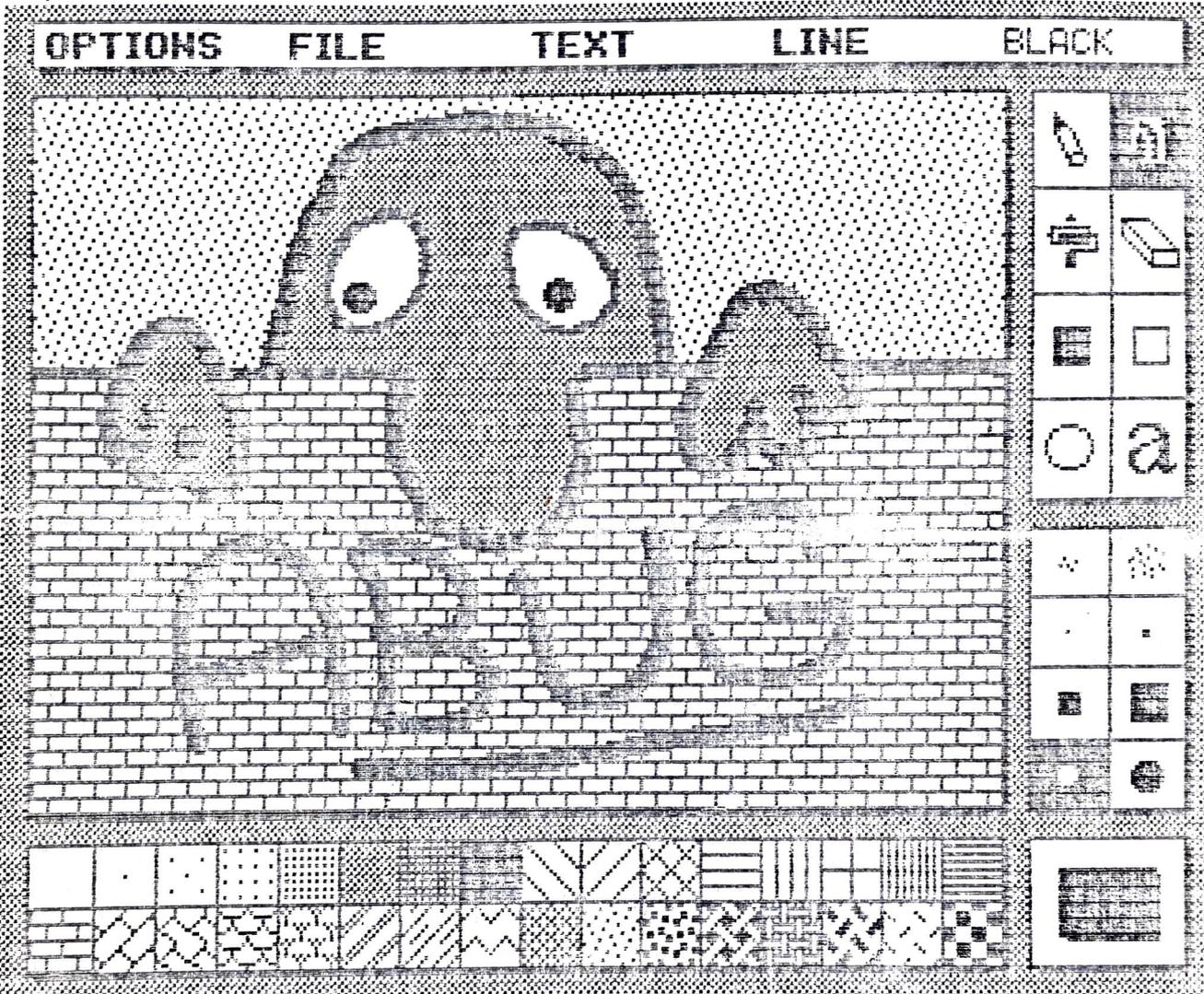


ABUG



ACORN & BBC
microcomputers
USER GROUP
Sheffield

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Diary

March 20th	(The Hornblower)	Talk and Demonstration by ATPL
April 3rd	(The Hornblower)	Social
April 17th	(venue to be arranged) MARK BATES	Talk and Demonstration by Steve Gold
May 1st	(The Hornblower)	Social
May 15th	The Annual General Meeting	

Thanks to John Morrell for organising the visit to ITEC, which most members found very interesting and instructive. If any members have contacts for similar visits locally, then please let Phil Rubini know.

