

Among the new products under review this month are: Intel's Pentium MMX OverDrive, a graphics package from Micrografx, a high-resolution colour inkjet printer, two Pentium notebooks, and a document management program



Intel calls it MMX (multimedia extensions), and according to the adverts, the rest of us call it 'fun'. Either way, there's a new, more powerful version of the Pentium processor on the market that looks set to become the next standard.

All this is great if you want a new machine but if you've already invested in a PC, how can you take advantage of MMX? The answer is with the Pentium MMX OverDrive, a special version of the chip designed to upgrade existing systems.

The Pentium MMX is an updated version of the Pentium processor with an extra 57 commands designed to greatly enhance graphics, sound and communications performance. The chip has 32Kb of cache RAM (double the existing amount) and has been redesigned internally to process data faster.

The OverDrive comes in two versions: one for upgrading P75 and P90 systems to 125MHz and 150MHz respectively; and a faster 166MHz model for P100 machines. The 166MHz can also be used to upgrade some faster systems but the difference in performance will be less dramatic. A 200MHz OverDrive for these PCs is expected in the second half of the year.

The 166MHz OverDrive processor we looked at comprises a Pentium MMX processor with heatsink

and built-on fan, a voltage regulator to fit older motherboards and additional circuitry to make the switch as hassle-free as possible. Intel claims up to 95 percent compatibility with existing systems and provides a testing disk which must be run before and after upgrading to check everything has gone well.

After running the test program, you open up your machine and remove the existing processor from its socket. Pentium processors come in a ZIF (Zero Insertion Force) socket, which has a small handle at the side allowing for easy removal, and the OverDrive can fit into ZIF sockets five or seven. Once the chip has been removed, all that's left to do is line up the OverDrive with the socket and drop it in place.

The Intel Media benchmark result for the P166MMX OverDrive shows a substantial improvement in all areas, particularly video, image processing, 3D geometry and MPEG 1 video playback, and the overall performance rating shoots up by 131 points.

Performance in application tests was also faster with MMX, but this is mainly due to the 32Kb of internal cache RAM. Unfortunately, few applications have been written to use the new instructions, so it's impossible to gauge the chip's true potential at this stage.

Chris Cain

## Intel Pentium MMX OverDrive

*A processor replacement for Pentium 75, 90, 100 systems to upgrade them to Pentium MMX technology.*

### Speed tests

|                   |      |
|-------------------|------|
| Pentium 100       | 1.0  |
| OverDrive 166 MMX | 1.29 |



- Pentium MMX processor
- 57 new multimedia-specific instructions
- Improved instruction execution
- 32Kb of on-board cache
- Built-in heat sink and fan
- Easy to fit

**While there are only a few MMX software titles around at the moment, the OverDrive is an easy-to-fit upgrade to bring your PC bang up to date for a fraction of the cost of a whole new system.**

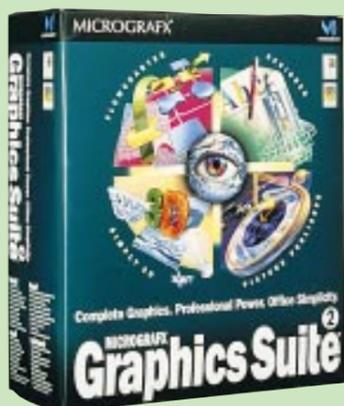
- £316 P75/90 upgrade
- £387 P100 upgrade (all prices inc VAT)
- Intel: 01793 431155

#### Intel Pentium MMX OverDrive

|                 |       |
|-----------------|-------|
| Build quality   | ★★★★★ |
| Performance     | ★★★★★ |
| Ease of use     | ★★★★★ |
| Value for money | ★★★★★ |
| <b>Overall</b>  | ★★★★★ |

# Micrografx Graphics Suite 2

A comprehensive graphics package incorporating 2D and 3D vector drawing, animation, image processing, flowcharting and Web design tools, together with a wealth of samples and clip-art.



- Interactive 'living' flowcharts
- Selective undo in Picture Publisher
- Tutorial Wizards in Picture Publisher
- Precise placement in Designer
- Tools for creating and testing Web pages
- Netscape and ActiveX plug-ins
- 3D modelling, logo and animation effects
- 35,000 clip-art and photo images
- 250 TrueType fonts

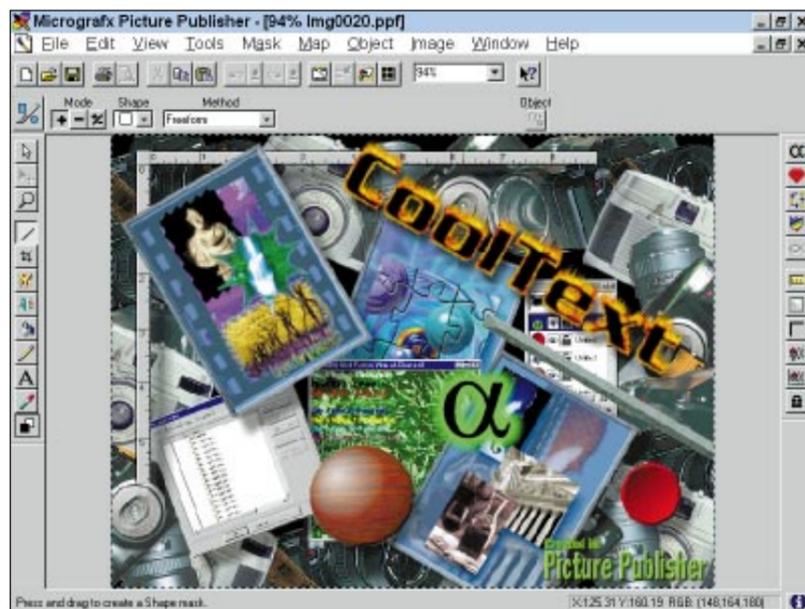


When it comes to graphics suites, there's certainly no shortage of products to choose from. The big 'C' may be the name that springs to everyone's minds but there are other packages around that can do the job just as well as Corel's products and for less money. We looked at Micrografx's entry into the market in December 1995 but its rather unimaginatively titled 'Graphics Suite' has just been updated to version 2.0.

The Graphics Suite comes on four CD-ROMs and the four core applications are Picture Publisher, Designer, Flowcharter and Simply 3D. In addition, Media Manager handles the clip-art and photo images, and Quicksilver is a collection of Web plug-ins and utilities.

Picture Publisher is a high-end image processing and painting program, offering all the usual facilities for enhancing and retouching images or creating special effects. Despite the power, the interface is logical and simple – the tools are grouped in the usual screen-left palette and a ribbon above the work area changes to reflect the options available for each tool. There's a comprehensive set of tutorial Wizards to get you started and they introduce topics such as retouching or using 'floating' objects and further Wizards and macros are on-hand to perform tasks such as creating special text effects with flaming or glowing letters.

Picture Publisher's killer feature is the 'Command Centre'. Most image-editing software has an



'Undo' command, but usually this means that a separate copy of the image has to be held in memory for each undo level. The Command Centre goes about this in a far cleverer way, by recording a list of every action you perform on an image. Not only does this consume less memory, but it means you can edit the list. Say you applied a texture effect to an image, then carried out several more changes before deciding the texture effect was wrong. With a normal undo, you'd have to go back to square one, but here you can remove the offending command – or insert other ones – and Picture Publisher will rebuild the image without losing the subsequent commands.

Another neat feature is 'Fast-bits', which lets you save time and memory by loading just part of an image, say for retouching red-eye. Also new is the 'Nozzle', which lets you spray a collection of images – assorted leaves, for example – onto the image. Though not quite as well implemented as the similar feature first seen in Painter, it's still tremendous fun.

Designer, the vector-drawing package, has a similar look and feel, but lacks the on-line Wizardry – you'll have to plough through the printed tutorials and, though there are some 'Project Wizards' with accompanying on-line help, these are somewhat limited.

Unfortunately, Designer has a long way to go to match the artistic capabilities of Corel Draw. There are no fractal fills or transparency effects, for example, but there is a very high level of accuracy for technical drawing. A co-ordinates dialog lets you position and size objects numerically and Designer will import a range of CAD (Computer Aided Design) formats.

New Designer features include dynamic blends and Boolean operations. When you blend two objects, a series of intermediate objects is created, gradually changing shape and colour. Normally, when you edit one of the end objects, you have to recreate the blend but this is now done automatically. Boolean operations let you combine objects in different ways – adding objects together, intersecting objects, or using one object to 'punch holes' in another. For Web designers, there's a tie-in with the Quicksilver utilities for creating interactive graphics and an 'Audit' tool that makes recommendations for reducing Web page file size and calculates download time.

