The following is based on an article originally published by the Independent Zoo Enthusiasts’ Society (IZES) in the journal *Zoo!* (No. 20, Winter 2002). My thanks to the Chairman of the IZES, Mr Tim Brown, for permission to reproduce it here. A few minor adjustments have been made to the text.

Kilverstone ‘New World’ Wildlife Park, owned by Lord and Lady Fisher, was a zoological park I knew and loved well, having visited it on many occasions. Situated near Thetford in Norfolk, it concentrated almost exclusively (but not totally) on Latin American mammals and birds. East Anglia appears to attract the zoogeographic collection, more so than any other part of the U.K., and today, in this region, there is Thrigby Hall Wildlife Gardens (concentrating on Asian animals), Africa Alive! (African and Madagascan species), and Amazona Zoo. Like Kilverstone, the latter has chosen to specialize in South American animals. There was also, at one time, the Norfolk Wildlife Park, which took as its theme British and European species.

In 1973, at the tender age of eight, I was privileged to be taken to Kilverstone for the first time only a few weeks after the Park had opened (it was opened by the TV personality, Frank Muir, on 1st April) and so I can claim to have been one of the first visitors. As I recall, the Park was born rather prematurely. The path through the deer park wasn’t finished and terminated after only a short distance, compelling visitors to retrace their steps (later on, visitors would follow a circular route through the deer park and along the bank of the River Thet without the need to ‘double back’). Even worse, there had not been time before the opening day to erect divisions between the cubicles in the ladies’ lavatory, as Lady Rosamund Fisher recalls in her delightfully anecdotal book about the Park’s early years, ‘My Jungle Babies’ (George Allen & Unwin, 1979).

As far as I can remember, none of the occupants of the deer park could be said to represent Latin America. In this part of the Park, visitors could admire American Bison, Formosan Sika Deer, Chinese Water Deer, Reeves’ Muntjac and Fallow Deer – all creatures hailing from other parts of the world.

Surprisingly, Kilverstone was bereft of reptiles, amphibians, fish or invertebrates (all the more puzzling when you consider that Anacondas, Poison-dart Frogs, Piranhas, Caiman, Electric Eels and Goliath Spiders are all synonymous with South America). I think Lord and Lady Fisher were just not all that interested in them.

Kilverstone Wildlife Park closed down, very quietly and without much fuss, at the height of the Recession at the beginning of the 1990s. There was no concerted effort to try to save it, no public appeal, no rallying cry, in fact hardly any publicity at all, as there was with the London Zoo, itself in dire straits at that time. The existence of Banham Zoo just a few miles down the road could not have helped Kilverstone’s ailing finances. (Zoological gardens may no longer be in active competition with each other as they were in the (bad) old days, but if two zoos are situated too close to each other, then, like it or not, competition is inevitable.)

But there is another, more oblique, reason why Kilverstone may not have received a greater volume of visitors, one that nobody seems to have touched on before. Probably more so than anywhere else in the world, Latin America is home to creatures with bizarre-sounding names that most members of the public have never even heard of, and some of the animals’ names are guaranteed to put tongues in a twist. Although South and Central America and the Caribbean do contain a spattering of populist animals (Monkeys, Penguins, Parrots, Flamingos, Jaguars, etc.) which can always be relied upon to draw in the visitors, the majority of the animals found there are much less familiar, and, although of great interest to us zoo enthusiasts, the casual visitor is often left unmoved. Think of Tayra, Uakari, Jaguariundi, Agouti, Acouchi, Paca, Pacarana, Kinkajou, Olingo, Coati, Tapir, Peccary, Vicugna, Pudu, Tamandua, Seriema, Oncilla, Grison, Guanaco, Douroucouli, Rhea, Oropendola, Troupial,
Trogon, Quetzal, Degu, Viscacha, Tucu-tucu, Pichiciego, Caracara, Muriqui, Margay, Kodkod, Yapok, Curassow, Guan and Chacalaca (I should add that not all of these animals were kept at Kilverstone). Chances are that the proverbial man-in-the-street is unaware of their existence.

These animals have never cropped up in nursery rhymes, advertised Guinness or a price comparison website, or featured in old Ladybird Books (remember them?). Well, almost. In fact I was once very surprised to see a Quetzal pictured in a Ladybird Bird purporting to teach toddlers the alphabet (‘Q is for Quetzal’). Even documentary film-makers tend to ignore them. Conservative zoos choosing to exhibit such familiar megafauna as Zebras, Giraffes and Lions – animals everyone has known about since early childhood – are probably always going to be more popular with the visiting public than a zoo which takes the daring (but very commendable) step of displaying a high proportion of less well known or downright obscure species, such as those listed above. No matter how specialist a collection aims to be, it is a regrettable fact of life that the general public continues to demand ‘box-office’ animals (personally I prefer to see the less familiar species that cannot be viewed in almost every other collection, but I am in the minority). As John Aspinall perceptively remarked about the closure of Kilverstone, ‘To restrict the zoo park to New World species only was commendable in every sense except the commercial one.’

I was saddened when Kilverstone closed down in September 1991, and I will always regret not visiting the more cosmopolitan collection, run by Lord and Lady Fisher's son, the Hon. Patrick Fisher, his wife Lady Kay and Mr Ray Philpott, that all too briefly replaced it on the same site the following year. (This "New" Kilverstone was a dismal failure and closed down in 1993 after barely a year.)

1991 was a bad year for U.K. zoos, with several other collections being lost in that same disastrous year, but Kilverstone (in its original incarnation) was arguably the most regrettable casualty. It’s where I saw my first Maned Wolf, and the collection of South American primates was second to none. One of the nicest things about Kilverstone was always, of course, the idyllic, rural setting. There was proud Kilverstone Hall itself (not open to the public), dating back to 1620, the Thet River buzzing with Dragonflies and the occasional "plop" of a fish or a Water Vole, the historic walled garden and magnificent water tower, the rolling parkland seemingly designed at the outset for the herds of exotic ungulates that cropped the grass, and there were some truly beautiful vistas. Surely few other sites have leant themselves so well for the establishment of a zoological collection. The first time I drove past the grounds after Kilverstone had closed down, there appeared to be what looked like a supermarket and garden centre in place of the wildlife park where once Macaws Preened and Penguins Plunged*. A great shame.

Russell Tofts

* An allusion to two books written by the Bartlett Society’s founder, C.H. Keeling.