

A short history of long pink legs at Chester Zoo

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Abstract

Chester Zoo opened its gates in 1931. The Zoo was established by George and Elizabeth Mottershead. Flamingos featured from the very beginning and although their fortunes waxed and waned over the next 90 years; the latest development is a Latin American Wetlands Aviary with its flock of over 130 Caribbean flamingos (*Phoenicopterus ruber*).

Resumen

El zoológico de Chester abrió sus puertas en 1931. El zoológico fue establecido por George y Elizabeth Mottershead. Los flamencos se exhibieron desde el principio y, aunque su suerte creció y disminuyó durante los siguientes 90 años, un desarrollo reciente es el aviario de los humedales de América Latina con su grupo de más de 130 Flamencos del Caribe (*Phoenicopterus ruber*).

Résumé

Le zoo de Chester a ouvert ses portes en 1931. Le zoo a été créé par George et Elizabeth Mottershead. Les flamants y figuraient dès le début. Bien que l'effectif ait varié au cours des années 1990, l'installation récente d'une volière présentant la faune des zones humides d'Amérique latine permet de montrer plus de 130 flamants des Caraïbes (*Phoenicopterus ruber*) au public.

Introduction

When George Mottershead planned the layout of his zoo, he knew that first impressions counted. The first enclosure that a visitor would encounter would be a waterfowl pond. This enclosure was located where the Chinese Garden can be found today. Built by George's father Albert, this miniature lake was dug out of clay and left unlined so that the pool's bottom would host invertebrates for the waterfowl to feast upon. The first denizens were mandarin ducks (*Aix galericulata*) and North American wood ducks (*A. sponsa*), guaranteed crowd pleasers with their bright colours and tufted head feathers giving passable impressions of brightly painted wooden toy ducks. The larger Muscovy ducks (*Cairina moschata*) and barnacle geese (*Branta leucopsis*) gave this enclosure added interest, but the *pièce de résistance* was the addition of six flamingos,

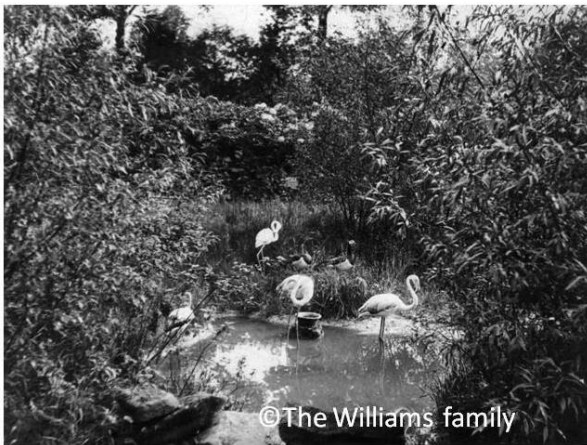
which to Mottershead's relief arrived just two days before the Zoo opened in June 1931.

The History of Flamingos at Chester Zoo (1931 to 2021)

This is the story of flamingos at Chester Zoo. Although the waterfowl and flamingos had a miniature lake, they did not have access to a shelter; so at night time Albert Mottershead would light a series of oil lamps and place them around the enclosure to ward off foxes. This method of protection is documented as still being in use up to the winter of 1968/69 (Chester Zoo New, January 1969). The flamingos were a seasonal attraction and during the winter months they were removed from the pool (pictured right) to warmer accommodation, probably, either in the stable block or more likely a room in Oakfield House.

