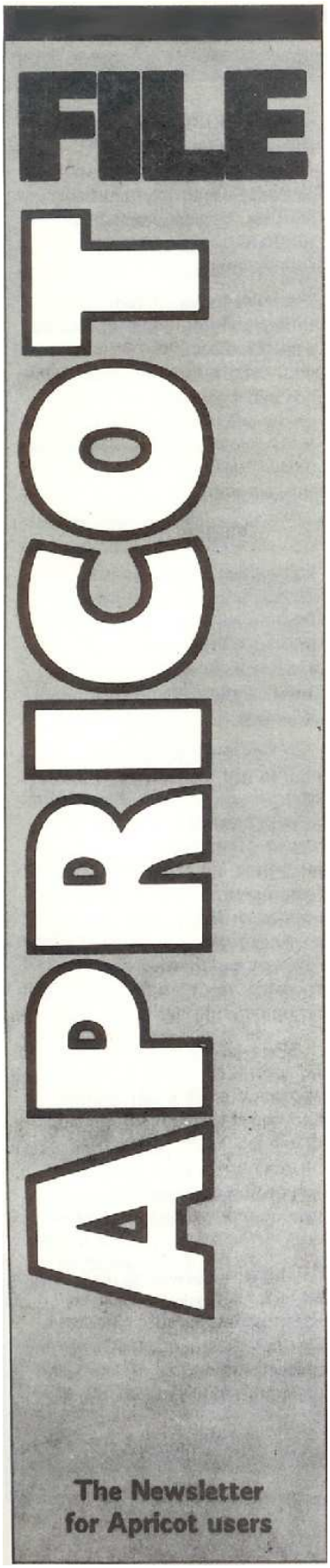
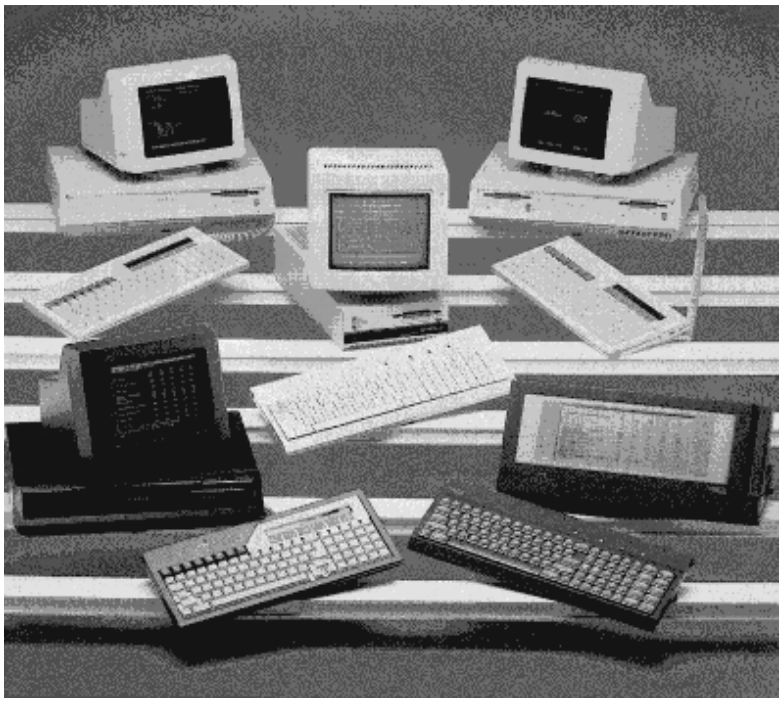


Apricot File 1_7



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Release 1.7

FILE

APRICOT

The Newsletter for Apricot users

April 1986

Apricot pulls out of the States

£3 million write-off

By Simon Potter

Apricot has pulled the plug on its Statesside operation. In its one year of trading, Apricot Inc lost around £14 million on sales of just £4 million (about £2.7 million). That compares with original forecasts of $33 million sales and breakeven in 1985, with $88 million sales and real profits in 1986.

In fact Apricot plc was pretty canny in the way Apricot Inc was established; its financial exposure was minimised by going for the option of a holding company rather than a wholly-owned subsidiary. The net result is an extraordinary loss to the British group of only £3 million. In practice that will be enough to wipe out the small profit that was expected this year.

Apricot Inc was set up in November 1984 through an Isle of Man company called Apricot Ltd. A public offering in Apricot Ltd was fully subscribed, with Apricot plc itself taking only 19.9 per cent.

The group already had a US subsidiary called ACT North America Inc, but it was wholly owned. The Isle of Man solution was described at the time as "an absolutely lovely arrangement ... an incredibly cost-effective way to have a crack at the US market" by Tim Harford of Apricot's friendly neighbourhood merchant bankers Singer & Friedlander (he subsequently joined Apricot plc's board). S&F placed 29 per cent of Apricot Ltd's shares with own clients, incidentally — the rest were taken up by the public.

Now Apricot Ltd shareholders are being offered Apricot plc shares: that will dilute the equity by a modest 8.5 per cent. This merely brings forward the deal proposed in the offer document for Apricot Ltd: shareholders were then promised the chance to convert at the end of 1987.

Apricot Inc itself is being sold to two senior managers for "a nominal sum". The company is basically no more than a distributor with a dozen dealers signed up to it (most of them are the rump of Apple's dealer network, which was radically re-thought in Autumn 1984 with much chopping). It seems the US company is still solvent (though presumably it wouldn't be if it paid all its bills to Apricot plc for stock and services) and the intention is to keep it going as a distributor — though not exclusively for Apricots, and maybe not for Apricots at all. Nor for that matter is Apricot plc going to sign an exclusive distributor relationship with anyone on the other side of the water.

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If you have something you'd like to say, contact the Editor first to talk about it. Thereafter articles can be submitted in two ways — transmitted via **electronic mail** (Micromail, Telecom Gold, The Source, or Easylink): or in word processor format on **disk** (we can take Apricot, Victor and IBM PC disks. And we can handle most WP formats, but it's safest to send an accompanying hard copy too).

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Apricot Inc shuts down

So the US adventure, which started with such high hopes, has dribbled away into nothing. For six months before setting up Apricot Inc the company had been working through an exclusive distributorship with Micro D, but both sides were obviously unhappy with that. Still, in hindsight the PR guff sounds familiar: under the April 1984 arrangement Micro D was expected to sell 20,000 Apricots in 12 months, and its appointment followed "several months of intensive research to identify organisations with the right combination of expertise and marketing muscle to make a major impact with Apricot in the States ...".

That flopped miserably and Apricot looked for an alternative method of fostering its ambitions to be no. 2 to IBM worldwide. But Apricot Inc didn't do much better.

For a start it took longer to get going than was planned, with much transatlantic toing and froing occasioned primarily by problems in setting up dealer and technical support. It looks as though Apricot plc underestimated the difficulties, particularly as trading in computers is just so different over there — box-shifting and discounting are the order of the day, vertical marketing is embryonic.

The F1 was expected to be Apricot Inc's lead product, too, and we all know what's happened to Apricot plc's views on the profitability of *that* computer. Anyhow, there was a good deal of resistance in the USA to the idea of a low- cost personal computer that wasn't IBM-compatible. Apple had managed it, of course, but then Apple's early start in the business gives it a rather special place in computer marketing. And 1985 saw the start of a flood of Far Eastern imports that *were* IBM-compatible and could match Apricot Inc's prices. That coincided with the massive slump in the US PC market; the present up-turn is coming too late for Apricot.

Apricot plc says its trading showed "a decisive return to profitability" in the last quarter of FY1985. The US disposal will obviously stop the drain on 1986's figures, and anyhow Apricot has sold a couple of other business for nearly as much as the American loss — between them, ACT Preprint (computer stationery) and ACT Computer Services (the bureau business that was actually the group's original venture) raised £2.9 million. Obviously both of these were peripheral to Apricot's main interests now, though at one time the marketing plan was very definitely to promote one-stop-shopping with a fully- rounded everything-you-need computer services firm.

Rather against our inclinations, we're going to applaud Apricot plc's decision. There has been a good deal of biting on the bullet in Edgbaston; and given the current conditions of the computer market, the removal of high- risk ventures and non-mainstream activities does make sense for any company with aspirations to longevity. Some 80 per cent of Apricot sales are in Britain, with most of the balance apparently coming from Australia thanks to Barson's success down-under with big public service contracts: and the product pitch now is definitely for added-value and high profitability, rather than last year's volume sales and mass market penetration.

The possible concern is that Apricot isn't investing sufficiently in the future. It's all right to cut out the dead wood, but there's that other saying about not seeing the wood for the trees ... Too much axe-work and not enough planting means you lose both the wood *and* the trees.

Packages for Apricot

Still, there is some evidence of marketing eagerness on the small scale — mostly via the availability of products that will help dealers sell Apricots.

For one, Apricot now has a version of the best-selling **IRMA** board, which allows quick 'n' easy (and safe) **3270 emulation**. IRMA outsells all competitors in its IBM PC version; for the Apricot the board is £895 and emulates the 3278 or 3279. It comes with Apricot's own **poly-COAX** software for terminal emulkation and file transfer with IBM TSO and VM/CMS mainframe systems. The board will fit any current model, though for the F2 and F10 you'll need an expansion box for it.

More important for Apricot is the availability of big-name general-purpose packages. One of the demo systems at the Xen's launch last Autumn was running Lotus 1-2-3, but that turned out to be a bit of a bodge — the 1-2-3 in question was a straight port from the Xi.

But now there's a pukka version — **1-2-3 release 1A**, complete with Apricot- specific drivers, priced in line with other versions at £395. That apparently represents six months' "close collaboration"; discussions are also under way on Xen implementations of other Lotus products (presumably Symphony, which appeared on the Xi a year ago) but no announcements have yet been made.

And **Microsoft** is making a big play for the corporate user with the new version 2.01 of **WORD** — not that it's short of facilities anyhow. There are drivers for no fewer than 15 laser printers (didn't know there were 15) and a built-in 'ideas processor' (based on Living Videotext's *READY*).

Available now for the IBM PC, WORD 2.01 costs £400: an Apricot version is due this Summer. Meanwhile Release 3.0 of WORD is coming along too. That claims over 50 new features, notably automatic indexing and contents pages plus full

column manipulation; probably more important, there's a major improvement in speed. It's only available in the States right now and only for IBM-compatibles, but an Apricot version of that one too is mooted.

OEM business

Looking for an OEM market has been one of Apricot's promises for 18 months — and this *could* be an important strategy for Apricot's future. An OEM business, putting an Apricot inside someone else's system with their label on the front, means you can keep up manufcaturing volumes and plan production and cashflow much better.

To date Apricot has only nibbled at the edges of this potentially important diversification, but now at last it has won a major OEM deal — weighing machine and retail systems supplier **W & T Avery** has signed a three-year contract for Apricots, mostly F2s and F10s to be used in complete retail systems. Apricot says this one deal could contribute fully ten per cent of its sales next year.

Avery is part of **GEC**, too, and the agreement also provides for the supply of Apricot systems to other parts of the group with Avery effectively acting as a specialist dealer.

Fly Communiqué

The latest dial-up service to be plugged into Communiqué is the **Official Airline Guide** database run by Dun & Bradstreet — flight times and fares around the world, available 24 hours a day, updated daily. This isn't unique to Communiqué; OAG is a standard (though newish) Telecom Gold service. It's just that Communique can now offer slightly simplified access to it.

Hello sailor

After a successful season last year, Apricot is backing the not- coincidentally named racing trimaran *Apricot* for 1986 with increased sponsorship. It won three of its dozen or so races last year; and owner- skipper **Tony Bullimore** and his designer-partner **Nigel Irens** were voted 'British Yachtsmen of the Year'.

It's Apricot's first (and only) major sponsorship deal, and the feeling is that last year "proved a stunning commercial success". The season starts in March, but the highlight is probably the two-way Atlantic crossing in June. ◆

Diary dates

On with the Shows

A round-up of potential relevance

May 1986

11-14: Business to Business Exhibition *London.* Quite a nice show, this Barbican event; mercifully free of schoolkids. Doesn't attract many large companies, but is full of people with interesting services to sell. Organisers reckon they're going to be distributing a million tickets ... *Organiser: Silver Collins & Co, tel 01-729 0677*

12-14: MIM 86 *Montreal.* The Montreal International Software Market exhibition and conference. Software-only shows don't have a good track record, but the North Americans are able to do them rather well. Montreal's pleasant enough, anyhow. *Organiser: Mimogram, tel Canada (514) 288 8811*

13-15: INFOBASE *Frankfurt.* Show and conference for 'information management', all about using electronic sources of information. The European dimension might be the interesting aspect. *Organiser: Messe Frankfurt, tel Frankfurt 75 75 477*

13-15: COMPEC Europe *Brussels.* The European version of one of Britain's best micros-and-peripherals shows. *Organiser: Reed Exhibitions, tel 01-643 8040*

13-15: Eurosoft/Nordcomp *Hamburg.* Software-plus-hardware event. *UK contact: Network Events, tel 0208 815226*

28-29: International Videodisc, Optical Disc and CD-ROM Conference and Exhibition *London.* Snappy title, no? Aficionados abbreviate it to IVODCDROMC&E ... Could be The Future, must be more of a chat-show than an exhibition. *Organiser: International Exhibitions, tel 021-780 3214*

June 1986

1-4: PC 86 *Melbourne.* The seventh Australian personal computer show. It's associated with the **Office Technology 86** and **Communications 86** exhibitions, so *somewhere* in that lot must be something of use ... *UK contact: Andry Montgomery, tel 01-486 1951*

2-8: Computer Taipei *Taipei.* Established hunting-ground for Taiwanese OEM products. *Organiser: Computex, tel (Taipei) 02 7151515*

3-5: European UNIX User Show *London.* Becoming one of the premier Unix exhibitions in Europe. *Organiser: EMAP, tel 01-608 1161*

The Disinformation Column

On getting the date right

By David Langford

O frabjous day! We may not have been shortlisted for a British Microthingy Award, but over Easter I received the British SF Association Award for a story in *Interzone* magazine (plug).

What, you ask, does science fiction have to do with Apricot computers? Well, not only is Apricot literature full of glittering, impossible SF concepts like Xen's IBM compatibility, but the SF author Gene Wolfe actually predicted an important feature of our machines in a novel dated 1980. Here the lead character, a professional torturer, mentions a trick of his painful trade: "the excruciation we call *two apricots*". If that isn't a stunning prediction of the now-famous BIOS incompatibilities, my name's not Nostradamus.

Unauthorized tampering

Everyone talks about the amazing power of DEBUG to patch program files, but the actual *details* remain obscure.

Perhaps those who've mastered the technique don't want to share their lucrative secrets. Perhaps they're afraid of recriminations from software houses (who sometimes object to tinkering): or from users, who get unreasonably upset when an incautious keystroke in DEBUG wipes a master program file.

Nevertheless, here goes.

