Ultimate Windows guide

Microsoft operating systems seem to get bigger and fatter with each successive release, making grappling with them harder and harder. Never fear, *PC Advisor's* Windows guru Dennis Jarrett knows the best way to tame them and is here to tell you how to strap down those submenus and get the best from their shortcuts, whichever version of Windows you use

By the mid-1990s Microsoft had two species of Windows, each with different underlying technologies, development teams and characteristics. One operating system developed into Windows 95, 98, then Me, while the other became Windows 2000. Finally, in spring 2002 the two were unified into Windows XP. These days you're likely to be using one of the following operating systems:

• Windows 98 A not-especially-radical revamp of Windows 95 that includes USB support and, controversially at the time, integrated Internet Explorer. Windows 98 SE came along a year later and fixed some of the teething problems. If you're still making do with 98, make sure it's the SE version.
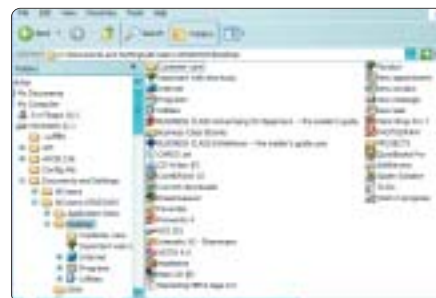• Windows Me Windows 98 under the hood with a slightly updated appearance and more support for music and images.
• Windows XP A radically changed system and certainly the best Windows yet, XP is more user-friendly and easier to get to grips with than previous versions

and has a genuine resistance to crashing or seizing up. Windows XP comes in two flavours: most users have Home edition, but there's also the more expensive Windows XP Professional. There are still some problems with Microsoft's latest OS, though: a noisy minority of people who tried to install the recently released Service Pack 1.0 found that rather than giving their systems a fine-tune, it left them well and truly trashed. Unfortunately, Microsoft still doesn't know why this happened to certain PCs.

Basic Windows tips

• **Right-click** Get used to this – a right-click almost always pops up a Context menu with options and commands relevant to whatever you're doing at the time. The number of options increases according to how late your version of Windows is. Frequently you'll find that one of the options is labelled Properties; select that and you'll get plenty of extra settings, selections and basic information.
• Follow the mouse The mouse pointer tells you what's going on and what you can do next. The cursor is generally an arrow, but look closely. When dragging an icon on the desktop, for instance, you may get a plus sign when you pass over something like a CD or a floppy disk icon. This means you can drop a copy of that file on to the disk (rather than move the original there). When the cursor changes to a double-headed arrow, it means you're at the edge of a resizable toolbar or something similar.
• Explore There's a good reason for the name Windows Explorer – you can rummage around your hard disk, browse or search for all your files and look in all your folders (unless someone has restricted access to them). Until you start renaming, deleting or moving the files in those folders, exploring can't do any harm.
• Take the shortcut You can make a shortcut on your desktop to any program, but you can also create shortcuts for drives, folders or individual documents. Put a shortcut to a Word document on the desktop, for instance, and clicking it will fire up Word and have that file open and ready to edit. Generally you can create a shortcut by using the right mouse button to drag and drop the icon for a program, drive, folder or document on to the desktop.

→ It's easy to organise and edit your desktop through the relevant Windows Explorer directory

• Edit the desktop The desktop is a folder on your hard disk, just like any other. Find it in your Windows directory (often c:\Windows\Desktop) or in XP's Documents and Settings folder. Anything on the desktop will be mirrored in the desktop folder down the lefthand pane (as shown above), so when you use Explorer you can expect to find a list of files, folders and shortcuts. Any of these can be renamed or deleted and the changes will be reflected in the actual desktop display.

Working life

98 Me XP Hotkey launches

Ever since Windows 95, the operating system has had a hotkey capability – you could designate a certain key combination to run a particular program or specific file. This can be very handy if you need quick-and-easy access to something that would otherwise need several mouse clicks to open.

