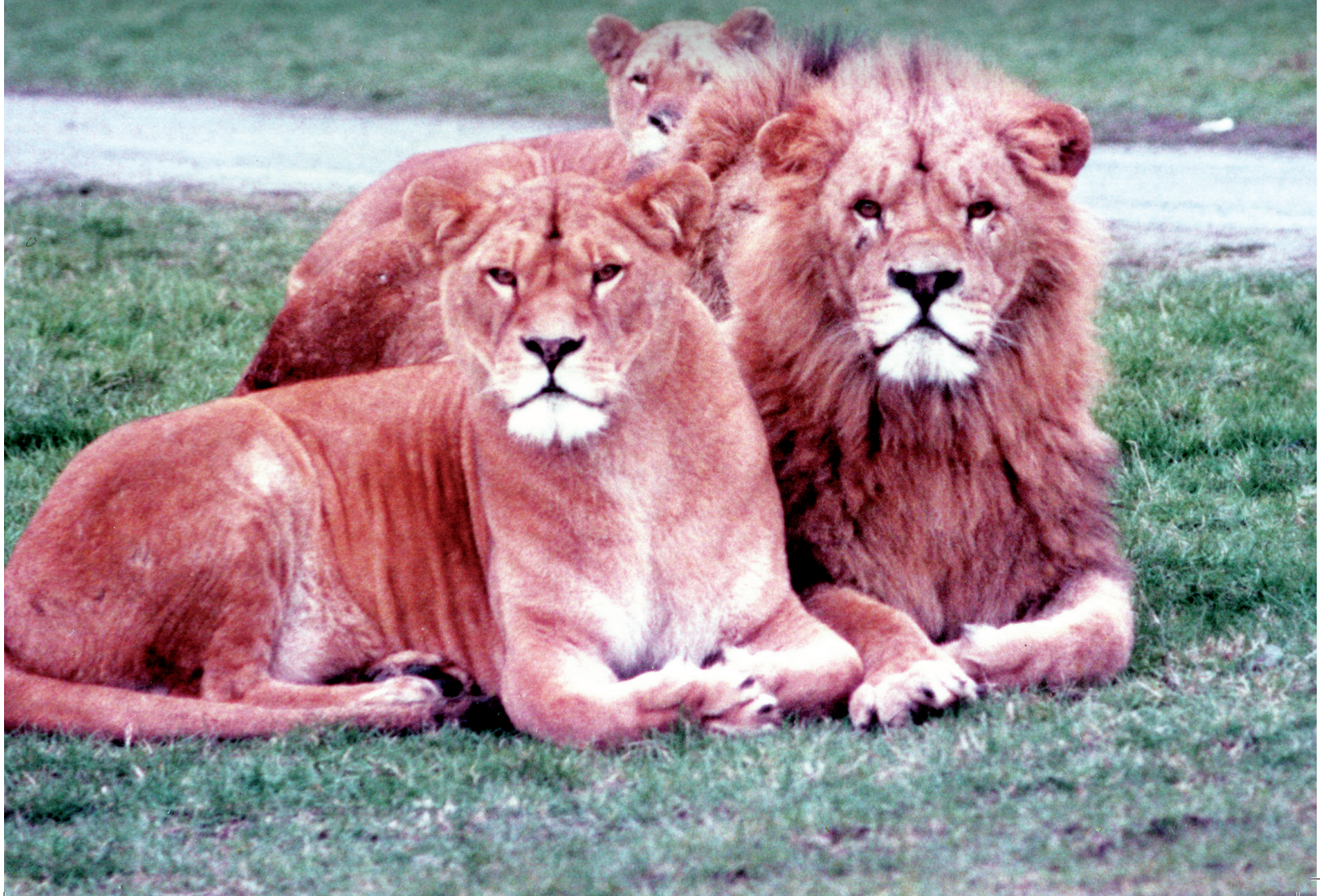


A Causeway
Safari Park Tale
.....
1970-1997



A Causeway Safari Park Tale

is a new exhibition which opened in August 2024 in Ballymoney Museum to tell the story of the Causeway Safari Park which was located at Benvarden outside Ballymoney.

Causeway Coast and Glens Museum Services would like to thank all those who contributed photographs, memories, film and objects towards the exhibition and this booklet. A Causeway Safari Tale exhibition would not have been possible without the contribution and support of members of the public, both local and abroad.

