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Close-up

Toshiba Libretto 100CT

You could be forgiven for thinking that the Libretto was a Windows CE palmtop that had simply been eating a little too much but, like its predecessors, the 100CT is a true Windows 95 device. It now comes with a 166MHz Pentium MMX processor, 32Mb of EDO RAM and a 2.1Gb hard disk, which is still a remarkable amount to fit in so modest a space.

As you would expect, the Libretto's floppy drive is external and connects via one of a pair of 32-bit PC Card slots. The machine only has an infra-red serial port, a microphone input and an audio line-out, with the rest of the ports contained on a small docking adaptor which clips on to the back of the case.

This weighs 225g, while the floppy module adds another 350g, so even with both, the carrying weight stays remarkably low.

The 100CT has a 7.1in TFT screen that operates at a hybrid, wide-angle resolution of 800x480. It can cope with 24-bit colour and the image is bright and readable, despite its size. The extra horizontal room is an improvement over 640x480 VGA but since the vertical resolution is unchanged, you still need to scroll more than you would with an 800x600 SVGA screen.

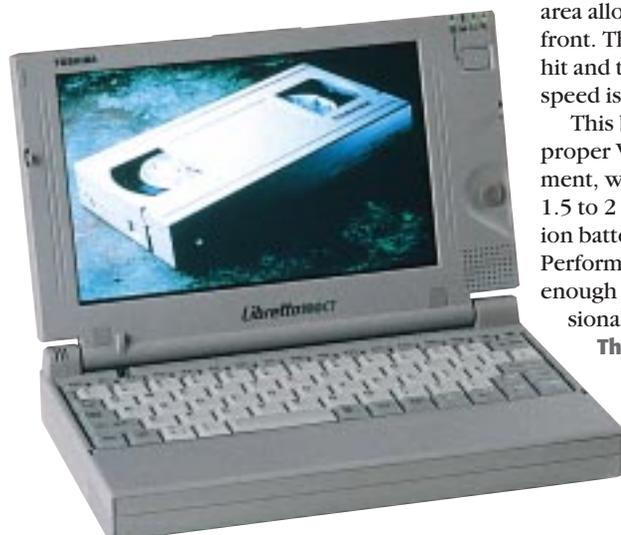
Users lacking dainty fingers aren't going to take to the keyboard, which is still very small and would have been better if it had extended over some of the area allocated to the hand-rest at the front. The small keytops are difficult to hit and the resulting reduced typing speed is the Libretto's biggest drawback.

This being a Toshiba product, you get proper Windows-based power management, which can squeeze in the region of 1.5 to 2 hours out of the slender lithium ion battery under normal conditions. Performance isn't great but it's good enough for the kind of moderate to occasional use the Libretto is intended for.

There's no doubt the Libretto's amazingly compact build will win it more fans, especially now it has two Cardbus expansion slots and a larger

screen but the small keyboard is still a problem.

Dominic Bucknall



| |
|--|
| Intel 166MMX Pentium processor |
| 32MB of EDO RAM expandable to 64MB |
| 2.1GB EIDE hard disk |
| 2Mb NeoMagic MagicGraph 128XD graphics |
| 7.1in TFT screen (800x480 in 24-bit colour) |
| Integral 16-bit audio |
| External floppy drive (PC Card interface) and mini port replicator |
| Lithium ion battery |
| Weight: 950g |
| Dimensions (mm): 210Wx132Dx35H |
| £1,757 (inc VAT) |
| Toshiba: 01932 828828 |
| www.toshiba.com |

Specifications

| Toshiba Libretto 100CT | |
|------------------------|-----------|
| Build quality | ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ |
| Performance | ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ |
| Features | ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ |
| Value for money | ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ |
| Overall | ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ |

Panasonic LFD-101U DVD-RAM

The price of CD recorders has only just fallen to an affordable level - some 13 years after the debut of PC CD-ROM. It's a different story with DVD. We first saw a PC DVD-ROM drive a year ago and Panasonic already has a recordable one.

The LFD-101U DVD-RAM drive is com-

patible with a range of formats and lets you write an enormous amount of data onto reasonably priced removable discs - both DVD-RAM and PD optical. It can also read practically any disc.

As a SCSI device, the LFD-101U is easy to install (but you will need a SCSI adaptor in your PC), and writing files to discs is as simple as dragging and dropping.

Unlike CD-R, you don't need custom software to write to discs and you don't need to know arcane terms like packet writing or buffer under-runs.

We tested the drive on a powerful PC with a high-performance Adaptec SCSI card but even so, data transfer didn't quite live up to Panasonic's claims. Nonetheless, the drive will read from CD and CD-R at around 10-speed (1,500Kb/s), and from DVD-RAM at single-speed (which for DVD is 1,385Kb/s). You can write files to disc at around 550Kb/s, which means that the contents of a CD-ROM will take about 20



minutes to copy and a 2.4Gb DVD-RAM disc will still have room for another two CD-ROMs. At the moment though, DVD-RAM complements CD-R rather than replacing it. Since they're stored in a cartridge, DVD-RAM discs can't be read in an ordinary DVD-ROM drive and though you can record music to them, you can only play this back through your PC.

DVD-RAM is great if you want to record at a decent speed onto large, cheap discs but bear in mind that you'll be the only person able to access your data until the format becomes more common. John Sabine

Specifications

- SCSI-2 recordable DVD device
- Writes to DVD-RAM and PD optical discs
- Reads DVD-RAM, DVD-ROM, DVD, CD, CD-ROM, CD-R, CD-RW and PD discs
- DVD-RAM discs available in 2.3Gb and 4.6Gb sizes

£468.83 (inc VAT)
£17.57 for 2.3Gb disc
£26.97 for 4.6Gb disc

Panasonic: 0990 357357

Panasonic LFD-101U DVD-RAM drive

| | |
|------------------------|-----------|
| Ease of use | ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ |
| Build quality | ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ |
| Performance | ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ |
| Value for money | ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ |
| Overall | ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ |

Apple PowerBook G3/233

Apple is certainly thinking differently with its PowerBook G3/233. Its sleek black curves look like nothing else on the market and it features Apple's speedy G3 processor. It's still stuck with a high price tag though.

