

The Old Town Elephant, 1705

An Indian elephant had been toured around Europe in the 1680s and 1690s before being brought to Britain and eventually Edinburgh. In a letter, dated 23 November 1705, Adam Kerr, a baker in Fishmarket Close, complained about how his bakery and oven were being ruined and exposed to elephant dung, with water also causing damage from the flat above.

Adam Kerr baxter, burgess of Edinburgh, humbly complaine upon Abraham Seybour (Sever) a Dutchman owner of the eliphant that where I having ane shop and oven at the head of the fishmercat close with a back vault to the south thereof. ... [he] keeps his eliphant therin and exposes the same his dung and water thereof comes so doun upon my said vault that it has spoylt the same — and comes doun in great quantities upon the vault and spoyle and abuses the concerned goods. ... [I am] beseeching your lordship and councill to visit to remove the said eliphant”.

He petitioned the Guild Court to visit Mr Sever, who had already asked Edinburgh Town Council to allow him to show off the elephant to the public. The council agreed:

The Council upon ane petitione given by Abraham Sever Dutchman grants liberty to the petitioner to expose his elephant to all persones within the toun and suburbs.

It appears the elephant died in Broughty Ferry in 1706. A contemporary illustration shows Abraham Sever and the elephant he housed in an upstairs flat in Edinburgh in 1705. Perhaps the phrase 'there's an elephant in the room' actually originated in Edinburgh ...

