Risc PC: First Impressions

Lee Calcraft finally gets his hands on a Risc PC, and puts it through its paces.

L ast month we carried a series of reviews of Acorn s brand new clutch of machines. These were written on the basis of fleeting visits to Acorn House, and the more extensive use of early development machines. But the
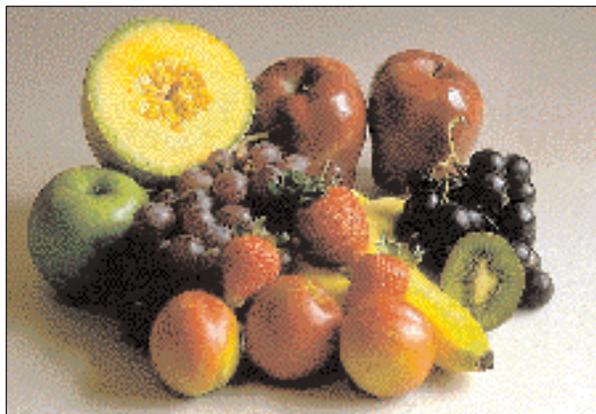
16-bit photographic realism with SlideShow

production lines are now beginning to roll, and Risc PCs are finally changing hands. There were even a few on sale - yes actually on sale! - at the Risc Developments open day last Sunday. And a few days ago, Acorn delivered me a review machine. What follows are some initial reactions to this powerful and delightful computer.

I had no choice over the model on offer, and what I finally received was a single slice machine with 8Mb of DRAM and 1Mb of VRAM. I ll translate: the case was a single-decker type, with 8 megabytes of ordinary dynamic RAM (DRAM), and 1 megabyte of video RAM (VRAM). Both drive bays were filled. To the right was a

standard 3.5 inch floppy drive, and to the left a CD-ROM drive - a Sony CDU-561 double speed Photo-CD compatible drive. Incidentally, you can check what SCSI devices you have attached by hitting F12 and typing Devices at the command line.

The accompanying monitor was an AKF60. This

is the cheaper of the two monitor options offered with the Risc PC, but really performed impeccably.

STUNNING PHOTOGRAPHY

One of the nice things about the Risc PC is that the hard disc already has a good selection of programs and resources to get you going straight away. The first thing that I tried was the
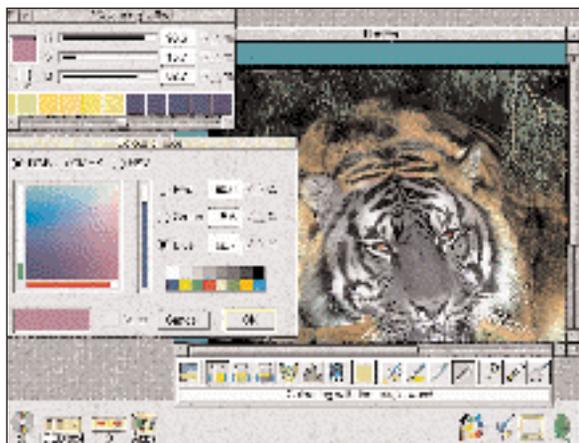
Retouching a tiger with PhotoDesk

Images directory. This contains a modestly named application called SlideShow which

cycles through the one hundred high resolution 24-bit colour images supplied with the machine. The results are quite stunning (and I do not use the word lightly), and caused audible gasps and jaw-dropping whenever I showed them off. The pictures are supplied in the highly-compressed JPEG format, and emanate from the Corel Corporation. They have been professionally taken, and this really does show. The on-screen quality is far in excess of that which you would get from carefully processed 35mm colour prints - even on the AKF60 monitor. One final point - the SlideShow application performs miracles. It decompresses each JPEG image on the fly and cross-fades it into the currently displayed image in little over a second - which is astoundingly fast work.

DESKTOP MOVIES

The next directory worth checking out is Video. This contains four Replay movies: Birds, Launch, LionFish and Rafts. Just double-click on any of them, and sit back and watch. The resolution of these video clips is definitely a good bit better than those on the original Replay CD-ROM that Acorn produced - aided partly by the fact that we are playing off hard disc rather than the slower CD-ROM, the fact that the Risc PC is faster and is not limited to 256 colours, and the fact that Acorn are using new compression algorithms to create their movies - these are based on the so-called moving block algorithm rather than the moving lines algorithm used previously.

Machines for reviewers also had a further bonus in that an extra directory named Films contained ten further Replay clips. These included long title sequences from Star Trek the Second Generation, Doctor Who, and Film 93, and were very impressive indeed. Unfortunately, Acorn s licence for these clips restricts their use to demonstration purposes, and they are not supplied as standard.

MODE TESTING

To check out the combination of Risc PC and monitor, I next experimented with the different modes available. As you may know from our reviews last month, you now select modes by specifying the required number of colours, and

the screen resolution. The AKF60 supplied handled all resolutions competently, and without flicker, right up to 1600 x 600 pixels, where the scale is such that you can get some 35 icons on the icon bar. And even at this resolution, I was still just able to read text in the system font. Such modes would be ideal for DTP work, allowing you to work on a full double page spread. Coming up a step, the 1024 x 768 pixel modes are very clear, and still give a massive desktop.

Back at the other end of the scale, it is still possible to use the time honoured modes 12 and 15. Officially these are only represented in so-called pillar box mode , but it is a very deep pillar box indeed, with only an inch or so of unused screen at top and bottom.

GRAPHICS

As a further test I wrote a very short Basic program to fill the screen with red, yellow and blue areas which blended into each other (see figure 2) - and even using only a 32,000 colour mode, you really can t see the joins:

```
MODE "X800,Y600,C32K,EX1,EY1"
GCOL 128,100,100,100:CLG:OFF
FOR A=255 TO 0 STEP -1
 FOR B=0 TO 255
  GCOL 255,255-B,A
  RECTANGLE FILL 160+A*5,100+B*4,4,3
 NEXT
NEXT
```

Incidentally, I couldn t really run this with 16 million colours, because the machine supplied only has 1Mb of VRAM (video RAM), and although you can get this colour depth without the 2Mb upgrade, you are limited to a paltry 480 x 352 resolution, which quite spoils the effect. Unfortunately, this is even the case with Acorn s top-of-the-range machine, and to get a full 2Mb of VRAM you are forced to upgrade!

As a final test, I loaded some of the excellent JPEG images supplied, into a pre-release version of PhotoDesk, Spacetech s new 24-bit art package. Even in its pre-release form, this is already a very versatile product. It only took a minute or so to attack the Tiger JPEG, applying Toning in blue at 50% with its