Simply 3D, as the name suggests, allows you to create three-dimensional objects, either by constructing them from basic cones, cylinders, boxes or spheres, or by dragging ready-made objects from

a catalogue containing everything from firearms to fruit. Having done this, you can apply materials to the surfaces, arrange lighting and view, then 'render' the wire-framed scene as solid, textured objects and animate a scene for export as an .AVI video file.

The basics are fairly simple – dragging objects into scenes and materials onto objects. To do any serious work, though, you are going to have to work through the printed tutorials as, apart from a Wizard for creating animated 3D text effects, there's little in the way of on-line assistance.

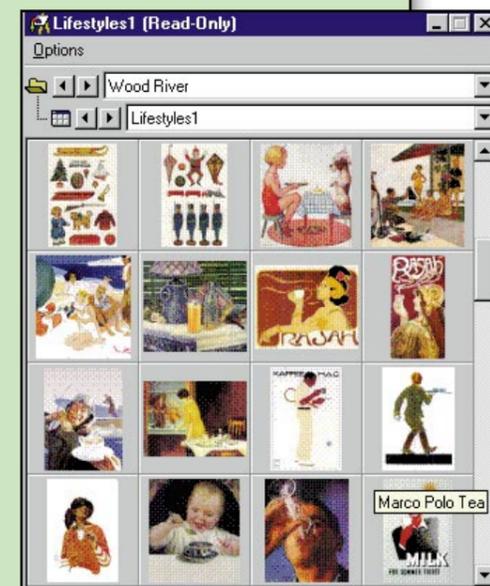
FlowCharter offers not just flowcharts, but practically any kind of business diagram. Although it's a highly complex program, the Shape Palettes make the actual drawing very easy. These contain everything you could possibly want, from conventional flowchart symbols, through networks, pictograms and general clip-art, which can be dragged straight onto the page. Complementing these are Connector Lines, which stay attached to symbols as the latter are moved around the page and automatically route themselves around non-connected symbols. Cool-Sheets are a new extension of templates designed for the artistically inept – choose one of a dozen chart types, such as process or time-line, drop in the shapes and lines and type the text. All the formatting and sizing is then done automatically.

The big new feature is Living Flowcharts. Instead of looking at a static chart on screen, the end-user is led through a series of dialogs, rather like Wizards, and the path taken through the chart depends on the answers given. This could be used, for example, to create 'walk-through' troubleshooting routines, but since the decision-making process can handle data values as well as simple 'Yes/No' questions, it could lend itself to all sorts of uses in finance, training, and 'what if?' management modelling.

Altogether, despite a reasonably consistent interface, this is something of a mixed bag. Picture Publisher stands out as being powerful and, thanks to the Wizards, easy to use. FlowCharter, though also powerful and flexible, could really do with a similar set of Wizards and interactive tutorials, as could Simply 3D and Designer. The latter doesn't really have the star quality of FlowCharter or Picture Publisher, and is certainly no match for the high-end competition such as Corel or Freehand. Finally, Picture Publisher's Command Centre is a brilliant idea – so why isn't it implemented across the package?

Tim Nott

# Micrografx Graphics Suite 2 (continued)



**A mixed bag – Picture Publisher and FlowCharter are excellent, but Designer and Simply 3D lag somewhat, especially in ease of use.**

- £292.57 inc VAT (upgrade £149.22)
- Micrografx: 0800 626009

### Micrografx Graphics Suite 2

|                 |         |
|-----------------|---------|
| Ease of use     | ★ ★ ★ ★ |
| Performance     | ★ ★ ★ ★ |
| Features        | ★ ★ ★ ★ |
| Value for money | ★ ★ ★ ★ |
| <b>Overall</b>  | ★ ★ ★ ★ |

Minimum requirements: 486DX processor, 8Mb of RAM, Windows 95, 11Mb of hard disk space.

## Epson Stylus Color 800

*A high-quality colour inkjet printer capable of a top print resolution of 1,440 dots per inch.*



- Piezo print head
- Four-colour, two-cartridge system
- 1,440dpi print resolution
- 100-sheet A4 paper feeder
- Quoted print speed (mono): 8ppm (pages per minute)
- Interfaces: Parallel/Mac serial
- Dimensions (mm): 475(w)x274(d)x177(h)
- Weight: 6.5kg

**Few products manage to live up to all they promise, but the Stylus Color 800 does just that. At this price level its output quality is currently untouchable.**

- £480.58 (inc VAT)  
Ink cartridges: £21.15 (mono); £22.33 (colour).
- Epson: 01442 61144

### Epson Stylus Color 800

|                 |                  |
|-----------------|------------------|
| Build quality   | ★ ★ ★ ★ ☆        |
| Ease of use     | ★ ★ ★ ★ ★        |
| Performance     | ★ ★ ★ ★ ★        |
| Value for money | ★ ★ ★ ★ ★        |
| <b>Overall</b>  | <b>★ ★ ★ ★ ★</b> |

Minimum requirements: PC – 386/25, 16Mb of RAM, 20Mb of free hard disk space; Mac – System 7.1, 3Mb of RAM, 20Mb of free hard disk space.

The Epson name is synonymous with printers. The Japanese company has been making printer products for nearly three decades. Since then printer technology has progressed in leaps and bounds and high-quality colour inkjet printers are now commonplace. Since their launch in 1994, Epson's Stylus Color printers have featured print heads capable of resolutions beyond that of any of their competitors – 720dpi (dots per inch). Epson has now doubled this to 1,440dpi and launched a new range of printers. The first, the Stylus Color 800, is designed for demanding home or office users.

Although larger and less square than its predecessors, the Stylus Color 800 is typically Epson. At the front of the cream-coloured plastic case is a three-piece slide-out catch tray and on the top is a paper feeder that can hold up to 100 sheets of A4 paper – or smaller amounts of glossy paper or transparencies. A small number of envelopes can also be accommodated.

To get the Stylus Color 800 up and running you simply use a standard parallel cable, plugged into the printer's rear, which is automatically detected when Windows 95 starts up. The drivers supplied by Epson let you tweak the Stylus Color 800's many settings, and provides a print job progress monitor.

At any level you choose, the print quality is difficult to criticise. Printing in colour at high resolutions (720dpi or beyond) on standard plain paper naturally leads to some ink bleed but in fairness, Epson recommends against doing this. On the recommended 'photo-quality' paper (£12.33 per 100 A4 sheets) the results are outstanding. Colours are exceptionally vibrant and pho-

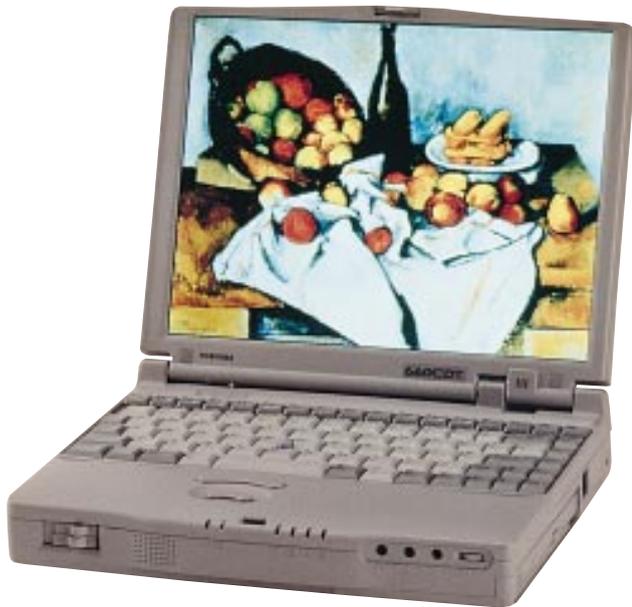
tographic images look extremely realistic. Printed text is good down to the smallest font sizes, but on plain paper it doesn't quite come up to laser printer standard.

We can find little to complain about when it comes to speed of printing. Epson's quoted 'laser-fast' 8ppm (pages per minute) in black and white is a shade optimistic, but the sustained 6ppm it managed during our tests is still very impressive. The speed of colour output varied enormously and depended on the resolution and coverage. A basic page with a few small images and some colour-splashed text took around a minute, whereas it took nearly four-and-a-half minutes for a full A4 image at the highest resolution. This sounds excessive but we think most people will accept it once they've witnessed the results and besides, it's no slower than any other similarly priced inkjet printer.

But how does the printer achieve such high resolutions, without sacrificing speed or quality?

