

# 1940s



The 1940s began with Britain plunged into the Second World War with Germany. The war period was one of great austerity with shortages of every kind and the toy industry was subject to the same restrictions as other industries. Rationing, introduced early in the war, continued long after the war ended. The government launched the Utility scheme in 1941 to ensure that good contemporary design went hand in hand with economy of production. The guidelines extended to all types of manufacture including toys, but in reality most children played with toys which had been handed down from older children or made at home.

Where possible, some firms, such as Nicol Toys, were able to continue production throughout the war as long as they were permitted access to materials. Plimpton Engineering, the manufacturers of the construction set Bayko, used aluminium or tinfoil instead of steel for the rods in the kits, less consistent colour, and packaging became very crude. By the end of 1941 all production came to an end and the works went over entirely to the war effort. It produced a range of war related goods together with parts for Wellington bombers. Others were unable to survive, with companies such as The Teddy Toy Company, set up in 1914, winding up in 1951. Raw materials were rationed until long after the war was over as almost everything was used in the war effort. Teddy bear firms also

helped with the war effort, such as Dean's Rag Book Co. who made life jackets. Chad Valley made children's clothing and Merrythought made military uniform accessories. Soft toy makers tried to continue making their products, but even teddy bears had to get slimmer because they had less filling. Due to this the general shape of teddy bears and other soft toys began to change; Limbs and muzzles became shorter, necks were unjointed.

Other major toy manufacturers played their part. Lines Bros. made gas masks and military supplies for army training for most of the war period. Production at Britains continued at the outbreak of war in 1939 until 1941 when it made munitions for the war effort. After 1945 it returned to the manufacture of toy soldiers and other toys but with limited output due to labour shortages. From 1943 metal was completely banned for use in toy making. Meccano's familiar red and green paint vanished until after the war and only plain metal sets were available.

Another old established firm, Brookes and Adams, founded in 1853 making medals and badges, installed with great foresight, a plant for the production of plastic products in the late 1920s, in an attempt to diversify. The first plastic article that it made for the toy market was the Bandalasta 'Playtime' tea and dinner set that it made through the war period, after which it went on to produce games equipment. Made between the late 1920s and the 1950s the sets were highly unusual at the time, because they were made from plastic as opposed to the more usual earthenware.

After the war new toy firms began to spring up and the home industry began to grow. The British Toy Manufacturers' Association was started in 1944 and it organised a Toy Fair which was held in Brighton for many years. In 1947 Leslie and Rodney Smith formed Lesney Products, taking on a third partner Jack O'Dell before long. At first they made pressure die-cast products and from 1954 small die cast replicas of real vehicles which they sold in small boxes based on safety match boxes under the trade name Matchbox. The boxes are said to have been based on the design of Norvic Safety Match boxes. The idea of the matchbox as a container is said to have been inspired by Jack O'Dell's daughter who took one of the cars to school in a small box and triggered a demand for this new product amongst her friends. The idea took off, and new ranges of cars were added in due course including the Superfast models in 1969 and Yesteryears in the 1970s. Lesney Matchbox were one of the firms producing die cast vehicles which were hugely successful in the export market. Unfortunately, fire and flood destroyed much of its factory in Rochford in the late 1970s. Coupled with considerable competition from other manufacturers Lesney became bankrupt in 1982 but was taken out of receivership by Universal International of Hong Kong. The Matchbox brand was acquired by Tyco Toys who were taken over by Mattel in 1997.

**Pictures opposite page top to bottom**

Blackout board game, early 1940s

Poodle puppet made for Pelham Puppets, about 1949

Cluedo board game made by John Waddington Ltd., about 1950

'Playtime' Bandalasta tea set, about 1945

Post-war Britain was mad about sport and any amusement connected with some aspect of sport was welcomed. This was strengthened by the fact that sweets and other luxuries continued to be rationed for several more years after the war. The Subbuteo Sports Games Ltd. was formed in 1947 by Peter Adolph who revised a table football game originally designed in the 1920s as New Footy. The Subbuteo trademark includes a bird of prey - the hobby. Peter Adolph wanted to call his game 'The Hobby' but could not licence the name. The Latin name for the hobby is Falco Subbuteo. Made from flat wire, netting and card and played on an old blanket or piece of board, the game was cheap to produce. Subbuteo remained in production until the end of the 20th century.

Still in demand also is Cluedo, another of the toys of the post war period now regarded as a classic. Cluedo was introduced in 1949.

The early sets featured quite a plain design and came with the playing board and a separate box for the accessories. The game was redesigned in 1965 and 1972 and featured an all in one box and a much more colourful design. In the US it is known as Clue.

