

An Early Vegan: Lewis Gompertz

by Hannah Renier

“Suppose...we reflect on the building of London Bridge, we cannot then help admiring the genius and assiduity of man. But could all the torture and destruction that this has caused to the poor horses, who drew the stones and cleared the rubbish, be brought to light, what an emblem of crime would this beautiful bridge exhibit; many years’ labour has it cost; many teams have been constantly at work, and the extreme severity of the labour imposed on them was almost at any time to be seen. Now, if all the strainings, the lashes, the blows, and the wrenchings with all the bits, had been kept account of, how immense would be the list...”

- Lewis Gompertz

Lewis Gompertz, inventor and animal rights activist, was a kindly, passionate, bird-like little man, alert to everything around him. He was born in 1784, at least a century before his time, into a large and prosperous family of London diamond merchants. As Jews, Lewis and his siblings could not go to University, but the boys, at least, received an education which taught them to ask questions and seek logical solutions to problems.

His older brother Benjamin’s outstanding abilities were noticed when he was young. He became a Fellow of the Royal Society at the age of 18, and later a founder of Alliance Insurance. But Lewis was 40, and had already spent twenty years in business, when he entered public life as a founder of the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals. Its inaugural meeting was held at Old Slaughter’s Coffee House in St Martin’s Lane in 1824.

This was a time when viciousness towards animals was routinely ignored. Excepting the endless black existence of pit ponies, and country pursuits such as hunting and badger-baiting, all kinds of cruelty could be seen on the streets of London. The smartest horses had their tails docked. Exhausted nags were whipped into motion by any ruffian hired to drive a cab. At Old Smithfield - a ‘live meat’ market - agony and carnage jostled in bloodied alleys.

Bull-baiting, cockfights and dog-fights were legal and popular with the many ‘sportsmen’ in the House of Commons. Richard Martin, MP, was sneeringly called ‘Humanity Dick’ because he campaigned for better treatment of animals. He was another founder member of the new SPCA, to which Gompertz contributed energy, imagination and funds. Titled sponsors were induced to support it, as well as humane reformers including William Wilberforce.

The SPCA was to be run by a Reverend Broome. It devoted itself specifically to preventing suffering: that is, to enforcing the law and re-educating the public. In this it led the vanguard of nineteenth century self-control and self-improvement movements –for temperance, against tobacco, for chastity, and vegetarianism, and hard work.

London had hundreds of thousands of equine labourers. Brutal treatment of horses and donkeys had been illegal since 1809, but since every ton of bricks, bale of cloth, churn of milk and individual who

moved about in London relied on horse power, transgressions abounded. SPCA inspectors reported the worst but magistrates were loth to convict, and even more to punish. The SPCA persisted until, after less than two years, a gaping hole opened up. The Reverend Broome had mismanaged the funds.



Contemporary caricature of Lewis Gompertz

Together, Gompertz and Martin straightened the accounts and put Broome on his feet, only to see him end up imprisoned for debt. Then a second member dipped into the till. This time Gompertz took over, providing funds to carry on. For six years he personally pursued unrepentant abusers of animals. He wrote letters, raised money, attended police courts, engaged in public debate, generally got people talking.

His books and letters address difficult moral issues in the dialectic mode in which he had been educated. He concluded that it was unacceptable to compel an animal to act in a way that the ‘purpose or caprice’ of a person might require. And certainly immoral to kill it. He ate neither meat nor dairy produce; he refused to travel by coach.

Since the national economy required animal exploitation for transport, food, and construction, not to mention footwear, entertainment and glue, this was outrageous. When Marx wrote of revolution a couple of decades later, he seemed moderate by comparison. The SPCA, whose committee members happily hunted and ate meat, were shocked to hear that Gompertz was promoting ‘Pythagorean doctrines’ (i.e., that animals’ feelings were of equal value to those of humans). A man called Greenwood engineered a new resolution - the SPCA should henceforth act only in accordance with strict Christian principles. ‘Certain sects’ would be excluded from membership. It was passed.

continued...

Lewis Gompertz (cont.)

Gompertz resigned. He founded the Animals' Friend Society, and took the more rational members of the SPCA with him - mostly Quakers or humanitarian Evangelicals such as Wilberforce and the Countess of Shaftesbury. (The nineteenth century Evangelical movement was not remotely like the one that exists today.) In the 1830s and 1840s Gompertz worked tirelessly, in effect outstripping the SPCA, constantly promoting his view that it was cruel to use any animal for a cause not beneficial to the animal itself. He campaigned long and hard against live vivisection, without success.

In 1846 he had to resign, due to his beloved wife's terminal illness. He devoted the rest of his life to writing, speaking and inventing. Most of his inventions offered alternatives to animal labour, or preserved human life. 'How can man do without the aid of horses?' he asked, rhetorically, and answered himself: 'That is his business to find out.' He took out many patents. If you've ever used a drill with an expanding chuck, Lewis Gompertz invented it. He seems to have been groping towards something like caterpillar tracks for tanks, and something else rather like the Segway. He often thought of things for which materials were unavailable, or the supporting technology didn't yet exist. Sometimes he was impractical: sometimes, brilliant. He was fizzing with ideas, hundreds of them. His book *Mechanical Inventions* went into at least two editions. 'Many of the machines



1865 photo illustrates the typical loads horses were expected to draw.

herein described have been publicly exhibited, and for some of them I have been honoured by a medal from His Royal Highness Prince Albert,' he wrote proudly. In 1861, he died at his home at the Oval.

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A 2008 talk by Norm Phelps transcribed in *Critical Society Journal* issue 8.



About Hannah Renier

Hannah has ghost-written five well-reviewed books for a presenter of TV history programmes. As a ghost-writer, she has also researched and brought to life the long history of London, other people's family histories, and some early 19th century diaries. Under her own name she has published articles on aspects of London such as the music hall – and Lambeth Past, about North Lambeth.