

HAPPY 30TH ANNIVERSARY TOP-TEKS!

Here at Zerb we are always pleased to celebrate the 'significant birthdays' of GTC sponsor companies – and in this issue it is the turn of **Top-Teks**, who recently turned 30. As with all our longstanding sponsor companies, we are incredibly grateful for their many years of support for the GTC (Top-Teks joined as sponsor members way back in 1993, when the company was a mere infant at just 4 years old). In researching this article, it has been fascinating to see just how many times Top-Teks appeared in searches of our online Zerb and GTC In Focus archives, showing the range of different ways in which they have collaborated with us over the years – as a constant source of great technical advice, frequently lending cameras and other equipment for review, and hosting many events. As demonstrated by the warm testimonials included below, many GTC members have personally benefited from years of excellent support and service as well. It is interesting too to observe how developments in camera technology have evolved in parallel to the progress of the company.



Trevor Porter



Gwen Thomas



Mike Thomas

Top-Teks was founded on 15 May 1989 by Gwen Thomas, Trevor Porter and John Shepherd. Located in a 450ft² office in Harefield (Park Place), it started as an engineering services company providing support and maintenance to broadcasters, production houses and freelancers. Trevor and John had been engineers at NBC News, having both previously worked for BBC Television, and they recognised that the television broadcast industry was changing. Equipment was becoming more reliable and in-house service departments being cut back. Trevor and John spotted the opportunity for an independent service company to pick up the servicing the smaller in-house departments were no longer able to handle.

Meanwhile, Gwen and Trevor had also been part of a team in a totally different context: Gwen had been the driver in a car rally team with Trevor as her navigator. She had her own accountancy practice, so was familiar with starting and running companies. With Trevor and John knowing the broadcast industry well, and Gwen very familiar with how to run a company, the new team was formed. At the time, the main format was U-Matic but Betacam SP was just gaining in popularity. Top-Teks dabbled in sales from the off but engineering and service were very much the core business to start with.

Initially, their main customers were the London offices of American and Canadian broadcast news companies,



The Top-Teks team (including Whiskey the dog) outside the first premises at Park Place, Harefield

such as NBC News, CBS News and CBC News, but Top-Teks' reputation soon began to spread and the rising number of new facilities companies increased demand for their services. Opportunities for different kinds of support grew too; for example, when Brazilian broadcaster TV Globo needed to move premises, Top-Teks built its new facility in The Interchange building at Camden Lock, London, and provided ongoing support for its camera crews and edit systems.

Expanding premises and sales

It wasn't long before bigger premises were called for, so in the early 1990s the young company expanded into a 1000ft² unit across the road, later adding the next door office to double its floor space. Meanwhile, the popularity of Sony's Betacam had grown and Digital Betacam was launched in 1993. DigiBeta was a slow burner to start with, largely due to the 4:3 camcorder starting at around £50k, but eventually it would become the dominant format. The year 1993 was notable for a couple of other reasons in the Top-Teks story too, most importantly the arrival on the scene of Gwen's son Mike, who joined the company initially as a service engineer, although he had previously worked elsewhere in sales. From our point of view, also very significant was that, in October, the GTC was able to announce in GTC In Focus that *"Top-Teks Ltd have joined that most exclusive of clubs, the ranks of the Guild sponsors and we welcome them to what we hope will be a long and mutually beneficial relationship."* This relationship swung straight into action and throughout the latter half of the 1990s, Top-Teks, and Trevor in particular, was a frequently cited voice of technical authority in 'Tone's Tea Bar', the eponymous GTC In Focus

technical roundup by the indefatigable Tony Grant, which ran and ran for many years.

By 1996, Top-Teks had fully embraced the world of sales, with Mike now taking an active part in driving this forward, drawing on his previous sales experience. His combination of both sales and servicing knowledge gave him the edge over many broadcast equipment resellers, not many of whom were as equipped to advise on both the product and the servicing side of things. The company quickly became one of the biggest dealers for Sony in Europe. Around this time, a series of regular GTC social evenings hosted by Top-Teks was announced, once again in Tony's column: *"The Tea Bar may be facing some serious competition (and not just giving away teabags). Gwen Thomas at Top-Teks has decided we should have more socialising and is considering regular evening meetings in Harefield once a month. Her idea is to arrange a gathering on the first Monday in every month. Each evening should have a theme and/or presentation by a manufacturer(s) but will also provide a get-together for all interested parties to have a good old chin wag."* These evenings did indeed run for a while, proving very popular with those members who attended.

