



FOUNDER
1828 - 1906

TRADE MARK



Regd. No. 459993

BRITAINS LTD

On September 25, 1852, Anne was born at 174 St. John Street off of Goswell Street in the London district of Clerkenwell (north of St. Paul's Cathedral). William Britain listed his occupation as "Brass Tap Maker." The introduction of plumbing and water lines facilitated the rapid growth and suburbanization of metropolitan London, so manufacture of plumbing parts supplied steady work. On December 20, 1853, the second daughter, Emily, was born at 16 Lower Queen's Row in Clerkenwell, and William again listed his occupation as being a Brass Tap Maker. On August 29, 1855, Minnie was born at 69 Charles Street, off St. John Street in Clerkenwell--with William's occupation now given as Brass Finisher Journeyman (he had completed his apprenticeship). The last daughter, Julia, was born on October 6, 1857 at 36 Caroline Place off Copenhagen Street, east of the King's Cross railroad station. Julia's birth certificate shows William Britain as a Brass Finisher. He was 26 years old.

On December 14, 1859, William Britain, Junior was also born at 36 Caroline Place, with his father's trade listed as a Brass Finisher. The year of his birth has often been erroneously reported as 1860, but his birth certificate (prepared in 1860) verifies the date as 1859. By the February 26, 1862 birth of Alfred, the family was living at 47 Hanover Street (now part of Noel Road) in the eastern part of Islington. William Britain, Senior, again recorded his occupation as Brass Finisher. By 1866, the family had moved to 3 Grove Cottages, Barnsbury Grove in Islington. On April 23, 1866, Julia (only eight years old), died there of measles and pneumonia, according to the death certificate. The November 17, 1866 birth of Frederick took place at 31 Sussex Road in Islington.

Both of the 1866 certificates list William as a Brass Finisher. However, the most exciting moment in my research was when I received a copy of the birth certificate for Edward, born on April 3, 1871. On that certificate, William, Senior listed himself as a "Model Maker" and the 1871 Census also records William as a toy maker! The family was still at 3 Grove Cottages in 1871. Interestingly, on the birth certificate for the last of the nine children, Frank, born on October 19, 1872 at 3 Grove Cottages, William reverts to Brass Finisher as his occupation. One can surmise that he had begun making the mechanical toys he specialized in before 1871, but that it was not easy to support a large family on the fluctuating income it brought in, so he may have halted doing it full time and only done the model making part-time. It is unlikely that William, Senior started making toys as early as the 1845 date sometimes claimed, for he would have been only 14 years old. A more credible date is sometime in the 1860s.

What else have I been able to discover? Kelly's 1878 Directory shows the Britains family residing at 28 Lambton Road off of Hornsey Rise (Road). This was a three-story house located near the Crouch Hill railroad station, and is less than two miles north of the Barnsbury address. The 1881 Census shows all eight children living at home at 28 Lambton Road, ranging in age from Anne at 29 to Frank at nine years old. However, Minnie married George Mills and moved out in 1884. The Electoral Register for Islington in 1887 shows William Britain, Junior and Alfred Britain as lodgers at 28 Lambton Road paying six shillings a week rent to their parents. (There was a means test to qualify to be a registered voter.) By 1889, Alfred Britain was living at 7 Dresden Road--only 500 meters northwest of Lambton Road.

On June 4, 1889, William Britain, Jr., married Lucy Kate Ashton, the daughter of an electrical engineer. The marriage certificate indicates that he was living at 28 Lambton Road, and lists both his and his father's occupation as Model Manufacturer. Lucy Ashton was born in 1867 (eight years after William Britain, Jr.) Patents for several mechanical toys were taken out by William Britain, Jr., in 1884, 1886, and 1888. Sales of such entertaining toys as the Waltzing Couple and the Tea-drinking Mandarin may have enabled the family to move from Lambton Road and for William, Junior to get married. Readers can refer to Arnold Rolak's recently reprinted article on Britain's mechanical toys in the Fall 2000 issue of *The Old Toy Soldier* (Volume 24, Number 3).

