To Print
Or Not To Print

Before photography, pictures were created by artists, usually trying to reflect, in their art, the scene before their eyes. In 1806, William Hyde Wollaston created the Camera Lucida, a prism that reflected light on to a piece of paper, allowing an artist to draw and achieve a good likeness of their subject. The logical next step was to capture the projected image rather than tracing round it.

In the 1830s, Louis Daguerre and Henry Fox Talbot were working on processes to capture light permanently. Fox Talbot claims to have invented photography, but it's hotly disputed by supporters of Daguerre. All of which is irrelevant. What is relevant is that photographic prints became a reality.

For the rest of the 19th Century, photography was limited to professionals - of their day - and the well to do. At the turn of the 20th century, camera and film progress, particularly mass production, lead to more people being able to afford to take up the art.

By the middle of the 20th Century, camera ownership and use was enjoyed by the masses. Just about every family had a camera, thanks in great part George Eastman and his company, Kodak. Such was the popularity of the Kodak Instamatic and its easy-load films, that many companies sprang up to develop and print the pictures. Companies, such as Truprint and BonusPrint would not only develop, print and post your pictures to you, but also send you another film to put in your camera. One might say, an early adoption of the supermarket 'loyalty' scheme.

As well as developing and returning a packet of 15 x 10 cm prints and negatives and a new roll of film, the companies also provided a re-print service. While many hobbyists still printed their own in makeshift darkrooms at home, usually in black and white, colour prints had overtaken black and white in mainstream popularity. Colour prints not being so easy to produce at home, printing of enlargements or additional copies of prints was mostly outsourced to the industry.

Time marches on and another century has come and gone and digital photography is now mainstream. When the sale of smartphones took off, suddenly everybody had a camera in their pocket, rather than the family camera to be taken out on outings, holidays or anniversaries. The quality of smartphone cameras has improved to the extent they are on a par with - or exceed - 'pocket' digital cameras. Along with their phone, everyone usually has a free cloud storage plan to store their pictures and nobody deletes anything. It's estimated that nearly 5 billion pictures are taken each and every day. All stored up there in the cloud. Some are even looked at from time to time. But it would seem the datacenter has become the biscuit tin for digital photographs, once there, they're rarely opened.

Why bother with prints?

Even if you're not old enough to have taken pictures on a film camera or had the anticipation of waiting for the prints to come back, you must have parents or elderly relatives that still have the actual biscuit tin. You visit their house and out comes the family albums. When you look at an old photographic print, you are holding a microsecond of history, maybe your family history. That point in time will never, ever, occur again. You may see a face from your past, you touch the face in the photograph, as though you're reconnecting with that person. A picture of an old pet, the family dog or a long forgotten holiday. The memory is there in your hand. You can 'feel' the moment. A print can bring so much more emotion than a glossy screen on an phone ever can. Isn't that reason enough to make prints of your pictures?

Camera Club Prints

While you can take your phone or memory card to Boots or other high street outlets to get instant prints, Camera Club Prints take the process to the next level.

People that attend camera clubs are usually the people that want to take their photography beyond pulling the phone out of a pocket to quickly snap a picture (though yes, I still do this when I don't have any other camera with me).

Time is set aside to get the camera out, ensure batteries are charged, memory cards are clear and any relevant accessories are packed. The process of taking pictures is more deliberate. Maybe a subject, maybe a scene or maybe even an emotion is intended to be captured.

At the end of the session, there will hopefully be a few images the photographer is happy with. These are the keepers, the contenders for the next competition or just a pleasing image that means something to the person that took the photograph and is worth hanging on the wall.

Even without the print section of club competitions, surely those 'keeper' photographs are worthy of being printed? Even at 15 x 10 cm on the home printer. But if the picture really pleases you, it must be worth printing out to a larger size and entering into the competition? It may not get a commended or a top placing, but the feedback received is invaluable. It will help you to improve your photography. You will also be showing your pride and joy off to your peers in the club. The feedback from other members can be just as useful to you for improving your photography as any comments from a judge. If you ask, others will critique your work. Don't be afraid to have your pictures critiqued. Nobody is going to say it's a bad picture. It isn't, or you wouldn't be showing it. Welcome constructive criticism, it is what helps us to get better and progress in our hobby.

How do I get my pictures ready for printing?

This is a topic in and of itself. As there are so many different image editing packages out there, each would require its own tutorial. There are many YouTube videos that will walk you through the process of preparing your image for print with whichever image editing program you use. Google is your friend.

If you haven't invested in image editing software yet, you can use inexpensive programs for a tablet, such as Serif's Infinity Photo app or even with free programs, such as GIMP for a laptop. There are programs available to suit most budgets. Again, how to use these programs is contained in YouTube tutorials. Whichever program you settle for, it is worth getting to know the program well.

