

How little things led to one big Festival

A friend had £300 in the bank and an electric typewriter. She had a passion for miniatures and a hatful of new ideas. The London Dollshouse Festival was off to a flying start

BY CAROLINE HAMILTON

When it became embarrassingly obvious that I was spending a lot of the house-keeping money on my hobby, I started making little framed scenes called 'shadow boxes' for sale and traipsed off on Sunday mornings to sit in the cold at Covent Garden craft market with my dollmaker partner Judith James.



This led to joining the British Toy-makers Guild and also finding out that, while there were a few specialist doll's house fairs in various parts of the country, in London miniaturists struggled to be noticed amongst large antique dolls and teddy bears.

I got to know Sue Atkinson of Sunday Dolls and she thought we should start a miniatures-only fair in London. She had £300 in the bank and an electric typewriter so we took a deep breath and in May 1985 we hired Kensington Town Hall for a one-day Dollshouse Festival.

With no experience in this field at all, I just tried to do everything I would like to find as a keen collector myself: I aimed for a balance of different crafts, to celebrate the best quality work I could find worldwide, a proper catalogue with clear floor plans with tables named not numbered, decent refresh-

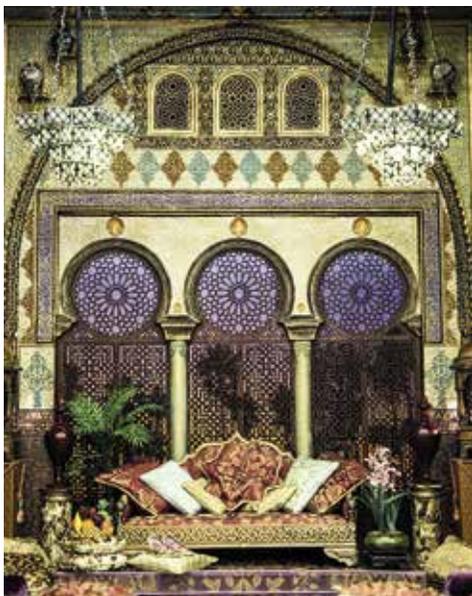


Book by KDF regular Miniature Boekenbinden

ments and room to sit down and, above all, some finished doll's houses in a display section to show off and inspire –not just a fair, but a festival.

Hobby mate Jane Fiddick took charge of the display and every year we laboured to finish another project, offered each other whatever papers or mouldings might come in handy, ran around the corner late at night to borrow the fret - or the tabletop saw - and consulted at length. Finally we had to wax everything down in the houses so that we could bubble-wrap them and load them into a transit van that I drove with considerable trepidation.

The Festival quickly expanded to a three-day weekend, became a great international success and our lim-



Arabian room set by previous KDF exhibitor Ron Hubble



Winner of the KDF Cup 2018 Nikki Nakki Nu



Doll by KDF regular Gale Elena Bantock



Painted furniture by Summer Show exhibitor Janet Reyburn



Fish tank by Summer Show exhibitor Fatima Dona



Spring Onions by KDF regular Mouse House Miniatures



Overview of Kensington Dollhouse Festival

ited number preview tickets sold out months in advance. When I passed the show to Charlotte Stokoe, twenty years later, she took it onwards and upwards, adding more shows to the calendar, with the original Kensington Town Hall making its fiftieth appearance in its thirty third year. It has been immensely rewarding to see so much talent blossom from Scholarship Table (our free place for rising talent) to top of the tree and to share the delight of fellow collectors.

It's celebration time as Festival hits fifty mark

When show organiser Charlotte Stokoe did the maths, she was left with one thought.. it was time to celebrate fifty shows run under the London Dollhouse banner

Charlotte Stokoe is stocking up on the gold and the glitter this December when the London Dollhouse Festival celebrates its fiftieth show.

She took over the organisation of the world-famous Festival in 2005 and is finding it hard to believe that she has since run 30 shows in the past 13 years.

"This fact dawned upon me very suddenly," Charlotte said. "I can't remember why I was adding up the number of shows. I was probably trying to find something more important to do than my VAT return, but as soon as I had done the maths a few times to make sure I hadn't made a mistake..14 summer shows plus 11 Christmas shows plus five City of London shows, I realised that, with the twenty shows Caroline Hamilton had run before me, that it was time to celebrate fifty shows."