The fascination for observing wild animals in captivity began purely for entertainment and recreational purposes. Over the years attitudes changed and this led to an interest in research, breeding programmes and conservation which is reflected in the changes at the Causeway Safari Park. This booklet aims to give an historical timeline of the key events within the history of the Causeway Safari Park and information has been largely drawn from contemporary newspaper reports.

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Back cover images:

A selection of images capturing the joy of the visitors to The Causeway Safari Park. Courtesy of various members of the public who contributed their images to A Causeway Safari Park Tale.

Research by Linda Logan.

Family background

The **Stephenson** family performed horse riding and dog acts with the Ringling Brothers and Barnum and Bailey Circus all over the world.

They had a son, **Pat**.

Evelyn Chipperfield of the famous Chipperfield's travelling circus married one of Europe's top wild animal trainers **Francesco Trufelli** of the Royal Italian Circus. They settled in Portrush and owned Barry's Amusements.

They had a daughter, **Louise**.

Pat Stephenson and **Louise Trufelli**

met when Pat was travelling through Northern Ireland with Duffy's Circus.

Pat Stephenson and Louise Trufelli, along with Pat's sister Lucy Stephenson and Louise's cousin, Dick Chipperfield, opened The Causeway Safari Park in late August 1970.

It cost £60,000 to construct the Park set on 52 acres at Benvariden outside Ballymoney.

During the first three days of opening, the Safari Park welcomed 6,000 people.



1970



Louise Stephenson
and Stamper.

Due to open Easter weekend, a rabies scare across the UK delayed the opening of the Safari Park until late August.

A baby male Indian elephant arrived in April from Delhi via the Liverpool ferry.

A heated elephant house had been built specially for him, and a female elephant arrived two weeks later.

Belfast Telegraph readers were asked to send in suggestions for the elephants' names. The names chosen were **Tusker and Stamper**.



Main image:
Courtesy of Betty Ward

Small image:
Courtesy of The Coleraine Chronicle & Constitution Archive

1970

Twenty two African lions were out of quarantine by August and roaming around their enclosures. The lions were aged from one to seven years old, and had three enclosures with 16 foot high fences.

They were separated into prides, as one pride of black-maned lions came from Chad Valley in central Africa and the other pride of tawny lions came from Natal in South Africa.

Courtesy of Niall McCaughan

1972



Monkey business at zoo

THE biggest mass breakout in Ulster this year took place this morning—but there were no red faces among the security forces or the prison authorities.

It happened in Ulster's first open zoo, at the Causeway Coast Lion Park at Benavarden, North Antrim.

The escapees, who enjoyed two hours of freedom, were 30 baboons!

Last night's storm lifted the roof off their winter quarters, and the leader of the pack, Coco, scaled a 40-foot high enclosure, followed by the rest.

Mr. Patrick Stephenson, proprietor of the park, said: "They were wandering about when they were spotted by a night watchman, who immediately alerted the game wardens."

"We even had our veterinary officer standing by with a tranquiliser gun in case any of the baboons decided to take refuge in the trees."

"But they came peaceably when we caught Coco, and when all trooped back into their enclosure."

Mr. Stephenson stressed that at no time had the "escapees" left the confines of the 50-acre reserve.

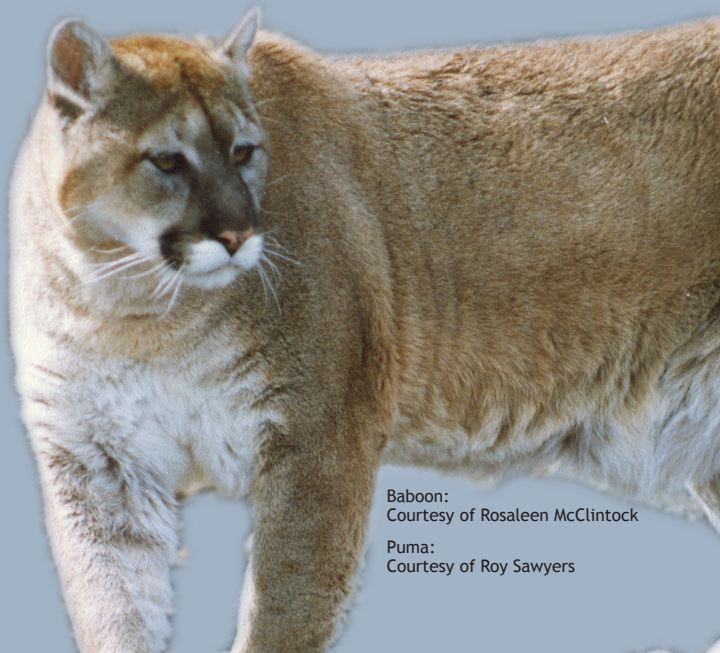
Belfast Telegraph, 27/01/1972

1973

30 baboons escaped for two hours during a storm in January. Strong winds blew the roof off their housing, and Coco the baboon climbed up their 40 foot enclosure, with the others following.

