

## *Gerald's Column* *by Gerald Fitton*

I had expected some interest in my comments last month about portable spreadsheets replacing calculators particularly since, in his 100th issue memoirs, Paul highlighted my column with such a flattering editorial note. What I was totally unprepared for was the volume of correspondence I received!

As a consequence of the correspondence I've decided to feature the Acorn Pocket Book II this month. In doing so I must make it clear that I have no intention of usurping Audry Laski's excellent Pocket Book Column which has been running in Archive for a couple of years now. It seems to me that Audry's column is aimed more at existing users—my comments are more in the nature of a review for those who haven't got one yet (though I refer to correspondence I've received from many who have). In addition my review will be more than a little biased towards the use of the spreadsheet, Abacus, rather than the more balanced nature of the Pocket Book column. However, even if you're not a user of spreadsheets, don't be put off. There's plenty here for all of you.

### **The Acorn Pocket Book II**

As a result of last month's column I've had questions ranging from an interest in whether Father Christmas did drop an Acorn Pocket Book into my stocking to asking me for a more detailed description and an opinion about whether to buy one! To those of you who asked, Father Christmas has been kind to me and to summarise my view of it I am greatly impressed and I am going to find it most useful. However, to say I am greatly impressed does not mean that I think it can not be improved – and to say that I shall find it most useful is not meant to imply that it will be useful to everybody.

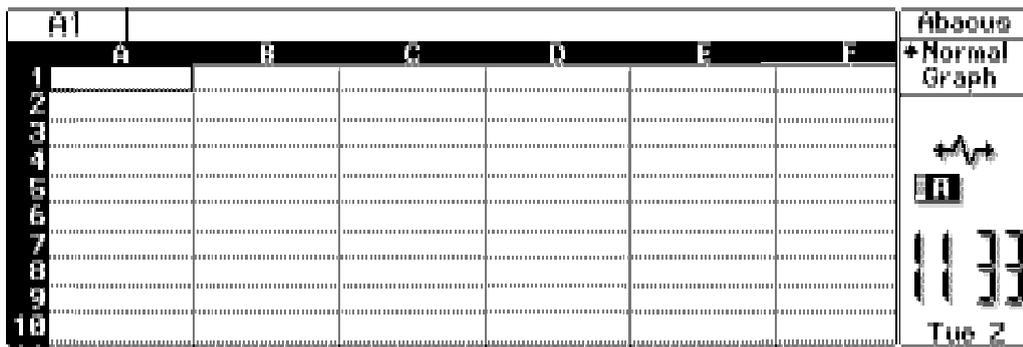
Let me expand on my views first with all those things I shall find most useful before moving onto limitations and my thoughts about the future of the palm top and possible or likely improvements.

### **The Portable Spreadsheet**

My earlier comments centred on the use of the palm top computer as a portable spreadsheet so I suppose that's where I ought to begin. In doing so my comparison has to be with a calculator rather than with a personal computer. As I said last month, a spreadsheet has many advantages over an electronic calculator not the least of which are (a) its ability to show all the stages and 'part sums' of a calculation on screen simultaneously and (b) the use of the "What if?" facility. In this regard the Acorn Pocket Book II performs excellently both for the calculations I need at College as well as those I require at home.

Using a reasonable size of font, the screen contains 47 characters across the screen width. The default screen is 6 columns each of 8 characters but you can use narrower, wider or more columns within this limit of 47 characters.. There are two screen modes which will show more characters across the width but I find them too hard on my eyes. In my favourite mode, 10 rows are displayed. Have a look at the screenshot below. Of course, like all spreadsheets you can move across and down creating as many new columns and

rows as required within the memory limits of the machine (and possibly there's a limit of about 225 columns and about 8000 rows – but I'm not sure).



