PAGE THE ORIC

Oric Products International was set up as a rival to Sinclair Research. It was financed by British Car Auctions and was staffed by people from Tangerine Computer Systems and Tansoft. However, in its early days, the company was beset with design faults and problems of supply.

When it was founded in 1982, Oric combined marketing experience — in managing director Barry Muncaster and sales director Peter Harding — with the design experience of Dr Paul Johnson in hardware, and Paul Kaufman in software. The machine the company developed, the Oric-1, is a 6502 equivalent of the Sinclair Spectrum. It comes in 48 Kbyte and 16 Kbyte versions and in comparison with the Spectrum has a better keyboard, comes in a stronger case, and has superior graphics and sound. Its resident BASIC is the standard Microsoft dialect found in computers such as the Vic-20 and the Apple. The Oric also has a standard Centronics printer interface, allowing it to connect straight to full-size printers.

However, the company was hit by a number of major snags, suffering from delivery delays and design faults. The early machines had problems with tape loading and unstable screen displays. The BASIC ROMs contained a number of small but irritating bugs, making programming awkward. In addition, the Oric's memory-saving graphics techniques made it very difficult to program. These problems were exacerbated when the company was forced to reprice the system above the Sinclair Spectrum.

As a result of these difficulties, the machine did not sell well at first and it was difficult to obtain software for it. Tansoft worked hard to support the machine, providing languages such as Assembler and FORTH, and now the Oric has a respectable software base.

Old And New Orics
The futuristic-looking Oric 1 lasted 15 months before Oric decided to repackage it as the smart red-and-black Atmos with a full keyboard and a revised BASIC ROM. The Oric four-colour printer/plotter also had a matching redesign

Oric also promised a whole range of add-ons, including disk drives, a modem and a printer. Of these, only the four-colour printer/plotter emerged. Following this shaky start, the Oric has slowly established itself. Overseas sales have been very impressive. Of the 170,000 machines manufactured in 1983, over 50 per cent were for export. The Oric is particularly popular in France, where it was voted top micro in 1983, because its RGB monitor output, unlike that of other British micros, will work on French television sets. In Japan, also, a specially designed Oric has sold well.

Fifteen months after its launch date, Oric cured many of the problems inherent in the Oric 1 in a very novel way. It launched the Oric Atmos model, which features a full keyboard and improved BASIC ROMs, but is otherwise the same machine repackaged. With the announcement of the Hitachi three-inch disk drive to complement the system, the Oric Atmos begins to look like an extremely good-value disk-based micro — more in league with the Acorn Electron and the Commodore 64 than the Spectrum.

Once again, however, initial optimism has been tempered with problems. There have been delays in the delivery of disk drive shipments and the Atmos has trouble loading and running existing tapes. But a new development centre in Cambridge has been set up and a tie-up with the British semiconductor manufacturer Inmos should provide a good base from which to work in the future.