Night security spotted them wandering around the Park, and called the vet in to tranquilise them. Luckily this wasn't required, and they were peacefully and safely rounded up.

An escaped puma made news headlines in April. The puma cub was in a different cage because the mother had given birth to new cubs. When staff opened the cage to clean it, the puma ran out. The police, local farmers and park staff mounted a search to find it still hiding inside the Park.



Baboon:
Courtesy of Rosaleen McClintock

Puma:
Courtesy of Roy Sawyers

1974



Harold Condell.

The Park opened a miniature railway which was owned and operated by Harold Condell until August 1993 and did a round trip of the amusement centre and zoo. Harold built all the trains that he used and built the station and bridge.

Largy Primary School visit in June.



Main image:
Courtesy of The Coleraine Chronicle & Constitution Archive

Small image:
Courtesy of Gillian Condell

1976

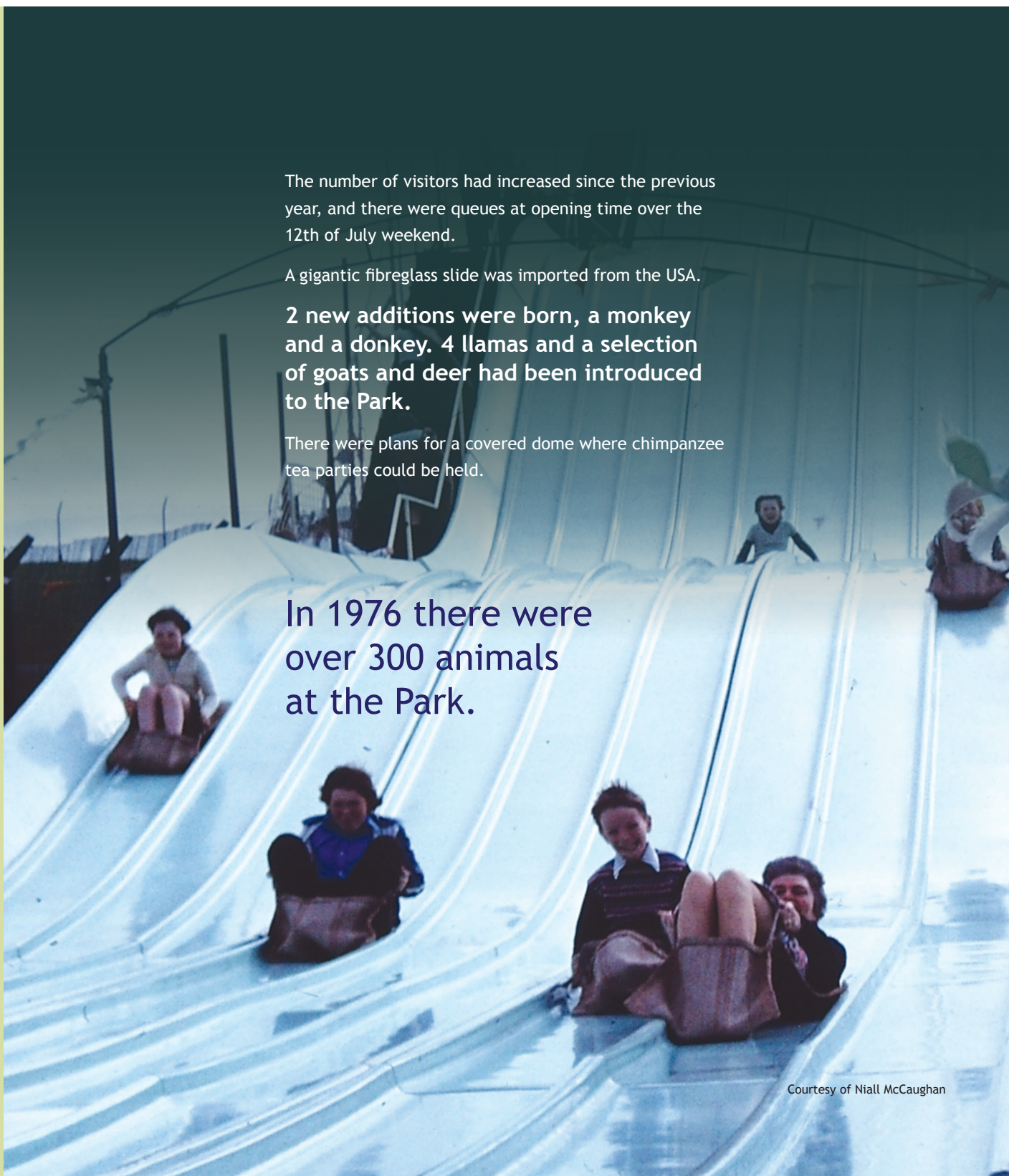
The number of visitors had increased since the previous year, and there were queues at opening time over the 12th of July weekend.

