

Watchdog

Welcome to Watchdog, designed specifically to protect your interests as a consumer. Over the page, we check out the latest PC prices on the high street and direct from manufacturers in Price Watch.

High price of Y2K

How would you feel about forking out £40 to buy a piece of software that, as well as being almost worthless, intentionally corrupts itself after the first time you run it?

It might sound unlikely but that's exactly what customers of direct-mail company Scotland Direct receive when ordering Prove It 2000, a program designed to check PCs for the so-called year 2000 millennium bug.

In quarter-page advertisements run in national newspapers recently, Scotland Direct printed a number of scare stories suggesting that a 'nationwide computer crash' was imminent. Concerned PC owners are urged to call an 'emergency helpline' number, which is, in fact, Scotland Direct's unannounced sales line. Indeed, the only 'help' available to those who call is the chance to buy a copy of Prove It 2000 at £39.95.

Watchdog has obtained a copy of Prove It 2000 and, in fairness, the program does exactly what's claimed - run it and your PC will be checked for year 2000 compliance. However, even though Scotland Direct makes little secret of the program's one-run life, the fact remains that the £40 charge is out of all proportion to its actual worth.

Any PC owner can perform a simple



test in order to check whether their system is ready for the millennium - as outlined on page 63 in last month's *What PC?* - and programs that do the same thing are available without charge (two such were included on our October cover disc).

CASE FILE

Robert Paterson from Maida Vale in London has been through the rapids with Dell's customer services.

After months of deliberation, Robert placed a £3,000 order for a Dell Latitude notebook and several peripherals. To his delight, the system arrived a few days later, sooner than promised. Unfortunately, his joy was to last less than 24 hours...

An apparent problem with the Latitude's infra-red port prompted Robert to call Dell's technical support line. Following a lengthy wait, he was put through to a US technician who couldn't help him and suggested he speak to a European technician.

Over the next few days the saga developed to the extent that Robert was told he would need to 'scrub' his hard disk and start again. He did, but the problems prevailed.

After wasting a week trying to resolve the situation Robert reached the end of his tether and requested a refund, but Dell would not oblige and American Express could not cancel the transaction.

At the time of going to press, Robert had returned his Latitude to Dell at its request and is awaiting its return in a fully functioning state. Watchdog has contacted Dell and been assured that the situation will be resolved promptly. Of course, we will be keeping a close eye on the outcome of Robert's case.

Do you need a TV licence?

Thinking of buying a TV tuner card for your PC? Already using one? Watch out, you could be breaking the law.

PCs fitted with TV tuner cards are subject to exactly the same rules and regulations as a normal television set, and for that reason you must have a valid television licence before you can legally use one.

As long as you possess a domestic colour television licence for your home you needn't worry, but guesthouses and hotels are subject to different regulations and need to check the terms of their licences carefully.

Write to Watchdog

If you have a case for us to solve or a story that needs investigating write to: Watchdog, *What PC?* Editorial, VNU Business Publications, 32-34 Broadwick Street, London W1A 2HG, or e-mail us on whatpc@vnu.co.uk.



If you're looking for a really powerful system and cost isn't an issue then you might want to cast your eye in the direction of Viglen's aptly-named Awesome 2/266. The mean 32Mb of RAM aside, the machine features a 266MHz Pentium II processor and a massive 7Gb hard disk. The company is also currently bundling an A4 flatbed colour scanner as part of the system.

The buoyant pre-Christmas PC marketplace has provided a particularly busy month for the Price Watch team. In fact, in contrast to last month, IBM is the only manufacturer with an entirely unchanged line-up.

Perhaps the most obvious change is the appearance of entries from Tiny, the fast-expanding high-street retailer. To make room, we've had to drop coverage of Time's systems for now but we will pick up on those again at a later date.

Interestingly, Compaq has withdrawn the Presario 2110 - a previous Price Watch Pick Of The Month - from the table and put the more expensive (but better specified) 4220 model in its place. The main difference is an Intel Pentium 166MHz MMX processor (the 2110 was powered by Cyrix's 133MHz Media GX chip), but the faster 33.6Kbits/s modem is also a welcome improvement.

Hewlett-Packard has also changed this month's Pavilion entries by no small degree. The 3110 is pitched as the entry-level system, and manages to combine better specifications with a lower price - a whole £200 less than its equivalent last month. At the top end of the scale, and for a similar price as last month, the 7380V replaces the 7370V.

