PIECE OF THE ACTION

The Apricot is an extremely compact three-piece computer from the British company ACT, which was responsible for the successful Sirius business computer. It comprises the now-familiar processor box, screen and separate keyboard. Although it does not attempt to be a 'true' portable, it is light enough to be moved easily.

Designed very much with the business user in mind, the Apricot comes in two versions: one with two 3½" disk drives and the other with a single 3½" drive and a built-in 10 MByte hard disk. Although boasting numerous features designed to appeal to the serious user, the Apricot makes few concessions to the home market — it has no colour graphics, cassette port, games paddles or television output. Supplied as standard, however, is a high-resolution monochrome monitor, a single parallel printer port, a single RS232 serial port, a connector for an optional mouse, some software and a quality keyboard.

The most striking thing about the Apricot is the versatile and innovative keyboard. A novel feature is the Microscreen — a 40-column, two-row LCD display located to the upper right of the main keys. On power-up, the top row of the Microscreen displays the day of the week, the month, the year and the time. The date and time may be altered by using one of the utility programs, and a battery powered clock keeps the time while the computer is not in use.

When the machine is switched on, a test program is automatically started. This displays the amount of memory available (256 Kbytes is standard but this can be upgraded to 768 Kbytes) and asks the user to insert the MS-DOS master disk. For users unfamiliar with operating systems such as CP/M or MS-DOS, a user-friendly 'menu' called the Manager allows easy selection of applications software (such as Supercalc, Multiplan, Microsoft BASIC, etc.) or utilities (such as the keyboard configurator or screen font editor).

The Microscreen is software-controlled, so it acts as more than just a visual display of the time and date. Six user-programmable keys are provided, and the functions allocated to these may be shown at any time on the LCD screen. Thus, when a program displays an option menu on the main screen, the same menu may be duplicated on the Microscreen. Touching the appropriate function key is equivalent to selecting the item from the screen menu by using the Cursor and Return keys. The only criticism here is that ZX81-

style membrane keys are harder to use and less positive in action than conventional typewriter-style keys.

There are also eight ordinary function keys. These are inscribed with legends for their normal functions — HELP, PRINT, MENU, FINISH etc. Like all Apricot keys, however, these can be reconfigured with the supplied Keyedit program. The feel of the Apricot keyboard is up to the high standard expected of a business computer, but the Control and Escape keys are in a slightly odd place. To make the machine easy to move, the keyboard clips to the underside of the main unit. The heavy bulk of the separate monitor is enough, however, to scotch any claim to it being a true portable.

The software supplied with the Apricot is a comprehensive suite of system utilities and Supercalc. 'What if?' - type number crunching is catered for by Supercalc and Superplanner. There is evidence here, as in those other pieces of software adapted for use on the Apricot, of a rather hurried attempt to get it ready in time for the launch of the computer. Two operating systems come with the machine, MS-DOS and CP/M-86. Apricot owners are promised free copies of Concurrent CP/M-86 when it is ready. Only version one of Supercalc is supplied with the Apricot, although versions two and three are available at discount.

One of the earliest criticisms made of the Apricot was that the MS-DOS operating system had been badly implemented and that it was slow in operation. This problem now seems to have been overcome. The applications software supplied with the machine seems to work reasonably quickly, and benchmark programs to

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