3Com PalmPilot Pro &
Desktop for Windows

Tested over six months

Keep your PC and organiser in perfect harmony as the last paper bastion takes it on the chin from this little beauty.

My old but trusty paper personal organiser had taken on a rather battered appearance some time earlier and was well overdue for replacement, but the small or non-standard keyboards on most Personal Digital Assistants (PDA) had always deterred me from "going digital". Six months ago, though, the unthinkable happened. Who knows? Maybe one day I'll find my organiser and I'll be able to look back on the whole episode and laugh; at the time, though, it was anything but funny. But there is a silver lining to all clouds and in this case it took the form of the PalmPilot Pro, which replaced my little black book.

Pocket-sized (8cm by 12cm and 1cm thick), the device has a large LCD for both display and input. A stylus, that slips neatly into the body for storage, is used to enter information either by tapping on a small representation of a QWERTY keyboard (which easily switches into a numeric keypad) or via the handwriting recognition area of the screen. The latter requires characters to be drawn in a particular way and although I wondered how practical this facility would be, text entry can be mastered swiftly and 100% accuracy is possible with just a little practice.

The built-in software includes a standard suite of address book, diary, notebook, To Do list and calculator. A game which lets you practice handwriting input, an email client and an expenses record are included, clearly indicating this is a product aimed at businesspeople. What makes the PalmPilot stand out is the HotSync utility which enables the records in the PalmPilot to be synchronised with those on a desktop
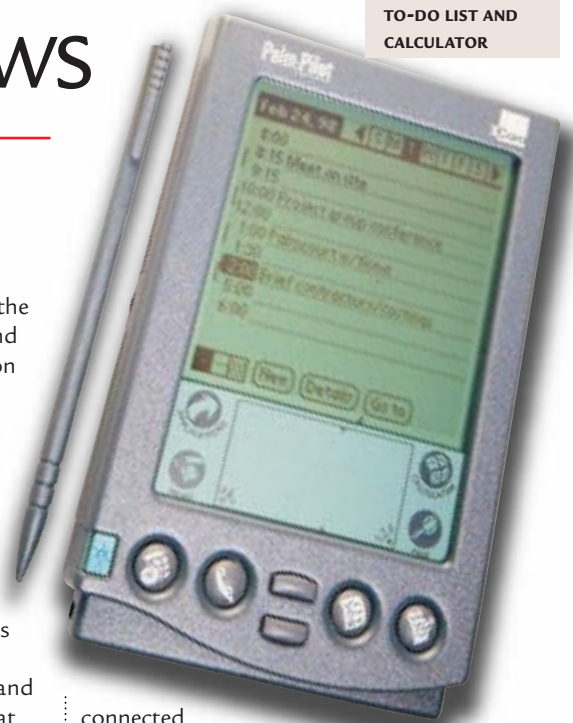
PC and vice-versa. Having installed the software, the PalmPilot Desktop, and connected a cradle to a serial port on the PC, synchronisation is achieved by pressing a button on the PalmPilot. The Desktop software mirrors the suite on the PalmPilot and data can be entered on either device. The HotSync process can be tailored to your needs and a number of options are offered, ranging from overwriting the records on one machine with those on the other, to merging all of the records and updating both. One drawback is that add-on software is needed to HotSync with systems other than the PalmPilot. That said, interfaces for all common PIMs appears to be readily available.

I tend to judge how good a piece of software is by how far you can get before having to refer to the instruction manuals. In this respect, the PalmPilot scores well. The software and communications link between PC and PalmPilot installed easily and the user interface is intuitive, offering more than just a functional front-end for the PC.

The PalmPilot Desktop is closely integrated with Microsoft Office, enabling data to be exported to MS Word, MS Excel or the system clipboard by dragging the required data on to an icon. Macros offering a variety of formatting options are included to make exporting data easy; addresses, for example, can be used in a mail-merge or to produce labels. Emails can be prepared on the PalmPilot and, following synchronisation, are ready to be sent from the PC. For those who really need to be able to communicate on the move, a PC is not essential and a modem can be

connected to the slot used for HotSyncing. Despite the lack of support for Outlook, the PIM and email client supplied as part of MS Office, the PalmPilot and its Desktop email system are well integrated with MS Exchange.

