



Project: British Toy Making Project

Tom Karen
Graphic Designer

Interview conducted by
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CAREER BACKGROUND

Tom Karen (ca. 1925 -) was born in Vienna but spent his childhood years in Czechoslovakia. His family left Czechoslovakia in 1939 and arrived in Britain in 1942 via Belgium, France, Spain and Portugal. He studied aeronautical engineering at Loughborough College and spent ten years working in the aircraft industry. He then decided he was more interested in design and went to study industrial design in London before joining the Ford design studio in 1955. In 1958 he won a national car design competition with his radical concept called the 'Rascal'.

Over the next few years he worked for David Ogle, Hotpoint, and Phillips, where he set up their studio for white goods in London. In 1962 David Ogle was killed in a car accident and Karen was invited to take charge of Ogle Design. He was managing director and chief designer until 1999, during this period he was responsible for the development of a wide range of innovative products including: the Bush TR130, a best selling radio during the 1960s; the Raleigh Chopper, launched in 1970 and a bicycle icon; a novel marble run toy which was sold to Kiddicraft.

On retirement Karen continued to remain active in the design industry giving lectures and making toys for his grandchildren.

INTERVIEW SYNOPSIS

Tom Karen discusses how he started working in the design industry; the toys he designed; his relationship with other toy companies; the concept of toy design in general; contemporary toy design, and toys he has made for his grandchildren.

Tom Karen Part I

[Duration 00:47:58]

[0:00:02]: Okay if you could start talking.

[0:00:03]: Right... My name is Tom Karen and I spent most of my career, the best part of forty years, running a design company called Ogle Design. And we did everything from truck interiors and aircraft interiors, motorcars to radios, baths and toys and... I've quite a fondness for toys I must say.

[0:00:33]: And how did you first get into design?

[0:00:38]: A slightly curious route because I studied aircraft engineering actually because it was a sort of period when aircraft were very topical. Although, as a kid I was mad about motor cars but also about aircraft and, and ships and things but motor cars very much. So I, I spent ten years in the aircraft industry at first doing stressing which I was hopeless at. I'm not a mathematician, and then I went into the publication side and I did some illustration and that sort of thing and by this time I'd discovered there was a such thing as industrial design so I managed to get into Central School fairly briefly and then Ford were recruiting people and I went to Fords for, I was able to, to get involved in motor car design, so, so that was great. Then just briefly I spent four years there. I, I

thought I might get trapped in the motor industry so I didn't want to stay there, rightly or wrongly, and I briefly worked for David Ogle, then I worked for Hotpoint, then I worked for Phillips, the latter two was white goods and I wondered how long I could stand doing that. And then poor old David Ogle whom I worked for was killed in a in a car accident and his... fellow Directors in the business invited me to come and run it. So suddenly, suddenly I was in charge of a Design... Design Office which was doing from motor cars to radios and things like that. A variety of products, and, and that suited me because I have a sort of butterfly mind and I like to work on different products and... and so that that suited me, so we went on from there. I... how did I get into toys?... The main work when we started, I was working for Bush, the radio people, with quite a lot of success. I took that over from David Ogle. And then we got Electrolux and Phillips we worked for and then we picked up Reliant and started doing motor cars, and we did luxury coaches and the, the business developed and grew. And incidentally we had a wonderful model shop. Everything we did, designed, had beautiful models made that looked exactly like the final product. So that was Ogle now... ... Toys I, I have a feeling that it may be that I was a slow developer and I loved having toys for quite a long time, and one night in Czechoslovakia where I come from, I was woken up and told to pack, to choose my favourite toy take with me and we were off and run away, you know? And I took some models of ships that I had, Waterline ships that were absolutely beautiful and made by people called Viking and you... look as if you

