TONY LODGE

or password. If the service you have dialled is private and you are not a registered user, then you probably will not get much further — unless you are either good at guessing or very patient! A lot of computers will, however, allow restricted access to 'guests' who are not registered users, so it is worth trying a few words like NEWUSER, GUEST or HELP.

The BBS, on the other hand, is open to anyone and is free of charge (other than the cost of the phone call). You just give your name and town when asked, and once 'signed on' you will be asked for details of your computer, such as the screen width or perhaps the specific make. This is to enable the 'host' computer to identify you in future calls and set up the system to function properly with your computer.

Once this has been done you will be given some system information, such as operational times and technical details, and a time limit for your call — perhaps 30 minutes. You now come to the main menu, which consists of a list of half a dozen commands, and you choose the required one simply by pressing the corresponding initial letter. For example, to register as a 'New User' you would type N; to finish your call type G for 'Goodbye'. Further menus will appear with most of the options, and you carry on selecting the relevant option until you reach what you require. The BBS is rather like a tree — you start at the trunk, the main menu, and choose different 'branches' with each sub-menu. The same idea is used with Prestel and most other databases.

The 'New User' section is for those who wish to register with the BBS. Your name and address are requested, and you can choose your own password to use in future calls. The 'Information' command gives detailed technical information about the system. The 'Utilities' section informs you how

long your call has lasted, and also gives details on all the other Bulletin Board Services.

The 'Bulletins' section contains public notices that other users have put on the system for anyone to read. You can also add your own notices. The 'Messaging' section is for you to read private messages that people have left for you. Similarly, you can send private messages to other users, or to a group of users who have something in common (for example all BBC Model B owners). These features are perhaps the most exciting aspect of the services, and are probably responsible for their growing popularity.

A slightly different service, called Rewtel, offers a specialised database for electronic components and related information. It also offers direct ordering from the keyboard of stock items, but only for subscribers. Unlike the BBS, you enter 'keywords' to specify your area of interest. For example, if you wanted some help in using the shopping facility you would enter HELP REWSHOP. It also has a BBS facility: you enter the keyword CHALK and you can then leave a message. Non-subscribers can use the service and will be allowed eight minutes on the system. Distel and Maptel are similar database services primarily intended for ordering electronic and computing equipment. The advantage of these commercial systems is that they operate 24 hours a day, and are not as frequently engaged as the Bulletin Board Services.

While mainframe computers have been 'on the phone' for some time, it has been only recently, with the fall in modem prices and the increased sophistication of microcomputers, that such communication has become feasible for home users. Over the next few years the modem is likely to become as common an accessory for the home computer as the printer or cassette recorder.

**Computerised Notice Board**
One of the most rewarding applications of a modem is accessing an electronic bulletin board. These are computerised versions of the traditional club notice boards. Messages can be 'pinned on' to be read by anyone, or specific individuals who have the correct passwords. Meetings and secondhand computer equipment for sale are advertised. It is even possible to download games or other program listings onto your disk or cassette