The principle is simple: create a shortcut to the program or file and, in the shortcut's Properties panel, specify the key combination. Drag and drop a file on to a blank area of the

desktop (the Start menu in Me and XP would do just as well) and create the shortcut. Right-click on it, select Properties and enter a key combination in the Shortcut key entry.

It's worth mentioning that you can't set up hotkey access to anything that isn't a shortcut and it has to be on your desktop or on the Start menu. When you create a shortcut elsewhere, you'll still get the option of specifying a shortcut key but it won't have any effect.

You aren't limited to Ctrl, Alt hotkeys. In fact, Ctrl, Shift and Alt, Shift also work. You can even use Shift with any F key. Simply type the combination you want in the Shortcut key dialog box (shown right).

98 Beautify your folder displays

Are you fed up with seeing a blank white background in your folders, with plain black text for the folder and filenames? Let's get creative. Open the folder you want to change and select View, Customize this Folder. Click on Choose a background picture and find something on your disk that you want to use – any image that's too small will be tiled over the folder area. If you want a basic single-colour background simply use Paint to create a solid-colour square first and save that as a BMP image.

Experiment with the 'Icon caption colors' section underneath (shown below right), choosing colours for the text and for its background. Click Next when you're happy, then Finish and enjoy the view. If you don't like the results and wish to

→ Create unique shortcut keys for frequently used programs – you'll find this quicker than accessing them using your mouse
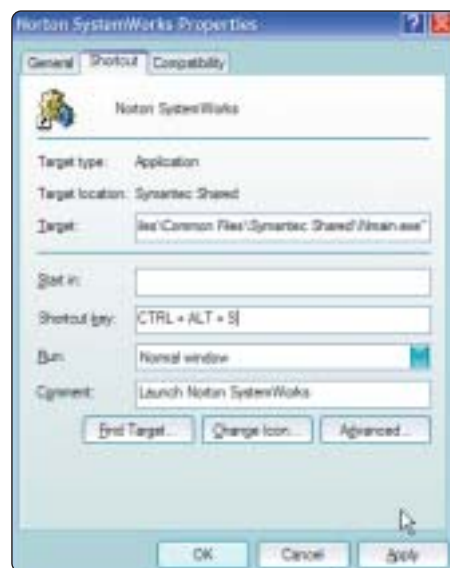
restore the original, open the folder, go to View, Customize this Folder and select Remove Customization.

XP Customise XP folders

Windows XP doesn't have the same kind of customisation on offer, eschewing the potential silliness of a funky background in favour of a much more sober approach. Use Explorer to find the folder in question, right-click on it, select Properties, Customize. Now you have a number of options. You can select a folder template, which means you can apply one of XP's predefined collections of settings and specific features to your folder – notably viewing options for pictures or music.

This is handy, for instance, if you store images somewhere other than My Pictures and you want to see them in the Image Preview layout. Right-click the folder in question, select Properties, Customize and from the drop-down template list try Pictures or Photos. You can also choose a picture for your folder, though this isn't a background. It will be overlaid on to the folder icon when you look at the parent folder when the View, Thumbnails option is selected. This may provide a quick way to identify particular folders.

And finally, you can select something other than the standard Windows folder

icon to represent that folder in all views other than Thumbnails – again, a neat way to differentiate one folder in a mass of alternatives.

You can't apply any of these customisations to My Documents, My Pictures and My Music as they are structurally part of Windows. You can, however, customise any folders contained therein and any other folders on your disk that aren't part of the OS itself.
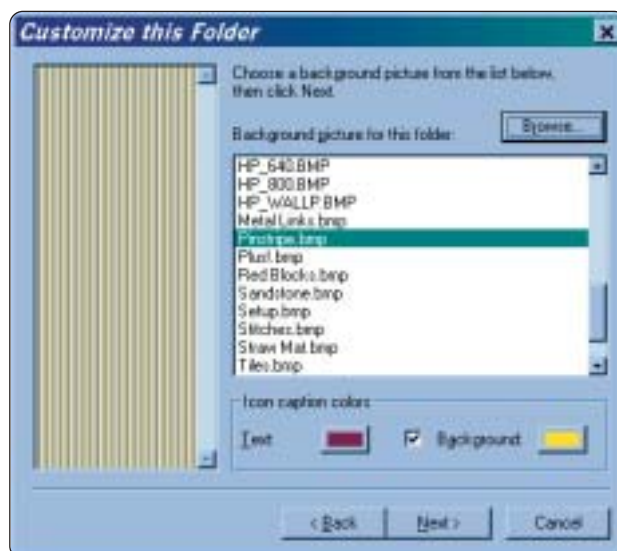
98 Me XP Tasty titlebars

