

Brian Byrne publishes three automotive magazines in Ireland - *Irish Car*, *IrishVan & Truck*, and *Irish 4x4 & Offroad*. He also contributes to the Irish Times and several Irish regional newspapers each week, as well as regularly broadcasting on automotive affairs. He uses an AlphaSmart 3000 and Dana in his working 'armoury'. I had the pleasure of interviewing Brian in email recently. He is, as some of you know, an active member here in the AlphaSmart Community.

Brian just recently celebrated his 60th birthday, and he has been a journalist since 1977. Born into a business family, he was himself part of that business for many years before deciding to follow a bent towards writing for a living. He has managed to survive and rear a family in that pursuit, but is the first to say that it is 'not a recipe for getting rich'. His interests beyond writing are photography, magazine and website design, history, celtic mythology, travel, and singing and playing guitar. And, of course, things automotive, including their historical, current and future perspectives.

Email Interview with Brian Byrne conducted by Richard Wanderman in September, 2004

Brian, can you give us a timeline: when you started writing, how you got interested in writing about cars, when you started using electronic tools in your writing, and when and how you discovered AlphaSmart products?

I guess I was always a writer. I remember in my last year at Primary School I did an essay on 'Why I want to be a Scientist'. The teacher was so taken with it that I was frogmarched around the other classes to read it aloud... which didn't really do a lot for my popularity.

I didn't become a scientist, as it happened. Instead, after a year in University where I found that the idea of putting letters in place of numbers and calling it Maths did nothing for me, I opted out. Some years as a plumber and heating contractor followed, then a decade or so running the family business of pub/restaurant and funeral undertaking. Perhaps it was that latter that prompted me to write again, because I began spending time, after closing the pub, with an old portable typewriter. Some of the bits and pieces I wrote later became the foundation for short stories.

In 1977 I decided I wanted to write for a living, and with a young family made what would seem to be a rather foolhardy decision to leave the business. I've written previously in this forum about some of my adventures, but the short line is that I managed to move through freelance print journalism from local to national, did a 10-year stint as a broadcast journalist with the national radio station, RTE (Radio Telefis Eireann), and subsequently developed a contract publishing business with clients in Ireland that included Apple Computer, the Industrial Development Authority, and University College Dublin.

I have always been interested in cars and driving, but it wasn't until some 16 years ago that I became actively involved in writing about them, for a small local newspaper on a freelance basis. One way or another, that side of my work grew until about five years ago it was representing around half of my

personal income.

Now it is full time, following the death of a friend last January and - with my associate Trish Whelan - buying the three automotive titles which he had founded.

My use of electronic tools in writing began in the autumn of 1981 when I invested in a Wang Word Processor with a view to increasing my output as a freelancer. The week it arrived I was offered a full-time job in RTE, and so I continued freelancing while taking up fulltime radio news work until 1990.

The Wang's position was usurped by a Mac Plus sometime in the latter half of the eighties, and since then I've used a variety of Mac desktop and portable machines. Soon after getting the Plus, I discovered the Tandy 102, and that allowed me to do a lot of basic writing work away from the office as well as freeing up the Mac for another colleague.

I had been vaguely aware of AlphaSmart products for a couple of years around the turn of the millennium, but my portable needs were being reasonably satisfied by whatever generation of Apple PowerBook I was using at the time, albeit with the downsides of its battery life and weight. If I simply needed a keyboard for short trips, the Tandy was still functioning.

But the arrival of the Dana to my attention in the early part of last year coincided with the death of the Tandy because of my misapplication of some superglue to fix a wonky key (headline: 'Journalist Pleads Guilty to Killing Tandy').

Besides, I was intrigued by the fact that it could give me all sorts of PIM goodies, looked eminently portable, and there was that amazing 25-hour battery life. I ordered it on the phone while driving a new Ford car in the south of France, and when I got home Dana was there.

The rest is AlphaSmart history, with the addition very quickly of an AlphaSmart 3000 simply because I was going to have to send Dana in for its backlight repair and I didn't want to be without a keyboard for any length of time. As it happened, after the Alphie arrived, the Dana was back within 24 hours from the time I sent her away.

Now I use both AlphaSmart machines more or less equally, depending on where I'm working and whether or not I'm going to need the PIM elements of Dana with me. And, by the way, within a month of getting Dana, I ordered one for my business partner Trish.

What is your typical writing process? How do you currently use the AlphaSmart and Dana in your process?

As a working journalist for more than a quarter of a century, my writing process divides.

Newswriting is straightforward, getting the facts down in an informative and accurate format, and sending it on for the reader's short-span attention.

Feature work requires more, but I don't spend any time thinking about it. As somebody once said to me; 'your fingers talk' and it seems that when I need to write a piece, once I have done any needed research, the story just comes out as I hit the keys. Of course there will be some editing, but at this stage of my writing life not a lot. Besides, deadlines are both a danger to good writing and conversely a stimulus to getting it right first time.

Fiction, which I did quite a lot in the eighties and early nineties, is something I've only got back to in the last couple of years, mainly because I've realized that I'll never really have that extra time to do it 'some day' and I simply have to steal time now. It is a more piecemeal process, though I try to write first drafts in sequence rather than flitting around the place. The best part for me is when I get down to the rewrites, one of which I'm working on now. The essential difference between journalism and fiction is that you give yourself time to hone your prose.

