Wilkes Iris Diaphragm: 110 Years in the Spotlight

It's not often L+SI people drive East from Eastbourne. And if we do venture out, it's usually to get out of the country via Dover. However, news in this industry comes from all corners of the globe, as you will note in this issue. It could just as well be from Omaha, Nebraska one day, and Bexhill-on-Sea in East Sussex the next.

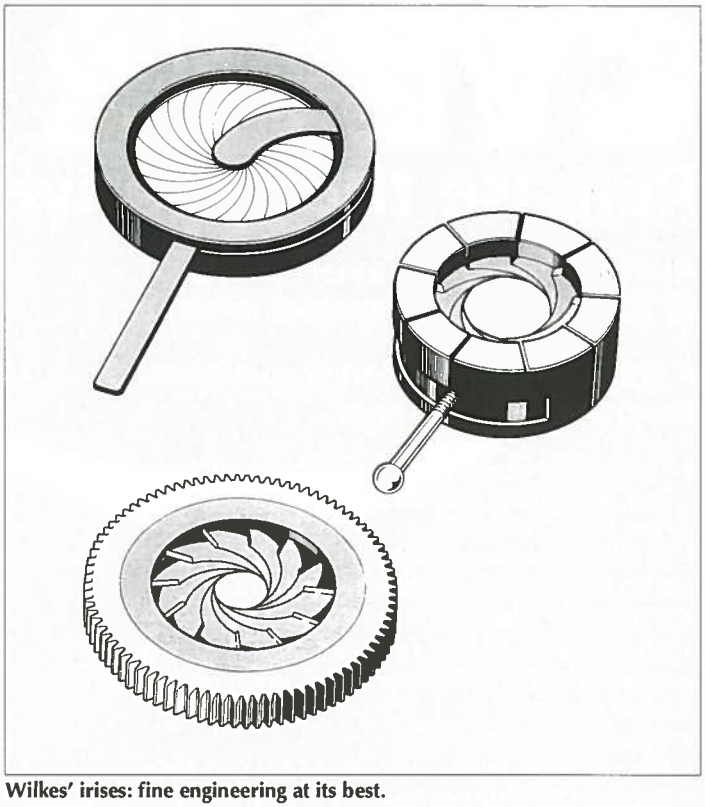
So, off I duly went, to sleepy Bexhill, a 12-mile journey from PLASA's offices, and I still managed to be five road-works minutes late for my appointment with Keith Woods, managing director of Wilkes Iris Diaphragm Co Ltd. If your memory serves you well (you may remember my assistant editor Ruth Rossington's L+SI report from two years ago which was a masterpiece of engineering romanticism), and by now you've twigged that the company manufactures iris diaphragms, then I'm not going to tell you about the fine engineering involved, the special metals used, the exacting tolerances and the regular talk of thous'. We shall assume that as the company has been around for over a century it knows quite well how to make the pieces of engineering that are the subject of its company name.

The business was founded by James Wilkes in 1884 to manufacture irises for the scientific industry for use with microscopes, and it wasn't until the early sixties that they decided to spread their wings into the entertainment lighting industry. Keith Woods, formerly a BBC television news cameraman (he'd covered the early troubles in Northern Ireland), is nothing if not straightforward in his manner, and I guess he can tune his eye as finely as the irises he makes. He is the grandson of the said James, and found his way into the business by way of a change of scene and and a touch of family duty.

Such has been the growth of the lighting industry business to Wilkes over the past 30 years that 75 per cent of their turnover now comes from it, with many of the major luminaire manufacturers taking their irises direct from the company. Obviously the 'state on the industry' as far as lighting projectors is concerned could be analysed at any point in time from a study of Wilkes' accounts and order books, and although we couldn't do that, there are some interesting pointers that came out of our general conversation.

Trade for the company increased slowly but steadily through the course of the recession, with exports increasing year on year and making up for the dip in demand from the UK home market. In recent months, however, things have 'picked up' dramatically, with extra staff taken on, and business is now running at a level 25 per cent higher.

Much of the growth has come from the moving mirror projector area, and Wilkes' units now find their way to Studio Due, Lampo, Ness and King Disco, for instance, in addition to Coemar and Martin Professional, with quantities of around 500 per month being shipped out to Denmark for the latter, a pointer to the sheer number of this type of instrument is being thrust out into the world



Wilkes' irises: fine engineering at its best.

lighting equipment market at this present time.

On the more traditional stage scene, Wilkes' irises are going to ETC in the States for their new and headline-making 'Source 4' luminaire.

