

LET'S GET SIRIUS

Ten years after the 24, Zero 88 think they have another world beater.

Ian Herbert visited Cwmbran to find out more

You can take the Golden Valley road, or come through the Black Mountains as I did, if you're on your way to Zero 88's Cwmbran works from mid-Wales, but most will miss that colourful scenery as you speed down the M4.

Arriving there, your first impression is of space - the factory sits comfortably on a slope, with a fine vista over its industrial park to the hills of the Welsh Border, and once inside you find a sales office that could fit a bowling alley into its spare space, a well-equipped showroom the size of a (less well-equipped) Fringe theatre, and an airy, high-roofed assembly floor with plenty of elbow room of its own. Upstairs, the management suite and programming area flow easily into one another, and the effect is one of interweaved, co-ordinated effort. My visit was a chance to get some idea of what a middle-scale supplier is doing in a wicked world of stiff international competition, a rising pound and an ever-growing number of smaller niche companies snapping at their heels.

The history of Zero 88 will be familiar enough to most of L+SI's readership. Of the four Brunel University engineers who got together in 1972 in an attic in Hanwell to make lighting controls, starting with some rather nifty effects cartridges for the disco market, three (MD Peter Brooks and design supremos Chris Fenwick and Richard Thornton Brown) are still very much involved in the operation, having moved with the expanding business first in 1973 to St Albans and then in 1989 to Cwmbran. (The last survivors of St Albans, the sales department, finally came West at the beginning of this year.) The fourth, Alan Munton, left in 1987 to start his own restaurant.

The company name was picked more or less at random - Zero to indicate that the business had been started from nothing, 88 because 1988 seemed far enough away at the time. By a useful coincidence 1988 was the year in which they launched their most successful product to date, Sirius 24, the first affordable lighting board with memory, which was to do for the company's place in theatre what the almost equally successful Eclipse board had done five years earlier for it in the disco world. Richard Thornton Brown tells the story of the gentleman at 1988's ABTT trade show who was leaving their stand, impressed by the new board but obviously convinced that it was beyond the means of his amateur



theatre group. "Wait a minute, I haven't told you the price," said Richard. When he heard it, the gentleman stopped in his tracks and came back with added interest. "Do you realise," he said, "that's only three jumble sales?"

So Sirius consolidated the move from the company's disco beginnings towards the theatre business. Now they supply to the main three sections of the entertainment technology market, disco, music and theatre (not to mention their highly successful line of products for film and TV) and the structure of their overseas sales will vary according to the dominance of their local agents in one or other field. At home, they can reach them all through a strong dealer network.

As an innovative company in which two of the founders are still very much concerned with the development of new products, Zero 88 has to keep a finger on the pulse in these three spheres. One successful way of achieving this is by bringing in lighting people to test Zero products in their showroom. Right now, ALD members will be getting their hands on the latest development, the new Sirius boards, arriving exactly 10 years after the original.

The Sirius 250 and 500 are, as they sound, rather larger than the 24, but those who have worked with the old warhorse will find they look familiar - and what's more they'll be half

way to understanding how these much more powerful beasts work. What the new boards do is to take the well-trying Sirius approach to control into the realm of moving lighting. These 'hybrids' can accommodate either conventional or moving lights, and as someone who hasn't really been in front of a lighting board since Strand phased out the Grand Master, I can tell you that the concepts behind the 250 and 500 are easy enough for a complete novice to grasp. The board looks a bit like a grey sailboard, but it would be rather uncomfortable to tread on it: it has the familiar banks of faders, plus strings of

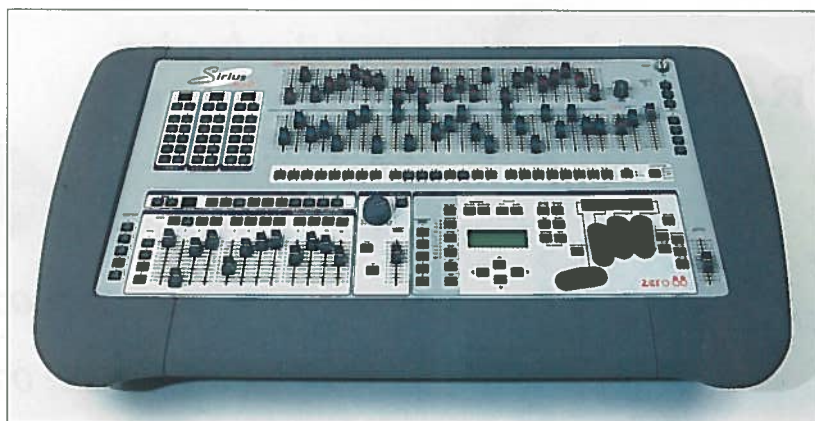
well-organised function keys and some clusters of simple yet versatile buttons to work the various special memory activities. It even has a fader in the bottom right hand corner called the grand master. Memory Lane . . .

