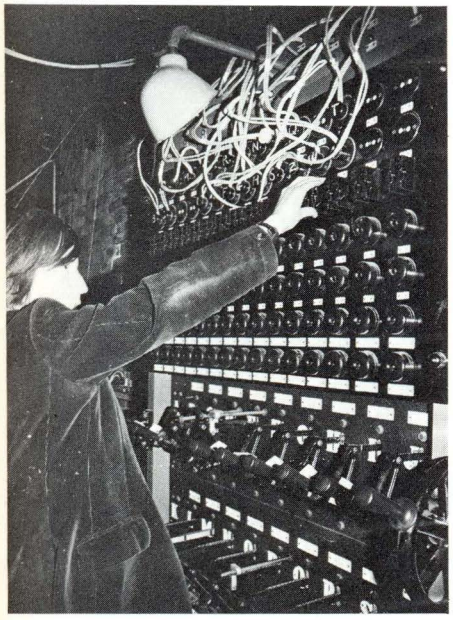
Like many schools, we relied heavily on overhead compartment battens for both colour washes and fill-in lighting. I still recommend them: they're far cheaper than spots and can cover a multitude of sins. I suspect my first few productions had the best lit heads, shoulders and stage cloths in the business; I'm not so sure about the faces! Possibly it was this aspect of my lighting that drove the producer to put on R. C. Sherriff's "Journey's End" with a set having a complete ceiling (required to collapse on stage in the last scene) covering up my beloved battens and pattern 60s. I was forced to concentrate on FOH for lighting the entire stage, and getting it right without fill-ins. I also had to produce sunrises, sunsets, night skies, Very lights and other cyclorama effects for the first time. At this time I also discovered the conflicting advice given by the professionals about the *sort* of luminaire to use for FOH. Had you noticed that R.S.E. publications seem to recommend profile spots, whereas a rival concern insists on Fresnel spots? Since the school didn't possess any profile spots at all (not even the ubiquitous patt 23's), and couldn't afford to hire any, I compromised by using barn doors on all our Fresnels. To my delight I found not only that they were able to cut off the edges of the beams in just the right places to line up with the many edges of the set, but also that they avoided the 'patchiness' that the same number of profiles would produce. I still have a weakness for a few pattern 223's or their tungsten halogen equivalent plus barndoors out front, especially for productions on a limited budget.



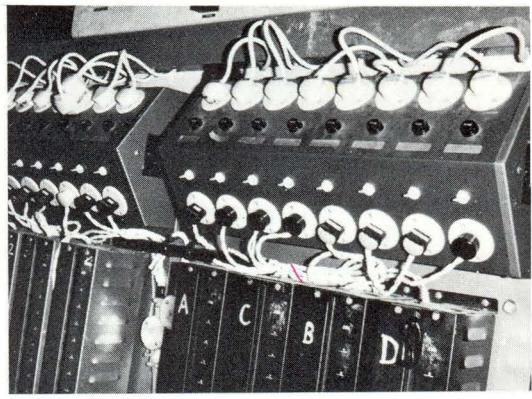
Pulled levers and patched and re-patched spaghetti-like cables.

At this time also, I was introduced to stage pyrotechnics. "We need to blow up the set at the end of the play, and you may as well give us some smoke and a few flashes and bangs during the play. As a Physicist you know and love all things electric . . ." I dutifully ordered some electric fuses and maroons from Strand (who I think might just have become Rank Strand Electric by then), together with detailed instructions for their safe use, but pride forbade my ordering their flashes and smokes. After all, I had the full resources of a well stocked chemistry lab at my disposal and enough knowledge of chemistry to avoid blowing myself up – or so I hopefully imagined. A few experiments in the labs produced smoke mixtures and magnesium flash powders which seemed to do what the producer expected. The maroon was a different matter however. I borrowed a dustbin and wired some chicken wire over its top as instructed, retired to a safe distance, put in my ear plugs and switched on. There was an almighty bang and the chicken wire embedded itself in the stage ceiling, from which it showed a remarkable reluctance to part company. The next firing was at the Technical Rehearsal, and this time I'd secured the wire cover so that it couldn't possibly come off. It didn't. A hole appeared in the side of the dustbin instead. The whole cast and technical crew had appeared on stage to watch the fun, and rapidly vanished looking as shattered as the dustbin. On performance nights I could see the poor actor, who had to remain on stage whilst it was blown up (or rather down) around him, lying in his bed – shaking. The actor who was supposed to leave the stage just before the explosion begged me to make absolutely certain that he had. The rest of the cast were not to be seen – they wisely left the building!

At the Technical Rehearsal the producer felt that I had rather underdone the smoke produced to go with the flashes earlier in the play, so on the First Night I increased the amount of chemicals used. The school governors and guests of honour in the front row disappeared from view in a rolling cloud; the fact that they were still there was advertised by spasmodic coughs and curses. As they re-emerged into view, the rows behind vanished as the chemicals made their inexorable way throughout the auditorium. The producer never again asked me to increase any of my pyrotechnic effects.

On the second night the flash mixture decided to ignite the set, and those in the front row saw my hand surreptitiously slide into view and put out the flames. On the next night I reduced the quantity of this mixture to be on the safe side, and was rewarded by a much smaller flash – followed by an explosion which rivalled that of the maroon. The maroon itself was obviously determined not to be outdone and not only blew off the chicken wire again, but blew down one flat as well! Luckily the audience thought it was all part of the realism, and since it was the last night neither set nor dustbin were needed again. Just as well, because by now the dustbin had nearly as many holes as a sieve. The actor who remained on stage during the explosions never appeared on stage again at that school, and I learned to use large and heavy water tanks for my bomb tanks in all future productions.

Somehow, I felt it was time to move to another school – but that's another story.



. . . Designed, built and installed single handed.

Like many schools we relied heavily on overhead compartment battens. The combined age of these boys is less than that of the batten.