

were both besotted with each other.' Apparently Teresa had to make up her mind quickly. The story goes that Frank proposed to her as they were crossing the river by ferry. When she asked for time to think about it, he told her she had 15 minutes before they reached the other side. The couple were engaged for over a year before they were married, on 15 July 1957, at St Michael's, Houghton-le-Spring, followed by a honeymoon in the Lake District. The marriage would last for nearly 50 years, broken only by Teresa's death in January 2004. She became the bedrock of Frank's life as he began concentrating on building the family business.

2 'PICKING CHERRIES OFF A TREE' — THE BINGO BOOM

When the six feet seven inch frame of Father Jeremiah O'Callaghan loomed above the counter in the South Street shop one day in the late 1950s, no one had any idea that his request would be the catalyst for utterly changing the business. He asked John Louis if he could supply him with bingo tickets for the next parish fund-raiser. 'No problem at all, Jerry. I'll sort that out for you,' responded John Louis as the priest left the shop, immediately turning to Frank and saying, 'You can do that, Frank'.

Frank made investigations and discovered that W S Cowell Ltd of Ipswich printed the Bernard series of bingo tickets. 'So I bought them, and you could buy them in eight different colours, and 1,800 combinations, and that was it.' When the tickets arrived, Frank laboriously pinned them all into separate books. Cowell's had begun printing bingo tickets at the beginning of the Second World War. The Royal Navy believed that bingo was the ideal game for keeping naval ratings relaxed yet alert while they were at sea. They wanted tickets to supply the Mediterranean fleet but paper was even scarcer in Malta, the fleet's base, than in the UK. The Navy asked for help from the Malta branch of the naval outfitters, Bernard's of Harwich. Bernard's acquired the copyright to the combinations which were in use and had the tickets printed by Cowell's, which had previously done work for Bernard's.

Father O'Callaghan will have known just how successful bingo sessions were in raising funds for the church. The Catholic Church had never held the extreme views about gambling taken by other churches and had made the most of the minor changes in the law which had made it possible for quasi-commercial games of bingo to be held, providing the profits all went to charity. So widespread was the use of bingo for fund-raising throughout the Catholic Church that many participants were convinced the game had been invented by the Church.

Of course, the origins of the game went back much further. Something similar was being played by working women in London in the early eighteenth century when the first state lottery was also organised. Illegal, private lotteries were also popular, particularly

with women, who would pay as little as a halfpenny for a ticket. The game was taken up by the Royal Navy in Malta in the early nineteenth century and eventually given official approval under the name of 'tombola'. The British army had adopted 'house' by the beginning of the twentieth century. The elements of the game were well-established, using the numbers 1 – 90, with five figures in each row, marked off as the numbers were called out from balls drawn from a bag. Frank's father told him how he had played bingo in the trenches. Many servicemen brought the game back with them, introducing it to servicemen's and working men's clubs. Although commercial gambling was effectively outlawed, the game was illicitly played up and down the country and was particularly popular at fairgrounds and seaside resorts. During the inter-war years the name 'bingo' began to be applied to the game. The claim that the name originated in the USA is disputed, with evidence suggesting it was already in use in England around the same time. It was only in the 1950s that the new name overtook the use of 'tombola' or 'housey-housey'. Even when Frank Cronin established a separate company to handle the bingo business, he combined the two more traditional names for the game by calling it Tombola House Ltd.

Father O'Callaghan was certainly pleased with the service Frank gave him. As the word spread, other priests and parishes began placing orders for tickets. The firm also began supplying working men's clubs, which were particularly strong in the north-east, with 30 or more in Sunderland alone. All this quickly made the original Sunderland premises too small. In 1959 Frank moved the printing operation to an old flour mill in Wilson Street North, in the area known as Sheepfolds on the northern side of the river. The mill was bought for pennies, remembered Frank,; it was 'cheap space'. He could use the basement for the heavy printing machinery and the three upper floors for lighter equipment. Having more storage space was equally important not only for the increasing volume of paper the printing presses were consuming, but also because there had to be a separate picking point for every customer. 'Initially you

take what you can manage with the coppers you've got. I didn't pay very much for it ... It was a foot-in-the-water exercise – you don't dive in until you know what the temperature is.' He never believed in leasing or renting assets – when one supplier later offered to provide an orange-juice machine for the staff canteen provided Frank bought the orange juice from him, Frank refused because he wanted to own the machine – and always avoided borrowing money. Ray Brown, who joined the company in 1963, remembered that 'Frank was always a very careful person, he would not go into debt for anything'.

