

in brief

Products covered in our concise reviews this month include: an alarm designed to protect your PC against theft, software which takes the strain out of filling in self-assessment tax returns, a desktop scanner which can also be used for faxing and copying, a value-for-money eight-speed CD-Rom drive, and two monitors with built-in speakers

Samsung Syncmaster 15Me

The Syncmaster 15Me is the first monitor produced by Samsung to have speakers built in to the case.

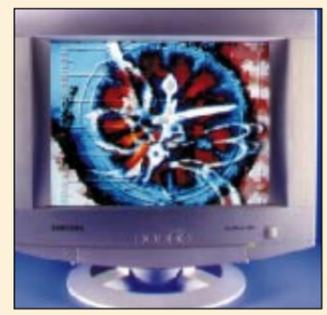
Despite the fact that it's the economy model, the unit is still up to the company's usual high standards. It has the same design cues as the stylish GLi range and a respectable 13.8in viewable image diagonal.

The Syncmaster's speakers are positioned as two strips that run either side of the screen and, unlike other multimedia monitors we've seen, they're relatively inconspicuous.

Although the speakers themselves are quite small, the quality of the sound they produce is rather good, and easily matches that of many low-end external devices. In addition, there's little distortion when you turn the volume up high, which is good news for games players.

The monitor's image quality is excellent. The FST screen is pin-sharp with perfect focus and colour balance. Digital controls are hidden behind a flap just below the screen, and they're easy to use even though there's no on-screen display. A very useful speaker 'mute' button is also included.

The Syncmaster 15Me is an excellent monitor that manages to combine a superb display with respectable sound reproduction. It's worth every penny of its significantly cheaper street price.



○ £393.63 (incl VAT)
○ Samsung Electronics: 0181 391 0168

Samsung Syncmaster 15Me					
Features	1	2	3	4	5
Build quality	1	2	3	4	5
Value for money	1	2	3	4	5

Sicos DMS2000

The Sicos DMS2000 is a black-and-white desktop scanner, described by the manufacturer as a document management system. Although extremely compact, the DMS2000 can handle images as large as A4, with scan resolutions of up to 800dpi.

Unlike similar scanning devices which connect to your computer via the parallel port, the DMS2000 requires you to install a card in an expansion slot before it can be used. This connection method allows the card to satisfy the DMS200's power requirements without the need for a bulky external power supply unit, but it also means that you cannot use it on a notebook computer.

The DMS2000 comes with Personal Image Edition scanning and editing software. This is acceptable for acquiring images, although its editing features are far from remarkable. Also supplied is Document Manager, which allows you to use the DMS2000 for faxing and copying, and Recognita Plus, an optical character recognition (OCR) package that produces reasonably accurate results. Xerox's superior Textbridge OCR system will also be shipped with the final release of the DMS2000.

Considering the quality of the 800dpi scans it produces, the DMS2000's price is reasonable. Unfortunately, it is let down by poor acquisition and editing software and the need to install an expansion card.



○ £151.58 (incl VAT)
○ Eurebis Distribution: 00 353 1 456 9383 (Dublin)

Sicos DMS2000					
Ease of use	1	2	3	4	5
Build quality	1	2	3	4	5
Value for money	1	2	3	4	5

Computerguard PC Alarm

PCs are among the most expensive items in the home and they are now prime targets for clued-up thieves. If you feel the time has come to install protective measures, the Computerguard may be able to help.

The device fits into any PC with a free Isa expansion slot and, after an initial period of 14 hours to charge its battery, you arm it by removing the security key. The key is nothing more than a 3.5mm jack plug, but it serves its purpose as the contacts are non-standard, and inserting any other type of 3.5mm jack plug instantly triggers an ear-piercing 120dB alarm.

As well as the security key, the Computerguard has movement and light sensors. If the PC is moved from its position (as opposed to being accidentally jolted), the alarm is triggered. Similarly, the alarm sounds if the light sensor detects rapid changes in lighting levels (such as an arm moving back and forth removing components).

A trip switch is also supplied and this is positioned under your PC's cover to detect removal. Once activated by one of the triggers, the alarm sounds for 30 seconds before timing out and re-arming – this process continues until either the security key is inserted or the battery dies.

