

The Backstage Heritage Collection and Theatrecrafts: How did we get here?

Jon Primrose



This is the story of a website which is attempting the impossible: an educational resource that is also cataloguing and preserving the ever-growing history of entertainment technology.

It all began simply enough, in 1991 – an A3 piece of paper listing Strand Pattern numbers, as an aide memoire, and as a teaching resource. I'm Technical Manager at the University of Exeter Department of Communications, Drama and Film, where we introduce technical skills to students on the BA Drama programme. Was the Pattern Number list complete? In the pre-internet days, I wasn't sure if I'd included everything. After checking through old catalogues it became very clear I hadn't.

A few years later, I started experimenting with web design and databases and decided to upload a Glossary of Technical Theatre Terms to a new website I named theatrecrafts.com¹. The Strand Archive soon followed and became a large online database of all equipment produced by Strand. As my web design skills evolved, so did the website – many iterations (and errors and omissions) eventually led to a useful resource for folk wanting to look into the history and evolution of Strand Lighting (and Strand Electric and Rank Strand) equipment.

Fast forward to August 2014, when a selection of key industry folk got together in response to a rallying cry to rescue a collection of miscellaneous lighting control desks which were taking up expensive storage space that could no longer be afforded. We had to retrieve the desks and find somewhere to put them, or they'd be removed and skipped. Among the group were Rob Halliday, Richard Pilbrow, Jane Thornton, Jim Laws and myself.

Could a museum of theatre technology ever work? We've been here before of course – the Theatre Museum in Covent Garden was open between 1987 and 2007 and was a wonderful celebration of all aspects of theatre. But that ran out of funding, and the collection is now taken care of by the wonderful Victoria & Albert Museum.

It became clear that we couldn't envisage a physical museum to house all of the equipment that we had, so we decided on an online museum. A distributed model, where physical equipment could be displayed anywhere, as long as it was catalogued on the website, and could be explored either in-person, or remotely.

We owe a huge debt of thanks to Chris Nicholls, formerly of White Light (the major lighting supplier to the West End), as he was able to offer space on the mezz level of the warehouse to a display of kit.

As I write this, in February 2026, I'm en route to White Light in Wimbledon to rephotograph the collection that is still on display there. It's grown over the years, and now looks like a history of lighting control as well as including lanterns and some dimming equipment, which has come from Jim Laws and his partnership with the newly formed Historic Stage Lighting Collective.

White Light, now a d&b solutions company, have continued to be hugely supportive of the collection and we look forward to many more years of collaboration. They use it for training their staff, and to celebrate their own 50-year history providing equipment and expertise to the industry. We're working on increasing access to the museum and even offering audio guides to enable folk to explore it at their leisure. Contact us via the website for the latest information on accessing the White Light Collection.

Some other consoles went to AED's headquarters in Belgium and can be visited online or in-person when nearby.

Our annual appearances as Classic Gear Live at the PLASA Lighting & Sound Show at Olympia in September for the last 3 years, masterminded by Rob Halliday, has demonstrated that there is a lot of interest in old lighting consoles, and old scenic automation controls, sound desks, moving lights, lighting plans, and psychedelic projection equipment. Come and see us in September!

Rob's column in Lighting & Sound International magazine 'Classic Gear' has been a constant source of fascination as previously unknown technologies and histories are uncovered, and the magazine is now a key resource online as we add details of what product launched when, which shows first used key technologies, and who worked on what.

There are now a number of groups dedicated to the same goals as the Backstage Heritage Collection – preserving and collecting equipment and reaching a worldwide audience. There are regular posts in Facebook groups such as Archiving Technical Theater History, British Entertainment Technology Archaeology, Historic Stage Lighting Collective (HSLC), and Technical Theatre Preservation Group (TTPG), and we are aiming to continue to use Backstage Heritage Collection website as an

¹ I named the site Theatrecrafts with no knowledge of the US journal Theatre Crafts – it was named after a module at the University of Exeter which was called Stagecraft, and I felt it should open out to other forms of entertainment using theatrical techniques.

umbrella, to act as a repository for information and resources gathered from a number of sources worldwide. Just keeping on top of the latest Facebook posts is a full-time job, but there are some amazing stories on the groups! Why are we preserving this old technology? It's hugely important to know where we came from. Why do we rely on radio mics and moving lights when *Oliver!* in 1960 had neither? Audiences expect more from theatre now, of course, but is there a simpler (cheaper!) model of West End theatre? What did early scenic automation look like, before computers? We need to keep moving forward, but it's always useful to look back occasionally.

