CAREER BACKGROUND

Torquil Norman (1933 - ) studied at Eton, Harvard and Trinity College, Cambridge. He spent 11 years working as an investment banker in the United States before returning to the UK in the 1960s. In 1973 he became Chief Executive of Berwick Timpo toy company, in 1980 he founded Bluebird Toys, makers of Big Yellow Teapot House, the Big Red Fun Bus and Polly Pocket. Norman retired from the toy industry in 1996 and in 1998 Bluebird Toys was taken over by Mattel.

Norman bought the derelict Roundhouse arts venue in Camden as an impulse buy in 1996 for £3 million. As founder and chairman of the Roundhouse Trust he raised £27 million from public and private sources to restore the crumbling building. He was awarded a knighthood for his services to the arts and disadvantaged young people.

INTERVIEW SYNOPSIS

Torquil Norman discusses how he started working in the toy industry; the different jobs he had in the toy industry; the range of products Bluebird Toys produced; and the individuals he worked with.
IEUAN HOPKINS: OK, we’re recording, so if you could just start by saying your name and main responsibilities...

TORQUIL NORMAN: OK, my name is Torquil Norman, and I started in the toy industry, um, in 1961 when a small business venture capital company called Batehill that I had started with Ken Bates [and Philip Hill], took an interest in a small toy company – I can’t remember the name of it now, but it was run by a man called – [Bert Collins].

Yeah, a company called Batehill that I was a combination of Philip Hill-Higginson, Erlangers, where I worked, and Ken Bates. It was a small company that invested in other small companies who Philip Hill as a merchant bank didn’t feel was credit-worthy without extra support in the way of equity and so on. The man who ran our first investment, his name was Bert Collins, had an amazing approach to the toy business - he started his own small company and we helped him to get started – it was that he used to make friends with the stewardesses on British Airways and when they came back from trips to Japan and the Far East and other places they brought him all kinds of toy samples. This was back in 1961, and Collins would then take these and put them on show at the Harrogate Toy Fair, the ones he liked, and if they sold well he would set about tooling them and delivering them. So this was a very strange way of doing it; it involved copying precisely any little toy that he got a hold and I have
to say that after about three or four years the business wasn’t doing very well it was one of the rare companies in the group that we actually had to close down. So it was an interesting initiation into the toy industry. After that, we took an interest through Batehill in a company called Berwick’s Toy Company in Liverpool, which was a lovely old company run by a man called Ken Berwick who made play suits, cowboy suits, nurses, postmen, bus conductors, that kind of thing, tea sets, inexpensive games, plastic toys and so on. And I must say Berwick’s Toy Company was what gave me my real interest in the toy industry because it was like a piece of history but it need bringing up to date and new toys introduced and so on. So we took a stake in the business and I spent a lot of time working in it and eventually took a stake in Batehill myself and wound up with a small stake in the toy business as a result and decided that I preferred working in the toy business than in the banking business. So the company became eventually Berwick Timpo because we bought Model Toys a small company in Shotts Scotland that made a wide range of miniature soldiers and similar figures. I found running both companies a very full-time job and I worked in Berwick Timpo for many years until I had a falling out with my colleagues, particularly the non-executive main board Director who was the chairman appointed by the Ionian Bank, who had been financing us, although it wasn’t really a financial issue because the company was doing well. It was more to do with the fact that I felt, with my
colleagues in the companies, that we knew how we wanted to grow it and develop it and so on, and the Ionian Bank, through John Oakley, had very different ideas and so it became obvious that we weren’t very compatible and so I decided to leave and my colleagues, who were the managing directors of the individual companies, they also included Harbutt’s Plasticine by then, Peter Pan Playthings, Flare Toys and one or two others, small businesses that we acquired. So what happened was that we kept the toy industry amused one whole summer because my colleagues said that I shouldn’t leave and that we should continue to develop the businesses and so on, but they unfortunately succumbed to all kinds of offers from the board, of which I was by then no longer a member and decided that instead of supporting me and in spite of a very strong statement they made to the merchant bank who was helping us, decided that they would like not to support the takeover that we were by then mounting and so I found in the end that I won two out of the five resolutions but lost the three most important ones. The result was that I really was out of a job (laughs) and, the toy industry had I think enjoyed the experience of watching a publicly quoted company, going through offers and counter-offers during the summer and all the fun of the fair that went with it, and, I thought at the time what a wonderful opportunity to get out of the toy industry, it would be nice to get on and do something quite different. But I’m ashamed to say that after a couple of months of
being pretty idle and trying to think of something else that I would enjoy doing or have the luxury of having a little time to do that I suddenly came up with the idea for a new toy that I really liked which I later called the Big Yellow Teapot, and I went to a friend of mine who was a model maker and who designed toys and gave him a very rough drawing, and we worked on it together and eventually a rather beautiful yellow teapot appeared out of it. The tool makers thought it was very difficult because it wasn’t exactly round, but never mind, it looked very nice and it had a teapot family that lived in it, and the dog was called Sugarlump and he had a little teacup car that lived in the garage underneath and it was actually a terrific toy. And in fact it went on for years and years even after I left the business and Peter Pan and so on. But it was the first toy that I thought of and had designed completely, and I suddenly realised that that’s what I really liked doing, so instead of licensing it to somebody else, which I certainly didn’t want to do, I decided to start a new business called Bluebird Toys, which I could design some toys for and hopefully get back into the business that I actually really liked but due to force of circumstances hadn’t seemed possible to go on as it was.