Although materials continued to be difficult to obtain for some years to come, the potential of the new synthetic fibres as useful and economically priced replacements for silk boded well for the future of soft toys. Other toys such as Bayko started to become available although complete sets were not made

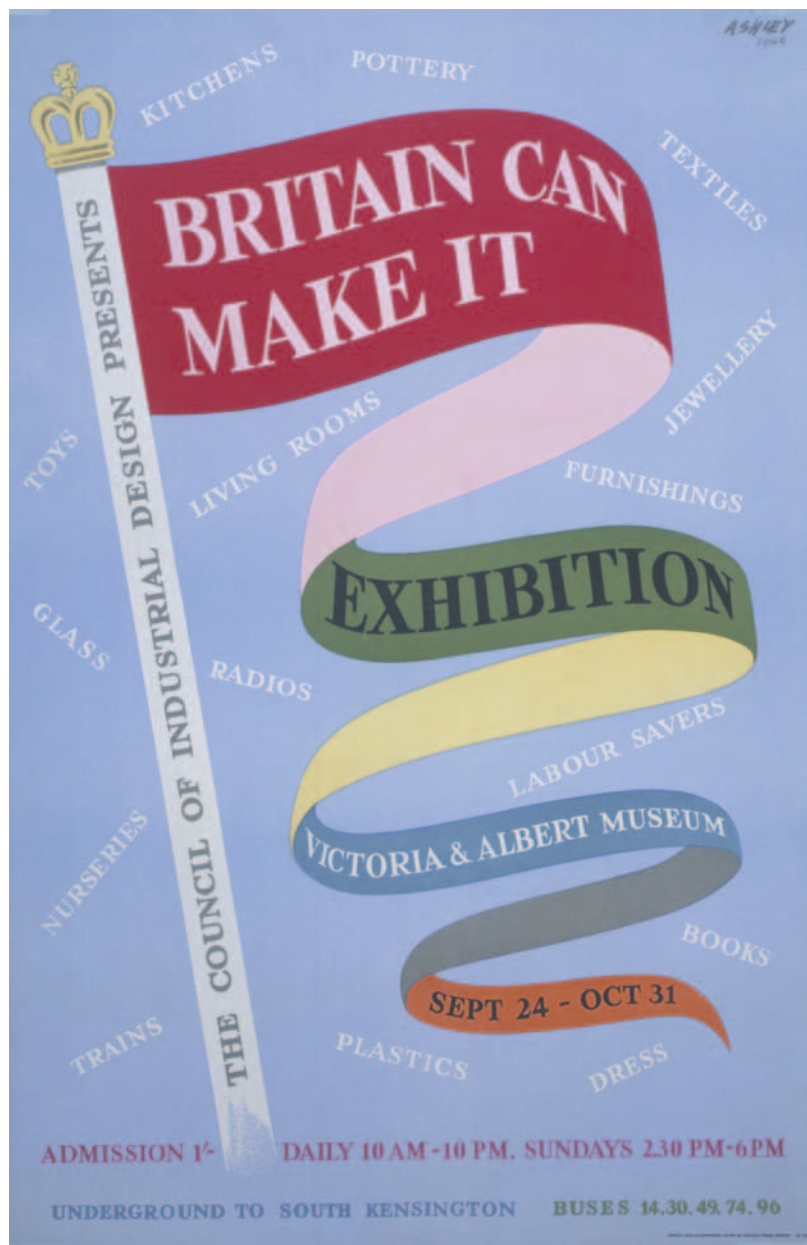


until 1946. In 1945 issues of the Games and Toys magazine Kiddicraft proudly announced that their 'Plastic Educational Toys, in pre-war form, are now available again in limited quantities' and featured an image of a toddler playing with a stack of plastic building beakers.

Experiments with plastics had been conducted throughout the 1930s and continued in the 1940s. This resulted in revolutionary new injection moulding techniques in 1941 developed by British Xylonite. This was to become the standard method used for all plastic production.

However, the new plastics technology cost a great deal, and it would seem that the toy industry had expected things to return to normal, as they were before the war - they were therefore hesitant to take the risk of investing in it. Progress was inevitable and too much had changed for the industry to be able to return to the way things were.

On a socio-historic level, the late 1940s was a time when the government had determined to offer the people a more secure and promising future than ever before. The Butler Act of 1944 made secondary school education mandatory, The National Health Service was launched in 1948, and the Victoria and Albert Museum staged the Britain Can Make It exhibition in September 1946 which included toys in the show and on the poster. Toys had to play their part in the re-birth of Britain as vital exports and also as educational tools. New goals and new materials would ensure that the toy industry kept up with the competition at home and, increasingly, from abroad. Post-war British society was about to experience the beginning of the consumer age. The influence of the US and the Far East on British popular culture, already underway by the 1930s, was about to expand very rapidly with the arrival of the television set in most British homes during the next decade.



**Left**

Slim Teddy Bear, early 1940s

**Above**

Poster for 'Britain Can Make It' exhibition by Ashley Havinden, 1946