



Team Celestion - (L-R) Paul Cork, John Paice, Dee Potter, Ken Weller and Nigel Wood



The patent that started it all, granted to Eric Mackintosh in 1925



The first home of Celestion in Hampton Wick

The history boys

Over 90 years, Celestion has borne witness to almost every milestone in the development of professional audio. **Barney Jameson** discovers some history

IN THE HISTORY OF THE AUDIO BUSINESS, THE 1960S overshadow everything that came before. But by the time The Beatles made Vox guitar amplifiers the sound of the British Invasion, the company behind one of the main components had already reached its fourth decade. Its name was Celestion, and while it soon became an iconic rock and roll brand, its roots went far deeper.

This year that same company is celebrating its 90th anniversary. Over the years, much has changed – owners and management have come and gone, new markets have been addressed then abandoned, factories that once opened in a blaze of publicity now no longer exist. Yet in essence it remains what it was at the very beginning, when Eric Mackintosh invented one of the world's first cone loudspeakers, and approached Cyril French (later joined by his brothers) with the idea of starting a company. It was 1924, and that first speaker would become known as The Celestion.

'There's a purpose and a reason behind the name – there's a clear lineage,' reasons John Paice. 'The first product we ever made was called the Celestion and it was a loudspeaker driver. Now here we are 90 years later still making loudspeaker drivers. The technology is completely different but it's essentially the same product.'

'In marketing terms, that's something you can't replicate artificially – you can't throw money at a brand and make it look old,' says product marketing manager Ken Weller. 'You just have to wait for it to have that authenticity. It's not something you can fake.'

'There are very few companies who get to 90 years old,' adds managing director Nigel Wood. 'They're either purchased and they lose their identity, they go bankrupt, they become diversified or the owner closes them down. So it's a privilege to work for a company who started making speakers 90 years ago and is still making speakers today.'

In 2014, Celestion is part of the Hong Kong owned Gold Peak Group, but its personality remains quintessentially British. The company has become so closely associated with its adopted home, the English town of Ipswich, that nearby roads are given names such as Celestion Drive. But in those early years, it was based in a very different part of the country, and in far humbler circumstances.

In order to launch the business, first named the Electrical Manufacturing and Plating Company, Cyril French took over a small, two storey building in the southern village of Hampton Wick, located beside the Thames. Loudspeaker manufacturing took place upstairs, largely handled by Cyril's brother Ralph, the creator of the Celestion name.

But it didn't take long for the company's prospects to become more obvious. Throughout its long life, Celestion has repeatedly displayed a talent for positioning itself in the right place, at the right time and with the right product. As Mr Mackintosh was being granted his patent, the BBC was coming to life and homeowners all over the country were desperate to experience the 'modern marvel' of wireless radio. Cyril French quickly acted, bringing the Celestion loudspeaker cabinet – part technological wonder, part furniture – to market at six pounds and 10 shillings, with a choice of oak, walnut or mahogany.

Some of those early models remain at Celestion's current headquarters. 'The quality of the original Celestion stuff – when you look at the boxes – is impressive,' says head of engineering Paul Cork. 'They are wonderful pieces of furniture that make a lovely noise. We still take pride in them.'

The first model was such a success that the company grew rapidly, changing its name in honour of the product and upgrading to larger premises. But it was a time



One of Celestion's earliest designs complete with bamboo from China

of opportunity and challenges in equal measure; the initial boom of popularity was tempered by the departure of both Eric Mackintosh and Ralph French in 1930, followed the worldwide recession of the mid-1930s and Cyril French's own resignation. Then came the Second World War and a change of direction. 'It wasn't PA as we know it now, but loudhailers and the like,' explains Mr Cork. 'We even produced a speaker for tanks.'

The same restrictions applied to Celestion's main competitor, British Rola Limited, and in the post-war years the two combined, becoming known as Rola Celestion. Taking place in April 1947, it was the first time Celestion was the subject of an acquisition. It moved again, this time to Rola's facility in Thames Ditton – an address that would later be memorialised in the names of classic hi-fi speakers. But crucially, although Rola was the principle partner, it is

grew,' says Mr Wood. 'Celestion today has a direct link to the 1960s. I think before that there's less of a link because the market and the industry were different.'

That growth prompted another move, this time from Thames Ditton to Ipswich, where the new factory, on Foxhall Road, rapidly became the stuff of legend. 'Princess Margaret visited it,' smiles Paul Cork. 'Everything got painted especially!' Production began there in 1968, followed by R&D in the 1970s. 'There are so many people in Ipswich who worked there,' says Mr Wood. 'Twenty years ago we were one of the biggest employers in the area.'

Today, Celestion's longest standing employee, having notched up 40 years of unbroken service, is production manager Dee Potter. She arrived at the Foxhall Road factory on a Monday morning in 1974, having left school the preceding Friday. 'The place was huge and very dirty,' she