Not wishing to miss out on the column inches, Packard Bell has replaced its Executive range with the new Pulsar

High street

Model	Price from	Processor make	Processor speed/class	RAM	Hard disk	CD-ROM	Sound card	Speakers	VRAM	3D Graphics	Monitor	Modem	Other	Warranty	Bundled software	Telephone
Compaq																
Presario 4220	£1,199	Intel Pentium	166MHz MMX	16Mb	2.1Gb	16x	SB 16 (compat)	●	1Mb	n/s	14in	33.6	○	1 yr (os)	● + 8 titles	0845 270 4000
Presario 4830	£2,799	Intel Pentium II	266MHz MMX	32Mb	6.5Gb	24x	SB 16 (compat)	●	2Mb	n/s	15in	33.6	Easy access buttons	1 yr (os)	● + 14 titles	0845 270 4000
Hewlett-Packard																
Pavilion 3110	£1,099	Intel Pentium	166MHz	16Mb	2Gb	16x	SB 16 (compat)	●	n/s	64bit	14in	33.6	○	1 yr	● + 20 titles	0990 474747
Pavilion 3120	£1,199	Intel Pentium	166MHz MMX	16Mb	2Gb	16x	SB 16 (compat)	●	n/s	64bit	14in	33.6	○	1 yr	● + 20 titles	0990 474747
Pavilion 7380V	£2,299.00	Intel Pentium	233MHz	32Mb	4.3Gb	16x	SB 16 (compat)	●	n/s	●	15in	33.6	Sub-woofer, MPEG, gamepad	1 yr	● + n/s	0990 474747
IBM																
Aptiva E10	£999	IBM PR166MX	166MHz	16Mb	2.1Gb	24x	SB 16 (compat)	●	2Mb	●	14in	○	○	1 yr (os)	● + 23 titles	0990 727272
Aptiva E12	£1,099	Intel Pentium	200MHz	16Mb	2.1Gb	24x	SB 16 (compat)	●	2Mb	●	14in	33.6	○	1 yr (os)	● + 18 titles	0990 727272
Aptiva E20	£1,799	Intel Pentium	233MHz MMX	32Mb	4.2Gb	24x	SB 16 (compat)	●	2Mb	●	15in	33.6	○	1 yr (os)	● + 39 titles	0990 727272
Packard Bell																
Pulsar 19	£1,399	Intel Pentium	200MHz MMX	16Mb	3.2Gb	24x	SB 16 (compat)	●	n/s	n/s	15in	56	Fast Media	1 yr (os)	● + 30 titles	01628 508200
Pulsar 20	£1,599	Intel Pentium	200MHz MMX	16Mb	3.2Gb	24x	SB 16 (compat)	●	n/s	n/s	15in	56	Fast Media	1 yr (os)	● + 30 titles	01628 508200
Pulsar 23	£1,899	Intel Pentium	233MHz MMX	32Mb	4Gb	24x	SB 16 (compat)	●	n/s	n/s	15in	56	Fast Media	1 yr (os)	● + 30 titles	01628 508200
Tiny																
Tutor 200	£821.33	Intel Pentium	166MHz	16Mb	1.7Gb	12x	SB 16 (compat)	●	1Mb	n/s	14in	○	○	1 yr (rtb)	● + 8 titles/home media	0800 821333
Accelerator	£1,079.83	Intel Pentium	166MHz MMX	32Mb	3.5Gb	12x	SB 32 (compat)	●	2Mb	●	15in	33.6	○	1 yr (rtb)	● + 18 titles	0800 821333
PII Professional 233	£1,526.33	Intel Pentium II	233MHz MMX	32Mb	4.2Gb	24x	SB 32 (compat)	●	4Mb	●	15in	33.6	○	1 yr (rtb)	● + home media	0800 821333

● = Yes ○ = No ● = Windows 95 ● = Lotus SmartSuite 97 ● = Microsoft Works ● = Serif Pageplus ● = Selection of Microsoft titles (os) = On-site (rtb) = Return to base (c&r) = Collect and return (n/s) = Not specified

