

## Photography blog post series: what to do if you want to explore the world of traditional film photography.

**Title: Discovering Film Photography**

**The Joy of Film**

**How Did You Take Photos, Grandad?**

**... Part 2, Choosing a Camera**

Last time, I looked at some things to consider, for anyone wanting to get into film photography—an introduction to getting a camera, choosing film, and how to cope without automatic exposure. You can find it [LINK: [here](#)] if you missed it first time around. If you read that piece, and you've never shot film, it probably seems a little daunting, and you don't even know where to begin. Well, fear not: for anyone taking up photography seriously over the last century or so, it's been the same story. We're not born with the ability to understand all the ins and outs of shutter speeds, f-numbers and depth of field. It's just as well then, that it's quite possible to learn as you go—and learn as much or as little as you want to.

There used to be a photo lab in London—Joe's Basement—run by a colourful character known as Gypsy Joe. It's said that when he took photos, he always used the same setting: 1/125sec at f/5.6, if I'm not mistaken. My Box Brownie probably gave something like 1/40 at f/11, which is almost the same exposure value, so there you go—it was good enough for Edwardian photographers, and it was good enough for Joe. If you're going to get into photography with manual cameras, you'll get used to the 'numbers' that go hand-in-hand with it. Just don't get hung up on it at this stage.

Now, you *could* go out and find a Box Brownie or similar, but I'd advise against it. For one thing, you'd probably have to use 620 film, and that's as rare as hens' teeth these days. Better to start with 35mm, the most common film camera format you're likely to find. But within that format, there is a wide range of models, from the most basic to professional-quality equipment. A web search for "used film camera" will bring up plenty of possibilities from dealers to private auction sales.

Let's start at the bottom end: the easiest route to camera-ownership is probably to visit your local thrift shop. There, you may find a bargain bin of cheap plastic cameras for a dollar or two. With one of these, you won't have to pawn anything to get a foot in the door, but it will be very basic—effectively the modern equivalent of a Box Brownie. The focus will be fixed, the shutter speed and lens aperture will be fixed, and the only concession to modernity may be a tiny flash unit.

If you start with a basic point-and-shoot camera, it will be good for fairly bright daylight conditions but indoors, in the shade, or near sunset, you are likely to suffer underexposure, ending up with dark images. You will also have to forget any notion of close-ups: with focus probably fixed around 3-5 metres, anything closer than a metre or two is going to be fuzzy. But if you want to shoot landscapes, go right ahead!

Another limitation of a simple camera is the lens. Good camera lenses—even the one in your phone—have at least three separate lens elements, to improve the image quality. With a single lens

element the image quality won't be great, but if you don't want to make big enlargements, it won't be a disaster.

*It's worth stating right now that whatever camera you have, if you work within its limitations, you will be able to take worthwhile photos. Take this recent Box Brownie image: in good light, with subject matter mostly in the middle distance, the Brownie came up with the goods. All it needed was for me to press the shutter release gently, to get a sharp image. In the world of photography, it's not what you've got, it's how you use it. (This photo has been edited digitally, with the corners and edges darkened for effect.)*



*Photo credit: the author*

If you're ready to spend a bit more cash, then look around for a camera that has adjustable settings. In saying that, you could find such cameras from the 1930s to almost the present day. Names like Canon, Nikon, Olympus; folding cameras with bellows, rangefinder cameras, SLR cameras ... the choice is huge. Some of these old classics have become collectors' items though, and carry hefty price tags ... and might not be the best thing to get started.

Many cameras from the 60s and 70s are still going strong, and are definitely worth considering; you could spend upwards of a few tens of dollars and get a very capable **compact 35mm rangefinder (RF) camera** with a great lens: Canonet, Nikon, Minolta, Olympus, Ricoh, Yashica ... the list goes on. These cameras were made in millions over the decades, and would make an excellent starting point in your exploration of film; it might even be the only camera you'll ever need. Briefly, this type of camera is usually pocketable, has good optics, built-in light meter, accurate focusing and possibly manual *and* automatic exposure. Bottom line: a good compact will likely produce better-quality photos than your smartphone.

One thing about the compact RF: because you don't view and focus through the lens that takes the photo, the view isn't exactly the same. In practice, shooting landscapes or street views, it's not a significant difference. If, however, you want to take close shots, then *parallax* comes into play, and the film records a slightly different view; that lovely portrait that you carefully got in the middle of the frame will actually be off centre to some extent ... your sitter just lost an ear!

**Compact RF benefit:** they are very quiet.

There's no motor in pre-1980s models, and the shutter fires with a quiet click; the noisiest thing is likely to be winding on the film, but that's not going to disturb anyone either. So, if you want to be unobtrusive as you shoot, one of these cameras would be ideal.

Here's a typical compact rangefinder: a rectangular box with a lens on the front, plus windows above it for viewing and focusing (that's the *rangefinder* bit).



