

# George Mottershead – Change Master

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George Mottershead played by Lee Ingleby in the BBC's *Our Zoo*

Chester Zoo in the north of England is recognised as one of the leading zoos in the world. Home to 12,000 animals set in 125 acres of award-winning zoological gardens, it hosts 1.6 million visitors each year. For more than 80 years, Chester Zoo has been dedicated to protecting biodiversity and saving species from extinction. The only reason it exists is the vision and dedication of one man: George Saul Mottershead. How did it all come about?

It was on June 12, 1902, that young George Mottershead celebrated his eighth birthday. He was especially excited at being taken by his father for his first visit to a zoo. Opened in 1836, Belle Vue Zoo had grown over the years to become a major attraction in the north of England, not only as the country's third largest zoo, but as an amusement park.

Mottershead already knew and cared about some animals. He and his father looked after birds in an aviary and he had his own collection of beetles and lizards as well as some hens that he had raised from chicks.

He had seen many pictures of wild animals in natural settings but seeing live animals in cages behind iron bars at the zoo shocked him. Even at this young age he felt it wasn't right to

do this to lions and tigers, let alone larger animals such as elephants and giraffes. But this is what zoos were like at the time. That night he vowed change this and to one day open his own zoo without bars.

However it was going to be some 30 years before this his dream would come true. First there was schooling; he left school at 13. He then helped his father run a plant nursery. Later he became a physical culture instructor before enlisting for war service and being sent to France in 1915. He came home on leave in January 1916 and married a local girl, Elizabeth.

In September 1916 he was badly injured in the Battle of the Somme and was repatriated home with the expectation he would be in a wheelchair for the rest of his life. Having two sons killed in France, this was another devastating blow to his parents. A few weeks after he was hospitalised, his first daughter was born.

After his discharge from hospital it seems his determination, his knowledge of the human body and the exercises he was used to as a physical education instructor played a major role in his recovery, so much so that he was able to walk unaided within three years. And he wasn't idle during this period. Even though he was of little help to his father in the plant nursery, he studied accountancy, took classes in carpentry and brought in some money by breeding and selling birds.

His first foray into running his own business came about after he had purchased a small parcel of land south of Manchester. Here his father grew vegetables for George to send to the Manchester Market and later sell direct to the public in their own village shop. One of the shops sold birds and small animals. All went well until the major strikes took place in the mid-1920s and his shops were no longer viable. This is when he started his own zoo which, while modest in size, was nevertheless successful. He then took in a partner to help with funding the expansion of the zoo but this partnership failed and he withdrew from the business.

It was now 1930 and he felt it was the right time to build a much larger zoo. After finding the ideal property in a country estate in Chester, around 20 miles south of Liverpool, he was then faced with the difficult task of financing the venture in a depression. He did succeed and he, his wife, two daughters and his parents moved to the Oakfield Manor in October 1930.

But then the objections from the local community started. Some of the residents were concerned about the possibility of wild animals escaping, while other gentrified landowners didn't want to see their property values diminish due to a zoo being in their neighbourhood. It took until June 1931 before the Chester Zoo was able to open. But severe restrictions such as no advertising sign to be seen from the public road meant that hardly anyone came to the opening day. The family desperately needed income to feed themselves and their animals. One

bright spot, however, was the positive press reports saying the zoo would be of great benefit to the local and broader community.

Those first few months were difficult financially and it's lucky the venture survived.

The ensuing years were a continual string of ups and downs. One positive was the completion in 1936 of an enclosure for the bears – the first enclosure without bars. The design was based on the work of German zoologist, Carl Hagenbeck. It consisted of a circular area with trees in the centre surrounded by a moat filled with water. This allowed visitors to have an open and safe view from close range.

Wartime was a particularly difficult period because of the shortage of food, building materials and manpower. Zoo animals are a low priority when a country is at war.

Writing in her memoir, Mottershead's second daughter, June Williams (Mottershead)<sup>1</sup>, recalls the resilience and creativity of her father:

George Mottershead was a force to be reckoned with. What for others would have been a setback, my father saw as a challenge, and a challenge was just another word for opportunity. If he set his mind to something, he would do it, and if he couldn't do it himself, he'd persuade somebody else to do it for him.

My father was the most inventive person I have ever known. If a problem needed solving, he'd find the answer. If it worked, then good. If it didn't, he'd try again. And again, and again. He never gave up.

An example of his creativity was his idea for animal adoptions whereby people would pay money for the animal feed while the animal was still housed in the zoo. June writes:

[W]ithin two weeks of war being declared, Dad's 'adoption scheme' was in place, and newspapers across the country were more than happy to give it coverage. It was all meticulously organised. My father's adopt-an-animal scheme was eventually copied by all other zoos in Britain, and subsequently by zoos across the world, and not only for the duration of the war. Adoption and sponsorship are now part of every zoo's vocabulary, and not only zoos. Endangered species across the world are helped by adoption. It is a legacy my father could be justly proud of.

In fact, Mottershead was a master at gaining publicity, especially free publicity. But it wasn't just George who achieved the remarkable advances and changes in how a modern zoo operates. He inspired his own family, zoo staff, donors and supporters, other zoo operators, and the general public at large.

The story is told in the BBC TV series, *Our Zoo*,<sup>2</sup> based on the book of the same name.

George Mottershead stayed actively involved in the zoo until his death in 1978, aged 84. The vision of the little boy years earlier had been achieved.

## Endnotes

[1](#) Mottershead, June. *Our Zoo*. London: Headline Publishing Group, 2014. N. pag. *Kindle* ebook file.

[2](#) *Our Zoo*. DVD. England: Big Talk Productions, 2014.