ORIC

THE STORY SO FAR

by Jonathan Haworth

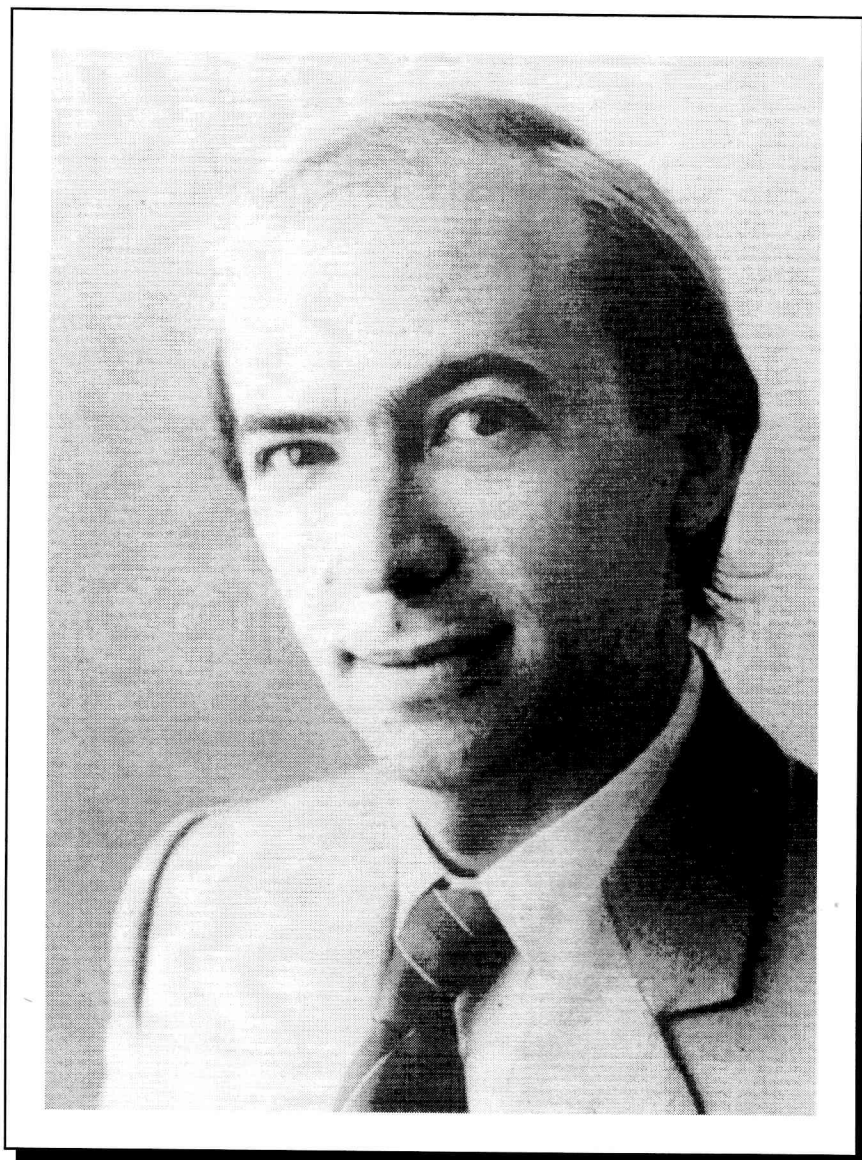# ORIC - THE STORY SO FAR

Jonathan Haworth

Dr. Paul Johnson

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Barry Muncaster

PREFACE
to the First Edition

I have for some time felt that the known history of the Oric microcomputers should be placed on record, lest it disappear in the mists of time. This is not to suggest for a moment that those of us who remain loyal to our favourite computer will yet abandon it. But as the years pass, it becomes more and more difficult to discover and verify information. The time now seems ripe to produce this little booklet, in the hope of providing both an interesting read and an accurate chronicle of events pertaining to the Oric.