With this growth maintained, and with costs of engineering production a lot lower in many parts of the world and most particularly in the former eastern block and the Far East, Keith Woods has a wary eye open for sources of potential competition, and is making sure that he can supply "off-the shelf'

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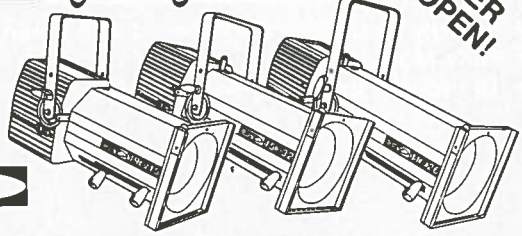
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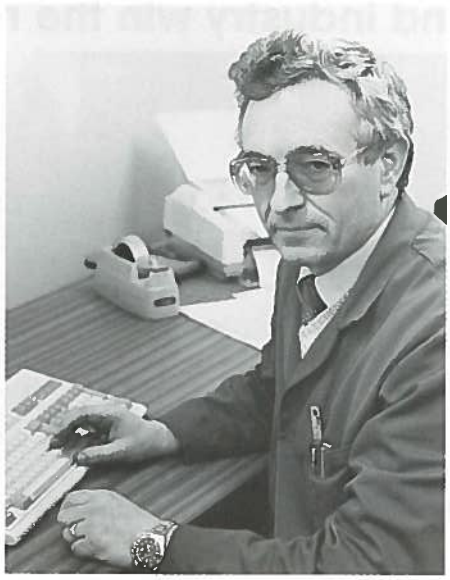
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The bit I liked most was when Keith Woods explained that originally manufacturers got to hear about the company by word of mouth. Fine, but what speeded things up considerably was the appearance of a small regular advertisement in L+SI. "Now they all know where we are," he said.



Keith Woods, managing director of Wilkes Iris Diaphragm Co Ltd.

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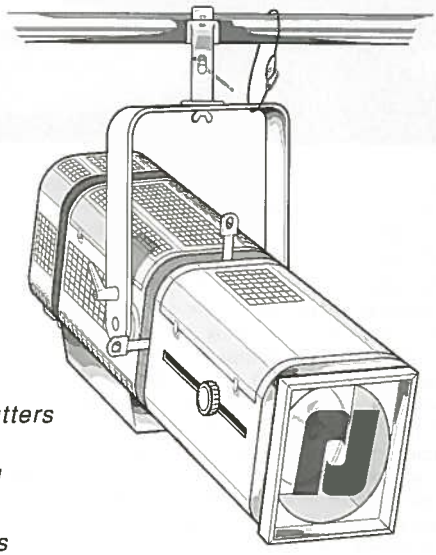
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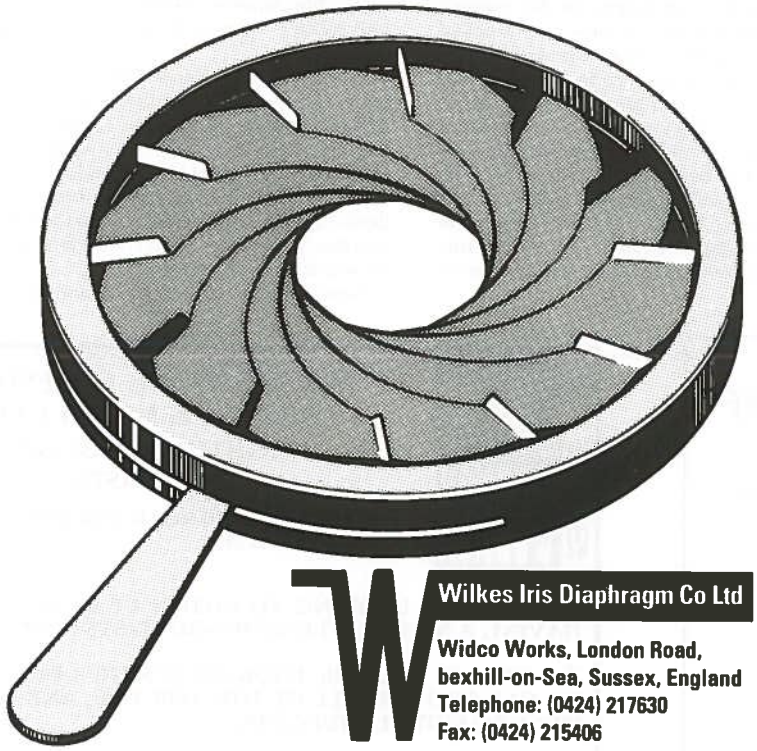
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PHIL COLLINS IN REHEARSAL AT BRAY STUDIOS

PHOTO: JONATHAN GOTTELIER

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