

# CLEAR WHITE LIGHT



**Last year White Light passed its 30 year milestone, so it seemed appropriate for L&SI editor Ruth Rossington to catch up with the company's managing director John Simpson and general manager Bryan Raven to talk about the past, present and future . . .**



*The White Light Group's new home includes 35,000sq.ft of equipment space and 10,000sq.ft of office space. Inset, managing director John Simpson*

If you're unfamiliar with the White Light name let me tell you two key things about the company - it employs a team of over 100 people and has an annual turnover of £9million and rising.

That's a big operation by our industry's standards, by any industry's standards, and yet White Light has never given the impression of size having gone to its head. There's no sense of a large corporate structure at work, no imposed hierarchy in the office, no parking spaces allotted to directors. Instead, White Light thrives without all these formalities in place, it doesn't waste time on non-essentials (rumour has it a yellow card is shown to anyone in the office who starts bullshitting), and actively promotes the fact that it is not a one-stop shop (though it is more than capable of being so), but a collection of companies each with their own individual identities.

Central to this are the two lighting hire operations in London and Yorkshire - White Light (Hire) and White Light (North). From these two bases, numerous lighting hire projects are managed, ranging from a small-scale school production right through to a major West End run. Whilst the London end tends to secure the larger projects, the Yorkshire operation is by no means an outpost - under the direction of John Anderton, it has grown to become a significant operation in its own right and from its 10,000sq.ft facility at Sowerby Bridge provides a gateway for White Light to the North of England and Scotland. The success of the two hire operations led to the formation of a thriving sales arm - White Light (Sales) - which last year did £3millions' worth of business in its own right.

From these three radiate out a network of associated companies - The Moving Light Company (specialists in automated lighting), The Service Company (offering service and support on a wide range of products and projects), Colourhouse (a relatively recent addition to the Group which works in the highly demanding corporate and exhibition sector), Enliten (which takes the skills and technology of

the theatre sector and adapts them to the architectural market), Co-Ordination (a theatre and live event management company), Technical Insight (an architectural practice), and finally Modelbox (the pioneer in applying computer aided design to set and lighting design). As separate companies they're highly effective, as a combination probably unequalled in the industry.

This 'pool' formula has provided a ready mechanism for meeting head-on just about any project the industry can throw the Group's way. At any one time it may have a roster of upwards of 250 projects on the go - ranging from lighting and stage control systems for the Hard Rock Café in Manchester or a new lighting system incorporating Strand and Wholehog consoles for the Churchill Theatre, Bromley, to supplying new moving lights to the Royal Opera House or lighting the 1940s House at the Imperial War Museum.

Though in recent years, thanks to the inroads being made by Colourhouse and Enliten, it has spread into the conference and architectural sectors, theatre remains the central feature of the Group's portfolio. White Light's connection to some of the major theatrical productions of the last 30 years has been well documented and its experience in this area continues to show in its order book. The current West End productions of *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang*, *The Full Monty*, *My Fair Lady*, *Kiss Me Kate*, *Chicago* and *Daisy Pulls it Off* and the touring productions of *Grease*, *Sunset Boulevard* and *Miss Saigon*, are all using rigs supplied by White Light. As too are a number of international productions, a Canadian production of *Oliver!*, the most recent to be added to the list.



*Above, general manager Bryan Raven.  
Below, various lighting fixtures on test in  
the company's on-site test facility*

The current profile of White Light is a far cry from the company's roots some 31 years ago - a fragile start that perhaps explains why today the Group has positioned itself across several markets, and why the emphasis is on building a portfolio of complementary services.

John Simpson, the only remaining member of the team of three who founded the company (Andy Phillips and Rory Dempster having left to pursue other careers) comes from a background immersed in theatre arts. His early career coincided with a huge increase in arts subsidies - and thus a role working for the Arts Council as one of the country's first arts administrators. It took him all over the country, learning about various theatres and arts organizations and eventually through the doors of the Royal Court in London, where as manager during the late sixties and early seventies, he met with Phillips and Dempster, then resident lighting designers at the Court.

As an apprenticeship for a future career in lighting hire and supply, it proved

formative. It made Simpson aware that it wasn't just the technology that mattered, but also the service that came with it. The Royal Court galvanized the trio into addressing this by forming their own lighting hire company, and it also provided its name - White Light - a nod to the theatre's reputation for often stark, almost exclusively white, lighting schemes.

The early days were touch and go: despite injections of cash from all three founders and theatre impresario Angela Fox, it was several years before the company was in a position to

pay any of them a proper wage. In the meantime, Simpson, Phillips and Dempster continued with their separate careers - Simpson, for his part, taking on the management of *The Rocky Horror Show* for Michael White, overseeing its transfer from the Royal Court Theatre Upstairs to the Kings Road Theatre. It was a role that lasted six years and came to be regarded as White Light's first job.

In time, the company began to gain momentum, building its hire stock, its opportunities and its workforce. As if to illustrate the point, Simpson pulls out a ledger book, almost Dickensian in quality, where carefully written script details the various hires of those early years.