The '4 Computer Buffs' programme on Channel 4 every Monday at 5.30 is well worth viewing. Also, the last of the present 'Micro Live' programmes on BBC2 is on Friday 8th March, and repeated the following day.

A.G.M.

The time has come round yet again for the Annual General Meeting which has been arranged for May 15th. As usual the only business of importance will be the election of the committee. In previous years most of the committee have been prepared to stand again, but this year there is a general feeling that fresh impetus is needed and all of the present committee have decided to stand down. A new committee will bring in new ideas with different emphases and contacts.

We think we can speak for all the current committee members in saying that it has been a very enjoyable and educational involvement and we can unreservedly recommend it to anyone who is tempted to take on one of the posts. Certainly nobody should be put off by a lack of experience since this is the position from which most of us started almost three years ago. All of the present committee will remain in the club and will be available and willing to assist with any problems of continuity.

The present committee structure comprises:

Chairman: (John Morrell)

This post probably requires the least amount of additional time but involves chairing both club and committee meetings, announcing visiting speakers etc.

Secretary: (Carol Hounslow)

A fair amount of work is required to deal with general correspondence and minutes of committee meetings.

Treasurer: (Jon Fryer)

The club's accounts are not at all elaborate and no great accounting skills are required; however a basic numeracy is considered desirable.

Librarian: (Tony Wood)

Ideally someone with their own transport and strong arms should take this on.

Events Organiser: (Phil Rubini)
 Perhaps the most demanding of spare time and enthusiasm this requires chasing up speakers and general events and exploiting one's contacts to the full.

Newsletter Editors: (John Bramwell & Ken West)
 Requires someone with a word processor and boundless enthusiasm for bullying other people to write articles. Failing all this, the ability to create four pages of newsletter every month from within. A printer is also desirable but not essential as alternative arrangements can be made if needed.

If anyone has any interest in any of these jobs then please approach the present incumbent. The structure listed above evolved to utilise the people available at the time the club was formed, and is in no way sacrosanct. Any variation on the above or combining or sharing of existing activities can be agreed at the AGM. The important thing is that six or seven members are willing to become actively involved in the organisation and administration of the club, otherwise the club will dissipate and possibly cease to exist.

Problems At Acorn

By now everyone will have heard of the problems which have beset Acorn. Their shares were suspended last month after they had fallen from a peak of 193p in 1983 to 28p. For some time there was considerable uncertainty as to whether or not the company would survive and then a series of rumours of takeovers by Clive Sinclair (!) and others.

The present situation, as far as we know it, is that Olivetti (well-known printer manufacturers) have bought out 49% of Acorn for some twelve million pounds with options to increase this holding in the future. Herman Hauser and Chris Curry have both been retained as deputy chairmen under a new executive chairman.

Even without being bailed out in this way it is very unlikely that the BBC micro would have disappeared but now it seems that the development program for the new add-ons and business computers is secure. It is interesting to note that several companies were giving assurances that support for the Beeb would continue even before the rescue was announced. Being realistic about it, there are very few add-ons in most peoples computer set-ups which are derived directly from Acorn.

AMX Mouse

Recently we had a chance to try out the AMX Mouse system (from Advanced Memory Systems). It has been displayed at most micro shows since it's release towards the end of last year, and widely advertised in the popular computer magazines.

The mouse is well packaged and presented, and includes the mouse, ROM Firmware, user port connecting cable, utility disc and cassette, manuals for the mouse and AMX art software.

The mouse is of conventional design with a large steel ball-bearing to allow movement in any direction, with optical detectors to translate this movement into signals which are then sent to the user port. Three red buttons give a wide variety of selection options for any associated software. It is interesting to see that this use of the user port appears to be compatible with the sideways RAMboard, which is at variance with the disclaimer on page 4 of the Solidisk manual.