We start with a popular SuperWriter query: is it possible to correct the program's vile habit of giving dates in American format, with the day and month switched? This happens when you use SuperWriter's \%DATE\ system variable — also \%CDATE\ (file creation date) and \%MDATE\ (date of last file modification).

Yes, we can change all three.

First, the usual precautions. One: don't use your normal working disk. Format a new one, copy the SuperWriter files across to it, and add a copy of DEBUG.COM.

Two: while in DEBUG, count slowly from 01 to 0A (hex) and allow your whole past life to flash before your eyes before you enter a W command.

Three: if in doubt, enter Q for Quit and start again.

Four: when in spite of all the above you manage to enter W 100 0 0 10 and destroy the directory for the disk in drive A, intone this Coptic Apophthegm translated for you by my wife: "These things happen to me because of my sins". (In other words, don't blame *me*.)

To boldly debug ...

If anyone's still reading, here's the routine. Pop the DEBUG-plus-SuperWriter disk into the default drive, and at the A> prompt type DEBUG SW.COM followed by Return. (All DEBUG commands end with Return, so let's not waste our editor's valuable space by repeating this henceforth.)

The effect of this command is to load DEBUG and then load SW.COM, the main SuperWriter program, into the workspace. It lies there at your mercy. All you see at first is the DEBUG prompt, a hyphen — in some editions of DEBUG it's a greater-than sign.

If you type D for Dump you'll see the first 128 bytes of the file, something like the panel. This is SuperWriter 1.03; version D1.09 is similar (see below).

I've omitted the confusing segment information, an extra group of preceding digits like '209A:' at the start of each line. The numbers on the left are hex addresses: those in the middle are hexadecimal bytes of SW.COM. On the right are ASCII characters represented by these bytes (control codes and other non-printable characters become full stops).

The first three bytes are actually a machine-code command, as seen by typing U 100 (U for Unassemble):

```
0100 E94872        JMP     734B
0103 53            PUSH    BX
011C 68            ... rubbish
```

```
0100  E9 48 72 53 75 70 65 72-57 72 69 74 65 72 20 28   iHrSuperWriter (
0110  74 6D 29 0D 0A 43 6F 70-79 72 69 67 68 74 20 31   tm)..Copyright 1
0120  39 38 33 20 20 53 4F 52-43 49 4D 20 0D 0A 53 2F   983  SORCIM ..S/
0130  4E 2D 30 30 30 30 30 30-2C 20 4D 2D 53 20 44 4F   N-000000, M-S DO
0140  53 20 31 2E 30 33 45 31-20 38 34 2F 30 38 2F 30   S 1.03E1 84/08/0
0150  31 20 31 33 3A 34 33 0D-1A 33 33 30 34 41 50 52   1 13:43..3304APR
0160  49 38 30 38 36 20 20 20-20 F1 00 90 C3 90 E9 09   I8086    q..C.i.
0170  00 00 00 90 66 5C 66 E9-F3 72 33 C0 C3 E9 82 03   ....f\fisr3@Ci..
```

In other words, SuperWriter starts by 'jumping' past the copyright information, constants, variables, subroutines and God knows what else. It goes straight to location 734B to begin its dirty work at location 734B.

A final experiment is to enter R CX ('R' for 'Registers') to find what's in the CX register:

```
CX 7A00
:
```

Hit Return at the semicolon prompt (which is inviting you to change the CX value) and you get back to DEBUG's hyphen. 7A00 hex is 31232 decimal, the size of this SW.COM file. The information is there for DEBUG rather than you — this is the number of bytes DEBUG will write to SW.COM if you press (take a deep breath) W.

So far, so boring. How do we get from here to a date format modification?

Inside information

Step forward, the wonderful and exceedingly expensive *MS-DOS Programmer's Reference Manual*. The important insight is that SuperWriter has to extract the date from the operating system via an MS-DOS function request — in other words, an INT 21 call of the sort I discussed in APRICOT FILE Release 1.5.

According to the manual, 'Get Date' is function call 2A hex; and this returns the month and day as the high and low bytes respectively of the DX register.

Momentarily abandoning SW.COM, let's clear out the DEBUG workspace for a quick experiment: try entering ...

```
F 100 FFFF 0
```

(This means "fill memory from location 100 to location FFFF with zeroes"). It is not a good idea to enter W at this stage ... Instead, using the DEBUG 'A'-for-Assemble option, we can assemble the two instructions which make up a 'Get Date' function call:

```
-A 100
100 MOV AH,2A
102 INT 21
104
```

Entering a blank line (Return only) gets us out of 'Assemble'; entering U 100 gives us the hex machine-code translation. With a profound sense of spiritual insight we learn that our two instructions translate to the four bytes B4 2A CD 21.

If we can find this byte sequence in SuperWriter, with luck we'll have found a 'Get Date' request to the operating system. (If you cleared the memory and went through the assembly rigmarole, don't forget to Quit and reload with DEBUG SW.COM at this point.) Happily, DEBUG has a Search function, and the following translates as "search from location 100 to the end of the segment for the pattern stated":

```
-S 100 FFFF B4 2A CD 21
```

'1FBE' is DEBUG's reply — omitting the preceding segment number as usual. The obvious witty retort is U 1FBE to have a look at that bit of the program:

```
1FBE B42A          MOV     AH,2A
1FC0 CD21          INT     21
1FC2 890E0508      MOV     [0805],CX
1FC6 86F2          XCHG    DL,DH
1FC8 89160708      MOV     [0807],DX
1FCC B42C          MOV     AH,2C
1FCE CD21          ...and much more
```

Now this is interesting. The year, from CX, is MOVed into memory location 0805; the month and day, in DX, go to 0807. But inbetween, presumably in a hasty US-format correction for the Document History, the month and day are swapped! XCHG DL,DH means "swap the low and high bytes of the DX register".

Our next experiment is now obvious. We zap that two-byte XCHG instruction at location 1FC6. And that you do like this:

```
-A 1FC6
1FC6 NOP
1FC7 NOP
1FC8
```

(The blank line is again a Return, leaving 1FC8 untouched.) Since the assembler instruction NOP — 'no operation' — produces a machine-code byte of 90 hex, you could instead use the 'E' for 'Edit' command:

```
-E 1FC6 90 90
```

For those with SuperWriter D1.09, the relevant addresses are slightly different:

```
-E 2012 90 90
```

That done, it only remains to write the altered SW.COM to disk. With nerves of steel you poise your finger over the W key, press it, think again, go back and check with the D or U commands to make sure you did it right ... and hit Return. Then finish with Q.

The good effect of this patch is that \%DATE\ now inserts the date in proper *dd/mm/yy* format when you print a SuperWriter document.

Of course, nothing's perfect: the day and month will appear the wrong way round on the Document History menu. Conversely, \%FDATE\ and \%MDATE\ will give US-format results with files created *before* you patched SuperWriter, since they're read and held in the Document History.

Afterthought

Tiny snippet of the month: some printers, like the Epson LQ-1500, have a letter quality option that is not normally accessible from SuperWriter. If you have one of these, try the CHARSET embedded format command (as not found in the manual) with a number from 1 to 4.

For example, \CHARSET 2 will set letter-quality print on the LQ-1500 when this printer is installed in SuperWriter 1.03. \CHARSET 1 will reset.

Other likely printers for this technique are the C Itoh 8510-A, IBM Graphics, IBM PC Colour, Texas 855, and letter-quality Okidata models. ◆

Vitriol

Computers for Absolute Beginners

A layman's lambast

By Terrance Duggan

I want to use the computer as a tool, not as a mystical weapon or the new philosopher's stone.

Long years of studying archaeology have at least in part been some preparation for the 'command-driven menu'. To the uninitiated, both involve terminology that is pretty damn incomprehensible.

As you may gather, I am having problems. Not with the Sirii, the Apricots, PC-compatibles, their add-on hard disks, the network, not with PC-DOS or MS- DOS or the innumerable variants and BIOS versions, not even with any of the seemingly numberless programs in the TP Group's headquarters.

No, there's no real problem in using them *individually*. The difficulties come in using them as a cohesive working unit.

I see packages that appear to be the best invention since the wheel, but the .DOC file scrolls past so fast I have no idea what I have just been witness to. And the one thing the STOP key does is to stop working; you really need ALT S. Or is it SHIFT C? (Or is that on the CD player at home?)

Is it DISKCOPY or DISK or DCOPY? That just depends — on which machine you're using, which operating system, which version of MS-DOS. Or maybe it's the wonderful ACTIVITY that you have to use ...

Inactivity

Actually, that 'wonderful' is a sarcastic joust. There may be more drawbacks to it; but so far (and believe me, that's as far as I shall go) I have had only two problems with it. First, Apricot keyboards provide a set of perfectly good cursor control keys ... but the cursor that is supposed to make ACTIVITY so easy to use is not moved by these keys. For this program the cursor pad is the number pad. Of course it is: why didn't I think of that before?

Confused? You will be. To copy a single disk on our Apricot PC by using ACTIVITY takes exactly twice as long as DCOPY. It's even slower than the COPY option in the old-style MANAGER DISK menu. And this is supposed to be the newest go-faster version of the BIOS.

So for this routine function it seems the wise men of the industry have produced a program that is slower and more difficult for the novice to use. The name ACTIVITY looks at best like rank optimism, at worst it's an outright con.

In search of the Grail

I would like it simple, you see. I have no great interest in the arcane rites, but do I have a choice?

There is a layman's guide to running an Apricot PC with an add-on hard disk, MS-DOS 2.11 and BIOS 3.1, Cardbox Plus, a Star printer and a 1200/75 modem; there's another for running dBASE II on the same system — likewise SuperCalc 3 and Spellbinder. And there are similar sets for similar applications on the Sirius, the IBM PC, the V286 ...

They are all produced by wise and experienced people, they avoid the legalistic precision of language that characteristically impedes comprehension of computer manuals (four long words where eight short ones will do), they exclude everything you have no need to know, and they are aimed at the frustrated fools out there like me ...

Sadly, those user guides are not yet in every computer bookshop. Well, actually they haven't been written yet: they're sitting around in the minds and the memories of the wise and experienced people.

Instead we have the average manual. Here is an example of the state of the art at present, from the Apricot MS-DOS USER GUIDE:

> FOR is used to set up a command loop. A variable which is represented by %%(C) (where (C) can be any character except 0 to 9) is in turn made equal to each member of a set. The command is then carried out for each value of %%(C) ...

This may be easy to understand if you have the mental double vision required of manual readers, but for the average user it makes about as much sense as a row of hieroglyphs. You may be familiar with the terminology, and as in this illuminating

example there may be all the information you require: but it's the sin of omission that is the most destructive.

DIP switches are aptly named; it's best to use the printer and its manual while in an alcoholic daze. Find the relevant part of the manual and you're told all the settings for different print styles ... but you won't be told to turn the printer off and on again before the changes are effected.

Those of you fortunate enough to own the Victor Plus-PC user's guide will find nothing about how to copy Victor-format files on to an IBM-format disk. Instead there are enough references to the fact that you cannot use SDCOPY or DISKCOPY in IBM mode to make you worried about attempting *any* copying into IBM format at all. It's dead easy, of course; you just use the standard COPY command. But that fact is absent from the guide. Thanks a bunch.

A friend of mine has PerfectWriter on an Olivetti M24; and he refuses to use 'cut and paste' even though he thinks he should. He finds the manual impossible to grapple with and he cannot spare the time to experiment; he sees no reason why he should be made to, and he regards experimentation as potentially lethal to the computer, his data, and his mental health.

The fact that it is probably easy to do and would save him time is actually beside the point.

My problems are somewhat similar, compounded by a feeling that if only I could coordinate all the information in the three different types of computer books and the advice I have been given the answer would be staring me in the face, and I would neither be as foolish or as frustrated as oft is my wont in our automated office.

But when I use computer terminology to talk about these difficulties, I find some of the people I am trying to talk to have entirely different or more frequently slightly blurred interpretations of the same vocabulary.

It seems the data processing manager of Coca Cola is having the same problem: "*Office automation* is a buzzword dreamed up by the computer industry. Our top management don't know what it means. I've been in data processing for 26 years and I always thought that office automation was what I was doing ..."

The books of words

Perhaps one of our subscribers writes recipe cookbooks? That person is the ideal candidate to write in the same simple language what happens at each action of the fingertips from boot up to back-up. This would save me from sitting in front of my computer and having my back up from boot up.

Oh, it won't be easy — but there is a market out there; even I have made a jam rolypoly and an Airfix kit, because I have instructions I can follow.

To try and become an initiate there are three types of computer book that I have read: glossaries of terms, machine guides and program manuals.

The first is a guide to the hieroglyphs of the computer pyramid, telling you helpfully that when you are face to face with a dot or A> prompt that you are looking at a dot or the A> prompt.

The other two are equally arcane documents that provided me with as much useful information as a translation of the Rosetta Stone (and are equally useful for day-to-day life). I now have the vocabulary of the computer postulant: I can face the mystic, the software guru, even the computer-industry journalist, and I can trade term for term ... and much good it does me.

I also have some idea of how a computer works: bits, bytes, CPU, heads, chips and drives do really mean something specific — rather as a jackal's head on a man's body tells the observers they are looking at Osiris, but tells them nothing about how Osiris behaved.

I know (at least, I have been told) about the meteoric development of the micro: and this is often given as the reason for users having difficulties on the somewhat spurious grounds that manuals, programs and the computers themselves are only honed in to something that approaches simplicity for the user over a period of time.

This is probably correct: but it's hardly palatable. Certainly neither is it a wise way of conduct in this industry.

Alternatives

Nor is it the *only* way. For instance, there has been a similar if somewhat less rapid development of the record player) with crucial differences. Modern 'music systems' are technically sophisticated, but they're designed for a mass market: so 1986's record player or tape deck is easy to 'install' and use — all you need to do is turn the machine on at various points (mains, amp, tuner, turntable maybe); select the correct speed, if you're using the record deck, and lower the arm on the record ...

Lo and behold, this confluence of modern electronic and mechanical technologies actually plays for you. First time. No messing. Read the instruction book later, if you must, but you don't have to.

It's said that computers are becoming more friendly. That mice, icons, windows, pull-down menus, pop-up menus, all the sexy goodies of the modern system are making the modern micro a doddle to use. That cheap memory and fast processors give the software designers the space and the internal resources they need to build sophisticated, helpful, automated packages. That the computer business is now rich enough to afford the best people in management, in program-writing, in the production of manuals.

But it is this basic ease of use that seems to be receding the more rapidly the micro computer and its associated paraphernalia 'develop'.

As a simple and obvious example, I am confused by the number of different terms and commands used to describe the same process on different machines, different packages, different operating systems, and even different BIOS versions.

Still more do I hanker for some standardisation in methods: most packages have to do some of the same basic things, like loading and saving and editing: surely there must be some mileage in industry-wide agreement about how they're done? Why should the user who's unfortunate enough to need more than one package have to relearn all the essentials?