It will readily be apparent that this is a first edition, and inevitably gaps exist in the narrative. I would welcome any additional information, however insignificant it may be, that might expand and improve on this first effort. Equally if any errors have crept in that the reader can correct I would be grateful to hear from you.

If together we can aspire to a definitive history, the effort of producing this First Edition will not have been in vain.

Jonathan Haworth
Cambridge
Oct 1989

PREFACE
to the Second Edition

It is now three years since the First Edition of this book. Above all I must thank all those who have provided me with press cuttings and further information since 1989. A wealth of material has come to light, with the result that the text of this edition is now three times the length of the first. And yet I am sure there is still more to be learnt...

Thanks to improving technology, I have also been able to illustrate this edition. I trust this will meet with the reader's approval.

As ever any errors are mine; once again I would be grateful for your comments, criticisms and corrections.

Jonathan Haworth
Cambridge
Nov 1992

Peter Halford, Andy Brown, Chris Shaw, Barry Muncaster and Paul Kaufman
at the launch party at Coworth Park

Chapter 1

Conception and Birth

On the 27th January, 1983 Oric Products International Ltd. held the official launch party for the Oric-1 computer. It took place at their headquarters at Coworth Park Mansion, Sunninghill, near Ascot, formerly the home of Lord and Lady Derby. Peter Harding, the Sales Director, then a mere 34 years old, announced six major deals with High Street stores for the supply of over 200,000 units, and added "We're going to beat Clive Sinclair by offering much more for much less money".

While the Oric name was born with such brave hopes, we have to go back in time for a moment to chronicle the conception. It was in October 1979 that Dr. Paul Johnson and Barry Muncaster set up Tangerine Computer Systems Ltd near Cambridge, and produced the Microtan 65 computer. The name followed the contemporary trend of 'fruity' computer companies. In the summer of 1981 Paul Kaufman joined Tangerine, and became editor of the 'Tansoft Gazette' on its launch that October. By early 1982 Tangerine had sold off their Tandata Prestel arm, moved to the Cambridge Science Park, and set up Tansoft as its software division.

It was from those early beginnings that the idea of a competitor in the infant home computer market grew. In April 1982 Oric Products International Ltd was incorporated, and work started immediately on the design of the Oric-1, Tangerine acting as the research and development house for the new Oric company. The original aim had been to produce an executive desktop machine which would link to Prestel and compute. Paul Kaufman wrote a memo listing what he thought were the right

> ## "We're going to beat Clive Sinclair by offering much more for much less money"
>
> ### Peter Harding

features for a 'Microtan 2' - sound and graphics, a modulator and so forth. The result was a design in late 1981 for the 'Tangerine Tiger', a desktop machine with three processors - a Z80 for CP/M, a 6809 for I/O, disc and printing, and a graphics chip. In the end this design was sold off to a company called H.H. Electronics, and never was produced. The Microtan 2 plus a Prestel capability was the basis for the Oric.

At this stage they saw what Sinclair had done, and financial backers British Car Auctions wanted higher volumes from the mass market to be the target. Thus was the Oric-1 born, although the first mock-up retained its executive image with a teak and apple-green colour scheme!

The Oric-1 was announced in the August/September 1982 edition of the Tansoft Gazette, which included a priority voucher valid until the 1st November.
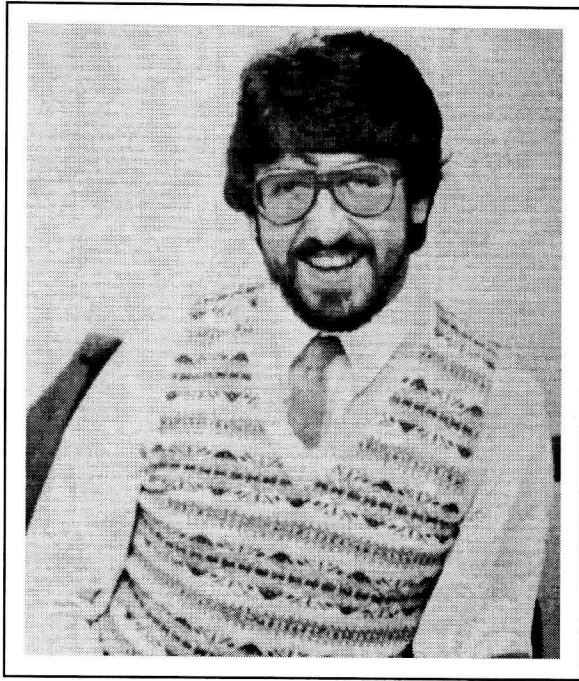
Oric International was launched with £1250 of capital (probably the only time it was in the black). The name, incidentally, was an anagram of the last four letters of 'micro', and had nothing to do with Aurac, the computer in the contemporary television series 'Blake's Seven'.