What I had forgotten to mention in my comments last month is that you can use a spreadsheet as simple database in which each row is a record and each column a field. Speaking personally I found that for names, addresses and ‘phone numbers using Abacus is easier than Cards, the database supplied with the Pocket Book. An advantage of using a spreadsheet as a simple database is that you can Sort records (change the order of the rows) so that any particular column is in order (what mathematicians call ‘ranked’).

Let me give you an example even though it is one you might never use! I entered the names of my students (I’m a Lecturer) into column A and their date of birth into column B. Sorting on B placed all the students in order of age.

One of my correspondents uses this facility for a different application. He enters the price of his purchases at the time he takes them off the supermarket shelf and, having done so he sorts his list of purchases made over a period of time by product, by price and by the name of the store. He claims that this helps him to know which store to shop at and whether a ‘bargain’ is a real bargain! In a similar way another of my correspondents checks prices against previous prices as she does her weekly shopping. She has built in a “Price per Kg to Price per lb” converter which she says came in very handy when we changed over to metric weights recently.

Another correspondent says “don’t forget to mention the graphs!” He taps in a few of his favourite share prices each evening from the Teletext results and looks for trends graphically. He says he can do this without seeming unsociable and without the risk of making a mistake by writing to paper and then keying into the computer (in another room).

As a final example of the use of a pocket spreadsheet (I have many more from other correspondents – thanks to all of you), one correspondent uses his Pocket Book on the train each day and then transfers what he has done to his Archimedes when he gets home.

In use Abacus is almost totally key compatible with Lotus 1-2-3. Files can be saved in Lotus WK1 format or converted to Lotus format during transfer to an Archimedes via the A-Link accessory. Fireworkz has a built in Lotus to Fireworkz converter; in the jargon, Fireworkz has a Lotus loader. You can save Fireworkz files in Lotus format and convert them to Abacus .SPR (for SPReadsheet?) format during transfer. A Lotus converter is supplied with PipeDream as a separate utility. I have tried both conversions, and, with the usual limitations (mainly the Style of the display), they work well.

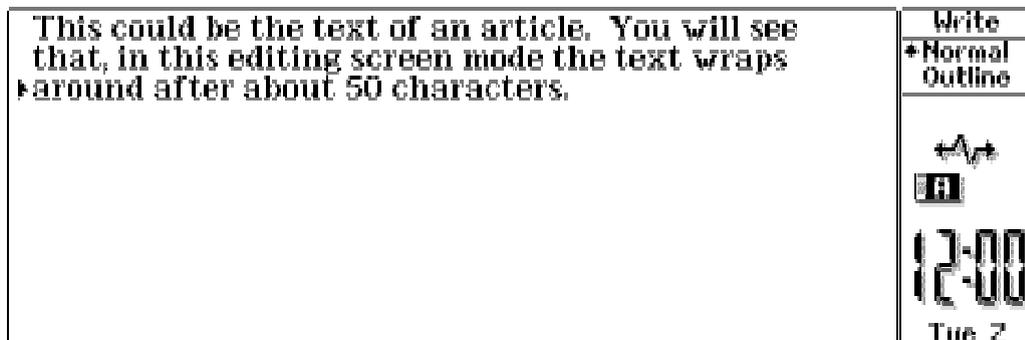
In summary, as a portable spreadsheet, I and many of my correspondents say that they find

the Pocket Book II even better than they anticipated, easy to use, highly useful and compatible with both Fireworkz and PipeDream.

