

This week, the British Empire and Commonwealth Museum released a photograph of Rupert snoozing on a living room rug while a boy in an armchair relaxed with a book. The extraordinary scene was snapped in 1960, yet little else was known about it.

Now, more than 40 years on, the Mail has tracked down the boy - and unearthed a fascinating insight into the hilarious trials and tribulations of keeping a mighty rhinoceros as a family pet.

Mike Condy, now 53 and a financial services adviser living in Johannesburg, South Africa, well remembers having his picture taken with Rupert, and the day the rhino came to stay at their home in the Rhodesian bush.

Rupert was just a few weeks old when the Zambezi valley was flooded to make the Kariba Dam in Rhodesia. Along with many other beasts who would have drowned, he was rescued by a team of animal lovers including Mike's father Dr John Condy, a local vet.

They made a 'Noah's Ark' raft from oil drums and tree trunks to float stranded animals to safety, but Rupert's mother - rhinos cannot swim - was too heavy, slipped off and drowned.

'Rupey' became an orphan - and so Dr Condy took him home for adoption.

Yesterday Mike Condy said: "It was amazing. Dad brought home a pet rhino. I was only about eight years old at the time. I'll never forget it."

The Condy family - Mike, his parents John and Joan, his two sisters and a brother - lived side by side with another British family, the Fords.

Boyhood friend Simon Ford, now 49, recalled yesterday: "We were like one big family. The Condys and us reared Rupey with milk formulated by a vet from a sample of the mother's milk.

"We had the most obscure, surreal childhood, with animals everywhere.

"Rupey was our mode of transport. We used to ride around on him. He was safe enough, apart from at 5pm when it was his 'playtime'. You climbed a tree then, and the dogs scattered, and Rupey would put his nose down and charge around.

"One day, my sister was riding a bike and he went charging after her - my mum had a freak-out. But he did a beautiful side-step, came up to her and just nuzzled her. He thought he was one of the dogs.'

Mr Ford added: "Our dog used to go into my bedroom and lie on the bed. One day, Rupey did too. It was one of those metal hospital beds, but it was a bed no more after that."

He said one weekend his businessman father Eric had some clients from Britain to visit. He said: "All us kids had been told to behave and keep out of the way. When they arrived I had never seen such a smart car. The dogs went flying off down the drive to greet it - and so did Rupey. The car stopped abruptly, turned around and took off. When my dad went to the office on Monday morning they said his visitors had fled because of a 'wild animal' roaming loose in his garden. But Rupey was just being friendly like the dogs."

Mr Ford, who now lives in Surrey with his English wife, said: "Visitors often hid behind the curtains. Rupey liked the living room and often the only way to get him out was by tempting him with bananas. Once, he decided to exit through the kitchen door - and took the door frame with him."

Though partial to the living room, Rupey was made to sleep out on the veranda, but the two families found it impossible to fully 'domesticate' their oversized pet.

Mr Ford said: "There was a time when he went to the loo inside the house. We all thought it was a hoot until Joan made us help clear it up.

"With our fathers away working a lot, Joan and my mum had six kids and all the animals to wash and feed. It wasn't just Rupey, we had pet snakes, an ant eater and lots of guinea fowl."

After a year, Rupey had grown too big, and he was released back into the bush. Sadly, after 18 months of roaming free he succumbed to pneumonia and died.

But Mr Condy said: "I'll never forget those days. It was unique. Rupey was one in a million."

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Special indeed, however more stories of domesticated rhino's are known. I did play with and hugged a baby rhino in a small village in Nepal. After her mother was shot, she had approached the locals for food and then became some kind of pet rhino.

- Patrick, Amsterdam, Holland

I would really love to see this tale published in a book.

- Darrion, Taipei, Taiwan

Made my day reading this story.

- Neil Adlington, Macclesfield, Cheshire

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