



DALEK HUNTER

HANDS OFF! THESE DOCTOR WHO TOYS ARE NOT FOR PLAYING WITH...

WORDS: ROBBIE DUNLOP

IN HIS DAY JOB, CHRIS HILL IS A DIRECTOR AT a scientific research organisation that supports the US government. By night, he hunts Daleks. Toy Daleks.

It's not unusual for fans of *Doctor Who* to collect the tie-in merchandise. But there are few who go to such extremes as Hill, a devotee of the show since the mid-'60s. "I'm told that I was one of those kids who was watching from behind the sofa, peeking my head out," he tells *SFX*. "I had a plastic Dalek by a company called Herts Plastic Moulders, and a Dalek shooting game.

"But I wasn't a collector then. I became one in February 1971 when my dad brought home the first issue of a comic called *Countdown*. There was a *Doctor Who* strip in it with Jon Pertwee. I remember looking at that and thinking, 'I'm going to start collecting these.'"

Today, Hill – a leading *Doctor Who* memorabilia expert – boasts a record-breaking 12,500 individual items, from "cast cards" signed by the series' stars dating back to 1963, to the latest anniversary T-shirt, coaster and badge collections. This vast number is of little surprise when you consider there have been steady releases

of official *Doctor Who* tie-in products from early on. "There's been a constant stream of *Doctor Who* merchandise since almost the very beginning," Hill says. "The first boom was 1965's 'Dalekmania'. The Daleks were everywhere. On the telly, in the newspapers and comics, on the cinema screen, and so, of course, the toy shops and sweet shops were packed with licensed items.

"There were plenty of toys and games, but almost anything you can think of was available with a Dalek on it. You could buy Dalek soap and Dalek storage jars for the kitchen. There was a Dalek painting book, birthday cards and pencils."

Among his prized possessions he counts a vintage Dalek playsuit, a coin-operated Dalek ride and an extremely fragile Dalek papier-mâché mask. But for Hill, a major part of the allure of '60s merchandise is the highly illustrated packaging. "The effort that went into the design for even the most basic of products back then was phenomenal," he enthuses. "It's so colourful; so evocative of that time."

Hill's Dalek money box was truly plundered when he had the opportunity to buy the cardboard packaging from a pair of 1965 Dalek slippers. "I'd already →



The very rare Scorpion Automatives Dalek playsuit.

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bought the slippers from another collector, then the box came up for sale – and I missed it,” he says. “The person who bought it agreed to sell it to me for a very substantial price.”

Fortunately, he considers his greatest outlay to date to have been balanced by the bargains he has picked up over the years, including a piece of tinfoil wrapping from a 1965 chocolate Dalek – the only one of its type, he believes, that still exists.

“Someone had carefully peeled it off, stuck it in their scrapbook along with the card that would have been in the sweet shop, and 50-odd years later posted a picture of it on Facebook. I contacted them and said, ‘Would you be interested in parting with it?’ The guy said he would. It wasn’t cheap, but it wasn’t outrageously expensive either. And you have to ask, how on earth did this survive? It shouldn’t exist any more.”

TOYS 'R' USA

In 1986, Hill moved from England to Washington DC. He kept up to date with the latest releases via mail order catalogues. But then, in the mid-'90s, eBay came along, “and suddenly the world changed”. The chance to buy items that he’d once only dreamed of owning came, however, at a price. “There were a handful of really serious collectors who were competing heavily for the '60s stuff,” he says, “so we were paying way over the odds for things back then.”

Now, Hill spends an hour or two a day trawling eBay for *Doctor Who* memorabilia. If something unusual appears, he acts fast. Many serious collectors will contact sellers and try to negotiate a deal. Case in point: a toy Dalek gun from 1965.

“I was sitting in an airport in Minneapolis when I saw it and I thought, ‘By the time I get home, it will have gone.’ So I was frantically contacting the lady who was selling it, trying to do a deal – or at least talk to her. Ultimately, she sold it to me. She later said the reason I got it was because I was very polite, while other people were very aggressive in their approach!”

When the limited-edition Robert Harrop figurines of classic *Doctor Who* characters go on sale, it’s 3.00am in Hill’s time zone. Sleep? What’s sleep when you’re a dedicated collector? “I’ll set my alarm, get up and log online,” he says. “There’s always a risk they’ll sell out quickly. But they’re so well designed and manufactured. They’re definitely my favourite range of current merchandise.”

The figurines are proudly displayed in Hill’s *Doctor Who* Room. But latter-day merchandise goes straight into plastic bins and storage – after it has been catalogued.



Can we live in your basement please, Chris?



