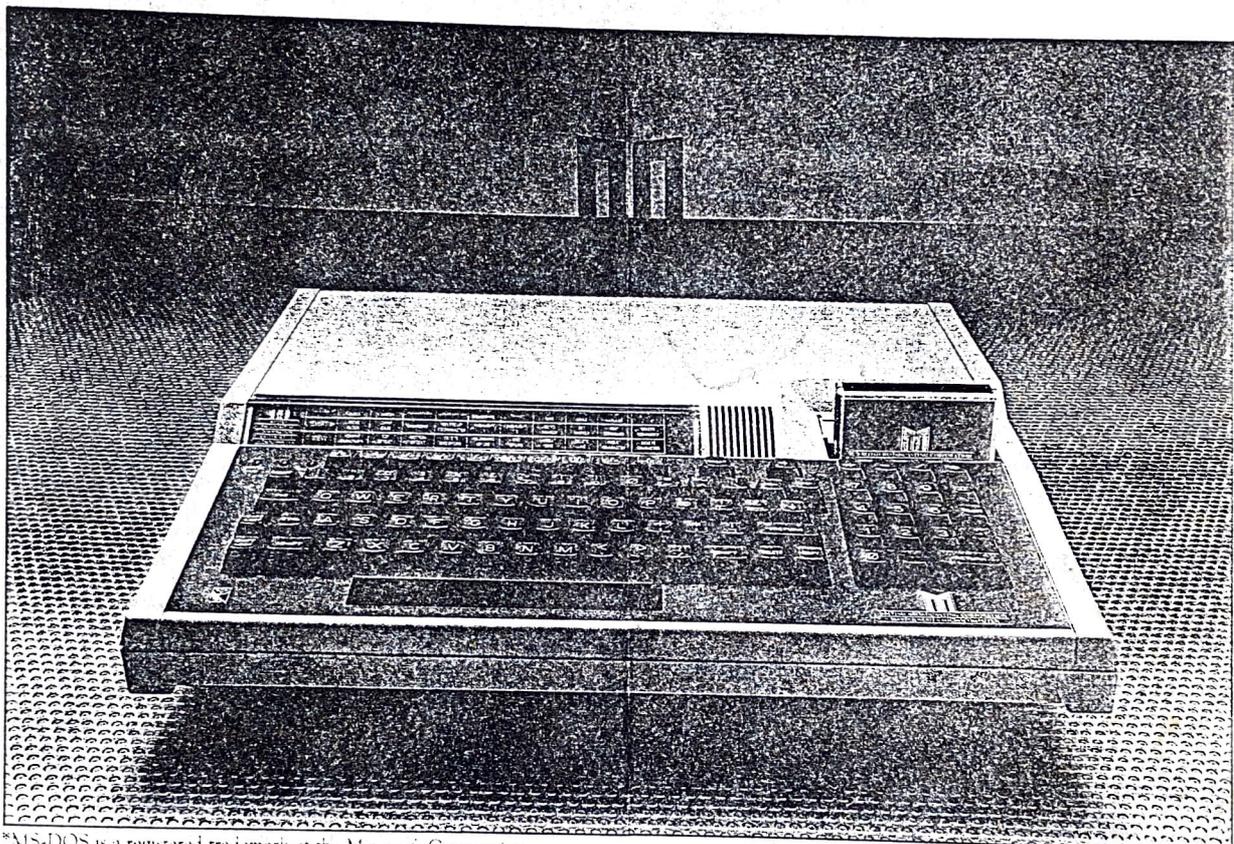


ABUG

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ABUG #47

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DIARY

The next few meetings will be held on:

3 June
17 June
1 July
15 July

All meetings are held at the Sheffield Trades and Labour Club, Duke Street.

ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING

It's Annual General Meeting day today. We haven't received any nominations for the committee at the time of writing, but it's not too late to put yourself (or one of your friends) forward.

MASTER 512

With the drastic price reduction, the 512 co-processor board apparently became more popular and, for a short time, it was a little difficult to obtain. The recommended retail price is now £199+VAT, but the discounted price seems to have settled at around £189+VAT, and if you search around you may get below this.

What do you get for your money?

The package consists of a circuit board, mouse, four discs and a manual. The actual board is quite small and is easily fitted. The installation is very secure, totally in a different league when compared with the majority of the various Beeb upgrades. The mouse is of good quality and plugs directly into the user port.