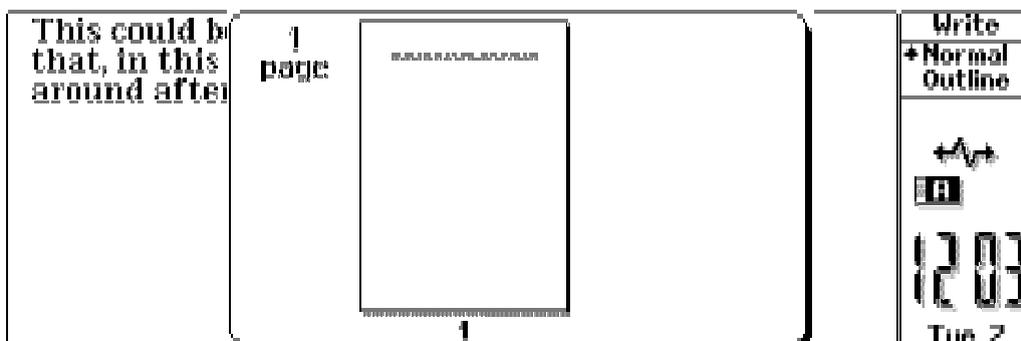
If you have an application which uses the Abacus spreadsheet which is giving you trouble then please feel able to write to me and ask my advice. It may be that my expertise in the use of spreadsheets will be more relevant to finding a solution to your spreadsheet problem than the undoubted expertise in more general matters of Audry Laski who writes the Pocket Book column for Archive. If you send me a disc file containing your efforts then please use the Abacus .SPR format and please don't use an HD disc since I can't read them on my Archimedes A540.

## A Portable Word Processor

The word processor, Write, is not WYSIWYG. This came as a bit of a shock to me after years of using Impression, Fireworkz and PipeDream which are all WYSIWYG. Have a look at the screenshot below.

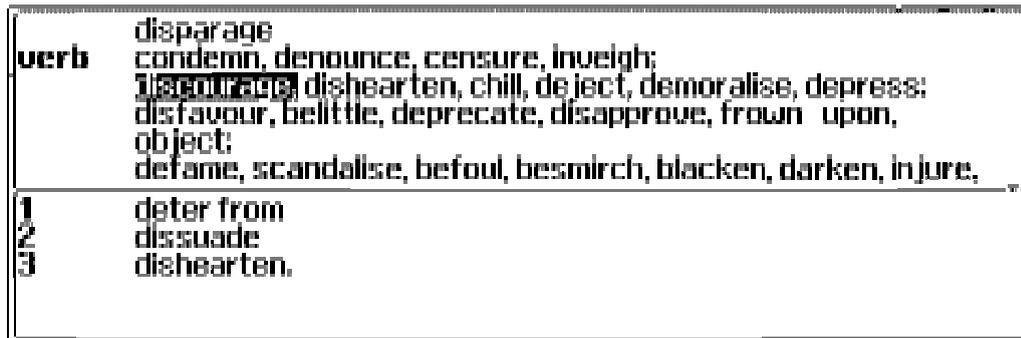


To see what the final layout will look like when printed you have to use something called a Print preview. If you have ever used WordWise then you'll know what I mean. You can swop between the Print preview screen (the text is too small for me to read but it does show the page layout) and the text editing screen quite quickly – but is something I have had to get used to again. A screenshot of the Print preview is shown below; the preview is the view of an A4 page shown in the centre. As I said, the text is too small for me to read but it does show two lines of text each having about 80 characters.



At work we used to teach students word processing using something similar to Write, the MS-DOS, non Windows version of Word – we don't use it any more.

Don't let me be too disparaging about Write. It has a good spell checker, dictionary and thesaurus all of which are completely interactive. Let me explain what I mean by interactive. If you are unhappy with a word you've used and want to find a better one then you place the cursor in that word, call up the Thesaurus with a keyboard shortcut, look at the dictionary definition of each of the alternatives given in the Thesaurus (viewed on a split screen – see the screenshot below) and, when you tap the <Enter> key, the word in Write changes to the word highlighted in the Thesaurus! Magic!



I don't think I would want to rely on the Style features of Write for my masterpiece I don't think I'll ever print out in earnest from Write. The benefit of Write to me, and to many of my correspondents who have sent me welcome comment, lies elsewhere. I shall use Write purely as a non WYSIWYG word processor and apply Styles after porting the plain text to the Archimedes.