The reason why

Perhaps it's merely the case that people in the computer industry do want to make the computer easy to use — but they just find themselves unable to devote the necessary time or money to the problem yet, not while the sales competition is so hot and the marketing environment demands so much attention.

But there are other possible reasons. Here's one: by writing both the programs and the manuals in a semi-literate fashion and with goals that owe little to the user's requirements, the computer business is fostering the existence of a computer-literate elite.

The chosen few thereby protect their status and earning power ... at the expense of many who either despair of their computer or find the whole industry surrounded in such an incomprehensible miasma of terminology that they close their minds to the benefits a computer can bring. It's all not unlike the many ancient civilisations in which scribes and priests (the literate users and programmers of their day) could amass power and protect the status quo simply because they could communicate by writing.

Second, it may be the industry does not realise there is a problem. If that were the case, why are programs like ACTIVITY and WINDOWS and GEM on the market? It would surely be too cynical to suggest that they've been produced purely for marketing reasons, to make the host computer look sexier, different from the herd ...

Or it may just be that the producers of hardware, software and manuals do not wish to inform the user: that way they can prevent any rationalisation of the market. This operates by making the package as difficult to use as is possible while at the same time claiming it's simple and indispensable; the hapless user will have enough difficulty trying to master the first acquisition that upgrading within the same manufacturer's product line becomes the only sane option.

Who wants to invest all that time and money in trying to learn how to use a different package? You're motivated to stick with what you've got. Thus the market share of each company with a foothold in the industry is protected.

It's not only the learning process; if you do find a more appropriate package, or even a complementary package, chances are that it will be totally incompatible with anything you are currently using. At best, it will be laborious and error-prone to transfer information between them.

Perhaps the cynical view is correct. Perhaps there is so much competition out there for my money that the complexity of the packages and languages are seen as a positive virtue in distinguishing one from the many.

I *want* to use the computer, I really do. And I have no doubt it's all there in the corpus computum — but in intelligible language? A keystroke at a time? Designed for the novice user, for someone who just wants to have the computer do something without requiring in-depth knowledge of the way the thing works?

If it were, I might even be able to sit down and work without frustration — and without praying thrice to *MicroSoft Apricot Lotus Canon Victor Star MicroPro Plus 5 IBM BusiSoft Business Simulations Ashton Tate Digital Research* ... the litany is endless. ◆

Review

Flashing fingers

Three typing tutors reviewed

By Dermod Quirke

If you have a personal computer, you've got to talk to the beast. And that means using the keyboard.

Mind you, some self-conscious 'executives' consider this beneath their dignity; so they dictate to a secretary, or faff about with a mouse, or wait for voice actuation to emerge from the realms of gee-whizzery. But this is daft — the whole point of a *personal* computer is that you can use it yourself. So it makes more sense to come to terms with the QWERTY keyboard.

In practice, you're probably already familiar with the keyboard layout, and able to tap out a text with two fingers. And if you've been using a computer for some time, you're likely to have built up a fair head of speed — possibly more than you realise. (I was amazed to discover that I type at nearly 60 words per minute, using three fingers!)

Looking to improve?

If you want to build on your existing skills, you'll find that most traditional typing courses aren't aimed at you: they're intended to turn school-leavers into copy-typists. You'll be composing your own text as you type it, and that calls for quite different skills and techniques.

And you'll be working on a computer, most likely using a word processor. Most typing courses were designed for use on typewriters; they lay heavy stress on first-time accuracy, and penalise errors severely — whereas for word processing you should aim at high speed coupled with efficient error correction.

You probably can't spare the time to attend supervised classes: so you'll want a self-instruction course. This means you'll have nobody to make sure you don't 'cheat' by looking at the keyboard or using the wrong fingers. And of course there'll be nobody to stop you jacking in the course if you find it boring! So a teach-yourself course needs to be lively and stimulating, and based on sound psychological and ergonomic research.

Above all, the course mustn't ask you to unlearn your existing skills and return to first base. If you can already rattle away at 40 wpm, it doesn't make much sense to sacrifice this very real achievement in order to learn the 'correct' way to type a mere 30 wpm!

(Don't worry if this seems to contradict received wisdom — the shibboleths of traditional typing courses are mostly bullshit. For example, there is absolutely *no* evidence that looking at the keyboard reduces your typing speed. Trust your own instincts, do what works best for you; if you find that you type faster by using the 'wrong' fingers, go ahead and use them).

I wanted to review the twelve such courses listed in the APRICOT FILE Catalogue; but many of the publishers were unwilling to have their products reviewed. You may draw your own conclusions about the reasons for this reticence ... I did find three from suppliers willing to participate. So what do you get? And how much improvement in your keyboard skills can you expect from them?

Snowball: Microguide

When you're reviewing a brand-new program, you expect to encounter a few minor bugs; after all, you've probably been sent a patched-up pre-release version of the software. But when a program has been around for a couple of years, it should have been thoroughly debugged; so it's a mite disconcerting if it crashes as soon as you try to run it.

That's what happened when I tested Microguide's package — it wouldn't even display its title frame. I found *nineteen* major syntax errors in the first fifteen lines of the Basic program. And there were more to come — lesson 2 aborted on the first line; lesson 10 was duplicated at the end of lesson 11; lesson 25 couldn't cope with the Sterling sign; lesson 26 demanded that I type thirty letters, but was unable to accept more than fourteen ...

Each of these bugs prevented me from proceeding; yet when I tried to escape, the program rejected the 'quit' command which it ordered me to type! I was not greatly impressed.

Mind you, I was testing the Sirius version of the program; the publishers assure me that the Apricot version is bug-free, and I believe them.

If you can overcome the bugs (and all you need for this is an advanced knowledge of Basic programming) you'll find that Snowball is a strictly conventional copy-typing course. It's designed for classroom use, though there is an 'Executive' version for self-tuition.

I wasn't able to test this; but I was told that it is identical with the classroom version, except that it doesn't have a manual. (The manual is a large and complicated contraption of vinyl and Velcro which folds rather like a deckchair; but it's difficult to see quite what purpose it serves, apart from teaching manual dexterity.)

There are 26 lessons, followed by ten speed tests. Each lesson tells you where to place your fingers

for a given selection of letters, and then leads you into a drilling session.

No attempt is made to measure speed — accuracy is the sole criterion. If you get a line wrong, the program *always* says "Not quite right", regardless of whether you made one error or fifty: then it insists that you retype the line correctly, and you can't proceed until you do. There's no way of bypassing this: Nanny says you can't leave the table until you've finished your rice pudding ...

Accuracy is achieved by using a destructive backspace key — you delete everything you've typed until you come to the error, then correct it and carry on from that point. For a word processor user this is positively wrong: you should *never* delete sound text, but always use the cursor keys to locate a specific error and correct it.

Then suddenly, at lesson 27, the speed tests begin. You've been given no training of any kind in fast typing; but now you must type against the clock, copying ten very dreary paragraphs about computers. But don't worry — you're sure to do well. However fast or slow you are — even if you type only one word per minute — the program will respond with "Well done!".

In fact, you can even type the wrong text by mistake (as I did), and you'll *still* get exactly the same message — the program will see that you have used words like "and" and "the" which happen to appear somewhere in the prescribed text, and it will rate these as 'correctly' typed! By this criterion, "dog lazy over quick the the jumped fox brown" would rate as 100 per cent accurate.

I dare say that this course might be modestly useful for supervised classroom training of young kids; but it is wholly unsuited for self- instruction. It claims to offer 'graded speed development', but I could find absolutely no evidence of this. It lacks subtlety and sophistication, it displays no awareness of the psychological and ergonomic aspects of keyboard training, and it is exquisitely boring.

It is cheap; so if you happen to have £24.95 spare, this could be the ideal package for you.

Touch 'n' Go: Caxton Software

If you're richer still and have £45, Caxton's Touch 'n' Go is what you need. It's a self-instruction program, promising 'keyboard mastery' in 24 hours. 'Mastery' is defined as 40 wpm, which may not strike you as particularly masterful; but it would be a useful attainment for a beginner.

To be fair, Touch 'n' Go lays heavy stress on speed, and it certainly should bring you up to 30 wpm — though not necessarily in the promised 24 hours. But 30 wpm is the target speed right up to the final lesson: then it is suddenly upped to 40, without any explanation of how this dramatic speed increase is to be achieved. Presumably you just have to type faster; but Lord knows how the program can claim any credit for this.

The course is grimly traditional, a bleak assembly of 61 dreary lessons. Each lesson briefly instructs you where to place your fingers and then launches into repetitive drilling: "kik kik kik kik" it drones, and then "if if if if". Towards the end a few real sentences are introduced, including such stimulating gems as "London is east". Gosh, what fun!

Touch 'n' Go doesn't *teach* you to type — it just *orders* you to type, and refuses to allow you to proceed until you've worked out how to do it for yourself. It gives you no advice of any kind, displays no insight into the psychology or ergonomics of typing, and offers no guidance on word processing techniques. Mercifully, you can get out of it at any stage by hitting the ESCape key — a blessed release...

You probably won't survive until lesson 61; but my advice is to *start* with that lesson. You can then take the final test of speed and accuracy, using your usual two fingers. If, like me, you pass that test with 100 per cent accuracy and 65 wpm *before* starting the course, you may well ask yourself why you need to spend £45 to achieve a *lower* standard.

Iankey Typing Tutor: Iansyst

There's nothing so amateurish about Iansyst's Iankey courses. They're soundly researched and thoroughly professional. So they stress speed rather than accuracy; they firmly reject meaningless drills like "kik kik kik kik"; and they do not forbid you to look at the keyboard.

If these deviations from received wisdom alarm you, the publishers can produce an impressive dossier of independent research findings to support their heretical views. I've worked through the courses, and I've studied the research — and I'm totally convinced!

You have a choice of two Iankey programs — the **Crash Course** if you're a beginner, and **Two Fingers to Touch** if you're an experienced two-finger operator wanting to get nearer to touch-typing levels. Both cost £49: if you want to use the course for several people, you can make extra copies provided you buy a licence for each one, which will cost you a token fiver.

The Crash Course starts from scratch, and introduces you to the entire alphabet in the first lesson. This means that gibberish drills are not needed — you start off with real sentences (like

"Beanz meanz kidz can't spell"). The program is very chatty, and pauses frequently to tell you how to sit comfortably, or to explain the structure of the course.

It's also very clever. For example, it continuously computes and displays your speed and accuracy while you are typing — most such courses wait until you've finished. And it uses a fiendishly sophisticated error-analysis algorithm; so if you omit or insert a couple of words, it will catch up with you, identify the type of error, and put an error code below it on the screen.

My only criticism of this generally excellent course is that the screen displays too much information — the running analysis, the text to be copied, your own input and a keyboard chart. The chart is very nifty, though: if you hesitate before selecting a key, the chart jogs your memory by flashing the letter you want.

But if, like me, you find this too much to cope with, you can simply remove the keyboard from the screen. In fact, you have a lot of control over the program — for example, you can change the speed and accuracy targets at any time; you can customise the keyboard chart if your computer has a special keyboard; and if you're working late at night, you can switch off the error bleeper.

Two Fingers to Touch has similar features and uses much of the same exercise material. But it is not merely a light reworking of the beginner's course — it appears to have been completely rewritten to meet the needs of experienced two-finger typists. It builds on your existing skills, and aims at a working compromise between 'correct' typing practice and real life. So you don't have to return to the nursery: you keep the speed you have already achieved, and learn how to increase it painlessly.

Between the exercises — which are genuinely witty — you'll find lots of very practical tips and some fascinating notes about the psychology of typing. The course treats you as an adult and takes you into its confidence, so you know exactly what you are doing and why. This means you can use the program intelligently, and you don't feel like a sulky schoolkid.

This approach worked very well indeed for me: my speed and accuracy have both increased. And I vastly enjoyed the course.

Best Buy

As you'll probably have gathered, I've come to a very clear Best Buy conclusion. Of the packages tested, only **Iankey** displayed any evidence of serious research; and it was also by far the most technically sophisticated course. I strongly recommend it as excellent value for money. ◆

Snowball Keyboard Training

Description:	Disk-based typing tutor for computer users who are not experienced typists
UK supplier:	Microguide Ltd
Address:	14-16 Low Pavement Nottingham NG1 7DL
Telephone:	0602 581020
Price:	£24.95
Configuration:	any Apricot
Conclusion:	Not bug-free, boring

Touch 'n' Go

Description:	Disk-based typing tutor for computer users who are not experienced typists
UK supplier:	Caxton Software Ltd
Address:	10-14 Bedford Street London WC2E 9HE
Telephone:	01-379 6502
Price:	£45
Configuration:	any Apricot
Conclusion:	Amateurish, boring

IANKEY

Description:	Disk-based typing tutor for computer users — two versions, **Crash Course** for beginners and **Two Fingers to Touch** for converting two- fingered typists
UK supplier:	Iansyst Ltd
Address:	39-41 North Road London N7 9DP
Telephone:	01-607 5844
Price:	£49.00 (but see DEALS FOR READERS)
Configuration:	any Apricot
Conclusion:	Interesting, effective — BEST BUY

The Workshop

The Fundamentals of GSX

Part Six: Saving and loading graphics

By Lindsay Doyle

This series provides a pragmatic introduction to the Apricot GSX graphics extension — how to use it without necessarily needing to know how it works.

This time we're looking at saving and reloading graphics displays, and in particular how GSX can be used with a RAM disk. This is no. 6 in the series.

Without knowing anything about the gears and cogs in your car's transmission, you are perfectly able to make use of it by manipulating the gear shift lever. And that's the level at which I shall approach the problem of saving a screenful of high-resolution images.

All you need to know is that when in Graphics mode a special piece of memory is allocated to hold a complete bit-by-bit image of what's on the screen. This starts at address 02800h in RAM and contains the 40,000 bits necessary plus a little bit more.

There are also a few MSBASIC commands needed which may be unfamiliar to those of you who (like me) cut their teeth on a Commodore or Spectrum home computer. Three of these will be of particular use for graphics storage: DEF SEG, BSAVE, and BLOAD. If you know about these already, you can skip the next three sections

Defining a segment

A segment is any area of memory up to 64K bytes long whose starting address ('base address') in hexadecimal has zero as its least significant digit. In other words, segments can start at any address which is a whole multiple of 16.

Any location in memory may be defined by a segment and an offset, the offset being an integer between 0 and 65535.

In the MSBASIC statement ...

DEF SEG = address

... the address is also an integer between 0 and 65535. When multiplied by 16, it gives the actual base address of the segment. Knowing all these facts, we can define a segment starting at the beginning of the graphics memory area by writing

DEF SEG = &H0280

(Hexadecimal numbers in MSBASIC are prefixed with '&H'.) When we're done with addressing the graphics memory area, DEF SEG alone can be used to redefine the current segment to be the area of memory starting at 00000.

