

1. Original Showroom (ex dry cleaners) at 481 Malvern Road, South Yarra, Victoria.
2. Port Melbourne showroom.
3. The whole Strand Australia staff in Graham Street about 1960.
4. 212 Graham Street, Port Melbourne (we only had the top floor.)

5. Australian ingenuity – homemade set up for making lead screws for pageant lanterns or Fresnel spots.

6. 19 Trent Street, Burwood – we built and owned it!



Shortly before, Reg and Judy Bartram had decided to return to their native Sydney, and set up shop as the NSW Strand sales agents, with their own hire business for base income. This was a successful arrangement, as Strand Australia could only afford to pay commission on actual sales, and the hire more or less saved its interstate agents from starvation between orders for new equipment. For non-Australian readers, it should be explained that the geography is generally against running a small national sales organisation – Melbourne to Sydney

HSV, and two early pattern CD/TV systems 120 ways with 50% dimmers for each of the other stations. Hence my having to read Bentham's cryptic notes on the vagaries of Comptom presetter boxes and stop-keys before an overnight 600 mile drive to help Reg Bartram commission the first unit at ATN. There was always great suspicion in King Street (Strand's old head office) about overseas, and a conviction that only UK knew about anything technical, so when we got all systems running there was a distinct air of relief all round. Only some time

indeed. There was one way out, as special licences could be obtained for the import of component parts for local assembly, provided one could demonstrate that they could not reasonably be sourced within Australia. This was my cue to visit London officially for the first time in 1958, in order to learn what went on in Gunnersbury and Kennington Works, and the hallowed precincts of King Street, not forgetting the principal design and conference centre known as the Lamb and Flag.

It is necessary here to pay tribute to the Directors and staff of Strand

of lanterns and accessories in Melbourne, and thus maintained our sales throughout a very difficult period. We also made slider resistance dimmers, but Australian-made control equipment did not really come into its own until the invention of JTM dimmers some time later. Meantime, larger systems such as CD or LC could sometimes be imported under special licence, the Canberra Theatre Centre being the first major theatre built since World War II and our first CD customer. Saturable reactor systems were also Melbourne built, but the reactors, circuit relays and fader levers all had to be imported. To London's chagrin, we sometimes made special systems, e.g. a 5 group SR for Canberra ABC Television, and on one famous occasion, supplied reactors and faders only to a customer, who made his own racks and control desk – sacrilege! But, to us it was that or no sale and, let us whisper, the profit margin would have been the same either way.

During all this, I rose to the exalted rank of Deputy Chairman, and assumed total responsibility for the Australian operation not that anyone in Strand acquired personal riches from their work. The fun was considered ample reward. We now had sales agents in Sydney, Adelaide and Perth, and were becoming known in our own right. We represented Hall Stage Equipment Ltd. and Stage-sound London, and tried to provide as complete a service as possible. A number of our staff worked on shows at night, and some were busy semi professional designers or lighting men, as well as Strand men in the day time. We had casuals too – one such working with Reg Bartram in Sydney, was Nick Dowling, now well known as the boss of Rank Strand's Hong Kong operation.

Still the main approach to our market, as it is now called, was a mixture of education and service.

There were no schools teaching stage lighting, certainly no formal training existed in theatre design or equipment and we had to wear Australia from battens and floats with resistor boards, through plano convex and reactors, to profiles and thyristors. We ran lectures, seminars and demonstrations galore in all states, had parties of teachers and pupils visit us, and I spent many hours in the offices of architects or engineers, pleading on behalf of the theatre world for enough wing space, grid height and steel, power supply or whatever long before anyone got round to thinking about buying equipment – which they usually didn't without persuasion, as auditorium decor and the like usually soaked up the last remaining funds.

Battens and resistance boards remained firmly entrenched for many years in NSW clubs. The advent of poker machines resulted in high

Strand in Australia

is nearly 1000Km, and Melbourne to Perth about the same as London to Istanbul, so hire stocks had to be established in several capital cities.