With the company growing rapidly, bigger premises were yet again required, prompting a move to acquire more offices above the workshop, plus a subsidiary, T2 Direct, was opened in Hillingdon. T2 focused more on the new DV and DVCam marketplace and on camera accessories, also offering a mail order catalogue (this was after all pre-internet sales days). This new initiative was met with enthusiasm in Zerb: *"T2 comes from a stable with an awesome reputation, and the store is a natural progression from the provision of equipment and personnel, as well as their*

best wishes TOP-TEKS

WHEN I STARTED AWFULLY NICE VIDEO back in April 1988, we had to wait a year, until May 1989, to begin our continuing relationship with Top-Teks. Back then it took a serious loan from the bank to buy a camera – our first Betacam cost more than my first flat, even with a good discount!

Top-Teks started up just down the road from their existing, much larger, premises in Harefield, which now boasts a great showroom as well as the service area and offices. The one thing that hasn't changed over the years has been the amazing level of service everyone at Top-Teks provides. Whether it's Mike and his co-workers in the sales team, or Trevor and John (now joined by Paul) in service, the family feel and friendliness is an overriding factor in any dealings.

The fact that the staff turnover is so small says a lot about the firm and there's always a friendly face whenever you turn up (and often a special greeting from the resident dog) – even if you're arriving unannounced with a camera that needs fixing NOW!

That is where Top-Teks scores so highly. While Mike will always try to do his best to match a price for you if he possibly can (even in this mad internet world of grey imports), the after-sales experience I have received over the years has been exceptional and, whatever part of the world I've been in, there has always been someone at the end of the phone to talk through any problems.

This, for me, is what makes Top-Teks stand out. The fact that they are less than 5 miles from our office is a real bonus, but having a company that understands your needs and will loan you new equipment to try or give you a heads-up that new things are on the way really makes a difference.

As Chair of the GTC, I would also like to thank Gwen and all the team at Top-Teks for 25 years of support for the GTC, for which we are very grateful.

Many congratulations on your first 30 years and here's to the next 30!

Graham Maunder, Chair, GTC



HAPPY 30TH BIRTHDAY TOP-TEKS. I guess that means I've been a customer for 30 years... wow, that's scary.

So why have I stayed loyal to them for so long? One word: service. As a professional cameraman, I cannot afford failure; if kit fails or is damaged, the job doesn't stop. In the olden days(!), Top-Teks was sometimes a bit more expensive but I was always happy to pay the extra in the knowledge that the service I would get would be second to none. Nowadays, they are as competitive as anyone, so why would I shop elsewhere?

How many times over the years have they bailed me out? Honestly, I have lost count.

Audio 1 has suddenly gone noisy and I'm doing a day of lives for the BBC, phone up Top-Teks and take it straight in for a quick check. Corrosion around the XLR, we'll loan you a camera while we sort it out. Job goes ahead.

Probably the most extreme example was a two-week shoot covering the first ever Annapurna Triathlon. We flew into Kathmandu. In those days, I always carried the camera as hand luggage and stowed the equipment in a Portabrace camera bag. On picking up the bag from the carousel, it had a large oily tyre mark across it. I poured out the battery charger in bits. The four batteries were OK though – so I had two weeks of filming and four batteries. I immediately phoned Top-Teks, who had a replacement couriered to Heathrow and on the next available flight. It took a few days to arrive but the job went ahead.



Did I also mention that they are really nice people? What more can I say.

Steve Ryder,
GTC member

I'VE KNOWN THE TEAM AT TOP-TEKS FOR around 25 years now, since working for a film company and taking our Betacam kit in to be checked over; we always received excellent service. So, when I went freelance in 1997 and started to slowly build up my kit, Top-Teks was my first port of call.