The acid test for any gizmo, though, is whether it ends up gathering dust on a shelf somewhere, the novelty having well worn off. Well, six months on, the PalmPilot is still with me. There are times when it would be nice to be able to jot down a quick note on paper, but this drawback is far outweighed by the benefits of being able to swap and synchronise my personal information between PC and Organiser. And, you know, there are some rather neat little accessories you can get for it, too...

GARY BEATON

Text entry can be mastered swiftly and 100% accuracy is possible with practice

PCW DETAILS

★★★★

Price *About £160 (£136.17 ex VAT)*
Contact *Infoline 0800 225252*
www.palmpilot.com
Good Points *You can ensure that your Organiser diary says the same as your PC.*
Bad Points *Needs a spare serial port to link to a PC. The handwriting recognition may not suit everybody.*
Conclusion *A convenient and practical replacement for the paper personal organiser.*

Demon Internet

Tested over three years

Demon takes the devilment out of the net, providing an inexpensive, quality service.

I migrated to Demon Internet three years ago after a couple of years online with CompuServe. I was spending more and more time on the web — expensive, with CompuServe fees added to the phone bill. I subscribed to both services for a while but couldn't justify the cost and opted to go with Demon, which seemed in the vanguard as the web developed.

I noticed immediately the faster WWW service from Demon — and missed the excellent moderated CompuServe forums. I still think CompuServe Forums are better than Usenet groups. Moderation in all things is my motto. With Demon I noticed how techie it all seemed compared to CompuServe. I have needed to use telephone support lines very few times in my years online. CompuServe were friendly and helpful; Demon *tried* to be helpful but were plainly exasperated by my relative lack of know-how. (I was renting some commercial web space and unsure how the system worked.) Since then I've solved my own problems, so it's been good for me in the long run.

Three years is a long time in comms, though, and these days Demon are pure pussycat, I'm told. The Demon service is volatile. I was tempted to say diabolical, but my sense of fair play overcame my love of cheap jokes. Sometimes email is received and posted in a flash. Other times the mail system seizes and times out. Sometimes I just give up and try again later, but it can be very frustrating. Just like the Post Office, in fact. I can usually connect first go but am frequently informed that "the remote server has unexpectedly closed the connection". It's one of the net dilemmas: you never know whether your ISP is at fault or something has trashed your settings. But a friend suffers the same frequent cutoffs, so it's probably Demon. The Demon Web connection seems as fast as any other. I've worked at large companies where even a dedicated line doesn't improve access.

The bottlenecks are many — and mostly lie further out in the net. I've found the 5Mb of free web space useful. As a professional photographer I have my portfolio on-line; so far it's brought me in £700-worth of work. Not a fortune, but bear in mind that my Demon subscriptions from day one have amounted to less than £500. The amount of free space is now 15Mb, which is ample for most people.

There are limitations, of course. You can only run a Demon supplied CGI, which amounts to forms and hit counters, basically. But you can have RealAudio, so your home page can not only show your public how wonderful you are, it can tell them, too.

Which brings me to a gripe. I run an online Theatre, The Surrey Stick Figure Theatre of Death www.c-cat.demon. co.uk/theatre/. When I wanted to publicise it, I sent a four-line note of its existence to 25 humourous newsgroups. This was a small representative selection of the humour groups on Usenet, there was no commercial interest involved and it was strictly relevant to the groups' interests. Demon promptly closed down my site for excessive cross-posting — 25 from 26,000 newsgroups! The site was reinstated after emailed, faxed and snail-mailed apologies. If ever you hear ISPs bleating on about freedom of speech, remember they are quite happy to act as both prosecution and judge to stifle it themselves — and with no right of appeal.

All in all, for a tenner a month you can't go wrong. Demon have been around a long time (by ISP standards), and they run a superb web site at demon.net. I believe they are now distancing themselves from their techie past and becoming a more consumer-based service. Their new "fax by email" service and *Demon Dispatches* magazine show the trend, which will be hastened by the Scottish Telecom takeover.

DAVID THORPE

> ## All in all, for a tenner a month you can't go wrong

PCW DETAILS

★★★

Price *£10 per calender month (£11.75 inc VAT)*
Contact *Demon Internet 0800 458 9666 www.demon.net*
Good Points *Local call access, free web space, comprehensive service.*
Bad Points *Occasional email seizures, dropped connections.*
Conclusion *As good as any, better than most.*

Packard Bell Executive PC

Tested over thre years

Technology shifts greatly over three years, but a solid PC won't let you down.

