

Museum of Childhood

A great destination for a family or school visit

Step through the door and into a 'street'. There are marbles, skipping ropes, hopscotch, all kinds of games that were played in the streets and visitors can play them now. There are also homemade games and modern toys. Significantly, there is a helper on hand to show the children how to play some of these games. This is 'Adventure', the first gallery in the National Trust's £2.2 million transformation of their Museum of Childhood at Sudbury Hall in Derbyshire and if you can, head in that direction. It is well worth the journey. The Museum mainly covers the nineteenth century up to today and has been organised to appeal to a wide age range. The main impression is one of fun, colour and activity but there is also a learning mission here and schools will find it a rewarding destination.

Out of the street and through a (clean) coalmine into 'Work'. The chimney from the old Museum is still there to be climbed but is now larger, to accommodate today's children. The Chimney Master, wielding a large stick, is one of the several costumed volunteers. In the laundry, where they have a handling collection, you may become a scullery maid or a scullion. There are displays of costumes, written accounts, oral histories. All displays run from past to present so there is also information about current child labour worldwide and you can think about, and then vote on, whether this is desirable or not.

We move on to 'Home'. It really asks the question: what is a home? The staff worked with children in the creation of the gallery and they put out an appeal to fill some gaps in the objects. It seems there was a great response. In here, you can design your own room and when they are working with groups, the staff ask the children to gradually remove items which would not have been available in the past, giving them a sense of what their lives would have been like then. If you look up, there are more rooms from other periods actually on the ceiling. Toys, games, clubs and celebrations are shown from different cultures in Britain and there are not only objects but books and stories. By pressing a button, you can listen to *Listen with Mother* or *The Big Toe Show*.

Not far from 'Home' is 'School'. There is a Victorian School Room, presided over by an impressive school master in a black coat and equipped with a cane. There is beautiful copperplate handwriting on the blackboard and slates for the pupils who wear pinafores when taking part in a session. There are even

clogs to show what they would have been wearing instead of their trainers. The schoolmaster says that accompanying teachers often look tense when, after a rousing hymn, he launches into mental arithmetic with the groups. Outside the school room, a video runs which will fascinate accompanying grandparents as it shows playground games, drill and uniforms that some will remember only too well. In the learning gallery, display cases built as desks can have their lids lifted to reveal books and equipment from the past. The question is posed: how do you learn? The display allows the question to be asked and experiments with the answers to be made. One aid is an enormous shoe with laces to be tied.

Sometimes the experimentation is noisy and special arrangements have been made to make sure everyone hears the fire alarm – not usually a problem in other environments!

The 'Baby' gallery deals with a child's early development, including feeding and aspects of care. The full gamut is run from a superb ivory and gilt rattle to a bag of nappies. The equipment and toys reflect development over time. As the staff point out, it is all excellent for the study of materials and the children will hardly

notice they are learning. The multicultural aspect comes through again in the information on christening and naming ceremonies and here, there is an activity for parents. A table game invites the player to pack all baby's necessities. Perhaps one for parents of older children who can laugh about it now. It is good to see a copy of the Ahlbergs' *Peepo!* in the display.

There is a special area for stories and books in the gallery called 'Stories and Imagination'. The visitor enters through an atmospheric corridor. First we are under the sea, hearing the



Baby Gallery © National Trust



Victorian Schoolroom

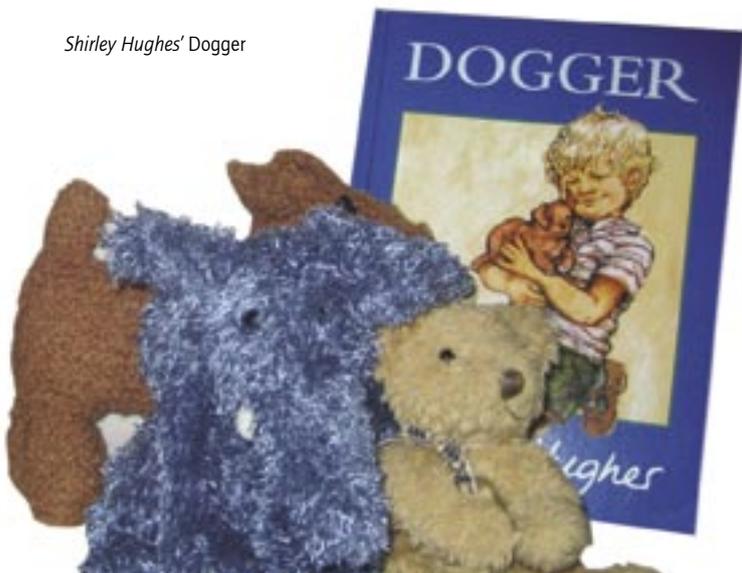
waves, seeing *Treasure Island*. Then in space, surrounded by *Star Wars* models, then in the forest. *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* in old and new versions appear here as well as the Disney character dolls from earlier times. These are the places where stories may be set. We step out on to a dragon carpet and we are in the character area. Puppets and marionettes hang here and lead into the story room where the walls are covered in the scenery from Yorkshire Television's *Book Tower* programme. The display cases are huge books and there are marionettes and dressing up clothes, with space to act out your own story. There are also stories on headsets and a story teller's chair for live story telling.



Toy Gallery © National Trust

The exceptional funding allowed for a new upper floor to be built and that houses 'Toys'. Many of the displays are arranged to show an historical progression and here you can see Egyptian and Roman toys as well as those that will be recognised by all family members in turn. There is a truly magnificent doll's trunk, full of necessities for travelling, equipped as for some marquis. It should even satisfy Paris Hilton. In lovely contrast are some soft toys and among them sits a copy of Shirley Hughes' *Dogger*. As an example of the attention to their visitors' needs, there are a few spare teddies around and a little wall to walk them along – a

Shirley Hughes' *Dogger*



little perk for a flagging very small visitor. Hope they get all those teddies back.

In this gallery is a selection from the remarkable *Betty Cadbury Collection of Playthings Past*.

This contains objects from the fourth to the twenty-first century and includes dolls, teddies, optical toys and automata. The fragile automata are shown in action on film but, again, there is evidence of the thought put into this venture in the new, more robust version available for



Mouseworld © National Trust

children to play with. Here they teach toy technology in workshops and there is space in the Hall to display children's work.

As if all this were not enough, there is one further gallery for temporary exhibitions which will provide a space for changing, themed exhibitions and these will start with one actually on the making of the Museum.

There are three main aspects which make this a first class Museum to visit with children. Firstly, it is a good mixture of display and activity. There is always something to do which involves them with the displays. Secondly, there is provision for a wide age range. Apart from the breadth of the collection itself, there are thoughtful touches, such as the height of the labelling. A well-loved aspect of the old Museum was the Mouseworld boxes and these are retained – tiny, mini-displays, often at ground level. Anyone at the crawling stage will have a built-in advantage. The staff says a bonus is to see family parties, grandparents, parents and children who talk together about what they are seeing. The third factor is access. It is inclusive, welcoming both different cultural groups and those who need the lift and well placed seating. It is likely to appeal to a wider range of social groupings than most National Trust properties.

There is, naturally, a café (serving Mouseworld Meals) and a shop but perhaps the most pleasing feature is that throughout the displays, a deal of attention is paid to children's books. Whether you are taking the family or your class, the Museum of Childhood provides an excellent, busy day out.

Pat Thomson

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 For details of opening and charges see www.nationaltrust.org.uk