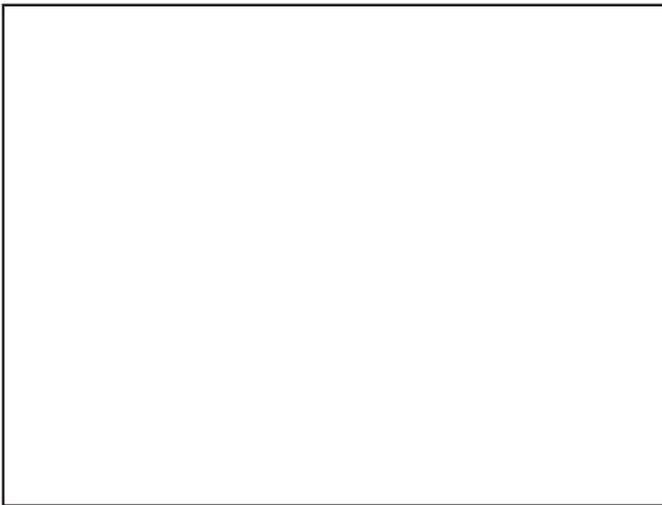# Chatter from 4Mation

Ian Burley reviews the latest in comms packages, with one aimed at the educational market.

T o produce a decent communications package for any computer is a bit of a black art. The Archimedes, which has had a history of oddities afflicting its main comms interface (the serial port), is no exception. Despite such problems, there are several accomplished packages for the

Chatter phone book configuration window

Arc including Longman Logotron s ArcComm 2, ARCterm 7 from The Serial Port and RISC Development s Hearsay II. 4Mation recently entered the fray with Chatter, a competitively priced package aimed squarely at comms novices and the education market.

At £37.50 (ex. VAT), which includes a free site licence, Chatter comfortably undercuts its main rival, ArcComm 2. Both these

programs have schools primarily in mind and offer specifications closely following the requirements of the Campus 2000 online service for schools. Of course, the more powerful and expensive ARCterm and Hearsay alternatives also incorporate Campus 2000 compatibility. However, all the additional features of these relative heavyweights conspire to make it harder for the user to become familiarised with the software. Chatter and ArcComm 2 have the accent on simplicity, though some might complain this has been at the expense of some necessary features.

My first problem with Chatter was that I didn t read the manual properly before installing it. A quick glance at the manual contents page didn t indicate a chapter on program installation. I wasted time manually copying Chatter files to my hard disc, not realising there was any need to initialise the disc. I wondered how many others might not see the initialisation instruction, placed out of the way before the main text of the manual. 4Mation say they seldom get any customer feedback on this.

Unlike most of its competitors, Chatter is supplied on a copy-protected floppy disc, which means you cannot make a security backup of the programs until the disc has been initialised. However, once initialised you are free to make as many copies as you like though all of these copies will have your details embedded within them. Dave Caughley and Mike Matson at 4Mation have worked hard to provide Chatter users with a very concise and accessible RISC OS front end. Chatter is certainly one of the simplest RISC OS comms packages I have come across. There aren t too many main menu options, and the phone book is easy to get into and edit.

Several different address books can be created and saved independently. Automatic log-ons are supported if you
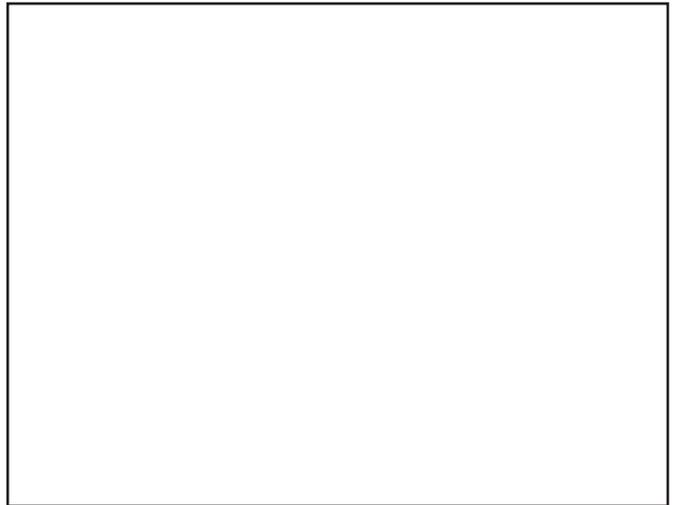
have an intelligent modem and a suitable modem driver is selected. Log-on messages from the host can be recognised and an appropriate response actioned if required by entering a suitable command script. Function keys can be used to contain short script sequences which can be used as hot-key commands once you are on line. In turn, the phone book menu is neatly linked via a nice big button to the main terminal configuration dialogue window. Open this window and initially it reveals a one third view of its area. You re not immediately blinded by a bewildering myriad of set-up options. The rest of the window s contents is easily revealed by maximising the window or dragging the horizontal scroll bars.

