

I was There!

My last article in this series* had left me gazing at the brown-paper 'glazed' window of my room in the Royal Hotel Bristol in Spring 1941. After six months in peaceful Lisbon on the S'Carlos job it was a stranger from outer space who reported to his bosses Jack Sheridan and Stanley Earnshaw at King Street the next morning – they had as little idea what to do with me as I did. I wandered aimlessly down into King Street basement and there was my lovely lighting demonstration theatre surprisingly intact; but not completely unused. On a table between the stage and the

by Frederick Bentham

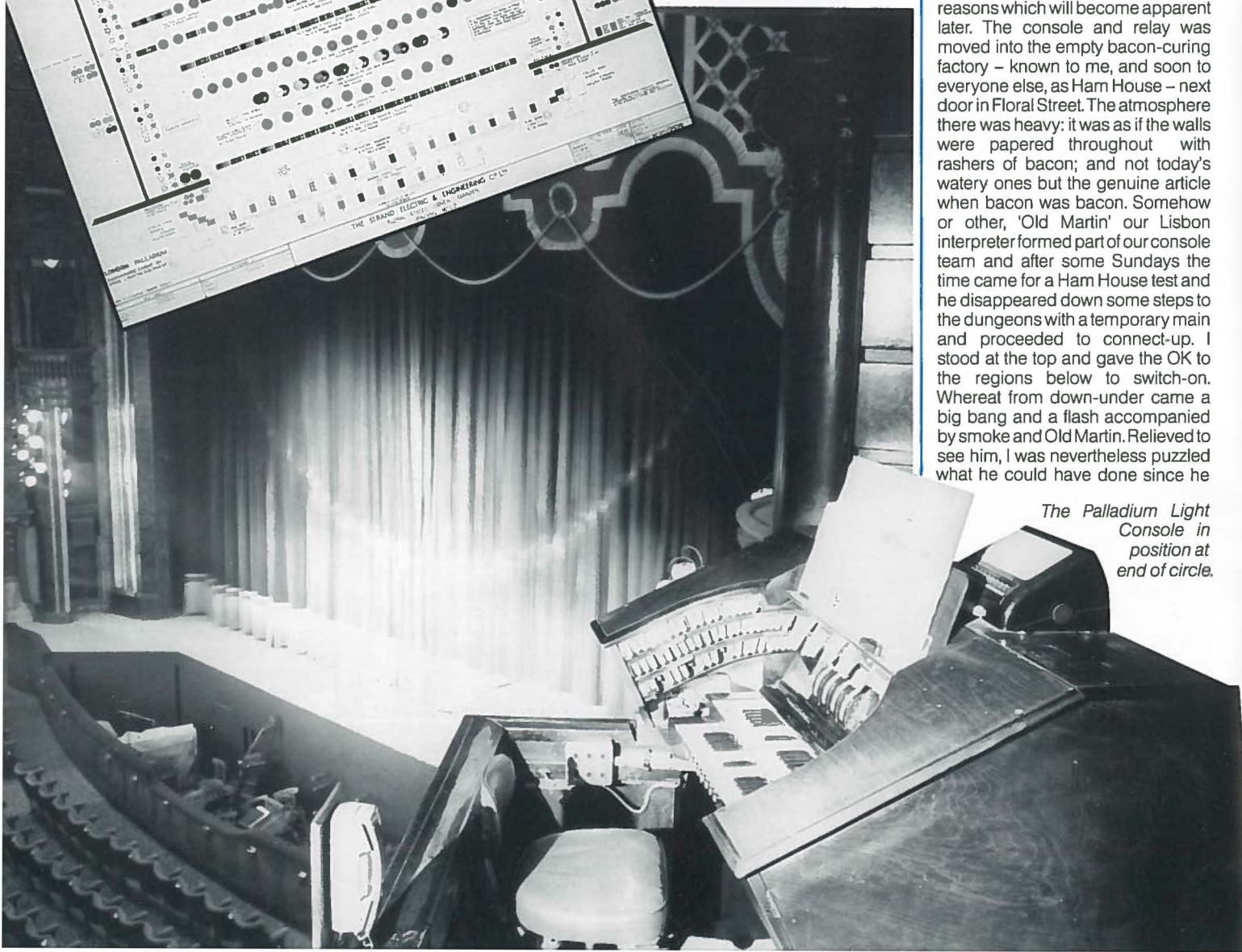
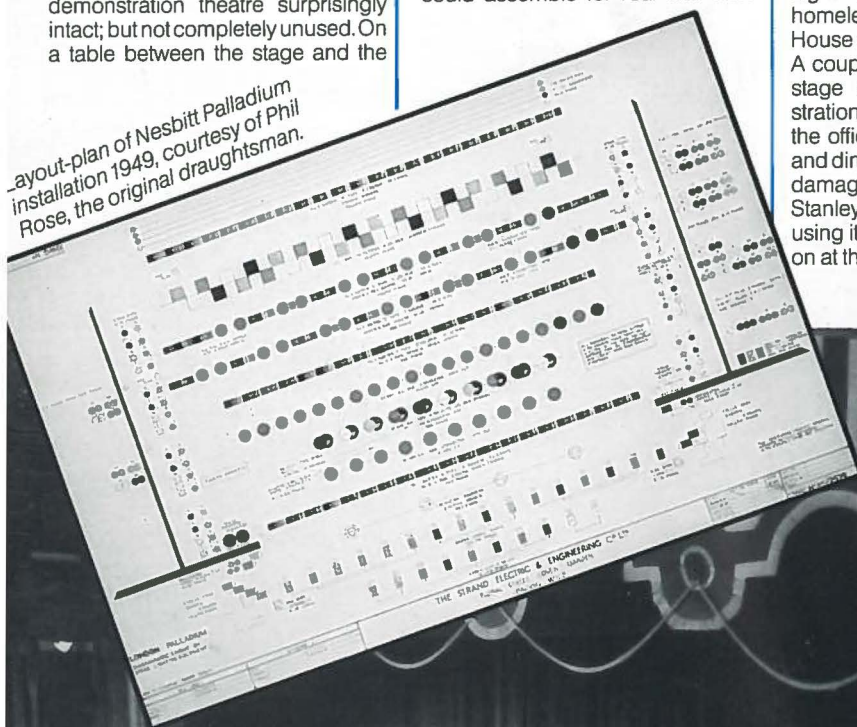
fixed seating area was an arrangement of lenses, my retort stands, a couple of lamps and some bits of bent tin. Vaguely it suggested an epidiascope. Enter, as if on cue, Percy Corry with a couple of Royal Navy officers and I got involved in this strange job there and then. Those bits became the nucleus around which Strand's esoteric stage lighting techniques – clutch-operated dimmer banks, optical & cyclorama effects – could assemble for *real* war work.

