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Christopher Wray

Founder of Christopher Wray Lighting

When Christopher Wray left school at the age of 17 in 1957 he had big plans to become Britain's youngest professional magician, so he took a job as a clown's assistant in Bridlington and did magic tricks during his show. When the season ended, however, Wray discovered that there was not much of a demand for magicians. So he decided to become an actor instead. He moved down to London from Yorkshire where he was brought up and managed to get a place at stage school. Then he landed parts in television shows such as *Upstairs, Downstairs* and *Doctor Who* before joining a repertory company touring Ireland.

It was Wray's job to scour junk shops for props for the show, and while he was looking he started buying bits of bric-a-brac for himself at the same time. So when an actors' strike made it difficult to get work back in London, a friend suggested he hire a stall in the newly opened Chelsea Antique Market. He could sell the things he had collected as a way of making money until the strike ended. Wray says: 'I



didn't know anything about this business so I just put everything I had on the stall and put a price on it.'

The first thing he sold was a Victorian paraffin oil lamp. So he quickly bought more from nearby junk shops, where they had ended up after being discarded as houses in rural parts of the UK were fitted with electric lights. He polished them up and put them on his stall and when they sold straight away too, for several times what he had paid for them, Wray started specialising in old oil lamps. One of his regular suppliers was a man who would drive up from Somerset each week with dozens of them in the back of an old camper van. Wray says: 'I never deliberately thought about going into lighting. It was pure luck really.'

He had run the stall for a year when he discovered that a post office on Chelsea's King's Road was closing down. So he borrowed £1,000 from his mother and reopened the post office as a specialist lighting shop, renting it for £750 a year and getting a friend to look after it whenever he got acting jobs.

Wray's timing was perfect. It was 1964 and the King's Road was about to become the epicentre of the swinging sixties. Actor Dudley Moore would come in to play the harmonium Wray kept in the shop.

In the first week Wray sold enough lamps to pay a year's rent. He says: 'One customer just went round the shop and bought all the best lamps. I couldn't believe it. I had to rush out and buy more things to sell.' But his dual life could not last. When Wray was offered a permanent part as the village policeman in the television soap *Emmerdale Farm*, he realised he had to choose between acting and his lighting business. He chose the latter. He says: 'Acting was a wonderful life but I realised I had a unique thing here. And as an actor you never really make any money.'

The shop continued to do well. When customers started asking for replacement glass shades for their lamps because the original shades were hard to find, Wray persuaded a factory in Yorkshire to make new shades from original moulds. He also got a factory in Birmingham to make replacement brass parts for lamps. As demand grew he expanded by buying up shops around his own as they came up for sale. At one stage he owned 10 shops on the same street.

Wray eventually realised, however, that it would make a lot more sense to have one large, purpose-built shop. So in 1983 he bought some land from the local gas board and after several complicated property transactions and much negotiating with the bank, finally opened the doors of his new shop seven years later in 1990. He says: 'It was my dream to build the absolute ultimate lighting emporium. It was designed so that the whole of the top floor is my office. I am king up there.'

This time, however, his timing was not so good. The new shop opened for business just as recession hit. He says: 'It

was as though the sky had fallen in. My staff and I looked at each other and said “Where has everybody gone?” Wray took immediate action by bringing out a catalogue aimed specifically at retail customers, which highlighted the less expensive items in his shop. Happily it worked and the business survived.

Indeed the name Christopher Wray has become so synonymous with lighting that many customers are surprised to discover that Christopher Wray is a real person. He says: ‘People are always coming up to me and saying “Oh you do exist, do you?” They just assume it is a fictitious name.’

Wray took further action in 2005 when he realised he was facing growing competition from other, cheaper, lighting retailers. Determined to stay one step ahead, he started selling exclusive upmarket furniture and accessories alongside lighting. He also undertook a radical overhaul of his stores, getting rid of the period lighting he had stocked, introducing more contemporary modern styles and fitting new shopfronts. Wray closed his smaller stores and focused his efforts on five key stores in London,

Fact File

Date of birth: 8 March 1940

Marital status: married with three children

Highest level of education achieved: boarding school

Qualifications: four O levels

Interests: classic car rallying, water sports

Personal philosophy: ‘Always look on the bright side of life.’

including the business's flagship furniture and lighting emporium on the King's Road, and selling online. He also began to work on many more specific projects with interior designers and wealthy private clients, and in 2009 will have sales of £4 million.

Restructuring the business in this way has also freed up more time for Wray to indulge in his favourite pastime, driving classic cars, and in 2008 he and his wife spent two months driving a 1961 Corvette from Panama to Alaska.

Wray says the secret of his success has been finding something he enjoys doing: 'It is about wanting to succeed and having the courage of your convictions. But the overriding thing is that it is such fun.'

Now 69, he has no plans to retire. 'I don't see the point', he says. 'Some people tell me I'm mad and that I should have sold the business so I wouldn't have all this hassle. But the hassle is part of what I do and I get great satisfaction out of it. I am always thinking of the business. I wake up in the night and have to write little notes.'