A gigantic fibreglass slide was imported from the USA.

2 new additions were born, a monkey and a donkey. 4 llamas and a selection of goats and deer had been introduced to the Park.

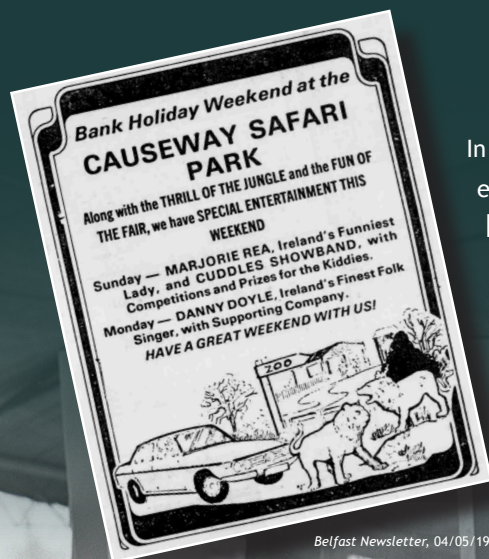
There were plans for a covered dome where chimpanzee tea parties could be held.

In 1976 there were over 300 animals at the Park.



Courtesy of Niall McCaughan

1978



Belfast Newsletter, 04/05/1979

In addition to the animal attractions, the Park held music events, with local names like **Plug and Cuddles**, **Dave Glover**, and **Gary Paul**, and comedy from **Marjorie Rea**.



