

Lighting the "Avo" Way

John Offord visits Avolites "Productions" at Park Royal

The word 'production' has two quite different meanings for Ian Walley, managing director of Avolites. With Murray Thomas, he had founded a company in 1976 to set up lighting rigs—Avolites Production Company Limited. Just ten years later the term has a different connotation. The memory lighting consoles produced from their factory at Park Royal in West London are industry standards, most particularly on the touring front where the expertise can be traced all the way back to the beginnings in a cramped railway arch at Hammersmith.

Ian Walley had previously worked on lighting design and production with major tours such as The Osmonds, and Murray Thomas was an electrician. Together they'd learned what the industry had needed. "We came about as an entity to set up more sensible lighting rigs," explained Ian Walley. In fact they pioneered the multi-pin lighting rig.

The first equipment they made was for their own use. "We had the ability to make equipment that worked and held up on the road. Up to that point equipment hadn't been designed for touring. It had to be

robust in fashion and keep working under all circumstances," said Walley.

Within a couple of years they were being asked by touring companies to build equipment for them, and that very rapidly took over as the major part of the business. "The only aim at the start was to build desks of the best possible quality," said Kevin Eyres, the company's sales manager. "Because the founders were doing it for themselves there was no point in cutting corners. And we've carried on like that."

The lighting board that hit the industry in the late seventies was simply known in the trade as the "Avo" or the eighty-one hundred. It became the centre-piece for the company's prosperity, and there are well over 100 in regular use around the industry today. The 8100 is still available, and like every board made by Avolites is assembled only after consultation with the client in order that all of their requirements are fulfilled. There are many function and size combinations available, the most usual being an 84 channel version.

The new flagship is the QM 500 series of

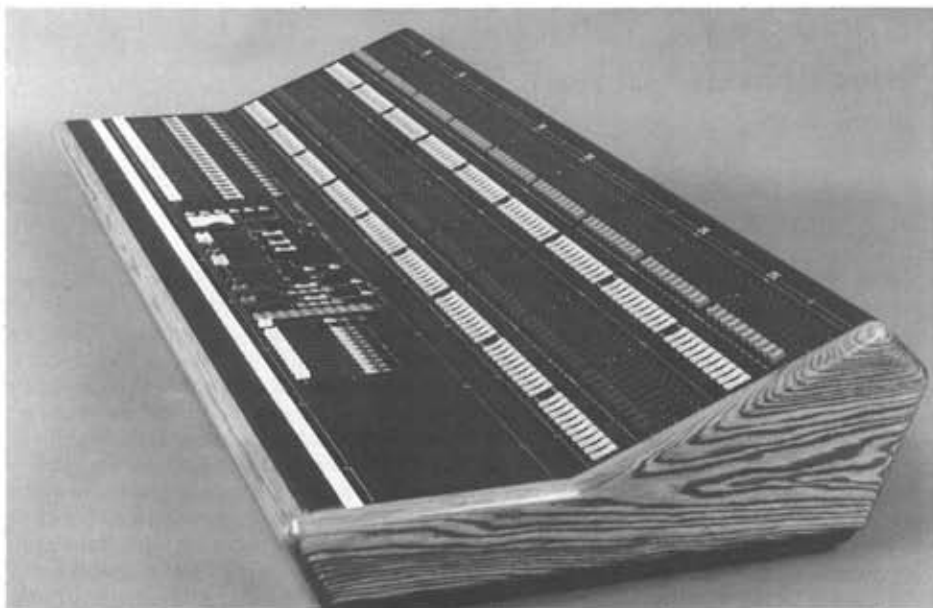
memory consoles, first used for a Michael Jackson US tour in 1984, and the design philosophy is that the hardware should be sufficiently flexible to adapt to the inevitable developments in software and operating procedures. Among features of the range are 400 real level memories available on 20 faders, an integral keyboard for programming alpha-numeric displays, and 20 memory chase programmes (over 1500 steps) accessible on 2 chase controls simultaneously. There is simple memory and chase programming and editing with alpha-numeric prompting available in a number of languages.

