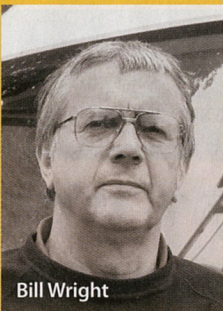


Pro Talk

Bill Wright looks back in anger

When a masthead amplifier or an LNB plays up, old gits like me are prone to moan about crappy modern rubbish and make out that in the old days things were much better made.

This is rose-tinted cobbler! Most of today's pro equipment is more reliable and better specified than ever before – and far cheaper. Allow me to wax nostalgic about some of the gear that



Bill Wright

has made me pull my hair out over the years. Older installers will remember and shudder; young ones will probably think I'm making it all up.

- Multi-output amplifiers that would go mad if all the outputs weren't terminated. Amps that would expire if there was a lightning strike anywhere closer than Moscow. Amps that buzzed so loudly they kept the whole house awake. Amps that had only 8dB between the noise floor and the cross-modulation threshold.

- Distribution amplifiers that had a maximum output not much more than a good aerial signal, so you'd find amps with 27dB gain complete with a 24dB attenuator on the input!

- Masthead amplifiers that cheerfully accepted anything from DC to 1GHz. They would be utterly swamped by a legal CB radio using a whip aerial in a kid's bedroom half a mile away. Unscreened mastheads with absurdly high gain that radiated so much they had to be 30ft from the aerial or the oscillation would swamp the street. Masthead amp power supply units that ran so hot they scorched the carpet, and those that leaked so much mains current into the co-ax they scorched anyone who touched the aerial.

- Satellite receivers that radiated on UHF channel 25 and wiped out terrestrial reception across a 200-yard radius.

- Group B aerials that wouldn't work above channel 50, and Group A ones that had the polar response of a coat-hanger below channel 23.

- Co-ax cable with strange performance owing to sections of the inner conductor taking a diversion along one of the spaces in the dielectric. Expensive foam-filled distribution cable that soaked up moisture like a sponge and was sodden after a year. So-called 'low loss' co-ax, with 15 per cent braid cover, astronomic signal loss, and the ability to act as a very fine indoor aerial.

- Co-ax plugs with grub screws that shorted the inner pin to the outer barrel – but not until 5pm on Christmas Eve.

- Masts with a seam that would split open under stress and turn the mast into a ludicrous giant rotating spring – hilarious to watch in a breeze, but still quite annoying. Masts made from dodgy aluminium that imitated a banana at the first gale. Steel masts that rotted from the inside and collapsed after 18 months.

- Expensive top-brand wallplates with a section of printed circuit board connected to the inner conductor and protected from the braid by nothing but a coat of green paint. Cheap Chinese wallplates with unnecessary and inscrutable printed components and losses of 4 to 18dB. Wallplates that shorted out on the backbox.

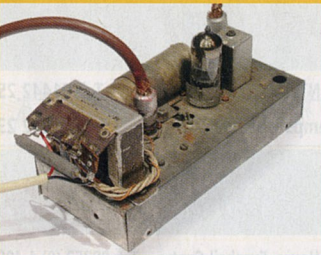
- LNBs that cost £200 and performed like a modern broken one.

- UHF modulators that cost a fortune and drifted half a channel if you put a hand on the case.

- Crude signal meters that cost two months' wages.

Believe me, you young guys in this trade – in the 1970s and 80s the technology and quality control were so far behind what we have now that to an old feller like me it seems like these days we're working in paradise. Enjoy it, but don't take it for granted. Modern technology means that the world is your oyster. Exploit it!

Read more from Bill at www.paras.org.uk/



This 1950s distribution amplifier used an ECC84 low noise RF amplifier valve. The valves didn't last too long, and for a company with a lot of these amps in use the replacement schedule was like painting the Forth Bridge