

# A pleasantly puzzling success

By Robert Temple

Loncraine Broxton & Partners claims to be Britain's leading manufacturer of ingenious puzzles, the sort that used to be called executive toys.

The company, started as a penniless partnership in 1969 between Richard Loncraine and Peter Broxton, now has a turnover expected to reach £3 million this year.

Behind the achievement are some amusing products. A new range this year will be address books in human "costumes", including a country squire in tweeds with tartan tie and waistcoat.

Loncraine and Broxton met when they were at art school together. They decided, with no capital, to start producing well-designed giftware because there was little quality material on the gift market.

Mr Broxton said: "Our only asset was a van. Newton's Cradles (steel balls suspended from strings which bounce against each other) really got us off the ground. I had a man in a rag-and-bone shop in Chelsea making them and I drove around selling them."

The partners led a hand-to-mouth existence until 1972 when another partner, Audrey Ladyman, joined them. As financial director, her contribution was crucial. Mr Broxton said: "We badly needed organizing, and Audrey did that very efficiently."

In 1972 they got their first bank loan for £5,000, and using friends, students and out-of-work actors, made more and more ingenious gift objects out of simple materials not requiring substantial capital outlay, such as springs and nails.

They bought hundreds of tons of 8in.



Executive-toy boys: Peter Broxton (left) and Richard Loncraine

nails and made them into napkin rings, pens and even a joke "nail through the head" for pranksters. In 1974 came the first "real investment" — £500 to make small puzzles with steel balls going through holes, called Mindbenders. About seven million have been sold.

The first really sizeable investment in the company came in 1978: £10,000 from retained profits, to finance the Mercury Maze puzzle, which features a blob of mercury working its way through a labyrinth. All finance for the company has been self-generated, apart from normal bank-overdraft facilities.

Mr Loncraine is the one who comes up with most of the product ideas. He conceived a series of amusing pens with shapes like fish, bananas, mushrooms, eggs and potatoes. More than 100,000

pens disguised as red mullets, packed in real fish boxes, were sold.

The 1972 turnover of £30,000 increased by about 30 per cent a year until now, apart from during the recession years of 1982-4. Turnover in 1984 was £1.7 million, and in 1985 £2.3 million.

A conscious effort to build export orders has resulted in 60 per cent of the company's products going overseas. The company retails through 2,000 outlets in Britain and has won two Design Council awards.

Mr Broxton sums up the recipe for a not-so-puzzling success by saying: "Our strength lies in the fact that we design and manufacture our own products and organize our own marketing worldwide. All the other companies in the same area are importers or selling to somebody."