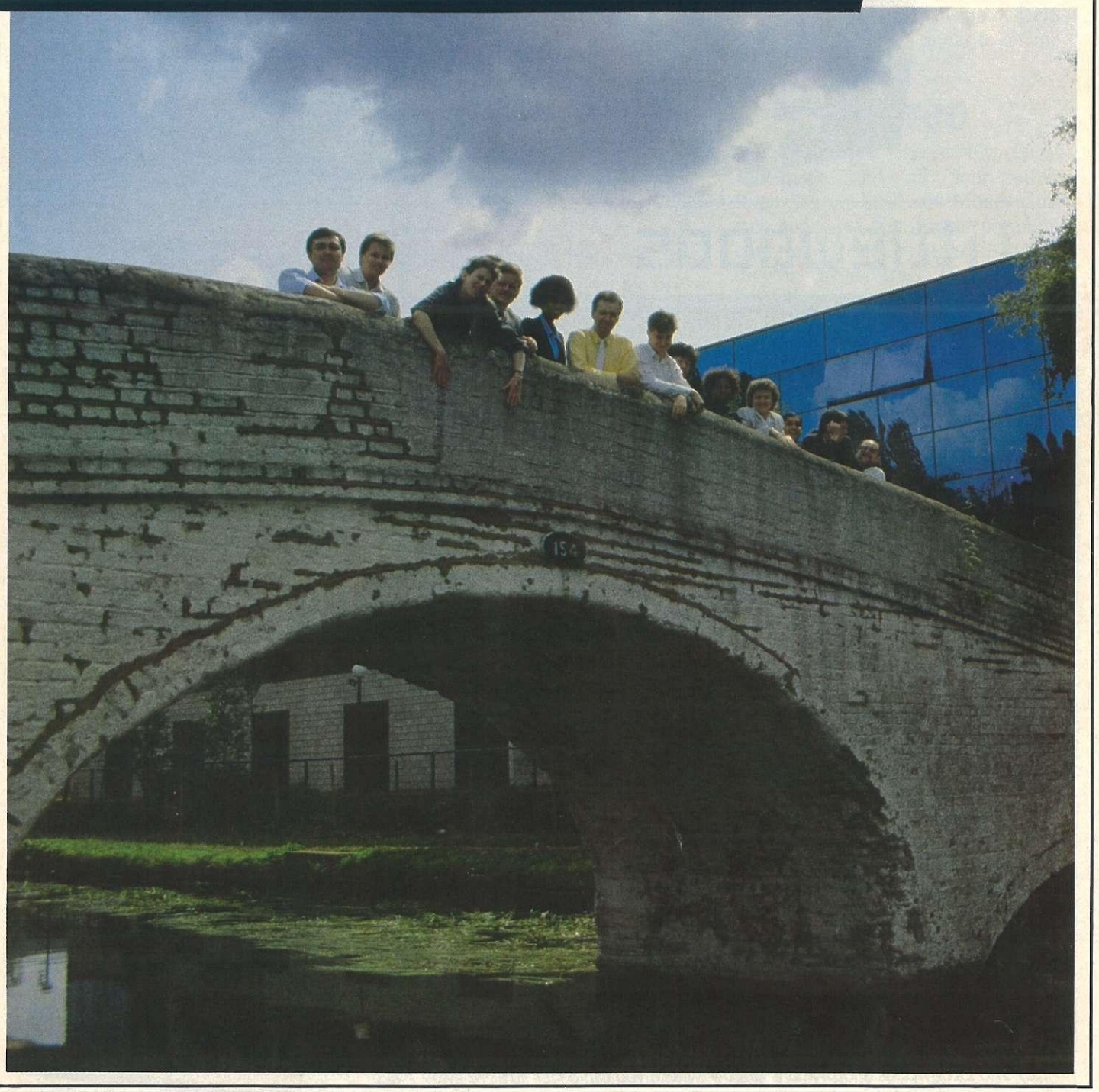
LOG ON

ISSUE No 9
Autumn 1989

THE MAGAZINE FOR MICRONET MEMBERS



- New Mailbox unveiled
- WIN a brand new Acorn A3000
- Socialising with the Shadists
- Music on your Micro
- The Observer observed
- Ghosts in the machine: Micronet unravelled
- Telesoftware favourites

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LOG ON

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FRONT COVER
Micronet's staff gather outside the new Dialcom building in Hertfordshire.

THE MAGAZINE FOR MICRONET MEMBERS

Log On was produced by:

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Net future secure in BT buyout

Business as usual...

Telemap Group Ltd has been formally taken over by British Telecom, as part of the Managed Networked Services Division. MNS comprises all BT's 'value added' services such as Prestel. Telecom Gold. PSS, and various special networks used by Government, broadcasting, and EFTPOS banking. Previously, Telemap was part-owned by BT, EMAP and Bell Canada, and since 1986, the day-to-day running of the company has been BT's responsibility. Telemap's Managing Director, John Tomany, says the move is "the logical one for both parties. As part of BT MNS we'll have access to resources that Telemap, as a small independent company, never had. That has to be good news for Micronet members."

Key sector

John, as head of MNS Consumer Services, is now responsible for the full range of 'publishing and transactional activities' relating to Micronet, Prestel and Telecom Gold. But at ground level it's business as usually, with the same editorial and operations team bringing you your daily slice of electronic wizardry.

Some of the technical benefits of the move are already apparent. Micronet is now firmly ensconced in Dialcom House. Prestel's brand-new HQ just outside Hemel Hempstead, and taking advantage of the hi-tech facilities there. Those are described in detail on pp 15 and 16 of this issue of Log-On, as Net Editor Paul Needs reveals how what you see on the screen actually gets there.

John Tomany is bullish about the future of the Net: "Services such as Micronet, Interbusiness and Shades will form a key sector in the activities of MNS" he says. "This acquisition and the continued expansion of MNS reaffirms our commitment to on-line publishing."

Xtra! is free

Slasher, The Velcro Fly, Legal Eagle and all your other favourites on Xtra! and Money Xtra will soon be free from premium charges for all readers! Actually, they've been free to Micronet Subscribers ever since they began, but Prestel-only users have had to pay 3p a minute in time charges to access the pages.

This meant 'Netters have had to wade through several frames warning of dire financial extras before they could read what was free to them anyway — and, naturally, a fair number never got to the magazines themselves.

"I was never very happy with the time charges" says Xtra! Editor Chris Bourne. "Before we merged with Prestel it was necessary to raise revenue in order to justify being on open access. Now we're all part of the same outfit, we can get rid of the charges and start to build the audience both Xtra! and Money Xtra deserve. Eat more duck."

Richard Poynder, Editor of Money Xtra, adds: "The services provided by Money Xtra! are of such a high quality that it's a tragedy they haven't been available to the whole Prestel audience on the same cost basis. This decision is very welcome."

Link offer

Microlink, our closest competitor, is moving to Istel in October. Up until now, Microlink members have operated from their base on Dialcom's Telecom Gold network, the business-orientated sister network to Prestel.

Although it should be possible for Microlinkers to use UK networks via a complicated arrangement involving calls to the USA, Dialcom is offering two

special deals to subscribers who wish to retain their Telecom Gold facilities.

Option one involves transferring to a 'Club' Mailbox, with standard Gold facilities and their current Microlink mailbox number and ID.

Option two is a combined Micronet and Telecom Gold account. Users who subscribe before September 30th will get a free three months' subscription to Micronet, Gold and Prestel. They'll be able to access Gold through the Interlink gateway and, of course, keep their own mailbox numbers on Gold with the distinctive MAG prefix.

Stephen Wood, head of Dialcom UK Messaging, hopes many 'linkers will stay with the Dialcom networks. "What we are offering is an alternative for Microlink subscribers who are concerned about the future quality of their service", he said.

Mate on line

Chess players have something to look forward to this Autumn with the launch of The ChessBox Club on Prestel. The Club will provide the latest news and information from the British Chess Federation, as well as organise play-by-mailbox matches.

ChessMoves will be the online magazine, with reviews, features, news, tournament results and problems. Then there's ChessMate, a 'Find a Partner' service which matches up players according to standard, age, and how often they can play.

ChessMatch is the tournament area, under the auspices of the British Chess Federation. The first official ChessBox Tournament will start in January and will run until December, with free entry for club members. ChessBox will be open to all categories of players.

