

## UP CLOSE: FROM THE ARCHIVES

### THE ELEPHANT'S STORY: JUMBO c.1880–1896

■ For once, let's talk about the elephant in the room.  
Vanessa Finney has the story.

In 1896, the earthly remains – skeleton and skin – of Jumbo the elephant came to the Australian Museum from the Zoological Gardens at Moore Park.

Jumbo had arrived in Sydney from Siam (now Thailand) as a present from King Chulalongkorn only 13 years earlier, in August 1883. Exchanged for a selection of

Australian birds and plants, the 'youthful' Jumbo joined Jessie the female elephant who had arrived from Calcutta Zoo one year earlier.

Jessie lived to the ripe old age of 65 years, moving to the new Taronga Zoo in Mosman in 1916 where she gave rides for the next 23 years.

Jumbo, too, was soon busy. According to an early Zoo brochure, within months of his arrival at Moore Park he was giving rides to as many as 10,000 children a year as well as 'making himself useful in helping with any heavy drawing or lifting work that turns up'.

Jumbo's working life, however, was cut short. He was retired in 1894 after attacking his keeper and was kept confined to his enclosure for the next two years. He died of natural causes on 18 January 1896.

The Australian Museum was informed the same day, with Museum staff promptly dispatched to the Moore Park Zoo to measure the remains. According to the veterinarian's report he was 22 feet 2 inches (6.8 metres) long at death, with a girth of 18 feet (5.5 metres).

By 4 February, Jumbo's skeleton and skin had arrived at the Australian Museum.

The Museum's Curator, Robert Etheridge Jnr, initially suggested



Jumbo has been on continuous display at the Australian Museum since 1897.  
Photo Australian Museum.

that Jumbo be '... paid for at the rate of the value of its ivory, viz. £9 and £6 for skin', a total of £15. This was politely refused by the NSW Zoological Society which suggested instead the sum of £25, and which Etheridge agreed to on 4 March.

By 1897, according to the Museum's Annual Report for the year, Jumbo's skin had been preserved and put into store 'there being at present no facilities for setting it up', and his skeleton had been mounted and formed 'a conspicuous object among the Osteological [skeleton] Collections'.

His skeleton has been on continuous display at the Australian Museum ever since. Jumbo's skin unfortunately deteriorated in storage, exuding '... certain fluids which have a very strong and unpleasant odour', and had to be destroyed in 1916.

Vanessa Finney is an archivist at the Australian Museum.

● Did you know that elephants walk on their toes? It's true – come and see Jumbo's skeleton for yourself in the revamped *Skeletons* exhibition on Level G.



above: Jumbo's death notice sparked immediate action as a team of taxidermists was dispatched to the Zoo to 'process' the skeleton.

below left: The initial offer of £15 was politely refused ...

below right: ... and the final sum of £25 was paid to the Zoo. It's interesting that the Museum affectionately used Jumbo's name on the paperwork. Documents from the Australian Museum Archives.