When you shell out over £2,000 for a notebook, you don't expect to be craning at the screen, desperately fiddling with the contrast to see your work clearly. Alas, this is the case with the G3/233 and the passive matrix display is simply unacceptable.

The keyboard is soft and responsive and the generous palm rest makes typing a pleasure. The touchpad takes some getting used to, particularly as you can't tap it to produce a mouse click - you have to click the button above it instead.

There are two expansion bays - one on the left can be fitted with a floppy drive or lithium ion battery and the right can accommodate the 20x CD-ROM drive, an optional second battery or third-party storage device. The drives are hot-swappable, so there's no need to turn the PowerBook off if you replace or remove them and batteries can also be swapped when the notebook is in sleep



mode. Other extras include a SCSI interface that allows you to attach up to seven external devices; an Ethernet adaptor for network connections, an infra-red port and a 56Kbits/s modem.

The G3 chip is combined with 32Mb of RAM and a 2Gb hard drive, offering a performance that matches up to some Pentium II desktop systems and outstrips pre-PII notebooks. However, as ever with Apple's computers, there is a price to pay and if you've got £2,000 to spend, you can get a better overall specification from a PC notebook.

The PowerBook G3/233 is a beautifully designed notebook fitted with the fastest processor Apple can offer, so it's a shame to see it let down by a poor screen and high price. Ursula Tolaini

Specifications

- 233MHz G3 processor
- 32Mb of RAM
- 2Gb hard drive
- 12.1in passive matrix SVGA colour display
- Lithium ion battery
- 20-speed CD-ROM
- 56Kbits/s internal modem

£2,103.25 (inc VAT)

Apple: 0870 127753
www.apple.com

Apple PowerBook G3/233

| | |
|------------------------|-----------|
| Features | ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ |
| Build quality | ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ |
| Performance | ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ |
| Value for money | ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ |
| Overall | ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ |

Adobe Photoshop 5

The latest version of the leading professional image-processing application available for Windows 95, NT and Power Macintosh

Adobe Photoshop is an image-processing application that has maintained the lead among graphics professionals almost since its inception. Practically every image you see in glossy magazines will have been 'Photoshopped', whether just to improve the quality of a photograph or to combine multiple images together with special effects.

Given this, we won't dwell any further on its past glories, except to say that it has all the features for overall image enhancement and retouching one could expect, together with precision colour control and the very important concept of layers.

Layers are an essential feature of high-end image work. By using layers, different images or fragments of images can be combined yet stay separately editable. Layered objects can be added and removed, stacked in any order, moved about in relation to each other and be made more or less transparent. The last update to Photoshop brought 'filter' layers - essentially effects that worked on the layers below them but didn't physically change the image, so they could be removed or altered, unlike a conventional permanent filter. This time, Adobe has gone further with Layer effects. Say, for example you create a layer that consists of a few brush strokes. You can then add the Layer Effects of a drop shadow and a glowing outline. The clever bit comes when you return to that layer and add more brush strokes, as these will automatically retain the same effects with the same options.

There's also been considerable enhancement to text creation, which is now much more like a drawing program. You can place text vertically and horizontally, format characters individually, and edit tracking and kerning. 'Double-byte' fonts are also supported, so you can use Chinese or Japanese typefaces. Usefully, all text is saved to separate layers and thus remains editable.

One brand-new and potentially brilliant feature is the History palette. As the name suggests, this provides a list, together with a tiny thumbnail, of every

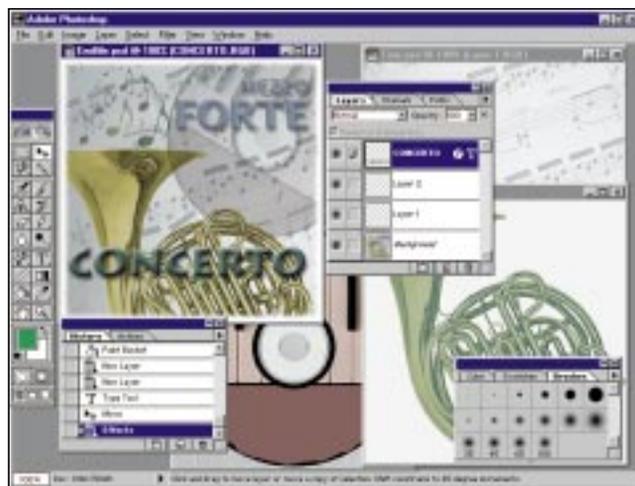
action performed on an image. This effectively offers a multiple undo and can make it much easier for artists to try various effects before returning to an earlier state. Unlike Micrografx Picture Publisher's similar 'Command centre' list, this can only undo sequentially - you can't skip back undoing some actions but keeping others. Working in conjunction with this is the History brush. This is rather like a Clone brush that works in time rather than space, as you can select a previous snapshot in the History list and use it as the source to paint on the existing image.

Another new feature (also previously seen in Picture Publisher) is the Magnetic Lasso tool. This helps users 'cut out' shapes from the background by automatically tracing a selection along the borders of an image region - say the head of a portrait. A corresponding Magnetic Pen lets you draw paths (vector shapes) in a similar manner.

