

IN THIS ISSUE:

Salford University: Gateway to the Arts
New multi-million pound arts facility

Tech Focus: MPR50 & MTK952
Wisycom's IEM solution reviewed

Preview: PLASA Focus Leeds
Expected highlights

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DIGITAL
EDITION

An Inspector Calls

Re-imagining a classic

FLY BY NITE'S REHEARSAL STUDIOS • SES BRINGS CUSTOM DIMMING TO THE MARKET
DALI: TRIALS & TRIBULATIONS • ENTECH: AUSTRALIA'S TRAVELLING TRADE SHOW
LED BY THEATRE: ROBE NRG AT GSA • NEW SOUND FOR DORKING HALLS - AND MUCH MORE ...

plasma media



classic gear

The Hook Clamp | Rob Halliday . . .



How should one measure innovation? By the level of advanced new technology crammed into a product? Or just by how radically it changes the way a task gets done?

Put it another way: can a bent piece of metal be innovative?

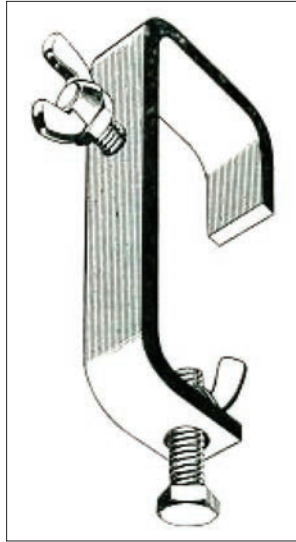
There's an example hidden in plain sight that says it can: the Hook Clamp.

Almost everything you hang - lights, speakers, tracks and more - hangs from these. You just take them for granted, but to understand their innovation you really need to know what came before . . .

In the UK, the previous standard for rigging lights was the L-Clamp. Its form lives on in the British-style boom arm: two curved metal plates sized to fit around a bar, then locked into place by joining them together with two nut-and-bolt sets, one top, one bottom. A short stub arm twisted 90° had a hole to which a thread from the lantern could be bolted. With nothing to take the weight of a light while you rigged it and tools required at every stage, it would have been incredibly tedious to hang a rig of lights working at ground level, a nightmare at height.

The seeds of change came from television. For the BBC's 1954 move into the Riverside Studios in Hammersmith the plan was for lanterns to be hung on 1 29/32" scaffold hoist bars; a cast aluminium clamp was designed to attach to the spigot found on most lanterns, then hook easily onto the bar. Variations on this design were later used at Television Centre.

Strand Electric came up with a simplified, cheaper version (some say designed by Bob Woolnough, at first for use in their famous demonstration theatre). The 'ref 483 hook clamp', revealed in their 1958 catalogue, looks almost exactly like the clamps we use today. They also announced that their stage lighting trunnions would come with bolts



and wing nuts for use with the new clamp. Now you could just hang a lantern on the bar, then worry about precise positioning then locking off using the wing bolt on the clamp, and the wing nut holding the lantern to it - no spanner required. That catalogue featured a few drawings of lanterns using the new clamp; older illustrations were carefully cropped to conceal the older clamps. Three shillings and eightpence per clamp at launch.

It's interesting to contemplate why it appeared when it did. The introduction in Strand's *Tabs* magazine noted that many more lights were now used hanging than on stands. It was also a time when shows started putting up specific rigs rather than relying on permanently installed house rigs of battens and spots.

Other products of the same era give further clues: the compact, lightweight Patt 23 and 123 'baby spots', the internally-wired bars of 1.5" internal/1 7/8" external diameter which first appeared in the same 1958 catalogue. Rigging

of this diameter soon started usurping the older, fatter gas barrel.

Today's hook clamp, from a variety of manufacturers, is little changed from the 1958 original. Same strengths (easy to use, versatile) still outweighing the same limitations (doesn't fit over-size bars, hard to get a really good lock-off, not designed for side- or over-rigging, though people do . . .)

Imagine how many lights - how many generations of lights! - have been rigged since 1958. Think how many more fantastic shows have happened at all just because that extra time was available to us all. Seems pretty innovative to me. ☒

Hook Clamp launch announcement in *Tabs*:

▶ www.theatre crafts.com/archive/tabs/scans/1959_Vol17_1.pdf

First appearance, in the 1958 catalogue:

▶ www.theatre crafts.com/archive/album-viewer.php?id=6&page=1&type=a

Rob has been working in and writing about lighting for more than 25 years, on shows around the world. He wonders if this makes him a classic... or just old!

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