

20 Years of HPCC

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Abstract

This paper summarises the history of the club, and also summarises how the book that Włodek and I edited to celebrate 20 years of HPCC, 'RCL 20', came about.

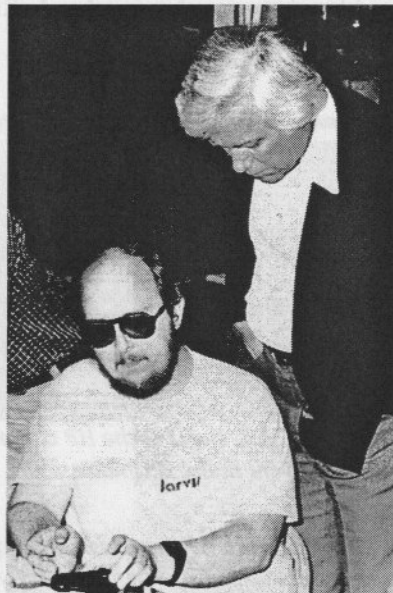
In the tradition of special editions of DVDs, I'm also going beyond the conference presentation and including behind-the-scenes details and an "editor's commentary" about what it took to create RCL 20 from scratch.

Introduction

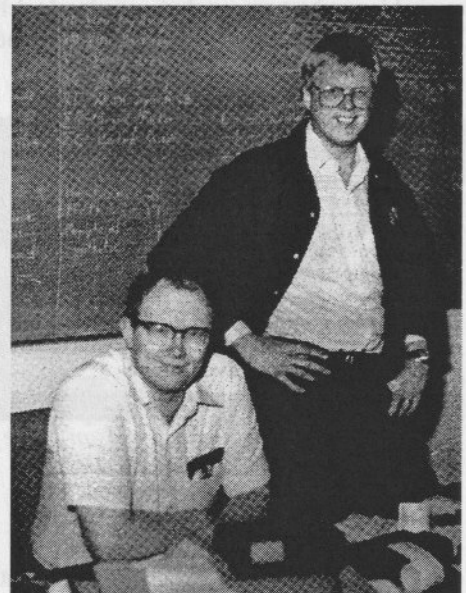
HPCC was formed in 1982 as PPC-UK, the British chapter of the international group PPC. The 20th Anniversary conference seemed a suitable time to look back over the history and development of the club. In thinking about how best to achieve this, it became apparent that it would make sense to set the club in the wider context of the development of personal computing devices. It also became clear that it would take more than a reminiscing issue of *Datafile* to do justice to what we wanted to say, and so early on, Włodek and I decided to write a book; but more about that later.

HPCC: Getting Started

Hewlett-Packard's introduction of the HP-35 in 1972 started a line of small personal computing devices that would continue through the HP-65, 67 and 41, and that ultimately created the need for user groups to support the use of these amazing little gadgets. In 1974, Richard Nelson started publishing *65 Notes* as the newsletter of what became the *HP-65 Users Club*. This provoked an identity crisis in 1977 when the HP-67 and HP-97 arrived, which was resolved by renaming the club to *PPC* (with unspecified derivation), and renaming the publication *PPC Journal*. The introduction of the HP-41C in 1979 helped to push PPC's growth to its peak in the early 1980s.



Jim deArras shows how adding memory to his HP-41C yields 831 registers, 1980



Richard Nelson & Keith Jarrett working on the PPC-ROM, 1981



PPC Eastern Conference, Philadelphia, USA, 1982



One of the initial meetings convened by David Burch to get PPC-UK started, 1982

By this time, many of those people who would ultimately become founder members of PPC-UK were members of PPC, but it wasn't until David Burch decided to write his letter to *PPC Journal* in early 1982 that the notion of creating a chapter, or locally organised group, of PPC members in the U.K. turned into a reality. By April 1982, David had had enough responses from around the country to start planning meetings, getting together material for a journal of our own, and even contemplating a conference. The first issue of what was to become *Datafile* was posted in the early summer, starting a publication that has been produced with almost alarmingly dependable regularity ever since.

Conferences & Meetings

The initial meetings of club members happened in places like Graeme Cawsey's house in Lechlade (near Swindon), and Zengrange's offices in Leeds, but these were clearly exceptions to whatever rules would follow. David felt that it was important to start PPC-UK with a bang, and that drove him to organise our first conference in the autumn of 1982, at the grand-sounding *Great Northern* railway hotel at King's Cross station in London. Not only did an unreasonable quantity of excitable geeks turn up, but we also had PPC founder, and honorary member number 1, Richard Nelson fly over from California to wave the official PPC (barcode) wand of success at us.



