

## FREE SOFTWARE FOR PHOTOGRAPHERS

At a meeting of Crediton Photography Club in January 2010, we undertook a brief review of the most popular free software currently available for photographers and others. The following data sheets each give a summary of the features, benefits and drawbacks of one of the applications discussed.

Each of these applications has been around for quite a long time, has a large user base and is still being regularly updated. There is no reason why they should not be as safe and reliable as commercial software for which you have to pay a licence fee, **but of course you try it entirely at your own risk** and, as a minimum, you should check anything you download with an up to date anti-virus programme before you install it.

With most well established free software, its use is not completely unconditional. Frequently you are required to accept an End User Licence Agreement (EULA). Often this is in the form of either the standard Open General Licence or the GNU Public Licence which, amongst other things, are intended to ensure free software remains free and that the source code is also made freely available to anyone who is interested in it.

All the programmes listed will run under any recent version of MS Windows, nearly all have Linux Versions. Most have versions for Mac OS9 and Mac OSX. Where possible, details are provided of download sites.

The applications covered, in the order in which they are listed, are as follows:

Irfanview	An organiser for photos and multimedia files
Open Office	An office productivity Suite
Audacity	An audio editing utility
Raw Therapee	A Stand-alone RAW image editor
UFRaw	A RAW image editor that can also be used as a GIMP plug-in.
GIMP	A high-end photo editing suite
Paint.net	A basic photo-editing application
CD Burner XP	To create or copy any kind of Optical Media
Firefox	A Web Browser
Linux	An alternative operating system.

Two of these applications deserve a special note about timing:

A new version of **Ubuntu Linux** is released every April and October. Once every three years a Long Term Support (LTS) version is launched. The version due out in April 2010 (Version 10.4) is a major upgrade and also an LTS version, so it may well be worth waiting until then before trying such a major installation.

With GIMP, the current “Stable” version is Version 2.6. Version 2.7 is a development version and a testbed for Version 2.8 which should function even more like Photoshop CSx than its predecessors. New users might therefore be better advised to wait a few weeks until version 2.8 is published, with the promised new interface.

<b>Name of Programme</b>	<b>Irfanview</b>
What does it do?	Organiser for photos and other multimedia files, such as audio and video.
Good Points	Fast to open and to use. Accepts a very wide range of file formats. Has some excellent tools, including one of the most comprehensive utilities available for re-sizing large batches of photos.
Bad Points	Editing facilities are basic, as is the slideshow capability. The indexing tools are not as sophisticated as (for instance) Adobe Lightroom
Tips	Because it opens so quickly and is easy to use, it is easy to overlook some of its more powerful features, which are worth exploring.
Source of Help	Extensive dedicated help system.
Operating System	Windows only, it seems.
Background Information	There is no evidence of a Mac version being produced at present, although there is evidence that many Mac and Linux users would like a version that ran natively on their systems.
Where to find it	<a href="http://www.irfanview.com">www.irfanview.com</a>

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<b>Name of Programme</b>	<b>Open Office</b>
What does it do?	Fully featured office productivity suite, including Word Processor, Spreadsheet, Presentation Package, Database, Drawing & Maths
Good Points	Looks & feels like MS Office. Internationally recognised document formats. Almost fully compatible with MS Office. Widely supported and used. Good multi-language support, and will also output files to HTML and (within limits) .pdf formats.
Bad Points	No Desktop Publisher or Personal Contact Manager modules. Can be slower to open than MS equivalent (although latest versions are addressing that issue). A few advanced formatting options do not convert correctly into the MS Office equivalents.
Tips	It is highly configurable, so keyboard shortcuts etc can be modified to suit your working practices.
Source of Help	Extensive dedicated help system. Books available. There is a large internet community of users.
Operating System	Windows, Mac OS, Linux, Solaris
Background Information	Supported & sponsored by Sun Microsystems Inc. It is not yet clear how committed Oracle will be to continued development once they complete their takeover of Sun
Where to find it	<a href="http://www.openoffice.org">www.openoffice.org</a>

