

Pub Genius...^{ooo}

Probably the best column in the world... Transcribed by Gary Cooper.

Performing Musician: Ha ha ha! At last!

Pub Genius: Explain. And take that smirk off your face, you're scaring the landlord's dogs.

PM: I've got you! A mistake! In the Fane story, you said they were founded in 1952, but their website says 1958!

Pub Genius: Well, never argue with the people themselves. I thought it was 1952, but clearly I was wrong. Sorry about that. I suppose I should make a confession, while we're at it. I also said it was founding partner Arthur Faulcus who had been part of the venerable Richard Allen speaker business, but it was actually his partner, Dennis Newbold.

PM: Two in one day! Oh dear — who's going to be buying the pints, then?

Pub Genius: Don't rub it in. You do want the rest of the story, I suppose?

PM: Go on then. Let me see... We'd got to where Fane were going great guns, supplying a lot of the top British amp makers in the '60s.



Pub Genius: Well, they certainly were firing on all four by the 1970s, and by the '80s they were probably the biggest speaker business in Europe.

PM: There's one of your famous 'and then it all went horribly wrong' twists coming, isn't there?

Pub Genius: In a word... Yes. Through a series of complicated buyouts and takeovers, Fane had become part of the Yorkshire-based Audio Fidelity group, which included the RSC Electronics chain of shops, FAL Electronics, and also a firm that made the Linear amps that any guitarist over 50 will still be having nightmares about. Later they also absorbed the Custom Sound amplification brand, which had begun as an independent but had gotten into trouble around 1980. Later, when Vox had been sold by the legendary entrepreneur Ivor Arbiter to distributors Rose Morris, the same factory even made Vox amps for a while.

PM: What were they like?

Pub Genius: Hideous, by and large. They weren't great days for Vox.

PM: Ah! OK... So what happened to Fane while all this was going on?

Pub Genius: Fane had managed not to be too tainted by politics and was being run by a remarkable character called Arthur Barnes. He had started as a press shop foreman in 1966 and had worked his way through the ranks to become Managing Director. Barnes really drove the company and was responsible for its great success during that era.

PM: But?

Pub Genius: He didn't actually own the business. In the mid '80s, the family that held most of the shares sold everything except for Linear and Custom Sound, which left Fane in new hands. Then the new owners got into financial difficulties around 1989, even though Fane themselves were still doing well. Once again the company were up for grabs, and this time, Barnes tried to buy it. Unfortunately, he wasn't successful.

PM: So who was?

Pub Genius: Surprisingly, yet another once-Yorkshire based loudspeaker company — Wharfedale.

PM: Hang on. I've seen Wharfedale tellies in Argos! And then there's Wharfedale PA gear. What's going on?

Pub Genius: Sad, isn't it? Wharfedale were once one of the proudest names in hi-fi, but the company had become dismembered after having been sold by sometime owners, the Rank Organisation. It was passed to a company that also owned two other great British hi-fi brands — Quad and Leak. Later still, those three names were sold to a Chinese-owned group called IAG but, somehow along the way, the Wharfedale name was also licensed for use on cheap domestic products. It's very messy.

PM: So what happened to Fane?

Pub Genius: It was a real misfortune not to have been bought by Arthur Barnes because, towards the end of the 1980s, Barnes had started talking with an American called Bob Gault who owned a company called Eminence.

PM: Eminence speakers? They're good, aren't they?

Pub Genius: The very same! Gault was one of the world's biggest suppliers of speakers to amp makers but had never pushed the Eminence brand in its own right. Barnes persuaded Gault it was time he did and more or less took Eminence under his wing, from where it went from strength to strength. Meanwhile, in the mid

1990s, Fane were sold once again — this time to the German side of the PA company Adam Hall.

PM: This is pretty confusing!

Pub Genius: And you're only getting the simplified version! Suffice it to say that this deal didn't fare very well either, and in March 2007, Arthur Barnes, then working with his two sons, Neil and Mark, was finally able to buy the business that he had started working in on the shop floor, all those years ago.

PM: And this was good because...?

Pub Genius: It was good for all sorts of reasons. Barnes built a new factory in Yorkshire and even tracked down some of the original team that had been there in the 1970s. So today, the lady who winds the voice coils is the same person who was doing it over 30 years ago.

PM: That's one way to get the vintage sound!

Pub Genius: It's been pretty successful too. Of course, like everyone else, they have a production range made in China, but the top-end speakers are still made here, and they even tracked down the original company in Sheffield that made Fane's speaker chassis as well as the firm that supplied the original Fane cones. They're about as close as it's possible to get to the old originals, it's said.

PM: So who uses Fane today?

Pub Genius: The biggest is the now Yorkshire-based Hiwatt, who have reformed the links between the two that were made in the late '60s. On the PA side, Funktion One use Fane, and the Barnes family also own Precision Devices, who supplies Turbosound and Tannoy.

PM: So what's Fane's biggest achievement then?

Pub Genius: Well, they were the first speaker maker in the world to offer a single 12-inch speaker capable of handling 100 Watts — this was back in the '70s. And some of their early Colossus speakers had phenomenal power handling for the era. But there was also that elusive 'tone' thing, which is what makes elderly Fanes sought after by the vintage collectors' market in the States. Which, apparently, is what Fane are after now — building on the 50th anniversary and going for the boutique and replacement market.

PM: Ah yes, the 50th anniversary... From [cough] 1958, was it!?

Pub Genius: All right, all right! I suppose it's a fair cop. A pint of rat poison, was it?

PM: Theakston's, I think, as we're celebrating a Yorkshire company. Oh, and I don't suppose they sell humble pie-flavoured crisps here, do they?

Pub Genius: Don't push your luck, grasshopper, don't push your luck. ■ **PM**

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