So, Bluebird Toys started; I went down to a friend of mine in the City, Bobby Nicolle, who was a manager at Kleinwort Benson, one of the merchant banks, and Bobby said they’d like to help and he
introduced me to a man called Harry Conroy who ran their small businesses and various investment trusts and it was quite funny because I went to a meeting and I had with me the only model I had which was the Big Yellow Teapot, and I put it on the table, and it looked rather wonderful actually, and while we were having our discussion the tea lady came in and said “Wow, what’s that?”, and I said “It’s the Big Yellow Teapot”. She said “That’s beautiful”, she said “What is it?”, I said “It’s a toy”. She said “Oh, are you going to make it?”, I said “Well that’s going to depend rather on Harry and Bobby here whether we do that”. She said “Well, if you do may I have the first one off the production line?”, and I said “Of course”. And, I think this rather impressed the bankers, so anyway they agreed to invest in the business and it turned out as it happens to be one of their most successful investments, and it was the largest investment eventually, in any of their small company trusts and I think they paid something like four pence ha’penny for the shares and sold them probably later on around four pounds, so it wasn’t too bad. That was really the start of Bluebird Toys. I got the name Bluebird, I approached Mettoy, to whom it was registered, but they had it registered for Malcolm Campbell’s Bluebird racing car…and they agreed I could use the name as long as I didn’t use it for anything to do with racing cars and things like that, and I said that that would be fine, I didn’t want in any way compete with them, but I just liked the name because it was at a time when there was a
recession going on as seems all too common now days, and the idea of making toys in Britain was very appealing and so we used to make everything in this country, and we designed every toy, I even put a Union Jack on every box saying that every toy we make is designed and manufactured in Great Britain. And we had initially leased a factory, in Swindon and then through a succession of things we built up more factories. We had a big one that you would have heard from Gareth in South Wales. I’ll never forget the discussion when we were driving down there and he asked me, he said “How much money are we going to ask the Welsh Development Agency for?” and I said “Well, what do you think?”. He said “Oh, maybe two million do you think?”. I said “Well, the thing’s going to cost a lot more than that”. And so we decided, driving along, that we’d ask for five million, which seemed, you know, it’s best to go into these negotiations on the high side, and I think we ultimately got four or four and a half million pounds, but Gareth will no doubt have told you the number. It enabled us to buy the factory and equip it and have a bit of working capital to help it along. And it was a terrific factory; it was part of the old Hoover factory there and it became our main production base. We employed at tops I should think three or four hundred people, maybe on a seasonal basis, it would be lower at Christmas time, and it proved to be a great success.
And we then had a factory in Swindon and then we bought Randalls, which was a toy business in Potters Bar I think, which made games and nursery toys and chemistry sets; we brought Peter Pan Playthings back again from previously, which was in Peterborough, and, we built a group around Bluebird Toys which proved to be quite successful. However, it did become clear that we couldn’t go on with the policy of only making toys in Britain and eventually we decided that it was important to have some toys costed to find out the cost of making them both in Britain and also in the Far East, and David Laxton who was our Technical Director and responsible for all the manufacturing and so on, I persuaded him to go to Hong Kong. It was like pulling teeth, he didn’t want to go at all because he used to buy his tools in Portugal and I said “Well, come on, there’s so much competition coming from the Far East we may as well understand what it’s all doing”. And he agreed to go out there, which he did with a lot of grumbling, and when he got there, after about a week I got a telegram back from him saying “It’s absolutely terrific out here, I’m so glad you sent me!” (laughs), so that was good. So then we started to get pretty well every toy where there was any doubt about where to make it we costed it in both Hong Kong and the UK and worked out which was the most economical place to do it. Obviously we had to import it so that was a cost, but in nearly every case except for the very large toys like the A La Cart Kitchen we made them in the Far East, a lot of them, so this really
did put some pressure onto our UK manufacturing facilities and ultimately we reduced our manufacturing in the UK and we had eventually at one point about eighty employees in our office in China and a really substantial business there.

And I think one of the great boosts for our Far East production was the fact that we started a little range called Polly Pocket which turned out to be sensationally successful. We licensed Polly Pocket to Mattel for most of the world not including Britain and Japan, and they eventually made a huge success with it, it was their second largest girls’ brand after Barbie, but only about a fifth I should think of the size of Barbie, but it sold perhaps a couple of hundred million dollars a year. That was a lot of turnover for Bluebird, and, so that justified on its own the manufacturing arrangements in the Far East.

But we built up under David a very professional operation there and we sourced from all over China, South China, and North China occasionally, and a lot in Taiwan. About three quarters of Bluebird’s turnover I should think, was sourced from the Far East. But products like Plasticine and so on we still made here as well as large toys like the A La Cart Kitchen or Manta Force the ones that had big bulk and would be a lot of freight were still made in the UK.

