

Typing back the years

All **Richard Barr** wants for Christmas is his old Smith Corona



Sounds, smells, sights and even typewriters can transport you in an instant to a different time or place. There is a particular kind of unpleasant soap that reminds me immediately of incarceration at a boarding school. A popular (cheap) brand of polish puts me in a long closed-down magistrate's court and the click clack of a manual typewriter carries me 5,000 miles and more than 40 years back to America.

In the 1960s I had a year at the University of Nebraska. Nebraska is a state physically in the middle of the USA, the size of England with a population of well under two million people, most of whom live near the path of the meandering Platte River, described by early settlers as being "an inch deep and a mile wide". My grandparents and great-grandparents were indeed early settlers. They homesteaded, which meant that they were allocated a large square of land (usually in chunks of a quarter of a mile square). If they managed to live on that barren land for a year, they were allowed to keep it. My forebears became substantial landowners in this way, but that was before the Great Depression (which made what we are going through at the moment seem in comparison like a gentle walk in the autumn leaves), and that is a different story.

Electric and Amstrad

Several decades later I rolled up in Lincoln, Nebraska, to my mother's old university to study business. I never learned much business but I soon learned that assignments were not accepted unless they were typed. The rich students paid the poorer ones to type their works, but I was at the bottom of the food chain, so had to type my own. For the investment of \$20 I became the proud owner of a Smith Corona typewriter and gradually taught myself to touch type.

And that was the only lasting skill I acquired from my year in Nebraska. That

typewriter served me well for more than 20 years until Lord Alan Sugar (as he then wasn't) and Amstrad introduced the nation to very cheap word processors and we all started to think of computers that did not fill large rooms. It would be working still but many years ago I lent it to a friend and have not seen it since.

"For years, secretaries thumped away at enormous manual typewriters which made the whole building shake"

This eases me forward to 2012, pausing on the way to dip into the 1970s. The firm I was in then was a little slow on the uptake of new technology. For years, secretaries thumped away at enormous manual typewriters which made the whole building shake. Documents typed with these machines stayed typed forever.

Then came the electric typewriter. It was still big and noisy but it had an electric plug. We had one in the branch office which I ran at the time. It was regarded with great suspicion by the manual typists who, at holiday times when the branch office secretary was away, would bring their huge manual typewriters with them – for fear no doubt that they would suffer electric shocks from an electric typewriter. The muscles they had developed from using them meant that they made light work of lifting their machines out of the backs of their cars.

What you see

Nowadays it would be unthinkable to keep the same computer for 20 years. People would giggle at the chunky slow machines of the early 1990s. Elderly computers (by

which I mean computers that are three years old) may still work, but in comparison to later models they are slow, have limited memories and aren't as pretty.

My laptop had passed its sell by date and recently I took delivery of a sleek new model with speeds that would enable me to play the fastest games, watch high definition movies and control the world.

But it is not just computers that change. Their whole way of working changes too. My new computer arrived with Windows 8 and Office 2010 installed. My previous computer had Windows XP and Office 2003. All the menus have been rearranged and re-grouped. Nothing is where it was and everything is difficult to find. There is even no obvious way to shut down the computer. In the previous version, you could find it with humorous logic when pressing the 'start' button.

I am sure it is all very clever, and the geniuses at Microsoft must have spent months devising new ways to taunt their customers, so why am I yearning for my old typewriter back? What you saw was what you got (if you ignored the fact that it was not very good at typing the letter 'e') and over the 20 years that I used it, it never changed the way it typed once. It is said that those who used manual typewriters never suffered from repetitive strain injury. So Mr Gates, if you want to show that you are really clever why not recreate my Smith Corona typewriter, complete with seismic sound effects and hard to press keyboard, and an undertaking to change nothing for 20 years? It will see me out, and there may be other takers too.



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