Down the lane

The houses that Lilliput built

By Sherry Kahan
special writer

Even though it is less than three inches tall, the small house calls out for attention. It is a replica of a home in England once lived in by the creator of Peter Rabbit, Flopsy, Mopsy, Cottontail and a host of other names of field and forest.

When she settled down in England's Lake District, Beatrix Potter picked an old house made of local stone and slate in which to write and illustrate her popular children's books.

When a British firm called Lilliput Lane began to make miniatures of old English dwellings, it settled on the Potter home as one of its collector's items. Along with its many other buildings, Lilliput has come up with one of the more popular collectibles today.

The company has also begun to turn out a collection of German structures of the past and is contemplating the production of replicas of American buildings.

A REPRESENTATIVE of this thriving industry recently paid a visit to Georgia's Gift Gallery in Plymouth to talk about these miniatures.

President of the American outpost of Lilliput, Roger Fitness, worked with fine bone china and glass before joining Lilliput after its founding in 1982.

He picked up a replica of a German rathaus (city hall), and examined it. Much larger than the Potter home, it was notable for its red tile roof. These tiles were so small that they must have been made by someone with the hands of a surgeon and the eyes of a hawk.

"Every one of these tiny red tiles was cut by hand and then placed on the roof, one by one, by an artist using an instrument similar to the pick favored by dentists," said Fitness in an accent splendidly British. "It takes weeks for the artist to tile one of these roofs. Some have over 10,000 tiles."

Fitness knows that the popularity *of these miniatures is due to the* extraordinary detail with which the models are made. For example, each of the five front windows of the Beatrix Potter home has 12 miniscule panes of what looks like glass. The quarter-inch doors of a shed at the side of the house have wee latches.

A HOME IN YORK has leaded and mullioned windows that brought plenty of light inside for the spinners who worked in the house. A cottage found in the Lakeland countryside is whitewashed and has a wavy roof of heavy split stone, and a small Victorian dwelling in Westmorland added a conservatory at the side. A bright red Virginia creeper grows outside. In fact, most of the Lilliput buildings are surrounded with foliage.

Lilliput's collection of old homes, cottages, inns, pubs, churches, restaurants, mills and shops offer a useful study of the architecture as well as the building methods and styles of the British past.

The miniatures are constructed of material developed by artist David Tate, founder of the company. Made of amorphite, it consists of especially hard gypsum rock. It is breakable but less so than china because it is a *hard, dense material.*

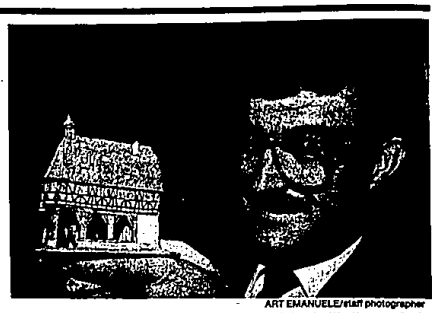
What may be the best job in the company is the one that takes an employee and sometimes the president himself to byways and back country roads of Great Britain to look for buildings with the kind of charm that will attract collectors.

"They are often found in narrow lanes, or tucked in a corner somewhere," said Fitness, who has done some searching himself. "Usually they are beautifully maintained by owners, who are proud of owning a home that is hundreds of years old. Often the gardens are immaculate.

"The company asks permission to add the house to its collection, but it doesn't pay them. They are happy to have the piece done. But they don't want us to tell where it is. That would spoil their tranquility."

Secrecy is necessary because in six years the company has built up its English collectors club to about 15,000 members, making it one of the largest clubs involved in collectibles in a country that is extraordinarily craft minded. (There is also a club in Canada and a fast growing one in this country.) If these members started making pilgrimages to the original houses in their collections, it might well disturb the owner's tran*quility.*

After a building is selected, it is photographed in great detail. "Then the original models is sculpted in special wax we developed ourselves," explained Fitness. "With tiny, tiny tools, the artists carve the model from a hard block of wax. They have to get every last detil into the model because after the original model is done, there can't be any more detail. Then it must be scrutinized by members of the company. Each piece may have a different painter so they may vary slightly."



ART EMANUELE/staff photographer

Roger Fitness holds a German rathaus (city hall), the roof of which has over 10,000 tiny red tiles, individually set in place by an artist.

The English love these replicas of old treasured cottages and other buildings because they are part of their heritage, Fitness said. To Americans, they also have similar *appeal.*

Diane Gamble, who came from Mt. Clemens to Plymouth to talk to the English visitor, is one of them. "I have always loved English history and architecture. I love English anything. I love to read their history. These pieces are unique in their detail, entirely different," she remarked.

SHE ADDED A financial note. "If they have pieces that they retire, I bet that in two or three years they double or triple in value. The only way to get one then is to go through someone willing to sell."

At Georgia's Gift Gallery, the cost of the smallest Lilliput item is $21.50 for Bridge House, while the largest, more elaborate Tudor Court sells for $294.95.

The gallery is currently kicking off with the sale of a Christmas house called Deer Park Hall, said Michelle Suttle, who with her brother Livonian Michael McCarty owns the shop. Covered with snow, Deer Park Hall is a copy of a home made of oak and brick that is set in a herringbone pattern.

Tuning in to murmurings of a magical place

Mona Grigg is on vacation. Her column is being written by a colleague, Sarah Wolfe, a Livonia writer whose mystery-suspense novel, "Long Chain of Death," was published in 1987. She is currently at work on another book.

book break

WHEN I was a graduate student at the University of Michigan's School of Library Science, a guest lecturer ventured the opinion that most librarians were people who had worked in some other profession first, and then, when they had failed or become disillusioned with it, had turned to librarianship.

The reason for this, he said, was that as children they had found libraries to be comfortable, safe havens to which they now, in the face of failure or unhappiness, wished to return.

I have no way of knowing whether his theories were supported by facts or merely opinion.

But in my case, it is certainly true that I had had a previous profession that I did not find altogether satisfactory. It is also true that the library I used in my childhood seemed like a warm retreat where a child was welcome to linger and explore.

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— Sarah Wolf

The adult reading room was all pale oak and bright overhead lights. The stacks for adults were on two levels, with the second level overlooking the circulation desk and only an ancient iron grillework to keep the unwary from falling to the floor below.

The stairs to that redoubtable place were circular, the first circular stairs I had ever seen, and they creaked, as did the wooden floors.

BUT THOSE places were the province of adults, and it was only with a kind of awesome daring that a child ventured into them.

The children's reading room was in the back, behind the circulation desk, and it was panelled in dark walnut, like the refuge of some baronial book lover. Three walls were covered with books, while windows in the fourth wall overlooked the town park.

The tables were walnut, too, and the chairs — everything dark and warm as a summer night or a mother's hug.

I spent a great many hours in that library, exploring, reading, developing the sense I've had ever since that libraries are intriguing places where the wisdom of the ages, all the thoughts that anyone has ever expressed, all the stories that anyone has ever told, lie in wait to be discovered and discovered and discovered again by each new reader.

A WRITER friend shares similar recollections from her childhood, though her local library was quite different.

Hers was the McGregor Branch of the Detroit Public Library, a building she remembers as huge and glorious, having massive columns, echoing marble floors, rich dark oak, and room after room of books. Such a marvelous building could only have the purpose of containing extraordinary treasures.

Both of us understand completely the young Adso of Melk in "The Name of the Rose."

When he confronts the first library he has ever seen, he perceives it was a "place of long, centuries-old mur-

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