

**W**hen it was built as the centrepiece of the 1951 Festival of Britain, London's Royal Festival Hall was a revolutionary concept in concert hall design - as much a building of its time as Australia's Sydney Opera House would become later. Not surprisingly, Strand Lighting has featured large in the history of the RFH from the outset.

No one appreciates this more than Reg Bond. Who's he? The doyen of chief engineers everywhere, he will for ever be known as "Mr Festival Hall", having retired recently after more than 40 years keeping the place running.

During that time (which by his own admission was 'a wonderful life') he met Kings, Queens, statesmen and the great and famous from the world of music and entertainment. So closely was he wed to the job that he, his wife and son, had an apartment 'above the shop' - on the roof of the Festival Hall.

From here he was not only able to keep a fatherly eye on his beloved building for 24 hours a day, 365 days a year, but also had ready access to every concert and show held in the complex - absolute heaven for a music lover. However, there were occasional drawbacks. Even closed doors and an 11-inch thick wall could not keep the mellifluous (not his description) sounds of Pink Floyd at bay on one occasion.

More to his musical liking was the great Toscanini, who when he appeared in London was too frail to walk up steps to the RFH rostrum, and so a ramp was built for him.

So tight was the Festival Hall's budget in those early days that no money could be found to pay for construction of dressing rooms for the performers. Consequently they changed in corridors, backstage, and anywhere else they could find. Wash-basins were rigged up in any available space. 'When we had opera and ballet companies in, we had people dressing and undressing all over the place,' he recalls. 'In the case of the young ladies ... well, we all had to do the gentlemanly thing and look the other way.'

Reg started his career at the RFH as an approver-fitter with mechanical engineers Matthew Hall when the building was still under construction. He was just 19 and immediately fell in love with the place. He applied to be taken on the permanent maintenance staff and within a few years he had worked his way up to a senior position

## "WHO'S THAT MAN IN THE PYJAMAS?"



Mr Festival Hall - Reg Bond the Chief Engineer of the Royal Festival Hall

## "OH, THAT'S OUR CHIEF ENGINEER!"

by Richard Humphries.

The building was extended; further concert halls were added, and at the height of his reign, Reg headed-up a maintenance team with responsibility for everything from the massive boiler room (more like a ship's engine room) to the most inconsequential light bulb. Along the way he also played a decisive role in the project team designing the additional buildings of the South Bank complex, the Queen Elizabeth Hall and the Purcell Room.

But for a commendable streak of loyalty, Reg might have been looking back on a career at the previously-mentioned Sydney Opera House. When the antipodean concert hall was constructed Reg was offered a senior technical post there by a former colleague from London. However, Sydney's loss was London's gain.

From 1962-64, the RFH was greatly extended, which involved major construction out into the River Thames. From Reg's point of view, this was 'an extremely stressful time', since the RFH had to remain fully functional despite being one of London's largest construction sites.

Such is the respect with which the technical team at the RFH is regarded that when the adjacent Queen Elizabeth Hall and Purcell Room were constructed, Reg and his staff advised the engineering professionals on many aspects - and all their recommendations were implemented.

Over the years the RFH has been a continuing showcase for Strand Lighting products. In the early days, lighting control provided by a Light Console, followed in 1974 by an MMS. Now it is the state-of-the-art Galaxy, in all three concert halls.

Reg explained, 'To be honest, we have never had any real problems with the lights. If there has been any query or difficulty, we have got on to Strand and someone like Alan Luxford has always been there to help out. The service we have had over the years from Alan and his colleagues has been terrific.'

'Over the years, Strand has only been called in half a dozen times on our account. But the problem has always been with shows coming in. Touring companies generally want to use their own equipment and Strand would arrange for it to be rigged for us.'

Having his home on the premises since 1969 not only gave Reg and his family one of the most prestigious addresses in London but also gave one of the grandest-possible views across the Thames to the City of London. But there were drawbacks.

'One Friday morning we woke up to find that the whole of London, as far as we could see, was deserted. There were no cars, no trains - and no people. Then we discovered that they had dredged up a huge wartime bomb from the river and that everywhere had been

evacuated while it was made safe. Unfortunately, the police had forgotten to tell us!'

Reg's principal problems with lighting came with the famous orchestral conductors of the day - people like Sir George Solti and Mantovani. They would invariably blame him for inadequate lighting on the rostrum desk, making it difficult for them to read their music.

'There was not a great deal I could do to improve their lighting. The truth of the matter was that they were too image-conscious to wear their spectacles during a public performance,' he recalls.

The very nature of his job meant that the general public was totally unaware of the behind-the-scenes dramas being dealt with during performances. For example, there was the time an expansion joint ruptured in the roof void above the stage 20 minutes into an important concert. With the prospect of the orchestra and audience being unexpectedly showered with water as they played, Reg climbed into the void armed with sacking and sawdust, made a temporary repair and mopped up the overflow. The show went on.

He was not so fortunate, however, on another occasion. He woke one morning after a late night working, to find water flooding into his flat. Still dressed in his pyjamas he decided to trace the cause and set off around the building. He hurried through one particular door... and found himself in the auditorium, to the extreme delight of hundreds of school children attending a morning concert.

But he admits, 'I had one of the best jobs anyone could ever have. This building was way ahead of its time when it was constructed. The old London County Council had some wonderfully innovative staff working for it in those days. It was a privilege working here and being able to work alongside such talented people as the technical staff from Strand Lighting.'



**Footnote:** Further reminiscences of the Royal Festival Hall are to be found in Fred Bentham's recently published autobiography, *Sixty Years of Light Work*, Chapter VII: King Street Again - Festival and Export 1948-64. See page 17 and 19 for further details.