

PLOD ESSAY:

The Joy of the Toy

There is one thing that we humans all have in common – we were all once children, and the most exciting part of childhood, apart from lollies, was toys!

Whether it was the anticipation of what was under the Christmas tree, the trip to the shops after months of pocket money saving, or visiting a schoolmate to play with their bedroom trove of toys, it is no wonder that the sight of any old toy sparks a wave of nostalgia in even the crustiest old timer.



This was recently displayed to me when Irene Williams told me the tale of ***Bobby the Doll***. Her eyes lit up as she described how special he was. Apparently he was recently sent away to the Doll's Hospital in Melbourne for some repairs. However, whilst in the "big smoke" he had undergone some gender reassessment and returned wearing a dress. Irene was mortified and quickly modified this dress into a pair of trousers! Bobby still lives in Wonthaggi with Edith Dowson (Asquith), his long time "carer", and perhaps will attend one of our future meetings.

My Old Doll by Edith Dowson

"I have a very old doll which has a porcelain head. It is very small. It fell into disrepair, so has been mended at the Doll's Hospital. It is a lovely doll, originally made in Germany. It was given to me by Mr & Mrs Parkes, who were friends of my mother through Methodist Church connections. Mr Parkes was a lay preacher there for many years. His daughter, Phyllis Wardope, is still living in Wonthaggi, aged 97 years.

After consulting Phyllis's daughter, Kathleen Jamieson, I discovered that the doll was brought from England and given to me after Mr and Mrs Parkes returned there with 7 year old Phyllis for a holiday, 90 years ago.

As I am now 91 years and 6 months old, I have had the doll for 90 years. I was never allowed to play with it much as a child, but I have kept it all these years."

Its name is Bobby – I don't know why? Edith Dowson 1st June 2021



Toys have always been manufactured in a huge variety of materials, complexity and prices. From a simple ball or bucket and spade, to elaborate doll's house or toy train set. The values of many have skyrocketed as "big kids" try to recapture their inner child. Toy robots and old metal pedal cars bring huge sums at auction.

There have always been new fads, usually around Christmas time, but I feel that today's children have missed the best – electronics and easily broken plastic are a poor substitute for classic timber and metal. There are many toys though that have stood the test of time, dolls, (Barbies), tea sets, Lego and toy cars are still wildly popular, and the very best designs allow kids to invent games and role play – doll's tea parties and block construction spring to mind.

Mum had a small cash register (or till) which enabled generations of children to play shops. The simplest of toys are often the best; a bat and ball, or a stick, allow a multitude of games, often young children are more interested in the box the toy came packed in.

Grandad Tom Ridley's speciality was a baby rattle, manufactured from a beer can with some small stones added, the top being soldered shut in his Broome Crescent blacksmith forge. Of course the beer can had to be emptied first – toy making can be thirsty work!

Here at the museum we do not have many toys, however we were recently gifted an old tin toy from Mary Mabin. It is a ***pressed tin clockwork monkey riding a donkey***.

Manufactured by Tippco in Germany before World War 2, in the 1920s and 30s pressed from tinfoil in two halves with a clockwork mechanism in the middle. It was designed to rock back and forth whilst the monkey and donkey head moved. Our example had been stood upon and partially repaired many years ago. But some careful panel beating and reassembly has improved things somewhat. The tin toys require a gentle hand to repair, the small metal tabs which work the two halves together are very easily broken and impossible to replace. You must also be careful not to damage the lithographed paintwork – in this case a wonderfully painted red and yellow saddle and green meadow dotted with yellow daisies. I love the detail of the donkey's head, ears swept back in the breeze, along with the monkey's expression of concentration as it rides the steed "where were they off to? I wonder".



Unfortunately the clockwork mechanism defied my best efforts to fix up as one of the gears was missing and the others were worn. But what do you expect after almost a century? I doubt that the latest plastic, computerised gizmo will be around for that long, although I suspect that archaeologists will be digging up Lego bricks in the future and wondering what could the purpose of these objects have been, I will bet that the expression on their faces, as they realise that they click together, would be one of unbridled, childlike joy.

A more sophisticated toy is our ***Mamod Steam Powered Wagon***, still with its original box. It appears to have never been fired up, something I intend to rectify. I reckon that a demonstration run on the platform would be good. This toy is beautifully constructed from metal made in Britain, possibly related to the Meccano toys, and would have been a prized possession of any junior engineer – fire and steam and movement – if they could get Dad to let them have a go!

There are numerous YouTube videos of blokes restoring and running these sought after toys. The small catalogue which accompanied our model shows a variety of other machines which can be powered by belts from the main engine, the bases are compatible with meccano.

I never owned such a wondrous device as a youngster but I do have something just as special – ***a steam powered boat***, probably hand built. I think that Dad got it from the San Remo fishermen. He was an



Assistant Sea Scout Master there. It is sleek and narrow, not very stable in the water, but I wonder at the time and skill that went into making it – how long ago? The builder probably knocked it up whilst waiting for the notorious Bass Strait to calm down after a south-westerly blow – perhaps one of the boat builders such as the Laccos.

What memories do our members have of their favourite toys? Do they still have them? I would love to see them and listen to the memories they evoke.

I must be off – I am going to get my matchbox car collection out and roll back the years.