

West One Vanguard

Tested over twelve months

Reliable, well built and complemented by good customer support, the West One is a winner here.

Twelve months ago I needed to purchase a second computer. I wanted to buy a machine that I felt would be good value, well made and from a company I could have faith in. After much consideration and consultation, I purchased a West One Vanguard. It was a 200MHz K6 (which was fairly new then) with 32Mb RAM and it immediately outstripped the performance of my Escom DX50. The machine was also ordered with a tape drive, a network card and an AWE64 sound card. A Microsoft mouse, Fujitsu keyboard and 15in Iiyama monitor were supplied. West One builds to order, and the time from order to delivery of four weeks was explained and acceptable. All of the components were good quality and inside everything was neat, with all cables secured and tied back to allow access to all components.

Adding a modem and a second HDD was very easy, but unfortunately I have not been able to maintain the neatness of the cables since my tinkering! The customer support line was helpful when I wanted to obtain an upgrade driver for the AWE64/K6 combination. I have had no reason to contact the company in the last 11 months, and apart from the occasional failure of the graphics card to start up first time, the machine has worked reliably at everything I have thrown at it.

I am still happy with the choice and the value of the purchase. A good machine, built well, from a company I would happily trust again.

DAVID BRIGHTON



PCW DETAILS

West One Vanguard

★★★★★

Price £1730.78 (12 months ago)
(£1448 ex VAT)

Contact West One 0171 878 1900

www.west-one.co.uk

Good Points Good customer support. Reliable PC.

Bad Points The odd problem with the graphics card.

Conclusion A good buy.

IBM 9507 10in colour TFT

Tested over eighteen months

The earth, we are told, is not flat, but the future of monitors may well be.

TFT flatpanel displays have been around for some time. They are most commonly seen on more expensive laptop computers, but as they are now being made in larger sizes and bigger quantities, prices are dropping and they are migrating to the desktop. The IBM 9507 was introduced in 1993 to complement the low-profile, energy-efficient PS/2E, and is comparable in size to a 12in CRT which, at the time, was still fairly common. It comes in three main parts, the first part being the panel, with a solid metal base and tilt/swivel stand. The second is a brick-sized black box, the power supply for the unit. The final part is a small, heavy, metal box which takes the analogue inputs of the VGA outputs from the computer and converts it to digital for the display. This adds to the general

clutter of the display, as there are a lot of cables on show, but does mean that the power supply and converter box can be hidden, leaving a very slim and elegant main unit. In addition, the 9507 does not suffer the effects of magnetic fields, or give off any radiation.

At the time, the 9507 cost several thousand pounds, although recently I have seen it advertised on the net for about £400. Even so, the image quality,



build quality and sheer appeal and uniqueness make it good value at twice the price. I'll take two!

ANDREW DEACON

➔ Pictured: IBM's 14in Stealth flatpanel

PCW DETAILS

IBM 9507 10in colour TFT

★★★★★

Price Currently available for about £400

Contact IBM 0870 6010136

www.ibm.com

Good Points Good looking. Low profile. Good image quality.

Bad Points Purchased new, it was expensive. A rather small screen.

Conclusion Fine flatpanel at a fair price.

Winwriter 150C

Tested over thirty-six months

Easy to use, and with good software, Lexmark's colour inkjet is happily staying the course.

Purchasing a colour inkjet printer can be a tricky task. A plethora of products line shelves and making an educated choice can be complex. I settled on the Winwriter 150C from Lexmark for three main reasons:

- The two similarly priced alternatives (£299 then) failed to print demos and therefore could not be seen working.
- It came with a free copy of CorelDraw.
- Nobody ever got fired for buying IBM, and Lexmark was IBM.

An additional benefit is an excellent software package for controlling the printer. Through Windows 3.x it is easy to select from the range of options on offer (specifying paper type and image quality up to 600x300dpi), allowing the best possible output no matter what the medium used. On upgrading to Windows 95, the latest drivers continued to function faultlessly.

The Winwriter prints successfully on paper, card, envelopes and overhead transparencies. The colour is accurate but now looks slightly lacklustre compared to more recent models. The inclusion of a separate black cartridge alongside the colour cartridge guarantees a true black to all text. Full colour pages have a barely noticeable banding but this has not been evident on the black at all, despite my having printed full-page letters for banners.

The Winwriter is sturdy with an average footprint. Having put it through three years of heavy usage, I have learnt why the adage "nobody ever got fired for buying IBM" is true. I would certainly entertain the notion of another Lexmark inkjet should this one ever die.

PHILIP ROLT



PCW DETAILS

Lexmark Winwriter 150C

★★★★★

Price The 150C is no longer available, but Lexmark's range starts with the 1100 for £99

Contact Lexmark 01628 481500

www.lexmark.com

Good Points Excellent software.

Bad Points Starting to look a little dated.

Conclusion A real stayer.

Agfa e1280 digital camera

Tested over nine months

Versatile and providing superb image quality, this digital camera is the focus of attention.

Buying the Agfa e1280 was a bit of a gamble at the time. I had never seen the camera, but reviews of its lesser cousins were good, the specification was outstanding, and the Agfa allowed me a full range of manual control with very high resolution. I'm a doctor, and I need a camera to take a variety of rather demanding images, ranging from close-ups of skin to X-rays and CT scans. There were one or two minor gripes. After paying out £725, it was annoying to have to go out and find a protective carry case — one should be provided for this sort of money. The control knob doesn't lock and turns too easily, and the plastic flap covering the sockets is badly designed and fragile. I was amazed that such simple design problems had not been sorted out before the product became available. However,

the camera itself proved to be a joy to use, and the picture quality is remarkably good. Some adjustment to the image is often necessary, but this can easily be tweaked with the excellent software package to give outstanding results.