A very unusual new feature is 3D rotation. Though this might seem a contradiction in terms for flat bitmaps but within the limitations of the image it works very well. On a more serious level, there are new features for precision measurement of angles and distances, and a palette that will sample colour values from multiple points in an image. Though, unlike much of the competition, there are no 'naturalistic' painting media, the retouching tools and brushes are, as ever, precise and delicate. One notable omission, however, is an image browser or media manager.

Finally, as usual, the documentation is excellent, with multimedia tours, tutorials and an inspiring gallery of artists' works created using the product.

For those willing to pay the considerable price, Photoshop once again provides



the ultimate in image processing, though the well-equipped studio will need extra software for 'natural' painting and image browsing.

Tim Nott

Specifications

- History palette for multiple undo/redo
- Magnetic auto-tracing around edges
- Enhanced typographic control
- Precision distance, angle and colour measurement
- 3D rotation
- Layer effects update automatically
- Spot colour channels
- ICC colour management

£700 (inc VAT)

Upgrade: £188 (inc VAT)

Adobe: 0181 606 4001

www.adobe.com

Adobe Photoshop 5

| | |
|------------------------|-----------|
| Ease of use | ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ |
| Performance | ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ |
| Features | ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ |
| Value for money | ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ |
| Overall | ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ |

Minimum requirements: Pentium PC, Windows 95, 32Mb of RAM, 80Mb of hard disk space.



Gateway Solo 5100 266LS

Last year, the big thing to happen to notebooks was the spread of affordable high-resolution screens. This year, it's Intel's Pentium II Mobile proces-

sor and Gateway has adopted the new processor for the flagship model in its 5100 series of notebooks.

Despite the heavyweight specification, the Solo is surprising light at only 3Kg, something which it owes in part to its slim 40mm case. You have the choice of installing either the 20-speed CD-ROM drive or the floppy drive in a single bay at the front but unlike some machines, the bay cannot be used to house a secondary battery. The floppy drive can be run externally from the parallel port but only if you pay Gateway extra for an adaptor cable.

The machine is powered by a lithium ion battery that provides around two hours of continuous running under normal conditions. You can toggle between various levels of power savings as you work using a key combination but to fine-tune the power-saving behaviours on offer, you need to interrupt the boot process and go into the BIOS setup directly.

The keyboard is easy enough to adapt to thanks to its spacious layout, large Enter key and spacebar, and the lack of unusual function combinations sometimes found on notebook keyboards. The touchpad is less successful and

needs to be more sensitive both to movement and tapping, which it often fails to recognise as 'mouse clicks'.

The screen is excellent, thanks to its large 14.1in diagonal and a TV output port is included.

Well made and pleasant to use apart from the somewhat insensitive touchpad but although the Solo is fast, it isn't quite in the premier division where performance is concerned. Dominic Bucknall



Specifications

- Intel Pentium II 266MHz processor
- 48Mb of SDRAM expandable to 144Mb
- Removable 4Gb UltraDMA hard disk
- Removable 20-speed CD-ROM drive
- 14.1in TFT panel with 16-bit colour at 1024x768
- Software includes Windows 95, Office 97 SBE, Money, AutoRoute Express, Encarta 97

£2,983 (inc VAT)

Gateway: 0800 282000
www.gateway2000.com

Gateway Solo 5100 266LS

| | |
|------------------------|-----------|
| Build quality | ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ |
| Performance | ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ |
| Features | ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ |
| Value for money | ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ |
| Overall | ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ |

Ulead PhotoImpact 4.0

PhotoImpact 4.0 is an image-editing and retouching program similar in features to the best-known image-editing package, Adobe Photoshop (also reviewed on page 23). However, whereas Photoshop is designed for professionals,

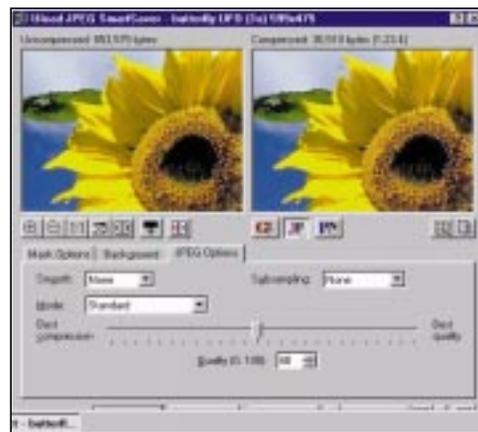
PhotoImpact has been designed with general users in mind.

So although the program is packed with features, these are presented in ways that make more sense to those unfamiliar with the terminology of image editing. For example, when applying a colour manipulation scheme, images are said to be given a 'sunrise' or 'sunset' look (with visual feedback always at hand).

The program includes all the necessary features for manipulating the colour, size and other attributes of images and there's a wealth of interesting special effects. PhotoImpact has always been good for text manipulation and this new version offers textual 3D effects in the form of depth, texture, reflection, shadow and so on.

But it's the Internet-specific features that make this version stand out. The program has more or less everything you might need for image editing for the Net - from scanning and editing, to uploading to your Web site. For compressing and saving images, you're able to move a slider and preview in a separate window the quality of the resulting image against its file size.

Once you have loaded or scanned in an



image, you can turn it (or any part of it) into a 3D button, a background, a frame or a shadowed thumbnail, or generate animated GIFs from a number of images.

Although PhotoImpact is specifically not a Web page authoring program, it will generate Web pages for you if you are creating picture catalogues and slide shows for the Internet, with all the thumbnails and links added automatically.

For £100, PhotoImpact has most features you will find in the more expensive Adobe Photoshop, and more. A very good deal.