Saving the graphics screen

BSAVE allows data or programs to be saved as memory image files, which is just what is wanted for graphics. The complete form is ...

BSAVE filename, offset, length

To save the graphics memory we need to specify no offset because of the way we have defined our segment. The length required is 40960 bytes, A000 in hex. So our statement resolves to ...

BSAVE filename, 0, &HA00

The filename follows the usual rules and must include the disk ID if anything other than the default disk is to be addressed.

Recalling the graphics screen

BLOAD is to LOAD as BSAVE is to SAVE. The complete form is ...

BLOAD filename, offset

The offset can be omitted, in which case the file is loaded back into the same location it previously occupied. So you can simply use BLOAD filename

The joys of RAMdisk

What is faster than floppy disk? Hard disk is. And what's faster than hard disk? RAMdisk is!

While it is possible to save a graphics display on a floppy, a hard disk, or even in RAM, you should go for RAMdisk when automation effects or rapid visual changes are desired (though be warned that Basic limits the speed of access: machine language is really required for high-speed effects).

A RAMdisk is nothing but a resident program which allows a piece of random access memory to be treated as if it were another disk drive. It has the advantage of high-speed access and, just like any RAM, it has the disadvantage that its contents disappear when you turn the power off or press Reset.

To use RAMdisk in the Apricot you must have the file RAMDISK.SYS on your default drive at startup. It will be ignored, however, until you have changed the file CONFIG.SYS. Take a look at it using TYPE and you'll probably find that it reads as follows:

```
BUFFERS = 20
COUNTRY = 44
```

Never mind what that means (remember the gearstick!) — just use your word processor (or, God forbid, EDLIN) to add a line:

DEVICE = RAMDISK.SYS

Now re-save the file. Boot up again by using the Reset button and ask to see the directory for disk drive C. You should get the message:

```
 Volume in drive C is Ramdisk
 Directory of C:\
File not found
```

Jubilation to the degree of roasting one ox: you have created a third 'disk' in RAM. The Apricot has given you a 64KB chunk of RAM for the RAMdisk; if you'd wanted it to be larger, you could have used the form ...

DEVICE=RAMDISK.SYS/N

... where N is the number of 64K blocks required. The RAMdisk is always a whole number of 64K blocks, and you don't have to worry about exactly where it is in memory: that's all taken care of automatically.

The accompanying listing gives some lines of code to be added to the SKETCH.BAS program from installment no. 4 (these are not incorporated in the GSX User's Disk from DEALS FOR READERS, no AP005). They will allow you to save your masterpieces to whichever disk you specify; but remember that drives A and B are permanent and have room for many graphics screens, while disk C is transient and has room for only one — so a second SAVE will overwrite the first one.

When using the new SAVE and RETRIEVE functions, be sure to wait for the cursor to reappear before doing anything else.

Interactive commands

When you are in Graphics mode and want to use some interactive command such as INPUT (which will result in text being printed on the screen) you have three choices. You can let alpha-mode characters print on to the graphics screen; you can write text using the graphics functions; and you can write to the Microscreen.

The first two approaches both have disadvantages. Alpha text will appear with each character separated from its neighbor by two dots, and it will be difficult to position on the screen (for reasons previously discussed in the series).

A Basic command like INPUT will generate alpha text in any case; so if you don't want that, you'll have to invent some messy subroutine to simulate its results while using graphics characters.

Either way, if you want to save the graphics screen it'll be cluttered with printing that's not wanted. This is why I prefer to keep pure graphics on the screen and put interactive commands and printouts on the Microscreen.

The Apricot documentation for the Microscreen commands is spotty and far from clear. However, by trial-and-error experimentation and infinite patience I have discovered that if you open graphics first and then use ESC "W" to open the Microscreen, the graphics screen stays inviolate and subsequent messages appear on the Microscreen only.

A message directed to the Microscreen appears on the lower line initially but will be bumped to the upper line if it ends in a carriage return. The simplest way to clear the screen is by scrolling up with a line feed command. (Avoid the Escape code supposedly provided for this purpose.)

To withdraw with dignity and without leaving a lot of blivets about, close graphics first: then use ESC "s".

Speed considerations

Saving a whole screen to or reloading from floppy disk takes about 12 seconds per display. That is some 26,000 bits per second, and disk transfers can be much faster than that: so we're obviously being held back by the speed capabilities of Basic. Hard disk requires about 8 seconds and RAMdisk about 6.5. I would like to hear from anyone who has saved a screen to RAMdisk using machine code: is it fast enough to appear instantaneous? ◆

SKETCH.BAS amendments

Make these changes or additions to SKETCH.BAS to incorporate SAVE and RETRIEVE functions:

```
530     IF IN = 81 THEN GOSUB 50200: SYSTEM:
        REM "Q" = QUIT
540     IF IN = 113 THEN GOSUB 50200: SYSTEM
670     IF IN = 83 OR IN = 115 THEN GOTO 800:
        REM "S" = SAVE
675     IF IN = 82 OR IN = 114 THEN GOTO 800:
        REM "R" = RETRIEVE
800     REM: SAVE AND RETRIEVE
810     INPUT "Name"; N$: IF N$ = "" THEN N$
        = TN$
820     PRINT "OK. WAIT FOR CURSOR TO
        REAPPEAR.";: REM NOTE SEMICOLON
830     IF IN = 83 OR IN = 115 THEN GOTO 850
840     BLOAD N$: PRINT: PRINT: GOTO 470:
        REM
 RE
 TRIEVE
850     DEF SEG = &H280: BSAVE N$, 0, &HA000:
        REM SAVE 40960 BYTES
860     TN$ = N$ 870 PRINT: PRINT: DEF SEG:
        GOTO 440
50100   REM: OPEN WORKSTATION, TEXT TO
        MICROSCREEN
50120   FOR Z = 2 TO 10: G2%(Z) = 1: NEXT Z:
        GOSUB 54000
50130   PRINT CHR$(27); "W": RETURN
50200   REM: CLOSE WORKSTATION, CLEAR
        MICROSCREEN
50210   G1%(1) = 2: G1%(2) = 0: GOSUB 54000
50220   PRINT CHR$(27); "s": RETURN
60140   PRINT: PRINT "S = SAVE DRAWING";
        SPC(30) "R = RETRIEVE DRAWING"
```

Review

Portable encore

Pig's ear or bargain of the year?

By Alan Solomon

With Dixons selling the discontinued Apricot Portable like it was going out of fashion (it is, too) we thought it was time for a brief appraisal of its merits — particularly at the bargain price of £495.

The Apricot portable was Apricot plc's demonstration of what *could* be done, rather than what *should* be done. It sold so badly that the company took a £5 million write-off and flogged all remaining stock to Dixons. And Dixons has now sold about 15,000 Apricot Portables; they sold like hot cakes.

The Portable attracted a lot of favourable press comment when it was launched, and it picked up a couple of the 'product of the year' awards. But in one of its last issues the late lamented 16 BIT COMPUTING slagged the Portable off very strongly — and quite rightly, too. So what has changed ?

The new Portable

The price is what's changed. You used to get a crummy keyboard, an unreadable screen, and only one disk drive for a shade under £2,000; now you get a full- travel keyboard, an 80x25 display, 256K memory and even a 720KB disk drive for only £495.

In other words, it's a question of perspective. The kit is the same; it just looks a lot better at the price.

Compare it with the BBC Model B: a puny 32KB, no monitor, no MS-DOS and its accompanying library of ready-to-go software, and no disk drive ... for nearly the same price. Or even the Amstrad PCW8256 — the Amstrad screen is much more legible (but it's a home-computer TV-type monitor) and you do get a printer included (though it's damn slow in NLQ mode): but it uses very non- standard 3in disks and the ancient CP/M operating system. The £399 Amstrad doesn't give you a comms port or a spreadsheet package and word processor, either.

The Portable, once the ugly duckling of the Apricot range, has been transformed into a swan — by the simple application of a magic price cut. I decided to buy one.

What you get

So what exactly do you get for your money? That depends; there are three kinds of Portable, and Dixons took some of each — and since the people at Dixons don't seem to know the difference between them, it's a bit of a lucky dip.

The three versions of the machine are different combinations of memory and colour — 512KB with colour, 256KB with colour, 256KB without. The colour machines are identified by a nine-pin socket around the back which looks like every other Apricot monitor socket.

(Incidentally, a subscriber rang us to ask whether a monchrome monitor can be used with a Dixons Portable; and clearly the answer is a definite no if you don't have a colour machine because the monochrome machines don't have any kind of monitor socket.

Even if you do have a Portable with colour, you can't just plug in an ordinary monitor to get an improved display without the expense of buying a fancy colour screen: but a big dealer called **Fraser Associates** has produced a £30 adaptor that *will* run a monchrome monitor from the colour socket. Fraser is on 0280 816087.)

Anyhow, at Dixons you probably won't get a choice: but if you do, the 512K is the best, followed by the 256K colour, followed by the 256K mono version. More memory is highly desirable, especially in a single-drive machine (you can effectively run a second drive by using a swathe of memory as a decent- sized RAMdisk — which means junking the RAMdisk supplied and paying for a proper one: more on that later).

If you get the colour machine, you'll be able to attach a colour monitor when finances permit; that LCD screen really is hard to read. If you wind up with the mono machine, console yourself that it is the only one that can be expanded up to 896K (the others only go to 832K).

The next element of luck affects how many disks of software you get. I was lucky and got the full complement of four. That gave me MS-DOS, SuperWriter, SuperCalc, ASYNC and some assorted rubbish (of which more later).

Other people have had only two disks, and didn't get the Super programs; they are good and very useful, so it is worth making a fuss if you don't get them. All the advertising says you get them, so you can reasonably claim that you are entitled to them.

The hardware

The screen is very hard to read; don't be under any illusions. There is some contrast control using CTRL and the arrow keys — but you will still need the best possible light behind you, and at the right angle. Have a good look at the screen display in the shop before you buy.

The keyboard is a bit on the Noddy side. The keys are like a mosaic, and it's hard to type fast on them. The connection to the main unit is via an infra-red link, and this works well: I have never needed the light pipe that Apricot provides, although I did need that when I used an F1.

There is only one disk drive. This may be stating the obvious, but have you considered how you will back up your work or software? You'll have to use the RAMdisk: and the Ramdisk is only 64K or 128K, and for some perverse reason it can hold only 15 files. Working with one disk drive is very fiddly.

There is only one expansion slot. This means that you can plug in a 640K memory card *or* a modem *or* some other card ... but only one of these at a time. I use a 640K memory expansion card which means I can run any program, as well as two RAMdisks (one small one, another of 512K).

There is a Centronics-type parallel printer port, and my Epson works fine from it. There's a serial port, too, which I use to connect a modem. I haven't yet tried the port for a colour monitor. There is a microphone for voice recognition; one of these days I'll be teaching it to recognise 'Left', 'Right' and 'Fire' for *Space Invaders*.

The Portable *is* fairly portable, weighing only 18 pounds in its handy carrying case. But you can only use it near a mains power point: we don't know of anyone who's doing a battery option for it.

The software

I could not believe ACTIVITY! I have never met such a horrible user interface. It looks as if it were designed for a hard disk and a mouse; since I had neither of these, I didn't bother with it.

Instead I made up an MS-DOS system disk with all the necessary utilities (and some of the APRICOT FILE stuff) and I use this as my boot disk.

One problem though; the only way you can *format* disks is via ACTIVITY, as FORMAT is not supplied on the Portable's MS-DOS disks. Fortunately, I have FORMAT from an F1, and that works fine. Otherwise, I would have had to work out which of the many ACTIVITY files was actually FORMAT: there's no way I'm going through the ACTIVITY performance to format disks. My daughter Angela liked Activity, though; she thinks it's a game and calls it "lorries". I guess when she's four she'll grow out of it. (*For the unitiated,* ACTIVITY *on the Portable starts up with a lorry driving across the screen to unload the system software symbols — Ed.*)

As well as MS-DOS, you get SuperCalc 1 and SuperWriter. Neither of these are my favourites; but they are certainly good products, and well worth having. My preferred spreadsheet is 1-2-3, which doesn't work on the Portable (no screen driver): my favourite word processor is Turbo Pascal, which does work (yes, I know it's a programming language, but I also use the editor as a word processor). WordStar also runs on the Portable.

You get Basic, of course, and I suppose it will do until your mail-ordered Turbo Pascal arrives. But please do not try to write big programs in Microsoft Basic, as it isn't a proper programming language — it lacks too many vital features to be considered seriously.

You also get ASYNC, which is an ok communications package; not as good as some, but a lot better than others. ASYNC will handle dial-up comms via a modem and is also useable for porting stuff from other computers. But it's also worth having KERMIT, another comms package I use a lot for file transfer between different computers; the error-checking is much better. Get this from APRICOT FILE.

That's all you get that is useful, but you get a few other things besides. You get SuperProject, which is possibly a fine project planning tool (but my projects don't get planned). You get DIARY, which would be useful if you could summon it up while in the middle of another job *a la* Sidekick: but I can't see the use of a diary that requires you to boot up a computer or quit your present job if you are already using the machine. And I would call SKETCH just a demo package, since you can't print what you have drawn. BTRAN is probably useful for those of us who want to transfer BBC programs to the Apricot.

Documentation

You get two main manuals plus some odd bits and pieces. Read the dot-matrix printout on the Portable before you read anything else.

The MS-DOS manual is the usual Apricot version, leaving out lots of the features and barely adequate as a training manual. Why is there not a proper MS-DOS manual for Apricots? I suppose it saves money.

The other main manual is for the Super series. This is ok, but it does omit quite a lot (like how to set up and use XQT files). Be warned, too, that the version of SuperWriter supplied may not match the version documented ...

In conclusion

I've tried to point out everything that I didn't like about the Portable, because I think that anyone buying one should do so with their eyes open (wide open, to read the screen).

Overall, though, I liked it; I liked it a lot. It's a lot of computer hardware and software for the money. I wouldn't recommend it for business use. But as a second machine, or for home use, it would be fine. Provided you accept it for what it is, it is good value. If you offered me £495 for mine, I'd tell you to go to Dixons. ◆

Readers' writes

Subdirectory dots

In a back issue of 16 BIT COMPUTING, Simon Potter's article on MS-DOS 2.11 subdirectories queried the value of the single-dot reference for the current directory. Let me give you a use for this that I often employ.

In copying files from one directory to another, you should first establish yourself in either the source (copy-from) or the target (copy-to) directory. The example in the article establishes you in the source directory:

```
CD\
COPY SC*.* \SCALC3
```

But if you do it the other way round and establish yourself first in the *target* directory, you'll find a use for the single-dot notation:

```
CD\SCALC3
COPY SC*.* .
```

Barry Cornelius, Hull

Public Domain revisited

I have recently acquired copies of some of the public domain software in the PD-SIG library, but I'm rather disapopointed that very little of it runs on the Apricot even though most of it is for MS-DOS.

