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Malham Man

Roger St. Pierre talks to Dennis Eynons.

The sign on the door reads "Malham Photographic"—but in the discotheque industry the company is more simply known as plain Malham Ltd.

Not that the name is in fact as well known as it deserves to be for Malham and its founder Dennis Eynons—one of the great characters of our industry as well as being one of its true founding figures—has tended to keep a low profile, leaving its work to speak for itself.

The Malham building is in itself quite unprepossessing, being just about the only thing left standing in a quiet South London backstreet which is currently being redeveloped by the local council.

Says Dennis with that winning grin of his: "They wanted to pull our place down too till we told them we would want recompense not just for the building but for two murals we have on our walls. They were painted by an old friend and colleague Walter Mitchell who has become a major figure in the art world—it's hard now to put a price on their value but it's a lot of money!"

a spacious one, allowing Malham to be one of the few true manufacturers in the of the few true manufacturers in the business, rather than merely assemblers of bought-in parts. "Nobody in the game believes we do it all—but we do," said Dennis. "I'm a fully qualified metallurgist and we have our own foundry here. We cast in aluminium and also do our own sheet metal work and it's all finished in-house too, in our own paint shop."

All that work takes place on the ground floor while the electronics are put together on the first floor where Dennis's son James, who handles most of the design, also works.

And design is a major part of Malham's work for it's Dennis's fascination with finding solutions to seemingly impossible problems that has led to his company specialising in innovative custom-built one-off lighting pieces rather than mass production. "I spent 15 years in metallurgical research, principally in light alloys," Dennis told me. "The chief chemist where I worked was an internationally known portrait photographer and he fired my interest in photography which led to me studying modern art and the history of art. I started Malham Photographic in 1953 with the intention of providing photographers with reliable lighting equipment."

A Welshman from the Rhonda Valley—"Where men are men and women know it!" as he says—Dennis had moved to London and based his business in Malham Street, Forest Hill, from which the Malham Ltd name derives.

"All my years in research had shown me that no matter how complex the problem, the final solution is almost always simple. I became fascinated with the idea of achieving the supposedly impossible which is why if someone has a crazy idea we'll tackle it for



Dennis Eynons.

them and, believe me, some of the ideas these days really do seem outrageously crazy at first sight!"

It was at a photographic exhibition in Cologne in 1955 that Dennis met William Creamer from Paris: "I had a strong technical background and he had good knowledge of the stage, TV and night club industries so we set up a joint marketing arrangement. We were like two bloody twins and together we played havoc with the lighting scene."

"The world famous Lido, Crazy Horse Salon and Casino De Paris, son-et-lumiere displays at Versailles, lighting for the rose window in Notre Dame, the lighting for Canterbury

Cathedral, the dancing fountain at the Paris Gaumont, movie and TV studios, stage lighting—we tackled the lot. It was an incredible apprenticeship in the lighting game. New problems cropped up regularly, requiring new designs and production changes. It was a hectic eight years.

"During that time I met the radical architect Nicholas Schoffer, who had a studio in Montmartre and had the revolutionary idea that the final art format would consist of moving coloured patterns, created by mobiles lit by coloured spotlights which were to be operated from sound signals.

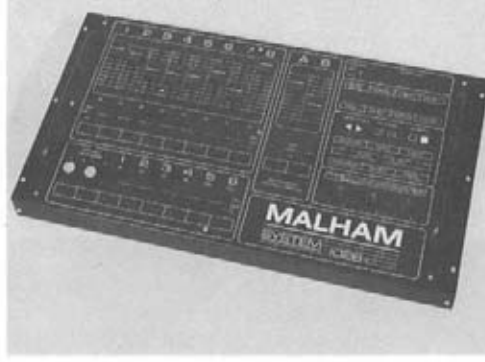
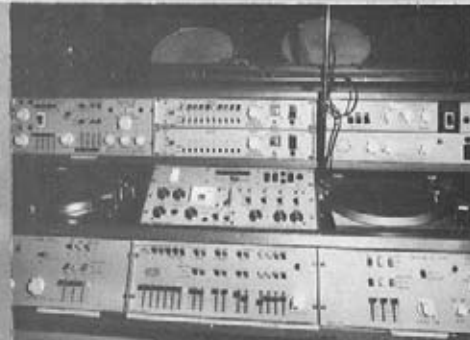
"His concept was first exhibited at the Institute of Modern Art in New York way back in 1938 and again at the Tate Gallery in London at the '10 Years of Modern Art' exhibition in 1963, which I visited. Schoffer was, I suppose, the original light jockey with his sound-to-light concept.

