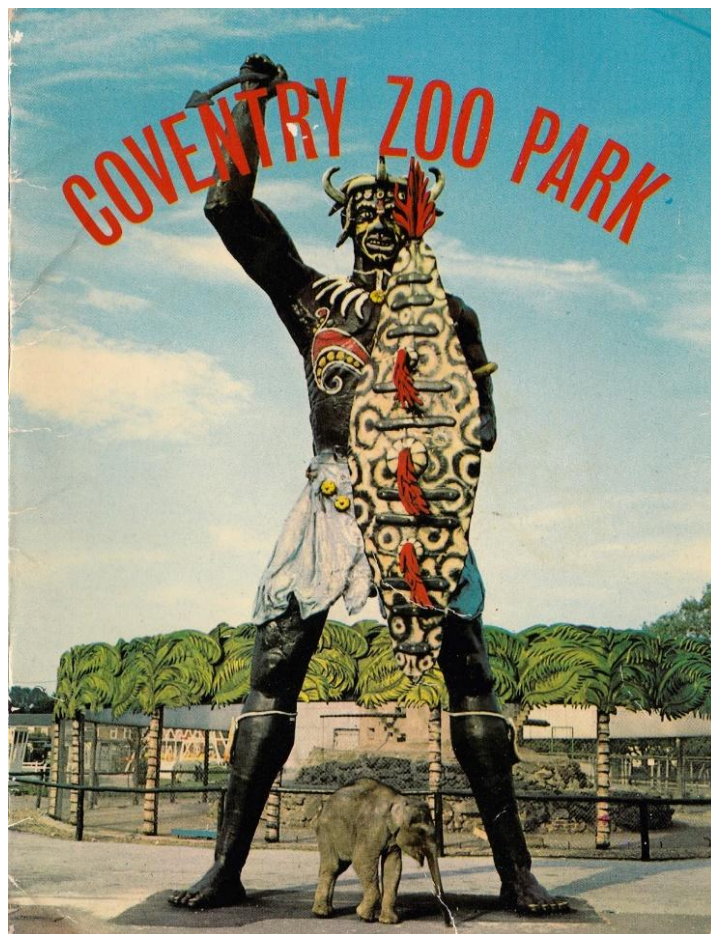


# What ever happened to the Zulu Statue of Coventry Zoo?

Luke Garland.

The Zulu Warrior statue became more than just fibreglass and steel mesh; it became a Coventry landmark and greeted thousands of visitors to Coventry Zoo for a generation, becoming a shared local memory. Its loss was felt deeply by those with nostalgic childhood memories. Therefore, its unknown fate piqued the interest of the collective consciousness of Coventry.

Many Coventrians still express curiosity and wonder as to the fate of the Zulu Warrior statue that once stood at the entrance of Coventry Zoo many years ago. The Zulu's fate has been a local mystery for decades and has been subject to many erroneous rumours. It has taken decades to establish but luckily over recent years the story has become somewhat clearer and now there are conclusive answers. From abandoned scrapyards to university raves and TV appearances, the Zulu warrior's past certainly doesn't lack surprises; for a fibreglass statue 'he certainly had an eventful life'. So, in the words of the people of Coventry: "*What ever happened to the Zulu of Coventry Zoo?*".



Coventry Zoo Brochure cover

## The Zoo Years

The Coventry Zoo Park opened in April 1966<sup>[1]</sup> and was later bought by Billy Chipperfield in 1969 for £100,000<sup>[2]</sup>. The zoo, shortly after opening<sup>[3]</sup>, decided to buy a statue of a Zulu warrior. Standing at 35ft tall it was an imposing presence in the zoo (*some sources suggest 22 ft but this article suggests this is incorrect- see notes*). It was made of fibreglass but despite this, weighed approximately 2 and a half tons. The Zulu was made by a Scunthorpe business called Fantasy Décor, in (assumedly) the late 1960s, and was then bought for the sum of £1500 by Coventry Zoo<sup>[4]</sup>. It was erected on the 19<sup>th</sup> of March 1970<sup>[4]</sup> (Paul Maddocks, who worked at the zoo, confirms this as he recalls that the Zulu was not at the zoo when he began working there in summer 1966<sup>[5]</sup> when the zoo had just opened).