Three years ago, technology was at the early Pentium stage and prices were not too savoury. It was at this time that my mother took me to Curry's to get a computer. The final decision was a Packard Bell multimedia system. It was based around a Socket 5 P60, with 8Mb RAM, a quad-speed CD-ROM drive, and a 504Mb hard disk. It came bundled with multiple pieces of software, most of which showed off the then high-tech hardware.

▼ **A PERFECT PC FOR THE FIRST-TIME BUYER**

Windows for Workgroups 3.11 was the standard operating system, with DOS 6.22 underneath. There was no modem or any backup device as seen in similarly-priced systems. The hard-drive had more than enough room for Office, and only started to struggle when Windows 95 was installed. Inside, the case it was a bit of a mess. The processor was placed close to the fan, but this didn't provide adequate ventilation as it frequently overheated and crashed.

Recent installation of RAM passed easily, as two of the four SIMM sockets were not covered up by anything. The monitor was a 14in model with a maximum resolution of 1024x720 at a flickery 60Hz. The colour is, to this day, even and crisp.

The Packard Bell Executive PC has served us well for the past three years, and has taught me lots about computing. Its original price of £2000 included a Canon BJC-4000 bubblejet printer, the quality of which was not great but was certainly adequate. One of its few down points of this system is that it is not upgradable without purchasing a new motherboard.

PAUL O'NEILL

PCW DETAILS

★★★★

Price *The Pulsar range starts from £1,099 (£935.32 ex VAT)*
Contact *Packard Bell 0990 500049*
Good Points *A very reliable PC.*
Bad Points *Expensive to upgrade.*
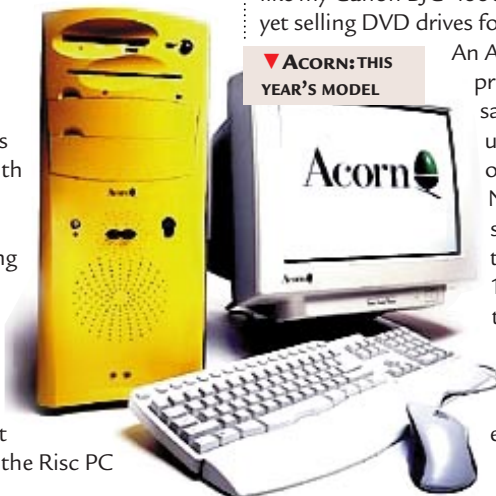**Conclusion** *A solid buy.*

Acorn Risc PC600

Tested over four years

If reliability is what you look for in a PC, you will have to trade off a little flexibility.

When I first heard of the Risc PC600 back in 1994, I instantly wanted one. For around £1000, it offered 24-bit graphics, stereo sound and an operating system kept securely in ROM. It was also the first of Acorn's RISC machines with a slot for an Intel-compatible processor, allowing Windows-based software to be run at an acceptable speed. Acorn broke with its past by trying to make the Risc PC

▼ **ACORN: THIS YEAR'S MODEL**

use industry-standard hardware rather than with its own proprietary designs. Thus, the Risc PC uses standard SIMMs, the keyboard uses a PS/2 connector and, with an adaptor, ISA expansion cards can be used. However, increasingly, the Risc PC has been unable to keep up the pace with PC developments: Acorn's printer drivers do not currently support Photoreal printers like my Canon BJC-4550 and no-one is yet selling DVD drives for the machine.

An ARM600-series processor, the same series as used in the original Apple Newton, came as standard with the Risc PC. In 1996, I upgraded this with a 202.4MHz StrongARM processor; the effect was an approximate seven times speed increase, and made the Risc (on paper) significantly faster than any Intel-based PC, albeit only for a few months.

Risc OS 3 has never been widely used outside of education. But, despite the launch of Window 95 and 98, it remains a capable alternative. Being stored in ROM, it never requires re-installing. Also, the OS rarely crashes. It might not be widely used; but, hey, at least it works.

ALEX SINGLETON

PCW DETAILS

★★★★

Price *Risc PC600 discontinued. StrongARM version around £800 (ex VAT) on the street.*
Contact *Acorn Computers 01223 725000 www.acorn.com*
Good Points *Reliable OS and PC co-processor.*
Bad Points *Lack of drivers and software.*
Conclusion *It's a lot more reliable than a Windows-based machine.*