

Apple II

Gordon Laing looks back at the **fruit that first tempted** the PC consumer, kick-starting an industry.

In the last issue before the new millennium, we thought we'd look back to the birth of personal computing, and find the machine which really kick-started the industry.

The MITS Altair was arguably the very first personal computer, originally making itself known to the techie masses by being the cover star of January 1975's *Practical Electronics* magazine. This issue single-handedly became the catalyst for both Microsoft and Apple. Bill Gates and Paul Allen had been into computers for some time, the former yet to drop out of Harvard, and the latter holding a comfortable job at Honeywell. When they saw the Altair, they knew their time had come. One licensing deal of BASIC later and the first Microsoft product shipped.

Our story, however, concentrates on the members of the Homebrew Computer Club in Santa Clara Valley, which included Stephen Wozniak as a regular. Wozniak had met his future business partner Steve Jobs back in 1973, in the garage of mutual friend Bill Fernandez. Woz and Fernandez had just completed their first computer, named the Cream Soda after their favourite canned beverage, and Jobs had been invited over to take a look. Jobs (16 years old) recognised a genius when he saw one, and quickly became friends with Wozniak (20 years old). Both were later inspired by Homebrew's first demonstration of the somewhat flaky Altair in 1975. If the club members could fix or soup one up, what was to stop them creating their own personal computer from scratch?

Rather than going for the aspirational, but relatively expensive,

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the bargain-basement 6502 processor for their new baby. The 6502 was developed by Chuck Peddle, the man who designed the Commodore PET and started up Sirius a few years later. Jobs and Woz's computer was unveiled to their friends at the Homebrew Club in 1976, and on 1 April that year, they registered the name Apple.

However, the Apple I was far from being the influential personal computer this page is searching for – that was to arrive one year later in the form of the Apple II. While hunting high and low for someone to lend him the money he needed to expand, Jobs met Mark

Markkula, an ex-Intel employee, already enjoying retirement before middle age. Markkula liked what he saw, raised capital, hired a CEO to run the business, and made himself one-third of Apple.

The lead-up to May 1977's first West Coast Computer fair in San Francisco was almost too much to bear for Apple.

All were committed to launching the Apple II at the show, but it was taking longer than anticipated. While Wozniak pondered the technical side of things, Jobs perused consumer appliance designs in high-street stores. Rather than going for the boring old metal cases

employed by PCs so far, Jobs decided that a beige plastic case with rounded corners was much more palatable. The logo, too, enjoyed a redesign into the multi-coloured fruit still used today.

The Apple II made it in the nick of time, and easily stole the show. In *PCW*'s fourth issue of 1978, we enthused about its 'high-resolution colour graphics, extreme portability and high-quality construction'. Colour, unheard of back then, was top of Woz's design wish-list, and his Apple II boasted no fewer than 16 of them at a resolution of 280 x 160 pixels. The basic 6502-based 16KB machine carried a UK price tag of £1,250 ex VAT.

Any system lives or dies by its industry support, and back in the late Seventies, things were no different. Apple helped by later releasing a cheap 5.25in floppy drive for the system, but the real boost came with the 1979 launch of VisiCalc. Dan Bricklin and Bob Franston had written the world's first spreadsheet and arguably the first killer PC application – and at launch it was available only for the Apple II.

Apple may have had its ups and downs, and happily is enjoying the former with its iMac, but we can fondly remember the Apple II in 1977 as the first true personal computer platform.

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▲ THE APPLE II BOASTED THE WORLD'S FIRST KILLER APP – A SPREADSHEET PROGRAM

Intel 8080 processor, Jobs and Wozniak instead opted to use