Once you get a moving light into the Sirius, a library of types will identify what its different channels should be doing and fit them in to the 256 or 512 available. Then you can programme for colour, focus, beam shape, gobo, size - you name it. The gimmick which makes these boards different from any other produced so far is the patented 'four wheel drive', a set of four encoder wheels with a tire-tread surface which fit your thumb and first three fingers to access the activities which are best controlled by touch. (You vary those menus by a set of buttons that are in reach of your little finger.) Thus thumb and forefinger can control the x and y axis in either moving a beam around or defining its area. Built-in acceleration means that if you move the wheels quickly, the beam will move equally fast; for fine adjustment, you just turn slowly.

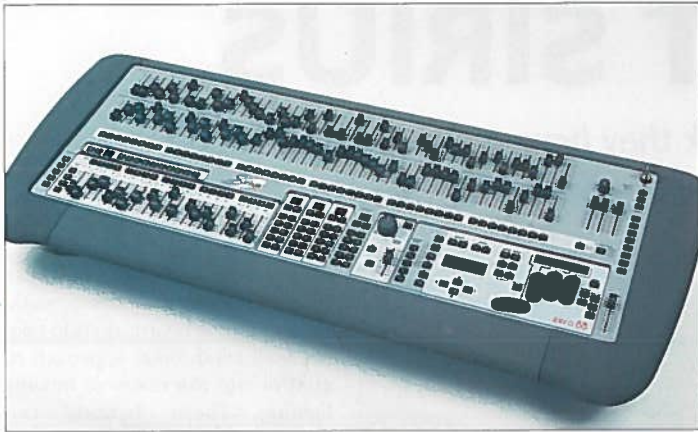
There's some very clever software to go with the boards, too, strongly graphic and (I'd have thought) a blessing to visually-oriented lighting people. Not only is there a monitor display of all that you're doing with the board's built-in capabilities, there's a new plotting system,

Cueline, which uses mouse and monitor to plot a show. Once the board knows all the lanterns you've got, and all their properties, you go into Cueline to determine fade times and intensities, movements - and it all shows up in time-linked pictures on the screen.

An imminent development is a portable Cueline, called Sirius Offstage, which LDs can use on their own PCs for preliminary plotting or fine tuning of shows. These new machines mark something of



The Zero 88 Sirius 250.



The Zero Sirius 500.



The Assembly floor at Zero 88's Cwmbran headquarters.

the return to integration we have been seeing lately in the different segments of the lighting world - the moving lights and visual effects beloved of the music and disco lighting fraternities have made their way into the theatre, and as the trade in second-hand moving lights heats up we are likely to see what was so recently only a top-end activity percolating down pretty fast.

Perhaps we shall see more chase and sound-to-light effects creeping into legit theatre too. With the 250 coming in at the cost of a couple of high-end desktop PCs, the 500 maybe a couple of decent laptops, the price of sophisticated control for today's clever new lighting machinery has just got within a lot of people's reach - just as happened with the first Sirius 10 years ago.

So what kind of a company is Zero 88? It's one that has been able to keep some stability in a field which is notoriously subject to change. From a tiny technology-led outfit powered by the enthusiasm of its founders it has grown into a middle-scale organisation, comfortable in its modern premises, with an almost completely new local workforce - over 50 of them now. The board have been very pleased with the quality of staff available in South Wales, from assemblers to programming people. The original driving force continues, with Peter Brooks still a very active MD, but while Chris Fenwick and Richard Thornton Brown continue to exercise their share of control through the board, their day-to-day energies can be devoted to what they like best, respectively electronic and mechanical design.

This design element is something that especially impressed me about Zero 88: a team of software gurus is constantly at work not

simply producing strings of code, but devising smart graphics and busy but clear screens that make their messages quickly, visually intelligible. And it's there in the hardware too, with the company designing their own switches both to keep costs down and to impart a Zero 88 individuality to their products. The components are made outside - volume is not enough for them to make their own - but every product is assembled, and extensively run in, on the premises. Those products, apart from the boards and power packs include all sorts of dimmers from portables via the evergreen bestseller, the Beta, to big installations like the LTC. A company favourite is the digitally-controlled Contour, popular for touring.

