

AT THE FIRST public airing of the ABC range during the PCW Snow, a development manager from Apple is reputed to have challenged staff on the Acorn stand about who had written the icon-based desk-top manager software — because it was so similar to Apple's own version for the Macintosh and they might want to sue! Apocryphal or not, the story reflects the concern which the arrival of the ABC must have stirred up in the competitive business computer market.

Acorn has repackaged its existing BBC micro-based products in an attractive new enclosure, and at the same time launched a range of hardware and software extensions which will give even the biggest commercial computer suppliers a few second thoughts: The ABC will be available in eight different models (see table below) providing a structured upgrade path within one chunky monitor housing which should cater for a wide variety of business needs.

All of the range use a 6502 processor for input/output (to control the screen, keyboard and disc drives); the larger models also have second processors to allow them to run more sophisticated operating systems than Acorn's MOS. At the low end is the Personal Assistant, with View and View Sheet as standard. And there's the Terminal, providing emulation for the DEC VT100 terminal for use with modems or the Econet. Neither of these machines has second processors as they run MOSbased software.

The ABC100 and 110 are Z80-based machines running CP/M and were recognised as such at the PCW Snow. Commented one visitor: 'If they had released the ABC100 on its own, no-one would have taken much notice —

VERTICAL TACK OF THE ABC

by Tony Quinn and Alex van Someren

it's hardly revolutionary stuff.' But the top-end 310 has been noticed, and excited many potential buyers.

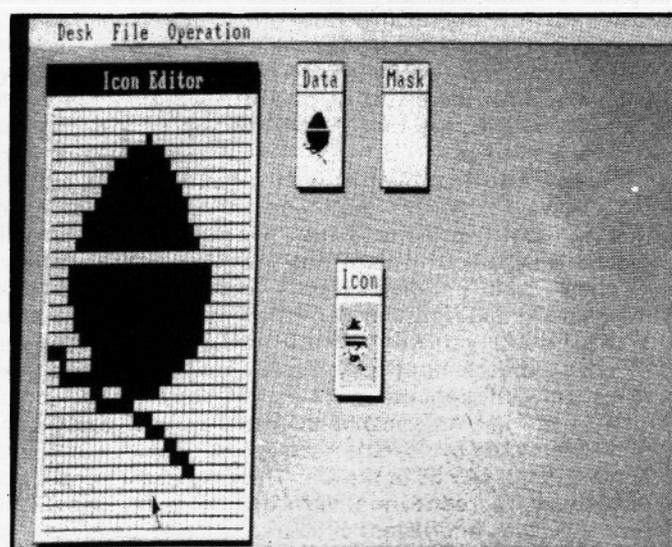
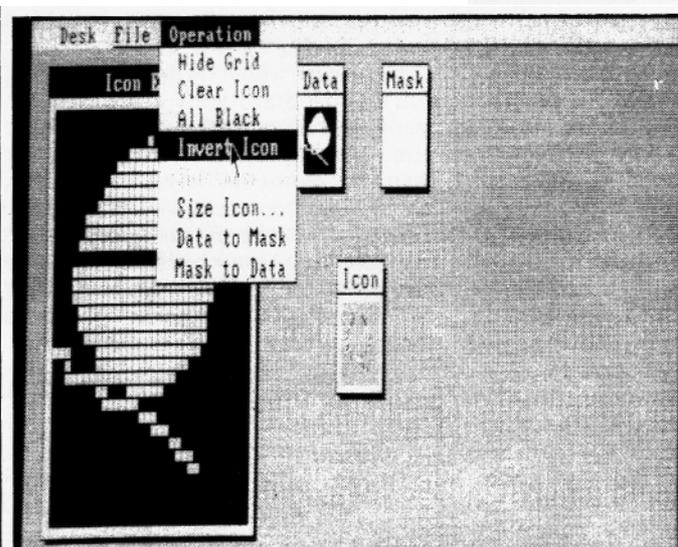
The 300 series uses the Intel 80286 processor and is an impressive machine to sit down at. It is compatible with the IBM PC but can provide more advanced processing power with its Concurrent OS and Desktop Manager. It is sure to give IBM's new PC-AT a run for its money (it uses the same processor), and Acorn's Hermann Hauser has been quick to point out that the product was developed in far less time than IBM who had early access to the

chip, while carefully integrating it into their range. The ABC310 offers icons, multi-tasking, windows, CP/M, MS-DOS, and PC-DOS. 'The ABC', says Hauser, 'is the only machine to do this.'

