

FAMOUS FARNELL & MERRYTHOUGHT BEARS

Kathy Martin



Kathy remembers five special bears produced by two giants of the British teddy bear world

LEFT:
A Merrythought Punkinhead minus his shorts
ABOVE RIGHT:
Merrythought and 1925 Farnell label

There's an awful lot to love about Farnell and Merrythought, two of Britain's most distinguished manufacturers of teddy bears and soft toys. Take, for example, the fact that Farnell was the first UK firm to create a teddy bear, and that Merrythought is today's sole survivor from the glory days of British teddy production. And then there are the companies' superb bears, a few of which managed to achieve far-reaching fame whilst simultaneously performing their primary task of being cute, soft and huggable. Here, we take a look at just a few of these super-stars.

Winnie the Pooh

To Farnell goes the accolade for creating the world's most famous teddy bear, a celebrity bear that has spawned a billion dollar industry and is famous across the globe. That bear, of course, is A. A. Milne's Winnie the Pooh. One August day in 1921, a young woman called Daphne Milne visited Harrods in Knightsbridge

in order to buy a teddy bear as a first birthday gift for her son. The teddy she selected was a Farnell Alpha Bear, about 24 inches high with light gold mohair and a rather solemn facial expression. Over time, the boy – Christopher Robin Milne – and his bear became inseparable companions. Initially referred to as Bear, Teddy or Edward Bear (a full account of how Pooh came by his curious name is given in my book, *Farnell Teddy Bears*), the Alpha Farnell



was with Christopher Robin throughout the day while by night he was placed inside the nursery ottoman. The family spent their free time at their farmhouse on



KATHY MARTIN



Kathy is a writer, author and editor with a strong interest in history, antiques and collectable toys. Formerly the Editor of *Teddy Bear Scene* and Features Editor of *Collect It* magazine, Kathy has also worked as a valuer on *Flog It*, the BBC's popular daytime antiques show.

She currently lives in Berkshire where she writes non-fiction books as Kathy Martin and historical fiction as K.E. Martin. Her latest non-fiction title, *Famous Brand Names & Their Origins*, was published by Pen & Sword Books in 2016.

the edge of the Ashdown Forest in Sussex and whenever they travelled between the two homes, the teddy bear always went with them. In due course, Christopher Robin's father, the successful playwright and humorist A. A. Milne, began immortalising his son's relationship with his bear in poems and stories. And thus it all began.... Today, the original Winnie the Pooh resides at the New York Public Library with old friends

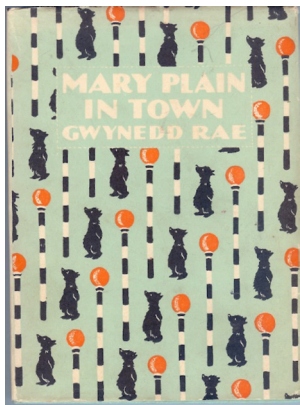
LEFT:
The original Winnie the Pooh and friends in situ at the New York Public Library (taken prior to their recent spruce up)

Kanga, Piglet, Eeyore and Tigger to keep him company. All the toys have recently undergone restoration and are now back on public display.



Mary Plain

In contrast to Winnie the Pooh, Mary Plain was a literary sensation before she was a Farnell toy. Mary, described by her creator Gwynedd Rae as ‘an unusual, first class bear, from the Bear Pits in Berne’, found fame in the Thirties when the first Mary Plain books were broadcast on the wireless. Farnell began making Mary Plain bears in 1937, priced at five shillings and sixpence each. Production was most likely halted by the advent of



war in 1939. Today Mary Plain bears are very scarce but from the recollections of those who owned them, we know that the design

featured an inset muzzle in a colour that contrasted with the rest of bear. The books are now out of print but copies can be purchased from specialist dealers.

