Somewhere, Over the Laptop

SIR CLIVE SINCLAIR has had a bit of trouble with the press over the last few years. Can't see why, myself; the man's contribution to British technology has been remarkable, and if you feel inclined to make silly jokes about the C5, remember, please, that Sinclair invented the pocket calculator, the pocket television, the home/personal computer and innumerable other handy devices.

Now he has produced another undoubted winner. It does not have the name "Sinclair" on it (that apparently being owned by Mr Alan Sugar as a result of some vast business "deal" which I have neither the ability nor the desire to understand) but on the grounds that it is (a) British and (b) good to look at, being black, slim and elegant, just how I like them, its patrimony is obvious.

It's the **Cambridge Computer Z88** and the thing that irritates the hell out of me is that I will not be able to use it. I will not be able to use it because of pride. I suspect the Z88 will rapidly become the next Yuppy status symbol, outstripping the Filofax, which I can't use either.

But the Yuppies will be getting good things for their money. The Z88 is a real, proper computer, battery-powered and portable, offering (in unexpanded form) 20 hours use on four penlight Duracells. It's the size of an A4 sheet of paper and about half-an-inch thick, featherweight, elegant and possessed of the best keyboard I've yet encountered, one of those rubber things which, in this case, makes the quotidian act of typing into an almost erotic experience.

What you get with the Z88 is just about everything most people ever need from a computer. There's a diary, a calendar and an alarm clock, all of which interrelate most happily, a program called *PipeDream*, a communications program and a copy of BBC Basic (the best Basic available), plus the usual utilities.

Doesn't perhaps sound all that exciting, but let me assure you that it is. *PipeDream* itself is a remarkable achievement. It offers a spreadsheet, a word-processor and a database, and if you think I am talking about a conventional integrated program, you are wrong. *PipeDream* does all those things within one program. No switching between modules or cutting and pasting; *PipeDream* simply offers you a matrix of "slots" into which you can either type continuous text or figures or formulae or database "fields".

There are portable computers around but they are ugly and unfashionable and, what's more, the word-processors are generally pretty basic and fifth-rate. *PipeDream* offers all the functions of a full-scale word-processor in a casing so elegant that the blonde in the next seat is bound to lean across and murmur, "O what a neat one, may I feel it?" which more than repays the modest investment.

For the illiterate, *PipeDream* offers as much spreadsheeting power as you can need to bullshit the opposition, and, what's more, you can write your lies and then make up your sales projections in the same document, just by telling *PipeDream* that this next bit is numbers or text or a database or what you will.

The database operations in *PipeDream* are more-or-less limited to list management. You can sort on different fields, search through ranges or whole documents, and, in the database mode as in the other modes, you can link documents together and search through the whole lot with one command.

What is particularly nice about the Z88 is its export/import facility. You get a utility for your office computer which allows you to transfer files back and forth without reformatting, which is tedious at the best of times and impossible most of the time. No need, therefore, to worry about being locked into the Z88; you can download your current work from your IBM or Macintosh take it on your travels tucked inside the Z88, work on it, impress your enemies, and return to the office and reload it into the big machine.

If you need one, that is. It would appear to me that the Z88 would be more than adequate for most businessmen's needs, unless you want fancy graphics, or DTP. The screen, though dodgy in low light, is a clear, six lines by 80 columns LCD job, and includes a lovely little "map" which shows you, in miniature, what your current document looks like. The ability to cut and paste blocks of text or data means you can have a permanent "scratchpad" and move stuff from it into more formal documents at will, and in general it acts like a more efficient version of one of those personal organisers which are so popular, being ideal not only for storing contacts, notes, diary information and so forth, but actually being practical for doing real work.

I do have a few niggles. There are one or two aspects of the word-processor which take some getting used to, and the odd tiny quirk which jars, but these are so unimportant as to be only worth mentioning to the software designers. I do wish it had a built-in modem, but you can't have everything, and there is one which fits neatly on the back. Where it scores way above the competition is in having a proper QWERTY keyboard, well-designed software, plenty of storage (both RAM and permanent EPROM storage) and in being featherweight – under two lbs.

I have had the use of a prototype now for a few days and I am damned if they are getting it back until I get my own Z88. There are a few things to which I give an unreserved 100 per cent, and this is not one of them; but I do give it 90 per cent and, even more remarkably, I propose to buy one out of taxed income. There was a snide and stupid piece in a second-rate computer "magazine" a few weeks ago suggesting that the Z88 was a con-trick and vapourware. It ain't; it exists, it's excellent, it's shipping now.

Technical details? Okay. Eight line, 80-column supertwist LCD display, 32K RAM expandable to 416K (and to four Megabytes with the new one Mb chips), built-in diary, word-processing, spreadsheet, database and BBC Basic, permanent storage available on EPROM cartridges, data-transfer program for exchanging data with *Lotus 1-2-3*, *WordStar* etc.   ❧

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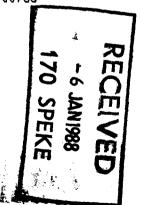0451 16   SALE   1702

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