Edward Thompson's success with local churches and working men's clubs showed that there was obvious potential for bingo on a commercial scale. Loopholes in the law already made it quite easy to establish regular bingo sessions in many parts of the country. Mass games were common in the holiday camps which sprang up after the war, raising many thousands of pounds for charity. Reforms intended to regulate gambling actually opened the floodgates to commercial bingo. The Betting and Gaming Act, 1960, not only made it legitimate to establish bingo clubs provided stake money was returned to the players, but also made it possible to make a charge for the right to take part in a game.

The legislation came into effect on 1 January 1961 and the first commercial bingo club opened two days later. There were long waiting lists to join the new clubs and the first games attracted long queues of eager players. Within two years commercial bingo clubs had more than 14 million members. The game was criticised for attracting many older women on limited incomes, posing the danger that bingo threatened to turn them into gambling addicts, throwing away money they could ill-afford to lose. Even today women still make up three-quarters of bingo players. But Frank Cronin believed that bingo revolutionised the social lives of many women in the north-east. In a society dominated by male culture to an extent many would find difficult to comprehend half a century later, bingo clubs gave many working-class women a largely female social focus where it was possible for them to gather on their own

during the day or in the evenings. As one newspaper put it, 'A housewife's bingo stake is the equivalent of her husband's beer, baccy and betting money'. Frank would later tell a journalist that 'those halls are important. When they began in 1961, they were in their way a major part of the women's liberation movement in this country. They were a place where a lady could go for an evening, entirely on her own at a time when she could not go into a pub alone. She could meet friends, eat a snack and feel entirely at home. It was a revolution, especially in the north'. Recent research has confirmed that bingo clubs have made an important contribution to the social lives of many women.

The boom transformed Edward Thompson. The company's growth was phenomenal. Turnover doubled every year for several years. From less than a dozen employees in 1959, the company was employing more than 300 just six years later. From selling a few thousand tickets supplied by someone else every month, the company was printing 50 million each week by 1965. Thanks to his dexterity with numbers, Frank Cronin expanded the number of combinations for use with bingo tickets from less than 2,000 to nearly 17,000, keeping pace with the incessant growth in the size of games run by the expanding commercial operators. The company branched out into sales of bingo equipment as well as bingo tickets and supplied customers at home and overseas. Edward Thompson printed the tickets, Tombola House handled the collation, binding and distribution of the books of tickets, and Wearside Electronics developed bingo equipment. New factories were built for Wearside Electronics in Wilson Street North and for Edward Thompson in nearby Richmond Street.

How did Frank Cronin achieve such success for Edward Thompson? Firstly, the company was in an advantageous position as bingo boomed. The firm drew on its earlier experience in selling bingo tickets to local churches and working men's clubs. It was driven by Frank's outstanding mathematical talent and his entrepreneurial spirit, determined to make the most of every opportunity which came along. Knowing little about the game,

many newcomers to the industry turned to Frank Cronin, still just 27 when the boom began, for help and advice. Frank was happy to advise them. 'You had to think about the mathematics from the start because the trouble was that your customers weren't mathematicians so you guided them through the whole thing, really. I would have to tell them how to do it.' Word spread about his knowledge and fantastic mathematical ability. People in the industry would come to him with ideas for games and he always helped them to work out the details. Edward Thompson gained the reputation for being 'the bingo people', to the extent that gaming inspectors even spent part of their training at the company.

