

Britains Toys



'There were once five-and-twenty tin soldiers. They were all brothers, born of the same old tin spoon. They shouldered their muskets and looked straight ahead of them, splendid in their uniforms, all red and blue.

The very first thing in the world that they heard was, "Tin soldiers!" A small boy shouted it and clapped his hands as the lid was lifted off their box on his birthday. He immediately set them up on the table'



An extract from Hans Christian Anderson's *'The Steadfast Tin Soldier'* published in 1838

The Tale of the Census

William Britain was born in 1831 in Birmingham. Like his father before him, he worked as a brass worker making taps. In 1852, he married Anna Maria Messenger at St Luke Finsbury. In 1861, he was working as a brass finisher and living in Gloucester Place, Marylebone. At that time, they had four children; Ann, Emily, Minnie, Julia and Brian and kept a house servant to do the domestic work.

By 1871, they had moved to Barnsbury Place in Islington and William was working as a toy maker. Their family had increased by the addition of Alfred and Frederick and they now didn't have a domestic servant.

Sometime between 1871 and 1881 the family moved to the north of the Borough and lived at Nugent House in Lambton Road. The family, with the addition of another two sons, named Edward and Frank now numbered eight children. William Britain was now working as a mechanical toy maker and was assisted by his children; Ann, Emily, William and Alfred. Son, Frederick was an unemployed Chemist's Clerk.

Hand Made Mechanical Toys

The toys they made were clockwork or coin operated and included walking bears, a Chinese coolie pulling a rickshaw, a man on a penny farthing bicycle and a kilted Scotsman who drank a bottle of whisky. They also produced a steam roller that is believed to be the first friction driver



operated toy. Some of the toy figures were dressed in 'real' miniature clothes that were designed, cut out and sewn by the Britain family daughters.

Although, by the end of the 19th century, the production of European lead toy soldiers had captured the toy market, Britain's were still making these mechanical toys right up until WWI and even later when they produced a fairground merry-go-round that was operated it by hand.

The problem with the mechanical hand-made toys was that they were labour intensive and expensive to make. This meant that the sale price was up to £5.5s each (About £25 at present day value). These factors severely limited the number that could be sold.

Britain's were also in competition with German and French manufacturers who were making and selling huge quantities of their far cheaper lead soldiers. In this situation, it wasn't surprising that the Britain family turned its attention to the lead toy soldier market.

The Genius Of William Britain Junior



William Britain Junior, was the inventive genius and toy designer member of the family. The story goes that, one day in 1893, in a series of pots of bubbling molten metal under a cherry tree, William Britain was cooking up his major invention – the hollow-cast lead toy soldier.

He started with a master model copied from a contemporary military print. He made a two piece plaster mold from which he cast a two piece brass mold. These, when clamped together had a spout into which a metal mix of antimonial lead and antimony could be poured. Effectively, This was the same process used by German and French lead soldier manufacturers.

It was at this point that the William Britain Junior's genius came into play. He found that by pouring some of the mixture through the feet of the soldier and then tipping some out in an upside motion, the remainder of the metal mixture would set as a thin skin inside the mold. Because the metal couldn't flow out of the mold unless air could get in, a small hole was put in the head of the soldier. The secret of success was to keep the temperature of the metal right and the temperature of the mold was controlled by the speed of working.

This process completely revolutionised lead toy manufacturing by dramatically reducing the amount of expensive lead needed to make the toy

The Life Guard

Having invented the new manufacturing process, the tasks then was to design, make, produce, advertise and sell the new product. William chose a Life Guard member of the Household cavalry as his subject which he sculpted from plaster. This was sent to a foundry to be cast in brass as a mold. The brothers then used the new process to cast and produce the hollow cast figures which were then trimmed. They were individually wrapped and packed five to a box by the sisters in crimson boxes.



Twenty years later, Alfred Britain said *'I could sell five, in a neat box, for a shilling; and they went faster than we could turn them out'*. But it wasn't like that at the beginning as they found that initially, the big stores were not interested in the new product.

Left: A much later version of William Britain's original Life Guard

Alfred Britain, A Good Talker And Salesman

Alfred, always known as Fred, was a good talker. He recognised the value of the family name as being synonymous with the country and he decided to see if he could interest Gammages, a well know London store famous for its Xmas displays, in the new toys.

