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The first wave of blisteringly fast 450MHz PCs come under scrutiny, Apple makes a stylish bid for the home computer market, Psion launches its latest PDA and Canon brings you a mobile printer

Close-up

Hewlett-Packard Brio 8500 & Viglen BizPro S 450ES

Two big-name PCs with the latest Intel processor – a Pentium II running at a blistering 450MHz

It's hard to keep up with the ever increasing speed of Intel's processors. Every time we look inside a PC, it seems to be fitted with a new, 'fastest ever', Pentium II. Indeed, this month sees two of the first systems powered by the latest, fastest 450MHz chips, hit the stands.

The 450MHz Pentium II processors knock the 400MHz chip from the top slot but prices remain under £2,000 for these souped up, high-end PCs, packed with loads of handy extras. The 450MHz chip benefits from all the performance enhancements introduced with the Pentium II chip, plus the hiked clock speed. It also slots onto a 440BX motherboard, which allows it to take advantage of the faster 100MHz system bus to speed up data processing.

The Pentium II chip found here should not be confused with the recently launched 450MHz Xeon processor. The Xeon is a Slot II processor, which refers to the connector on the motherboard that the chip fits into and this needs a different motherboard design.

Xeon is designed for use inside mid- to high-end network servers. To meet the performance demands

Specifications

HP Brio 8500:

- 450MHz Pentium II processor
- 128Mb of RAM
- 10Gb hard drive
- 4Mb ATI Rage Pro graphics card
- Accton 10/100 Base T network card
- 17in monitor
- 32-speed CD-ROM drive
- 24/4-speed CD-RW
- Windows NT 4.0

£1,991.63 (inc VAT)

Hewlett-Packard: 0990 474747
www.hp.com

Hewlett-Packard Brio 8500	
Build quality	★ ★ ★ ★ ★
Ease of use	★ ★ ★ ★ ★
Performance	★ ★ ★ ★ ★
Value for money	★ ★ ★ ★ ★
Overall	★ ★ ★ ★ ★

of these systems, it can be fitted with up to 1Mb of Level 2 cache that operates at the same speed as the core processor, rather than the half speed of standard Pentium II chips. It also supports multi-processing for up to eight processors. That said, we wouldn't be at all surprised if someone produced a multi-Xeon-based desktop PC before the year is out.

Although the PCs under test here don't benefit from all the enhancements offered by Xeon, they're still fast performers. Both the Hewlett-Packard Brio 8500 and the Viglen BizPro S 450ES are aimed at the business market, rather than home users or games enthusiasts, but as is the way with new processors, Pentium 450 systems will certainly appear in home systems before too long.

The Hewlett-Packard system came with Windows NT installed, reflecting its more serious business intent. Viglen, on the other hand, stuck with Windows 98. This difference did have an effect on performance though, and the Sysmark 98 benchmark scores for both systems are not directly comparable for that reason. Talking of benchmarks, the Sysmark 98 one is new, so don't compare these results with ones previously published in *What PC?* The new tests are explained further in this issue's notebook PC group test.

The HP Brio 8500 combines its processor with a 10Gb hard drive and 128Mb of RAM, resulting in an impressive 194 score in our performance test. Alas, the beefy processor didn't help much with the Final Reality graphics test and its ATI Rage Pro graphics card only managed to pull in a result of 3.71. This is lower than most of the scores from the 400MHz Pentium II systems we tested in the August issue of *What PC*.

As you would expect from HP, the Brio is very well put together and comes with plenty of extras. The tower unit is fairly compact and its CD-ROM and floppy drives are complemented by a CD-RW drive, which means you can use the Brio to burn your own CDs.

The supplied 17in monitor is of reasonable quality and supports resolutions up to 1280x1024 with a refresh rate of up to 100Hz, ensuring a flicker-free display. HP also supplies an extended keyboard with extra keys for direct access to such features as the Internet, e-mail and Help. These keys can be programmed to take you to whichever features you choose but the handy icons that illustrate their functions can't be changed. Because the Brio is a business PC, an Ethernet network card is fitted instead of a modem, but even in this market, a modem is a useful component to have.

Viglen's BizPro is more suited to small business or even high-end home users, as it comes preinstalled with Windows 98 and a 56Kbits/s modem. The rest of its spec is similar to the Brio and its 10Gb hard drive and 128Mb of RAM helped it turn in a performance test result of 179. For topnotch graphics performance though, this is the PC to choose. Its Matrox Millennium G200 card gave a score of 4.66 in our Final Reality test. The card is based around the MGA200 chip, which copes really well with both 2D and 3D graphics, and so the BizPro will have no trouble handling graphically- intensive applications.