Apart from the online coverage, which in October will include the World Championship semi-finals in London, members will receive a quarterly newsletter, a membership pack, and other benefits.

Key *MBX CHESS# or *CHESSSPOT# to keep up with the latest developments!

SID: Acorn's online gateway to Micronet

A major new gateway is opening on Micronet with the launch of SID, the Support Information Database from Acorn. SID will provide a complete viewdata system for owners of all Acorn machines, all the way from the Electron to the Archimedes.

The gateway links users to one of twenty Archimedes computers, operating at four million instructions per second, according to Acorn's Phil Colmer.

Kermit protocols

"The database itself is in plain text", he says, "but the Archimedes will convert it into viewdata format as you go." This novel approach to transmission means that the frames may not be extremely pretty, but allows a large amount of information to be stored in a relatively small space, as well as being far easier to edit.

Users can also choose to download, or indeed upload material using the Kermit protocols, the first time this has been made available on a Viewdata system.

Once through the gateway, users can download a wide range of telesoftware. This includes sound and graphics demos, programs from the Micro User and Acorn User magazines, and application notes for the whole range of Acorn machines, as well as material on how to use Acorn's RISC operating system.

Great addition

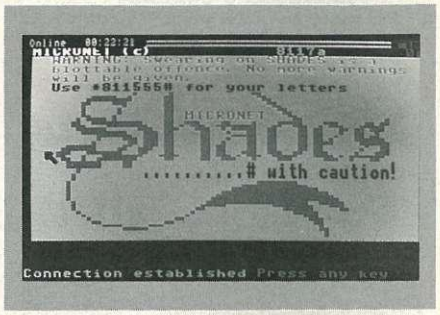
To use SID, with its 8Mb of telesoftware and 1Mb of text, you'll have to pay a charge of 1p per minute; on top of normal Micronet or Prestel time charges. But once that's out of the way, everything else on the area is free, with no charge for any of the software.

"SID is a great addition to our service" comments Micronet's News Editor, Ian Burley, who has liaised with Acorn in setting up the area. "Now members with Acorn computers will be able to get information straight from the horse's mouth, as well as a wide range of telesoftware. I hope everybody who owns a BBC, Electron or Archimedes will be delighted with the new service."

At the time of writing, SID is due to be launched on September 4th, so you should be able to access it now.

Key *SID to access Acorn's special gateway or key page 8119999.

Novice Nights for Shadists



Newcomers to Shades, Micronet's popular multi-user fantasy game, will be relieved to learn that help is at hand in their efforts to get to grips with the game.

In his ineffable wisdom, the Arch-Wizard Hazeii (alias programmer Neil Newell) has decreed that certain night of the week shall be set aside as Novice Nights, with the sole object of helping new players around the game.

Strange Little Girl

So if you don't know where LID is, or you can't find any treasure, or you've never managed to touch the Strange Little Girl in the approved manner, don't despair!

Just go to the Shades database (details below) and check out the date of the next Novice Night, where Arch-Wizards and other players will be queuing up to help you through those difficult dangerous first steps in the world of Shades.

Novice Night on Shades: Key *SHADES or *8117

Richard Langdon, the man behind Micronet's Legal Eagle service, ruminates on a Prestel lawyer's life.

Online Law with Legal Eagle...

How many times have you found yourself in a situation where you feel you have been unfairly treated, but are unsure as to whether you have legal redress? Or had to capitulate to doing something you did not want to after being threatened with legal action?

On such occasions you are faced with a dilemma: you need legal advice, but are wary of going to a solicitor and being charged a fortune only to be told that there is no legal solution to your problem.

In our increasingly litigious society, where it is becoming ever more difficult to obtain legal aid, this problem grows larger every day for the average citizen.

For this reason, perhaps, the Legal Eagle service on Prestel grows in popularity from month to month.

What and who is Legal Eagle?

Legal Eagle is an extremely cheap legal advisory service on **Money Xtra,** the financial and consumer magazine run by Micronet, Prestel's largest information provider.

Users simply send in their legal question via Prestel mailbox, and an answer is published on Money Xtra, usually within a couple of days.

The face behind the Legal Eagle column is Richard Langdon, a solicitor with his own private practice. Richard is 43 and something of a "Techno freak"!

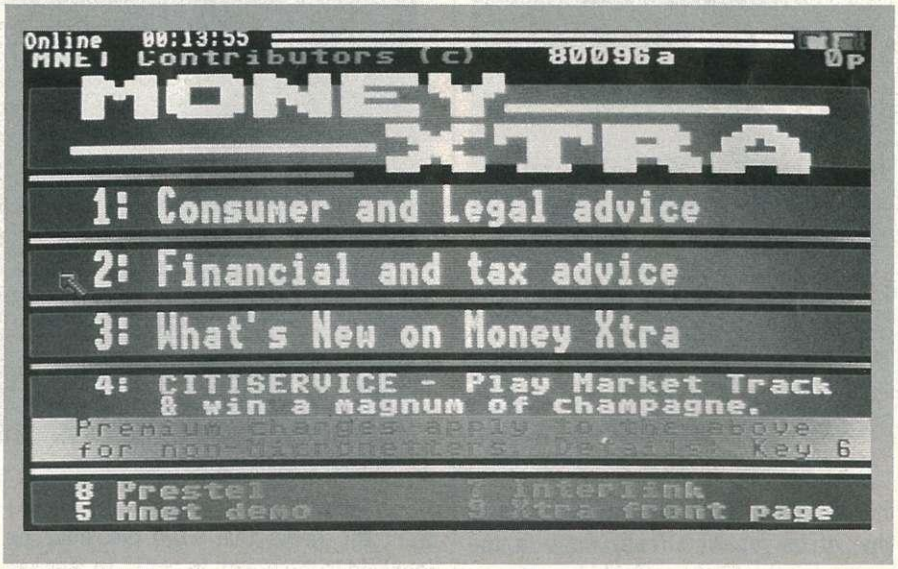
When Micronet first came along Richard was one of the early subscribers, generally logging on about once a week, aware that there was tremendous potential waiting to be unleashed.

Richard's invitation to become the present Legal Eagle followed his writing in to complain after reading an article on Money Xtra about solicitors, which he felt was unfair. Some months later when the first Legal Eagle had to withdraw, Money Xtra Editor, Richard Poynder, dug out his old disks, contacted Richard and invited him to join Micronet as a freelance writer. This was in the Summer of 1987.

Richard has always enjoyed doing the Legal Eagle spot. Many questions come round again, but it keeps him on his toes and he finds it refreshing to be giving legal advice (albeit of a limited kind) without an actual client!

Richard tells us that after some 25 years in the legal world most of the questions received by Legal Eagle are problems he has come across in the office, although some he meets in his practice have yet to be experienced on Prestel. Like, for instance, the client who once asked him to stop speaking in court whilst the voices communicated with him! Or the lady who was convinced the ornaments on Richard's bookcase were a jury who would send her to prison and whose handbag rattled to the chink of empty bottles which she swore were empty pill bottles!

He remembers also the client who had apparently suffered a severe leg injury and walked with a bad limp whenever he called. "In this job you often work on a degree of instinct or intuition" says Richard, "and this fellow did not feel right. After one interview I discreetly followed him from the office to see him have an absolutely miraculous recovery a few hundred yards away. The limp just vanished!"



Money Xtra offers legal, financial and consumer advice.

Out to Lunch

Then there was the client who took him out to lunch (clearly solicitors can no longer afford to take their clients out!) who knew of Richard's liking for escargots. The client actually brought some in for the chef to cook and, not liking the restaurant's wines, sent out for his own claret — and this in a restaurant in a four star hotel!

Richard tells us that his greatest joy in being a solicitor is simply being able to help people with their problems and, in matrimonial cases, sometimes seeing the couple get back together.

However, Richard is very unhappy with the pressure now being brought on his profession with the publication of the Government's Green Paper.

With increasing demands to be competitive, Richard feels that lawyers will be encouraged to adopts a "self first" attitude and that once the professions (including doctors) are forced into that situation, then it's the public who will suffer:

"You cannot put yourself first when dealing with people, their emotions and personal problems; yet the pressures on the profession now are breeding a new type of lawyer who really does fit the image of the money-grabbing cartoon picture and who, regardless of the hurt he inflicts, winds an amicable situation into a dispute.

