

# An Andean Condor in Newcastle upon Tyne

by Anthony Flowers

One of the most surprising, remarkable, and it has to be said, unlikely stories of Newcastle upon Tyne, is that of the City's Andean condor.



In June 1886 a nine-month-old Andean condor (*Vultur Gryphus*) nestling was presented to the Natural History Society of Northumbria, by Mr W C Tripler of Coquimbo, Chile. How this young bird arrived at the Hancock Museum is not clear, although four years later in November 1890, W.C. Tripler gave to the Society “A very fine living [female] Haunaco [Guanaco]” which was brought from Chile to Middlesborough by steamer. It seems likely that the condor was conveyed by the same means. The survival of such a young bird was always doubtful. Against expectations it grew and by 1889 required a large aviary, which was presented in 1890 through subscription. The substantial aviary was erected at the back of the museum, and began to attract visitors to see the condor. There is evidence that W C Tripler attempted to obtain a companion for the condor, because in November 1888 a skeleton of a condor came to the collection from Chile; an old label suggests that the bird died at the museum in March 1889, though it has not been possible to establish if this was the case.



E. Leonard Gill arrived in Newcastle in July 1901 to take up the post of curator at the museum. From the first Gill was fascinated by the bird. His diary for Wednesday 9 April 1902 records “Condor laid her first egg”; the following Monday he had labelled the egg and placed it on display in the museum.

Aware of the interest this event would cause he wrote a short piece for the local newspapers. The condor continued to lay a single egg every succeeding spring until 1908, when she laid two eggs. In 1909 no eggs were produced but she resumed laying in 1910, when she was in her twenty-fifth year. The last egg was laid on Saturday 15 April 1911. As Gill puts it in his diary: "Condor laid an egg but she smashed it". This probably reflected the bird's declining health, and the fact that she was in heavy moult and obviously very ill. The condor died on June 16 1911.



Gill, who was obviously affected by the demise of a bird that he had come to know very well, wrote for the *North Mail* what amounts to an obituary for the condor:

*The condor which probably thousands of visitors to the Hancock Museum, Newcastle, have stared and wondered at is dead. From far Corral Quimodo in Chili, the condor hailed in 1886, and she has lived an unruffled life in Newcastle ever since. She was only a nestling when Dr H Salvin Pattinson and Mr W C Tripler presented her to the museum. Gradually she developed into a fine adult female, and except when emerging from her bath - one of course is not expected to call on a condor even at such time - she was always to be seen in splendid feather and condition. The condor's behaviour was generally exemplary. She had her moods, and she could really be disagreeable [Gill prepared a caution notice for the cage in June 1909 in order to discourage boys from placing their fingers through the bars]; but although in coming to maturity she developed a decidedly unfriendly disposition, she remained singularly enough, on affectionate terms with the late Mr William Dinning, formerly secretary of the Natural History Society. The only other person she would tolerate for a moment inside her cage was the museum caretaker, Mr William Voutt.*

*Of the vulture the average man has rather a disagreeable idea. He thinks of whitening corpses on sandy plains, the prey of the bloodthirsty giant of the air. It is not a pleasant notion. Still the condor, which is not only the largest of the American vultures, but the largest of all birds of prey, is a magnificent creature, to whose splendid soaring flights the pen of Darwin could do but justice.*

At the death of the condor Gill stuffed the bird and supervised the construction of a special display case for the specimen. For many years it was displayed in the entrance hall to the museum. In 1927 the bird was cleaned and photographed by the new curator T Russell Goddard and placed in the Bird Room.

As the years passed the story of the condor was forgotten. However, as an old man the Northumbrian poet, Basil Bunting (1900-1985) remembered visiting the living bird as a schoolboy in Newcastle 'It was one of the great attractions of our childhood. When we got out of school and before taking the bus home we'd go up to the museum to see the condor. A wonderful bird...' It had lived at the museum for such a long time that in Bunting's words 'It had become almost a symbol of Newcastle...'