The main reason I chose this particular camera is a feature that hugely increases its versatility. It is, simply, a filter thread on the lens mount. This allows supplementary lenses and filters to be attached, and the addition of a macro lens, screwed into the filter thread, allows me to take really close close-ups of very tiny objects. This camera is easily the best available at a reasonable price, and is a truly wonderful piece of kit.

HR BAILLIE-JOHNSON



PCW DETAILS



Agfa e1280 digital camera

★★★★★

Price £762 (RRP) inc VAT (£649 ex VAT)

Contact Agfa 0181 231 4906

www.agfa.com

Good Points Ease of use. Great functionality.

Bad Points No case supplied. Poor control dial.

Conclusion A winner.

HP LaserJet 4L

Tested over thirty months

As a reliable, high-quality printer, the 4L excels.

I was still operating a 486 DX2/50 in 1995 when I purchased my Hewlett-Packard LaserJet 4L for nearly £400. As the printer was approaching replacement there was no price drop; it was phased out and the 5L phased in.

The only fault I have ever seen has been an overly thick capital "A" in bold type on some TrueType fonts, rectified by switching to an equivalent hardware font on the printer. Being a writer now, the ability to print and forget is a luxury, and so far only one DTP project has been unable to cope with the 1Mb of memory.

One drawback is the paper tray: it holds 100 sheets of 70gsm paper which no-one uses in the office any more, or 80 sheets of the more typical 80gsm bond. The toner life is rated at 3,000 pages, but apart from slight fading due to a dying drum, the original cartridge had printed

over 6,000 pages by the time it was changed. It may not be the most environmentally friendly solution, but the one-piece combined toner and drum cartridge is another unique selling point of HP printers — pull out, push in, one cost, no fuss. The average cost of the 4L's toner is now £50, giving 2p or 3p per page if measured across the six reams of paper. Since I printed double the rated toner life with a single cartridge, that cost barely measures a penny a page (0.0083p) and the printer has now paid for itself.

Not even Hewlett-Packard makes them like this any more, and I will be returning to HP without hesitation for my future colour inkjet printer if I can get anywhere near this level of reliability.

KENNETH HENRY



PCW DETAILS

HP LaserJet 4L

★★★★★

Price Replaced by 6L, £292 inc VAT

Contact Hewlett-Packard 0990 474747

www.hp.com/uk

Good Points Old-fashioned HP. Quality plus long toner life.

Bad Points Small paper tray for mass printing.

Conclusion Brilliant value for money.

Pace 56 Voice (internal)

Tested over twelve months

A modem with multiple uses and impressive speed can add to your surfing enjoyment.

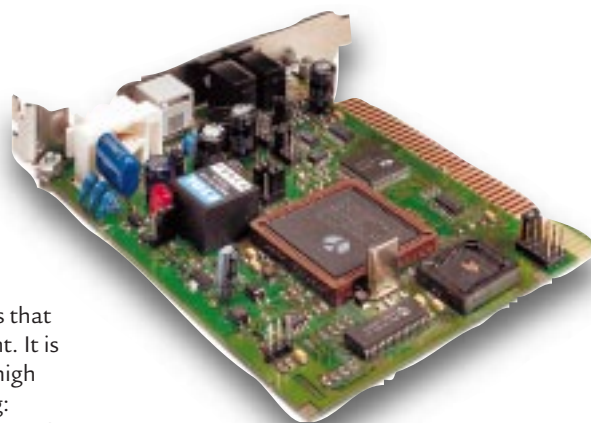
Despite being an internal ISA card, the Pace 56 is easy to fit. Turn the computer back on, and Windows detects the modem immediately. Insert the supplied disk, and Windows sets it up. The Voice bit means that it can be used as a phone. The modem comes complete with connection leads so that you can link it to your sound card, or you can plug your mic and speakers directly into it. Using the supplied SuperVoice 2.2 software you can make voice calls using software that looks like a phone. SuperVoice can also turn your computer into an advanced answerphone, allowing you to set up multiple voicemail boxes for your family. It can send faxes by using the supplied driver that sets itself up as another printer. It works, but so does Microsoft Fax. The software occasionally jammed, and I had to reset my computer in order to make the modem hang up. Mainly it's used for accessing the

internet. With a suitable provider I get a normal connection speed of 48,000bps. Not quite 56,000bps, but no 56K modem gives that. This is still faster than 33,600 and means that web browsing is more pleasant. It is worth remembering that the high speed is only for downloading: when you upload files you are stuck with 33,600bps. It makes web browsing faster, but still isn't as good as ISDN.

The modem's speed is brilliant, giving high-speed internet access over a conventional phone line. The SuperVoice software lets it down, as it keeps jamming. Using it under Linux, having solved the problems, showed that it has many uses.

ANDY FRASER

• For details of Pace's latest voice modem, see the Modems & Comms group test, p208.



PCW DETAILS

Pace Voice 56 (internal)

★★★★★

Price £169 inc VAT (£142 ex VAT)

Contact PMC 0990 561001 www.pacecom.co.uk

Good Points Fast.

Bad Points Likes DOS too much. SuperVoice software.

Conclusion A good all-round modem.