Charlotte has lots of exciting things planned for the anniversary show. She said: "I don't need much encouragement to celebrate so we have some great ideas to make the show special on December 1st. I



guarantee there will be lots of gold, glitter and balloons involved."

50th Show celebration cards

The current LDF logo is a version of the original logo from back in 1985, but this year

Charlotte wanted to add a new-look doll's house. She turned to Robin Hunter, multi-talented LDF Team member, who has 'artist' listed as one of his many skills. Charlotte said: "He pictured the house perfectly, and 300 special 50th Show Celebration cards featuring the house were posted to our most regular visitors."

Limited edition book

Liza Antrim has just published another wonderful book about her doll's house collection and Charlotte has asked Ellie de Lacy, one of her regular exhibitors, to produce a mini version.

An edition of 50 copies launched in November and will be available at the show. Charlotte said: "Ellie's work is always accurate and detailed so I am sure the finished book will be something all collectors want."



A doll's house doll's house by KDF regular Geoff Wonnacott



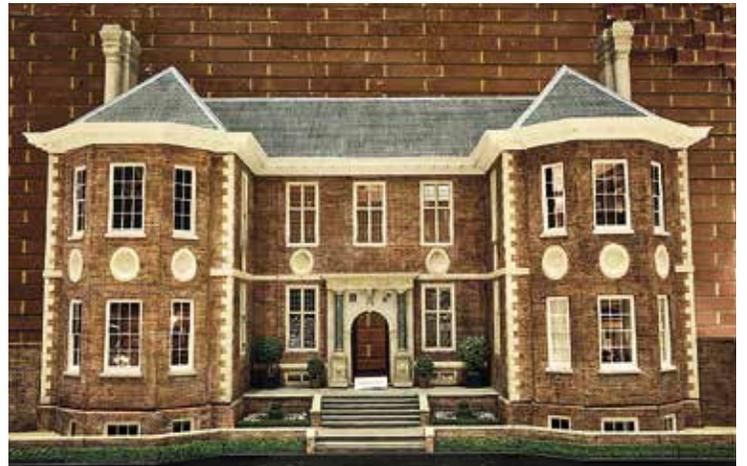
Doll's house by KDF regular visitor Debra Kirby



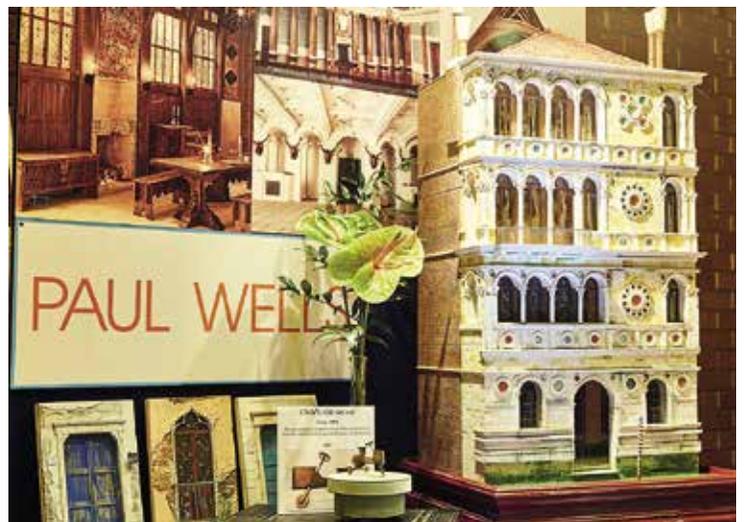
Shop scene by previous KDF exhibitor Jethro's Barn



