

# Balancing the books

Small businesses and the self-employed are better served than ever by budget accounting packages which range from entry-level cashbooks to sophisticated systems packed with features



No matter how simple or how complicated your present manual accounting system is, you're likely to be able to find something to suit your needs from the wide range of software now available. The trick, when you're computerising for the first time, is not to be too ambitious to start with – aim to replicate your manual system as far as possible. Look principally for ease of use and for features which will suit your business. Remember that price is not necessarily any indication of suit-

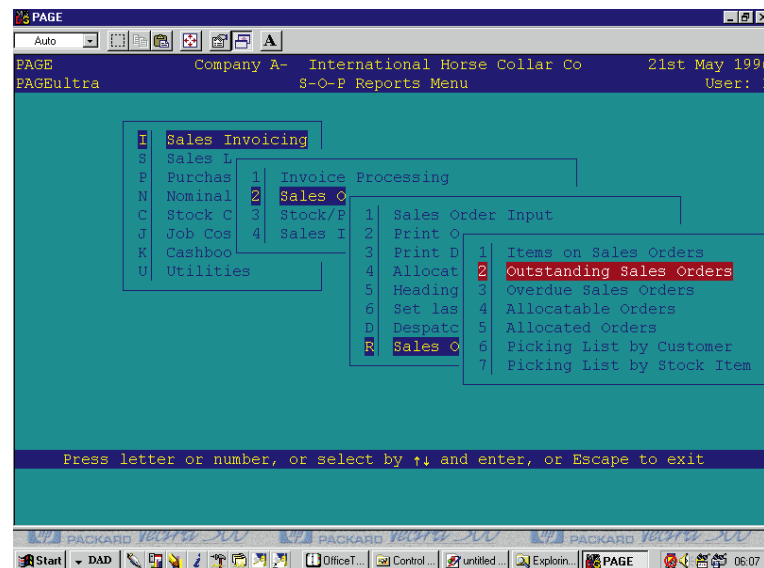
ability and that the cost of software is nothing compared to the time it can take to set up a computerised system properly – and you only want to do it once. To qualify as business software, programs must include dedicated sales and purchase recording facilities, and all the packages reviewed have these features. Some follow the traditional manual format for credit sales and purchases by setting up separate sales and purchase ledgers, while others record the information in one combined ledger and the relevant information can be

extracted when required. Neither method is intrinsically better for small business use. Not all accounts software offers a stock control function, so if you keep stock this could limit your choice. A good stock control module will let you list stock items, quantities, re-order levels, prices and discounts, and let you reserve, use, or replace stock. Invoicing is a separate function from sales ledger, although the invoicing module should link to and update the sales and nominal ledgers and the stock control module as well if appropriate.

## Products Page Ultra

Page Ultra offers a range of features normally only found in higher-priced modular packages. You not only get sales invoicing, for example, but you also get the production of credit notes, pro-forma invoices, quotations, sales orders and order acknowledgments. Invoices can be produced from sales orders directly, as can despatch or consignment notes. Page Ultra also handles bills of materials and assemblies, and offers job costing help in the creation of quotations. You get some control over invoice layout, although the procedure isn't as easy as it could be. You

Page Ultra's cascading menu system eases the awkwardness of a Dos interface.



can use pre-printed forms, letterheads or blank paper. Page Ultra provides for traditional period-end procedures, drawing a line under one set of figures and opening a new page for the next. The procedure for the end of the month removes all completed transactions and resets balances, so you need to have taken paper copies first. The year-end procedure is the same except that nominal account balances are carried over. There's a simpler version of the package – Page Financial Controller – that saves you £100 on start-up. **Page Ultra offers a comprehensive range of facilities at a very keen price. Its Dos interface only gets in the way when designing stationery layouts.**