As I compose this article I am on holiday in a hotel room tapping away in Write. There is no way that I could have brought the A540 with me so the Pocket Book is a boon – I don't think I'd have met Paul's deadline without it. However, what I shall do is to convert the file to plain ASCII as I transfer it from the Pocket Book to the Archimedes through the A-Link; then I'll load the ASCII file into Impression. In Impression I shall add my preferred Styles – which Paul will carefully remove before applying his own!

If I can then I'll add a few screenshots when I get home – a picture paints a thousand words and space in Archive is short!

Other correspondents tell me they find Write most useful for making notes. I shall probably do that also.

### **Other built in packages**

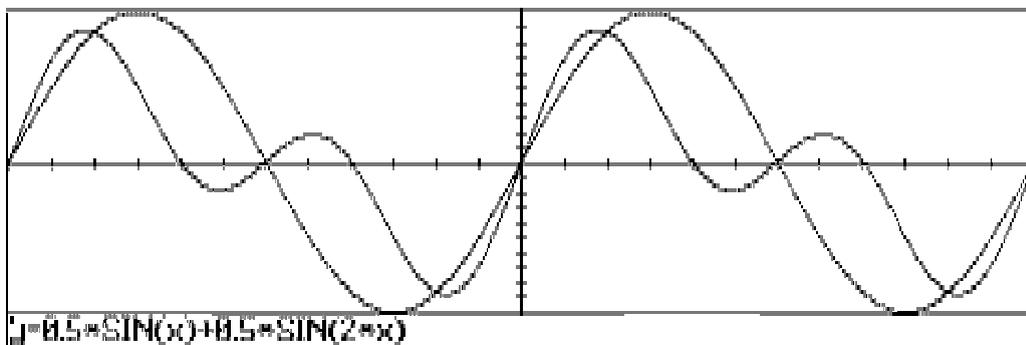
Cards is a simple database. I don't think I shall use it much since I prefer the spreadsheet format as I've said before. However, there is one feature I do like and that is that you can generate dialling tones from 'phone numbers entered into the cards. You hold the Pocket Book to the 'phone and the tones are transferred down the line from the speaker of the Pocket Book to the mouthpiece of the 'phone.

Schedule is a first class diary and planner; you can view a day, a week a month or a year. The slots into which you type text expand as you enter more and more into the same slot. I shall certainly be able to find a use for that.

Time includes alarms. The battery on the clock we brought to the hotel with us has died so I've set up the Pocket Book to wake us up in time for breakfast tomorrow – I don't have to leave it switched on because it'll do that for itself when the alarm goes off. You have a choice of alarm noises including the possibility of recording your own wake up message.

World is quite fascinating. You can put in the latitude and longitude of any place on Earth and it will tell you how far away it is (using spherical trigonometry), the local time and the time of sunrise and sunset! World includes many UK and International STD codes and you can add your own for any place on Earth. I have already added a few including Swindon.

There is also a Calculator which retains the last few calculations on screen and a Plotter which will display a wide range of functions including the derivatives and integrals of the chosen functions. A screenshot of a couple of graphs drawn in Plotter are shown below.



Other packages, including games, can be added as plug in solid state memory modules. It is well reported that any which are sold for the Psion series 3a will work on the Acorn Pocket Book II.

## Overall

It would be unfair to compare Acorn's Pocket Book II with an Archimedes. The Archimedes is far superior but bulkier, heavier and not portable. If I make any software comparisons then they would have to be with software used on an IBM type of PC. I think that the Pocket Book software, particularly the spreadsheet and word processor, remind me more of non Windows MS-DOS software than Archimedes software. However, unlike MS-DOS packages, the Pocket Book is multi tasking and it is possible to transfer data and formulae between documents. In my view it is only the small screen size which prevents multiple windows being displayed as they are on the Archimedes.