Much of the present responsibility for management of the company and its future planning rests with the next, younger tier. Marketing executive Claire House, a recent arrival, is looking after the test drive programme for the new Sirius boards. She reports to Blair Drummond, who as marketing and development manager takes charge of the software and hardware design teams, and market planning. Operations manager David Rosen runs the factory and sales side.

Like most British manufacturers, Zero 88 have suffered overseas lately as a result of the strong pound, and Drummond, in particular, is keeping a weather eye out for new markets - the trick is to hit them when they can afford a product of Zero 88 quality, and although spots like India and the Eastern European countries may not be candidates today, they could become so very quickly. Both can't wait for the Single European Currency - whether or not Britain is in it, pricing in Ecus will immediately make life a lot easier and quotes a lot more comparable.

After a quarter-century of not always smooth progress (let's not talk about the great sales slump of 1980) Zero 88 today occupies a high-profile position in the industry. Part of this can be put down to well-directed public relations effort. As well as Peter Brooks' stint as chairman of PLASA, the activities of another PLASA stalwart, Freddy Lloyd in devising memorable Zero 88 occasions have ensured that they are a difficult name to forget. Lloyd's background was in entertainment, as a performer, and in maintaining Zero 88's excellent relations with their dealer network he makes good use of his performance skills. Some of the events he has staged to celebrate shows like PLASA or SIEL are almost legendary, and his latest, the biennial Zero 88 Go-Kart Grand Prix, has become a huge undertaking.

Having closed the St Albans office and reached the magic 65, he is now technically part-time, though the hours sound quite long enough to me, even for one who describes himself as 'the youngest geriatric in the business'.

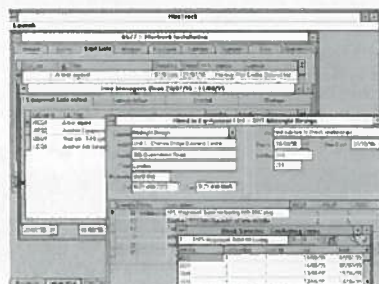
And what of the future? No self-respecting businessman is going to give away trade secrets to a passing enquirer, so the crystal ball gets a little cloudy at this point: a plan to make their own lanterns has long been consigned to the shelf, but production of what Zero 88 know best, for OEM sales, is likely to be expanded. It seems reasonable to expect the new boards to be a hit, and to have spin-offs quickly in both hardware and software, not to mention stiff competition from rival manufacturers. I'm waiting for the moment when you can really tell that the Sirius 250/500 series has made its mark: that'll be when they introduce the left-handed version.



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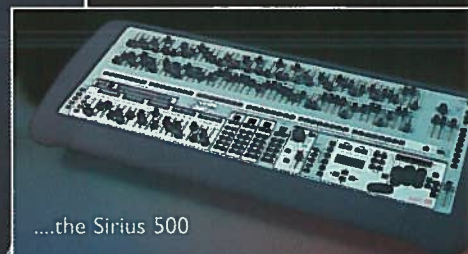
The hybrid....



**New Features
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Snapshot

Instant programming of all parameters to give a complete 'look'. Can be programmed onto a fader or Go button.



....the Sirius 500

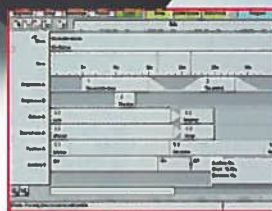
Sirius 250 & 500



Brightness



Position

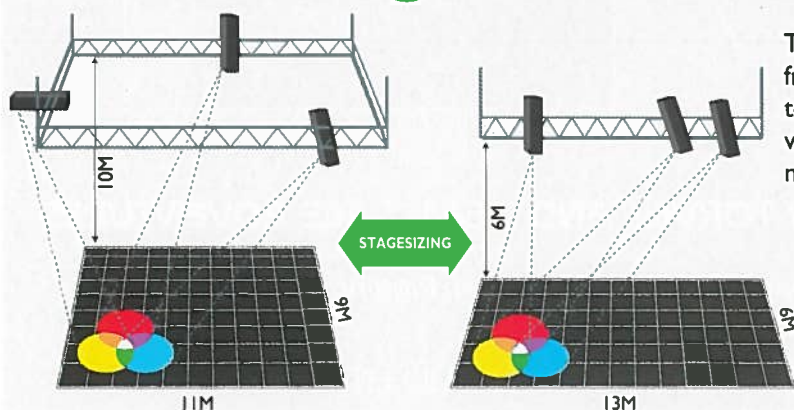


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TORVILL AND DEAN'S ICE ADVENTURES

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PLASA

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