An absolute must before processing your images is to ensure the monitor you use is colour calibrated. This is a process that will ensure that when you're seeing colours in your images, whether it's a white, a red or a blue, those colours are accurate. If you've worked on your image and got it looking just right, you want your print to also look 'just right' IE. To match the image you see on your screen.

Importantly, even if you don't print your images, the need for a calibrated screen also applies to projected images. You want your picture to look the same on all other (calibrated) screens, particularly those of the competition judge.

There are a number of packages and devices for colour calibrating your screen, the most common being the ColorMunki or the Colorvision Spyder.

Once you have learned and understand the preparation process, there are some rules around the printed output that have to be taken into account.

Your print can be of any size, however the mount it is displayed in has required dimensions. The mount should be 50 x 40 cm. (Purely club competitions are not this strict, but any entries to inter-club competitions usually stipulate these dimensions).

Displaying a 15 x 10 cm print in a mount this size is not really going to work. Typically, your print should be on A3 sized paper. You've gone to a lot of trouble to take the picture, develop the image and then prepare it for print, so you will want it at a size that can be viewed in all its glory. Whether you print borderless or centre your image in the page is an artistic decision for you to make. Ideally though, you want all of your image to be seen. Printing borderless will result in the edges of your print being hidden by the mount.

There are boundless paper types available for print, from standard inkjet photo paper through to fine art papers made from silk. Which one do you use? Again, that comes down to artistic decision. Some judges will comment on the paper used. However, a judge should never judge an image based on the paper used.

Unless your funds are unlimited, a good rule of thumb is to use a matte based paper for black and white prints and a semi-gloss paper for colour. Remember though, this is not hard and fast. A colour image may look better on a matte surface and vice versa.

Your print preparation tutorials on YouTube should include a section on a process called Soft Proofing. This basically allows you to see, on screen, a representation of what your image will look like when printed out on different papers which will help in your choice.

Prints? Mounts? Where?

Not everybody has a printer at home, never mind an expensive A3 printer capable of printing on fine art papers. If you do, then I'm guessing this article isn't for you anyway.

So how do you get gallery quality prints that can be entered into competitions - or to be framed and hung on a wall? The photo printing companies mentioned earlier in this article still exist. Some still continue to develop films, though you won't get a postage paid envelope and a free film on its return. Most of these companies will take your digital photographs and print out photobooks, calendars, coasters, T-shirts and just about any other item that can be printed on. Boots the chemist can deliver prints while you wait from your phone. But they're not going to deliver the quality you're looking for.

To obtain the quality you're looking for, there are specialist print sites on the Internet that produce gallery quality prints for professional photographers as well as hobbyists. An example is Peak Imaging though an internet search will include other companies. Whichever you choose, typically you will create an account, upload the pictures you want printing, specify layout, paper type and the number of copies etc and they will produce and return your prints as required. These companies will also hold stock of different (expensive) papers that will allow you to choose based on your image, so you're only paying for the paper you use and not the cost of a full box.

www.peak-imaging.com

There are also smaller companies that will produce gallery quality prints. A small company in Norfolk that was recommended to me is run by a very helpful and friendly chap called Chris Herring. Chris will not only print your images to your specification, but will also provide advice on print sizes and maybe even suitable mounts for your prints.

www.photographyprinting.co.uk
01493 749701

When it comes to mounts, there are a number of routes you can take. Mount and backing boards can be bought from craft shops or online. You will need a mount cutter and another

YouTube tutorial on mount cutting to prepare your own mounts. For some, this is an enjoyable pastime and part of the photographic process.

For others, mount boards with apertures already cut are the way to go. There are internet companies that will sell picture mounts, backing boards and protective envelopes along with everything else you may need. An example is Cotswold Mounts.

www.cotswoldmounts.co.uk

Out of interest, Chris Herring (Photography Printing, above) can provide everything you need, the print, suitable mount and backing board and protective plastic sleeve. He posts these to you protected by stiff board and copious amounts of packing tape and bubblewrap.

About the only other thing you will need is tape and double sided tape for attaching your print to your mount and the backing board and a suitable sized portfolio carrier to transport and protect your prints. These are available from Amazon or craft shops. I have inserted stiff card into my flimsy carrier to prevent prints from being bent or folded.

Hopefully, you now have enough information to help you get started with producing your own prints. Not just for competitions, but for those treasured memories you may wish to hang on your wall.

You will now understand that preparing the image for print is a process in and of itself. Seeing and feeling the final print is an experience and one that's recommended.

If you have questions not covered in this article, please speak up at a meeting and a club member will always be happy to help you.