So, the business started to grow, in fact it grew every year I think during the time I was there. I think we started it in 1979 – I’m going
from memory now – and opened the factory in 1980, and I think the first year we sold around a million pounds of toys and made a very small profit and after that every year it went up and up. We designed most of the toys ourselves but then we began to license products from other people and from companies round the world who didn’t, weren’t big enough, to have their own manufacturing or sales in this country. We used to specialise in looking for them at the toy fairs and finding ranges of toys that suited us or one of our companies because we had virtually the whole industry covered with different products by then, and that helped us to build up all kinds of sectors in the company – I think I left in 1995, maybe I stayed on as Chairman until '96 and then I left; I figured that from 1961 when I’d first gone into the toy industry to then was a hell of a long time and I’d been to so many toy fairs (laughs) and seen so many people, and also the industry was changing a lot, there were more and more electronic toys coming in and more and more character licensed ranges that really weren’t particularly good toys, they were pretty good facsimiles of the characters and things that they represented, but I wasn’t so interested in that, I didn’t like the electronic toys much and I wasn’t much good at them, I didn’t understand them. I liked plastic toys which were nice quality but with interesting themes and different play patterns and so on that would keep kids’ attention, you know, with the toy, whereas more and more it became the character that was important not the toy
and, and the technology of adding sounds and things, we used quite a bit of it but I never felt we were in the vanguard of it and developing it as we should have been and so on, and I thought probably it was because I was getting old and...it was time to move on to something else. So, I retired from the business in ’96. I think, unusually for a toy company, it had something like thirty million pounds in cash in the bank, so it had been fairly successful, and, at the same time I started a little charity, put some shares from the toy business into it. My wife, bless her heart, was giving my overdraft away to good causes (laughs) faster than I could keep up and I did explain we had five children to educate and that really we had to come up with a better solution, and so we put some money into – well quite a chunk of the toy business – into a charity and then when I retired I spent the money in the charity which had become several million pounds, on buying the Roundhouse in Chalk Farm as a place for young people to develop their skills in all kinds of areas, and it’s, touch wood, proved to be a huge success so I felt the toy industry had had a certain sort of rhythm to it which was very nice.

IH: That’s tremendous. That was a wonderful sort of summing-up really...

TN: Well, I don’t know if it was. I think I’ve forgotten lots of – there’s probably, I mean you know, heavens, I was there eighteen years or so...
IH: Can we go back to the Big Yellow Teapot which was the first thing you designed. You said you just sort of had the idea...