Like many inkjet printers the Stylus Color 800 employs a twin ink-cartridge system to produce its colour output. One cartridge has black ink and the second is divided into three ink reservoirs, each containing a different colour (cyan, magenta and yellow). By mixing the inks, the printer can create any colour. However, unlike most other inkjets, the Stylus Color 800's ink cartridges do not have a built-in 'throwaway' print head. Instead, it is an integral part of the printer and it uses Epson's piezo technology. This means the print head works like a very fast and highly controllable pump – the faster it pumps the smaller the ink droplets it fires, hence the higher resolution.

Scott Colvey ►



The name might be a somewhat ungainly play on words, but there's no denying that Toshiba's Portégé range has been creating a good impression since its launch a couple of years ago. The latest addition to the family is not only the most powerful to date, but also the first to feature the sort of modularity familiar in Toshiba's A4-sized notebooks.

What this amounts to is a comparatively small and light machine that packs a Pentium 150 processor, integrated audio, a 10-speed CD-ROM drive and a high resolution screen capable of displaying photo-realistic images or video clips in millions of colours. This sort of thing isn't cheap but we've seen the Portégé advertised for around £3,900, which is well below Toshiba's RRP.

All the fancy features are no use unless the core system measures up, but Toshiba has assembled a solid basis on which to build. The P150 is backed up by 16Mb of fast EDO RAM and a 256Kb secondary cache to feed frequently requested information back to the processor at top speed, boosting performance.

Since the machine will probably be expected to run the current generation of applications under Windows 95, and may well be used to store fat graphics files and/or video clips, it was also encouraging to discover that it comes with a relatively spacious 1.34Gb hard disk.

There are the usual two PC Card expansion slots in the left-hand side of the case, but both of these support the latest high-speed 32-bit CardBus standard for improved data throughput, and both can be used with so-called Zoomed Video cards which bypass the main processor to avoid slowing everything else down during video input and decompression.

The normal selection of ports for

an external monitor, mouse or keyboard and printer are present, as is an expansion bus for connecting up to a docking station. The Portégé is packaged with an adaptor unit which increases its footprint to the standard A4 size, so it can be used with Toshiba's existing port replicator and docking station options.

An open-bottomed bay at the right side of the machine provides a home for either the floppy drive or the CD-ROM drive, and you get a short cable which lets you connect up the floppy drive when the CD-ROM is installed. The bay can also house an optional second battery for those occasions when operating life is paramount and drives are a secondary consideration.

Reducing size is great for portability, but it results in rather small keyboards which can be a problem if you don't have especially dainty hands. This is the case here, and the lightweight action, rather wobbly keytops and a degree of give in the baseplate during typing don't help.

There's enough room for a decent-sized 11.3in screen however, which is comfortable to view at the intended 800x600 resolution and can display this in up to 16.7 million colours thanks to the provision of 2Mb of video memory. This also means you can run an external monitor at 1,024x768 resolution in 65,535 colours, and the graphics chipset supports a flicker-free 85Hz vertical refresh for this mode.

Power consumption can be controlled easily from within Windows via Toshiba's Maxtime power management software, and the Portégé should run for two to two-and-a-half hours if it isn't pushed too hard. Performance is average for a Pentium 150 notebook – slower than the equivalent desktop but fast enough for most uses.

Dominic Bucknall

## Toshiba Portégé 660CDT

*A modular and fully multimedia-capable sub-A4 Pentium notebook.*

- 150MHz Pentium processor
- 256Kb of pipeline burst secondary cache
- 16Mb of EDO RAM (max 80Mb)
- 1.34Gb EIDE fixed hard disk
- Removable 10-speed CD-ROM drive
- Removable internal/external floppy drive module
- Two Type II (or one Type III) PC Card expansion slots with CardBus and Zoomed Video support
- 11.3in SVGA TFT screen
- 2Mb Chips & Technologies 65554 graphics
- Integrated 16-bit Yamaha sound chip
- Integrated monaural speaker and microphone
- Internal 28.8Kbits/s data/fax/voice modem
- Infra-red serial port (4Mbits/s IrDA 1.1 standard)
- Lithium ion battery
- Weight: 2.6kg including CD-ROM drive
- Dimensions (mm): 261(w)x210(d)x49(h)

**A remarkably compact but well-specified multimedia portable that turns in a reasonable performance and battery life. The keyboard may not be to everyone's taste but the overall quality is high, although this is plainly reflected in the price.**

- £4,694 (inc VAT)
- Toshiba: 01932 828828

### Toshiba Portégé 660 CDT

|                 |           |
|-----------------|-----------|
| Build quality   | ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ |
| Performance     | ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ |
| Features        | ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ |
| Value for money | ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ |
| <b>Overall</b>  | ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ |

## Xerox Pagis Pro 97

A document management program that enables the business or home office user to scan, copy, fax and retrieve documents more efficiently.

- Works with virtually all scanners, fax/modems and printers
- Integrates with Windows 95
- Thumbnail views of scanned documents within Explorer
- One-button faxing, copying and scanning
- Saves scanned pictures and text in a single editable file
- Converts scanned files into editable text automatically
- Converts scanned text into HTML for use on the Web
- Creates an index of all documents on your PC
- Stores scanned files in space-saving compressed format
- TextBridge Pro OCR program included

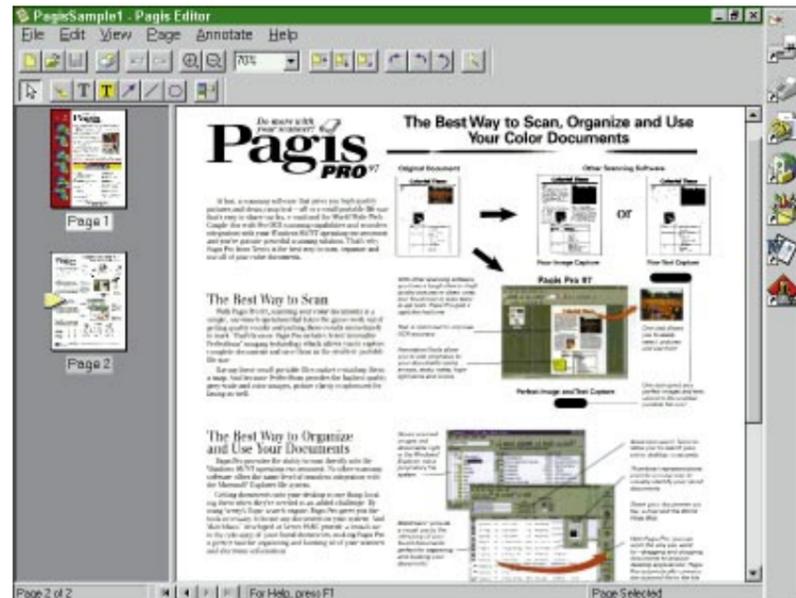
**Pagis Pro reduces the complicated handling of electronic information to a few simple mouse clicks. Very few of the programs we review earn a permanent place on our PCs, but this is one of the exceptions.**

- £233.83 (inc VAT)
- Xerox: 01189 668421

### Xerox Pagis Pro 97

|                 |              |
|-----------------|--------------|
| Features        | ★★★★★        |
| Performance     | ★★★★★        |
| Ease of use     | ★★★★★        |
| Value for money | ★★★★★        |
| <b>Overall</b>  | <b>★★★★★</b> |

Minimum requirements: 486/66 PC (or better), Windows 95, CD-ROM drive, 16Mb of RAM, 25Mb of disk space.



**P**agis Pro 97 gets your scanner, fax/modem and printer working in harmony and offers seamless optical character recognition (OCR) to help you share information between programs.

The most visible part of the program is a toolbar which loads automatically every time you start Windows 95. On the toolbar are six buttons, three of which are labelled Scan, Copy and Fax. Selecting Scan brings up a dialog box containing a number of options and a start button. When Pagis Pro has finished scanning a document it enhances it in several ways: straightening the image if it is skewed, turning it around if you scanned it in the wrong orientation, cropping any blank spaces, removing extraneous dots and enhancing the contrast, colour and brightness.

The document is saved in a highly compressed XIF file which, unlike the usual TIF format, keeps the graphical and text elements separate. This means you can use just the picture from a scanned page and ignore the text. Alternatively, you can use optical character recognition on the text without the pictures getting in the way. To give you an idea of how compact XIF files are, a 5Kb XIF file converts to a 5Mb TIF file.

The Fax and Copy buttons carry out a scan and then immediately send the prepared image to your usual fax program or the default printer, cutting out the intermediate stages of passing a scanned file from one program to another.

