

Peter Matthews hasn't been one to go for this new-fangled digital photography but when he used some of the new 35mm Fuji Velvia 100 film recently he was dismayed to find that his regular laboratory had closed down. So he sent his films to the lab in Warwick which operates under the Fuji banner, believing that this would ensure the best quality results from this state-of-the-art new film.

What he did not realise is that this lab is neither owned nor operated by Fuji.

Peter ordered the Full Monty – E-6 processing and mounting (£5.45), 7.5 x 5 inch 'Silver prints Automated/Uncorrected' (£13.99), and 'Images to CD' (£5.99). Including £1.50 return postage, this lot totted up to £26.93 per film for processing alone – to which must be added the cost of the film itself.

What he got was something less than he anticipated. Take a look at the photograph of the Seven Sisters cliffs in Sussex for starters.

At the top of the column is a shot taken from the CD the lab supplied. Bear in mind that every image has to be scanned for printing on a Fuji Digital Frontier mini-lab anyway. This scan is over-exposed, with the highlights in the chalk burnt-out. Admittedly it's a tricky shot, in the evening light.

Now look at the enlarged section. Somehow the film has been scratched before or during processing, as the scratch is evident not only on the transparency itself but also on the CD and print. And look at all that scanned dust. Was someone sweeping the lab floor while Peter's film was being processed?

Next look at the print. Not quite the tonal range of the scan, is it? Yet each 'Automated/Uncorrected' print cost 39 pence.

Finally, my scan using the Nikon Cool Scan 8000. Not only has the built-in Digital Ice removed all the dust but it has also minimised the scratch.

Peter's saga is not yet over. Departing from London Heathrow Airport for an overseas trip, he thought that it might be a good idea if he took a little more film. So he popped into Dixons in the departure lounge, only to discover that they no longer sell reversal film.

They'd been asked for slide film before, though, and helpfully sent him to Boots whom, they said, sell Fuji film under their own brand name. So Peter bought a few rolls from Boots. Process paid.

On his return to the UK Peter sent his films off to the Boots lab which is – guess where? – also in Warwick. Boots boasts 'FDi – Fujifilm Digital Imaging' on its leaflet. Could it be that the two labs are one and the same, whilst apparently being quite separate? Or is Warwick the centre of the photo-processing universe these days?

Processing was already included from Boots but a CD cost Peter £6.99 and 7.5 x 5 inch prints another whopping £13.99. Boots seems to be a pro lab, for it also offers additional services, such as up- and down-rating, contact sheets and even clip tests.

Some of the transparencies have short and curly hairs embedded into the emulsion and the scans to CD and prints once again leave much to be desired. But the distortion of the carrots is a natural phenomenon which cannot be blamed on the lab.

Ironically, using a great new film does not in itself seem to ensure better results. The real tragedy is that it's actually some of those whose livelihoods depend on film whose lack of care is destroying it.

By the way, the reason Peter contacted me was to ask my advice ... on which digital camera to buy.

Are the labs committing suicide?



Lab's CD



Scratch and dust



Lab's print



My scan



Scratch no dust



Lab's CD



Lab's print



My scan