

# LONDON SHOW REPORT

Text and Photos: Steve Gilbert

Steve Gilbert reports the pre-Christmas edition of the show drew a paid of attendance of 1,217 people looking for old treasures and checking out what's new in the toy soldier hobby

Lots of questions were on my mind as I traveled to the Dec. 3 Toy Soldier Show London at the Royal National Hotel, Russell Square.

Space shortages had prompted longtime organizer Vectis Auctions Ltd. to shift its British Toy Soldier & Figure Show from the hotel to the more commodious Alexandra Palace starting Dec. 4, 2004. Meanwhile, Ian Carrick had nipped in smartly to launch the London Toy Soldier Show at the old venue beginning Nov. 6, 2004.

Between them the rival organizers had an unsustainable total of six Central London shows scheduled for 2005 until Vectis bought Carrick out and his March 19 event plans were canceled at the last minute.

The Neville family of King & Country U.K. took over Carrick's open show date at the hotel on a "one-time-only" basis. Faced with this turn of fortune, Vectis decided to stop organizing toy soldier shows, making the March 12 event its last.

These events thrust the Nevilles into the regular role of organizing three shows per year. They had a clear field in Central London until the first annual Norman Joplin's Old Toy Soldier and Figure Show (U.K.) was staged in September. Now organizer Norman Joplin has slated an additional show for May, doubling his 2006 slate (see related story in Opening Volley).

From the soundings I took, it seems like the Joplin event will complement rather than rival the

Nevilles' shows. Traders in old toy soldiers appeared to be happy to do both. But let's hope collectors' resources will stretch far enough.

As I headed to the pre-Christmas show at the Bloomsbury hotel, many questions came to mind.

At last was there enough space at the hotel now that its Edward VII and Alexandra Suite across the courtyard from the regular rooms had been booked? Can even just three events per year be financially viable? Would I find the figures I wanted?

These and other questions occupied my mind during the journey uptown.

## LIVING HISTORY

Undaunted by the bleak and cold day, World War II re-enactors were in good cheer and in occupation of the hotel courtyard twixt the two main halls. Representatives of the Summer of '44 Living History Group were clustered around a jeep with comrades from the 89th Field Security Section.

Despite the extra space, some exhibitors had set up in the foyer of the main hall.

Toy Army Workshop's Graham Pettit was busy with inquiries about his sizeable WWII range of figures, equipment and dioramas. One of the things I have always liked about his products is his ability to re-create the mundane aspects of army life without being twee or gimmicky.

His newest items included a portrayal of the dreaded barracks inspection. An officer points to an

article of a soldier's kit laid out on his bed while the private in question stands stiffly at attention and a sergeant with a handlebar mustache awaits the officer's verdict. It was all painted to TAW's usual excellent standards, and is also available as castings.

The Randall family of Asset was also doing business in the foyer with a stand highlighting figures from their WWII Home Front range. Here was a female Air Transport Auxiliary member whose role it was to ferry aeroplanes for the RAF resplendent in her lifejacket. A couple of ladies manned pumps to fight fires. These figures rubbed their diminutive shoulders with female "clippies," or bus conductresses; and a Lyons "Nippy" waitress from the



Above: WWII re-enactors brought history to life at the London show.



Above: Dr. and Mrs. Igor Baklanov with their Studio Niema display.

Below: Mignot jazz band on the Tradition stand.



famous chain of teahouses. Also doing her bit was a lady poppy seller.

From the foyer I headed into the main hall. I wish I could say that what follows is a leisurely tour of the stands with a report and opinions from each. But I'm afraid that would not be true nor possible since the size and scale of the event necessitated what turned out to be a mad dash from table to table seeking views, news and photo opportunities while trying not to impinge on the business of the day.

## ALL THAT JAZZ

I first spoke to Steve Hare, Tradition of London Ltd. sales manager. He reported steady trading after "not such a big rush" to begin with. He thought this show had a better atmosphere than previous Vectis events. In particular, he said it was "1,000 per cent better than Ally Pally," remembering "loads of complaints" he heard from customers about that location and access to it.