The title area for a Windows window usually has a blue background, but you
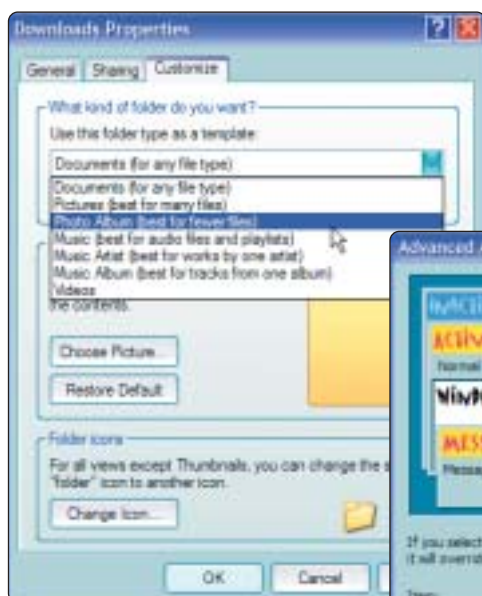
↓ If you're a Windows 98 user who wants to jazz up your folders then it's time to get creative with the Customize option

Do you need XP?

You'll still find Windows Me on some new computers – indeed, a few suppliers are still shipping PCs with Windows 98 onboard. That's because the vendors bought a job-lot licence from Microsoft and are using up their allocation of operating systems. Fairly soon, though, Windows XP will be the only OS in town for your average PC.
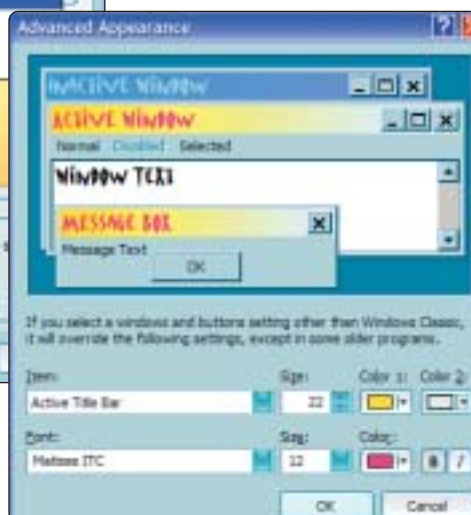
• If you have Windows 95 or Me upgrade to Windows XP as soon as possible: you'll be rewarded with a more capable and stable system.
• If you have Windows 98 or Windows 2000 and you're happy with the OS, wait until you purchase your next computer – it will probably come with XP preinstalled.

← XP users can customise picture or photo folders so that they're easier to view

↓ Create a titlebar colour scheme that suits you thanks to Windows' customisation options

can change that. You can also alter the font, text colour and type size. Right-click on an open area of the desktop, select Properties, Appearance (in XP you'll additionally need to click the Advanced button). Now click the down arrow beside the Item box. Find and select Active Title Bar. Now you can start playing around – all effects are previewed in the panel above, so you can see what you're doing (shown above right). Most of it is self-explanatory. There are the usual options for typeface, size refers to the depth of the bar (in pixels) and you can select a gradient fill for the background, with the colour changing from left (the selection for Color) to right (Color 2). When you like the mix, click ok.