The shareholding was split five ways between the directors, who were:

Managing director - John Tullis
Sales director - Peter Harding
BCA financial director - Ted Plumridge
Tangerine directors - Paul Johnson and Barry Muncaste

Paul Kaufman

The backer was British Car Auctions, thanks to the friendship between John Tullis and BCA managing director and chairman David Wickens. Tangerine ceased trading and Tansoft was formed with Paul Kaufman as Managing Director. A 16k Oric would have cost you £129, a 48k £169.95. A modem price of £79.95 was also announced that January.

First into print with a review of the new machine was Popular Computing Weekly on the 13th January, 1983. Headlined (appropriately for those times) "Oric-1 - not just a Tangerine dream", it was billed as the first colour micro to cost less than £100. That was the 16k version, of course. The Centronics printer port was "unusual, even unique, for a machine at this price". The early temporary manual was criticised, as was the lack of a program editor in the review machine. But generally the review was very favourable. A quote which portended the future was there:

"Oric Products devote a lot of space in their advertisements to highlighting the advantages of the machine for the business user. They emphasise the availability of their modem, and promise (no date mentioned, however) microdrive discs and a speed printer."

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Every Oric-1 box contained a copy of Oric Owner issue 1, "Jan/Feb 1983", published by Tansoft as the successor to the Tansoft Gazette. They were now based back in Ely at 3 Club Mews. The first Tansoft software was announced - Zodiac (converted from the Microtan version), Oric Chess, and OricBase. And there was a prediction for the future from Paul Kaufman, still the editor, which in hindsight makes interesting reading:

"An extended Basic, which gives the equivalent of B.B.C. basic, is almost ready to go into production".

At the launch party Peter Harding had also promised a Pascal language by February. The intriguing question of what happened to these particular projects hasn't yet been answered.

And from Dr. Paul Johnson, the designer of the Oric:

"The next peripheral you will see for the Oric is the Modem, followed very quickly by 5¼" discs."

Durrell advertised 'Lunar Lander' for £5.00, an indication of just how difficult independent software houses were finding it to produce anything but the most basic software.
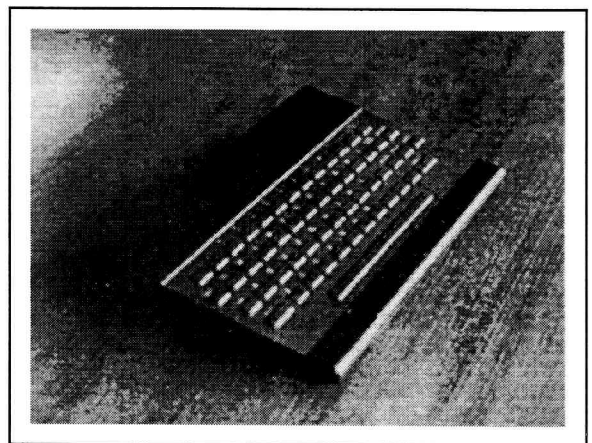
The teak and apple-green prototype

In Personal Computer News for the 10th February, 1983 there appeared a lengthy interview with Dr. Paul Johnson. Asked how the

project began, he said:

"The Oric was first conceived by John Tullis back in the spring of last year. He had been employed as a financial consultant at Tangerine. While he was with us he came up with the idea for a home micro... We realised that we would have to develop a machine at the very low-cost end of the market. We stuck with the 6502 processor - which we use on the Microtan - because it's probably the world's best-selling chip... The most exciting thing for me about the Oric is its serial attributes capability. It will be invaluable in fast games to save memory... As a starting point, I knew that we wanted a viewdata compatible display. We did the TTL version back in the summer. Once that is working you know the logic is OK. Then I went to the U.S. to California Devices Inc, who were going to do the CMOS arrays. We first laid the ULA out as a plan to see where the problems would be. We had the first Oric working in August last year, using TTL emulators instead of the finished gate arrays. When the first finished chips came through from California in early December we took out the emulator, plugged in the chip and it worked first time. It was quite a relief!"

And the quote of the interview:

"As well as being a great games machine, a lot of businessmen will buy the Oric to learn about computing. Some of them will go on to invest maybe £20,000 in a larger system but, for the corner sweet shop the Oric is all that's needed."

As the first brochure put it, "The Oric-1 should be on the desk of every informed executive" ! I suppose hindsight is a wonderful thing.

The ROM was written mostly by two professional programmers, Andy Brown and Chris Shaw. Peter Halford ('Ratters'), who had worked at a Northampton TV shop, wrote the cassette routines - justifiably described as shoddy - and Oric Mon, which Geoff Phillips had to spend weeks debugging. Paul Kaufman wrote the sound routines on a Microtan in Forth, hand-coded them in machine code, and passed them to

Peter Harding and John Tullis

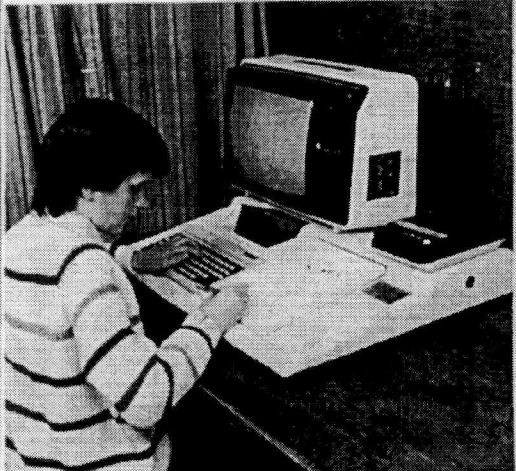Andy Brown, who put them in the ROM.

Paul Kaufman tells a nice story of the moment when the ROM was first running successfully. The machine-code programmers called for someone to enter a Basic program, and Paul stepped forward. Thus was written the first ever Oric program:

10 PRINT "Louise has lovely thighs"

Louise was Barry Muncaster's secretary!

The plastic case was designed by outside professionals. Apparently there were arguments about the mock speaker holes. It was intended to

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Personal Computer News
27th May 1983

have holes, but the plastic moulding machine could not cope and dummies were the compromise. The launch advertising and publicity designs were done by Paul Sample, who did the illustrations for Tom Sharpe's books.

That 10th February issue of P.C.N. also had the first advert for a peripheral - an Oric-1 cassette lead with motor control for £2.50 from Clares of Winsford, Cheshire.

Perhaps the most sensible conclusion was reached in the What Micro? review of February, 1983:

> "The Oric is sound, simple to get along with and offers great expansion potential. It's not an earth shattering novelty, but is very good value indeed."

The first 'type-in' appeared in Home Computing Weekly on the 8th March, 1983 - 'Junior

Mathematician' by one David Nowotnik.

The next peripheral to market was the Oric Desktop Console, advertised in May, 1983 by a Durham firm. It was a two feet square slab of white plastic with a hole for the Oric, and cost £36.95. It was, in fact, well reviewed in the T.U.G. newsletter.