TN: Well, I did have the idea – any good idea I have is nearly always in the bath truthfully, I can’t start the day properly without a hot bath and that’s when any ideas that come to me come, I actually based it, I do remember, I went out and looked at various toys thinking where could I fit into the market and so on, and there was a terrific toy which had been built – it was a Japanese toy, I think it was Takara originally that designed and marketed it and licensed it to General Mills and so on – called the Tree House, and this was a terrific toy. It was a house, you could lift up things and there were little figures in it and so on. It had been around ten or twelve years or something by the time I was thinking about what to make and so I though the Teapot, the Big Yellow Teapot, would be a more English sort of rendering of the idea of a tree house, which was terrific, and also Matchbox afterwards had developed the Boot which was along the same lines – it was cheaper and smaller but a very nice toy. But I think the Teapot actually did create a kind of precedent, it showed that we were interested in making and designing and marketing toys in Britain, you know. And so it was a huge success, it went on and on and on. Somebody I think then bought the tools after Mattel, after I’d left, a few years after I’d left. They sent the tools out to
Hong Kong and made it there, and I remember these old tools, they were made in Birmingham, and the bloke who made them and used them was in despair and he said: well, it’s round, the door at the back has got multiple curves on it, when you mould it it kind of distorts so they had to put in on a little mould to hold it flat while it cooled and so on and I mean it was a kind of nightmare to make, but, David Laxton, bless his heart, when he came in help to improve the tooling a bit and generally the speed of the manufacturing process and so on. But it was a terrific toy and it’s still used, strangely I keep seeing it on television because the BBC must have one in its prop room and so it appears every now and then, but, yeah it was a great toy. And then we had a whole lot of other highly successful toys. One of the best ones was a toy that I licensed from Marvin Glass in Chicago, or what was then called Marvin Glass, [it later changed its name as partners retired and younger one took over to] – Breslow Morrison Terzian, BMT, but anyway, they showed me this kitchen; it was a big kitchen, play kitchen on wheels, two wheels at the front, you could sort of wheel it around, and every kitchen made in France by Super Jouet and all the other ones, sat on the floor. Ours had had wheels, you see, so we thought this was a terrific idea and, I remember we went to a model maker in Marlow and got the models made there and designed it, we designed it, developed the design in all sorts of ways with all the little accessories, pots and pans and frying pans and vegetables and meat, and you know, it was a great,
it was a terrific toy. And we launched it eventually; we called it the  
A La Cart Kitchen, spelt c-a-r-t on the box, and I used to get letters 
from people saying you ignorant bums in Swindon or whatever it is, 
you don’t even know how to spell a la carte, it’s French and it’s got 
an ‘e’ on it, and I used to write back and say: you stupid bums, you 
haven’t looked at it, it’s got wheels on it (laughs)! So we used to 
have quite a bit of fun! Anyway, the A La Cart Kitchen was a total 
sell-out, I mean it was an expensive toy, I don’t know what it was 
now, probably it was £19.99 or £24.99 when it started, and one guy I 
remember drove all the way down from Newcastle, parked his car 
outside our factory and wouldn’t leave until we’d given him one, 
and it was a total sell-out for two or three years. And I heard, 
although this may not be true, so I have to say it with the usual 
reserve, but I heard, we heard that Fisher Price was going to come 
out with a kitchen the following year, and we were worried about 
competition, although Fisher Price toys were always about half as 
much more expensive and probably half as strong again so they 
were very good toys, I’m not in any way knocking them, in fact 
they’re fantastic toys (laughs), and in fact I once said to somebody, 
which was printed in the press, that they were so strong that I’d 
tried to take one apart and I couldn’t do it (laughs) and they pinned 
this up in their factory, but anyway I then noticed that it was 
delayed from that year to the following year and that was after 
they’d made a bit of a thing about coming out with it, and then I
realised why, because I think the success of the A La Cart Kitchen on
wheels was such that they’d decided to redesign theirs before they
tooled it and put it on wheels, which they did, and it was a terrific
toy but on the other hand it was half as expensive again as ours,
and we didn’t lose, I think we probably gained in volume because of
the attention, you know. So that was good. Another interesting toy,
but this goes back to Berwicks now from Bluebird, I came across a
toy at the toy fair – oh no I didn’t, I was in a, in Cleveland in the
office of a stockbroker in Cleveland - God knows why I was there but
I must have been introduced by a friend and I can’t remember what
reason it was at all, it seems odd that I would have been there when
I was on a trip to do toys - any way, I was reading the Wall Street
Journal while waiting to see my friend and I read a story in it about
a company called Wham-O in California who had produced a thing
called a Superball, and this was a ball which was made out of some
material, with a mixture of materials which had the ability to
bounce about 95% of its height when you dropped it, and so it went
on and on and on bouncing and it was fantastic. In fact, if you
banged it into the ground you could bounce it over a house, and it
really was an incredible toy, so I called Wham-O to see if I could
come out to see them in California…and, talk to him about the
Superball and he said “Well, I don’t see why should you? We’ve got
agents in England” – it was J&L Randall, as it happened, and, and he
said “We would normally give it to them in the normal way”, and I
said “Well this isn’t the normal sort of toy”, and after a long conversation with a man called Ed Headrick, who eventually became a really good friend of mine, I said “Well, if I come out tomorrow, would you not see me, or could we meet?” and he said “Well, if you come out tomorrow of course I’ll see you, but I can’t give you any undertaking that we’ll do anything” and I said “Okay”. So I jumped on a plane, went out to California, got a cab, went out to Wham-O’s place – I can’t remember where it was now – um – somewhere outside Los Angeles – and Ed Headrick and I got on like a house on fire, and it showed me that he was a complete nutter actually, but a lovely guy, and he showed me the toy and everything and in the end I said “Well, look, Randalls have shown no interest in it, we’ve shown a lot of interest, I undertake to you that I will tool it up as soon as you give me the authority to do so and a license that we can agree and stuff, and we’ll pay you royalty and we’ll do whatever you want, we’ll promote it in the best way we can, and so on”. So he said “Alright, what the hell”, so I said “Well can we shake hands on it?” and he said yes, so I said “Can I take some of them back with me to show my colleagues?” and he said yes. And so I got the rights for it, came back and we started tooling it up and we made I think, I don’t know how many, forty-nine cavity tools? A hell of a lot, anyway, again at a place in Marlow, and then I had to cast around, because the stuff was made of polybutadiene plus various other things that Wham-O had mixed in to make it strong and whatever,
and that needed a thing called a Banbury mixer, which is a bit of sort of rubber-type technology to make it and mix it and stuff, and I discovered a little company in Birmingham – I’ll never forget, it was located under a huge sort of slag heap – it was making bottle tops for cider bottles and those things, and eventually I produced this Superball and bounced it in front of him, and he said “Wow, that’s terrific”, and I said “Well, could you make it?” I said “It’s made of polybutadiene”; he said “Yeah, we use it to make a lot of things, and I said “Have you got a Banbury mixer?” and he said “Yeah, I’ll show it to you”. He took me out the back to this huge great thing, and it wasn’t a sort of modern twenty-first century factory by any means, it was very much the Black Country sort of stuff. Anyway I gave him a set of tools and said would he make some and I said “I’ve got the formulation here too, but you’ve got to promise me” – and I gave him a piece of paper to sign that he would keep it absolutely secret and nobody would know about it and so on, and he promised to use it and everything was fine, so I got the piece of paper and sent it to Headrick. So, we started making it. Anyway, I went down to see him again when he’d produced some, and he said “Well, what do you think of that?” and the thing was sort of bouncing, and I said “It’s terrific!”, I said “I take it, therefore, that you’ve stuck to the formula?” and he said “Well, to be completely honest, I didn’t stick to it completely”, and I said “Well, is what you’ve done cheaper or more expensive than the other one and does it work as well and
how does it compare?”, and he said “I can’t really tell much
difference in the performance” he said “and it’s certainly cheaper”.
So I said “Terrific, so what do you put in it?” and he looked rather
sheepish and he said to me “Well, to be truthful I’ve put in it what I
put into almost everything I make”, and I said “What’s that?” and he
pointed out a little window, he said “That slag out there from past
patents (laughs) it comes out as a sort of powder, you know, when
you get it in here and it’s absolutely brilliant sort of filler for use
with polybutadiene and stuff, it’s absolutely perfect and I just put in
thirty per cent of that” he said “and I’ve got to tell you you can’t tell
the difference and it’s a brilliant product” (laughs). So I never said a
word to Headrick about it (laughs), but we went ahead. He seemed
very pleased with the result and we made about a million of them
that year; it was a terrific business. I mean, I have to admit there are
endless stories of this kind, I don’t want to bore you to tears.

