

The worlds' best-selling and surviving Bugatti (scale) model – ever.

By Bart Oosterling

The 1:48 scale diecast Lesney/Matchbox Models of Yesteryear series 1926 Bugatti 35 and it's 2 plastic derivatives.



Old scale models also come in all sorts of "dans son jus" (author)

Introduction

Lesney (Toys) of England was an industrial die-casting company formed just after WW2. When industrial orders were low, they started making children's toy to fill in the spare capacity of the factory. This proved to be a milestone on the path to the company's destiny to become a toy manufacturer.

At the 1956 UK Toy Fair they launched the start of a series of models of pre-WW1 and -2 cars, trucks, steam powered vehicles, tramcars and an electric vehicle, named "models of Yesteryear". This series consisted of a series of toy scale models for (young and older) collectors. Initially the models were branded "Lesney". Later on, the brand name "Matchbox" appeared on the boxes and much later also on the models. The myth behind that name is that children were only allowed to bring small sized toys to school that could fit in a matchbox. The box size thus dictated the scale of the model within. But the first part of this story was debunked later: the size of a matchbox was just a suitable size for an affordable toy.

It may seem a strange choice for a manufacturer to make toy models of old cars and trucks and not something more contemporary. But considering England was and is a forerunner in the world as it comes to preservation of motoring heritage, traditions and history, it could also be considered logical. History has proved it was a good choice as these models, in a gradually expanding and evolving series, were made in billions and were successfully sold worldwide for years to come. And they are still being enjoyed and collected today. Most of the different models in the series can be easily found and are not rare.

One of the earlier models in the Yesteryear series was of a Bugatti 35.

Two other manufacturers later copied this model and issued it in plastic: the Polish brand Estetyka and the English brand Kelly Toy, the latter in a much simplified form.

1. The Lesney /Matchbox “Models of yesteryear” 1926 Bugatti type 35

Most Bugatti enthusiasts will know of and/or own this little model. But there is more to it than just a blue and a red model.

The correct manufacturers' designation of this model is no. 6 (on the model and the earliest box-type) or Y-6 (on later boxes).

Instead of the regular 1:43, the scale of the Lesney Bugatti 35 model is approximately 1:48. It was dictated by the standard size of the boxes that Matchbox used for all their models. Considering its original prize and considering its size, the detail of the model is very good. Also the shape is captured very well. While the shape was well, the choice of colours was less exact: wheels and radiator and fuel cap were (normally) gold and the dashboard (normally) red or white. The gold paint was a feature on many other Yesteryear models too, where it easily could have been the correct nickel/silver. Probably Lesney chose gold instead of silver because they already used gold for earlier issued models of the “brass” era. A switch between gold and silver would mean production inefficiency and increased chances of production errors.

All Bugatti models of this type only have “Lesney” on the baseplate. The Matchbox brand only appears on the later (D2) type boxes for the Bugatti.

The model consists of 19 parts in total: a diecast body, baseplate, 5 wheels and tires, 2 axles, a gearshift/handbrake part, steering wheel, a dashboard/floor part, a black plastic seat and a pin to hold the spare wheel. All parts are metal except for the seat and tires which are plastic. Two decals (a red nr. 6 on white roundel) and (normally) 3 different paint colours per model complete the model: The outside colour of the body (blue or red) was painted and baked on. The base plate is painted black on the outside only. The inner floor and dashboard part was painted red, and later white. Additional gold accents on the radiator and fuel cap were painted manually.

There is no windscreen. Louvres, bonnet belts and a supercharger hole and body screws are visible in the body casting.

As with all collectables, condition is king: mint examples of regular variants demand higher prices.

Add a mint box and prices can quadruple or more. Rarer variants do turn up for sale by the unaware and can be picked up by lucky eagle eyed collectors for low prices. But for the rest, and especially the rarest, it is what one is willing to pay to obtain these variants. When the rarest become available, it is mostly in specialised auctions or between collectors.