Files and folders

98 Me XP Explore by default

When you double-click a folder it will normally open in a new window, but you might prefer it to open within Windows Explorer – featuring the standard two-pane display, with folders tree-listed on the left and the contents of the currently selected folder showing on the right. Microsoft has decided that the open-a-folder approach is less intimidating, but many people find the Explorer view an easier way of browsing around the computer.

It's easy enough to change things. Double-click on My Computer then select View, Options (for Windows 98 and Me) or

Tools, Folder Options (Windows 2000 and XP). Hit the File Types tab and scroll down the list until you come to Folder (not File Folder). Press the Edit button (Windows 98 and Me) or the Advanced button (2000 and XP). Click on Explore (shown below) and then the Set Default button. That's all you need to do. Next time you open a folder or anything else that lists files, you'll view the contents in the two-pane Explorer view.

Me XP Detail views

Windows Me and XP are quite flexible in letting you decide exactly what you see in the righthand pane of a Windows Explorer display when the Details view is selected. In all versions of Windows you can sort items by double-clicking on the column name, which can be very

→ Some users prefer folders to open within Windows Explorer, rather than in a new window. This is easy to set up

useful if you want to identify the most recent additions to the folder, for instance, or for grouping files of the same type. But XP goes one step further, permitting a whole range of column heads corresponding to different attributes of the files.

You can add or remove details in two ways. Go to View, Choose Details and tick or untick any item in the list (the only one that cannot be deleted is the filename, which makes sense). You can also arrange the order in which the columns appear by moving items up or down the list.

You can do all this and more on the display area itself. Click on a column title and hold down the mouse key while you drag the column to a different position. Click on the dividing line between two columns and drag it to the left or right to resize the column.

Double-click a column head's right boundary to resize the column to the length of the longest item in the column. Alternatively, with the document pane selected, hold down Ctrl as you press the plus sign on the numeric keypad; this will resize all columns at once.

Right-click anywhere in the title area to bring up a full list of possible entries, with ticks against those currently shown in the table. Right-click on any to deselect a ticked item or to select a new one.
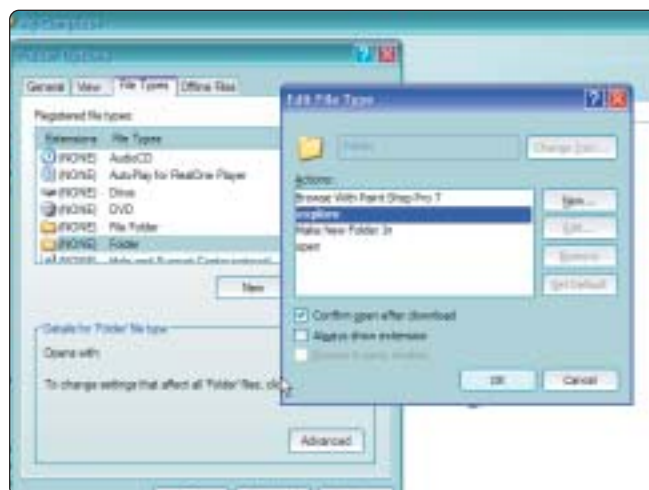
XP Group files by name

Not many people know this, but Windows XP's Explorer can organise files into groups. Open any well-filled folder in Windows Explorer then click View, Arrange Icon By, Show In Groups. If Name is also

98 Me XP Add shortcuts to the Send To list

One of the real Windows goodies is the Send To list, which should be included in the pop-up menu when you right-click a file or an icon. As it stands, the Send To options include some useful standards – send the file to a floppy, to an email recipient, to the desktop as a shortcut and so on.

You can easily add items to the Send To list. Start by creating a shortcut to the folder you want to add: hold down the right mouse button while you drag it to your desktop. XP users can release it once the plus sign is displayed by the cursor, as this will automatically create a shortcut. Windows 98 and Me users will have to release the mouse button and select Create Shortcut(s) Here. Click the new icon, press F2 and give the shortcut a relevant name.