Panicos Georgiades

Specifications

- Sophisticated image editing and retouching
- Special effects
- Text manipulation including 3D effects
- Animated Gif creation for the Web
- Web Smart saving of graphics

£100 (inc VAT)

Bit UK: 01420 83811

Ulead PhotoImpact 4.0

| | |
|------------------------|-----------|
| Ease of use | ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ |
| Performance | ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ |
| Features | ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ |
| Value for money | ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ |
| Overall | ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ |

Minimum requirements: Windows 95, 16Mb of RAM, 120Mb of hard disk space



Dotlink Power Tower 400SE

A powerful 400MHz Pentium II desktop complete with multimedia features and a modem for a remarkably low price

If you factor in the VAT, the price charged by Dotlink for its latest home PC loses a little of its magic but take the Exchequer's cut away and you are left with a number that catches the eye – £999. This is no big deal by itself but it becomes one when you find out that the Power Tower is a 400MHz Pentium II PC and that's an awful lot of computer for this kind of money.

The system comes in a midi-tower case which is solidly constructed and not unpleasant to behold but it does suffer from the aesthetic shortcoming of having a rather loud fan. Powerful PCs need to be kept cool so this isn't by any means uncommon and the easiest way to minimise the problem is simply to put the system unit on the floor.

The peripherals supplied with low-cost machines can be fairly nasty but the Power Tower comes with a Microsoft mouse and Acer keyboard. This wasn't particularly substantial but had a quiet, middleweight action which

few people are likely to object to.

The mains-powered stereo speakers are from a company called Juster, which isn't hugely well known but undeniably knows its business. The sound was clear and balanced enough to make music playback work and powerful enough for immersive gaming and generally irritating the rest of the family.

Although improvements in the way Windows can mediate between software and hardware has made the brand of sound card less important these days, if you want copper-bottomed compatibility, Sound Blaster is still the brand to go for. If you have a number of DOS-based games you will be pleased to know that the Power Tower has a basic but competent Sound Blaster Vibra 16.

Monitors are relatively expensive as components go, which is why they are a favourite area for corner-cutting in order to keep the overall price down. Happily, Dotlink has managed to find a good compromise here in the form of a 15in Hansol display. This has an image diagonal of 13.7in, a relatively flat, undistorted screen and a detailed set of digital controls covering all the geometry corrections you are likely to need.

The picture was very sharp at the recommended 800x600 (SVGA) resolution and it even remained just about usable at 1024x768 resolution, although you might find the smallness of screen objects in this mode a bit of a strain on

the eyes. The tube supports an 85Hz refresh rate in all modes, so screen flicker can be eliminated entirely.

The machine is fitted with a 32X CD-ROM drive by LG Electronics and there's even an internal modem. This operates at the fast 56Kbits/s speed using the popular and widely supported K56flex technology and gives you fax and voice facilities as well.

Inside the case, the machine is tidily constructed and there's ample room for adding extra bits. There are two sockets for more memory, one ISA and four PCI bus slots for expansion cards, and one 3.5in plus two 5.25in empty drive bays, all three of which open through the front of the case. All told, this is more than enough in each department.

Machines with fast processors, even ones as fast as a Pentium II 400, aren't always that good overall, thanks to performance bottlenecks caused by poor components elsewhere. This was not the case here. The 8Mb AGP Matrox Productiva graphics card, 64Mb of fast 100MHz SDRAM memory and 5Gb UltraDMA hard disk combined to produce very impressive results indeed.

There's no way round it, the Power Tower is just excellent value for money and is one of the fastest PCs around at the moment.

Dominic Bucknall

Specifications

- 400MHz Pentium II with 512Kb of pipeline burst cache
- 64Mb of SDRAM
- Intel 440BX chipset
- 5Gb Maxtor Diamondmax UltraDMA hard disk
- 32-speed CD-ROM drive
- 8Mb AGP Matrox Productiva graphics
- 15in Hansol FST monitor
- Sound Blaster Vibra 16 sound card
- Active stereo speakers
- Internal K56flex modem
- Windows 95, Lotus Smartsuite 97

£1,174 (inc VAT)

Dotlink: 0181 902 5802

Dotlink Power Tower 400SE

| | |
|------------------------|-----------|
| Build quality | ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ |
| Performance | ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ |
| Features | ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ |
| Value for money | ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ |
| Overall | ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ |



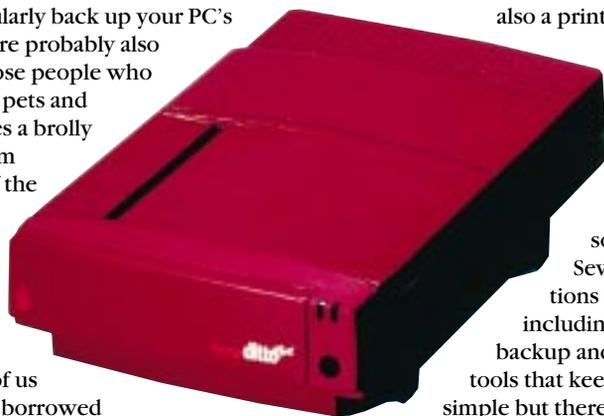
Iomega Ditto Max

If you regularly back up your PC's data, you're probably also one of those people who insures their pets and always carries a broly out with them regardless of the weather. In other words, you're in a sensible minority.

The rest of us are living on borrowed time and really should be investing in something like the Iomega Ditto Max. Iomega has long been involved in the tape backup business and the Ditto Max builds upon its successful Ditto drive.

The Max still connects to a PC's parallel port but tapes are now loaded using a slide-out tray, rather than a mere push-in slot. It can also hold up to 7Gb of compressed data on a 3.5Gb tape, making it ideal for the latest crop of PCs with multi-gigabyte hard drives.

Getting the Max up and running is a straightforward business. With the drive connected to the parallel port (there's



also a printer pass-through socket) and mains supply, all that remains is to install the software.

Several applications are supplied, including one-step backup and restore tools that keeps everything simple but there's also a more sophisticated application called

The Works for greater control over the backup process.

