

MATCHBOX CARS

Toys, Yes, but So Much More

Countless car enthusiasts around the world can trace their love of cars to Matchbox, originally produced by Lesney Products, an industrial die-casting company based in Hackney, a borough of London, England. The company's name is a mashup of its two founders' first names - Leslie and Rodney, two childhood friends who served together in the Royal Navy during World War II.

Lesney's bread and butter was making castings for automotive and agricultural companies in addition to specialty products such as a press used by anglers to shape small pieces of bread into fishing-hook bait.



Shortly after World War II, Leslie and Rodney met Jack O'Dell, an engineer who rented space in Lesney's workshop. O'Dell designed Lesney's first toy in 1948, in what was considered at the time a strategic move to keep production lines humming when industrial orders were slow—that toy was an Averling Barford road roller.

Next, Lesney produced a replica of Queen Elizabeth's coronation coach in celebration of her being crowned Queen of England in 1951. Over a million replicas sold in just three months, a success that both surprised and prompted the partners to focus solely on die casting model cars from then on.

Matchbox really became 'Matchbox' when O'Dell wanted to surprise his daughter with a toy car that she could take to school for Show and Tell. School rules dictated that no toys-from-home were allowed unless they fit in a matchbox. So, O'Dell scaled the toy car accordingly, and the Matchbox name stuck and the new line was born.

Straightaway, the company developed a line of 75 model vehicles, all sold in a box designed to look like a matchbox. By the 1960s, Matchbox was the world leader in diecast miniatures; they produced about a million of them each week. One key to their success was the price. Matchbox cars were less than 50 cents when Philbet was a little boy.

Lesney wasn't without competition—stiff competition. And it came from Hot Wheels and Johnny Lighting toys. In response, Lesney developed a line of King Size and Speed Kings models, along with a series of tracks. They followed that manufacturing evolution with Matchbox Models of Yesteryear (hitting paydirt with collectors), a series of 66 historic vehicles, the crown jewel of which was the coronation coach that started it all.

Lesney Products was purchased by Mattel in the late 1970s, uniting rivals Matchbox and Hot Wheels under one roof. In 1985, Matchbox manufacturing had ceased in England. Select Matchbox models are still made today, marketed not as toys, but as collectibles.

Red Clay Suzie's Philbet, the boy who wanted a car for everyone he ever loved, wouldn't care. He'd still want every model he could get his hands on.