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<b>Name of Programme</b>	<b>Audacity</b>
What does it do?	Fully Featured desktop sound editor. Creates, edits and combines and converts digital audio files.
Good Points	Very fast and easy to use. Has some highly complex technical features, but you don't need to touch them if you don't need them. Gives full control over edit process; great for creating commentaries, voiceovers or soundtracks.
Bad Points	Only a limited range of file formats supported (for instance the default format for iTunes is not supported, but it is easy to convert to MP3 within iTunes before you import to Audacity for editing.
Tips	Because of licensing restrictions in the US (not applicable in the UK), the file you need to export MP3 format tracks is missing from the download. Download this separately (it is called LAME.dll). Store it somewhere convenient on your hard drive & the first time you try to export an MP3, Audacity will prompt you to install it.
Source of Help	Very good dedicated help, which also serves as a good introduction to audio editing generally
Operating System	Windows, Mac OS or Linux
Background Information	For advanced users Audacity incorporates the Nyquist prompt to enable you to write your own special audio effects
Where to find it	<a href="http://www.audacity.sourceforge.net/download/">www.audacity.sourceforge.net/download/</a>

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<b>Name of Programme</b>	<b>RawTherapee</b>
What does it do?	Comprehensive RAW file manipulation software.
Good Points	Handles RAW output from nearly all cameras, including fairly recent models. Very nice interface, well organised workflow. Does just about anything you could possible need (except local adjustments)
Bad Points	To use all its facilities requires a fair amount of technical knowledge; not the best choice for beginners.
Tips	Take a bit of time to familiarise yourself with it, as it gives very high levels of control if used to its full capability.
Source of Help	Good dedicated help, including some highly technical information about the workings of “RAW” files.
Operating System	Windows, Linux, a Mac version is under development but meanwhile I am told you can run it on a Mac using Windows emulation
Background Information	Much of the basic programming for RAW file management was done years ago by an American called Dave Coffin. His basic “engine”, called DC Raw is used in many of the paid-for programmes still sold today. It also powers RAWtherapee and (qv) UFRaw, which are the free programmes covered in this review. Because it is so widely used, new modules get written fairly quickly when a new camera appears on the market.
Where to find it	<a href="http://www.rawtherapee.com/">http://www.rawtherapee.com/</a> Please note a trial edition of Version 3 has just been launched; not tested yet.

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<b>Name of Programme</b>	<b>UFRaw</b>
What does it do?	Camera RAW manipulation software
Good Points	Does most of the things that RAW Therapee does, but also integrates seamlessly with GIMP to give you all-in-one RAW control and photo editing
Bad Points	Not quite such a slick interface as RAW Therapee and one or two advanced features missing
Tips	Best choice if you are a regular GIMP user. If you want a stand-alone RAW editor, I think RAW Therapee is the slightly better option.
Source of Help	Comprehensive dedicated help with lots of information about digital files generally.
Operating System	Windows, Linux, there appears to be a Mac version too, but not so easy to find.
Background Information	The core software (DCraw) is common to many, if not most, RAW editors whether you pay for them or not.
Where to find it	For MAC: <a href="http://mac.softpedia.com/get/Graphics/UFRaw.shtml">http://mac.softpedia.com/get/Graphics/UFRaw.shtml</a> For others: <a href="http://ufraw.sourceforge.net/Install.html">ufraw.sourceforge.net/Install.html</a>

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<b>Name of Programme</b>	<b>GIMP</b>
What does it do?	High-end photo-editing software
Good Points	Does nearly all the things that Adobe Photoshop will do (at least for photographers). Extraordinarily powerful for a free programme. Most filters and plug-ins for Adobe Photoshop will also work in GIMP, and many collections of these are available for separate download.
Bad Points	Some processes on large files are a bit slow. Workflow is less intuitive than Photoshop or Lightroom, although most of the capabilities are there. Many keyboard shortcuts are the same as Photoshop, but some are not, which can catch you out (for instance Ctrl+D creates a duplicate of the image, whereas in Photoshop it means “Deselect”)
Tips	Highly configurable, so take time to set it up to suit your own workflow preferences. (It is unlikely that you will be using this if you are completely new to digital imaging). If you want, you can change all the shortcuts to their Adobe equivalents. Use the advanced facilities such as Layer Masks, Soft Proofing etc
Source of Help	There is a large on-line community of users, mostly refugees from Photoshop or imaging professionals on a tight budget. There is also a very comprehensive help system (but I do not find this as easy to navigate as some). You can buy books, including some for advanced workers.
Operating System	Windows, Linux, Mac OS
Background Information	By far the most widely used free photo editing suite for advanced workers, it has been around for years. The next “stable” version, V2.8, due out early in 2010, promises a more “Photoshop” like experience.
Where to find it	<a href="http://Gimp.org/downloads">Gimp.org/downloads</a>