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The 1891 Census is quite interesting, for it reveals that 28 Lambton Road was "unoccupied." By then, the family had split up. William Britain, Sr. (now 60 years old), his wife Anna Maria Britain, the two spinster daughters (Annie and Emily, 39 and 38 years old, respectively), and the two youngest sons, Edward and Frank (20 and 19 years old) still lived together. The Electoral Register for North Islington for the years 1891-1900 records William Britain, Senior's address as "The Firs" on Holden Road in Totteridge North (now in North Finchley). By 1901 he had moved to "St. Kilda" on Ballards Lane in Finchley. His death in 1907 occurred at the Ballards Lane address. Minnie; William, Jr.; Alfred; and Frederick had all left home by 1894. I have not pinpointed when Alfred married Ada Jane Sargent, but I think it was after 1907; he moved from Dresden Road by 1911 to Muswell Hill, and to Highgate in 1912. Fred married Sarah Annie Wood on May 9, 1894, when he was 27 years old. The 1901 Electoral Register reveals that William Britain, Junior lived at "Rochlea" on Colney Hatch Lane in Muswell Hill--which is where Dennis Britain was born in 1903. That same year the growing family of William Britain, Junior moved to the suburb of North Enfield.

What is intriguing is the clever advertising image projected by the family in its bid to overcome the dominance of German-made toy soldiers in the English market. They circulated a story that William Britain, Jr., had designed the first hollowcast toy soldier "underneath the cherry tree in the garden" at Lambton Road. Perhaps he did model the Life Guard figure there, but the family had already moved to more modern and comfortable quarters than the Lambton Road house that had probably been built in the 1850s or 1860s.

There was a significant fire at the Lambton Road factory on March 8, 1901, gutting the second floor according to the local newspaper. This must have disrupted production, but it appears to have been only a momentary setback for the successful toy soldier firm. Anna Maria Britain, the patriarch's wife, died on April 24, 1902, only a few months before her 50th wedding anniversary. The last two sons then married: Edward Britain wed Kate Martha Hawkins in 1904 and Frank married Constance Amy Guylott in 1908.

On June 12, 1907 (not 1906 as claimed by the postwar catalogs), William Britain, Sr., died of heart failure, aged 75. There was a large funeral (see accompanying newspaper obituary) and he was buried in St. Marylebone Cemetery in East Finchley. I have visited the grave, which has a substantial monument marking the graves of not only William

Death of Mr. W. Britain *Finchley Press (22 June 1907)*

The death took place, on the 12th instance at his residence St. Kilda, North Finchley, at the age of 75, of Mr. William Britain, head of W. Britain and Sons, toy makers of Hornsey Rise. Deceased, formerly resided for many years in Lambton Road, was well known and highly respected throughout the trade and by a host of private friends. His was a very unostentatious though a generous nature, and his genial disposition made him so popular that his death is lamented by all who knew him. He had been ill for some months.

The funeral took place on Tuesday, the interment being made in the family grave in St. Marylebone Cemetery, East Finchley. The service in the chapel and at the grave-side was performed by the Rev. H. N. Collier, M.A., Vicar of Holy Trinity, East Finchley.

The chief mourners were Messrs. William, Alfred, Fred, Edward, and Frank Britain, C.J. Montague and Wilfred Mills, E. Landen, Pryke, and Hatchings. Others present included all of the employees of the firm, Mr. Harry Harding, Mr. and Mrs. E. Speaight, Mrs. T. Beckwith, Mrs. Frank Speaight, etc.

The floral tributes, for which a landau was requisitioned, were very choice, one standing out most prominently being an open book with "At Rest" in violets and with a wide mauve satin ribbon bookmark from the employees, "With deepest sympathy." Other wreaths were from Son Frank, Annie and Emily, Will and Lucy, Connie, Son Alf, Fred and Annie, Minnie and George, grandchildren (basket) Teddie and Kitty, grandchildren Doris and Rita, Mr. E. Landen, Mrs Rabin, Mr. T.L. Williams, Messrs. G. and E. Greiner, Mr. and Mrs. Meek, Mr. and Mrs. Doble, Mr. and Mrs. A.E. Shotter, Mr. E.J. Mantle, Mr. H. Harding, and Mrs. Ellen Harding, Mr. and Mrs. Guylott and family, Mr. W. Larnett, Mr. and Mrs. H. Petch, Mr. W. Brown, Mrs. Crawford, Mr. and Mrs. Hills Davis, and the servants, etc.

Britain, Sr., but also his wife Anna Maria, and their eldest daughter, Anne, who died shortly after her father on August 14, 1907. Anne's estate was probated as being worth £1,936, while William Britain, Senior's will was probated at a value of £17,275. This equalled about \$83,000 in 1907 or almost \$1.5 million in today's dollars.¹ Next to his father's grave marker is a smaller one for Alfred Britain, who died from complications of diabetes on December 30, 1915. Leopold Stokowski, the famous conductor, is buried about 100 feet away. When probated Alfred's estate was valued at £25,074 (equal to over \$2 million today). He managed the business while William Britain, Junior, was the "artist" who designed most of the early molds, and Fred was the master salesman and Secretary of the Board.

