

Bear-Faced Love

Few items hold such sentimental value as a favourite teddy. Hannah Bass visits a 'bear hospital', where well-loved teddies are brought back to life

Teddy bears are a reminder of happy times, a person you could confide in,' says Edy Reilly, who runs Oldenbears restoration service. 'I can tell my bear anything.'

Edy's bear takes pride of place on the table in front of us, a jaunty little fellow bought for her when she was seven, with golden fur, amber eyes and a wide smile. He was also Edy's first patient. 'His hard nose fell off when I was about 10,' she says, 'so I decided to embroider him a new one – and after all these years, it's still there.'

'I preferred teddy bears to dolls, and I've always been crafty – I taught myself knitting and needlework as a child. I went into dress design and then in 1996 I found an old bear in an antiques

emporium, all in pieces. I decided to buy him, restore him and then sold him at a teddy-bear fair. That's when I realised there was a demand for specialist bear restoration.'

Nowadays, Edy restores several teddy bears a week in the little workshop at the top of a spiral staircase in her cottage in Huntingdon, Cambridgeshire, where the walls are lined with neat boxes of stuffing and cloth. There are reams of ginger mohair – Edy's most popular colour, bought from Germany (still the capital of teddy-bear craft) – tucked away in airtight boxes to ward off moths, and a trug full of odd scraps that



Edy with some of the bears in her care



Edy rummages through to find just the right piece to patch up a threadbare bear, a process she describes as 'putting a giant jigsaw puzzle together'. Trays of leather, velvet and felt for patching on to paws. Jewellery boxes filled with glinting glass eyes, organised by colour and size. Kapok stuffing so soft I can barely feel it between my fingers. And this is just the tip of the iceberg – Edy orders 4kg of stuffing at a time, so there's much more crammed into cupboards throughout the house.

And sitting on the shelves next to her worktop, the invalids themselves. Deflated little bears with leaking stuffing.

A decapitated teddy and his forlorn-looking head nestled lovingly in a shoebox. Two huge bears filled with old wood-wool stuffing so heavy that Edy needed help lugging them upstairs.

The same wood-wool stuffing used to give old teddy bears their distinctively firm, upright bodies was also used to pack china. Edy once named a patient of hers the 'Peckham Bear' – after opening him up for repair she found an invoice from the household shop 'Pretty of Peckham' in among the stuffing.

As she flicks through photos of

her past patients, Edy's encyclopaedic knowledge of the teddy bear world is clear. With just a glance at a downturned mouth or a distinctively cocked ear she identifies vintage makes – the main British manufacturers being Chiltern, Merrythought, Chad Valley, Pedigree and Farnell. 'Chilterns are my favourites,' she explains. 'I love their slightly sad-looking faces – I call them 'miserable bears'! I can tell them instantly from the shape of their head, their right-angled ears and chicken-drumstick-shaped legs. And there are clues when you open them up, too – Chiltern always used an unusual fluorescent yellow thread for the seams.'

It's not just their faces that differ – Edy believes each bear has his own personality. 'I never see two that are exactly the same. And I've restored a couple that I got so attached to that I didn't want to give them back!' But she jokes

that owners are less imaginative when it comes to naming their bears: 'They're always called Teddy, Edward, Bruno or Big Ted. You never get Colin or John!'

Most of the teddies that come to Edy's hospital are from the 1950s and 1960s, although she has restored some that date back to the 1930s for specialist collectors. 90% of her invalids are the result of dog attacks.

'I feel awful,' she confesses, 'but I always have a guilty chuckle when they come in without a head – it looks so macabre!'

Once a bear arrives, Edy begins her jigsaw puzzle, 'working backwards, looking at whatever is left', sometimes using childhood photographs of the bears in their prime if they're available. There's a bear she repaired for a surgeon – ironic, since her work seems somewhat similar. Sometimes all

Painstakingly restored



In order to get a bear back at its best, Edy has to save what's left, and then replace what's been lost with vintage-looking materials so you can't see the joins

that's needed is a patch-up, sometimes she'll almost have to remake the bear, dismantling parts and using them to cut a new pattern from mohair fur. But even her totally restored or remade bears retain an antique look. 'I don't just stitch material over the top because I won't leave anything of value if I make them look brand new.' She won't reveal the exact trade secrets of the ageing process but she says that, 'The materials are still available today, so I just age them and pluck them slightly – otherwise it's like putting a ginger toupee on a black-haired man.'

Toy making has changed drastically in the last half century. Many of Edy's wood-wool-stuffed bears are stiff and un-huggable, while others are filled with potentially deadly material. She shows me a little black bear with his face burnt by a lamp. 'When this one came in I emailed the owners saying, 'Never mind the bear, are you alright?' Because

when this old foam catches fire, it gives off cyanide!' Of course, Edy replaces dangerous stuffing wherever she finds it but she still uses joints made from millboard discs and nails, which means that her restored teddies can't be classified as children's toys under

'I never see two that are exactly the same'

today's regulations. 'These teddies need to be retired gently,' she says. 'No more strenuous games because they're not really toys anymore – they're antiques.'

But what hasn't changed is the love and affection these teddies inspire in their owners – no matter their age. Edy recently reconstructed a very old sheepskin bear of which only the

head remained. It was sent to Edy by a husband to be restored for his wife's birthday. In the photo of her unwrapping it, the utter joy on her face is clear.

Then there's the lady who throw a 50th birthday party for her gloriously restored bear – complete with a birthday cake and candles.

Undoubtedly, one of Edy's most impressive recoveries is a 1950s bear that came to her with his head ripped off, face cut open and stomach torn apart. The picture is actually distressing to look at – as Edy says, 'Even someone who doesn't like bears would be upset by this. It looks like an animal has savaged it.' The bear was a victim of suspicious customs officials at a Turkey airport. The distressed owner was so pleased with her remade bear that she emailed Edy to say, 'You've either done everything to this or nothing – I just can't see how you've repaired him.' She even sent Edy a bottle of champagne and a big bouquet of flowers to say thanks.

'Bears mean so much to people, especially when they're so old.

'They're also associated with the people who bought them for you, often a parent who isn't around anymore. They're a symbol of a happy childhood, or if not a happy childhood then a source of comfort through hard times,' she says. 'It's a joy to be able to give that back to people.'

● To find out more about Edy's restoration services, visit oldenbears.co.uk.

