bituary - The Acorn Computer 1978 - 1998

"Enjoying the fruits of British genius" - by Jim Coles

"Cambridge, 17th September 1998 - Acorn Group plc, the technology design and solutions company, today announced that following a strategic review of its operations, it is...to become more focused as a digital TV and thin-client components company."

his brief press release announced to the world that Acorn Computers would no longer be developing new desktop machines. There would be no more successors to the BBC microcomputer, no new machine to take over from the Archimedes.   An independent OS kowtowed before the might of Microsoft and expired.   Even in 1992 the writing was on the wall, Acorn had sales of just £48.2 million ($77US million).   UK schools kept Acorn in business for years but over the last 3 years the trend has been a straight switch from Acorn's RISC OS to Windows 95/98, first of all in high schools then in primary schools. With it's last niche market in terminal decline Acorn's announcement was inevitable. By 1997 Acorn had sales of around £26 million ($41 million) and was making a heavy loss.

With just one hundred employees left after the recent 'strategic review' should we care about Acorn? Even if they ceased trading it would   be a less significant event than the closing of Fujitsu's manufacturing plant in Newcastle, in economic terms at least. I feel that we should care. The value that Acorn computers have made to the UK and education as a whole is not based on a balance sheet. A generation of children   grew up using Acorns in the form of trusty old BBC microcomputers and Archimedes machines from the A3000, to the A7000+.

There are many similarities between the rise and fall of Acorn computers and the near demise of Apple. According to legend the two Steve's founded Apple Computer in a garage, Chris Curry & Herman Hauser founded Acorn sitting round a kitchen table in a back room in 1978.

The 1980's Acorn's Golden Years

Starting in April 1981, Acorn won a contract from the BBC to supply microcomputers and in 1982 the 'BBC' Microcomputer was born.   An 8 bit machine with either 16K or 32K of RAM, Britain now had it's own version of the Apple][. The BBC was snapped up by universities and business either as part of networks or as stand alone machines. The UK government put one BBC computer in every school in the country - quite an achievement in the early 1980's.   The BBC could run BASIC,   using it's own compiler and this   enabled many people to write their own software, and in schools this is what happened. From a Human Factors point of view this was the golden age of educational Information Technology.   The designers   really knew the needs of their users - children and teachers. The result was software that added value to children's education. In 1982 seven out of ten computers bought by UK schools were BBC's.

 The BBC, evolved into more powerful configurations,   the BBC 'Master'   increased available RAM from 32K to 128K. Then came the quantum leap from a Command Line Interface using BASIC and Acorn's proprietary Operating System Statements to a Graphical User Interface. Acorn referred to it's GUI as WIMP programming (Windows, Icons, Menus, Pointers). This happened   in 1983 while Steve Jobs was raising the pirate flag over the Apple Cupertino Campus and working on the Macintosh. Whilst Apple used the Motorola 68000 chip Acorn developedit's own 32 bit RISC ARM chip.   1987 saw Archimedes machines based on this architecture priced at under £1000. They were just what the education market wanted - affordable technology. Success breeds success and in 1984 Acorn won the Queen's Award for Technology and in 1985 Olivetti took a controlling interest   and made available the finance Acorn needed to develop their RISC OS. 1990 saw Acorn forming Advanced RISC Machines Ltd. (ARM) in partnership with Apple.   Leading to the creation of the ARM chip used in the eMate. Steve Jobs though saw the writing on the wall and he sold a large part of Apple's shares to help finance Apple's return to profitability.

"Education, Education and Education"

Acorn helped develop the Domesday Project in 1986. Every school in the country helped contribute to a new Domesday book on CD ROM to celebrate the 1,000 anniversary of William the Conqueror's survey of England. As an educational and Historical resource the Domesday Project has no equal in the world. It gives researchers and historians a snap shot of education in the 1980's. If you are under 30 perhaps you remember contributing to it?

ike Macs Acorn's are great multimedia machines, they are easy to network and they are upgradeable. In my school, and many schools across the country there are A3000 machines made in 1987 which are still giving good service. To say that they are robust is an understatement. When my classroom was burgled a couple of years ago the burglars dropped my A3000 on the floor breaking it's casing in two places. All I needed to replace it was some masking tape, it worked first time!

The 1990's, decline and fall

As the 1990's came Acorn started it's slow descent into obsolescence. Incompatibility with other computers became a problem. Although newer versions of RISC OS could write and read to PC disks and a UNIX model appeared Acorn was losing market share. Anecdotal evidence suggests that Microsoft studied the RISC OS at Redmond whilst developing Windows. However, Windows 95 hit both Apple and Acorn hard. Enthusiasts of both platforms started to chant the mantra "I know Windows can do it but we did it first!". Name calling like this doesn't sell computers the range of applications produced by developers is more important, and as more PC software for schools   grew the reasons for using Acorns became less and less. Ultimately, the UK education market simply could not sustain an entire computer platform. Developing an modern operating systems costs many tens of millions of pounds. Not even making all new Acorn machines capable of running Java, or the promise of an Acorn NC was enough. Cut and paste between applications and drag and drop never really took off in Acorn machines.

The legacy of Acorn Computer is a generation of children who created pictures, writing, music, video using robust upgreadble machines that schools could afford. Perhaps Acorn will have the last laugh though. Like Apple Computer Inc., Acorn Ltd. may not have been perfect, but at least they knew the century was going to end. In my school we have no year 2000 problems. Schools that bought PC's still have that particular 'bug' to deal with.

Some Acorn related sites that you may like visit:

Acorn Computer Ltd
http://www.acorn.co.uk

Xemplar - ann eduaction company jointly owned by Apple and Acorn:
http://www.xemplar.co.uk

A brief history of Acorn computers:
http://www.realtime-info.be/encyc/techno/terms/58/1.htm

The Quail's page All About Acorn Computers
http://www.coturnix.demon.co.uk/acorn.htm

About BBC microcomputers
http://www.bbcnc.org.uk/

Usenet newsgroups: comp.sys.acorn,
comp.sys.acorn.announce, comp.sys.acorn.tech, comp.binaries.acorn,
comp.sources.acorn, comp.sys.acorn.advocacy, comp.sys.acorn.games.

Work by children made using Acorn machines: - a shameless plug for my school's own web site
http://members.aol.com/grimesdyke
🔥Jim Coles
<http://members.aol.com/grimesdyke>