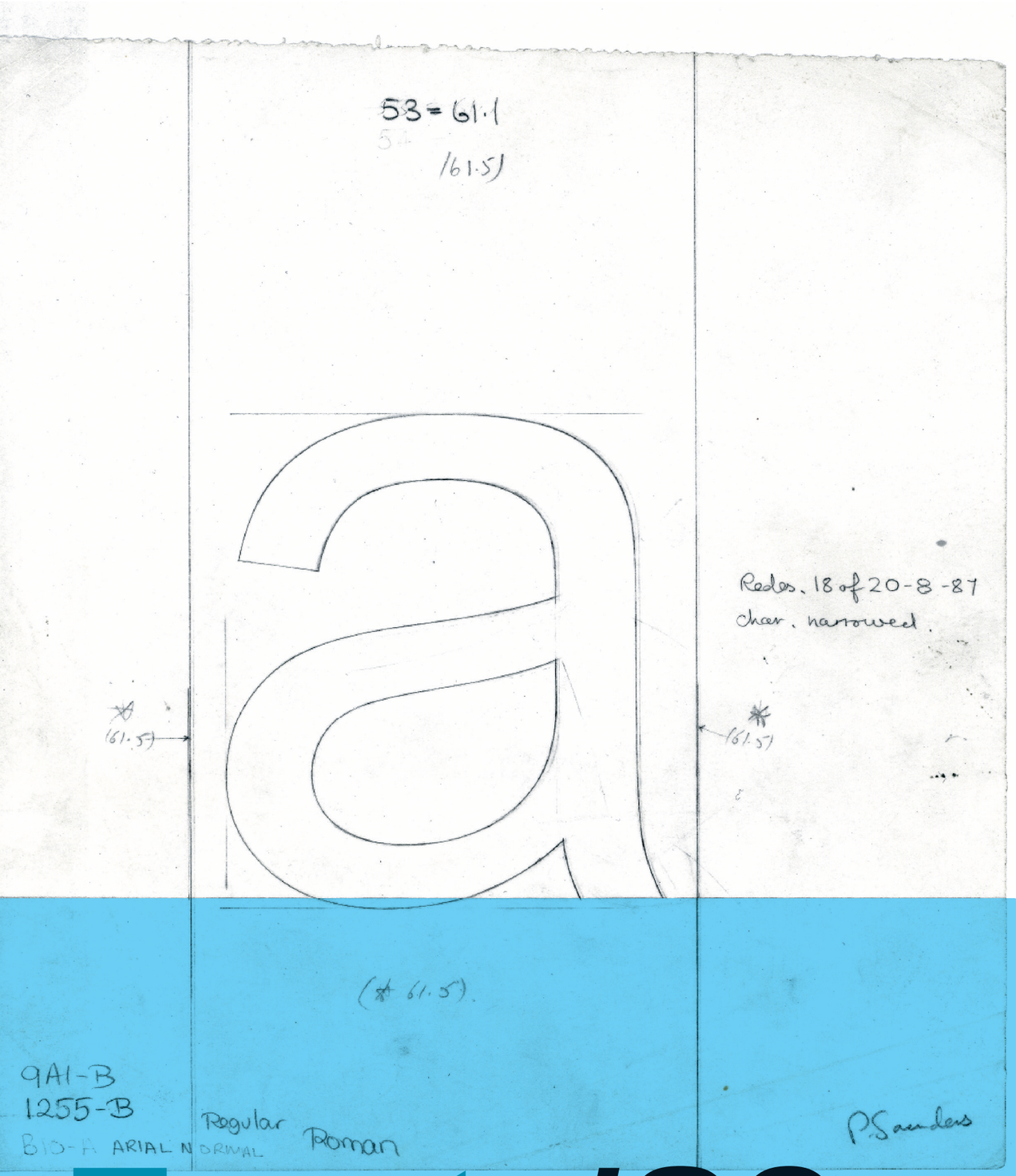


Twenty/20

ROBIN NICHOLAS is one of the people responsible for the creation of Arial. We caught up with him to try to dispel some of the myths (was it really a Helvetica rip-off?), and find out what else he has been up to.

abcdefghijklmnopqrstuvwxyz 1234567890
ABCDEFGHIJKLMNOPQRSTUVWXYZ
Arial MonoType Regular

abcdefghijklmnopqrstuvwxyz 1234567890
ABCDEFGHIJKLMNOPQRSTUVWXYZ
Arial MonoType Italic

abcdefghijklmnopqrstuvwxyz 1234567890
ABCDEFGHIJKLMNOPQRSTUVWXYZ
Arial MonoType Condensed

Which is better? Mac or PC? *Knight Rider* or *Baywatch*? Arial or Helvetica? Truth is, there's rarely a straight answer to any of those questions; anyone who automatically shuns one or the other often does so out of ignorance rather than on sound ideological or practical grounds. In particular, Arial gets bad press these days, but it's an unenviable reputation that's not entirely deserved. *MacUser* spent a day in Monotype's studios with Robin Nicholas, one of its principle designers, in an effort to get better acquainted with this misunderstood typeface, and to find out what Nicholas is doing now.

