

Like a kid in a toyshop

Sandra Morris has created the perfect showcase for her collection.

Karen Bamford reports

I have strong childhood memories of the few times that my parents took my brother and me to Harrods department store. I remember waiting impatiently in the clothes hall until the time would come for our ascent to the toy department. The walls of that vast emporium seemed to wrap around us, as we ran over the soft carpeted floors towards the never-ending displays of dolls, soft animals and huge boxes of games and toys. My husband tells me that he was similarly intoxicated by the general magnificence of the great store's toy department. On his first visit there at the tender age of eight he fainted. I was obviously made of sterner stuff.

Sandra Morris's miniature toyshop could have a similar effect on any passing urchins who stop to look curiously through its windows from the pavement outside. It is positively chock-a-block with the most



ABOVE The Toy Shop began life as a simple kit and has been transformed into a weather-worn period property

delightful toys and games, both collected and made by Sandra over the past 25 years.

Perhaps it should be compared with Hamleys rather than Harrods as, unlike any other miniature toyshop that I have seen, it occupies not just one or two rooms but five! Sandra has even arranged the contents into departments: boys' toys, such as trains and boats, plus games and books on the ground floor; working toys, plus pull-alongs, bears and animals on the first floor; and dolls' houses, theatres and dolls on the second floor.

Move

The idea for a really special toyshop came after Sandra sold most of her vast collection of dolls' houses and

miniatures when she moved from a large home to a smaller one. She could not bear to part with the miniature toys and she dreamed of a shop to display them in. Sandra, who makes 1:12 scale porcelain dolls under the Tower House Dolls banner, and tiny dollies and toys as Diminutive Dolls, also thought the shop would be an ideal way of keeping a record of each toy she makes. One example of everything is saved for the miniature shop. The majority of toys on display are, however, by other artists and collected by Sandra during 25 years of visiting fairs, both as a collector and as an exhibitor.

Sandra's workroom is crammed with doll making stuff, such as moulds, fabrics, ribbons, files full of patterns and books on fashion history.

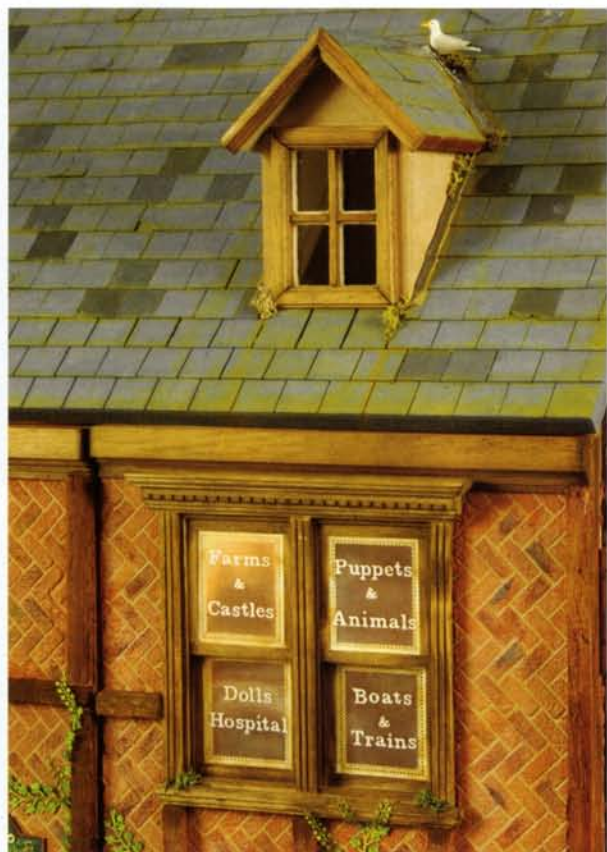


ABOVE A magnifying lamp is an invaluable tool for working on miniatures, but it was also the cause of a small fire!

PHOTOS: GMC / ANTHONY BAILEY



ABOVE The sign above the door was bought at a fair many years ago and kept in Sandra's 'one day...' box. "When I finally come across it again I knew it would be perfect for the type of old-fashioned toy shop I wanted to make," she says



ABOVE Frosted windows announce The Toy Shop's tempting wares

With the arrival of the shop kit from Smaller Homes, she allocated herself a separate hobby room, declaring that this was "not a luxury but a necessity"! She has always built from kits and altered them. This time she charted her progress on a blog to record her thoughts, successes and the inevitable hiccups as she went along. "Part of the fun is finding ways to get around problems," she enthuses.

Transformation

Sandra's first move was to get rid of two straight flights of stairs because they took up a lot of wall space. She played with the idea of false doors and a trompe l'oeil corridor, but decided she couldn't spare the space. "I'm sure there's an ancient lift somewhere off to the front which ferries customers between floors," she says. Sandra transformed the ground floor windows, which should have sat flush with the walls, into large square bay windows that would allow her to display the toys more temptingly. These can be admired from outside thanks to the addition of a pavement along the front.

"With a ceiling height of just 8½ inches (which incidentally is just perfect for the Tudor period of the building) ceiling lights would hang dangerously close to the shoppers and detract from the look I was trying to achieve. Instead I opted for concealed lighting inside the top of the display shelving," says Sandra.

