

Designs on the Future

L+SI COMPANY PROFILE

Ruth Rossington visits the Hampshire base of Anytronics

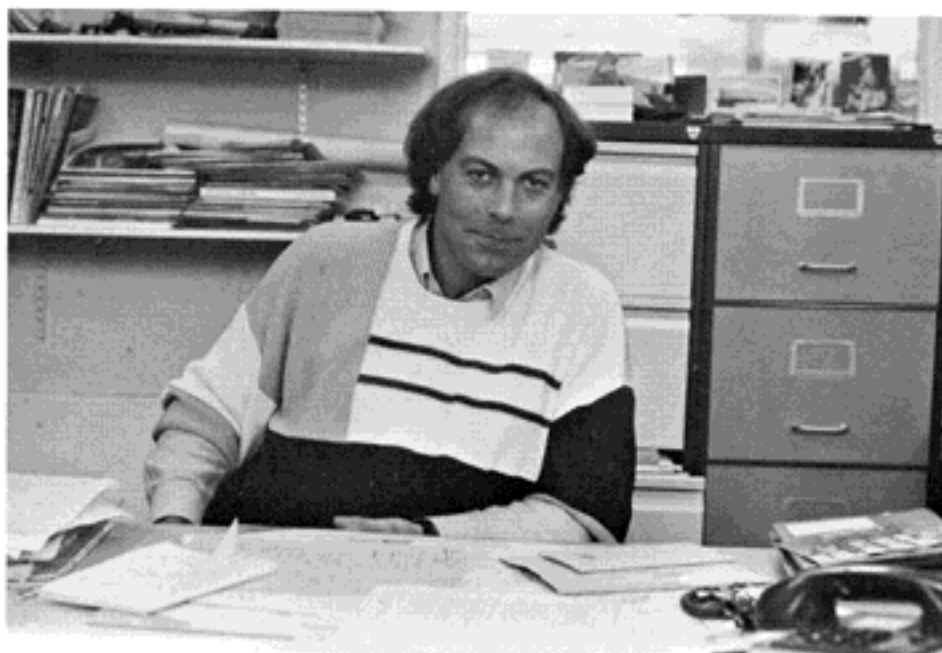
On first arriving in Hordean, the Hampshire base of Anytronics, one is struck by the altogether unassuming and unadulterated quality of the place. Appropriately enough, there is something about Anytronics that symbolises the nature of its surrounding environment. Industrious and unpretentious, the company occupies a small unit on the outskirts of the town. There are no billboards blazing a trail to the front door, but rather, a small sign politely indicating the way forward; which is why it comes as something of a surprise to meet Bob Hall, managing director of Anytronics.

He, in total contrast to his surroundings, occupies a desk strewn with papers and other oddities and seemingly straining with the weight. But this is no front of organised chaos, this is but the first of many reminders that the company has quite simply outgrown its present premises. For Bob Hall, an enthusiastic and gregarious man, whose appetite for life is infectious, this is a welcome headache and one which is being resolved as I write.

Bob Hall is one of life's natural high-flyers, he even trained as an airline pilot before joining Icelectrics. Having spent 12 years at Ice, he decided the time was right to start a new company and so agreed to a management buy-out, and together with his father, Charles Hall, who is also a director, they bought the present freehold premises. They haven't looked back since.

I asked Bob Hall to explain the decision-making processes that motivated Anytronics' early development. "The first products we decided to look at were strobes, obviously, the reason being that they had been in production within the industry for 10-12 years and had been selling extremely well. We decided to improve on the strobes available at the time, so, together with the strobes, we introduced switch panels and power packs and launched ourselves on to the market.

"We started design on the two products in May 85, the idea being to combine a product and company launch at the PLASA Light and Sound Show when it first moved to the Novotel." Although the company had a coil winding division running which produced coils for people outside the industry, there were no other products than the three being worked on. Initially, the industry was reluctant to test new waters and so Anytronics relied on orders from Norway and West



Bob Hall, managing director, Anytronics Limited.

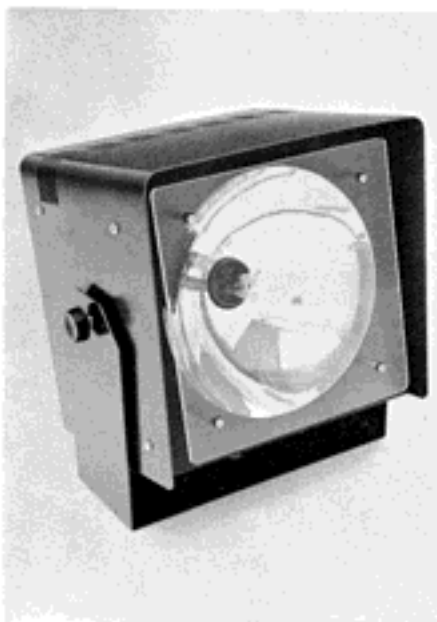
Germany. Had he known the barriers to be surmounted, Bob Hall may well have returned to his goggles and flying hat: "I never realised how difficult it would be to establish the company, a lot of people were interested, took literature, knew myself and my team very well, but decided that they wanted the product and the company to have a track record, before they would invest their money into buying stock."

