

Zoos acquire animal stars to attract visitors

[Clip from BBC FOUR Timeshift: A Day at the Zoo]

[Andy Flack]

So Obaysch was a hippopotamus that was caught on the upper White Nile in 1849 as a calf – its mother was certainly killed in the process of capturing the animal. It was brought to Southampton on the steamer 'Ripon' and there were many crowds there to greet the animal when it arrived.

Now the press really built this up because the translation of hippopotamus – which is Latin – is 'river horse.' So there's this idea that this is a horse that lives in rivers, in water, and when people see the hippo Obaysch they're disappointed because it looks more like a grey pig. Essentially this is not to them a horse - this is really disappointing. 'Why have we got this fat grey hippo?' There's a sense that this is not other or exciting or novel or curious enough – it's just a bit dull.

[Richard Bacon]

Despite the anti-climax, Obaysch doubled the number of visitors through the gates. For a short time, the hippo became part of popular culture as a figure of fun.