

1920s



At the beginning of the 1920s change was necessary for the toy industry to survive. The interruption in German imports due to the war made it impossible to bring in the machinery needed to make parts for manufacturing dolls and other toys. The challenge now was for the British industry to consolidate and review its position, to rebuild on new foundations using the best materials and technology that it could.

This was extremely difficult, with many shortages and few materials to work with. Nonetheless the toy manufacturers accepted the challenges and went to work. The soft toy industry rose to the challenge attracting a number of talented designers and makers. Experiments with synthetic fibres had been taking place as early as the 19th century and although the new fibres were not yet ready, the technology existed for colouring cloth. For the first time dolls' clothing and cloth toy parts could be brightly coloured. Dean's Rag Book Co. created a soft toy dog, Dismal Desmond, whose sad, droopy face featured in promotional projects. It was the mascot of the England cricket team as well as the ladies' changing rooms at Wimbledon. Chad Valley, one of the prominent toy making firms, began to make good quality rag dolls and was also the first company to base some of its designs on the drawings of children by Mabel Lucie Attwell. Norah Wellings, one of Chad Valley's designers,

also set up in business on her own.

Manufacturers of hard toys had no new materials to use. Although experiments had been taking place with plastics, the end results were not of acceptable quality for the toy trade in Britain. The toy maker William Britain made a new zoological series of lead in 1930 featuring 'realistic miniatures of favourite animals' which became popular. Lines Bros. concentrated on making good quality British toys. Destined to be the greatest British toy manufacturer of the 20th century, it is easy to see from the catalogues of this time that Lines Bros. was anxious to play its part in re-establishing the industry in an international setting. The advertisements are beautifully drawn and presented offering a wide range of outdoor toys including tricycles, scooters, bicycles and wheelbarrows, as well as nursery equipment and dolls' houses. Lines Bros. dolls' houses were to become internationally famous for their attention to detail. It offered houses with electric lighting, even offering a repair and redecoration service should it be required. It was possible to buy houses in several architectural styles including thatched cottages, Queen Anne and mock Tudor styles. It kept pace with the times by producing a small number of houses that reflected contemporary movements in architecture, such as the plain geometric houses of the 1920s and 1930s made in the 'Modern style.'

Hornby was also busy producing Meccano. It was available in nine sets, 1-7, plus the simple 0 and 00 versions for beginners. These were plain unpainted sets, but in 1926 'New Meccano' was introduced with certain parts enamelled in

green and red, much to the disapproval of purist Meccano enthusiasts. Moving forward the entrepreneurial Frank Hornby had hit upon an innovation which resulted in increased sales. Meccano had a lot of competition from other makers of construction kits such as Kinco, Erector, Villetto and Dometo, but remained unrivalled, setting up Meccano factories in Paris and New Jersey in the US.

Amongst the most outstandingly successful toys of the 1920s were the transport toys; miniature planes, boats, cars and trains. In real life 'modern' transport was still a relatively new luxury and people found the possibility of travelling to more destinations at greater speed irresistibly fascinating and this is reflected in the wide range of transport toys produced, particularly trains. In many ways the 1920s and 1930s proved to be the golden age of trains for the toy industry, triggering a new collecting craze, which survives to this day. Model trains replaced, in great part, the clockwork toys that had been preferred before 1914.

Two great names stand out as market leaders in train production in the 1920s; Frank Hornby and Wenham Bassett-Lowke. Bassett-Lowke was not only a connoisseur of modern and industrial design, but also a pre-eminent supplier of model railway and model engineering systems in Britain between 1900 and 1965. He is one of the most important