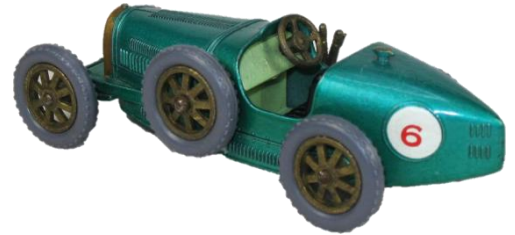
Lesney's Leslie Smith and (right) Jack Odell of Lesney Products, creators and manufacturers of Matchbox Toys, The Bugatti model in the center of the table (www)

The pre-production model (probably 1960/early 1961)

For the development of the model Lesney made a small series of pre-production models for testing all production aspects. These pre-production models for the Bugatti are only known in an atypical green metallic body colour with a mint green dashboard/floor. After being approved and improved for production and sales, somehow some of these green “prototypes” “escaped” the factory and today at least 13 different examples of this pre-production version are currently known in collectors’ hands. Apart from the colours used there are several slight differences to the later/regular main body casting. These pre-production models rarely are for sale and when they do come to market, they demand high prices among collectors. Because of this there are people who make fakes and/or replicas. Buyer beware!



Pre-production models (www)



Collector’s identification and catalogues for regular production models

During the regular production phase of the Bugatti model, small (production efficiency) improvements were made and some parts (mainly wheels and tyres) were changed slightly. There are several collectors’ catalogues that describe the different “official” regular blue and red production “issues” of the model, following the improvements made during the production period. When the models got more and more recognized as a collectible, with every new collectors’ catalogue that was published, collectors had discovered new variants that were described and inserted in between “issues” that were already documented. This caused a model that was described in an earlier catalogue as issue 4, became issue 6 in a later catalogue... And since new variants were discovered. Another collectors’ catalogue does not use the term issue, but a numeric “code” – which in Matchbox collectors groups also has a different meaning. This is confusing. Also these catalogues sometimes mention a (common?) production or quality fault as an “issue” of the model, which to me is not logical. Hence I did not use this “identification” by issues or codes in this study. When the models were produced and sold originally, there was limited quality control and sometimes machines did not function properly or gold paint stock ran out before replenishment. But production continued. This caused small series of *unplanned variants* of faults with non-plated wheels (plain metal instead of brass effect plating), a different type of steering wheel, missing or wrong/abnormal/upside down decals, upside down baseplate, inside out mounted wheels, steering wheels buckled during assembly and sometimes non or partially painted radiators and fuel caps. The *planned* production improvements and the transition from a blue to a red body colour also caused a series of probably not officially planned *assembly variants*, with non-standard colour combo of blue body and a white internal dashboard/floor part, a long or slightly shorter base plate and sometimes one or more slightly different wheel types assembled on one model. After the “regular” blue issue, the later red issue was supposedly made in higher volume and designated as less rare. There are no production records available to verify this. My own – and several collector friends - impression is the opposite: that the blue body version is much more common than the red.



Regular blue versions; right one with unplated parts (author)

The regular blue versions

Regular production of blue models probably started in 1961 and lasted to 1965 when the body colour was changed to red. The original retail price for the blue model was about 0,15 GBP.

The earliest production versions were made with the production mould for the body, Blue exterior colour, red dashboard, black base and grey “knobbly” tires (also found on one other Yesteryear model). This was followed with a version with one alteration: the tyres changed from grey to black. The next alteration was that the black “knobbly” tires were changed to a smoother profile tire. Further changes followed in the rims of the wheels with slight changes to the rim height and bevel/rounding of the rim, almost invisible for the unaware.

By the end of the production of the blue model, there were versions that were assembled with a white dashboard/floor part instead of the previous red part. These transitional variants are considered quite rare. That white dashboard/floor part became the regular part for the red models that were produced after the production of the blue models halted. At around the same time, probably to make assembly easier, the baseplate was shortened on the rear by about 1 mm. These “short” base plates are also seen on late production blue models with a red dashboard/floor part.