might know them and they're absolutely beautiful, how toys should be made. So when I started at, when I was Ogle, I had a hankering to do toys again and I started to sort of feed my way into it but actually getting us at Ogle to make a wooden racing car, which I can show you a model of, but my racing car looked like a Formula 1 racing car of the period. It had big wheels at the back which were made of rubber and smaller wheels at the front. It didn't have red wooden wheels the way the wooden toys normally would have. And um... we actually made those, which was not very efficient probably, but and our selling was probably not, even less efficient but it got us into the toy business and we started working for ESA... and uh work like that. Now um... then in (coughs) in around, towards 1970 we got involved with the Chopper bike, which is a sort of high profile thing and that was because Raleigh came to us looking for a more inspired answer than I suspect they were able to get in house, and we designed the Chopper. And uh that became a great commercial success as you will know and very iconic and I had an interview about it not long ago and I said, I explained that really I wanted every product that we designed at Ogle to be just as good. The only problem is if you do a very successful radio which is a bestseller in the UK, or a hugely successful bath, or something like that, it doesn't tend to get the same profile as uh the Chopper did you, know. But it wasn't a sort of eureka... experience of doing the Chopper, I just wanted to do a damn good bike to, to please children. But... about, by this time, I had uh started having uh children, and so was...had an opportunity to play with them and find

out what they liked. They of course liked the usual things like Lego and drawing which was, which was great but... one Christmas, I think it was, my, my sister gave my children a wooden marble run, and it was the fixed type, you know, and I was quite surprised how much satisfaction they got out of this. I think the marbles running down and then going 'clonk' and running down 'clonk' and the look of the marbles, they're quite pretty things, and then collecting them and shoving them on top and have lots of marbles shooting down... they got a huge amount of satisfaction from it and this, this really intrigued me, and I thought if there was a challenge in more building a marble run and then they get the reward and the reward was worth the effort of facing the challenge, it would be a much better toy. And except I suppose the, the clonking on the plastic isn't quite as satisfying as the clonking on the wood, I, I accept that... Now then, so I'd already started thinking about it and here I've got two hundred of my sketchbooks over the years and in it I've got how it developed, but it happened quite quickly. And what we did, we ... drew it up and had a prototype made because I had this wonderful model shop, and the prototype worked perfectly, and one of the beauties of it from a, I know cost point of view and simplicity point of view, there are only three different components in it. There's a bridge, there are like spaces and then a kind of hopper where the marbles go around and also where they collect at the bottom. And... and uh... then we, we prototyped it, it worked beautifully and we sold it to Kiddicraft, so all the initiative came from us. And I rate the marble run as a much more important toy than

the, the Chopper because thousands of children got a great deal of satisfaction from it for long periods of time in all kinds of countries and it, it is still on the market, it has been copied umpteen times... and any toy that lasts forty years is a very good toy because mostly they die after two years, as you as you may well know, and I keep seeing new new copies coming up, and often not very good ones, some quite some really are not very good ones. They got the wrong idea like having an electric thing that takes the marbles to the top instead of having the wonderful satisfaction of taking a handful of marbles and shoving them at the top, an illustration of how some people misunderstand children. So that was toys, now...

[0:10:32]: Was it... do you remember... if it was easy to sell to Kiddicraft?

[0:10:37]: Well, something strange had happened actually at that time. The Lines Brothers business had gone bust and one of the Lines's came to see me and said he could sort of help us and I said well can you sell this toy to somebody and he sold it to Kiddicraft. I don't think we, he, we did a particularly good deal, because we gave them the rights to America and they did a hopeless job of marketing there, and the American market is much much bigger than the European market, and so I think we... could have got a lot of more money out of it, we got sort of 5% you know, than we did. But it, I just get a lot of pleasure from knowing what a good toy it is, and I've sometimes, when I've given talks I've shown a pictures

of the marble run and on one such occasion I was in, in Iceland in fact with design students, and one of the students, a girl incidentally, came up and said 'do you know that was my all time favourite toy' and I've had the same situation somewhere else at the University so.. that's really cheering. And I've got photographs of my youngest daughter sort of sitting there playing with the original marble run from Kiddicraft, and I've got pictures of my grandson, you know, playing with it, and the two year old now loves it, you know, when he comes here, I've got the marble run they like playing with it so... that's what a good toy's all about... Does that cover cover the marble run?

[0:12:31]: Very much so. I suppose going back to the Chopper, when you first presented that idea to Raleigh what was their reaction?

