

# Ian BULLOCK

IN MY VIEW



## Roll up, roll up for old-fashioned fun?

It's confession time, folks. My name is Ian and, er, I've been to a circus – one with performing animals indeed.

Yes, I know it was wrong and that I'm an uncaring Very Bad Person who should be fed to the lions or at least made to balance a glittery ball on my nose while wearing a clownish frill around my neck.

Here at Bullock Towers, you see, we "have views" on traditional animal circuses which rob poor creatures of their natural dignity. That's what Julie and I always tell young Gregory anyway, in suitably stern tones, whenever he spots tempting posters for yet another travelling circus during our holidays abroad.

The French, whose penchant for foie gras, tender veal and supermarket tanks jam-packed with live shellfish speaks volumes, still appear to be big fans of the big top.

Whereas we politically correct Brits positively squirm at the thought of dressing some pitiful elephant up as a ballerina, our neighbours across the Channel seem so much more open to anything old-fashioned that involves doing bizarre things with animals.

"A circus! Can we go? PLEASE?" Gregory begs us almost every year. And every year comes the same firm reply: "Sorry, but you know Mummy and Daddy have views on circuses."

This summer, however, it was weak-willed old Daddy who found himself overpowered by the allure and romance of a night at the circus. "I know it's wrong and goes against all our principles, etc, etc," I waffled nervously, "but I think I'll buy myself a ticket. Will you join me Gregory?"

The sensible lad's response was unexpected but thoroughly laudable: "No Daddy. You know I have views on circuses." We're far from ringmasters but we've certainly got him well trained, eh?

Something irresistible drew me to the circus that night. Maybe it was the garish posters with their beaming clowns' faces, the oompah music booming from the big top or the colourful cluster of caravans and trailers.

Perhaps I was just curious, like some voyeuristic Victorian eager to "roll up, roll up" for an intriguing sideshow. I've long been against the idea of animal circuses, of course, and wanted to see if this experience would prove me wrong.

Leaving Julie and Gregory behind at our campsite caravan, off I snuck to the circus – 10 euros for a ringside seat clutched in my hot little hand. Feeling suitably shameful, I decided that should anyone inquire where I was heading, I would say the local brothel. Nothing could be quite such a crime as a naughty night of "loitering within tent".

Shortly after 8.30, the raucous music got even louder and it was finally showtime. This family circus would be about much more than humiliating animals, I kept reassuring myself, only to be disappointed from the very first cringeworthy act – two tiny ponies which ran around the ring, stood on a see-saw and took bows as the proud ringmaster guided them with a whip.

This was simple equestrianism, no worse than dressage or gymkhana games, I decided... and waited anxiously for the next act: a llama, dandily dressed in a gold and red coat, which showed surprising agility as it leapt hurdles and performed polite curtseys. Oh dear.

The animal acts, unfortunately, did form a significant part of this very French, utterly non-PC performance. There was a tightrope-walking cat, a dog with amazing numerical powers and two tiny apes in sparkly dresses, which rode on scooters and fervently waved the tricolour on command.

The elegant llama later performed an encore – jumping over two camels and nimbly passing through the slender gap between each pair of hairy humps. Well, they do that kind of thing in the wild... don't they?

All of the animals, I have to point out, were immaculately groomed, rewarded with treats and didn't seem unduly troubled in the ring. How they cope with life in a travelling circus and the intensive training regime needed to learn such tricks, I cannot say.

Interestingly, every one of the show's finest moments came when the humans themselves performed – aerial acrobatics, high-wire walking, clowning, a cowboy-style whip and lasso act, and one of the most breathtaking juggling acts I've ever witnessed.

Which begs the question: who needs ponies delicately poised on see-saws or monkeys in go-karts when human performers make such natural, impressive and endearing circus stars?

At least I can now say I've been, taken a good long look – and will probably never go again. We "have views" on traditional animal circuses, you see.