The latest in the series is a 180 channel version. It is switchable from a two preset 90 channel to a single preset 180 channel console, and offers in relatively compact form comprehensive instant control for the largest applications. The first UK use for this model was with the recent May tour of 'Queen'.

Introduced in late 1984 the Rolacue consoles offer the power of micro-processors with the parameters of size and economy given special design attention. The Rolacue 30 has 105 real level memories and a total of



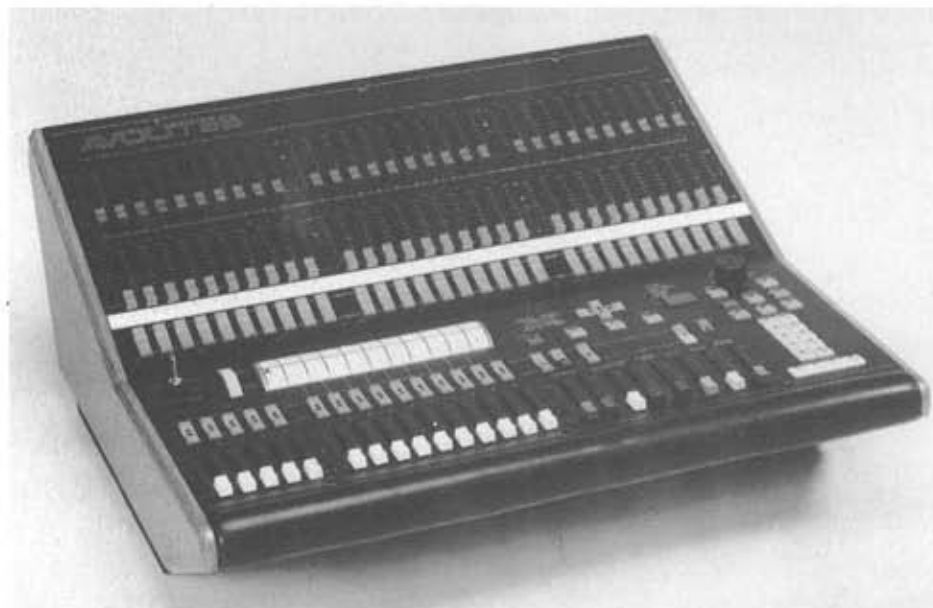
Avolites' 1986 award-winning ABTT Trade Show stand at the Riverside Studios.



The new QM 500 series 180 channel control console.



The popular Avolites' Ultra Chase II.



The 30 channel Rolacue—retaining the traditional Avolites' standard in a smaller application.

350 real level steps programmable over 10 chases. The '60' version has expanded memory capacity. All are linkable, and have the facility to save and load information via an outboard disk drive unit.

The more basic C Series controls were first introduced in 1985 and offer an "economic introduction to Avolites control equipment". They are available in 30 or 60 channel form with two presets.

Final "standard" on the control scene is the popular Ultra-Chase, which offers an efficient and compact method of controlling complex multi-channel effects. There are 20 patterns, each of up to 100 steps, with cross-fade time being programmable. Six of these units ran the lighting at Peter Stringfellow's Hippodrome in London before the main Avolites desk was installed.

Apart from specialist pieces of equipment, the main production floor at Avolites' factory



Ian Walley, managing director of Avolites Production Company Limited.

also looks after the manufacture of dimming systems, and these are divided into three categories. The modular systems are built around rack mounted multi-channel dimming modules, and all systems can incorporate mains patching, control patching, and mains distribution. The 40 amp dimming system is designed for use in the film industry—and built in the first place for Pinewood Studios. It is one of the most compact of studio dimming systems where loads of up to 10kW per channel are usual. The system contains 3 modules each of 6 channels protected by individual M.C.B.'s.