During the production of the blue bodied version there were what could be called production/quality control faults where the gold paint on the radiator was missing. Or a missing, upside down (9) or different decal (5) was applied, or a slightly different steering wheel was used. Sometimes the golden plating of the wheels and/or steering wheel and/or gear/brake assembly was missing. The blue paint had only very light colour variations.



Irregular blue versions; unpainted radiator and fuel cap, partially painted radiator, white dashboard (author)



Upside down decal: 9 instead of 6 (could easily be faked with good reproduction decals; [www](#))



Regular red version (author)

The regular red versions

Production of the red versions started in 1965 and lasted until in 1967. The evolution of changes in the red models is much shorter. The body of the red model was from the same production mould as the blue version. Red exterior colour, white dashboard and floor, (short) black baseplate and black "smooth" tires. At the (very?) end of the production, probably somewhere in 1967, a few models were made (by mistake?) with a black dashboard and floor, which are extremely rare.

As per the blue production, during the production of the red bodied version there were production/quality control faults: the gold paint on the radiator was sometimes missing. Also very few models that have no paint on the dashboard/floor part are found. The red paint that was used for the body had some shade variations, from brownish maroon to fire-red to a darker cherry red. Possibly caused by improper cleaning of the painting line. Steering wheel variations exist. There are no red models known with missing brass plating to wheels, steering wheel or gear/brake assembly.



Irregular red versions: black dashboard, unpainted dashboard, unpainted radiator and fuel cap, 5 decal, irregular steering wheel (author)

The plated and giftware versions

The Bugatti is believed to be the first model in the Yesteryear series to be also issued in a plated version. This plated version was made as a promotional item and as a gift for Matchbox relations. Lesney developed their chrome effect finish in 1961 and trialed it on the Y-6 Bugatti. Four normal production Yesteryear models were catalogued and marketed during 1962 but did not include the Bugatti. For all normal production models to be part of the Giftware range, the plating process for Lesney was done by a subsidiary company by the name of Spiegelstein & Sons in Wallis Road, Hackney.

There were 2 versions. One "stand alone" model made by Matchbox, which was plated directly at the factory and without decal. It was released in 1963.

The other version used a different plating process, was made by "Transpalite", and is often found cast in a Perspex paperweight, or mounted in a Perspex lighter.

Transpalite used a regular painted blue production model, and applied the plating over regular paint and decals. Smooth rubber tires were used as the normal plastic ones tended to melt by chemical reaction when encased in Perspex. If found these models are not cheap: a Perspex lighter version recently sold on EBay for almost € 1000,-. Only encased blue and plated versions of the model are known.



Plated version by Lesney (perished original rubber tires changed to regular knobby tires; author)

Some Transpalite plated models still show the blue paint underneath inside the cockpit and when damaged. These are also seen in the lighters and paperweights. Again, poor quality control.

Plated Yesteryear models are also found mounted on a ceramic ashtray or pen holder. These had a mounting hole in the baseplate for a screw to attach the model to the base. Despite one collector's catalogue mentioning the Bugatti in this configuration, there is no proof that it was officially released in this form.



Various encased versions: lighter (plated and unplated) and paperweight; sometimes with and sometimes without an orange/red base; below right the blue paint still visible inside as well as the "6" decal under the plating ([www](#))



Red paint and decal visible under plating and different type of tire ([www](#))

The boxes

No collector can do without original boxes. There are 5 variants, identified as types C, D1, D2, D3 and E: As production evolved improved designs and altered texts were featured on the boxes. Some boxes are designated as rarer because they were used during a shorter time span. Some boxes are available as reproductions. Again, buyer beware!

The C box is a “standard” box, very similar in its simple layout to the other models in the series, with on the front side a simple line drawing of the model it carries and a no. 6 and the text “by Lesney”. On the end flaps is printed “supercharged Bugatti Type 35” “Y-6” and “new model”. On the reverse side there is some information about the model, its evolution, performance and Ettore Bugatti and the scale of the model. This box only contained blue models.

