

# THE EDITOR'S

SIX-THIRTY A.M. and the melodious ring of my Little Ben alarm. Why so cheerful at such an hour? Then I remembered, I was off to Lancashire. Visits to the County Palatine are always looked forward to. Good and down to earth practical men and magnificent women with large chins plus a very independent manner.

I was off to visit the Strand seating factory at Lowton, midway between Liverpool and Manchester, to find out something about theatre and cinema seating.



A more pleasant route to Rank Strand Seating (you can keep the M1!)

PHOTOGRAPH BY KLEMANYSKI AND SUPPLIED COURTESY OF ROLLS ROYCE MOTORS

## A NEW LEASE OF LIFE

FIRST things first. In the Strand factory the piece of furniture that you and I, dear reader, call a 'seat' is called by them a 'chair'. Or to be more accurate, because we are in Lancashire, a 'churr'.

The men in charge are Len Holme and Geoff Molyneux. "Churr" men from way back. I always feel that if one was to surgically open their chests, springs and wool would shoot out! I mentioned this to Geoff, who said, quite unperturbed "No, polyether foam nowadays, not steel springs."

The factory itself, built about 50 years ago, is a large and rambling building, originally the Sovereign Toffee Works, as testified to by a rather sad plaque to those departed sweetmeats in the entrance lobby.

My interest this visit was in the art of restoration. A reasonably significant part of the seating scene at Lowton. Let me explain. Not always do customers wish to re-seat a theatre or cinema with all new seating. They may wish to retain the original appearance, they may be sentimentally attached to the old chairs, or they may even just want to save a little money.

If one stands for any time in the factory yard, the chances are that a lorry groaning under the weight of several hundred old theatre chairs will lurch towards the unloading bay. What a scene ensues. A group of Lowton demolition men will seize the cargo and quickly, with a few knowledgeable taps and blows reduce the chairs to frames, standards, seat backs and arm pads. See how knowledgeable I have already become, even the correct naming of parts.

Pathetic scenes sometimes transpire — one famous theatre's whole auditorium seating found its way to Lowton. So successful had their booking policy been that rear stall seats had been so undisturbed by patrons that they contained several mouse nests, whose denizens objected strongly to being disturbed. Some of the demolition men even complained of the odd bite. No, dear reader, I am not prepared to say which theatre. That knowledge must go with me to the grave.

The factory's large storage areas are extremely useful, because they are kept full of old seat frames and standards. A recent example of their usefulness has been in the refurbishing of the existing seating at the Birmingham Hippodrome. A new layout decided on by the architects designed to improve both sight lines and access for the audience meant that extra row end standards were needed. These would have to match the standard currently used, a 50 year old design known as "G.B. Sunray". I must not get carried away into another burst of thirties enthusiasm, but this is a well-known

pattern used in Gaumont British Cinemas before they came under the Rank banner in about 1940.

Goodness knows how they ever got into Birmingham's leading variety theatre which incidentally, is home still of the world's first MMS memory board — but they did. And Lowton were able to go to their large stocks of old parts and come up with the extra matching standards. It was not the visual matching of the design that mattered — that was destined to be covered by panels upholstered in the same material as the new seating covers anyway — but the matching of the pin height, the floor rake, etc.

This Birmingham job is worth looking at in a little more detail. It is a truism to say that any trade has its secrets and its expertise, and this is just as true of tip-up chairs as of electronics or theatre management. Let me explain. First, the economics. It is a fair guess to say that fully refurbished seating will be only half the price of a completely new job. And "fully re-furbished" in Strand terms means just that. The chairs are collected from the theatre, totally stripped down and all cloth, webbing, flock, coil springs and anything else that can deteriorate are cast ruthlessly aside.

The standards and all other ironwork are cleaned off and resprayed, the seats and backs are remade as necessary using band sawn hardwood frames and fire retardant polyether foam in place of the old coil springs, and then the whole is recovered either in a traditional wool moquette, a wool synthetic mixture or perhaps one of the very attractive new tweeds that have become so popular. Nylon based fabrics are not a good idea. One cigarette burn is fatal. You don't allow smoking in your theatre? Ah, but what about rehearsals, and conferences? and the cleaners having a sit down and a weed?

As explained, standards can be modernised by new panels to cover the old iron work details. Of course, if the standards are old enough to have bunches of grapes and art nouveau cornucopia, or sometimes even nymphs and shepherds, then we would suggest re-gilding, as the seats made about 1890-1910 were real works of art, being elegant and delicate and just ideal for a Victorian or Edwardian auditorium.

The original chair construction at Birmingham was rather strange. When the seating was installed the backs were fixed with bolts right through the wooden inner frames to the metal structures, and right through the covering to the seat back as well, so two bolt heads showed on each chair. The re-furbishment was used as an opportunity to change this construction to utilise set screws so — no visible fixing.

The absence of visible screws and fastenings has always been accepted as one of the criteria of good design.

