

Vintage Radio

by PETER LANKSHEAR



Vintage radio in London

One of the major attractions of overseas holidays is seeing how the 'other half' lives and of course for many of us, this extends to hobby interests. British and European vintage radio is significantly different from ours, and EA readers visiting London would be well rewarded, if they take time off to visit two splendid and internationally recognised — but very different — displays of historically important electronic equipment.

Much of the early work in radio was carried out in England, by famous researchers. Names such as Lodge, Marconi and Fleming are examples, and it is fitting that the British National Museum of Science & Industry in Kensington, one of the world's leading institutions of its type, should feature their work and that of other pioneers. Housed in a magnificent building, the Museum has several fascinating displays of early electrical and electronic equipment, justifiably treated as milestone developments. Although individual exhibits are subject to change and at any one time represent but a small part of an enormous amount of equipment owned by the Museum, there is always plenty to see. Documentation of displays is, as to be expected, of the highest order.

Recently I was fortunate in being able to spend a day there and naturally, I found the early radio displays to be most absorbing, from Marconi coherers through Fleming's diodes to a complete 1910 Marconi ship's radio cabin and

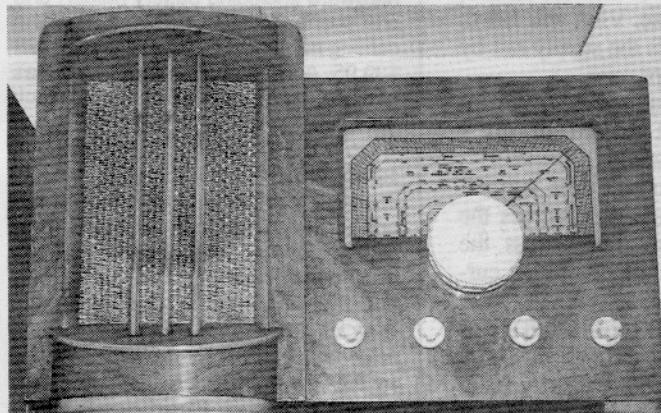
even Alexanderson RF alternators. More modern and domestic equipment can be seen too, and there is a working amateur station GB25M in frequent operation.

Be warned, though. There is such an enormous range of important and unique equipment on view that at least one whole day should be set aside for a visit. Furthermore it is easy to get sidetracked to other subjects. For example, I spent

more time than I could really spare in the railway locomotive section, which includes none other than Stevenson's original 'Rocket'.

Computer enthusiasts too will find much of interest, with historic models such as Alan Turing's 1946 'Pilot Ace' on display. But the most exciting must be the recently completed three-tonne working construction of the mechanical

Right: Gerald Wells' recreation of a McMichael dealer's shop, typical of the valve radio era. An essential item of equipment was the valve tester, often located on the counter so the customer could be shown the condition of their valves.



Visitors to the Wells museum find many of the cabinets interesting. This Radio Acoustic Products model of 1946 is very different from its Australasian contemporaries.



Babbage Difference Engine Number 2, designed in 1847-49 and intended to tabulate the value of 7th-order polynomials to 30 decimal places. The first automatic calculator to be designed, it remained a set of 20 drawings until 1991, when it was built to commemorate the 200th anniversary of Babbage's birth and to confirm the soundness of his ideas.

Monster spark coil

There is a wide range of early electrical equipment, from a vast collection of lamps, to the biggest induction coil ever made: the Spottiswood, containing 450km of wire in 340,000 turns, and capable of producing a spark over one metre long! Here too are the examples of the classic frictional electric machines, including Wimshurst and Van de Graaf generators.

In the Time Measuring section is a surprise exhibit, a comprehensive display of crystal oscillators. Telecommunications, the parent of radio, is well represented, from a 1837 Wheatstone needle telegraph to equipment of the 1980's.