*Photo credit: Wikimedia Commons*

If you feel you'd like more flexibility, then your camera of choice is likely to be an **SLR (Single Lens Reflex)**. Unlike the compact RF, where you compose and focus through a small viewfinder window, and the photo is taken through the main lens, an SLR uses the same lens for viewing, focusing and taking the photo. What this means is: WYSIWYG ... What You See Is What You Get. In other words, you will see exactly what the film will record, whereas the rangefinder camera shows a view that's offset from the main lens.

The SLR will allow you—depending upon which one you choose—to remove the *standard* lens (often referred to these days as the *kit lens*) and replace it with another of different focal length, or even to attach it to a microscope or telescope.

**SLR benefit:** wide range of lenses available.

*You can take off the standard lens and fit a telephoto or wide-angle; you can also use extension tubes or bellows units to do extreme close-up photography.*

Here's a classic SLR: just one lens, no separate viewfinder window, large bump at the top for the prism that reflects the image to a rear eyepiece. Almost every other 35mm SLR takes this basic form.



*Photo credit: Wikimedia Commons*

Many of the same names from the compact RF line-up will be found on SLRs; from the 60s and 70s, the big names included Canon, Nikon, Pentax and Olympus, but there were many more. The classic *Pentax Spotmatic* can be found in several variations, and is usually a fairly basic—though well-made—camera. In fact, the cameras of the 60s *were* pretty basic: here's a fairly typical specification:

- manual exposure and focusing
- shutter speeds from 1 second to 1/1000, plus B (this allows you do make long exposures: as long as you hold the button down, the shutter is open)
- lens with apertures typically from f/2 to f/16
- light meter
- self-timer
- contacts for external flash
- tripod socket

A word of caution: with a few exceptions, each manufacturer used its own, unique, lens fitting. For example, a Nikon camera will not take a Canon lens. Two notable exceptions were both found on Pentax cameras: the so-called Pentax thread, and Pentax K bayonet mount. In fact, the 'Pentax thread' was first found on the post-WWII Contax, but you may also see it called the Praktica thread, the M42 thread, or Universal thread. This was a screw-mount fitting, and was eventually to be found on many other manufacturers' cameras, such as Fuji, Cosina, Chinon and the Russian Zenit. Because it became such a common fitting, there were huge numbers of lenses made with it, some good, some less so. The Pentax *Takumar* lenses are usually very good—but beware of some early ones that have yellowish glass: they are radioactive!

Similarly with the Pentax K (or simply PK) bayonet mount, which replaced the Pentax thread mount in 1975, a few other camera manufacturers adopted it as well.

Some 3<sup>rd</sup>-party lens manufacturers such as Vivitar and Tamron made good quality lenses in a variety of fittings, or even used interchangeable adaptors, such as the Tamron *Adaptall* system, which allowed you to keep your lenses if you changed to a different camera brand. You can also adapt a

Pentax thread lens to many other cameras by buying a cheap 3<sup>rd</sup>-party adapter, but Nikon is one exception to this (it's possible, but not advisable).

Things to look out for, when buying a camera generally:

- Is there any obvious damage? Look for dents or cracks, broken parts, lenses that rattle or are very tight instead of turning easily.
- Is the lens clear, or can you see scratches, haze or fungus? Minor scratches and haze may not be a problem, but many scratches, or fungus within the lens, will degrade image quality.
- If there is a battery in the camera, is it leaking? If no battery, are the electrical contacts corroded from previous leakage? If so, the camera may be unusable, or need a repair.
- Do all the shutter speeds work? This may be hard to tell, but start with 1 second (or whatever the slowest is) and work through them all in turn; you should be able to hear a change from one to the next. Fire each one several times; is it always the same? In an older camera, shutter speeds may drift or not work at all.
- If you can see the lens aperture closing when you fire the shutter (set it to the minimum aperture, eg f/16), does it always close quickly and to the same extent? If not, there could be a problem with either the lens or the camera.
- Is the viewfinder clear? If it is hazy or dirty it will be harder to use.
- Does the focus system seem to work? Try to see if it is accurate, by pacing out or measuring the distance to something, then focusing on it; does the focus scale agree with the actual distance?
- Last, but not least: does it feel right in your hands, and at your eye? If anything feels awkward, it will be hard for you feel happy using it; move on and find a better one.

If you're buying from a dealer you will pay more, but you will have some sort of guarantee; buying privately comes with more risk, so ask if you can see any recent photos taken with the camera. It won't guarantee the camera is still working, but there's no harm in asking. But if you are only paying \$50, you may think it's worth the risk.

There is more to buying your *perfect* camera, of course, but these pointers should get you started. Beware: once you have bought your first real metal-and-glass camera, you might end up with GAS ... Gear Acquisition Syndrome. If so, don't worry, there are plenty of kindred spirits to be found, on the internet...

*Next time: finding and choosing film.*