Short Lifetime in Computing - A Personal Note.

Fifteen years ago it was 1983. I was only eleven and my opinions of computers were obviously limited. 1983 was one year shy of the first Apple Macintosh computer gracing the retailer's shelves.

I knew who Charles Babbage was from my history teacher. The poor chap lived into the late 1800's working on a mechanical computing machine for 37 years that he was never to finish. He was born in 1791 in Teignmouth, South Devon, UK,   just a few miles from where I live today.

Babbage's major contribution to the birth of computing was his Analytic Machine. Before he built this he produced the Difference Engine which operated on 6-digit numbers, and was designed to solve 2nd order difference equations. He died virtually broke and unknown in 1871.

1998 and Babbage's counting machine was restored and completed. So it's true some of the best ideas take time. Although his machine never truly worked when he was alive his principals of logical structure and the modern computer had laid the foundations for generations of designers to follow.

Apart from Babbage there's a few more historical computing dates:

1878   W.Odhner used pin-wheels for the next generation of mechanical calculating machines.

1886   Herman Hollerith founder of IBM had the idea of using punched cards to keep transport information. This device was constructed to allow the 1890 census to be tabulated.
In 1896 Hollerith founded the Tabulating Machine Company. Twenty-eight years later, in 1924, after several takeovers the company became known as IBM [International Business Machines], a name synonymous with computers the world over today.

Herman Hollerith died at the age of only 43 in 1929, it was a shame as Hollerith was

know as a sharp man, with many ideas that were alas to die with him.

1930   Vannevar Bush developed the first electronic analogue computer and the differential analyser.

1941   Konrad Zuse developed the first fully functional, automatic, programmable digital computer called Colossus.

1944   Howard Aiken and Grace Hopper developed the MARK I, a Electromechanical computer, used by the US Navy for ballistic calculations.

1969   UNIX was first developed as a private research project of Ken Thompson.

1971   Intel 4004 First single chip 4-Bit CPU, built by Marcian E. Hoff

1974   Altair 8800 the famous, affordable desktop computer, Bill Gates loved the idea of this machine, one of the many reasons he started writing adaptive code.

1976   Apple 1 put together in the garage by friends Steve Jobs and Steve Wozniak.

1981   Microsoft's DOS became the operating system of the IBM PC.

1984   The release of the Mac 128k, Apples new flagship. People [including me] always jump first to knock Microsoft down, but MS was quite supportive of the Mac back then too, right from those tender days. With software releases for the Mac such as MS BASIC and MS Multiplan. In this year Microsoft Press introduced its first Mac dedicated book called funnily enough 'The Apple Macintosh Book'.

1985   Windows was the attempt of Microsoft to do what Apple had already done.

The UK has a lot to be proud of when it comes to computing firsts. Apart from Babbage, Colossus was a fantastic machine. Colossus was name given to the World War II mighty code-cracking computer. 1943 or there about, saw Britain in the shroud of war spies and intelligence was the key to saving lives and attacking the enemy. Colossus was the super computer of that era, its one and only function was to decode coded messages.

War is a strange beast with its savage and distasteful results, injustices and massive surges in technology. The war years for the UK, USA, Germany, Russia, China and Japan in particular brought computers into the light, maybe for the wrong reasons but still they had found a market.

I suppose it was the late 70's that the home computer was truly born. Computers were now becoming respectable and used for enjoyment rather than solely used by vastly rich governments with large enough warehouses in which to store them.

I was only four in 1976. This year saw the birth of Apple Computer and the release of the now famous wooden housed Apple 1. No valves or cogs but compact microprocessors were about to herald the Personal Computer Boom. Incidentally '76 brought a certain 20-year-old Bill Gates into the media. A vocal young programmer with strong views against [ironically] software piracy. Gates' Microsoft was also founded this year and its first fruits was to refine and enhance BASIC [Beginners All-purpose Symbolic Instruction Code].

I could mention so many machines but one machine that took my generation by storm and held us in its grasp for about 1 year, this machine was the Sinclair ZX81.

eleased in the UK in March 1981 with a CPU blistering speed of 3.4MHz a ROM of 8 Kilobytes [whoa!], RAM of 1 Kilobyte, limited displayed colours through your TV screen. This spelt P-O-W-E-R if you were a school kid around this time.

At the same time Apple was playing around with the destined to be doomed Lisa. The best thing the Lisa did for Apple was its ability of pre-emptive multitasking. This technique was adapted later on to the Macintosh as the 'switcher'. Later on, in system 6, this was replaced by the MultiFinder.

Companies like Apple and IBM [the longest computer company around] have rode out the last two computer decades all the better for it. Strong and aware of the shift in market trends. Another company that started life quite differently still made its mark back in the 80's with their contributions to computing history.

The history of Tandy Corp. has a quite different start to that of most computer companies. In 1919 two friends Norton Hinckley and Dave Tandy started the Hinckley-Tandy Leather Co. The company ran a modest profit through the war years until 1950, when Tandy and Hinckley went their respective ways.   And the Tandy name went on to bigger and better things through the years.

Today, the Tandy Corporation is one of the largest consumer electronics retailers in the U.S. and has stores world-wide. Now that's a step up the ladder from those humble beginnings.

Tandy's own time line has its moments.

1977   Although Apple was founded one year earlier and had already stated producing

Apple 1's, Tandy on the other hand released the TRS-80 PC and were quite different machines. Apple's was in a kit form, but the TRS was wired and ready to go. It was also cheaper to buy the TRS was just £375.00 [$599].

1980   Apple was still building on the success of the Apple I and II, and Steve Jobs was just formulating the idea of an all in one machine that he would finally develop into the Mac 128k. Tandy on the other hand was also building on the success of their TRS-80, with the release of the TRS-100 portable computer, it even had a built-in modem.

1984   was the year that brought us a new flavour of Apple, the Macintosh 128k. Tandy introduced us all to the T-1000 PC, it was the first true IBM-compatible personal computer of its time.

The 90's as for most computer corporations was a time to forge new alliances. Tandy and Microsoft jointly announced hardware and software industry standards for multimedia computers. This year Tandy agreed to sell Compaq Computers through its Radio Shack retail outlets in the states.

Mind you, Apple as recently as August 1997 announced a broader collaboration with Microsoft on products and technology developments. The collaboration was thought to be the final handshake to silence the Apple faithful constantly banging on about MS stealing the MacOS.

Apple was getting a $150 million 'shut up' pay check and Microsoft was getting better publicity from the Mac press, Internet Explorer was going to be bundled with Apple product releases. From the deal Microsoft released its popular Wintel Office suite and now employs more Mac developers than any independent software developer outside of Apple.

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