



Testing for toughness: young members in a large annexe which can also be used as a theatre.

'Under the rulership of God', the Society of Brothers live and work in Sussex.

DIANE SPENCER reports

Playthings are their business

Community Playthings are robust wooden toys designed to withstand a lot of hard knocks from large numbers of children. They are from Rumanian beech, naturally varnished, with no square corners but wonderfully smooth and solid enough to stand an adult's weight.

They are made by the Society of Brothers who live in the Darvell Community, in Robertsbridge, Sussex. (In fact the society consists of families and single people—not just men.) Using the boilerhouse of the old TB hospital which is now their home as their workshop, the brothers make the playthings using modern tools: electric planes, saws, air-tools for hand finishing.

The society have only been in Sussex for a year, although Community Playthings started in the mid-sixties and the society itself in Germany in 1920. Their aim is to show that "under the rulership of God men can live a life of loving harmony and brotherhood, having all things common, as recorded in the Acts of the Apostles". They are perhaps closest to the Quakers.

The Brothers formed a community in the small village of Sannerz in Hesse and, in 1926, with numbers increasing, they bought a larger farm nearby and attempted to live a life based on the teachings of the early Christians. The community was dissolved on Hitler's orders in 1937. As a branch of the society was already established in Ashton Keynes, Wiltshire, the previous year, the Brothers migrated there. Since then communities have developed in the United States and South America.

Because the education of their children has always been of vital concern for the Brothers, the equipment they made for their schools, tried and tested by the children, was easily developed for commercial use. They went temporarily out of business from 1966 until last year because they felt the need to move from their Buckinghamshire home to be near their American counterparts.

Last year, after much house hunting, they found the ideal place in Robertsbridge to re-establish their community. The old hospital is suitable because its large grounds and rambling buildings will enable the Brothers to expand from their present 70 up to 200 (their ideal number). There is ample space for storage, making the toys and for living.

Each family has its own flat, but they like to have at least one meal together each day. These community meals are taken in a pleasant dining room with long tables made in the workshop and with a beautifully carved chandelier made by the

brothers hanging from the centre of the ceiling.

The food is simple but good (and not vegetarian). Guests are introduced to the gathering, a song is sung—not a hymn, there is a moment of silence then the food is handed round. During lunch one of the "sisters" (everyone is referred to as a brother or a sister in the community) reads a story.

The community appears to be self-sufficient. Everyone works within it. However, Robert Rimes, sales manager for Community Playthings, says they do not ignore world problems. They have many modern comforts: cars for example. The sisters go shopping in nearby towns and the village, the children visit playgrounds and the seaside, and they welcome visitors. If a guest wishes to stay he is charged nothing, but is expected to work like everyone else.

Everyone is assigned to a job by a work distributor which can vary from day to day. The foreman in the workshop usually has about a dozen working for him; but if there is a delivery of bricks or cement needed to finish an extension he will then lose some of his men to the bricklaying. If they get a big order from some education committee, the Brothers, ungrudgingly work overtime.

Children are educated in the community until they are 14 when they go to local schools and on to further

training. They are taught by qualified teachers belonging to the society. Classes are always small, especially now as the Darvell community is not yet up to full strength.

On the whole, the playthings are most suitable for play groups and nursery schools because of their size and price. The variplay gym and slide which costs £33, the unit and hollow blocks at about £30 for both make good basic equipment for starting a group. Many of the toys have developed from simple ideas; the variplay triangle set is perhaps the most versatile. A wheelbarrow, balance board, slide, see-saw and a cart can all be made from two boards, three triangular structures, two of them on wheels, which is sold as a set for £22.12.

The community runabout is the natural evolution of the board on roller-skates to be found in most back streets and gardens. It is a circular wooden platform with handrails, its base mounted on four heavy duty castors. A child can sit on it, holds, its base mounted on four heavy spinning off walls and furniture, but doing no damage because the whole thing is surrounded by a rubber tyre.

The society does not patent its products so it has imitators. However, Robert Rimes says they have had many nice letters from old customers welcoming them back into business.

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