IH: Not at all. What sort of lessons did you learn, sort of when you were
working first in the toy industry that you sort of made, that helped you
make Bluebird such a success story?

TN: Well, I suppose I learnt – I learnt everything there is to know
pretty much about the toy industry because I was involved in every
part of it and I, I never considered that I was much of a salesman,
the sales force used to, you know, go green if I appeared anywhere
near them and their stuff, but I did eventually learn about that and wasn’t so enthusiastic. We did all the marketing at Bluebird ourselves, I mean we didn’t have a position for marketing in it, we made the television commercials ourselves, in the early days and we got a director, one of several that we’d come to know one way or the other, helped by the advertising agency that we used, who was a very small one, and we hired a studio and we got kids in as models and stuff and shot the commercials. It was, didn’t seem any great shakes; the Superball commercial we made with Jimmy Saville because when he opened his eyes they were great balls, you know, on a white background (laughs) and he was terrific. The packaging I with Peter Barrow [who did all of Polly Pocket for example], and others I worked with; I worked with a company called Charterhouse down in the East End here who did all the originations for us and stuff. I guess I worked, you know, seven to eleven, or whatever it is, twenty-four-seven on it, but I, we used to do all the packaging ourselves, we did everything. So, Bluebird grew like anything, so I think what I learnt was that, that if you don’t have overheads, you know, you can sell your products at a reasonable margin and make some money. And, we were very particular about overheads.

David Laxton, who’s as tough as old boots was a wonderful man to work with, and he used to wind me up, you know, if we were going to Mattel I’d say “Well, I’ll try and get a million bucks advance for
this” – it was something or other, Polly Pocket or whatever – I said half a million and he said “Get a million”, so anyway I got a million, or whatever it was. So I’d learnt the importance of detail – plus I really liked the factories and I used to spend a lot of time going round the factories and, I say a lot of time, I spent a day a month in Wales and about two or three days a month in Peterborough, and so I kind of got to know things. I mean there’s almost nothing about the toy industry and manufacturing of that type, assembly and that sort of thing, that I didn’t learn from and I think I was a reasonable learner because the business has turned out to be successful.

And we had a lot of fun selling you know, the salesmen were all mad as hatters, lovely guys, Ken Simmons and Eric Robinson, you know, others who were sort of legends in the industry, and we always had very good salesmen, I mean, first in Berwick’s John Buttery was absolutely the king of salesmen. The wholesalers, which were major customers in those days, used to say “John, just go into the warehouse, see what I need, write the order, you know, I’ll sign it”, so it was a different world then, it wasn’t like today. Then later on those things got worse, you know, Toys R Us were trying to eat us up for margins, for this, for that, you know, counter ends and contributions to their catalogues and, you know, by the end it was, place became a nightmare and I think it was all to do with, the strength of characters and so on. So, it lost its interest for
me as the big battalions got more powerful and really the manufacturing wasn’t really worth it. I always felt that, you know, a workman is worthy of his hire and therefore, you know, if you keep people in business and do well by them they’ll do well by you and it usually works. And there were wonderful buyers too, Bill Dowle [the BHS buyer and subsequently the Woolworth buyer], who was a complete legend in the industry, he was a dear friend of mine and...and many others, but then if they needed something from us we’d go to the ends of the earth to get it for them, you know, we’d even make special things, you know, we’d do anything because they were good to us, you could trust them, when they said they’d do something it worked and so on, but then when Marks and Spencer, for example, went into the toy industry briefly and some, you know, gorgeous girl of about twenty, who I think had just come out of school more or less and sort of knew everything, a bit like a mug I gave one of my kids saying “Hire a teenager while he still knows everything” (laughs) and, but anyway, but they didn’t know, you’d say “Well, look, I think you’ll find this character is much better than that because I’ve got sales sheets coming out of my ears that tell me that”, but they’d say “No, no, we like this one”, you know, so all that sort of stuff went on. So in the end it just became a difficult business, you know. So I, I left when I thought I’d done all I could and, ran a charity which was a nice way to keep on being involved with young people.
IH: And what was it like working with Mattel?

TN: Um...

IH: Without going into too much detail....

TN: Well, you could write a book on it, in the early days, I mean, I got on very well John Amerman, who was the Chairman, Lindsey Williams, who looked after their international business, and Jill Barad, who was their Chief Executive, and I’ll never forget going over with the first models of Polly Pocket, which we wanted to license to them. So I rang up Jill and I said “Look, I’ve got something which I think’s quite important and I think that we’d like to ask you to be our worldwide distributors, with the exception of Japan and the UK, and but I’d like to, if you wouldn’t mind…” , because we were quite good friends, “…I’d like to have John Amerman and Lindsey Williams present if we could find a time when they were all around, because it’s an international thing this and it’s going to need, you know, a lot of work I think”. And so I went over there, I had the entire first year of Polly Pocket, it would have fitted in a box about yea big [gestures]...

