SOFTWARE & TECH

True Story Of We Bought A Zoo

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Introduction: The Heartwarming Reality Behind the Hollywood Film

The 2011 film *We Bought a Zoo*, starring Matt Damon and Scarlett Johansson, captured the hearts of audiences worldwide with its touching story of a family who purchased a dilapidated zoo and restored it to its former glory. While the movie is undeniably charming, many viewers are left wondering: how much of it is actually true? The answer might surprise you. The **true story of We Bought a Zoo** is every bit as emotional, inspiring, and unpredictable as the film suggests—and in some ways, even more remarkable.

Unlike many Hollywood productions that take extreme liberties with their source material, **We Bought a Zoo** stays remarkably close to the real-life events that inspired it. The film is based on the memoir written by Benjamin Mee, a British journalist who, along with his family, did indeed buy a struggling zoo in the English countryside. However, the real story includes layers of complexity, heartbreak, and triumph that even a two-hour movie could not fully capture.

Who Was Benjamin Mee? A Journalist Turned Zookeeper

Before he became the central figure in the **true story of We Bought a Zoo**, Benjamin Mee was a writer and journalist living in France with his family. Born in 1966, Mee had a successful career as a feature writer for publications such as *The Guardian* and *The Sunday Times*. His life seemed stable and predictable—until tragedy struck.

In 2006, Mee's wife, Katherine, was diagnosed with a brain tumor known as a glioblastoma multiforme. This aggressive form of cancer has a notoriously poor prognosis, and Katherine was given only months to live. The family, which included young children, faced an unimaginable ordeal. Yet rather than retreating into grief, the Mee family made a bold and unconventional decision that would change their lives forever.

The Fateful Decision to Buy a Zoo

While searching for a fresh start and a more meaningful life, Benjamin stumbled upon an advertisement for a zoo in Devon, England. The property, Dartmoor Wildlife Park, had fallen into disrepair and was on the brink of closure. Despite having no experience in zoology or animal husbandry, Mee felt an inexplicable pull toward the project. In a move that many considered reckless, he used his entire life savings—along with money borrowed from family—to purchase the zoo in 2006.

This decision was not made lightly. Katherine, despite her failing health, was fully supportive of the plan. She believed that the zoo would provide a unique and enriching environment for their children and that it could become a lasting legacy for her family. This unwavering partnership is central to the **true story of We Bought a Zoo**, even though the film portrays it with a more optimistic arc than reality allowed.

The Real Zoo: Dartmoor Zoological Park

Dartmoor Zoological Park, originally known as Dartmoor Wildlife Park, had a long and complicated history before the Mee family took over. Opened in 1968 by Ellis and Judy Daw, the zoo had once been a popular tourist attraction. However, by the time Benjamin Mee arrived, the facility was run-down, underfunded, and in desperate need of modernization.

The zoo was home to more than 200 animals, including big cats, primates, birds of prey, and reptiles. Many of the enclosures were outdated, and the zoo had been struggling to meet modern animal welfare standards. The Mee family faced the enormous task of renovating the property while simultaneously caring for the animals and maintaining public access.

The Role of Staff and Keepers

One of the most significant aspects of the **true story of We Bought a Zoo** is the dedicated team of zookeepers and staff who helped the Mee family succeed. In the film, Scarlett Johansson's character Kelly Foster is a composite of several real-life employees. The real head keeper, a woman named Dawn, was instrumental in teaching Benjamin how to manage the animals and run the zoo effectively.

These keepers often worked long hours for little pay, driven by their passion for animal care. Without their expertise and commitment, the zoo would likely have failed within months. Benjamin Mee has often credited the staff with saving not only the zoo but also his family during their darkest days.

Major Differences Between the Movie and Reality

While the film adaptation of the **true story of We Bought a Zoo** is largely faithful, there are several key differences that are worth noting. Understanding these distinctions provides a deeper appreciation for both the real events and the cinematic choices made by the filmmakers.

The Timeline Is Compressed

In the movie, the zoo appears to be brought up to standard within a matter of months. In reality, the process took years. The Mee family faced continuous challenges, including broken infrastructure, unexpected animal illnesses, and the enormous financial burden of running a zoo. The renovation period was far more grueling and extended than the film suggests.

Katherine Mee's Illness

The film treats Katherine Mee's illness in a more hopeful and less explicit manner. In real life, Katherine died in September 2007, just nine months after the family moved into the zoo. This tragic timing meant that Benjamin had to grieve his wife while simultaneously managing a zoo that was still struggling to survive. The **true story of We Bought a Zoo** is, in many ways, a story of resilience in the face of overwhelming personal loss.