[0:12:43]: Well, the story of the Chopper, of course, is that they needed to compete with a, a bicycle that had been developed in on the west coast of America, where all trends start, there's something called a Schwinn, which was a sort of chunky bicycle with very curvaceous frame and it was a huge success and I think it was used, or miss-used, very much by children. They would sort of chuck it on the pavement and get into the drug store and get whatever they wanted, then stand it up and then jump down on it and ride away. Anyway, Raleigh wanted to compete and ... [coughs] they, they, their marketing [coughs] their Marketing Director came to see me and he wanted to compete but wanted a

different sort of flavour to it but get into the same market, and I think I made up my mind while he was still with us that I would go for a big wheel and a small wheel because it sort of symbolises the power of going out on the rear wheel you know, speed thing, and then those lovely gear shifts that kids loved you know?¹ The handle bars not unlike at all the, not unlike the Chopper. The, the saddle we had to develop [coughs] and we prototyped it because there was a danger of infringing a Schwinn patent they found that on States, so we came up with this lovely L-shaped saddle with the, with the strap. And I put springs under the, the saddle and I can't even remember if the springs worked or not or whether they were just make believe. And another bit of make believe was actually the sort of ... disc brakes on the rear wheel that sort of furnish it, I felt it needed something there, so that, that was what sort of made the Chopper. There were some little things I think also, the sit of the, the mud guards over the wheels and ...I think the name was very inspired, I think Raleigh say they thought of it, but the guy who, who did the drawing, from Ogle, said he put the Chopper name on one of them because he was a motorbike guy, but, but I couldn't find any prints of that picture so I've never claimed that, but it was a brilliant name, it was so right. So that was the Chopper bike, and it, it in some ways, as a vehicle for going from A to B, it wasn't a very good bike. It was terribly heavy, you could never win the Tour de France on a, on a Chopper, you

¹ Raleigh designed a model called 'Rodeo' that was a bit of a Schwinn clone – it bombed and that was the reason their Marketing Director Peter Seels came to see me [Subsequently added by interviewee].

know, so that was the Chopper. But they were a huge success and it made a lot of money for Raleigh. So it, it pleased children, which was important, I mean essential. And it pleased Raleigh and sometime, we may come to that, clients who are, who put the emphasis on making money and not quite so much on pleasing children, but I'm sure you've been exposed to that. So does that, does that cover it, the Chopper?

[0:16:32]: Mmm. I'd be interested to know as well what other toy companies you had dealings with at your time at Ogle?

[0:16:39]: We worked for, for Airfix and... we and they had owned ... Meccano up in Liverpool and we'd, we'd tried to, well, we actually developed, a plastic version of Meccano, it was very simple to fit together, which didn't fly. And then we, we developed a range of very nice steel toys to try and compete with Tonka, which name you may well know. It was called the Mogul range and they were really nice but they couldn't get the cost right, so that was a problem. I tried to, I tried to talk Airfix into doing things for girls, because all their market was sort of aeroplanes and stuff like that and I, I even mocked up, having been to the Tower of London, a piece of jewellery worn by, I know, Elizabeth or somebody and thought you could make that in pieces and get girls to do it and, or if that would have excited you when you were young. But you know they were so fixed at their market they couldn't make a sort of leap of the imagination to go for girls. And incidentally the same

happened with Matchbox. I said look, you know, lovely toys for mostly they go to boys, is there nothing one can die-cast you know that would please girls? And, you know, they knew what they were doing you know and they were great at die-casting and of course their business went away because they didn't understand children, they just understood die-casting and were lucky to hit on making, making models. Who else... we worked for ESA, the educational type toys...

[0:18:49]: What sort of things were you producing or designing for them?

[0:18:53]: Well [coughs], there's one gadget to help you understand equations where you put different weights into things, and there's a little mini microscope and actually we, we did later we did some work for Kiddicraft, I don't know if they'd been taken over by then, but we did some toys for small children as well. ... And... yes we did and, a number of things for them. I would have loved to do much more work for the toy business but it, it was quite uphill to, to talk them into any new line of thinking like Airfix or Matchbox.

[0:19:50]: You found that across the board with different companies or were there some that were more receptive?