The figure was constructed of a fibreglass coating over a wire mesh, supported by H beams and light metal support tubing that ran throughout the structure<sup>[6]</sup>. The metal base of the Zulu was likely the heaviest part<sup>[6]</sup> as it was needed to hold the over-10-metre-high figure in place, assumedly contributing a large part of the 2.5 tons. The figure held a large painted shield in his left hand and in the other, a raised spear overhead, with his head adorned with a crown of synthetic animal horns.



*About 1971(?)- Photograph by the late William McSparron, kindly provided by his sons.*

The reason as to why a Zulu figure was chosen was never expressed or documented<sup>[2]</sup>. The choice is noted by some as culturally sensitive, for obvious reasons<sup>[7]</sup>. While this is true, it is likely that the figure was chosen purely for aesthetical reasons and being a decorative choice typical of the era rather than reflecting any offensive undertones. Given the time period in which it was constructed it is unlikely those present would have identified any contentious cultural representational issues when compared to more enlightened times such as now. In modern society we generally have a broader awareness and understanding of cultural sensitivities and would view the Zulu through a more informed, critical lens.

The Zulu stood at the entrance to the zoo in the entrance courtyard close to the ticket office and the manager's house<sup>[8]</sup>. From the mid-1960s to the early 1980s the Zulu remained in place while the zoo was in operation. Throughout this time, it became a Coventry icon to a generation of local kids. Many visitors walked beneath the statue's towering presence, making it a popular photo spot. Despite its popularity some younger children found the imposing figure rather scary and would be too frightened to pass the daunting model.



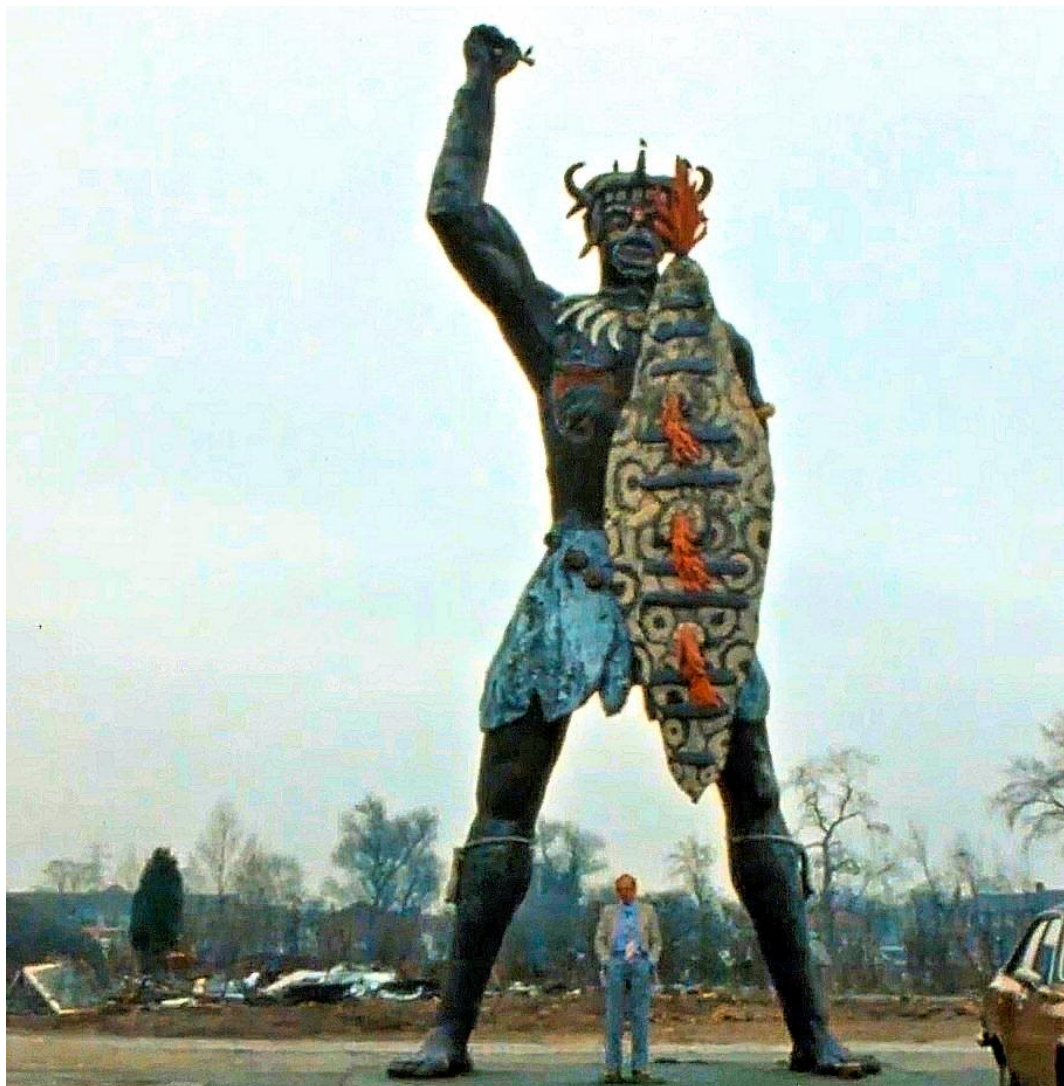
*1975; Leslie Kiernan repainting the Zulu's face.*

