

The Academy of Plumbing 28

40 Years On: We're all computer drivers now

So the AOP, née AFAP, began forty years ago. I was twelve and messing about with my Dad's Praktica. I took it to the Farnborough Air Show that September loaded with a roll of tranny and excitedly took the film to Boots for processing. It came back as mounted slides, packed into that little yellow Kodak box, and I immediately went through them, one-by-one, with the little plastic hand-held slide viewer we'd also got from Boots. I was disappointed and annoyed. All I had was a whole load of distant aircraft silhouettes. That's how I learned to open up a stop when shooting against the sky.

I was a schoolboy, more interested in aeroplanes than photography. That came later. What I certainly wasn't was a computer operator. In August 1968 there was no such thing as a microprocessor. There were transistors, found in transistor radios, but our Bush telly was still stuffed with valves. Transistors were then still "discrete" components; they hadn't yet been

rendered onto sheets of silicon. It was an analogue world in every shape and form. Concorde, first flown in 1969, was equipped with analogue computers.

Ten years later I'd left Art School and was working on an 18-month job creating a slide library of all the listed buildings in County Durham for a charity called The Civic Trust of the North-East. I had a Nikon F2, a Weston and a 28mm Shift Nikkor. I was very proud of my F2 because, lacking a metering prism, it didn't need batteries to work. I liked that idea a lot. I was a photographer, and I was happy. My first encounter with a computer was when a friend, lecturing at Durham University, brought home an Apple II that had a primitive game on it. The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy was all the rage. I found the Apple II a curiosity: the game was quite fun, but so what? I reckoned the same of the Space Invaders game at the pub. "Nah", I thought, and went back to my F2 and my Fender Rhodes electric piano, with which I still played a lot of local gigs. Not a microprocessor in sight in my world.

I was given leave to ponder this Elysian lost world last month when I fetched up in South London to attend to an overwrought G4. In through the front door, up the stairs, along the landing through the darkroom and overwhelming smell of fixer and into the box-bedroom office, to be confronted by a small table covered in 35mm film cameras and lenses, including a battered black Nikon FM2 emblazoned with black tape to



The Digital Plumber

By Paul Ellis

hide its branding, as was de rigueur for photojournalists in the '70's! Talk about nostalgia!

This photographer was shooting mostly with a pair of Nikon D200s but continued to yearn for the days of HP5. He was a nice enough chap, clearly fairly busy, but had that slight air of un-worldliness exuded by the distractedly arty. His world was concerned with imagery, dear boy. These blasted computers are all very well but have feet of clay, y'know. Imagery is where it's at.

And yet, he was stuck. His computer didn't work. He could neither send nor receive email. All of his clients were sending him emails and expecting him to respond to them, and he couldn't. Eventually some would phone him, asking him why he hadn't replied to their emails. Those working in companies with IT staff clearly could barely grasp the concept that his email was broken: how could he function?

And that's the nub of it. He couldn't. Forty years ago he'd have had a phone call, followed by letters in the post, commissioning him for work. He'd have delivered his trannies by hand, registered mail or courier. He'd eventually have received a cheque in the post. Now he must email JPEGs and get paid by BACS. What is he, primarily? A photographer? No. Along with everyone else in the industrialised world carrying out work that is not exclusively manual labour, he is now primarily a computer operator. He happens to use it for imaging, because he works with



images, but principally he uses it for electronic communication and business administration. He was in the process of learning the hard way that in 2008, drowning as we now are in microprocessors, no functioning computer means no functioning business. If your computer is broken, you might as well stay in bed.

There's a moral here, for this revolution has crept up on us almost imperceptibly. I hope that the following doesn't come across as hectoring, because it certainly isn't intended as such, but no matter what we might think we primarily are, we are all now actually, first and foremost, computer drivers. Professional computer drivers, at that. Whereas there might still be a case made for delegating digital chores or tricky retouching to savvy assistants and specialists, there are no longer any reasonable grounds for not being in control of your own computer. The era of the analogue photographer, man-as-an-island, is dead.



in the same way that it isn't strictly necessary to understand the physics of reciprocating engines to drive a car. Anyone capable of the technical competence necessary to become an AOP member can master the general operation of a computer. So, if you feel you're not fully in control of the day-to-day working of your Mac, now's the time to change that.

But what when it breaks? Notice not "if", but "when". Like cars, computers require maintenance, break down and cost you money when you least need them to, and leave you stranded until you can organize a fix or replacement. Unlike cars, when they break they can also take your entire business with them. We're now so utterly dependent upon computers and Internet access for our businesses to function at all that our first priority is to ensure that computer failure doesn't stop us in our tracks.

To that end, and perhaps not before time, next month's column will be a bullet-point guide to full-time Macintosh and Internet availability, security, storage and backup. Until then, happy reminiscing.

PDFs of this and all my other IMAGE articles are available to download at www.thedigitalplumber.co.uk, each with live weblinks for your browsing pleasure. Go and get 'em.

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