Courtesy of The Coleraine Chronicle & Constitution Archive

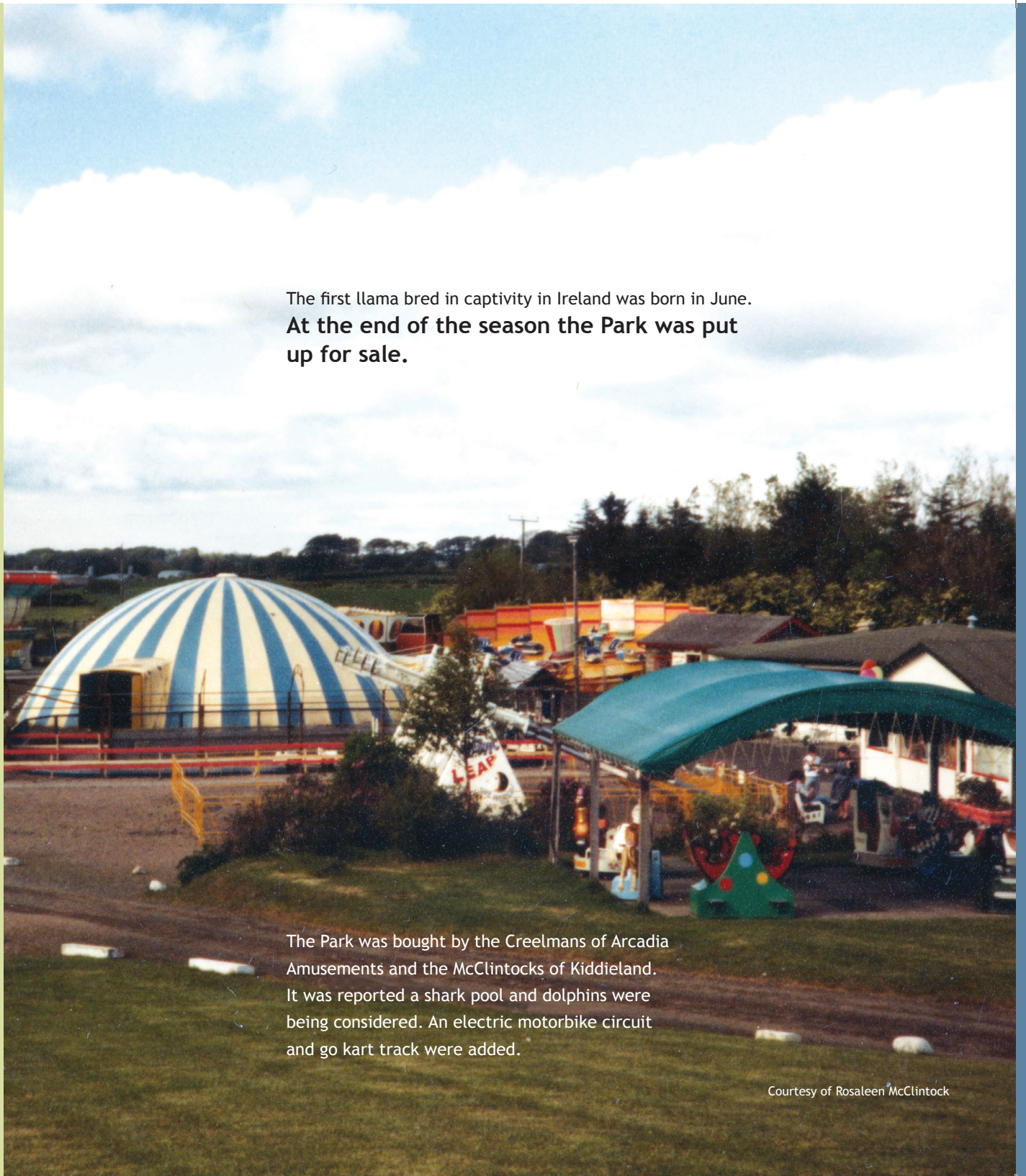
1981

The first llama bred in captivity in Ireland was born in June.
At the end of the season the Park was put up for sale.