Parallel port devices aren't the quickest to transfer data but the Max managed around 13Mb a minute in our tests. This is fine for large backups, since they're best left running overnight anyway but the Max also has the interesting ability to treat the first 125Mb of a tape as a removable drive. With the Flash!File application running transparently in the background, the Max can be treated just like a big floppy disk - perfect for quick drag-and-drop backups.

No-one gets excited by tape drives but you should see the look on someone's face when they lose a year's worth of data. Avoid this sad experience by buying a device like the Ditto Max. You know it makes sense.

Julian Prokaza

Parallel port tape drive with printer pass-through

 7Gb compressed capacity with 3.5Gb tapes

 Flash!File feature for fast 150Mb storage

£199 (inc VAT)

Iomega: 0800 973194

www.iomega.com

| Iomega Ditto Max | |
|------------------|-----------|
| Ease of use | ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ |
| Performance | ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ |
| Features | ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ |
| Value for money | ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ |
| Overall | ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ |

Minimum requirements: 486 PC, Windows 3.1, 8Mb of RAM, 4Mb of hard disk space, parallel port.

Specifications

Microsoft Office 97 SBE v2.0

Microsoft's Office 97 is undoubtedly the definitive general-purpose business software, including as it does, a word processor, spreadsheet and contact management. Microsoft has added DTP software in this Small Business Edition, now in version 2.0, as well as other applications of interest to small businesses.

A potential disappointment is the new Small Business Financial Manager 98. This add-on for Excel extracts data from your accounts software for analysis, letting you see the effect of turnover, price or margin variations. Financial Manager works with some versions of Sage Sterling, Pegasus Capital Gold and the US version of QuickBooks but since the first two are relative heavyweights in the market, this could be a bit of a damp squib.

Last time, Financial Manager was left out of the box and you had to send for it separately. This time it's the turn of Outlook 98 - an integrated e-mail application with a contact manager, calendar, task list and journal. It's yours for an interestingly

priced postal charge of £12 but you can make do with the supplied Outlook 97. There's also Word 97, Excel 97 and Publisher 98 for publications for print or the Web.

Doing Business on the Internet is an online reference offering advice via your browser, whilst the Value Pack is a collection of hints, tips and templates on the CD-ROM.

Also useful are the Small Business Templates - a collection of five preformatted Excel workbooks covering balance sheet, cash flow, debtors and creditors, profit

and loss, and sales lead tracking. An essential tool, if you need industry-standard software, but it's a pity about Financial Manager and the features that didn't make it.

James Taylor



Latest copies of Word, Excel, Outlook, Publisher and AutoRoute Express GB

 Add-on Small Business Financial Manager and Small Business Templates

 Hints and Tips on doing business on the Internet

£407.73 (inc VAT)

Microsoft: 0345 002000

www.microsoft.com

| Microsoft Office 97 SBE v2.0 | |
|------------------------------|-----------|
| Ease of use | ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ |
| Performance | ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ |
| Features | ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ |
| Value for money | ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ |
| Overall | ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ |

Minimum requirements: 486 PC, Windows 95, 16Mb of RAM, 145Mb of hard drive space, CD-ROM drive

Specifications

Evesham Micros Vale Platinum II pII/333

A truly turbo-powered PC combining Intel's Pentium II 333 processor with a sophisticated array of high-speed hard disks

It's not unheard of for computer manufacturers to focus a sales pitch on the power of the processor that has been used. 'Look,' they cry, 'it's a Super-Gigabuster! It'll blow yer eyebrows off'. In reality, however, a fast processor is no guarantee of exemplary performance - components like the hard disk and graphics card play equally important roles in determining the overall speed.

Evesham Micros' Vale Platinum II is a good demonstration of the synergy that can be achieved by paying careful attention to all aspects of a system rather than just slapping in a fast processor and hoping for the best.

The first thing that a fast processor like the Pentium II 333 should be given is lots of memory. In this case, there's

128Mb, which is sensible given that a machine like this is clearly intended for demanding applications. The next vital feature is the hard disk, as it is disk speed which is generally the most significant performance bottleneck in any PC.

The Platinum actually has two hard disks - both 9Gb units manufactured by Quantum - connected to the rest of the system via an Adaptec Ultra2 SCSI card. SCSI is the interface of choice for users requiring real speed from their drives, with the popular Ultra Wide SCSI standard capable of delivering an impressive peak data transfer rate of 40Mb per second. Ultra2 actually doubles the burst transfer rate to 80Mb per second and when coupled to extremely fast Quantum Viking II drives, this results in scorching disk performance.

As if this wasn't enough, Evesham has gone one step further to wring the last drops of speed from the disks. The twin drives are read and written together rather than individually, in a process known as data striping. This means that a block of data is split into sections and divided between the two drives, to be read or written by both simultaneously. The 'many hands make light work' principle operates and at its best, data striping can almost double the speed of a given read/write operation.

The final part of the performance top four of processor, memory, disk and graphics is taken care of by an 8Mb ATI All-In-Wonder AGP graphics card. This combines 2D and AGP-boosted 3D graphics with an on-board TV and Teletext tuner, allowing you to watch either in a window or on screen.

You can also watch films, thanks to

the double-speed Panasonic DVD-ROM drive or sit back and vex the neighbours with the virtually hi-fi quality sound delivered by the Sound Blaster AWE 64 Value wavetable sound card and Multimedia Labs speaker set. The consists of a sub-woofer and stereo satellite units, all powered by a separate amplifier complete with a five-band graphic equaliser and spatialisation circuitry. PC sound doesn't come much better than this.

