

# after hours: *family*

We explore a rival to Microsoft's Encarta encyclopaedia, return to childhood in Toyland, and visit some of the National Trust's properties

## Oxford Interactive Encyclopedia

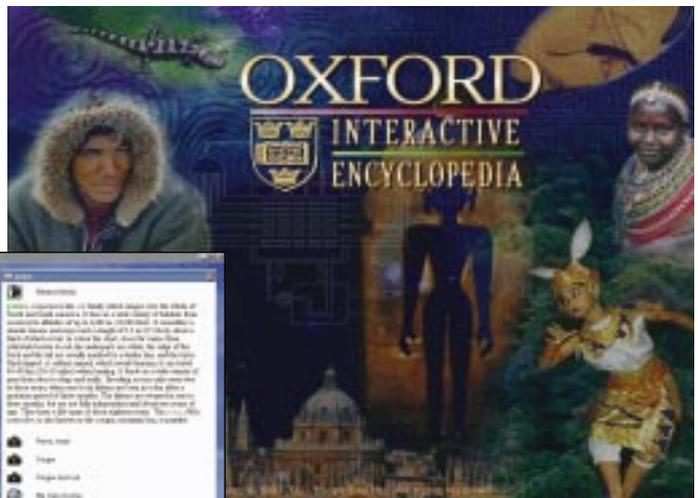
There are many multimedia encyclopaedias available, with Microsoft's Encarta the undisputed market leader. The latest challenger comes from Oxford University Press, in association with The Learning Company. The bulk of the content – 34,000 articles – is from the *Oxford Illustrated Encyclopedia*, and is impressively detailed.

The disc also includes a special encyclopaedia edition of the *New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*. It has all the entries of the full edition but lacks its sophisticated search mechanisms: definitions are accessible either from an alphabetical list or by double-clicking on any word in the encyclopaedia entries.

The main articles are British-oriented, clear and illustrated with a good range of pictures. These display in a small window beside the main entry but can be expanded to full screen. They include works of art as well as diagrams.

The included sound clips are

extensive, but the videos play in such a tiny window they can be difficult to follow. It is, though, possible to incorporate any of the entries into your own presentations.



Navigating through the entries is easy: the interface is based on the tried and trusted Compton's Encyclopedia, also from The Learning Company, and searching is reasonably powerful.

On-line links are equally easy to use, with a special icon marking out relevant Web sites. All those we tried seemed well chosen, but it is strange that you can't update the encyclopaedia from the Net.

Unfortunately, the atlas doesn't live up to the standard set by the

rest of the disc. It shows no topographical detail at all and only major towns, some of which seem to be in the wrong places. ▶

## family/multimedia news

**P**ingu the TV penguin is set to come to your PC in the latest educational CD-ROM published by BBC Multimedia. The disc is available now priced at £24.99 and includes puzzles, screen savers and games – including Fish Tennis.

Another trip to the frozen south will be possible in the summer when **Attenborough's Antarctic**, also from the BBC, hits the shelves.

BBC Multimedia: 0181 576 2000

Maris Multimedia has just announced the retail version of its **Space Station Simulator**, priced at £39.99. Previously only available bundled with new MMX PCs, the disc features a 3D guide to the International Space Station to be launched by the Americans and Russians in 2003. Users can design their own space station and learn about the space environment and the details of the international project.

Maris Multimedia: 0171 488 1566

The latest release from educational publisher IONA Software is **A to Zap!** Featuring activities for every letter of the alphabet, together with music and animations, it promises to help three- to six-year-olds explore and discover letters and numbers. The disc is available now for £19.95.

IONA Software: 0181 296 9454

Two new music programs have been released by



Guildsoft. **Music Works 2**, a fully-featured MIDI scoring, recording and editing package, allows music to be edited directly from the score and costs £58.70. **Music Ace** is designed to make learning music fun and features games designed to reinforce an understanding of music theory. It also allows users to compose their own tunes on the Music Doodle Pad, and costs £29.95.

Guildsoft: 01752 895100

www.guildsoft.co.uk



## After hours family

This is a fairly minor quibble as the rest of the disc is good, and looks even better value given that the CD-ROM of the *Shorter Oxford dictionary* alone sells for £80. **JS**  
**Apart from the atlas, this is an excellent reference tool. It's well put together and a worthy rival to Encarta.**

- £39.99 (inc VAT)
- The Learning Company:  
0181 246 4000

### Oxford Interactive Encyclopedia

Presentation	★★★★★
Ease of use	★★★★★
Value for money	★★★★★
<b>Overall</b>	★★★★★

Minimum requirements: 486DX2-66, DOS 5.0, Windows 3.1 or higher, 8Mb of RAM (16Mb recommended), 75Kb of hard disk space, 2x CD-ROM, 256-colour display.

### Learning in Toyland

Any parent of a young child will be familiar with the Fisher-Price name, which is synonymous with quality and play value. Fisher-Price has now lent its name to some children's software titles, which incorporate multimedia versions of its toys.

Learning in Toyland, for three- to six-year-olds, features toys such as the Big Action Garage, Flip Track Mountain and the All-in-One Kitchen – tempting enough to make most children start exploring immediately. There is a strong educational element, although this is unlikely to be apparent to a child who will simply enjoy playing.

Most of the activities allow for structured work and free play. In the Big Action Garage, you can either follow the instructions to make a vehicle, or design your own, using spanners, screws and so on. The best of these are the drill, which



drops wood shavings while you work, and the handy vacuum cleaner, so you can tidy up afterwards.

Another great game is making and decorating cookies – a three-year-old will be as over-generous with icing on the computer as she is in the kitchen but, pleasingly, there's no stickiness involved. **SH**

**There is plenty to do in this package, it's great fun, educational and enormously popular with both the six- and three-year-old testers. In fact, it was largely responsible for turning the younger child into a confident, independent computer user.**

- £29.99 (inc VAT)
- Ablac: 01626 332233

### Learning in Toyland

Presentation	★★★★★
Ease of use	★★★★★
Value for money	★★★★★
<b>Overall</b>	★★★★★

Minimum requirements: 486 DX33, 8Mb of RAM, Windows 3.1/95, 256-colour graphics, 2x CD-ROM drive, mouse, sound card.

### National Trust British Countrysides

This guide to National Trust (NT) properties is part of the Anglia Perspectives series. Unfortunately, it's difficult to see who it's aimed at. Unless you own a powerful notebook PC you can't take it with you when you visit the historic houses or countryside in the care of the Trust, and it doesn't have enough detail on individual properties to make this worthwhile.

Rather, it aims to provide background information on the Trust, with more detail on just a few properties. This section is interesting, with attractive pictures but is woefully short and makes too little use of video clips.

The sections giving Trust background would be better presented in the NT handbook. A picture, overlaid with semi-relevant graphics, accompanies a pane of text.

Moreover, the disc was rather slow, even on our Dell P200 machine, and crashed several times. Perhaps the most useful part is its link to the NT's Web site. **JS**

**Although some effort has been made, this disc doesn't make enough use of multimedia to offer any advantage over a paper guide. If you really want electronic information about the NT, go to:**

- [www.ukindex.co.uk/national\\_trust/](http://www.ukindex.co.uk/national_trust/)
- £29.99 (inc VAT)
- Anglia Multimedia:  
01603 615151

### NT British Countrysides

Presentation	★★★★★
Ease of use	★★★★★
Value for money	★★★★★
<b>Overall</b>	★★★★★

Minimum requirements: 486 SX25, 4Mb of RAM (8Mb recommended), Windows 3.1 or later, 2x CD-ROM drive, Sound Blaster-compatible sound card.