¹ To calculate the cost of living increases since 1913 and convert prior years' dollars into today's equivalent go to the website at <http://www.newsegin.com/neFreeTools.nsf/CPICalc>. Before using it, one must multiply the £ amount by the exchange rate, which was about \$4.80 before the departure from the Gold Standard in 1931, dropped as low as \$3.40 to the Pound in 1932, but rebounded to be fixed at \$4.03 per Pound during World War II.



Photo above, from left: Britain brothers Fred, Alfred, and William, Jr. c1899.

Emily, the second oldest daughter, was 54 when her father died. She lived to witness Frank Britain's marriage ceremony on August 17, 1908, but I have not confirmed when Emily died. In December 1907, Britains Ltd. replaced William Britain and Sons, and was inaugurated with a capitalization of 18,000 shares worth £1 each, held by family members in the following proportions: William Britain, Jr. 5,000 shares; Alfred Britain 5,000 shares; Frederick Britain 3,994 shares; Edward Britain 1,333 shares; Frank Britain 1,333 shares; Minnie Britain Mills 1,333 shares.

This only totalled 17,993 shares, but six shares were given to Fred Britain, and one share to Kate Martha Britain (Edward's wife) on February 14, 1908. When Britains Ltd. was established in 1907, William, Jr. was 48, Alfred was 45, and Fred was 41. Edward, Frank, and Minnie were not particularly active in the enterprise by then, so they received a lesser number of shares. Because I purchased at auction the Britains Ltd. stock certificates issued before 1940, I can confirm that there would be no other transfers of stock for 20 years, although Alfred's stock was inherited by his widow Ada Jane in 1916, and Minnie's stock was held by the administrators of her estate after her death on February 26, 1925. Minnie's estate totalled £4,969 at probate.

William Britain, Junior's first wife, Lucy Kate Ashton, died of a stroke on February 5, 1913 at age 45. On December 14, 1915 (only two weeks before his brother Alfred died from diabetes), William married his nurse, Mary Helen Victoria Kemp. He was 55; she was born in 1892 and was only 23 years old. William's youngest child (Dennis) was almost 13 years old, but William's declining health, and perhaps loneliness, undoubtedly motivated the marriage. William Britain, Jr., then fathered two more sons and a daughter with his young second wife. The children of this marriage were: Rossiter Frank Britain (born in 1918), Delia Helen Britain Ramsay (born in 1921), and Bayard John Britain (born in 1922).

On February 5, 1928, an additional 1,000 shares of stock were issued, split between Frederick Charles Pryke (Office Manager) and Edward Landen (Works Manager). Both had been with the firm for many years, had witnessed the signatures of some of the Britain brothers to the Incorporation Agreement in 1907, and were now made Directors of the company. They were the first stockholders who were not members of the Britains family. Given that William Britain, Jr., was 68 years old in 1928, it is likely that he had stopped designing new models as far back as 1915 due to his age and to his diabetes (which restricted him to a wheelchair he had designed

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himself). The need to reinforce the Board by adding these two loyal long-time employees was obvious. Not long after, William Britain, Jr., distributed 2,000 shares of his 5,000 shares, giving 1,000 shares to his second wife, Mary Helen Victoria Kemp Britain, and 250 shares each to the children from his first marriage, who were all over 21 years old in 1928. These four were Dorothy Kate Britain Kingwill (a copy of this stock certificate accompanies this article), William Edwin Britain, Frank Eric Britain, and Leslie Dennis Britain. Dorothy was born in 1892 and Dennis was born on January 13, 1903; I have not found the birth dates of William Edwin and Frank Eric, but they were born between Dorothy and Dennis. Another daughter, Kathleen, married William Kennedy, but for some reason was not given stock.

By now, Fred was the Managing Director running the company's daily operations, and he conducted the Factory Tour chronicled in the September 1929 issue of *The Toy Trader and Exporter*. Dennis Britain married Freda Hallam on June 26, 1930. Edward Britain, who had become a Director of the English branch of the Nestle's Milk Company, died on September 5, 1932; his estate was probated at £3,197. On November 24, 1933, William Britain,

Junior died at the age of 73 in the town of Birchington-on-Sea in Kent, northeast of Canterbury, where he had retired (see the accompanying obituary from *The Palmer's Green and Southgate Gazette* of December 1, 1933). When his will was probated, his estate was valued at £14,505 (but he had given away 2,000 shares of his Britains Ltd. stock in 1928). The estate is equal to \$671,000 today.

