

Elvetham Mysteries

PASTORAL – HISTORICAL – EVANGELICAL – ELECTRICAL

JAMES LAWS

Tuesday, 5th September 1978

Phone call from Mike Flanagan of the Christchurch Players concerning the lighting of an open air production in July '79 called The Elvetham Mysteries.

This was the start of one of the longest and most rewarding jobs I have ever undertaken. I shall continue the diary through to the first night and then discuss the problems, and the ways we met them.

Wednesday, 6th September

Rang Jim Northwood (Director's husband and Technical Manager) and quickly found the project to be ambitious. 750 seats – stage 60ft x 30ft + Arena, 100 Actors, professional designer (Clare Jeffery), to run from 28th July to 5th August 1979 in Elvetham Park, on the site of a water pageant staged for Queen Elizabeth I in 1591. Lovely setting, but problem No. 1: Electricity doesn't grow on trees.

Saturday, 23rd September

Visited site, occupied by cattle, probably since 1591. Ambient noises of (depending on wind) Motorway, Railway, Farn-

coln Cycle, which will be performed at Elvetham, is a collection of 20 plays first performed in Medieval times by local trade guilds to depict biblical scenes, mostly concerning Christ's progress from Baptism to Resurrection. The last play is Doomsday, which shows the good and the bad being judged and the bad are then herded into Hell.

November 1978

Site meeting for those who have volunteered for electrical jobs on the production. A motley crew of 10 of us assemble in the field and I lean heavily on their imagination to describe the towers, stage and tents that will grow out of the mire and thistles. We offer to buy each other insect repellent for Christmas and I return home happy that we should have person-power for 6 or 8 followspots. S.E.B. quote is very high – around £1,000, to include hiring of cable. When we inform them that we have a cable lent to us by Pirelli they retort that the price of copper has gone up and to hire and fit the transformer *alone* will now be £950. I thought that Monopoly was child's play until I discovered the Electricity Board. . .

several hundred square yards. Morris Men are sought to add to the medieval ambience. A brief flirtation with generated power proves unproductive, but the S.E.B. decide that their sums were wrong and drop price to £800.

May – June 1979

Flurry of activity – Meet Director for exact lighting requirements. A kindly local contractor lends us two 150 amp switches, one of which is mounted on the S.E.B. pole on a waterproof casing. Just time for a holiday and return to find cable in and power on. 5-hour meeting with Roland Smith, human dynamo and engineer, thrashes out power and local distribution. Seek second hand switchgear and buy a job lot in Brighton. Order 800 metres of cable. Appoint Mike Flanagan as lighting co-ordinator and together we work out who will do which lighting production jobs. Arrange 'final' equipment hire lists – equipment converges on Elvetham from 6 different directions. Write out detailed cue lists.

7th July 1979

Build main switchboard for power distribu-

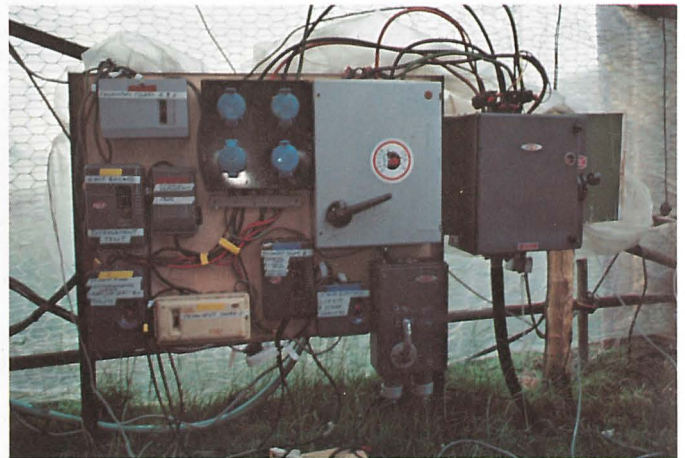


Goose eye view of an alien structure.

borough and Blackbushe Airfields and geese on lake upstage centre. Sound reinforcement mooted. Nearest houses 200 metres but look hopefully at modest national grid pylons in same field a mere 100 metres distant. Consult voltage drop tables. Must remember wellies next time.

October 1978

Explore possibilities of S.E.B. supplying power – the pylon will yield 150 amp 3 phase which is the minimum to aim for. Jim Northwood approaches Pirelli to lend us 100 metres of 95mm² 4 core armoured cable. I ask for 3 scaffolding lighting stands – one of which is 40ft high. This is rejected as unsightly. Write to Paul Carter at Coventry as he lit a Mystery Cycle in the old Cathedral the previous summer. The Lin-



Main distribution at the base of tower E.

Letter from Paul Carter of Coventry is very helpful; the main advice being that lots of followspots, minimum colour and really effective waterproofing will be needed. All of which is absolutely correct.

December 1978 – April 1979

Quiet months. Agreed: 4 towers 30ft high with 2 followspots on each. During this lull we rock our boat slightly by deciding to move to Norfolk and I resign my full time job with the Horseshoe Theatre Co., Basingstoke. After initial alarm from the Production Committee we all agree that it is unlikely that we can move before August and having no job will leave me more time to attend to everything. Just so. Meanwhile the project continues to grow, with an alarming number of tents spread over

tion and deliver to site, where stage is taking shape, towers are marked out and scaffolding contractors have started work. 10 car loads of lights to site so far.

14th July and week

David Lunn and I start the previous evening marking out the main cable loom which will span from tower to tower. Then the full team arrives for rigging and over the weekend it all goes up into the towers. We watch a rehearsal on Sunday afternoon. By Monday everything on production lighting works and most of it is focused that night. Scaffolders hold us up and weather protection is scanty. First lighting rehearsal on Wednesday with all 10 operators (8 followspots, 2 on control). By Friday evening all are somewhat tired but mostly we know