

Meet the real elves

Traditional toymakers' workshops are magical places at this time of year, as Jonathan Self discovers

WHEN my great-great-grandmother bought her grandson, William, a game called 'Willy's Walk to see Grandmamma', when my great-grandfather bought his daughter one of the first commercially produced rocking horses and when my great-uncle bought my father half a dozen miniature British officers and men made from lead (together with assorted native attackers, including *jezail*-toting Arabs and spear-brandishing Zulus) as Christmas presents, they were buying British-made objects that would—political correctness aside—stand the test of time.

Indeed, the attic nursery in my house contains toys and games that have entertained four generations of the family. There is a tin spinning top and a canvas box kite, a wooden doll's house and a paper theatre. More recent additions include an early Brio train set and a large crate of Lego. Nothing in the room requires electrical power.

I'm not quite as extreme as a friend who gave his children some beautifully wrapped batteries one Christmas with a note that read 'toy not included' (in fairness, I must add that he also gave them bicycles), nor would I ever be as biting as American talk-show host Conan O'Brien, who once quipped that the new high-tech *Star Wars* toys could talk and were interactive so that they could be easily distinguished from those playing with them, but they both have my sympathy. I believe old-fashioned toys are better.

In my experience, modern children do, too. Despite being born in a digi-

tal, consumer age—perhaps *because* of it—they take enormous pleasure in simple, unsophisticated amusements. I base this partly on the many children who visit the house and make an immediate beeline upstairs to play and partly on the growth of the artisan-toy movement. Never mind what's happening at the North Pole—at this time of the year in the British Isles, there's a small army of artists and craftsmen producing beautiful, imaginative, timeless toys.

‘There's a tactile, magic quality to a handmade toy’

Tim Hartnall, who creates perfect scale replicas of Georgian and Regency houses, is typical of the new wave of toymakers: 'I made a doll's house for my daughter and derived so much satisfaction, not just from the process but from her reaction, that I gave up my job running a successful IT company in order to pursue it as a career.' His doll's houses are in such demand that there's a waiting list of up to a year.

'Artisan toy-making is definitely enjoying a resurgence,' agrees David Plageron, chairman of the British Toymakers Guild and the sole proprietor of Noah's Ark Toys. 'If you want evidence of the trend, all you have to do is visit Etsy (www.etsy.com/uk), a website that promotes



David Plageron (above) of Noah's Ark Toys (right) believes that handmade toys are currently enjoying a renaissance



handmade objects, where thousands of traditional toymakers offer their wares.' He believes that demand is coming from parents who are fed up with 'poor-quality imports and losing their children to mindless computer games'. This theory is borne out by Giles Brown of Dorset Soldiers, who makes exactly the sort of figures that I inherited from my father and says that, when both children and adults see what he makes, they immediately want to pick them up and play: 'There's a tactile, magic quality to a handmade toy. It stimulates the imagination in a way nothing else can.'

If, as Einstein believed, play is the highest form of research then, surely, an elegant, handmade toy must produce the highest form of play? ➤

Noah's Ark Toys

(01803 866786; www.noahsarktoys.eu)

David Plageron (left), a Devon-based artist turned toymaker, carved his first Noah's Ark to celebrate the birth of his daughter, Anna, in 1971, and has never looked back. His range also includes circuses, farmyards and one-off pieces, such as a pack of hounds chasing a fox. Although his creations are miniature works of art, he hates the thought of them not being played with. 'If they end up getting a bit bashed, I can always re-sand and paint them.' He uses as many as 17 types of wood when modelling his Mixed Woods Ark sets and pays special attention to giving their faces a real sense of character. 'What makes me happiest is all the correspondence I receive from parents saying how much their children love playing with my toys.'



The Knitted Bear Company

(01903 785626; www.theknittedbearcompany.co.uk)

'I only launched the company a few months ago and the orders started flooding in immediately,' says West Sussex-based Diana Gilmartin. Each of her bears is made using her own hand-spun wool from rare-breed sheep. 'We aim to promote the rare breeds through a low-impact, environmentally sustainable natural product.' Diana does all the knitting herself—it takes about eight hours per bear—and suggests 'embroidered eyes for bears going to younger children and glass eyes for those going to older children (aka adults)'. For newborn babies, she recommends Jacob or Manx Loaghtan yarn, because they're lovely and soft.





Karl Longbottom Kites

(01981 550326; www.longbottom.org.uk)

'Nothing beats the satisfaction of seeing the look on a child's face as he sends his kite soaring upwards for the first time,' says Karl Longbottom (*above*). Although he makes traditional models (and reproduces historic ones), he's better known in kite-flying circles for his highly innovative designs. For instance, he's created a kite that's so light, it can be flown indoors.

'I have an engineering background and making kites was only a hobby until 10 years ago, when I went full-time,' he explains. It takes him between three hours and three weeks to construct each of his kites in his Herefordshire workshop, and he often gives them unusual names, such as Four Wing Thing, Bernard Bat, Pants and Ladies' Knickers.



Dorset Soldiers

(01305 823003; www.dorsetsoldiers.com)

Giles Brown, who started Dorset Soldiers in 1976, is one of a dwindling band of lead-figure craftsmen working in the country. Mr Brown and a friend cast each figure and then, with the help of two local artists, decorate them with layer upon layer of paint, finishing the details with fine brushes. 'It's a painstaking business, but the end result looks magnificent—a traditional toy, but with a neater finish.' Customers can have individual pieces or complete sets personalised, and the firm covers every period, from Ancient Britain to the modern day. 'We don't just do soldiers. For example, you could order "Rebecca, with her governess, is startled by a friendly dog" or "White Hunter, two Native Bearers with dead leopard, palm tree and grass clump". We try to mix it up a bit.'



Anglia Dolls Houses

(www.angliadollshouses.co.uk; 01553 811170)

Norfolk craftsman Tim Hartnall's (*right*) clients must sometimes wonder if they're ordering a doll's house or the real thing. He begins by taking a brief and discussing their needs in detail, before drawing up plans and working out a schedule. His more demanding commissions can take up to a year to complete.

'I specialise in Georgian and Regency houses, and everything from the plasterwork to the doorknobs and the scullery flagstones is in perfect proportion [*below and bottom*].'

He learnt his skills from his uncle, who was a cabinetmaker. 'Some of my properties are bought by collectors as showpiece homes; others for children or grandchildren to play with. Either way, they're built to last as long as the originals.'



Other toy makers we love

For handmade wooden toys, Toys with Tools (01377 229448; www.toyswithtools.co.uk) or Croglin Designs (01768 870100; www.croglindesigns.co.uk)

For rocking horses, The Kensington Rocking Horse Company (07967 644869; www.kensington-rocking-horses.co.uk) or Stevenson Brothers (01233 820363; www.rockinghorses.uk.net)

For miniature reproduction electric Land Rovers and tractors, Toylander (01767 319080; www.toylander.com). For go-carts, The Wooden Go Cart Company (07930 406610; www.woodengocart.co.uk)

For marbles, House of Marbles (01626 835358; www.houseofmarbles.com)

For dolls, Dalston Dolls (www.dalstondolls.co.uk)