One of the firm's earliest commercial bingo customers was a local cinema chain and in the long-term the most successful commercial bingo operators would emerge from the national cinema chains. Cinema-going had been in decline since the end of the Second World War. Although the number of people visiting a British cinema reached a record of more than 31 million weekly admissions in 1946, this figure fell to 21 million in 1956 and 10 million in 1960. The decline would continue until the mid-1980s. It was a sign of social change – as prosperity returned, more people could afford to rent or buy their own televisions while the advent of a teenage culture brought alternative recreation for young people, previously one of the staple cinema-going groups. But cinema chains were faced with the problem of what to do with the huge picture palaces which had been built during the heyday of film. Some were demolished, others were turned into dance halls, concert halls and bowling alleys, but none of these alternative uses lasted long. For the cinema operators, bingo proved a lifeline; for others, it proved an opportunity.

Initially cinema operators devised what was called cine-bingo. Recently, this term has been revived to describe bingo played in front of a cinema screen, with a live caller linking several games. The cine-bingo devised in the early 1960s was designed to attract more customers through cinema doors by putting on a bingo session between programmes. As one cine-bingo operator told

Frank, he had to give his customers what they were asking for.

But Frank Cronin believes that the move away from cine-bingo, abandoning films altogether in favour of converting cinemas into bingo clubs, began not with the national chains but with fairground operators. Among them was local showman Max Testo who had been running bingo games at fairs for years (he would later call his chain of bingo halls, 'Fair World'). With cine-bingo taking away business from fairground bingo, Max became one of the first to take a redundant cinema and turn it into a bingo club; he was also one of the first customers to ask Frank for larger combinations. 'The thing about Max was that if you gave him something that worked, he would come along for something that worked better, and something that worked better again, and he pushed the boat out, and the big cinema chains followed him, rather than the other way round. The big show people were more into bingo than the cinemas were.' Another showman was Bill Noble who founded the Noble Organisation.

Many of the cinemas supplied by Edward Thompson on the cine-bingo circuit would become bingo clubs. All the national cinema chains turned to bingo, from Rank and ABC to Granada and Essoldo. Rank started turning cinemas into bingo halls from 1961, transforming many local Odeons and Gaumonts into Top Rank Social Clubs, while the first ABC conversion in Walthamstow retained the ABC name as the Alpha Bingo Club. Where the cinema chains had ventured, the dance halls followed, for they too were fighting declining popularity. The most significant example was Mecca Dance Halls. Under Eric Morley, who also introduced bingo based on 75 numbers to the UK from the United States, Mecca not only converted existing dance halls but also bought up old cinemas for conversion into bingo clubs. Mecca's rapid progress highlights the astonishing growth of the game – by February 1961, one month after the new legislation came into effect, Mecca was already using 50,000 books of bingo tickets every week. By June it was selling half a million every week, with an average of 150,000 players every day. They were attracted by free publicity in the press,

celebrity callers, from Diana Dors and Cilla Black to Max Bygraves and Tommy Steele, and prizes which as well as cash featured exotic foreign holidays, jewellery and even dishwashers, an almost unheard-of luxury at the time. The National Golden Scoop Club, linking several hundred clubs together, was able to offer cash prizes exceeding £4,000, worth in excess of £100,000 today, based on the change in average earnings.

Such linked games – which strictly-speaking were illegal – used the larger combinations devised by Frank Cronin. These were a critical factor in the company's success. With much more valuable prizes at stake, and hundreds of participants, larger combinations reduced the risk of fraud and the likelihood of multiple winners (bingo players hated the idea of sharing their winnings and the idea that one player could win the jackpot was one of the main attractions of bingo). Frank had begun devising his own combinations when his original supplier failed to meet Edward Thompson's request for more tickets in response to demand. When he was told he could not have the supplies he needed to meet his orders, Frank decided he would have to replicate the tickets himself. 'They told us at one point that they could only let us have 3,000 a month, although we were selling 10,000 a month with ease. We thought about it and decided to print our own cards.' Since Frank did not own the copyright, this got him into trouble, despite the fact, as he strongly pointed out, that the supplier had failed to fulfil his order. He had to pay compensation for copyright infringement although his negotiating skills ensured that 'they did not get the money they were looking for'.