The four discs contain the following :-

- DISC 1 : DOS Plus operating system and support files
- DISC 2 : GEM applications
- DISC 3 : GEM data
- DISC 4 : Miscellaneous

The manual is very slim considering the potential of the system, and when compared with manuals for such as the Amstrad. There are two sections covering GEM and DOS Plus, but the manual is really the disappointing part of the package and inadequate for both novice and experienced user. There is no information about the contents of disc 4.

Access to the 512 is gained by booting disc 1 with control/break, after issuing a "*configure tube" command. It is possible to leave the master configured to expect the 512 boot-up disc. The operating system is then loaded. This is slow when you are used to the ROM-based operating system of the Beeb computers. At present the DOS Plus is version 1.2 and is compatible with MS DOS version 2.0, but Acorn are already offering an software upgrade which improves the compatibility. This costs £10.00 and includes other extra utilities for GEM and additional items on the

miscellaneous disc. However, four weeks after ordering, the waiting continues - Acorn time strikes again? Later this year, Acorn are planning to issue a further upgrade which will be compatible with the latest MS DOS (version 3.2), with the added advantage that this will be a 128K ROM. The estimated cost is £50.00, but it will release 128K of RAM for user use.

Acorn do not market the Master 512 as an IBM compatible machine, but they do list a series of software packages reported to run on the Master. The IBM screen emulation appears to be very successful and at present, the controlling factor as to whether or not a piece of software runs, is the version of operating system used, the use of 'legal' OS calls and the amount of RAM required. Obviously a ROM-based operating system will greatly improve IBM compatibility. The potential for the available RAM to be 640K, as IBM, is a definite possibility. Solidisk have followed their announcement of a co-pro adaptor (in competition with Watford, and now other manufacturers) with outline details of a proposed upgrade to transform the Master 512 into 1024K. Perhaps other, more 'reliable' manufacturers, or even Acorn will follow up on this and provide a similar upgrade.

The bundled software has been reviewed in all the Beeb-orientated magazines, and generally, the quality is very good. All the GEM applications are excellent, and GEM PAINT has, to some extent, been under-rated in various reviews. The file handling from GEM desktop is simple and very convenient. Any problems which occur with GEM are encountered when you try to run large applications from within GEM, and the 'strain' on memory becomes critical (the GEM environment takes up a considerable piece of RAM).

Should you invest in the upgrade?

With the development of the co-pro boards, the upgrade becomes a possibility for both Beeb and Master owners. If you wish to use a particular program, then you should first check that it will run. If you want to gain experience of 16 bit computing, then there is probably a sufficient range of 'proven' software and languages listed to provide for your needs. However, if you are not in a hurry, then it may be better to wait for the upgrades to be incorporated. The other option to follow would be to buy an IBM-compatible or other 16 bit computer, and the Amstrad will certainly fill the bill.

The unique advantage with the Master 512 is that the computer is still Beeb compatible. The Acorn policy to make their computers compatible is apparently to be continued, and it will be interesting to see if the latest Acorn venture, the 32 bit RISC technology, will be applicable to the Master and Beeb range.

John Bramwell

COMPUTER CONCEPTS' INTER-BASE

Computer Concepts were demonstrating (but not selling) their new database management system Inter-Base at the recent User Show in London, promising that the system will go on sale within a couple of weeks. It is driven from familiar-looking Computer Concepts menus, and seems very powerful, although it's difficult to judge properly from a brief look. It incorporates its own programming language, which has many of the features of BBC BASIC, but includes structures such as WHILE...ENDWHILE, CASE...ENDCASE and multiple line IF...THEN...ELSE. It also includes sixty commands for the creation and manipulation of databases and indexes, and searching and sorting.

The maximum field size is 32Kbytes, there can be up to 65,536 fields per record and more than 10 million records in one database. The practical limits will be set by the available memory in the computer and the disc capacity.

The package includes a menu driven card index program, allowing full control over the type of data to be entered (integers, reals, short (up to 255 characters) and long (up to 32Kbytes) strings, and dates), the layout of the display and printing options. Computer Concepts list its 'special features' as:

- * Full menu operation.
- * Multiple indexes on any field.
- * Variable field length.
- * Unlimited number of records.
- * Full conditional searching and sorting.
- * User definable print format.
- * All associated indexes are automatically updated.
- * Very fast searching via indexes.
- * Any database created using the card index can be used by another program written in the programming language.