On the D1 box, the drawing of the model is in colour and lifelike to the model (in blue) on a plain background. Y-6 is now the designation on the front side and the text is now “a Lesney product”. On the end flaps is printed “supercharged Bugatti Type 35” “Y-6”. On the reverse side the text “scale model” is added above the text that was already on the C box. This box only contained blue models.

On the D2 box, the drawing of the model enhanced with a racing pit background scene. On the reverse side the text is reduced to basic information and now printed in English, French, Italian and German language. This box probably only contained blue models.

On the D3 box, The script “models of Yesteryear” is replaced by “MATCHBOX”. The person depicted behind the Bugatti on the D2 box, has disappeared. This box contained blue as well as red models.

On the E box, The colour of the model is changed from blue to red. A drawing of the car in red is also added to the end flaps. This box probably only contained red models.



Boxes:

Type C
Type D1

Type D2
Type D3

Type E

(author)

Mobil packaging



Mobil packaged version ([www](#))

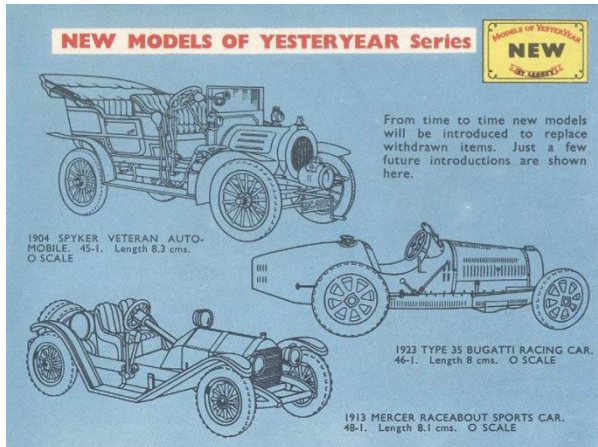
A part of the Yesteryear model series was also used as a promotion for Mobil fuels. One received a card with every 3 gallon of fuel and when the album of cards was completed one could get a free model that changed every month. The box was different from the regular Yesteryear boxes: it was larger and wit a window in it.



Mobil set ([www](#))

The manufacturers' catalogues

At the points of sale one could get free catalogues to see which models were available.



Introduction catalogue (www)



The 1962 and 1963 catalogue pages with the blue Bugatti (1964 and 1965 very similar; www)



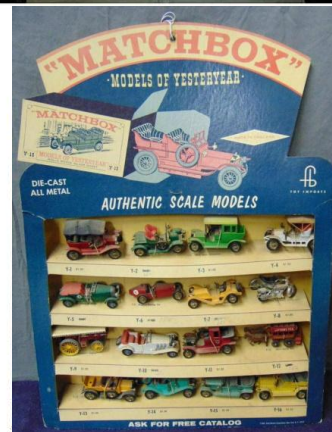
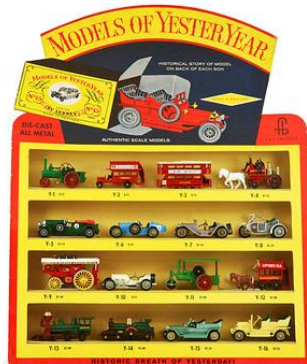
The 1966 and 1967 catalogue pages with the red Bugatti (www)

The point of sales displays

During the period of sales, several types of sales displays were offered for the points of sales.



Various variants of Point of sale promotional display in heavy cardboard; there were also plastic displays (www)



The gift set

Lesney offered the Bugatti also in their own gift set, combining it with 4 other models of the yesteryear series.



