





We all fall down like toy soldiers

Infantry marching with fixed bayonets, cantering cavalry and swaggering bands with rippling kilts: model soldiers are not only playthings, they're miniature works of art, says Charles Harris

SOON after Christmas 1881, Winston Churchill, then eight, wrote to his absent parents: 'I thank you very much for the beautiful presents, those Soldiers and Flags and Castle they are so nice.' Retaining his military enthusiasm, Churchill entered Sandhurst in 1893, the year that William Britain began to manufacture his famous metal soldiers—another enduring source of English pride and inspiration.

Before 1893, toy soldiers—mostly German-made—were solid and heavy. Britain invented a revolutionary hollow-casting method, using an alloy of lead and tin, which made his figures both lighter and cheaper. However, the primary attraction of these models, mostly designed by two of Britain's five sons, lay in the variety of subject matter, accuracy of detail and quality of painting. They were, in fact, small works of art—durable, redolent of British daring and romance—for daily use at home.

Infantry of many nations marching with fixed bayonets, cantering cavalry, swaggering bands with rippling kilts, tapped veins of vigorous young enthusiasm. All the warriors of the Empire appeared, in exciting gift boxes, and their opponents, too—Pathans, Zulus, 'Arabs of the desert', Russians, Chinese and, naturally, the French. Exotic figures on elephants and camels let ordinary families imagine the Delhi Durbar, Imperial apogee of 1903. →

H.G. Wells's great-grandsons playing with his vast collection of toy soldiers in 1966



Sets of toys were produced in the tens of thousands, many sold by Gamages. Britain had formidable competitors—English and foreign. ‘But, for quality of design and finish, Britains had no peer,’ states Paul Vickers, president of the British Model Soldier Society (BMSS). ‘Such was their pre-eminence that their scale, 1:32, became the industry norm: a soldier became about 2in high.’ H. G. Wells collected these troops and wrote rules for their use ‘for boys from 12 to 150 and the more intelligent sort of girl’.

Between 1914 and 1918, production faltered and, although it resumed quickly thereafter, popularity had understandably waned. In 1921, Britains diversified into its famous series of farm animals and implements. Girls certainly liked these and, many years later, my sister farmed peacefully beside her brother’s sieges and invasions.

Fortunately, toy-soldier sales picked up and, gradually, adults began

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hear the crash
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collecting. The 6th Marquess of Cholmondeley, a soldier in the Second World War, took his collection of some 20,000—of various makes—to Houghton Hall, Norfolk, in 1978. His son has inherited both dioramas and enthusiasm. He recalls: ‘I loved arranging and sometimes painting my toy soldiers, and was so fond of them that I took them to prep school with me.’

He can still recognise many of the regimental uniforms that he learned from the figures as a child. Less aristocratic enthusiasts included actor Douglas Fairbanks and Malcolm Forbes, an American magnate and collector

of Fabergé eggs, who had 100,000. The BMSS has a distinguished collection, too, once displayed at Hatfield House, Hertfordshire, but which now languishes in storage, awaiting a suitable home. Can anyone help?

One of England’s greatest collectors—and probably the best informed—is



Blow that for a game of soldiers

• **Serious collectors distinguish carefully between ‘toy soldiers’, made for play, and ‘model soldiers’, intended to be admired as figurines**

• A box of nine Guardsmen originally cost 1/-, half the average workman’s daily wage, but gradually became more affordable

• **The first moveable arm appeared in the 1896 Indian Army set**

• Until 1937, all Britains soldiers had moustaches

• **One of the rarest Britains figures—only three are thought to exist—depicts Kaiser Wilhelm, Queen Victoria’s hostile grandson**

• Between 1958 and 1972, Britains made outstanding ultra-realistic plastic Swoppets, which had moveable necks, waists and weapons

• **The first purely Britains toy sale took place in 1968. Prices of the toys peaked in 1987, but have**

since declined quite considerably

• Collector James Opie advises that C&T Auctioneers and Valuers in Kent (01233 510050; www.candtauctions.co.uk) is the leading specialist auctioneer

• **The British Model Soldier Society welcomes new members and holds various annual events and sales (www.bmsonline.com)**



Ranks of toy soldiers (left and below left) are, according to rules penned by author Wells (below), ideal ‘for boys from 12 to 150 and the more intelligent sort of girl’

an old Britains armed steamer regularly sailed up the linoleum Nile to Omdurman, to seek the Mahdi.