Private museum

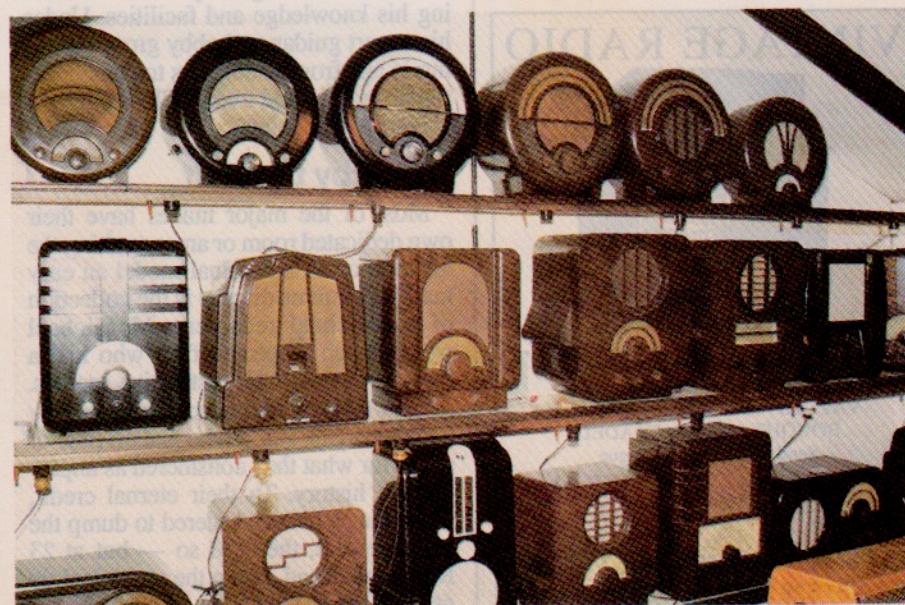
Sharp eyed viewers of British TV productions will have noticed that radio receivers used as 'props' are invariably of the correct period. This is no coincidence, as it is likely that they will have been on loan from Europe's major vintage radio collection — that of Gerald Wells, of 23 Rosendale Road, West Dulwich, a suburb of South London.

Gerald has been an active worker with radios since the age of 10! He was making receivers for sale by the age of 12 and was in business a few years later, in his own words "repairing anything with wires", branching out into TV and building amplifiers, using the trade name WADAR. However, in 1973, after 25

Top: Several sections of the Wells collection are dedicated to one brand; this section is devoted to Philco, which originated in the US but later expanded and produced receivers in countries such as Britain, Australia and New Zealand. Many of their sets are on display.

Centre: Gerald Wells in a corner of his extensive collection, surrounded by sets saved from destruction by factory employees who delivered them to him instead of to the local dump!

Bottom: A corner of the Ekco display in the Wells museum. E.K. Cole Ltd was a pioneer in the use of moulded Bakelite cabinets, and often employed leading designers to create innovative



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years, Gerald's health and the business collapsed and during his recovery he started his museum, initially as therapy.

That this venture was most successful is very evident. Gerald has an international reputation for both his knowledge and extensive collection which, although concentrating on English made equipment, nevertheless contains many splendid examples of US and European sets.

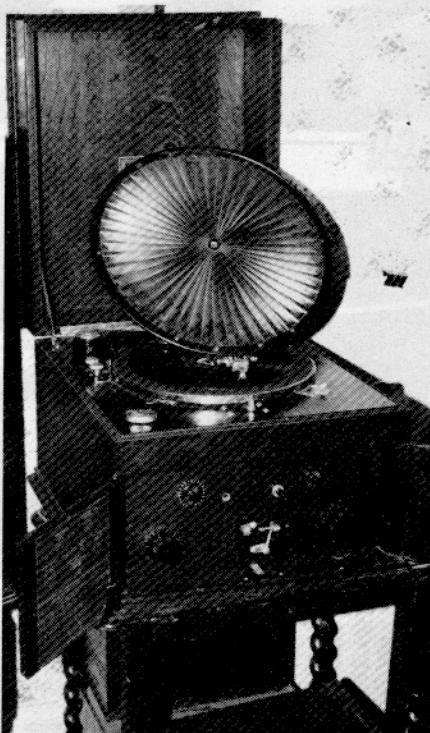
As well as a large display of just about every major brand of valve radio made in Britain and Europe, there are numerous early crystal sets (very popular during the 1920's), historic BBC equipment and early TV receivers, including Baird mechanical scanning viewers.