People tend to think that flight simulators – visual aids to train pilots without leaving the ground – belong to the recent electronic VDU decades: not so, there were these analogue methods and electro-mechanical equipments for Torpedo Attack Trainers in the Hitler war, as Percy Corry has related elsewhere¹. Incidentally much to my surprise on a tour of Scotland this summer I found the original T.A.T. building – the first ever – still there with its 42ft diam. cyclorama intact among the long ago deserted Fleet Air Arm camp, HMS Jackdaw, on the hillside at Crail in Fife.

That autumn a real theatre job arose for my original 1935 Strand Light Console. This had become homeless on the same night as the House of Commons was destroyed. A couple of small bombs fell on the stage of the King Street demonstration theatre, wrecking both it and the office block above. The console and dimmer bank had sustained little damage however. Robert Nesbitt and Stanley Earnshaw got the notion of using it for a show Nesbitt was to put on at the London Palladium.

That the work was done well in time for the opening *matinee* on December 17th 1941 is a tribute to something that can only be described as the spirit of the Strand Electric – something connected with the fact that we worked for and in theatre. It is true that in Floral Street there was both the Hire dept. and the fitup team to do the wiring required for any special show; but for the Works people it meant giving up their Sundays. They would be working overtime already on the other six days of the week. What is more, on the same sort of work since they were likely to be doing the T.A.T. dimmer banks. Nor was journeying to and from easy for some of those based at the Talbot Road works in West Ealing. And here I must once again single out Paul Weston who daily, or rather nightly since his days were so long, did the journey right across London from his parents' house in East Ham: bad enough in peacetime, but with blackout, bombs and diversions!

Anyway, the dimmer bank was dismantled and reassembled under the Palladium stage in what had been the band room and wired-up on the mains side to new outlets and some of the old. A complex layout for reasons which will become apparent later. The console and relay was moved into the empty bacon-curing factory – known to me, and soon to everyone else, as Ham House – next door in Floral Street. The atmosphere there was heavy: it was as if the walls were papered throughout with rashers of bacon; and not today's watery ones but the genuine article when bacon was bacon. Somehow or other, 'Old Martin' our Lisbon interpreter formed part of our console team and after some Sundays the time came for a Ham House test and he disappeared down some steps to the dungeons with a temporary main and proceeded to connect-up. I stood at the top and gave the OK to the regions below to switch-on. Whereat from down-under came a big bang and a flash accompanied by smoke and Old Martin. Relieved to see him, I was nevertheless puzzled what he could have done since he



The Palladium Light Console in position at end of circle.