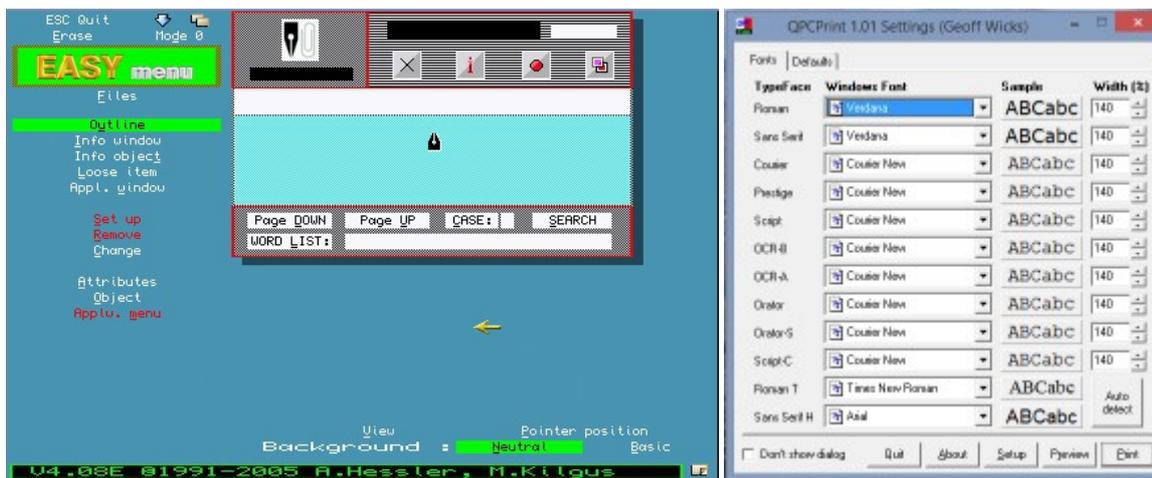


2005 - 2009 TURBULENT QL YEARS

The period from 2005 to 2009 were turbulent years that changed the face of the QL community. The period started with a weak Quanta and a triumvirate of traders attempting to fill the gap and rule the QL roost. It ended with a strengthened Quanta and two of the three traders no longer active. The UK could no longer claim to be the centre of the QL activity.

Much of the first year of the period was taken up by spin off software developments from the QL2004 international show where there had been a program emphasis on the GD2 colours. QDT and Qword had both been released in late 2004 after lengthy periods of gestation, but the new colours had still not gone mainstream. A major programming tool, EasyPtr, could not handle the new colours although there were ways of "fooling" programs to use them.



Early in 2005 Marcel Kilgus released EasyPtr 4 making the program GD2 compatible and later sizeable. It was not the only surprise that Marcel had in store for QL-ers. A major problem was Windows printers being unsuitable for QL use. QPC Print allowed the QL to print to a PC printer and was not just of interest to QL users but also to users of other non-Windows operating systems

Another prolific programmer was Dilwyn Jones. Freed from his time consuming duties as editor of QL Today, he had more time to devote to programming and produced a number of programs, many with a graphics theme, and including a front end, Launchpad.

There were other innovations. George Gwilt continued to develop the Turbo compiler including making it compatible with EasyPtr and also developed graphics programs. Roger Godley embarked on a project to make the Xchange programs resizeable and GD2 compatible.



$$\int_0^{\phi} \sec(\phi) d\phi = \ln(\tan(\phi/2 + \pi/4))$$



Another major software project was work on GPS for the QL and the Mercator Projection by Hugh Rooms. The mathematics were horrendous and QL Today had to devise new techniques to display the formulae, but it potentially revolutionised mapping on the QL by converting latitude and longitude to QL x,y co-ordinates. Just Words! set up a dedicated QL mapping webpage with databases and a toolkit of short basic routines to help in designing maps.

During the period several commercial programs became freeware including the entire Just Words! range, some Pointer Environment programs and the Digital Precision's Turbo and Perfection.

Hardware took a back-seat during the period. At the QL2004 show there had been a detailed talk on the feasibility of a successor to the SuperGold card and this led many QL-users to believe that its production was imminent. Some blamed Quanta for its non appearance because they were unwilling

to finance it. In fact the project had never proceeded to a point where Quanta could be approached over financing. At the time there was a general shortage of chips which meant that it was impossible to first build and test a prototype because of uncertainty about the price and availability of the chips at the production stage. This made the risks too great.

