



## SOLDIER BEARS

# A reminder of home

Many British soldiers who fought in World War I brought with them a small 'Mascot bear'. To mark the centenary of the war, **Mark Hill** explores the legacy of these tokens of comfort that came back from the front

PHOTOGRAPHS **RACHEL WHITING** STYLING **KIERA BUCKLEY-JONES**



### Our expert

#### MARK HILL

Mark has worked in the collectors departments of Bonhams and Sotheby's and has written a wide range of books on antiques and collectables. He has also hosted *Collectaholics* on BBC Two as well as making regular appearances on the *Antiques Roadshow*.

In 1916, somewhere in the quagmire of the trenches of the Somme, second lieutenant Percy Kinnersley-Baddeley met his death. He was one of 420,000 British casualties in a battle that has come to symbolise the horrors of World War I. Through the war Percy had carried with him a memento from home: a small stuffed bear he called Edwin. Remarkably, when Percy died, Edwin was found and sent back to Percy's wife Verna. She cherished the bear for the rest of her life, keeping it next to a photograph of her husband.

Percy was not the only British soldier travelling through the fields and trenches of France with a 'soldier bear' hidden in a pocket or kit bag. These tiny teddies (they are about 3.5in tall) were produced in their thousands during the war years and many were given to troops as keepsakes. Easily packed and concealed, they acted as a reminder of home and a comfort to the men plunged into the terrors of war.

According to Kathy Martin, teddy bear

dealer and author of a book on the history of British manufacturer Farnell, the idea of a grown man taking a teddy bear to war would not have been strange. Following the invention of the teddy bear in New York in 1902, the US and Europe were gripped by a craze for the bears. 'People loved teddies,' says Kathy. 'They weren't just given to children – adults loved them too, in the way they might love their iPhones today.' Remember Sebastian Flyte with his teddy bear in *Brideshead Revisited*? It might seem odd to us today but at the time it didn't at all.

Sold for around a shilling, soldier bears were made by Farnell, which has been dubbed the 'British Steiff' for the high quality of its teddies. The company was founded in London in the 1860s – it initially made items such as tea cosies – and was among the first to make teddies in the early 20th century. A bear from its 'Alpha' range was bought for AA Milne's son Christopher Robin's first birthday in 1921 and became

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**THIS PAGE** These red, white and blue bears are from dealer Leanda Harwood's collection – see 'Where to buy' for details  
**FACING PAGE** A private on his way to fight in World War I says goodbye to his family – many servicemen took soldier bears with them as a reminder of home

**RIGHT** Soldiers wave farewell from the window of a train leaving London's Victoria Station in 1916



## COLLECTING SOLDIER BEARS

Despite their almost crude construction, the value of soldier bears is surprisingly high. Blond mohair bears are the most common and cost around £180-£280. Blue or red will usually fetch £300-£400 and the rarer white examples can cost £350-£450. Although mint condition bears are prized for their rarity, most buyers prefer bears that are worn as a grimy bear is more likely to have accompanied a soldier on active duty. Values fall if limbs or eyes are missing or have been replaced but even limbless bears can fetch over £70. Many also have a squashed, almost mousy appearance, perhaps due to how they were stored. A cast-iron wartime provenance is the single most important factor in value. This explains why sets of Campbell bears sold by dealer Leanda Harwood in the early 2000s for £460 now exchange hands for around £1,200.



*In 2002, Percy Kinnersley-Baddeley's bear Edwin fetched £4,230. While the bear wasn't a rarity in itself, its incredible story was behind its value*

the inspiration for *Winnie-the-Pooh*. Although known by collectors as 'soldier bears', Kathy says that their proper name is 'Mascot bears' as they were part of Farnell's miniature 'Mascot' range, the first new range the company added following the outbreak of war. 'They were a simple design and cheaply produced,' says Kathy. 'People were on the move, it was mass mobilisation. The 16 to 20in bears weren't convenient to carry around, so Farnell adapted and brought out a small, portable bear.'

### THE BEAR NECESSITIES

The bears were produced in blond mohair and the patriotic single colours of red, white and blue. Buying a British rather than German teddy at that time was clearly the right thing to do. They were given to soldiers and others involved in the war effort to take away with them but were also carried around by people at home to show their patriotism and to remind them of their loved ones. Such was their popularity that Farnell continued to produce them throughout the 1920s.

A close inspection reveals that these charming chaps are rather simply made.

