

The Cryptid Petting Zoo

ROB GANDY attends an unusual event in Liverpool, and gets up close and personal with some monsters...



ROB GANDY is a visiting professor at the Liverpool Business School, John Moores University. He has written for *FT* on Merseyside dopelgängers, ghostlore, football curses and phantom hitchhikers.

I was browsing the programme for LightNight ⁴ in Liverpool when my eyes settled upon *The Cryptid Petting Zoo* in the wonderful Picton Reading Room of Liverpool Central Library. It stated that you could “see undiscovered animal oddities from around the world! Often thought to be creatures of myth and legend, this is a chance to meet some truly remarkable animals, with presentations from trained handlers”. Naturally, I put this at the top of my list.

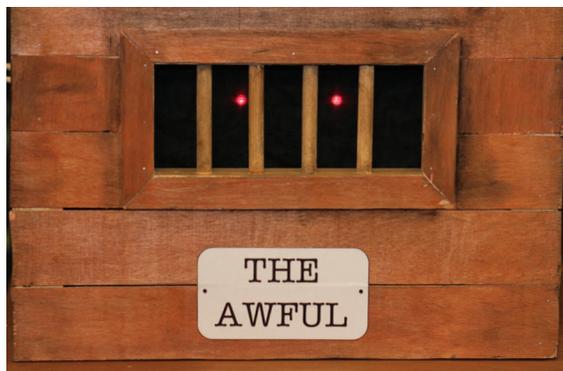
In the event, the room was packed, with parents seating dozens of young children at the front only inches from cages and boxes with labels suggesting that the Jersey Devil and a Sasquatch were inside – surely a tad dangerous if any of these cryptids fancied a snack?

On the balcony, I spied compere Beatrice Balfour III, dressed in traditional explorer attire and reading the current issue of *Fortean Times*. Obviously, a lady of taste! She descended the steps accompanied by Harry the Hybrid Hound, a chimera – with the head of a boar, the body of a lion and the tail of a fish – who liked having his tummy tickled. He bounced around the floor escaping the attentions of small, clutching hands.

Beatrice explained that cryptozoology was the study of hidden animals and highlighted that this was a rare opportunity for people to see so many of them at first hand and in a safe environment. Then, she introduced five more fortean fantastics:

The Awful: There was near catastrophe when the handlers almost dropped its cage. Fortunately the bars were strong and it was only able to growl and flash its red Mothman-like eyes from the darkness for the rest of the show.

The Wetlands Indigenous Mer-Pixie, or WIMP: This shy, nervous creature answered to the name of Trixie and had to be coaxed out from behind the covers to her cage. Her timid disposition, big eyes and blue colouring meant she



ABOVE: Beatrice Balfour III in the Picton Reading Room of Liverpool Central Library; the Beast of Borneo is visible at right. **LEFT:** Beatrice introduces Harry the Hybrid Hound. **BOTTOM:** The Awful – caged, thankfully.

was greeted with a loud “Aaah!” from the audience, and was popular at the subsequent petting session.

The Mongolian Death Worm: Smaller than I had anticipated, Bertie the Mongolian Death Worm lives in his handler’s airing cupboard. Apparently this is the nearest thing in Liverpool to the climate of the Gobi Desert. Bertie has something of a vicious temperament, and when he stuck his head out from inside his bucket, he bit one of the handlers with his strong beak, releasing his electric venom. This caused the light bulb she was holding in her other hand to flash on and off. Happily she recovered.

Baby Dragon(s): Tyson the baby dragon was roused from his slumber in his incubator, unfurling his wings. All of the children knew that dragons love gold and the handler wanted to demonstrate this to them. It wasn’t her day, as Tyson greedily swallowed her gold ring and nearly took her fingers with it. Attention then switched to the large egg at the other end of the incubator which started to shake and

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crack. Finally another baby dragon popped out, drawing another “Aaah!” from the audience and an interesting look from Tyson.

The Beast of Borneo: Beatrice did the big build-up for the final cryptid, the Beast of Borneo. She described its habitat and how it was related to Orang Pendek. Unfortunately, neither she nor the handlers had noticed that it had already entered the room, and was looming over them. Only pantomime cries of “It’s behind you!” made them aware of the creature’s presence. The



LEFT: The Mongolian Death Worm (smaller than expected) and handler. **CENTRE:** A pair of baby dragons. **BOTTOM:** The shy Wetlands Indigenous Mer-Pixie, or WIMP, needed to be coaxed from the corner of her cage.

Beast was quickly placated with its favourite sugar lumps, although this required Beatrice, in the interests of dental hygiene, to clean its rather large teeth with what looked like a bath brush. The Beast performed some of its party tricks to the delight of the children, before Beatrice thanked everyone and said that there was time for petting the cryptids before they returned to their cages.

And so finished a show full of visual fun, tricks and humour.

I suppose I should add that the cryptids weren’t actually real, and were puppets designed, built and performed by the Headstrung Puppet Company (HPC), which consists of three puppeteers: Katy-Anne Bellis, Eilidh Bryan and Beccy Hillam, augmented for shows by trusted associates Aisling Leyne, Alice Rowbottom and Jan Rule. Their interests and skills complement one another: Katy-Anne focuses on choreography and costume; Eilidh is a designer and puppet-maker; and Beccy is the Techy. Puppetry attracted them because of the creativity it involves: there are no rules and much scope to experiment. HPC formed in 2012 and developed within the late-night cabaret/clubland environment of Liverpool, with acts including knife throwing, fire breathing, circus and burlesque. However, reactions to the (original) Beast of Borneo, who tap-dances to “Singing In The Rain”, encouraged HPC to broaden their repertoire by developing *The Cryptid Petting Zoo* as an indoor and outdoor street show for families, with humour at multiple levels.

Eilidh says that she and her husband are keen on cryptozoology and regular readers of *FT*, while cryptids offer innumerable opportunities for puppetry. She and her colleagues hope that *The Cryptid Petting Zoo* will give children a sense of wonder and inspire them to keep open minds about whether there might be unknown creatures out there.

If any cryptozoologists or forteans want to add some cryptid puppetry fun to their planned events, contact HPC at info@headstrung.org or visit the website: www.headstrung.org 

¹ LightNight Liverpool, 15 May 2015: www.lightnightliverpool.co.uk