Direct from manufacturer

Model	Price from	Processor make	Processor speed/class	RAM	Hard disk	CD-ROM	Sound card	Speakers	VRAM	3D Graphics	Monitor	Modem	Other	Warranty	Bundled software	Number
Dan Technology																
Dantum	£989	Intel Pentium	166 MHz MMX	16Mb	2Gb	16x	SB 16 (compat)	●	2Mb	○	15in	○	○	1 yr (rtb)	● ● Quicken, Encarta 97	0181 830 1100
Home Plus	£1,378	Intel Pentium	166MHz MMX	32Mb	3.2Gb	16x	AWE 64 OEM	●	2Mb	●	15in	33.6	○	1 yr (rtb)	● + 9 titles + MMX bundle	0181 830 1100
Xplora Plus	£1,297	Intel Pentium	200MHz MMX	32Mb	3.2Gb	16x	AWE 64 OEM	●	2Mb	○	15in	33.6	○	1 yr (rtb)	● ● Quicken	0181 830 1100
Evesham Micros																
Vale Prima 686	£703.83	Cyrix	166+	16Mb	1.2Gb	○	○	○	1Mb	○	14in	○	○	2 yrs (os)	●	01386 765500
Prestige Multimedia 166	£985.83	Intel Pentium	166MHz MMX	16Mb	2.1Gb	12x	SB 16	●	2Mb	●	15in	○	○	2 yrs (os)	●	01386 765500
Platinum SE K6PR233	£1,890.58	AMD K6	233MHz MMX	32Mb	3.2Gb	24x	AWE 64	●	4Mb	●	17in	33.6	○	2 yrs (os)	●	01386 765500
Mesh																
Elite Professional	£821.33	Intel Pentium	166MHz	16Mb	1.7Gb	16x	○	○	2Mb	○	14in	○	○	1 yr (rtb)	● ● ●	0181 452 1111
Elite Ultima Plus	£1,350.08	Intel Pentium	166MHz MMX	16Mb	3.2Gb	16x	AWE 64	●	2Mb	●	15in	33.6	TV Tuner	1 yr (rtb)	● ● + 11 titles	0181 452 1111
Elite Fireblade	£1,350.08	Intel Pentium	200MHz MMX	32Mb	3.2Gb	16x	AWE 64	●	4Mb	●	15in	33.6	○	1 yr (rtb)	● ● ●	0181 452 1111
MJN																
166M	£1,091.58	Intel Pentium	166MHz MMX	32Mb	4.3Gb	24x	SB 16	●	4Mb	●	14in	56	○	1 yr (rtb)	● + ●	01282 777555
200M-2 B	£1,432.33	IBM 6x86 MX	PR200 MMX	64Mb	4.3Gb	24x	SB 16	●	4Mb	●	15in	56	○	1 yr (rtb)	● + ●	01282 777555
Exec 233M B	£1,702.58	Intel Pentium	233MHz MMX	64Mb	6.4Gb	24x	SB 16	○	4Mb	●	15in	56	○	1 yr (rtb)	● + ●	01282 777555
Viglen																
Home 166M	£996.40	Intel Pentium	166MHz MMX	16Mb	1.2Gb	16x	SB 16 (compat)	●	1Mb	○	14in	○	○	1 yr (c&r)	● ●	0990 944944
Performance PC 200M	£1,585.08	Intel Pentium	200MHz MMX	32Mb	5Gb	24x	SB 16 (compat)	●	4Mb	●	15in	33.6	○	1 yr (c&r)	● ● + 5 MMX titles	0990 944944
Awesome 2/266	£2,701.33	Intel Pentium II	266MHz MMX	32Mb	7Gb	24x	SB 16 (compat)	●	4Mb	●	17in	33.6	LS-120 120Mb floppy drive, A4 colour scanner, Microsoft IntelliMouse	1 yr (c&r)	● ● + 5 MMX titles + ATI games	0990 944944

brand. The most notable of these is the Pulsar 23, which is £300 less than last month's top-end offering (the Executive 9021XE) yet boasts a faster processor.

The mail-order side of things has also seen plenty of action with almost every

system receiving a price chop. Dan has joined its competitors by fitting a 166MHz Pentium MMX in its low-end PC, and the machine is £50 cheaper than the 133MHz model it replaces too.

Evesham has upped both the price

and the feature-set of its top-of-the-range system. The Platinum SE K6PR233 costs £1,890.58, which buys you a PC with an AMD K6 233MHz MMX processor, 32Mb of RAM and a 3.2Gb hard disk and 33.6Kbits/s modem. Unfortunately for

Evesham, MJN's high-end Exec 233M B seems to be a much better deal. for just over £1,700 the company will kit you out with a Pentium II 233MHz-based PC with 64Mb of RAM, a roomy 6.4Gb hard disk and a super-fast 56Kbits/s modem.

Last up is Mesh, whose mid- and high-level systems receive cuts of just under £60. Though the prices certainly seem reasonable, the specifications of these machines are beginning to look a little lightweight in face of the competition. ●