'Prestel offers an excellent medium for the advisory services provided on Money Xtra and has a phenomenal future'

"Matrimonial difficulties are the prime example of this. We badly need a family court with powers to penalise such lawyers. We, and generally the court staff, all know who the culprits are. It's time there was power to award costs against such warmongers!"

Richard also feels that his profession is branded with the image of the few (who deal predominantly with commercial matters) that charge high fees.

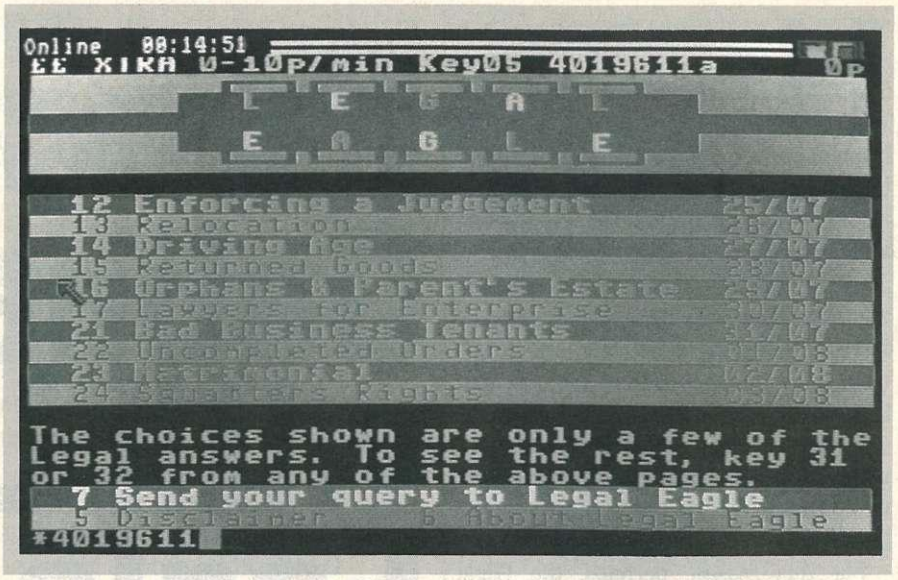
"The press make it sound as though high fees were the norm" says Richard. "In the 'Guinness' case, for example, my clients have received the impression from the press that £100 per hour on legal aid is the norm. In truth, an average of some £30 is nearer the mark — which is less than your average service man will charge to look at your washing machine!"

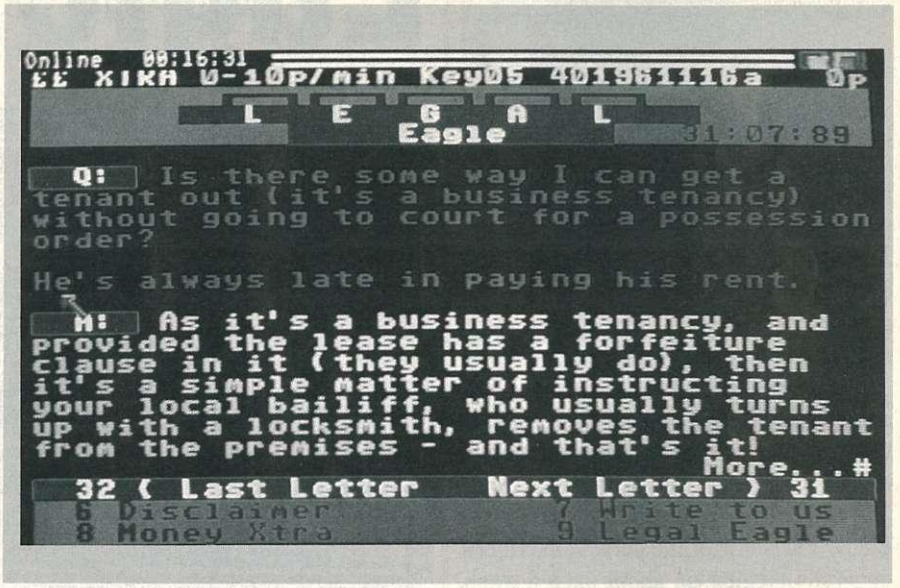
Richard's involvement with Money Xtra has led him to think about the future of such services:

"I feel that Prestel offers an excellent medium for the advisory services provided on Money Xtra (here I'm referring not just to Legal Eagle but also Taxfax and Socialman) and has a phenomenal future. Money Xtra contains a huge fund of advice, for little cost.

"What's more, just browsing through the articles that appear regularly on the magazine provides a wealth of useful information — and it is so easy to save and print out later anything of special relevance to the reader.

"I would like to see a medical advice spot to complete the portfolio of services available on Money Xtra. For instance, a medical advice section would benefit my practice by providing access to some medical information — even basic medical facts would help me in the understanding of my staff's and client's health. Certainly members of the public would appreciate such a service."





If you have a question for Richard, or just simply wish to read some of his advice, or investigate the wealth of other information on Money Xtra, you can access Legal Eagle on Page 8009611, or type *Money Xtra#.

Bass guitarist and Micronet editor Paul Needs explains how your computer can help you make real music!

The micro Maestro!

It's a stupid idea. Why ever would anyone use a computer to produce music? The essential art of music is that it has a spirit, life or feeling in it Are computers really capable of competing with Man on this basis?

The fact remains that computers have been used to generate music for some years, and even beeping machines like the ZX Spectrum are capable of very clever stuff when pushed by an expert programmer.

However, the real music started to happen when synthesizer-like chips were included as an integral part of the computer itself. The trusty Commodore 64 is capable of very respectable sounds, and more modern machines like the Amiga have absolutely superb sound sampling, processing and generating capabilities.

Although designing computers with internal sound facilities can be fun for the programmer, more interesting sound for games players and other features to boast to friends and owners of more 'lowly' machines about, the computer really comes into its own when it's used to control external sound-producing devices.

The original Music City database on Micronet was set up to support such a method of using computers in music. The Music 500 range of synthesizers were designed specifically to be linked to a computer - the Acorn BBC B and Master series. With its own dedicated language, AMPLE, it was a good way of allowing enthusiasts to produce their own music.

But many observers have looked at this approach, and commented that it was perhaps not the best way of using a micro to produce music. For a start, its appeal is limited to those with the correct computer, and is further narrowed down to those who can program. Those who couldn't had to rely on programs written by others who could – which tend to be arrangements of popular pieces.

With the advent of MIDI as a true standard (and one that everyone adhered to at that), computer controlled and generated music has become far more popular, to the extent that most of the chart music one hears today has several machines playing somewhere in the mix.

> *'Programs can subtly alter the tempo just like real musicians do — no matter how good they are'*

In principle, using a computer to control a MIDI instrument is very similar to using Micronet. In very simple terms (more detail can be found online), the MIDI cables send bytes of information at a fixed baud rate, and the construction of the bytes tell the synthesizer or other MIDI device what to do – play a note, turn on reverberation or whatever.

Until the Atari ST 'happened', most MIDI music was produced using very expensive custom sequencers, dedicated computers in their own right, or by the Apple Macintosh.

These days most commercial recording studios have STs, and Steinberg's Pro24 Sequencer/Editing package has become the industry standard. However, it must be said that other programs, such as those produced by C-Labs and Dr T are also superb.

Although the Atari ST is probably the music industry standard computer, by no means does this mean that it is the only machine that can be used to aid the production of worthwhile music. MIDI sequencer/recorder packages exist right across the spectrum of machines available in the U.K., including Amstrad CPC and PCW, BBC and Acorn machines (with some really spectacular packages becoming available for the Archimedes), C64 and Amiga, and of course the Macintosh and IBM PC compatibles.

It's in the field of IBM that a really interesting machine was launched last year. Yamaha, active in the music industry for well over a century and were responsible for developing FM digital synthesises for the famous DX range of synthesizers, launched an AT compatible laptop machine with a host of MIDI out ports and a powerful software package.

Aimed at MIDI musicians on the move, it'll be interesting to see whether it will catch on, against the much cheaper and better supported ST range, particularly the ST laptop, 'Stacey'. To quote one of my own songs, only time will tell!

