

WHY ANIMAL ACT CIRCUSES HAVE NO PLACE IN THE 21ST CENTURY



The beginning of a new millennium is a good time to take stock. Time to clear out those outdated practises and bad habits which no longer have any place in modern society. One practise which is long overdue relegation to the history books is the use of animals in circus shows. A hundred years ago the sight of exotic creatures was no doubt a wondrous thing for people who were largely ignorant about wildlife in other countries.

Just being able to see an elephant or a bear or a zebra or a big cat was enough to draw people to the circus. Soon that became boring and the circus proprietors had to jazz up their act. Before long they were teaching elephants and other animals to do tricks to entertain the public. Teaching animals tricks is a nice way of saying that the animals were forced to perform unnatural acts. Animals were beaten, starved and goaded to make them rear up on their hind legs, balance on barrels, jump through burning hoops and do all manner of demeaning things to thrill those gullible enough to part with their ticket money.

Regretfully things have not changed much as far as animal act circuses go. In the late 1980's John Robins of Animal Concern sneaked behind the scenes at the Christmas Circus in Glasgow and photographed elephants chained by the legs and unable to move more than a few feet in any direction. The next day Bobby Roberts of Bobby Roberts' Super Circus admitted in a BBC radio debate with John Robins that, apart from performing, the only exercise his elephants had received in three days was a one hour walk around the car park of the SECC in Glasgow. Around the same time an Animal Concern investigation disclosed that before the start of the annual Christmas circus Bobby Roberts had been keeping his animals in a damp, cramped, dilapidated barn at Bishopbriggs near Glasgow.

Another circus which caught the attention of Animal Concern was Chipperfields Circus. Several times during the 1990's we photographed their elephants between acts. These poor creatures were restrained by short chains on three legs and the circus proprietor, Tony Hopkins, admitted that they were imprisoned this way for as long as 23 hours every day. Although this is contrary to the welfare code of the Association of Circus Proprietors our complaints to them were ignored. In March 1997 we received video of Rane, a Chipperfields elephant being over-wintered at Twycross Zoo. John Robins describes what he saw, "Rane had a very bad skin complaint and an open sore on its right front leg. It was standing on the spot shaking its head from side to side. Although it was unrestrained it still thought it was shackled by three legs. It was a pitiful sight."

Over the last twenty years, at various circuses, Animal Concern has documented the following: Animals enduring road and ferry journeys from the south of England to the northern isles. Big cats abandoned in their cage at the side of an Ayrshire road when a tractor unit broke down. A mad bear pacing out its life in a cage the size of a transit van. Performing dogs taken from a big top in Perth and put into tiny cages in a small windowless van. Children gaining unsupervised access to dangerous animals at a circus in Inverclyde. Elephants, horses, camels, a rhino, hippo and leopard abandoned in airless trucks at the side of the road for a sweltering hot day when an Italian circus broke a court order and moved their animals from Edinburgh to Glasgow. They were eventually taken back to Edinburgh and we persuaded the Council to ban them from Glasgow.

Animal Concern is not the only organisation keeping an eye on circuses. In 1998 an undercover investigation filmed workers at Chipperfields beating animals. An elephant was repeatedly struck with an iron bar with so much force that the bar bent. The trainer, who had served time for killing a young woman in the 1960's, was sent back to prison for six months for beating this elephant. Photographs have been obtained showing vicious hooks hidden in the tassels at the end of sticks which trainers use on their animals.

There is no justification for making animals suffer in the name of entertainment. Today we can appreciate the wonder of animals in their natural environment through the many wildlife documentaries on TV. We do not have to condemn animals to a life of constant close imprisonment, lengthy road journeys and cruel training and then force them to do stupid tricks in the name of entertainment. Thankfully young people are becoming aware of this and perhaps they should be teaching their parents and grandparents about the issue. One leading teachers union has asked teachers not to take children to animal act circuses because of cruelty and the negative education value.

In 1998 an all party group of MPs looked at the circus issue. They made several recommendations, the most sensible of which would be to ban animal acts from circuses. Animal Concern wants to see animal acts banned from circuses and the animals retired to safari parks to allow them to live out their retirement in peace.

It must also be remembered that animal act circuses can present risks to humans. In 1990 Bobby Roberts was nearly killed when his favourite elephant Maureen turned on him during a publicity stunt and crushed his head so badly that he needed several metal plates and silicon implants to rebuild his face. Despite this Bobby has used his new favourite elephant Janey to raise extra revenue by inviting children to pay to have their photograph taken astride this animal during intermissions in performances.

In the 1990s in the USA there were many incidents where circus animals killed and injured people. On at least two occasions circus elephants have gone berserk while people were riding on them. It was also discovered that circus animals, including elephants, can carry the same type of TB which infects humans.

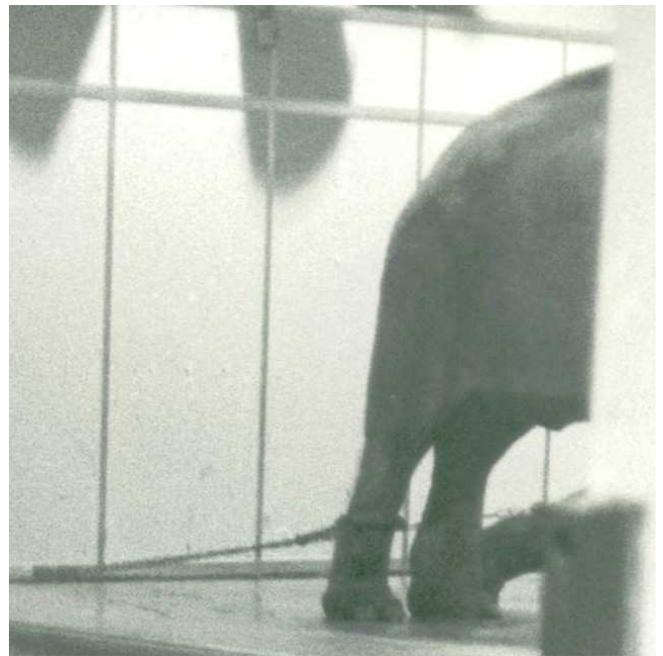
There are several things the public can do to help end the suffering of animals in circuses. The most obvious is not to go to see these sick acts, go to the cinema or a panto instead. Write to your MP, MSP and Euro MP asking them to call for legislation banning animal acts from circuses. Write to your local Council asking them to refuse to lease Council land to circuses with animals. Write to private venues which allow animal circuses and ask them to stop doing so.



The photograph above shows elephants at Chipperfields Circus at Inverurie in 1992. If you look carefully you will see the animals each have short chains on three legs.

Photo: D. Wilkinson/Aberdeen Animal Rights Campaign.

Even the best animal act circuses only give animals the most basic existence. They live out their lives in lorries and small cages, forever chained or tethered. Animal act circuses are cruel and exploitative. Help Animal Concern ban them and free the animals imprisoned in the name of entertainment.



The photograph above was taken behind the scenes at Bobby Roberts Super Circus at the SECC in Glasgow in 1986. The chains allow the elephants to move only a few feet in any direction. The day after this picture was taken Bobby Roberts admitted on BBC Radio Scotland that his elephants had been given only one hours exercise (a walk in the car park) in three days. Years later little has changed.

Photo: J. F. Robins/Animal Concern

Animal Concern receives no state or lottery aid and we rely on the public to fund our campaigns. Membership costs just £100 Life, £10 Waged, £5 Unwaged (Pension, Student, UB40) and £2 Under sixteen. To join, make a donation or to find out about our other campaigns please write to:



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