Carry On, Commodore

Simon Collin remembers a company that's long gone, but still has a very dedicated following.

Trawling through the cupboards at Retro Towers, I kept coming across dusty computers with the Commodore badge. Here was a company that helped define the personal computer market and produced a fantastically popular and influential range of home computers.

I visited Commodore HQ in the last year of its existence and there was still a buzz about the place, although it was nothing compared to the days when it was one of the world's most prolific computer manufacturers. Everyone knows the Commodore PET, a business computer legend that we have covered in past Retro columns, but it was the VIC-20 and C-64 that made Commodore a household name. What is rather less well known is Commodore's attempt to enter the portable computer market.

The VIC-20 helped to kickstart the home computer market. It enjoyed the support of software and third-party hardware suppliers. The electronics were crammed under the comfortable keyboard and a standard TV was used for display. The VIC had masses of great features aimed at the home user, and the games player in particular. At the heart of the machine was a custom chip that provided 320x200 colour graphics, with multiple sprite levels that gave VIC games programmers one of the best platforms around. This custom chip also managed the neat sound synthesizer, the MIDI port and the connections for the lightpen and joystick. Software was supplied either on cartridges that fitted into the back of the computer or by loading from a cassette tape. Cartridges provided instant access but were expensive.

The VIC-20 sold out across the world. Encouraged by its success, Commodore launched the more sophisticated C-64 in 1982. More than 18 million C-64 computers were sold and it still has an extraordinary following on the internet, where games, tools and utilities are available. The C-64 looked just like the VIC-20 but doubled the graphic resolution, upped the memory to 64Kb and improved the main processor.

The main unit was brown, with brown keys, and the stubby, fat keyboard look won no contemporary design

▲ **MORE THAN 18 MILLION C-64S WERE SOLD BY COMMODORE**

prizes. However, this computer had features for everyone, from the programmer to the games enthusiast. Its games were state-of-the-art — there are still more than 1000 Commodore games titles available to download from the internet.

Commodore then decided to re-market the C-64 as a business computer — or, rather, as a portable business computer. In January 1983, it released the SX-64. This bore a striking similarity to the Osborne 1 portable computer and was housed in a similar steel case about the size of a personal filing cabinet. The SX-64 was a neat, matt-black unit with a wonderful padded handle; you flipped the top down to use the keyboard and view the internal 5in composite colour monitor. Packed in to the right of the monitor were either one or two 5.25in floppy drives and a slot to accept Commodore program cartridges.

But the SX-64 did not sell well. Commodore released this make in the US under the Executive-64 brand name, but its sales trailed. There was competition from the dominant Osborne range, and the Commodore machine was too expensive and too heavy. To its credit, the colour monitor was impressive, and if you could afford it, the steel box made a great portable games machine.

Commodore did not waste too much time on the still very new executive portable market. It moved on from the C-64 to the C264, a computer with a few extra hardware features and a suite of applications supplied in firmware. Then came the Commodore 128, which included a second Z80A processor to support the CP/M operating system. It had great graphics features and was popular with video and design companies; I even saw it used by two broadcast TV companies to produce quick titles and animated title effects.

The Commodore products provided a host of ground-breaking innovations and a wide range of software. The SX-64 provided an interesting diversion and the best range of games software on any colour portable. ❑