"It's a lot better having two big rooms than lots of rooms upstairs," Steve observed, comparing the arrangements to the last Vectis show at the hotel in June 2004.

I found that Steve's views were echoed across the show.

Tradition is an agent for the venerable CBG Mignot range made in France and Steve had many samples on show. I was especially taken with a five-piece jazz band in one of Mignot's unique diorama boxes. A glass case contained a selection of Mignot's circus figures.

Studio Niena's tables were piled with rank upon rank of wonderfully detailed ancients and medievales. One very sad note here was the news that U.K. distributor Mike Henry had passed away suddenly Nov. 1. Dr. Igor Baklanov and his wife, Irena, the Russian couple behind the production of these figures, found the show day difficult.

Ever genial American dealer Joseph F. Saine reported a "bit more foot traffic" than the inaugural Joplin event (see issue 92). His stand was the picture of order with figures neatly in boxes belying the age I knew they must be.

Close by Mike Norris of Little Legion Toy Soldiers was happy



to tell me things had become "manic" after a slow start. Mike's mum, Pauline, stood on tiptoes to peer over the display items to add, "Ay berserk!"

Once more the Little Legion tablecloth had turned blood red as Zulus fought desperately to overcome the British. Three more fighting pairs debuted and sold well. A cart being dragged by eight bullocks and heaved on from the back by straining soldiers was an impressive addition to the Zulu War collection.

Mike's main ranges run across the Zulu and Napoleonic Wars. But that has not deterred him from forays into other eras and areas that interest him. Figures of the British Camel Corps from the Sudan campaign, Skinner's Horse in action poses and the Bikaner Camel Corps are all recent additions to his offerings at £32 each.

The Turner family of Fusilier Miniatures, who last year debuted the Napoleonic "Retreat From Moscow" range, again came up with a winter theme with some excellent WWI ski troops. So far, the Austrians and French have been covered with the Italians next. These fellows will cost a very reasonable £10 apiece in a choice of paint finishes. They can be combined with scenic bases priced between £9 and £16 to make a larger display. It's a neat touch.



Above left: Mike Norris and his mother, Pauline, with new British Camel Corps figures from Little Legion Toy Soldiers.

Above right: Frontline Figures' new WWII and ACW items were exhibited by Martin Prime, David Johnston, Emilie Prime, Gerard Prime and Bobbie Prime (from left).

Below: Steve Weston's Toy Soldiers showcased painted samples from Replicants' new Trafalgar playset.

Bottom right: New WWI French ski troops unveiled by Fusilier Miniatures.

Bottom left: Ballroom scene from the Napoleonic era crafted by John Eden.

## TRAFALGAR PLAYSET

Plastic toy soldier specialists Steve Weston and his wife, Linda, had been "absolutely rushed off their feet" with the new Trafalgar playset created by Peter Cole of Replicants selling "very, very, well." The painted up display of the Trafalgar set certainly was a source of comment and admiration while I was there.

Amongst the wealth of plastic figures and diorama items on show, Steve also had a massive four-section stretch of a trench scene priced at £90 straddling his tables. I also learned from the proprietor of Steve Weston's Toy Soldiers that despite the unfortunate history of the conflict, many American customers have been quite interested in and supportive about the recent Vietnam War era plastics he had begun to carry.

Before I left, Steve told me how impressed he'd been with





the "brilliant organization" of the show.

Also busy was John Eden of John Eden Studios with much interest being shown in two wooden display cabinets containing Napoleonic ballroom scenes. His late 18th-century street scene ("It could be France or Britain," John remarked) showcased more figures. A range of French guillotine sets were a prominent if rather morbid feature of John's display.

Nearby Allen Hickling had his wonderful collection of toy forts on show. The financial aspect of the show was not of prime importance to Allen, but he said he had "already met two people that will be very valuable in the future."

In the side room off the main hall Patrick Adams was tired but happy. His British Toy Soldier Co enjoyed a "record day" with an "unbelievable amount of WWI stuff sold." His stretcher bearers and nurses were very popular. By just after 1 p.m., 23 of his 24 nurses had been snapped up. Collectors were also buying his ceremonial troops in steady numbers. Patrick's sizeable parades were highlights of the show.