IH: A foot square.
TN: I mean, very small, a foot square, and, I’ll never forget, they sat up looking very powerful and rather ominous in this little theatre and I sat at the table in front of them and they had this sort of curved presentation table and I’d said “Give me five minutes before” so I’d set everything up, and I put the whole lot, the entire range underneath my pocket handkerchief. So they came in, they saw this slightly grubby handkerchief sitting on the table (laughs) and they said “Well, what’s that?” and I said “Well, this is what I wanted you to...” and they looked at each other and thought “The man’s gone completely mad”. So I picked up a little corner of the handkerchief and inside it was this tiny little figure, you see, Polly Pocket, about an inch high, and so I said “I’d like to introduce you to Polly Pocket” and they said “I can’t even see it”, I said – so I held it up, and then I sort of slowly uncovered the other bits and there were little rings with Polly in bed or in the bath or in the car, or something, that you could put on your finger. We had, compacts which you could open up and there was Polly and a friend having breakfast, you know, sitting down at a table which was, all the knives and forks all spread out, because I found this, talk about China, we could get over fifty hand-spray operations into each Polly Pocket compact and still retail it for £5.99, so it wasn’t bad you know, we’d have been £15.99, I think, in England if we’d done it – so, anyway, I sort of slowly – and by the end they were saying “You know, there may be something in
this after all”. And I’ll never forget, the first year they didn’t sell that many and I was rather disappointed, and I didn’t like to say much about it, but I was a bit disappointed, and because they’d run the line, we’d given them the next year’s range, ‘cause we designed it all and made it in China. That’s why we made money out of it because we a manufacturing margin and a royalty out of every piece, that was quite a good business. But I’ll never forget the second year in Feburary, you know, the beginning of the year, I was sitting in the office at Swindon doing something or other and the phone rang and it was Jill Barad, the Chief Executive of Mattel. She said “Torquil, how are you doing?” and I said “Very well, thanks Jill. Nice to hear you; what’s up?”, she said “Well, I’ve got, I might have an order for you”, so I said “Oh really?” I said “What for?”, she said “How quickly could you get me four million Polly Pocket compacts?” (laughs). So I said “Well, hang on a bit, you only sold about a million last year” or something, you know, she said “Yeah, but they all sold out and everybody’s clamouring for them”, and I said “Wow!”, so I said “I tell you what I might have to do” and she said “What’s that?” I said “Well, you didn’t sell all that many last year, so what I’m going to suggest is that we use last year’s tooling but change all the colours and so on so that it looks quite different and of course you’ll put it into different packaging and stuff, or you could…” – I think they designed their own packaging, but we made it for them – and I said “Plus, of course, you’ve got all the ones we’ve introduced this year
and I think we’ve got enough tooling there to, to surprise you”. So she said “Alright”, I said “I’ll get back to you in a couple of days”, which I did and I – this was February – I said “I think we could get the whole lot shipped to you by the second week of April”, or something, which wasn’t bad going when you consider four million, and, so she said “Okay, done, I’ll get you the order in the morning”. So that was the start of it. Then it became huge, you know.

Then after about three or four years we needed a new major smallish product to give Polly a good relaunch, and we thought of little playhouses with Polly inside and you, what you could do was open it and in the roof you would have the bedroom and everything and so on upside down, once you’d opened it it was the right way up, so it was sitting there sort of like that, and we also put little lights, electric lights, in, got a little battery with, with a little bulb, so that you could switch on the light in it and I remember the commercial we made which I really liked, which we still made because the screen was completely black and the only thing that appeared was ‘Do not switch off your set’, or something like that, and then after a second or two a little light went on somewhere in the background and you could suddenly see a little bit of a house and a light and then another and another and another and pretty soon the whole town was there with all the lights on then and the whole thing bright and beautiful and it was Polly Pocket, and we sold millions of
them. So the thing about Polly was that, since it was very true to life, it was a very easy thing to design new toys for. I mean, we made a church, God, I never thought anybody in the toy industry would make a church. We made, um, the weddings theme, you see, was the thing they loved best of all and there was a school, we could do everything, so we made everything in Polly Pocket for years and years, and it became a huge business and I must say it was very successful. There’s one other thing I might just mention which, goes back again to Berwick-Timpo days, because at Model Toys, we decided to make a doll which we called Daisy, and we called it Daisy, because I got Mary Quant, I was godfather to her son, Orlando, to design it for us, and it was a very pretty doll and she got a person who made the showroom dummies, the window dummies, whose name I can’t remember – it was a complicated sort of Polish name, um, to sculpt the head for Daisy eventually because…we couldn’t get anything that we liked. Anyway, she got – the name won’t come back to me – but anyway, her design was lovely and Daisy was a very pretty doll. And then we dressed her and so on in terrific clothes; Alexandra and Mary and I would sit for hours in their little workrooms over in Chelsea and she showed different designs, we’d say we like this one, anyway she did the whole range, and then we costed them and made them and so on and we had a big show at the Harrogate Toy Fair, because we were a wholesale business not a retail business, and I remember Richard Beecham coming in rather
pale and saying “What have you done here?” because he made
Sindy you see, and I said “Well, we’ve made a doll” it was smaller
than Sindy of course and cheaper, so anyway, it turned out to be
really quite successful, and we invited Richard to come to the show
that we had, we took over the ballroom at the Majestic. We had all
the great models of the time, because Mary knew them all and
persuaded them, to come along, and we made full size versions of
all the clothes and there was a girl called Eeka and Vicky Hodge and I
can even remember the names, they were very famous, you know,
comparable with models today, such as Kate Moss, and they
hammed up the whole show, you see, it was absolutely brought the
house down, people were cheering in the rafters, they had never
seen anything like that at Harrogate before, you know, ever, and
Richard was thoroughly pale again and sort of worried about his
whole future with Sindy, of course it would have made no difference
I should think, anyway, that was a very good...[phone rings] sorry,
may I just...idea which...