So, the machinery and software exist, and both continue to improve Good MIDI software can capture and reproduce the spirit of a performance, and replicate it time after time. Programs can subtly alter the tempo, just as real musicians do – no matter how good they are. Computerised music is just the same as any other computer function: The adage "Garbage In – Garbage Out' applies strongly.

However, music has become an important application for computers to deal with, and especially so in the field of MIDI. Stay tuned to the new Micronet Music City, and keep in touch with music and your computer.

Neil (right) sits with musical director Brian Breeze during a TV rock mix down.

Neil Harris, sound engineer

"That's a wrap!!" The magic words that mark the end of another heavy day in studio are the most welcome in the whole of television. Doubly so as a working day regularly ends late at night. In my job as a sound engineer with HTV Wales in Cardiff the penalty we pay for an interesting job is a messed up social life. That's not necessarily a complaint, there's a lot to be said for a job that's taken me from the roof of the cabinet office in Whitehall to the middle of a fight between Turkish militia and Greek protesters on a hillside in Northern Cyprus. It's just that with schedules changing drastically at a day or two's notice, any thoughts of a regular hobby activity goes out the window.

That's where Micronet comes in.

Computers have been a passion for years now. A natural interest for someone in a tech-based industry they have the added advantage of being available, fresh as a daisy, at half past midnight when I stagger home from a live show still high on adrenalin. This ease of access is a fringe benefit of a fascination that started with a ZX81 (16K of course!) and has progressed through a BBC B, MASTER 128, CPC 464 and on to my current ST and Amiga.

It was during the BBC B years that I discovered Micronet. Perhaps it's just as well that computer games hadn't become as sophisticated as they are now, because the attraction of an online world was immediate. Thousands of micro enthusiasts let loose on a huge, easily accessible database was too tempting, especially given the 'clubby' atmosphere of the whole thing — a rare experience for someone who couldn't possibly attend an earthbound club!.

TMMC, The Midnight Micronetter's Club, with its (in)famous chatline was a regular watering hole after shows, often till 2am with a cup of brazilian bean soup to keep me awake. Viewfax, Clubspot, Gallery and Waveguide have all been, or are still, old friends. Then the 'deeper user' effect set in. Computers have become more sophisticated, so have the users. They expect more from their machines and the services that go with them and thankfully Micronet has taken up the challenge and grown too — not without a few growing pains, but that's OK.

Electronic publishing is a living thing. It's not made by machines but people and the technology is a servant of their creativity, and that's one reason why I find it so compulsive. And that's why I've stayed with the Net — it's the best expander of horizons for the micro user I can think of.

So, it's 5.35, our Evening News operation is in full swing and it's time to put this Z88 away (love that technology!!). If anyone would like to swap MBXs on the TV world in general feel free to drop me a line on 022241830. Also I highly recommend WAVEGUIDE, one of the best run sections on the net.

See you online. Neil Harris.

Eve Weaver, editor & witch!

Eve Weaver is a bright, forceful lady of 40 years who lives in the West of London with a big fat furry cat called Fizzy. She joined Micronet in September of 1987, at the Personal Computer World Show.

"I went there for the specific purpose of getting a subscription" she recalls. "I always liked playing computer adventure games, anything to do with fantasy, and then I read about Shades in a computer magazine and I just had to join. An adventure game with real people to talk to!"

Eve created her Shades character, Heloise, and rapidly scored the 200,000 points required to join the Immortals, the elite group of Shades-players who have mastered Micronet's multi-user game. But Heloise, as most Net friends know her, is not one to sit on her laurels. When Micronet cut back its Shades coverage in the Spring of 1988, she decided to do something about it.

"I knew Tony Irons (who manages Arena, Clubspot's Multi-User Game fanzine) and said "what about a little area to cover Shades?". We started with about 20 frames and two articles."

InShades, Heloise's magazine, now has about 600 frames of letters, articles, party invitations, short stories and debates on the theme of Shades. Heloise estimates it consumes about 25 hours of her week — three to four hours every day — to run the magazine.

"I use an Atari ST" she says, "With Rubyview software. I wish to God someone would write something better for uploading though!"

During the day, Eve works for the Performing Arts Society, as a Training and Liaison Officer. The PAS deals with royalties for composers, authors and publishers of publically-performed music. It's a job which involves a lot of computer power, and Eve frequently finds herself setting up small databases for monthly figures and the like.

Apart from playing Shades and editing InShades, Eve restricts her use of Micronet to a few areas — chatlines, the general news, and Slasher, the venomous satirical column on Xtra!, which she finds hilarious. But Shades always remains the centre of her activities.

"The game is nothing without the people" she says. "I've tried other MUGs but they don't have the same camaraderie. Micronet's introduced me to a lot more people. Some think it ruins your social life, but Shades has probably made me more friends than anything else!"

Intrepid players trek to the Isle of Skye for a weekend of Shady fun and frolics!

Micronet's multi-user game Shades isn't just a fantasy! Chris Bourne investigates...

Shady social life exposed

Ask ten Shadists what Shades is about, and you'll get ten different answers. Some will tell you about the art of collecting treasure. Others will entertain you with endless tales of their evil deeds as killers, roaming the landscape with a rusty longsword, looking for a body to bury it in.

But there's a great deal more to Micronet's ever-popular Multi User Game. If you've never played before, you may be surprised to learn that Shades has quizzes, romances, chat areas and even football matches, as well as regular off-line parties around the country.

Mondays and Thursdays are quiz nights on Shades, when thirty or more players will congregate on game 7 to do battle with their brains instead of their blades. The Wizard Gauntlet runs the quizzes, although he's always looking out for new quizmasters to take part. On Monday there's usually an individual quiz, while on Thursdays the Immortals do battle against the Mortals, those players who have yet to achieve the highest rank on Shades, that of Wizard or Witch. The competition is fierce, and inevitably ends, after the final score has been announced, with impromptu fireworks as the Immortals show off their combined magical powers with explosions and bolts of lightning!

Romance is another favoured occupation of many Shadists, especially the imaginative role-players, who are more interested in creating and developing an alter-ego than in the daily grind of scoring points out in the game! Shades marriages are frequent, with a mock ceremony in the ruined church, and the graffiti on the wall in the Chat Area tell many tales of broken hearts or proud celebrations of love!

Of late, players have even created whole families, exploring the 'family tree' of their characters and role-playing brother and sister, father and son, and even the family pets! If you are used to standard adventure games, you'll be stunned by the inventive improvised theatre of Shades, where players create their own tragedies and comedies of love and despair, just for the sheer fun of it.

Most of this goes on in the Chat area, which you can enter right at the beginning of the game, by typing CHAT when prompted to do so. You'll find a pub there, with bars, and private lounges, and even bedrooms where weary revellers can sleep it off! You can also leave messages for your friends, to arrange times when you can play together, and the whole area fairly hums with gossip not just about Shades, but anything which takes the fancy of the players.

One of the more recent developments is the football! For many months there was a football in Shades, a heavy object which could be kicked from location to location but was otherwise not much use.

Shades Coder Hazeii and his assistant Ambushbug have created a football pitch, and teams regularly kick the ball around online. It's a strange sort of football, but works surprisingly well, and there's a regular band of devotees. Watch out for the grand tactician Applejack, or Rag, whose speed and dribbling prowess is in a class of its own!

Finally, there are the meets. These are perhaps the best-attended of all Micronet

get-togethers, with regular monthly parties at the Sols Arms in London, and a scattering of regional meets up and down the country. In the past month or two, there have been Shades meets as far away as Brighton, Coventry, London, and even the isle of Skye!

One of the grandest occasions last year was the Summer Mega-Meet at the country home of Pippin the Arch Wizard, who provided a huge marquee, buffet, bar, and live entertainment! Plans are still in progress for this year's party, and nothing has been firmly fixed as this edition of Log-On goes to press, but October 7th has been pencilled in. You'll find details on page 8118 of Micronet, *SHADES#, if you haven't already got your tickets!

But there are always lots of smaller gatherings (*81053# for details of these) and Shadists are among the friendliest folk on the network. So if you've been put off Shades in the past by its 'blood and glory' image, try typing CHAT and find out about the gentler side of Shades!

The long awaited new mailbox system is finally upon us. We talk to mailbox manager Chris Ramsey about the changes and what they all mean to you . . .

Mailbox Mark II – what's in it for you?