A lot of thought has gone into the setup process. As soon as you open up the box you are greeted by a Quick Start guide that shows you how to put the system together. To add an extra helping hand all the ports on the back of the PC are clearly labelled. All the additional manuals and documentation are gathered together in a folder.

The BizPro has an added bonus in the shape of a 19in monitor. As usual, this takes up a lot of desk space but it's a crisp, clear display that can handle a maximum resolution of 1600x1200 at 75Hz and picture quality is excellent. The BizPro isn't short of useful features either. It has a CD-ROM and floppy drive, plus a Travan tape backup drive with an 8Gb tape, which would be handy for business users, though not many home users would utilise this extra storage option. It also has a pair of Yamaha speakers with a subwoofer, and comes with Microsoft Office Small Business Edition preinstalled.

If you want to beef up the spec there is plenty of scope to add in more memory and extra devices. To make upgrading a simple job Viglen has kept the inside of the BizPro shipshape, with cables tied away to ease access to the processor and RAM. The 128Mb of RAM takes up just one DIMM slot, so you're left with two free slots to add in extra memory. You can also add extra 3.5in devices in the two free bays.

As we expected from the first 450MHz PCs, both of these systems are very fast performers. Their specification reflects their top-of-the-range status but if we had to choose between the two, the Viglen would get our vote. Ursula Tolaini

Below: The Viglen BizPro S 450ES pictured with optional 15in monitor.

Specifications

Viglen BizPro S 450ES:

- 450MHz Pentium II processor
- 128Mb of RAM
- 10Gb hard drive
- 8Mb Matrox Millennium G200 graphics card
- 56Kbits/s modem
- 19in monitor
- 32-speed CD-ROM drive
- Travan T4000 tape backup drive
- Windows 98
- Microsoft Office Small Business Edition

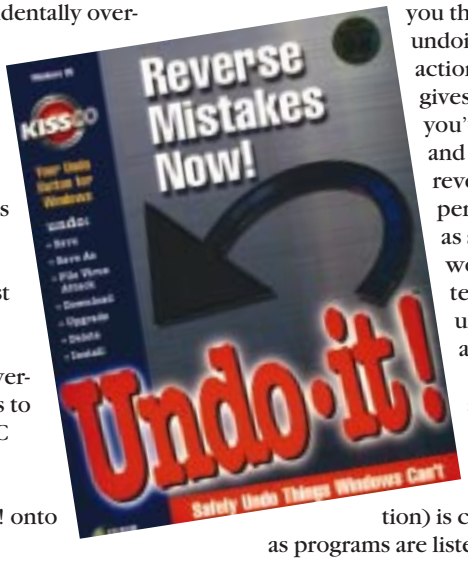
£1,995 (inc VAT)

Viglen: 0990 944944
www.viglen.co.uk

Viglen BizPro S 450ES	
Build quality	★ ★ ★ ★ ★
Ease of use	★ ★ ★ ★ ☆
Performance	★ ★ ★ ★ ☆
Value for money	★ ★ ★ ★ ☆
Overall	★ ★ ★ ★ ★

Undo it!

Everybody makes mistakes and thankfully, almost every Windows application has an Undo function to eradicate them. Well, most of them. While you can undo your typing in Word, for instance, you can't undo the times you click Save rather than Save As and when you accidentally overwrite a document you wanted to keep, it can be more than a little frustrating.



Enter stage left Undo it! from Cross Atlantic. The program claims to be able to undo almost any Windows 95 action, restoring everything from overwritten documents to the state of your PC before a program installation.

Getting Undo it! onto your PC is painless enough, though somewhat ironically, the program lacks an uninstall option. You have to answer a few fairly straightforward questions and then the program makes its presence known with a small icon on the Taskbar. And that's when the fun starts...

When you make a mistake, click the icon (which resembles a U-turn road sign) and a menu will pop up. This gives you the option of either undoing a program or file action. Selecting File Undo gives you a list of the files you've accessed recently and selecting one will reverse any or all actions performed upon it. It's as simple as that and it works, though it can be terribly slow if you're undoing multiple actions.

Undoing program actions (such as accidentally closing Word or reversing an entire installation) is considerably trickier as programs are listed by their executable filenames (Sndrec32.exe rather than Sound Recorder, for example). This is fine if you're a clued-up techie but the average computer user would at the very least be confused.