The Computerguard would certainly put off an opportunist thief, but the poor build quality means it's simple to silence the speaker once you get inside the machine.



○ £54.60 (incl VAT)
○ Bodyguard Security: 01438 350274

Computerguard PC Alarm					
Features	1	2	3	4	5
Build quality	1	2	3	4	5
Value for money	1	2	3	4	5

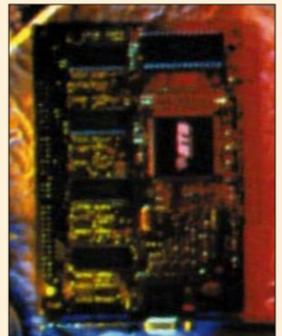
STB Powergraph 64 Video

The Powergraph 64-bit graphics card is available with either 1Mb or 2Mb of EDO Ram and uses the popular S3 Trio64V+ graphics chip. It also has an integrated digital video engine that improves the playback of video files, such as software Mpeg and Video for Windows. An optional TV tuner add-on is available, which can be used to receive television signals.

We looked at the 2Mb card, capable of a wide variety of resolution, colour and refresh rate combinations. At a resolution of 800x600 it can display in 24-bit (16.7 million) colour at 85Hz; 16-bit (65,536) colour at 100Hz; and will even go to 1,280x1,024 in 8-bit (256) colour at a steady 75Hz. Of course, you also need a monitor capable of these refresh rates and, like most new graphics cards, the Powergraph 64 uses Windows 95's monitor settings to determine whether or not yours is.

Image quality is good and, as you would expect from the supported refresh rates, completely flicker-free. Mpeg playback with the supplied Xing software Mpeg player was excellent, even at full screen. We did test the card in a 133MHz Pentium PC, however, which probably helped matters a little.

If your existing video card is feeling the strain, the Powergraph 64 is a cheap and effective way to boost your PC's performance.



○ £111.63 (incl VAT)
○ STB: 0181 897 1003

STB Powergraph 64 Video					
Ease of use	1	2	3	4	5
Features	1	2	3	4	5
Value for money	1	2	3	4	5

Taxcalc (1995-96)

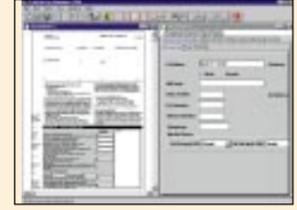
Regardless of your employment status, you're probably aware of all the hype surrounding the Inland Revenue's recent changeover to a self-assessment tax system. Taxcalc is a Windows-based program that promises to ease form-filling burdens by completing your 1995-96 tax return electronically.

The software offers you two ways to prepare your tax return: a linear 'interview' approach whereby you effectively have to complete your return in one sitting; or you can enter the details in any order that suits your working pattern by clicking on the tabbed category headings. Once you've entered all the relevant details, Taxcalc will prepare and print the forms required by the Inland Revenue with all sections completed accordingly.

Although the software cannot reduce the amount of information required by the Inland Revenue, it is a much simpler method of preparation than ploughing through the plethora of self-assessment forms. Also, because entries are stored electronically, corrections can be made quickly and easily with alterations filtering automatically through the entire assessment.

The on-line manual is extensive and more useful than a paper manual because of its cross-referencing of the numerous supplied Inland Revenue texts on the self-assessment system.

There's an awful lot of information crammed into Taxcalc. If you are concerned or confused about the new self-assessment tax system, this program may prove invaluable.



○ £29.99 (incl VAT)
○ Which?: 0800 252100

Taxcalc (1995-96)					
Ease of use	1	2	3	4	5
Features	1	2	3	4	5
Value for money	1	2	3	4	5

Xircom Creditcard Modem 28.8



The Xircom Creditcard Modem 28.8 is a V.34 PCMCIA card modem offering uncompressed data rates of up to 28,800bps, as well as a 14,400bps fax capability.

If you have Windows 95's PC Card Services enabled, installation involves nothing more than plugging the Xircom into a Type II or Type III PCMCIA socket on your notebook and assigning a Com port. A disk containing Windows 3.1 and Dos drivers is also supplied for those who have yet to upgrade or have specialist requirements. The Xircom is then connected using a neat clip through a rather bulky black box to the telephone socket.