The 30 x 10 amp system was first announced at the recent Frankfurt Music Fair, and was designed specifically to complement the 'C' and Rolacue control consoles. It incorporates three 10 channel versions of the 10 amp dimming modules, and each module has its own integral patch outlets. The com-

patch facility allows a total of 72 lamp channels to be patched into the 30 dimming channels.

The latest piece of gadgetry to come out of Avolites will also see the light during the current tour of 'Queen'. It is a processor-driven motorised controller: "a box of tricks with a keyboard and a terminal," said Ian Walley. And he wouldn't say more—a glint in his eye really showing he was waiting to see how it would catch the industry's imagination first.

And keeping in touch with the industry's every move is of prime importance to a company like Avolites. With most of the equipment sold direct to hire companies, the needs of the industry are soon felt, and development carries on apace.

The company employs five people in research and development alone, and Ian Walley calls them "a potent team of people". They work under the guidance of Paul Ollett (director of research and development and



James Henderson, desk supervisor, with a Rolacue in production.



Isabel Polar, Hire Manager.



Mark Thompson, service engineer, pictured alongside a QM chassis and matrix panel.



Enzo Fiondella—dimmer supervisor.



Derek Halliday backs up Kevin Eyres in the sales office.



Dave Saunders, Avolites' drawing office manager.



Ian Walley with Paul Ollett, director of research and development.



Kevin Eyres, Avolites' sales and marketing manager.

special projects), and also have the ever-present back up of Murray Thomas (director-technical) and Ian Walley himself. To keep their own hands "in touch" both Walley and Thomas continue their annual association with the group Barclay James Harvest.

It is now almost a hobby, but as Ian Walley explained: "We've always built the most fantastic lights for them. They've grown with Avolites, and we've grown with them". It is a creative link that is important now that the principal directors are more desk-bound. "It may be less creative nowadays," said Walley, "but is is more a question of concepts. In fact it is in some ways more interesting, because the scope is so much wider."

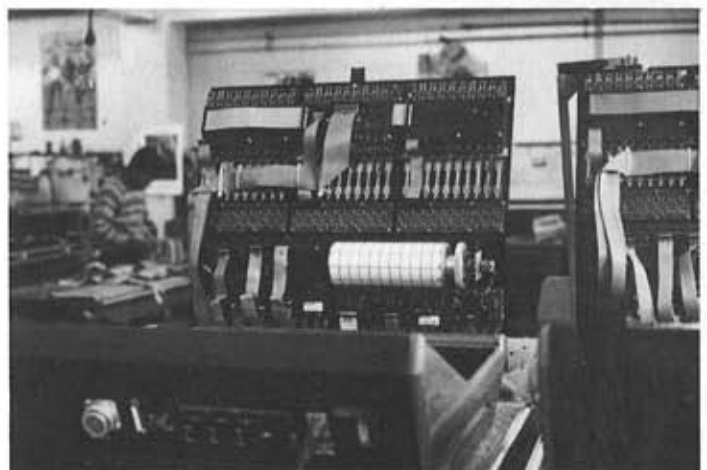
"A lot of research and development evolves naturally from the introduction of new equipment itself," said Kevin Eyres. "We bring our agents in from overseas, with their own technical people, and they stay with us for up to three weeks at a time."

The need for service personnel is minimal. The company employs only one full-time person in this area because, very simply, not much service is required. "If a problem comes up anywhere in the world we can always find somebody to cope with it," explained Kevin Eyres. And often it's more a problem of sorting out problems caused by misuse of equipment. "Like the time we had to go to France to put right equipment that had had champagne spilt all over it," he said.