Undo it! is a handy utility but it doesn't quite live up to its promise. It's sluggish in operation and, for anything more than simple document action undos, it's too confusing to use. Scott Colvey

Specifications

Records all Windows 95 actions

Undoes alterations to documents, program installations and Registry entries

Undo 'bin' limited only by hard disk space

£39.95 (inc VAT)

Cross Atlantic: 0171 228 6992
www.crossatlantic.co.uk

Undo It!	
Ease of use	★★★☆☆
Performance	★★★☆☆
Features	★★★☆☆
Value for money	★★★☆☆
Overall	★★★★★

Minimum Requirements: Windows 95, CD-ROM drive, 15Mb of hard disk space.

Pace 56 Solo

If you're looking to buy a modem, the only sensible option is a 56Kbits/s model. A quick scan of advertisements will show prices hovering around the £100-£120 mark. So what makes UK-based modem manufacturer Pace believe it can sell its latest 56Kbits/s model, the 56 Solo, for just a pound short of £200?

Well, this is no ordinary modem. For a start, it looks unlike any other modem you've ever seen, with more buttons than a pearly king's jacket sleeve. Not only that, but it can serve as a digital answering machine, hands-free speakerphone and fax machine – and it can even tell you who's calling before you pick up the phone (so long as your telephone service provider offers the facility). Better still, unless you're planning on surfing the Internet or sending an e-mail, your PC doesn't even need to be switched on for you to take advantage of many of these features.

Setting up the Solo is blissfully simple. Windows 95 acknowledges its presence as soon as you've started up your PC, following connection of the supplied cable. After that, the rest is up to you. Left alone, the 56 Solo will work in the same way as any other 56Kbits/s modem, sending data at up to 33.6Kbits/s and with ideal line conditions, receiving it at up to 56Kbits/s.

However, with a little tweaking of software and hardware options, you can release its full potential.

At the moment, the 56 Solo uses Rockwell's K56flex standard. However, Pace has posted a patch on its Web site, allowing the unit to be immediately upgraded to the ITU-approved unified 56Kbits/s modem standard, V.90.

If all you want is a modem, don't buy the 56 Solo. If, on the other hand, you want to do away with a lot of office equipment clutter, it provides an impressively integrated solution. Scott Colvey

Specifications

K56flex modem, flash upgradable to the V.90 modem standard

2Mb on-board memory (expandable to 6Mb), capable of storing around 30 minutes of voice messages

Stores time of messages

Automatically switches between voice and fax calls

Five-year guarantee

£199 (inc VAT)

PMC Electronics: 0990 561001
www.pacecom.co.uk

Pace 56 Solo PC Messaging System	
Ease of use	★★★★☆
Build quality	★★★★☆
Performance	★★★★★
Value for money	★★★★☆
Overall	★★★★★

Minimum requirements: Windows 3.1, free serial port.

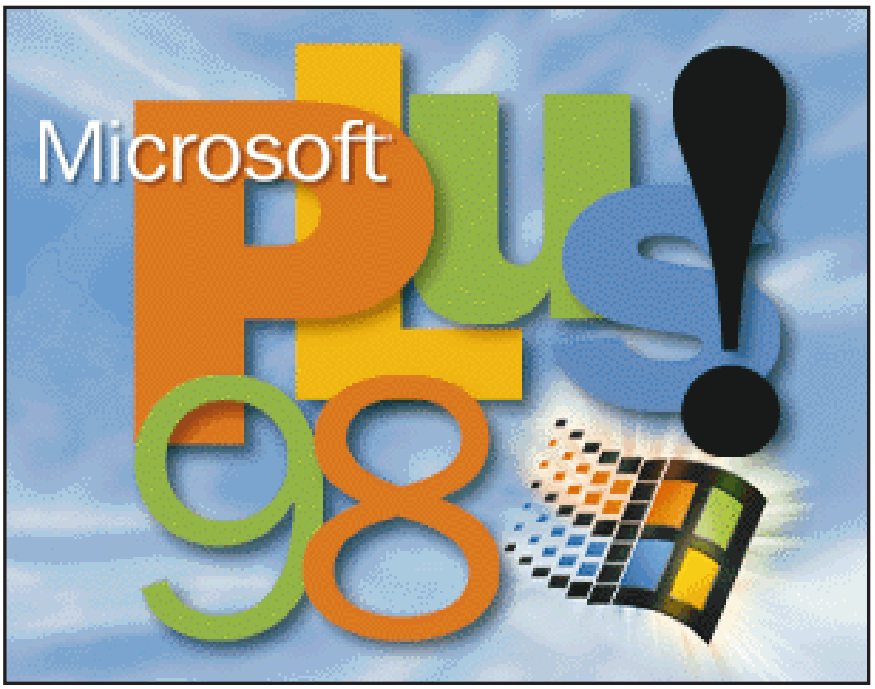
Plus! 98

Plus! 98 is a collection of system utilities, games and assorted extras for Windows 98 to keep your system running smoothly