"His studio was fitted out with a four by three metre screen and a cinema organ equipped with switches behind the keys and the foot pedals. These switches controlled numerous spotlights, colour wheels, floods and so on. He'd put a record on, sit at the organ and 'play' the lights.

"Schoffer's major breakthrough came with his *Formes et Lumiere* display at the Congress Palace in Liege, Belgium, which, I firmly believe, was the birth of psychedelic lighting. A screen some 70 metres by seven metres was lit by a mass of spotlights via a control system using Thyatron valves as dimmers, activated by recorded sound or from outside microphones which picked up the sounds of the city. Creamer and myself worked on this project, building the special projectors which



Pioneers or Bandits? Dennis Eynon (right), his wife, and William Creamer pictured at Photakina Cologne in 1963.



The Malham Control Story ...

(Left to right in date order).

The first 500watt per channel, three channel light to sound controller (frequency controlled, bass, mid and treble) 1965; the light to sound Regulus Rainbow Strobe 1966; Regulus light to sound dimmable U.V. Strobe with amplitude control 1966; the Regulus 6000—a typical small installation for clubs in early 1969—note dual sound (frequency and amplitude) and also retention of autocycle (colour change for slow numbers); a sophisticated control system for light to sound September 1966—because of vibration on a rotating stage on which the DJ pranced from turntable 1 to 2 it was necessary to play the records from the control room and consequently the turntable and tape decks were housed in drawers fitted into the console; a control system in 1972 in the refitted Valbonne—note drum kit (each drum had individual light to sound controller with individual mics built in); a typical controller in 1975 with built-in 3 and 10 channel sound to light (Cintra's, Croydon); typical controller 1982—the Malham System 1026/3, a fully automatic 3 colour with micro-processor and programme selection.

were later to become a standard tool in clubs and discotheques worldwide in the form of the Minimix.

"In 1963, again at a photographic exhibition, we were approached by the Rank people who came along and asked: 'What do you know about lights?' to which we replied that we knew it all!

"Rank Leisure had a livewire new Australian managing director named Jim Whittle who had been given the brief to build the Top Rank Suites chain of venues. He told me he wanted to change the concepts of dance halls, bringing them up-to-date to cater for the new, young audiences.

"We discussed the trends in Europe and the concepts of Nicholas Schoffer and Jim gave me the go-ahead.

"In August that year the Top Rank Suite opened with the first psychedelic light wall, using the Liege-style Mixlight pattern projectors.

"Cardiff was due to open a couple of months later and Jim said: 'We've got it on the walls in Bristol so why can't we have it on the dance floor in Cardiff?' and so we gave him the first psychedelic dance floor. There was a private opening on the Friday then on the Saturday afternoon the place was opened to the general public for the famous Rank tea dance. Such functions normally attracted 150 or so people but something like 1,200

teenagers turned out, doing dances I didn't recognise!

I remember one kid who was a fantastic dancer, his feet moving at twice the speed of anyone else's. I thought: 'He'd make a great deejay'—and that's what he ended up as. That evening, the Merseybeats did a show at the venue and the place was jam packed with screaming teenagers and that, for me, was the birth of the whole light show thing."

Altogether, Dennis and his rapidly expanding company built some 15 lighting schemes for Rank. "We were growing fast. We started off in just two rooms on the first floor and the terms of our lease meant that although people could come in through the front door materials had to be brought in through the window. The rest of the building was taken up by a firm that made shuttles and a firm that made wooden heels for ladies' shoes. The new fashion for stiletto heel did us a big favour because they had to be made of metal. That killed his business and we then acquired the whole building!"

The Rank Suites did more than build the foundations for Malham's prosperity; they provided the schooling for a wealth of talented people who went on to make a major impact in our industry. Recalls Dennis: "Their musical director was Gary Brown who went on to the Bailey's group of clubs then to Cunard where he put discos onto the

cruise liners; the manager at Cardiff was Ray Baines and his assistant was Athol Souter and they went to the top at Rank then on to Goodhews, Whitbreads and beyond; their assistant was Fred Lawrence, who is now top man at First Leisure, and the deejay was none other than master Keith Hardy. The development of mass market discotheques is an almost continuous story from those early days at Rank's Cardiff Suite. Certainly, those characters have very much influenced the way the disco business has developed.