At the end of 1933, Fred and Frank were the only living members of the original family. During 1933, Ada Jane Britain (Alfred's widow) transferred 67% of her 5,000 shares to her son Alfred Edward Britain--probably when he reached 21 years of age. When William Britain, Junior's will was probated in 1934, each of the four adult children (from his first marriage) received an additional 240 shares (giving them a total of 490 shares each), while his widow Helen Kemp Britain, Dorothy Kate Britain Kingwill, and Stanley Hugh Taten administered 2,040 shares as executors of William's estate on behalf of his minor children from his second marriage. Rossiter Frank, Delia Helen, and Bayard John Britain were given their shares of stock when each attained the age of 21.

The next major event in the family history was the death of Fred Britain from hepatitis on January 1, 1935 at age 68. His daughters, Doris Britain King and Rita Britain Underwood, inherited his 4,000 shares because his wife was not competent to manage her affairs and had been institutionalized. Fred's estate at probate totalled £12,688 (about \$587,000 in today's dollars). When his wife, Annie Sarah, died in 1938, her estate was valued at £6,044. On January 30, 1935, George Edward Smallwood was provided 200 newly issued shares, and on November 24, 1936 he was given 300 more shares. Dennis Britain and George Smallwood were appointed to the Board of Directors in January 1935, joining Frank Britain, Frederick Charles Pryke, Alfred Edward Britain, and Edward Landen. George Smallwood ran the Toolroom and the Design Shop between 1932 and 1945. He sang at an employee Christmas Dinner and Concert on December 23, 1912, while T.J. Scrine (see below) played the piccolo on that occasion. On January 6, 1936, Fred Pryke, the long-time Office Manager died. His widow, Florence Kate Pryke, inherited his 500 shares. His estate was probated at £5,523. Frank Eric Britain, an older brother of Dennis Britain, took Pryke's seat on the Board of Directors, while Thomas Joseph Scrine was promoted to Office Manager. Scrine began working at Britains in May 1911; he designed catalogs, the artwork for the box label of Set #1392, the civilian Autogiro, and, according to Dennis Britain, originated the idea of the Picture Packs after World War II. He was born in 1894, retired from the firm in 1962, and died on October 2, 1965.

By May 1936, Dennis Britain was appointed Managing Director based upon his 14 years of working at the firm, his modelling skills, and his managerial ability. He was 33 years old. The largest shareholder in May 1936 was Alfred Edward Britain (Alfred's son) with 3,334 of the 19,200 shares then issued. T.J. Scrine was issued 200 shares of new stock on November 24, 1936. The firm was doing an increasing business now, for on March 31, 1938 a bonus of one new share for each existing share of stock was declared to capitalize £19,700 of undivided profits that had accumulated in the Company's Reserve Fund. There were 22 shareholders whose stock holdings doubled (five of these were either widows or the executors of the estates of the original partners; four more held 500 or less shares, including Landen, Smallwood, and Scrine).

Opposite is a reduction of an original Britains Limited stock certificate, #20. It is approximately 8-1/2 x 12 inches, printed in red, signed and dated 8 August 1928 in black ink. The Britains Limited embossing stamp is impressed at the lower right.

Death of Mr. William Britain, Jr. *Palmer's Green and Southgate Gazette* **(1 December 1933)**

The funeral took place at Birchington Parish Church, Kent on Tuesday of Mr. William Britain, a former resident of Enfield and Southgate, who died on Friday [November 24th], after a long illness.

Mr. Britain, who was chairman of Britain and Co., toy makers, Hornsey Rise, lived in Enfield for 18 years and came to Southgate in 1921, residing there until he moved to Birchington two years ago [Editor's note: in 1931].

He was a man of quiet disposition, and although he did not take a prominent part in local affairs in either Southgate or Enfield, his passing will be mourned by a large number of friends.

Mr. William Britain was one of the first men in this country to fly, and conducted experiments with heavier-than-air craft on the Lee marshes near Ponders End before the War.

Then on August 21, 1938, Frank Britain, the last of the original founding family members, died. (His passing marked the end of an era.) Constance, his widow, inherited his 3,200 shares. The estate when probated was worth £8,748. Dennis Britain, 35 years old and backed up by the long experience of Edward Landen, T.J. Scrine, and George Smallwood, managed the company without mishap.