Windows 98 crept into the market a couple of months ago with little fanfare. Sales appear to be brisk and, in many ways, it's a vast improvement over Windows 95. But many users may feel that it's still missing something. Sadly, they won't quite know exactly what, however, unless they get their hands on a copy of the Plus! 98 Pack.

Plus! 98 comes with a whole raft of system utilities designed to help your system run more smoothly. They are all covered by the Maintenance Wizard, a handy little application that lets you take care of a number of different problem areas in one fell swoop. The wizard starts off with Disk Cleanup, which identifies broken links and tidies up the Start Menu. Microsoft has also added CyberMedia's File Cleanup. This utility identifies unnecessary files and gives you the option of deleting them to free up hard disk space.

The Maintenance Wizard will then defragment the disk for you and check for viruses with McAfee's highly-rated VirusScan product, which comes with six months of free virus fix updates. Although these utilities are very helpful, however, it can take a great deal of time to run all of them at the same time. To avoid waiting around, the wizard allows you to schedule different tasks for more convenient times.



Once you've got your data back in the right place and all the rubbish thrown out, you can save even more hard disk space with Plus! 98's compressed folder function. This feature condenses files and folders with up to 90 percent compression, allowing you to fit a big file onto a floppy disk or cut down on the size of an e-mail attachment. The files can then be viewed using any common compression application.

Plus! 98 also comes with a rather nice photo editor called Picture It! Express. You can import your own photos – either from a disk or straight from a TWAIN-compliant scanner – and then adjust the tint, contrast and brightness. It also allows you to crop and resize, convert it to another file format, soften the edges and get rid of red-eye.

Lest you think that Plus! 98 is all about housekeeping and hard work, however, Microsoft has also thrown in some fun extras that will keep you busy well into the small hours. The Deluxe CD Player is a vast improvement on the original Windows player simply in terms of looks, but it has Internet capability as well. When you insert an audio CD and hit the Internet link button, it quickly retrieves and stores the artist and track information. It can also point you to various Web sites where you can find out more about your favourite band.

A new set of Desktop themes is also included in the package. Once again, they range from the attractive to the bizarre, covering topics as diverse as Garfield, Rock and Roll, Jazz and Geometry. Plus! 98 also takes care of a number of other cosmetic issues, such as screen font smoothing, wallpaper stretching and high-colour large-format icons.

If you have any energy left after fine-tuning your system to the point of insanity, there are still three satisfyingly addictive games to try out – Spider Solitaire, Golf 1998 Lite and the fiendish Lose Your Marbles. Plus! 98 can certainly help you automate a lot of boring tasks and it will be useful for anyone lacking standalone utilities, virus and photo-editing applications. **Plus! 98's system utilities eliminate the need for standalone applications, while the collection of goodies will keep you occupied for weeks, but this is really stuff that could be a standard part of Windows 98.** Susan Pederson

Specifications

Disk cleanup utility

Maintenance wizard

McAfee virus scanner

New Desktop themes

Photo editing application

Deluxe CD player

Three games

£36.66 (inc VAT)

Microsoft: 0345 002000
www.microsoft.com

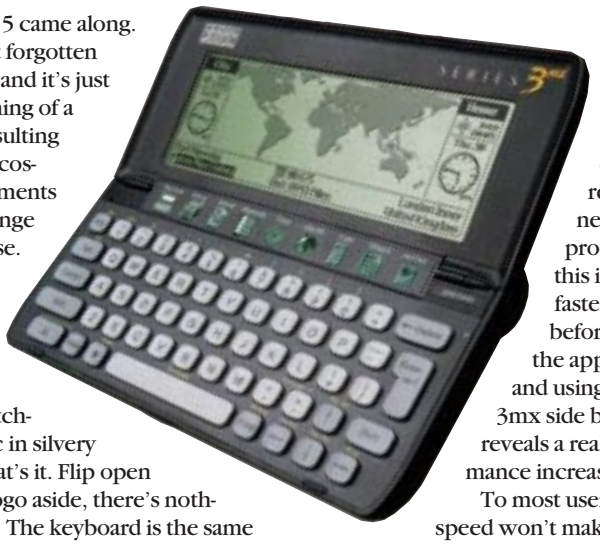
Plus! 98	
Ease of use	★ ★ ★ ★ ☆
Performance	★ ★ ★ ★ ☆
Features	★ ★ ★ ★ ☆
Value for money	★ ★ ★ ★ ☆
Overall	★ ★ ★ ★ ★

Minimum requirements: Pentium 90 PC, 16Mb of RAM, 100Mb of hard disk space, Windows 98.

