

Equipment Review: Plustek OpticPro A320L

A3 Flatbed Scanner



What's in the box?

The unit arrived direct from the Plustek factory in Germany. The packaging is very well thought out and the A320L was protected by 2 chunky moulded end-protectors inside its own box, which was neatly fitted inside a further custom sized outer box for shipping. Once unboxed unpacking revealed the scanner itself, a 24v AC adaptor sporting a 1.5+m power lead (and a UK 13A plug fitment, a 1.2+m USB cable, a setup CD-ROM for Win 7, 8, and 10, and a separate Mac OS X disk for versions 10.8 to 10.13. Rounding off the contents were a printed Quick Guide, and a further scanning help guide. Finally, there was a 'Read Me First' sheet in bright yellow. (All in multiple languages.)

Setting up

The 'Read Me First' sheet simply warned that the scanner should be switched off before plugging in or unplugging the mains adaptor. A further yellow 'unlock before use' warning label on the scanner transit packaging led to a simple slide-lock on the underneath of the unit. After plugging in the mains lead and USB cable Windows 10 did not indicate there was any new hardware, but this may be because there was a pending restart after yet another Microsoft-forced update, which we were not aware of until later. (Thank you Microsoft – yet another foible with Windows.) Because if this it was a manual install using the Windows CD-ROM. This was straight-forward, and ended with a restart.

Getting started

At IDMi we have used a wide variety of paper and film scanners over the years. Increasingly, devices have a method of invoking a scan or copy from a physical button on the device itself. (As opposed to being software invoked.) The A320L sports 7 such buttons on a pane down the right side on top of the device. Rather than dive in by pressing an option button at random, time was taken to refer to the scanning help guide. That stated it was best to invoke the DocAction software to set up parameters.

In Win 10, DocAction is invoked from a System Tray Icon not unsurprisingly labelled 'Plustek OpticPro A320L'. Access to the installed software is also available via 田 | All Apps then under either 'Recently Added' or scrolling to the 'P' section then 'Plustek OpticPro A320L'. In this case software was invoked from 'Recently Added'.

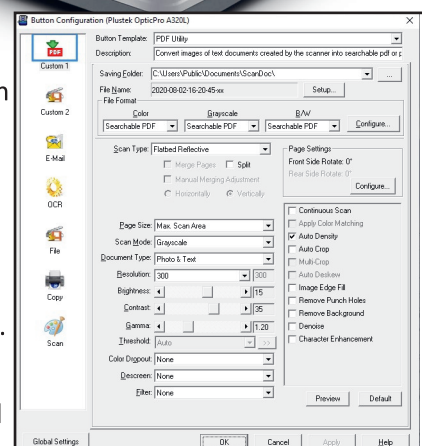
Once started, it is immediately apparent that the provided software is comprehensive. You can see on the left side of the software the options for the two Custom buttons, as well as the others, and all laid out in the order in which they appear on the scanners own control panel. Each

icon in turn reveals a rich array of potential settings.

Custom 1 & Custom 2:

These options allow fast access to specific settings which are fully configurable by the user.

Email: Scans according to the user's pre-applied settings, then opens the users default email package, begins and opens a new email, then automatically attaches the scanned file to the email.



OCR: This works via the supplied ABBYY Fine Reader software. When scanned, the image is processed by Fine Reader and presented in the users chosen application. This was tested using instructions for a tumble dryer, and the interpretation of the text was found to be very accurate. When opened in MS Word, the scanned pages were presented in discrete sections defined as selectable boxes. The software cleverly uses white space on the page to differentiate between what was text-only, and what was graphics. Interestingly, any graphics with lines leading to descriptive text, automatically included that text in the box so that both the graphic and the text could be selected as one.

File: As you might expect, this is the scan-to-file option and it does exactly what it is supposed to do.

Copy: Using an A3 scanner to print to A4 has its advantages. (Collateral for meetings perhaps, where no A3 printer is available.) The test performed used the tumble dryer instructions, which converted an A3 spread and printed to A4 with no difficulty at all.

Scan: This is the option likely to be most used by an operator. The full range of parameters will allow a variety of material to be scanned. Testing settings using the Preview button, (which incidentally is available on the screen for all of the preceding setups,) makes trial and error very fast, and there is a 4x zoom on the preview too, allowing the user to assess the test scan more closely.

