



# PROFESSIONAL HEAVYWEIGHT

**IBM-compatible machines are now dominating the business market. These are usually cheaper and offer more facilities than the machine they mimic, and many more are designed to be 'transportable'. Here we examine one of the earliest IBM-compatible portables, the Compaq Plus.**

When the IBM Personal Computer was launched in the United States, it brought a certain respectability to the microcomputer. Businessmen, who had previously regarded such devices as little more than gimmicks, were happy to buy from the acknowledged giant of the computer industry. As software houses began to produce a vast number of programs for the IBM, it was perhaps inevitable that many hardware manufacturers would produce computers capable of running IBM software and so take advantage of the huge software base that was accumulating.

One of the first in this field was the Compaq Computer Corporation — a company formed specifically to produce an IBM-compatible portable machine, the Compaq Plus. The model examined here is the 256 Kbyte twin-disk version, although the machine is also available with a single drive, or with a 10 Mbyte fixed hard disk.

## CARRY THAT WEIGHT

'Portable' is perhaps something of a misnomer for a machine weighing 14kg (28lb) — it is certainly difficult to carry it for more than a short distance. However, Compaq has at least recognised the problem of moving such a large weight around and has provided a padded vinyl handle that makes carrying easier on the fingers.

As is usual with portable computers, the Compaq keyboard clips onto the front of the computer. As the carrying handle is fitted to the back, this means that the keyboard also serves as the base. However, the machine is sturdily built and the keyboard seems to accept the weight and subsequent rough handling quite happily. The complete unit is approximately the size of a sewing machine. Once unclipped, the keyboard is connected to the computer by a thick coiled cable. The manufacturer claims that this enables the keyboard to be positioned to allow comfortable working. However, once the keyboard is pulled more than about eight inches from the unit it begins to be dragged back by the coils, thus limiting the distance between screen and user. A thinner cable would have removed this restriction.

The keyboard, like the computer itself, has folding legs that enable it to be angled for more



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comfortable working. As one would expect on a business computer like the Compaq Plus, the keys are easy to use and reliable. The keyboard layout is identical to that of the IBM PC, with 10 function keys on the left-hand side of the typewriter keys and a numeric keypad on the right. The obvious advantage of this layout is that users who are familiar with the layout of the IBM will be able to use the Compaq keyboard instantly without having to learn the position of the new keys. The disadvantage is that the IBM keyboard is not ideal and therefore design problems are duplicated. The Enter key on the IBM is the same size as the other keys, which makes it difficult to find. Perhaps more seriously for touch-typists, the Shift key is not in its usual place below the 'A' key. Instead the backslash key occupies this position, which means a touch-typist will, for a while at least, be continually hitting backslash instead of Shift. These are problems that recur on the Compaq.

While running MS-DOS (the Microsoft version of PC-DOS), the function keys on the left of the keyboard act as editing aids. These functions change depending on the applications program being run. Under BASIC, for example, they become single keyword entry keys such as LOAD, SAVE and LIST. A similar system is also used for the function keys on MSX machines.

The numeric keypad on the right of the keyboard has a dual function. In normal operation

## Compacting

The sleek and uncluttered lines of the Compaq's case are echoed in the simple front panel and its reasonable facsimile of the IBM PC keyboard. Flaps on either side of the case give access to the ports and power supply, and storage space for both the power lead and the mains plug — an important and often overlooked point!