The Edit button calls up a program that displays a scanned image on a split screen, with thumbnail images of each page on the left and a scalable depiction on the right. The image can be annotated with arrows, graphics and notes. Further

scanned files can be loaded in and the pages combined in any order you like. The resulting file can be saved as a new XIF file or exported in most other bitmap formats.

The really clever part of the Edit utility is the Send To option. If you send a document to your word processor, it is quickly and automatically recognised by the integrated version of TextBridge Pro so that when it arrives in your word processor it is ready for editing. XIF documents can also be dragged and dropped from Windows Explorer, with any appropriate conversions being made automatically. For example, if you drop a XIF file onto your Web browser it is converted into HTML text and JPG graphics, ready for use on the Internet after the layout has been tidied up.

The remaining two buttons on the toolbar are for the search and indexing features. When you first install Pagis Pro, it carries out an exhaustive indexing of all the document files (word processing, spreadsheet or scanned) on your hard disk. You can search for any words or phrases in any document in seconds, rather like the Find feature in Microsoft Word, but this one is available to any program. When making an index, scanned files are automatically processed by TextBridge, so you can even search for the contents of XIF and TIF files. The Pagis Search option installs itself onto the Start menu of the Windows 95 taskbar so it is always a couple of clicks away.

Within Windows Explorer, you can use the right mouse button to view thumbnail representations of an entire XIF file or its individual pages. Once you've used Xerox' Pagis Pro 97, you won't want to be without it.

Paul Wardley



**Y**ou either love or hate the Pilot. US Robotics' 'connected organiser' was an innovative first crack at the perfect PDA (Personal Digital Assistant) but wasn't without flaws. Fortunately, US Robotics has taken the unusual step of listening to users' requests and complaints and released two new models that address them.

Rechristened the PalmPilot, the new machines look like the old ones but have several extras. First, there's 512Kb of RAM on the PalmPilot Personal and 1Mb on the Professional. The second is the backlit screen. Hold down the power button for a second or so with the PalmPilot switched on and the screen lights up.

The most welcome changes, however, are in the applications. They're the same as before – Date Book, Address, To Do List and Memo Pad – but they now have features infuriatingly absent from the earlier versions. The Date Book can display a monthly view, in addition to the week and day views. The bars that show appointments in the week view can be tapped to display the information they represent, and dragged between days to alter timings. Appointments appear as small blocks in the month view and tapping one of them brings up the corresponding entry in the day view.

One very useful new feature is the ability to look up a contact in Address when making an entry in the other applications. Selecting 'Lookup' from the menu (or making a Graffiti stroke) brings up the Address application, and tapping on an entry pastes the name and telephone number into the original application. Apart from the 'lookup' feature, the only change in Address is a cosmetic one to do with the way the contact categories are managed.

Julian Prokaza

Changes in the To Do List and Memo Pad are also more of the 'tweak' variety. To Do List can now display entries complete with their due date and category and Memo Pad entries can be sorted alphabetically or dragged into any order.

The PalmPilots also have some totally new applications. Both models now have an expense tracker application called Expense. It's fairly straightforward stuff, allowing user-categorised entries to be made in various currencies. Alas, the payment- and expense-type lists cannot be edited, so the sub-way fare can only be paid with a 'check', but at least the entries are automatically entered in an Excel spreadsheet with each HotSync.

HotSyncing has always been the Pilot's strong point. Dropping a Pilot into its supplied cradle (linked to the PC via a serial cable) and pressing the HotSync button automatically and quickly synchronises the Pilot with the matching applications on the PC. The PC applications have been updated to reflect the PalmPilot's alterations and Windows 95 users now get a HotSync icon in the system tray, rather than as a program window.

New to the Professional (but not the Personal) PalmPilot is the Mail application. Unfortunately, this isn't as exciting as it sounds as it only allows e-mail to be downloaded from a PC for later reading and messages to be composed for later sending by that PC (all handled automatically by HotSync). Mail works with most POP3, MAPI and VIM Internet e-mail clients and so covers the likes of Microsoft Mail and Lotus cc:mail, and if you never seem to get time to reply to those e-mails, it's perfect for composing messages on the bus.

## US Robotics PalmPilot

Two updated versions of US Robotics' 'connected organiser' with more memory, revised applications and a backlit screen.

- 512Kb of RAM on the PalmPilot Personal, 1Mb on the PalmPilot Professional
- 160x160 pixel backlit screen
- Handwriting recognition with Graffiti
- Internet-ready (built-in TCP/IP stack)
- PalmPilot Desktop 2.0 software for Windows 95 only, Desktop 1.0 for Windows 3.1 also supplied
- Claimed battery life: 8-12 weeks on two AAA batteries
- Dimensions (mm): 117(h)x78(w)x15(d)
- Weight: 162g
- 1Mb upgrade card available for existing Pilots that contains new software

**More of a companion to than a replacement for a PC, the PalmPilot really is an organiser that can be carried in a pocket and used on the move, rather than dumped in a bag or left on a desk.**

- PalmPilot Personal: \$299
- PalmPilot Professional: \$399
- 1Mb upgrade to PalmPilot Professional: \$129
- US Robotics: 01734 228200
- www.usr.com/palm

### US Robotics PalmPilot

|                 |              |
|-----------------|--------------|
| Ease of use     | ★★★★★        |
| Build quality   | ★★★★★        |
| Features        | ★★★★★        |
| Value for money | ★★★★★        |
| <b>Overall</b>  | <b>★★★★★</b> |

Minimum requirements: Windows 3.1 or higher, 386 processor, 6Mb of RAM, 10Mb of hard disk space, CD-ROM drive, serial port.

## Evesham Vale Quest

*A slimline notebook computer fitted with a Pentium 120MHz processor and 8Mb of memory.*



- Pentium 120MHz processor
- 8Mb of RAM
- 1.2Gb hard disk drive
- 2xPC Card sockets (Type II)
- Ports: 15-pin VGA; 9-pin serial; parallel; IrDA; stereo in/out; microphone in; game/midi; PS/2 mouse/keyboard
- Dimensions (mm): 296(w)x235(d)x38(h)
- Optional docking station with CD-ROM drive

**The Vale Quest's best point is undoubtedly its slim design, but that's hardly a good reason to buy it. For the price the machine is certainly adequate, but to stand out in such a crowded market Evesham really must try harder.**

- £1,643.83 (inc VAT)
- Evesham Micros: 01386 765500

### Evesham Vale Quest

|                 |           |
|-----------------|-----------|
| Build quality   | ★ ★ ★ ☆ ☆ |
| Ease of use     | ★ ★ ★ ★ ☆ |
| Features        | ★ ★ ★ ☆ ☆ |
| Value for money | ★ ★ ★ ☆ ☆ |
| <b>Overall</b>  | ★ ★ ★ ☆ ☆ |

Long before PCs became as popular as they are today, Evesham Micros was busy selling Sinclair Spectrum computers from its first tiny shop in the town of Evesham. Those days are long gone, however, and Evesham has grown to become one of the largest mail-order PC suppliers in the UK. The Vale Quest is its latest machine and it comes in the form of an appealingly slim notebook.

Opening up the Vale Quest's traditional clamshell case reveals a sunken keyboard with a comfortable 3in of wrist rest in front of it. In the middle of this rest sits the pointing device, a 2in-square touch-sensitive pad. Naturally the top cover also contains the screen, which is an 11.3in dual-scan LCD (liquid-crystal display) panel. This is by no means the best type of panel around – its top resolution is 800x600 pixels and it displays just 256 colours – but it should be sufficient for most everyday needs.

Little about the Vale Quest's design is remarkable and, in fact, it is a thoroughly plain machine. The positioning of the peripheral connecting ports, however, is quite unusual. On most notebook PCs these ports, which are used for attaching things such as printers and monitors, are at the back, but on the Vale Quest the majority of them are hidden under a panel on the left-hand side. The exceptions are the audio input and output sockets which, usefully, are at the front; and next to these is a combination port that serves as either a game (joystick) or MIDI connector.

A Pentium processor running at 120MHz powers the Vale Quest, supported by a meagre 8Mb of RAM. While this is a suitable amount for using single applications (such as a word processor or

spreadsheet) under Windows 95, more demanding users would need to invest in more. Proprietary memory modules of up to 32Mb are available from Evesham, so the Vale Quest can be upgraded to a maximum of 40Mb. It's not possible for the user to upgrade any other part of the system but the two Type II PC Card slots give plenty of scope for add-ons.

Sound comes courtesy of a pair of tiny speakers, mounted underneath the screen on either side. Sadly, the output quality of these is dire and does little justice to the Vale Quest's 16-bit Sound Blaster-compatible sound hardware. To get the real benefit of this it would be necessary to attach some external speakers or slip on a pair of headphones. For recording purposes, there is a built-in microphone but on our review model at least, this performed so badly as to be as good as useless.

