THE CAMBRIDGE CONNECTION

John Shirreff

The city of Cambridge is fast becoming an English 'Silicon Valley'. Not only are successful companies such as Acorn and Sinclair Research based there, but also lesser-known firms like Camputers, which is now securing remarkable sales of its Lynx microcomputer in countries as diverse as Greece, Norway, Jordan and South Africa.

Camputers began as the brainchild of one man. In 1976, Dick Greenwood started working as a freelance electronics designer, accepting contracts from firms such as Pye Telecoms. By the end of the 1970s, Greenwood had formed his own company and had become involved in more specialised development work, also on a contractual basis. The company diversified into software development, producing a Bar Management System — a stock control package that enabled breweries to monitor their sales in pubs and off-licences.

The company then moved into microcomputer design, concentrating on projects based around the Zilog Z80 chip. In February 1981, Greenwood set up Camtronic Circuits (later to become Camputers), and with the help of the government's Small Firms Loan Guarantee Scheme work began on the Lynx home computer in the summer of 1981. Greenwood's stated aim was to 'teach the Z80A to dance around problems, not barge through them'.

In charge of the hardware development side of the project was John Shirreff, a graduate of Cambridge University, who joined the company

after working in the rock music industry. Software development was handled by Davis Jansons, who wrote the version of BASIC used by the machine.

When it appeared in 1982, the Lynx was considered a very professional-looking machine. Packaged in an attractive grey casing, with a full QWERTY-style typewriter keyboard, the computer came equipped with a standard 48 Kbyte memory that could be expanded to 192 Kbytes. The machine had the ability to display up to eight different colours, with a high resolution mode of 248×256 pixels. It also had a built-in speaker to take full advantage of its audio capabilities.
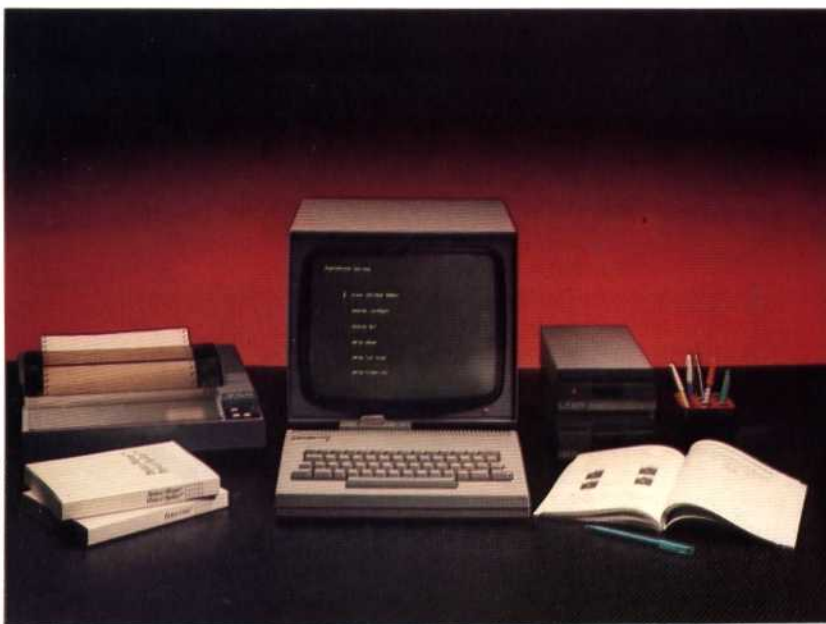
Unfortunately, the Lynx never really became popular in the United Kingdom, although sales abroad encouraged the company to continue to develop the basic design. The Lynx 96 appeared shortly afterwards, and came equipped with over 37 Kbytes of user RAM, as well as the ability to run $5\frac{1}{4}''$ floppy disk drives. Furthermore, the Lynx 96 came with pre-set sound effects on board. Serial and parallel printer interfaces were available for the machine as optional extras.

More recently, the company has introduced a machine aimed at the small business side of the microcomputer market. The computer is called the Lynx Laureate, and as it is based around the Z80 microprocessor, it can run under the CP/M operating system, which gives the user access to the vast quantity of CP/M software that has been written in the last decade. This is an important selling point as few users nowadays would consider buying a computer, especially for business use, that lacks adequate software support. Although designed as a small business machine, the Laureate is nevertheless compatible with the other Lynx models and is fitted with a 40-way expansion bus that allows it to use the full range of Lynx peripheral packs, including a parallel printer, joystick and ROM-based software.

Despite this impressive range of available micros, Camputers, under its present chairman Stanley Charles, is continuing to develop new products. In the near future the company is planning to launch an alternative version of the Laureate business machine. This system will be available as an integrated package, as opposed to the modular layout of the present design. There are also plans for a UK relaunch of the Lynx 48, under the name Leisure. This will be aimed specifically at the home and games computer market — an area in which the company feels its machines have been unfairly neglected. Looking further ahead, Camputers is working on a machine that the company expects will be fully competitive with the Sinclair QL.

Business System
Shown here is the Lynx Laureate modular system designed for business users. 128K of memory on-board enables it to support CP/M

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