

# BACKSTAGE AND TECH



Jim Laws with a gas lighting control which was used pre-electricity



The two preset, split wing Strand Electronic console from the Manchester Opera House

## Where do consoles go when they die?

There is no dedicated museum for backstage technology, but **Rob Halliday** visits a private lighting collection that could form the basis for such a backstage heritage venture

It's long struck me as a curious thing – in this country you can find museums that will show you the history of everything from aircraft to cars to narrowboats to pencils. But if I want a museum to let me experience a little bit of the history of the industry we work in, backstage technology... well, there isn't one.

Other than theatre's constant quest for reinvention, always heading to the next first night, there seems to be no particular reason why not. People outside the industry love the thrill of 'backstage' – if

nothing else, the current going rate for nicely chromed up lighting classics gives an indication of how much some are prepared to pay for their own piece of backstage magic.

And people who work in the industry? The recent reunions between a world-renowned lighting designer and the little lanterns he lit shows with at school, or between a one-time stage manager and the lighting console she operated 50 years before, tell their own stories: a sudden recognition, then a wide-eyed look of delight, then an irresistible urge to

reach out and touch the gear all over again, time seeming to just melt away.

Those reunions took place at the nearest thing there is to a lighting museum – the collection of equipment held by the one man encyclopedia of lighting history that is Jim Laws.

Many have heard of Laws' collection – he used to rent period equipment out to shows and films, although he has passed that side of the business and the lights that the rental market generally prefers to another company, Ancient Lights Ltd. Rather fewer, I suspect, have actually made the journey to Suffolk to see it for themselves. He will tell you he's downsized, but there are still three barns full of lights, control consoles, dimmers, rigging bits, brochures and catalogues.

It's a collection built up over many years – and a working collection, since it

started because Laws was trying to acquire extra lights to use on shows he was lighting, firstly at Windsor's Theatre Royal, then at the opening of Farnham's Redgrave Theatre, and he still has a stock of bulbs to let it all light up. The collection grew as Laws gained a reputation as the person to turn to when you didn't have the heart to just throw things into a skip. In 1987, he and his remarkably understanding wife Pat, together with 12 pantech-nicians (a museum-worthy term in itself) of lighting relocated to Suffolk. They've been there ever since.

If you have any love of stage lighting, this is a treasure trove of the most exquisite kind. A Patt 23 over here, a Patt 123 over there, familiar enough to a generation who learned with them at school. But the not-quite familiar lights over there? The prototype Patt 263s made for

flyman



## Technical precision that won't fail to impress

The current issue of the Association of British Theatre Technicians' journal, Sightline, has a cartoon of a young man meeting his future in-laws. "Our Rosie," her mother says, "tells me you're a theatre technician. At which hospital?"

Information on the range of possibilities for non-performance work in the entertainment industry has been much improved in recent years through the work of Creative and Cultural Skills and its many partners (including The Stage) in events such as Stagecraft at the Royal Opera

House and its regional equivalents, Creative Choices events. CCSkills is also charged with setting national occupational standards, which are used to develop vocational qualifications and apprenticeship programmes.

All good stuff which might convince young Rosie's parents that showbusiness is more than Britain's Got Talent and allow her boyfriend to show he has genuine skills and he is worthy of their daughter's hand.

But, while the first two parts of the plan have moved on a long way, the final bit, where

qualifications are standardised and nationally recognised, has barely got off the ground.

There is almost universal support for the idea. Trainers, whether drama schools or further education colleges, like it because it would increase the employability of their graduates. Students like it because it allows them to prove they have the skills they say they have.

The unions like it because proof of appropriate skills is a good bargaining counter in wage negotiations and because it implies that employers will support continual professional

development training to keep those skills current. Employers like it because it allows them to be sure what skills job applicants have with positive implications for induction programmes, health and safety and staffing levels. So why are we still so far from achieving this popular goal?

Some past initiatives, such as NVQs were judged not fit for purpose. Recent negotiations between SOLT and BECTU, which would have included a step towards qualification-based pay grades, foundered for reasons which were by no means exclusively to do with that aspect of the agreement.

However, it is to the credit of CC Skills that it has provided the information on which such qualifications could be based

and to the credit of some visionary leaders in technical theatre that they continue to push them to be sure what standards without the interference of the dead hand of bureaucracy. But why are they not better supported when so many agree with the principle?

