

# Hot on the Press

John Henshall visits our printers as the press rolls for our first complete computer to plate issue

**D**o you know the Welsh for Merthyr Tydfil? Yes, of course, it's Merthyr Tudful. I'd love to have the Welsh road sign concession. The signs there have to be at least twice the size of those elsewhere in the UK and you have to read them twice – just to discover that you're lucky if you can understand them once.

The fog, through which we had travelled all the way from Oxfordshire, turned a beautiful mixture of gold and blue as we drove up the valley towards Merthyr Tydfil, er, Tudful. Suddenly we were above it all, in the first sunshine and blue sky we'd seen for a week. It was good to be in Wales. Good indeed.

Dave Pattison – Alamy.com's quality control guru – and I were travelling to the Taff Valley to meet Dylan Thomas.

Dylan is another Welsh tradition. He has a voice more deep and sonorous than Richard Burton and Anthony Hopkins together. Unlike his namesake, he didn't actually write *Under Milk Wood*, though he most certainly should have played the part of its First Voice.

Although our Dylan doesn't tread the boards, he does sing in the Glynneath Male Voice Choir.

But it's his day job which is more important to this magazine. Dylan is our Account Executive at the printers, Stephens & George, and we were visiting to see our first totally computer-to-plate issue roll off the press.

This magazine was the first to go digital, when David Kilpatrick FBIPP was editor. David was one of the pioneers of desktop publishing, and always had unique knowledge and skills.

We published the first images direct from a digital camera (Kodak DCS) in September 1991. There were no transparencies and no prints, just a 44MB SyQuest disk brought back from the US.

We didn't tell anyone what we were doing – just in case it all went horribly wrong. But it didn't go wrong and *Chip Shop* has always used digital files.



Nothing in *Chip Shop* has ever been sent out to a repro house for scanning.

In the early days there was what now seems a strange anomaly, however.

Every page of the magazine needed to be written out to four sheets of – guess what? – film.

Yes, you read me right. Film. Lith film. Four sheets, from which the Cyan, Magenta, Yellow and Key (Black) plates were made.

This was the norm until after Steve Bavister took over as Editor in June 1996 and Stephens & George became our printers from October 1996.

Gradually the whole magazine moved over to purely digital files, scanned (where still required) and assembled by Phoenix Colour plc in Leicester – to whom we owe a big thanks for maintaining our superb repro quality over the past nine years.

The November 2005 issue was something of a landmark issue, however. It was the first issue for which Steve produced the final pages himself, distilled as Press Quality PDFs using Adobe Acrobat Professional.

This is no mean feat. Everything

**ABOVE:** Printer Paul Morris and John Henshall check the colours of the first section printed on the press.

**FACING PAGE TOP:** Paul pulls one of the sixteen page sections from the Heidelberg Speedmaster SM102 eight colour press which prints eight pages on each side of a B1 sheet at a single pass, turning it over midway. Printing both side at once enables the printer to ensure that everything is in alignment.

**FACING PAGE CENTRE LEFT:** The Agfa Xcalibur-45XXT high speed thermal plate setter is a high-definition computer-to-plate machine. It directly converts our PDFs to plate using a patented Grating Light Valve for precision control of the laser. This enables our images to be printed at a phenomenal near photo-quality 240 line screen – so fine that it is difficult to see any dots on the printed page with the naked eye.

**CENTRE RIGHT:** Paul Morris changes one of the yellow plates after the first section has been printed. This plate will now be scrapped. The new plate for the next section is already in position above.

**BOTTOM LEFT:** The whole of the first printed section sitting on a pallet awaiting folding. Note the undulations. These are because the stack is thicker where more ink has been laid down onto the paper. This also makes a difference to the weight of the printed page. When the printers increased the ink density some years ago, BIPP Publications Chairman Ron Taylor FBIPP calculated how much the extra ink weight would cost in mailing. When it comes to *The Photographer*, nothing escapes our canny Scotsman.

**BOTTOM RIGHT:** Are you worried about the small capacity and high cost of inks for your inkjet printer? These drums pump the black, magenta, cyan and yellow inks to the whole S&G print works.



needs to be set up very carefully, to ensure the highest print quality. And this is where having a printer with the experience of S&G for us really counts.

To ensure that Steve had everything set up just right, S&G's Pre-Press Manager Mike Donovan travelled up to Peterborough to check that Steve's configuration was optimal.

I lay out the *Chip Shop* pages myself and, up until the October issue, I had to send my QuarkXPress design pages and all the individual TIFF images to Phoenix Colour by FTP (File Transfer Protocol) over the Internet by broadband or ISDN. Phoenix then converted these files to Press Quality PDFs and sent them on to the printers.

In October all this changed and I sent my six pages to Steve as Press Quality PDFs for his final approval and transmission to S&G by FTP.

To save money, we never have contract proofs, relying on 'soft' on-line proofs and the pre-press and printing skills of Stephens & George. They have always served us superbly.

Although I used the Adobe Acrobat Distiller settings recommended by S&G, I must confess that my heart was kind

of in my mouth last month.

All my work for the magazine is judged on a calibrated Barco CRT monitor, in controlled lighting conditions. What I see on my monitor is very close to what appears in print in the magazine. I have stuck with the Barco, preferring it to Trinitron tubed monitors and 'glossy' looking LCDs.

If you sell images through a picture library, the chances are that almost all of them will be printed on a press similar to the Heidelbergs used by S&G. This kind of printing is nothing like printing your images on an Epson ink jet or Kodak dye sublimation printer.

Those are the reasons why Dave and I decided to venture across the Severn and into Wales. I wanted to see how it printed out – while there was still some chance of tweaking if necessary. Dave was keen to expand his knowledge to help his work at Alamy.

If you understand the attraction of steam trains, you will enjoy being in a big printing works. The sound of the first sheets trundling through the machinery is not unlike the sound of a train thundering down the track. And there's certainly something about the

smell of printing ink.

We made very little adjustment to the colour of the printing. I had feared that my separation of Kevin Wilson's winning Phase One shot might be slightly cyan. Kevin had supplied the image as a grey scale and I had made it into a four colour monochrome. In the event it appeared slightly magenta but Paul Morris soon tweaked this back to neutral and the press rolled.

It's not far off a hundred years since David Stephens and William George set up their printing works to service the needs of the prosperous coal and iron industries in the South Wales Valleys.

That industry has now gone but S&G remain one of the most successful and experienced magazine printing houses in the UK.

They even publish their own magazine, *Com'municator*, in which they share their experience in many useful pre-press tips.

It's beautifully printed, of course, but you can also download it as a PDF at [www.stephensandgeorge.co.uk](http://www.stephensandgeorge.co.uk)

If you download it you'll have to print it yourself. And that would rather defeat the object of fine printing, wouldn't it?



**FAR LEFT:** Our Account Executive Dylan Thomas chats with Alamy's QC guru Dave Pattison. They are backed by some of the 150+ titles which Stephens & George print. Note the October issue of *The Photographer* on the second shelf, midway between them.

**NEAR LEFT:** Mike Donovan is the man on whom we rely for sound advice on everything pre-press.

**BELOW:** These seven (of eight) plates are now scrap from the printing of the first section. Even a full-frame fish-eye isn't wide enough to take in all eight print stations of the Heidelberg Speedmaster SM102 press.

