

# PLAYING HOUSE

*Jo Caird peeks into  
the miniature worlds  
of dolls' houses  
through history*



Nostell Dolls House

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## There's something magical about dolls' houses.

The sense of wonder that comes from peeking into a miniature world is most keenly felt in childhood, but it's a fascination that persists long after our playing days are over. And the more elaborate the dolls' house, the more enjoyable the experience, as we marvel at intricate details and the sheer effort that must have gone into the creation of so many tiny, perfectly-formed objects.

Take for example the red velvet bedroom of the Nostell dolls' house, a nearly 300-year-old miniature version of the real Nostell—the National Trust property in West Yorkshire that inspired it. The silk velvet bed curtains are as luxurious and detailed as those found on real-sized beds at the time (specifically, the state bed in Nostell's Crimson Room), the beautifully carved chest of drawers is made from walnut, and the portraits on the wall are framed with gold-embossed paper to imitate gilt wood.

Nostell curator Simon McCormack estimates that the dolls' house would have cost around £20,000 in today's money—with such high standards of craftsmanship throughout the two-metre tall artifact, it's not hard to see why.

One of the rarest dolls' houses in the UK, the Nostell mini-mansion has been painstakingly conserved and is now the centrepiece of a new

permanent exhibition at Nostell that allows visitors to take a closer look at the dolls' house than has ever been possible before.

**DOLLS' HOUSES ORIGINATED IN** 16th-century Germany and the art form hadn't changed very much by the time the Winn family commissioned this one in 1735. Dolls' houses—or "baby houses" as they were known—were intended mainly to be admired. The preserve of the rich, they were a way of showing off one's wealth.

"The quality of the materials is one of the key features of these dolls' houses," says Simon. "They really were very showy."

Collecting expensive "toys"—miniature versions of real size household artefacts, rather than playthings, as the modern meaning of the word suggests—was a popular pastime among monied

Europeans from around the middle of the 16th century. Tiny items of furniture, silverware and glassware were crafted by both dedicated toy-makers and as a sideline by the manufacturers of full-scale luxury goods. Baby houses, which often mimicked the design of the actual family home, provided the ideal platform for displaying these trinkets.

**ONE OF THE EARLIEST RECORDED DOLLS' HOUSES** was made for the Duke of Bavaria in 1557-58, and while this particular artefact was

lost long ago, a few fine examples of other 17th-century German baby houses survive to this day. There's a beautiful one in the V&A Museum of Childhood in London. Known as the Nuremberg House, it dates from 1673 and is the oldest in the museum's collection of more than 100 dolls' houses, models and shops. We don't know who commissioned it, but details such as the bust of a unicorn and the layout of the downstairs rooms suggest that it may have belonged to the family of an apothecary.

Will Newton, a senior curator at the museum, explains that baby houses had a practical purpose alongside their decorative one. "A lot of girls' education in the past emphasised home making skills," he says. Dolls' houses often served as educational tools in the teaching of domestic management. With their accurate representations of real-life kitchen paraphernalia, room layouts and interior decorating schemes, baby houses offered an opportunity for girls and young women to practise





Dutch Kitchen

a source of frustration to younger members of the family. It wasn't until Victorian times that dolls' houses were designed and manufactured with play in mind.

Dolls' houses first began appearing in Britain in the late 17th century, possibly after being introduced during the Restoration with the return of the Stuart court from Europe. An alternative theory credits travellers on the Grand Tour importing the baby house craze, writes Simon in the bijou

putting together and running a home on a small scale. The well-stocked linen closet and elaborate arrangement of tableware in the kitchen of the Nuremberg House, for example, would have been a helpful guide for the young women of the household as they prepared for their future lives as wives and mothers.

#### INTRICATE DOLLS' HOUSES LIKE THIS

one look like great fun to play with but it's unlikely that children would have been left unsupervised with them very much. Hardly surprising, given the money and time spent putting them together, but no doubt

guide that accompanies the dolls' house exhibit at Nostell.

In any case, the earliest surviving British dolls' house was said to have been bought by Queen Anne for her goddaughter, Ann Sharp, around 1695. An example of the Dutch tradition of cabinet houses, the detailed interior is concealed behind an ordinary cabinet door, as opposed to the architectural exteriors found on German-style baby houses.

The Ann Sharp dolls' house is in a private collection today but you can see a single-room Dutch dolls' cabinet, dating from the end of the 17th century in the Museum of

Childhood (there are larger examples in the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam). From the outside the "Dutch Kitchen" looks like an ordinary linen closet—inside, however, are dozens of pieces of kitchenware and furniture (it was donated to the museum with 215 items but not all of them are displayed at once), including hand-painted blue and white tiles that nod to the Dutch porcelain industry.