Albert Gammage knew a good potential seller when he saw one, especially when the goods he was offered were half the price of the competitors, and placed a small order. The toys sold out instantly and it wasn't long before Gammages provided an entire department for Britain's new toys. By 1906 virtually all the toy soldiers in Gammages catalogue were made by Britain's

The business grew rapidly. A major factor in its success was the accuracy in detail of the toys and the fact that they were made to a standardised scale that was in relation to toy railway trains. By 1906, Britains were producing non military figures and such was the influence that

Britains had over the toy trade that even today the size of their figures is the industry standard. Another huge factor in the success of the company was that early on they introduced the use of attractively boxed sets of the products.

A New Factory In Lambton Road

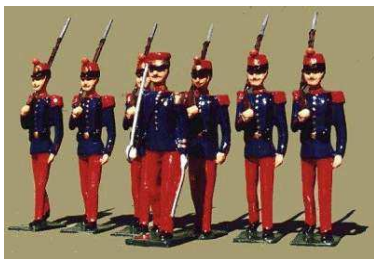
In an attempt to meet the demand for their toys, the house in Lambton Road was extended and the house next door was purchased. This still wasn't sufficient and the houses were torn down. On the site, a large factory, warehouse and office complex of 36,000 square feet was built employing some 300 people.

Below: Britain's original premises in Lambton Road, N7



The inspiration for new models wasn't hard to find as there were any number of wars to pick from. Before 1900, toy figures were produced of combatants in the Zulu, Russian-Japanese, Indian, Greek-Turkish and Boer wars. A thriving export trade was developed and in 1907 the family proprietorship of William Britain & Sons was incorporated as Britains Ltd.

Britain In France



In 1905, Britain's opened a factory in France. This enabled the company to extend its range of figures to include French army units such as Zouaves, Dragoons and Cuirassiers. The factory was successful but was closed just before the start of WWI.

Left: French Line Infantry soldiers from 1900

The Ponders End Flying Machine

William Britain Junior was an inventive man with an enquiring mind. He knew about the Wright brothers successful manned flights in 1903-1907 and would have been inspired by Edwin Alliott Verdon Roe's (A V Roe) first successful British flight on Walthamstow Marshes in July 1909. He decided that he too wanted to design and build an airplane,



Left: Edwin Alliott Verdon Roe

In 1910, he made and experimented with models that he flew in his garden and with the aid of his young son Dennis, built his own two propeller triplane constructed from bamboo with hand sewn oiled silk paneled wings.

This was powered by a special engine commissioned from J A Prestwick.

In order to avoid curious crowds, the plane was taken secretly at night by horse and cart to a flat field in Ponders End where a farmer had been persuaded to rent a field where a make-shift hanger was built. Edwin Roe himself came to see the airplane which, piloted by a Mr Small, made a number of short hops into the air of 15-20 feet.

Unfortunately, shortly afterwards somebody broke into the hanger one night and stole the engine and that was the end of William Britain Junior's flying ambition.

Interestingly just a few years later, in 1913, on fields very near this spot, one of the UK's first WWI pilot training aerodromes, RNAS Chingford was sited.

WWI



Left: Shrapnel balls excavated from the WW1 (3rd Battle of Ypres) Paschendaele battlefield

The outbreak of WWI brought an end to Britain's toy production and the factory entered into the production of war materials. Ironically, the metal mix used for making toy soldiers was found to be ideal for making shrapnel balls and Britain's work force had the right skills to cast millions of these. The end of WWI produced an unexpected double bubble bonus. Britain's had made large sums of money throughout the war making

shrapnel balls. After the war, the government were stuck with hundreds of tons of unused stock-piled shrapnel balls that Britain's were very happy to purchase at cut price rates. With these, they were able to recommence the manufacture of their toys and thus turned their swords profitably into plough shares!

Diversification



By the early 1920's the public fascination with war had waned and the UK economy was in decline. In response to a falling demand Britain's developed a range of other toys. Prominent among these was the farm and country village sets. By so doing, at a stroke, Britain's had extended its sales market to girls as well as boys.

The farm and village sets encouraged children to gradually build up their collection of animals, farm buildings and accessories over a period of time and provided and extended a continuing purchasing public base for the company.

Company Management

By 1938, all the original Britain family members who were involved with the company were gone and William Britain Junior's son Dennis was running the company.

