Macs have long had a backup system (called "Time Machine") that the user simply "sets and forgets"

I've often wondered why Microsoft can't do something similar as the whole area of backups is one that a huge number of users find too complicated, too confusing and too tedious to engage with. All the advice I ever give about the importance of backups is probably ignored at least half of the time because it's just too complicated a subject. Beyond Microsoft's offerings, I've also been looking elsewhere for years for a simple, trustworthy backup system that manages to square the circle of combining simplicity with flexibility. I have yet to find such an animal but it seems that Microsoft may now provide an adequate solution built into Windows 8.

It is called "File History" and is available from the Control Panel.

The main menu is reasonably straightforward

It provides flexibility and ease of setting up by assuming that you will wish to back up all data found in your libraries plus the contents of your desktop, contacts, and favorites. If you always save your data in the recommended locations (eg in "My Documents" or "My Pictures") then your data will be backed up without any further ado. If you keep data in folders that are not contained in libraries then you can add those folders to existing libraries or create a new library where you can place all of the extra folders that you wish to back up. But – and it's a very very big "but" – there are folders that could contain absolutely crucial data that would not be included in the backup unless you knew about them and dug deep to find them and add them to the backup schedule (by adding them to a library). The most obvious of these that comes to mind is the "pst" file if you use Outlook. Why on earth do Microsoft hide this most important of data files in a folder that is not only kept apart from other data files, folders, and libraries, but which is also hidden by default? The "pst" file contains all of your email messages, calendar, contacts, and task lists. As far as my own business is concerned, my Outlook PST file is the most important file I have (together with my Clients database). The same applies to other "email clients" from Microsoft. Outlook Express and Microsoft Mail also set up your data files, by default, in a hidden place that's really tricky to find unless you know what you are doing.

Select a File History drive

Choose a drive from the following list or enter a network location.

Available drives	Free space	Total space
Local Disk (S:)	0 bytes	111 GB
\\COMPAQ\Com-2-Data	0 bytes	462 GB
com-1-xp (\\compaq) (U:)	29.0 GB	43.9 GB

Add network location

Show all network locations

External drives, USB flash drives and network drives can be used for backups

File History is quite flexible in letting you choose where your backup is going to be made. You can not create the backup on your main "c:" drive (as a hard drive failure could lose you your backup as well as your normal files) but you can use USB flash drives, external hard drives, and even network drives. You could also back up onto a different partition of your main drive, but that's risky, of course, in the event of a total hard drive failure. If the backup location isn't available when the backup is made then the program caches the backup on the hard drive ready for when the backup drive is available. Personally, I don't like this as it could lull you into a false sense of security about the state of your backups. I'd rather be told if a backup is not possible because the backup location is not available.

You can choose how long you wish to keep your backups (weeks, months, forever while there's still disc space) but I need to do more digging to see if backups are automatically removed when they get to a certain age (very very bad) or removed when they reach a certain age provided that there are newer versions available (much better).

You can choose how often backups are taken, ranging from every 10 minutes to once a day. The backups then take place quietly in the background, without (apparently) causing any noticeable effect on the performance of your computer for whatever else you are doing.

Exclude from File History

If you don't want to save copies of specific folders or libraries, add them here.

Excluded folders and libraries:

Folders and libraries can be excluded from backups as well as being added to them

From what I've found out so far, there are other weaknesses in File History. For instance, if you change the name of a file then that name change is not applied to backups: it's as if you've created a new file. For now, though, I'm so pleased that Microsoft have, at last, built some kind of simple data backup system into Windows that I would encourage you to use it if you are not doing any other kind of backup. I could probably help you to set it up by remote

control (using Teamviewer), but remember that it is only available in Windows 8 – not in either Vista or Windows 7.

Restoring files just requires "stepping forward or backward"
through time and then "drilling down" to select the files(s)

If you don't take backups then it probably means that you've never had a serious data loss yet. And that's the key word – YET. I've seen a few heart-breaking data losses over the years, but I know that it's difficult for the average user to get their head around the subject. Looked at from that perspective, I think File History in Windows 8 is certainly better than nothing. I'm going to be testing it in the coming weeks and months by running it side by side with my normal backup routines. I'll come back to the subject if I find any fatal flaws or useful tweaks.

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