Up until August this year, Prestel's mailbox system was one of the older electronic mail systems in the UK – and from time to time, it's shown it. As it creaked away, more or less efficiently, so the demands grew for a new system, with more facilities and a friendlier approach to sending mail.

Finally, after several years of development, Mailbox Mark II has arrived. "It's been in the pipeline a very long time" says Chris Ramsey, who manages the system, "but we've responded to popular demand by taking many of the best features of other Email systems and integrated them into the Prestel environment."

One of the reasons it's taken so long is that the GEC machines used by Prestel operate in a little known language called Babbage. "There are not very many programmers who write it" says Chris, drily. "Also, it has cost a lot of real money, and it's always hard to get people to spend real money."

The real breakthrough came when Prestel got the contract to provide the software for Singapore's new videotex system. They wanted a better version of the existing Prestel mailbox, and that enabled the UK operation to take off, refining the Singapore version in the process.

So, what do you get with the new Mailbox system?

Firstly, when you log on, you can call up a summary of all the messages waiting in your mailbox, each one with its own subject heading. You can delete these as you wish, keep them there, or send them on to other people. If you have more than twenty messages waiting for you altogether you'll have to deal with some of the existing ones before you can read the full text of the rest, though.

Everything is colour-coded, so you can see at a glance which messages you've already read, and which are new. You select the ones you wish to read, and call them up. Once you've read it, it's as if the message is stored automatically for you: you can delete it, but you don't have to shunt it into a different place in order to keep it, as you do at the moment.

Under the new system, when you receive mail, you immediately reply to it and have the Mailbox number (the account number or address) of your correspondent automatically slotted in.

When you send a message, you also get a variety of new options. Firstly, you give the message a heading, which will appear on the summary list. On the next frame, you begin the message. If you wish to send more than one frame, you can have up to four extra frames for the princely sum of a penny.

> *'I feel far happier now about saying we're a contender in the market than before'*

Another penny buys you an automatic acknowledgement of your message, and you can even send it out to one of several customised mailing lists of friends or clients.

Some of the new facilities cost a few pennies to use, but don't worry! Anything you could do on the old system you can do on the new one for no extra charge. But in fact, it should be cheaper to use the new system in spite of the charges! If you want to send out a set of invitations to a party, for instance, you can construct a mailing list, and then send out all the invitations in one go. Used efficiently, such facilities should work out cheaper than laboriously sending each message in turn by hand, and accruing time charges as you go.

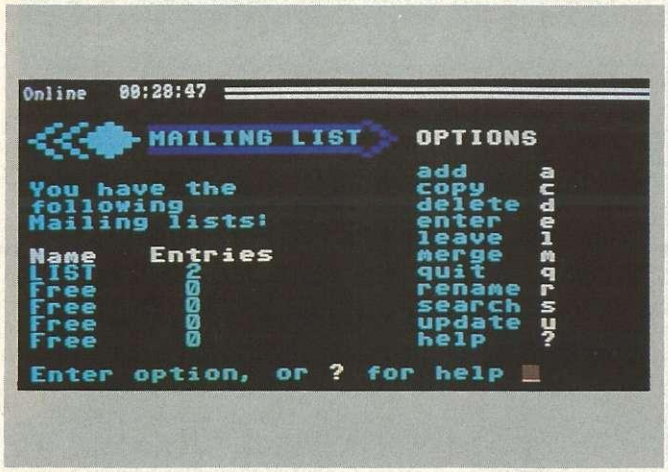
"The more people who use it, the more money we make" says Chris, with refreshing candor. "But it is actually a lot better. Leaving aside the finance – I honestly believe it's a much better service, I feel far happier now about saying we're a contender in the Email market than I did before."

Why charge the new system at all, though? Will it be more reliable than the old one, especially with all these new functions?

"We've shelled out for extra hardware" explains Chris. "In particular, more discs. That's partly because the system generates more messages and partly because we want to be able to cope with the expected increase in traffic." On top of that, of course, and even with the added boost of the Singapore contract the software development has still cost a great deal of money.

Micronet members, have borne the brunt of problems with an overstretched service in the past.

"There were a number of problems



k Two: so or you?

with the old system which didn't come to light until we reached high load conditions" says Chris. "The peak load was always in the late evening, from 11pm to midnight. You could say the traffic flow was a one-humped camel, and the hump was Micronet."

When the hump collapsed under the strain, everybody suffered: chatlines, which were linked inextricably to the Mailbox system, sharing the same Pandora computer, tended to develop problems as well. Chris is confident that the new system should be independent of the Chatlines, which do not share the same processing any more.

But the story doesn't end there. Not only have users a much greater freedom and flexibility in how they send, store and manipulate their mail, they also have free use of a completely new concept for Prestel: the notepad.

The notepad is essentially a 5 message, 25 frame store in which you can put messages you've received, or messages you are in the process of writing, stuff you haven't sent but will use later, in fact, just about anything which can be passed through your mailbox.

This means, for example, that if you're in the middle of a long letter to a friend, and the doorbell rings, you can swiftly store it on your notepad, log off, and answer the door. You can go back to the letter you were writing and continue from where you were interrupted. Another benefit of notepad, which also applies to the continuation frame system, is that you get a chance to edit the whole message before it is sent, instead of having to send each frame as it is written, a severe limitation of the old system.

Finding the numbers

Mailing lists are another new feature. You can have up to five of them, with a maximum of 240 Mailbox numbers in each. The software automatically weeds out duplicate Mailbox numbers, checks that the numbers you enter are valid, and sends out messages to your designated list. Lists can be merged, as long as they don't go over the 2140 limit, and edited, with old numbers deleted and new numbers added.

Finding all these numbers used to be a real chore! But the new directory allows you to type in a name and have Prestel's computers do the searching for you! If there are more than 90 names in the list, you'll have to cut it down a little, but there are special commands for doing this.

Chris Ramsey hopes everybody will at least give the new system a thorough try-out. At the time of writing, the Beta Test is going well, and there seems to be no reason why the system shouldn't be in place by the time you read this.

It's worth getting to grips with: although some of the services are charged, efficient use should save you time charges as a result, making the net cost to the user more or less the same, if not actually cheaper. However, the costs won't show up on page 92. Chris explains that the charges are levied by Pandora, and there is no direct link between Pandora and the billing computer. If there was, it would slow the system down immediately: imagine sending several thousand single items of billing information every time a company ran a mailshot.

The one set of charges which is more expensive should please most Netters no end! Junk mail, unsolicited adverts from companies using the network to disseminate their services, will cost the sender 20p per advert. That should cut down the amount of unwanted mail accumulating in your Mailboxes, leaving you more time to deal with the stuff you want to deal with.

Chris Ramsey is at pains to point out that unsolicited mail means commercial advertisements, not simple messages to people you have never met before. There's a special frame for commercial ads...and if you get unsolicited adverts using ordinary message frames, complain to Prestel and they will ban the company responsible from using the new system.

At Micronet, we've had lots of fun testing the new system amongst ourselves. We reckon it's a big improvement, and well worth the effort it takes to get accustomed to it. But it's what you think that counts, so don't hesitate to let us, or Chris Ramsey, know your views!

WIN

this fabulous Acorn A3000 by entering our quiz

We've a truly fabulous prize for the winner of our latest Log-On Competition... over £1000 worth of computing equipment from Acorn, including the brand-new A3000 microcomputer.

This powerful machine, with a massive 1Mb RAM, includes a 3.5 inch floppy disc drive and Acorn's award winning RISC operating system. RISC OS manages a staggering 4 mips (four million instructions per second) making the A3000 the fastest micro at its price in the world.

Included as standard with the A3000 are mouse, parallel port, 103-key keyboard, and ROM-based BBC Basic V: indeed, many BBC micro programs will run on the A3000 without modification.

Optional expansion modules allow connection to Econet, MIDI instruments, and even a PC emulator.

Fine. You're drooling. You want one. But we're not just handing out an A3000 as our competition prize. Apart from a couple of applications discs, with printer drivers, graphics software, games, Email software and other goodies, we'll also throw in a full-colour high resolution monitor and a monitor stand.

That brings the total value of the prize to more than £1000. Here's how to win it!

HOW TO ENTER

The word-square contains ten words, associated either with Acorn and the A3000, or with Micronet and Prestel. The words can be read up, down left, right, or diagonally, and your task is to find them all. To help you, we've already ringed one of the answers!