Software supplied includes Delrina's Winfax Lite and Wincomm Lite. Wincomm Lite is an unremarkable communications package but Winfax Lite, although designed originally for Windows 3.1, is a good alternative to Windows 95's limited fax facilities, and offers versatile scheduling and logging of fax documents.

We had no difficulties making and sustaining connections at 28,800bps and faxing was similarly trouble-free. The manual is clearly-written and well-illustrated, and a separate guide detailing both the AT command set and S-registers is a welcome addition for those with greater technical knowledge.

An excellent modem which comes with a good manual and a quick-start guide - but, as the Xircom is a self-configuring PCMCIA device, it's unlikely you'll need either.

Xircom Creditcard Modem 28.8

Performance	1	2	3	4	5
Build quality	1	2	3	4	5
Value for money	1	2	3	4	5

- £304.33 (incl VAT)
- Xircom:01256 332552

Blasterkeys Home Studio



The Creative Labs Blasterkeys Home Studio system comprises a Soundblaster AWE32 sound card and a Midi keyboard. The combination of sound card and keyboard means you can record your own Midi files, and you can also take interactive piano lessons with the Musicware Piano Teacher software.

The 49-key Midi keyboard has full-size, velocity-sensitive keys, but unfortunately they aren't weighted so playing can feel a little artificial. The keyboard, however, is light and barely larger than the keys themselves, which makes it ideal for slipping on the desk for the odd lunchtime practice session.

We've looked at the AWE32 sound card several times before and the sound quality is excellent. The Midi Orchestrator Plus sequencer software allows you to record compositions a track at a time and then edit them in a piano-roll display. Files can be saved in Midi format and existing Midi files can also be modified. The Musicware software lacks a little in terms of presentation, but it's sufficient to get you to the level where you can at least read and play simple melodies.

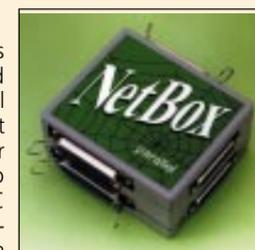
Since you can buy the AWE32 separately for £200, another £200 for the keyboard and Musicware software seems a bit steep. Making your own music, however, is great fun - and think of the money you'll save on piano lessons.

Blasterkeys Home Studio

Ease of use	1	2	3	4	5
Features	1	2	3	4	5
Value for money	1	2	3	4	5

- £410.08 (incl VAT)
- Creative Labs: 01734 344322

Netbox



Nighthawk Electronics' Netbox is a device for networking PCs and sharing printers using parallel cables. Its hardware component is a sturdy metal box with four parallel port inputs and two parallel port outputs. Each PC you want to network is connected to the Netbox using a standard printer cable, and each printer you want to share is connected to the device rather than the PC. A separate mains adaptor powers the unit, and four LEDs indicate which PC connections are active.

Installation under Windows 95 is straightforward - simply add a new network driver from the supplied disk and reboot the PCs a couple of times. Drivers for Windows 3.11 and MS-Dos are also supplied, but using MS-Dos alone only allows printer sharing.

Although Netbox allows PCs to share their disk drives and files with each other, it isn't quite as versatile as a true network. Parallel cables are relatively slow compared to Ethernet connections and there is a performance decrease on any PC that is being accessed by another. For occasional file sharing, however, it's fine and it's an ideal way to bring redundant PCs back into use as file servers.

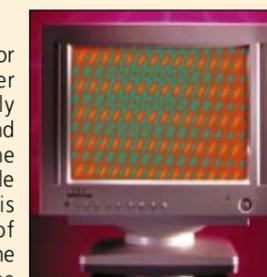
The Netbox is the only device we've seen that offers an easy solution to the problem of cheaply networking more than two PCs - and it does it extremely well.

Netbox

Ease of use	1	2	3	4	5
Functionality	1	2	3	4	5
Value for money	1	2	3	4	5

- £193.88 (incl VAT)
- Nighthawk Electronics: 01799 540881

CTX 1769MS monitor



The CTX 1769MS 17in monitor has two front-facing speaker panels which are vertically mounted in the main casing and add approximately 2in to the width of the unit. Its viewable image diagonal of 15.9in is reasonable for this type of display, bearing in mind that the 17in measurement refers to the tube itself and not to the visible area inside the screen frame.