Tudor house by Christmas Show exhibitor The Workshop



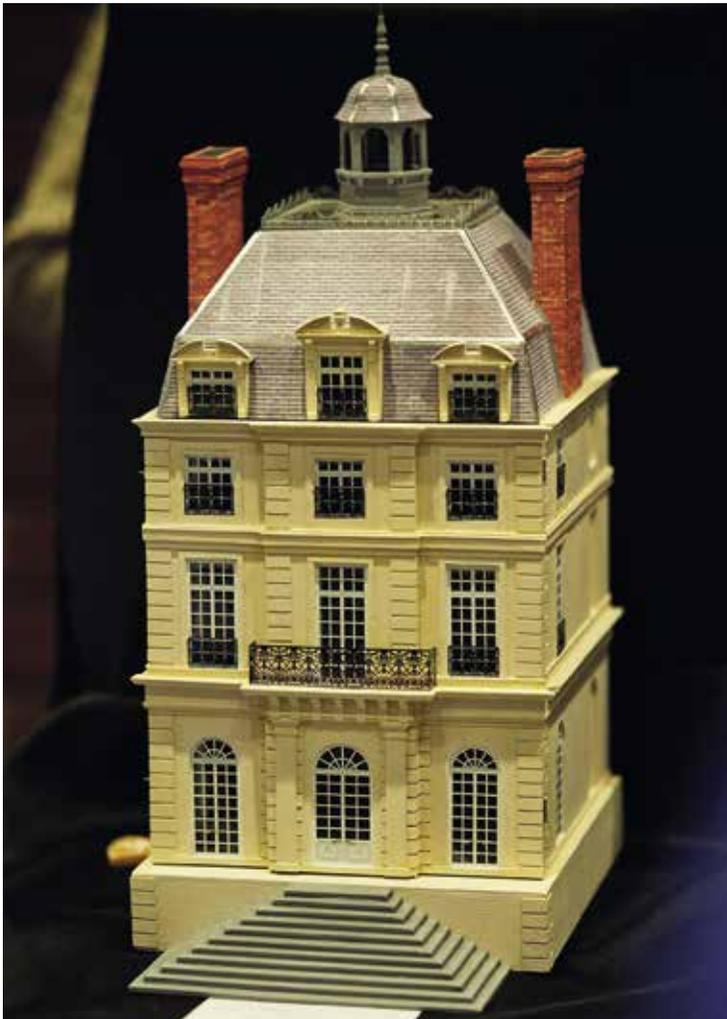
Ham House by KDF regulars Mulvany & Rogers



Venician palazzo by Paul Wells



Room interior by previous KDF exhibitor The Georgian Dolls House Co



1:144 scale house by KDF regulars Small Time



Parisian Boutique by KDF regulars Mulvany & Rogers



Treasured memories

Jan and Paul Brownhill of Country Treasures are another couple who haven't missed a single Festival. Jan tells us about their experiences, including a very noisy start

Q: You've been at every show since 1985. What's your secret? There is no secret, but it's hard to believe we've done 50 shows. Time stands still when you're doing something you love.

Q: Clearest memory of that first show? Waking up the residents of Kensington early Sunday morning when the exhaust system broke in half, and having to return home on the back of an AA recovery vehicle at the end of the show. The amazing day in-between made up for the inconvenience.

Q: Has your range changed much over the years? Hopefully it's improved. Paul continues to add to the list of copperware and kitchen ranges. My range of preserves and food displays are constantly changing and now we have Laura, our granddaughter, with her amazing wildlife and detailed food items.



Q: If you hadn't been at the fairs, how would you have spent the time? Most likely some other creative activity, or nosing around antique fairs, getting away in our little motor home. Certainly not sitting twiddling our thumbs.

Q: What changes have you noticed? New faces behind the stands as others retire or move on to new ventures. The biggest change is the instant access to social media. There wasn't much of that around back in the day.

Q: What do you love most about the Festival? The wonderful atmosphere. Meeting up with old friends and customers. They lift our spirits with their lovely comments and joyful faces.

Q: What do you least like? Getting out of bed in the early hours to travel to London when the country is asleep.

Q: Do you have a set unpacking routine? Paul has his routine. I sit back and let him get on with it. He does allow me to put the cloth on the table and carry the bags to and from the car. Happy days!

Q: What's the strangest thing that's happened to you at the Festival? It was at one of the early shows. We found ourselves pinned between the wall and our stand. It was like the January sales. We couldn't persuade the visitors to move back enough to push the stand into its original position.

Q: What makes you pull your hair out at shows? It takes a lot to get me to that stage. Paul hasn't any left to pull.

More memories



Q: You love making miniatures, but do you love selling them? We love the look of happiness on customers' faces when they purchase something they've wanted for ages. Especially when they return to show photographs of our work displayed in their doll's houses and room settings.

Q: How many more Festivals do you have in you? Who knows. Can't imagine life without miniatures. Luckily, our granddaughter has joined us. She has great enthusiasm and lots of new ideas, so even when we are not around Country Treasures should be for a long time to come.

● www.countrytreasures.co.uk



Karen Griffiths and Peter Armstrong of Stokesay Ware have exhibited at every Festival. Here Karen gives us a flavour of what it's been like.

Q: You're one of only two makers to have attended all 50 shows. What's your secret? Luck. We were in the right place at the right time when Caroline invited us to the first show.

