

You never forget how to ride a bicycle, they say. Sport participants achieve excellence by constant practice and working to improve.

If you use a computer you will have benefited from the rapid improvement in the machines and software. The benign purpose of designers is to make life easier for the user. There is no doubt that they have succeeded in doing that, but the benefit comes at a cost. Users are now far less familiar with the basics.

Not the youngsters who have been taught computer technology as part of their education, but those who came to computing as adults and needed to acquire new skills to use a computer to advantage.

The arrival of Windows with its Mouse and Icons opened the door of computing to the world at large and has continued with the advances of digital photography, emails and so on. It is now possible to do so much without having any idea of what is going on inside the machine. You don't need the ability to build a car to drive one, but if it goes wrong - you're stuck.

Generally, the more you know about the basics, the better off you are if something does go wrong. It might even be as basic as being able to explain what happened. It could be that the understanding makes you aware of what could go wrong and avoid the problem in the first place. (As I never tire of pointing out: the only people who never back up their files are those who haven't lost any – yet!)

With all that in mind, last year we introduced some short sessions before the main topic of a meeting. Short sessions enable us to review some of the basics; to help people understand more when something goes wrong.

I was reminded recently of a very basic point - the file extension. All files have a name in the form of **filename (dot) file extension**. The file name can be anything you choose. The file extension, on the other hand, is supplied by the programme used to create the file.

The benefit to you is that if you click on the file to open it, your computer will read the extension; know which programme to load and open the file for you.

If you cannot see the file extension, open any folder; click on tools > Folder options >View, then untick the box that says "Hide extensions for known file types" and click Apply. You will then be able to see extensions: 'doc' for document files; 'xls' for spreadsheet files; 'txt' for text files and so on.

Two files could have the same name, but the extensions will clarify the difference. Basics are useful: every little bit helps your understanding.

The next meeting is on Tuesday 24th January 2012 at All Saints Lesser Hall, Victoria Square, Penarth. 7.30 pm for 8.00. The topic is planned to be about Open Office – free software! For more information ring Howard on 029 20708439.