[0:19:57]: I think generally speaking... people are not receptive to new ideas, I find. I think and I think this country's worse than others for that. I,

yeah, I'm a bit disillusioned from that point of view. I mean for, for Matchbox, I don't know if that's the bit you want to come to, but about how, how management dealt with their business... is that ok to discuss? Well, Matchbox of course started die-casting things, I think they did die-casted things for Ford, and they're very good at die-casting. And, and then one day they hit on this idea of doing the Coronation coach, and that was a big success and so they woke up to the possibility of making little models, the Matchbox models which were a great success, and they did very good die-casting and they made quite nice models and, and built up a very good business but... they, they their, as the business developed they, they, the board would sort of sit there in boardroom and little Product Managers would sit outside and, ready to be called in to present new ideas, and depending on what time of day it was, whether it was before lunch, I mean if early morning or before lunch or after lunch or late in the afternoon, the chances of success of selling a new toy depended on that, which was a bit unfortunate because it wasn't a very objective way of, of assessing the possibility of a, of a toy. And I think that's where, where my proposal to try and do something for girls probably hit the buffers. And then of course somebody offered them to do what, what became Hot Wheels, you know a better way of toys to run, little models to run more freely, and they turned that down and of course Mattell took over and encroached in the market and so, basically, I think they were good at die-casting and they didn't understand children and toys very well, which is what, what caused their, their sort of

collapse in the end. And being taken over by Hong Kong, who were making a lot of their toys by then. So that's not, not, you know that's how some of our companies operate, and it's very sad. I don't know if I dare bring you up to date but I, and I don't know how far it goes but I, I wrote to the to the man who, who runs Hornby now, which is a very successful operation and, um, it takes in now Corgi and uh Airfix and maybe something else. And I wrote to him saying that I, I'd love to put some ideas to him because I was so close to one child who was mad on trains, but I could see what, what he wanted and I knew what kind of toys I want and would have liked to have. And it turned out, and I knew this actually, that he'd worked at Raleigh so he knew about the Chopper exercise, except I had to explain to him that, that the concept came from me and from Ogle and not from inside the company because there was a.. .the marketing people had concocted a story that, that, you know about that? No okay.... Well they concocted a story that the Technical Director had designed it on the back of an envelope and, that sort of ran for quite some time. So I had to put him right over that. But anyway he'd referred me to his Design Development department and they frigged around, really not very keen to talk to me, and then they said 'maybe you should talk to our Marketing department' and so I tried to get onto them and they really didn't want to run at all. It's such a shame because from my experience with my, with grandchildren, I've got such a clear idea of, of things that they badly want, like, for example, if you if you go to a collector's fair or, or a good toy shop you will see some beautiful die-cast

cars, but the underside and all the sort of mechanism, in particular the steering, is made of plastic and with small children, however careful they are, they break, and they break very quickly and, and that leads to big disappointment. I've been able to repair some but with the steering mechanism it's, it gets more difficult. And I, I remember and I've got books on toys, before the war, in Paris I think, somebody did a, a, an Alpha Romeo racing car which you could steer, and it was about so big and it's a classic and it's in some of these toy books and I love that product and I know the same thing would, my grandson would love it and lots of other children would. And you cannot have it, it's, they're all collectors pieces. And if you go to, to a collector's fair you see all these people who are fifty and sixty and seventy and they go around and there are very few kids, you know, and they, they buy to collect and, you know, it's not for kids, you know, keep them out, you know! Which is, you know, a bit sad... So anyway are we getting off your...

[0:26:34]: It sounds from what you're saying that... you and Ogle came up with ideas and then took them to companies rather than companies coming to you and saying we'd like you to design a new 'x' or a new 'y'...

[0:26:47]: Yeah well... I think you have to do quite a bit of knocking on doors. The Chopper was an exception, and incidentally we did quite a lot of other work for for, for Raleigh, not just the Chopper, and some really nice work but somebody decided not to go ahead, they had ideas of

going into prams and toys and for small children and so on, we did some really stuff, but it, they, they were making a lot of tubes for, for people doing prams so they thought they'd better keep that business and not go into competition with them um.. So... quite a lot, you knock on doors...

[0:27:41]: Was there a team of you at Ogle that were sort of specialising in...

[inaudible] toys?

