

CHRIS STEVENS

include free programs and programs that you pay for. The free ones are fine for a bit of fun, but you shouldn't expect too much for nothing.

Both Micronet and Prestel offer a tremendous range of information. As well as news and reviews, there are pages of technical advice, jokes, games, letters, contact advertisements, and so on. You can even send electronic mail to other people who use the system regularly. Micronet also has a rival — the *Viewfax* newspaper in a different part of Prestel has an irreverent micro section run by the mysterious 'MicroGnome'.

The information 'explosion' on Prestel bodes well for the future. But some of its early problems are still apparent, particularly in Micronet. Many news pages are out of date and often the paths that lead from one page of information to the next are confusing. But if you tire of Prestel, you can try communicating with other Spectrum users directly. The VTX5000 is also designed to link two Spectrum computers via the telephone lines, so that they can send messages and programs directly to one another. The speed of transmission is a healthy 1,200 baud. Early versions of the modem were sold without the necessary software to do this, but now a tape that facilitates this data transfer is included with each unit. Obviously, this software is of use only to Spectrum owners who have friends who also have Spectrums and VTX5000 modems.

Several other communication standards are in common use for modems, but the VTX5000 cannot cope with them. The most important limitation is the modem's lack of the standard needed for the many free bulletin boards, which are being set up by computer communication enthusiasts around the world. These operate at a data rate of 300 baud, but the VTX5000 can't transmit as slowly as this.

Anyone who really wants to explore the whole area of computer communications with their Spectrum may find it more suitable to buy an RS232 interface (particularly Sinclair's own ZX Interface 1) and use a general purpose modem. However, this would probably entail writing your own software, wiring cables and so on. The VTX5000 is ideal for those who want to use Prestel only.

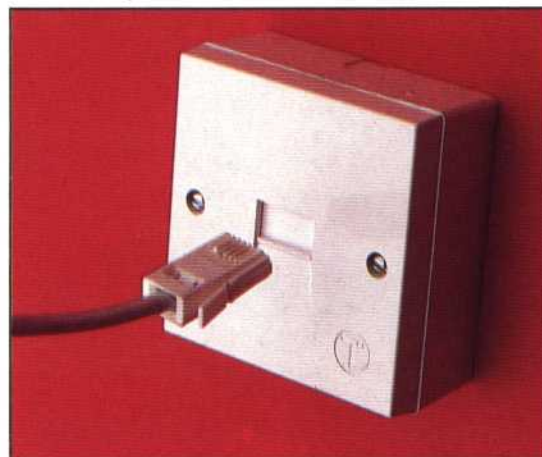
Direct Connect

The VTX5000 connects directly to the Spectrum with no additional interface required. Your telephone plugs into the VTX5000, which is then hooked directly into your modular telephone socket. Note that this modem will only work on modular jacks, not on older-style telephone connection boxes

each session, even if the user calls up Prestel several times.

The next step is to telephone one of the four computers that hold the Prestel database. When it answers with a high-pitched note, you press the Line switch on the modem and replace the receiver. The Spectrum is now 'talking' to Prestel. The first thing you must do is enter a four-letter password. This stops anyone else using your Prestel account and you can change it as often as you like to keep it a secret.

Once you have access to the database, it's like using any other Prestel adaptor. Prestel requires star (*) and hash (#) keys to move from page to page. The Spectrum uses Enter and Symbol Shift for the same functions. You can call up other functions of the Micronet software at any time, while still logged onto the system. These let you copy pages from the database, and store them on tape or print them out. Alternatively, you can 'download' (copy) whole programs off the system into your Spectrum. Micronet's telesoftware pages



BT Modular Phone Jacks

These jacks are being installed with all new phone lines, and conversions of existing lines. The jack takes a squarish plastic plug as shown here. If you do not have a modular jack, BT will install one on your existing line for £28 (excluding VAT)