Inter-Base can take data from the other Rom-Link packages (Inter-Sheet, Inter-Word and Inter-Chart) and include them in its own data, allowing complex mail-merging, etc.

Inter-Base will cost £69 inc VAT (show price £60), but this may, of course, be discounted at the next User Show (in July), or by other suppliers. The package is supplied as a single rom on a carrier, similar to Inter-Word. It will not work if it is plugged into a Solidisk 4 Meg board (even if switched to 2MHz), although it should work in a machine fitted with such a board.

It must be emphasised that the above is based on a very short look at the package, and on information supplied by Computer Concepts, and is not a review as such (I'll be interested to hear from any member who buys a copy) - reviews should be appearing in the magazines in the next month or two, and past experience suggests that A & B Computing may be first.

Dave Brown

OTHER COMPUTER CONCEPTS NEWS

SPELL-MASTER

The latest release of Spell-Master is 1.67, and if you have an earlier version Computer Concepts recommend that you return it for upgrading.

Spell-Master is now available on a single 128K chip, in a similar format to Inter-Word, instead of two 64K chips on a carrier. Computer Concepts say that this new format is functionally identical to the old, and therefore will charge £25 if you wish to swap your old two chip version. They don't say which format will be supplied when you upgrade to the latest release.

INTER-WORD

John Bramwell reports an acknowledged bug in Inter-Word which gives problems when using the multi-file option. Embedded commands get corrupted when each file is automatically saved during use. The cure advocated by Computer Concepts at the moment is to ensure that embedded commands do not occur at the start of a line. A space or any character is sufficient, but this may not always be convenient. An upgrade for Inter-Word is in progress to cure this and other anomalies. The latest release at the Show was 1.02, the version that most people already have, but they did acknowledge that 1.03 was planned.

'INTER ROM'

Computer Concepts are attempting to put all four of their Rom-Link packages on a single 128K chip. This is causing them big problems at the moment, but if they are successful, it should be available in about three months' time. The expected cost is about £150, but a 25% discount will be given for each Rom-Link package traded in, up to a maximum of 75%. The Computer Concepts representative at the Show said that if they had not succeeded in putting all the programs on a single chip by the end of the year, they would probably abandon the project, as they were not intending to develop any more software for the Beeb.

WHAT'S IN THE MAGS?

DISK USER, June/July 1987, #1, 36pp plus 5.25 inch disc, £2.95

Produced by Argus, the publishers of A & B Computing, this is a bi-monthly magazine, designed around a 40 track single-side disc. There is a utility on the disc to convert it to 80 track, even if you don't have switchable drives or a DFS that allows double stepping.

Features & Programs:

Animation / Adventure game / Disc examiner / A kung fu game
/ A platform game designer / Disc cataloguer / Program to

transfer files from tape to disc / Winchester

A & B COMPUTING, June 1987, Vol 4, #6, 108pp, £1.50

Features & Programs:

Communications for beginners / 3D drawing program / Desk top publishing packages for schools / Astronomy planets programs / Variable structures in Pascal

Reviews:

ACE graphics program / PMS Genie / Silicon Visions' Real Time Graphics System / AMX Extra / Technomatic's Windomatic Viewsheet front end / Watford's Eureka Card / Games reviews, inc Sentinel pokes / Adventure reviews / OS9 on the Cumana upgrade

THE MICRO USER, June 1987, Vol 5, #4, 172pp, £1.25

Features & Programs:

Checksum program for type-in listings / Knitting patterns program / Conditional statements in programs / Arcade games secrets inc Thunderstruck 2 tips and map / Pseudo code series / Program to put files into rom / RISC feature / Econet in Australian schools / Farming program / DIY video digitiser part 2 / Telesoftware downloading techniques / Mad Maze game / Development of a rom family / 2nd fire button for the Compact / Rom service calls / Ceefax Telesoft programs for June / Roms directory / Program library

Reviews:

Games reviews / Adventures reviews, inc Acheton tips / Educational software reviews / Technomatic's EpromRyter blower / CJE's Inform help rom

ACORN USER, June 1987, #59, 178pp, £1.30

Features & Programs:

Converting BASIC to assembler / Front-end for ADFS / Editing your own magazine / Typesetting from View / Home publishing software / Make the most of your word processor / Geography educational programs

Reviews

Games / Book - DOS Plus / ESP's rom/ram extension board / Acorn's ARM RISC development machine

Dave Brown

WANTED

Rom extension board wanted. Please contact Henry Brook, Sheffield 364387.