"However, Rank and their big rivals, Mecca and EMI, never really thought that the discotheque was here to stay—they still thought in terms of dance halls. It was left to private entrepreneurs to really bring about the disco explosion.

"I suppose it was Regine, in Paris, who really started it all. She opened a cellar club on the Champs Elysees. No formal seating, just cushions on the floor. There was no booze, just soft drinks, and the music was all recorded. She called it a Disco-bibliothèque and that word soon became shortened to discotheque.

"I then met Louis Brown, who was then a photographer who was working a lot for the Daily Mirror. He was into the entertainment scene and decided to open his own club. That was the legendary Scotch of St. James in



Installation at "Papillon"—Stormont Hotel, Belfast.



"Cupids" at Newry, Co. Down, Northern Ireland.



The Top Rank Suite at Birmingham in September 1966—patterned floor and sophisticated lighting control.



Top Rank Bristol Suite—August 1963. The first use of psychedelic lighting of walls and dance floor using Mixlight Projectors in the "Schoffer Concept" as at the Formes et Lumiere at Liege in Belgium.

Mayfair which became the Beatles' favourite haunt when they moved down to London. It was a runaway success and soon Louis had a chain of clubs including Le Kilt, Lulu's, Die Fledermaus, La Poubelle, Birdland and, of course, La Valbonne.

"Louis was always looking for new gimmicks—like the indoor swimming pool which was the centrepiece at La Valbonne—and he helped push disco lighting ahead with his demands for more and more outrageous effects.

"I remember him saying to me: 'They can dim neon in the States so why can't you do it?'. I went away, worked on it and we achieved a means of fully dimming neon. I then went to the States and they said: 'Oh, no, we can only dim it half-way!'

"Louis' ultimate was the Studio Circus at Juan Les Pins in the South of France. That was a truly amazing club. He had so much lighting there that when we turned it all on for the grand opening we blew the main switches for the whole town—there was hell to pay!"

When Gary Brown went to Bailey's, Malham were invited to design the lighting for their La Dolce Vita in Birmingham. Recalled Dennis: "That was a big jump. The place was lit entirely with Minimixers. We did a string of places for Bailey's—it seemed like they were opening a new venue every 12 weeks."

Malham came up with the first true light-to-sound system at the Cavendish Club in Yardley in 1968 then did it in the grand manner in Blackburn a few months later: "That was a significant event because at the opening I ran into a guy who was proposing to open clubs in Germany. He loved what he saw in Blackburn and invited me over—and the disco scene exploded in his country. His first club was the Voom Voom in Augsburg and we did several venues for him. We sued him for three years trying to get paid for the work and eventually he died on us.

"The architect involved was an amazing character named Thomas Geyrig who ended up designing more than 300 clubs throughout Germany, many of which we worked on. He was opening a couple of new venues each week.

"Thomas was always coming up with amazing new ideas. At one club he had people dancing in what was, effectively, a shop window. Another place was so narrow that there was no room between the tables so he had a three-foot wide raised platform running down the centre of the club, passing over everyone's heads.

"Geyrig did a huge club in Munich called Blow Up. It was the first time I saw a 1,500 capacity disco—no bands, just records. His most exotic project was also in Munich, the Subway, which opened at the time of the Munich Olympics. They'd built a new underground railway and the entrance to the club was off the platform. Two authentic underground carriages were inside the club and served to provide the seating.

"Around that time Watneys were desperately trying to sell Red Barrel. They had a contra deal with Lowenbrau and through that connection they went to see Subway, were introduced to Thomas Geyrig and brought him to England to build their Birds Nest disco pubs. The first was in Kings

Road, Chelsea, and he did three more for them.

"That brought the discotheque limelight back to England from Germany and got the breweries heavily involved.

"Eddie Futrell opened Barbarella's in Birmingham and that's when Mick Gibson came on the scene—that was the first club he designed. It was on different levels, one floor being a cabaret room, with a basement cellar all lit with rainbow strobes—there's never been anything like it! Mick's assistant then was Neil Tibbetts and the first club he did on his own was Snob's in Birmingham.