Due to being exposed to the elements it required multiple repainting and maintenance during this time. One such occasion was when it was repainted by Leslie Kiernan in 1975, when he was just 16 years of age<sup>[9]</sup>, who used tall ladders to climb the 35 feet statue and reapply paint to the Zulu's face. A feat that would unlikely be repeated in modern times in fear of safety concerns.

### **An Uncertain future**

Running into financial problems, the zoo closed in 1980 when it was purchased by the Meireel Consortium who intended to turn the site into a new racquet sports centre<sup>[2,10]</sup>. Barry Cohen of Meireel Ltd expressed a wish to leave the Zulu in its place in a 1981 TV interview but conceded that the statue would not be in keeping with a racquet centre<sup>[3]</sup>. The new racquet sports centre plans were submitted in March 1981<sup>[11]</sup> and were built shortly thereafter. During this time there were plans to build a small children's zoo on the site in addition to the new sports centre<sup>[12]</sup> but these plans were never realised. Even if it had been built, it was thought that the Zulu statue was outdated and would not fit in with the new designs. The Zulu was left standing in the ruins of the, now levelled, Whitley based zoo site until at least November 1982<sup>[12]</sup>. During this limbo period, the Zulu's future became highly uncertain.





*1981; The Zulu standing alone in the levelled remains of the Coventry Zoo site.*

## **The Scrapyard Chapter**

Eventually, during the early 1980s, despite good intentions by the company it was decided that the statue be removed. The salvagers, H. M. Barnes Salvage, removed the Zulu and Fred (Freddie) Barnes, the owner of the Baginton Scrapyard (located near Coventry airport), decided to keep the Zulu figure in his yard. His intentions were to erect the Zulu at the front of his yard<sup>[6]</sup> and continue the Zulu's life as a Coventry superstar. It was placed on its back in the yard awaiting its later installation. Some may remember Mr Barnes by his wrestling name, 'Prince Barnu'<sup>[13]</sup>, from his time in wrestling showbusiness, training and wrestling journalism.

Unfortunately, Mr Fred D Barnes passed away on the 18<sup>th</sup> of July 1989, aged 70<sup>[14,15]</sup>. He had run the scrapyard for 31 years at the time of his passing<sup>[16]</sup>. Another scrap merchant, John Sharman of J. R. Sharman Dismantlers was charged with sorting the H. M. Barnes scrap and vehicle dismantling yard after Mr Barnes' passing. He recalled how he had found the Zulu figure still lying, face up, in an overgrown area of the yard. Mr Sharman intended to echo the sentiments of Mr Barnes by attempting to move it to his own scrapyard to be displayed but found the Zulu in a poor state of decay with one of the arms detached<sup>[6]</sup>.

The elements had severely damaged the figure and as such, upon attempting to lift it the Zulu fell apart and the fibreglass, now brittle, crumbled. It was decided that the Zulu was beyond repair and thus scrapped with the internal structural metal retrieved and recycled and with the metal support mesh and crumbled fibreglass being buried in a hole at the rear of the site. Mr Sharman recalled "In short, the Zulu warrior died of old age and I did the decent thing and buried him"<sup>[6]</sup>.