I think if you were to ask me what was my greatest disappointment
in the toy industry it was as follows: I had an idea for, it wasn’t really
a toy but it would be sold through toy outlets, that I thought would
be so spectacular that it would probably be the biggest thing ever
made by anybody ever in the toy industry. Now that is saying
something, I mean by a sort of promotional item, and, it took me
weeks and weeks and weeks to get an appointment to go and see Brian Epstein who was the Beatles manager and when I eventually got to him he kept me waiting for an hour and a half, I told him what I wanted to do and he said that was utterly tasteless, wholly ridiculous and they wouldn’t even consider it, good-day, five minutes, end of story. And what I wanted to do was to get every Beatle, when they next had their hair cut, to take all the clippings from each of them, carefully identified separately, and with somebody from the Bank of England, or some great bank, they would certify that these were real bits of hair from Ringo or John or whatever, and that we would take one of these bits of hair, which I’m sure there’s lots of, and put it in a little gold locket and chain that we would make in the Far East and it would carry a certificate from the Bank of England certifying that this is certified to be a real hair from the head of Ringo Starr and the date. And I can honestly say that we could sell them for one forty-nine, or something like that – those lockets cost nothing and would make a huge profit on it – the Beatles would have made a massive royalty on it and I believe that, you know, that would have been the biggest single little item we could do because the Beatles at that time were so bleeding famous that you could hardly imagine anything like it. And, I got a very shirty five minute dismissal from this Mr Epstein. Do you think that’s a story?
IH: (laughs) Brilliant.

TN: Wow!

IH: If that’s your sort of biggest disappointment, if you like, what would be the biggest, your fondest memory, the thing you are most proud of probably in your time?

TN: It’s very hard to be sure about. I was proud really of the people I worked with, because we had so much fun and so it was such a fascinating period and I made so many friends truthfully in the industry and, there are many of whom I still see, and so I think that’s about, I mean I don’t think pride is really an emotion, you know, that I’m too involved with, but I think that, well the pleasure of it was the fact that every toy fair was a complete wonder of bad behaviour, too much alcohol, funny jokes sort of played on each other and other people and stuff, it just went on and on. There were a group of about twenty of us and the thing was just appalling, we behaved so badly, I can’t even tell you. It all rather came to an end when my son came into the industry because suddenly I had to sort of behave, but it was, we did have a lot – I was chairman of the World Table-Walkers Association, we used to walk on tables in restaurants and things and it did cause a stir, poor Mrs J in New York who used to go absolutely mad for it, and we used to eat all the tulips that she had
on the tables, you see, which, um, actually tulips are quite good to eat though people don’t know that, they try eating other things like roses which are disgusting and cloying and stuff, but tulips are rather good, and, anyway, she got so mad one year that she banned us all from going to the restaurant ever again and I used to send her postcards which a friend of mine, who lived in Lincolnshire had given me about thirty postcards of the tulip fields of wherever, and I used to send her a card saying “Well, it’s all very well, but the tulips out here are absolutely delicious, even better than in New York”, you see, and so she got mad and so on. Anyway, (laughs) a friend of mine, Bill Lichtenstein, who I think was good friend of hers and I really mean a good friend ... I said to Bill “You’ve got to make it up for me with Mrs J ‘cause I’m in deep trouble, and so on, and we all want to go back to have dinner”. She had a little restaurant called Mrs J’s Sacred Cow in, um, in West Side New York and she had all these young men and women from the opera there and they would sing arias and they had a pianist there and stuff, it was a wonderful place, and we used to take all of our customers there, I am afraid we behaved very badly, she didn’t mind all that much, but you know just that we behaved a bit too badly. The ceiling was too low really for table-walking, which wasn’t so good, but....and anyway, I think that the worst moment was when I’d bough about a hundred tulips in a huge bunch for our reunion, you see, after being banned and we came in and I gave her this huge bunch of tulips and said ”Mrs J, we
promise not to eat a single one of them and they are entirely for you” and so on, and so she was very pleased and she put them in a huge vase right on the corner of the staircase, it was absolutely brilliant, and I think the bad news is truthfully, I think I must have been a bit pissed or something, because coming down the stairs I, you know, unfortunately just touched the vase which took off completely and the whole lot went crashing down to the floor (laughs). It really was a complete disaster, so I didn’t know what to do then (laughs). It was sort of game over, but in the end we patched it all up and it was okay. So, I think my, my real pleasure, you know, was that the toy industry did turn out to be an extraordinary, wonderful place because we just happened to have a bunch of friends all together, both on all sides, whether buyers or manufacturers or agents or whatever, and we used to have these ridiculous parties everywhere, so it was fun.

