



# Windows On The World

**Viewdata is one of the few areas of computing where international standards have been established. This gives your computer access to a network of databases across the globe**

Viewdata systems, such as British Telecom's Prestel service, enable us to gain access to a variety of databases by way of a modified television set and a telephone. A system may be a public one, open and relevant to all, like Prestel; it may be open to all but rather esoteric in content — like Fintel, a constantly updated financial database; or it may be private.

Viewdata systems, however, should not be confused with the teletext systems now available over the broadcast television channels, which use similar character sets and page layouts. Teletext systems, such as the BBC's Ceefax or ITV's Oracle, are broadcast as subsidiary signals overlaid on normal television programmes. The signals that define a teletext page are transmitted between the frames of a normal television picture. A decoding device separates them out and creates the teletext image. The resulting text and graphics can displace the normal broadcast picture or be superimposed over it so that the two appear together, as when teletext is used to provide subtitles for the hard of hearing.

Teletext systems are not interactive — that is, there is no means by which the viewer can change the contents of a page of information, or even make a response. Access to them, however, is free. All that you require to enjoy the benefits of a large volume of useful information is a suitably adapted television set.

Viewdata systems, on the other hand, use the domestic television set simply as a monitor to display data received over the telephone network. Normally, users cannot amend the database but they can use their keypad to enter responses to questions into the system. All viewdata systems are totally menu-driven — that is, the range of choices available to the user at any level is always displayed. The user makes a choice by entering a number on the numeric keypad. This transfers control into the selected sub-menu; and the procedure is repeated down through the levels of the hierarchy until the user arrives at the desired page of information.

Each page is identified by a unique number, and it is possible to go straight to a particular page by entering that number. This is the quickest (and the cheapest) method for those people who consult a particular page frequently.

By way of an example, let us follow a hypothetical user as he books his summer holiday via Prestel. The 'sign-on' frame (the first picture he sees when he turns the system on) tells him to



COURTESY OF PRESTEL

press the # symbol on the keypad to arrive at the main index. From then on he follows the menu prompts from page to page. First stop is the General Information frame. The fourth entry in this page is headed Holidays, Transport, Travel, so he keys 4.

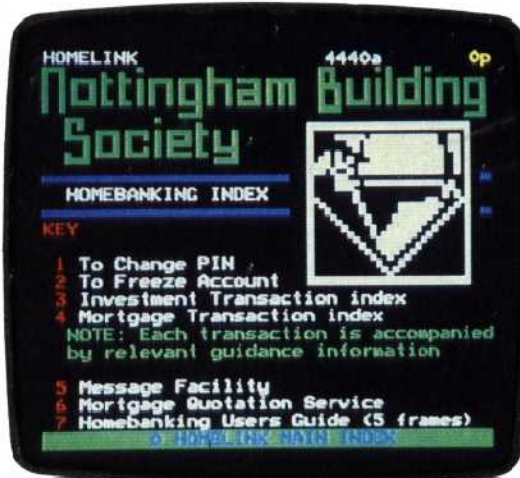
In response he will be offered a choice between Rail Travel, Air Travel, Coach Travel, Other Transport, Holidays and Tourism, and Cars and Motoring. There are also four further 'exits', each of which goes to an information frame (a sort of detour, like a footnote in a book) from which he can return to the main body of the text. After pressing the key corresponding to Holidays and Tourism, our

### Public Information

British Telecom's Prestel viewdata service, comprising some 250,000 pages of information, is available anywhere in the country — even from a public telephone under certain conditions. All that is required to access the database is a telephone line and a television receiver

### On-Screen Statement

The Nottingham Building Society, in conjunction with the Bank of Scotland and British Telecom, have developed a system that allows subscribers to take care of many of their financial transactions directly from their own homes using a Prestel adaptor supplied by the consortium. Customers can examine their bank and building society accounts, pay bills, communicate with other subscribers and even buy a range of goods and services



COURTESY OF PRESTEL