The terminal set-up provides access to fundamental settings like comms data rate, data format, and terminal emulation. Unusually, there is an option which is designed to prevent some intelligent (Hayes compatible) modems from using certain error correction or data compression modes which would confuse the host system set for that particular phone book entry.

From the same window you can choose other standard options like echo status, Xon/Xoff and character pacing rates. Here you can also choose Campus 2000 mode which ensures the terminal recognises special Escape sequences for automatic online switching between different terminal emulations, notably Prestel viewdata and VT102 for Telecom Gold. All the communications settings are either linked to individual phone book entries or can be altered to take immediate effect if you are dialling manually.

To choose a modem type you need to have a look at the Chatter icon bar menu. Clicking on the Choices entry reveals another compact and neat dialogue box. You can either choose a pre-prepared modem driver,

create a new one or modify an existing one. Once opened, the modem driver configuration window lets you edit the modem driver name, type, dial strings and various optional commands dependent on which type of modem you are using. I d like to have seen a rather bigger selection of modem drivers supplied with Chatter. If, as 4Mation has indicated, Chatter targets the comms novice, the complexities of setting up a new driver from scratch for an unsupported modem model are not to be

Chatter online to The Silicon Village viewdata service. Note the glitch caused by misinterpretation of double height codes

recommended.

Back to the Choices dialogue box, there are also some radio buttons to set a history buffer size. This is a useful feature which enables you to look back at something which may have scrolled off the screen up to a maximum of 10,000 lines back - depending on what you ve set it to and how much memory is free. A recent addition I have been informed of, but haven t yet seen, is a replay utility which captures an online session and enables the user to browse over it at leisure offline without the phone bill still ticking away. This is aimed at videotex users and particularly Campus 2000 users who have access to the relatively pricey Minitel

service in France.

So far so good, generally. Unfortunately, when I started using the program in anger I became rather disillusioned with Chatter. Its admirable user interface is not matched by the accuracy or performance of its terminal emulations, especially the screen update speed - or lack of. At the less demanding speeds of 1200 or 2400 bits per second (bps) the screen updating is just about acceptable on an ARM2 machine. Any faster than that and Chatter is left behind by the modem.

The worst culprit is the viewdata emulation, which couldn t display incoming data faster than about 4800bps. Owners of increasingly popular 9600bps or 14.4K bps modems will be very frustrated by the version of Chatter I evaluated. Another problem is that the viewdata emulation insists on displaying frames in a two pass operation which is quite annoying to watch if you re used to better emulations. I also noticed minor problems with the way certain display codes were interpreted in both the ANSI and viewdata terminals. But there is hope yet. I put all these points to author David Caughley and in response he was good enough to spend some time improving the viewdata emulation. I haven t yet seen the modifications he came up with, but he assures me things are much improved.

Other points he also promised to address were some quibbles I had about the ZMODEM file transfer box which asks the user to enter a filename even though this will be ignored as one is already embedded in ZMODEM files. X, Y and ZMODEM file transfer protocols are supported, but I was surprised there was no CET telesoftware downloader. 4Mation says there is little demand for it- an assumption I question.

I contacted Campus 2000 for their