No PC is complete these days without a modem and the Platinum comes with an internal 56Kbits/s model, providing top download speeds for normal phone line users. It's also fitted with a 100Mb Iomega ZIP drive, which is ideal for backups and storing non-essential data, as well as exchanging large files like graphics or short-ish video clips with other users.

The icing on the cake is a 17in Taxan Ergovision 750 monitor, based on Mitsubishi's excellent Diamondtron screen. This deals out bright, rock-steady and sharply focused graphics but also conforms to the stringent TCO95 standard limiting electromagnetic emissions. **The Platinum II is an extremely fast machine and combines cutting-edge performance with an enviable feature set. It's fairly expensive but a PC of this order simply does not come cheaper.**

Dominic Bucknall >>



Specifications

| |
|--|
| Pentium II 333 processor |
| 128Mb of SDRAM |
| Intel 440LX motherboard chipset |
| Twin, data-striped Quantum Viking II 9Gb SCSI LVD hard disks |
| Adaptec 2940U2W SCSI controller |
| 8Mb ATI All-In-Wonder Pro AGP graphics card with TV tuner |
| 2x Panasonic DVD drive |
| Iomega ZIP drive |
| Sound Blaster AWE64 Value |
| External Multimedia Labs power amplifier and three-piece speaker set |
| Internal 56Kbits/s fax modem |
| Taxan Ergovision 750 TCO95 17in Diamondtron monitor |
| Windows NT Workstation 4.0 |
| £3,700 (inc VAT) |
| Evesham: 0800 634 5998 |
| www.evesham.co.uk |

Evesham Micros Vale Platinum II PII/333

| | |
|------------------------|-----------|
| Build quality | ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ |
| Performance | ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ |
| Features | ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ |
| Value for money | ★ ★ ★ ★ ☆ |
| Overall | ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ |

AutoSketch 5

A low-cost, easy-to-use CAD package for novices and occasional professionals

AutoSketch 5 is a major new release of Autodesk's two-dimensional precision drawing tool for inexperienced CAD (Computer Aided Design) users. From the same stable as the renowned AutoCAD, AutoSketch sits at the low end of the company's product range and is targeted at professionals who occasionally design relatively simple drawings.

Typical users might be engineers or managers, using AutoSketch at the concept or proposal stage of a project. Home users might turn to AutoSketch when regular drawing and presentation graphics programs prove inadequate. Most of them can't cut the mustard when it comes to precise measurements or scaling - such as in a specification for some modest landscape gardening or the design of a new bookcase.

Installing AutoSketch is very simple and on starting the program, you're presented with a StartUp dialog box which immediately lets you access the program's strongest new feature - Applications Wizards. Most software in this

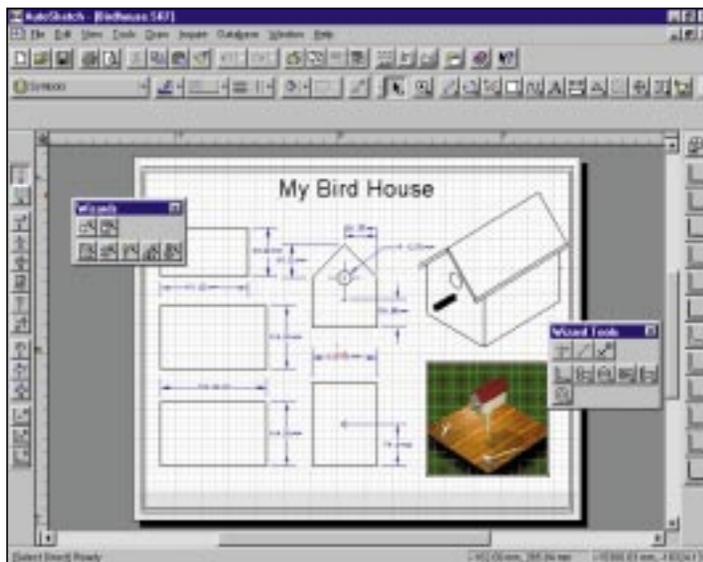
price range provides a general-purpose range of drawing tools and starts you off with a dauntingly blank page. In contrast, the AutoSketch 5 wizards help novice or occasional users to create the most common types of drawings, such as architectural, mechanical or diagramming drawings. Having selected one, the interface and design options are automatically tailored to that application.

For example, the Building Wizard allows you to set up a drawing of an office or house, define its general shape and dimensions, set the default thickness for walls, and so on. Once the wizard has set up your drawing, you can then draw interior walls, add furniture, doors and windows, and layout electrical cabling or water pipes.

Adding these symbols from any of AutoSketch's dozens of symbol libraries uses another impressive new feature - the Symbols Explorer. This lets you preview the symbols and manage them via a standard Windows interface. Complementing it is the Symbol Bar - a docking toolbar that displays all of the symbols in the current library, giving you one-click selection and placement.

As is the fashion these days, several Internet capabilities are now included in the product. Autodesk's Drawing Web Format (DWF) standard helps you to access and post drawings and data using the Internet. Hyperlinks will enable you to embed links in drawings that point to other drawings, Web sites and Microsoft Office documents. This last facility stems from general Microsoft Office 97 compliance, which also allows relatively easy annotation of drawings with details in Word or Excel files.

Many other new or improved features



have been incorporated into AutoSketch 5. Files can be saved from AutoSketch in DWG format, which an AutoCAD or AutoCAD LT user can then edit. AutoSnap lets you see what point the cursor will snap to before you make your choice and is based on the input mode you've chosen - such as snap to a grid point, an end point or an intersection. Draw Picture lets you enhance drawings with photos and scanned images, as well as control their size and placement. Nor are customisable grids confined to the usual rectangular type - they can also radiate from a central origin or be isometric, allowing you to represent 3D objects in a 2D drawing, viewed from either left, right or above.

