

Shining a light on a bright piece of history

LIVERMORE is, without doubt, a nice place to live. On the Eastern edge of California's San Francisco Bay Area, the town is cultured suburbia with a little bit of wine country and a little bit of ranching. At one end of town are the renowned Concannon Vineyards, at the other end is the Livermore-Pleasanton fire station.

The flag of the United States flies on the pristine white pole outside the picket fenced, fire station. The doors are rolled up and two big red diesel engines sit inside. The night before, I had met with Lynn Owens the fire chief and he invited me to call along at any time. So here I was.

There are fireman suits hanging on the walls. Even though it is quite dark inside everything is still very shiny. The floor gleams, rows of helmets pick up shards of light and the chrome on the engines reflects the red surrounds.

But this is not the light I'm looking for — "You can't miss it," Chief Owens had told me.

And there indeed, it was. Hanging by a short wire from the ceiling, ironically upstaged by a fluorescent lamp, was the least impactful world record I had ever seen. It was the world's longest-lasting light bulb. It was turned on first in 1901 to light the way to the fire engines and it has never gone out since — with the exception of three power failures and two building transfers.

This, however, is not a very unusual occurrence as there are many more, probably hundreds, of what are known as centenary bulbs, bulbs lit for more than 100 years, dotted

Donal Hayes tracks down the world's longest lasting light bulb in San Francisco and bemoans the decision to introduce CFL alternatives

all over the US and Europe. Back in the day, they were blown glass with tungsten filaments. And they were built to last.

There is a web cam pointed at the Livermore light and, with delicious irony, this is the third web cam, the first two have burnt out.

In the first few decades of the 20th century the competition was



Donal Hayes is thrilled when he finds some traditional light bulbs as the CFL bulbs don't fit most of his lamps.

Picture: Dan Linehan

fierce to make the longest lasting bulb. When Edison launched his first bulb, it advertised 1,500 bright hours. It wasn't long before Philips was offering a bulb that gave you 2,500 hours and there was talk of an eastern European bulb that glowed for 10,000 hours. Clearly they were competing themselves out of business.

In 1924 in Geneva a cartel called Phoebus was formed by the world's light bulb manufacturers with one express purpose — to reduce the lifespan of the light

bulb. By the end of the conference all had agreed to reduce the life span of their bulbs to a maximum 1,000 hours. For many companies it meant spending more money to reduce the quality and life expectancy of the bulbs but within a few years they had all achieved their goal.

The theory of "built-in obsolescence" became integral to the American economy and a serious contributor to its financial recovery. The manufacturers of toasters, radios, clothes and, most impor-

tantly, the automobile industry warmly embraced the planned depreciation of their products. The increase in production and sales was used as justification for this borderline malpractice.

But that was at a time of abundance, a time of limitless resources, the start of the consumer society. Style, fashion and design were the words of the day as people started shopping for pleasure rather than out of necessity.

Ironically again, the light bulb has always been the symbol for

good ideas and innovation and yet it is one of the earliest and best examples of planned obsolescence.

And now, 80 years later, we are being legally bound to leave the traditional light bulb behind to move to CFL light bulbs. They cost 10 times more than the old bulbs and last about as long as they did in 1924. They don't fit most of my lamps, they have mercury in them so if you break one you should, technically, call the EPA, they also take forever to light up and give off a weird blue light. But I hate them mostly because I feel I'm being conned.

This is obsolescence with muscle. On the face of it, bulbs that last longer can only be a good thing, right? But little research has been done and no one appears to have looked at the history. We stand outside beneath electric patio heaters and we ban 60w bulbs.

The top five CFL manufacturers that will benefit from this law have a very strong overlap with the companies who started Phoebus in Geneva 85 years ago. Surely, this is a lucky coincidence.

In Kinsale, today, a few months after the European fatwa on light bulbs, a few months after the order of verboten has been handed down, I spot a cluster hiding in my local super market. I put four into my basket, then another four but I don't want to start a run here.

At the checkpoint, the manager is casually keeping an eye on commerce and is more than surprised when I come up and hug him and whisper, "Viva la Resistance, Viva la Resistance".