Woolworths sold these 7-inch Daleks.



A “marble maze” game, from 1965.

“I’ve always felt like a sophisticated collector,” Hill explains. “I’m someone who does a lot of research. I know what’s available, I know a lot about the product, and I put a lot of effort into trying to find the different variants of items, as well as any related promotional and advertising material.”

“Many collectors keep a spreadsheet, so they know what they’ve got and don’t duplicate items. I use professional museum software so I can enter all the information that I can find about a product. I’m extremely disciplined. It’s almost as if I’ve set myself up as having this duty to the world of *Doctor Who* merchandise; not only as a collector, but to record everything I can as an archivist.”

Not a weekend goes by without Hill adding items from his collection to his database. At least it keeps him out of his wife’s hair for several hours. “She’s very tolerant,” Hill smiles. “We have a few ground rules. It all has to stay in the →

Heroes and
villains living
in harmony.

basement – it doesn't creep into the upstairs part of the house. But I think she appreciates that I have a passion for doing this, and she's always very supportive. She rolls her eyes, but that's to be expected."

SHELF LIFE

It would be another four decades before a boom in merchandise overtook "Dalekmania". In 2007, with David Tennant's Doctor at the height of his popularity, there was another big explosion.

"It was huge," says Hill. "You could get anything, whether it was something to use in the kitchen, something to play with, or something to wear. Everywhere from Primark to Next to Sainsbury's had their own clothing ranges. I tried to collect everything – there was an unbelievable amount.

"I had a network of people who would shop for me. My mother would go to all the clothes shops to get me the different sets of pyjamas and T-shirts." Does he have a size preference? "I always try to get the smallest because it takes up the least space," Hill laughs.

With toys flying off the shelves at an unprecedented rate, some less-than-reputable companies sought to cash in on *Doctor Who*'s rekindled success... "There was an infamous fake Cyber Controller's car and helicopter," says Hill. "They were basically cheap toys from China that had been repackaged in a box covered with pictures of a Cyberman and David Tennant's face.

"Those two I bought because they were interesting novelties. The BBC came down heavily. By then they had a very sophisticated brand management and licensing organisation."

Today, it's Character Options which manufactures some of the most popular *Doctor Who* action figures. Many purchasers play with them; some display them. Hill's remain sealed in their packaging. "I have no reason to take them out," he explains. "I don't have the same affinity for these toys. I collect the new series stuff because I'm a completist.

"The classic series items I take out; it's much easier to remove '60s and '70s toys from their boxes because they weren't packaged in the way things are today. The new series toys are held in with plastic ties, sometimes vacuum-sealed, and there's little chance of opening them without destroying the packaging. And honestly, I don't have the space to display much of the recent stuff anyway."



All you need
to dress to
impress.

Yet Hill buys these toys in each of their repackaged variants. "For the figures, it's really a bit of a drag. Oh gosh, I've got to have the Weeping Angel with both the angry face and the serene face! It's where I tend to feel I cross the line from sympathetic collector to obsessive, by feeling that there's a responsibility to have all the variants or I'm not doing my job."

Hill's collection may be unparalleled, but even he has a few gaps. "Nobody's ever managed to find a pair of 1966 Dalek pyjamas," he laments. Not that he hasn't tried. He managed to track down the sons of the owner of the factory that manufactured them. "One remembers, when he was a kid, seeing the pyjamas produced. So they were definitely made, but nobody's found them.

"There's also a toy that was advertised in the trade press in 1965 and was offered as a competition prize in a comic at the time: the Dalek Pencil Craft set. I'd sell an organ to get one of those!"

But for Hill, the thrill of the hunt is all part of the fun. "That's much more enjoyable than the subsequent owning of something. I like having things missing from my collection

“My mother would go to the clothes shops to get the different sets of pyjamas and T-shirts”

because it motivates me to keep looking. If you want to collect *Doctor Who*, the nice thing is, there is so much you can collect. It's a very accessible hobby. You can decide – and a lot of people do – to collect the Target books. That's a realisable collection.

You can decide to collect all the Big Finish CDs. There's a lot of them, but you could do it. If you set out to, say, own all the '60s Dalek merchandise, well that's going to be a bit of a stretch. You've got to have some pretty deep pockets and you've got to be willing to invest a heck of a lot of time into doing it."

So just how much money has Hill spent on *Doctor Who* in total? "I have no idea," he laughs. "And if I did, I probably wouldn't say!" Sorry, Mrs Hill... ●

Chris Hill appears in the *Doctor Who: The Collection* Blu-ray documentary series *The Collectors*. Visit thespacemuseum.net.