First, let's clear up a few Arial myths. The most virulent is that Arial is a straight rip-off of Helvetica, the typeface developed to great success by the Haas foundry in the 1950s and used with aplomb in the Swiss school of design in the 1960s. Some even go so far as to suggest that Arial's creators simply opened up Helvetica, pulled a few curves and adjusted a few baselines, and sold the result to Microsoft, an accusation which is, quite frankly, ridiculous.

Arial actually has a much older and more noble pedigree. It started life as a bitmap font developed for IBM around 1982, and was effectively redrawn towards the end of the decade to coincide with the emergence of the desktop PC market sparked off by the Mac. Its forms are based on Monotype's venerable Grotesque face, although there's less difference between thick and thin.

The team responsible for its creation – around 10-strong, and headed up by Nicholas and Patricia Saunders – referred to its class of type as an industrial sans. 'It was designed as a generic sans serif; almost a bland sans serif,' Nicholas says. He has seen it used very well – *Design Week* used it as its main font, for example, as indeed did *MacUser* prior to our redesign in March 2004 – but he has had to endure seeing it used very badly more often than any other face, simply because of its ubiquity.

The notion that Arial was just a knock-off of Helvetica is clearly abhorrent to Nicholas. We started the interview by asking him the usual set of Twenty/20 questions, and before the subject of Arial was even broached, he responded to our question about how far he would compromise his artistic principles for money by saying that he would never just recreate

IDENTIFYING ARIAL AND HELVETICA

At first glance, Arial looks almost identical to its nemesis, Helvetica, but there are many subtle differences. In the first instance, where most of Helvetica's strokes end squarely, Arial's usually end at an angle. There are other, more obvious differences, but looking out for squared-off or angled ends is an excellent way to differentiate between the two – it's at its most obvious in the lower-case T.

Look out for the capital G: Arial's formation is similar to its ancestor, Grotesque. There are differences between the lower-case As – not only does Helvetica's have a tail, but the bowl flows neatly back into the stem, rather than simply intersecting it.

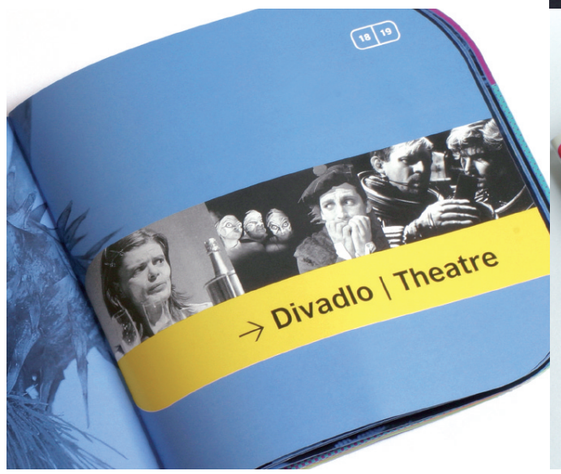
The other character that you can use to tell the two apart is the upper-case R; Helvetica's boasts a distinctive stem.

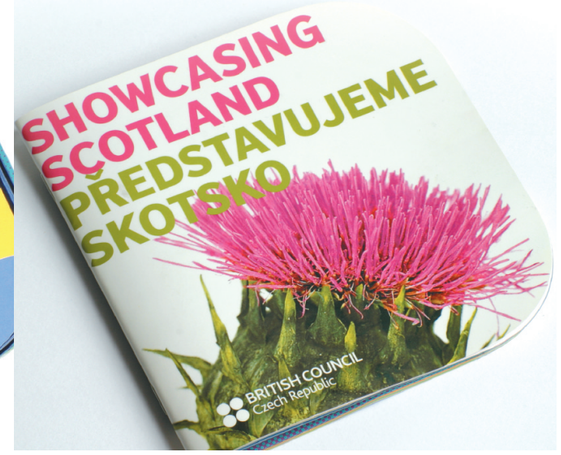
◀ Barclays Expert Serif and Sans were designed to assist the company in presenting a consistent corporate image across all brands.