WWII



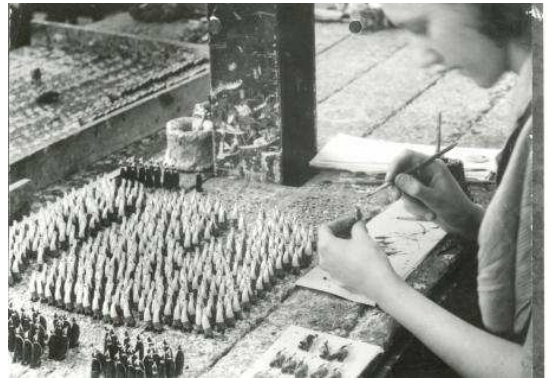
Left: A model of a Mosquito aircraft. The toy monoplane was given to a youngster in 1941, that was bought for a child during World War Two. It was never unwrapped and played with because he was killed in the Blitz. It was found wrapped in newspaper in a loft in Bristol where it had sat untouched for 70 years. The mint condition plane sold to an American collector for £10,000.

The firm began making camouflage-painted toys after war broke out in 1939, but by 1941 had switched their manufacturing tools to help the war effort. Dennis Britain joined the RAF in 1940 and left his brother Frank in charge as Managing Director until he returned after the war.

Britain's Homeworkers

Very many women in Islington and Walthamstow remember Britain's because of the 'homework' that they carried out for the company. This system involved outworkers collecting toys and toy components from the factory that they assembled or painted in their own homes.

Before the second world war, virtually all the work involved with the production of the toys had been carried out in Britain's factory. One of the processes that often caused a bottleneck in the production was the painting of the figures. This often involved a number of colours that had to be applied separately after one colour had dried. It was delicate and very time consuming work.



Right: Painting toys at Britains factory

Britain's introduced the 'homework' system after WWII when one of the company's women painters left to get married. She asked if she could work at home and the company supplied her with paints and delivered the unfinished toys to her home. It seemed such a good idea that Britain's made arrangements to employ 3,000 women 'homeworkers'. Six depots were set up in north and east London and women collected work from these centres and delivered back the finished product.



'Homework' was a very profitable part of the production process for Britain's who had little 'on-costs'. The 'homeworkers' collected the work from the factory and delivered the finished product back to the factory. They were paid very low piece work rates and they virtually turned their own homes into mini factories supplying their own production space, electricity and labour.

Neil Watling tell us: <http://www.walthamstowmemories.net/pdfs/Neil%20Watling.pdf>

"Then just along the road was 'Britains' toy factory where as a teenager I used to do 'outwork' where I would get boxes of animals to paint, there would be a painted example for each toy and you would apply the paint in stages in order to copy and match the example. Once all of the toys had been painted they were taken back and you received payment and your next batch of work, it was not easy money"

Colleen Morrison wrote in 2006 : <http://archiver.rootsweb.ancestry.com/th/read/ESSEX-UK/2006-02/1140864027> "I've been contacted by a Britains collector/historian who interested in any reminiscences of the Britains toy factory, of Blackhorse Road/Lane, Walthamstow. Talking to him has rolled back the years to the days when my grandmother and I were homeworkers who used to paint and assemble these toys - especially the cowboy

& Indian and knights range - called Swoppets - at home.....”

A New Factory In Walthamstow & Post War Expansion

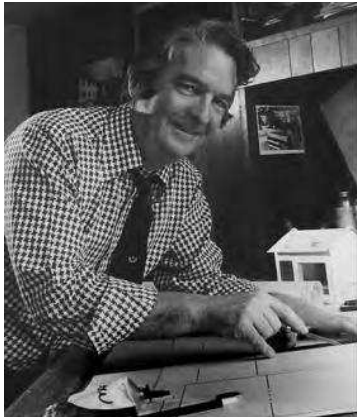
The company continued to expand and by 1931 the firm employed 450 at its London factory. The catalog had expanded to 435 sets and twenty million models a year were being produced. In Lambton Road they were very short of necessary productive capacity. In 1931 they moved the production of the farm toy range to the North Light building in Stirling Road, Walthamstow where there were about 700 employees in 1949.

Little changed with the style of the figures until the late 1950s, when the introduction of plastic figures from companies such as Herald made Britains sit up and take notice. As business continued to grow, they decided to seek to build a new purpose made factory where production would be on one site. So, in 1951 they built a new factory in Sutherland Road, Walthamstow.

