

# Four New Computers From ACT

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In one of the most dramatic new product introductions on either side of the Atlantic, ACT recently unveiled four new Apricot computers, thus making the Apricot line one of the most complete from any manufacturer.

Prior to the launch, ACT distributors were flown up to the ACT plant in the new town of Glenrothes, Scotland. This particular area of Scotland—from north-east of Edinburgh running west along the Firth of Forth—has come to be known as Silicon Glen, and is the home for much of the U.K.'s computer industry. As a result, a highly skilled and motivated labor force has gravitated to the area, much as has happened in the San Francisco Bay area.

The year-old ACT plant is a model of efficiency, and, although it is not as highly automated as some Japanese and American factories, quality control is second to none. In contrast to Far Eastern factories, the work floor is open, airy, and relatively quiet. As the government requires a certain amount of space per worker, even after gearing up to make the new machines, the plant should retain its nonclaustrophobic atmosphere.

## ACT Concert in Royal Albert Hall

No, it wasn't the Proms—an extremely popular classical concert series held toward the end of the summer—but more than a few Londoners wondered just what was going on at Royal Albert Hall on June 28th. ACT called it "the most remarkable event in the history of the British micro-computer industry," and perhaps it was. More than 2500 U.K. computer dealers, international distributors, and members of the press were present at 12:00 noon for an extravaganza of light and sound, dancing girls, comedians, a midget, and, oh yes, four new computers.

Since you are not reading this magazine to learn about multimedia shows and champagne lunches, let's talk computers. Perhaps the most significant aspect of the launch is the fact that ACT now offers a complete, upward-compatible line of 16-bit computers and is, as far as we know, the only manufacturer in the world



to do so (see table). The only significant parts of the market in which ACT does not have an entry are the home and notebook portable segments. And if you believe Roger Foster, managing director of ACT, ignoring these sectors is quite deliberate.

The significance of having a complete family cannot be overemphasized. Besides providing buyers with some very attractive machines to consider, a compatible line makes the initial decision as to which computer to buy much less critical. You can select the machine that is best for your school or business today secure in the knowledge that as your requirements increase, so can your Apricot expand.

## F1 Entry Level Business System

The Apricot F1 has a 16-bit 8086 micro-processor running at 4.77 MHz (as does the entire Apricot line), 256K of RAM (expandable to 768K), double-sided, 3½" floppy disk drive (Sony type) with 720K of storage, a cordless infra-red full-stroke keyboard, color graphics, and RS-232 and Centronics interface ports.

The keyboard is a European-style unit with square keys having a rounded depression in the top of each one. One can get used to it in a few hours. The unit is a longish 17.7" x 8.7" wide. It has 92 keys

with a numeric keypad and ten function keys at the right side.

In addition to the keyboard, ACT also offers a wireless mouse (a mouse without a tail?). Moreover, the mouse can be used upside down as a trackball which, if your desk is as cluttered as mine, could be a considerable plus. The mouse has two buttons, one on each side, and is fully compatible with the Microsoft mouse.

The system unit houses the electronics and single disk drive. This compact unit has a single expansion slot which most likely would be used for memory. In addition, an external expansion box with five more slots is available; this box can also hold a second 3½" drive or a 5¼" one.

The F1 drives practically any kind of display: RGB monitor, composite video monitor, or standard TV set. Graphics resolution is 640 x 256 pixels (four colors) or 320 x 256 pixels (16 colors). Resolution on U.S. NTSC displays will be 640 x 200 and 320 x 200. Text resolution is the expected 80 characters by 25 lines.

To increase system performance, the F1 basic input/output system (BIOS) has been implemented in 32K of ROM. The BIOS handles communication with all devices connected to the computer, and

putting it in ROM reduces the amount of space required by the operating system, which leaves more memory for applications software and user programs.

The bundled software with the F1 includes the MS-DOS operating system; Sorcim *SuperCalc*, *SuperWriter*, and *SuperPlanner*; ACT *Diary*; ACT *Sketch* (an easy-to-use drawing tool with a wide range of handy features); the Apricot *Tutorial*; and even a challenging strategy game. Many of the software packages make extensive use of icon and window technology and can be accessed by either the keyboard or the mouse.

For multi-user applications, Concurrent DOS (formerly Concurrent CP/M) is also available. Other optional packages include CP/M-86, GW Basic, Personal Basic, GSX graphics system, and Dr. Logo.

### F1e Education System

The F1e education system is a cut-down version of the F1. Although it is aimed at the education market, frankly we don't see any reason at all that this wouldn't have appeal for the serious home user as well.

Physically, the system appears identical to the F1. However, it has only 128K of RAM and a single-sided disk drive (315K of storage); everything else is the same as the F1 in the hardware.

The software bundled with the F1e includes CP/M-86, Personal Basic, and Dr. Logo.

The F1e can be upgraded into an F1 with a "Business Upgrade Kit" which includes additional memory, an expansion box, MS-DOS, and business software packages.