Theatre is ephemeral – maybe it should just exist in the moment, and once the show closes, we forget it. We don't (yet) have a way of preserving nuances of lighting designs other than as production photos, lighting plans and (sometimes) cue lists. The subtle way the designer achieved a transition between LX cues 110 and 110.5 drew applause every night, but it's impossible to study this, or view it again, once the show has closed. Even if the show is recorded on video, the whole stage can rarely be seen. And what about all of the people who achieved a Tetris-perfection of storage in the wings that meant the whole Act II set could be stored at stage level, and the actors could still make their way around it to do a quick change, collect props and enter upstage? Or even the team who realised that with some care the flightcases could be stacked in (only) one possible configuration that meant one less truck was needed for the tour, saving the production a fortune? Or those who worked on innovative rigging solutions, who invented new ways to connect bits of technology together to solve unique problems for a particular show, who put months of work into something that audiences never even see, except for the tiny percentage of the mechanism that appears at stage level?

Website

TheatreCrafts.com is driven by a database which organises and displays the information on the site. There is still a lot to be done before the semicolon in the second paragraph.

TheatreCrafts.com is driven by a database which organises and displays the information on the site. Journals to be uploaded and indexed/cross-referenced, exhibits to be investigated, photos to be uploaded and interviews to be done. Work is continuing on a weekly basis to fill gaps and to add more documents to tell the story. Some stories

are nearly completely covered (we have information on all of the Strand Electric Light Consoles built between 1935 and 1955, and photos of most), while other subjects remain just pencil sketches.

Going forward, there are also new ways the data will be displayed, including themed timelines (the history of lighting control, scenic automation, vocal amplification in musicals etc.) and interactive galleries.

And we are constantly tweaking the website design, including recently removing a lot of adverts which had taken over the site and redesigning the back-end functions that display the material.

Oral History

One of the key elements of the history of a profession where only the folk downstage centre are publicly celebrated, is the recording of stories and memories. I'm aiming to start recording interviews each month (putting this in writing will make it happen, apparently), and releasing them as podcast episodes on the website (and Spotify, Apple Music etc). The stories will be given context with links to shows, venues and equipment referred to. If you know someone (or you ARE someone) with interesting stories about live events or theatre production, or memories of particularly transformative moments or innovations in technologies, procedures, or approaches, we'd love to hear from you! We can do interviews in-person, or online (on Zoom) and while they're audio-only at the moment, we could expand into video.

I'll also be at the ABTT Theatre Show in June and will be happy to talk about the website and project, and to interview anyone that would like to talk! I'll be wearing a purple hi-vis vest to ensure I stand out.

Support or Contact Us:

If you're looking for some information about any aspect of technical theatre, or have stories you'd like to share, or have documents that we don't yet have on the archive, please reach out via the TheatreCrafts.com website 'Contact Us' page.

We have a GoFundMe link on the page if you'd like to support us financially – any funds go directly to travel for interviews and to collect documents, and to visit and document other collections.

We're looking forward to the next 10 years!

Sightline

The background image is a full-page photograph of a theatrical performance. A large, red, segmented dragon puppet is suspended in the air, its head and wings visible. A massive, powerful spray of water is being directed upwards from the ground, creating a large, white, cloud-like structure. In the foreground, several performers in bright red uniforms and hats are seen from behind, holding long poles. A modern building with a curved, glass and metal facade is visible in the background. The sky is blue with some clouds.

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H2G2 the Immersive Show
Backstage at the Old Vic
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