IDMi Test Scan Material Choice

Putting a flat-bed scanner through its paces is different to that of a rotary production scanner. Firstly, as

'TIP: The scanner will go into standby mode if you have switched it on at the mains and left it standing for a period. No bad thing, and this timeout is configurable, but if in standby the software will not start, pressing any of the top panel keys allows operation to continue.'

with any flatbed, there is usually a handling overhead, particularly with originals greater than A4, so when used in a proper work situation, consideration should be given to pre-sorting and/or batching work in order to grade by size, image/print quality, the medium itself (e.g. paper, translucent film, and the resolution required*.)

** IDMi found that as an A3 300dpi scan only takes 5 to 6 seconds, this is less of an issue for the throughput of higher volumes of similar material, all assisted by presets and configurable custom buttons.*

To put the scanner through its paces, IDMi had a variety of originals selected in advance. The range of test scans comprised, newsprint, magazine, book, poster, artwork and 3D relief.

Newsprint (Letterpress): Broadsheet, not ironed flat, heavily yellowed with age

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Tabloid, not ironed flat, lightly yellowed with age

Result: All scans showed good detail and emphasised there is logic in the apparent madness of ironing newspapers not so 'his Lordship' does not get newsprint on his hands, but to wrinkle out the creases even more apparent in our examples as we have had them in storage for a very long time.

Magazine (Offset Litho): A4 single + double page spread.

Result: Again all scans showed good detail although to be fair we were using good quality print examples.

Book (Continuous tone): A4+ and in very good condition.

Result: Very good crisp scans.

Book (Line art): A4.

Result: A trickier one this, but good quality scans from all originals. There was a bit of experimentation required with the bi-tonal images from the graphics book, but again this was quick and easy to test before settling on the best settings.

Poster: A3 excerpt of an A1 continuous tone poster.

Result: Surprising good when you consider it was an old spot-colour poster which had not been rolled up in an optimal fashion. Although only a part of the poster was scanned, multiple scans and some stitching software would have worked well and would be a lot cheaper than buying an A1/A0 scanner for the occasional item well oversize for the device.

Artwork: Framed print.

Result: The 10mm depth of the frame did not phase the scanner one bit. The resulting image was pleasing and accurate.

3D: Relief of a shoemaker. (Approx. A5)

Result: The thought was that this scan might not work too well. We were wrong. A moulded plastic relief was scanned which had a front-to-rear depth of around 15mm. As it was a thick original, we left the scanner lid open. All details were

rendered accurately and the depth of field achieved was more than enough to render detail even at the back of the relief. (i.e. Farthest from the glass platen.)

IDMi Opinion

Overall

The thought process was that the aforementioned originals would test most of what the scanner would be called upon to capture during its working life – and beyond. The device was easily set up and easy to set for the various options. As with most scanners these days, the quality of the supporting is very good. The IDMi PC only failed to cope with a scan once, and that was down to a PC memory shortage issue and no reflection on the scanner whatsoever. (It was a 1,200dpi scan to TIF which the PC failed on and then closed the scanning setup app. Easily restarted, this was our fault entirely.

Pros

Easy to set up and use. Learning all of the settings will not be required as users will quickly get extremely good results even with the basics. IDMi particularly liked the general build of the device, which has clear buttons, easy access to the USB and power ports, and well defined size markings along the leading edge and right hand side of the platen.

Cons

The only slight criticism is that you cannot save all of the settings for all of the 7 buttons in a named configuration

file. If that functionality were available you could have a file of settings for (say) accounts, another set for archives, a further set for the legal department, etc., etc. But overall this is a very minor thing in what is a comprehensive and affordable package.

IDMi Rating

5/5

IDMi Rating ***** (5/5)

Build Quality	*****
Appearance/Size	*****
Ease of setup & Use	*****
Software Quality	*****
Software Functionality	*****
Software Options	*****
Other Features	*****
Ease of Use	*****
Quality of Scans	*****
Value for Money	*****

Note: As space is limited within the magazine, we cannot show the range of test images here. To gauge the quality of this excellent scanner for yourself, you can view the actual scan test images at

<https://intelligen2020.wixsite.com/idmi/hardware>

For a full technical specification visit the Plustek web site. ■

More:

www.plustek.com