Following the Zoo's guidebooks and newsletters we can piece together a partial

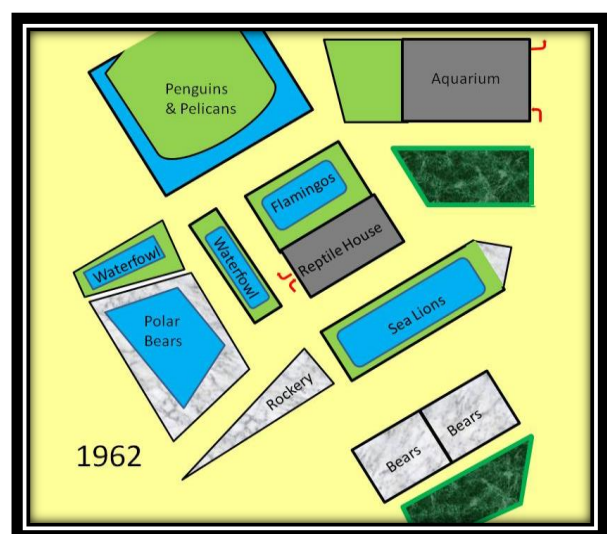
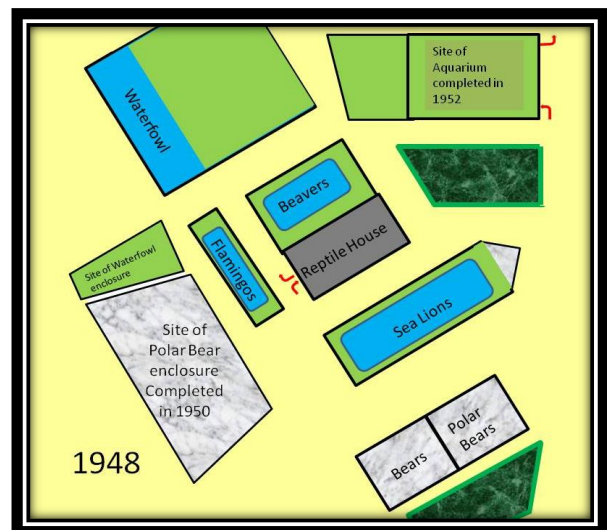
history of flamingos at Chester. The original mini-flock of flamingos probably lived for three or four years, we know that they were still present when the Chester Zoological Society was formed in 1933, but are probably absent by 1937 when the first edition of the *Our Zoo* newsletter is published and they are certainly absent from the list of animals available for adoption in late 1939. Additionally, perhaps because the pond was not lined, it is later described as an “unsightly drop of water” (*Our Zoo News* No. 17, March 1939) and the wildfowl are re-homed in a naturally occurring pond.



The species of these first flamingos is unspecified. During the 90-year span of this story, the taxonomy and naming of flamingos has morphed. To simplify the story telling for both the teller and the reader, I have been consistent in the use of common names for all six IUCN recognised species of flamingo. The main species this affects is the Caribbean flamingo (*Phoenicopterus ruber*) which is also referred to as the rosy and Cuban flamingo. I have substituted original common names used in newsletters and guidebooks with “Caribbean” throughout.

The post-World War II years saw a rapid expansion of the Zoo, including the development of two bear pits and a sea lion (now giant otter) pool. Almost incidental to the creation of these enclosures were the development of pools for beavers and flamingos. Together, along with the original

reptile house, they occupy a footprint that today forms the penguin enclosure. Water flowed from the sea lion pool, via filter beds, through to the flamingos then onto the beavers before making its way over a weir into a newly created lake. The first published visitor map appears in the June 1948 edition of *Our Zoo News & Guide*. That map is hand-drawn and a stylised version of the relevant section showing the location of the flamingos is included below, alongside a similar map of the same area from 1962. The maps do not reflect exact split between land and water in many of these enclosures, including those of the flamingos, this is because it is not recorded in the original source material.



In 1948, there were just two flamingos and we know that they were West African which probably makes them greater flamingos (*P. roseus*). The birds are described as “large

white birds” (Our Zoo News No. 89, December 1948) so along with the fact that greater flamingos were more popular in collections at that time, it all but confirms that they were the greater species. The flamingos shared their pool with ibis and had to be wintered in a more sheltered area.