When you've done that you'll have to log into Micronet to send us your answers: key page 81186 (or *LOGON COMPETITION) where you will find instructions for how to do this. Only entries received via our special online entry form will be valid.

All entries must be received before Monday 16th October 1989, and employees of Acorn and British Telecom, their associates and subsidiaries, are not allowed to enter.

S	O	L	N	E	W	S	D	A	Y
M	E	Q	U	I	S	L	N	P	T
I	C	D	O	E	A	G	L	E	I
C	O	I	E	G	N	I	C	M	C
R	N	A	E	M	N	D	R	I	C
M	E	L	P	E	I	I	I	C	I
E	T	T	E	R	E	H	S	L	S
T	O	A	L	T	S	V	C	E	U
G	A	L	L	E	R	Y	X	R	M
K	I	K	O	N	N	R	O	C	A

Paul Needs looks at the origins of The Midnight Micronetters...

The online night-club

There are at least two kinds of 'Netter. Those who do, and those who don't. Talk to others online, that is.

Communication is a two-way thing, and with the multitude of computer bits on Micronet, the Midnight Micronetter's Club has become one of the few havens for those who like to indulge in on-line talk about other matters — anything from music to politics, trivia to human rights. Computer chat does slip in from time to time, but the focus is firmly fixed on just about everything else — it's all been discussed at some time!

The focus for TMMC over the past four years has been the "Chatbox" chatline. Still the most popular daisychat on Micronet, the majority of its users appear for their fix of chat, abuse and banter between around 10.00 p.m. and 2.00 a.m. each night, and the chat is always lively — no matter the subject.

The Midnight Micronetter's Club was formed when a group of people who regularly conversed via mailbox (back in the days when you could only send mailboxes to people on the same Prestel computer) approached Micronet and asked if they could have their own area on the database.

Since then, the original editor, Phil Edward has left to pursue his career as a sound engineer, but has been succeeded by a host of other dedicated editors, such as Ricci and Sue Stamp, Stephen Williams, and the current editor, Stuart Painting.

Although the area is based around the online social life and conversation of the chatline, it doesn't end there. Features and fictional stories often appear on the area, and the 'meet' originated when TMMC 'members (every 'Netter is a member really) decided to see what the others looked like, and to continue their online friendships in real life. Many firm friendships have resulted, as well as some gigantic hangovers!

Nowadays, the TMMC meet is not as popular as it once was, and it seems that the meet has become the domain of Shades players. However, TMMC is still there, and has expanded to cover help for new Micronet members with 'Virgin User', and its own daily letters column for those less disposed to real time conversation.

When you tire of computer talk, have had your fill of files and want a change, pop into TMMC (*TMMC#). Join in the conversation, or start a new one. You'll find a new aspect to Micronet and online communications.

'DIAL IN TO'
DIAMOND VIEWDATA

Computer, Business & Domestic Information
at your finger tips 24 hours a day

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Chris Bourne visits the Observer's new building Battersea, and discovers how Prestel's premier news service is put together.

Observing the Observer

The Observer building in Battersea almost rivals the nearby power station for intimidating grandeur. Huge pillars embrace a glass and steel structure humming with terminals and the incessant mutter of journalists and sub-editors. A national newspaper office is more like an insect hive than a place where people work, and the Observer is no exception.

In one small corner of this mighty edifice lurks the **Observer Dialcom News Service**. Today the operation is entirely in the hands of Deputy Editor Simon Killingworth, as his boss, Paul Todd, is sunning himself in the Isles of Greece.

The News Service is the heart of the Newsday area on Prestel (*123#), which includes the FT and Citiservice business news pages, Viewtel, and routes to other current affairs pages.

I discover Simon taking a short coffee break, after sending off the 10am bulletin. It's his third update today. He's been working since 7am, and already published a roundup of news at 8am from the morning papers, and a 9am bulletin of short stories — snaps — from the overnight news which broke too late to make the papers.

Coffee finished, we log into the main Observer database to hunt for news. Simon can access the full output of Reuters, PA, AP, and UPI: the four largest news agencies in the world. "We use Reuters and PA most", he says. "The other two tend to have an American bias." Simon tags the stories he wants and they are dumped into his IBM PS2 terminal for further work. Beside that terminal sits another Reuters machine, which continuously churns out the headlines as they come in, so Simon can react to major stories as soon as they break.

"Golly" says Simon, mildly. "There's so much bloody detail!" He's now wrestling with the text of a story about a Portuguese oil slick which the Reuters correspondent has turned into a sort of gazetteer of Portugal's coastline. "It's not a very big story" he says, "But lots of people will be going there on holiday around now, so we'll use it."

As well as feeds from the main news agencies, Simon can also use material from the Observer's own journalists. This mainly takes the form of features from the foreign correspondents. This material may not be used in the paper itself, which only appears once a week, and the correspondents therefore file reports to a syndicated news operation run by the Observer. There are usually two special features a day, with a maximum of ten a week.

By now, Simon's knocked the mid-day bulletin into shape, working from the raw material at blinding speed. Each story can only occupy four frames at most, and great efforts are made to fit them neatly into the frames, without leaving large patches of black space everywhere.

The resulting files are squirted onto the frames, along with the new index and routes, using PC Editor communications software. Simon then logs into Prestel directly to fix any small errors which have been spotted. Today he's cursing because the lst frame failed, and he has to re-type it by hand. "PA stories tend to lose their quotation marks and we have to guess where they should go! And fractions disappear altogether..."

On Thursdays the service provides an additional Arts section, with reviews culled from the full range of Observer critics, and there's always an Arts feature, Sportsfile, and a recipe over the weekend.

Eventually Simon's finished his bulletin, and it's all online and live for 12.15am. It's taken him just over an hour to process five stories, plus a little extra time to search through the database and select them in the first place. He's barely got time to visit the bank and grab a sandwich before he has to start all over again.

Accompanying me to the tubular glass lift — very Twenties! — Simon grins as I ask him the obligatory Observer question: has he ever come under undue pressure to report the doings of Tiny Rowlands and the Harrods takeover saga?

"No!" he grins. "Mind you, that's probably because he doesn't know we exist!" Looking back across the expanse of word-processors, the piles of stories and rolled-up shirt-sleeves, the sprawl of photographs and potted plants to Simon's tiny corner of Tiny's empire, I can see his point.

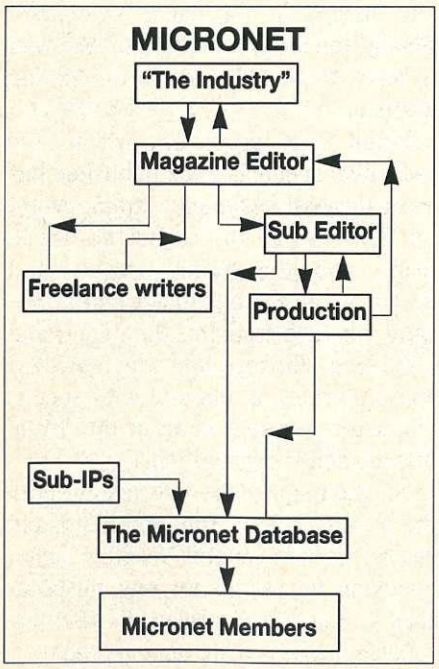
Micronet staff outside their new home in Apsley.

Each month, Micronet publishes over four hundred individual updates. Log-On readers have asked just how we manage it, and Micronet Editor Paul Needs describes the various convoluted and devious methods used...

Putting the Net together

When I first joined Micronet as a member of staff, everything we published had to be typed in by hand, including letters sent in by 'Netters or even articles on how not to blow up your Sinclair Spectrum. As you can imagine, actually typing the stuff onto frames, in much the same way as a Gallery Editor does, is time consuming and boring to do.

All this work meant that during the day, and often quite late into the evening as well, there would be Bishopsgate Viewdata terminals logged onto the Prestel Editing Computer, Duke.



The machines

Eventually, Micronet decided it could do things more efficiently and quickly if it commissioned a multi-user editing system, with all the delightful time-saving features such as word and attribute wrap, block move and bulk update. The idea was that by editing on a local network, all the horrendously large telephone bills could be reduced and all copy could be sent on-line by bulk update. The advanced, word-processing type features would save time and make frame editing less tedious.

