

Pictures: STEVE HILL/Rex Features; MICHAEL DUNLEA



STAR ATTRACTION: Edward at Bristol Zoo

From meeting meerkats to busting moves with street dance groups, a week in the life of the Earl of Wessex is full of surprises, as CAMILLA TOMINEY discovers

THE Earl of Wessex's train is delayed. The Queen's youngest son was due 10 minutes ago on the 09.57 from Reading but there is still no sign of him at Bristol Zoo. As news of his imminent arrival spreads backs stiffen, suits are checked for stray pieces of fluff and a shoe is given a last-minute shine on the back of a trouser leg.

Suddenly he appears and it is straight to business, shaking hands and exchanging clipped "hellos" and "how are you?"

Apparently unfazed by his delay on First Great Western (first class, naturally), Edward is a man on a mission. Walking at his father's brisk pace and boasting his mother's smile, he is unmistakably Windsorian, with his hands clasped behind his back, signet ring on pinkie.

The Earl is talking to schoolchildren in the activity centre when someone hands him an elephant's tooth. "Have you ever fed an elephant?" he asks knowingly, "It's quite challenging."

Although the father-of-two leans down to speak to the youngsters there is something awkward

about a 47-year-old man in a smart, navy blue overcoat making small talk with the under-11s. Edward signals the need to move on with a snappy "excellent", seemingly one of his favourite words alongside "okay", "right" and "good".

There is double cause for excitement at the gorilla enclosure where visitors are treated to two rare sightings for the price of one. Three-week-old gorilla Kukena, the zoo's newest

resident, appears in her mother Salome's arms just as Edward approaches.

Visitors stop and stare, some take pictures on their mobile phones and the royal suddenly turns into the main attraction.

One couple spots him but, as if faced with an unfamiliar primate, can't quite work out what they are looking at. "It's Prince Edward," I prompt them. The penny drops and they continue snapping away for their album, presumably entitled *What We Saw At The Zoo*.

Edward, who carries out about 350 royal engagements a year, is oblivious to the stares as he bustles past the love birds to the meerkat enclosure. "Ah, this is the new thing," he nods. Clearly he has seen the adverts.

In the butterfly enclosure he is told that most species live for only a few weeks but one of the longest surviving is the monarch. Doesn't Edward know it.

Having had to step down from running Ardent, his production company, in 2002 following a string of embarrassing blips such as *It's A Royal Knockout in the Eighties* and filming Prince William while he was a student at Edinburgh University when the press was banned, Edward has grown used to playing a supporting role to his mother's starring one.

To his credit, he does it well and without fanfare despite what Fern Britton describes as his

Edward's simple approach is a knockout supporting role



SOCIABLE: Edward meets the Phresh Boiiz and chats to Betty Bickerstaff

"pompousness". When she interviewed him for *This Morning* in 2008 she found him "very reserved and suspicious". Nevertheless Edward, who is renowned for being a hands-on father, manages to appear "down with the kids" during a visit to the Knowle West Media Centre, a creative outlet for young Bristolians.

There he is greeted by an all-boy street dance group called Phresh Boiiz. Edward has a huge smile on his face throughout the gyrating performance and hails Phresh Boiiz as "fantastic".

"He'll skip things but not people," says Colonel Paul Arengo-Jones, the stiff upper-lipped former military man who is his personal attendant. "Often we go into schools and they will do an entire line-up and I have to drag him out because he insists on greeting each and every one of them."

At Mortimer House, a home for people with learning difficulties and dementia, the Union Jack bunting has been hung out. Manageress Liz Spires says: "One resident, when he found out the Earl was coming, sang the National Anthem from start to finish."

Edward is invited to meet Betty Bickerstaff, who despite her 87 years still manages a deep curtsy before ushering him into her bedroom for a chat. As he sits on the bed, Betty begins to tell him how she got stuck in a lift recently. "Lifts are a bit like that," he reassures her, "they are very dodgy things."

Just how good Edward is at small talk becomes apparent at St James's Palace, when he doles out Duke of Edinburgh gold awards to hundreds of teenagers.

As international trustee for the award scheme set up by his father in 1956, he will one day become the next Duke of Edinburgh and works for the charity "more or less every day", according to chief executive Peter Westgarth.

As his private secretary, a grey haired businessman-like fellow named John Smedley points out: "We've already done one of these ceremonies this morning. It can be a bit repetitive but this is what we do."

It doesn't stop Edward cracking a few jokes with the crowd, accusing the youngsters of being like fishermen. "The challenges get bigger every year, don't they? The mountains get higher, the rain gets heavier! That's what comes with sticking at it and overcoming all the challenges."

Glib though it might sound, it seems a fitting motto for the Earl's life.

'The Earl of Wessex will one day become the next Duke of Edinburgh'

In S Magazine

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