Let me very briefly give you a background to how my collection has evolved.

I first started buying older toys in 1958, my first year at the Royal Veterinary College London, not with any pre-conceived idea of building a collection but just because they appealed to me and were a welcome addition to my sparsely furnished student flat in Hornsey Rise.

The collection has constantly evolved over the past 56 years to reflect my changing interest, taste, development and very importantly a knowledge of what was made. I am still constantly surprised at the number of previously unrecorded toys that are discovered. I have a fascination with those lesser known, and at time unknown, pieces and have developed a subconscious philosophy, rightly or wrongly, that if an object can be easily obtained I do not need to own it.

The collection now is almost exclusively German toys and concentrates on the early development of the tin toy industry from a cottage industry in the early years of the 19th century to companies employing thousands of workers in large mechanised factories. The three most significant 19th century German tin toy manufacturers were Rock & Graner, Lutz and Buchner. Most of the 19th century German tin toys – horse drawn carriages, early boats and trains etc that you see in the collection were made by one of these three makers.

The 1880’s and 1890’s saw the rapid development of factories in Nuremberg, Bavaria with Bing, Carette, Plank and Schoenner at the forefront of this rapid evolution. Marklin in Goppingen, Wurttemberg took over Lutz in 1891 and rapidly developed Lutz’s range of basically hand made toys into commercially viable factory produced products. The finest and most elaborate tin toys were made in the 1895 – 1914 period an era that has been christened the Golden Age of Tin Toys many of which were based on the rapidly developing mechanised transportation of the adult world. All the early automobiles, larger boats and early aeronautical toys in the collection were made in this golden era when cost seemed less important than quality and companies were competing with each other to produce the best rather than the cheapest. There are examples by all the major German makers.

Many of the composition figures that were sold with early tin toy carriages, cars and trains were made in and around Sonneberg by sub contractors for the tin toy industry.

I have tried to buy as many early figures as possible to help bring the collection to life and some of these are of wonderful quality.
David’s Collecting tips:

Although every collector has their list of dream toys that they would like to own, the best way of building a fine collection is to take opportunities as and when they arise. The most unusual toys can appear at the least expected moment and these opportunities should be taken. There are still constant surprises especially with 19th century toys and if an item has quality, appeals and is in the right condition it should be bought even if it is not on your ‘shopping list’.

Always buy the best quality and condition that you can afford. Long after the price has been forgotten a great toy in fine condition will give pleasure and usually proves to be a wise investment.

Learn from your mistakes. Every collector and dealer makes mistakes either as to value or originality. As long as a lesson is learned just put it down to experience and move on. Always look forward to your next acquisition rather than fretting over a past mistake!

Be very careful in attempting to clean or restore a toy yourself. The old medical adage of ‘Physician do no harm’ can be adapted to ‘Restorer do no harm’. Cleaning with the wrong materials or ‘touching up’ a toy to ‘improve’ its appearance can seriously damage or devalue an item. It is always best to leave it in its virgin, as found state, than try to over clean and lose paint. Simple cleaning with enzymatic fluid (commonly known as spit) soaked cotton buds will do no harm and works well. This can be followed by a light polish. Techniques needed for cleaning and paint conservation will vary from toy to toy depending on the type of dirt, the paint or lithographic finish and many other factors. I personally leave this to the professionals.

David’s Restoration tips:

In an ideal world every toy that you found would be in perfect condition and restoration would not be necessary. The world is not ideal, consequently restoration has an important place in toy collecting.

The finish of a toy is all important, be it hand painted or lithographed. Every collector has to decide for him or herself the degree of restoration that is acceptable. This depends very much on the toy in question. Factors such as the type of toy, rarity, size and complexity must all be taken into account. A replaced mast or lifeboat on a large toy boat, the lamp on an early automobile are much more acceptable than significant paint restoration. When restoring an important toy it is always a good idea to keep a photographic record - this is important if the toy is sold in the future as it shows the purchaser exactly what is original and what is replaced.

A complex early toy might have to go to 3 or 4 different specialists to conserve it. Early paint sometimes has a tendency to flake - it is a time consuming, thus costly, and skilled task to refix this virtually invisibly.