Another hardware idea that did not become a reality was USB support for the QL. An SER to USB converter was available, but hardware specialists were divided on whether or not it would be QL compatible. Speed was likely to be a problem with possibly the only practical applications being for keyboards and mice.

One successful hardware venture was the production of keyboard membranes for both the QL and the Spectrum. This had been started by Bill Richardson and then taken over by Rich Mellor. Quanta provided the capital by means of loans.

Dilwyn Jones produced the most portable QL ever, so small that it would fit on a key ring. This was various QL emulators on a USB stick enabling the user to run QL software on any PC. At the time the cost of USB memory was too high for a production run and instead the software was provided on a CD.



Between 2000 and 2005 CD writers moved from being an expensive peripheral to being almost universal on PCs. QL-ers began to use CDs for bulk storage. Dilwyn Jones proved to be an enthusiastic user with a range of CDs on QL documentation and specialist subjects. Rich Mellor converted his SuperBasic reference manual from two massive ring binders to one CD disk.

Another innovation by Rich was the launching of a QL Wiki. This was just one of several website developments, with some sites being rewritten and relaunched. These included Dilwyn Jones, Just Words! And Quanta.

In other ways the QL seemed to go rapidly downhill.



In 2005 Quanta held a two day prestige show to celebrate 21 QL years, but from then on UK shows went into near terminal decline. The traders became increasingly frustrated, spending hours preparing for a show, arriving an hour early to set up their stall and leaving an hour late after dismantling it. For the first hour of the show the traders talked among themselves until the first attendees arrived and the hall remained quiet for the rest of the day. For all their efforts the traders would be lucky to make £50 from the event.

The last show in the south of England was held in 2007 and from then on Quanta could only finance events in the Midlands and the north.



2008 saw the last QL workshop held in the St Joris College in Eindhoven. This had been a long standing QL venue and at one time hosted an annual international show, a high spot of the QL calendar. It had also been the venue for QL2004. The school had been available free of charge because two QL-ers were on the staff. Some years after their retirement a new head teacher who did not know them refused permission for use of the premises.

In 2005 a long standing QL trader, Bill Richardson, announced that QLis21 would probably be his last show. He was 87 years old and the surprise was that he had remained active in the QL community for so long. In practice his last show was Hove in 2006.



Bill's announcement was a harbinger of more serious trader news.

Early in 2008 Tony Firshman announced that he would be taking a less active role in the QL community. The pressures of his day job and other duties meant that he could no longer offer the quality of service to the QL community that he would wish to.

Later in the year QBranch ended its QL activities, but in less favourable circumstances. QBranch had been responsible for buying and circulating the UK copies of QL Today. This had been done efficiently and with enthusiasm, but QBranch frequently defaulted on the bills. Twice QL Today had withheld the UK copies until payment was received, but when the debts rose above £1,000 had to terminate the link with QBranch.

Rich Mellor of WRAP became the only trader attending QL workshops. He had survived by an emphasis on internet sales especially of second hand hardware and trading to both the QL and Spectrum communities.

Quanta experienced the biggest roller coaster ride. Several ex-officers describe the years immediately before 2005 as being Quanta's lowest ebb. The then Chairman and Secretary were frequently out of the country on their day jobs and inevitably Quanta duties were neglected. Three traders stepped into the vacuum and started to dictate when Quanta was to hold its meetings. Initially Quanta acquiesced even though it made the 2003 AGM unconstitutional..

In his final report in 2004 the outgoing chairman had made two points. Firstly, Quanta was no longer viable on its then level of subscription and secondly, it would have to remodel possibly becoming internet based.

The incoming Chairman and outgoing Secretary vetoed any change to the subscription because they were frightened of losing members paying by standing order. Nevertheless membership fell steeply from 272 in 2004 to 177 in 2009 with a serious effect on Quanta's finances. Subscription income fell from £3,824 to £2,460 and Quanta's capital from £15,933 to £9,457.

Quanta was heading for financial disaster, but was saved by three things. Firstly, Rich Mellor was

selling second hand hardware on their behalf; secondly, the collapse of shows in the south saved hundreds of pounds; and thirdly, a concentration of committee members from the Manchester area saved on committee expenses.



The chairman closed his eyes to reality and forbade discussion. He seemed to dwell in a surreal world spending over £500 on AA sign posting to an event attended by under 50 people. He described that Quanta Magazine as a "flourishing production" even though for the previous five years it had had no permanent editor and in the previous year had published only 5 out of 6 issues. Any loss of membership was down to "Anno Domini" or "The Grim Reaper". Quanta members were clearly dropping dead at the rate of one a fortnight!

