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Wombwell's Menagerie

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George Wombwell was one of nine children of John Wombwell and Sarah Rogers. John and Sarah were married at Braintree on 10 February 1760 and appear to have moved in 1777 to Duddenhoe End in N.W. Essex, where George was born on 24 December 1777. He is thought to have been in education until the age of 12.

George had a passion for animals from an early age, keeping pets and injured wildlife, seeking advice from the family doctor. Moving to London, he became a cordwainer, but his interest in animals took him to the London Docks where he saw the disembarkation of many wild animals for sale to zoos and showmen. He set up a yard in Commercial Road for buying and selling of foreign animals.

Quite fearless, he bought two boa constrictors for £75. By exhibiting these, he recouped his outlay in three weeks. At his yard he built wagons for transporting the animals, and in 1805 put his menagerie on the road. He married Mary about 1811, but disliking the constant travelling she left the menagerie and lived in London. George then lived with Ann Morgan (1788-1876).

The business prospered and there were three menageries on the road at one time. Royal patronage followed – Princess Victoria and her mother, Duchess of Kent visited the collection at Thirsk on 3 May 1830. In 1834 he showed the menagerie at Windsor Castle to King William IV and Queen Adelaide. In 1842, by Royal Command he showed at Windsor to Queen Victoria, Prince Albert and others (*Windsor Express*, 27 October 1841).

The menagerie toured widely and visited Saffron Walden in early spring 1850 and on 24 November 1856. George died at Northallerton on 16

November 1850 and is buried at Highgate Cemetery with Ann Morgan. On the death of George, the menagerie passed to his niece, Emma Wombwell (1834-1904). She married James William Bostock on 6 October 1852 at Tollesbury, Essex and the business continued to flourish until 1931 when the entire menagerie was sold in lots and dispersed, some animals going to Whippsnade.

One of his most famous animals, Wallace the Lion, features on his memorial at Highgate Cemetery, and his stuffed form is on display at Saffron Walden Museum.

Notes

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Also many newspaper articles have been published.