Also in the side room was Chris McDonald with his new Last Stand Miniatures range featuring the British 24th Foot of the Zulu War (see issue 91). In addition, Chris has purchased the range of figures formerly owned by Robert Jones, who traded under the Barracks brand. The latter figures, which were painted by Bob Prati's RP World Models, typically retail at £35 for a set of five covering topics such as the North-West Frontier, Zulu War, Boer War and WWI.

Nick West of Battlezone Miniatures, has shelved plans to emigrate and is continuing to produce his paratroops. More good news is that Nick is setting up as a British agent for The Old Northwest Trading Co. The two ranges would seem to complement each other quite well, and certainly they were both selling well.

## IMPERIAL NEWS

Peter F. Turner of Glebe Miniatures had another of his detailed Victorian gunboats for sale at £275, including the crew. A Mignet gunboat by contrast was charming in its simplicity and could be yours for £215.

Peter also had news from Imperial Productions of New Zealand, which had considered shutting down but will continue manufacturing with some changes, including the closure of its shop and the deletion of some figures. Plans are said to be afoot to expand the popular Napoleonic and Victorian civilian ranges. Peter had a number of Imperial's classy sets on display.

Irrepressible Errol J. Pace of ErrolJohn Studios had five new Christmas sets commemorating the homecoming of WWII troops in 1945. Original as ever, these sets could be combined with any 1940s street or train station diorama.

The seasonal vignettes included a family reunion, a "Sally Ann" canteen, a pair of hungry Jocks, "Funny Money" with a Tommy helping a confused American with his change, and "Happy News" featuring an aging newspaper seller wishing returning soldiers a happy Christmas!

Errol also had a good selection of his unique Victorian Indian and British forces out to tempt collectors, including me.

Next I met Keith Over and his delightful partner Karen Shere of Whittlesey Miniatures. These good people produce a series of mounted and foot knights that go for £50 and from £20 to £29, respectively. This type of figure with detailed heraldry can often command far higher prices, but check out the quality of these.

Roman legionnaires and their ancient Briton adversaries are also produced by this couple and are very keenly priced from £7 and £9, respectively. I had never seen these Whittlesey figures before, but anyone interested in these eras would do well to contact Keith.

Andrew Rose of Bastion Models was anxious to show me eight new sets of traditional-style WWII marching figures.

I also said hello to Sammy Lindsay and Sam Watson of the Irish Toy Soldier Museum, who were over from Belfast for the event. I was sorry to learn later



Top left: New Christmastime figures produced by ErrolJohn Studios adorn a train station.

Top right: Toy soldiers garrison a fort on Allen Hickling's table.

Second right: Ceremonial troops made by The British Toy Soldier Co. form a stunning parade at the show in London.

that Lindsay had a heart attack while en route home from the show and died Dec. 12 (see Opening Volley).

## BUSY BRITAINS

Understandably, for most of the day the W. Britain stand was too busy for me to approach Richard Walker, who became its new general manager with the firm's acquisition by First Gear in September.

Walker was part of a contingent that included First Gear CEO Rich Knight and sculptor Alan Ball. They had hosted the W. Britain Salute to the British Army at the National Army Museum the night before the show (see page 18).

During the early afternoon things thinned out enough for me to talk with Richard, who was pleased with the good reaction to the Britains takeover.



Above: Chris McDonald of Last Stand Miniatures.



Above: Giles Brown of Dorset Soldiers offered military artwork.



Right: Sets made by Imperial Productions were exhibited on the Glebe Miniatures stand.

He said British collectors had been "very supportive" and had made his visit a pleasure.

Gerard Prime of Frontline Figures displayed a bunch of new sets, including WWII Allied and Axis air crews, and a Confederate marching band of the American Civil War (see pages 36-37 for a review). I was keen to get a few measured thoughts on the show from the Prime family, whose Frontline range is one of the main rivals to the King & Country Ltd. range sold by the event's organizers.

After due consideration, family matriarch Bobbie Prime told me the new show was "much better than the Vectis event."

"Better atmosphere?" I queried.

"Absolutely. Better space, better advertising," she replied. "I cannot fault the organization of K&C in any way. The show is better in every way -- very professional."