A system was written to run on a DEC MicroVax II under the Unix operating system, but it turned out to be unreliable and slow. What's more, articles still had to be typed in.

Several programmers spent many hours at Herbal Hill, where the 'Net was then based, trying to make the program behave in a more predictable and reliable fashion. Improvements were made, and eventually the system became usable — even if GRiSm had to keep an eagle-like eye upon the various editing files!

However, it was decided that using the 'VAX was a bad idea, and that we'd get the program transferred to a more manageable machine. Laurence 'Fred' Kirby, who has written many of the utilities that Micronet use every day, was drafted in to make some final patches to the system to keep it going, and also to transfer the program to a fast PC-AT machine.

WHO'S WHO AT MICRONET

EDITORIAL:	
Paul Needs	Editor, Micronet
Ian Burley	News and features Editor
Anna Smith	Sub-Editor
Chris Bourne	Projects Editor
Richard Poynder	Money Xtra/Interbusiness Editor
Dave Dorn	PC Base/Amstrad ZEditor
David Foster	ST Editor
Paul Vigay	BBC/Acorn Editor
Brian Gaff	Sinclair Spectrum Editor

PRODUCTION:	
Gary Smith	Deputy Production Controller
Roger Cracknell	Production Assistant

Before he set off to complete this mind-boggling task, Fred and I were often to be seen hunched in corners, whispering about 'squirting', ASCII files and RS232 ports. I went back to writing PC reviews, and Fred went off and wrote a BBC program, which was later dubbed "The Squirter".

This program allowed us to upload text files directly onto our editing system, straight into frames, using especially created 'templates' for headers and footers.

Since we now have the totally re-written editing system running on a 80386 PC, which is much faster than the Vax ever was, it now takes seconds to upload a piece of text that would have taken perhaps 30 minutes to type in before.

MICRONET'S STANDARD ROUTES

Most areas on Micronet — at least those produced on the main 800 node — have a similar routing structure.

0	MIcronet's 'help' page — 8000
1	Next item in this subject
2	Previous item in this subject
3	Start of current item
4	
5	Spare for special routes
6	
7	Send a message to the area editor
8	Browse route at index level
9	Subject index

The reasoning behind this is that no matter where you are in any magazine, you'll be able to find your way around.

Major areas and updates are routed from the front page

What we do

Every magazine within Micronet has an editor, whose job it is to write and commission articles of interest to the readers of his or her magazine. The editor needs to plan the type of coverage we give any subject, with my help or hindrance from time to time, and make sure that the software and hardware companies, hi-fi producers, or whoever is involved give us the information we need, or products to review.

Once an article has been commissioned from a freelance planned by a magazine editor, it is researched and finally written. This in itself involves a great deal of hard work, as anyone who has written professionally can tell you! Contrary to what many might think, writing a review of a poor product is often more difficult than writing about a good one. Finding the right words is a hard task.

When completed, the article is sent to Micronet. These days, the finished articles — copy — are received in a variety of ways, but very rarely on paper. The majority of items are received on Telecom Gold, which is deally suited to sending large amounts of text around the world. We've received copy from America and Germany this way, as well as from regular contributors in the U.K.

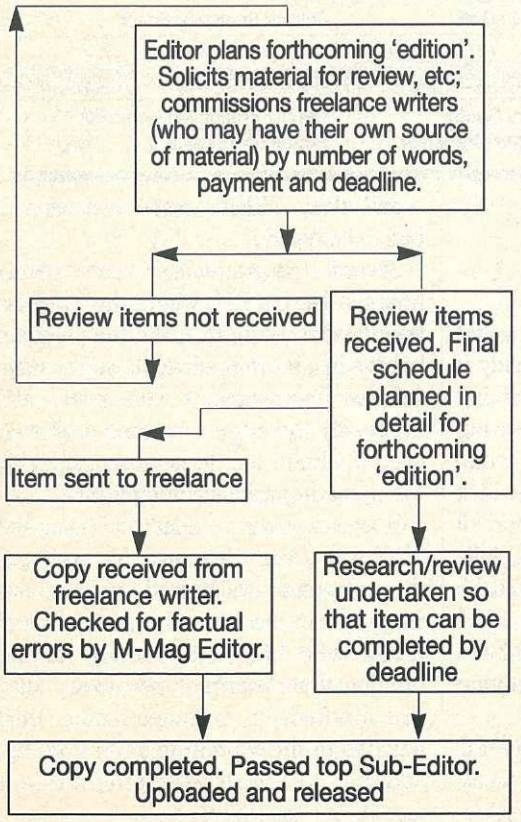
From Gold, the articles are downloaded onto an Acorn ADFS disk, although in theory this could also be any filing system on any machine. The next stage is to check each word and sentence for spelling, grammar, legality and sense (you better believe it!). Known as 'Subbing', this difficult task is performed by Micronet's Sub-Editor, Anna 'The Vigilant' Smith.

The article is loaded into a word-processor, and any changes to the text are carried out on-screen, often with telephone calls being made to the writer or editor to clarify what he or she meant in particular sentences! Finally, the file is re-written to disc, and is ready to be uploaded to the editing system.

When the page on which the individual article is to be published has been decided, a template frame is set up. This has all the routes we use in place, and the frame headers and footers — all the bits that are to be the same on each frame of the item being published. The area into which the text will be written is marked with special characters, so that none of the 'fixed' information is overwritten.

We then squirt the information onto the frames, colour it in, and index and release it for general reading, again checking as we go for any mistakes that we may have missed the first few times. Finally, you log on and read.

A MICRO-MAGAZINE



MICRONET DIRECTORY

*All the software listed below is available FREE via Micronet's Telesoft Gateway. For details of how to download the software, and many more titles, key page 811602 or keyword * TSW#*

A – Z QUICK GUIDE	*M AZ#	800046666
Your on-line guide to all that's on Micronet.		
ADVENTURE SPOT	*ADVENTURE SPOT#	8105
Adventure helpline, InShades and more for adventure game fans.		
AMSTER'S CAGE	*CAGE#	800934
Coverage of Amstrad CPC and PCW micros, including a daily letters update.		
BEEBUG	*BEEBUG#	800909
Information from the UK's foremost BBC Micro user group.		
CHATLINES	*CHATLINE#	811
Whatever the subject, come here to talk about it and meet other members.		
CLASSIFIED ADS		828999
Buy and sell computers and more.		
CLUBSPOT	*CLUBSPOT#	810
Run by the Association of Computer Clubs. Club information and general computing coverage.		
COMMUNICATIONS INDEX	*M COMMS#	8008083
A quick index to the many ways of communicating on Micronet.		
COMPLAIN	*M COMPLAIN#	800406006
If you have a complain tell us, so we can put it right.		
COMPLIMENTS	*M COMPLIMENT#	800406005
Tell us when we get it right too.		
COMPUTER NEWS	*M NEWS#	8001110
The fastest computer news service there is. The latest stories every day.		
CUG	*M CUG#	800652
A closed user group for gay members		
DIALTALK	*DIALTALK#	81195
A powerful teleconfering facility. Talk to a group of people in real time. Full instructions on-line.		
EDUCATION (CAMPUS 2000)	*EDUCATION#	165
Prestel's service for education users. Includes telesoft for BBC Micros.		
ENROL A FRIEND	*ENROL A FRIEND#	800020001
Recommend a friend to Micronet and save £10 on your subscription.		
FAX	*INTERLINK#	80074
You can send a fax with Micronet by using the fax facility on Interlink.		
GALLERY	*GALLERY#	81122
Run your own electronic magazine, and read other members' Galleries.		
HOBBYSPOT	*HOBBYSPOT#	8109
Featuring Chess, photography, science fiction, music and other hobbies.		

