

The battle of the fast black and white films is fought in Fleet Street - the rest of the photographic world has to be content with the spoils. Though it may seem surprising to ordinary photographers, the Press uses so much fast film that along with two or three other identifiable customers it represents the bulk of the market.

Fast films are therefore pitched at Press users, pre-production tested by picture desks, and ultimately marketed with most of the promotional 'spend' aimed at newspaper, magazine, PR and freelance news photographers. Hence the Ilford and Kodak black and white awards, in their various incarnations.

One of the worst developments in recent years, as a result of this emphasis, has been just that - worst development! Press darkrooms need speed rather than subtlety, and are concerned with squeezing push-process detail out of films and doing so rapidly. The Kodak developer HC-110 has long been popular in the USA as a fast, reliable process which can also be tamed, and made to produce high quality.

In Britain, Ilford emulate the viscous dribble of concentrated HC-110 by producing Ilfotec HC, a gel-solution developer of very high activity and phenomenal shelf life. In Europe, Agfa produce Studional, which is diluted 1 + 15 and is another developer you can almost stand a thermometer up in. All three developers involve ridiculously short dev times; fast films go through in three to four minutes, slow ones would require as little as two if anyone was brave enough to try.

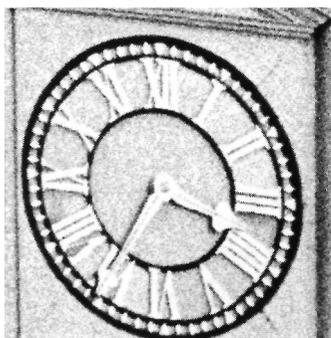
The quantum leap made by T-Max (Kodak, troublesome developer with long times and high costs) and XP-1 (Ilford, even more troublesome developer eventually forgotten in favour of routine C-41) did not impress Fleet Street much. Tri-X and HP5 remain their favourites. Agfapan 400 doesn't enter the running as Agfa simply don't chase that market.

Tri-X processes like a dream in the highly-concentrated, fast-acting 'technical and press' developers. It machine-processes at high temperatures very nicely, and the current incarnation stands abuse well. Ilford have always had a slightly more refined product, with theoretically higher shadow detail and finer grain. In practice, HP5 didn't enjoy press processing,

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Ilford's HP5 Plus: competing for Fleet Street confidence

More pushability, finer grain, higher sharpness and superior highlight separation without loss of shadow detail from Ilford's Tri-X alternative.



Going against the grain: HP5 Plus at 16 x 24" print size from 35mm.

and the general complaint was that the film was 'softer' than Tri-X, a totally unwarranted assumption based mainly on its deeper-coloured film base, which is tinted slightly blue-grey to minimize light piping and halation.

Ilford revision

Tri-X produced bright and clean negatives where HP5 produced rather flat-looking negs. Few pressmen bother to look at the final prints. They rely, instead, on very good darkroom printers who can turn almost any negative into a decent bromide. They look at the negs and contacts - and Tri-X looks nicer in negative form, and makes nicer contacts.

Second to this point, Tri-X has a huge reserve of speed. The American two-bath developer Diafine develops all films to finality. Most Ilford films, processed in Diafine, end up at between two and four times their nominal rating; HP5 produced 1600 ASA. Kodak films often end up at eight times their official speed, and Tri-X has always yielded a usable 2400 ASA when processed in Diafine.

Such developers are no longer widely used, because HC-110, Ilfotec HC and similar

rapid processes permit easy pushing. Tri-X can be taken to 2400 with little trouble; HP5 to 1600.

Against this background, Ilford chose to launch HP5 Plus, keeping the same emulsion name rather than calling it HP6. The benefits of the new film, according to the maker, are a greater degree of compatibility with Ilfotec or HC-110, finer grain, higher sharpness and better tonal range.

The real gain with HP5 Plus is found in the leaflet about the film. We quote:

"Although rated at ISO 400/27°, it's possible to use meter settings up to EI 3200/36 with HP5 Plus by extending development. Push processed HP5 Plus has higher speed and contrast than HP5."

That, folks, is the story. That's the bit which matters. Old HP5 reached 1600 and began to fog over, lowering contrast and destroying shadow detail. New HP5 Plus behaves like Tri-X, staying clean and clear at 1600 and pushing to 2400 and beyond, up to 3200 before the fog starts to armour-plate those empty areas.

The surprising thing is that Ilford state that the very finest grain can be obtained by using Ilfotec HC at 1 + 15 (3.5 minutes); diluting the developer to 1+31 will indeed increase the grain, but who would have thought that Ilfotec HC could possibly be finer grained than Perceptol stock (11 minutes) with its effective downrating to ISO 250? We were equally surprised to see the very ordinary Ilfosol S rated as producing the highest sharpness.

Checked out

Our quick tests of HP5 showed that it accomplishes what was

intended; it paces Tri-X for speed. You can use the two films together and process them together, and the Ilford results will no longer look superficially worse than the Kodak, which was formerly the case. The grain is indeed finer, especially in those critical sky-and-skin mid-tones, and tonal separation in the upper midtones and highlights is improved. Shadow detail was already good with HP5.

Beside old HP5, it has a snappier image-quality and less natural fog, but the film-base is if anything slightly denser - a bluer colour on test films processed simultaneously, the older film tending towards a warm grey. We couldn't test the roller-transport rapid machine processing, which matters to major agencies, but presumably Ilford have got their emulsion right for this in much the same way.

It's good to see a film which is intended to conform in terms of processing; just as we welcomed Agfa's standardisation of process times for ISO 25 and 100 emulsions in early 1989, we appreciate the fact that Ilford have kept the dev time for HP5 Plus unchanged and that it does not require extended fixing times like T-Max 400. However, it does not achieve T-Max image quality and this is probably why Ilford did not use an 'HP6' designation.

As to reactions elsewhere, who can say? For a long time 'serious' photographers in Britain deliberately obtained American Tri-X because they reckoned it was superior to 'British' Tri-X. Film preferences are like that. It only takes one influential printer to tell his client press photographers that HP5 Plus has more shadow detail, or doesn't flatten off in the highlights, to win whole newspapers, or agencies on to the film.

Ilford have put more into Press photography than other companies; the entire Multi-grade 500 enlarger system, the Ilfospeed rapid processors, the short-lived 72-exposure HP5, the change of XP-1 to true C41 to go through the new colour lines being installed - all these showed their preoccupation with the world of news images.

Let us know, if you're in that field, how you rate HP5 Plus against Tri-X and the previous HP5. Write to: **HP5 Plus Info**, PHOTopro, Icon Publications Limited, Maxwell Lane, Kelso TD5 7BB.