Back to the What Micro? review. It was generally favourable, but noted that the original UHF modulator had caused problems and a new one was being fitted on the latest machines. We also learn that Barry Muncaster had just become Managing Director of Oric, replacing John Tullis who became Chairman. The circuit boards were being made in Singapore using many American components, with only the plastic case being manufactured in the U.K. But the non-quote of the article was from Barry Muncaster,

> "The faults in the Basic language have been tracked down and corrected. A new ROM has been ordered and should be in all machines leaving the factory after the start of April."

Surely he didn't mean 1984? And again,

> "Several add-ons will be available for people who pay £15 for an expansion box which will plug into the back of the Oric. The box is about the same size as the Oric and is strong enough to take the weight of a monitor sitting on top of it. There will be four slots inside the box to take various expansion modules and it will also take plug-in ROMs for things like alternative languages. It will have sockets to take standard joysticks. The first expansion module expected by May is a modem, the second by June a disc drive controller... The third module planned for the expansion box is a 'fun box'. It will contain A/D and D/A converters, a number of relays and anything else we can think of. It should appeal to the hobbyist. Various ideas are being considered for the fourth slot in the box, including a speech synthesiser... Oric will sell a 10" colour monitor for about £240."
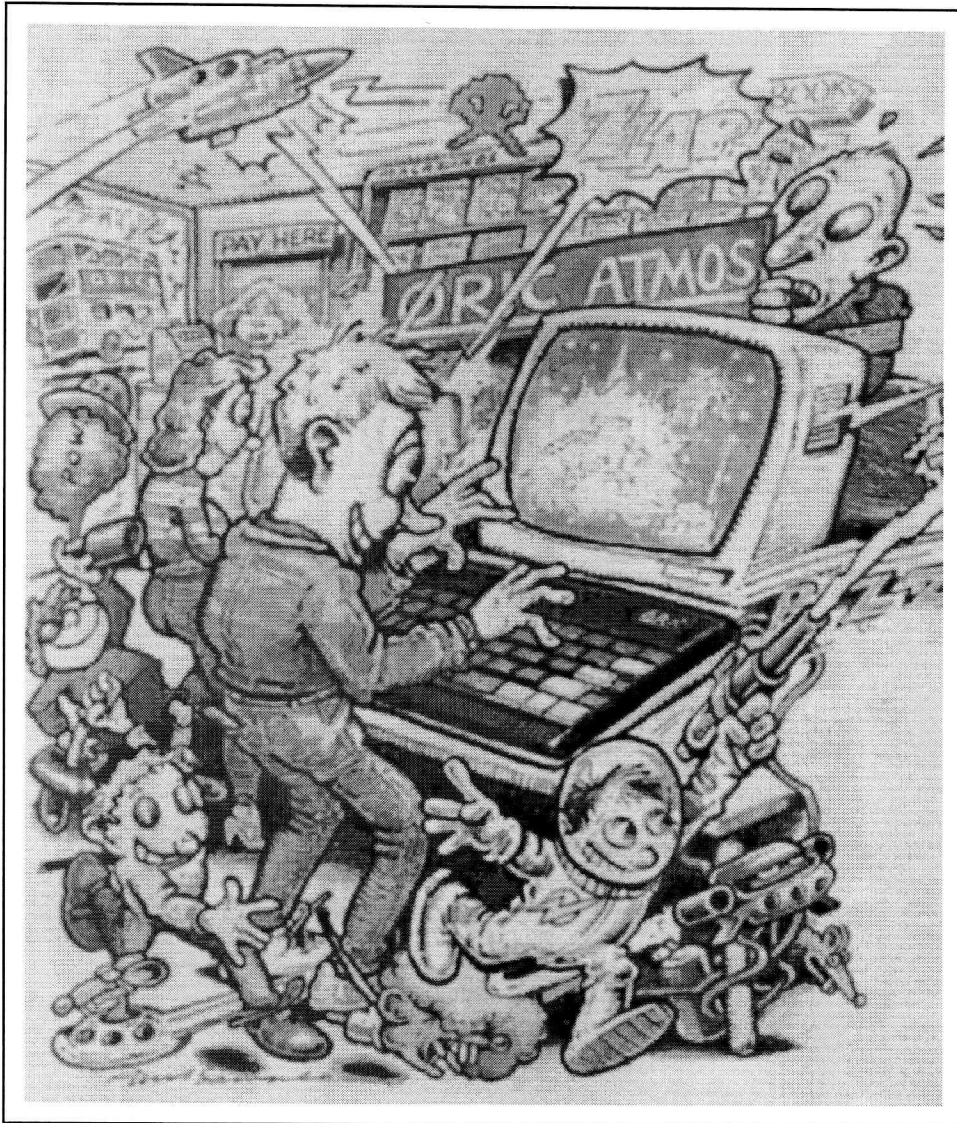
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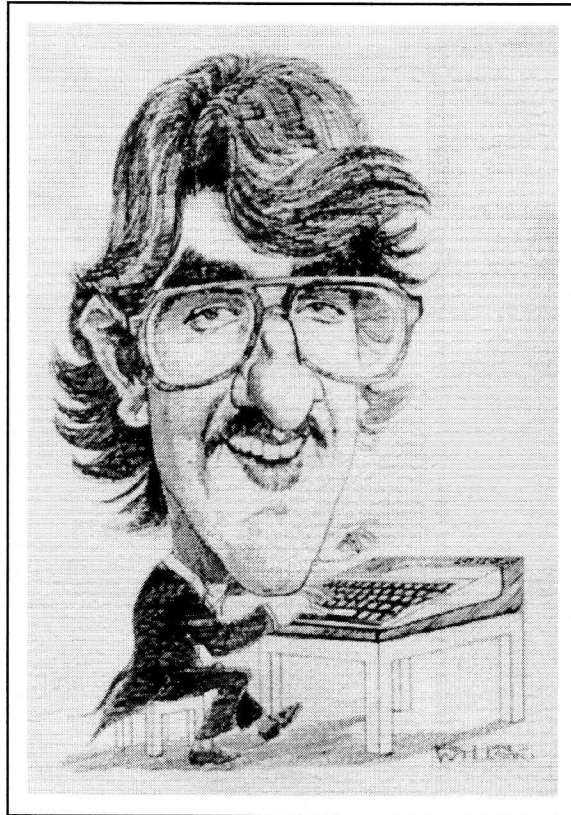
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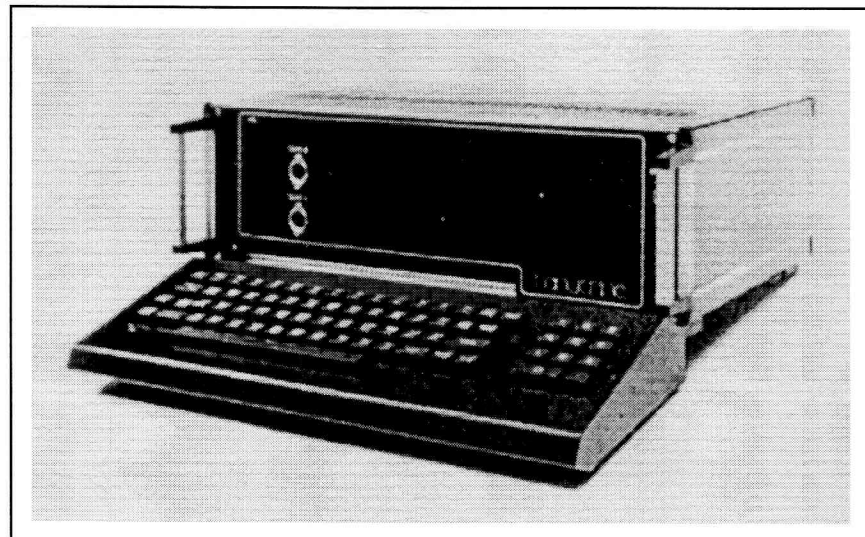
Tangerine's Microtan 65