- £199
- Atlantic Coast: 01297 552222

## Page Ultra

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

## Capital

Capital is a fully-featured and integrated accounting software package that offers much of the functionality of high-end modular packages at not much more than the typical cost of a single module. It includes the usual sales, purchase and nominal ledgers, cash book and invoicing, together with the less usual, but very useful, sales order processing, stock control and purchase order processing. It can be configured for all types of trader from the self-employed through partnerships to limited companies, and used for product or service businesses. Transaction entry facilities include a recurring journal update function to take care of standing

orders and direct debits. Files are updated as soon as postings are made, so enquiries always show the up-to-date situation. There's the usual run of reports available, and information can be exported to spreadsheets or word processors. There's also a VAT return option for calculating and printing your VAT100 form. Capital also features versatile sales order processing, automatically adding information from previous customers' account records, including credit limit and current balance. It also automatically notes any settlement discount already agreed, any overall discount to be applied to the whole and the carriage details. **Versatile accounting software with sufficient features and functions to satisfy most small-to-medium businesses, especially with its inclusion of sales order processing.**

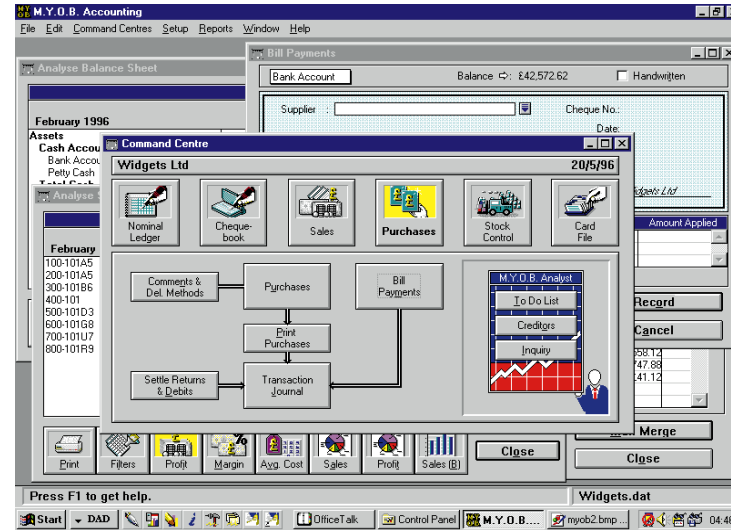
- £550
- Pegasus Software: 01536 495000

## Capital

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

## MYOB v5 for Windows

MYOB is a full three-ledger system with stock control and a card file for addresses. It has a navigational Command Centre interface which uses a hierarchical flow chart; you can also use the standard Windows menu, which many might prefer.



MYOB's colourful Command Centre provides hierarchical navigation to all essential operations.

The card file and its to-do list provide a simple contact management facility which can be used only for accounts-related matters. You can categorise your contacts for anything from credit control to sales prospecting, make notes, and set a follow-up date.

The nominal ledger permits up to four levels of account nesting, giving you the opportunity to analyse your figures closely. Updating is instantaneous, as opposed to batch posting. You get help in choosing your initial list of accounts which can cover the supply of goods or services, including 'professional' services.

The sales ledger lets you assign customer-specific credit terms, and you can also assess and impose finance charges on overdue accounts. As well as invoices and credit notes, there are pending or pro-forma invoices, the issue of which has no effect on ledgers or stock and which can be used as quotations or acknowledgments. You can also establish any number of jobs for each customer, and each job's income and expenditure can be tracked separately.

Stock control is handled automatically, although you can also adjust stock manually. Stock items can be grouped together to allow automatic parts assembly.

You get a full complement of on-screen or printed reports, including customer and transaction histories, which analyse everything you need to know about your business. All reports and other forms can be customised for fonts, fields and layout, so you can print on plain paper or your own letterhead. **Offering big business versatility, MYOB adds simple card index contact management to this fully-integrated double-entry accounting system**

- £195
- Best Programs: 01992 451551

You can add and amend Capital's operating records, including customers, suppliers, products, nominal accounts and analysis codes.

**MYOB v5 for Windows**

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

**Money Manager/Final Accounts for Windows**

Money Manager and Final Accounts are available separately but can be integrated to provide a reasonably-featured accounting system at a reasonable price.

Money Manager doesn't subscribe to the clean-screen philosophy and reveals all its nuts and bolts. For example, it shows several items of information at once with codes being listed against account names. But this approach does give you the opportunity to analyse data in greater detail.

You can have up to 10,000 transactions per month, allocated between account codes, class codes and mark codes. Account codes define your major control accounts like bank, cash and VAT. Sub-account codes refine these by identifying individual customers and suppliers. Class codes categorise expenditure or income, such as machinery, stationery or salary, and let you analyse income/expenditure for particular classes. Mark codes are optional labels you can use to collate entries for further analysis, such as separating petrol expenses between partners.