However, Acorn is keeping a low profile on any IBM clash and letting the industry do the talking: The company's first brochure for the ABC range doesn't even mention IBM. The nearest it gets is 'PC-DOS'. Sales Director Peter O'Keefe put it succinctly: 'We are a little smarter than to take IBM head-on: We're going for vertical markets in research, communications and so on,

Table 1. The ABC range

Model:	PA	Terminal	100	110	200	210	300	310
Processor:	6502	6502	Z80	Z80	32016	32016	80286	80286
Floppy disc:	640K	—	2x720K	720K	2x720K	720K	2x720K	720K
Hard disc:	—	—	—	10Mb	—	10Mb	—	10Mb
Screen:	Green	Colour	Green	Colour	Green	Colour	Green	Colour
Software:	View Sheet	VT100	CP/M	CP/M	Various, Xenix		CP/M, MS-DOS, PC-DOS	



These screen shots show the desk-top manager from the ABC310 in action. The letters on the screen look different to the BBC because the text face has been redesigned. The first picture shows an

Operation (note this is in black at the top of the screen) being performed. The black arrow, controlled by the mouse, has pulled down the window menu for Operation. This gives six choices, the one selected being 'Invert Icon'. The result is shown in the second picture, with the acorn in black

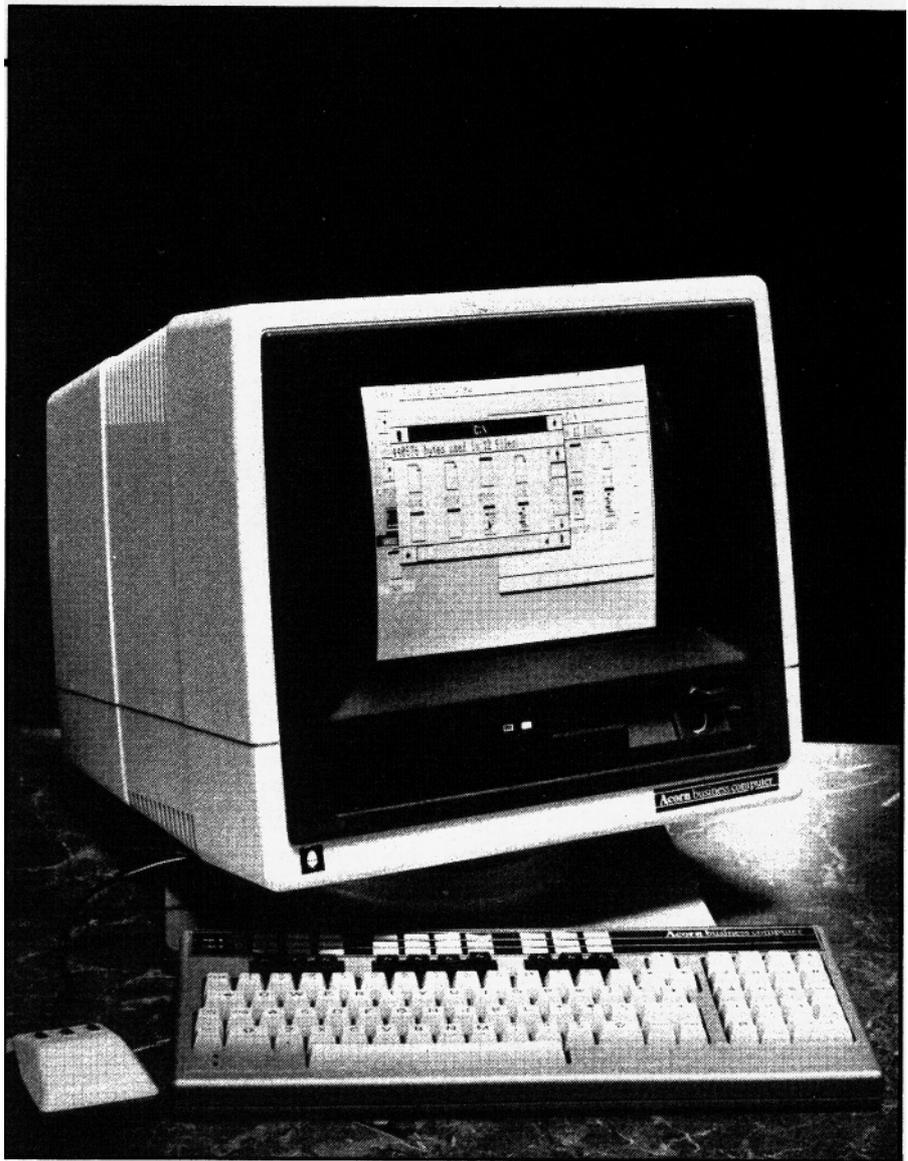
where we are established.' He also pointed out at the recent company results meeting: 'IBM are good customers of ours.' At which Chris Curry chipped in: 'But we don't buy any of theirs.'

