



## History of LEGO

**Think building bricks, think minifigures, think the world's most popular construction toy and what do you imagine? Probably LEGO. It's so famous you may think it has always been a huge toy business. But the history of one of the world's most famous toys is actually quite surprising. It reads like the old fairy-tale *The Elves and the Shoemaker*. There's a carpenter, a workshop and a failing business.**

### Beginnings

LEGO's start came in 1916 when the Danish carpenter Ole Kirk Kristiansen purchased a woodwork workshop in Billund, a small Danish town. His initial business was geared towards building houses and furniture but, with the worldwide Great Depression in the early 1930s, Kristiansen had to rethink his business plan. With his workshop in danger of closing, Ole Kirk Kristiansen turned to making a range of toys suitable for young children. The toys at this time were nothing like the LEGO blocks we know today. They included wooden building blocks with alphabet letters on them, wooden yo-yos and hand-painted pull-along toys. These were all manufactured and painted to a very high standard of quality. When Denmark was occupied by Germany in 1940, the use of metal and rubber in toys was banned as it was needed for the war effort, the company's wooden toys became even more popular as a result.

In 1947, after the Second World War had ended, Ole Kirk purchased a plastic injection-moulding machine from a British manufacturer. This was a huge investment as

it cost DKK 30,000 (1/15 of the company's earnings for the year). Although plastic toys were expensive to produce, the ability to use plastic technology allowed for greater detail in the design. Colourful cars, trucks and tractors became very popular, as did younger children's plastic rattles.

### What's in a Name?

The LEGO name came about in 1934. Ole Kirk Kristiansen ran a competition amongst his workers to find a name for his toy company. He offered a bottle of wine as a prize but won it himself when he settled on the name LEGO. The name came from the shortening of two Danish words 'LEg Godt' which means 'Play Well'. The founder later discovered that 'lego' is also a Latin verb meaning 'to assemble' or 'to put together'.



## Building with Bricks

But what of the most famous LEGO toy of all? What of the bricks? The first LEGO bricks were produced in 1949. At that time, they were called “Automatic Binding Bricks” and, although they had the trademark studs on the tops, they were hollow and had slits down the sides for the placement of windows and doors. This range was renamed and called LEGO Mursten (Bricks) in 1953.

In 1954 Godtfred Kirk Kristiansen (the son of Ole Kirk Kristiansen) returned from a toy fair in Britain with new ideas. Discussing toys with a colleague, he realised that there was no system of play in the toy industry. Looking around the toys produced by his own company, G K Kristiansen realised that the LEGO brick was probably the perfect toy to build into a ‘system’. The LEGO system he developed was a creation in which every element could connect to every other element. He wanted to create ‘a toy that prepares the child for life, appeals to the imagination, and develops the creative urge and joy of creation that are the driving force in every human being.’

### Amazing Numbers

19 billion LEGO bricks are produced worldwide every year. That’s 36,000 every minute!

Information from **The LEGO book** by Daniel Lipkowitz.



### A System for Play?

By 1955, the LEGO System of Play had launched with the Town Plan range of construction sets. These included everything children needed to create their own town centre. There were street boards, people, cars and building blocks for houses and shops (all in red, white and blue). The first boards to set the town on were soft plastic but this changed to wooden fibreboard in 1956. At this point though the people, trees, signs and cars were made from pre-molded plastic rather than the LEGO blocks and mini-figures we find in sets today.

One of the things that has made LEGO so appealing to children and parents has been the ease of construction with any of its materials. The strict design guidelines under which LEGO created its first System of Play has ensured that the system has never been bettered. Godtfred Kirk Kristiansen had realised that the bricks needed to lock together as firmly as possible to create solid and stable models. The company then spent several years developing different ways to improve on the brick’s initial ‘clutch power’. By adding tubes to the underside of the initially hollow design, the company

created a brick with a perfect three-point connection with the studs of the next block below. They looked at blocks with crosses on the underside, and two tube connections but settled in the end on the three connection tubes for every 2-by-4 stud block.

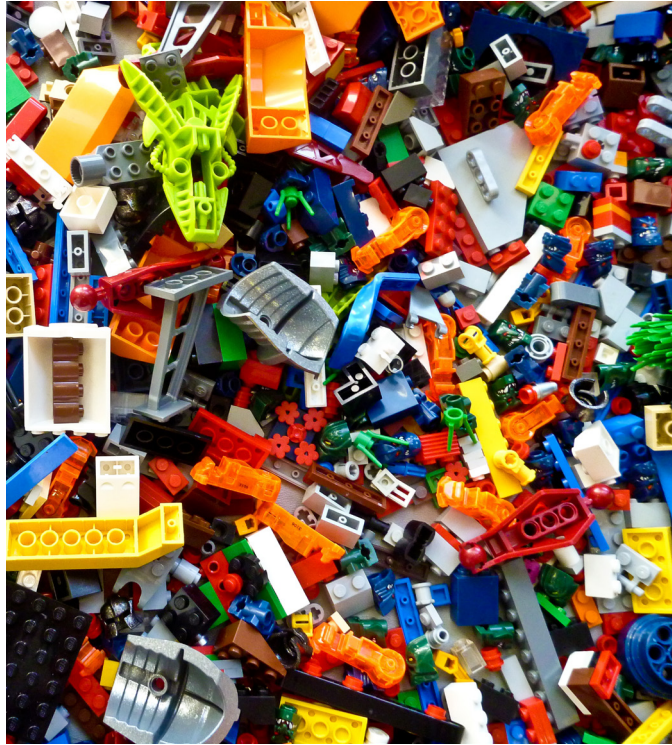
### Awesome Combinations

Part of the appeal of LEGO is the fact that it can be put together in so many ways. The possibilities are truly staggering. If you have two eight-stud LEGO bricks you can already combine these in an impressive 24 ways. Add one more brick and the possibilities go up to 1,060. If you have six eight-stud LEGO bricks, you can combine them in an astounding 915,103,765 ways!

Information from **The LEGO book** by Daniel Lipkowitz.

The LEGO brick, designed in 1957, had a patent applied for on January 28th, 1958. This patent has now been registered in over 33 countries worldwide. Even though LEGO bricks are manufactured in hundreds of different shapes and sizes now, they are all still designed to connect to one of the original 2 stud by 4 stud bricks. How many other toys do you know that can still make use of additional pieces that are sixty years old?

From humble beginnings as a carpentry workshop, LEGO has grown and grown to become one of the world's leading manufacturers of toys. Perhaps part



of its success comes down to the founder's philosophy that 'Only the best is good enough'. There have been toys for babies, ranges for girls, board games, movie tie-ins, and films and television series devoted to LEGO. The company is a testament to good design, practicality and adaptability. Just think – you could get a new LEGO set for your birthday and connect it to old LEGO you have at home, some of which might have been played with by your grand-parents!

### Mini Delights!

You don't have to be big to be amazing. The LEGO minifigure has been around since 1978 and, at 1 ½ inches tall, has become one of the most popular toys ever. There are now over 2500 different characters. The smallest of all? The 2002 production of Yoda began a tradition of creating shorter legged figures. These have since included goblins and other characters from films.