David Burch and Richard Nelson at the first PPC-UK conference, 1982



The PPC-UK stand at the HP computing event at the Barbican, 1983

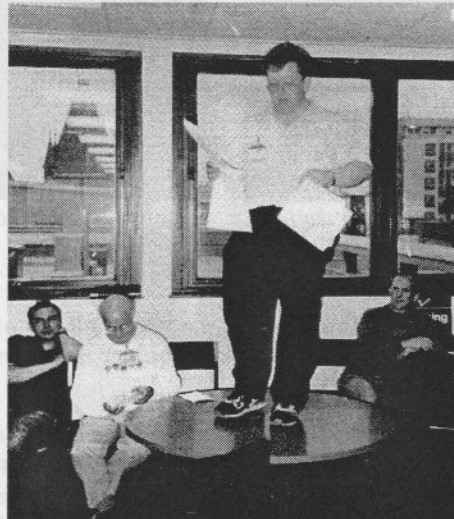
Instead of having a conference in 1983, PPC-UK took a stand at an HP-organised computing exhibition at the Barbican in London; that helped us get the message out to many ordinary users that support and information far beyond what was in the manuals was available. Since 1984, however, the club has concentrated on having at least one 'special' meeting per year.

There were conferences in each of 1984 and 1985 in Chelsea, but since 1987, there has been a regular pattern: a major conference every five years, and mini-conferences in intervening years—hence, in this 20th anniversary year, we have a major conference.

However, one meeting a year isn't enough to keep happy those people who wish to meet up more regularly, so various non-conference meeting schedules have been tried out over the course of the club's history. The most enduring has been the regular meeting at Imperial college in London, on the second Saturday of every month since 1983 (except when this is Easter Saturday, when it's the third Saturday instead). Other regular meetings outside of London have also happened from time to time, as have one-off meetings, such as with Bill Wickes at HP Bristol, or at airports when particular people (or equipment!) worth meeting are passing through.

Datafile

The other thing David felt strongly about was the need to have a regular newsletter of some kind. As well as being a clear benefit of membership, it would also serve as the principal vehicle of participation for those who could never make it to a meeting. Its early issues were the clear sign that the new club was up and running, and, after the initial problem over whether we could use the name *HP Source*, it quickly became called *Datafile*.



*Mark Cracknell makes a stand
over an editorial decision*

David was the editor until the end of volume 4. Since then, the journal has been edited by the late Mark Cracknell, Les Finch, Roger Wiley, and presently Bruce Horrocks. During those periods when no volunteer has stepped up to take on the editorial task, an editorial committee has always condensed from the mist of the club's most active members to make sure that *Datafile* gets produced regularly even *without* an official editor. This mechanism of co-operative production is surely unique to HPCC, and is part of what keeps the club alive.

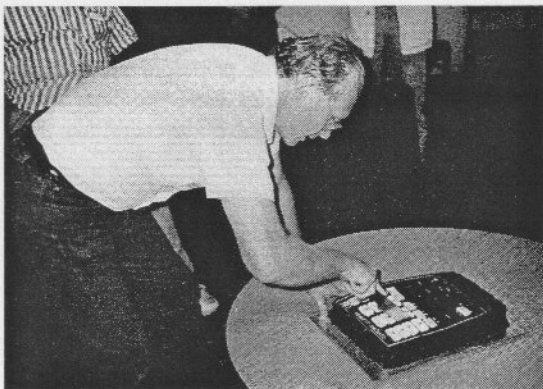
Datafile is now approaching the end of volume 21, having gone through various sizes, colours and flavours, with no apparent end in sight. For those of you without the space or inclination to have over one hundred issues on your shelves, Jake Schwartz has methodically and meticulously scanned the first 20 volumes into PDF format, and publishes them now on a single CD-ROM.

Growing up

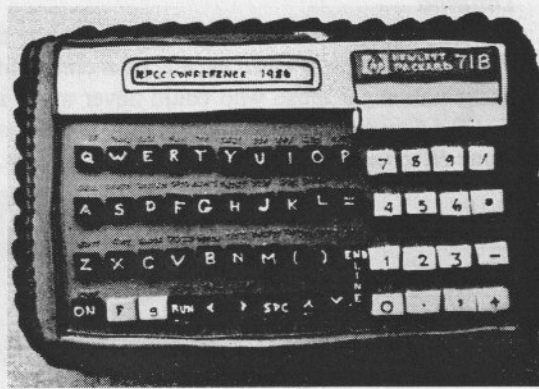
Being a British club, we have also acquired the appropriate elements of formality and bureaucracy over the years, including the club committee, the club bank account, the annual general meeting,

the treasurer's report and the club library. Perhaps most obviously, we also acquired a formal written constitution, which helps determine what the club is and isn't, and which is now printed in the club member pack to ensure that all members know the nature of what they've joined.