Work on the new polar bear enclosure began in December 1949 with an adjoining pool was designated for flamingos but it is unclear whether the birds ever occupy this new pool as the zoo reports difficulty in obtaining new flamingos and their 1948 pool is later re-designated for penguins. From mid-1951 until 1957, zoo maps no longer feature flamingos, and their pool is now occupied by penguins (Our Zoo News No. 113, August 1952). Flamingos are also absent from a stock list published in 1955.

Moving forwards to September 1957, we see find the importation of “a number of lesser flamingos (*Pheoniconaias minor*) from East Africa”. These wild-caught birds were immature birds measuring 18 inches (45cm) and came from Lake Elementita in Kenya. These juvenile birds may have been misidentified as during a review of the flamingo flock in 1980 a newsletter article refers to the arrival of greater flamingos in 1957, five of which were still at the zoo in 1980.

Alternatively, the arrival date of the greater flamingos in the 1980 flock may have been incorrectly recorded. Lake Elementita is home to both lesser and greater flamingos, however it is said that it is difficult to distinguish between the juveniles of these species. During the 1957/58 winter these African flamingos resided in the Pygmy Hippo House and by the following summer they were sharing a pool with Caribbean flamingos, scarred ibis (*Threskiornis aethiopicus*), “wood Ibis” (wood stork, *Mycteria americana*) and some African ducks.

By 1963, it is reported that although the flamingos are building nests, but are not

laying any eggs (see photo right). Captive breeding of flamingos was still relatively uncommon, with Basel Zoo recording the first European breeding of Chilean flamingos (*Phoenicopterus chilensis*) in 1958 and the world’s first breeding of greater flamingos a year later. There is an update on Chester’s breeding attempts in 1964 when it is reported that besides continued nest building, a single egg had been laid. The Zoo’s flamingo flock now consists of lesser, greater and Caribbean flamingos. The birds over-winter in wooden houses where there is supplementary heating provided by infra-red heating lamps.



Referring to the 1948 map above, in 1954 the beavers were transferred to a new enclosure after it was discovered that they tunneled under the Reptile House. By 1964/65 the Reptile House is no longer in use; the former beaver pool has been adapted for flamingos; and the old flamingo pool is now a general waterfowl enclosure. In the spring of 1966, the existing flock of 11 flamingos is augmented by a fourth species of flamingo: six Chilean flamingos. Across the drive from the flamingo pool the waterfowl enclosure is home to pelicans and penguins.

By 1969 this waterfowl enclosure has become home to the mixed species flock of flamingos, and it is here that flamingos still reside today. During the same year four more Caribbean flamingos are added to the Zoo’s flock, swiftly followed by 15 more Chilean flamingos. By 1970 further attempts were being made to

breed the flamingos, recognising that for breeding that their lake requires to be a specific depth, so the birds find their pool is deepened with steps cut into the bank.

Flock building continues with the addition of several Chilean flamingos in 1970. The following summer, Mottershead completes a full house of flamingo species with the addition seven James's (puna) (*Phoenicoparrus jamesi*) and three Andean flamingos (*P. andinus*).

Review of the flamingo population

George Mottershead passes away in May 1978 and is succeeded by Dr Michael Brambell as Director. Brambell is determined to give the Zoo a stronger conservation focus and develop its breeding programmes. An early Bramwell appointment is Peter Stevens as Curator of Birds.

Together Bramwell and Stevens review their flock and their enclosure. In 1979, four more Caribbean flamingos arrive. The flock (see Table 1) has representatives from all six species including the five greater(?) flamingos from the original wild-caught import from Lake Elementita back in 1957.

Species (April 1980)	Number of birds
Chilean flamingo	19
Greater flamingo	5
Caribbean flamingo	11
Lesser flamingo	1
Andean flamingo	1
James' flamingo	1

The outcomes of the review are that the singletons are sent to the Wildfowl Trust at Slimbridge; the greater flamingos are to be transferred to another zoo; and Chester would henceforth concentrate on keeping just two species - the Chilean and Caribbean species. A similar pattern is seen across the late '70s and into the 1980s, with zoos across the world moving single birds or small groups to try and create breeding flocks of the rarer flamingo species.