Historic house

Even Gerald's home, a suburban detached house, has historic radio associations. Purchased by Gerald's father in 1914, 23 Rosendale Road had been occupied by a pioneer: Mr A.R. Taylor, London's first radio amateur, 2AF. Gerald can recall the old aerials still being in position when he was a boy.

Now large portions of both floors of the house are occupied by his displays, and in the basement is a collection of some 40,000 valves! The Wells collection, together with excellent workshop facilities including woodworking machinery, has long since expanded out into several separate buildings at the rear of the property.

A dedicated and skilled technician, Gerald restores to 'as new' condition equipment that many enthusiasts would consider to be unsalvageable. Major re-



Possibly the world's first radio-gramophone! A 1924 prototype hybrid which never went into production. The tone arm activated the large pleated diaphragm, which doubled as a magnetic speaker for the front-mounted receiver section — comprising a crystal detector and two audio amplifier stages.

construction of relics is commonplace, even to rebuilding cabinets and making celluloid dial scales, complete with new printing. A huge range of spares ensures that few receivers cannot be repaired because of lack of components.

Gerald derives great pleasure in sharing his knowledge and facilities. Under his expert guidance, hobby groups ranging in age from youngsters to pensioners repair, restore and even build replica receivers and cabinets.

Saved by the staff

Most of the major makes have their own dedicated room or areas, making the location of an individual model an easy matter. A unique display is the collection of McMichael receivers. McMichael was a much respected firm who had a display of their own distinctive models. As can happen, they were taken over by a major organisation who had no time or space for what they considered as unproductive history. To their eternal credit, when the staff were ordered to dump the old receivers, they did so — but at 23 Rosendale Road, not in the municipal tip as envisaged!

Over the years, the Wells Collection has acquired some very significant and unique pieces of equipment. One of the most impressive is the BBC's Television Standards Converter, used during the transition period when the pioneer 405 line system was being phased out in favour of the PAL 625 line system. Occupying two standard racks, it is not small, but is invaluable for live demonstrations of early TV receivers.

Valve manufacture

One dedicated activity of Gerald and a group of students must be unique. They are in the process of making working historic valves! Gerald acquired a small valve-making plant, and duly set it up in a workshop. At the time of my visit, they were in the process of making working replicas of the World War I French designed 'R' valve, a spherical bulbous general purpose triode with a tungsten filament. There were still a few minor problems to be ironed out, but I imagine that by now these have been solved.

Gerald is a very friendly and hospitable host, and welcomes genuine visitors — but PLEASE phone or write first to make an appointment. Unless you have mastered the intricacies of London's number 2 bus routes, about the easiest way to get to West Dulwich is to take an underground train to the Brixton terminus of the Victoria line and then a cab from there.

A word of caution though. Like many large cities, London has security problems, and Gerald's collection, situated as it is in a suburban house, is very vulnerable. For this reason his home carries no identification and it is not publicised locally as a museum. Do not direct the taxi to the 'Vintage Wireless Museum', but specifically to 23 Rosendale Road.

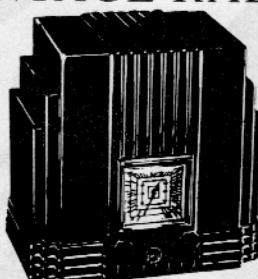
Group in Tasmania

Closer to home, I have received a letter and brochure from the Sound Preservation Association of Tasmania (SPAT), whose purpose is to preserve history in the form of recordings and early recording and radio equipment. An accompanying photograph shows a very attractive museum display of equipment of all kinds.

Founded in 1985, and with monthly meetings, they are clearly a well organised and very active society with a resource/research centre in Hobart.

Recently SPAT was made an agent for the National Film and Sound Archive, Canberra. For further information write to Mr John Wanless, 157 Wells Parade, Blackmans Bay. ♦

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