After the unexpected demise of PPC a few years after PPC-UK formed as a chapter of PPC, our committee decided it would be best to rename the club in a way that made it clear that the management of PPC had no claim on our club or its assets. Consequently, we became HPCC, which (according to the constitution) means "Handheld and Portable Computer Club" while allowing the alternative unofficial interpretation of "Hewlett-Packard Calculator Club". This has subsequently given the club the flexibility to discuss non-HP machines from time to time, and those members who occasionally get excited by this are pointed politely at the club's constitution.



Richard Nelson cuts a calculator cake baked by
Simon Bradshaw's mother



The 1986 conference HP-71B cake

HPCC still continues today, in no small part due to the heroic efforts of its volunteer committee, but also due to the continued and renewing enthusiasm its members seem to have for little computers, and the things one can do with them.

As long as HP and others continue to make interesting machines, and perhaps even when they no longer do, HPCC members will enjoy playing with them, working with them, and occasionally taking them to bits. They'll keep sharing ideas and solutions, even sometimes arguing about what can and can't be done with them, and about what might have been if only *obviously* good ideas or that *clearly* better way of doing things hadn't fallen by the wayside. And ultimately, they'll continue to use little gadgets as a tenuous pretext for learning and making friends long into the future.

Here's to HPCC's next 20 years!

RCL 20

At the start of 2002, I happened to be talking with Włodek about nothing in particular, when it came up that a particularly useful program of mine¹, originally published in the then-still-unnamed club journal in the summer of 1982, was still being used by at least one club member in 2002. I, in turn, mentioned this to my wife, and she suggested that perhaps we should mark this event in some way.

After some initial discussion, Włodek and I settled on the idea of putting together a collection of reminiscences of the first 20 years of the club in book form, to be published in time for the 20th anniversary conference in September 2002. It would include how HPCC got started, and how it

¹ *Dungeon of Death*, V1N2

developed, and would also let us write a few things in memory of members like Mark Cracknell, Gerry Rice and John French. The conference would also act as an immovable deadline for planning and scheduling, which helps to concentrate the mind when one is in the midst of writing and editing.

By creating a book, rather than just an extended conference presentation or a special issue of *Datafile*, we felt that we could create something that would mark a moment in time in a distinctive way, that would get down on paper what HPCC and HP calculators have been all about for us, and that could perhaps even be appreciated by those outside our world who wonder why on earth we're in it.

We also realised that if we were to have any hope of recouping the cost of actually publishing such a book, we ought to try to attract a readership beyond a subset of past and present HPCC members. This implied we should also be writing about the broader context of the development of personal computing devices, the user groups that have coalesced around them over the last generation, and what it is about these little machines that has sucked us all in, and ultimately changed our lives.

All this led us to wonder how best to organise the contents of such a book, and so in May 2002 we used a combination of dinner at my place, flip charts, whiteboards and *Post-It* notes to create three lists:

- potential topics addressing the areas we'd discussed
- potential authors to write about them, favouring HPCC members where it seemed right to do so
- a timeline of significant HPCC events as the basic structural element of the book

We then rated all the topics that we wanted articles about, and started allocating potential authors to them on an "if we're really lucky" basis.

As an interesting device in setting context, Włodek wanted to start with the science-fiction story that HP commissioned in the late 1970s, about the speculative future HP gadget nicknamed 'Beep'. We also wanted to include personal anecdotes by long-time calculator hackers, founders of calculator clubs, and the HP engineers who worked on the machines we've been using for so long. Finally, if we had time, we wanted to include smaller items, *Reader's Digest*-style, of quotes, facts, and other short space-filling items.

Ultimately, we would get almost everything we originally hoped for into the book, including the 'Beep' story (whose permission came through from HP at the last moment); only the 'filler' items were dropped, due to lack of time.

RCL 20: Making it happen

I took the zillion notes we'd produced in our planning meeting, typed them into a spreadsheet to calculate some initial word-counts, drew up a preliminary schedule, and wrote a letter of solicitation to be sent to potential contributors. Włodek had found a printing company who could print on our schedule to a reasonable budget. Much e-mail and telephoning went back and forth between us, revising and honing the plan and the ancillary information.