Alan Balfour, Leeds

This is one of the reasons why we have to charge £15 for our Public Domain disks — we sort, select, check, re-document and in some cases rewrite the programs to ensure that they *do* run on the Apricot ...

IBMBASIC alternative

I was interested to read the Workshop on IBMBASIC.BAS. As GWBASIC is virtually identical to IBM's BASICA (with slight differences in colour soft- key handling), I would have thought that it would have been easier for readers to obtain a copy of GWBASIC to run IBM programs directly.

If IBMBASIC is being used, however, may I suggest that the COLOR X,0 statement be converted to PRINT CHR$(27)+")"; when X is between 1 and 7, and to PRINT CHR$(27)+"(" when X is between 8 and 15. A similar approach could be used to transfer reverse-video attributes.

Andrew MacLean, Preston

Bad taste corner

I return herewith your Games Disk No 2 with disappointment, as I find the language used on the disk to be in bad taste. To make matters worse, one presumes that children could gain access to the games in question. I therefore request that you either refund me the £15 or provide another games disk which does not have such offensive language as on the CLEWDO program.

B K Cross, Woking

Your cheque is in the post, but it did start Roger thinking about a putting together a special PG-rated disk ...

Bristol fashion

I was encouraged to subscribe to APRICOT FILE by the comment on Bristol Software Factory in the sample issue you sent me. I've been using Silicon Office for three years now; and in the early days, BSF seemed to be quite helpful — they even sent out an unsolicited update once.

Times changes, however. At the end of last year I received a mailing about SO-REPORT from Datarun. I contacted them for details and they were most helpful. There is a snag, however: to use SO-REPORT you need a more recent version of Silicon Office than any I have come across.

So I contacted Bristol Software Factory. The reply was that I should send £25 and my original disk for the update. I use four copies of this £800 program: that's £100 and four floppies.

Much is written about the support brought by paying a high price for hardware or software — but I've never seen any of it. Some of the equipment I use has been bought at a discount, some at list price, and the difference in support is *zero* — you get none in either case (especially if you're using something which no dealer seems to understand, like Silicon Office).

That I can live with, but the attitude of BSF is most irritating. I am a great fan of Silicon Office, if not of its supplier. But I've reached the conclusion that the price is way over the odds: to justify it they might at least volunteer a bit more support to end-users. Asking £25 for an update which is required to run another bit of software that they're trying to flog you is galling enough — but asking you to send them the floppy as well is just too cheap for words.

But then I should be used to this attitude. After all, I bought an Xi in the days when it came with an ARCHIVE utility which didn't ...

I *should* be used to it, but I'm not. Apricot, Bristol Software *et al* are heading for disaster if my feelings are anything to go by. I was about to buy a modem for the Apricot I use at home when it hit that for another £400 I could have an Amstrad as a dedicated communications machine on auto-answer. I'll probably pick up a copy of BRAINSTORM — I've always wondered what I could do with that, and now it's £50 rather than £200 ... I bet I never buy another piece of software for the Apricot, not at £800 anyhow.

That said, I find APRICOT FILE very encouraging. Maybe there is life in my machine yet. I particularly like the feeling that your contributors are actually using these machines in the real world ...

Tim Leighton-Boyce, London

Free Small Ads

This Classified Ads section is free to APRICOT FILE subscribers. We'll take anything (holiday cottage to let? Pen-pals wanted? Pulsar accounts packages to swap?) but regular categories could include these:

- **Sales** especially for **secondhand equipment** and pre-owned **software**. (We'd prefer not to carry ads for commercially-available products, unless it's a kitchen-table sideline of yours)
- **Wants** — which could be anything, from individual items of software or hardware
- **Contacts** including (for instance) notice of user club meetings, clubs forming, or *cris de coeur* asking for help with specific problems
- **Misc** — well, we've got to have somewhere for ads that don't fit the other categories.

How to send in your ad

Simple — just let us have a sheet of paper (or preferably a disk) with the words. To summarise the requirements:

- indicate which classification you'd like it to appear
- use a typewriter or printer if possible — disk is even better. If you handwrite it, please try to ensure legibility
- the first couple of words will be in capital letters for emphasis. Indicate where you want the emphasis if it's not clear
- don't forget to include an address and/or phone number (we won't be operating a box number service)
- please try to limit yourself to 50 words or less
- let us know when you want the ad removed from the list!

Send your ad to:

APRICOT FILE
P O BOX 509
LONDON N1 1YL

Help

■■■ HELP FOR F1/F2/FP USERS: Gateway Users Group is new and exists solely for users of these machines. Details from Tony Hill at 85 Edna Road, Raynes Park, London SW20 8BS.

■■■ BIRMINGHAM AREA: any users of Apricot computers interested in forming a User Group for the exchange of ideas, software, etc please contact H Cohen on 021-454 2563 (evenings only) or write to 3 Fairlawn, Westbourne Road, Edgbaston, Birmingham B15 3TL.

■■■ BUSINESS MICROCOMPUTER USERS ASSOCIATION holds meetings quarterly to exchange experience of software package (eg modelling, database, graphics) and receive presentations on new ones. Membership £25 pa plus £10 per meeting (includes lunch). Information from Val Warden (chair) on 044 282 6774 oU Tony Martin (secretary) on 01-236 0233.

■■■ HELP GROUP FORMING: Apricot users within striking distance of Reading, Berkshire, and interested in forming a friendly group to give and receive help on programming, communications, software packages and anything else legal (!) are invited to contact David Holland on Reading (0734) 68860 — evenings only.

Wants

■■■ LOAN OF PORTABLE DISKS WANTED — Dixons muddled up the disks I should have received, say there's two months delay on replacement, and have certainly omitted at least the Voice disk. Can anyone help? Contact Paul Anderson, 01-868 4499 ext 263 (office hours) or 02518 3470 (evenings).

■■■ HELP WANTED from manufacturer or distributor to market and sell a dental software package — running on Apricot PC, can modify for any hardware. Contact H Cohen on 021-454 2563 (evenings only) or write to 3 Fairlawn, Westbourne Road, Edgbaston, Birmingham B15 3TL.

■■■ MOUSE WANTED for Apricot F1. Serial mouse preferred, but willing to consider infra-red Apricot mouse if cheap. Contact Dr Cartwright, tel 045 383 4576.

■■■ DATABASE/FILING PACKAGE (Palantir or Cardbox preferred) and A.S.D. Superwriter disk. Exchange IANKEY touch-typing tutor, GRAMMATIK grammar checker, PROOFREADER spelling checker (full working copies with documentation) — cash difference either way. Phone 095 786 261.

Misc

■■■ HOME COMPUTER BUFFS — a clearout of our shelves has turned up a number of books, games tapes etc for Commodore Vic and 64. Does anyone want to take them off our hands? No charge. Call Dennis Jarrett on 01-833 3501.

Review

Cream of the CAD packages?

DAXCAD by Practical Technology

By Stuart Bunt

Trying to decide between CAD packages designed for use on the kind of micros that we poor mortals can afford is like trying to compare apples and oranges. Each of the several possible options has its advantages and disadvantages.

Having had to review several packages for use in a computer-aided learning project, I find I now wish for the ultimate — a package that combines all the handy tricks of the different programs with none of their individual failings. Perhaps the software developers should spend some time and money on perusing the opposition?

And so to work ...

DAXCAD (or ROOTS, as it was known in a previous incarnation) is a fair stab at my ideal, a superior CAD package with many novel features.

DAXCAD runs on a number of micros and miniframes from the VAX through IBMs to the Apricots. On the Apricot, DAXCAD smacks of a program downgraded from a mainframe or miniframe implementation — the kind of environment where it would be running on many terminals, using several graphics cards.

In its Apricot guise it is designed to be used with a mouse, bit-pad, or some other pointing device: it needs an Xi with 512KB memory (it now appears that all apricots except the F1 'terminal' now come with 512K as standard): and the 8087 maths co-processor is advised for speed.

Surprisingly, and pleasingly, the program will also run on the Xen, the F2 (though it's a little hard to read on the lower-resolution screen) and even the Point 32 fileserver when it is booted with BIOS 2.7 (a practice that is definitely *not* encouraged by Apricot plc!)

I also tried the demo version on a 512K PC (whoops, sorry — the Official Word from Apricot plc says this machine is now the 'XiFD'); and it runs ok with just a little manipulation of the batch file which would normally copy the program on to an Xi's hard disk.

In use

I have used the program for some weeks now and it has only crashed twice, both under rather unusual circumstances. This is a tribute both to the GSX system of device-specific drivers and to clean programming from the progenitors of DAXCAD at Practical Technology Ltd.

The opening DAXCAD display is divided up into four areas. The topmost indicates the nature of the next input the program is expecting (a nice touch this, one that could well be emulated to their advantage by many other pieces of software). The centre square is the blank page awaiting the next drawing; the remaining two boxes on the right hand side of the screen contain a minor menu (changes to different options, depending on what the user is doing to the drawing) and a major menu that remains the same (contains commands such as 'redraw' and 'zoom' which can be used at any time.

All these boxes do mean that the screen is rather crowded. But it does enable a lot of menu choices to be displayed at once, with helpful prompts at all times in the top box.

DAXCAD's strength lies in its ability to build up complex commands in any order the operator wishes and to define points or lines in relation to already existing elements of the drawing.

For example, you could tell DAXCAD to 'draw a line 5mm long at a tangent to a given arc parallel to another indicated line'. This would be entered by using the mouse to place the cursor consecutively over the relevant commands in the menus at the side of the screen — INSERT, LINE, DIMENSION (typing '5mm' at the prompt), RELATIVE TO, ARC ... and so on. And this could be done in almost any order.

Performance

The speed of drawing is quite satisfactory even without the maths co- processor, though it starts to slow up as the drawing becomes more complex. The drawing is saved continuously on disk, so a hard disk is preferable to to speed up access times. Still, it never seems to take more than about a minute to redraw even a complex picture.

All the common and necessary commands such as rotate, move (translate) scale and so on are supported. So are a few less common tricks like the ability automatically to dimension a drawing, neat little arrows and numbers being appended to any lines or arcs indicated. The program will also measure accurately distances, angles and relative distances, or angles on the screen.

Points can be indicated in a general fashion by placing the cursor in the general area; the program will 'intelligently' decide on the nearest actual point required.

The filleting is very good; smooth curves are drawn between indicated elements, odd lines projecting beyond the curve being cut off or left in position as required.

I was unable to test the output of DAXCAD as the demo package we were given doesn't allow plotting: but it appears that plotting and drawing can go on simultaneously, and the use of 'layers' allows selective drawing of discrete elements of the drawing. Small 'windows' on to the drawing can also be plotted.

Several hatching styles and line types are supported. Text can be drawn in many sizes and orientations, though it cannot be distorted (as for example you get with DOODLE).

The manual is laid out in an identical fashion to the menu lists as they appear on the screen but with much greater explanation. There again, it's an indication of the ease of use of the program that I learnt to use all but a few of the commands without having to refer to the manual at all.

The drawbacks

There aren't many disadvantages to DAXCAD. The program does not give a continuous output of coordinate positions, such as you get from Blue Water's DESIGN-86. But the ability to draw lines or points at defined distances relative to other elements almost makes this redundant anyway.

It is unfortunate that the program does not make more use of the function keys or the MicroScreen. But then that does mean you can concentrate on rolling the mouse without other distractions.

One grave ommission is the inability to manipulate files from within the program. It is not possible to list a disk directory or to delete or rename a file from within DAXCAD.

Price and availability

DAXCAD is available direct from Practical Technology Ltd. The basic package costs £1,400; an additional Bill of Materials module at £250 is promised for the Apricot version at the end of April, the parametric module (allowing calculations to produce standard shapes for any size of drawing or plot) is available now for £300. A three-dimensional facility is also due in April or May.

For another £150 per year you can have access to a hotline query-answering service and two free updates of the package.

Last words

DAXCAD would probably be of most use to an architect or engineer, for applications that place a premium on accuracy and require ease of producing perpendiculars, lines at particular distances relations to other objects, and so on.

It would be of less use to someone interested in producing diagrams of real objects with all the warts and imperfections. For instance, there's no ability to draw freehand lines, or to stretch, bend or manipulate text; and there are only limited capabilities for shading. On the other hand, this does mean that the drawings take up little disk space and are quickly drawn on the screen.

The program is definitely successful. I have only one significant caveat — the inability to use standard MS-DOS commands. Against that, it appears a very full, easy-to-use, mature CAD package. ◆

DAXCAD

Description:	Two-dimensional computer-aided draughting package
Supplier:	Practical Technology Ltd
Address:	Clutha House 120 Cornwall Street South Glasgow G41 1AA
Telephone:	
Price:	Basic system £1,400; additional Bill of Materials module £250, parametric module £300. Hotline support £150 pa.
Configuration:	Larger Apricots, preferably with hard disk
Conclusion:	Genuinely easy to use, function-filled, no major bugs; recommended for precision work (architecture, engineering); not suitable for freehand 'doodling'.

Propaganda

Redressing the balance

A word for Concurrent CP/M

By Edward N Bromhead

'Ere, there's this operatin' system that let's yer run four jobs at the same time on that micro. So, when yer doin' yer accounts, yer can get on wiv writin' a letter on the word processor, run off a coupla hundred circulars on the printer and still be playin' *Space Invaders*. Yer just flip back to the serious business if the boss pokes 'is head around the door ...

Hearing this for the first time, it is tempting to believe that it's true. And in a way *it* is true. But the typical review of Concurrent CP/M-86 (*aka* Concurrent DOS) will say something like: "performance is downgraded proportionately to the number of tasks simultaneously in operation".

In other words, you *can* run your spreadsheet, database, word processor and the Basic interpreter simultaneously: but the performance from each will be pretty sluggish.

Well, what did you expect? Even a mainframe or supermini will slow down as you increase its workload. Concurrent has had a bad press, and I think the balance needs to be redressed a bit.

What Concurrent doesn't do

The problem is that concurrency is a misunderstood facility. What it claims to provide (but not necessarily what it's best at) is a limited form of multiprogramming, which spreads the power of the processor between several tasks.

Most of the time when you are using a computer system, the processor is waiting for the operator to input something at a (relatively) slow pace. So if your computing involves a high percentage of work which doesn't tie up a significant amount of processor power, Concurrent CP/M can operate as a multiprogramming system.

In real multiprogramming computers, each 'task' has its own input-output units (probably separate VDU terminals). When an Apricot is used to do the same thing, there are four 'virtual consoles'. These are much the same as having four real terminals connected to the computer; but because there's only one screen and one keyboard, three of these 'terminals' have to be 'hidden'. At any one time you can see only one of them (unless windowing is used: more about this later).

It is quite easy to switch tasks (or 'consoles') between what you can see (the 'foreground') and what's hidden in the background You just press CONTROL and a number key from 0 to 3. Since the four consoles are numbered 0 to 3, this switches that one into the foreground.