Switching the machine on for the first time brings few surprises. Windows 95 comes pre-installed on the 1.2Gb hard disk, as does a program called TranXit. This small data transfer utility makes regular appearances on notebook PCs that feature IrDA (Infra-red Device Association) ports. The Vale Quest's infra-red port can communicate wirelessly with other IrDA-compliant devices at speeds of up to 115Kbits/s.

If you want to take advantage of the wealth of software that now comes supplied on CD-ROM, there's a six-speed drive contained within the optional docking station. The Vale Quest simply clips into this and, as well as the CD-ROM drive, it gives you a PCI expansion slot and a better pair of speakers, complete with volume control.

Scott Colvey ▶

## Picture It

An image-editing program geared towards producing projects such as calendars, collages and greetings cards from your own photographs.

- Create calendars, collages, labels and invitations
- Works with digital cameras and TWAIN scanners
- Prints to any colour inkjet printer
- Uses Kodak FlashPix format to create compact files
- Pictures and slideshows can be sent via the Internet
- Contrast and tint defects fixed automatically
- Simple tools to remove red-eye
- Large selection of frames, backgrounds and ready-made designs
- Two months' free access to the Microsoft Network
- Free conversion of your first 10 photos to CD-ROM format
- One free print of your finished work from Kodak

**It's fun and it's easy to use but somewhat overpriced at £80. There is strong competition from the likes of Corel Print & Photo House and Adobe PhotoDeluxe but the special Picture It services offered by Kodak are a unique feature.**

- £79.99 (inc VAT)
- Microsoft: 0345 002000

### Picture It

|                 |           |
|-----------------|-----------|
| Features        | ★ ★ ★ ★ ☆ |
| Performance     | ★ ★ ★ ★ ☆ |
| Ease of use     | ★ ★ ★ ★ ☆ |
| Value for money | ★ ★ ★ ★ ☆ |
| <b>Overall</b>  | ★ ★ ★ ★ ☆ |

Minimum requirements: 486/66MHz processor (or better), Windows 95, CD-ROM drive, 8Mb of RAM, 75Mb of disk space, minimum 1Mb of graphics memory.



Image editing doesn't sound like a very exciting thing to do with your PC and in the past it has always been the province of designers and art editors, rather than mere mortals. But Microsoft's Picture It is aimed squarely at home users and it adopts a task-based approach in which you set out with an object in mind – let's say, to make a personalised calendar – and the program guides you through the processes step by step.

The first thing you'd do is load your own picture. Of course, this needs to be in electronic format, and there are several ways you can convert a photograph for use with Picture It. The easiest method is to scan an existing snapshot, but not everybody has a scanner, so another option is to send in a roll of film for developing and at the same time ask the photo shop to transfer the pictures onto a Kodak FlashPix CD. You could also get one of these made up from snaps you have already taken.

To get you started, there's a voucher and a mailing envelope in the Picture It box which you send off to Kodak to get your first 10 pictures transferred to CD free. If you're lucky enough to own a digital camera, you don't need to do any conversion: Picture It can load images straight from that.

Once you've got your pictures loaded (by whatever means), they appear in a filmstrip along the bottom of the screen. From here you can drag them into the editing window and play around with them. You don't get the range of editing options found in professional programs but you can correct colour and contrast, sharpen or blur the image and correct red-eye effects caused by your subject looking into a camera flash. What you can't do

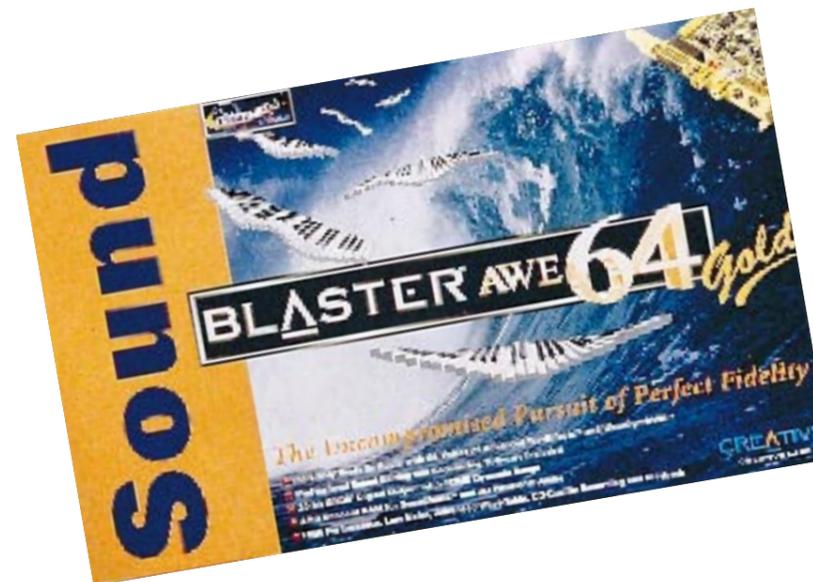
is edit pictures pixel-by-pixel and there isn't a despeckle feature to remove the unwanted blobs of colour you sometimes get on scanned images. Also absent are the sort of fun-to-use filters that can be used to turn photographs into mock watercolour paintings or charcoal drawings. Picture It seems to concentrate on photo-realism rather than artistic expression.

Once your pictures look as good as you can make them, you can cut bits out and paste them together to make a new photo or a collage. In doing this you can use the background of one of your own pictures or choose from a wide selection provided on the Picture It CD-ROM. The cutting tool is probably the easiest to use of any we have seen.

Finally, you add a frame if you want one, and then print the picture. This can be done on your own colour inkjet (you get four snapshot-sized pieces of glossy printer card to experiment with) or you can send the picture electronically to Kodak, via the Internet, and have it done professionally. Kodak not only prints your creations as ordinary photographs but can also provide them as video case sleeves, photo albums, invitations, postcards and labels. You get a voucher free with Picture It that entitles you to try out this service with one free print.

If you're not sure of your own artistic abilities, there's a shortcut to creating a project by picking one of the themed designs for birthdays, Christmas, weddings and similar occasions. All you have to do is slot your picture into the space or spaces provided, though it has to be said that, as with the greetings cards you buy in shops, many of the designs are a bit corny.

Paul Wardley



We reviewed Creative Labs' successor to the AWE 32 in the March sound card group test but due to space restrictions we could only touch upon its new features. The AWE 64 exists in two versions and we've taken a look at the 'professional' model – the AWE 64 Gold.

The most obvious difference between the AWE 64 Gold and its cheaper sibling is the gold-plating on its blanking plate RCA (phono) connectors. Gold connections give a purer sound, though you need sensitive ears to detect much of a difference. Audiophiles will also be pleased to see a separate blanking plate provides an S/PDIF (digital) output. Once connected to the digital interface on the sound card (which the other AWE 64 lacks), this allows output to be sent to an external DAC (Digital to Analogue Converter), amplifier and speaker set-up for even better sound.

The 'professional' emphasis also accounts for the lack of an IDE interface (still present on the cheaper AWE 64). Anyone running a CD-ROM drive off their existing sound card will have to make alternative arrangements if they upgrade to the AWE 64 Gold. As with the other card, the memory expansion interface is proprietary but the memory module prices don't differ too much from standard SIMMs.

Both AWE 64 cards' biggest feature is that they have 64-voice polyphony. This means that MIDI compositions can play up to 64 notes simultaneously, giving more realistic renditions. Rather than synthesise 64 voices using hardware alone (as other cards do), Creative Labs has opted to split the synthesis 50:50 between hardware and software. Unfortunately, the software synthesis relies on software

written for a Pentium processor and until Creative Labs releases updated software, owners of AMD- and Cyrix-based systems can only get 32-voice hardware synthesis with the AWE 64 and can't experience the card's special wavetable effects.

This is a shame as the WaveGuide effects software supplied with the AWE 64 is another of its big selling points. A wavetable sound card uses samples to reproduce instruments. To produce the sound of a trumpet, for example, several samples of its range are made and any that are not can be reproduced by altering their pitch. This works perfectly for instruments that play individual notes, but it's not so successful with others such as electric guitar chords.

Some sound cards, such as Yamaha's SW60XG, get around this by having extra MIDI commands that specify more information about notes being played but these rely on MIDI composers to make use of them. The AWE 64's solution is the WaveGuide software – a set of mathematically defined filters that improve the sound of samples. The clever bit is that it's automatic, works on existing MIDI files and is simply turned on and off.