▶ Operating in 110 countries, the British Council needed a highly legible typeface that would function in many languages.

◀ SL Gothic was designed for public transport and signage communications.

Move to Barclays
and enjoy the benefits





an existing font. Acknowledging that, 'when you're working for a large organisation, it's difficult to stand on your principles.' Nicholas says, 'the only areas where I would take a stand are those where there would be legal problems; somebody wanting us to make a typeface that's clearly a corruption of somebody else's typeface.'

Despite Arial's traditional associations with Windows – Nicholas himself pronounces it 'Ae-rial' rather then 'Ah-rial', incidentally – Nicholas is a Mac man. His first was one of the compact all-in-ones (he's not enough of a computer geek to remember whether it was a Plus, Classic or SE) and his current hardware consists of a G4 tower and G4 laptop. In the early days, he didn't use his computer for font creation at all; rather, he used it for composing text documents. It wasn't until the mid-1990s that the Mac itself became an integral part of the design process instead of something that used the finished result.

For the first 25 years of Nicholas' career at Monotype, the work was exclusively drawn by hand. Asked to name his greatest creative inspiration, he is temporarily stumped. While his work is informed by what has gone before, he says that when he joined Monotype, 'it was a mechanised, physical process; it didn't, in a way, require inspiration.' Instead, it was and is a question of hard graft.

▼ Typeface designer Rob Nicholas (right) and senior designer Sebastian Lester get down to some hard graft.

Despite this conservative background, Nicholas is no reactionary Luddite. He never resisted the adoption of computers – indeed, he says he was keen to start using them – and he enthuses about the new type technologies. He's most excited about OpenType (see OpenType Explained, 15 April 2005, p58), as it allows the designer to 'put back into fonts a lot of the features that were actually there in previous technologies', and it supports multiple languages. Like the rest of us, though, he just wishes it was supported by a greater range of applications.

His quiet enthusiasm is still being brought to bear on current projects, and it's interesting to note the different processes and challenges involved in his work.

The project (above) to design a font for the Stockholm transport system, was brought to Monotype by a design agency in Sweden that had done some basic design work on the typeface. Nicholas and his team then developed it, bouncing ideas back and forth across national borders. 'It's very much an iterative process,' Nicholas says, adding that the level of detail offered in the comments from the agency is unusual; even graphic designers tend not to comprehend how much work there is in designing a typeface – Monotype typically charges by the hour – and they'll usually offer much more general feedback.

The client wanted three weights – display, body and one optimised for small point sizes – so the font was mastered in TrueType and hand-hinted to look good on screen for material such as timetables.

Monotype enjoys a long-standing relationship with Barclays (top) and, here again, the first few letters were drawn by an outside agency (Interbrand Newell and Sorrell). There are three groups within Barclays, and at least one wanted to keep the authoritative, corporate branding of the bank. The high-street banking group, however, wanted to attract a much younger audience.

Nicholas describes the original Barclays sketches as 'ephemeral'. He explains that part of the challenge was finding a common ground that all the groups involved could feel comfortable with. Later, when Barclaycard was spun into the group, Monotype helped design its logo.

When it approached Monotype, the British Council (above) had a very specific typeface in mind. The organisation picked a range of existing typefaces and highlighted particular characteristics they had – a large x-height, for example – that it wanted in its typeface. Monotype responded in its usual fashion by designing an initial set of around 20 characters, using set text such as the 'Hamburgefonts' sample to illustrate how the font fits together.

Although he's a long-standing part of Monotype's illustrious pedigree, Nicholas is far from curmudgeonly. When asked what's wrong with design today, he responds that it's healthy. 'There's more of it today than there has ever been. Everyone who has a computer is a designer,' he says.

However, Nicholas thinks you need bad design as well – that it would be a poorer world without it. Of typography, he says: 'I still like to see people bending the rules'; an admirable sentiment from the man who gave us Arial.

THE MONOTYPE FOUNDATION

Formed in 2004, The Monotype Foundation is an organisation that supports a wide range of typographic initiatives such as scholarships, research grants and museum projects. It funds itself by selling limited-edition prints of original typeface drawings – the first is Gill Sans Bold Extra Condensed, and it's a truly beautiful piece. Find out more at *www.monotypeimaging.com/about/MonotypeFoundation.asp*