Within six months however, the mood in the market had perceptibly altered and Anytronics was fast becoming a byword for reliability, quality and value for money. As Anytronics' reputation began to grow so did its product range: "We extended the power pack range, which had hitherto consisted of a 4 x 5 amp switch pack, the PP405, to include two further models in the switch range plus a dimming pack model which, although we didn't manufacture other control equipment as such, was intended to be part of a power pack

range to be used with any low-voltage control equipment. I'm glad we made that decision because it suits and it's served us very well indeed."

The decision-making process has been a critical element in the company's present success and with 28 products on the market in three years, demonstrates the kind of buoyancy that can be achieved by a small operation toiling away in a quiet backwater. Fighting against the constant distraction of the phone, I suggested to Bob Hall that he might like to highlight some of the more significant product introductions and extensions of the last three years: "After 12 months we decided to modify the strobes to work with our extension speed control system, that certainly increased sales no end.

"We also added to the range, by bringing out a linear tube strobe more for the theatre and the very large discotheque market. We were worried



First strobe: the Superstar was introduced in 1985.



The Anytronics Megastar Strobe in assembly at Hordean: production space has just been doubled.



Simon Fickling, Anytronics' technical manager (right) pictured with Bob Hall in the test and research area.

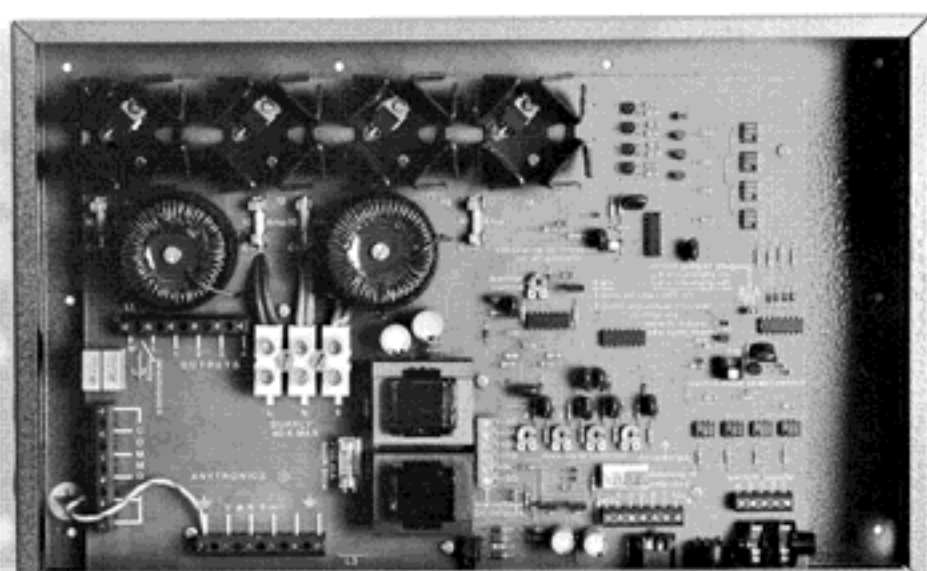
to a certain extent that the product might not sell, it being a much more upmarket, much more expensive product than its contemporaries, but sales have been incredible, far better than we ever imagined. Alongside this, we've expanded into, not only the theatre side, but the TV market also, so again a new market has been opened to us; one that we never envisaged as likely.

"On the power pack side, once we'd brought out the dimming pack, the theatre market started looking at it, especially the section with limited budgets. A number of them bought it and were amazed that a product at that price could be as reliable and versatile as it's turned out to be. We've done exceptionally well and just cannot believe that sales figures are as high as they are across the world, literally, from Singapore to Canada."

Anytronics' products are divided into four areas - strobes, power packs, modular lighting control systems and transformer winding. The company moved into modular lighting in 1987, with the intention of creating a system that would possess characteristics of durability, versatility and longevity. "We released the first modules really as add-on units to enhance existing low-voltage control equipment. We didn't have a controller as such, but we thought that if we produced 4-way fader panels they wouldn't be as transient as other products, but essential add-ons and not something that goes in and out of fashion. The panel sells very well and about 70% of dimming packs go out with the 4-way fader panels."