You get bank reconciliation, cheque printing on your own cheques, and a good selection of reports. There's no invoicing, so you have to use your word processor or look elsewhere (you can, of course, enter invoice details).

The Final Accounts add-on produces your trial balance, profit and loss report, and balance sheet as well as looking after things like fixed asset depreciation, capital allowances and tax.

**Money Manager offers a high entries capacity with versatile analysis facilities, although paradoxically its mnemonic codes can be confusing.**

- Money Manager for Windows Business Edition: £79.95; Final Accounts for Windows: £49.95
- Connect Software: 0181 743 9792

**Money****Manager/Final Accounts**

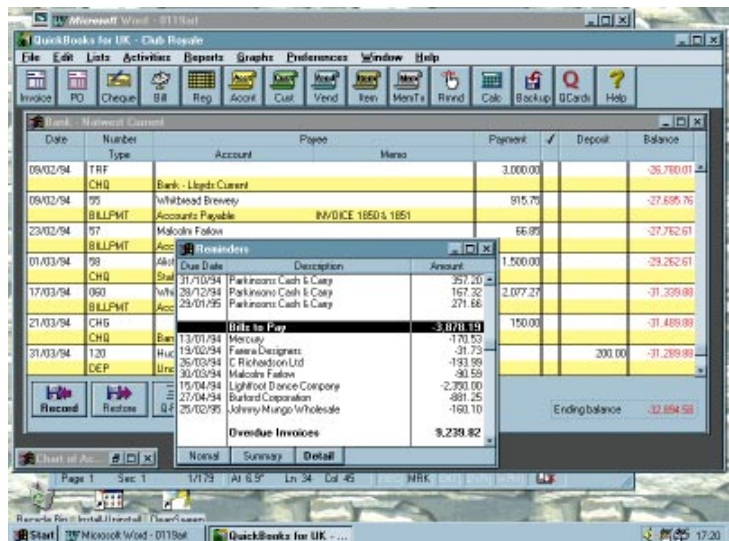
Ease of use	1	2	3	4	5
Features	1	2	3	4	5
Documentation	1	2	3	4	5
Value for money	1	2	3	4	5

**Quickbooks v3**

Quickbooks v3 has several new features, including an integrated stock control and stock reporting facility. When active, this gives a stock part item category that you can increase by making purchases and decrease by making sales. There's no parts explosion facility. You can turn stock control off and it will revert to being an invoice item list containing service item descriptions.

Three different invoice layouts (professional, service and goods) let you add, drop, or rename fields until you have the correct information on the form. You can do the same thing with cash sale receipts, credit memo forms and purchase orders.

Another optional feature is the audit trail, which is implemented so that the original entry and any subsequent changes appear together on the list. You don't have to use it but if you do it's password-protect-



**Transactions are easily recorded in Quickbooks using convenient on-screen forms.**

ed against disablement. You can also add finance charges to your invoices when they haven't been paid by the due date, and you can choose your own percentage interest rate or charge a fixed sum.

Quickbooks includes a flexible job function: jobs can be assigned to individual customers and you can charge specific invoices against them.

It also includes easy invoice production and statement generation, on-screen cheque forms, graphical interpretation, Quickfill data entry help, automatic reminders, and a wide range of reports. You can choose your initial account categories to suit several alternative types of business and specify either accrual or cash accounting.