"G-6" 5 in one gift set package containing the blue Bugatti variant inside and on the packaging (www)

See back of this pack for one of the actual prints

 <p>1912 PACKARD LANDULET This four cylinder automobile was one of the finest of its period.</p>	 <p>1926 BUGATTI It is held that this car is perhaps the most characteristic representation of the true racing car ever constructed.</p>
 <p>1928 MERCEDES-BENZ With its supercharged, 6 cylinder overhead cam engine, this car could go 110 mph in top gear.</p>	 <p>1913 MERCER RACEABOUT When built, demand could never be met and even today this car is the most sought after of all antiques.</p>
 <p>1907 ROLLS ROYCE This is the original "Silver Ghost" as designed and built by Henry Royce.</p>	 <p>1929 BENTLEY With a maximum speed of over 120 mph, only 50 of this model were ever built.</p>

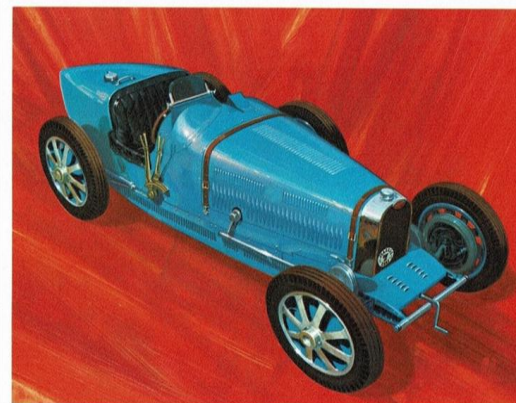
1904 SPYKER
The workmanship that went into this car made its quality more than average for the period.

SAVE \$3.00

Get a set of authentic, limited edition models of these cars from the "Yesteryear" series of "Models of Yesteryear". They're made of genuine metal in England and are completely new to their fine racing wheels. Save \$3.00 by CLASSIC CARL, P.O. Box 52, S.P.O., New York, New York 10001.

NAME _____
ADDRESS _____
CITY _____ STATE _____
Supply Limited

In the USA there was another set of 7 models that included the Bugatti. This set was promoted in various magazines.



1926 Bugatti

Promotional materials for the "G-6" 5 in one gift set (www)

On the picture some characteristics of a real Bugatti are adapted to the model car's reality: the gearshift and handbrake assembly are all but a representation of the items on a real car. The front apron and the radiator also are odd compared to a real car. Note the blower hole is missing in the picture, where the models had it and vice versa the steering drop arm and tie rod on the picture that is omitted on the model. The position of the fuel filler is also different. And so are some other details: the rear view mirror, windscreen and the brake drums: Artistic liberties?



Salesman promotion packaging (www)

The mystery

This early regular model with Apple green, red dashboard, unpainted base plate, knobby black tires was bought from a renowned Australian Yesteryear collector who found it years ago: it could be a colour trial in the early stages of regular production of the blue bodied version: around the transition of the grey to black “knobby” tires. Or a “lunch job” of one of the personnel: a one-off (?) created with or without permission. The green paint is applied directly on the metal and the rivets are normal.



Mystery green early version (author)

The fakes, repaints and some modifications

Standard (ex) blue and red models are also “restored” to the owner’s personal taste. And/or created with a view of profit by selling them to collectors.

A few examples below:

Yellow: seen in a collection in South America, but no detailed photos so may be a hand painted (fake)
Models with parts switched to create “unique” issues that never were produced originally: a red issue with red dashboard or with black or grey knobby tyres, which can easily be interchanged.

Other “plating” variations.



Yellow body and red body with red dashboard: almost certainly repainted and fake; silver and bronze are known repaints (all [www](#))



A plated version on a Wade porcelain tray; probably a non-factory combo ([www](#))



A type 43 Grand Sport created from 2 type 35s and a “touring” type 37 using some parts of other Yesteryear models (author)



Modified Yesteryear A Ford (using some parts of other Yesteryear models) and standard Yesteryear Bugatti 35 combo inspired by original period photo (author)

Further information about this model

[Here](#) a YouTube video that illustrates several variants and boxes.

A nice breakdown (and restoration) of a model can be seen [here on YouTube](#).