Significant growth came in the eighties, largely on the back of a boom time in theatre, particularly London's West End, where Andrew Lloyd Webber and Cameron Mackintosh were opening up theatre to much larger audiences. By the end of the decade nearly 40 people were on the payroll, the Modelbox computer aided design service had been added to the portfolio and the turnover was tipping £2million.



Bryan Raven was also on board as hire manager, with a brief to continue to build the hire side of the operation - which is exactly what he set about doing.

Over the next few years, further growth followed, further companies were either acquired or launched, and the nineties came to a close with the Group turning over in the region of £6-7m a year. An impressive run for a company that started with very little. Now, a £10million turnover is within sight.

That the growth has been organic, rather than part of some grand master plan, is not denied.

"We're not in it because we all want yachts and a place in the Med," explains John Simpson. "We like the job, and we want to do it well." "Doing it well" means offering the best technology and service possible and acquiring the means to do so - hence the expansion of the last few years, fuelled by two things - the ever-increasing range of lighting technology available and the ever-increasing range of markets for lighting outside theatre.

In the last six months, the Group has moved from its former Fulham base (and associated



*Just a small part of the White Light team pictured  
outside the new Wimbledon HQ*

offshoots) to a new facility in Wimbledon - where 35,000sq.ft of equipment storage and preparation space and 10,000sq.ft of office space has allowed all the Group members to be brought together under one roof for the first time. It's also, as Simpson wryly admits, a chance to leave old habits behind.

According to Bryan Raven, the move has also allowed for some significant consolidation and re-investment in the Group's massive stock inventory - a line-up which includes a wide range of products from Strand, Martin, ETC, Robert Juliat, High End, DHA, Tomcat, Lite Structures, Wybron, Zero 88, Avolites, Smoke Factory, MDG, Lee Filters, Rosco, Le Maitre and Jem.

In the last year alone, the company has added over £1million's worth of new equipment: part of that has gone into developing existing stocks, purchasing additional Robert Juliat followspots and ETC Source Four Profiles and Pars. The remainder has been invested in new equipment - the new framing shutter version of the Martin Mac2000 spotlight, Wybron's CXi colour mixing scroller and Avolites' ART touring dimmers. A considerable investment has also gone into equipment that satisfies various regulations; for instance, the Group



*Just about every major lighting, staging, trussing and effects manufacturer is represented in the White Light stockholding. Below, the latest range of Robert Juliat lanterns (for which White Light became distributor last year) are put through their paces*

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has recently added fully adjustable LOLER rated ladders to its list.

It's a cycle of investment most hire and service companies will be familiar with - money earned is channelled into the next generation of technology. Along the way, the company has also found time to develop some technology of its own, notably the VSFX Optical Effects System - a combination of a flat-field projector, drive unit and effects disc, the success of which has led to the development of the WaveFX unit, a slimmed down version of its originator which, as its name suggests, creates wave and ripple effects.

There's also a pretty impressive range of architectural fixtures from Enliten, the Calisto and 575W MSR Exhibition Par having done much to open up the architectural market for the Group.

As developments in technology call for a greater skill base amongst end users, both Simpson and Raven feel that industry-wide training is essential, but currently undervalued. "White Light gets paid by the industry," explains Simpson, "so we should put something back - both to lighting, as we do with our Training Initiatives and Student Lighting Bursary - but also to the larger arts world, as we do with our support for the Soho Theatre and the new writing it nurtures - it is new writing, rather than the latest technology, that is actually the driving force of the industry."

Whatever shape the next 10 years take, the White Light Group seems well positioned to respond effectively, but there's no



complacency here. Everybody at the company is well aware of the challenges that lie ahead, particularly in the theatre market, where the profile of live performance is changing. The days of the long-running musicals, which did much to bankroll many companies, are beginning to be but a distant memory. The trend now is towards much shorter runs (the average West End run is now 12 weeks), not a good direction for service companies who traditionally don't see any return on their equipment investment until perhaps a production's third or fourth year. And despite the shorter runs, it seems the client still wants to pay the long-term rate.

As Simpson and Raven acknowledge, there are also more companies now pitching for the

business, and a buyer's market always drives down prices - not a bad thing in itself, so long as companies bidding for contracts don't end up locked in a price war.

"The only way to address all these changes is to get your efficiencies in and find ways in which you can reduce your costs without compromising the quality of service you offer," explains Simpson. "The industry is putting huge pressure on manufacturers to produce cheaper products. But there are consequences - to keep prices down they have to cut back on R&D - hence the lack of any major new developments for some years now."

It's clear that this is a road White Light is only prepared to travel so far down. Whilst it recognizes that its prices have to be competitive, it also believes strongly that you get what you pay for, as a quote from John Ruskin on the company's website illustrates only too well.

"It is unwise to pay too much, but it's worse to pay too little. When you pay too much, you lose a little money - that is all. When you pay too little, you sometimes lose everything, because the thing you bought was incapable of doing the thing it was bought to do. The common law of business balance prohibits paying a little and getting a lot - it can't be done. If you deal with the lowest bidder, it is well to add something for the risk you run. And if you do that, you will have enough to pay for something better."

Photos: Chris Toulmin