

Inside a museum with byte and big dreams

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Jason Fitzpatrick with the Alfair 8800, the first home computer from 1975

It's amazing to think that the humble mobile phone in our pocket packs way more punch than a supercomputer from 1975. Steven Russell discovers more - and hears about dreams for a state-of-art museum that would really put Haverhill on the map

YOUR reaction's just about typical, grins Jason Fitzpatrick. "People look at the Spectrum and ZX80 just as they've come in and say 'I remember them! I haven't seen one of those in 20 years!'"

Those Sinclair computers from the 1980s are among more than 1,500 items at the embryonic Centre for Computing History in Haverhill, designed to tell the story of the information age that's shaping our lives.

In one of the rooms another blast from the past flickers on a TV screen. The Binatone TV Master is a classic "pong" game of its era, offering four rudimentary activities: football, tennis, squash and . . . er . . . squash practice. It looks positively prehistoric alongside 21st Century whizzy graphics and sound, but in its day it was the bee's knees. Jason's certainly not one to denigrate the technology of yesteryear.

"You take the PlayStation 3 with the latest games. You can be playing away, two of you, and you'll go 'Y-e-s-s-s!'. You can have two old boys on that" - he nods at the Binatone - "and you'll also hear 'Yes!' It's the same fun. So do you really need all those graphics? It's like hopscotch in the playground; you don't need much to have fun."

This shrine to the microchip and the power of the binary system is born of Jason's passion for electronics and computing.



The Sinclair collection, brought to us by Sinclair Research of Cambridge and found in thousands of homes in the 1980s.

He's an Essex boy, from Dagenham, but has lived in Haverhill for more than 15 years. When Jason was eight or nine his uncle had an early computer. "A lot of these things were home-built, with wires everywhere, but to a nine-year-old it was 'space' and 'technology'; the future. Little lights flashed inside just like you saw on telly at the time, and I just thought it was the best thing in the world."

Then in 1980, when Jason was about 10, his dad got them a ZX80, which was closely followed by the ZX81 - "a little plasticky thing with 1K of memory! But it didn't matter, because I could program it to count to 10 or add up; little games; whatever. The very fact you could make this machine do what you wanted was everything."

Naturally, his career lay in electronics and computing. An early job was in the agricultural industry at Newmarket, designing computers to feed cattle the right food at the right time. He moved on to programme for the internet; and then set up his own multimedia company, specialising in website and brand creation, design for print, photography, video production and 3D animation. More than a decade on, Pure Energy employs 10 people.

Over the years, people aware of his consuming interest in computers offered him obsolete models. "I'm a bit of a hoarder, so I never said 'No'. I needed more and more space to put all this stuff." He also bought and accumulated equipment "like no-one's business".

So it came to be that vintage computers and related artefacts were scattered hither and thither: in Jason's loft and office, his mum's roofspace, and in spare corners at other companies' premises - "boxed up wherever I could find space".

And so it continued until the autumn of 2006, when Jason and Elaine Collins got chatting and realised they had the germ of something much bigger on their hands. Elaine's from Gold PR, and the two companies had worked together since 2003 on a number of projects, such as launching a local chamber of commerce in Haverhill and starting the Haverhill Business Awards.

"I'd had a pipedream for a long time, but I didn't necessarily think it was achievable," he admits. "When I spoke to Elaine about it, she did see something in it I might have missed, in that this is achievable, but it's got to be bigger than just me and the collection."

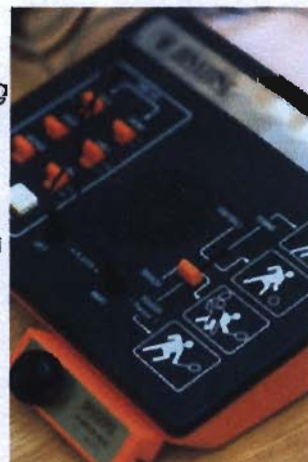
"People were fascinated and we realised they wanted to know about it. We spoke about it and sounded out opinion, mainly business opinion, and we got a committee together and it's moved on from there."

It has moved on. Those early musings led to the formation of the Centre for Computing History just before Christmas 2006. Jason's gathering of 150-plus vintage computers forms the core of the collection, which has been and continues to be swollen by welcome donations from firms and individuals.

Old computers fill much of the ground floor and two rooms upstairs, where Jason and Elaine's companies handily have their offices.

Already believed to be the only museum in the UK dedicated to computers and their social impact, its home at The Counting House, off the High Street in Haverhill and sponsored by landlord Gurteens, is very much a temporary base, however.

The bold vision is, eventually, to open a striking, purpose-built, modern building with exhibition galleries, activity areas, a cafe, research facility and auditorium. "We'd need to get folk in to talk about what it was like developing a computer; to get them to give presentations to the next generation coming into the industry. It's got to be active in the industry; not just a walk-around museum," insists Jason.



A Binatone TV Master home console system



The Apple 3 from 1980 shot through a floppy disk

AMSTRAD, Apple, Apricot . . . Canon, Commodore, Compaq . . . Sanyo, Sony, Sun Microsystems - the names from the Information Age trip off the tongue. But Jason Fitzpatrick is adamant that the history of computing should focus on the stories behind the technology.