Production at the Lesney factory (with the blue Bugatti visible at 1m56s) can be seen [here](#).

In 1986 and 1990 Matchbox released a bigger scale version (1:35) of the Bugatti 51 and 35 respectively under the numbers Y11-4 and -5.

Though 60+ years since Matchbox made the first models, these models are still loved and collected. Regular models can be found quite easily and at reasonable prices.

Missing Matchbox parts for a restoration can be sourced from:

<https://modelcarparts.com/>

<https://www.recovertoy.com/>

<http://model-supplies.co.uk/>

<https://www.diecastrecoveries.org.uk/>

2. The Polish plastic Estetyka Bugatti 35



Colourful cars and boxes (author)

Stare Samochody Antyki (Old Antique Cars) Hobby of Spółdzielnia Pracy Warszawa (Workers' Cooperative Warsaw) in Poland made a very close copy of the Matchbox model in the 1980's. The Estetyka models were fully made in colourful plastics except for the axles.

On first glance these models look 1:1 the same as the Matchbox predecessor. Scale is 1:48 like the original.

But a closer look reveals several detail differences: There are no number roundels on the pointed tail, there is no supercharger hole, the louvres and body mounting screws have different spacing, there is no front belt on the bonnet. The fuel cap is mounted a bit more forward.

The separate dashboard/seat assembly was also constructed different from the Matchbox model.

The base plate displays only the makers' logo and "Bugatti 35".

Estetyka made the model in many colour combinations. Apparently the oldest models had white radiators and orange wheels. Later in time the wheels were yellow, with silver and golden radiators. At the end of production the wheels were transparent/white, with black radiators. There are at least 40+ variants in body/base plate/wheel/radiator/seat colour combos. And at least 4 different box types. Sometimes with a stamp print on the end flap.

Estetyka also made a model of the Bugatti Royale, also in several bright colour variants, and some other models derived from the Matchbox Models of Yesteryear series and other brands.

According to the website of a Polish Museum, a possible justification for Estetyka to copy the Yesteryear models was that it was common practice at the time in so-called East-block countries to model products after successful Western products.



Estetyka Box types for the type 35; 1926 printed on the décor, but stamps and prints on end flaps also designating the model as a 1935 Bugatti (author)



Estetyka different wheel and grille colours (author)



Some of many colour variations and combinations (author)

3. The Kelly Toy (KT) plastic Bugatti 35

Similar toys to the Matchbox models of Yesteryear series were also made (copied) by (for) Kelly Toy (KT) from the UK in their product series "Polythene Yesteryear Vehicles". They were probably also made in the 1980s: there is almost no information on the www about them. Though the quality is low and they are simple and look like a gift from a surprise egg of a bag of candy, they were not. They were sold and packaged as the original they copied. With the "yesteryear" name. If it was licensed copy is not known.