'Bingo was getting into its stride and before long the printing of bingo cards was our main concern,' Frank would later tell the local newspaper. The challenge of producing ever larger combinations appealed to Frank's mathematical brain. He knew that, given every game used a pool of 90 numbers, with every ticket featuring a selection of 15, there were in theory more than 45 thousand million million different combinations (45, 795, 673, 964, 460, 816, to be exact). Frank seized the chance to devise his own

combinations – ‘What I liked to do’, he would say, ‘was to move faster than the other guys ... normally they were chasing me rather than ahead of me.’

He began with 3,000 and would eventually reach 16,800. This, he remembered, ‘put the competition in real trouble’. From the outset he made sure he owned the copyright of the new combinations. One unique characteristic was that every ticket differed from the next by five numbers, which, Frank had calculated, was the mathematical optimum. The tickets of most rivals differed by only two numbers per ticket. For commercial bingo operators, Frank’s system proved very attractive, with its larger combinations and numbering scheme, guaranteeing a single winner in 90 per cent of games. It gave Edward Thompson a clear advantage over its rivals and would turn the company into one of the largest of its kind in the world. Even today, Frank says, ‘There is no other combination in the world which works as well as ours’. According to Ray Brown, ‘The Edward Thompson combination was generally recognised as being the best you could get’. This helped the company to claim Rank, the cinema chain, and Mecca, the dance hall group, as major customers as they became two of the leading bingo club operators in the country. They chose Edward Thompson precisely because other suppliers could not match Frank’s larger combinations which made big bingo sessions possible.

Frank’s facility with numbers was awesome. Often he would calculate answers in his head or simply make a few calculations on a scrap of paper. His skill was shown when Frank’s combinations came under closer scrutiny. As the bingo club chains grew in size, the clubs were ever more anxious to prevent the nightmare of hundreds of winners. In the late 1960s Frank was asked to devise a completely new game for Top Rank, the bingo offshoot of the Rank Organisation. One day he received a call from Top Rank’s managing director who told him that a professor of maths had been asked to analyse the game and had concluded it would indeed yield hundreds of winners. Asked to visit Top Rank’s headquarters in

London, Frank took the train from Sunderland the following morning and, on reaching the office, was left alone for an hour with the pile of computer listing paper containing the complex mathematical analysis made by the professor. When the managing director came to see him, Frank told him that he had marked up the errors in the professor’s analysis. Although he was impressed with the professor’s work, he was convinced that the game was sound and committed himself to underwriting the risk of having more than one winner. Frank, of course, was right. As he later said, ‘The motivation for making sure a game works is because it is your livelihood, not an academic exercise’.

In the early days producing combinations was laborious and time-consuming. Linda Holden joined the firm from school in 1966. She remembered Frank interviewed her while he sat with his feet on the desk. She began on the switchboard in the office above Wearside Electronics before moving to accounts. For a time she was also part of the team of young women working on combinations. Each line on every ticket had to be checked manually against all other previous lines, the details of which were entered in green ledgers. Tom Clark recalled how counters were used to work out new combinations. It would take a full day to compile six bingo tickets with new combinations of numbers. When the Richmond Street factory was completed in 1965, it included a ‘Computations Room’ containing files of 250,000 bingo cards stretching back four years, covering every combination printed by the firm.

Edward Thompson occupied an almost unchallenged position in the industry for many years but it was not without rivals. The company met the competition and retained and expanded its customer base by its emphasis on service. One of Frank’s maxims was never to say no to a customer – he always took the order first and only then began thinking how it could be met. This was his instinct from the very moment he joined the business and the bingo boom simply reaffirmed it. In London, for instance, the company won a lot of business because it offered delivery in days rather than the six or seven weeks quoted by rivals. ‘It was so easy,’

remembered Brian Walsh, who joined the company as a salesman in London in 1966, 'it was like picking cherries off a tree.'

One of the reasons all this worked was because of the able lieutenants and hard-working employees Frank recruited. Frank was always in control of the business, making every important decision, but he soon realised he could not run the ever-growing business single-handed. Over the years he gathered together a committed group of managers. Alan Crawford was probably the first when he was invited to become Frank's partner in Tombola House. His family bookbinding firm, Mawson's, based in Villiers Street in Sunderland, had worked for Edward Thompson for a long time, and Frank valued his expertise. Eventually Alan Crawford sold his stake back to Frank and returned to the family business.

