Testdrive

Welcome to Testdrive, our 'test on request' section designed to help readers make the right buying decision. Each month members of the *What PC?* team, together with staff from the VNU Labs, test and compare products at your request to make sure you get what you want.

Meet Michael O'Brien

This month we went to the aid of reader Michael O'Brien, a chartered landscape architect who works in London. Michael uses a PC in his job and has an ageing Compaq 386 at home, which is also used by his wife, and two children, aged three and six. Although it has given years of good service, the Compaq can't cope with the family's demands any more and so it's time to upgrade.

Michael's requirements

Having decided that the family needed a new PC, Michael wanted a machine that could cope with his current demands, but which had enough power to let him do more later and work from home if necessary. Mrs O'Brien had to be able to use the PC for word processing and wanted to do DTP work in the future. The children were keen to play games and use multi-media education applications – apparently, the appeal of Windows' Paintbrush had worn off. The family also decided that they would like a colour printer, and budgeted about £1,500 for the whole bundle.

The contenders

Michael asked us to help him choose his PC, and assigned about £1,250-£1,300 to it. After wading through the ads in *What PC?* he narrowed his choices down to four systems – Northwood's Aurora Multimedia, the Colossus 166M B 15, Time's Powerstation, and Dan's Xplora Plus with 200MHz MMX.

Michael was initially worried that the Time system had a Pentium-compatible processor rather than a genuine Intel chip. But after seeing reviews in *What PC?* that showed these chips have outperformed Pentiums in the past, he felt it would be worth trying the machine.

After setting up the systems, the first thing Michael noticed was that the Time and Colossus machines looked exactly the same. Although they had different specifications, both systems were badged Colossus and came in cream mini-tower cases. This is because both companies are divisions of the Granville Technology group, and Colossus makes systems for Time.

Up and running

The first PC up and running was the Aurora Multimedia from Northwood. Its 200MHz Pentium MMX was certainly a good start, and with 32Mb of EDO RAM, a 3.5Gb hard disk, 15in SVGA monitor, 4Mb graphics card, an AWE64 sound card, Zip drive, 24x CD-ROM and 56Kbits/s modem it certainly fits the bill for hardware.

Michael was impressed by the high specification and by the keyboard, which was one of the best he'd seen. It was well styled, had a good typing action and came with a set of user-definable keys

proved him right, and the design showed a lot of thought with fully usable slots and neat, tied-back cabling: 'You can clearly see that someone has taken time over this.'

The Dan specification was similar to the Northwood, but with a larger hard disk and less video RAM. It was slightly cheaper at £1,324.23 (inc VAT), and came with Quicken, Microsoft Works and five MMX multimedia titles installed, which proved popular: 'It's certainly got what I need to get started.' Michael was also taken with the way that Dan had arranged helpful shortcuts and hints on screen.

Even the Dan had its faults, however. Michael observed that the ports at the back of the machine were not labelled, and this proved a problem for him when connecting the speakers and mouse. A small set of stickers would have made all the difference.

When it came to the Colossus and Time PCs, Michael was equally impressed with the specifications offered for the money. The Colossus had a 166MHz Pentium MMX, 32Mb of RAM, 4.3Gb hard drive, 24x max CD-ROM, 15in SVGA monitor and wavetable sound, and came with Office 97 and IBM voice recognition software pre-installed, all for £1,278.40 (inc VAT, plus delivery). The Time had a similar setup with an IBM 6x86MX chip, 64Mb of RAM, 14in screen and Lotus SmartSuite, for £1,209.07 (inc VAT, plus delivery).

After using these for a while, Michael felt that both PCs were a little slower than the Northwood and the Dan – although this was only to be expected given the speed of their processors. But he also had problems running Ubi Soft's POD on one of the machines, and

that could be programmed to do things such as launch applications and control volume settings.

It was another matter on the software front. Northwood supplies Windows 95 and a range of utilities with the Aurora, but surprisingly it doesn't come with any general business software. For £1,408.83 (inc VAT), which was in fact over his budget, we would have expected a copy of Microsoft Works, and Michael agreed.

The inside of the Northwood machine was also a bit of a disappointment. Although the components could not be faulted, it would be difficult to use full-length cards and one of the PCI slots was completely blocked off by the case. Michael also noticed that 'the internal cables are messy and would be likely to make upgrading difficult'.

Build quality

Next up was the Dan Xplora. Michael immediately noticed the high build quality, and was impressed by the size: 'There's certainly a lot of room for expansion.' Opening the machine

couldn't get sound out of the CD player on the other. These problems aside, he thought they were good systems.

Decision time

So did Michael like any of the systems enough to replace his Compaq? He thought the systems were good value: 'They all seem very powerful and you get a lot for your money.' He liked the Colossus bundle, although it lacked software for his children, and was also taken with the 'feel' of the Northwood and its styling. But it was the Dan's rock-solid casing and tidy design that grabbed him. 'It feels solid and they've taken a lot of care with the design. There's also plenty of room for expansion, although I don't know what else I'll need.'

Any of these machines would have fit Michael's criteria, but given his preferences we think he made the right choice. Will he be buying one? 'As soon as I can get the money together.' ●

Be a Testdriver

If you would like to appear in Testdrive, simply write to:
Testdrive,
What PC?,
VNU House,
32-34 Broadwick Street,
London,
W1A 2HG