

## Headless Rocking-horse

There it was, abandoned in an open-fronted shed in a pub garden. The Nottingham Castle, Westgate-on-sea, since you ask. Oh, of course, it was suffering from woodworm and extreme neglect, but it was love at first sight for us, and we played with it happily while Mum and Dad enjoyed a quiet drink. The head was held on by a single rusty nail, and it didn't take long for it fall off. We jammed it back on again and continued the horsey adventures of our imaginations.

'Look, Dad,' we said, seeing past the woodworm, the peeling paint, torn saddle and sad remains of mane and tail, 'isn't it lovely?'

Dad stroked his chin. He did love a challenge. 'Wait a minute, then.' He disappeared back into the pub, re-emerging minutes later. 'They don't want it. We can have it, girls. I'll bring the car down and fetch it tomorrow.'

Our very own rocking-horse! Dad did fetch it back, in two pieces. The head had fallen off in transit. But not to worry, Dad could fix *anything*, couldn't he? He did, too. We watched in awe as woodworm was treated, bits of rotten wood replaced, the head firmly reattached. Then he painted it – not its beautiful original dapples, more of an easier-to-paint piebald. Somehow, he conjured a replacement mane and tail made of god-knows-what, and the rocking mechanism was painted, tightened up and rendered relatively safe. Just as well, as it was about to be tested to the limit by us and our friends. After much ill-treatment the head fell off once again, but we still rode it occasionally, headless or not, although we were growing up and growing out of toys.

When I was twelve, we moved house and the old rocking-horse, now very redundant, came with us. 'It looked so forlorn,' said Mum, 'and I just couldn't leave it behind.' It was installed in the damp cellar of our new home and mouldered quietly away, with its head propped on its saddle.

It's pleasing to think, though, that the old horse had a second wind with us, galloping once again to the boundless ends of childhood imagination. Strangely, I can't remember giving it a name – but perhaps it played the parts of many horses, had many identities. Perhaps we should have called it Anne, as in Boleyn.