Three other managers from the early years of the bingo boom were Jim Hennessy, Tony Strutt and Ernie Dawson. 'Jim Hennessy', said Frank, 'would have walked through fire for me'. He had been working at Pemberton's paper mill when Frank recruited him to manage the bingo section, where he became works manager. Born and bred in Gateshead, he was a tough man who had served in the Royal Navy during the war but he was very fair and earned the respect of the staff. Although he could be dour, he was, said Frank, 'autocratic in a genial sort of way ... that requires a tremendous amount of skill'. For a number of younger men working their way up through the business, Hennessy was an influential mentor. Frank contrasted him with Tony Strutt. Coming from the family which helped to found Strutt & Parker, Strutt was the great-grandson of the second Lord Rayleigh. With his cut-glass accent and aristocratic origins, he could scarcely have been more of a contrast to Hennessy. Twenty years older than Frank, Strutt had flown with the RAF during the war, become a test pilot, and attained the rank of group captain. Ray Brown recalled that he was a man of many parts. He had suffered a broken jaw from a biplane accident in Iraq during the 1930s, taken part in the 1936 Winter Olympics and designed a flight simulator. Like Ray Brown, Strutt also came from Pyrex, and directly approached Frank when Wearside Electronics was being

developed. His experience in electronics made him an ideal appointment and he helped to design the first bingo equipment, including blower machines and scoreboards. He stayed with the business for several years and made a valuable contribution. Ernie Dawson had been in the same class as Frank at school. Frank appointed him in 1966 as the firm was growing rapidly to help him handle sales and marketing.

Frank recruited several young men who later became instrumental in helping to run the business. Tom Clark, Ray Brown, Ray Smith and Brian Walsh would all become directors. Looking back on the people he assembled, Frank concluded that 'we had a fabulous team'.

Frank gained great satisfaction from making jobs available for local people. The number grew steadily, climbing from 300 in 1965 to 500 five years later. At a time when the town's traditional employers were in decline – headlines in the local newspaper spoke of battles to save jobs at yards like Swan Hunter and the closure of others, such as the Palmers' Yard – Frank was conscious that the job opportunities offered by Edward Thompson were a precious commodity. He knew many households depended on the wages of each of the people he employed. They often worked day and night shifts, supplemented by casual staff employed during holidays. It was commonly believed that you had to be a Catholic to work at Edward Thompson but this story developed only because Frank often employed young men and women who were leaving St Anthony's, one of the local Catholic schools. Frank's father, John Louis, who had grown up during a period when Catholics were still fighting for acceptance in British society, firmly believed that every single employee was Catholic and Frank was content for him to do so.

Frank believed in looking after his staff. When a new factory was built in Richmond Street, Frank made sure it was equipped with a canteen, surgery, sick bay and nurse. Vending machines provides drinks during breaks and employees worked to music piped from records played on a radiogram in an upstairs office. Frank knew

everyone's first name and insisted on being called by his first name. He knew something about each employee and their families. Linda Holden recalled how this young dynamic businessman 'gave you confidence in yourself, he looked after you, you felt part of a team'. There were annual outings and an annual staff dance, held originally at the Mecca Ballroom in Sunderland. He would help out staff who were in trouble and encouraged them to come to him if they had any problems. He was a strong believer in training and encouraged staff to take day-release courses to improve their qualifications. A bonus scheme gave workers the chance to increase their earnings. The first one paid by Frank was worth three times average wages. Until the 1980s, Frank recalled, bonuses were 'always fantastic' and a great incentive – 'the work got done all the time'.