Pictures opposite page top to bottom

Clockwork table railway made by Gebrüder Bing, early 1920s

Dismal Desmond, 1926

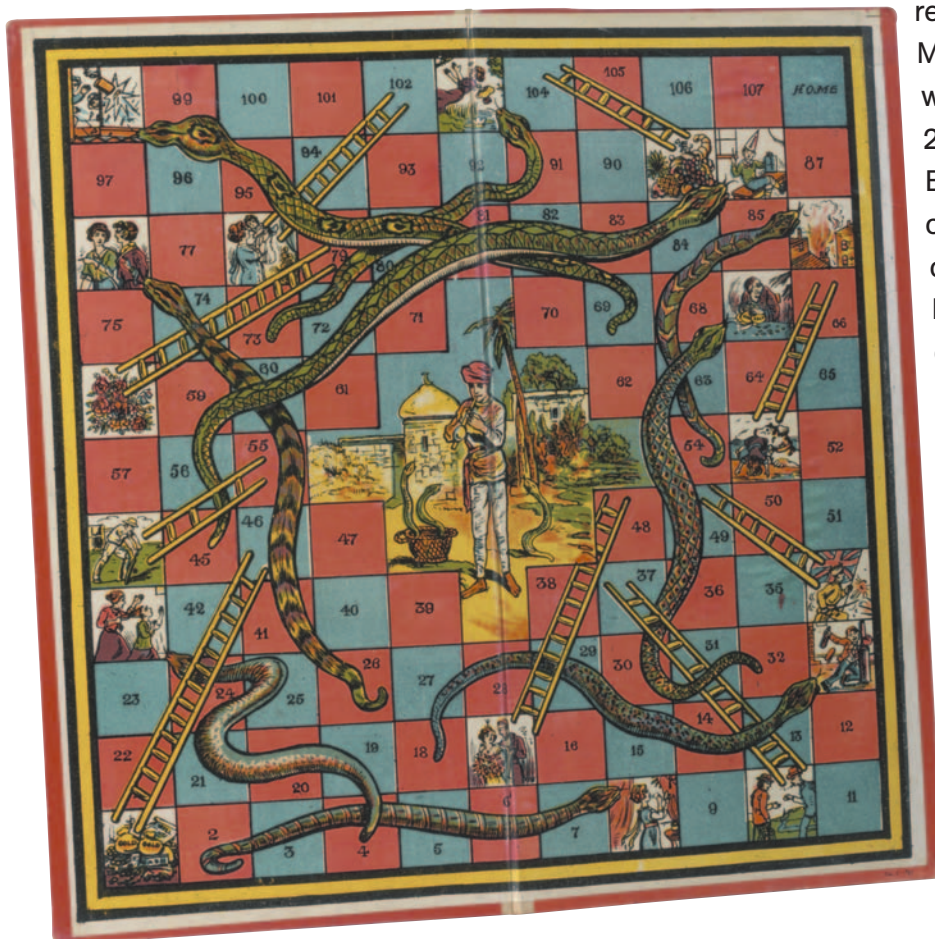
Bluebird Landspeed clockwork car, about 1928

Noah's Ark made in England, about 1929

names in the history of 20th century toy manufacture. A man of considerable taste, he had hired Charles Rennie Mackintosh to design furnishings and interiors at his Derngate house in Northampton. He was also a risk taker and entrepreneur. Frank Hornby's Meccano factory had been dedicated to government work during the First World War and it was during this time that Hornby started to experiment with model trains. In the 1920s he launched the first Hornby trains, 'the new idea in clockwork trains'. These early trains were sold as kits that were intended for self-assembly, differing from the pre-built German models. Train collectors, children and adults alike, took this new hobby seriously, requiring good standards of accuracy. In 1925 Hornby launched the electric train set which also became very popular. Cheaper trains sold under the name Trix were made by Bassett-Lowke, who sought the highest standards of

accuracy in train production, in association with Hornby. A large range of wagons, vans, goods vehicles and accessories were also available, which helped make train collecting hugely popular.

After trains came planes, boats, and cars. The main British model plane was FROG (Flies Right Off Ground) which was inspired by the first Supermarine racing seaplane which won the Schneider trophy from the Italians in 1927. Boats and yachts had been familiar and popular toys throughout the 19th century. Early toy boats, including Noah's Arks, were made for use with or without water. Wooden pull-along boats with large wheels made for use in the home continued to be manufactured by Lines Bros. in the 1920s. Sailing boats and graceful yachts were designed by expert boat builders. Other sensations of the time were the landspeed



record-breaking cars, such as Malcolm Campbell's Bluebird, which reached a speed of 206.956 mph at Daytona Beach, Florida in 1928. Toy copies were made by companies like The Kingsbury Manufacturing Co. in the US during the late 1920s. Although not quite accurate they were great fun as clockwork toys which demonstrated the streamline design of the real thing.

For those who could not afford the new trains, the old toys were still being made. Jokes, puzzles, magic tricks, and clockwork toys were cheap and

popular. Toys were still very much gender oriented with girls playing with soft toys, sewing kits, dolls, tea sets, cookers and other miniature domestic appliances as well as dolls' houses where they could be afforded. Boys were given realistic chemistry, electrical, telegraphy, radio crystal and engineering sets, such as Kinco. Under the umbrella heading 'educational toys' fell such toys as miniature post offices, shops, printing kits, typewriters, word making kits, picture cubes, jigsaw puzzles and board games. Experiments in new educational styles, toys and equipment were being carried out in a number of different schools including Dartington School in Devon. Some of these were used in the 1930s in the Abbatts' toyshop which pioneered the commercial production of educational toys and was later followed by the Educational Supplies Association, and Galt.

Board games such as Ludo and Snakes and Ladders were other old favourites, as were war games designed in the First World War like Sink the Submarine. These would often be played whilst listening to the radio. The BBC had started to transmit radio programmes in November 1922 and families would gather round to listen to the latest news in much the same way as contemporary families watch television today. John Logie Baird invented television, holding the first public demonstration at Selfridges in London in 1925. In 1927 the 'talkies' arrived from the US and quickly replaced the earlier silent screen cinema. The television and cinema were poised to make huge changes to the



life of the average family in the coming decades. However, outdoor life was still encouraged for children, and toy catalogues at the time were full of advertisements for outdoor toys which included not only scooters and bicycles but several items of gardening equipment as well. The most popular outdoor craze was the pogo stick which sold by the million world-wide.

By the end of the 1920s, the toy industry had risen to the challenges that it had faced at the start of the decade. Change, almost imperceptibly, had taken place. With one foot still planted in the past, the other was feeling its way towards the future.

Left

Snakes and Ladders board game, 1920s

Above

Dolly in the window paper doll, 1920s