## Rediscovery

If not for the next part of this article, the Zulu's story would sadly end here. Fortunately, a few years before the Zulu figure's untimely burial, in the early 1980s, brothers Gary and Wayne Anderson, were at the scrapyards looking for car parts. They came across the Zulu statue in the overgrown section and decided to remove the Zulu's face, spear tip and big toe<sup>[17]</sup>. The Andersons kept the Zulu's face, spear tip and toe for many years, moving with them from house to house (and even going with Wayne to University in Manchester for 5 years, hanging it on the student accommodation living room wall overlooking various parties)<sup>[17]</sup>.



*Debbie Mann and her brothers, Wayne and Jason Anderson, with the Zulu face and spear tip, 2011.*

After living with the Anderson family for many years and spending much time in sheds, garages and lofts, Debra 'Debbie' Mann (Wayne, Gary and Jason's sister) decided to take the Zulu remains to the, then, Ricoh Arena, for a recording of TV's "Dickinson's Real Deal" in 2011. The experts did not make an offer but instead advised the family to place the items on eBay<sup>[17]</sup>. The family expressed an interest to sell the pieces but what happened afterwards was not known until 12 years later.

## Back on display

Tony Pedley, the owner of the Coventry antiques shop, the 888 Emporium, announced in 2023 that he had bought the face and spear tip of the Zulu (presumably from the Andersons) and planned to display them in his shop<sup>[18]</sup>. The face and spear were in surprisingly good condition and only a small amount of degradation to the nose and chin and damage to the horns of the 'crown' were of any concern<sup>[19]</sup>. The face was roughly measured as 2.5 feet wide and 3 feet tall, with the spear tip being of similar height<sup>[19]</sup>.



*Tony Pedley and the Zulu, 2023.*



The face and spear of the Zulu were put on display shortly after and have (*as of time of writing*) remained on display at the shop. Mr Pedley very kindly bought the items in order preserve Coventry's history and raise money for Coventry's Myton Hospice<sup>[20]</sup>. Interestingly the big toe that was described as also being recovered by the Anderson brothers was not part of the items bought by Mr Pedley and so he appealed to anyone who might have it to reunite the items<sup>[7]</sup>. While this would be nice, it's quite possible the fibreglass of the toe has degraded and may not have had as much structural meshing as the spear or face thus perishing.



*The Face (left) showing signs of degradation on its nose and chin but in otherwise remarkably good health (2025). The interior of the spear (right) showing how thin some of the material is (2025).*

## Present day

This article hopes to have cleared up some of the misinformation and rumours as to fate of the Coventry Zoo Zulu and hopefully it has done so. If you wish to see the Zulu statues remains, the head and spear can still be visited (*at time of writing*) at the 888 Emporium on the Foleshill Road, Coventry, allowing the legacy of Coventry Zoo to live on. Even in its fragmented state now, it still provides a tangible link to a time gone by, reminding the people of Coventry of a cherished era in their collective history.



