

The Society of Light and Lighting Presidential Address 2014

Mr John Aston MSL

It is both an honour and a privilege to represent the Society as your President for the coming year. It was also something of a surprise to be asked if I would consider taking the role; after all I have spent more than 95% of my career in lighting trying to persuade people to turn their lights OFF. I can only hope that I can meet at least some of your expectations.



Like many of you in the Society I consider myself to be an accidental lighter; by which I mean that I came into the industry by chance rather than some grand plan. The first time I encountered the lighting controls company I joined in 1979 was about a year earlier. In those days I was commuting to London where I worked in the internal audit division of HM Customs and Excise. On this particular day an old friend of mine caught the same train and naturally I asked him what he was doing now, and why was he carrying such a big briefcase? Geoff (that was and is his name) explained that the briefcase was in fact a portable lighting control system demonstration; which he proceeded to show me and to explain how it works. Alas trains did not have 13 amp socket outlets so imagination had to be used. The explanation made a lasting impression on me; clearly there was an opportunity to improve the way we controlled lighting and to save significant amounts of energy and cost. This was a small company with a very big idea.

Some six months later Geoff's boss (who I also knew) quite out of the blue asked me if I might consider a change of career. As you do I said I was always open to considering new opportunities, and a few weeks later we were sitting down discussing the role. Cutting a long story short, I was offered a job, resigned from the civil service and took to the commercial world of lighting for the first time. My decision to take this step was, in no small measure, a result of that chance meeting on a train; the idea behind this small company was so good it seemed too good an opportunity to miss. The rest – as they say – is history....

Since 1979 the lighting world has seen more changes than many industries. There have been innovations in lamp technologies and control gear, which were primarily intended to improve the quality of light; think tri-phosphor and high frequency among many other advances. And these advances also brought improvements in efficiency, a sort of 'win – win' situation. However, the really dramatic changes all began around the turn of the century, and I would like to dwell on these for a moment. One of the things that had always surprised me about lighting was the fact that there seemed to be little debate about the effect of artificial light on health and well-being. In the main there were recommended levels of light for different tasks and issues concerning glare and VDT screens. The only serious health study I recall from the 1980s was the study by Arnold Wilkins into the beneficial effects of HF lighting, when lower frequency flicker (typically 100Hz) was shown to have adverse effects on some office workers.

So what changed around the start of the 21st century? I guess the most significant influences have been 'CO₂ reduction' and 'solid state lighting' but it is also interesting to note the advent of lighting schemes that varied both their intensity and colour temperature to offer an improved working environment. These schemes use blue enriched, white light to help people to stay alert by mimicking the effect of daylight. Whatever the cause health issues are now on the lighting agenda, and we need to learn from the experience so far. Pursuing CO₂ reduction through the widespread distribution of CFLi low energy lights highlighted a minority of the population who had adverse reactions; most of which, alas, is anecdotal but nonetheless real to those affected. It is for this reason that I welcome the recent agreement with the CIBSE Research Fund that means that the Society will be funding research into the effects of LEDs on people.

The other lesson that we were taught by the CFLi episode relates to metrics; the people were told that certain 'Wattages' of CFL power were equivalent to other 'Wattages' of incandescent power; what on earth possessed us to sell light by the Watt in the first place? Labelling now requires the largest number (in terms of font size!) on the packet must now be the lumens provided by the lamp or fixture. But how many people outside our Society understand a lumen? And what are we, as lighters, doing about it? There is a clear need to improve the level of lighting knowledge held by the public; both in basic terms of quality and quantity as well as addressing any potential health risks that new lighting technology might bring. We know we need to improve lighting education within the industry; the Lighting Education Trust has, and is, making every effort in this direction. But we also need to increase the awareness of lighting and its importance to the much wider audience beyond. We also need to take pride in the maintenance of our Lighting Guides and their reputation as the reference source of choice for current lighting practice.

Earlier I mentioned 'solid state lighting' as one of the major influences on lighting in the 21st Century – or LEDs to give their familiar name. We all know this technology is the most disruptive change experienced by the lighting world since Sir Joseph Swan had a good idea, and it brings with it further challenges. In particular LEDs are questioning one of our primary lighting metrics – colour rendering – and we will need to resolve this if we wish to ensure the full acceptance of this new light source. We must be 100% confident that the metrics correctly describe the light that is being produced. Of course LEDs are not the only current challenge we face; others include Building Information Modelling (BIM), the proper definition of daylight ingress to buildings, and EU Directives. These challenges are not just about knowledge but also how different organisations can meet their obligations. For example, can a small lighting design practice afford to implement BIM?

As we can see there are many aspects to lighting that need constant attention, and it is how our Society monitors and reacts to them that will be the measure of our success in the future. I believe we can do this most effectively in two ways. First we must grow, and widen, our membership; we need to attract everyone including 'controllers' (like me!) and others involved in the production, invention and distribution of light. Perhaps we could challenge each current, active, member to recruit a colleague? Second we must grow the knowledge and appreciation of light to the wider public. Make lighting an important subject that is recognised for the great values it offers in work, at play and in terms of our health and well-being; in such a context we can then show that being a lighter is a profession that is worthy of respect and properly valued by our peers.

In conclusion, therefore, during the coming year I want to focus on ideas and initiatives that promote the knowledge of lighting, and our Society's efforts to establish itself as the pre-eminent professional body representing the subject of lighting. This is why I am taking a particular interest in the current review of the SLL Masterclasses and the 2014/2015 programme we are undertaking. In the meantime you can all look after the growth of members by taking up the recruitment challenge.

Thank you.

John Aston – May 2014