The museum's pride and joy is an Altair 8800 from 1975, widely regarded as the world's first personal computer, launched the Microsoft dynasty and inspired the computing revolution. Jason saw the machine on Ebay "and just HAD to own it!" Evidence suggests it's the third ever made.

After the Altair appeared on the cover of Popular Electronics magazine, he says, an excited Paul Allen burst in on Bill Gates and said something along the lines of "It's the beginning of the revolution and we have to be in on the start."

The midnight oil was burned to write BASIC programming language for the machine, on punchtape. The first program typed in was "2+2", thankfully giving the answer "4". Gates and Allen soon afterwards formed Microsoft, then spelled Micro-Soft.

It's amazing to think a blue and grey metal box with switches and little red lights - and no monitor or keyboard - started a revolution. But it took the binary system in its stride and represented "basically a solution looking for a problem", says Jason.

"People lusted after having their own computer. They were big scientific things in rooms with men with beards and sandals, and nobody else could get near them. Nobody had one they could play with themselves. This was the first."

In the same room at the museum is a laboratory automation system - one of those big, grey, metal cupboard-type affairs behind whose doors reels of tape turn periodically. It looks like something tended by rogue scientists in a James Bond film.

Jason reckons it reminds visitors of Benny Hill's character in *The Italian Job* from 1969. Professor Simon Peach's job was to fiddle with Turin's computerised traffic control system so the police were delayed in jams after a gold theft.

"This one was owned by Shell at its Thornton research centre (in Cheshire). So for most of its life it was doing heavy-duty stuff, like searching for oil, effectively. It was running calculations about depth, and this, that and the other.

"Yet if you take this machine and that one and that one and this one and that one and that one . . ." he jabs a finger around the room, "we add up to 657k of memory - which is nothing, really. A digital photo is more than that these days. Way more. And yet these were doing huge stuff."

One of the others is probably the oldest in the collection: the Minivac 601, dating from the late 1960s. It's not so mini by modern standards; and, explains Jason, it was electric rather than electronic. It was largely intended as an educational kit, to demonstrate how computers worked. Wires plugged into holes, a bit like an old switchboard, and it offered six bytes of memory. "It could compute, though. They did do some fairly ferocious calculations with it."

The centre's web site gives an intriguing glimpse into marketing psychology. It says that although the Minivac 601 "gained fast acceptance amongst educational institutions and home hobbyists, large corporations were unwilling to buy it as a device to help their employees learn more about how computers worked.

"The firm selling the product repainted the device from red and blue to gunmetal-grey, changed the tolerance on some of the switches (at a very nominal cost) and renamed the device the Minivac 6010. They also increased its price to \$479.



Space Invaders and joystick for the Atari 2600

It would prove a fitting stage on which to tell the story of the social and historical impact of the computer.

"Children think the first games console was the Nintendo and have no experience of anything before it. And everyone in the UK has had some kind of experience with computers: good or bad. You can't walk down the street without being involved with them: shop tills, cash machines in the wall, your phone - they're all computer-based."

As well as preserving vintage machines and memorabilia, the mission is to spotlight the people behind the inventions and inspire future generations.

"We just know there's interest in it. The last year's been really big for us, getting it from a bunch of boxes stored everywhere to this. Now we've got this other jump, which seems to be four times bigger and for which we're going to need a lot of support."

Local businesses and other organisations - such as Samuel Ward Upper School and local councils - already lend their support, and the centre is at the moment privately funded by corporate sponsorship. Early next year a major fund-raising campaign is due to start.

Elaine feels another older building might be used as a stepping stone while a spanking new permanent home is built: perhaps something akin to the Sutton Hoo centre near Woodbridge.



Helen Mayes playing Breakout on an Atari 2600 home console gaming machine

She realises they'd have to be flexible: probably seeking a plot of land where a purpose-built centre could go up, with other buildings grafted on as and when money was available.

A unique aspect of the museum dream is that it's very much a local effort. There was an invitation to consider moving the collection to a technology park near Ipswich, but those leading the project are doing it for their town: hoping a world class visitor attraction in Haverhill will raise its profile and act as a catalyst for its ongoing economic and cultural renaissance.

In any case, it's a logical location. Haverhill is a CB9 town - part of the official Greater Cambridge sub-region - and just 20-odd miles from Silicon Fen. Charles Babbage, widely viewed as the father of computing, read mathematics at Trinity College, and Cambridge was home to Acorn Computers, developer of the BBC Micro, and Sinclair Research, creator of the ZX81 and ZX Spectrum computers.

"If we can get the location for it, we want to go the whole nine yards: Science Museum-style," says Jason. "This is something that's definitely 'national', and probably 'European' as well. There's huge interest. There's way more people interested out there than geeks like me! Way more . . ."

The Centre for Computing History can be viewed only by appointment. It was slightly bounced into opening its doors earlier than anticipated after folk read about the fledgling museum on the web and got in touch! A couple of hundred people have so far visited since March, including people who have donated equipment and enjoyed a look around.

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