I've bought from other dealers with no issues. However, it's the technical knowledge that Top-Teks bring to the table when buying kit, with them always able to answer my questions and check for me whether a piece of kit will do a specific job. If it turns out it won't, they don't try to force a sale, instead suggesting another product that will fulfil the requirements. I have always



1995: Gwen, Mike and Trevor at the V&A (Visual and Audio) Show with a prize Canon EOS 5000 camera

famed maintenance service." T2 worked well for some years until eventually the divide between the dominant broadcast format (still DigiBeta) and the cheaper professional formats (DV and DVCam) began to blur – at which point T2 Direct became less relevant and was discontinued.

1997 saw the launch of HDCam. Again, the HDW F900 camera was ferociously expensive and would take some time to catch on but famously the HDW-F900F was used for *Star Wars: Attack of the Clones*, allegedly making this the first feature to be shot digitally. It would be five years before the HDW-750P, a less expensive access point to HD video, came along, and then later again, in 2006, the HDW-F900R with 24p arrived on the scene.

Meanwhile, back in the story of the Top-

Teks-GTC relationship, who can forget the karting years? For a few years around the turn of the century (1999 and 2001), the GTC got into go-karting, holding several social/kit exhibition events, and even an AGM, at various karting venues. On each occasion the Top-Teks team proved unbeatable!

Breaking into the natural history market

Although Top-Teks has always been a big seller of Sony cameras, it also has an excellent relationship with other camera manufacturers, notably Panasonic and Canon. In 2003, the Panasonic relationship led to a major breakthrough in the wildlife filming arena for Top-Teks. The company was asked to supply and support the digital cameras for the BBC's *Planet Earth*. The camera of choice was the Panasonic VariCam, which had been picked for its off-speed ability that mimicked the under- and over-cranking that was a staple of natural history filming. The VariCam had launched in 2001 and required a bespoke computer/frame-rate converter to achieve the off-speed video. Top-Teks supplied five

Karting success – obviously part of the company DNA ever since Gwen and Trevor's rally racing days!

Top-Teks Triumphant at Karting & Kameras, 2001



kits in all plus another two Sony HDW-750s for underwater work. The project took three years to shoot and not a single camera was harmed in the making of the series!

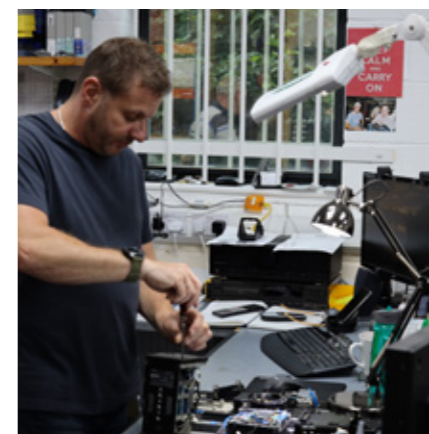
2003 also saw Sony launch HDCam SR and XD-Cam. Sony's first tapeless broadcast XD-Cam Disc camcorders survive today with the PDW-700 and PDW-F800 still in use.

All change again

The second half of the 'noughties' was another period of big change. A series of robberies had occurred at both the Park Place and Hillingdon offices, so it was time to move premises again – this time to the current location at Bridge House.

And in the world of camera technology a sea change was about to take place. Solid state media had started to appear in 2008 but at first the media was expensive and tiny. However, nobody saw the event that would really fast-track the arrival of solid state coming. On 11 March 2011 the devastating Tohoku earthquake and resulting tsunami struck, completely destroying Sony's Sendai tape factory and leaving the broadcast world largely devoid of supplies of tape. Solid state quickly took over, one consequence of which was a steep decline in Top-Teks' service revenue for routine maintenance of tape-based cameras and VTRs.

By now, at least in comparison to the early days of Top-Teks and the long DigiBeta era, new cameras and formats were coming through thick and fast. At the end of 2011, Canon announced the EOS C300. This was the start of the move to large-sensor cameras. Although Sony had launched its F3 a year earlier and Panasonic the AF100 a year



Paul Sibley, Technical Director, with a Sony F55 in pieces on the workshop bench

prior to that, the C300 was the first to have 50Mb/s recording, which was considered broadcast standard and really kicked off the adoption of large-sensor cameras for broadcast productions. The following year Sony announced the F5 and F55, and then, in 2014, the FS7 was launched at IBC, remaining dominant today. Finally, in 2018, the Sony VENICE made its debut at BSC Expo, now complete with high frame rates, making this camera the complete package. It is worth noting that the price of a Sony VENICE base kit is the same as a BVW-400AP back in the 1990s and far cheaper than DigiBeta or HDCam when they were first released.