The company had a Paris ‘office’ from 1905–23, a source of especially charming, delicately sophisticated Chasseurs—fit to sabre any man, seduce any woman and delight any child. Napoleonic soldiers appeared in many editions: red for the English, blue for Gallic columns and jaunty tartans for the Scots. Generous parents donated horse artillery and limbers.

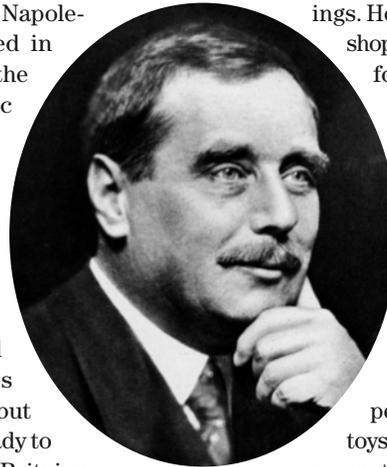
With fret saw, imagination and industry, I could make good castles—not Krak des Chevaliers perhaps, but a sturdy stronghold, ready to resist my trebuchet or Britains cannons. The pleasure was always more in setting up the men rather than slaying them, for fallen toys make unrealistic corpses: they so lack *joie de vivre*.

Britains produced munitions in the Second World War, but its toys soon reappeared to fight it over again. Sand and gravel depicted Libya for me and the Afrika Corps was regularly re-trounced in the playroom by men in pale khaki and three tanks. In 1966, when lead-based toys were banned, the manufacturer largely converted to excellent plastic soldiers (and other things, too—including an eskimo dog-sledge set). Sadly, by the 1980s, the best

was past. In 1984, the family sold out to a buyer who concentrated on expensive, larger collectors’ items. These are remarkable—the texture of chainmail, the glint of buckles—but they are not toys. The Britains name is now American-owned.

When my children were small, I increased the family stock of soldiers considerably—for them, of course—and they enjoyed, as I had, a decade of elaborate all-day set-ups, rugs over cushions providing undulating country, large stones for cliffs, with model trees and buildings. However, when I returned to toy shops recently and asked for soldiers for grandchildren, there were none. Only grim little monsters or ugly space people. Nothing to stir the imagination or bring the past to life.

With Britains, you were an unbeatable young general, infallibly executing charge, ambush or siege, all the time, perhaps unconsciously, appreciating shako, sabretache and pelisse. To see again the favourite toys I knew when young is to dip into currents of acute emotion, a wistful, gripping nostalgia for the robust happiness of childhood. *The Eagle* magazine can do this, too. My toys are popular with grandsons, although it is sometimes necessary to query their use of aircraft to reduce a Plantagenet fort. It may be that modern armies, lacking the colour, chivalry or style that once they had, are simply less generally appealing than they were—but there is something deeper. To me, England seems not the proud and powerful nation that she was, pugnacious patriotism is discouraged and children prefer computers. Alas for them, the pageantry of Britains playthings is no more. 🐉



James Opie, the owner of 15,000 figures, who has devoted his life to the study of Britains soldiers. The author of fascinating books about them (one weighs 8lb, another is imminent), he speaks with a quiet, twinkling and affectionate authority. ‘From 1900 to 1980, Britains was simply the most successful toy-soldier and figure manufacturer in the world,’ he enthuses. ‘Its secret was to tune its ideas to adults, as well as to children, and at half the price.’

The delight of Britains toys was almost infinite. One might, with their Trojan warriors, inhabit a world of Grecian myth (carried away, I once converted some horses and men into centaurs). Next day, perhaps the Crusades: fearsome Christians in red-crossed surcoats, outnumbered by multicoloured Saracens cunningly led by Saladin. I still have a fine set of the Knights of Agincourt, from 1957, with feathery plumes, heraldic shields, brittle lances and caparisoned destriers. With them arrayed, you could almost hear the crash of axe on helmet. Nearby, in a friend’s playroom,