## FREE SOFTWARE FOR PHOTOGRAPHERS

<b>Name of Programme</b>	<b>Paint.net</b>
What does it do?	A basic, but perfectly adequate photo editor
Good Points	Fast, small, very attractive interface. Does most basic tasks with minimum fuss. Includes most of the usual editing tools, levels & curves controls and simple layers.
Bad Points	Windows-only. No support for RAW files or for colour depths greater than 8-bit. It sticks to the basics, with none of the extras that you get with recent editions of Photoshop Elements
Tips	If you work in JPEGs or 8-bit TIFFs and do not need features like layer masks & soft proofing, this does most of what you need. Great for beginners.
Source of Help	Dedicated & well written help system,
Operating System	Windows only (there may a Mac version in the future)
Background Information	Started life as a US University Project. It was so successful that the students continued to support it and it now has a substantial on-line following.
Where to find it	<a href="http://www.paint.net">www.paint.net</a>

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<b>Name of Programme</b>	<b>CDBurnerXP</b>
What does it do?	Creates most sorts of optical media
Good Points	Very quick; very tidy interface, does all the basic stuff without any gimmicks. Burns CDs DVDs (including dual layer) ISO copies, system disk etc.
Bad Points	None really
Tips	Just use it as a hassle-free way of burning any discs you need. The very latest version even handles recordable Blu-Ray discs
Source of Help	Dedicated help, but you don't really need any.
Operating System	Windows A Mac version may be available on the Australian site listed below, but having tried NCH before I would not guarantee it!
Background Information	
Where to find it	For windows: <a href="http://cdburnerxp.se/">http://cdburnerxp.se/</a> For MAC (possibly) <a href="http://www.nch.com.au/burn/index.html?gclid=CLTYgriyqZ8CFVBd4wodrFQH0g">http://www.nch.com.au/burn/index.html?gclid=CLTYgriyqZ8CFVBd4wodrFQH0g</a>

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<b>Name of Programme</b>	<b>Firefox</b>
What does it do?	Web Browser
Good Points	Huge number of users; independent from Microsoft, quicker & cleaner than Internet Explorer 8 and (some say) more secure.
Bad Points	None really. A very small number of websites will say they are only set up for Internet Explorer, but Firefox is now so widely used that most are coded to fully accept it.
Tips	Choose a home page that suits your workflow, Make sure you have the security & “housekeeping” features set up to give you a totally trouble free web experience.
Source of Help	Comprehensive on-line help
Operating System	Windows, Linux, Mac OS
Background Information	Supported by Mozilla organisation, a legacy from the old Netscape browser.
Where to find it	<a href="http://www.mozilla.com/firefox/">www.mozilla.com/firefox/</a>

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<b>Name of Programme</b>	<b>Linux</b>
What does it do?	A complete operating system and software suite
Good Points	A free and (for some) completely acceptable alternative to MS Windows or Mac OS. More users are familiar with it as some of the cheap Netbooks are retailed with Linux instead of Windows. Dell, amongst others, will provide it pre-loaded on a new machine if you ask.
Bad Points	Has a reputation for being “clunky” and technical, but latest versions are, in reality, as easy to use as Windows and generally more stable. Until recently high-end multi media, (like hi-def video) was not that well supported.
Tips	Take care to choose the Distribution that best suits your needs. My own preference is Ubuntu, but Suse and others also have their advocates.
Source of Help	Vast repository of help; and unlike Windows or Mac, everything is completely transparent, there are no trade secrets
Operating System	It does it all without needing one. It is however now possible to run Linux from WITHIN Windows, using a feature called WUBI.
Background Information	Has the same roots as the UNIX mainframe operating system and the Mac OS. We all use it every day without noticing because it powers a whole range of technical gadgets like DVD players. (Reason; it is stable, small and does not involve paying fees to Microsoft)
Where to find it	<p>All over the web. For my preferred distribution, go to <a href="http://www.ubuntu.org">www.ubuntu.org</a>. If you don't fancy such a big download they will even mail a free CD to new users.</p> <p>For a UK-based one-stop shop for everything Linux, try <a href="http://www.linuxemporium.co.uk/">http://www.linuxemporium.co.uk/</a> although you will have to pay a small fee to have the software of your choice mailed to you.</p>