

Zoo Keeper Retires after 45-Year Career

Working at Dudley Zoo for over four decades, Head of Reptiles, Graham Chilton, certainly has some tales to tell. The 61-year-old has decided to say goodbye to his beloved animals and hang up his keeper's uniform as he retires after 45 years at the Castle Hill site. Since starting work as a trainee on 29 September 1966, at age 16, Graham has worked with most of the zoo's collection of animals from the big cats, primates and elephants to dolphins and the orca named Cuddles. The keeper has also traveled the world through his job, studying pilot whales and dolphins in the Faroe Isles, visiting zoo collections in San Diego and Singapore, as well as visiting Australia seven times.

One notable expedition took place in the 1970s, when Graham spent three months in the Falkland Islands with two other keepers to bring back 90 penguins and 12 elephant seals. Graham said: "We were there for a few weeks before the boat reached us to take us home. We then had a ten-day turnaround to catch them all and load them onto the cargo ship. It took seven weeks for us to get back to the UK. We had to individually hand feed the penguins three times a day and we were the first expedition at that time to get back to the UK with all 90 penguins."

However, one of his proudest career highlights was being the first in Europe, and possibly the world, to breed a captive Nile crocodile – on 12 July 1977. Graham explained: "We made a nest for eight eggs out of straw, elephant dung and leaves and put a heat lamp over it to maintain a 90° F temperature. We kept spraying it with water to keep the atmosphere humid and then I noticed one of the eggs had cracks appearing in the shell. I didn't touch it and then after about 90 days I heard a muffled yelping noise as a baby croc began calling for its mother and cracked out of the shell. It was unbelievable. We only had one egg hatch and we named the baby Caesar. He had worldwide fame and eventually went to another zoo as part of a breeding program. Nile crocs live to around 60-70 years, so he's probably still alive."

Graham also spent many years working with the marine animals – starting at just 21 years-old. He said: "My job was to train the dolphins for the shows. It was really hard work. We had to keep testing the water, manually pour in salt and had to put scuba gear on and dive to the pool bottom each night to check for glass. At that time many zoos in the UK had whales and dolphins in the collection. These days none do and you have to specialize in marine biology to work with them."

"One incident that I will always remember is the night a lollipop stick was floating in the water. It was late at night and I was trying to get it out, when one of the dolphins picked it up in his mouth. He was playing about and refusing to give it to me and on one of my attempts to grab it from him, I fell into the pool. He then swam right into my arms and handed it straight to me. He just wanted me to get in with him and play – so that's what I did, whenever I wanted him to give me something."

Despite working with a variety of different species, Graham said his passion will always be crocodiles and venomous snakes. He said: "They are so beautiful. I don't fear them, I respect them. I would love to come back one day and see a reptile house full of crocs and venomous snakes. I had never even seen one before I started work here and I remember going home after my first day and saying to my dad I didn't want to go back as I didn't think I could work with snakes. But 45 years later, now is the right time to go. I've had the opportunities, now it's the turn for the younger keepers."

"I'm really going to miss the place. I've made a lot of friends, but you do this job for the love of the animals. I have been so privileged."

Source: *Stourbridge News*, 02 October 11, as appearing in *Zoo News Digest*, October 9-15, 2011



2011. "Zoo Keeper Retires after 45-Year Career." *Animal keepers' forum* 38(11), 546–546.

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