'Computing is a metaphor for life – it can be rough, but that's how it is, and, with a bit of help from others, most of us get by'

RETIREMENT should, ideally, be an opportunity for developing new interests and learning new skills. And, yes, some ten months after retiring from the IET and relocating to Cornwall in the south-west of England, I can confidently distinguish between a cormorant and a shag, recognise the flight pattern of a gannet at half a mile, and explain the difference between a ketch and a yawl. All vital stuff, but none of this remotely compares in significance with my new-found understanding of the potentially awful realities of personal computing and the one-man business.

In practice, I'm only semi-retired. Two days a week, I sit at my PC and edit one of the IET's magazines over a broadband connection. As I began working towards the completion of the first issue, I became increasingly aware of my vulnerability to PC failure. I wasn't completely unprepared, as, prior to starting work, I'd bought an external hard disk as a remedy against the spectre of a hard disk crash; backing up my work on a, more or less, regular basis. It soon dawned on me, however, that saving your files to a hard disk isn't much use unless you've a working PC to attach it to. Clearly, I needed a new, spare PC.

No big deal you might think – the likes of PC World and Dell are virtually giving the things away. But, here, alas, lies the beginning of my troubles. What I call my old PC is roughly the size of a small suitcase and makes a noise like an asthmatic vacuum cleaner. My new PC would, I was resolved, be smaller, quieter, and, stylistically, much cooler. A small form factor PC, like the Shuttle, looked very tempting, but I was put off by the need for a proprietary motherboard. Then, digging around on the web, I chanced on the NSK3300 case from Antec – a mere 14in high and 8in wide, it could, nevertheless, accommodate a standard MicroATX motherboard, and comes with its own high-efficiency 300W power supply. I found an Asus motherboard with Nvidia on-board graphics supporting a DVI output, which, complete with some fast memory, a decent AMD microprocessor and a SATA hard drive, all seemed to provide the basis for a very nice, not too expensive, business workstation.

For a while I was tempted to build it myself. I've got books telling you how easy it is – just a case of finding a set of compatible components and plugging them together. Fortunately, I managed to resist. What, I asked myself, would I do if it didn't work? Unable to come up with a satisfactory answer, I did a bit more digging around on the web, discovering Helston-based Primary PC Solutions. They promised to build my dream machine within three working days.

FRIDAY MORNING
One wet Friday morning, early in March, I set-off to Helston to collect my new PC. Back home, after a hasty lunch, I settled down to the business of installing the operating system. For reasons that are, perhaps, not entirely rational, I use Linux as my working operating system. I've nothing much against Windows; I just think it's over-priced and irritating to use. I also believe Microsoft's virtual monopoly of the desktop OS market has exercised a baleful influence on the development of personal computing. Using Linux is, in part, my small, admittedly ineffectual, protest against this state of affairs. It's also an excellent OS in its own right, while the GNOME user interface that comes with my current Linux distribution, Ubuntu 6.06, is elegant, totally intuitive, and generally a joy.

My old PC is a dual-boot system – at start-up I can choose between Windows XP or Ubuntu 6.06. Finding that I was using Windows less and less, and getting fed up with the need to update my virus checker every time I did so, I decided that my new PC would be Linux only. I've found that the only time I really have to use Windows is when I'm accessing websites that only work with Microsoft Explorer. Linux users can easily overcome this problem by installing CrossOver Office, allowing them to run Explorer by running the Windows desktop within Linux – a pretty amazing sight.

If you've never installed an OS it can seem a daunting prospect, but it's generally perfectly straightforward, if rather boring. You select a few obvious options, language, location etc, and then sit around while the installer does the real work. In practice, a Windows installation is a bit more of a ▶

backup bungle

In the first of an occasional series, in which contributors describe their struggles with technology, **Roger Dettmer** recounts his problems keeping his new Linux workstation up and running