The mill in Wilson Street North was only ever a short-term solution. Spread over four storeys, with wooden staircases and squeaky floors, it was never a practical proposition. While the printing works was ideally located in the basement, any waste paper had to be hauled up to the fourth floor for baling before being sent down again. The first new building was the factory to house Wearside Electronics, erected next door to the mill in 1963. Frank had the foresight to realise that the business would need even more space and he soon began acquiring more property around the mill, mainly in Richmond Street. The company's healthy cashflow – and the impressive margins the business enjoyed from its commanding position during the early days of commercial bingo – made it possible to buy every property he wanted. Brian Walsh remembered that the company was awash with cash. Visiting Sunderland to collect reimbursement for his expenses, the accountant, Alec Oliver, paid him from wads of notes in his back pocket – 'it was phenomenal'. The business, remembered Madge Johnson, who joined the company in 1967, 'was printing money' in the 1960s.

Work began on a second purpose-built factory in Richmond Street in 1964. Completed a year later at a cost of £25,000, it contained offices, a despatch department and printing and

composing rooms, housing 13 Heidelberg presses consuming 50 tons of paper each week.

This was all the result of what seemed to be the unstoppable growth in bingo. As one newspaper put it at the time, 'The big bingo bubble shows no signs of bursting'. It had, continued the paper, become 'part of the British way of life, like football, cricket and working men's clubs'. Twenty million visits were being made each week to bingo clubs across the country, compared with just five and a half million cinema visits. During 1967-68 the number of commercial bingo clubs increased from 1,634 to 2,254. In one week alone, three new clubs opened in Newcastle, including a city-centre club with a capacity for 1,800 players which enrolled 19,000 members before opening day. This was not unusual. Another club of a similar size opened in Scunthorpe with 6,000 paid-up members. Taking into account working men's clubs, village and church halls, kiosks and fairgrounds, it was reckoned that the actual number of groups regularly playing bingo was over 20,000.

Given this enormous growth, it was hardly surprising that, as Frank Cronin put it, 'it was hands on everywhere' at Edward Thompson. When Ray Brown joined the company, he worked evenings even while he was serving his notice at his previous employer – 'they were just so busy'. To cope with orders, Frank organised a twilight shift from six until nine in the evening for young girls and older women. Once an order had been completed – and the girls in the factory would often work from eight in the morning until ten in the evening, six or seven days a week, alongside the twilight shift, to meet deadlines – the completed books of tickets were loaded into the company's growing fleet of vans for distribution all over the UK. Even the cavernous Standard Vanguard estate belonging to maintenance manager John Hare was pressed into service at peak times. By the end of the 1960s there were 60 vans delivering tickets as well as a UK sales force of 15 and a service depot with five staff in Dublin. Madge Johnson recalled night shifts had to be introduced in the office in order to process the huge number of invoices. In his office, Frank Cronin had a wall map

of the UK covered in pins marking the location of clubs served by the company. Customers ranged from local clubs to national chains. The most important was Top Rank, the bingo offshoot of the Rank Organisation, which was buying 85 per cent of its bingo tickets from Edward Thompson by the late 1960s.

Frank Cronin often travelled down to London to meet Top Rank's chief buyer, Alex Slatter, but he disliked staying in hotels. Brian Walsh was tasked with making any bookings. One of Frank's foibles was an insistence that All Bran should be available at breakfast. There would be hell to pay if it wasn't, and Brian often had to buy a box from the nearest shop. Eventually Frank would take to travelling with a box in his suitcase. Frank also hated air-conditioning systems and resented hotels where he was unable to open the window. Instead of hotels, Frank liked to stay in Tottenham, at the home of Len Jenkins, the manager of the Star bingo club in Bruce Grove, and his wife Doris. Brian was courting their daughter Beth at the time but was just completing his long convalescence after a kidney infection, and was at a loose end. Frank heard all about this from Len and one morning threw his car keys at Brian and told him he would be driving Frank to meet with Cowell's in Ipswich. It was after that journey that he offered Brian a job, wanting to cut down his own sales trips to London. Three months later, after training in Sunderland, Brian took over responsibility for selling bingo tickets in London. He was paid £10 a week, with £5 guaranteed, and earned commission of 2.5 per cent on all sales over £200 – 'I earned a fortune in those days'. His area quickly expanded beyond London to cover the south coast with its seaside resorts, and extended north to Cambridge and west to Wales. 'There was not a single bingo club I did not visit.'