Finally, one other quite revolutionary change in this release is the replacement of Action/Object operation by the Object/Action approach, in which you first select your object (such as a rectangle) and then act on it, say, to fill it with a solid red colour. This is by far the more common method and is generally more popular - but no doubt there will be howls of protest from some classic AutoSketch users.

Complementing its extensive precision drawing tools, AutoSketch is now enhanced with the Application Wizards, drag-and-drop symbols, Internet capabilities and many other features, and offers great value for the occasional 2D CAD user.

Terry Pinnell

Specifications

Application Wizards for creating common drawing types

Customisable Grids, including radial and isometric

Symbols Explorer and Symbols Bar for symbol previewing

Microsoft Office 97 compatibility

Hyperlinks to other drawings, documents or Web sites

Multiple rulers

£99 (inc VAT)

Force Two: 01844 261872

www.autodesk.co.uk

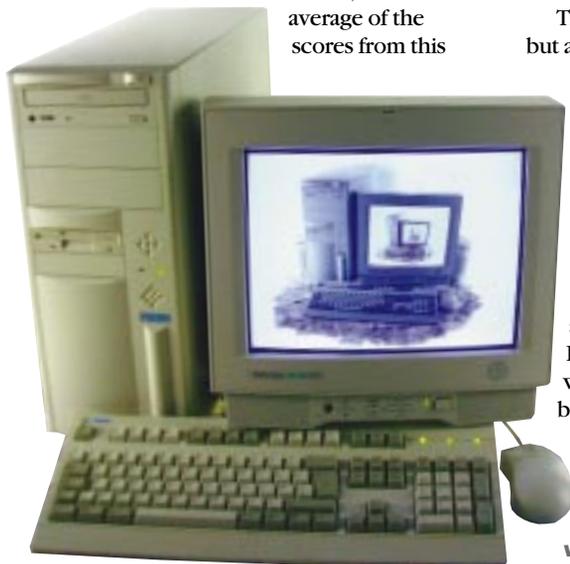
| AutoSketch 5 | | | | |
|-----------------|---|---|---|---|
| Ease of use | ★ | ★ | ★ | ★ |
| Performance | ★ | ★ | ★ | ★ |
| Features | ★ | ★ | ★ | ★ |
| Value for money | ★ | ★ | ★ | ★ |
| Overall | ★ | ★ | ★ | ★ |

Minimum requirements: 486 PC, Windows 95, 8Mb of RAM, 39Mb of hard disk space, a CD-ROM drive.

Mesh Elite Professional 350BXT

If you want a PC with the newest and fastest Intel processor, you won't have to pay a premium price. Mesh has a PC based on a 350MHz PII for under £1,000 but only if you miss out the VAT man.

You'll get good performance for your money though. A BAPCo score of 351 is respectable and though this is lower than the Dell Pentium II 350 we tested last month, it's about the average of the scores from this



month's Pentium II 400MHz group test. Speed, however, isn't the only thing you should look for in a PC.

The Elite Professional has a fair set of components for a business machine and the 64Mb of RAM and 6.4Gb hard disk should keep you happy. The on-board Ensoniq chipset isn't the best we've heard and sound isn't the only compromise Mesh has chosen to make.

The supplied 15in monitor is adequate but a 17in one would have been better. A business machine could use some form of removable storage and there's no modem. All of these would have added to the price but without them, the Elite is lacking.

The Elite is a poor choice for home users too, principally because of the graphics card. The Matrox Productiva is an excellent 2D card and scores well on this part of our Final Reality test but its poor 3D score will hold games back. We'd also quibble about the case's power button (its shape makes it prone to jamming), the unmarked sound card sockets and a missing power cable.

For a business, the Elite is certainly worth a look. However, it's been

stripped down to meet a price and its specification has too many holes for the home user. Look at the Dotlink Power Tower on page 32 to see what can be done for £999 + VAT. John Sabine

| |
|--|
| 350MHz Pentium II processor |
| 64Mb SDRAM |
| 6.4Gb hard disk |
| Matrox Productiva 8Mb AGP graphics card |
| Onboard Ensoniq sound |
| 15in Taxan monitor with built-in speakers |
| Lotus SmartSuite 97 |
| £1,173.83 (inc VAT) |
| Mesh: 0181 208 2028 |
| www.meshplc.co.uk |

Mesh Elite Professional 350BXT

| | |
|------------------------|-----------|
| Build quality | ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ |
| Performance | ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ |
| Features | ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ |
| Value for money | ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ |
| Overall | ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ |

Specifications

Maxtor DiamondMax 2880

It wasn't that long ago when a 40Mb hard drive was considered capacious. These days, a single Windows 95 program file can be bigger than this and of course, hard drives have ballooned in size accordingly.

The latest model from Maxtor is a veritable monster. Its DiamondMax 2880 range starts at a modest 2Gb but this top-end model is a whopping 11.5Gb. To put this into perspective, this is almost 300 times the capacity of a 40Mb hard drive. Despite this, the DiamondMax 11.5Gb

still has the TARDIS-like ability to fit into a 3.5in drive bay.

Installing a new hard drive is a straightforward business and the DiamondMax is particularly easy, thanks to the comprehensive instructions. A small switch on the back sets the drive as either the master or slave unit (depending on whether you want to keep your old hard drive and if you still want to boot from it) and all cabling and screws are supplied. There's also brackets to fit the drive in a 5.25in drive bay, so flexibility is the key word here.

Once fitted, the drive must be configured and it's here that you might encounter problems. The BIOS of some PCs can't recognise drives larger than a certain size - 2.1Gb, 4.2Gb or 8.4Gb, depending on the PC's age. Fortunately, Maxtor's Max*Blast software circumvents this and, as long as your operating system supports it, you can use the drive as a single 11.5Gb partition.

