done via email servers (you ask a remote computer to mail you a file). Either of these systems will provide you with your own Internet email address, for example:

bob@arcade.demon.co.uk

This is all you need in fact to write and tell Bill Clinton to quit, to which his computer will reply automatically thanking you for your support. It should be said that these systems are run by dedicated enthusiasts, usually at great cost to themselves. Although they are for free, financial contributions are welcome, and they deserve to be treated with respect.

Level 2 - hand holding

Many systems have been produced to put a helpful front end on the Internet. Sometimes this is the result of necessity (because facilities are limited), or as a deliberate attempt to limit what users can do, or to make it easier to charge for services. Once in a while the purpose may actually be to make things easier for the user! Accessing the Internet this way is typically like accessing a bulletin board system using ordinary data comms software. However, easy-to-use graphical interfaces are on the way.

With this access method, you get email, ftp and so on. However there may be limitations, and you may have to go through contortions to get the desired result. For example, when using ftp, files may have to be transferred to the host, before using traditional file transfer (e.g. X/Y/Zmodem) to get the file back to your computer. In these systems, the Internet software is running on the host, and you are then talking to the host via whatever interface the service provider has devised.

At this level, cost becomes a factor. Working out which system

is cheapest is impossible because the cost depends on what you want to do. In addition a system with high rates may work out cheaper if you only need to make a local call to contact it. Of course you may pay more for extra facilities. Some systems are not good value - so always check out prices carefully and thoroughly.

Some examples of level 2 access are:

Cix - one of the earliest entrants; it has a cryptic command line based interface, and offers most Internet facilities.

Compuserve - a vast US-based on-line system with Internet links; it offers both command line and graphical front ends. A shareware package called Arctic is available for RISC OS.

Almac - a large commercial bulletin board providing email and access to newsgroups.

BBC Network Club - a new system, which promises both its own bulletin board (Auntie) and full Internet access. Also promised is an easy to use graphical front end for RISC OS. It will be interesting to see how this develops.

Level 3 - the real thing

The ultimate method of connection is actually to link your computer directly to the Internet. The advantage of this is that you can do anything that can be done on the system. For this method, you need software that supports the network TCP/IP protocols (which are used to ship the packets of data around).

Because your computer must cope with mail and ftp etc. by itself, traditional data comms software is of no use. Thanks to the efforts of a lot of people, there is a reasonably good PD package called KA9Q (the obscure name comes from US amateur packet

radio, where the same protocols are used). KA9Q will let you perform ftp and email, gather news groups and conduct terminal sessions.

You need another program to make your modem dial up and connect to the host, and yet more software (a mailer) is needed for

reading and writing messages. Again all this can be had for free (e.g. Slipdial, Readnews), but it s easy to see that the whole process can be quite complex.

The classic provider of this sort of service is Demon Internet. Apart from its technical superiority, costs are low - just £10 ex. VAT per month with no charges for connect time, or for the amount of mail or data shipped. Demon has many enthusiastic supporters so there are plenty of people who will help you with problems (there is a conference on Arcade BBS for instance). Demon is growing, with more phone lines and more points of presence around the UK, so depending on your