Q: What do you remember about your first show? It was tremendously successful, Peter and I were elated.

Q: How has your range changed over the years? The biggest change we made was quite early on when we stopped using commercially available patterns and started drawing and making our own exclusive designs. More recently the innovation of full colour

printing in ceramic enamels which can be permanently fired into the glaze has opened up a whole new avenue to explore with the the exciting possibility of new ranges of colourful china.

Q: What would you have been doing if you hadn't been spending all those weekends at fairs? I would have been decorating and furnishing my own doll's house which has stood untouched and neglected in the corner of my living room for 30 years.

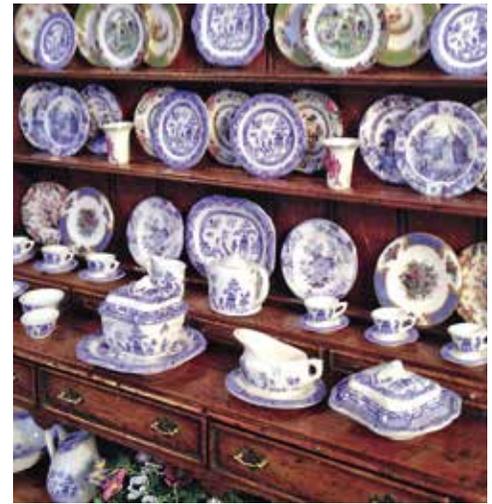
Q: How has the Festival changed? In some ways I don't think the Festival has changed that much in that it maintains the same high standards that Caroline insisted on. It still has the same buzz and excitement and Charlotte has successfully grown it to two shows a year, plus the Tower show, without compromising the original vision.

Q: What do you love most about the Festival? It is our local show.

Q: What do you least like? London Transport engineering works

Q: Most memorable moment? My most memorable moment really was the unexpected success of that first show. I went home thinking that if I never did anything else again I would





at least have done something that was an unqualified success.

Q: Do you have favourite customers?

We have so many customers who have been visiting us for decades that they have become like old friends, but the amazement on the faces of new visitors is a joy too.

Q: Do you have a set unpacking/packing routine?

We still carry the checklist my late father made for my first show, although we now leave out the mole grip wrench, string and ashtray. It was 37 years ago!



Q: Does anything surprise you each year? The skill and ingenuity of our fellow exhibitors is a constant source of delight. I collect myself so fully appreciate the exquisite pleasure of unpacking a new treasure when I get home.

Q: What makes you pull your hair out at shows?

Very little - but if it does we recite the 'Serenity Prayer'! There are some things that we just have no influence over.

Q: You love making miniatures, but do you love selling them? It is the sincerest of compli-

ments when customers part with their hard-earned money for something we have made, so yes.

Q: How many more Festivals do you have in you? This is so much more than a job for us, it's a way of life and we can't imagine doing anything else. We are excited about the new projects and in view of this we plan to review your question after the next 50 shows!

- Karen and Peter sell their current ranges through their website www.stokesayware.com and at shows. Their previous ranges and vintage work will be available on eBay under their user ID stokesayarchive

Why Caroline's stunning headdress was created

When the Festival was under Caroline's command, first-time visitors and exhibitors were often taken aback by her eccentric headdress.

There was certainly no missing the show organiser. And that was the point. Caroline recalls: "Partner Sue Atkinson was stuck at her Sunday Dolls table and worried about seeing where I was; all this was well before mobile phones and such.

"So I wore extra-thick-soled trainers, a bright red sash and made a Caroline sign above my head. I included my languages in case a foreign visitor was stuck.

"Stall holders made a mock and said: "It'll never fly Caroline". So I said: "But it'll have flashing lights on it next year!" And it did, with a small battery down my bra.

"In the Millennium dome year it was an inverted plastic pudding basin and for our 18th year I made the birthday balloons version. It was incredibly useful and looking at the old photos I still admire it."



See the houses

The book 'Our Dollshouses at Newby Hall', by Caroline Hamilton and Jane Fiddick, will be on sale at the Festival. The book features many of the houses that will have been displayed at the Festival over the years. You can still see the houses too, perpetuated in a permanent home at Newby Hall, near Ripon, North Yorkshire.



Kensington Dollshouse Festival Christmas Show

1st December 2018

Kensington Town Hall, Hornton Street, London W8 7NX.

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www.dollshousefestival.com