Frank continued to come down to London to visit Alex Slatter and Brian remembered how they often ended up in Soho at Raymond's Revue Bar with its scantily clad girls. When one of them came over to take orders for drinks, Frank, a teetotaler, asked for a glass of milk. The girl replied politely that they did not serve milk but Alex Slatter beckoned her over. He whispered to her that if she

found a glass of milk, record sales of whisky would follow, for Frank was just lining his stomach in anticipation of the rest of the night. Frank got his milk.

On his trips to London Frank liked to be given a challenge. On one occasion Brian Walsh asked him to see if he could sign up the small chain of Dara bingo clubs, which he had been wooing in vain for several months. Within 24 hours Frank had set up an appointment with the managing director, Brian Tressider. Frank rarely used bad language but when he came back from the meeting he swore at Brian. He told him he could not have picked a more difficult person to sell to – Tressider turned out to be the London agent for Bernard's bingo tickets. But in a testament to Frank's persuasive powers, Tressider had given Brian Walsh a trial order within the week which eventually led to Edward Thompson supplying all seven clubs in the chain.

The scale on which bingo was played alarmed politicians and by the late 1960s there were veiled threats from the government that new legislation would bring an end to commercial bingo. The 1968 Gaming Act did impose strong regulations over an industry which had previously been largely unregulated but the major bingo club chains, thanks to the opposition organised by Eric Morley of Mecca and the widespread popularity of the game, emerged largely unscathed. The new law reinforced the dominance of the national chains as many independent clubs closed because they could not meet the stringent new regulations. There was also consolidation among the chains. In 1970 the Star Group, the largest of the chains, with 114 clubs and two and a half million members, took over the clubs operated by ABC, while in 1973 Ladbroke acquired the Essoldo clubs, renaming them Lucky Seven Bingo. Edward Thompson continued to expand. In 1970 two more floors were added to the Richmond Street factory, when a large art department was also established. By then, the company was the largest manufacturer of bingo tickets in the world, turning out one hundred million every week. It was, remembered Ray Smith, a business 'on the move' under a 'dynamic and very aggressive' Frank Cronin.

Edward Thompson did not just sell bingo tickets. Frank had seen the potential in supplying all the equipment and accessories needed by bingo clubs. This too was driven by customer demand. From an early date the company had printed club membership cards, and, under Tony Strutt, Wearside Electronics developed equipment for many different aspects of the game, including blower machines (the traditional method of calling by drawing numbers from a bag had been replaced by the blower which selected numbers from plastic balls in glass cabinets) and scoreboards. As prizes increased in value, more secure alternative methods were sought to the original blowers which were unsophisticated and easy to manipulate. Through Wearside Electronics, Edward Thompson later introduced a new bingo random selector, described as 'the first major automatic computerised Bingo unit which involved a patented selection process and gave a security system which would meet the most stringent demands'. Many of these ideas came from Frank. He believed innovation came from solving problems rather than an isolated spark of genius: 'The problem came and then I would scratch my head and then you would bring in the engineers ... and eventually you'd get a solution'. One example was the ball-varnishing machine Frank dreamed up. The numbers on the surface of the plastic bingo balls were printed in black ink but they tended to fade after the balls had been jostled together in the blowers time after time. To make the numbers, and thus the balls, last longer, Frank came up with the idea of coating the balls in varnish, a simple and very cost-effective solution.

The constant improvement made by clubs to the facilities they offered brought even greater opportunities. With so many people wanting to play the game, the clubs, noted one press article, very soon 'exploited it with lush surroundings, bigger prize money, cosier club amenities: everything to keep the clients, mostly middle-aged women, content'. The licensing authorities would consider applications to serve alcohol only if the clubs indicated that they would be moving away from the traditional cinema seating by

installing tables and chairs which gave players more space. Brian Walsh found a firm based in Derbyshire which was already supplying clubs with a fixed unit of a table and four seats. The company also began quoting for the conversion work involved in the modernisation of clubs, such as levelling the raked flooring. This led Brian to move to Sunderland to concentrate on selling everything other than bingo tickets, from office equipment and electronic bingo machines to public address systems and background music machines. This venture proved so successful – and won customers beyond bingo, such as supermarkets - that it would lead to the formation in 1975 of a contracts division within the company under Brian Walsh's direction. By the early 1970s, it was said of the company that 'so wide has the diversification been on the bingo side since the first bingo tickets were printed that the company could now take an empty building and furnish it as a bingo hall'.

