



It's all in black and white



Richard Barr locks himself away to develop a hobby

Photography has run in our family almost (but not quite) since it was invented. I have family photograph albums that contain black and white pictures taken nearly 100 years ago.

My mother developed her own photographs back in the 1930s, so it was inevitable that I would take on the hobby, starting with a Brownie Box camera which didn't focus, had no exposure control and took only 12 pictures at a time. Even with such primitive apparatus I became interested in home developing and enlarging at an early age.

It was never going to be an easy hobby. To do it I had to take over the family bathroom and lock myself in for hours. No amount of banging and protests made any difference; the door remained locked and I stayed determinedly in the gloom - bathed not in water but in a soft red light.

The companies that provided the supplies for aspiring amateur photographers went through hard times when digital photography took off, but, like many things the old techniques do have a habit of coming back into fashion.

Not far from where we live the village of Worsted (so famous that even centuries after the spinning and weaving industry disappeared, the name lives on) has recently had a large grant to reinvigorate the ancient industry.

The same applies to vinyl records

and so now it is with photography. There is an upsurge of interest in home developing and enlarging.

Most people - myself included - produce our photographs these days digitally, but I still miss the excitement and difficult creativity of the home dark room. I still love black and white photography and I often set my digital camera so that it photographs only in monochrome.

There are essentially two stages in producing photographs on film. First you have to develop the negative. If you ruin that, you lose everything (which I found to my cost from time to time). This has to be done in complete darkness; it is necessary to get the negative into a developing tank without allowing any light into it.

I would disappear into the darkest room in the house (the cupboard under the stairs!). Then prise open the cassette with a can opener, snip off the trailing end and wind the undeveloped film onto a spiral before sealing it into the tank.

Correct timing, dilution and temperature were essential. If you got any of them wrong and you ended up with a film that was too dark or too pale, making it impossible to produce decent prints.

The real excitement comes with the next stage - the challenge of turning a 35 millimetre negative into an attractive photograph. This is the point when the family was barred from the bathroom. The process is carried out under the

dim glow of a red or orange safe light and requires a lot of space. I would put a big board over the bath then squeeze in a card table for the trays of chemicals. No cats came to join me but I would not have been able to swing one if they had.

An enlarger is like a projector on a long stem which points down vertically. Pictures are enlarged by projecting them onto photographic paper and exposing them to light. There are so many variables that it is never possible to judge the right exposure - so photographers make test strips using various exposures counting the seconds of traditionally by using the mantra thousand one, thousand two, thousand three.... which approximately represents the corresponding seconds.

There is a kind of magic in rocking the paper back and forth in developer and watching as the picture gradually appears in the gloom. In my early days I was inspired by the film *Blow Up* - a wonderfully atmospheric 1966 movie with David Hemmings playing a photographer who inadvertently photographs a murder. Much of the action takes place in the dark room and you could almost smell the chemicals as he produced the prints.

There was also enormous scope for special effects even before anyone had dreamt of digital photographs.

You could - **Dodge** part of the picture by holding back the exposure either with your hands or shaped pieces of cardboard. Because everything was in

reverse that would make light areas in the final print

Burn - doing the reverse: deliberately exposing part of the print to make it darker (useful to make unwanted features disappear or to emphasise part of the picture).

Use filters to increase grain or give a pattern or texture to the print. I also found that if you laid a sheet of plate glass on photographic paper then drew patterns in Vaseline smeared on the glass it made the picture look like a painting. Still with glass and Vaseline, you could smear the edges and keep the centre clear, but this time move the glass around during exposure, producing a print that is focussed on the centre and soft and fluffy at the edges.

Change the grey scale so as to reduce the range of shades in a photograph (posterisation) or turn everything into pure black and white (soot and snow).

All these techniques took a long time to set up and were easy to get wrong. I could sometimes take a whole evening working on one photograph but now it can literally be done in seconds with no trays full of chemicals, no apparatus and above all no need to keep the family out of the bathroom.

The photographs shown here are all 20 years old or older. Some still bear my handiwork in the darkness of the bathroom, but others I confess have been adjusted with modern techniques.

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