Meanwhile, life went on; pages flew from the calendar. The project was subjected to the usual random delays, business and academic emergencies and holidays that just jumped on us out of nowhere. When it seemed like we were about ready to roll, I wrote some restricted-access web pages based on the plan at that point, to act as a central source of information for the contributors as the project would progress.

Finally, in the wee small hours of July 24th, Włodek and I started sending out our solicitations to potential contributors. As the mostly positive and enthusiastic replies came in over the next few days, we knew that we might actually end up with something approaching our hopes when we

started. We also knew we were now *really* committed to making something happen that would live up to the efforts of the people we'd got involved.

August saw arriving articles, various communications with authors, and also a few further waves of solicitations as we thought of other people to get involved and chased up no-shows from the first attempt. We jiggled the plan to fit the material that was coming in, without losing sight of the overall goal. I kept the web site up-to-date with developments, and by early September I was making almost daily updates on progress, including in-progress edits, cover and font mock-ups, and other details.

In order to meet the nine-week start-to-print schedule we'd set ourselves, we were not only editing the book, we were copy-editing it, designing it and producing it as print-ready artwork, to be delivered on CD to the printers on or around September 8th. Consequently, the schedule, as published on the project web site, included this planned item from the beginning:

September 7th—much swearing at copy preparation products

Little did we realise that we would end up over budget on swearing by about 300%, despite a lot of expert assistance on Microsoft Word's foibles from my wife Paola, who knows more than any reasonable person should be required to about this crock of software.

In spite of our computers' best efforts to mangle and destroy our work, we managed to get the first 100 copies done, dusted and delivered on time, with (literally) a few hours to spare before the start of the 20th Anniversary conference in London. In fact, just enough time for me to write my conference presentation on my laptop! (And no, I did *not* use PowerPoint.)

RCL 20: Summary

RCL 20 contains:

- 190 A5 typeset pages, 28 articles by 20 authors and 2 editors
- a diversity of contributors:
 - the founders of PPC, CHiP, PAAHC and HPCC
 - 5 founder members of HPCC
 - 5 HP calculator engineers
- the stories of EduCalc & Zengrange
- the "Thank you, ...Beep!" short story

Although it took long days and sleepless nights, we're glad we did it, and we hope that it provides something of value to read both now and in the future.

I'd also like to take this opportunity to thank all the contributors once again for their excellent work under a tight schedule, my co-editor Włodek for putting up with me during the whole process, and my wife Paola for doing much of the heavy lifting during the project without complaining that she actually had better things to be doing.

RCL 20: bonus collector's edition special feature

It's become a new tradition on the DVD "special editions" of movies that the film-makers get to witter on for ages about how much effort went into their movie, and all the behind-the-scenes stuff that the average person doesn't know about (in some famous cases, the bonus features are better than the film).

So, I'm taking this opportunity to use the conference proceedings to cram in a bunch of extra material about what it takes to create a book from scratch, in these days of desktop publishing, e-mail and digital printing. Perhaps seeing the process in more detail like this will inspire you to write your own book (or, alternatively, scare you off the whole idea).

Feel free to fast-forward over this piece if you like.

RCL 20: Design and production

One of things we wanted to do was create a book that wasn't just interesting to read, but that would also stand out as well-designed, and that would bear physical and stylistic comparison with anything you can find in a bookshop today.

Despite both being computer geeks, my wife Paola and I happen to know something about design, and so we decided to see if we could apply our knowledge to the process of creating a coherent and attractive book design in the time available.

This meant addressing three areas:

- Overall book layout
- Choice of typefaces
- Cover art

It also meant taking on the task of actually formatting and laying out the whole book digitally. As it happens, this was not an additional burden, since our desire to have the book ready by the conference meant that we couldn't afford the time to involve anyone else to do this anyway.

Overall book layout

We arrived at an overall book layout by grabbing a bunch of representative books from our shelves, going through them, and noting particular design feature we liked or disliked. We then discussed general book conventions, and principles of design, including relevant user-interface and information design features, and generally cogitated for a while.

From all this, we derived things like:

- the dual title-only pages: the first internal page echoes just the title from the cover, and a matching page by itself, after all the introductions and before the *real* page 1 of the book, signals the actual start of the book proper
- the section and chapter structure of the book, and how it ought to be represented visually:
 - each section must start on a right-hand page, with a distinctive layout
 - each chapter must start on a right-hand page, with the left-hand facing page reserved for an introductory statement by the editors
- the user-interface feature that blank pages within the body of the book should have page numbers but no headings to clarify that they ought to be blank

