

The LEO story – a simple timeline

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Spring 1947	J Lyons and Co – Britain’s largest catering company, whose back offices are run by John Simmons, a leading figure in the drive for business efficiency and innovation, send 2 executives to the USA to investigate the latest developments over there. They have heard about ‘electronic calculators’ and want to see what is available. They see nothing suitable, but are encouraged by Professor Goldstine, Princeton University who tells them of work going on in the UK – at the Cambridge University Maths lab run by Dr Maurice Wilkes - on a machine called EDSAC (Electronic Delay Storage Automatic Calculator) – designed to carry out complex scientific calculations. Maybe this could be the basis for building a computer for business purposes.
Nov 1947	Lyons managers can immediately see the potential of this and persuade the Lyons Board to give money - £3000 - and the services of an engineer to help Cambridge complete EDSAC. Simmons: <i>‘We believe that we have been able to get a glimpse of a development which will, in a few years time, have a profound effect on the way in which clerical work is performed.’</i> There is no business computer in existence – so they decide to make their own – an astonishing venture for a catering company.
May 1949	(EDSAC operational – a condition for Lyons proceeding) Lyons go ahead and start work on building a computer of their own based on a modified EDSAC. John Pinkerton, a graduate electronic engineer from Cambridge, is appointed to work on developing the machine. It is built in Lyons’ HQ building in Hammersmith - upstairs from a food factory. They decide to call it LEO (Lyons Electronic Office) – perhaps appropriate for a firm called Lyons!
1949-1951 Development phase	A small team of engineers is appointed to work with Dr John Pinkerton - and the machine is built. Running parallel to the construction of the machine – which is a massive size....another team is set up led by David Caminer, who has worked in Systems Research at Lyons since before the war, to create the software. He has to start from scratch in designing the way the new machine can be used to carry out business programs. The LEO team work very long hours to get LEO up and working.
Feb 1951	Princess Elizabeth visits LEO while it is still in the trial and testing stage at the Lyons HQ .
Thursday 29th November 1951	After many earlier trials, LEO runs a bakery valuation job live for the first time - and thereafter runs this every week – the world’s first regular routine office job. Verified as a Guinness World Record.
1951 – 1954	Lyons uses LEO for stock control, tea blending, teashops deliveries, sales invoicing and then payroll. On Christmas Eve 1953 the bakery payroll runs for the first time. LEO’s usefulness is quickly seen by government and large firms – Met. Office calculations carried out on a service basis. Other early uses included: Inland Revenue PAYE tables, life assurance and annuity tables, market research analysis, calculations of distances between all stations to all others for British Railways.
1954	Full Lyons payroll run on LEO.
1954	LEO is so successful both within Lyons and on a service basis to others that LEO Computers Limited is formed. A second machine ‘LEO II’ is made – with many technical improvements.
1956 - 1961	First external order for a LEO – from WD and HO Wills, tobacco. Followed by Stewarts and Lloyds (steel),Ford Motors (2 machines), Ministry of Pensions, British Oxygen, Standard Motor Co., Ilford (films) and a second one to Wills. Lyons bought one and one was used by LEO Computers themselves. There were 11 LEO II machines in total.
1962	LEO III, many times more powerful than LEO II, launched.
1960s	2 LEO machines sold to South Africa, 4 to Australia, 3 to Czechoslovakia. The Post Office buy 10. Also many other UK companies and government departments - e.g. Dunlop Rubber, CAV, Shell-Mex & BP, HM Customs & Excise, HM Board of Trade, HM Inland Revenue, HM Dockyards, Smith & Nephew, Kayser Bondor, Manchester Corporation, Cerebos, Tote Investors, Heinz, Renolds Chains, Allied Suppliers, Phoenix Assurance, Freemans, Coventry Corporation, Royal Bank of Scotland, Colvilles, South Western Gas Board, British Insulated Callenders Cables, , Ever Ready and Wedd Durlacher Mordaunt. Altogether 59 LEO IIIs were delivered.
1963 Mergers	LEO Computers Ltd merges with English Electric. Later a series of mergers: with the computer division of Marconi to become EELM (English Electric Leo Marconi). In 1965, Lyons sells its interest in the firm, then in 1968 EE Computers merges with ICT and Elliott Automation to create ICL. In 2002, ICL is bought by Fujitsu, a Japanese electronics firm.
Jan 1965	LEO I stops work – an ‘obituary’ is printed in the Daily Mail.
1981	The last of the LEO IIIs are decommissioned by the Post Office after 12-15 years service. Coincidentally the last Lyons tea shop closed in the same year.