I have already compared the Pocket Book with a calculator – that comparison doesn't do the Pocket Book justice because it is much more than a super calculator, it is a palm top computer. So, for those of you who know it, let me try another comparison. I have a Z88; to be more accurate I have two. It is a portable computer which runs off four AA batteries. I think it's no longer available but the software on it has many features which the next

version of the Pocket Book would do well to emulate. Because of this I shall spend a little time describing the Z88 and those features from it I'd like to see on the next Pocket Book.

In comparing the Z88 with the Pocket Book let me start with the weight and size. The Z88 weighs about 1 Kg against 300 g for the Pocket Book (both with batteries). The Z88 is the size of an A4 sheet of paper compared with the Pocket Book which is just larger than A6. The Z88 has a full size QWERTY keyboard (without function keys and numeric pad). The keyboard of the Pocket Book is about half size (in any linear dimension). Concentrating now on the Z88; the screen display is across the top of the keyboard and, in PipeDream it displays 72 characters across the screen plus a couple of useful areas to the left and right of the part you can type into; however it displays only 7 lines (and not 10 as the Pocket Book). In my view the wider Z88 display is better than that of the Pocket Book and I like the full size keyboard better than the half size one of the Pocket Book.

Now to power. The Z88 uses four AA batteries and uses them up in a few hours – a real embarrassment. You can't change batteries without using the mains eliminator or losing data. The Pocket Book will run for many weeks on its two batteries and has a lithium back up so that you can change batteries anywhere.

The software built into the Z88 includes a version of PipeDream (approximately equivalent to PipeDream 2), BBC BASIC, a Calendar, Terminal software and quite a few other interesting packages. The Z88 shows its age because it does not contain any means of generating graphs, it has no dictionary, spell checker or thesaurus. The Z88 version of PipeDream is used as a spreadsheet, word processor, and simple database; it is a complete integrated package. You can't use fancy fonts for display on the Z88 but only a mono spaced System font. If you print out a PipeDream file using a mono spaced font stored within the printer then, within the limitations of mono spaced fonts, the display is completely WYSIWYG.

To summarise the comparison, when compared with the Pocket Book the Z88 is bigger, less portable and runs out of batteries after a few hours of use. There are omissions in the software notably a spell checker, dictionary, thesaurus and graphs. However, I prefer the Z88's integrated PipeDream to the Pocket Book combination of Write and Abacus.

Now to the future of the palm top computer. Although I would like to see some way of having a larger screen and keyboard I think I might be one of the minority and I don't expect it to happen. Where I would expect many to agree with me is that concepts in software should have moved on since the Z88 was first produced (1988) and I would expect an improvement whereas, at least in part, some of the the software on the Pocket Book is not as good as on the Z88. I'd like to see something with the power of at least PipeDream 4 (complete with PipeDream 4 type graphs, custom functions and command files but plus the dictionary and thesaurus of Write) replacing the combination of Cards, Write and Abacus – and I do expect it will happen on the next model. To Acorn and to Colton Software I'll say "What are you doing about it?" For the rest of the specification, memory will get cheaper and so we'll be able to have more of it built in to the next palm top series and we'll find that it operating more quickly, perhaps with RISC chips and perhaps with more than one window one screen at the same time.

## Should you buy one now

Of course, you can always wait for the next model – and the next one – and the one after that. And they'll always get bigger (memories) and better and cheaper! No! I suggest that you look at this question from a different angle. Do you have a use for a portable spreadsheet, electronic note taker, planner, etc, now? If the answer to that question is "Yes!" then you'll be able to get your money's worth before the new model comes along and, when it does, undoubtedly you'll want to update your system. What people generally leave out of their considerations is the time they invest and the value of the knowledge and expertise they build up by using a system. I don't think it will be more than a couple of years before the Pocket Book II looks outmoded but I'll bet that the expertise that you'll gain and the benefits which will accrue from using the current model of palm top in those two years will far outweigh the written off cost of what I shall call the core hardware (the pocket book itself with no accessories).