During this period, the company continued to support the GTC in many tangible ways, including hosting some very successful workshops, 'Dealing with Data' in 2013, and 'Travelling with Kit' in 2018, plus Mike Thomas became a regular speaker at the GTC's new TV Academies, aimed at university students.



GTC members getting useful tips on 'Travelling with Kit' at the 2018 GTC Workshop kindly hosted by Top-Teks

found their prices to be competitive but Top-Teks are not box-shifters. They look after their customers, and this is one of the many reasons I return.

I know that if I do have an issue with a piece of kit, a quick call to Top-Teks will get it sorted one way or another. I've bought a number of cameras and a range of equipment over the years, confident that I have backup support from an excellent engineering team, who are based in the same building and offer a quick turnaround service.

So, Happy 30th to Mike, Gwen and the team at Top-Teks.



Thanks for keeping me on the road filming!
Max Hodgetts,
Former GTC Council Member

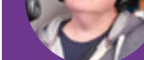
I FIRST REMEMBER VISITING TOP-TEKS many years ago at Park Place, Newdigate Road – massive fish tank and all! This was when, rather than worrying about the next big camera purchase, most camera professionals were more concerned about keeping the hours down on their tape heads... whatever happened to the 'Save' switch? Dare we use it with more than the recommended hours? The legendary John Shepherd would take the camera off us and deliver it back some time later, ready for another 650 hours... or more.

That was where I first met Gwen and encountered the Top-Teks engineering team. Entering the workshop was an eye-opening experience for a young assistant with all sorts of unidentifiable bits of cameras, VTRs or monitors in various states of undress. How they ever went back together remains a mystery to me even now.

Now that I am a 'decision maker' when it comes to buying kit (if nothing else in life), I like to use suppliers who focus on customer service and technical backup, whether that be before, during or after purchase. As someone who is often away, I am confident that a phone call or email to any of the team at Top-Teks will be dealt with quickly and empathetically.

In a world where there is an increasing disconnect between the customer and the supplier, the presence of a company who knows their customers and understands the industry we work in is something that is priceless. In my experience, Top-Teks

has always been one of those and I hope that continues for many years to come.



Simon Edwards,
GTC Vice Chair

Still offering servicing

At this time when the move towards sustainability and pushback against the throwaway culture are gaining momentum, Top-Teks is very proud still to offer its service department with three engineers, who can undertake everything from annual services and cleaning to repairs on cameras, lenses and tripods. The company has always worked closely with, amongst others, Sony, Panasonic and Canon to provide the very best service backup and after-sales support.

So far, 2019 has seen Top-Teks working across a wide range of different projects, including refreshing the studio cameras for ITV's *Coronation Street*, supplying camera channels for two new studios at BBC's New Broadcasting House, equipping four studios at BBC's New Broadcasting House in Cardiff, and many more projects yet to complete.

Over the years, the broadcast world has changed, as has the way people buy equipment. The relationship between supplier and customer has been attacked by the competitive prices and wealth of information available on the internet,



Today's team (including Jess the Top-Teks pup) outside the current Bridge House premises

Fact File

Keep in touch and see more about **Top-Teks** and their full range of products and services at:

Instagram: @topteksuk
Twitter: @TopTeksuk
Facebook: @TopTeksuk

LinkedIn: Mike Thomas
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changing the buying habits for electronic equipment of consumers, professionals and even large organisations. Often these apparent attractions have superseded people's traditional desire to buy from somebody they know and trust, with all the benefits this can bring. There is also a trend for customers to communicate electronically rather than on the phone or face-to-face. Thankfully for Top-Teks, there are still plenty of customers (like the GTC members quoted) who appreciate that price isn't everything and that reliable, helpful service and support are key. Long may that last – and we wish Top-Teks all the very best for the next 30 years!

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