TOP LEFT:

An Alpha Farnell of the same vintage as Winnie the Pooh

ABOVE:

Rare and collectable Mary Plain book; an advert for the Farnell toy is printed inside the dust wrapper

Toffee

Like Mary Plain, Toffee was an ur-sine radio star, brought to prominence by the stories read on the BBC’s Listen with Mother programme in the 1950s. Chad Valley produced the first Toffee toys in 1953 but Farnell took over the licence in 1960. While the Chad Valley Toffee had been equipped with a red knitted hat and scarf, Farnell’s first offerings lacked these accessories although subsequent versions had the familiar hat and scarf back where they belonged. The standard Farnell Toffee was 10 inches high and made from golden brown mohair with rexine paw pads and a black, vertically stitched nose. The eyes were usually amber and black glass although later Toffees have been found with plastic eyes. Sometimes Toffee appeared in different shades of mohair such as cinnamon and, more rarely, white. The cinnamon examples still have rexine pads



counterparts are found with red leatherette pads.

Punkinhead

Punkinhead, surely one of Mer-rythought’s most iconic creations, may never have existed had it not been for Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer. In the 1940s, Eaton’s - Canada’s largest department store chain – sponsored the Toronto Santa Claus Parade, a huge event which brought enormous publicity to the store. But Montgomery Ward, a competitor of Eaton’s, threatened to steal some of their

limelight when they introduced a character called Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer as a Christmas promotion.

Determined to fight back, Eaton’s introduced a character of their own, a funny little teddy bear called Punkinhead who sported a thick woolly tuft of hair. When he led the Toronto Santa Claus Parade in December 1948, Punkinhead won the hearts of thousands of children. Aware that they had a merchandising



ABOVE TOP:

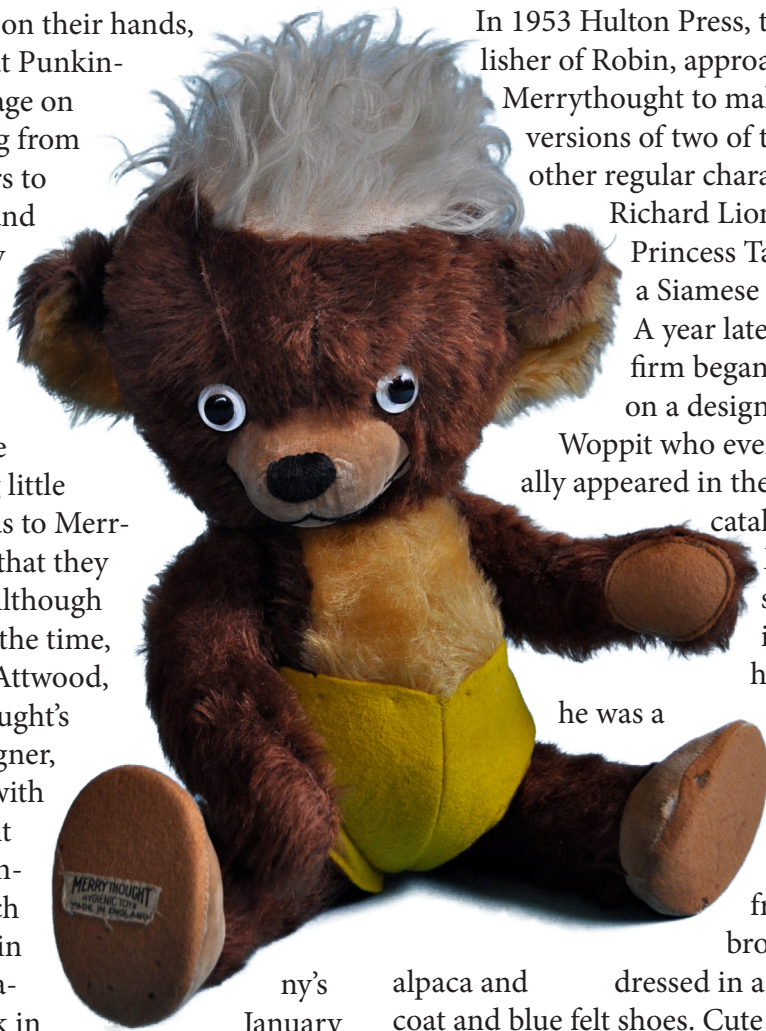
Farnell Toffee in the less common cinnamon mohair (image courtesy of Vectis Auctions)