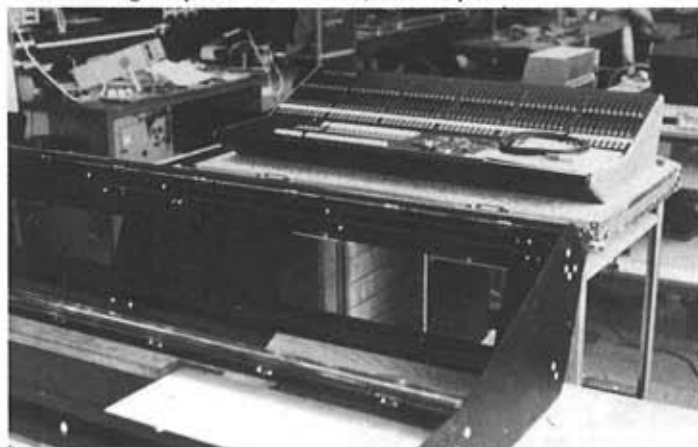
Avolites maintain a permanent and strong presence in the United States through its base at Chatsworth just outside Los Angeles in the



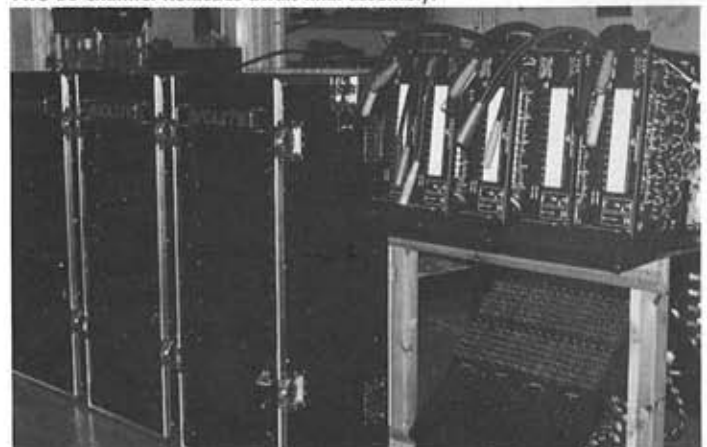
Hidden among the pieces—Mux Murrell, stores supervisor.



Two 30 channel Rolacues await final assembly.



Production line—in the foreground a QM chassis, and behind a Rolacue.



Modules, patch legs and main frames awaiting assembly.



Kevin Eyres ponders the mysteries of the Rolacue.



Production manager Mark Honebon.

San Fernando Valley. "We felt it essential to provide a service there," said Ian Walley, "and all our staff are 'true Brits' exported from the UK." The main team revolves around Clive Standley who is sales and marketing director, Dick Ollett (brother of Paul in UK R and D) who looks after the technical side, and Rob Steele who copes with any servicing requirements.

All equipment is manufactured in the UK, and the Park Royal premises has five basic departments employing the skills of over 40 people. The administration floor comes complete with a roof garden and a view over the impressive roof tops of suburban Wembley, right across to the Stadium itself. In addition to the main production floor, there is a stores and hire section, an engineering shop, and research and development hidden away in a corner you don't get to visit.

And this is an area where the talking also starts to dry up. I asked Ian Walley about the future. "A very sensitive subject," he said. "It can be dangerous if you don't live up to expectations. But we know where the lighting industry is going—and we've every intention of being there!"

As far as the Industry in general is concerned, his view is that it is learning how to make the most of new components as they become available. "It's all got to fit together, and we've got to get all the up-grades right," he said.

For the man who named the company after his own nick-name (he was affectionately known as 'Avo' in the trade—after the Avometer), things have travelled a long way. And as salesman Kevin Eyres interspersed: "We assume that everything big has our equipment in it."

One of the most satisfying things for Ian Walley is that people selling Avolites equipment after five years of use are still getting more money for it now than they paid for it at the time. "I've yet to meet a man who has lost money on buying some of our equipment," he told me.

"Avolites are here to stay, and they are going to take care of their clients with the best in integrated lighting control," he concluded.

For details of forthcoming features in

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(see Contents page 5)

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