The maximum vertical refresh rate supported by the monitor is 75MHz at 1,024x768. This is non-interlaced and results in a steadier, flicker-free image than that of the 60MHz refresh rate at 1,280x1,024. But pushing a 17in monitor to a width of 1,280 pixels is not a good idea unless you have remarkable eyesight.

The speakers coped well with the output from the 2W sound card fitted to our test machine, and although the unit lacks an external volume control, there is a mute button if you want to suppress the sound altogether.

A microphone is built into the front of the monitor, along with four buttons that work in conjunction with the excellent on-screen display to adjust horizontal and vertical alignment, rotation, convergence, and pin-cushioning.

Our test machine seemed to suffer from misaligned guns in the tube. These affected the colour quality at high brightness levels, although the image was still very stable. This monitor is good value at its recommended price.

CTX 1769MS monitor

Performance	1	2	3	4	5
Features	1	2	3	4	5
Value for money	1	2	3	4	5

- £586 (incl VAT)
- CTX: 01923 818461

Samsung SCR-830 CD-Rom drive



This eight-speed CD-Rom drive, at just over £150, is good value for money. Quad or six-speed drives seem to be the norm on new PCs, but the premium you have to pay for Samsung's eight-speed device is negligible.

In common with other eight-speed drives, the SCR-830 can transfer data from a CD at the rate of 1.2Mb per second, which is faster than many hard disks could manage just a couple of years ago. The seek access time – a measure of how quickly the required data can be located on the disc – is quoted as 146ms, although our review machine managed only 161ms, which is still highly respectable.

The SCR-830 looks similar to most other drives, with a headphone socket and volume control mounted on the front. Because it's an Atapi/IDE device, the drive is easy to fit either to a sound card or to the same IDE interface as the hard disk.

One minor complaint about the unit is that there are no plastic guide rails or fitting screws provided. If Samsung expects to sell the SCR-830 as an upgrade to users of older drives, supplying these 'extras' would cost very little and save purchasers a lot of time and trouble.

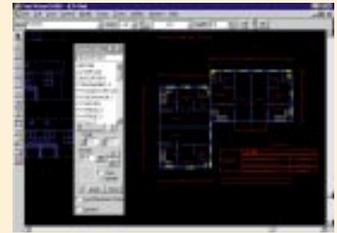
It looks good, works well and represents good value for money. If you're going to upgrade an older double-speed CD, Samsung's eight-speed device could be just what you're looking for.

- £151.57 (incl VAT)
- Samsung
- 0181 391 0168

Samsung SCR-830 CD-Rom

Ease of use	1	2	3	4	5
Features	1	2	3	4	5
Value for money	1	2	3	4	5

Corel Visual Cadd



Corel continues its mission to convert the whole world to 32-bit computing with this release of Numera's Visual Cadd, now badged as Corel Visual Cadd. It costs a hefty £410, which is more than four times the price of Turbocad (reviewed in the June 1996 issue), but still cheap when compared with both these programs' declared rival, Autocad LT.

The CD is crammed with fonts and plenty of example files and symbols. All 8,000 architectural, mechanical and electrical symbols are illustrated in the combined manual/resource catalogue, but they are not flagged as being either ISO or BS-compatible.

One strong point is that the program can actually run quite fast in 8Mb of Ram on a 486/DX2. It runs under Windows 95 and Windows NT, but not under any of the 16-bit versions of Windows, not even those with 32-bit extensions.

Visual Cadd's screen presentation is fairly standard for a Windows-based Cad program, but its multiple viewport feature, with which you can simultaneously work on several views of the same file, is a real timesaver. There's a host of quick command icons running down the left of the screen and users who cut their teeth on earlier Dos-based Cad programs will love the fact that every command has a two-keystroke shortcut.

There's a lot of competition in the cut-price Cad market, and every title has Autocad LT in its sights. This program costs two-thirds the price of the real thing, which may not be cheap enough.

- £410 (incl VAT)
- Corel: 0800 581028

Corel Visual Cadd

Ease of use	1	2	3	4	5
Features	1	2	3	4	5
Value for money	1	2	3	4	5