



DRESSED TO QL

The Sinclair Spectrum has proved to be the most successful home computer ever in the UK. However, the machine has begun to appear a little outdated and unimaginative next to stylish rivals like the Amstrad CPC 464 and Commodore Plus/4, and Sinclair has responded by dressing the old machine up in new clothes.

At its launch in the spring of 1982, the Sinclair Spectrum offered outstanding value for money. Its only real rivals were the Vic-20, with a meagre 3.5 Kbytes of user memory, and the Texas TI99 4A, which sold at twice the price. At £175, the Spectrum was an instant hit with first-time buyers as well as being the natural choice of the thousands of micro enthusiasts who had outgrown their ZX80s and ZX81s. The new machine had an astounding 48 Kbytes of memory, used a good BASIC, and offered eight colours for graphics, as well as a primitive sound facility. The keyboard, too, was a vast improvement on the 'touch-sensitive' flat plastic sheet of the ZX81. Initially available by mail order only, the Spectrum was an instant success, and rapidly became the country's best-selling micro.

In the two and a half years since the Spectrum's launch, Sinclair's competitors produced a range of machines to challenge the Spectrum's market dominance. Despite having a decidedly inferior BASIC, the Commodore 64 was the most successful challenger; it offered more memory (although machine code was needed to make the most of

this), superb sound and a 'real' keyboard with typewriter-style moving keys. The BBC Micro, too, offered superior specifications, but its £400 price prevented it from being a serious threat, and its manufacturers chose not to lower its price. However, a succession of Commodore price cuts reduced the cost of the 64 from an initial £340 to £150; Sinclair reacted by dropping the Spectrum to £130.

By this time, the Spectrum keyboard — once such an attraction — was now a decided drawback. The machine's software base was unsurpassed, and many 'serious' packages were produced for it. However, trying to use word processing programs with the Spectrum keyboard was like typing with mittens on. Many users, therefore, invested in 'proper' keyboards, and this trend accelerated when the long-awaited Interface 1/Microdrive unit finally appeared. It soon became apparent that the micro users of 1984 were no longer prepared to accept the Sinclair idea of what constituted an acceptable input device.

SPECTRUM FACELIFT

Sinclair Research's response has been to give the Spectrum a facelift. The Spectrum+ is essentially the same machine, but housed in a cut-down QL keyboard, with a few extra keys, a Reset switch and a couple of retractable legs. All of the peripherals produced for the older version should work with the 'Plus', but Sinclair has failed to take the opportunity to bring the Spectrum's performance more in line with the competition by improving the sound, or providing a monitor socket or a built-in Interface 1. The sound capabilities of the machine are now its greatest handicap. The two legs do allow a little more volume to escape from the machine's base but this is more an annoyance than a convenience as it means that the LOADING and SAVEing noises are also magnified. The Spectrum's pathetic BEEPing is still woefully inadequate.

The Spectrum+ measures 319 by 149 by 38 mm (12½ by 5⅞ by 1½in). The new design makes programming easier by providing extra keys for 'Extended' and graphics mode, true and inverse video, Delete and Break keys, and separate keys for commonly used punctuation symbols like the semi-colon, quotes, comma and full stop. An extra Symbol Shift key has also been added, and the cursor keys are now allocated new places alongside a small Space bar. All the old key combinations still work. For veteran Sinclair users the new design may cause a few problems. In particular, the new Edit key is situated next to the 'A' key; if this is hit by mistake when a long

Six Of One

Following the current fashion for 'bundling' software with home micros, Sinclair includes an impressive software six-pack with the Spectrum+ (and the Spectrum 48K). It comprises a word processor, spreadsheet, two games, and two graphics packages — at least £30 worth of good-quality software

