

The early years

Rabin Ezra, #19

It is now difficult to remember that, at the beginning of HPCC's life, the choice of programmable calculator or desktop machine was much harder to make than it is now. The issue of PCW which carried a cover story on the Sinclair ZX80 also had a review of the HP-41C. To my 13-year-old eyes, they seemed in some sense similar in the possibilities they offered, with the latter having the advantage that I would be able to carry it around, and it would remember my programs when I turned it off. Today, the gulf in computational power between the laptop on which I type this, and the 48SX on the table, make their respective roles clear.

Somehow, I managed to convince my sceptical parents that they should buy one for me. As part of HP's support activities, it produced a newsletter called HP Key Notes containing programs and news. In Vol. 6 No. 2, a letter from David Burch announced the formation of PPC-GB. (Its name changed to PPC-UK by the actual start of the club.) Having already discovered the wonders of "Synthetics" thanks to the green Wickes book, I was keen to see what else people had discovered and so joined.

The first major event was the U.K. conference held at a remarkably grand location (or so it seemed to me, as a 15-year-old). Rather than using a college venue, the conference was organised at the Great Northern Hotel in Kings Cross in London. For me, it provided an opportunity to see hardware which had previously only been pictures in catalogues. The various peripherals were probably what made the 41 a computer system rather than a calculator, even if I couldn't afford them at that time.

The conference also saw the introduction of the HP-75C. I remember being stunned by the slide show of one in bits, as it hadn't occurred to me that someone might take such an expensive piece of equipment to pieces simply out of curiosity. It also saw a debate as to whether the 75C, perhaps the first ultra-light laptop computer, should be supported by the club. The consensus that eventually emerged was that we should support the HP aspects of the machine, but not print BASIC programs which might work on any machine.

Sadly, I missed out on perhaps the most important part of any conference; being rather younger than the other attendees I had not opted to stay at the hotel, but rather to commute. I therefore didn't stay for the late-night informal sessions, which I only discovered had happened when Vol. 1, No. 3 dropped on the mat. With issue 3, the journal gained a card cover and photos of the sessions, as well as the more normal part of the conference. I even managed to sneak into a picture, though nobody knew who I was, so the list of people under the picture labelled me ..."

The 41, and RPN machines in general, remained the main "FOCaL" point of the club across the first few years of its existence. Even with the 75 and HP-71B, there remained a feeling that the club's constituency was predominantly RPN machines. As well as conventional ways of programming them, the club also provided a forum for those of us interested in m-code programming.

It was in connection with this that the club attempted its first hardware project. As I had some electronics skills, I became involved. To write machine code for the 41, a box capable of simulating a plug-in ROM was required as the memory spaces used for user data and programs were physically distinct from that in which m-code executed. The 41's processor had a serial bus, so interfacing more conventional components to it required a set of shift registers and some assorted decode logic. As an additional oddity, the words were 10 bits wide, so some packing logic was required if space in conventional 8 bit memory parts was not to be wasted. Eventually the club chose to simply provide a service for members by sourcing ERAMCO units as a full design could not be justified.

The release of the HP-28C marked the close of the early years of HPCC. With its release, HP moved from expandable, interfaceable machines to much more targeted products. Though later products could take memory cards, they assumed that for I/O, the owner would have a PC to connect to. As well as being a closed box, the 28 marked a major change in the usage model: out went the type-limited four-level stack, and in came a completely polymorphic, infinitely deep one. The programming language also changed.

HPCC did pull a 28C apart to check on the feasibility of adding more memory, as it was based on the same processor as the 71B. One quiet evening at Imperial College, I took a drill to the heat sealed case to open it. The machine appeared, reassembled, on the following journal cover with the keys rearranged and still functioning, though lacking a little in the solidity "stakes".

(These days, the HP I use most is a 16C, without which I would be lost.)

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