Into the Arc

The Joys and Tribulations of Upgrading to an

In a departure from our usual format Margaret Penfold relates her

I wanted a hard disc. The A3000 is not designed to accept one either cheerfully or cheaply. Upgrading to the A5000 seemed the most sensible solution, so that's what I did.

On unpacking the new system I found three manuals: a slim Welcome Guide, a RISC OS 3 User Guide and a new Applications Guide which included tutorials for Draw and Paint - a big improvement that.

Setting up an A5000 is easier than putting together an A3000. The connections all fit securely. The mouse fits into the rear of the keyboard - no more upturning a whole computer, wondering whether the instruction "arrow upwards" relates to the keyboard surface or to the upside down base.

Once the monitor was in position I found I had too little room in front of it for the keyboard. As the monitor can swivel and the coiled lead connecting the keyboard to the systems box is sturdy I was able (temporarily) to place the keyboard at the side of the systems box.

I switched on the computer and was greeted by a rushing sound. I panicked, checked the instructions, then realised I was listening to the cooling fan in the systems box. The noise becomes less noticeable during use but impinges if the computer is left on while other activities take place.

As soon as the Desktop appeared I clicked on the hard disc icon IDEdisc4. Acorn had already put the contents of Application discs 1 and 2 onto the drive. Later I was to rearrange the files to suit my own needs but it was useful to have them there ready for use.

The most useful applications, Alarm, Calc, Chars, Configure, Draw, Edit, Help and Paint had been moved into ROM, some with extra features.

Draw enhancements include converting outline fonts to paths, grading and interpolating (but I still added DrawPlus to hard disc for the extras it includes).

Alarm, which is also an icon bar clock, has a clearly readable digital display, but you can choose an analogue alternative if that is more to your taste.
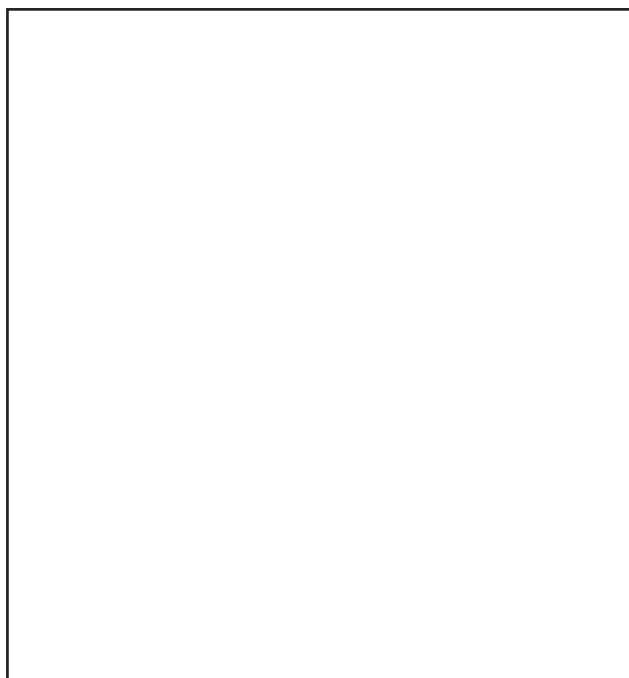
Calc is a satisfactory calculator for normal purposes (there is a more sophisticated scientific calculator in the applications suite that automatically loads in Basic VI, good apparently at floating point calculations, but I haven't yet found a real use for it).

Chars' display is too compact for my ageing eyes so I have added André Timmerman's CHARSET to the hard disc.

The new Edit promises to make the Basic Editor redundant. I have used it for editing Basic but I am not yet at ease with it. I have struggled at intervals to use it for text printing but to date it will print out only one line per sheet of any text file. If the new Printer Manager (see last month's Into the Arc) is the true culprit I will forgive it since in all else it has proved an unexpected bonus. For the first time since buying a Canon bubble-jet 130e printer I get real harmony between computer and printer in all modes.

The boot file system is new and easy to

use. You load applications onto the icon bar and open the directories you want seen whenever you start up. Then you simply drag the boot file icon into the root ($) directory viewer. If you want to start up with anything more complicated you can type it into the boot file.

Transferring files from floppies to hard disc is simpler than transferring from one floppy to another, but some complications arose from anti-piracy devices and computer incompatibility.

Pipedream 3 transferred with no trouble and is much easier to use from hard disc, especially when it calls upon Draw files. I only use short, uncomplicated spreadsheets and databases, with less than 100 records and 10 fields, so I have not found RISC OS 3's extra speed particularly noticeable. For some Spell functions that I know take a long time on Pipedream I use David Pilling's superb, value for money, CrossStar. That application transferred happily and seems to work more quickly on the A5000.

Ovation was more complicated. I couldn't uninstall the main program to install it onto the hard disc; the floppy program disc refused to work; and there was no mention of Ovation in the A5000 release notes. I contacted RISC Developments and they replaced the old disc for one compatible with the A5000 absolutely free. Hurray for RISC Developments. Ovation works superbly on the A5000. It had been a little irritating on the A3000 needing innumerable disc changes as I constantly forgot to dismount discs, but I haven't had one fatal error message from Ovation since upgrading.

FontFX, another favourite application, transferred easily enough, but got into difficulties with fonts. The A5000 already has Corpus, Trinity and Homerton in ROM, and Porterhouse and Selwyn in the !Fonts directory. The manual tells you not to transfer other versions of these particular fonts. Fine, until you use FontFX. It won't accept the new fonts. I now provide it with its own font directory filled with fonts it can use.

The monitor (AKF18) which is part of the whole package deserves a mention. Several people have commented on its clarity in the default mode 27, but it was not until I received ModeAid (RISC User 5:3) that I appreciated its full versatility.

While still getting used to the A5000 I experienced two major set-backs. I had a few seldom-used files in 1st Word Plus format. Having been told that 1st Word Plus files could be printed out without using the parent application I sold my 1st Word Plus to help pay for the A5000. I did not retain a backup copy as I felt that would be dishonest. I had no sooner swapped computers than I found myself needing to print out a 1st Word file in a hurry. I put it into Edit only to be confronted by strings of control characters, none of which responded immediately to the normal search and replace facility. There is a section in the User Guide on how to print 1st Word Plus

files, but I had not reached that part of the manual.

The other set-back occurred with my PC Emulator v1.34. It does not work on the A5000. There is an option to upgrade to a greatly enhanced version for about `45. This offer closed in March. I am still saving. However, the A5000 can read ASCII files that have been saved on PC format discs without using an emulator.

With so many applications in ROM I expected 2 Mb of RAM to be ample, but the A5000 devours memory, especially in the module area. I start up with the default allocations of 160K for screen memory, 64K for cursor, sound, system etc., 416K for the module area, and a 112K font cache. I boot up Calc(16K), Alarm(32K) and the Printer Manager(160K). This leaves me with only 1056K in RAM and about 150 spare in the module area. An application like Ovation needs 512K to start up. I should imagine it would be unbearably frustrating if not downright impossible to use an A5000 that came with only 1 Mb of RAM.

These few niggles, however, have not made me regret the considerable financial sacrifices needed to make the upgrade.

If other A5000 users would like to add to or comment on Margaret Penfold's experiences then please write in to our new Write-Back feature.