WaveGuide is supposed to reproduce the intangible aspects of a note – the flavour imparted by the original instrument, the articulation of the musician, and so on. The AWE 64's samples are the same as the AWE 32's (though they have been cleaned up a bit) but a MIDI file played back with WaveGuide does show a marked improvement. WaveGuide doesn't improve every MIDI file and Creative Labs' claims are a little ambitious but with the right piece, the sound from the AWE 64 is extremely impressive.

Julian Prokaza

## Creative Labs AWE 64 Gold

A higher specification version of Creative Labs' replacement for the AWE 32 sound card that has more on-board RAM, higher quality output and extra software.

- 16-bit ISA expansion card
- Plug and play installation
- 1Mb of wavetable ROM
- 4Mb of RAM, expandable to 12Mb
- 64-voice polyphony
- WaveGuide effects for MIDI playback
- Digital Output via 20-bit S/PDIF connector
- Gold RCA connectors
- Highest signal-to-noise ratio and lowest total harmonic distortion of any Sound Blaster
- Bundled software includes Cubasis Audio sequencer (for a limited period), Vienna SoundFont Studio, MIDI Orchestrator Plus, Creative WebPhone and Microsoft Internet Explorer.

**If they're useful to you, the AWE 64 Gold's extra RAM and hardware tweaks are worth the extra £50. The 64 voices and software effects are a useful feature but 'professional' users may find WaveGuide's entirely automatic operation a little restricting for MIDI composition.**

- £199 (inc VAT)
- 4Mb memory module £35
- 8Mb memory module £60
- Creative Labs: 01245 265265

### Creative Labs AWE 64 Gold

|                 |           |
|-----------------|-----------|
| Ease of use     | ★ ★ ★ ★ ☆ |
| Sound quality   | ★ ★ ★ ★ ☆ |
| Features        | ★ ★ ★ ★ ☆ |
| Value for money | ★ ★ ★ ★ ☆ |
| <b>Overall</b>  | ★ ★ ★ ★ ☆ |

Minimum requirements: Intel Pentium 90 or better, 8Mb of RAM (16Mb recommended), Windows 3.1 or higher, CD-ROM drive.

## Brother Super PowerNote PN-8500MDS

A notebook-sized dedicated word processor with address book and scheduling facilities.

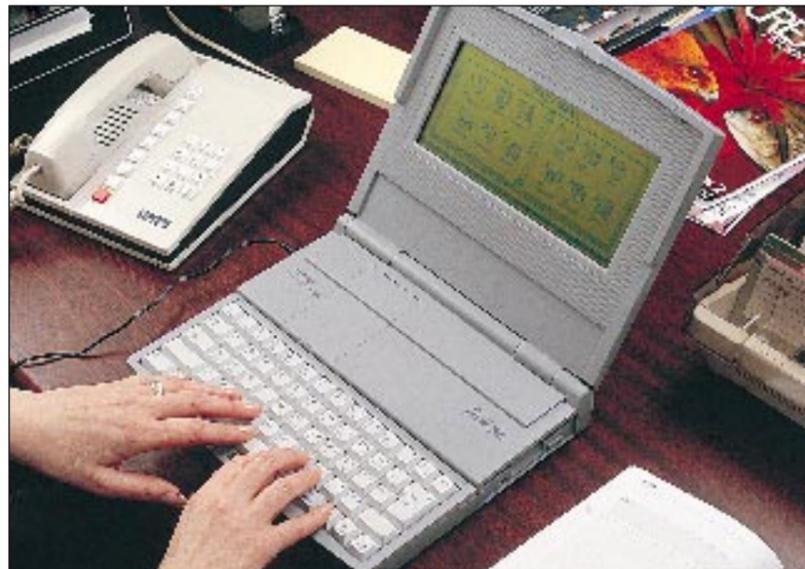
- 64Kb of memory
- 1.44Mb floppy disk drive
- 8.4x3.6in, 80x22 character LCD panel
- Parallel printer port
- 9-pin serial port
- Ni-Cad battery
- Built-in applications/utilities: word processor, spreadsheet, address book, schedule/calendar, world clocks, calculator, communications tool
- 70,000-word dictionary
- Dimensions (mm): 285(w)x246(d)x48(h)
- Weight: 2.1kg

**We have mixed feelings about the PN-8500MDS. On the one hand it feels cheap, tacky and idiosyncratic but on the other, it's compact and competent at handling many different tasks. A perfect machine for students and those on very tight budgets but we wouldn't trade in our PCs to get one.**

- £399 (inc VAT)
- Brother: 0161 330 6531

### Brother Super PowerNote

|                 |           |
|-----------------|-----------|
| Build quality   | ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ |
| Ease of use     | ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ |
| Features        | ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ |
| Value for money | ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ |
| <b>Overall</b>  | ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ |



Dedicated word-processing systems enjoyed broad popularity in the 1980s because they offered a no-fuss, low-cost way of producing professional-looking documents. However, as prices of fully-fledged PCs dropped and specifications rose, both consumers and manufacturers abandoned the dedicated machine concept in droves. A couple of months ago, though, Amstrad stalwartly revived its once-mighty PCW word processor range and now Brother has followed suit with the Super PowerNote PN-8500MDS, a portable alternative.

From the outside, the PN-8500MDS looks pretty much like a notebook PC. It has a typical clamshell design, stands just under 2in high and is about the size of a sheet of A4 paper. On the right-hand side is a PC-compatible 3.5in floppy disk drive and under a flap at the back is a parallel printer port, and a 9-pin serial port. Just like a notebook PC, it can be used on the move, thanks to a snap-in rechargeable battery. Even so, it's unlikely the person sitting on the train next to you will be fooled into thinking it's an expensive system, because it is made from the type of flimsy plastic you'd expect to find encasing a child's toy.

There's a further give-away when you open up the machine to reveal the screen: an ocean-green LCD (liquid-crystal display) panel. This can display 80 characters across and 22 lines down and is only black and white, or rather, black and green. Although by today's standards such a display is woefully behind the times, it gives a clear enough image for most purposes.

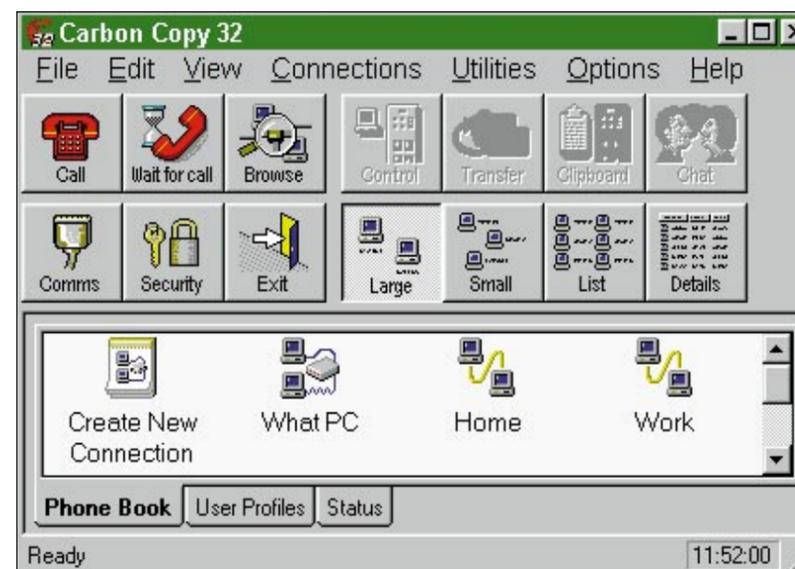
After switching the machine on you are presented with a set of 12 icons, each leading to an application (address book, scheduler, etc) or a utility like the file manager. The applications themselves are menu-

driven but don't think that means they have a Windows-like interface. Using the PN-8500MDS is like taking a step back in time to the days of DOS-based PCs. There are no fancy graphics and all menu navigation is carried out using a set of directional cursor keys and the 'Enter' key. This isn't much of a problem if you've never used Windows before, but if you have you'll find many aspects of its operation counter-intuitive.

The main two applications are the word processor and the spreadsheet. Both programs have most of the functions you are likely to need on a day-to-day basis and the word processor also features a 70,000-word spell-checker. Any work you create is stored temporarily in memory and need only be transferred to floppy disk when this memory is full. However, the small 64Kb of memory could prove to be a bit of a hurdle when it comes to creating and editing large documents or spreadsheets. Only half this memory (32Kb) is available for document editing and this means that any document much over 10 pages long would have to be split into separate files. Also, unless you can regularly borrow or gain access to a printer, you'll need to buy one and the PN-8500MDS is compatible with the majority of inkjets and laser models you can buy today.

