



Whether you are setting out to buy a home microcomputer for the first time, or you already have one which you now wish to upgrade to a higher level of sophistication, the choice available to you can be quite bewildering. So far in the HOME COMPUTER COURSE we have described in detail some of the home computers on the market, explained basic operating principles and operating methods, talked about some applications of microcomputers to our everyday life and decoded some of the jargon that surrounds them.

There are many factors to be considered when purchasing a microcomputer for the first time, and perhaps the first amongst them is the cost of the machine. Now, it is possible to go to a high street store and buy a Sinclair ZX81 in its simplest form for less than £40. The chief drawback to this is the keyboard quality or 'feel', of the ZX81. In order to reduce the size of its physical package as much as possible, Sinclair adopted a multi-layer membrane design for the keyboard. The result is an absence of sensitivity or 'tactile feedback', which can lead to considerable frustration. Computer programming, when one is a complete beginner, is quite demanding enough, both in terms of intellect and attention to detail, without the added complication of a relatively 'unfriendly' machine.

This might appear a small enough price to pay, considering the saving of £60 or more that one makes, but there are other considerations, such as

the ZX81's inability to generate colours or make sounds and its limited 'add-on-ability'.

Similar criticisms can be levelled at other low-cost computers: for example, the Aquarius, which is very competitively priced, but which has a low-quality keyboard of unorthodox layout, and lacks program editing facilities. So we disregard the cheaper machines in this survey.

There is a whole series of features that one should expect in a home micro. These have been detailed on the previous page, and it is vital to make them into a personalised list, in order of importance. If, as many users do, you see your prime requirement as playing computer games, then you will want a broad software base, appropriate peripherals, such as joysticks or trackballs, good graphics and sound generation capabilities. Alternatively, if your interest is in the business/home management field then you will perhaps be more concerned with the number of columns displayed on the screen, the quality of keyboard, mass storage, easy printer connection and, once again, lots of software.

While computers are extremely versatile, some are better suited to a particular task than others. It really is essential to make a comprehensive checklist before you set out to buy your first machine. Put down absolutely anything you can think of, perhaps allocating to each a value from one to ten in order of priority.

For a general-purpose machine, look for a good dialect of BASIC, a comfortable keyboard, wide expandability and a reasonably large memory as standard.

It pays to shop around. You are unlikely to be

Caveat Emptor

New computers are appearing in the shops every month — making the decision of what to buy increasingly difficult for the newcomer. With so many factors to consider, the old saying 'buyer beware' is more appropriate than ever