### State-of-the-Art Portable

An interesting half step up and half step to the side from the F1 is the Apricot Portable. Weighing less than 13 pounds, the Portable features a full-size 80 x 25 character (640 x 256 pixels) flat screen LCD display, cordless keyboard and mouse, and built-in speech recognition unit. Other hardware specifications are the same as the F1. Incidentally, the machine does not run on batteries.

Technologically, the speech recognition unit is probably the most interesting. It is manufactured by Dragon Systems of West Newton, MA and uses a microphone cradled on the right of the display. It can have a vocabulary of 4096 words of which 32 can be active at a time. ACT furnishes voice-driven versions of ACT *Diary* and ACT *Sketch* with the computer. It is uncanny to speak to the computer with a phrase such as "Print all appointments starting after 1:00 p.m. next Monday" and see an appointment list appear on the screen. The *Diary* package itself is quite amazing with separate windows for a calendar, appointment schedule, and detailed

descriptions of individual appointments.

The 25 line by 80 character LCD screen is made by Sharp. Although several manufacturers have talked about the product, only ACT and Apple (for the IIc) have actually announced its availability. Interestingly, the LCD screen can be used simultaneously with a color (or monochrome) monitor. With this combination, it is possible to run two applications on the two screens simultaneously using the windowing software. Or, when using a package like *SuperCalc 3*, text can be shown on the LCD screen while graphics are displayed on the color monitor.

The LCD screen is supported by a separate 16K memory module and a custom IC. With the LCD screen on, the color screen can display 640 x 256 pixel graphics in eight colors; with the LCD screen off, 16 colors can be displayed.

In common with the F1, the Portable has an expansion slot for additional memory, and it may also be upgraded with a 10Mb Winchester hard disk.

### Apricot and Apricot Xi

The Apricot and Apricot Xi (hard disk version) computers are unchanged from the originals (see *Creative Computing*, Feb. 1984 for a complete review). They are furnished with 256K; a 96-key full-stroke keyboard with a two-line, 40-character LCD display; internal battery-powered clock/calendar; TI sound chip; serial and parallel ports; dual 3½" Sony disk drives; high-resolution monochrome display; and MS-DOS.

We were especially impressed with the Manager overlay on the operating system which makes using the Apricot a joy for a novice as well as an experienced user. The system also includes the same excellent range of bundled software packages as the F1. Concurrent with the ACT announcement of the new computers, Lotus Development Corp. announced that *Symphony* would be available for the Apricot. *Symphony* is an integrated package including spreadsheet, database, word processing, and graphics software.

### Point 7 Clustered System

The Apricot Point 7 is an upward extension to the existing Apricot Xi. It includes 512K of RAM, a 10Mb Winchester hard disk, a double-sided 3½" floppy disk, and a six-terminal cluster controller.

The cluster controller allows Apricot, Sirius, and IBM PC computers to be used as stand-alone systems and as intelligent workstations accessing the host Point 7's Winchester disk. In the latter mode, the Point 7 and its terminals act as a multi-user system running under Multi-user Concurrent DOS. The ability of each terminal to function as a stand-alone computer reduces congestion on the cluster controller and enhances performance. Terminal

Market Segment	ACT System	Competitors
Home	None	Commodore 64 Color Computer
Education	F1e	Apple IIe Acorn (BBC)
High-end Home Low-end Business	F1	Apple IIe
Notebook	None	Tandy Model 100. et al.
Full-function Portable	Portable	Compaq IBM Portable
Desktop	Apricot PC	IBM PC
Desktop, Mass Storage	Apricot Xi	IBM PC XT
Multi-user	Point 7 Point 32	Altos 68000 Unix systems

computers must be located within 50 feet of the host system.

Software for cluster use furnished with the Point 7 includes the ACT *Diary* package which permits a group diary to be maintained, and the Pulsar integrated accounting package. Pulsar also plans to make other packages in their line available for the Point 7.

### Local Area Network System

The Apricot Point 32 is a local area network system that allows up to 32 Apricot, Sirius, or IBM PC computers to gain access to up to 200Mb of mass storage, with the added security of cartridge tape backup. The system uses a device called The Bank and Omnet card made by Corvus. The software is a new system developed by Microsoft called MS-NET.

The heart of the Point 32 is an enhanced 10Mb or 20Mb Apricot with ACT LAN (local area network) cards. This acts as a file server to a network of personal computers linked via the Omnet card. Up to ten file servers can be included in the network. Computers in the net can be located up to 2000 feet from the host.

### Pricing and Availability

U.S. prices have not yet been set on the new Apricot line, but judging from the U.K. prices, the line will be priced very aggressively. At the current rate of conversion, the F1e would sell for about \$1200 and the F1 for about \$1500. These prices do not include shipping or import taxes so the final prices will be somewhat higher.

Micro-D has just signed a contract with ACT to be the exclusive U.S. distributor. Given Micro-D's excellent coverage of the market, you can expect to see Apricots on the shelves of a wide cross section of stores throughout the country.

ACT promises that the new computers will begin shipping in about 60 to 75 days to the home market. That means they probably will not hit these shores until early 1985. Frankly, we can't wait!

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CIRCLE 491 ON READER SERVICE CARD