If you do this while a background console is generating output, it will have to store it in a file, lose it, or stop processing. If it does the latter, the benefits of multiprogramming are lost.

As a consequence, it's not usually possible to gain full advantage from the multiprogramming capabilities of Concurrent — especially on a floppy disk machine, where the total backing store may be quite limited. Tasks will then have to stop.

As I understand it, the late-lamented Apricot Point 7 network ran a sort of super-Concurrent with eight 'consoles'; one of them managed the others, and the connected computers acted as the remaining physical consoles. Such a network would not need (necessarily) to have the extra disk storage because the consoles are 'real' and not 'virtual'; in any case, the hub of the network was a 10MB hard disk machine.

But the reviews are quite right when they point out that the Intel 8086 chip isn't really up to number-crunching several tasks simultaneously; and response times can indeed be quite slow.

Also, in a network the individual workstations have quite a bit of processing power themselves. The demands on the single processor that are made if you run Concurrent as a multiprogramming system don't show up if you're running multiple processors.

So if it is difficult to use Concurrent as a multiprogramming operating system, what is it really good at?

Imagine that you are using a spreadsheet, a word processor, and a database manager. Each time you switch between one and another, there's a delay as the program ends and the next one is loaded. It is worse if a disk swap is needed. Concurrency quite simply allows you to jump from one program to another *without any delay whatsoever.*

This needs a lot of memory, of course, but it doesn't (necessarily) involve accessing a disk. You'd load the programs once from their own disks at the start of work; then you never need the program disks again.

And that's the *real* point of Concurrent CP/M: it is for the user with maximum memory and minimum disk capacity. Or, to put it another way, concurrency is a substitute for having a hard disk if you have plenty of memory.

The drawbacks

What lets the system down is the fact that non-overlaid programs are needed if you are to take the program disks out: and most of today's applications software does involve overlays, because it's been crudely cobbled together by converting from eight-bit microcomputer versions where the maximum RAM was 64KB (and you were lucky if you had *that* much).

You'll also notice with most software today that on completion of a particular job, the program must go back to the start (like the opening menu in Wordstar) rather than dumping you back in the operating system. This means it needs to be reloaded for the next job.

There are some built-in features that might put you off the system, too. Since Concurrent is a

development from CP/M-86, it has a number of features in common with its parent. And there is a widespread view that the CP/M style of commands is quite difficult to get on with (in contrast of course to 'the easy to use' terminology and 'natural' syntax of MS-DOS.

This view is based on tiny differences between the commands in the two operating systems. Take copying, for instance. The MS-DOS syntax is:

```
COPY fromthis tothis
```

But COPY is an internal command, unlike PIP (the 'Peripheral Interchange Program' in CP/M and Concurrent) which has to be loaded from a disk. Here is the syntax:

```
PIP tothis = fromthis
```

'Convoluted structure', I hear muttered. Rubbish. There probably isn't a high level programming language in the world which doesn't do things this way round! Look at Basic: LET A=99, and so on.

To keep you happy, Concurrent has a 'copy' program that works just like COPY in MS-DOS except that it is external. But when you contrast PIP with COPY, the superiority of the former is incredible. As well as concatenation, verification, and wildcards, PIP includes selective backup, truncation of line lengths, echo of the transfer on the screen, and filters to remove form feeds, change upper to lower case (and *vice versa*), expand tabs to spaces, zero the parity bit (to 'un-WordStar' document files) and a whole host of other things.

Because PIP has to be loaded, rather than being embedded in the operating system, it has a facility where you can load it once and then use it by handing over the filenames when a job has to be done. Where PIP is in action on a background console, it can handle background printing; this is an ideal use for one Concurrent console.

How you could use Concurrent

A typical set-up using the different consoles on my system could look like this:

Console	Task
1	application program (written by me)
2	SuperWriter or WordStar
3	PIP

This gives me the facility to create or amend data files on console 2, run them with a data check graphics program on 0 (as an engineer, most of my data files represent a physical object that can be 'viewed'), run the analysis (console 1), and finally do the housekeeping (console 3).

A word processing user might keep SuperWriter on console 0 and PIP on console 1. This makes it easy to do background printing (with the advantage that it is the operating system that monitors whether the processor is busy, not the application, thus cutting out at least one of level in the chain); and using the archive option with PIP, the chore of backing up on completion is eased. Another console might be kept available for peeking at remaining free space on disks: this is especially important if large text files are being edited

hit that one.

A third suggestion, this time for the program developer: keep the editor on one console, run the compiler or assembler on a second console, do test runs on a third, and use the remaining console to run STAT (another Concurrent utility) to monitor the progress of execution of the application program as it runs.

Running MS-DOS programs

Concurrent on the Apricot loads very quickly from disk (much faster than MS- DOS). It accepts disks in MS-DOS, CP/M-86 and Concurrent formats; and it runs most programs written to run under MS-DOS because it can emulate the MS-DOS system calls.

Surprisingly, this emulation is almost exactly as fast as MS-DOS. The 'out of the box' SuperWriter and SuperCalc run just as well from their MS-DOS disks under Concurrent as they do with MS-DOS (the screen handling is slightly different, and this gives the programs a superficially different feel at first).

To run properly, though, any other program must be 'well-behaved':
the hardware via
the operating system and not directly. Otherwise it's difficult to switch that program into the background. It may cause some screen display to burst through, for instance, and has to be suspended when switched into background mode.

Other restrictions are that piping and I/O redirection don't work, so any program that relies on that won't run successfully under Concurrent.

Finally, good old WordStar (MS-DOS flavour) doesn't like Concurrent. The answer to this is appears when you DEBUG WordStar to find the message "This is where WordStar patches the operating system ..."

Similarly, the MS-DOS device drivers loaded at boot time through CONFIG.SYS can't be used (at least not in my Version 3.1; I'm told it is possible in a later version). Batch files are run much as with the CP/M SUBMIT facility, by typing a command BATCH followed by the batch file's name at the operating system prompt.

What else does Concurrent have?

You want more? There's windowing for a start. Then there's protection for files, or drives, so that these can be set to read-only and have password protection to prevent inadvertent erasure of information. This is as well as using the tab on the disk itself.

There's also a form of subdirectory structure called USERS. In principle, the disk has 16 users numbered 0 to 15. Switching from one user to another is like changing directories in MS-DOS.

There is a major plus for Concurrent's 'users' approach over MS-DOS directories: when in one user area, all files given a system attribute (whether in that area, on that disk, or on any other disk) are

accessible just by referring to their name. You don't need to give the full reference. That's a bit like setting paths in MS-DOS.

On top of that there are better directory utilities (and a simulator for the MS-DOS DIR command), programs for setting file attributes, a useful facility for the program developer that allows you to watch a program execute on another console, and GSX graphics.

The use of an 8087 co-processor can be permitted or forbidden for any console. This is especially handy for me; with 8087s in both my Apricots, I can no longer test my programs on a non-8087 machine.!Tse
generates code which checks for the presence of the co-processor chip, and if it finds one it will utilise it.

The maximum memory available to each Concurrent console can be set by typing M=n, where n is the number of kilobytes to be allocated to that particular console. Lamentably this potentially useful facility is undocumented.

The snags

So what are the drawbacks? One minor thing is that the formatted capacity of a disk under Concurrent is slightly smaller than if the disk is formatted under MS-DOS.

Second, the Apricot screen graphics device driver is a little less well- developed than the MS-DOS version. You can't change consoles from a graphics screen to either another graphics screen or to a text screen, you have to complete the graphics first: and you can't window the graphics.

It ought to be possible to share the code between different consoles if the same program is running on both, to cut down on space, but I haven't tried that yet. And the RAM disk referred to in the manual just doesn't exist. Pity, but then who's got that much memory? The basic operating system takes a little over 200K.

Documentation is fuller than for MS-DOS but contains just as many errors.

The cost

Fine, you say. This paragon is for me. But how much does it cost?

This is the unbelievable bit. Once you have the necessary extra memory (it won't do anything properly in 256K) the software was absolutely free once you sent back the card in the Apricot box.

Even if you never used it, you got five single-sided floppies from ACT for nothing (or rather, for the price of a stamp. But if you'd tried Concurrent you would have been hooked, like me.

Even today, when you can get windowing and concurrency through MS-WINDOWS, you have to go through a real rigmarole to get non-specific windows applications to run: there's none of that with Concurrent. I'd really like the latest version with RAMdisk, loadable device drivers and the works. ◆

Writers in this issue

Roger Gann works full-time running the DEALS FOR READERS section of the newsletter as well as contributing words, ideas, humour, hints, legal advice, spittle for mass-mailings, etc. He was formerly the principal writer on 16 BIT COMPUTING; before that he was a builder (and a pioneer Sirius user), a lawyer, and a kind of grandiose bank clerk.

Lindsay Doyle escaped from the dungeons of MICROCOMPUTER PRINTOUT in the confusion following that magazine's demise, and had contributed just one piece to 16 BIT COMPUTING before that magazine also crashed. But we don't hold that against him: he now resides in a specially-furnished cell deep beneath the editorial offices of APRICOT FILE, and there he is motivated by the promise of occasional bread and water to generate a series of articles about using the Apricot PC and Xi.

David Langford is a full-time writer and computer addict, whose latest novel *Leaky Establishment* is "by no means" about his years at AWRE Aldermaston. He is inordinately proud of winning one of the 1985 Hugo Awards, Science Fiction's 'Oscars'.

Kathy Lang is a partner in Mayflower Computing Consultants, a firm which specialises in independent advice on word processing and small business applications. She was one of the mainstays of 16 BIT COMPUTING; she has also been published widely in the computer and business press, regularly takes part in conferences and seminars (and is an excellent speaker), and has a number of books in print.

Dermod Quirke is a former public servant (well, a librarian) who runs a word processing and translation bureau on Sirii. His notable skills include the use of SpellBinder and his ability to cut through the crap when he surveys the computer scene.

David St John Wallis is a sort of psychologist who runs an export marketing consultancy and writes *enourmously* thick marketing books about the developing world which don't sell very well. He says the greatest achievements of his 44 years were getting a disk volume named after him and proposing to the Governor of Puerto Rico. We don't know if he was accepted.

Terrance Duggan is one of the prime movers in TP Group — his responsibility is generally the office management side. He is basically an artist (great with pen and ink — give him a call if you want a signed original of your house or your office) but in the past has been an Army officer, a bookies' runner, and sundry other things.

Readers Queries

Q&A:

Your questions answered

Basic modes

What does the 'Bad File Mode' message denote? I get it occasionally when trying to MERGE two programs.

Basic can only MERGE programs which have been SAVEd in ASCII format (by a SAVE "FILENAME", A command). It can't MERGE files which have been SAVEd in the normal tokenised format by a simple SAVE "FILENAME". So reload your programs and SAVE them again with the A parameter.

The Dixons' dump

I gave myself the Christmas present of a cut-price Apricot Portable from Dixons, and in general I am having a good time with it. But there does seem to be a problem or two with it. For instance, there's no mention in the documentation of the SW.DEF printer definition facility in SuperWriter ...

Correct. Not only does the Dixons' Portable have a manual that omits SW.DEF (and much else besides), the documentation is evidently based on SuperWriter version D1.09 ... while the version of the software on the machine is actually the much later (and much improved) 1.03.

See David Langford's inaugural Disinformation Column for APRICOT FILE for more information on this; and buy one of the products produced by his company Ansible Information (like the ASD disk we sell through DEALS FOR READERS) — that way you'll start receiving Ansible's occasional but fact-packed fun- filled newsletter, which contains gems galore for SuperWriter users.

Incidentally, Alan Solomon, who's just bought himself a Portable, is promising an occasional series of articles and Workshops on the machine.

Fancy printing from Cardbox

I use Cardbox for a name-and-address list on which I want to do a mass mailing. Ideally I'd like to set up a single-page mailshot letter as a template and personalise it by adding the address lines and the salutation as I print. The letters are going out in window envelopes, so the positioning of the name and address is important.

My problem is that the letter is a bit too long. If I set the left margin in the template's print format controls to position the address correctly for the window, the right margin has to be fairly wide too in order to balance the look of the letter; and this means the text strays on to a second page, which I don't want. Is there any way of setting an indent for part of the template — for the address lines — and then resetting the rest of the text to a different margin position?

Presumably the problem is that the name and address are on multiple lines but referenced only as a single field. Setting up a template with some leading spaces before the field name would provide an indent only for the first line of the address; the rest of it would blindly start printing at the left margin.

You could write out all the personalised letters to a disk file and then use a small Basic program or perhaps a word processor to massage the relevant print lines by adding some leading spaces; but that seems a bit crude.

On the other hand, we can't think of an alternative in early versions of Cardbox. But the latest version, 3.0, is yet another distinct improvement on an already good package. Among other things it permits you to include direct printer controls in template text, so before the address you could have an Escape code to reposition the left margin: and after the address another print control could reset it.

Business Simulations tell us that existing users can get an upgrade to version 3 for £30 by sending in their master disk with a cheque (add VAT — the total amount then is £34.50). This should produce a replacement disk and a few additional pages for your manual.

The company is on 089 286 3105.

EDLIN and XQT

Is it possible to use EDLIN to insert control codes into a SuperCalc Execute file? I want to set up an 'automatic print' XQT file that includes the codes to specify compressed output on my printer (Control Q).

One option: read Alec Wardop's Hex codes Workshop in APRICOT FILE Release 1.3. And/or use Alec's HEXFILE.BAS utility to create your XQT file — it's on DEALS FOR READERS disk AP003.

Superwriter in French

I work with SuperWriter on my F1, and I prefer its simplicity to the complications of more sophisticated packages like Textor and WordStar. But I would like to be able to utilise French characters complete with accents on my screen. Do you have a solution?

Well, yes and no. The screen font and keyboard can be edited via ACTIVITY to allow the display of accented characters. But they will almost certainly be printed incorrectly; and because they'll have ASCII values above 128, SuperWriter will assume they are 'punctuation' marks, which messes up word counts and word-oriented cursor movements.

One compromise is to create the characters by overprinting, as described in David Langford's Disinformation Column in APRICOT FILE Release 1.2 — but this will produce an ugly screen display. If you are going to try it, it's worth using this technique from an XQT file which automatically all the special characters by overprint instructions: for example, globally changing 'eeeee' to 'e\OUT8\eeee' — and so on.

Changing the disk label

How do you alter the 'volume' name on a disk? I have an Apricot with single- sided disks.

Well, our DEALS FOR READERS utility VOLSER has been revamped and should now do the trick for all Apricot disks. Alternatively, use DEBUG (on DEALS FOR READERS disk AP002) and follow this procedure:

```
>L 100 1 4 1
>D 300
>F 300LB 'NEWNAMExxxx' D 300
>W 100 1 4 1
```

This should work, unless you've used the SORTDISK utility — the location is altered if that's been used. In any case, you can find the volume label by loading and searching through more sectors and doing a search. For instance:

```
>L 100 1 4 8
>S 100 FFFF 'OLDNAME'
```

Blinking WordStar

WordStar has its critics, but my only real objection is quite a simple one — I don't like the non-blinking cursor, and oftentimes it is mighty aggravating to lose the solid block (and your place) on the screen. Is there a fix?