Do this as often as you need for the extra Send To items. You might want to have a variety of different destination folders – you can even add printer shortcuts by dragging them on to the desktop. Now collect all the shortcut icons (right-click on each while holding down Ctrl) and then press Ctrl, X to cut them. Use Explorer to go to c:\Windows\SendTo (for Windows 98 and Me) or c:\Documents and Settings\ [username] (for Windows XP). The latter is a hidden file, so you might have to go to Tools, Folder Options, View and select 'Show hidden files and folders'.

Right-click that folder and select Paste. You'll see that your newly created shortcuts are joining the existing Send To landing places. And when you try out your revised Send To command, your newly created shortcuts will be included in the list (see above right).

There's a clever trick that provides a quicker way to add program destinations to the Send To menu: you add a shortcut to the Send To folder itself. To do that, locate the Send To folder and drag it on to the desktop to create a shortcut. Then cut and paste the shortcut into the Send To folder as before.

→ Streamline your filing by including more options in the Send To list

↓ If your Send To list gets too cluttered, just create subfolders of options as in any other list

Now, when you want to add a program destination to the Send To folder, right-click the program in Windows Explorer and choose Send To, Shortcut to Send To. That will put a new shortcut into the Send To menu. (Don't try using this technique to add folders to the Send To menu – you won't get a shortcut there, you'll move the entire folder there.)

If your Send To menu starts to get unwieldy, group the contents logically into subfolders. Use Explorer to go to the Send To menu and create subfolders as normal. The subfolders will appear in the Send To list, with their contents in a submenu (see above).

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selected, you'll get an alphabetic-index format. With Size selected, the files will be grouped into Tiny, Small, Medium and Large. Type organises them by file type and if you go for Modified the list will be separated into This month, Two months ago, Earlier this year and so on.

98 Me XP No to all
When you're copying or pasting files and Explorer notices that by doing so you would overwrite something with the same name, you get a warning message. If you're copying multiple files the message includes a Yes To All option which means you can overwrite any files. If you don't want to overwrite a file, you click No – and you have to do that for each file you don't want to lose.

What's needed is a No To All button, but Windows doesn't provide one. The workaround: hold down the Shift key while you click on the No option. This applies the No To All files that would overwrite the originals.
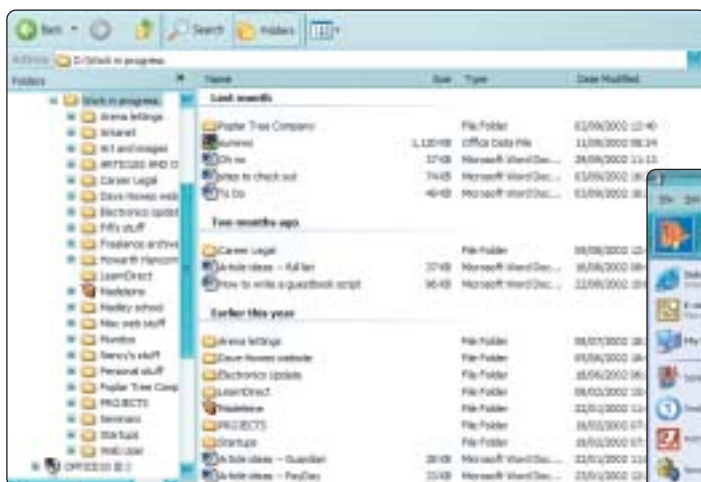
Housekeeping

98 Me XP Clobber the Start menu clutter
The Start menu can be a useful one-stop shop for all the applications you have. But if there's a lot of them the Programs menu can easily become messy. For a start, new entries appear in the order in which they were added rather than alphabetically. Fortunately that's easy to

fix. Select Start, Programs (or All Programs if you have XP), right-click anywhere within the Programs list and select Sort by Name. Then you can sort things out a bit more by creating logical subfolders inside the Programs folder, moving applications into the relevant folder. That's what Windows has done with Accessories, after all. Here's how to do it: right-click the Start button, select Open and click on the Programs folder to open it. Go to File, New, Folder and create your first subfolder. Continue creating subfolders until you have a few with names like Utilities, Graphics, Web tools and so on. Drag applications from the Programs folder into the pertinent subfolder and that's it.

