1950s

Britain was far from wealthy at the start of the 1950s and materials were still in short supply. There were restrictions on imports and rationing continued to be a problem for all industry. However there were bright spots in the gloom; Britain still had a toy industry, whereas the German and Japanese manufacturers were badly affected by the war. An article by Roger Coleman in the Council of Industrial Design's magazine, *Design*, published in December 1957 clearly conveys a picture of an established industry:

'Although a number of the larger toy manufacturers now operating enjoyed a healthy existence before the war, it was not until comparatively recently that the industry on its present scale became so firmly established. It has an annual turnover of somewhere between £34-35 million, compared with a pre-war figure of approximately £3 million; and the export trade now accounts for some £7 million, about 21 per cent of total production. No doubt that the German toy industry - by popular tradition the most ingenious and creative - was out of action during, and immediately after the war, created a stimulus to British manufacturers to expand at home.'

At home the demand for toys rapidly increased, probably fuelled by the shortages that families had suffered for so long. Children still played with the toys that their parents had played with; chunky realistic

toys like teddy bears, guns, building kits, scooters, dolls, dolls' houses and tea sets. Model vehicles were the top sellers and the production of die-cast toys was huge business on an international scale. Products such as Lesney's Matchbox series (1954) and Mettoy's Corgi cars (1956) were leading the world. Although retailers had been sceptical at first, the public appreciated the quality and detail that had gone into the manufacture of these small toys. They were also portable, relatively inexpensive, and collectable.

In 1957 Scalextric caused a sensation at the Harrogate Toy Fair. Invented by Fred Francis, the cars ran on grooves, not rails, picking up the electric current from beneath the groove with the aid of a 'gimbal' wheel. The first set cost £6.00 and demand was so great that the firm, Scalex, could not cope with producing the sheer number of sets needed and had to sell out to Lines Bros. Another important name in the toy world was that of Airfix. Originally founded in 1939 by a Hungarian Jew, Nicholas Kove, his London based business sold cheap air filled rubber toys. The firm bought one of the new injection moulding machines initially making plastic combs. Their first kit was the model of Sir Francis Drake's vessel Golden Hind and the first model of an aircraft, the Spitfire Mk1 appeared in 1953. Kove also hit upon the practical idea of selling the kits in plastic bags as opposed to colourful packaging, immediately reducing the cost of the kits for the manufacturer and customer.

Plastics offered an opportunity for those manufacturers who, like Kove, were willing to take the risk and invest in the expensive machinery that was needed. Injection moulding forces liquid plastic into moulds or pre-set forms. Cheap and fast, it did away with the splinters and sharp edges of die-cut wood, and pressed steel and tin. Plastic had been regarded with some suspicion because of its association with cheap imports from the Far East but had proved its worth in toy manufacture in the 1940s. In a letter published in the Games and Toys magazine in June 1954 Hilary Page, Managing Director of Kiddicraft Ltd. wrote 'When I decided to start using plastics for Kiddicraft 'Sensible' toys in 1936, my co-directors were certain that I should ruin the business with this new-fangled material, and that persuaded me to form a

Pictures opposite page top to bottom

Scrabble board game made by J.W. Spear & Sons, 1970s

Mr Potato Head made in Hong Kong by Peter Pan, about 1960

Muffin the Mule puppet made by Hogarth Puppets, 1950s

Scalextric made by Minimodels Ltd., 1964

Above

Slinky, 1996 (made in the US from 1946)

new company, British Plastic Toys Ltd., through which to experiment with these new toys. Mothers took to plastic toys immediately because of their hygienic properties and because they could be washed indefinitely.'