Psion Series 3mx

The Psion Series 3 was and is one of the most successful PDAs ever. The 3c incarnation, launched a couple of years ago, introduced a handful of extras – rubbery finish, new applications, a backlit screen – and this was the model of choice until the Series 5 came along.

Psion hasn't forgotten the 3c though, and it's just given it something of a facelift. The resulting 3mx has a few cosmetic improvements but the big change is inside the case. The most obvious change with the 3mx is the new finish – smooth, scratch-resistant plastic in silvery grey. And… that's it. Flip open the case, and logo aside, there's nothing new inside. The keyboard is the same old finger-friendly model and there's the usual strip of application buttons between keyboard and screen. Screen quality is crisp but unchanged, although the backlight is a touch brighter.



Switching on the 3mx for the first time reveals few surprises. All the applications are the same as before – meaning you get a word processor, spreadsheet, database, agenda, and sundry programs. So what, exactly, does the new mx epithet stand for? Well, try using an application and you'll find out. The mx refers to the new NEC mx processor and this is three times faster than before. As a result, the applications fly and using a 3c and 3mx side by side reveals a real performance increase.

To most users, the extra speed won't make much difference – mostly just less time to flip between applications. For some, however, who use their 3c for serious calculations and for complex spreadsheets, the faster processor will be a boon. **Though not a huge step forward for PDAs by any means, the Series 3mx is a fast and affordable addition to an already flooded market. If you're looking to buy for the first time, keep it simple and buy this.**

Scott Colvey

Specifications

- Word processor, spreadsheet, schedule and database applications
- 2Mb of memory
- Serial connector for attaching to a PC
- Infrared communications port
- Built-in digital audio recording facility
- **£269.95 (inc VAT) includes voucher which can be redeemed for a free copy of MS AutoRoute**
- **Psion: 0990 143050**
  www.psion.com

Psion Series 3mx	
Ease of use	★ ★ ★ ★ ☆
Performance	★ ★ ★ ★ ★
Features	★ ★ ★ ★ ★
Value for money	★ ★ ★ ★ ☆
Overall	★ ★ ★ ★ ★

Canon BJC-50

The one disadvantage to a notebook computer is printing from it. It's a little difficult to take your laser printer on the train with you, and a touch inconvenient popping back to the office every time you want a hard copy. Enter the BJC-50. This little black beauty is more or less the same size as a packet of 200 duty-free cigarettes and rather more flexible.

If you've got a decent-sized case for your notebook, this should fit in it too. If you want black and white or colour prints, this will deliver. Best of all, if you buy the optional scanner cartridge from Canon, it will scan for you as well.

Installation of the printer was a snap and, though the scanner cartridge was a little trickier, the logical instructions made it all very clear. Then came the printing. Here, you have a choice between a normal cable connection (the BJC-50 needs a cable with an unusual mini plug but this is supplied) or infra-red. Either way works fine but be warned that your notebook's infra-red interface may be temperamental – ours conflicted with a modem initially.

Both prints and scans are acceptable, if rather slow over infra-red – the BJC-50 only supports the older 115Kbits/s protocol. It also gets tedious feeding sheets of printer paper in one at a time, since there's no sheet-feeder, but then this is a printer for occasional use anyway. A real boon though, is the supplied battery. Good for 30 pages or so and using rechargeable Lithium Ion technology, this lets you print and scan without any wires at all. **If you must have portable printing, then the BJC-50 delivers all you could want. It's truly wireless, if just a tad pricey.**

John Sabine

Specifications

- Portable printer that doubles as a page scanner
- Lithium Ion battery
- IRDA infra-red interface
- 360dpi resolution for prints and scans
- Weight: 950g
- **£316 (inc VAT)**
- **Canon: 0500 246246**
  www.canon.co.uk

Canon BJC-50	
Ease of use	★ ★ ★ ☆ ☆
Build quality	★ ★ ★ ★ ☆
Features	★ ★ ★ ★ ★
Value for money	★ ★ ★ ☆ ☆
Overall	★ ★ ★ ★ ★