OSBORNE ON SHOW

The US-based Osborne Corporation, manufacturer of the first 'portable' microcomputer, the Osborne-1, has recovered from its financial problems to produce a new machine. Here we look at the Osborne Encore — the latest in a long line of IBM PC-compatibles.

As the first all-in-one portable computer, the Osborne-1 started a revolution in microcomputing. Equipped with a built-in monitor, twin disk drives and interfaces to modems and printers, the machine was the first self-contained CP/M business computer. Although the designation 'portable' was perhaps something of an overstatement (the Osborne-1 weighed 10.5kg), other manufacturers were quick to see the potential of the new machine and the Osborne Corporation, instead of being in a field of its own, found itself surrounded by competitors.

The crunch for the new company came in 1981 when IBM announced the launch of the first model in its Personal Computer range. The new machine quickly swept all before it as businessmen rushed to buy from the well-known giant of the computer industry. Osborne, together with many of its competitors, swiftly announced the imminent launch of a PC-compatible machine. This new model, the Osborne Executive, was to be equipped with dual processors, allowing it to run both CP/M and MS-DOS software. However, because of the worldwide shortage of 8086 microprocessors, the machine appeared without the chip needed to make it PC-compatible. As a result, sales of Osborne machines fell dramatically, and Osborne was forced to file for voluntary liquidation in the summer of 1983. But Osborne managed to survive and the new-look company is now a research and development operation similar to Sinclair Research in the UK.

A new machine from the company — the Osborne Encore — has now finally arrived. It is a bold gamble from a firm that has barely managed to stay in business. Although not quite so compact as machines like the Epson PX-8, the Encore's significance lies in its attempts to bridge the gap between the lap-held and desk-top sections of the business market.

Weighing in at around six kilograms, the Encore is considerably less of a burden than its predecessor. The keyboard folds up into the screen, making a compact box that is roughly the size of three telephone directories. The casing is in sturdy blue plastic and the keyboard is held in place by a pair of clips.

The keyboard contains QWERTY typewriter keys, above which is a plastic membrane covering the function keys and the 'icons' (symbols that represent the built-in programs). On the main body of the computer itself is a 23.7cm by 8cm liquid crystal display screen.

The keyboard has a solid professional feel to it, with the control keys on either side of the keyboard and four cursor keys in the bottom right-hand corner. The design of the keyboard is very cramped, and this is, no doubt, a result of trying to fit all the features of the IBM PC into such a confined space. On the right-hand side of the IBM there is a separate numeric keypad that performs calculator functions. To maintain compatibility on the Encore, these keys have been incorporated onto the main body of the keyboard. The calculator functions are marked in blue, in contrast to the white labelling of the standard alphanumeric keys. The calculator is accessed, like the other built-in programs on the Encore, by pressing the appropriate icon on the panel above the keyboard. Encore icons represent the calculator, modem, disk and calendar routines.

The touch panel is not so well designed and detracts from the overall professional feel of the keyboard. The function keys (which on the PC are located separately to the left of the keyboard) have the same sort of feel to them as the ZX81 keyboard. Although one can feel the bubble

CHRIS STEVENS

Compact Package
The Osborne Encore is one of the first IBM-compatible machines to be fitted with an LCD display instead of the standard cathode ray tube. When not in use, the keyboard folds up onto the screen, making a very compact package that can be carried with the shoulder strap provided