Bobbie should be given credit for her honesty, even if she might have been biting her lip a little as she spoke.

## GOOD SOLDIERS

By this point I was running very tight on time with Hall B still to cover. Rain was now lashing down and I had to dash across the courtyard.

First I encountered Alan Goodwin of Good Soldiers, who had been doing some figure painting demonstrations earlier. I understand that his efforts were well received, particularly by younger show visitors. His excellent value soldiers had sold well. News from Alan was that he now supplies the entire Cheshire Volunteer range.

A new face, to me at least, was Andrei Natourin from Riga in Latvia. Andrei is sales and marketing manager for Art.I.G., whose matt-finished connoisseur range was established in 1997. The Napoleonic period is the main inspiration for these very high-quality figures, with several regiments and many character figures available. Also covered are Romans, the ACW and the Russian army of 1910-1917.

Virtually all of the painted foot figures were listed at \$30 U.S., and are also sold in kit form. The firm is beginning to produce different regiments of British Foot Guards. Could this entry into

Right: Andrei Natourin with some of Art.I.G.'s Napoleonics.

Far right: Brothers Tony (left) and Bob Neville of K&C U.K. flank RSM Nick Pettit. The Neville family organized the show.



Above: Adrian Little offered a variety of old toy soldiers.



Above: Alan Goodwin of Good Soldiers, who performed painting demonstrations during the show.



Above: Excellent sales at the show gave dealer Andy Morant something to smile about.

Right: Rows of goodies from Alexanders Toy Soldiers.

Far right: Representing the new W. Britain team at the show were General Manager Richard Walker, First Gear CEO Rich Knight and sculptor Alan Ball (from left).



popular ceremonial-type figures herald a convergence of two strands of collecting: connoisseur matt and toy gloss? I think Art.I.G. is a firm to watch out for in the future.

During my last foray in London (see issue 92), I met Andy Morant. He was back again enjoying "his best takings ever." No wonder he was smiling!

Adrian Little of Mercator Trading, who I had also first met in September, had not had such a good day as the Joplin show. But he stated that event had given him a record day that was "better even than a whole week in Chicago."

## NEVILLES PRAISED

There were lots more stands to visit, including displays mounted by Figarti and Dorset Soldiers, but I still had one major exhibitor to take in.

K&C products as shown by the Neville family ran right across the back of the hall with several super dioramas. These included some newly released items, such as Waterloo diorama buildings and late 19th-century Chinese warriors.

Patriarch Mike Neville said it was "our busiest day ever sales-wise" with plenty of new collectors as well as existing customers.

Present behind the tables was Regimental Sgt. Maj. Nick Pettit, GM QGM, the most decorated British soldier since WWII. He was slated to speak at the King & Country U.K. Global Collectors' Convention that night at the Imperial War Museum (see page 16).

I had hoped to chat a little with Hong Kong-based K&C manufacturing boss Andy C.



Neilson, but even at this late stage he was in an animated conversation with a customer.

It would seem that the London show has now come of age with 17,000 square feet of exhibition space to take in with 226 tables staffed by 103 traders and their helpers. According to Bob Neville, the event drew 1,217 paying visitors, a very significant increase from the 600 or so in November 2004 or the 700-plus last June.

Plaudits for the Nevilles, who put in a collective total of 260 hours during the weekend, came from traders and customers alike and were freely given. Bob Neville confirmed that both halls are now booked up for future shows and most traders have rebooked. The springtime edition is always quieter than the pre-Christmas event, but everyone is looking forward to the next show March 25.

Looking ahead to the future, Bob said, "I guarantee that we will not sit back, and will always try to move things forward to the benefit of us all, no matter what we sell, make or distribute! 2005 has been a great year!"

There is one final tale I'd like to relate. At 5 p.m. the hotel staff unhelpfully told the Nevilles to clear their 60 odd feet of tables "Now!"

It seemed like an impossible task, but that did not stop Lynn Kenwood from mobilizing his MKL Models staff to help. It was a very decent gesture at the end of a long day. Tony Neville was to miss the evening convention as a result. It's a pity the hotel could not have been more accommodating. ■

