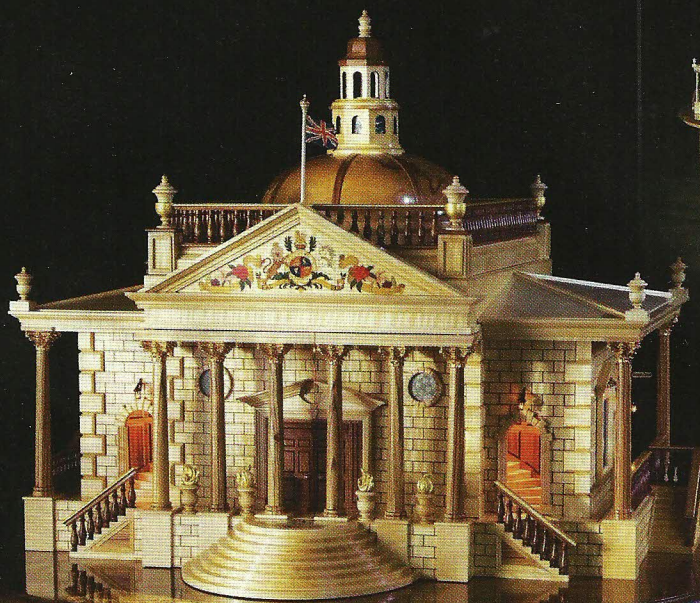


HOME HELP.

*For the safe storage of trinkets, keepsakes and treasured souvenirs, a beautifully handcrafted wooden memory box is the perfect solution, says **Hugh St Clair***



Pantheon theatre, an exquisitely made memory box, is an enduring memento

I have always loved the idea of a little box full of keepsakes and significant things. For instance, a tatty ticket to the ballet can transport you back to a childhood trip to *Swan Lake*.

I learned so much more about my mother's childhood when I asked her about the things in her box. Pottery queen Emma Bridgewater recalls that in her childhood there were Sunday boxes, where children kept their favourite things and they were allowed to play with them after church.

The BBC filmed a programme that follows the making of a memory box featuring the creation of a pantheon theatre (above), from concept to completion. For craftsman Nigel Wheathills of the Exquisite Memory Box company, this represented 2,380 hours of work spread over two years, and required more than 10,000 pieces of veneer.

The cost to the couple who commissioned it was £100,000. They love travel and the theatre and this is reflected in the design of the box. The outside is in the form of a neoclassical theatre with pediment dome and columns that open to reveal a miniature theatre complete with stage and props – there is even a model of Judi Dench carved in wood. Some people, says Nigel Wheathills, order memory boxes the size of trunks, while others are more modest. But all are made from the highest-quality materials. A hero's box was commissioned for a lurcher-owning, bobsleigh champion who loved India, and all these aspects had to be combined in one design, with secret drawers for his special things. Prices for such boxes start at £1,100.

My children, although now in their late teens, still have their wooden memory boxes, featuring pull-out drawers painted

by an artist friend, with images of the things they especially loved when they were very young.

Jenny Read, of Read's Creations, has a wide selection of boxes that can be customised for any occasion. The unpainted wooden boxes, some with pull-out trays, are awaiting decoration from artistic customers. The small will hold items up to A4 size and prices start at £26.99. Jenny Read offers a creative service too. For example, if you send her a wedding photo or a copy of the invitation via computer, her company will transfer it on to a wooden box and paint and decorate as required.

According to Joy Hepworth of Memory Boxes, supplier of everything to protect mementos, modern colour photos fade much faster than ever before because, 'The quality of the inks is much worse than old black-and-white photographs. Paper, especially newspaper, has a high acid content that breaks down fast,' she explains. 'Most people put a whole collection together in one box and the acid can migrate from one thing to another.'

She recommends separating items with acid-free paper and putting photos in acid-free envelopes, which protect against harmful UV light. 'Obviously we can't stop things deteriorating, but we can slow the process. We sell acid-free labels, acid-free zip bags for jewellery and other small precious items. We also have marker pens with ink that contains less-destructive chemicals than standard ones. Memory Boxes doesn't pack-and-wrap for customers, but Joy says that it's worth contacting your local County Council – some of its archive departments are offering this service and advice for a small fee, due to the increasing interest in researching family archives. ♦

- ◆ Exquisite Memory Box: 01332-824819; www.exquisitememorybox.com
- ◆ Memory Boxes: 01636-830108; www.memoryboxes.co.uk
- ◆ Read's Creations: 078866-56438; www.readscreations.co.uk

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