When Dennis Britain enlisted in the Royal Air Force at the age of 37 in 1940, his older brother Frank Eric became Managing Director during the War. Landen, Scrine, and Smallwood, all middle-aged men, helped keep the factory running--including the conversion to munitions production in July 1941. William Arnold Stables became the Works Manager. Upon Dennis' return in 1945, he detected that Smallwood had been misappropriating supplies and equipment to run his own business on the side, and he sacked Smallwood accordingly (as Dennis told me during an interview in 1984), which is confirmed by Smallwood's removal from the Board on February 28, 1946. T. J. Scrine was appointed to the Board of Directors in his place. On January 3, 1946, Edward Landen resigned from the Board. He had served the company for over 40 years as the Manufacturing Foreman and Works Manager, and as a Board member since 1928. Harold Edgar King (husband of Fred Britain's daughter Doris) was appointed as a Director on October 29, 1946. Joseph H. Thake was appointed to replace Stanley Hugh Taten on January 1, 1949, while Bayard John Britain (one of Dennis' step-brothers) became one of the Directors even though he was only 26 years old. He was also a modeler and designer, and attended some British Model Soldier Society (B.M.S.S.) meetings as a

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Britain Family Tree



William Britain, Sr. was born on August 8, 1831 in Birmingham to Edward Britain, Sr. and Elishaba Parry. He married Anna Maria Messenger on August 10, 1852. She was born on July 28, 1830. Anna Maria died on April 24, 1902, while William Britain, Sr. died on June 12, 1907. They had nine children, shown in the following chart.

Children	Date of Birth	Date of Death	Date of Marriage
Anne	September 25, 1852	August 14, 1907	Never married
Emily	December 20, 1853	After 1907	Never married
Minnie	August 29, 1855	February 26, 1925	Married George Mills in 1884
Julia	October 6, 1857	April 23, 1866	Never married
William, Jr.	December 14, 1859	November 24, 1933	Married Lucy Kate Ashton in 1889; married Helen Kemp in 1915
Alfred	February 26, 1862	December 30, 1915	Married Ada Jane Sargent after 1907
Frederick	November 17, 1866	January 1, 1935	Married Sarah Anne Wood in 1894
Edward	April 3, 1871	May 9, 1932	Married Kate Martha Hawkins in 1904
Frank	October 19, 1872	August 21, 1938	Married Constance Gylott in 1908

William Britain, Jr. was born on December 14, 1859 in London as the fifth child and first son of William Britain, Sr. and Anna Maria Messenger. He married Lucy Kate Ashton on June 4, 1889. She was born in 1867. They had five children between 1892 and 1903. She died on February 5, 1913; William Britain, Jr. then married Mary Victoria Helen Kemp on December 14, 1915. She was born in 1892. Three children were produced by this second marriage. The children of William Britain, Jr. were Dorothy Kate Britain Kingwill (born in 1892), William Edwin Britain, Kathleen Britain Kennedy, Frank Eric Britain, Leslie Dennis Britain (born in 1903), Rossiter Frank Britain (born in 1918), Delia Helen Britain Ramsay (born in 1921), and Bayard John Britain (born in 1922).



Photo above is Dennis Britain; he is examining a Bikanir Camel Corps figure about to go under the hammer at Phillips.

liaison, just as Dennis had done when the B.M.S.S. began in 1935. On September 23, 1949, Frank Eric Britain resigned from the Board after 13 years; Dennis related to me that he was perturbed to find when he returned from the R.A.F. that Eric had allowed an employees' union to organize, which Dennis stopped at that time.

By 1950, Britains Ltd stock was held by 32 stockholders. Alfred Edward Britain (Alfred's son) died by 1944; his estate was still the largest stockholder in 1950 with 6,877 of the 39,401 shares. By 1958, Miss Betty Patricia Carvell, a daughter of Alfred Edward Britain and a granddaughter of Alfred Britain, was the largest shareholder with 4,445 shares. Helen Britain still owned 2,000 shares. Roy Selwyn-Smith, the creator of the Knights of Agincourt and many plastic models, had become a member of the Board of Directors and held 130 shares, Joe Thake had 140 shares, T.J. Scrine and his wife held 1,000 shares, while Dennis Britain and his wife Freda had accumulated 1,675 shares. Descendants of Minnie Britain Mills, who died in 1925, held 1,488 shares; Edward Britain's widow, Constance, owned 2,668 shares; while George Smallwood (who died in 1962), Fred Pryke's widow, and Edward Landen's widow were all still shareholders.

In conclusion, through years of research I located most of the vital statistics for the original family except for the date of Emily's death (probably between 1910 and 1920) and the date of Alfred's marriage (probably after 1907). We now have documentation from Edward's 1871 birth certificate and the 1871 Census that William Britain, Sr., had begun to be a serious maker of mechanical toys by 1871, but probably not before 1860. We have narrowed down when the Britains family bought the Lambton Road house to between 1873 and 1878. We can trace the stock sales and bequests through the stock certificates I possess, and can verify through the wills that the family became well off financially through the success of Britains Ltd--all of this documented from a study of family history.

TRADE MARK