By 1956, sales and hire were growing well, and in that year received two significant boosts. One was the Olympic Games, with associated Royal Tours and accompanying activities; the other, the advent of monochrome television. Both these required hire and sales of all kinds of lighting and control gear which were out of the ordinary to most trade houses, so Strand benefited, at least in turnover terms. How profitable those years were must remain a mystery, as Alec's salesmanship and showbusiness ability far outweighed the accompanying paperwork which we all hated. At least, the staff increased, and we moved into new premises – the first floor of a spec built warehouse in Port Melbourne. Imagine – everything had either to be carried up or down narrow stairs with two landings, or else hoisted through a loading door high in the air, where one was either frozen, soaked, or roasted according to the season.

The television industry here was dominated early on by newspaper interests, who employed engineers to run their stations. Those engineers worked entirely by technical data and facts, and worshipped waveform monitors more than pictures. In fairness, they probably had to in order to keep their equipment going, but the theatrical approach to lighting was not for them. Because of this our initial attempts to supply their lighting were unsuccessful, with the exception of hire fit up and outside broadcast occasions. In contrast, Messrs. Bentham and Bear of the U.K. Strand Electric had been making inroads into British television. This, in pre laniro days, involved working at times with Mole Richardson UK and Marconi/English Electric on package contracts. Marconi obtained contracts for four stations in Australia (ABN and ATN Sydney; ABV and HSV Melbourne) so we gained acceptance by the back door as it were, with an 18 way SR board for

afterwards did we let on that in ABV Melbourne (1957) I had had to extend the preformed CD control cables by about 80 feet because of a change in studio layout. The factory stoutly maintained this was impossible, as we would not understand the resulting voltage re-balance necessary to ensure correct operation of the servo dimmer drive. This benevolent and irritating 'father knows best' attitude was a continued obstacle to the development of the Strand business in Australia, but was to be forcibly changed very quickly by a new and larger problem.

By this time, various political and economic factors, plus Alec Brown's ill health, resulted in the formation of Strand Electric (Australia) Pty. Ltd. as a wholly owned subsidiary of Strand Electric London, with Jack Sheridan as Chairman; Mr. W. S. Lang, a Melbourne accountant as Deputy Chairman to keep us honest; plus Allen Sullivan ex London accounts section, and myself as directors.

Meantime, theatre equipment sales were gradually growing. The Elizabethan Theatre Newtown (NSW) was opened with the first all electric remote control board in Australia, an 18 way SR. This was used for 'specials' the cyc and flood bars being worked from the resident Sydney built resistance board – one of a number around, rejoicing in the title of 'Rowe's Electric Patent Dimming Machine'. In Melbourne, the Methodist Ladies College opened a 1000 seat hall with a (then) generous size stage, and a full lighting complement of battens, floods, Patt 53 FOH, and a 36 way SR Board. We were now accepted by the architectural and engineering professions, and looked set for a reasonable future. BUT – we had not reckoned on a new government move, – import restrictions! The effect of these was to limit imports to levels imposed by the issue of import licences the value of which was generally based on previous history. As the Strand history during the quota years was very small, we looked to have dull prospects

London, who without exception went out of their way to welcome and assist their Australian visitor. Aside from the cheap garret room in a Bloomsbury hotel (chosen by Henry Myers, the economically minded Strand Company Secretary) my memory of that period is a very happy one of working with a dedicated and enthusiastic lot, whose sense of humour was always present, and whose aim then as now, was to give the best possible service to theatre and television. There were of course many problems, mostly because the head office had dominated their market for years (read the Jubilee Tabs if you don't believe me) and could not, or would not understand that wiring practice, building and safety standards, distances and many other factors in Australia are vastly different from UK, so changes in design were needed. Fortunately, by this time another branch of the Strand tree had opened in Toronto and their Manager was finding the same difficulties. There thus began a natural collaboration and we slowly succeeded in teaching King Street about life outside Britain and Europe.

Back to Melbourne, where Allen Sullivan and I had to beaver away at the bureaucratic processes of proving a case for import licences covering lenses, die castings, special pressings and other parts, whilst setting up a simple sheet metal shop, paint shop and assembly area. This manufacturing activity gradually came under the wing of another electrician/dancer we had, Bruce Harvey, whose wife Nita was the head chorus girl at the Melbourne Tivoli. Bruce a tireless worker with a blunt manner and an abrasive sense of humour, took a great pride in his small team of workers especially when they could beat the 'bloody poms' at their own game, by reducing the labour content of Pattern 23's for instance. By importing components requiring special techniques, or having high tooling costs, and either subcontracting or making the rest in-house, we produced the whole range