

Girls and boys and their



Traditional wooden toys were out and garish coloured plastic was all the rage—until we realised what it was doing to the environment (and our homes). Claire Jackson explains why proper playthings are back

Photographs by Millie Pilkington



WHEN Nicola Murray posits a policy to promote wooden toys in the political satire *The Thick Of It*, the flustered MP is derided for her impromptu war on the plastic contents of toy boxes. Amid growing reports about the amount of plastic in our seas, our Rt Hon fictional friend has a point ('Let's get back to wood. Simple wooden toys for simple... It's very early days'). Although the concept of a return to wooden toys clearly felt outlandish to those screenwriters, some 10 years ago, we have since become better educated about the long-term impact that our choices can have on the environment. Plastic is out and sustainable materials—such as wood—are in, inspiring a new generation of toymakers.

'I cannot bear plastic toys,' asserts Karen Mazurek, co-founder of Little Country Cooks, the boutique East Sussex supplier of miniature wooden toy stoves (*see box*). 'If a toy is going to be part of your home, it needs to be beautiful—not something you rush to put away every time someone comes over.' You certainly would keep Mrs Mazurek's tiny replica Agas out on display; these delightful creations are so convincing that people often ask whether they are working models (they aren't). 'When my children were little, I was looking for a play kitchen and the only ones I could find were flimsy and looked as if they wouldn't last very long,' she elaborates. 'My husband and I made a toy wooden stove based on our Aga and our children played with it for years.'

The couple initially sold the stoves to order through their local toy shop. When production increased—and, sadly, the toy shop closed—sales moved online. 'We used to make each one ourselves, but we now have help with that side of things,' explains Mrs Mazurek, who assures me that the items are all handmade in England. There are, however, certain drawbacks to using wood. 'The stoves aren't light—they're not



And he made them two by two: David Plagerson creates wooden arks (*facing page*) filled with every kind of animal

the sort of thing you'll move very often,' she warns. The small production line is also reflected in the price: at £345, these toys are investment pieces, made to pass down through the generations.

Toys that encourage imaginative, 'real-life' play have always been popular, particularly those that mimic day-to-day activities. Many of these replica gadgets are now sold in wooden formats, rather than plastic, from barbecues to ironing boards. English

Heritage even sells a wooden toy espresso machine (£30, www.english-heritageshop.org.uk), complete with teeny wooden pods—the perfect training ground for teaching your child to make the morning coffee.

Of course, 'wood' doesn't automatically mean 'good'. Any mass-produced product is still subject to complex supply chains and, often, the final item will have clocked up many air miles before it reaches the shop window (or, more likely, your screen). ➤





Gorillas and llamas and camels, oh my: Mr Plageron's animals, all made from local, seasoned, Dartmoor timber, await their final touches

There is also enormous variety in the types of wood used for toymaking. Not all manufacturers use materials from sustainably managed forests—that is, dedicated areas where trees are strategically replaced. Because toys need to be relatively hardwearing, they tend to be made from hardwoods, including maple, birch and beech. These are slower-growing trees, unlike softwoods, such as pine and fir. It is, therefore, critical that they come from properly maintained areas. That wooden push-along Winnie-the-Pooh may eventually decompose (depending on how it has been finished) in a way that its plastic counterparts never will, but its purchase isn't necessarily environmentally friendly.

'Our understanding about sustainable wood is improving,' assures David Plageron, who makes exquisite, hand-carved toys from his garden workshop in Devon. 'I buy my wood from a farmer in Dartmoor who seasons his own timber.' 'Seasoning' is the drying process once the tree has been felled; it can take several years for hardwoods such as oak to be properly prepared, although kilns can expedite the process. 'I mainly use limewood, which is popular with carvers,' >



Above: Non-toxic paint is a must for small children's toys. Right: The artist at rest



Into the toolbox: where to buy traditional toys

Benjamin Pollock's Toyshop, Covent Garden, London WC2 (020-7379 7866; www.pollocks-coventgarden.co.uk)