The appliance of science, Celestion style



Princess Margaret visited the Foxhall Road factory in 1977

MODEL JUNIOR 8	MODEL STANDARD 8	MODEL JUNIOR AUDITORIUM	MODEL P64
<p>Driver diameter 8"</p> <p>Power handling 100W</p> <p>Frequency response 40-15,000 Hz</p> <p>Impedance 16Ω</p> <p>Weight 1.5kg</p> <p>Dimensions 150 x 100 x 100mm</p> <p>Price £12.00</p>	<p>Driver diameter 8"</p> <p>Power handling 150W</p> <p>Frequency response 40-15,000 Hz</p> <p>Impedance 16Ω</p> <p>Weight 1.8kg</p> <p>Dimensions 150 x 100 x 100mm</p> <p>Price £15.00</p>	<p>Driver diameter 12"</p> <p>Power handling 200W</p> <p>Frequency response 40-15,000 Hz</p> <p>Impedance 16Ω</p> <p>Weight 2.5kg</p> <p>Dimensions 200 x 150 x 100mm</p> <p>Price £20.00</p>	<p>Driver diameter 6"</p> <p>Power handling 50W</p> <p>Frequency response 40-15,000 Hz</p> <p>Impedance 16Ω</p> <p>Weight 0.8kg</p> <p>Dimensions 100 x 75 x 75mm</p> <p>Price £8.00</p>

An early line-up of Celestion driver models

the Celestion name which endures today. 'It's a little bit sticky, isn't it?' grins Mr Paice.

Indeed, as the years passed and further acquisitions followed, the brand endured. Rola Celestion was bought by Truvox in 1949, and the company expanded into more professional PA whilst serving the suddenly growing hi-fi market. Finally, the 1960s arrived, and Celestion loudspeakers were suddenly in the middle of a cultural revolution. Again, the brand was in the right place, at the right time, with the right product – the G12.

'Most of the guitar speakers these days are still suffixed G12 - the General Purpose 12,' says Mr Wood. It was the loudspeaker that helped to define a generation as part of the Vox AC30, despite having been in production since 1936. 'When the demand for higher powered drivers arrived, our business took off and

remembers. 'When it rained it came in from the top and came up from the bottom. It wasn't a glamorous place to work – the environment we've got now is marvellous in comparison. There were lots of different cultures and not everyone got on. There was always a fight of some sort.'

In those days of UK-based manufacturing, Ms Potter became an advocate of the company's growing professional business. 'Back then, all of the emphasis was on hi-fi,' she explains. 'But heavy power was getting bigger and they needed someone to take over running the Forth line, as it was then. I took it as a personal thing that we wouldn't be ignored. If the line stopped I'd move hell and high water to fix it. Eventually we started making money and people couldn't ignore us anymore.'

Since then, Ms Potter has seen Celestion change again. The Foxhall



A 1988 newspaper article on the Foxhall Road factory

Road facility has long since been demolished in favour of housing. The company's current headquarters – still in Ipswich, but less sprawling and more comfortable than its predecessor – has its own manufacturing facility, overseen by Ms Potter and operations manager Richard Klein, but it concentrates on prestige models. The bulk of Celestion product comes from the company's factory in China – it was among the first to shift its production eastwards following the Gold Peak acquisition. Even so, Ms Potter maintains that it still feels like the same company. 'It does,' she confirms. 'I wouldn't have been here 40 years if I didn't like coming here. I love my job.'

The Gold Peak purchase, meanwhile, seems only to have spurred Celestion onwards. 'Being part of the Gold Peak Group gives us more power on different levels,' explains Mr Wood. 'Senior management are always looking to invest in the business. They're always looking to put more in than they take out. That allows us to plan years ahead, knowing that the owners will be supporting us.'

He adds, however, that Celestion 'is a British brand. It's very important. Keeping the headquarters here in the UK makes it feel very British.'

Mr Wood arrived at the company 10 years ago and quickly set about changing it for the future. 'When I first joined Celestion we made speaker cabinets as well as drivers. It became clear to me that we had to make one or the other,' he says. 'I remember going to my first Frankfurt show and seeing all of these competitors making black boxes, but I struggled to find speaker driver manufacturers.'

At the time, the company's range of cabinets were due an overhaul. 'It was getting to the time in the market when line arrays were starting to come in,' remembers Mr Cork. 'We would have had to invest a lot and the effort involved in that would have been huge.'

'In the guitar market we have a very large, dominant share,' Mr Wood continues. 'Our job is to keep that share. But to truly grow the business we had to go into a new segment, which was professional drivers. We put in a huge investment, basically doubled the size of the R&D team.

In terms of volume, we are now the biggest branded manufacturer of compression drivers. Ten years ago, we would have been an also-ran.'

The strategy has been a tremendous success. 'Ten years ago 90 per cent of our business was guitar drivers,' Mr Wood reveals. 'Today, guitar drivers are only 30 per cent, and we've grown that side as well.'



Assembling drivers at Celestion's Ipswich headquarters

This kind of long-termism is arguably Celestion's most powerful asset. When plans are made they are for the next five or 10 years, rather than the more short-term approach of a younger firm. Everyone knows that Celestion isn't going anywhere – it has time on its side.

'My experience is if you plan for the long-term then you'll be successful in the long-term. If you plan for the short-term then you will be successful in the short-term, but you'll forget about the long-term,' reasons Mr Wood. 'Gold Peak aren't really interested in what happens next year. They're interested in what happens in five years. That's the big difference.'

All of which begs the question of how the company will look when it celebrates its centenary in 2024. It's telling that Mr Wood doesn't even have to consider the question – the plans have already been laid. 'On the guitar side, in 10 years we'll be selling the same products we sell today – our number one guitar driver will still be the Vintage 30. The changes will be on the PA side. We will continue to put more and more investment into PA drivers to make better, more efficient and more cost-effective models. In 10 years, 90 per cent of our business will be in PA and 10 per cent will be guitar.'

It's the kind of ambition and confidence that Eric Mackintosh, Cyril French and Ralph French could only have dreamed of back in 1924. But for the company that grew out of that first patented cone design, it is destined to become just another page in the long and distinguished history of Celestion.