

A night sky with the Milky Way galaxy visible over a dark landscape. The text is centered in the upper half of the image.

VOICES FROM A FUTURE PASSED

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EDWARD PEDERSEN
85m
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34° 11' 25.48" S. 144 ° 43' 15.11" E. Elevation



The Milky Way extends North to South
Viewed facing west over the One Tree Hotel located 37km north of Hay, NSW on the Cobb Hwy.

DO YOU RECALL THIS QUOTE?

- *The small boys came early to the hanging.*

OR THIS?

- All the way to the horizon in the last light, the sea was just degrees of gray, rolling and frothy on the surface.

...

The people who shared the journey remembered West. The following winter, describing the nasty northeaster over dinner, the captain remarked,
"That fellow West is a good man in a storm."

THEN THERE'S THIS ONE...

- To reach 4A Market Hill, Cambridge in 1981, you passed through an unimpressive entrance at 4 Market Hill beside the Eastern Electricity showroom, located on the eastern side of the Market Square. The end of the passageway was so poorly lit, even the graffiti was difficult to read.

THE TRIGGERS...

- A suggestion from Hermann Hauser and encouragement from former Acorn Computers Australasia M.D., Doug Pauling.
- An invitation from Chris Jarrett to speak at TNMoC Econet weekend in June.

WHAT IT INVOLVED...

- Equal parts research, cat herding and writing/editing.
- Reconstructing the events of the late 1970s and early 1980s was like an episode of *Murder She Wrote*.
- 11 months, 12–18 hours a day, 6–7 days a week.



MOTIVATION

- The story of Acorn and its prime movers had been told. But the whole story needed to be captured before it was too late.
- So much of what has been published about the Acorn years is simply wrong.
- The backdrop was pure gold: The Beatles and Rolling Stones, Margaret Thatcher and political turmoil – an extraordinary time in the lives of Britons.

THE APPROACH

- A snapshot of the events through the stories of the people who made it all happen.
- Doug Pauling, Brian Cockburn, David Allen, Steve Furber, Chris Turner, Christopher Curry, Sophie Wilson and others helped.
- After 40 years, Brian and others were still able to help me get in contact with people – including ex-Acorn people in the USA.



THE BBC

- The BBC showed little interest.
- David Allen has been a joy to work with.
- Richard Russell has kept BBC BASIC and the history of the project alive.
- Despite my background I hadn't appreciated how important the Computer Literacy Project had been to the UK and the rest of the world.
- It became a larger part of the story – an essential part of the narrative.



DEVELOPING THE STORY

- Building on each contributor's perspective became the focus.
- It's been like solving a jigsaw puzzle, with each chapter contributing elements to the complete picture.



IS IT A REWORK OF PREVIOUSLY PUBLISHED MATERIAL?

- Many details can be found on the internet. My approach has been to focus on the accuracy of each part of the story.



WHAT SURPRISED YOU?

- The impact of the *BBC Computer Literacy Project* to Britain and the rest of the world.

DOES IT MATTER WHAT HAPPENED 40 OR 50 YEARS AGO?

- Every decade has its story. The 60s, 70s, 80s and 90s were particularly memorable.
- Observations of people at Sinclair Radionics/Science of Cambridge, Cambridge Processor Unit, Acorn Computers, the BBC, the University of Cambridge and the Olivetti Research Laboratories.
- Some think of it as ancient history. But it helps us know where we are today, and where we're going in years to come?

ANOTHER QUOTE – THE IDEAS FACTORY...

- Should we care about how new ideas begin?
Practically speaking, if our cell phones ring and our computer networks function we don't need to recall how two men sat together in a suburban New Jersey laboratory during the autumn of 1947 and invented the transistor, which is the essential building block of all digital products and contemporary life.

AN INTERNATIONAL STORY

- Much of the story focuses on Cambridge and London but technology is international.
- Driven by the constant post-war demand for newer and better.
- In the USA, it was driven by the idea that there was a lot of money to be made. In the UK, it came from fear that Britain might be left behind.
- So, one driver was entrepreneurial spirit, and the other was an attempt to hold onto its former position as a world power.

WHOSE VOICES TELL THE STORY?

- David Allen and John Radcliffe – *BBC Computer Literacy Project*
- Richard Russell, BBC Engineer and patron saint of BBC BASIC
- Directors: Christopher Curry, Andy Hopper and Sam Wauchope
- Acorn technical leads: Chris Turner, Steve Furber, Sophie Wilson
- Andrew Gordon, Arthur Norman, Brian Cockburn, Carl Dellar, Jes Wills, Jim Mitchell, Joe Dunn, John Cox, Jon Thackray, Kim Spence-Jones, Laurence Hardwick, Paul Fellows, Ramanuj Banerjee, Colin Priestley, David Bell

WHAT DOES IT COVER?

- 1960s – Christopher Curry's intro to Clive Sinclair, then reconnects with Hermann Hauser
- 1978–1979 – enter the MK14 Chris Turner, Steve and Sophie, David Allen's world tour which led to the BBC Computer Literacy Project, education and other programmes.
- 1980 – The search for a 'BBC microcomputer'
- 1981 – The Acorn Proton becomes the BBC Microcomputer, and the *BBC Computer Literacy Project* gets underway.
- 1982 – 'The Computer Programme' is launched along with other BBC and government-backed initiatives. Massive demand for BBC Micros. Sinclair vs BBC vs Acorn
- 1983 – Supply stretched. The British electronics industry reveals its gaping holes.
- 1984 – Demand peaks, then 'Rule Britannia' is replaced by brand loyalty and rapid expansion of 'globalisation'. Disaster strikes. Debt. Oversupply. The Electron. Acorn USA and Germany.
- 1985 – Olivetti takes over. Arrival of ARM1. Christopher leaves Acorn.



AFTER THAT...

- You will just have to read the book!

SOME GENERAL COMMENTS ABOUT MY APPROACH

- Writing is a team sport.
- The thoughts and ideas are the contributors. The words are mainly mine, though they had final approval.
- There has been no censorship, though a couple of people made special requests. It is raw in places as we deal with the highs and lows of what happened.

IN SUMMARY...

- “Acorn Computers is what happens when there is a concentration of really, clever people who happen to be in the right place at the right time and have the courage to take advantage of opportunities.
- “They came together almost by accident. They weren’t there because of their business ability, so lots of things did go wrong. Everything relied on individual motivation and a deep personal sense of responsibility. No one tried to control anyone. It was a very open environment. You were expected to see what needed to be done and get it done. Most of the time that worked spectacularly. When it failed, it was equally spectacular.”

David Bell, Acorn’s Technical Director (Acting) 1990–1995



QUESTIONS?