

The Fred Bentham Column



Fred Bentham compares his first 1936 Strand Electric catalogue with the new Strand UK 1993 catalogue...

CATALOGUES NOW AND THEN

It was interesting to open the new 1993 Strand Lighting catalogue and throw my mind back fifty-seven years to my own 1936 Strand Electric catalogue. Indeed it was not necessary to rely on memory, as I have both before me as I write.

I am certain that what a distant 24-year old Fred Bentham would have had uppermost in his mind then, would have been the improbability that any 81-year old one time 'expert' could possibly express an opinion in this context worth listening to!

My 1936 catalogue had to show-off how uniquely comprehensive our range was and what a technical leap had taken place since the 'old days' - the 1920s. And this had to be backed-up by pages set in lavish format, plenty of space around. In a sense it was an echo of the age of the grand Picture Palaces into which it was launched. Its 120-pages were case-bound with hard covers. There were but two addresses for the firm - Floral Street London and Oldham Road Manchester. Those were the days of Travel by steam-train and steamboat.

My first thought on leafing through the pages of the Strand

1993 Catalogue was that today's problem had been how to get it all in, rather than mine which had been how to spin it out to make what there was on offer plus what had been done look impressive.

The second thought was that finding a satisfactory format for all the 1993 material owed much to the printing techniques of today. What of the content itself? It is a reference book which combines information, instruction and temptation. This is what a real sales catalogue should be; combining *I need that* with *I want that*. There is too much temptation only in modern advertising material. It is only when you have bought it that you are given any real advice on what you can use it for and how. The Strand catalogue avoids this trap. Everything is there in fifty-two neat but dramatic compactly bound A4 pages.

All in all, the best tribute this Fred of 1993 can pay the Strand catalogue is to declare that I think even that young intolerant Fred of 1936 would have approved!!

Sixty Years of Light Work is Fred Bentham's autobiography, available exclusively from Strand Lighting. See page 16 for details.

Peruvian actress and director Aurora Colina went to the ends of the earth in search for her lighting system...

A MINI-2 IN PERU



The author during rehearsals in 1967.

Peru, 1967. The play, *O Pagador de Promessas* ("The Promise Payer") was Brazilian. Our small theatre group decided that as the cost of renting the lighting equipment could buy us the spotlights from Strand Electric, we'd contact the local dealer, La Química Suiza. Our five Patt. 23 Baby Mirror spots became our "babies"; touring with us from performance to performance. Sat on the actor's laps, they would be cosseted during those car journeys sometimes lasting 26 hours between Huaraz, Caraz and Yungay.

The import of goods into Peru was prohibited by the dictatorship in 1972, but I had been in London earlier in the year and had bought a "Mini-2" dimmer pack and desk from Mr. Fitzwater of the Overseas Division of Strand. I asked him to send it as an "unsolicited gift", or a "second hand device", but the differences in cultures was apparent. Strand was British and couldn't lie; we're Latin, and a white lie is often needed to get what you want.

Mr. Fitzwater and I exchanged ever more desperate letters and

phone calls in search of a solution, while my Mini-2 went to Lima but couldn't be imported, went on to New York where it was stored before eventually being returned to England.

I then met an English diplomat who had been initiated into the Latin ways by his Peruvian girl-friend, who coincidentally was his private secretary. He agreed to 'deliver' the lighting control to Peru through the diplomatic bag, a route usually reserved for the supply of Scotch whisky. At last, after nearly three years' waiting, we had our treasure...

Imagine my feelings when we opened the box to find that the packers had forgotten to send the plugs - those typically English 15A round pin plugs.

By then it was 1975, and I was going to Prague for an ASSITEJ congress. While in Berlin I wrote to Strand's German branch to ask for help. They were so surprised to have such a strange request, and so curious to meet that strange actress who wanted those strange plugs to use on the other side of the world that they sent a man immediately.

On the long journey home, via Frankfurt, Lisbon and Havana, one of my cases was lost, and I feared the worst, but the most important souvenirs of my trip arrived in Lima safely, as the photograph proves!

A reply from Peter Fitzwater - Belated apologies, Aurora, for being too British(?). Back in those days Copp (E.V. Coppendale), who had never been schooled by Woodie (J.T. Wood), ran a tight ship. However, my subsequent travels around the Middle East taught me the art, and benefits, of the 'white lie'.



"On a Tree without Leaves" by Celeste Viale 1991-2 (note the prop 'intercom' - it's the Mini-2 desk!)