

## Leo Computers Ltd.

The catering and bakery firm of J. Lyons & Company was founded in 1887. The firm became well known in the London area for its high street cafés, known as *tea shops*. The company was also well known as a pace-setter in office mechanisation and in 1947 two employees were sent to America to study 'the possibilities of electronic calculators in the office'. On calling at Princeton University, the two were advised to return to the UK and visit Cambridge University, where the EDSAC computer was under development. Suitably impressed by the Cambridge team, Lyons made a donation to the EDSAC project and sent a member of staff to Cambridge for six months to learn about the computer. By the spring of 1949 Lyons had started building their own computer in London, based on EDSAC but with enhanced capabilities for bulk input/output. Their computer was called LEO (Lyons Electronic Office).

By February 1951 LEO was running simple programs and the system was in full operation for business processing by the end of 1953. It attracted a great deal of attention from other commercial organisations. Accordingly, at the end of 1954 Lyons founded a subsidiary company, Leo Computers Ltd., to build and market a new computer called LEO II. Eleven of these machines were sold, starting in 1957.

Leo Computers Ltd. continued development, producing the LEO III machine in 1962, of which 94 were sold. In April 1963 English Electric's Computer Division merged with Leo Computers Ltd., to form a company called English Electric Leo Computers Ltd. The reasons why this merger made sense for both partners were two-fold. Firstly, English Electric wished to broaden its computer horizons by moving away from reliance on the scientific field and towards participation in the rapidly-expanding commercial data-processing market. Leo Computers were well-established in the commercial data-processing area. Secondly, the management of Leo Computers realised that the tasks of enhancing their current product, LEO III, and then designing a future replacement for it, were beyond their present technical resources.

By 1968 English Electric Leo Computers had become part of International Computers Ltd. (ICL). Meanwhile, the original Lyons catering company was having financial difficulties. In 1978 Lyons was acquired by Allied Breweries, becoming part of an amalgam called Allied Lyons. By 1994 all trace of the Lyons name had vanished from public gaze.

The Leo computers featured on the *Our Computer Heritage* site are:

Group	Computers	Dates first working	Relative size	Initial target applications
L1	LEO I	1951	Large	Commercial data processing
L2	LEO II	1957	Medium	Commercial data processing
L3	LEO III	1962	Large	Commercial data processing

For further reading, see: *A computer called LEO: Lyons teashops and the world's first office computer*. Georgina Ferry. Published by Fourth Estate, 2003. ISBN 1-84115-185-8.