[0:27:44]: Oh well... I did have in the end one particular person who, who I persuaded to concentrate on toys. He moaned a bit about it because he was a good designer and he could do other things but, uh he supported me terribly well and we worked very well together and he did some lovely things on his own without me. And together we did good, good stuff. And... Ogle was a sort of a finishing school for designers and some used Ogle as a sort of passport to a better job because people knew we had good people and we trained them well. He stayed quite a long time but in the end when he left he actually set up doing toy design and I, I'm in touch with him and I, I've great respect for his ability, but I think even he has been conditioned by, by the people he works for in a way that I think is a bit of a shame. However, so, but Ogle. I finished up having ninety people at Ogle, it wasn't a small operation, we were one of the major design studios in the country, and I had a, a wonderful big model shop and, you know, we built a double decker bus and a forty five foot long aircraft and we built a spaceship for Star Wars the 'Y' Fighter was

done by us, and um... we did numbers of cars and trucks and, and of course vacuum cleaners and refrigerators and lots of radios and [one word inaudible] et cetera et cetera et cetera. Our output was huge and very, very varied, so it was a lot of fun. I had quite a lot of people working at Ogle. Uh so, prompt me again.

[0:29:58]: Do you get the impression that toy design is seen as the poorer cousin to other industrial design?

[0:30:05]: It, I'm sure David Ogle would never have wanted to design toys and, and certainly some people get into toy design and stick with it and of course some designers have a have a small range and they quite like to become specialised. No, if anybody looks down on toy design I, I would, I would be really sad because it, it is, it is a very important design field because ... I, I just adore small children and I think that they, their first few years of their life, particularly the first six, they have a huge capacity to learn and a huge desire to learn and, and you can give them wonderful experience and, and their they're open minded, enthusiastic and they're just wonderful so not to give them the very best one can seems [interference and delay] really sad... So so... that's that's been my motivation. But generally speaking, I mean, certainly some people seem to have just specialised in toys, that is, that is the case, but then some people have specialised in, in mobiles and lighting and so on. And doing what we did, every design challenge was included because on a vehicle

for example you've got the big sculptural aspect of the body, you've got structural aspects, you've got seating which is uh furniture, you've got instrumentation, you just have to cope with everything. But even there, actually some, some vehicle designers like designing exteriors and preferably sports cars and if you give them a truck to design they, I've known some people who really can't do a good truck but they can do a beautiful vehicle. So, so some people have their limits and I tried not to have limits I just loved it all. So anyway guide me.

[0:32:55]: Do you approach designing a toy differently to designing another consumer item, a white good for example or are there the sort of central core aspects of design and your approach to it are they the same?

[0:33:11]: I well, I think overall the approach wouldn't be very different. I, I tried to do something that really will really please the person or persons who are going to use the product. But I suppose where the difference arises is that I could relate just that much more to wanting to please a small child than I did to the woman using a refrigerator or a vacuum cleaner. Now I wanted them to have beautiful vacuum cleaners and refrigerators but to see a child light up because they really like a toy, that was magic. So that I think was the difference from my point of view.

[0:34:02]: Were you... sort of influenced or inspired by any particular other toys on the market at the time or manufacturers or...?

[0:34:13]: I think I had a particularly clear idea of what things I liked myself which, which wasn't a necessarily a, a broad enough picture, because I think some children really like Meccano and they build wonderful things and the Meccano I had (coughs) were bits of metal full of holes and if you tried to make an aircraft out of it you just knew it wasn't anything like an aircraft and my, my parents used to come to, to this country and I think they probably rushed into Hamley's to bring something back, back for us and they once brought a beautiful little wooden model of a Lysander. I mean not the most exciting aircraft in the world but it was actually a beautiful model of a real aircraft, and I loved my Lysander just as I loved my Viking waterline ships because they were, they were not only correct models and had all the turrets going around but the wonderful they did is that, the British North Sea fleet was painted in this sort of muddy colour, Mediterranean fleet was near white, there were instructions inside on, not instructions, there were uh notes inside telling you the tonnage and the speed and how many mines they carried and the calibre of the cannons and it's a great shame that they don't do that for little car models, to know what the performance is. If you listen to Top Gear the only thing that interests them is the nought, nought to sixty top speed, weight you know, rhubarb rhubarb and Mr Clarkson is totally blind to the look of a vehicle, But children I think like to absorb the details as well, although I think the visual aspect is the most important, at least my the kind of kid I was. But it's, it's been the same

with my, my grandson. He can recognise cars since he was quite small as I did and, and I will show you some things which surprise me that he likes. But they're they're pretty things anyway.

[0:36:55]: Did you test when you were designing at Ogle the toys did you sort of test them out on your children? Were they part of the design process?