"Later on we did the lighting for Neil Bartwick's scheme at Elton's in Tottenham. He beat Mick Gibson to the Punch in getting GLC approval for tivoli lighting. Mick introduced it at Le Chat Noir, in Richmond, three weeks later and used Neil's approval as a lever to get permission.

"One of Mick's jobs up in the Potteries, a converted pub, must rank as the quickest paying club in history. The guy who opened it got his investment back in just three weeks, it did so well."

Malham's continental involvement was continuous: "One of our early club light schemes was at an incredible place called the Monestire des Freres at Pau in France. The place was built as a replica castle, complete with moat, huge open fires and the deejay located in a turret. We got the lighting rig completed, all ready to open, and asked where the mains were, only to discover that they hadn't put any in—the house lighting was by candles!

Spain became a major market for Malham: "We did a big club called Ramoses at the Victoria Hotel in Madrid. They were doing the Pepsi Cola radio show from there, it was a beautiful club. From there, our business in Spain really took off and we also got into Portugal. Projel went into a licensing arrangement with us to make and market the Minimixer and they were selling hundreds of them. I asked where they were all going and they told me: 'Up and down the Pan American Highway!'

"We took a stand at a photographic exhibition in New York in 1969 and a Japanese fellow came along and bought the entire stand as it stood!

"When I arrived back from the USA there was a copy of the projector sitting on my desk. It even had 'Malham Mini Mix' on it. It had come from the Japanese guy. He offered to manufacture for us under license for \$11 a piece which was \$4 cheaper than we could do it!

"Mick Gibson did the Pink Pussycat in Singapore then used Malham equipment to do installations in Japan and New York—Act One was our first club there.

"The Irish market also became increasingly important to us. The first club we did was for Eamonn Andrews. It opened on Paddy's night. What an event that was—it was so packed they even had to dance on the stairs.

"Pat Gibbons, who was tragically killed in the Beaujolais race a year or two back, became a good customer with his partner John Ryan. They did fantastic work in opening up the discotheque scene over there, especially in terms of getting the previously restrictive licensing laws changed so they

could sell liquor and beers in discos. They created a really strong industry lobby in the Dail.

"They were friends of Louis Brown, who introduced us. The first club we did for them was Tomango's. Since then we've done lighting for more than 50 discotheques in Ireland and we've found that, in general, the standard of clubs is higher there than it is in England."

The industry had come a long way during Dennis Eynon's lengthy involvement: "The lighting side of discotheques is now a firmly established industry. I'm very keen on trade associations like PLASA which, I feel, have a major role to play in pushing for export trade.

"The technology and skill is here in the United Kingdom. We are much further advanced in these areas than any other country. Instead of in-fighting for the home market we should all be looking further afield. There's a vast overseas market."

Another organisation Dennis keenly supports is the recently incorporated Worshipful Company of Lightmongers of which, he is sad to say, he is currently the only disco lighting member: "We've been working on it since 1953 and finally, last March, the Lord Mayor and Aldermen of the City of London graciously granted us status as an excepted livery company, the chief objects of which are: 'To foster the art and science of Lighting by bringing together with those practising the many different skills involved and to promote goodwill in the industry.'"

Dennis feels there is a continuing need in the discotheque industry as a whole for people of imagination. "It's characters like Louis Brown and Peter Stringfellow who have made the business so healthy. If Louis was the king of discotheques Peter is the Crown Prince—but I reckon he'll have to wait a while before succeeding to the throne because Louis hasn't yet had his last word.

"Peter put up the first stainless steel ceiling of any kind, in Stringfellows, and the influence of all those wings flapping up and down from that massive lighting rig at the Hippodrome has been enormous."

Malham's own most impressive centrepiece is known as the Centaur, the castings for which are huge. "We're working on a special at the moment which will be nearly 30-feet across," said Dennis, showing me a clever cardboard model which will help in sorting out all the many problems. Son James showed me several mind-boggling schemes currently being undertaken for different clients, each with its own unique problems which explains why Dennis refers to the Malham works as being a laboratory rather than a factory. "We produce various standard items but even these are often customised specially to suit clients' requirements"

One recent scheme involved putting truly amazing "house lighting" into a huge jet aircraft being outfitted at a total cost of \$18 million—which underlines Dennis Eynon's philosophy that Malham Ltd is in business to give service to people who want something 'out of the ordinary'.

The Malham business card bears the opposite legend: "Lighting consultants to architects".