Herald Toys



In the late 1940's, the brilliant pioneering British toy designer - Roy Selwyn-Smith had taken part in some of the earliest experiments with



Above: Roy Selwyn Smith

producing models in plastic and by the end of the 1950's, plastic had superseded metal as the favoured material for toys. Roy Selwyn-Smith and another designer Charles Biggs working at M. Zang's company, that was later to be known as Herald Miniatures, produced a range of "unbreakable" plastic figures that soon grew to rival the more old-fashioned metal toys which had been the hallmark of the larger manufacturers such as Britains for many years. These included; figures of Guardsmen and Highlanders, figures from the Wild West and the American Civil War and many others were made with great attention to detail, hand-painted, and above all much safer and less fragile than their metal rivals

Swoppets

Britains had been in the business a long time, and they were never frightened of embracing change, nor of taking a commercial risk. In 1955, they bought a controlling interest in Herald, bringing the best plastic toys on the market under their own control and in the process acquiring the services of Roy Selwyn-Smith. In return, Herald, became an associate company of Britains and was able to avail itself of the production and marketing resources of the longer-established company. At a time when the days of the lead toys were coming to an end, the golden age of plastic soldiers was beginning, and Herald were well and truly at the leading



edge of this revolution

The credit for the basic idea of the *Swoppets* - figures that can be swivelled with body parts that can be swapped based on suitable joints at the neck and waist - is claimed by just about everyone who worked for Herald or Britain's around about this period but the patent taken out by Britain's credits Roy Selwyn-Smith as the inventor.

By their acquisition of the Herald company, Britains also acquired Roy Selwyn Smith's greatest creation – the Swoppet Knights. These were beautifully moulded and highly detailed figures that cost about a week's pocket money for a child and were highly desired.

Cowboys

The launch of the *Swoppet* series took place in March 1958, with the first set of Cowboys. There were six figures on foot and six mounted. Each figure had three distinct sections: head, torso and legs, which could be swivelled at the waist and/or the neck to give a variety of poses and swapped with the other models in the series to give similarly varied results.



Exports, Health & Safety Risks & Another New Factory

Although Britains had already shifted most production to plastic, in 1966, as a result of growing costs and concerns about the safety of lead in toys, Britains ceased production of its hollow cast lead figures in favour of plastic models. In 1968, the company moved into a new purpose built factory on a four acre site in Blackhorse Road.



Toy companies were among the most profitable of all British manufacturing enterprises in the late 1960's. Recorded sales of toys in Britain reached £920,000,000.

In 1973 Britains introduced New Metal models, which were die cast in a durable alloy and were aimed at the British souvenir market.

In 1983, Britains responded to a growing collectors' market by introducing additional models and limited edition sets. This range was greatly expanded over the next 20 years and included die-cast versions of their old toy soldiers, some made from original moulds. These, as well as their lines of Deetail plastic figures and accessories, and their older sets have become highly collectable.

Whatever Happened To Britain's ?

The answer to this question is much the same as happened to many of Walthamstow's successful companies. Once it came out of family management, it was subject to a succession of sales and take-overs by competitors and rival companies.

The Britain family controlled the firm until 1984 when it was sold to a British conglomerate, Dobson Park Industries. They combined the operations with an existing line of toys and renamed the company Britains Petite, Ltd.

In 1997, Britains Petite, Ltd was bought by the Ertl Company of Iowa, a maker of toys since 1945. Ertl was subsequently bought by Round 2 LLC, another American die-cast miniature and plastic kit maker. At this time, production of toy soldiers was moved to China.

In 2005, the W. Britains brand was acquired by First Gear, an American maker of die-cast collectibles. This firm produces and sells mostly contemporary matte-style figures to the collectors market under the W. Britain brand. On January 30, 2012 Bachmann Europe Plc became the sole distributor of all W. Britain figures in the U.K and Continental Europe.

Postscript

Walthamstow Museum recently ran, what I have been told, was an excellent exhibition about toymaking in Waltham Forest. Unfortunately, I wasn't able to get to see it so I have written the above piece about Britains.

A long time ago, when I was a young man, I tried to explain to a friend about Britains 'homework' system. Like most people, he had assumed that the toys were made in sweat-shops' by exploited low paid Chinese labour. He was shocked when I explained that they were actually made in London by low paid women who used their own homes as mini factories. Now the wheel has turned full circle. Toys with the W Britain brand are made in China.

Bill Bayliss
April 2014

Some Sources:

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<http://www.inquitaudio.co.uk/wfohw/projects/toy-making.html>

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<http://www.gracesguide.co.uk/Britains>

<http://www.britishpathe.com/video/toy-soldiers/query/TOY>
Film of Britain's factory in 1965 making toy soldiers

<http://www.british-history.ac.uk/report.aspx?compid=42779>

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<http://www.oldtoysoldier.com/subscriptions/spring2011.pdf>

Recollections of my wife and children from when she did Britains homework.

Assistance from Mel Gibbs a Britain family descendant.