[0:37:09]: To be honest, not that much, except of course with my own children. But of course things were, some things I designed knowing what the children were like. I mean Tonka, we had a Tonka truck and so to go from there to want to do other steel toys it wasn't a big step so, ... and... I made Airfix models which were given to my kids because I said you can't do them, I'll have to take that in hand, and so, you know, that wasn't a big step, so. And then of course because I took advantage of having a wonderful model shop and if I wanted to design something for, specifically for my kids I could do it and my eldest child was seriously dyslexic and, and took a long time to walk and so I, I had a baby walker made, like a real car, you know, a top deck with a green stripe and a, and a hooter and a gear shift and a steering wheel and lovely leather seat, and the guy could walk around, you know, and be mobile and chase the dog which otherwise he couldn't do, he, he wasn't capable of walking around for quite a long time so... You know, I could, I, I took advantage. And I did some little boats that, that rocked and each time it rocked forward it actually moved forward, and I thought that wasn't a success

but I talked to my one of my daughters and she said she did use it. And then I made something, modified one, one sort of toy which my young my, the younger of my two young boys used and you would cheerfully go down into the village for shopping, and he had to sort of peddle it but it had a caster in front and two wheels at the back and a fixed steering wheel and he, he was very happy using it for good distances. It worked very well. So, so I think that's where my learning comes from as well as my own experience...

[0:39:36]: I'm thinking now across, because you said you were at Ogle for was it forty years. How has the...the toy design process changed over that time? What were the differences at the end from when you started out? ... Maybe not the process but also the manufacturing and the companies as well.

[0:40:02]: I think, of course, that children seem to grow up a bit more quickly and they start wanting to use Apple products and play on computers and so on more quickly. There's more plastic being used and often in a horrible way. I, I think maybe they've become more cynical as well. You've got young sort of marketing people who haven't got kids of their own, doesn't matter, but they know how much each foot of, of shelf space should bring in, in terms of money and profits and that's the motivation and part of this, I think cynicism I would almost say, or one sided type of looking is that ...they they know that toys for small children are likely to be, are most likely to be bought by adults and it could be

Auntie or Grandma and so on, and they will buy something that they may think is okay and that toy designer may design things for, that they will buy and not necessarily what the child will, will want to buy. And I, an example of that, I was in Habitat, I know last year some time, and I looked around the toy department just to, to, out of interest and it was a quiet time and the lady from you know, working there, came to join me, and there was a racing car there and it was made in plastic and everything about it was plastic, the wheels and everything, and, and it was a racing car with an engine at the front and a driver which couldn't be removed. Now, racing cars haven't had engines in the front since about 1960. You know, admittedly a lot of children don't go to Formula One racing so they might not know but, that, that the designer will cheerfully design this plastic toy of a 1960 or pre-1960 racing car offends me. Um, so, so that sort of thing I think is sort of cynicism or else it's, you know, at worst it's just thinking totally about making money and, and not making necessarily the best toy for children. And my, my colleague who went to specialise in toy design, he comes across people who, who don't necessarily understand children and, and understand how to make money, what it is that will hit the market, and it's new and it sounds exciting and they can sell it. And of course another aspect of cynicism is the franchising of things, you know. I mean my eldest grandson, partly influenced by his father but, but he took to it very readily, he loves trains. He loves trains. But if you're a small child and you like trains you get into the clutches, clutches of Thomas the Tank engine and I, personally, hate

Thomas the Tank engine. I hate the horrible faces on their trains, you know? But once you're there, you know, you get more books and you get paper serviettes and, and I've even seen a table cloth, you know and, but to his credit he tries, he draws locomotives and there never is a stupid face on the front of a locomotive that he draws, you know. He knows they don't have that, you know. And so, so I mucked about to draw a... em Flying Scotsman and so he was very pleased for me to draw a Flying Scotsman. After a period when he asked me to draw another Flying Scotsman I'd forgotten some detail and he really attacks me about that, 'no – I hadn't got that right' you know 'that was not what the Flying Scotsman was all about', so you know, they care about the detail, the real thing they don't want to be fobbed off with things with silly faces, so that's an aspect that I don't like and yet the marketing is so strong, you know, they flog all these Thomas products. I'm not very happy about that.

[0:45:46]: Do you see it as the same product but with a different character?

Used to sell it it seems [inaudible]...