INTERBUSINESS[1]	*INTERBUSINESS#	7007
Information and advice service for businessmen.		
INTERLINK (TELECOM GOLD)	*INTERLINK#	80074
Your low-cost link into Telecom Gold, BT's powerful electronic mail service. Full guide on-line.		
LETTERS TO THE EDITOR	*ED#	8001170
Our editor speaks his mind, and so do the members. Now it's your turn.		
MAILBOX[1]	*MAILBOX#	7
Use mailbox to send a message to any user on Micronet and Prestel.		
MICROMOUSE	*MICROMOUSE#	800951
Comms guru Steve Gold's daily Smalltalk column should not be missed. Only on Micronet.		
MONEY XTRA	*MONEY XTRA#	80096
Personal Finance and consumer advice, including interactive help from tax and legal experts.		
MUSIC CITY	*M MUSIC#	800989
All things musical for your micro		
PC SUPPORT	*PC SUPPORT#	800936
Vital support for PC users. Make sure you read the daily letters.		
PRESTEL MAIN INDEX[1]		1
Front page for all Prestel services.		
SHADES	*SHADES#	8118
The UK's most popular multi-user adventure game is on Micronet, complete with extensive back-up. A new world is waiting for you!		
SOFT-TECH FEATURES	*SOFTTECH#	8000201
General computing features for all machines.		
SPECTACULAR	*SPECTACULAR#	8009121
All about the Spectrum range of micros.		
STARNET	*STARNET#	811211
A space based strategy game where you compete with other Micronet members.		
TELESHOPPING	*M TELESHOPPING#	811613
The place to buy on Micronet.		
TELESOFTWARE GATEWAY	*TSW#	81160
Download software for a range of machines from Spectrums to PCs.		
TELEX[1]	*TELEX#	8
Send a UK or international telex on Micronet.		
TMMC	*TMMC#	800952
An on-line social club for Micronet members. Everybody's welcome!		
VIRGIN USER	*M VIRGINS#	800953
If you are new to the service this area is designed for you. On-line help for new Micronet members.		
WAVEGUIDE	*WAVEGUIDE#	800900
The latest news from the world of TV and Radio.		
WHAT'S NEW	*M NEW#	80002
Find out what's new on Micronet everyday. Check this page when you log on.		
XTRA! ENTERTAINMENT	*XTRA#	800401000
Topical comment, gossip, music reviews and more.		
VOLTAGE		4014012
Hi-Fi and Audio, video and other technological gadgets revealed.		
16/32	*SIXTEEN#	800916
All about the Atari ST range of micros.		

TELESOFTWARE TOP FIVES

*All the software below is available FREE via Micronet's Telesoftware Gateway. For details of how to download the software, and many more titles, key page 811602 or keyword *TSW#*

BBC

Rob Bathgate's disc editor allows you edit sectors on the disc, mending any that are broken, or just adding special effects or features. An invaluable utility.

1 – DiscEditor by Rob Bathgate (60110085
2 – Catalogue Concealer by Rob Bathgate (601100084)
3 – Mutant Plants by Jamie Pearce (601100061)
4 – Beed Editor by The Mad Sysop (601100026)
5 – Pooper Pig by J. Dodman (601100024)

SPECTRUM

Dave Gorski's legendary VTX5000 program offers a 26-frame store, tagging, uploads to MBX, special printers modes and many other superb features for Spectrum owners.

1 – The Editor by Dave Gorski (601200035)
2 – Chopper Mission by (601200097)
3 – VTX Enhance by Dave Gorski (60120084)
4 – Derek's Brickyard by Mark Jones (601200028)
5 – Perils of Timothy by F. Chim (601200030)

AMIGA

Mysterious graphical surprises from Leo Schwab with his weird 'Melt' program will boggle Amiga users!

1 – Melt by Leo Schwab (601700076)
2 – STemulator (601600010)
3 – Hack (601600017)
4 – Dropshadow (601600069)
5 – Target (601600033)

ST

Missile Command brings the evergreen arcade classic to searing life on your ST screen. This fully-featured game will keep you zapping for hours.

1 – Missile Command (601700076)
2 – Chequers (601700098)
3 – Thunderbirds (601700046)
4 – Monopoly (601700028)
5 – Laserchess (601700027)

AMSTRAD

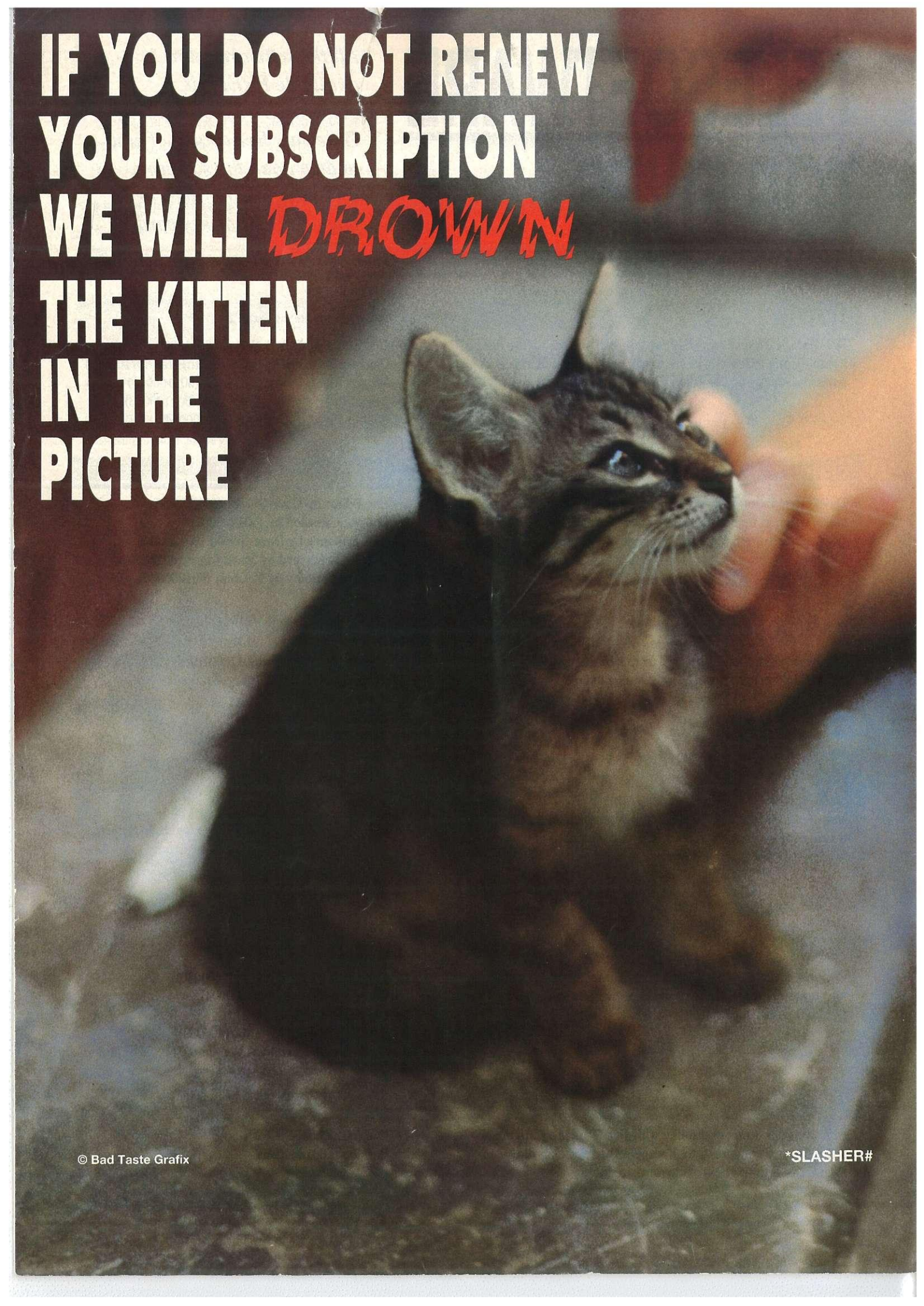
Connect 4, the ever popular strategy game, involves getting four counters together in a row. Especially for youngsters aged between 2 and 250.

1 – Connect 4 by A Pendle (601400030)
2 – Where Evil Dwells (601400004)
3 – DU (601400059)
4 – Ramdisc II by T Hoyle (601400033)
5 – Screens Unlimited by A Pendle (601400028)

PC

Improve your street credibility with Jive. This program takes a text-file and converts it to 'Jivespeak' by replacing old fogeyisms with the best of current street-cool.

1 – Jive (601500036)
2 – Basstour (601500036)
3 – PCrail (601500018)
4 – Venture (601500007)
5 – Shez40 (601500034)


IF YOU DO NOT RENEW
YOUR SUBSCRIPTION
WE WILL DROWN
THE KITTEN
IN THE
PICTURE
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*SLASHER#