



Testdrive

READER'S NAME: Kurt Cox
QUESTION: I need a replacement for my Psion 3a palmtop – what are the choices?

Welcome to the third in our new Testdrive series designed to help readers with buying decisions make the right choice. Each month members of the *What PC?* team, together with staff from our European Labs, test and compare products at your request to make sure you get what you want.

Meet Kurt Cox

This month we go to the aid of reader Kurt Cox, a 28-year-old civil servant from south east London. Kurt uses a variety of computers in his job, and keeps a busy personal life in order with his trusty Psion 3a. Unfortunately, after four years

of outstanding service, the palmtop can no longer cope with his demands and so a replacement must to be found.

What Kurt wants

Kurt originally chose the Psion 3a because of its portability, easy-to-use applications and expandability. The screen was a good size compared to other organisers and, although it was small, the keyboard could be used for typing notes on the move. As a bonus, the machine could also be connected to his home PC using the PsiWin package.

Now Kurt wants a machine that can be used for producing more complex documents, with more storage space to cope with ever expanding database files and spreadsheets. He would also like to keep the same level of portability, which excludes even the most popular sub-notebook PCs, and the ability to port at least some of his existing word processor, spreadsheet and data files across.



The contenders

After weighing up several alternatives Kurt narrowed his choices down to the updated Psion 3c, the new Psion Series 5, and Hewlett-Packard's 320LX Windows CE palmtop. All of these offered the basic functionality required, much more memory, PC connectivity, and were easier and safer to carry around than a notebook. He ruled out the US Robotics PalmPilot and Apple's Newton because they didn't feature a keyboard as standard, and he felt that it would be uncomfortable to write long documents using a stylus.

Screens

Kurt was instantly impressed with the amount of features and functions on all three machines: 'It's amazing just what can be packed into a palmtop computer these days.' He especially liked the fact that improvements such as more memory and larger screen sizes hadn't made a dramatic impact on the overall size or weight of the products.

The first thing up for comparison was the quality of the screens. The display on the 3c was the same size as the 3a, but both the HP 320LX and Series 5 offer larger displays with a higher 640x240





pixel resolution. All three palmtops under consideration include a handy backlight for operation in poor lighting conditions.

Kurt thought that both Psion screens were of good quality, but noted that neither of them was as clear as his 3a. The 3c had the sharpest display, and the HP 320LX was by far the worst with poor brightness and contrast. The Psion Series 5 offered the best all-round solution, and featured 16 shades of grey as opposed to four on the HP and just three on the 3c.

Keyboards

A good-quality keyboard is also a must when writing long documents, and after tests Kurt came down firmly in favour of



the Psion 5 design. 'It's much easier to use than the other two. In fact, it's more comfortable than some of the notebooks I've used.' He thought the 3c's keyboard was fine for short periods, as it was the same as the 3a's, but again found that the HP just wasn't up to scratch.

In use

Things changed a little when it came to using the machine and the applications. The HP's Windows CE interface made it easy to get to grips with, and Kurt managed to get the machine ready for use in no time at all. He quickly learnt to work with the pen-based interface, and was surprised at how easy it was to use. As a bit of an Excel whiz, he was impressed with the Windows CE pocket version, although it lacked quite a few features. The pocket version of Word was also basic in comparison with its bigger brother, but had all the features needed to knock up documents on the move.

Psion's Series 5 offered a larger suite of applications, and Kurt was pleased to hear that the new version of PsiWin would allow him to port his old data files across. He was also taken by the way graphics and logos could be easily embedded into word processor documents, and he also thought the built-in Sketch program and clip-art library were both excellent.

Suppliers

Psion: 0990 143050

Hewlett-Packard: 0990 474747

The machine's spelling checker and sound recording facilities also went down well, but Kurt was disappointed that he couldn't use his existing SSD (Solid State Disks) cartridges. He also didn't think he would have much use for the infra-red facilities.

Apart from a backlight and extra memory, Kurt decided that the 3c didn't really offer much over his existing 3a. He thought the only real improvement was the rubberised case, but that wasn't a very good reason to upgrade.

Decision time

With its innovative keyboard, large memory and pen-based applications Psion's new Series 5 met all Kurt's requirements. But will he be buying one? 'Absolutely. The keyboard is excellent. The best I've ever seen on a pocket computer. I still can't believe how easy it is to type on. The applications are bigger versions of my old ones, I can take all my data across easily, and I really like the pen, although knowing me I'll lose it.'

Given the criteria we think Kurt made the right choice. ●



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