Yes there is, and it's simple. You need DEBUG again (from DEALS FOR READERS disk AP002) and a working copy of WS.COM (of course you should never work on the original).

As it stands, the cursor is controlled by eight bytes starting at address 293 and preceded at 292 by a flag that says an eight-byte string is about to follow. You add a couple of bytes to this string to produce a flashing cursor, and you amend 292 to say the string is now ten bytes long.

So Edit 292 and change the '08' there to '0A' (the hex equivalent of decimal '10'):

```
>E 292
08.10
```

Then change the contents of 29B from '00' to '1B' ...

```
>E 29B
00.1B
```

... and alter 29C to '32':

```
>E 29C
00.32
```

That's all there is to it. Use W to write the amended version to disk and exit with Q. Now the next time you run WordStar, the cursor will have changed to a blinking block.

Our thanks to Nicholas Guppy for this one.

Oki upgrade

I would like to use programs such as the DEALS FOR READERS utility POLYPRINT, but I find that my somewhat aged Oki Microline 83A printer can't handle graphics. Is there a solution?

Oki's UK distributor X-Data has a £30 upgrade for parallel-interface 83As (£45 if you have an RS232 model) that adds the graphics capability, effectively making the 83A into an 84. You get a couple of ROM chips that are quite easily installed on the printer's controller board. X-Data is on 0753 72331.

F1 problems

I have been accumulating a list of problems with my F1 — in particular, it seems to lose characters when printing from Basic: and I can't swap character sets with the F1 and F2 I use at work.

This could be a ROM BIOS problem. Sydney Harrod's **Apri-Soft-Exchange** user group (great value at £10pa) carried an almost identical comment in a recent issue of its newsletter; it seems there are bugs in the microcode of BIOS 1.8. Get hold of the much improved version 3.1 as soon as you can, and if necessary go back to an earlier version (like 1.6) in the meantime.

Label change

When using the DISK utility to format fresh disks, I always end up with a volume label 'Apricot'. Is there a way of altering the label applied to a disk during formatting?

You can use DEBUG to change the name assigned to a disk during formatting. Work on a copy of DISK.OVL and use the DEBUG S-for-Search command to find the seven locations which hold the word 'Apricot'; then Edit something else into that string.

So your screen might start off looking like this:

```
A> DEBUG DISK.OVL
   >S 0 FFFF 'Apricot'
   1F54:4C90
   >D 4C90
   1F54:4C90 41 70 72 69 63 6F 74 20
             20 20 20 B8 0C 00 50 E5
             Apricot....8..Ph
```

Now use E to replace the text, W to write it, and E to exit. Any future formatting with DISK will put your new label on your disks.

Thanks to Paul Miller for this. ◆

Deals For Readers

This is our mail-order section, exclusively for readers of APRICOT FILE. **In the** DEALS FOR READERS **lists you'll find ...**

- **public domain software**, mostly games and utilities that aren't easy to obtain elsewhere — and many of these are unique to APRICOT FILE
- **deals on software**, typically useful items that aren't widely available
- **demo disks** for packages that we regard as pretty good
- **books**, mostly by contributors.

Each issue has new entries and (occasionally) price changes. So keep looking!

How to order

Simple: just send us a note or a purchase order with the item's name and the reference number as quoted in the list. We will normally be able to process orders within two working days.

Note that for orders totalling less than £50 we can only accept prepayments and only in Sterling, so a cheque or money order (made out to "TP GROUP") *must* accompany your order.

We can accept purchase orders *only* from companies and other organisations, and *only* if you want goods totalling more than £50. But if it's at all possible we would prefer cash with order — we just aren't big enough to provide the effort of chasing invoices and to cover the shortfall between despatch and delivery.

The prices quoted include VAT where applicable and despatch. Your order will arrive with a VAT invoice/receipt.

Overseas orders

Orders from outside the British Isles are at the same price. Anything we send abroad is free of the VAT sales tax, and since that 15 per cent levy just about approximates to the extra cost of overseas postage we thought we might as well simplify things.

This may however mean that bulky items or long-distance despatch will go by the postage rate that most closely fits the 15 per cent allowance — and sea mail can be interminable. So if you want to ensure swift despatch, or if there's any doubt, ask us to quote ...

Contribute!

We're always looking for contributions to further £15 disks. So if you've written something — a game, a utility, a helpful batch file — why not share it with other readers? And if the ideas and techniques therein would make a useful mini-article for the newsletter, we'd certainly be interested in printing it.

Public Domain Disks

These disks contain public domain programs and text files which we have sorted, selected and tested. In many cases we have debugged, amended and documented the material too.

Apricot Disk No. 1

Order no:	**AP001**
Price:	**£15**

Over 40 files. Highlights now include:

AUTOEXEC with an improved prompt
SDIR and **FDIR** two sorted-directory utilities
VDEL and **DELQ** two selective DELete commands
WAIT and **ASK** two batch file commands, both more useful than PAUSE
GRAFCHAR define your own characters
ESCAPES list of Escape code for Sirius and Apricot
OTHELLO good version of the board game
LEADTRAK and **ACCTRACK** two sales lead management systems

Apricot Disk No. 2

Order no:	**AP002**
Price:	**£15**

Includes 79 files. Highlights:

ALTER and **CHMOD** change file attributes
BASICKEYS single-key entry of Basic commands
DEBUG the Apricot version
EPSON sets alternative print modes
KNEW copies only new files
MENU easy batch-file menu system
MOVE moves files from one subdirectory to another
RENDIR rename subdirectories
SORTDISK sorts directories in a variety of ways
TREEDIR displays a DIRectory of all files on a disk — in their subdirectories
WHEREIS searches disk subdirectories for named file(s)

Apricot Disk No. 3

Order no:	**AP003**
Price:	**£15**

A bumper bundle. Highlights:

SWEEP excellent all-purpose file housekeeper
SCAVEN finds and locks out bad sector on microfloppies
MEMDUMP browse through memory
TURBOKEY key redefinition for aficionados of Turbo Pascal
SUPERWRITER XQT FILES a useful clutch of macros

Games

Order no:	**AP004**
Price:	**£15**

Includes the very tough flight simulator **747SIM** (fly your own

Jumbo) plus old favourites like **AWARI, TOWERS OF HANOI,** and many more besides. A very full disk

GSX User's Disk

Order no: AP005
Price: £15

The complete GSX tutorial from Lindsay Doyle — includes a library of ready-to- use **Basic subroutines** that drive GSX, a set of five printable **Workshops** in text form, many **graphics demo programs**, and Lindsay's improved HEXPAWN game **IMPHEX** (which among other things demonstrates something not unlike artificial intelligence).

Games No. 2

Order no: AP006
Price: £15

Another diskfull of Apricot entertainment. Includes **CLEWDO** (solve the mystery), **TRUCKER** (get a cargo across the States on time), and some games for the younger Apricot user (**SPELL** and **HANGMAN**). Plus for the first time a GWBASIC version of **STARTREK** (noises and all) and **BACKGAMMON.** *Some games unsuitable for F Series and Portables.*

Apricot Disk No. 4

Order no: AP007
Price: £15

More indispensible tools and utilities. Highlights:
ASMGEN dissassembler
132-column screen configurator
memory speed test benchmarks
improved version of **SETUP**
DIARY year-planner
LABEL address label printer
BANNER prints fancy letterheads with your daisywheel printer

Games No. 3 — Great Britain Ltd

Order no: AP008
Price: £15

Only two games on this disk, but both excellent and quite realistic entertainments. **GREAT BRITAIN LTD** is a political-economic simulation — be Prime Minister, balance the books, win the election too if you can. And **INHERITANCE** is an interesting investment/gambling game; you could get hooked on both!

■■■ NEW ■■■

Utilities No 5

Order no: AP009
Price: £15

A total of 38 files plus full documentation — includes John Lyth's imaginative MS-DOS **menu** front end, a suite of dBASE II programs to control your **bank account**, **CHECKER** to verify inputting in MSBASIC, **DEBUG.PAS**, a clutch of Spellbinder utilities, **IBMBASIC** (BASICA to MSBASIC converter) ... and much, much more!

■■■ NEW ■■■

GWBASIC Games

Order no: AP010
Price: £15

A miscellany of graphics-based games, some old and some new (some borrowed and some blue) — including some special sound effects and graphics demos. Highlights: **OPERATOR** (try running a large mainframe computer system), hunt for oil with **WILDCAT**, depress yourself with **NUKE-LA** and **ALIEN.**

■■■ NEW ■■■

Programmer's Disk No 1

Order no: AP011
Price: £15

Our first disk for programming fans. Star attraction is a public domain implemenation of LISP called **XLISP**; plus fifteen Turbo Pascal routines and utilities, a C cross referencer, an MS-BASIC programmers' toolbox, a program line indenter and useful batch file utilities.

■■■ NEW ■■■

Programmer's Disk No 2

Order no: AP012
Price: £15

Features **BSU**, a program to unprotect protected MSBASIC programs; plus Ron Cain's Small C compiler, a trio of cross-referencers for Basic and C, an ASCII-to-Hex converter, a GWBASIC core dumper, the appendix that Microsoft omitted from the MACRO-86 manual, and a C source code checker.

■■■ NEW ■■■

Lotus 1-2-3 Disk No 1

Order no: AP013
Price: £15

No less than 25 .WKS templates for 1-2-3, including the Asterix suite of business worksheets, and the macro library MACLIB.WKS

■■■ NEW ■■■

Lotus 1-2-3 Disk No 2

Order no: AP014
Price: £15

A heap of technical notes and external utilities for 1-2-3 plus seven .WKS files including an address label macro and PRNTMENU.WKS to manipulate your Epson printer.

■■■ NEW ■■■

Chess

Order no: AP016
Price: £15

Only three games — but what games! For the first time on an Apricot, a challenging public domain chess game with superb hi-res graphics — even supports an 8087 if you have one. As an *hors d'oeuvre* we include a version of PACMAN, for dessert a golf game. A self-booting disk with a free bonus: the latest version of MS-DOS with BIOS 3.1. *Not for F Series or Portables.*

Demo Disks

Try before you buy? Here's your opportunity to check out our selection of some of the best Apricot packages — and to do so

without a salesman hassling you to write a cheque for them. All disks are priced at £15 including despatch and VAT.

BusiPost

Order no:	**AD002**
Price:	**£15**

British mailing list package — fast and flexible. *Not available for the Apricot F Series and Portables.*

Letterer-Set

Order no:	**AD005**
Price:	**£15**

Utility that lets you print on any dot-matrix printer any typeface that can be displayed on your Apricot screen.

■■■ NEW ■■■

MENUGEN

Order no:	**AD007**
Price:	**£15**

Here at last! A demo for the fine menu-creation utility from Menugen — menu selections can run programs, call other menus, execute MS-DOS commands, etc.

MicroSight

Order no:	**AD008**
Price:	**£15**

Everything you need for digitising an image and several facilities for manipulating it.

PC Programmer

Order no:	**AD009**
Price:	**£15**

Program generator that lets you produce complex applications software with minimal effort and no need to learn a programming language.

Praxis MicroChart Plus

Order no:	**AD010**
Price:	**£15**

All-British business graphics package, ideal for presentation of spreadsheet data etc. *Not available for the Apricot F Series and Portables.*

Cardbox Plus

Order no:	**AD011**
Price:	**£15**

Particularly good demo for one of the best 'flat-file' records-keeping packages. *Not available for the Apricot F Series and Portables.*

Other extras

■■■ PRICE CUTS ■■■

Expansion Memory Boards

256KB	**AH002**
	£130
512KB	**AH003**
	£185

High-quality add-in memory cards from a well-known manufacturer at prices we think you'll find hard to beat — bearing in mind that they *include* VAT and despatch. The 512K board is particularly good value, perfect for RAM disks and big SuperCalc worksheets. But both boards are socketed, so if you can get the chips you can populate the board up to the 512KB maximum yourself.

The Good Computing Book

Order no:	**AB001**
Price:	**£3.00**

A tubby and packed paperback for beginners. Mostly a reference dictionary of computing terms, but also lots of introductory info. Claims to offer "everything you need to know and nothing you don't".

Special software

This collection represents our first attempt at purveying conventional packages: these are not public domain items, and they are not discount deals on the kind of software your dealer will sell you. Instead we have gathered a few titles that (a) we feel will be useful to the average Apricot user and (b) you won't find easily — or at all! — anywhere else.

FAST Apricot Screen Accelerator

Order no:	**AS001**
Price:	**£25**

The rumour is that the designers of the Apricot chose to put various screen-handling impedimenta deep within the BIOS in order that it should not compete on performance too strongly with its then stablemate, the Sirius. And these screen delays have remained there ever since.

Until now. FAST is an accelerator for the Apricot screen: it bypasses certain screen interrupts. Simply running it in an AUTOEXEC.BAT will cause your Apricot to handle screen text up to *twice* as quickly. FAST doesn't affect CPU clock speeds and so it does not accelerate your graphics or supercharge your program execution times. But its effect on screen performance is pretty impressive.

FAST is very compact, less than 650 bytes; and it's modest price reflects that. For the money you won't find any better way of speeding up an Apricot with a single-line AUTOEXEC command. *Not available for the Apricot F Series and Portables.*

BPS Disk no. 2 — RAMdisk with WordScan

Order no:	**AS002**
Price:	**£40**

The **RAMdisk** is better than the Apricot's freebie; the **Wordscan** word/line/character counter is *very* fast and always useful for anyone who writes text on their computer. Normal RRP is at least £70.

POLYPRINT

Order no:	**AS003**
Price:	**£30**

Pretty printing from your Apricot on any matrix printer — POLYPRINT lets you produce

near-letter-quality printing (almost typesetting quality, in fact) on ordinary dot-matrix printers that are capable of printing graphics (which these days means just about any low-cost matrix printer). Menu-driven, uses only nine keys. Comes with 12 selectable typefaces, some of them very fancy. Accepts ready-to-print output from any word processor; will also work directly from WordStar files without your having to save them on disk first. *You must specify which printer you have when ordering* — POLYPRINT *comes customised for particular printers.*

POLYPRINT PLUS

Order no:	**AS021**
Price:	**£20**

For existing POLYPRINT users only: 13 new typefaces and additional facilities including the new capability of mixing typefaces in the middle of a document.