#### WEALTHY FAMILIES IN BRITAIN

took to dolls' houses and miniature collecting with the same fervour as their European counterparts. The architectural exterior of a dolls' house would either have been bought as a generic empty shell or commissioned from a local carpenter, with the latter tending towards more elaborate schemes that referenced details from the family home.

Even if a manor house was the inspiration, most baby houses had a town house format as it was more convenient when it came to interior layout. The Nostell dolls' house is a good example of this: its pediment and windows mimic those at Nostell while the object as whole looks more like a grand Georgian townhouse.

Miniature furnishings were usually a mixture of store-bought, commissioned and homemade objects, with "toys" imported from Germany and the Netherlands sold alongside British products. The level of detail to be found in some

**"IT'S UNLIKELY THAT CHILDREN WOULD HAVE BEEN LEFT WITH BABY HOUSES UNSUPERVISED"**



of these objects is extraordinary, from hallmarked silver fire irons the size of match sticks to chairs carved from ivory.

Of the many toy shops that opened on British high streets during this period, at least one is still going strong today—originally called Noah's Ark, Hamleys first opened its doors in 1780. You can still buy dolls' house furniture there to this day, though you'd be hard pushed to find hallmarked silver and ivory items at its famous Regent Street address.

Wealthier families such as the Winns would have commissioned local crafts people to outfit their baby houses, with the women of the household contributing additional decorative elements. The walls of the drawing room of the Nostell dolls' house, for example, are decorated with copperplate engravings that have been hand coloured and pasted. Projects like this, as well as costume making for dolls and the planning of the interior design scheme as whole



were a “good way to show off your creative skills,” says Will.

**THE MARKET FOR MASS-PRODUCED** toys grew throughout the 1800s, with dolls' houses starting to be manufactured at scale in the second half of the 19th century. “Box back” dolls' houses—a very simple design with plain sides, a flat roof and a hinged door—looked just like the Victorian terrace houses springing up all over the country. Bought through toy catalogues or department stores, these mass-produced houses were designed to be played with, not just admired.

“You can trace it to the expansion of the middle classes, who suddenly had disposable income and wanted to be able to buy things for their children,” says Will. “They wanted to have toys that would reflect their own lives.”

This traditional style of mass produced dolls' house has proved enduringly popular. In the 1930s,

40s and 50s, Tri-ang Toys sold dolls' houses that reflected domestic architecture of the time, including some modernist models with flat roofs and geometric designs. But it wasn't really until the 1980s, when Bluebird Toys launched the now iconic Big Yellow Teapot, that there was any real innovation in the field. These days, if you want to buy a dolls' house off the shelf, you'll find that most of the options available are in the Georgian or mock-Tudor style.

Even after mass-produced dolls' houses took off, there was still plenty of demand for bespoke versions. At one end of the scale is Queen Mary's Dolls' House at Windsor Castle. Built between 1921 and 1924, it is probably the most famous dolls' house in the world. Designed by leading British architect Sir Edwin Lutyens, it features contributions from over 1,500 artists, craftsmen and manufacturers, including a library of tiny books handwritten by famous authors.

At the other end of the scale are the homemade dolls' houses, lovingly built for children and grandchildren in garages and garden sheds across the globe. Katherine Biggs, a museum educator who now lives in London, has fond memories of playing with a dolls' house made by her great-grandfather around 100 years ago. The same dolls' house is still in the family today and regularly played

with by Katherine's 15 nieces and nephews.

“It looks very homemade”, she says with a chuckle. “Inside it's a real mix of things. The carpets and the wallpaper all match what my mum's house used to look like. When we first moved into that house all the leftover pieces were used to redecorate the dolls' house.”

A lot of the furniture is also homemade—some of it up to 80 years old, according to Katherine's aunts—but there are some fancier pieces too. These are the products of Katherine and her mother's twice yearly excursions into London to visit a dolls' house shop in Covent Garden, where she was allowed to choose one precious item to take home with her. “There's a little sewing machine table that I remember buying and absolutely loving,” she says.

**ENTHUSIASM FOR ELABORATE** DOLLS' houses continues to this day, with eagle-eyed collectors perusing online auctions for rare miniatures, attending events like the annual Kensington Dollshouse Festival and making pilgrimages to see extraordinary artefacts like the



Nostell dolls' house in museums and stately homes across the land. It's not hard to see why.

For Angela Hartnall, one half, along with her husband Tim, of bespoke dolls' house makers, Anglia Dolls Houses, it's all about perspective.

“There is something of a sense of wonder—like [the sense that] we all had as children—when you see something in miniature, as your mind immediately tries to relate the miniature to the real world that it purports to represent. You see the essence of the thing and do not take anything for granted,” she says.

“Good dolls' houses help us to see things differently.” ■

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INCLUDES A LIBRARY  
OF TINY BOOKS,  
HANDWRITTEN BY  
FAMOUS AUTHORS"**

