FROM LITTLE ACORNS

Chris Curry

Herman Hauser

Acorn Computers is the company that produces two of the finest examples of British home computer technology: the BBC Micro and the Electron. Yet only a few years ago, Acorn was a fledgling enterprise engaged in consultancy work and selling a few special systems from a small office in Cambridge.

Acorn's founder, Chris Curry, was a former employee and close friend of Sir Clive Sinclair. Curry had joined Sinclair Radionics in 1965, when Sinclair had offered him a job as a development engineer for the sum of £11 a week.

At Sinclair Radionics, Curry was put in charge of the project that produced the Executive calculator in 1971. For the next five years, he devoted himself to developing calculators, which are now considered as the precursors of the modern home computer. In 1975 Sinclair Radionics ceased trading, and Curry joined Sinclair in a freelance operation called Science of Cambridge. The new venture aimed to package electronics components as kits.
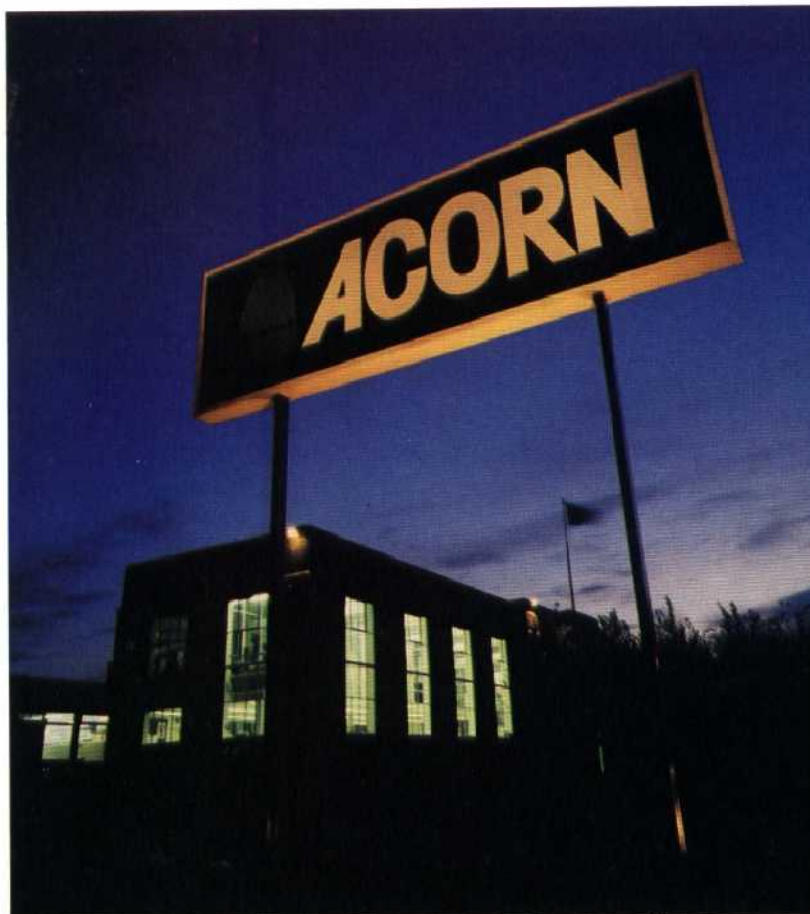
One idea that sold well was a wristwatch calculator. But Curry was also inspired by the single-board computers that were emerging in the US, and he set about developing a kit of his own. This was called the MK14 (Microprocessor Kit with 14 chips) and featured a National Semiconductor microprocessor, 256 bytes of RAM, a small fixed memory containing the monitor, and the components needed to power an eight-digit LED display.

Curry found that the company was constantly supplying advice and ideas over the telephone to electronics hobbyists and decided to take on Herman Hauser, a PhD student from Cambridge University, to deal with these enquiries. However, Curry's ideas were soon diverging from Sinclair's and he decided it was time to start a company of his own. With Hauser as his new partner, Curry formed a company called the Cambridge Processor Unit — a rather mischievous name if you abbreviate it to CPU! Working from a small office in Bridge Street, Cambridge, the men hired themselves out as electronics and computer consultants.

The success of the MK14, and developments in the US, had clearly shown that what the customers wanted was a computer in a box with BASIC on board. Having written a fast version of BASIC for machine control for one of its consultancy projects, CPU decided to add this to a machine and put it on the market. The machine was called the Atom, and CPU adopted the name Acorn for the company that was to market it. The machine was primarily intended to capture the educational market, but most schools thought that the BASIC deviated too much from the Microsoft dialect to be acceptable. The machine did, however, find much favour among hobbyists. Acorn went ahead with a development of the Atom, which was called the Proton and was intended for use in laboratories and colleges.

But in 1981, while the Proton was in pre-production, Curry heard that the BBC was searching for a machine that would complement its computer literacy programme. Curry's response was to demonstrate the capabilities of the 6502 processor — not in the Proton, however, but in a specially designed system.

The BBC specification was for a machine that beginners would find easy to use and yet could be expandable to a very high standard. The machine should also offer good value for money (the Corporation was initially specifying a target price of £200). Against stiff opposition from Sinclair Research, Acorn was given the job, and it created the BBC Micro, which it is now producing at the rate of 12,000 a month.