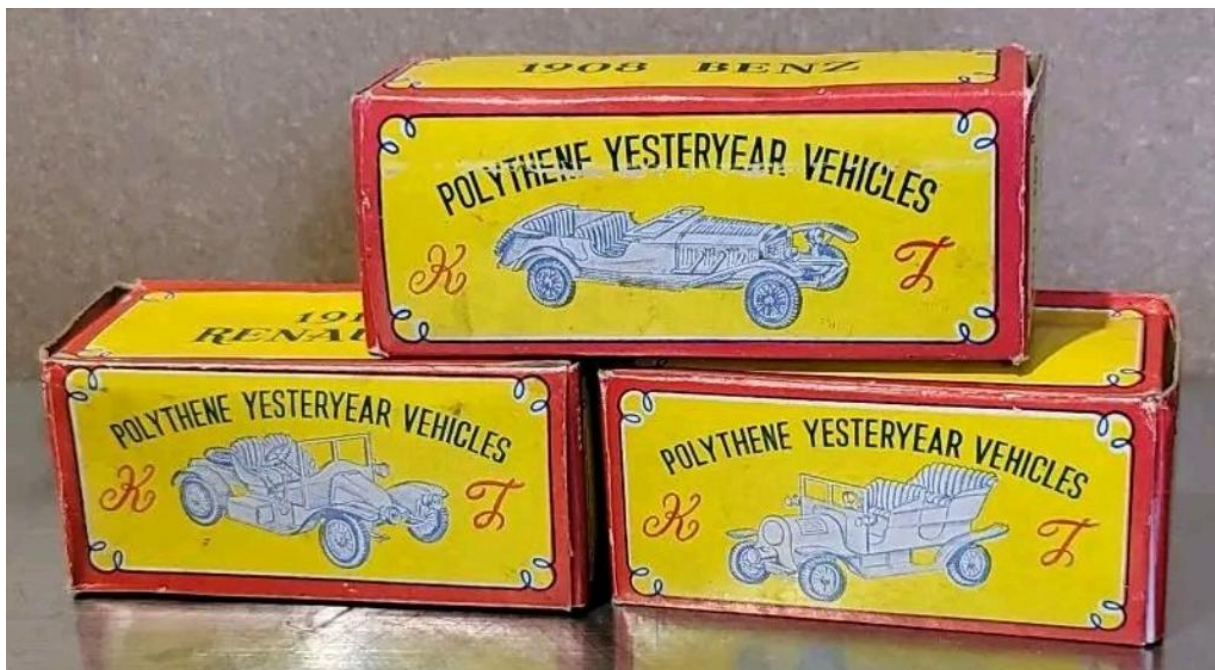
The Kelly Toy Bugatti 35 model is a crude simplified copy in plastic, in exactly the same scale as the Lesney and Estetyka models. There is no makers' identification on it. Only 6 different parts complete this model. There is no gearshift/brake assembly and no base-plate. The seat/bench is a bit "oversized". On the left side of the tail a small number 139 is visible in relievo. On the right side below the opening for the driver the text "HONGKONG" is visible in relievo, which is where they were made. Strangely the supercharger hole is on the left side.

So far I have only seen these two. Considering the low quality these may have been broke soon from playing and discarded and thus may be more rare. Probably the production volume was not very high too. There probably was also not much collectors appeal for these in time.

The Kelly Toy Polythene Yesteryear Vehicles models were sold in a box picturing the model and "Kelly Toy" and the models' number on the side flaps. A (picture of the) correct box for the Bugatti has not been found yet.



Kelly Toy (KT) 139 (author)



Boxes of other Kelly Toy Polythene Yesteryear Vehicles models (www)

Sources:

Sites:

Yesteryear:

<https://www.moyboyz.com/>

<https://vbd3.co.uk/viewforum.php?f=11>

https://www.chezbois.com/non_corgi/MBX_Pages/1926%20Bugatti%20Type%2035.htm

<https://4-fenderfriends.eu5.org/YesteryearCollection/Yesteryear%20Collection%20-%20Y6-2.html>

<https://www.midatmk.sk/y062/y062.htm>

<https://www.blue-gold-angel.com/index.php?page=yesterdis>

Estetyka:

<https://pufiland.weebly.com/estetyka-warsawa.html>

<https://www.muzeumdomkow.pl/mapa-war-estetyka>

<https://nomadcars.wordpress.com/category/estetyka-warszawa/>

Books:

The Yesteryear Book 1956 – 1993 / 1956 - 2000 (Millennium Edition) / 1956 – 2002

Matchbox Diecast Toys-The First 40 Years, by Kevin McGimpsey & Stewart Orr

Collecting Matchbox Diecast Toys- The first 40 years, by Kevin McGimpsey & Stewart Orr

Yesterday's Yesteryears, by Robert Carter & Eddy Rubinstein

The Yesteryear Companion, by Robert Carter & Eddy Rubinstein



Variations on a theme (author)

Thank you

My thanks and appreciation for their contributions to this study goes out to several online collector friends: you know who you are.

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