**A competent business tool, perfectly satisfactory for most small business users.**

- £99
- Intuit: 0181 990 5500

**Quickbooks v3**

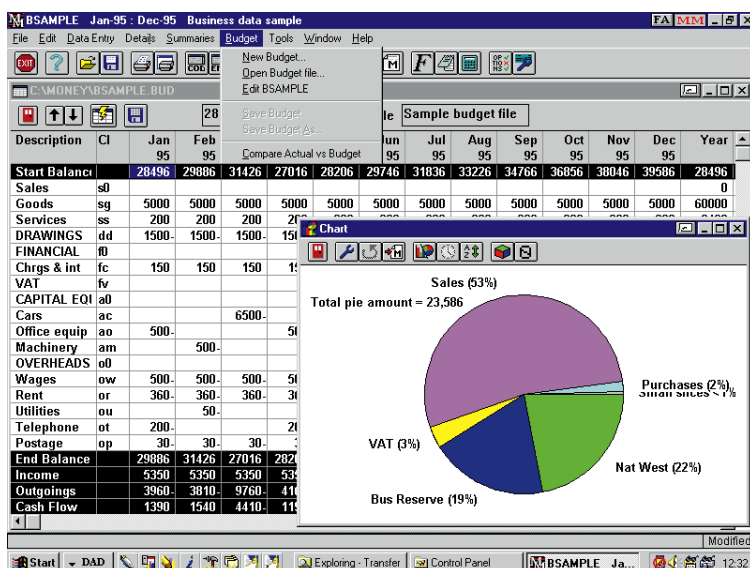
Ease of use	1	2	3	4	5
Features	1	2	3	4	5
Documentation	1	2	3	4	5
Value for money	1	2	3	4	5

**TAS Books**

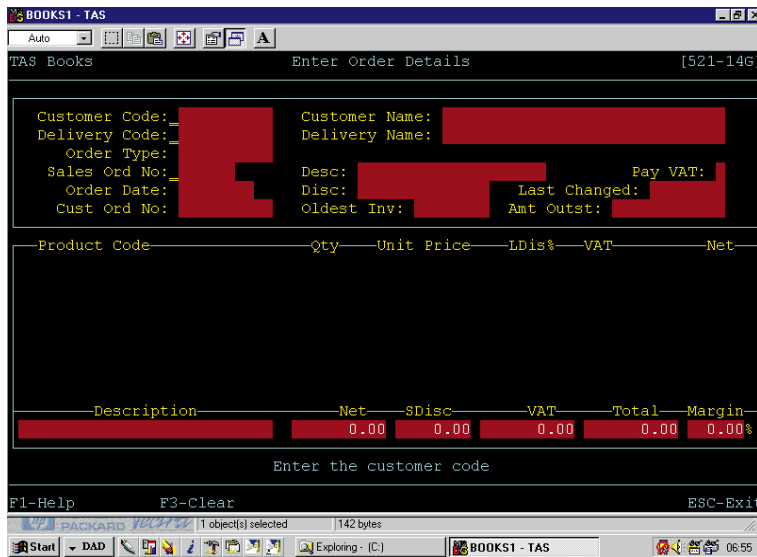
The box includes two substantial loose-leaf manuals, one a reference manual, the other a tutorial; a card-board function key guide; a user log and password reference card; some petty cash vouchers; journal vouchers, journal entry forms, invoices and statements; and the system disks.

There are two TAS Books programs. TAS 1 version 1.4, reviewed here, is the starter program; the upgrade, TAS 2, is functionally identical but adds sales and purchase order processing and stock control facilities, and costs an extra £250 (single-user). TAS 1 now has a 'drill-down' facility in the ledgers and day-books, allowing you to access various levels of information. There's also a semi-automatic double-entry

**Money Manager's reports let you 'drill down' to the underlying detail.**







Left: TAS Books incorporates simple sales order entry.

Below: You can choose to use Pastel's comprehensive System Navigator or its standard menu or both.

function and more flexibility in recurring transactions. Features include a three-ledger system; a wide range of reports, including audit trail; refund and bounced-check handling; invoicing, with predefined item details; and full period-end procedures.

Although it incorporates period-end procedures to advance your accounting year, TAS Books doesn't actually close off any transactions, so you can bring up any item in detail from any period, giving you the best of both worlds.

