

Malcolm Goodman is the owner of the largest collection of kites in the Western world – a hobby that has taken over his home and cost him more than £100,000

Malcolm Goodman owns a B&B in County Durham. The occupants of his guest rooms have flown in from all over the world, but they have no need for pillows, sheets, or a hearty fry-up. They are kites, in their hundreds, strung up across five rooms and spilling into the corridors. Kites shaped like butterflies and turtles, trains and castles, snakes and tigers. Kites smaller than a penny, and as large as his prized dragon from Indonesia, which is 100 metres long when in the sky.

Malcolm, known as 'the Kiteman', purchased the B&B to house his collection. He estimates he has well over 1,000 kites and is confident that his is the largest collection in the Western world. A retired electronics engineer, he has spent 50 years growing his hoard, visiting over 50 countries in the process. He reckons it has cost him more than £100,000, including travel expenses. Malcolm lives upstairs with his wife, Jeanette, as the entire ground floor is dedicated to kites. Even then, they don't all fit – he has six garages in which he stores the rest.

He has never grown tired of flying a kite – 'All your worries go up that string,' says Malcolm. 'You don't think of anything else.' He also praises the health benefits of the pastime. 'I'm 80 and I can still run as fast as I could yonks ago.' As a child, he made diamond kites out of brown paper with his father, who died when Malcolm was 13. Struggling with what he later learned was dyslexia, he left school a year later with no qualifications. He took up an apprenticeship at a radio, hi-fi and TV shop, where he became skilled at repairs; he later started his own electronics firm.

On a trip to the USA in his thirties, he was impressed by adults flying single-line kites. He joined a kite club in Seattle and purchased the first of his collection: two birds with papier mâché bodies and silk wings.

A couple of years later, he heard that the club had been



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High flyer
Malcolm
with a kite
shaped as
a tiger (above);
Princess Anne
flying one of
Malcolm's kites



invited to China to help revive kite flying in the aftermath of the Cultural Revolution, which had seen them banned for their decadence. Funded by the British Council, he secured a six-week work sabbatical and joined ten Americans on the trip that cemented his hobby. Since then, as his collection spiralled, he's become a familiar figure at international kite festivals, meeting other enthusiasts from all over the world. He has taught kite-making in schools, and in 1989 he married Jeanette at a kite festival in Hawaii.

You might think of flying a kite as simply a pleasant way to spend a summer afternoon on the beach. But kites have a rich history. Their exact origins are unclear, but it is likely they were invented in China or Southeast Asia more than 2,000 years ago. They didn't reach the West until much later, in the 16th and 17th centuries, where they were enlisted in scientific experiments. Benjamin Franklin is said to have used a kite to prove that lightning is electricity. And kites were the inspiration behind the aeroplane's invention, crucial to the research of the Wright brothers.

Likewise, Malcolm's collection is more than an assortment of toys. While plenty are designed to entertain, many are cultural artefacts. Some are by celebrated Eastern kite makers from families where the craft was passed down the generations. Unable to interest tech-obsessed youth in the tradition, they've since died without apprentices, making their creations the last of their kind.

Some were made for practical use. Take, for instance, the American kite that was created for target practice during the Second World War, khaki and emblazoned with a Kamikaze plane. Or the Indonesian kites crafted from leaves to help catch needlefish. But whether functional or decorative, each kite tells its own story – of

GETTY, FULVIO ZAPPATORE





☛ a person, a place, a moment in history. Like those made by a friend of his, Peter Powell, the man responsible for Britain's kite flying boom in the Seventies. He invented the dual-line, steerable kite which was named toy of the year in 1976. Malcolm owns six. Peter's career started humbly, peddling kites out of his car boot by the seaside, and ended when he set his manufacturing equipment alight, haunted by dwindling sales. He died in 2016, aged 83.

Then there's the kites made by another friend of Malcolm's, Jan Pieter Kuil from Holland. 'He liked making shapes that no one else could make,' says Malcolm. A train, a castle, a yacht. 'He was very clever with a nuclear physics degree. But the only jobs he could get were in nuclear weapons. He didn't want that and took his own life.' Five years ago, Jan Pieter's wife gave her husband's collection to Malcolm, on the condition he flew them regularly. Malcolm has stayed true to his word – they're regular crowd-pleasers at festivals.

Many others represent cultural customs, such as fighter kites from countries such as India and Pakistan. There, kite fighting is a sport that can be dangerous, sometimes deadly. Competitors attempt to cut the string of their opponent's kite with the string of their own. Designed to be abrasive, the strings have caused accidents.

Hundreds also come from China and Japan, capturing centuries of traditions and rituals. Two from Japan were designed to banish sickness, each depicting a face with a long tongue.

Malcolm explains how if a child was unwell, one such kite might have been pinned over their bed for a day or two. Then the kite would be flown, the line would be cut, and it would sail away on the wind, taking the illness with it. According to superstition, if someone touched the fallen kite, they would become sick.

There are miniature kites, too, of only 5mm. Samurai warriors originally made

these out of straw and tissue paper, then flew them over the air from hot cooking stoves to relax after battle.

He has lifelike birds from Indonesia, Malaysian 'moon kites' with intricate floral designs, and wacky varieties including a flying pig and a pair of pyjamas. But getting them home hasn't always been easy. One, a large crane, originally came from China, where the bird is a symbol of longevity – it was named Rodney by Malcolm. While he was nervous about carrying it on his flight back to the UK, he needn't have worried. Rodney was promoted to first class, where he was allowed to spread his wings across three seats. However, his safe passage home was threatened on arrival in London when a coach driver was less keen to let him on board. 'Luckily, I always have a £5 note in my wallet,' says Malcolm.

Rodney's luxurious flight wasn't his only experience among the upper echelons of

society. He was flown by Princess Anne in the early Nineties at

'All your worries go up that string. You don't think of anything else'

The Kiteman Holding Jan Pieter Kuil's train-shaped kite (top); Rodney the crane kite (above); and one of Malcolm's favourites from Japan (below)

a kite festival. 'We got to the field and there was no wind at all,' says Malcolm. 'Then she arrived and the wind started up, so we could finally fly the kites for a couple of hours. As soon as she left, the wind disappeared. It was crackers.'

Point at any kite in his private museum and Malcolm will tell you stories like these. The plan was to open his house to the public, but safety regulations prevented this. Now, as he looks to downsize, he wants to donate the bulk of his kites, ideally to a museum, where they can be appreciated by a wider audience.

His two daughters, who are in their forties, don't have the capacity to take them. 'If anything happens to us, we fear the kites will end up in a skip,' says Jeanette, who has accompanied Malcolm on his travels, and has her own collection of around 20 kites. But museums have been wary, citing lack of space and preservation concerns. Still, he has had interest, lately from an organisation that has proposed creating a travelling exhibition and compiling a book.

Though their future is up in the air, Malcolm believes there is nowhere else in the world with such a diverse range of Eastern and Western kites in one place – Peter Powell's stunt kites next to intricate work by Japanese kite masters. For now, they have all landed in his B&B within the Durham Dales. Where will they fly next? ☼

