The Micro Buyer's Survival Kit

Set out to buy a computer and you'll be reeling at the range on offer. Here's how to emerge unscathed

Video recorders, television sets and hi-fi systems all have one thing in common — each performs a specific task. The degree of sophistication between different models may vary. But a stereo system can only reproduce sound, a washing machine washes clothes, and a television set just receives and displays broadcast signals.

A computer is different. A hundred people can buy the same computer and each will find a unique task for the machine to carry out. This is why purchasing a home computer is so different from any other item you have bought before.

When you set out to buy a home computer, several factors require careful consideration. The very first thing to do is to write out a check list of the things you want the computer to do. For instance, you may want to learn the fundamentals of BASIC programming — in which case a Sinclair Spectrum or an Oric-1 may be the machine for you. Alternatively, you may wish to use your home computer to play games, act as a word processor or handle the home accounts — so a BBC or Commodore 64 might be a better choice. Factors such as price and reliability will probably come high on your list.

Your check list should be exhaustive, so that you don't end up with a computer that simply will not do what you want it to.

The home computer of your choice may be only the heart of a system. To exploit its full potential you will also require a means of saving programs for future use. A cassette recorder or disk system are typical methods. You will need a television set so that you can see programs and react to games. Often this will involve buying a second set, particularly if you have a family — they won't take kindly to missing their favourite programmes while you are busy with your micro! For anything other than games you may require printed copies of programs or of results produced by the computer, and for this you will need a printer.
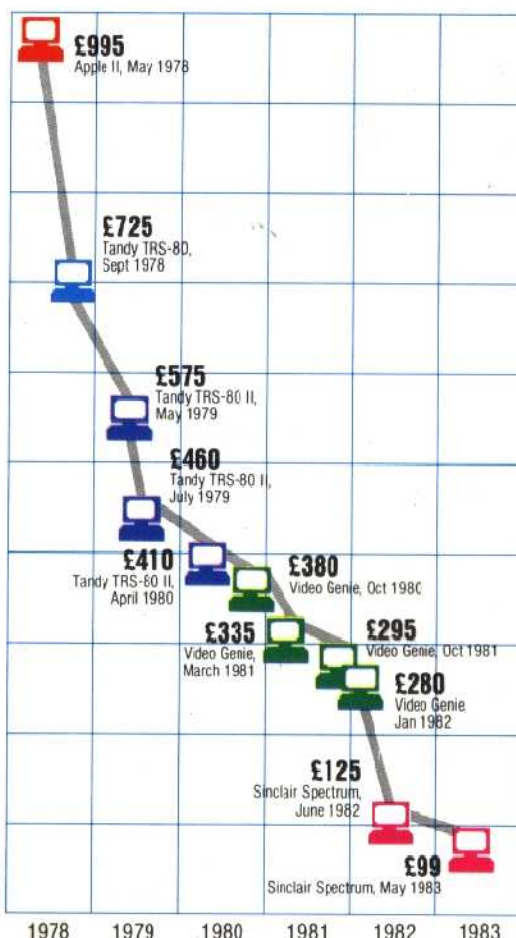
If the computer is to be used purely for games, your main consideration will probably be the amount of software that is available. Here micros such as the Sinclair Spectrum, Vic 20 and BBC score highly, as there is a vast and varied number of programs available for them on cassette.

How much memory will you need? This will depend on the complexity of the programs you want to use. The more complex programs will often be larger in size and will therefore require more memory to hold them. Word processors need large amounts of memory to store text. Generally 32K of RAM should satisfy most needs, although 16K will probably be sufficient to run entertaining games software with good graphics. As a rule, go for a machine with as much memory as you can afford.

Some of the more expensive home computers (such as the BBC, Commodore 64, and Atari 800) can be considered suitable for office use. All three have the facilities for adding disk drives, printers, and modems, which link to other computers via the telephone.

So do make sure that you've thought of everything when you've made out your check list. You should be absolutely clear in your own mind what you want from your home computer before parting with your money.

£995
Apple II, May 1978

£725
Tandy TRS-80,
Sept 1978

£575
Tandy TRS-80 II,
May 1979

£460
Tandy TRS-80 II,
July 1979

£410
Tandy TRS-80 II,
April 1980

£380
Video Genie, Oct 1980

£335
Video Genie,
March 1981

£295
Video Genie, Oct 1981

£280
Video Genie
Jan 1982

£125
Sinclair Spectrum,
June 1982

£99
Sinclair Spectrum, May 1983

1978   1979   1980   1981   1982   1983

The Fall In Price Of The Micro

These are selling prices from dealers for the most competitively priced computers with at least 16K of RAM. (Prices do not include an add-on RAM pack)