A quick mention has to be made about the 59-key keyboard, which is a letdown in two respects. First, it has a very spongy feel and second, and in our opinion quite strangely, Brother has placed it right at the front of the machine leaving several inches of empty space behind it. A simple reversal of this design would have meant the empty space could have served as an ample wrist rest.

Scott Colvey



There are many reasons you might want to connect two computers together and use one of them to control the other. Perhaps to transfer files that are too big to copy onto floppy disks, to provide support to a remote user or just to access your office computer when you are working from home. Like other similar packages, Carbon Copy 32 is a program that allows exactly this and you can even install it onto two PCs, so long as you're the main user of both.

Although Carbon Copy can make connections between up to 256 machines, it's easier to describe a one-to-one link. The computer that will be remotely controlled is called the 'host'; the one that does the controlling is the 'guest'. A 'user profile' set up on the host assigns a nickname and a password to someone who is allowed to connect to it and take control. If the connection is via the telephone, it's also possible to specify who pays for the call by enabling or disabling the callback option on the host. With a profile set up, the host PC then waits for a connection request but it can be used normally in the meantime.

Configuring the guest PC is simpler, involving just adding phone book entries for host computers that you want to connect to. Each entry consists of a computer name, the telephone number to call, and a nickname and password so the host computer will let you in. Once the phone book entry has been defined, all you have to do is click on it to make a connection and all being well, the guest computer takes control of the host.

The view the guest computer gets of the host depends on the viewing options. The default is to see the host computer in a window

on your desktop but you can also decide to display it full-screen. In this case a hotkey combination switches between full-screen and windowed views.

One of the drawbacks of running programs on remote computers is the slow speed of data transfer, compared with the speed at which computers read information from their own hard disks. For this reason, you can instruct Carbon Copy to ignore any large bitmap files (which take a long time to transfer), such as the splash screens which programs display while they are loading. You can also disable the background wallpaper and screen saver on the host computer so that you are not sending any unnecessary information.

A Chat feature displays a split window on both PCs. One window shows what you type and the other shows what the remote user types. Because Chat works at the same time as remote control you can remotely control somebody else's PC while chatting to them, opening up the possibility of using Carbon Copy to support users by demonstrating a technique while chatting to them about what you are doing.

If, during a remote control session you want to transfer files from one computer to the other, the File Transfer utility, which is akin to the Windows 95 Explorer program, shows the files and folders on both PCs. You can drag and drop files between the two machines or use more advanced menu options to perform file comparisons so that you don't copy files that already exist on both machines. During a remote control session, you can grab information from the host PC and paste it into any program running on the guest PC.

Paul Wardley

## Carbon Copy 32 V.4

A communications program that enables one computer to control another via a direct cable link, modem or network connection.

- Connect computers by cable, modem or network
- Parallel cable provided
- One-to-one or one-to-many connections
- Chat mode
- Drag and drop file transfer
- Clipboard feature copies data from remote computer
- Call-back facility
- Flexible security and access options
- One-click call and log-on procedures
- IPX and TCP/IP network connections
- Multi-wait system allows a host computer to wait simultaneously for network, modem and fax calls

**Though the manual makes heavy going of the installation and setup procedures, it's really not that difficult to make a connection. Once you've linked PCs using Carbon Copy, manipulating a remote computer is almost as easy as running a program on your own machine.**

- £152.75 (inc VAT)
- Microcom: 01483 740763

### Carbon Copy 32 V.4

|                 |           |
|-----------------|-----------|
| Features        | ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ |
| Performance     | ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ |
| Ease of use     | ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ |
| Value for money | ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ |
| <b>Overall</b>  | ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ |

Minimum requirements: Each PC must be a 486 or better with 8Mb of memory, 4Mb of hard disk space, Windows 95 and Carbon Copy.



## Mesh Elite 200TX Plus

*One of the very first systems to feature Intel's new MMX-specific motherboard chipset, as well as other speed-enhancing features such as SCSI and SDRAM memory*

**W**hen it comes to making a fast PC, there's more than just the processor to consider. The graphics card, hard disk, RAM and cache all affect overall performance but one of the most fundamental influences on speed is the motherboard chipset.

The motherboard is the large printed circuit board that fills the base of a PC case. This contains the chipset – sometimes called the 'glue logic', since it controls the flow of data between the system's different elements and essentially holds everything together. Processor manufacturer Intel is acknowledged as the producer of some of the best motherboard chipsets, so the arrival of its latest – the '430TX' which is designed specifically to work with the new Pentium MMX processor – has been keenly anticipated.

One of the very first systems with the new chipset is the Mesh Elite 200TX Plus, a PC designed to appeal to users wanting an unparalleled performer on their desks. Users prepared to pay the price get a 200MHz Pentium MMX processor, 512Kb of pipeline burst cache, a substantial 64Mb of RAM and of course, the TX chipset orchestrating the show.

Unlike most current PCs, the Mesh uses SDRAM rather than EDO because one of the features of the TX chipset is that it allows manufacturers to take advantage of the faster access times offered by SDRAM memory technology. It seems likely that we'll see an increasing amount of SDRAM over the next few months as the MMX/TX partnership becomes more established.

Further up the scale, the Elite boasts a Matrox Millennium graphics card, complete with 4Mb of on-board memory. This card is ideal for demanding, high resolution work where a great deal of colours are required and with 4Mb it will com-

fortably deliver the full 16.7 million colours needed for photorealistic images at a resolution of 1,024x768.

The hard disk can be a major bottleneck on overall system performance, so Mesh has opted for the very latest Seagate Cheetah drive which connects to the rest of the machine via an Ultra Wide SCSI (Small Computer Systems Interface) controller. Ultra Wide SCSI is capable of very high data transfer speeds and is considerably faster than the standard EIDE (Enhanced Integrated Drive Electronics) interface which is an integral part of many Pentium motherboards.

SCSI is an 'extra' and requires a special controller expansion card to connect devices to. The card fitted in the Elite also has integrated sound, in the shape of the Vibra 16 chip, leaving an ISA slot free that would otherwise be occupied by a sound card. As well as the hard disk, the SCSI controller also links up to the machine's 16-speed TEAC CD-ROM, again ensuring the best possible performance. The Cheetah hard disk is big (4.3Gb) and very fast. It generates so much heat Mesh has taken the sensible step of giving it a small cooling fan of its own to keep it at a reasonable temperature.

The PC has a good-quality pair of Altec Lansing active speakers and an Idek Iiyama 17in monitor based on Mitsubishi's Diamondtron tube. This produces a sharp, clear image which can be set up to be absolutely flicker-free, thanks to the monitor's vertical refresh rates of over 110Hz at 1,024x768 resolution.

The net effect of these high performance components is a 200MMX machine that goes about as fast as is possible with current technology. Its steep price is a reflection of this, of course, but bear in mind that this time last year, £3,000 bought you a P166 with 32Mb of RAM and a 1.5Gb hard disk.

Dominic Bucknall

- 200MHz Pentium MMX processor
- 512Kb of pipeline burst cache
- 64Mb of SDRAM
- Intel 430TX chipset
- Seagate 4.3Gb Cheetah SCSI hard disk
- TEAC 16-speed SCSI CD-ROM
- ASUSTek/Adaptec Ultra-Wide SCSI controller with on-board Creative Labs Vibra 16 audio
- 4Mb Matrox Millennium graphics
- Altec Lansing ACS5 active stereo speakers
- Idek Iiyama Vision Master Pro 17 17in Diamondtron monitor
- Windows 95, Lotus SmartSuite 97

**This is a very fast, very expensive and very well-specified machine. Although by no means to everyone's tastes, the Mesh Elite 200TX Plus will appeal to serious power users and it offers a glimpse of what might be on many desktops within 12 months or so.**

- £3,284 (inc VAT)
- Mesh Computers:  
0181 452 1111

### Mesh Elite 200TX Plus

|                 |                  |
|-----------------|------------------|
| Build quality   | ★ ★ ★ ★ ☆        |
| Performance     | ★ ★ ★ ★ ★        |
| Features        | ★ ★ ★ ★ ★        |
| Value for money | ★ ★ ★ ★ ☆        |
| <b>Overall</b>  | <b>★ ★ ★ ★ ☆</b> |

# Instant Accounting '97

*The latest edition of Sage's entry-level bookkeeper for the small business comes prepared for the millennium and the Internet.*

- Three-ledger system with banking and invoicing
- Cash and accrual VAT management controls
- Product descriptions and prices database
- Aged debtor analysis
- Extended on-line help
- Year 2000-ready
- Internet-aware
- Predefined reports plus custom forms designer

