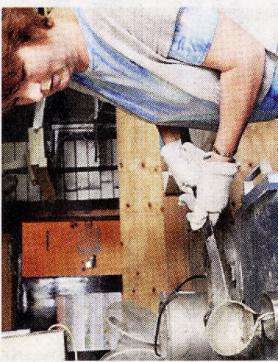




Lars Edman at his Toy Soldier Factory in Kilnamartyra, which he established with his wife in 1976 when they brought truckloads of equipment from Sweden; above, workers in the factory include Joan Leahy, seen here pouring metal into a casting machine, and master painter Eileen Kelleher soldering figures; right, the Crusaders chess set, one of a range that also includes a Lord of the Rings chess set and soldiers from the War of Independence.

Pictures: Denis Minihane



also do a lot of school tours. The visitor centre contains hundreds of moulds which allow visitors, young and old, to cast their chosen miniatures — you can choose anything from Roman, Napoleonic or Middle Ages soldiers to the famous Irish Wild Geese soldiers, Michael Collins or fantasy figures. The factory also sells chess sets and a wide array of completed figures from the Lord of the Rings trilogy, and it's planning to expand its overall range to celebrate the centenary of the Easter Rising.

"We're planning to bring out a range of Irish Civil War figures with the centenary of the Easter Rising coming up." Given the level of demand — a steady stream during the year and large crowds during the summer months — the visitor centre is now scheduled for a big face-lift. Edman is planning to double the size of the kids' workshop area so that groups of up to 50 can be facilitated at a time, while the parents' area will also be expanded, with more refreshment and information.

Are any of his own adult children interested in taking over the business if and when he ever decides to retire? "As yet none of my children has shown any interest in taking over the factory, but you never know. I wasn't supposed to take over the factory either," Edman had been planning to become an engineer, but instead took that fateful journey to Kilnamartyra.



Building an army in Kilnamartyra

Lars Edman tells Áilín Quinlan about his famous toy soldier factory in Co Cork

IN 1976 a truck pulled to a stop in the sleepy rural village of Kilnamartyra in West Cork. In the truck, which had travelled thousands of miles from Sweden, were newly-weds Lars and Gunilla Edman — and some mould-making machines.

The young Swedes, the villagers learned later, had upped sticks and come all the way from Scandinavia to make toy soldiers. Within two weeks the pair had started churning out moulds for the toys, and the renowned Prince August Toy Soldier Factory was born. "A friend of mine, Erik Wessman, had moved to West Cork from Sweden," recalls Lars, who had started out working with his father in Sweden making moulds for toy soldiers.

"He had a toy factory in Macroom making cuddly toys for babies and young children." The move to Ireland came as the business began to expand.

"Erik said there was a business-friendly environment in Ireland and that labour was low-cost. In fact, everything was low cost compared to Sweden," says Edman. "In the 1970s, Sweden was like Celtic Tiger Ireland — costs were too high and the country wasn't friendly to industry."

In contrast, says the 63-year-old manufacturer, "Ireland was very pro-industry. 'The cost of setting up a business was about one sixth of what it cost in Sweden at the time.'

On arrival in Kilnamartyra, the Edmans — who had only been married about a week — immediately set about establishing their business in a vacant factory premises in the village.

They called the company after the Prince August Steam Engine, a famous Swedish train which ran in the 1850s.

"We brought the machinery in a truck. We had about two mould-making machines which we installed, and we were up and running in two weeks."

Nowadays the factory's eye-catching signs with their striking red soldier icon, are familiar to motorists travelling the Cork-Killarney road and the Cork-Killarney road, and the company attracts thousands of visitors every year, but back then all of that was in the future.

"Our first employees were Joe McCarthy and Tony Nott. I particularly remember Tony as he came into the factory, said nothing but hello, grabbed a hammer and started to work."

"We had no interview or formal agreement. He just floated in and became an employee."

Both men have since left, but the

they enjoy melting the metal down. It's a very silvery metal, it's like magic.

"You pour it into the mould and after about 90 seconds you have a new shape in a nice, heavy good-quality metal. Then you paint it. We run workshops where we show them how to cast the figure and then we explain how to paint it."

The factory also provides workshops on miniature-painting for adults. "Adult men love doing something they enjoyed doing when they were kids," they like to relive their childhood," he says. Workshops for children run from 10am to 4pm every day seven days a week. "It's good if people book in advance but it's not necessary," he says, and they

mixture of tin, bismuth and lead. The factory also manufactures completed miniatures for sale.

"Casting your own toy soldier was an old Swedish hobby, and in Sweden back in the 70s the market was primarily seven to 12-year-old boys — but today the market is about 60% children and 40% adults," says Edman, who adds that many girls have now become interested in casting figurines.

Five years ago, the factory expanded its range to cater for girls who, he says, seem to be more drawn to fairies, dancers and teddy bear figurines. These days, girls make up about 50% of the children attending the workshops. "All children like small things and they like to be creative, so

with whom he has three children — he had one child with Gunilla Edman is the owner of the only toy soldier factory in Europe.

"The toy industry has died a death in Europe; it has all been shifted to China and Asia."

So far his business has survived two recessions and is still attracting thousands of visitors every year.

At one stage 40 people worked in the factory. The business currently employs eight, but the past 18 months has seen a noticeable surge in demand for both the factory's popular workshops and its products.

Prince August makes the black rubber moulds which customers use to cast their own toy soldiers and other figurines from a

next employee, mould-maker Dan Golden, is still with the factory, as is general operator Joan Leahy.

It took a while for the Edmans to get to grips with the rural Irish phone system.

"You had an operator in the local post office. The operator connected you to the operator in Macroom. When you wanted to make a call you turned a lever on the phone. This rang a bell in the Kilnamartyra post office.

"They then connected you to the Macroom operator — but if the operator in Macroom was busy you might wait 10 or 15 minutes to get a call through."

"In the end we put a direct cable to Macroom and they gave us priority."

Now remarried to Margaret,