[0:45:53]: Yeah, yeah, and it's a sort of insult to the intelligence of the child, because you know he, he loves the, the Flying Scotsman because it's got a character and a design and whoever designed it loved doing it, you know, and it meant something and he intuitively understands that,

and, um, to try and foist on him Thomas the Tank Engine and all the other blooming engines, it's very sad.

[0:46:35]: Have you seen any... good designs recently that for toys that you...?

[0:46:45]: Oh, I mean there are plenty of good designs and, you can start and finish with with Lego, almost. I mean that is wonderful and my children we played with, with Lego and did wonderful things, and Duplo, and my grandchildren play with with Lego and do things, and, and there are, again, for this four year old, Theo, he's got various trucks, tracks for making train tracks, and the one the wooden one which Brio started but every, every type of copy, the challenge of making very complex tracks and going up and down and so on, he finds that very satisfying, so that's a great toy for him. Um...but if you wanted to break at some point I could show you some of the toys that I've got around. Would that suit you?

[0:47:55]: That would be lovely.

Tom Karen Part II

[Duration 00:12:41]

[0:00:03]: I mean this here is the prototype which you've looked at where you can turn a triangular kind of shape and you can go from a hippo to fruit to, to a London bus and mix them all up together. And

this is a variant on a traditional toy but make it look more fun with the, the colours and the fruit and and, and so on.

[0:00:31]: Where did you... obviously it's a traditional toy but where did you sort of get the idea for the fruit from?

[0:00:37]: I just wanted to do a better one (laughs). There's no point in making the the, the sort of traditional one, you can buy it in the shop, but what you can't buy is this, you know. And these, these dogs are made just out of boxes and covered with tissue paper and paper and nothing, absolutely nothing, costing anything. Um... um... This is, this is a wooden racing car with bolts that enables you to open the back and expose the twelve cylinder engine with electronics that came off a tin. And having the bolts and being able to open something is is, is very satisfying. This actually, I thought, I thought I'd got two pictures together. This started like that, and it didn't seem to please them, so I converted into a rocking a rocking toy and now it works well and they, the four year old can rock it forward and it actually moves forward and the two year old rocks and it seems to go backwards but, but it it's very satisfying rocking, you know, it's, it's good stuff.

[0:02:09]: Soothing as well.

[0:02:11]: And these, these toys, these things are made out of cardboard boxes to show children for workshops what you can do with them. And uh I did a fun box with an elephant looking out of the top window, and a giraffe at the back and the kids letting off a balloon, just to sort of prompt them. And these are the, the penguins that can walk. This is, this is a good toy. I made a, a kind of Hercules which had a ramp and you can actually put a Hummer and a, and a Jeep into it and close it and judging by the number of times I've had to repair it it's in very frequent use. I, I should have used a better kind of ply but the tail got broken once and I had to repair it and the wings got broken twice and I, I put a bit of aluminium underneath it to strengthen it, so, and the, this here is a garage and it's got numbers of doors and each door is a different lock because uh, one of my guys he, he loved locks and keys and things, so I thought the challenge of having different types of locks would be good, and he, they love storing things in garages you know and things. And actually in a similar way posting things is very satisfying, and again I try to do something a bit different and what I've done is, there there's a rectangular kind of hole for the cheese and a, and a slot for the butter and the melon can actually go through the cheese thing and the banana can go through one of the round things, and the chocolate thing, which actually says it's bad for your teeth, you know, can go into the round thing and that, that is quite a good toy for little ones, they quite like that.

[0:04:28]: Do you enjoy making these or watching your children play with them more? [Inaudible]

[0:04:33]: Oh no I, I like to monitor how, how they react and how they play and when they have friends I try to have them around so that I can see how they use it. And for little ones this this works very well, and um... I think I decorated them quite well because I started to, one of them chewing the melon, I think and I had to sort of stop him. There's a carrot and an orange there and so on. This is another way of playing, of course, you know plasticine is wonderful stuff, and the airport building is, was made from something that held eggs and there's even a crowd of people and um, there's a MiG fifteen here and he, there's a Concorde somewhere, the white one, and there's one that he made, and he's got a tanker and it's got it there's a pipe going into the wing and, oh it's, it's good stuff that, you know. This plane is, is quite nice, but it's solid, you can't do much with it, but he quite likes it. It looks pretty much like a real aeroplane but it's solid, you know, it's and it's got rubber wheels.