Broken down into percentages, the strobes account for approximately 25% of turnover, the power pack side for 50%, 15% for transformers and the rest 10%, though that should increase with the new control range due out this month.

Bob Hall is quite certain that Anytronics' current levels of performance are a direct result of his unwillingness to commit the company solely to the provision of goods for the disco and entertainment industries. Whilst at Icelectrics, he learnt how fickle the dictates of the market can be. In the late seventies disco hit problems, and in the States 'Billboard' was reporting the demise of disco, whilst in the UK, 'Saturday Night Fever' was the one surviving testimony to an apparently bygone era.



The PP410 dimming pack was introduced in mid-1986.

"The philosophy behind forming Anytronics was to establish a much broader-based electronics company that could feed into the wider area of leisure. With a name like Anytronics, we could branch into other areas that we might find ourselves wanting to explore without anything as major as a name change. We decided on a company beginning with the letter 'A', so that we could be towards the top of all the directory lists!"

The company are at present hoping to secure a contract with British Rail for the supply and maintenance of a xenon warning beacon system. Their first presentation to BR was back in 86 when Anytronics simply modified one of their existing products to meet specific criteria. The product was then approved and a small R&D budget followed. Three design modifications and 95 units later, Bob Hall and his team have produced a product which they believe will be difficult for the rest of the competition to beat.

Optimism such as this is all too often taken to be synonymous with naivete, but there couldn't be anything less naive than the manner in which Bob and Charles Hall have steered Anytronics towards a period of sustained growth. Two new lighting controllers are due out this month, and I asked him why the company believed the products to be so important: "There's a very large market for 4-channel controllers. We wanted to make an expandable lighting controller that could be afforded by the average user, so that when they want to add to the equipment they can without selling it or exchanging it, in the same manner one would add to lego! The other major factor governing these controllers was ease of operation. We will be adding new products all the time, so that the controller, instead of becoming obsolete in a few years time, can remain the base of a larger control system."

The product was a result of the company's wish to produce a lighting controller; and whilst still in its conceptual stage, it became the subject of discussion at a chance meeting with the Design Council, whose interest encouraged Anytronics to get away from C.M.O.S. Control and into EPROMs. The Council were offering money to those willing to explore new areas of design and visited the unit in Horndean.

Bob Hall takes up the story: "After the initial

presentation, they returned again with a senior industrialist, and sat the other side of my desk, looked at each other and said: 'well shall we give him the money or not?' The guy turned round and said 'Harry, I think it's a good idea' and the money was duly arranged."

It provided for all the development costs for the auto display pack and the light systems 1 and 2, which are available as from this month and which were first premiered at the 88 PLASA show. The launch of the product coincides with Anytronics' expansion of their present premises to incorporate the adjoining unit, which means that the company will have freehold ownership of just under 4,000 sq.ft.

Perhaps to some, Horndean is not the ideal location, from which to compete in an industry, whose main thrust is London oriented. But when one considers the many benefits, not least the close proximity to the A3M, which provides easy access to the Capital, one realises that Hampshire has more to offer than rural charm. The move will enable the company to compartmentalise the product and test areas, allowing the 10 on-site staff more scope in their work. Such is the scale of the operation that in addition, Anytronics also finds it necessary to employ 16 specialist sub-contract staff.

This is hardly surprising when one considers the company's impressive record in sales and exports: "We sell mainly through the trade and distribute to over 20 countries overseas. Our direct exports last year were just under 50%, and we reckon on another 25-30% going abroad through UK distributors such as Cerebrum Lighting."

There are many examples of the company's determination to succeed in an extremely competitive market. Part of that resolution is reflected in the structure, which has its foundations in 'esprit de corps'. Charles Hall and Simon Fickling are key members of Anytronics, having been involved with the company since its inception, and, it is interesting to note that all the original workforce remain.

Bob Hall welcomes the increasing professionalism within the industry and would like to see PLASA and the government working together to improve the reputation and potential of the lighting and sound industry. I asked him in which particular areas he would like to see progress: "I'd like to see more organisation with regard to European electrical approvals; it seems to be a very grey area. I understood that all electrical products would be E-marked and that eventually we would get the approval in this country and then purely register in other countries, but since then we've heard no more about this."

"I'm sure that there is a lot more that the British government should be able to offer exporters like ourselves, to enable British products to stay where they are at the moment and maintain the lead in their field; otherwise the light and sound industry will lose this advantage as so many other British industries have done."



Now available: Anytronics' Light System Two - a new generation of expandable lighting control systems.



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