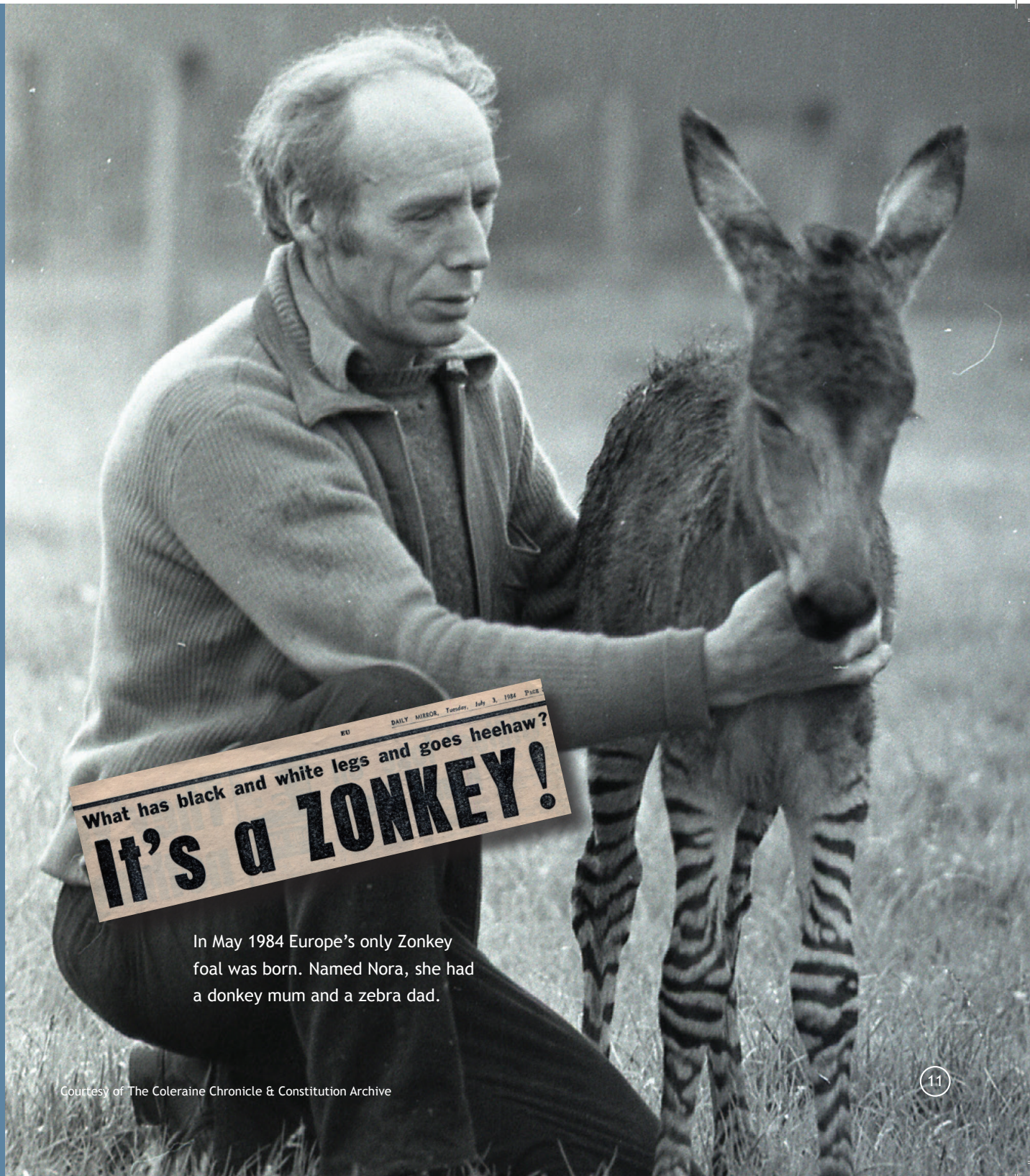
1982

The Park was bought by the Creelmans of Arcadia Amusements and the McClintocks of Kiddieland. It was reported a shark pool and dolphins were being considered. An electric motorbike circuit and go kart track were added.

Courtesy of Rosaleen McClintock



1984



What has black and white legs and goes heehaw?
It's a ZONKEY!

In May 1984 Europe's only Zonkey foal was born. Named Nora, she had a donkey mum and a zebra dad.

Courtesy of The Coleraine Chronicle & Constitution Archive

1986



The Park was again put up for sale in August and was bought by brothers Trevor and Christopher Duncan from Kells, and Samuel Gaston from Cloughmills. They immediately invested £30,000 in the Park and renamed it Safari Wonderland, with an improved amusement area.



Pete the smoking chimp was renowned for smoking cigarettes since his arrival at the Park in 1987.

Main image:
Courtesy of The Coleraine Chronicle & Constitution Archive

Poster:
Courtesy of Gary Crouch

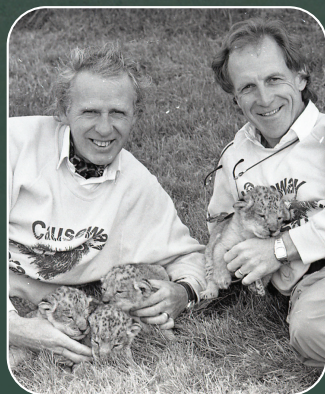
Chimp:
Courtesy of Roy Sawyers

1991



By summer the Park was up for sale again. Entrance fees were now £2 per adult and £1 per child.

1992



Roy Sawyers and Gerry Neill.

The Safari Park celebrated its 21st birthday. New owners Roy Sawyers and cousin Gerry Neill added a mini cinema, café and bar and flower shop.

Management was working on new open environments for the animals to fit with modern animal welfare standards and entrance fees had risen to £3 per person.

Main image:
Courtesy of Rosaleen McClintock

Small image:
Courtesy of The Coleraine Chronicle & Constitution Archive

1993

In August, a 15 year old staff member was attacked by lions as he closed a gate to the lion enclosure. He was rescued by head keeper Davy Liggett and taken to hospital where he spent 10 days after undergoing throat surgery. The Park employed a safety expert on site and spent £60,000 on improvements.

1996

The Safari Park was experiencing serious financial difficulties due to animal escapes and political unrest. Visitor numbers had fallen from 120,000 per year to around 50,000 per year.



Courtesy of Rosaleen McClintock

1997-2010



Owner Jim Garvin put the Park into liquidation in March 1997. The USPCA stepped in and created an animal sanctuary on the Safari site, with Coleraine Animal Shelter and Larne Hospital relocated there. They proposed to rehome most of the safari animals by April 1998, and improve conditions.

It was reported that the dangerous Wild Animals Act was to be introduced to Northern Ireland in 1999. As a result the USPCA were expecting more wild animals to be surrendered to them. It was already costing £1,000 a week to feed five tigers, a lion, puma and leopard.

The USPCA withdrew from the site and it is now Benwarden Animal Rescue Kennels (BARK).