The Xenix operating system is promised on the ABC210, along with up to 1Mb of RAM. Virtually every language under the sun has been mentioned, from the latest, Modula-2 (see Byte, August issue) to Fortran 77 for the diehards. The 32016-based ABC200 machines are being pushed as academic workstations, and, sure enough, were running Lisp, the artificial intelligence language, at the Show.

The flagship ABC310 certainly lives up to its promise, for it has been demonstrated running a sophisticated, mouse-controlled, desk-top manager with icons, menus and windows. For those of you who are baffled by such jargon, it provides a software simulation of a desk complete with overlapping sheets of paper (windows), disc storage (shown as pictures that are known as icons) and possible things to do (presented in menus).

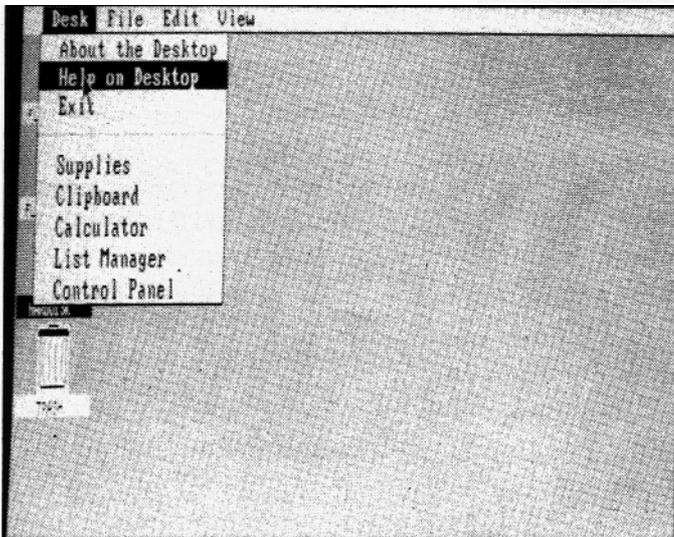
The success of the machine, as with any business computer, will depend to a large extent on the amount of applications software written for it. On this front Acorn has certainly hedged its bets with all the popular operating systems available, and response at PCW was good, said Howard Fisher who is responsible for the ABCs.

How will it find its place in the market, and especially when it comes up against the IBM PC-AT? Who knows, but on first showing its chances are good and prying (so far guessed at £500-£3500), should be competitive. And, as Peter O'Keefe says: 'There's room for IBM as well as Acorn.'

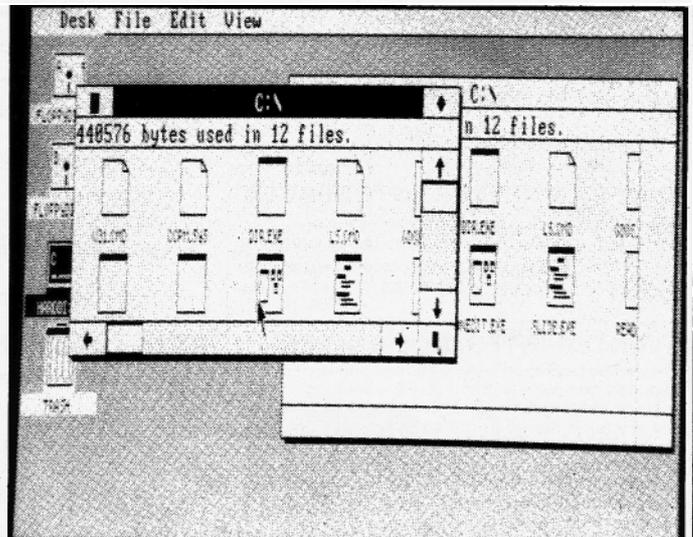


A marvel on marble: the ABC310 in all its glory. Beneath the monitor screen on the left is the Winchester hard disc, with the floppy drive beside it. Note the new symbols on the keyboard, re-arranged function keys, keypad and the mouse. There is no break key, but a reset is fitted on the rear of the keyboard. The monitor can be tilted and swivelled on its stand

Additional reporting by Geoff Nairn



In this shot, the menu for 'Desk' has been accessed with the black arrow cursor pointing to 'Help'. Underneath this menu window are the standard icons to choose the floppy drive (sides A or B), hard disc or 'trash can' (very American!)



The hard disc has been accessed here (hence the icon in black on the background) to display file C:\ which is 43.5k long. Two windows showing parts of the 12 files in C:\ are shown