The arrival of Dana and AlphaSmart 3000 gave me a better chance to 'steal time' both for my personal writing and paid-for stuff. And, as most writers here do, I've found that the AlphaSmart 3000 is a great first draft machine. But I can also edit comfortably enough on it. Dana is that much easier again, but is really more my 'on the road' replacement for my iBook when I don't have to do any graphics work away from my desk.

Generally, if I'm back at the office before a piece has to be sent in, I'll go through it on the larger screen, doing whatever cleaning up or adding to is necessary. But I have regularly sent finished material to editors directly from Alphie (through a press-room or internet cafe computer), or from Dana through my cellphone, from various parts of the world.

The other advantage of the AS3K is related to the fact that I'm probably addicted to keyboards. I simply cannot bear to go anywhere without one, even to a formal function. So if I'm going somewhere a bit dodgy in environmental or personal safety terms, Alphie will come either in a shoulderbag or left under the seat of the car (if I'm at that formal function) so that I'm never short of filling in some spare (stolen) time. Much as I'd hate to lose it, the cost wouldn't break the bank, whereas the loss of an iBook sometimes would.

You are an active member of the AlphaSmart Community. Can you comment on that experience: how helpful it has been to you to have a community, meeting other writers there, etc.

Well, there's an extraordinarily catholic (using the universal sense of the word) group of people in the community, all linked by a common thread of interest in AlphaSmart products. Equally, between all of us here we are very much representative of the human condition in most of its aspects, most notably interest in the creative, artistic, and educational. And there's a whole great body of people here who are prepared to help, and to share, and to suggest solutions to problems which any of us may have experienced in our AlphaSmart Adventure.

More important than all that, though, is the fact that many of us have become friends, even if we have never met. It is why the community is the first thing I check every time I get back to the office computer, and as soon as I've looked at my home page of The Irish Times first thing in the morning.

What do you think (so far as you've heard and read) of the new AlphaSmart Neo?

It seems to be the logical evolution of the AlphaSmart 3000, with the best of the physical Dana experience brought to the new product without sacrificing the simplicity and ruggedness that are the AS's best points. I want one, but can't really justify yet another keyboard for the moment.

When the new software for AlphaWord and Beamer are made available, I will upgrade both ASs and gain the benefits both of nameable files and a communications ability between them and Dana that will 'complete a circle' that is currently incomplete.

What would your ideal electronic writing tool be like? If you had the AlphaSmart engineering group's ear, what would you tell them to build next?

Honestly, between the existing AlphaSmart products, 'ideal' already exists. In effect I could survive all my writing work with either AS or Dana, and the latter will also allow me to communicate and manage my diary and to-do needs. I don't need the internet capability apart from the SnapperMail programme that I use from time to time with my cellphone.

With Docs2Go and either HotSync or a cardreader, I can transfer any documents I want into Dana and out again, and for basic word-processing AlphaWord is quite the best programme I've every used. All I want that I can't yet have is a 'split screen' for Dana that will allow me read research material in one area and write in the other without having to switch files/applications. Please, AlphaSmart? Pretty Please?

What other tools are in your electronic toolkit? What's on your desk at home and what do you travel with?

At home (office) is an eMac, still the best value in getting fairly fast use of the graphics and internet capabilities that I need for my business. We also have an old iMac that Trish uses and which will be replaced by another eMac as soon as we have some money to spare.

(I have a habit of not buying the absolute latest hardware, but waiting - for financial reasons as well as for the bugs to be ironed out - for the next generation to make the superceded more affordable. So far I don't think I've really fallen too far behind.)

For internet site management I use Adobe GoLive 6. I taught myself html, but why do it the hard way if you don't have to? (I did the same in colour photography, learning colour printing but then using a service because I could do something more profitable with the time saved.) I use Quark Xpress for magazine page layout, and Photoshop for image processing. My browser of choice is Apple's Safari, and my email is the Mail application that comes with OS X Panther, which manages to divert the junkmail very well. My word-processor on the Mac is mostly the bundled TextEdit, followed by AppleWorks.

For interviewing, I have a much-loved Sony Walkman Professional tape machine that gives me broadcast quality, but mostly these days I'm using an Olympus digital recorder. What I want is one that uses CF cards.

My current main camera is a Canon EOS 300D (Rebel in North America), but I still find work for the old Canon G1 3.2 megapixel that has stood me in great stead for several years.

And my portable Apple machine is a 500Mhz G3 iBook that, if the funds allow it, will be replaced by the end of the year with its latest iteration G4, WiFi iBook.

My Macs, if they could tell me, are probably quite jealous of my AlphaSmart machines. But I have enough love in me for all.

I travel with different combinations. As I leave Wednesday to spend four days in Paris and subsequently three days in Italy (all working!), I will have iBook and a brace of AS3Ks between Trish and myself, the iBook being the main communication and publishing computer back in the hotel. Plus cameras for both of us, and all the chargers and WiFi bits and cables that we might need. One of these days I'll learn to travel lighter!