**TAS Books is not quite as good value for money as it used to be but it still offers a lot for your money.**

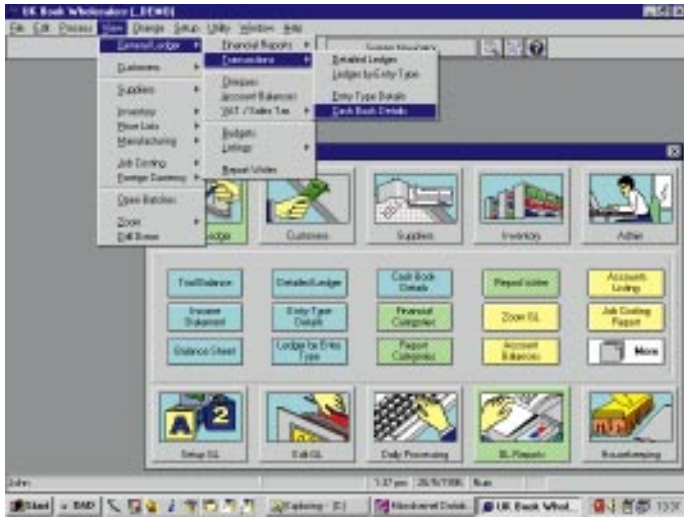
£99  
Megatech: 0181 874 6511

**TAS Books**

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

**Instant Accounting**

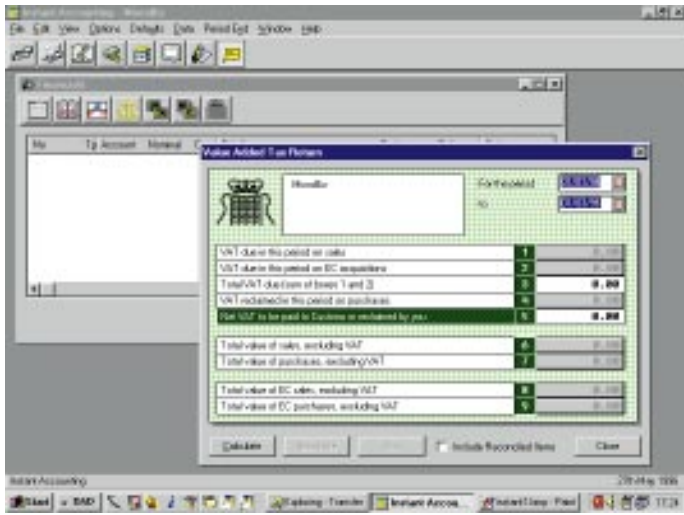
You get a range of features useful to most small businesses, such as sales and purchase transaction recording; cash and credit trading facilities including credit cards; cash and accrual VAT accounting; and financial and management reports. The Oops function allows limited corrections to mistakes made entering transactions. Instant Accounting lets you post invoice



Below: Instant Accounting shows Sage's speciality – unnervingly lifelike forms on which to make your entries.

es, credit notes and statements immediately, or later in batches after checking. You can also log invoices you have produced manually and already sent to your customers.

The package offers versatile document-customising facilities to produce professional-looking paperwork. Invoices, reports and letters can be produced on your own pre-printed forms, plain paper, or stationery supplied by Sage which the company will personalise.



Sage says you can upgrade to Sterling when you're ready for its extra facilities like stock control or order processing.

**Useful package which includes versatile invoicing, context-sensitive help and outstanding customisation of printed output.**

£127.50  
Sage Group: 0191 255 3000

**Instant Accounting**

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

**Pastel Partner Accounting v4**

This includes invoicing, cashbook, budgeting and stock control. The integrated package is network-ready for up to ten users per company, and can handle an unlimited number of separate companies. Even if you've only got one company, you can still have up to ten cash books, 30 separate tax types, 32 types of entry and up to 16 currencies in addition to the pound.

The software uses batch processing, allowing verification before posting. It also lets you process across periods – in fact, you don't need a month-end procedure at all. Transactions can be kept on line for up to two years.

You can create purchase orders and supplier invoices, and prepare and process quotations and sales orders. You also get a full manufacturing or stocklist module with inventory items, bills of materials and parts build-up. As well as inventory item codes, Pastel handles bar codes and bin numbers. The bill of materials function can list components, quantities, labour and overheads, along with selling prices.

You can create individual prices for each inventory item; use separate default tax types for purchasing and for sales; create multiple delivery addresses for each customer, each with its own contact details; and set up a commission structure for agents or salesmen. You have full control over paper output and formatting of reports. Reports can also be exported into spreadsheets and word processors for custom formatting.