Bonus tip: use uppercase to name your subfolders as they stand out better.

← Get your folders organised and you'll never lose any important documents again

↓ Tidy up the Start menu and make it quicker to find programs by opting to have them listed alphabetically

98 Me XP Bin unused Windows components

It's all too easy to neglect your hard disk and let it fill up with temporary files, unnecessary backups and unused applications. It's time for a spring-clean.

Get rid of any unused Windows components. They take up a lot of space and are always available on the CD if you find you need them after all. Go to Start, Settings, Control Panel (or directly to Start, Control Panel if you have XP) and open Add or Remove Programs. Click the Add/Remove Windows Components button (XP) or the Windows Setup tab (98). Untick anything you might not need and press ok.

98 Me XP Delete unwanted files

When Windows crashes, if you have to use Ctrl, Alt, Del or even the Big Red Switch solution, some temporary files will be left on your disk. Some installation routines will also leave temporary files behind.

You could also delete a clutch of files with other extensions:

• BAK Many applications will rename an old version of a data file, adding the BAK extension when you save a new version. If you have the new version and it's okay, you don't need the backup.
• $$$ Same as BAK files.
• 000 Same as BAK files.
• OLD Same as BAK files.
• CHK ScanDisk and Chkdsk are disk-checking utilities that will consign any duff data to a file with the CHK extension. In theory it's there to help you try to recover the original, but it rarely works out so smoothly.

• CNT Table of contents for Help files. If you don't need a table to help you navigate through a Help file, you don't need these.
• DMP When Windows (or an application) crashes, memory is dumped into a DMP file for troubleshooting purposes. Unless you're a geek, you won't know what any of the files mean so it's fine to delete them.
• FTS These files are created when you search a Help file; they're designed to speed things up if you repeat the search. They aren't very effective, so lose them.
• GID Every time you run a Help file it creates a GID index to make future accesses marginally quicker.
• ~MP Same as TMP files. Use Search or Find to locate all instances of this file type by including them in the Name box of the 'Search for' dialog box. Give each a wildcard asterisk and separate them by a space. Don't erase files with today's date because they could still be in use. (When the search results appear, click on the Modified column title to sort them by date.)

To be on the safe side, send deletions to the Recycle Bin and leave them there until you're sure you don't need them. If Windows or any program complains about a missing file, just select your Recycle Bin, find the file and right-click on it.

98 Me XP Temporary Internet Files

Internet Explorer speeds up your browsing by storing web pages in a temporary cache – so if you want to revisit a page, it has the elements on hand. It's worth cleaning out the cache regularly. Run Internet Explorer, select Tools, Internet Options, General. Find the Temporary Internet Files section and press the Delete Files button.

98 Me XP Use Windows tools regularly

From 98 onwards, Windows includes several utilities you should be familiar with:

• Disk Cleanup This will wipe some of the dross, including Temporary Internet Files and some Temporary Files. Or you can run the Cleanup automatically whenever a drive runs low on space. Go to Start, Programs, Accessories, System Tools. You should probably click everything on the what-to-clean list under the Disk Cleanup tab. Windows 98 users can go to Settings and tick the checkbox that will run Disk Cleanup automatically; for Windows XP there are a few more options.
• ScanDisk (Windows 98 and Me) checks the disk for errors. Again it's under Start, Programs, Accessories, System Tools. When ScanDisk loads tick the Automatically fix errors option before you hit Start. Running ScanDisk can take a while, especially if you select the Thorough option; use it once a week and be prepared to leave it running for a couple of hours.
• Error-checking (Windows XP) This is ScanDisk by another label. In XP open My Computer, right-click on a disk drive, select Properties and click the Tools tab. Thereafter it works as for Windows 98.

• Disk Defragmenter is a tool that reorganises the contents of your disk so that programs run faster and data files load quicker. This is an even lengthier task that should be run at least once a week and can be found at Start, Programs, Accessories, System Tools.

