

Museum tells story behind every screen

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Jason Fitzpatrick's passion for computers gave birth to the idea of the Centre for Computing History.

GIVEN that the UK has museums dedicated to the likes of pencils (Cumbria), lawnmowers (Southport), and even baked beans (Port Talbot), it seems strange that there's never been a public exhibition devoted to the invention that's changed our world beyond all recognition - computers.

Until now, that is.

Earlier this year, the Centre for Computing History opened its doors in Haverhill. But this is no 'strictly for- the-geeks' exhibition of boring machinery. The centre is as much about the lives of the people behind the scenes - a tale of risks, betrayals, dramas and legal battles - as the computers themselves.

The idea for the museum came when a sprawling collection of vintage computers, belonging to curator Jason Fitzpatrick, began to spill out of control. Having filled every available space in his own house - and his mum's - Jason, who runs a design company, started storing them at the offices he shares with Elaine Collins.



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"I was always saying: 'God Jason, this place is just full of all this stuff ! What is it all about?'" laughs Elaine.

"So he started telling me all these stories about them, and I was really interested. I said: You should be writing all this down." Jason duly began cataloguing his collection online, "and then we realised there was a lot of potential in it because it wasn't being done anywhere in the UK," says Elaine.

"But at the end of the day there are very few people who want to go and see a load of machines on a shelf - it's the stories that are gripping. We thought the UK needs a dedicated museum that explores those stories."

Jason is frighteningly knowledgeable about the history of computers, but has a gift for relaying it in an engaging way, with tales ranging from the day a hung over Bill Gates first saw a computer advertised - and went on to become the richest man in the world - to the fact that the Japanese government had to re-mint the 25 Yen coin because they were all sitting at the bottom of Pac Man machines.

"Nothing's affected humanity like computers have," he says. "The average home has about 150 computers in mundane things like your fridge, washing machine, clocks, tellies. If we had computers taken away from us now, it would be like being taken back into the dark ages."

"You've got one in your pocket - a mobile phone is just a computer. But that phone is far more powerful than the computers that were used to put people on the moon," he says.

"And it's those facts that interest people," adds Elaine.

The pair set up a committee of prominent people from Haverhill's business community, and together they launched the centre in February. Interactive and accessible, the collection is aimed at absolutely everybody, as Jason explains: "The technology side is amazing for people who are interested in that kind of thing - a geek like me can go around and say 'Wow, I had one of them!'. But my other half and kids can come along and mess around on the computers and take something from it as well."

Not surprisingly the most popular area of the exhibition is the gaming room, packed with Ataris, arcade machines and GameBoys, with their clunky graphics and evocative bleeps. "We leave people in here for ages," grins Jason.

"These games are so simple, yet we loved them. Pong's probably the best example. If you take the best football game now and you take Pong, what's the difference? The 'Yes! Gotcha!' reaction is exactly the same. If you win, you beat the other person and that's what counts."

The reaction from the public has been fantastic: "People almost have orgasms over some of the machines, and you think 'steady on!' laughs Elaine. Donations have been pouring in too, from computers the size of living rooms to those that can be held in the palm of your hand - like the model of the US president's PC from blockbuster film Independence Day: "It was on the desk when the aliens blew up the White House," explains Jason.

In fact they've had so many donations that space is proving to be a problem. Currently the museum is on the ground floor of Jason and Elaine's offices, and has machinery packed into every room - even the ladies' loo - and plenty in storage too. They're hoping to move to a bigger site as soon as they can raise some funds. "We've got a silly amount of things," grins Jason.

"There about 3,500 things archived on the website, ranging from a magazine up to a big computer."

And his favourite? An Altair 8800, generally known as the first personal computer back in 1975 - Jason has the third one ever made:

"That's the jewel in our crown, because it was used by key people. I bid in binary for it on eBay - it's just a geeky thing to do - \$11,111. It went for less than that in the end, but it was a massive amount of money.

"But it's only going to get rarer as time goes on, and while I know there's other idiots out there who want these things, it'll have a value."

The centre's website is already being used worldwide as a resource centre, and Jason and Elaine are encouraging everyone to record their memories of computers on the site: "We want to look at the human side of it, the way it's affected our lives, so those stories are vital," says Elaine.

"It's not about just preserving machines of the past, it's about telling those stories and being inspirational to future generations."



The Centre for Computing History is at The Counting House, High Street, Haverhill. Viewing is by appointment only: call 0870 895 8606 to book, or visit www.computinghistory.org.uk for more information.

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