IH: And then just, I suppose, finally, Gareth Morris described you as a toy man through and through. Is that something you’d agree with and what do you think it means?

TN: Well, I think…I think I probably did become rather much of a toy person. I mean, I used to be asked what are the qualifications, you know, for being in the toy industry, and I said I think there are only two: one is, an eye for detail, because children are fascinated by
detail and little things that open and shut and how they work and stuff, and secondly, a mental age of about seven, and I think, to be truthful, I qualified on both counts, so you know, I suppose I must be a toy man (laughs). But Gareth, did Gareth tell you about how we got to the point of deciding how much money we were going to ask for [from the Welsh Development Agency to buy our new factory in Merthyr Tidfil]?

IH: No.

TN: It’s funny, that’s very interesting.

IH: He mentioned meetings with Tom Charnock on the A1, you used to sort of meet mid-country...

TN: Yeah, we did meet. Well, we used to meet, I used to meet Tom at a place called the Bap Centre, which was a little place that served breakfasts and, and, and we are the inventors of the Mega Bap, I think I invented it, because he used to have sausage baps and egg and bacon baps, and I eventually said “Well, why don’t we put the whole bloody lot together in a bap and we’ll call it the Mega Bap”, and the bloke, I can’t remember his name, Harry or something was delighted with this so he got the Mega Bap on the, on the blackboard outside, and so we used to have those, it was huge, you
didn’t need anything else to eat all day. And then that night when all the gales came and the whole of London was blown away and all the dustbins were thrown around and the whole of Regents Park was flattened and everything and I could hardly get out of the house, a tree had come right down across the door, front door in, just round the corner in Gloucester Crescent, and, when I got up to the Bap Centre, as we called it (laughs) it had disappeared, the caravan had been blown away, it was just a bit of blue canvass on the car park, so we didn’t get any baps that day.

IH: Very sad! Um, I think that’s probably...

TN: Are you alright, Sarah, is that lowering the tone of the whole thing?

SARAH WOOD: No, well, I was just thinking as you said, metal age of about seven, that’s about our mental age!

IH: Yeah. I think that’s where we’ve ended up!

TN: Well, I think if you’re involved with toys you’ve got to kind of understand it that way.

IH: Definitely.
SW: I just wanted to ask about, um, the names of, if you had designers? You said you did it all yourself within the company [inaudible].

TN: Well, no, well we did the...well, no, Polly Pocket was our idea at all, I should have mentioned it. Polly Pocket, we worked with a group of young guys called Origin, particularly Chris Wiggs and Chris Taylor, and they ran a little business called Origin which was based towards the Portobello Road, and, one day, because they had developed Polly Pocket with us and they were responsible for all the final designs and the model-making and so on. We had meetings pretty well every week because there was always things to discuss and so on, but Polly Pocket originally was not our idea at all. Chris Wiggs had one day at a meeting produced – because we used to have brain-storming meetings – produced a wooden box about that size, um, with a little wooden doll in it, didn’t do anything but it was there, which he said he’d made for his daughter six years before, and he said “Do you think there's anything in it?” and I said “Well, I don’t know, I've no idea”, and then I thought about it a bit and really more as much as for something to say as anything else, I was holding the doll, and I said “Can you make it bend at the waist?” and he said “No, it’s too small”, and I said “Well, come on, you’re a terrific engineer, you know, you can do anything, so I’ll come back next week and I’d like to see the doll could do something, could sit
down at least”, you know, and so anyway I came back the next week, he’d made a beautiful model of a little doll that moves and sat down perfectly, so I said “Well, hell, we may be into something now” and so that’s really how it started. And, um, then it wasn’t me but another guy who we used to pull in for brain-storming who was an advertising person I think, suggested the name Polly Pocket and the moment we heard it we said that’s it. And, so you know, like everything it sort of evolved, but from then on well, then we were all thinking about what to do with Polly Pocket and it worked very well.

**SW: Was it the same with the other toys? Did you work with other companies?**

TN: We worked with, yes we worked with Tom Kremer whose company was called Seven Towns and he was the agent for things like Rubik’s Cube, which he still does I expect, or his son, David I think, does. We worked as I said with Marvin Glass which became BMT when Jeff Breslow and everybody took over, and we worked with, we worked actually with all the toy inventors. I used to spend a lot of time talking to toy inventors; sometimes we had something, sometimes we didn’t and I used to go round the whole of the Nuremburg Toy Fair. The moment I got away from the London toy fairs I was not, because I’m not selling anything or buying anything,
all I had to do was think about our ranges and how we should develop them, and so I used to go round with a little, little, er, recorder and every idea I had as I walked around looking at things I would just put on the thing and then we’d type it all out and then when I got back to the office we could see, you know, the sort of tortuous way one’s mind works and whether it actually was any use or not, and some of things we wanted to do and some we didn’t.

IH: Marvellous.

[END OF RECORDING – 1:07:42]