



MAKING A HABIT OF THE HOBBIT

**Simon Dally has
been using this
fast floppy tape
system**

■ **Hobbit Floppy Tape System, Ikon Computer Products. £135 + VAT (no disc interface required).**

THE Hobbit is a chunky-looking black and white metal box, not much larger than a box of sugar lumps. It comes with a ribbon cable which plugs into the user port of the Beeb, a cable which goes into the power-socket beneath the micro, an operating system chip and a professional-looking manual. Up to two Hobbits can be used at any time.

The fitting instructions are quite clear. The only worry for the nervous is in fitting the chip — being ham-fisted I broke a pin on mine and had to ask for another. Also, opening up your computer can void the guarantee so if you have any doubts get your dealer to do it. My ROM didn't work at first but a quick phone call to Ikon established that I had an early machine and needed to cut a couple of small links on the PCB.

The panic over, I switched on and everything worked a treat.

The Hobbit stores and retrieves programs and data from micro-cassettes (the type used frequently in dictaphone machines). As with discs, before you can store anything you have to format the

cassette — this takes it about five minutes. Then you're ready to plonk your files on to it.

Switching back and forth between the tape system and the Hobbit is child's play and transferring software on to the Hobbit's microcassettes is easy, even with machine code programs. Once you've done this the Hobbit - really comes into its own.

Having been driven frequently to the borders of insanity by the

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cassette loading system on my Beeb I cannot begin to describe the liberation one feels at typing *CAT and seeing a well-designed index to the tape appearing on the screen. Programs which hitherto took three minutes to load even without those tiresome 'Rewind tape' messages now come up in 30 seconds, though this can vary depending on whereabouts on the cassette the Hobbit has stored it.

But the important thing is that you dispense with tape counters or unplugging the earphone socket to hear where the program begins: the Hobbit keeps track of the position of all files on the tape. To the cassette user it is the equivalent of the owner of a hand-cranked car suddenly acquiring a model with a self starting motor.

Various types of files can be created (including random access files) and there are commands enabling you to append, write only, read only, delete. There are also some built-in checks which ask you to confirm your instructions if you're about to wipe something out: in fact the only way you can accidentally erase data is by switching the Hobbit on or off with a cassette in it.

If you use a home computer for serious purposes and cannot tolerate any storage errors whatsoever, you shouldn't rely on any kind of tape-based system. But for those who find ordinary cassettes frustratingly slow and who cannot afford the cost of a disc interface and drive(s) the Hobbit is an impressive and reliable compromise.

Simon Dally