With such a strong presence in the UK market, it was not long before Frank Cronin began looking overseas for business. From the earliest days of commercial bingo the company had been receiving a steady trickle of enquiries from all over the world. They were infrequent and any orders were usually small but Frank believed that any sale was a foot in the door of another country. Once you gained a toehold, experience would teach him, it almost always brought repeat business. He believes that the first time he travelled overseas was to France although the first orders came from Australasia and North America. It was business which expanded only gradually. As Frank recounted, 'If you were a lad from Sunderland, going down to the big city, going down to London was overseas.'

One of the most important avenues for developing exports was the international exhibition circuit. The company regularly exhibited at what is now the Amusement Trades Exhibition International (ATEI) event, held every year in London, and Frank attended similar exhibitions around the world, from Rome and Paris, Melbourne and Sydney to Chicago and Los Angeles. For Frank

these were hugely important. In non-English-speaking countries they helped him with languages. They allowed him to meet his customers and heard what they thought about the company. He could see the latest technological developments and keep an eye on his rivals. Taking staff along helped them to understand that the company was looking ahead. And they were a source of new orders. Advertising, he believed, was much less effective. Selling itself not on price but on service, Edward Thompson one year had no hesitation in advertising under the slogan 'The Rolls-Royce of the Bingo Trade'. The company became well-known at the various exhibitions it attended because of the costumes Frank himself designed for the six sales girls on the stand. At one exhibition Frank overheard two men discussing where to start, with one rejecting the suggestion of the other, saying, 'No, first let's go and see what the Thompson girls are wearing'. The costumes changed every year, ranging from the Thompson tartan to a shimmering, glittering silver.

It was at the ATEI that the company was first approached by overseas bingo operators. It was another challenge to relish. As Frank later recollected, 'A great joy of the job was overcoming the problems of internationalising the market'. It had never been done before, bingo had never been so popular at home or abroad, and with so little competition it was an opportunity with huge potential. Frank threw himself into this new avenue with gusto. He did not confine himself to English-speaking countries, such as Australia and New Zealand, the United States and Canada. He was not only armed with an ability, like his father, to absorb languages, equipping him with enough of several languages to see him through many deals; he also had his mother's gift of mimicry, allowing him to speak each language with the same inflection as the person with whom he was negotiating. 'If it doesn't sound like their language,' he would say, 'they won't even listen.' Tom Clark learned a lot about selling from accompanying Frank on some of his early sales visits overseas. 'He realised,' said Tom, 'that the customer was the company.' For Ray Smith, who also travelled with Frank

overseas, 'he was a hell of a salesman'. As at home, the company sold on service, not on price, and a deal was always sealed with a handshake, never a written contract. Frank liked to handle all these enquiries himself. Taking Italy as an example, he quickly learned that the customer always wanted to hear from the man in charge even if there were language difficulties. 'The Italians are going to listen to the man who's the boss even if he's struggling with the language and talking rubbish, because he's the one who's telling the truth.' He disliked having interpreters, finding they interrupted the rhythm of negotiations. His reputation as a communicator would make him welcome wherever he went in the world.

As in the UK, the company eventually offered a complete bingo package to overseas operators. Jim Johnson was given a job by Frank Cronin in 1971 and has been there ever since. Ultimately joining the electronics business, Jim travelled all over the world to set up bingo games, from the United States to Brazil and South Africa. By the early 1970s, noted a newspaper article of the company, Edward Thompson was selling bingo tickets in 17 countries. It was even receiving enquiries from Bulgaria and the USSR. Sending bingo tickets overseas required logistical precision. Too heavy to be sent by air, they had to go by sea, a much longer journey which required careful planning if the tickets were to arrive on time at destinations often at the far side of the globe.