All About Credibility

Much has been made recently in the computer press (by that catering for the Acorn market at least) and on television of the fact that 1992 marks the tenth anniversary of the the advent of the BBC micro. In all the hype that has appeared, one small but significant fact seems to have been overlooked, and that is the fact that Acorn s Archimedes range of 32 bit machines is itself five years old this year, having been launched in June 1987. Thus half of the last ten years have also covered the appearance and evolution of a computer system which must be hailed as a major achievement for a British company of the size of Acorn.

When the Archimedes first appeared, it was claimed to be the world s fastest micro, and the first affordable computer embodying RISC technology. It uses its own proprietary operating system, RISC OS, widely acknowledged to be superior even to the Apple Macintosh s legendary desktop. There is now a wealth of software from a variety of sources, the best of which can compete with major applications from the PC and Macintosh worlds (Computer Concepts Impression II was recently voted Best non-PC Business Package in the Computer Shopper Show Awards). Innovative hardware in the fields of scanning, digitising and image processing is generally second to none in a field where the Archimedes offers considerable potential in comparison with other machines. And not least, the Archimedes range (particularly the A3000) outsells all other makes of computer in our country s schools by a ratio of 5 to 1.

Yet how many of you reading this, and presumably owning an Archimedes, might well admit in casual conversation about personal computers, Well, actually I use an Acorn Archimedes , and then prepare to defend that choice. Despite its many excellent qualities, the Archimedes range still seems to lack what I would call credibility, particularly in commercial and professional areas. Its very success in British education sometimes seems like an millstone, dragging the reputation of the system down to the levels of not being a real machine.

One argument often put forward is lack of compatibility with PCs (MS-DOS), but that hasn t stopped the Macintosh achieving a high level of success. And like the Archimedes, Macintoshes are made by a single source - unlike the many clones available in the PC marketplace.

It is true that there is more choice in software for other systems - you have only to look at the pages of PC and Macintosh magazines to see this for yourself, and much of that originates from the States, probably the largest market for computers and software in the world.

However, the Archimedes is very good at quite a number of things. Desktop publishing is one, and the joint development of a professional quality DTP platform by Acorn and Computer Concepts is a strategic step which is long overdue. More such ventures would surely help, and I cannot but feel that given the currently limited and somewhat parochial nature of the Acorn market, Acorn itself needs to take a more positive role with software houses and hardware developers, and actively to promote more joint ventures in order to gain greater market acceptance.