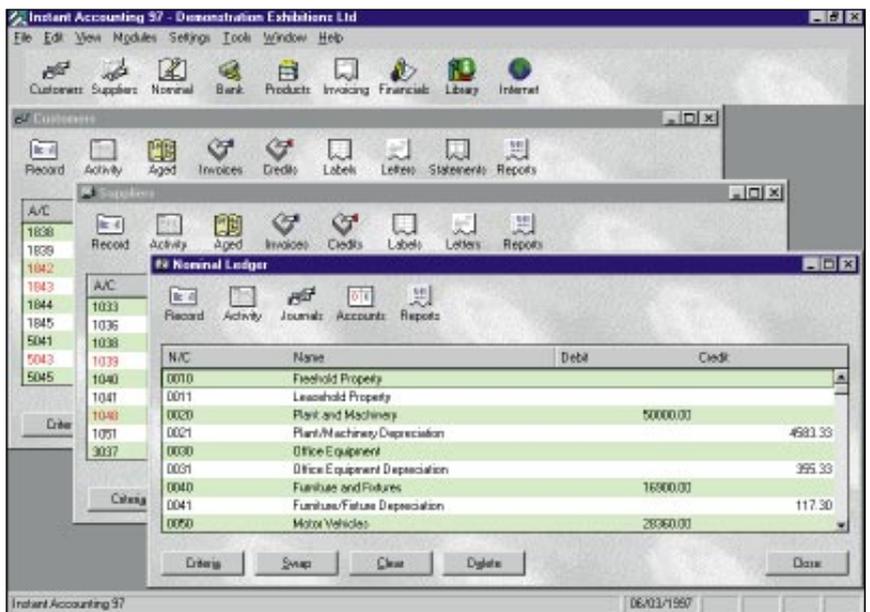
**Sage's Instant Accounting '97 is small business software that's easy to use without needing too much familiarity with orthodox accountancy procedures, but its output should still satisfy your accountant. Year 2000 compliance is a big plus; Internet access less so.**

- £98.99 (inc VAT)
- Sagesoft Ltd: 0191 255 3000  
www.sagesoft.co.uk

### Sage Instant Accounting '97

|                 |         |
|-----------------|---------|
| Ease of use     | ★ ★ ★ ★ |
| Features        | ★ ★ ★ ★ |
| Performance     | ★ ★ ★ ★ |
| Value for money | ★ ★ ★ ★ |
| <b>Overall</b>  | ★ ★ ★ ★ |

Minimum requirements: 486 processor, 8Mb of RAM, 3Mb of hard disk space, Windows 3.1, VGA screen, printer.



From now on, any business using a computer for the first time runs the risk of wasting money if their system isn't ready for the millennium date change. This includes software – much of the accounting software currently on offer, for instance, will not survive into the year 2000. Sage's new Instant Accounting '97, specifically aimed at such businesses, is year 2000-compliant and it's one of the first to declare itself prepared.

Instant Accounting '97 also boasts other topical features. It is able to link to the next version of Sage's Instant Payroll (available from April), allowing the automatic transfer of payroll figures to Instant Accounting rather than doing it by hand. It's also Internet-ready, which means that a Web-browser can be launched directly from Instant Accounting's toolbar instead of doing it from the Start menu or desktop. This may, or may not, be a big deal but it does at least take you directly to Sage's Web page, where some topical news items and a link to Microsoft's business pages can be found.

Otherwise, Instant Accounting '97 is much the same as before. It's a full three-ledger system – nominal, sales and purchase – with cash and credit trading facilities including credit cards, cash and accrual VAT accounting, and financial and management reports. It has a full audit trail (which is a complete listing of all your transaction activities) so that you can demonstrate to your accountant (and tax inspector) that you haven't cooked the books. Even so, you can still easily carry out limited error-correction, including reversing mis-postings.

Invoices, credit notes and statements can be posted at the same time as they are entered or all together later after being checked

first. Depending on your business, you can choose product or service-based invoice formats, using either standard templates or your own layout, which can be printed on plain paper or pre-printed stationery (which you can get from Sage).

Instant Accounting's reports can also be tailored for such things as the periods used in reports (using either calendar months or number of days) and the automatic grouping together of consecutive transactions of the same type on your statements (those that share the same date or reference, for instance). You can also set your own criteria for the selection of customers, suppliers, nominal accounts and product records, as well as invoices. Criteria which you use frequently can also be saved, so that you can use them again later.

Certain reports also offer a 'drill down' facility, whereby clicking on an invoice total, for example, reveals the descriptions and prices of all the items making up that invoice. You will be hard-pressed to find any mention of this in the indexes of either the manual or the help systems, though.

Data entry is helped by a calculator button on some of the numeric data-entry boxes and a calendar button on text boxes where you need to enter a date. There are also Wizards to help you through some of the lesser-used procedures such as transferring money from one bank, cash or credit card account to another.

When you do outgrow Instant Accounting, perhaps to get extra facilities like stock control or order processing, you can progress to Sage's Sterling software which is file-compatible, and find yourself already familiar with its menu format and icons.

James Taylor



# How reliable is your PC?

Fill out our survey form to enter a prize draw for a FREE one-year subscription to *What PC?*

**M**ost of us depend on our PCs at work or at home, but just how reliable are they? Tell us about your system by filling in this form and return it to us at *What PC?*

editorial, Reliability survey, VNU Business Publications, 32-34 Broadwick Street, London W1A 2HG. The first 10 out of the hat will receive 12 issues of *What PC?* absolutely free.

### What make is your main desktop PC?

- Acer
- Adams
- Apple
- Apricot
- Aries
- Armari
- AST
- Brother
- Carrera
- CIC
- Colossus
- Commodore
- Compaq
- Compuadd
- Dan
- Dell
- Digital
- Dotlink
- Escom
- Evesham Vale
- Other (state) .....
- Fujitsu/ICL
- Gateway
- Hewlett-Packard
- Hi-Grade
- Hyundai
- IBM
- ICL
- Mesh
- MJN
- Olivetti
- Opus
- Packard Bell
- Red Box
- Special Reserve
- TAG
- Tatung
- Tiny
- Tulip
- Viglen
- Zenith

### What processor type is your main desktop PC?

- Pentium
- 486
- 386
- 286

### How long ago was your desktop PC purchased?

- Less than 3 months
- 3 months to a year
- One to two years
- Over two years old

### Has your PC ever broken down?

- Yes
- No

### If so, what was the problem to do with?

- Hard disk drive
- CD-ROM drive
- Floppy disk drive
- Processor
- Memory
- Power supply unit
- Motherboard fault
- Serial or parallel interface
- Internal modem (if supplied with PC)
- Keyboard
- Mouse
- Windows 3.1
- Windows 95
- Business software application
- Leisure software (ie game, multimedia, etc)
- Sound card
- Graphics card
- Monitor
- Don't know
- Other (state) .....

### How did you fix it?

- Did it myself
- Sent it back to manufacturer/supplier
- Manufacturer/supplier serviced it on-site
- Phoned manufacturer's technical support line
- Repair shop
- Friend
- Still broken

### How do you rate the support you got from your supplier/manufacturer?

- Very good
- Satisfactory
- Poor

### How do you rate your desktop PC for reliability?

- Very good
- Satisfactory
- Poor

### Do you have a printer? If so, is it a...

- Laser (including LED printers)
- Inkjet printer
- Dot-matrix printer
- Other (state) .....

### What make is your main printer?

- Apple
- Brother
- Bull
- C. Itoh
- Canon
- Citizen
- Dataproducts
- Epson
- Fujitsu
- Other (state) .....
- Hewlett-Packard
- Integrex
- Kyocera
- Lexmark
- Mitsubishi
- Oki
- Olivetti
- Panasonic
- QMS
- Samsung
- Seikosha
- Sharp
- Star
- Tally
- Tektronix
- Triumph Adler
- Xerox

### How long ago was your printer purchased?

- Less than 3 months
- 3 months to a year
- One to two years
- Over two years ago

### Has your printer ever broken down?

- Yes
- No

### If so, what was the problem to do with?

- Paper feed
- Toner cartridge
- Ink cartridge/print head
- Power supply unit
- Leads/connections
- Software (drivers etc)
- Don't know
- Other (state) .....

### How did you fix it?

- Did it myself
- Sent it back to manufacturer/supplier
- Manufacturer/supplier serviced it on-site
- Phoned manufacturer's technical support line
- Repair shop
- Friend
- Still broken

### How do you rate the support you got from your supplier/manufacturer?

- Very good
- Satisfactory
- Poor

### How do you rate your printer for reliability?

- Very good
- Satisfactory
- Poor

Name: .....

Address: .....

Postcode: .....