Mohair is stuffed with folded wood wool, as with most bears of the period, and the ears are small folded sections of pipe cleaner pushed into holes. The eyes are made from glass and vary from little black spheres to clear eyes with black pupils. Some say that they were placed high on the head to gaze up at their owners out of a breast pocket. Noses, if they are present, vary from small discs of felt to simple stitches, which may have been added by their owners after the disc fell off. But most bears are nose-less, giving them an almost mole-like appearance.

Their worn, sometimes battered appearance does not put off collectors, as former teddy bear dealer Diana Sutherland confirms. She collected other bears for 20 years before falling for the charms of soldier bears last year. 'I hadn't paid these bears a great deal of attention before, as you don't get much bang for your buck,' she says. 'But I bought one as a gift for a friend and, as soon as I held it in my hand, that was it, I was hooked. They exude charm and offer such a tangible link to the past.'

To my mind, it is that sense of wonder about where these bears have been that makes

them so special and is the reason why they sometimes fetch enormous sums of money. In 2002, Percy Kinnersley-Baddeley's bear Edwin fetched a staggering £4,230 at Christie's. While the bear wasn't a rarity in itself – it was in common blond mohair – its incredible story was behind its value.

### A SOLDIER'S TALE

Although it involves World War II, one of the most well-known stories attached to a collection of soldier bears is that of the Campbell brothers, David and Guy, who amassed an army of 398 of them as gifts from relatives when they were children in the 1910s and 1920s. When not stored in a suitcase (with the lid 'propped open so they could breathe,' as David put it), the bears were used by the brothers to re-enact battles. They even made tunic uniforms for them and each had their favourites. When the brothers were sent to war as 29-year-old officers, Guy took a bear named Young and David took one called Grubby.

David was captured by Rommel's troops in 1940. When he was admitted to a prisoner-of-war camp, Grubby was confiscated by German soldiers, who ridiculed David. A German officer intervened and handed Grubby back. They were never parted again and David was allowed to keep the bear for his three year-long internment. Both

brothers were awarded the Military Cross. In 1999, the brothers' collection was sold at Sotheby's for £26,000. I was working there at the time and fell for the bears and their story. When I came across a wonderfully worn blond bear at the Antiques For Everyone fair last October, I finally became the proud owner of a soldier bear myself.

The Campbells' massive collection was unique and the supply of other survivors is limited. Increasingly high prices and strong demand have led to reproductions being made. Although at first they look identical, their fur is too bright, even and new. Their faces also lack the wear and charm that comes from being almost 100 years old.

Returning to second lieutenant Percy Kinnersley-Baddeley, I like to think that the bear I own once brought comfort to a soldier like him. It's certainly battered and grimy enough. Unlike Percy, did the owner of my bear survive? I like to think so and I hope that the patriotic red, white and blue ribbon it wears was tied around its neck by the same soldier on Armistice Day, when similarly coloured ribbons, posters and confetti were used in celebrations across Allied countries.

Of course, I will never know for sure. But the bear remains a poignant reminder of the horrors experienced by soldiers in World War I and of the sacrifices they made for us all. ■

## FIND OUT MORE

### WHAT TO READ

- **Farnell Teddy Bears** by Kathy Martin (Remember When, 2010)

### WHERE TO SEE

- The most famous of the Campbell bears, Grubby and Young, now reside at the **Spielzeug Welten Museum** in Basel, Switzerland ([spielzeug-welten-museum-basel.ch](http://spielzeug-welten-museum-basel.ch))

### WHERE TO BUY

- **Leanda Harwood** 01529 300737
- **Daniel Agnew** 07515 004635; [danielagnew.com](mailto:danielagnew.com)
- **Dolls, Bears and Bygones** 01726 61392; [dollsbearsbygone@aol.com](mailto:dollsbearsbygone@aol.com)
- **Vectis** 01642 750616; [vectis.co.uk](http://vectis.co.uk)

### FOLLOW ON TWITTER

- **The WWI Pocket Bears** @thepocketbears

**BELOW LEFT** Some believe the eyes are high up so the bears appear to gaze up at their owners out of a breast pocket  
**BELOW RIGHT** Black bears are rare - the Campbell collection featured only two



PHOTOGRAPH: WM VIA GETTY IMAGES; MILITARY JACKETS, FROM A SELECTION AT ROKIT; BUTTONS AND RIBBONS, FROM A SELECTION AT THE CLOTH HOUSE; TABLE, FROM A SELECTION AT THE FRENCH HOUSE