



In Memoriam

Mr. Dennis Britain, OBE, DFC

Dennis Britain, OBE DFC, former Managing Director and Chairman of his family company, Britains Ltd., the oldest toy company in England, died on 14th April, at aged 93, after a short illness.

The founding of Britains in the past century by Dennis Britain's grandfather, William, paved the way for Dennis to carve an illustrious career in the toy industry. In January this year that work was honored when Dennis received a Lifetime Achievement Award from the British Toy & Hobby Association.

A dozen years ago Joe Wallis interviewed Dennis for OTSN in Volume 8, #5. That piece began: "For almost 40 years, Dennis Britain has been inviting business guests to luncheon at the Royal Air Force Club on Piccadilly in London. In various capacities, Dennis worked at Britains Ltd. from 1922-1978. During World War II he was an air gunner on a Beaufighter night interceptor plane combating Luftwaffe bombing raids, then became a radar navigator and trained other navigators in using this secret weapon, and finally finished his war service by representing the Air Ministry in India in 1945 winding down the R.A.F. there. He earned a Distinguished Flying Cross, later followed by the honor of being made an Officer of the British Empire for his export trade record. He enjoys the old English game of lawn bowling."

Dennis Britain led a distinguished life of service to his family and their firm Britains Ltd. and to his country, especially as a decorated Battle of Britain flyer. But it was for his continued enthusiasm for this hobby that we will most miss him. Dennis was a consistent, committed reader of OTSN and often wrote to comment on or to correct an article of ours. His life nearly spanned the history of hollowcast toy soldier production.

Asked how to verify 1893 as the actual date Britains introduced hollowcast models, Dennis explained to Joe Wallis that 1893 "...is the date when we entered into a contract with Gamages Store in London to market them. My father had been working on the concept and trying it out for a number of years, but 1893 is when he perfected it to the point where we could be confident of quality and steady production."

Dennis Britain also recalled for OTSN in 1984, "...at first I went to work for some of my uncles who were Directors of Nestle's under the assumed name of Bryant. But, by the time I was 19...I persuaded my father (*William Britain, Jr.--who designed the first hollowcast Britains figure and lived from 1860-1933*) to let me start working at Britains Ltd.; he agreed on condition that I start at the lowest jobs and gain

Dennis Britain in 1994 flanked, from left, by OTSN's Joe Wallis, Don Pielin, Steve Sommers and Britains Charles Biggs.



promotion through merit. Of course I had no real idea that I would work there for over 50 years, but I did progress through practically every job in the firm. During the 1920s, I designed many of the zoo animals."

Had he played with Britains as a child? Dennis remembered: "My father only brought them home as presents on special occasions, such as birthdays and Christmas, just like many other British families. Frankly I preferred to play with model railroads."

When Joe Wallis asked about items he had personally designed while working for Britains, Dennis responded: "I did a large *Felix the Cat* that sold very well during the popular craze for Felix in the late 1920sas I've said I did most of the Zoological models, as well as soldiers, farm animals, and advertising figures, and I designed figures into the 1950s. For instance, I came up with the idea for and sculpted the French Colonial Spahi...about 1957. "

How did he produce such accurate renditions of the zoo animals? Dennis explained, "I made friends with Dr. Vevers who was Curator of the London Zoo. To really be able to observe the animals and sketch them with precision, he arranged for me to actually enter the cages and sketch them for several hours at a time. Naturally this was only possible with the less aggressive and dangerous ones."

And how did Britains get ideas for some of the many civilian pieces Britains made? Again, Dennis's words: "Sometimes we had an inside connection, if you will; my uncles were instrumental in facilitating the Nestle's World Cow since they worked all the time with Nestle in their business. I approached Walt Disney which had an office in London in the 1930s and Snow White and the Seven Dwarves and Mickey Mouse and Donald Duck were immensely popular then as now--it didn't take a genius to try to tie into that popularity. "

Dennis Britain as both figure designer and especially the firm's director did more to shape the collecting of tens of thousands of children and adults around the world than any other individual in the toy soldier hobby. Those who attended the Britains Centenary Dinner in 1993 heard him toasted with a full range of recollections from his work-ethic business style to stories of his love for driving fast British sports cars. Meeting him in person for the first time that year I was struck immediately by his firm hand and quick broad smile. "Steve Sommers," I said; and without a breath he replied, "Oh, the magazine; I look forward to it." It was certainly great to know that the hobby which he shaped for so many continued to give him joy into his nineties. May we all be so fortunate.

Steve Sommers

Hobby News

Shows

Spring toy soldier shows are off to a strong start with successful regional shows in New York, New Jersey and the Midwest. Typical is **Barry Carter** reporting that his **8th Indy Soldier Show** has grown on all counts. OTSN's Don Pielin says there was "strong selling to a good crowd on Sunday and plenty of socializing in the hotel on Saturday." I visited the **West Coaster** for the first time in several years and on all counts it has joined the front rank of soldier shows. There were at least forty rooms open on Saturday in the new Red Lion venue, Sunday's ballroom show was almost two hundred tables and there were several international dealers including **Andy Neilson of King and Country** and the **Dukes of Ducal** from the U.K..

Print

Articles on toy soldiers keep popping up some times in unlikely places; **Steve Ryan**, formerly of Reeves Int., has a piece in the Winter 95/96 **Cigar Aficionado** magazine on collecting toys including toy soldiers which mentions OTSN.



Auction

James Ople of Phillips, U.K. writes that among the many toys from the **Ruby Collection** to be auctioned in Bayswater on July second will be Britains master figures and many always very rare **Britains Paris Office** figures including boxed and horse drawn items. Also in the sale is a 1/32 model theater peopled with figures many commissioned from **Ping** by the horror film actor Peter Cushing.

Steve Sommers