

Lions loose on a gentleman's lawn: animality, authenticity and automobility in the emergence of the English safari park

Andrew J.P. Flack

University of Bristol, Historical Studies, 13-15 Woodland Road, Clifton, Bristol, BS8 1TB, UK



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ABSTRACT

When the English safari park first appeared in the grounds of Longleat House in Wiltshire's rolling countryside in the spring of 1966, it was the first time that visitors to an animal park in Europe were awarded the freedom of the road as they meandered through captive animal spaces in search of eye-to-eye encounters with exotic animals from the comfort of their cars. This kind of park, where the illusions of both wildness and freedom in captivity might be said to be at their most intense, has, however, received almost no attention from scholars, not least in the arena of zoo histories but also in the fields of environmental histories and historical geographies more widely. Moreover, while historians of environment and technology have increasingly considered roads and automobility, they have rarely been examined in relation to wildlife. This article focuses on the earliest years of Europe's first drive-through safari park. It illustrates that these kinds of human-animal geographies reveal much about the ways in which humans, animals and technologies combine and interact with each other in the forging of various hybridities. In so doing it raises important questions about what constitutes authenticity and artificiality. The story of the emergence of the English safari park is, at its heart, a narrative of trouble. In the safari park, and well beyond, spatial categorisations, human and animal natures, and interspecies encounters in captive worlds were disrupted, disputed and reconfigured.

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Deep in the heart of the Wiltshire countryside lies Longleat Safari and Adventure Park (Fig. 1). Opened in 1966, the animal park forms a single part of the vast nine thousand acre Longleat estate, landscaped by Lancelot 'Capability' Brown in the later decades of the eighteenth century. In addition to the animal park, the estate is also noted for its Elizabethan house, completed by Sir John Thyme c. 1580, as well as for the more recently constructed Centre Parcs holiday village which offers a 'back to nature' experience for body and soul. The animal park relies heavily on exoticising its animal exhibitions, crafting an exciting day out through a rich array of species and habitats, including Tiger Territory, Wolf Wood, Stingray Bay, Rockin' Rhinos and Cheetah Kingdom. Above all the park has built its reputation on the intersection of exotic wildlife and the twentieth century's principal travel technology: the automobile. Its 'safari' experience is one in which visitors can drive their own cars through animal spaces.¹ 'Wild' and thrilling encounters crafted and

mediated in large part by the automobile distinguish Longleat – a member of the British and Irish Association of Zoos and Aquariums (BIAZA) and the European Association of Zoos and Aquaria (EAZA) – from other varieties of animal attraction in the vicinity. Bristol Zoo (1835) and its recently opened sister establishment the Wild Place Project (2013), for example, both permit visitors the chance to encounter an array of species from Asiatic lion to cheetah in a diversity of habitats, but they do so within a philosophical frame of conservationism and only on foot, that more ancient and (usually) biotic travel technology. Over the long history of animal attractions mechanical travel technologies have usually served the purpose of dropping visitors at the gates without carrying them any further. When the English safari park first appeared in the grounds of the Longleat House estate in rural Wiltshire in the spring of 1966, it was the first time that visitors to an animal park in Europe were awarded the freedom of the road as they meandered through captive animal spaces in search of eye-to-eye encounters with exotic creatures (Fig. 2).

Such encounters are part of a deep and profound heritage of human-animal relationships spanning time and space. Animals are all around us, in all kinds of environments, and we have engaged

E-mail address: Andrew.flack@bristol.ac.uk.

¹ Longleat Safari and Adventure Park, www.longleat.co.uk last accessed 26 February 2016.

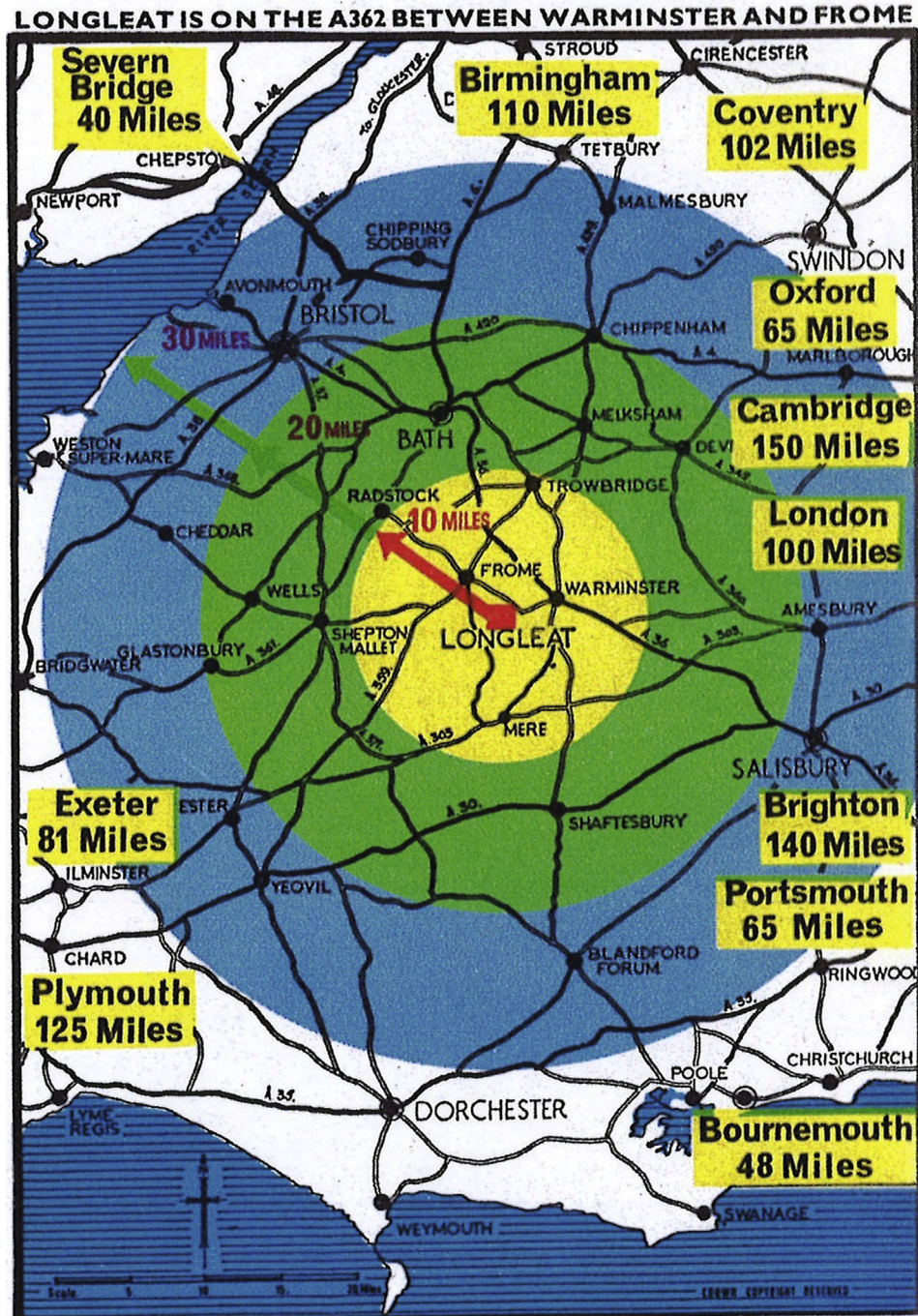


Fig. 1. Map of Longleat and surrounding area. From *To Africa and Back in a Day*, 1969. Reproduced with permission from Longleat Enterprises Ltd.

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