She chose screw-in bulbs with simple holders so that blown bulbs could be changed easily. However, the installation was a major task as each bay of every cabinet was to be illuminated. The cabinets line the walls of all the rooms. They have removeable perspex shelves, which means Sandra can vary the height of



ABOVE A mother and daughter, made by Sandra, enter the dolls' houses and theatres department on the second floor. In the adjoining room, all the dollies, including the devil, were made by Sandra

◀ individual shelves to suit the wares. The light from above shines through the shelves.

The building is old and the roof needs work. Sandra used pre-cut cardboard tiles and cut some to make them look damaged. Then she stuck them to the roof, allowing them to slip in sections. She painted them in various slate shades, with some green, moldy bits where the water runs down. She added little bits of moss, growing out of the holes where the tiles have slipped, as well as clumps of greenery to block the guttering.

The brickwork was achieved using stencils and brick powder supplied by Bromley Craft Products. Sandra decided on a herringbone brick pattern divided by oak beams. She painted the bricks individually to give some colour variation and 'cracked' a few.

Frustration

One major problem that occurred during construction was that the first floor windows developed a cloudy, crazed coating, possibly caused by a reaction with the wood stain used on the window frames, despite the fact that Sandra was careful to avoid any contact with the window acrylic. Rather than buy two new windows, Sandra decided to frost the damaged panes and add lettering to advertise the shop's wares. In hindsight, this was a time-consuming and frustrating process that ended up costing the same as simply buying new windows. However, the result is striking.

A far more dramatic incident occurred when Sandra set fire to herself. She was sitting at her desk next to the window when she felt a sharp nip on her shoulder. She rubbed it and carried on with her work. For half an hour, while the nipping and tingling continued, Sandra put it down to symptoms of MS, which often feel like electric shocks, and with which she was diagnosed several years ago.

Eventually she stopped to look over her shoulder and saw a plume of smoke rising. Her fleece jumper was on fire! The cause was sunlight shining through a large magnifying lamp that is clamped to her desk and had been swung out of the way while not in use. Sandra has since made a cover for the lens and cut up the burnt jumper to make a coat for her pet dog, Lucy.



ABOVE Sandra's collection of mechanical toys by Lawrence & Angela St Leger is so vast that she couldn't realistically fit them all into The Toy Shop. She tries to buy one every time she sees them at a fair. In the adjoining first floor room, the lamb pulling a cart is a Diminutive Dolls creation. The tiny circus in the foreground was an inexpensive, impulse buy on eBay



ABOVE A few of Sandra's favourite things! The dolls' house is her pride and joy (it can be seen open inside The Toy Shop). It is a copy of her 1:12 scale Scottish baronial mansion, which she sold, and was commissioned from Barbara Moore of Pear Tree Miniatures. "So although I no longer have the big house, I have a 1:144 version of it," says Sandra. The rocking horse was commissioned from DAW's Rockers. It is of great sentimental value because incorporated in the mane and tail is hair from Sandra's son's first baby haircut. He is now 22. The pull-along animal toys and vintage Jumeau-style dolls are by Diminutive Dolls

Customers

Calamities aside, 20 months after starting work on it, The Toy Shop is finally finished and ready for its photo shoot. All those precious toys have a fitting home at last. "I decided to have an old-fashioned Victorian

shop, set in the late Edwardian period, simply so that I can have mechanical toys which are more in keeping with that era. That, and of course I can have some lady customers browsing with their children, dressed in my favourite Edwardian costumes,"



ABOVE Sandra made the shopkeeper, Mr Albert Lowther, and named him after the Lowther Arcade in London which had its heyday in the late 1800s and was famous for its many toy shops



ABOVE Lucy, known only as "small dog" on Sandra's blog, is the business's official mascot and an important member of the team, helping to pick up dropped items while Sandra works

says Sandra.

But that's not the end of the story. Sandra has already bought a basement extension for her marvellous emporium, which will house two workshop areas: one for a toy maker, with Sandra's prized Terry McAlister workbench and tools; and the other

for a doll maker, complete with dolls' hospital. Sandra has "plenty of casualties" for the hospital, left over from her doll making.

She adds: "The aim of the shop is to

showcase my collection. The basement will be a bit of fun, with mice and insects, but you have to think of the staff so I will add windows!" We'll keep you posted. ●

Dolly details

When Sandra got her first adult dolls' house 25 years ago, she struggled to find dolls that she liked. Having launched Kent Miniaturists Club, she and a friend started selling home-made hats and accessories. Sandra saved her takings and after 18 months had enough to buy a kiln, some moulds and a book on doll making.

"I made so many dolls that my home looked like the set of Ben-Hur," says Sandra. Tower House Dolls was launched to turn Sandra's hobby into a business. Later she became drawn towards making toys, dollies and games, which she sells as Diminutive Dolls. Her business partner Pamela Shallcrass is the ideal sounding board for Sandra's many enthusiastic ideas. Sandra makes all the porcelain dolls and toys, and dresses the dolls, while Pamela does some of the painting and distressing, and makes wooden toys.

They will be exhibiting at Kensington Dollhouse Festival's first ever Christmas event at Kensington Town Hall on Saturday 6 December.

Alternatively contact 48 Robsack Avenue, St Leonards on Sea, East Sussex, TN38 9SL Tel: 01424 850694 or email: sandra@diminutivedolls.co.uk or visit www.diminutivedolls.co.uk Or www.towerhousedolls.co.uk Or www.towerhousedolls.blogspot.com

You can make and fill a Victorian toy shop window with Sandra's help. This major project, which starts in January, is part of her new series of online classes. Visit the Diminutive Dolls website for details.