Another consideration with any system is the portability of data. When I have been hired as a consultant to advise on a new computer system I have always stressed that, when you buy a system you must look at it to see what the cost (in time, money and inconvenience) will be when you want to get your data out of it and into your next system. Perhaps the most expensive part of any well used computer system is the (unique to you) data which you will have spent hundreds of hours entering into it. Acorn have an excellent record for compatibility between their new systems and their old ones. I would expect the next series of the Acorn Pocket Book to accept all your plug in memory modules (called Solid State Disks and abbreviated to SSD for short); I would expect that any Acorn packages you bought for the Pocket Book to still work on the new model; I would expect that the old A-Link will still work but perhaps a little more slowly than a newer model. The only bit you'll find useless is the £200 to £400 worth of core hardware (the Pocket Book itself) which you'll be able to replace either more cheaply or with something much better – or, more likely, both cheaper and better. My guess is that, in addition to the core hardware, you'll have spent as much again on things like the A-Link, SSD memory and other software packages.

So, to summarise, don't be put off by the thought that a new model of Pocket Book will appear in the next couple of years and you'll feel hard done by when it does. Of course you will and so will I! I've been through that analysis myself and I concluded that I would get solid valuable use out of one now (even if I can't quantify that value in terms of money) and that when a new model comes out in a couple of years I will probably discard the current one in its favour (or keep it as a back up). I feel confident that I'll be able to use all the knowledge and expertise I gain with the current model on the new one and that all my hard won data files will be instantly transferrable. In my view, the palm top computer is here to stay and everyone who does sums or makes notes will soon have one.

I have a distinct feeling that I won't be able to justify in terms of use to me any personal computer more powerful than the current Risc PC; there may be many of you wondering the same thing (see "Planned Obsolescence" below). If so then perhaps the way for you to acquire something more useful than a new, not yet announced, super Risc PC is to transfer your time and attention to a palm top computer.

Finally, and not as a commercial but to emphasise availability from a reliable source, Norwich Computer Services do sell all current models of the Acorn Pocket Book II.

Undoubtedly, through the Archive magazine, you'll hear about any developments as soon as the information becomes available. Think about it and let me know your views; would you buy a super Risc PC or a super palm top? Write to me. I assure you I'll be interested in whether you think a palm top with the sort of highly integrated software I've mentioned above is more relevant to your future use of computer technology than a more powerful personal computer (such as a super Risc PC) with many facilities which you may never use.

## **Shares**

This column is not a share tipping service but I would like to report that not only have Acorn shares doubled during the last year but that shares in Psion now stand at about four times the value they had a year ago. This augurs well for the continued supply of Acorn Pocket Books and their future development.

## **Planned obsolescence**

I had intended to include my considered thoughts on this topic in this month's article but, partly because of constraints on my time and the space in Archive I'll just make a few quick remarks, ask you for comments and leave it until next month.

What is called 'industry standard' hardware (IBM type) and software (MS-DOS, Windows etc) doesn't last as long as hardware and software does for the Archimedes. A couple of years ago (before the launch of the Risc PC) this longevity presented real problems for Acorn (who make hardware) and for hardware suppliers such as NCS. We are now arriving at the time when the longevity of Archimedes packages is presenting similar problems for many Archimedes software suppliers as well. Users of the Archimedes and Archimedes packages don't need to spend as much money in the medium and longer term as do those locked into an 'industry standard' system. I believe that this 'problem' should be seen as an opportunity. Watch this space – or let me know your views.

## **In Conclusion**

I can't read HD discs so please format to 800 Kb and not HD. If you write to me then the address is that of Abacus Training (see the back cover of Archive). If your problem is more than a quick couple of lines then please send me an example file on disc so that I can better see exactly what it is that you're trying to do.

Finally, I'm willing to help with spreadsheet problems for the Acorn Pocket Book but please, please send me a disc with an example file in .SPR format rather than try to describe what your problem is in words.