Performance-wise, the DiamondMax is pretty nippy, giving a typical raw data-transfer rate of around 12Mb a second. Better

still, it'll last you for years, or at least until 17Gb DVD discs come along...

At around 3p per megabyte, the Maxtor DiamondMax 2880 is a cost-effective and straightforward way to massively increase your PC's storage capacity.

Highly recommended. Julian Prokaza

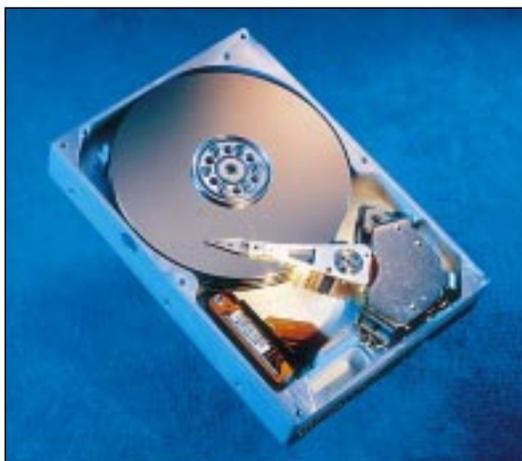
| |
|---|
| 11.5Gb IDE 3.5in hard drive |
| Max*Blast software for large hard disk BIOS support |
| All cables and brackets included |
| £399 (inc VAT) |
| Maxtor Ireland: 00 353 12 866 222 |
| www.maxtor.com |

Maxtor DiamondMax 2880

| | |
|------------------------|-----------|
| Ease of use | ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ |
| Build quality | ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ |
| Performance | ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ |
| Value for money | ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ |
| Overall | ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ |

Minimum requirements: 486 PC, DOS 5.0, free IDE interface, 3.5in or 5.25in drive bay

Specifications



QuickBooks Basic Accounting

A cut-down QuickBooks for beginners in small business accounting, at an entry-level price

QuickBooks is one of the most widely known and discussed business accounting packages available in the UK. Its publisher, Intuit, has done an excellent job in converting this US-derived software for use over here and each new edition has built on the last to offer more features and improved functionality. Until, that is, you come to QuickBooks Basic Accounting.

The immediately previous and, indeed, still current edition of QuickBooks is version 5.0. Though it's a competitively priced product, it won't necessarily attract first-time buyers who can also choose from offerings at around £100 from Sage, MAP and Connect. So QuickBooks Basic is obviously Intuit's bid for that first-rung market.

It's inevitable, if unfair, that QuickBooks Basic will be judged more against its bigger brethren than against its peers. Indeed, Intuit seem to encourage this with a handy list of features left out and this review could easily become a catalogue of what you don't get. Some of the more noticeable omissions include stock control, invoice customisation, memorised (predefined) reports, year-by-year comparisons and of course, everything to do with payroll.

What you do get is a three-ledger 'proper' accounting program (double-entry bookkeeping and all that stuff), although this is concealed from non-accountants. The three essential ledgers are Sales, Purchase, and Nominal and in

QuickBooks, these are called respectively, Accounts Receivable, Accounts Payable and Register. Between them, they track all monies owed to your business by your customers, all monies you owe for goods or services and the totals for all your bank, cash and credit card accounts. The Register will, in addition, keep a note of which analysis accounts (petrol, telephone, stationery) you've allocated spending to. All this takes place painlessly behind the scenes. Onscreen, money to be paid out is entered on a comfortably lifelike representation of a cheque, whilst invoice details are entered into fields laid out as the paper form.

Payments (in and out) and settlement of outstanding bills or invoices can be applied to specific outstanding amounts if required. In addition, you can record other cash and cheque payments against either the cheque number or a voucher reference. After incoming payments have been allocated to particular invoices, you can also record your banking deposit against your paying in slip number.

Although there's no stock control, both invoices and purchase orders can make use of goods or service item descriptions predefined by you and including all the necessary VAT categories and analysis references. Invoices can be issued for specific jobs, choosing between professional, service and goods invoice layouts. You can also create credit memos and statements but there's no control over layout. If you're brave enough, you can also add finance charges to your invoices when they haven't been paid by the due date, using your own percentage interest rate (with an optional minimum charge).

Monthly accounting and management information reports include cash flow forecast, project or job reports and miss-

ing cheques, as well as the usual profit and loss, balance sheet and trial balance. The monthly Collections report, which analyses your overdue invoices to produce a list of exactly how late payment is, is particularly useful.

If you're hoping to save disk space, QuickBooks Basic disappoints, taking up the same 25Mb as its bigger brothers. The manual and the help files are more-or-less straight copies of the QuickBooks 5 versions, with few concessions to the fact that lots of features just aren't there – potentially very time-consuming for users who believe the manual.

QuickBooks Basics continues Intuit's successful approach to 'non-accountant' accounting software at a price that makes it worth investigating but don't buy it if you think it's a version of QuickBooks 5.

James Taylor



Specifications

Accounts receivable automatically records invoices and payments

Accounts payable and bill paying keeps details of bills and payments

Automatic VAT calculation and recording

Reports and graphs customisable from 75 pre-designed formats

Transaction registers manage each of your bank accounts

Automatic budget calculations and cash-flow forecasting

File-compatible upgrade to QuickBooks Accounting or QuickBooks Accounting and Payroll

£99 (inc VAT)

Intuit: 0800 585058

www.intuit.co.uk

QuickBooks Basic Accounting

Ease of use ★ ★ ★ ★ ★

Performance ★ ★ ★ ★ ★

Features ★ ★ ★ ★ ★

Value for money ★ ★ ★ ★ ★

Overall ★ ★ ★ ★ ★

Minimum requirements: 486 PC, Windows 3.1, 8Mb of RAM, 25Mb of hard drive space.