

Obituaries

Jeremy Lancaster

Led his building products company to global success

JEREMY LANCASTER, who has died aged 83, followed his father as chairman of Wolseley, the world's largest distributor of heating and plumbing products.

Between them they presided over an era of growth which transformed their Droitwich-based company from a manufacturer of agricultural and garden machinery in the 1950s to a major international supplier of building products and materials a generation later.

As managing director from 1974 and chairman until 1996, Jeremy Lancaster saw Wolseley's market capitalisation multiply many times over as it rose into the FTSE100 index of leading UK companies.

Yet it remained relatively unknown to the wider public since its customers – for some 40,000 products ranging from shower heads to bricks and sand – were the building trades, with whom it did business through a network of distribution centres under a variety of local brands.

The Wolseley company had been founded in Sydney in 1887 by Frederick Yorke Wolseley, an Irish emigrant who invented a mechanical sheep-shearing machine. He returned from Australia to create an engineering business in Birmingham – with, as his foreman, one Herbert Austin, who turned part of the workshop over to building motor cars. But the company saw no future in them and sold the Wolseley marque to Vickers, while Austin left to develop the Austin Seven on his own.

By the time Jeremy Lancaster joined in 1961, Wolseley had merged with another Birmingham company, Geo H Hughes, floated on the stock exchange and embarked under Norman Lancaster's leadership on a long series of acquisitions of smaller firms, many in the field of domestic central heating, which both Lancasters recognised as an up-and-coming market.

In later years Jeremy continued the expansion with the ambitious purchase in 1982 of Ferguson, a US East Coast plumbing distributor, and of a French supplier, Brossette, in 1993, while selling off Wolseley's original manufacturing interests. He remained proud of the company's continuing independence, its strong balance sheet and its status as a beacon of Midlands industrial life.

Jeremy Lancaster was born at Solihull on February 28 1936. He was educated at Durlston Court prep school – evacuated from Swanage, where it was reckoned to be too close to a wartime radar station, to Earnshill in Somerset – and Rugby. After National Service in the Carabiniers he went to Christ Church, Oxford, to read English, later changing to History.

He was a graduate apprentice with the industrial conglomerate GKN before joining Wolseley to work in one of its first building supplies subsidiaries, Oil Burner Components. Once described as “an unsung captain of industry”, he was later chairman of the packaging manufacturer



He collected art and owned work by Picasso and Braque

Rexam (formerly Bowater) and a valued non-executive director of several industrial companies, as well as the merchant bank, Kleinwort Benson.

Beyond business, Lancaster was a passionate collector of 20th century art: an early admirer of Howard Hodgkin, he also owned work by Picasso, Braques, Giacometti, Frank Auerbach and Bridget Riley, and lent generously to exhibitions and galleries.

He was a trustee of Birmingham's Barber Institute of Fine Arts and Ikon Gallery of contemporary art, as well as the Artes Mundi prize held biennially in Cardiff. He was also West Midlands chairman of the National Trust and a council member of Birmingham University.

Jeremy Lancaster married, in 1959, Serena, daughter of Sir Anthony Rumbold, 10th Bt, from a line of diplomatists whose baronetcy was created for an 18th century governor of Madras; she was also a great-grand-daughter of the shipping magnate James Mackay, 1st Earl of Inchcape. She survives him with their son and three daughters.

Jeremy Lancaster, born February 28 1936, died April 3 2019