The mouse comes complete with an excellent set of software. An 8k ROM contains the code to control the mouse's primary responses as well as a range of '*' commands, which are available for use in any Basic programme with or without the mouse. For instance, there is an easy-to-use window definer, which avoids the need for complex VDU commands.

The disc/cassette software is very impressive. The use of icons and pull-down menus is similar to the Apple 'Mac' and other popular business micros. Icons are predefined characters, similar to sprites, and examples are to be seen on the right hand side of the front page picture. This month's front page is a screen dump from the AMQ ART programme. It clearly shows the range of drawing facilities available from within the programme, accessed from the screen via a series of pictograms. For example, the picture of the pencil gives line drawing mode, the paint roller fills areas with the selected shading, the circle and box provide the circle and rectangle routines and so on. At the bottom of the screen are displayed all the predefined shading patterns available, which are incidentally to British Standards. The top line displays the series of pull down menus available, all entered using the mouse-controlled pointer.

Overall, we were very impressed with the complete package. In particular the speed of the drawing routines and the 'ease of use' make it suitable for a wide range of users and applications. Following our short experience of it, the only reservation which we have is that the steel ball gives better response on some surfaces. There is no requirement in the manual for a particular material, but perhaps a coating on the ball would have given a more consistent response to a variety of surfaces.

In this month's Acorn User there is an indication that AMS are bringing out two more software packages for the AMX, and it is this sort of support that makes the future of this mouse quite secure.

Interfacing Problems

Our recent experience of reviewing the AMX mouse and the Penman plotter has highlighted a problem which has grown steadily worse over the last year, the competition for use of the various input/output ports provided for the BBC micro. Although the Beeb is generously equipped with such ports compared with other micros there are now so many add-ons available that careful consideration has to be given to ensure the correct combination of equipment. We have listed below the more popular peripherals which utilise each of the ports.

Printer port:

This is in fact the parallel printer interface and suits most printers. Since there is little further competition for this port it should always be used when possible. Some printers, especially the more expensive daisy-wheels, give an option between serial and parallel but there are only three reasons for using the serial port; the cable can be much longer than is possible with a parallel lead (max. 5-10 m), the cable is less bulky and easier to make unobtrusive, and the cable is much cheaper.

RS423 Port:

As mentioned above, can be used for printers but much more commonly for modems of all types, computer to computer communication, the majority of conventional plotters as well as the penman plotter.

A/D Port:

Most commonly for joysticks, paddles, digitisers (arms and pads), light pens, some robot arms and other laboratory interface equipment.

User Port:

This has been left principally for customised equipment but is now being increasingly used. Examples are the AMX mouse reviewed above, the Chameleon colour generator, EVI digitising camera, and proprietary D/A converters.

1 MHz bus:

For some reason this has been consistently under-used. In principle this bus can be used for accessing a further 64K of RAM and controlling large numbers of external devices but little use has been made of these facilities.

Current users are the ATPL eprom blower, Teletext and Prestel decoders and the range of Eurocard expansion units.

Disc port:

No problems here, you either have a disc or you don't.

The Tube:

This is used exclusively for second processors and if you want more than one you must accept the need to pull out the plugs and reconnect every time you change.

Power supply:

This was originally intended to run just a disc drive but it has also been used by several other devices such as the ATPL eprom blower and various robot arms. The moral is that if you can get equipment, especially disc drives, with integral power supply it is well worthwhile.

Cassette Port:

Obviously intended only for a cassette recorder but has been utilised by such devices as Prestel adapters. However there is usually no conflict as any such device will also contain its own cassette port which may often be used independently.

The only other input or output sockets on the Beeb are the three which feed different types of monitor. There is usually no conflict here: UHF for a television, RGB for a monitor and the video out socket for a composite video monitor. However if you need to take signals to a video recorder for sub-titling or simply recording screens then it is preferable to take an output from the composite video socket as this corresponds to the standard for many of the popular domestic video recorders. In this case it is obviously better to purchase a monitor which uses the RGB socket, as both can then be used simultaneously.