Agree they might, but they all have differing reservations and fear that any changes will have losers as well as winners. That is true but the losers will be inadequate training providers or less scrupulous employers – so that's all good then.

There will be more winners and maybe a longer term result would be that when Rosie brings home a surgical support operative, they will ask why she couldn't have found a nice theatre technician instead.

NEXT WEEK: Kat Nugent

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Jane Thornton is reunited with the 72-way Strand System PR console from the Theatre Royal Windsor, which she operated fresh out of LAMDA

Blitz!, sharp edges rather than the final rounded corners. Over there, one of the National's original rep Sils with lift-out cartridge shutter set you could swap between shows. And Pageants and Acting Areas and probably every Pattern number ever made.

In the next barn, control. The organ-like light console from the Theatre Royal Drury Lane and the later System CD that replaced organ keys with faders. A splitting two-preset desk from Manchester's Opera House with its thyatron valve dimmers. A box with rotary dials labelled with predefined colours, the Chromalux, precursor to today's console colour libraries. A mechanical Grand Master, and from further back in time still, a set of taps and pipes from a gas lighting installation. Laws' collection doesn't really stray into the computer era – except, sitting on its side so not immediately recognisable, the frame and a couple of modules from the National's 1976 Lightboard, described in these pages back in February this year.

Those reunions? Lighting designer and theatre consultant Richard Pilbrow was thrilled to find even some of his Lightboard, but most excited by the little Patt 27 Float Spots he last used at school. The widest eyes belonged to ex-stage manager and ABTT archivist Jane Thornton. Laws had mentioned having a board similar to the one she'd been thrown into running just out of LAMDA when the regular operator had fallen ill. When ultimately he revealed it was the very board she'd used, the ex-Windsor 72-way System PR, her gasp was audible. Then she explained – relived, almost – the tricks and quirks only someone who'd actually run one of these consoles in anger would know.

That these two people were at the same place on the same day was not coincidence, neither were they alone. Also there: Jim and Pat Laws, Molly Pilbrow, the ABTT's Robin Townley, Jon Primrose who runs the wonderful Strand Archive website, Shane Guy from Nottingham

Trent University, Lucien Nunes who has a collection of lighting equipment as part of his larger Electrokinetica collection, David Fitch of David Fitch Services, Peter Willis of Howard Eaton Lighting, Andrew Candler, and me (others, including the rabble-rousing Martin Moore, are involved, but couldn't make it on the day). It was an informal meeting, but informed with a purpose – to talk about the future of old lighting equipment, how it might be preserved, protected, and kept available for all to wonder at, play with and learn from.

The meeting was inspired by a coincidence of events. Ex-Strand employee John Wright's research for a book about the famous company has prompted an outburst of memories from fellow former employees. And another collection of lighting history, encompassing the computerised generation after Laws' ends gathered over the years by theatre electrician Jason Williams with the intention of establishing a National Exhibition of Entertainment Technology, needed to find a new home. Discussion of how to assist that collection led to a bigger discussion of how to preserve more of these items as their present keepers decide they can no longer be their custodians. It turns out there are a lot of people each holding little collections, the ABTT's Historical Research Committee working valiantly to keep track of them all.

Could, we wondered, all those collections ever be brought together in one place, a true museum of entertainment technology showing how everything came together to produce a show? We've filed that away, for now, as a dream. In true theatre style we moved quickly to a more pragmatic, practical alternative – a virtual museum.

The aim is to document the equipment we find (starting with lighting, but not necessarily limited to it) with photographs and videos backed up by catalogues, other reference material – and the thoughts and memories of the people who created the equipment in the first place, and those who put it to use. And then to preserve key items, distributing them across interested companies, theatres or educational establishments able to provide a home for these amazing artefacts. This is not just for those reliving their past – the next generation of technicians are as fascinated by the light console as the last.

That's the plan. The plan has a name – the Backstage Heritage Collection. It has a website [www.backstageheritage.org](http://www.backstageheritage.org). It has a lot of people interested in it. It is already at work documenting the NEET collection. It has a plan to raise money to support this work, one accessible to individuals rather than just big companies (although their support will also be welcome). It has ambition and it would love your support, whether practical help, reminiscences, artefacts or documents long hidden away.

Truth be told, we don't quite know where this is going to end up yet, but the stories we've already unearthed, and that delight as people have rediscovered favourites from their lighting past, make it seem certain to be a fascinating and thrilling ride.



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