The Children's Adjustment

In the film, Benjamin's children are shown gradually warming to zoo life, with the daughter becoming particularly attached to a peacock. In reality, the children adapted quickly and with remarkable enthusiasm. The zoo became a place of healing for them, offering daily adventures and a sense of purpose that helped them cope with their mother's illness and eventual passing.

The Romantic Subplot

One of the more notable cinematic inventions is the romantic tension between Benjamin and Kelly (the zookeeper). In real life, Benjamin Mee did not begin a romantic relationship with any staff member. While the film's fictional romance adds warmth and narrative structure, the **true story of We Bought a Zoo** is more focused on family bonds, community support, and the love between a father and his children.

Financial Challenges and Triumphs

Running a zoo is an expensive endeavor. The Mee family poured their entire savings into the purchase and renovation of Dartmoor Zoological Park. In the early years, the zoo operated at a significant loss, and there were moments when bankruptcy seemed inevitable. Benjamin Mee wrote extensively about these financial struggles in his memoir, and they are depicted in the film—though with far less emphasis on the sheer terror of the numbers.

To make ends meet, the family relied on creative fundraising efforts, including opening the zoo for special events, renting out spaces for weddings and parties, and even selling livestock. The **true story of We Bought a Zoo** shows that passion alone is not enough; it takes hard work, creativity, and sometimes sheer luck to keep such a venture alive.

The Role of Social Media and Publicity

Following the release of the film, Dartmoor Zoological Park experienced a massive surge in visitors. Tourism increased by over 300% in the months following the premiere. This newfound attention helped stabilize the zoo's finances and allowed Benjamin to make long-overdue improvements. It is a testament to the power of storytelling and how a well-told narrative can translate into real-world support.

What Happened After the Movie?

Many fans of the film wonder what became of the real zoo after the credits rolled. The **true story of We Bought a Zoo** did not end with the movie—it continued in ways both inspiring and challenging.

Benjamin Mee's Continued Work

Benjamin Mee continued to run Dartmoor Zoological Park for several years after the film's release. He also wrote a second book, *We Made a Wild Family*, which detailed the ongoing adventures and struggles of zoo life. He became a sought-after speaker, sharing his experiences with resilience, grief, and following one's dreams against all odds.

Changes in Zoo Management

In 2014, Benjamin Mee made the difficult decision to step back from day-to-day management of the zoo. The property was placed under new ownership, but the Mee family remained involved in an advisory capacity. The zoo continues to operate today as a popular tourist destination and conservation center. It has expanded its facilities, improved animal welfare standards, and become a hub for educational programs.

Conservation and Legacy

Perhaps the most enduring aspect of the **true story of We Bought a Zoo** is the conservation work it inspired. Dartmoor Zoological Park now participates in several international breeding programs for endangered species. The zoo's focus has shifted from pure entertainment to education and preservation, fulfilling the vision that Katherine Mee had for the property before her death.

Lessons from the Real Story

The real narrative behind **We Bought a Zoo** offers profound takeaways that extend far beyond the confines of the film. It is a story about taking calculated risks, embracing the unknown, and finding purpose in the midst of pain.

- Grief does not have to be paralyzing. Benjamin Mee channeled his grief into action, using the zoo as a way to honor his wife's memory and build a future for his children.
- Community matters. The zoo's success depended on the dedication of staff, volunteers, and visitors who believed in the mission.
- Dreams require sacrifice. The Mee family gave up financial security, comfort, and privacy to pursue an unconventional vision. The reward was not wealth, but meaning.

- Film and reality can coexist. The movie version of the story is softer and more romantic, but it does not diminish the real-world struggles and achievements. Both the real story and the film have value in their own right.

Conclusion: Why This Story Continues to Inspire

The **true story of We Bought a Zoo** is far more than a feel-good movie plot. It is a real-life account of a family who faced devastating circumstances and chose to respond with courage, creativity, and determination. The Mee family's journey from grief to triumph—while caring for hundreds of animals and building a business from the ground up—is a testament to the resilience of the human spirit.

Whether you first encountered this story through the film or through Benjamin Mee's memoir, the underlying message remains the same: sometimes the most audacious dreams are the ones worth pursuing, even when the odds are stacked against you. The zoo that the Mee family bought was not just a collection of cages and enclosures—it was a second chance at life, love, and purpose. And that, more than any movie magic, is what makes this story truly unforgettable.

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