The flamingo pool is redesigned to include a single large island surrounded by a shelf of shallow water to facilitate nest building and a fall-off to deeper water to support the mating of the birds. This enclosure is surrounded by a fox proof fence. It is acknowledged that it will take a year or two for this new enclosure to mature. The year is 1980. New indoor winter quarters were built complete with a heated pool. The building work on the new pool was completed under the supervision of George Mottershead's son-in-law: Fred Williams, which fits very neatly into and the Mottershead family's approach for Chester Zoo: 'Always Building'.

Despite the improvements to the flamingo enclosure, breeding success continues to elude the Zoo. Newsletters acknowledge that there needs to be a minimum of 20 birds with near equal numbers of male and females to enable pairing off. Further birds arrive, including six from Whipsnade in 1982. Then, in 1987 and 1988 patience and perseverance are rewarded with the Zoo's first successful rearing of Chilean flamingos. Since then, almost without fail, both species have continued to breed. In 2000 there were 51 Caribbean and 53 Chilean flamingos; by 2018 this rises to 119 and 103 respectively (Chester Zoo Annual Reports 2000 and 2018).



The Zoo's present flamingo indoor accommodation was built in 2007/08 (see 2021 photo below). In the photograph, the pink display panels are removable and are

masking viewing windows. Inside the building is divided to provide separate accommodation for the Caribbean and Chilean flamingos which then have access to their separate pools. Shortly after the completion of the building, the practice of pinioning ceases, with flight capable birds, including all reared juveniles were transferred to other collections (see Chester Zoo Conservation & Science Newsletter June 2021). In 2019, after 54 continuous years at the zoo, the flock of Chilean flamingos is divided and distributed to Jersey Zoo, Birdland and DierenPark Amersfoort, in the Netherlands (see Chester Zoo's "Z Magazine" Summer 2019). This was in preparation for the creation of a new mixed species enclosure which would feature only a single species of flamingo: the Caribbean.



Current flamingo housing at Chester Zoo

Ninety years after the first flamingo pool was dug, a new enclosure on the area of combined flamingo pools opened. It's a visitor walkthrough netted exhibit for Latin American wetland birds including a flock of 130 Caribbean flamingos- the original flock being augmented with juveniles from Copenhagen. The flock also includes at least one bird that was resident at Chester Zoo in the 1960s!

The salient features of the Latin American Walkthrough Aviary are illustrated in a

stylised diagram at the end of this article. Features of note include the repurposing of the Chilean part of the Flamingo House for the waterfowl. There is a dedicated shallow feeding pool for the flamingos which is drained, cleaned and refilled daily, while the main pool has aerators strategically placed to circulate the water in a clockwise direction.

The visitor flow is one way, from east to west- they enter and leave through visitor-operated double-gate systems. The educational and interpretation stands are under cover. On two sides of the enclosure there are shrubs and bushes which accommodate nesting boxes for the ducks; and small nesting platforms have been mounted in the trees for the scarlet ibis (*Eudocimus ruber*). Having a netted aviary eliminates the mixing of local wildfowl with the consequences of less competition for food and space as well as avoiding faeces contamination. The enclosure is predator-proof.

Aside from the scarlet ibis, the Caribbean flamingos' companions are roseate spoonbills (*Platalea ajaja*), as well as Argentine ruddy ducks (*Oxyura vittata*), puna teal (*Spatula puna*), black-bellied whistling ducks (*Dendrocygna autumnalis*), black-necked stilts (*Himantopus mexicanus*), Orinoco geese (*Neochen jubata*); and perhaps just for old times' sake (but probably coincidentally) a pair of Muscovy ducks.

Acknowledgements

This is a revised and updated version of an article first published in Keeper Contact (No. 166, December 2020).