'If you love art, folly or the bright eyes of children, speed to Pollock's,' wrote Robert Louis Stevenson about Benjamin Pollock's Toyshop. The emporium has long been admired for its miniature theatres (*right*), which include reproductions from around the world

Semmalina Starbags, Westminster, London SW1 (020-7730 9333; www.semmalinastarbags.com)

This boutique—run by sisters Emma Forbes and Sarah Standing—stocks a mix of traditional and contemporary children's clothes and toys, as well as the eponymous party bags, which are packed with favours and can be customised to almost any specification



Crocodile Toys, Cirencester, Gloucestershire (01285 656050; www.crocodiletoys.com)

The Cotswolds' premiere toyshop has recently made a move towards stocking ethically produced items that have been made from sustainable materials—there's no plastic to be found in its range, which includes everything from board games to make-your-own face-covering kits

Noah's Ark Toys (01803 866786; www.noahsarktoys.co.uk)

One-time farmer and teacher David Plageron's beautiful toys include farm sets, circus scenes and various limited-edition Noah's Arks, carved from a variety of locally sourced wood, including apple, pear, sycamore, cherry and black walnut. All are handmade at his Devon workshop

Teganau Tegid Toys (07815 784728; www.tegidtoys.wales)

Bala-based David Griffith makes a range of jigsaws and push-or-pull-along toys, including wheeled dinosaurs, hedgehogs and dragons. The former carpenter and joiner also offers personalised items, such as wooden name puzzles and trains, finished with non-toxic paint

Little Country Cooks (01342 824500; www.littlecountrycooks.co.uk)

Take role play to the next level with Little Country Cooks' adorable handmade wooden Agas (*left*) produced in East Sussex—these

free-standing stoves encourage imaginative interaction and come with a range of culinary accessories

More traditional toymakers can be found on **Etsy** (www.etsy.com) and through the **British Toymakers Guild**, of which Mr Plageron is chairman (0845 474 7905 www.toymakersguild.co.uk)



he continues. 'It has a very even grain and isn't too hard or too delicate.'

Mr Plageron turns dull logs into arks, farms and circuses, filled with neatly painted animals. The ark is his signature piece and gave his business, Noah's Ark Toys, its name. This love of arks grew from a visit to the V&A Museum of Childhood in Bethnal Green, London E2, which holds a large collection in its archive. Mr Plageron began making one for his daughter back in the 1970s, sparking a decades-long pastime.

'There's something timeless about an ark,' he reflects. 'Being able to hold something in your hand and use your imagination is a great skill, rather than relying on something ready-made on a screen—creativity is an important element in play.' His arks are equally popular with grown-up children, too: some 30 years after making one for a young client, the customer has recently returned to commission another ark for his own child. These are pieces that you won't want to hide in the nursery. 'My training

is as a painter, so there's a strong aesthetic element in my toys,' agrees Mr Plageron, modestly, 'but they aren't ornaments—they are made to be played with.'

The act of making wooden toys is as magical as playtime with the toy itself. These artisans have long been celebrated in popular culture, from the classic story of Italian wood carver Geppetto, who creates the mischievous puppet Pinocchio—immortalised

Today's wooden toys even include espresso machines, from English Heritage



in Disney's 1940 film, a creepy 2019 live-action retelling and the 2007 opera by Jonathan Dove—to Enid Blyton's *The Little Old Toy Maker*. In *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang*, when it seems that no one will help, it's the local toymaker who helps Caractacus Potts and Truly Scrumptious find the children, who have been captured by the terrifying Child Catcher.

Once upon a time, little boys played with wooden Brio train sets and little girls had peg dolls, but wooden toys aren't gendered any more. 'I have three sons and my first stove was made for them,' confirms Mrs Mazurek, adding: 'Role play is really important for every child's development.'

At a time when we increasingly rely on digital devices, there's much to be said for the comparative simplicity of wooden toys. As an interim step, however, there's always the Baby Einstein Magic Touch Curiosity Wooden Tablet Activity Toy... a wooden approximation of an iPad. ↪