**Feature-rich and keenly priced: a highly-customisable package without a bespoke price tag.**

£399  
MAP Pastel: 0161 624 5662

**Pastel Accounting v4**

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

Accounts packages compared							
	Platform	Price ex-VAT	Ledgers	Invoicing	Stock control	Sales orders	Purchase orders
Capital	Win	£550	N P S	●	●	●	●
Instant Accounting	Win	£127.50	N	●	○	○	○
Money Manager /Final Accounts	Win	£79.95 /£49.95	N	○	○	○	○
MYOB v5	Win	£195	N P S	●	●	○	○
Pastel Accounting v4	Win	£399	N P S	●	●	●	●
Page Ultra	Dos	£199	N P S	●	●	●	●
Quickaccounts for Windows	Win	£49	N	○	○	○	○
Quickbooks v3	Win	£99	N	●	●	○	●
Sterling for Windows v3							
Financial Controller	Win	£649	N P S	●	●	●	●
TAS Books 1	Dos	£99	N P S	●	○	●	○

Note: Ledgers: N = Nominal; P = Purchase; S = Sales. ● = Yes ○ = No.

**Sterling for Windows v3 Financial Controller**

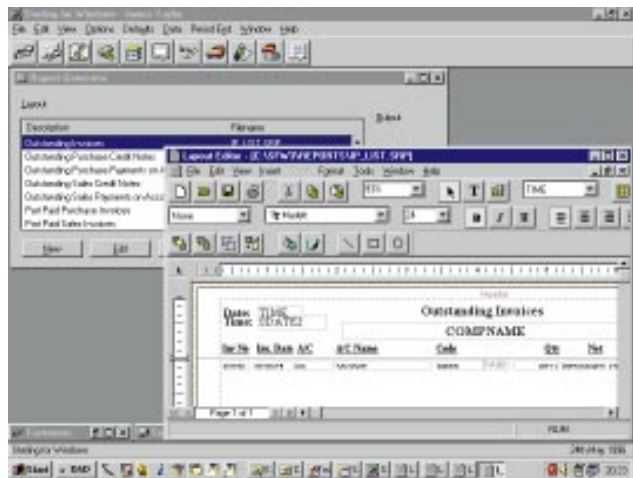
Sage's Sterling is really a range of programs offering a series of different features. Financial Controller is at the top of the range. For your money you get three ledgers – sales, purchase and nominal; invoicing; sales and purchase order processing; stock control; credit control; fixed asset management; and a wide range of customisable management reports.

You can also link with other business software like word processors, spreadsheets and databases, as well as Sage's own dedicated contact manager, Telemagic. There's a payroll program and a job costing module (the latter is a Dos-only version).

New features in the Windows version include batch invoicing; better drill-down facilities which allow you to access several layers of information; free text invoicing; and bank reconciliation. Many small businesses might regard this range of features as overkill and a fully integrated complete office system does cost a lot of money.

You can allocate your invoice entries to tax, nominal and department codes either item by item or for the entire invoice. Department codes can be anything you like and can be predefined for particular items. You also get separate product categories. Invoices (and credit notes) can be produced for goods or services, the former including quantities and rates. Goods invoices can also be raised using stock items, which also automatically update stock control.

**Sterling is the standard by which many packages are measured. If you need comprehensive financial controls, Financial Controller is the one to look at first.**



£649  
Sage Group: 0191 255 3000

**Sterling Financial Controller**

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

**Quickaccounts for Windows**

Sybiz Quickaccounts for Windows is designed as a first computer accounting system for small businesses. It operates as a single nominal ledger and has no formal provision for separate sales or purchase ledgers. You do get a cashbook and



Above: Sterling's flexible layout editing facilities help you get your paperwork exactly right.

Below: Transactions are easily recorded using convenient on-screen forms.

a bank reconciliation facility. There's no provision for invoicing, stock control or job tracking, and to upgrade to get these facilities will cost you at least another £250. In the meantime you have, effectively, a cashbook.

All data entry is made using the transactions button. Getting at the information afterwards can be a little long-winded – you need to negotiate another three menus to view the details of a single transaction. Backtrack a little and you can see a summary of other transactions in the same batch.

**Very basic program which is worth looking at only if you are completely unsure of computer accounting and don't want to invest too much time or money.**

£49  
Sybiz Solutions: 01635 877777

**Sybiz Quickaccounts**

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

**Although you'd probably like to go for Sterling, realistically it might be overkill for many small businesses. Choose between Quickbooks and MYOB, depending on whether or not you prefer clearly-defined ledgers.**

**TAS Books has a deserved reputation for near-comprehensive facilities and should prove adequate for most business needs. Money Manager is worth a mention as it's a good Windows product with flexible analysis options.**

James Taylor