• Maintenance Wizard Windows 98 and Me (but not XP) have a Maintenance Wizard which automates the whole procedure by setting a schedule for running ScanDisk, Disk Cleanup and the Defragmenter. Once it's set up you don't have to do anything else. Every Windows 98 user ought to run the wizard, another of the utilities at Start, Programs, Accessories, System Tools.

98 Me XP Barefoot backup automation

The Windows Search tool (which is called Find in Windows 9x) isn't just for searching. Once you have searched for a specific target – for instance, files created or amended in the last week, you can save your search settings for use later. That provides the basis for a semi-automated file backup regime.

Here's one possible routine, which locates Windows 98 files produced in the last 24 hours. Kick off by clicking Start, Find, Files or Folders. Don't enter anything In the Named or Containing text dialog boxes. Use the down arrow beside the Look in field to select My Computer. Go to the Date tab, click the down arrow beside Find all files and select Modified (which picks up newly created files as well as modifications). Click the button for 'During the previous day(s)' and enter 1 in the box.

Click Find Now. Even if no files match these criteria, you have the parameters for future searches so select File, Save Search. You might think that nothing has happened, but take a look at your desktop: there should be a new icon (a computer sitting on a folder) entitled All Files. Repeat the process and save another search and you'll see that the name is slightly different – for example, it might be files named @.jpg. You can rename the search icon in the usual way (right-click the icon and select Rename).

Double-clicking opens the original search form, so you could run the new files search at the end of each day and copy all the material that appears on to your backup medium.

The procedure is similar for XP, Me and 2000. Go to Start, Search, For Files or Folders. Skip the filename box and click on Date Modified (Me and 2000) or When was it modified? In Me and 2000 click the button next to 'During the previous day'; with XP you'll have to specify the exact date range.

Start the search and when it's completed go to File, Save Search as before. This time you'll get the option for saving the search in a particular folder (My Documents by default) and with a particular name. ■

CUT OUT AND KEEP ✂

Keyboard quicksteps

It's often quicker and easier to use key combinations rather than the mouse and the inclusion of a Windows key on many modern keyboards gives even more possibilities. Most people know about the first five combinations below, but there are a whole load of other useful keyboard shortcuts:

Ctrl, A	Select all
Ctrl, C	Copy
Ctrl, V	Paste
Ctrl, X	Cut
Ctrl, Z	Undo
Alt, Esc	Cycle through items in the order they were opened
Alt, Tab	Switch between open items
Alt, Enter	Properties dialog for currently selected item
Alt, Esc	Switch to next open application
Alt, Print Screen	Copy only the currently active window to Clipboard
Ctrl while dragging an item	Copy the item into a new location when you drop it
Ctrl, Shift while dragging an item	Create a shortcut to that item when you drop it
Ctrl, Alt, Del	Close Program options
Ctrl, Esc or Windows	Start menu
Ctrl, Esc or Alt, M or F2	Rename selected item
F3 or Windows, F	Find (in Explorer the selected folder will be filled in as the search path)
Print Screen	Copy entire desktop to Clipboard
Shift while inserting CD-ROM	Bypass autoplay
Shift, Del	Delete completely (bypassing Recycle Bin)
Shift, F10	Context menu (same as right-click)
Windows, Break	System Properties
Windows, D	Go to Desktop
Windows, E	Open My Computer
Windows, M	Minimise all windows (try Alt, M if you have no Windows key)
Windows, R	Run
Windows, Shift, M	Restore all windows (or Alt, Shift, M)

Most of these key combinations work with Windows Explorer, but there are some Explorer-specifics you might like to try:

Any alphabetic key	Move to next item in tree that starts with that character
Backspace	Move to parent folder
F4	Move to the drop-down list for the Address bar
F5	Refresh file listings
Left arrow	Close branch
Numeric keypad asterisk	Open all branches below current selection
Numeric keypad minus	Close all branches below current selection
Right arrow	Open currently selected branch