The Apricot Catalogue

Order no:	**AS004** [ASCII]
Order no:	**AS005** [Cardbox]
Price:	**£50**

A list of all the software and hardware we know of for the Apricot with prices, addresses, description (with our comments when we have experience of the package), contact names and numbers (including Telex numbers) where we know them. Based on the lists originally printed in 16 BIT COMPUTING, but regularly updated by us; currently well over a megabyte of information on six disks. The ASCII format can be read by most word processors or simply TYPEd, the CardBox format can be read by CardBox Plus and comes with a .FRM format (but not with the file manager program itself!).

ASD — the professional's SuperWriter disk

Order no:	**AS006**
Price:	**£57.50**

Formerly known as P.A.S.D.: this is the latest (and much improved) version of the first (and only?) independently-produced package of upgrades to and tools for SuperWriter — produced by a couple of professional writers (one of them being our columnist David Langford) for people who want to make the most of the word processor. A packed disk, and a good piece of work. Highlights:

- **two-column** formatting and print
- expansion, improvements, correction for the **dictionary**
- full documentation of **SW.DEF** plus a collection of useful formats
- improved (and more legible) **display font**
- **keyboard configuration** presets to speed up keying
- many **XQT** files to accelerate and simplify your routine work
- several batch files for **disk housekeeping**

AnsibleIndex

Order no:	**AS022**
Price:	**£86.50**

Sophisticated SuperWriter indexing utility, even permits indexing of subjects and themes. Can handle documents chained across more than one disk, too. Only requires two marks per index item.

AnsiblePatch

Order no:	**AS023**
Price:	**£15**

Patches SuperWriter to improve the legibility of displayed text on F series Apricots and Portables.

■■■ NEW ■■■

SSDISK

Order no:	**AS024**
Price:	**£15**

Fed up with the inadequate RAMdisk software that came with your Apricot? S&S has produced a RAMdisk which is configurable up to a full 896KB with 128 directory entries per 'drive'.

IANKEY Crash Course

Order no:	**AS007**
Price:	**£48**

The very best keyboard tutor we've seen for newcomers — beats TOUCH 'N' GO into a cocked hat. Sensible design based on serious research; clear on-screen instructions; takes only three or four hours to teach the basics of touch-typing. Our review concluded "I strongly recommend it as excellent value for money" — especially from DEALS FOR READERS, because the normal RRP with VAT and P&P is £58.65.

IANKEY Two-Fingers to Touch-Typing

Order no:	**AS008**
Price:	**£48**

An alternative keyboard tutor — converts a two-fingered 'hunt and peck' typist into a fast user; and it does so without wasting your time, forcing you to relearn the keyboard, or boring you stiff. Included in the enthusiastic review conclusions, and again available from us at a price £10 below RRP.

FORTRAN Utilities

Order no:	**AS009**
Price:	**£50**

A collection of assembler utilities for MS-FORTRAN applications, complete with test programs and link instructions. Includes:

- set date and time
- current date and time
- get/change default drive
- delete/rename disk file
- read/get character from keyboard buffer
- print characters on printer

DO-TO-ALL

Order no:	**AS010**
Price:	**£15**

Handy for hard disk users and anyone with multiple

subdirectories: DO-TO-ALL lets you issue just one command that is to be applied to *all* directories — to delete all BAK files in your subdirectories, for instance.

The FTU

Order no:	**AS011**
Price:	**£125**

The very best file transfer package we know of; we use it all the time, and that's not just because it's written by Friedman. A complete kit that enables you to transfer files between the three most popular machines — IBM PC, Apricot, and Victor/Sirius. Includes software for all three, and an 'intelligent' RS232 cable that will configure itself correctly for connection between any two of the computers. Our price is over £50 below RRP!

MXDUMP

Order no:	**AS012**
Price:	**£75**

Another classy little number from the programming pen of Friedman — produces exact screen dumps from your Apricot display on a standard Epson MX dot- matrix printer. Once loaded it sits quietly in MS-DOS waiting for you to call it (with a single keystroke). Lots of options: specify text or high-resolution graphics, normal or bold, standard-or double-width: and more ...

The Lotus Pack

Order no:	**AS013**
Price:	**£65**

Useful utilities from **S&S Enterprises** for Lotus users:

- **THEPOUND** lets you use all the displayable Apricot characters in worksheets — including the pound sign
- **SOLID123** consolidates several 1-2-3 or Symphony worksheets into a total
- **TRANSPOS** transposes rows and columns
- **123RANGE** lists worksheet ranges

The Printer Pack

Order no:	**AS015**
Price:	**£40**

Mainly for Epson-compatibles, mainly for spreadsheets:

- **SIDELINE** prints worksheets sideways so that wide spreadsheets fit on to the paper
- **FXPOUND** prints the pound sign on FX-type printers
- **SETFXPR** provides a set-up menu for printer functions

The Word Processing Pack

Order no:	**AS016**
Price:	**£50**

Four more handy S&S utilities:

- **WSASCII** converts WordStar files to ASCII format so that they can be read by other word processor
- **WORDNO** word counter
- **READAGE** calculates the reading age (ie the comprehensibility) of text
- **SEARCH** searches text for given phrase

The First-Aid Kit

Order no:	**AS017**
Price:	**£25**

Just what you need to make your computer more palatable to novice uses — the **DOSMENU** front-end option-choice menu and the **HELP** dial-an-explanation facility

The File Protection Pack

Order no:	**AS018**
Price:	**£60**

SECRET makes files invisible (or visible again) to DIR searches, **READONLY** sets the attribute bit so that they can't be deleted or overwritten, **ENCRYPT** encrypts and decrypts files according to your password, **ZAP** deletes them so thoroughly they can't be 'undeleted' at all

The Games Box

Order no:	**AS019**
Price:	**£25**

Two good games from Alan Solomon: **ADVENTURE** is the original 'Colossal Cave', **CASH CRISIS** is 'Space Invaders' with money

UNDELETE

Order no:	**AS020**
Price:	**£20**

The essential brow-soother — will attempt to recover files that have accidentally been DELeted, and does so with gratifying frequency. *Not for hard disk systems, though.*

All prices include VAT and despatch. Send your order with payment to:

APRICOT FILE
TP Group
PO Box 509
London N1 1YL
England

Queries: 01-833 3501

Cheques should be made payable to TP GROUP.

We aim to despatch within 48 hours, but please allow 21 days for delivery before calling to complain ...

Note that we can only accept payments IN STERLING, that we must have PREPAYMENT except for official Purchase Orders, and that PURCHASE ORDERS can only be accepted for orders totalling £50 or more.

News

Wordcraft updates

Wordcraft appears to be ticking over right now — no major new upgrades for a year or two, but several helpful little add-ons. The newest version, numbered 2.50, includes a number of small but helpful enhancements (notably background printing). The latest extra-cost utilities are a **DCA File Converter** that enables Wordcraft to read IBM's Document Content Architecture format (and *vice versa*): and a **Toolit** for programmers and advanced users which includes a dBASE III converter, an automatic indexer, and a bunch of technical notes. Both utilities will cost around £140 apiece from dealers, but call **0206 561608** if you can't wait.

... changes at the top

Wordcraft founder **Paul Handover** has stepped down from the top spot; the new MD is **Sid Newman**, a six-year veteran of the firm and most recently Business Development Manager. Handover remains as chairman but leaves the company to pursue other business interests; the word is that he's rather bored with it all and needed a change.

Steebeck to succeed?

Dowty Information Systems is a brand-new data comms company, formed from **RFL Systems** (top-end ends like command and control systems) and **Steebeck** (mostly modems). Steebeck has squirmed its way to the no. 3 position in the dial-up modems market, with a UK installed base claimed to be around the 65,000 mark: the products you might have come across bear the **Minimo** or **Quattro** labels — the former for cheapish low-end V21/V23 modems, Quattro for fancier Hayes- compatible units at a premium price. Steebeck/Dowty also happens to make Apricot's internal modem. The significance of all this is that Dowty (and Steebeck) have suddenly become one of the Big Boys, albeit with its principal interests being at the fancier end of things: but we can probably expect some competitive pricing, aggressive marketing, and new products.

Miracle scores

Meanwhile the brand leader in low-end modems, **Miracle Technology**, has gleefully reported the results of a **Dialog Information Services** survey of value for money on 90 or so modems. Miracle's **WS2000** topped the general poll, the **WS3000** came out best of the Hayes-compatibles by a long way.

Spaceheights package

Genial Jack Palmer at **Spaceheights** has put together a manufacturing system package that includes Silicon Office, his own Bill of Materials and Project Design Control suite, and the Magic Memory upgrade board (includes cache and printer buffer). The price is **£1,299**, which seems like a bargain to us: details from **0305 771974**.

Microsoft flotation

Microsoft's public offering a couple of weeks ago appears to have been hugely successful. To the insider's eyes the company may have been struggling of late in an uncharacteristic fashion, but it looks as though the investors have decided that's all down to unimportant technical questions rather than to Microsoft's marketing potential. They also overlooked the ongoing spats with Digital Research over windows and networking, the widely rumoured threats that IBM won't be sticking with Microsoft for much longer, and the notification in the tender document that **Seattle Computer Products** has started a copyright action on Microsoft's main money-spinner MS-DOS — SCP wrote the original version and Microsoft developed it. Microsoft argues that it gave SCP shared rights only to version 1.0 of the product, which in practice was the original PC-DOS. Anyhow, the floatation valued Microsoft at a whopping $690 **million** at an (over-subscribed) offer price of $21 — and shares started trading at around $28, about $10 higher than expected.

NCC attempts assessment

The **National Computing Centre** is trying to produce some objective reviews of accounts packages using methodologies developed via a **£50,000** Dept of Employment grant. The procedures will take three to five weeks, the supplier will be charged £3,000 upwards, and the results will be available to potential purchasers from the NCC or the supplier. **BOS Software, Da Conti** and **Plusmark** have already signed up: expect their reports in June. It's not an ideal system, of course, since it will produce an NCC 'Seal of Approval' rather than a 'best-buy' across the whole range of options — but it must be better than the kind of three-page 'reviews' written by journalists in the computer press.

Winners and losers

For the third year running, an **Apricot** computer was named 'Business Micro of the Year' at the *Sunday Times/Personal Computer World* Business Microcomputing Awards. It was the **Xen**, of course — though what exactly comprises the 'year' is thrown open to question by the **Data General DG/One** winning the portable category (it's been around a while, to no great effect in the marketplace). Other winners are a mix of the sane and the iffy — Sagesoft's **ChitChat** as best comms system, the Amstrad **PCW8256** as Home and Small Business Micro of the Year, Borland's **SideKick** as best utility, and Miracle's **WS3000** modem as the best peripheral. No quibbles about the Amstrad, and the WS3000 is a safe bet too: but SideKick isn't everything (a competitor called HOMEBASE is cheaper and more clever on the IBM) and ChitChat has its detractors too. Of course, the British Microcomputing Awards have sometimes been the kiss of death — last year's winners included the **Apricot Portable** and the **Oberon OmniReader**.

Bargain corner (1)

OMRC ComputerS, distributor of the Apricot-approved range of Infosoft peripherals, has dropped their expansion box prices for this issue of APRICOT FILE by £20. So for readers of this issue, the PC/Xi box is now £379 and the F series box is £279.

These six-slot boxes can now be fitted with 10MB or 20MB internal hard disks. Prices from £935.

OMRC also announces a range of internal Xen expansion boards from 512KB to 2MB. The *two-megabyte* RAM card is really necessary for big Xenix applications and this one costs £515

OMRC ComputerS can be reached at **042 873 5255.**

Bargain corner (2)

Best buys in 80-column printers abound right now. Try **Modehart** — the Epson **LX80** (newish, very neat, 100cps in draft mode and a decent NLQ at 16cps) is just £196 against an RRP of £255, the competitive Citizen **120D** (120cps draft, 25cps in an average-to-ok NLQ mode, RRP £235) is £150, and the Taxan **KP-810** (Canon PW1080 work-alike at 160cps) is a bargain £165. Prices don't include VAT or delivery. Modehart is on **0784 62405.**

Bargain corner (3)

A few bargains in Apricot hardware and package at **Morse Computers**, where's there's a stock clearance sale. Nothing spectacular on the Apricots, just a few quid off: but there appears to be some near-half-price bargains on software — like **Open Access** (RRP £550) at **£195.** Morse is on **01-831 0644.** **Discount-hunters looking for cheap Xens (say) might also try Hi-Voltage** in Croydon — **01-686 6362.**

Tact corner

Three police officers have resigned and 19 more are to be disciplined following an alleged abuse of the **Police National Computer** to participate in **BP**'s recent 'spot the car number' game. Seems that 39 of Britain's 43 police forces were involved in making more than 500 illegal requests for car registration information ... Aren't our police wonderful?

More market share fuss

Here we go again: market researchers **Context** and **Romtec** gave Apricot plc 19 and 18 per cent respectively of UK microcomputer sales last year ... but **Wharton Information Systems** gave it just nine per cent for the second half. All three do agree that the market grew by around 25 per cent last year (Apricot's share by value declined slightly because of the box-shifting on low-priced F1s) but bad news could be just around the corner — **Gowling Marketing Services** suggests there won't be any growth at all in 1986. Gowling surveyed UK small-business purchasers who bought 90,000 machines last year and found that purchasing levels would at best be maintained. Gowling says the number of small business with at least one micro increased from 16.6 per cent to 20.5 per cent in the year to January 1986 — amazingly, with IBM and **Sirius** as the main beneficiaries (Apple was the principal loser).

Tel says thanks

Some subscribers may know that **Terry Duggan**, one of the quartet primarily responsible for APRICOT FILE, was run down by a car in France at Easter. He's now recovering in Bart's, looking like the lead from *Curse of the Mummy's Tomb*, and he'll be there another month at least. We'd like to express our appreciation for the good wishes he has received.

Citizen of Europe

Citizen Europe was set up last Autumn to become another major player in the low-cost printer market. Lots of ambition and lots of advertising appear to have paid off: Citizen says it shipped **22,000** printers in the last six months, giving it the 1.5 per cent share of the European market that it was looking for. And projections for 1986/87 have been doubled to **160,000** units ...

This month's failures

Legal systems specialist **QDOS** has gone into liquidation despite rapid growth in the last year which took it to 150 or so users and second or third spot in the market for solicitors' systems. The affair casts a good deal of suspicion on the **Law Society** imprimateur, which is based not on assessment of the *product* but approval of the *supplier*: QDOS did most of its selling before receiving the Law Society's recognition, and then promptly folded.

MicroPro profits

MicroPro International turned in pretty good half-year figures, with sales marginally down at $20.8 million but profits of $1.5 million comparing with the year-ago loss of $1.3 million. Improved sales outside the States and the release in the US of WordStar 2000 Release 2 were cited.

A couple of weeks ago we ran out of early back issues of APRICOT FILE, which means that some new subscribers who asked for a backdated sub didn't get their full entitlement. We think we've tracked most of them, but Terry runs the subscription records and he's not been here — so we may have missed a few. If you have not received all the issues you should've, drop us a line to our Freepost address:

TP Group
FREEPOST
London N1 1BR