

Spotlight: David Latimer



We're somewhat dazzled today having industry heavyweight David Latimer in the Spotlight seat. David has had a truly illustrious career within the standard-setting processes of the Wiring Regulations, culminating in Chairman of the IEC (worldwide) and CENELEC (European) Committees from 1990 to 2002. Now retired, David is still closely connected with the IET, having been a member of the IET for over sixty years and through his involvement with BTNET, the IET's Built Environment Sector.

You started off your career in electrical contracting. How did you end up steering Wiring Regulations internationally as Chairman of IEC as well as the UK's IEE Wiring Regulations committee?

In about 1963, at the time of metrication, the man representing the Electrical Contractors Association of the IEE Wiring Regulations Current Ratings Panel left his company just before a meeting of the Panel. I was asked whether I could attend for one meeting, at the end of which I was asked whether I could come to the next meeting. I received the papers for the next 40 years.

In 1968 when IEC TC 64 was formed, the structure of the Wiring Regulations Committee was changed and the Technical Sub-Committee set up. I was to have been a member "believed to be in touch with contracting interests", as it was then expressed, and a former Vice President of the Institution was to have been Chairman, but he withdrew and I was asked whether I would Chair the Committee. With the support of the uncle with whom I worked, I accepted.

I was a UK delegate to TC 64 and I must have impressed the other delegates because, in 1990, I was asked whether I could accept the Chair of IEC TC 64 and of CENELEC TC 64. As I was then working for myself, I gave myself permission and remained Chairman for the full 12 years permitted by the IEC.

I might add that when I was working for my uncle's company I got all the time I needed. When the company was sold I was given a number of days a year and the rest came from holiday; when I joined the ASEE it was all taken from holiday and when I started working for myself it was, of course, all in my own otherwise chargeable time.

You were Chairman of the various committees during a period of change, as around the time of the 15th Edition of the Wiring Regulations, European requirements were first adopted by the UK. What was it like leading that change and how did the industry react?

You must realise that, back in the 1970s, David Brice, the Technical Secretary of the Institution of Electrical Engineers, carried enormous weight in the development of the content of the Regulations and the wording; if the Technical Subcommittee was going in a direction which he did not like, I had to stop the discussion and the item would reappear on the agenda

until the Committee decided the way David wanted. This is not to say that David did not consult a small coterie and might change his mind.

Adopting the new layout and adapting our content to it, while integrating new IEC requirements and discussing and deciding the UK response to the IEC document, was burdensome and we met monthly. One of the problems was to determine what exactly the 14th Edition intended and to analyse how the IEC proposals agreed with or conflicted with them.

I clearly remember the tense discussion over the question as to whether the principle of safety should be a 50 V maximum touch voltage (safer but impossible to verify) or a disconnection time (not so safe but verifiable) and whether that time should be 0.4 seconds or 0.2 seconds. They nearly had me in tears.

After about 12 years we froze the content and, eventually, after 15 years, the 15th edition came out.

After the 15th Edition came out the industry was, should we say, somewhat dismayed. There was a series of workshops held around the country, and the same question came up, complaining about requirements which, it had to be pointed out to them, were actually in the 14th Edition and its predecessors. There were new requirements and much time was spent in explaining how to handle them.

What have been the highlights of your career?

Undoubtedly my Chairmanship of TC 64 and CENELEC TC 64 but also my Chairmanship of the NICEIC.

The lowlight was accepting Part 7s in the Regulations on behalf of the UK; cleft sticks come to mind

What advice do you have for those installers out there who might like to pursue a standard-setting career?

First of all an employer who will give time, not only to attend meetings but also to study papers and attend international meetings; evening and weekend time is often necessary. While someone may be supported by a trade association and must advance their views, it is also necessary to consider those views in the light of what is expressed by others. Certainly, to attend a meeting and to address only those items that appear to affect your sector is wrong.

The willingness to raise difficult questions like 'why' and 'how' and a willingness to say 'I don't understand that' (and you can be sure that others do not) might not make someone popular but they will be listened to.

Above all, while attending international meetings, remember that the native tongue of other delegates (including the USA and Australia) is not UK English; slow, clear speech and the use of simple words is essential. An understanding of how other countries go about their installations (which are not necessarily inferior to ours) leads to better understanding as to why what is done in the UK, is done.

Finally, we can't forget about your famous bottle garden – a garden in a sealed bottle that I believe you last watered in 1972 and, certainly in 2013, was still going strong. How's it holding up?

It just sits there, never asks for anything, never complains, doesn't appear to change. You never see any dead leaves.