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Read Ian Bullock's previous columns at: [www.EDP24.co.uk](http://www.EDP24.co.uk)



Picture: SUBMITTED

**UNEXPECTED TWIST:** The permission granted for a 500-strong Category C prison at the former RAF Coltishall will be quashed in a London court next week thanks, on the face of it, to the lack of one document, a flood risk assessment.

# Locals eagle-eyed as saga takes new twist

Jack Straw must have been spitting tacks in the last 24 hours.

The justice minister's much-vaunted solution to part of the prison places crisis, outlined on the floor of the House of Commons in December, has been dealt a blow. And one which should never have happened if jobs had been done properly both within Mr Straw's ministry and at North Norfolk District Council.

The permission granted for the 500-strong Category C prison will be quashed in a London court next week thanks, on the face of it, to the lack of one document, a flood risk assessment. It may be more complicated than that, but at least all parties agree that this document was not completed, meaning the planning process will have to start again.

People living in the part of Norfolk affected – North Walsham, Coltishall, Aylsham, Buxton, Scottow and several other communities – will care little for Mr Straw's perspirations over the matter.

They will, however, have a series of questions they want answered, particularly in relation to the related proposal for an eco town and also a proper explanation about how such an apparently straightforward paperwork mistake was made.

As all parties involved are aware, the man who has pushed the current anti-prison court process is Richard Davies, the same man behind the eco town plan. But Mr Davies has himself insisted the court action is down to his firm belief that, as a self-confessed "Norfolk boy", the prison is in the wrong place. Allied with his repeated statements he has "lost appetite" for the eco town and the story wavers again.

But there is still the belief that even if Mr Davies withdraws from the eco-town project, there is nothing to stop another big bucks developer coming into the picture. It may be unlikely, but with so many unexpected twists to this saga, who can put their finger on the true odds of a second developer arriving on the scene?

North Norfolk MP Norman Lamb said yesterday: "The eco town concept is not dead yet, the proposal still has life in it. Given how strongly people feel about that development, we need certainty on this matter."

And Glyn Williams, chairman of the Coltishall Eco Town Action Group



Picture: SIMON FINLAY

**CHANGING TIMES:** Construction work on the former RAF Coltishall base building.

The only slice of certainty in the ever-changing future of Norfolk's famous former airbase at Scottow has gone because someone forgot to fill out a basic piece of paperwork for the prison plan. How much longer can people living around the former RAF Coltishall put up with such bungling ineptitude? **ED FOSS** reports.

(Cetag), said: "We have been told that there will be clarity on the eco-town project in the next two or three weeks, but even if it goes to the Rackheath site, there is nothing stopping another developer coming along and putting plans in."

Perhaps the key question now is this – when can the prison now open, if at all?

Even if this is just a case of one piece of paper, the planning process, public consultation and all, looks set to start all over again.

The amount of time between the first round of public consultation and intended opening date was 13 months, February 2008 to March 2009. If that were to be repeated with October featuring the new public consultation, the new opening date would be November 2009, but only for the first small tranche of prisoners. Guesswork, but a useful indicator.

Officials on all sides have been reluctant to discuss redrawn timescales, but it becomes clear why Mr Straw might not be in the best of moods if a key part of his patch up job on the creaking prisons system has now been delayed

until as good as 2010. That said, the delay may be shorter than this – but as things stand no one can answer that question.

Locally there will be an odd dilemma. There are those who do not want a prison at all, others who see its economic and jobs boost, but others again who welcome it purely as a useful irritant to the far less welcome eco-town plan.

"What we need is an open and honest process when the planning application goes back in," said Mr Williams.

"They need to talk to local people, there have been very limited attempts to speak to the public so far and that needs to change."

The governor of the new prison, Paul Cawkwell, told the EDP yesterday ministry officials would be holding talks with North Norfolk District Council in the coming days to discuss the fast-moving situation.

There will be a majority of folk locally who will want reassurance that those discussions lead to a second planning process which is not only fulsome this time, but which is inclusive of the views within their communities. Plenty of eyes will be watching.