those two interests.

Why did you decide to work here? Growing up in Cornwall I was used to wild and wonderful things. I then worked at London Zoo in the 1980s and enjoyed the concept of planting for animals and using exotic species to grow. When the job at the Park came up, it was a good opportunity to combine those two interests.

What do you think the gardens bring to the Park’s visitors? Visitors enjoy seeing the plants that have just been established. We get lots of questions about our cacti and plants, which many people enjoy getting out into the open and seeing the diversity of the plant species here. It’s about reconnecting with nature.

What grows like ‘wildflowers’ at the Park? Dahlia, with their varied shapes, heights and colours, providing lots of opportunities to grow them throughout the garden. Wildflowers do! We have done very well with our meadows allowing native species to grow and re-introduce themselves, including several species of orchids, which has been quite a triumph.

What’s the most common asked plant question? We get lots of questions about our cacti and banana plants, which many people are amazed to see growing outdoors in the summer. We have to take them inside in the winter and fortunately we have a good team that enjoys looking after our exotic collection.

If you were to choose one plant to represent the Park, what would you choose? Jubaecia chilensis, the Chilean Wine Palm – its curvy deep green fronds, elegance and poise make it a year-round aristocrat.

Plants at the Park

Tetrapanax papyrifer Rex. There are few plants that can go leaf-to-leaf with the power, presence and sheer drama of Tetrapanax. A semi-hardy exotic of truly gargantuan proportions!

Henry Lawrence

The Ginkgo biloba tree. Its distinctive leaves are the first clue that you’re looking at a living fossil. Here’s a conifer that’s adapted to our climate over 180 million years, with a lovely butter-yellow autumn colour – YUM!

Ellie Jones

Daphne bholua ‘Jacqueline Postill’. The scent of the flower in late winter and early spring is absolutely stunning and never fails to lift the spirits.

Christine Beausire

Gunnera manicata or Giant rhubarb. A large architectural tender perennial originating from Brazil. Seeing it growing in Cornish gardens inspired me to become a horticulturist. This stunning plant instantly transforms any garden into a Jurassic world.

Hillary Hepburn

All the different types of Dahlia, with their varied shapes, heights and colours, providing lots of opportunities to grow them throughout the garden.

Dan Bint

James and the Giant George

James Headland talks about our oldest resident here at the Park.

George the Giant Tortoise is approximately 85 years old. I have had the absolute pleasure of working alongside him and his “crew” (Sheldon - 60 and Darwin - 30) for the last 6 years which really is only a fraction of George’s time on this earth.

George is an Aldabran Giant Tortoise, the second largest Tortoise species on this planet. George’s records are few and far between. He supposedly arrived in the 1970s and could have been one of the Park’s earliest residents. He has moved house, previously being kept in the Reptile Courtyard where the Crocodile Monitor now resides. He now has a marvellous view of our listed Manor House and keeps a watchful eye over the Rhinos next door. George is a big lad, weighing almost 200kg and once fully grown could weigh almost 350kg. His favourite summer pastime is using his mud wallow, which he will guard and fend off any Tortoise who dares steal his muddy throne.

George is our most inquisitive Giant Tortoise here at the Park and is always first out in the morning, going for a stretch after sleeping the night away in his heated home. Being the most inquisitive, he is often the first to come over to meet staff, as well as Keeper for a Day and Giant Tortoise Encounters – especially as he gets carrots, a real treat!

Aldabran Tortoises’ natural diet consists of grasses and sedges, so George and his “creep” (the term for a group of Tortoises) do a great job in chewing away any long grass in their paddock. I would recommend them as very efficient lawnmowers and hedge trimmers (although we don’t tell the gardens team that)!. During the summer, the Giant Tortoises benefit from a huge selection of freshly picked weeds, favourites being dandelions, dock leaves and plantain.

George, Darwin and Sheldon are real characters on our section and we hope they will be welcoming visitors for many, many more years to come!
Fifty Years On

2019 was our fiftieth year of being open to the visiting public and none of us, my father included, would have predicted in 1970 that 2019 would see over half a million people coming to the Park (including freebies, such as under 3's), of whom 440,000 were paying visitors, a record for us.

I remember giving an interview on our 25th anniversary, at the end of which the question was sprung on me: “What’s your ambition for the Park in the next 25 years?” I hadn’t really ever thought about it much, so I just found myself saying “I want us to be the best Wildlife Park in the world that no-one has ever heard of.”

I still think, 25 years on, that that is a good ambition for us to aim for, although I’m not sure who is judge and jury of what is the best Wildlife Park! Most importantly, we want it to be best for all the animals in our care. Also, perhaps because many of us actually live here, I want this place to be the most beautiful Wildlife Park in the world. That too is a subjective judgement and it ought to be so simple, but I’m always amazed at how not-beautiful some attractions are. So perhaps it’s not so simple after all.

25 years on we can’t pretend that no-one has heard about us but we remain low-key and in an important sense very locally grounded, which I hope won’t change. We’ll continue to evolve, perhaps remembering always a favourite saying of my father’s: “Don’t do what’s new, do what’s never old.”

Reggie Heyworth
Managing Director