

Rodney Smith

Rodney Smith, who has died aged 95, was the co-founder of Lesney Products and oversaw the company's venture into the die-cast toy market, which would lead to the celebrated Matchbox range.



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In 1947, newly demobbed from the Navy and working for Die Cast Machine Toys (DCMT), Rodney joined forces with Leslie Smith, an old school friend, with whom he set up a business in a disused pub in Edmonton. They amalgamated their forenames to come up with the company title Lesney.

Rodney Smith hired John "Jack" Odell, a fellow ex-serviceman and engineer from DCMT, who agreed to work as a mould maker. At first the trio took orders from every quarter, producing die-cast string cutters, iron hooks, engine parts and windscreen wipers for Ford and Vauxhall. Toys were a sideline venture to tide them over during fallow periods, beginning with Lesney's diesel road roller, which went on sale in 1948.

Toy fire engines, pistols and handcuffs followed – though Smith recalled a "bit of a hoo-ha" over the last of these when children had difficulty extricating themselves. Moko, one of the oldest German toy manufacturers, approached Lesney to cast the legs for Jumbo, its wind-up tin-plate elephant.

At the time the biggest die-cast model manufacturer was Dinky, an offshoot of Meccano . But Lesney began to claim a share of the market and soon moved to bigger premises. Rodney

Smith, however, was keen to try his hand at other ventures, and in 1951 he sold his share in Lesney to his two partners.

He took a half-share in a yacht yard at Lea-on-Sea and went into pig- and poultry-farming. Meanwhile, Matchbox toys were launched in 1953 and enjoyed unprecedented success. By 1963 Lesney was exporting 70 million toy cars to 120 different countries; by 1968 it had a market capitalisation of £120 million. Over the next decade, however, economic downturn, industrial action and a major fire at one of its facilities all took their toll. The company finally went into receivership in 1981.

Rodney Annereau Ingman Smith was born at East Molesey, Surrey, on August 26 1917, the only son of an officer in the Merchant Navy . At 16 he began an engineering apprenticeship before enlisting in the Royal Navy in April 1940, serving in destroyers and as a chief petty officer in the depot ship Tyne .

The pig and poultry business did not suit Smith, and in 1954 he took on Lesney's outdated equipment and returned to the die-casting business on his own account.

His new company soon became the associated manufacturers for the die-cast distributors Morestone , which from 1956 to 1959 began to compete directly with Matchbox, producing models of the Esso petrol pump and a series of Noddy figures. In 1959 this became the Budgie toy range, comprising fifty 1:75 scale models. When the business was taken over in 1961, Smith remained as managing director until it folded in 1968. Transferring to the coast, he worked in a boating company and chandlery before retiring to Kent in 1982.

He married, in 1941, Lily Louisa Mash, with whom he had a daughter. The marriage was dissolved in 1957.

Rodney Smith, born August 26 1917, died July 20 2013