[0:05:50]: [Inaudible] ...Is that made of wood?

[0:05:53]: Yeah. And this is the rocket, you see. You make four of these and uh you can make the rocket, but an alternative would be

to, to make it plain and people could decorate it but what, what I then do, what I did, I developed it over a period of time. This is this is the launch pad. Now, it's just got a simple piece of cardboard, you can see what this is, and this is propped up on something made from cardboard. This is a cork fixed with a bit of elastic. This one was made from a tube that held chocolate. This is, was a plastic bottle. I made them out of tin cans. The, the, making the cone is a slight challenge for little people, they need a bit of help. This is made from little plastics that hold yoghurt or whatever you drink from and this is the wooden spoon, and these are the, the astronauts ready to board. And this is the '5-4-3-2-1 lift off!' and um...with, some perform better than others but, you know they, they easily hit the ceiling and sometimes they go they can go much, much higher than that. So...

[0:07:30]: It just bangs on the bottom of the... [inaudible].

[0:07:33]: Yeah the, the spoon hits, hits the, and up it goes, you know? And you should see the vigour with which they thump these things and when I, when I have workshops, you know, it's caused a riot, the children go wild when they can start hitting the thing and... Now this, this would make a lovely kit but I don't know if the Museum of Childhood is into kits or is the V&A. Of course this is not your department but ...

[0:08:02]: We've got a shop there... and we've been... the shop is run... it's not run by the V&A or it's not run by the Museum of Childhood so it's a contractor but there's an ongoing discussion we're having about selling things that are more relevant to... the collection to the Museum so... they will sell a lot of toys and children's things but something like that would be... fantastic...

[0:08:29]: It does it works terribly well.

[0:08:30]: Yeah. It's simple, it's something that children can do... it's exactly what would fit with a lot of the exhibitions we have there it's, all about creativity and there are um... some nice sort of recycled African toys made by children in Africa and things like that... just fit with that sort of side of things so no I mean I... I certainly can have a chat... [inaudible].

[0:08:52]: I mean at the Royal Academy in the shop they had a box with a with a rocket and the rocket was turned components and there were paints to paint it, but having done that it goes nowhere you know! And this rocket really can shoot up, it's, it's terribly satisfying, you can have sort of competitions because you can tune things, you know. The height under the, the stopper... I've had to do that. The, the position of the, the cork vis-à-vis the length of the thing. The height that this is, you know. The weight of the rocket, and incidentally some rockets I put something in so they rattle you

know, I say that's a North American they, they did some blunders
(laughs)... and so, so there's tremendous scope and it, it is a good toy
(laughs).

[0:09:53]: I think I mean... in terms of workshops as well... would it be something you'd be interested in doing at the... Museum?

[0:10:00]: Yeah, I could do, yes. What I do sometimes or have done at Sainsbury and elsewhere is to get them to bring in lots of boxes themselves you know, the right sort of size, and then get them to make things out of that. And they go and throw them some of the boxes and, and make things it doesn't take much to get them going.

[0:10:23]: Yes....exactly. I mean it's not my sort of area but they've got an Education floor... four members of staff full time working and the front of house team... so I'll have a chat with them next week [inaudible].

[0:10:37]: You know I did a, one rocket session with four year olds (laughs) and admittedly they had help with the cones and odd things but once they were, they were launching the rockets it was a riot (laughs) and the noise level 'wooooo' as high as the rockets, they, they, it was fantastic. So, anyway tell me what, what's outstanding in... [inaudible].

[0:11:05]: I think we've covered...

[0:11:10]: You, you've seen what I'm involved in currently, which is your last item and his, this here actually, is a dog which was meant to sit on top and when you crank the handle it snaps at the ball and the tail wags. But it's been sitting there it's should have been, and it's, it's an evolution, what it, what the guy called Peter Markey does. He's a friend of mine and he does these lovely toys that do this, yeah? But I've scaled it all up and introduced the, the tail that wags, and I, I need to finish that. And this is with dead matches. I tried to interest my , the one who's now four to make structure but didn't like the messiness of the glue gun. So it didn't go very far. Bubblewrap has more potential (laughs)...

[0:12:25]: It's just... I bet your grandchildren love coming here it's so much fun.

[END OF RECORDING – 0:12:41]