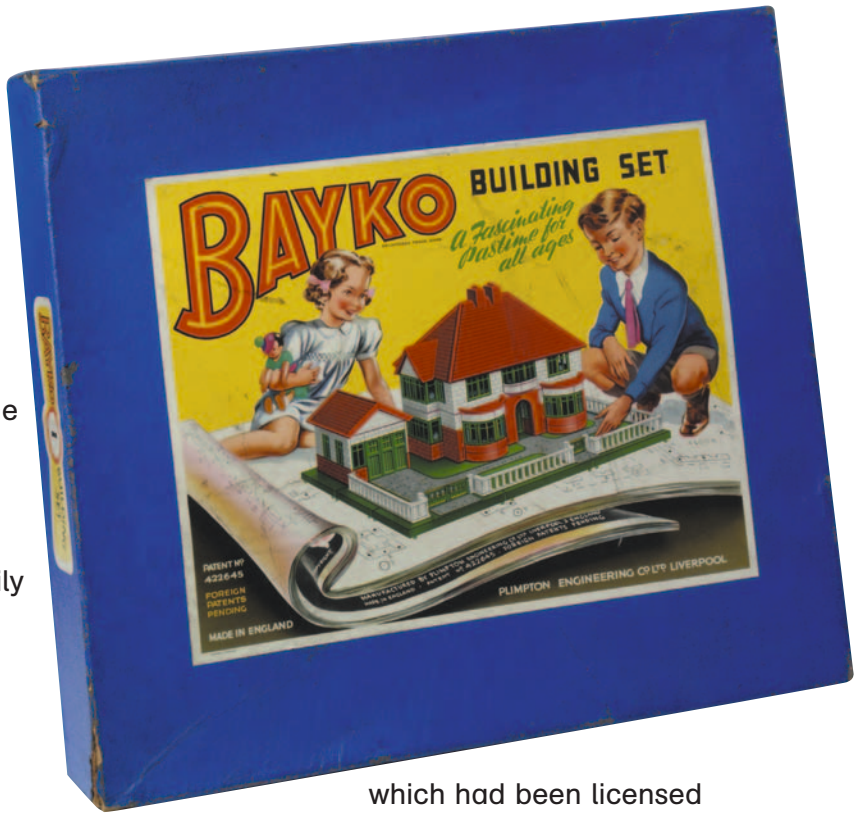
With doubts now allayed, large bright colourful hygienic and safe toys began to be made relatively cheaply for the pre-school market in particular. Given the considerable advantages that came with plastics, it was inevitable that it would only be a question of time before it became the material of choice for toy production on both sides of the Atlantic. In the soft toy world, synthetic fibres were also causing a revolution with polyester, Terylene, Orlon, Dralon and Acrilan being used in the making of soft toys and stuffing. The healthy state of the toy industry and the advantages of new technology established, the question of toy design was now being addressed in various ways. The toy industry was still unconvinced that it could be desirable to bring in marketing professionals and child psychologists when working on a new product line, particularly if it was connected with educational toys. Interestingly, Roger Coleman underscores this negativity when, in the *Design* article above, he points out that 'Complementary to the main part of the industry, there are a small number of designers, whose work should make more impression on the larger scale manufacturers than it apparently does, discounting direct copying of course.'

Concerns about falling standards in toy production were voiced by bodies such as the newly formed British Toymakers Guild, founded in 1955 by Leslie Daiken, himself a prominent personality in the toy industry and author of *World of Toys*. Daiken also founded the Toy Museum at Rottingdean, the collection of toys has subsequently become part of Hove Museum and Art Gallery. The British Toymakers Guild was set up to foster good quality handmade toys as a counterbalance to the plethora of mass-produced toys that were seen to be taking over the market. The guild criteria were well-designed and made toys, albeit necessarily on a much smaller scale. The guild continues to flourish in the 21st century.

With the war recently ended, there were calls on both sides of the Atlantic to ban toy weapons. Boys in particular had for centuries played with weapons of all sorts, improvised or shop bought, playing Robin Hood and Cowboys and Indians as part of everyday life. After 1953 such war toys were discouraged. Furthermore growing concerns about toy safety in general were forcing firms to rethink some of their products. The concern over the potential health hazard of lead, gradually induced firms like Britains to switch to plastics. In the US, even Hasbro's Mr Potato Head (1952) eventually lost his pipe in 1987 because of pressure from the anti-smoking campaign. Soft toy makers had to be scrupulous about the safety of their own products, and all imports of dolls and soft toys had to be tested for hygiene. This was because earlier items had been found to be full of stuffing which was far from safe for small children.

New toys from abroad included Lego, which although launched in 1955, did not make a huge impact until the 1970s when it won the Toy of the Year award three times. From the US came Scrabble which

was invented by Alfred Butts who had lost his job in the depression of the 1930s. His first version was Lexico and later Criss-Crosswords neither of which were successful. It took off after 1945 and the game was patented with the new name of Scrabble in 1948. The first sets available in Britain were made by the great firm of J.W. Spears & Sons in 1953.



The US had not been involved heavily in the war and had already established a working marketing strategy and was therefore in a powerful position at the time. Large companies such as Hasbro, Fisher-Price, Mattel and others were expanding and making use of advertising potential. In Britain thousands of families had bought a television set to watch the coronation of Queen Elizabeth II in 1953. Television swiftly took over from radio as the principal provider of news, entertainment and product promotion for children and adults. It was not long before adults were being reminded to buy that Muffin the Mule or Sooty toy.

Muffin the Mule was the first of the great stars of children's television in Britain. He made his television debut as a puppet in October 1946 with Annette Mills. No one is really sure about his origins but it would seem that he had been on the workshop shelves of the Hogarth Puppet Circus before being used by Annette Mills in For The Children. He remained a popular feature in Watch with Mother until 1955 when Annette died. One of the earliest examples of the importance of television in creating demand, British children bought many Muffin toys and novelties, which had been licensed by Ann Hogarth and Annette Mills through the Muffin Syndicate. The most well known toy is the heavy die-cast string puppet made in the 1950s.

The 1950s was a period during which fascination with the unknown was fuelled mainly by schoolboy comics like Eagle, and films like Godzilla (1955) and The Creature from the Black Lagoon (1954) and television. The companies, Charbens and Cherilea both produced models of astronauts and space creatures. The Crescent Company, an established old firm, decided to promote a Dan Dare set based on the Eagle comic character. This was just the beginning of what would be a huge demand for spin off toys and memorabilia as a result of the craze for stories about science fiction in the 1960s.

Above
Bayko Building Set 1 made by Plimpton Engineering Co., 1955