QL Today did not close its eyes and its Quanta reports led to a tense situation. Neither the committee nor the members would discuss the issues in detail, but just expressed indignation in the QL-users group. Two members even resorted to anonymous online trolling.

Some idea of the atmosphere and attitudes can be gained from the response to a QL Today editorial:

"Quanta now has under 200 members, but its structure, activities and thinking remain largely rooted in the time when it had over 2,000. Can Quanta adapt to changing circumstances? There are about 40 reasonably active people within Quanta and given a radical reshaping around the needs of these members it could remain a powerful force within the QL community."

In the Quanta Magazine the chairman responded:

"I notice in his Editorial in QL Today Volume 12 Issue 3, March-May 2008, that Geoff Wicks, once more, somewhat mischievously seeks to diminish Quanta completely oblivious that in so doing he diminishes himself."

The editor of QL Today offered Quanta a 2,000 word right of reply, but was not offered a reciprocal right in the Quanta Magazine. After many weeks Quanta responded in a reply that did not address the issues raised, but was just a list of what Quanta did.

The period saw some major changes to the Quanta constitution. The most controversial of which were the introduction of a three year period of office for officers; a six year rule to limit the time a person could serve continuously on the committee; and a raising of the deposit required to call a Special General Meeting from £300 to £500. There were also the first signs of anxiety about the falling membership with new clauses governing the winding up of Quanta.

The constitutional amendments had been supported by an overwhelming proportion of the members, but ironically for most of the following two years the committee was down to three officers and one committee member, a serious development as two of the officers were long serving committee members due to step down in 2009.

YOUR QUANTA NEEDS YOU John Gilpin



Over the last seven years, there have been only twelve different people involved on the Quanta Committee. At the beginning of this century, the committee was seven strong carrying out ten specific jobs. Anyone who has held an honorary position on a committee will accept that it is difficult to find people (with the required skills) who will give up a little of their time to serve any organisation.

QUANTA whilst still carrying out the same ten specific jobs now has only four committee members who, between them, are attempting to keep their heads above water and satisfy a membership of almost 200 members. While some of the double jobs we do go nicely with one another, there are other jobs which are at risk of not being done at all unless we can involve some new people to help.

In 2007 the Quanta Magazine published a warning that over a period of 7 years only 13 people out

of 200 members had been prepared to serve on the committee, and that the four present committee members were having to share 10 committee tasks between them:

"Personal requests for other members to replace (retiring officers) have fallen on deaf ears so this is our appeal to all the remaining QUANTA members to get involved NOW or is it the request of the membership that QUANTA should be wound up in the next couple of years and give all our assets to the British Red Cross Society as detailed in the constitution?"

This appeal marked a turning point in Quanta affairs and slowly but surely the committee gained new members so that by the end of 2009 the committee showed signs of coming up to full strength. The main problem was that it was increasing becoming more Manchester than national based.

It was not all gloom and doom for Quanta in the lean years. The officer who had written the plea for more committee members had played an important role in keeping Quanta alive. Traditionally Quanta committee members were proud of not participating in the QL users group describing the discussions as being petty and puerile. This officer broke the trend and became an active participant in the group giving Quanta a human face it had not had before.

The officer, together with the Chairman, transformed the Quanta Magazine improving the content and turning it back into reputable publication, even though it had proved impossible to find a permanent editor. In 2007 the Quanta Magazine achieved a major milestone by becoming available in an electronic edition. A great deal of work and experimentation had gone into this because of the need to keep the file size small as broadband was far from universal and many members still used expensive dial up.

Quanta was less successful in developing its website. Although an IT specialist joined the committee in 2007 and had designed a website, this failed through a lack of co-operation from the officers in keeping it up to date. Quanta has always blamed its website problems as being technical, but apart from a period of about 2 years in the mid 2,000s the problems had usually been editorial. The officers lacked technical expertise and apparently did not understand the difference between a webmaster and a web editor.

Quanta provided many of the news stories during the period 2005 - 2009. It started the period with its future existence in doubt and the traders trying to dominate. By the end of the period the traders had all but disappeared and Quanta was regaining its strength.

The QL scene in 2009 was very different from 2005, and, dare one write it, the UK was no longer the centre of QL activity.