*The Zulu in pride of place at the 888 Emporium, Coventry, 2025.*

*Written 10 June 2025.*

## References:

1. 'The Rise and Fall of Coventry Zoo' (2010), *Coventry Telegraph*, 11 October. Available at: <https://www.coventrytelegraph.net/lifestyle/nostalgia/rise-fall-coventry-zoo-3055067> (Accessed: 10 June 2025) [Online].
2. 'Going to the Zoo' (1992), *Coventry Evening Telegraph*, 23 November, p. 17.
3. 'ATV Today: 23.01.1981: Zulu' (1981) *ATV Today*. macearchive.org, 23 January. Video available at: [https://www.macearchive.org/films/atv-today-23011981-zulu?fbclid=IwAR3\\_2XN\\_pi028gTH1DrJmTa3dfhg7DfCUONzwwWVHHcv-bB2Tw6iFvQ4wCO](https://www.macearchive.org/films/atv-today-23011981-zulu?fbclid=IwAR3_2XN_pi028gTH1DrJmTa3dfhg7DfCUONzwwWVHHcv-bB2Tw6iFvQ4wCO) (Accessed: 10 June 2025) [Online].
4. 'Zoo's Zulu...' (1970), *Coventry Evening Telegraph*, 20 March, p. 13.
5. Maddocks, P. 'Coventry Zoo and the Hippo attack' *Historic Coventry*. Available at: <https://www.historiccoventry.co.uk/memories/content.php?pg=maddocks-p-zoo> (Accessed 10 June 2025) [Online].
6. Sharman, J. (2001) "ANY QUESTIONS: Book resurfaces after news of Titanic trips..." *Coventry Evening Telegraph*, The Free Library, 23 August. Available at: <https://www.thefreelibrary.com/ANY+QUESTIONS%3a+Book+resurfaces+after+news+of+Titanic+trip+.-a077471276> (Accessed 10 June 2025) [Online].
7. Howard, H. (2023) "Head of controversial 35ft Zulu warrior statue which stood at the entrance to Coventry Zoo until it closed in 1980 goes back on display - after it was rediscovered lying in a scrapyard" *Daily Mail*, MailOnline, 24 October. Available at: <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-12652895/Head-controversial-35ft-Zulu-warrior-statue-stood-entrance-Coventry-Zoo-closed-1980-goes-display-rediscovered-lying-scrapyard.html> (Accessed 10 June 2025) [Online].
8. Planning Department (1971) 'Coventry Zoo Park, Whitley Common, Coventry. Schedule of proposed development' (map- part of planning application document), Coventry City Council, Coventry.
9. 'The Zulu Warrior at Coventry Zoo...' (1975), *Coventry Evening Telegraph*, 24 October, p. 22.
10. Evans, A. (2004) 'Remember when ...?: The grave of the zoo's Zulu warrior...' *Coventry Evening Telegraph*, The Free Library, 27 January. Available at: <https://www.thefreelibrary.com/Remember+when+...+The+grave+of+the+zoo%27s+Zulu+warrior.-a0112625768c> (Accessed 10 June 2025) [Online].
11. 'Public Notices' (1981), *Coventry Evening Telegraph*, 07 April, p. 18.
12. Smith, J. (1982) 'Zulu Giant's days may be numbered', *Coventry Evening Telegraph*, 03 November, p. 16.
13. 'Her Own Rolls and She's Only 16' (1982), *Coventry Evening Telegraph*, 03 November, p. 13.
14. *Burials & Scatterings 1943 to December 1994 at Canley Gardens and Crematorium, Coventry*. Coventry Family History society [Database].
15. *England & Wales Government Probate death index 1858-2019*. Findmypast [Database].
16. 'Funeral of ex-wrestler (1989), *Coventry Evening Telegraph*, 18 July, p. 5.
17. Dimmer, S. (2011) 'Long lost Coventry Zoo Zulu warrior turns up at last', *Coventry Telegraph*, 01 April. Available at: <https://www.coventrytelegraph.net/news/coventry-news/long-lost-coventry-zoo-zulu-3044987> (accessed 10 June 2025) [Online].

18. Williams, R. & Cook, A. (2023) 'Head of Coventry Zoo's Zulu statue set for public display', *BBC News*, 09 October. Available at <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-coventry-warwickshire-67053217> (Accessed 10 June 2025) [Online].

19. "Coventry Zoo Zulu is back on display"- Richard Williams' interview with Tony Pedley' (2023). BBC CWR Radio, 19 October. Available at <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p0gmgghr> (Accessed 11 June 2025).

20. Williams, R. (2023) 'Head of Coventry Zoo's Zulu statue back on public display', *BBC News*, 19 October. Available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-coventry-warwickshire-67156946> (Accessed 10 June 2025) [Online].

### **Further Reading:**

'Coventry Zoo and the Hippo attack' by Paul Maddocks. Historic Coventry. Available at: <https://www.historiccoventry.co.uk/memories/content.php?pg=maddocks-p-zoo> (Accessed 10 June 2025) [Online].

### **Acknowledgements:**

The fellow forum members of the Historic Coventry Forum site have collated multiple sources and memories over the years that have proved invaluable in writing this short article and of course to Rob Orland the creator of the wonderful website, without whom this all would not be possible. My conversations with, the late, Mr John Sharman were also very helpful in confirming aspects of the story and bringing the story to life.

Also big thanks to the sons of the late William McSparron who kindly provided the amazing 1971 photograph of the Zulu.

Thanks to all.

### **Notes:**

-The Zulu figure is generally reported as 35 feet high but some articles suggest 22 feet. This article has used the 35 feet value. Using the approximate dimensions of the face (W2.5ft XH3ft)<sup>[19]</sup> and comparing it with old photographs, the 35 feet value seems more likely to be correct.

-Some sources suggest that the Zulu was erected in approximately 1966/1967<sup>[3]</sup> (instead of 1970) but this is likely confused with the opening of the zoo in 1966.