ABOVE: A rare white Farnell Toffee

goldmine on their hands, Eaton's put Punkinhead's image on everything from high chairs to watches, and when they decided to sell a soft toy version of the endearing little bear, it was to Merrythought that they turned. Although very ill at the time, Florence Attwood, Merrythought's chief designer, came up with a blueprint for Punkinhead which appeared in the company's 1949. The first version was 16 inches tall but 10 and 24-inch varieties were issued in due course. Similarly, different models appeared featuring variations in the colours of his two-tone plush and felt shorts. Merrythought continued to make Punkinheads exclusively for Eaton's until 1956. One year later, they launched their world-conquering Cheeky bear, officially created by new chief designer Jean Barber (Florence Attwood having died in 1952) but clearly owing a great deal to Punkinhead.

Woppit/Mr Whoppit

While Punkinhead sprang from a department store's publicity campaign, another Merrythought legend came from the pages of a comic. The character of Woppit was created by prolific children's author and illustrator Ursula Moray Williams for Robin, a brand new comic aimed at the very young. The Story of Woppit centres on a teddy bear who becomes lost when he falls from a pram. He is befriended by a donkey called Mokey, a scarecrow called Tiptop and a jolly lady called Mrs Bumble.



In 1953 Hulton Press, the publisher of Robin, approached Merrythought to make toy versions of two of their other regular characters, Richard Lion and Princess Tai-Lu, a Siamese cat.

A year later, the firm began work on a design for Woppit who eventually appeared in the 1956 catalogue.

Measuring 9 inches high, rather tubby character made from brown

alpaca and dressed in a red felt coat and blue felt shoes. Cute as he was, Woppit failed to make much of a splash and he had disappeared from the range by the following year. Yet he was saved from fading gently into teddy bear obscurity by becoming the official mascot of Donald Campbell, the first person to hold land and water speed records at the same time. Regrettably, it isn't recorded how Campbell acquired a Woppit, nor why his name was changed to Mr Whoppit. What is known, however, is that Mr Whoppit was with Campbell in his boat, Bluebird, in 1964 when



1. The three friends visited a farm. They made themselves very useful.
 2. Tiptop scared birds off the corn. Mokey and Woppit watched him.
 3. Mokey pulled the hay cart along the lane. Woppit rode on top of it.
 4. Woppit drove the cows home to bed. "I am a farmer's boy!" said Woppit.

he broke the world water speed record on Lake Dumbleyung in Australia, achieving a speed of 276.3 mph. Then, in January 1967, Campbell attempted to become the first person to do over 300 mph on water. He was attempting the record on Coniston Water in the Lake District, Mr Whoppit alongside him as usual, when things went horribly wrong. Travelling at over 300 mph, Bluebird lifted out of the water and crashed back in again, disintegrating on impact. At the time Donald Campbell's body was not recovered (it was found in 2001) but Mr Whoppit was discovered floating on the water and in due course was given to Campbell's daughter, Gina.

The former editor of the Teddy Bear Annual and Teddy Bear Scene, Kathy Martin is the author of Merrythought Teddy Bears and Farnell Teddy Bears, both published by Pen & Sword Books.



TOP LEFT:

This Punkinhead sold for £1,400 plus Buyer's Premium at The London Toy Auction in 2011

ABOVE:

The Story of Woppit from Robin comic

LEFT:

Gina Campbell with Mr Whoppit

Follow Kathy on Twitter @KathyMartin001 and keep up with her news at www.kemartin.co.uk