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Paul Sample's artwork

Chapter 2

A CLOAD of trouble

The launch was not to be without its problems. The heavyweight Personal Computer World printed a full benchtest in its April 1983 edition:

"The appearance of the Oric-1 has demonstrated once again the almost comical inability of British micro manufacturers to launch a new machine properly. Funded by British Car Auctions and utilising the considerable experience of Tangerine Computers, the Oric is aimed at the fastest growing sector of the micro market - the sub-£200 home computer. The delivery difficulties that dogged both the BBC and the Sinclair Spectrum should have alerted Oric to the pitfalls ahead, but the new company observed their rivals' mistakes, then promptly went out and repeated them. Adverts inviting customers to send off their cheques began appearing in October. 30,000 orders were received in the first two months and Oric was confident that large numbers would be delivered in time for Christmas. But delivery of ROM chips was delayed, and it became apparent that Oric's deadlines were hopelessly optimistic... It's unfortunate that Oric should have set about marketing its product in this unprofessional and slapdash way - it can do the company's reputation no good and, what is worse, it's liable to be reflected in the consumer developing a distrust of the computer that it really does not deserve."

Two of the early independent software adverts appeared in the P.C.N. of the 27th May. They were for an Oric Symbolic Disassembler, available from Crunch Computer Systems of Swindon for £7.50 (does it survive today?) and

> *"Oric dealers will have to make the running themselves if they want to get hold of software"*
>
> **Paul Johnson**

the inevitable 50 Games from Cascade for £9.95. In the same issue, however, there were reviews of Death Satellite from A & F, Othello and Awari from Kenema, Oric Trek from Salamander, and Multigames from Tansoft. And the conclusion? - "At least Awari LOADs"!!

Indeed during May, 1983 criticism had been mounting of the tape loading system. Oric responded by sacking its Tansoft tape duplicators and distributors, Cosma Sales in Witney. Paul Johnson was reported as blaming Cosma for the "tens of thousands of cassettes that wouldn't load". Cosma rather sensibly blamed the machine. Personal Computer News of the 27th May quoted Dr. Johnson:

"It's all off with Cosma. There was a technical problem with the tapes that seemed to be quite widespread, and people started saying there was something wrong with the Oric cassette system. But we're using a system that's been in use for years. The problem is purely down to the quality of the duplication. Chain stores have been sending back thousands of cassettes over the last few weeks."

Here then was the root of that well remembered software shortage in the shops. Back to Dr. J.:

"Tansoft is going to do its own distribution, and Oric dealers will have to make the running themselves if they want ...software. Smiths and Laskys will be able to come to Tansoft for Oric branded software."

That they didn't is well recorded.

Finally in that heady month, it was reported that the 16k Oric-1 was now shipping for £129.95.

The Oric-1 was almost immediately exported to France, a country which was to prove a very successful market. On the 29th June, 1983, a contract was signed with A.S.N. making them the exclusive distributors in France on the basis of 4,000 machines per month paid for on delivery; they adopted the name 'Oric France'. Their managing director, Denis Taieb was interviewed in 'Megaherz' magazine:

"In 1981 we looked for a French product to distribute, without success. So we looked in Great Britain, a country that was becoming an example to Europe. We spent 6 months analysing products there, and in August 1982 we started talking with Oric. The proposed quality, technical standards and performance of their machine impressed us. The company's manufacturing, financial and marketing plans were well thought out. They envisaged producing 50 to 60,000 machines in the year to the 30th June, 1983, but in fact the total was 130,000... Oric's initial policy was to avoid an exclusive deal, since they knew no-one in France. That situation lasted for 5 months, during which we sold 10,000 machines, and the other importers together a quarter of that number. So at the end of June we asked Oric to sign an exclusive deal, and we now have a contract for 5 years."

And to anticipate the future of our story, in March, 1983 a certain Fabrice Broche bought his Oric-1 and started to disassemble the ROM.....
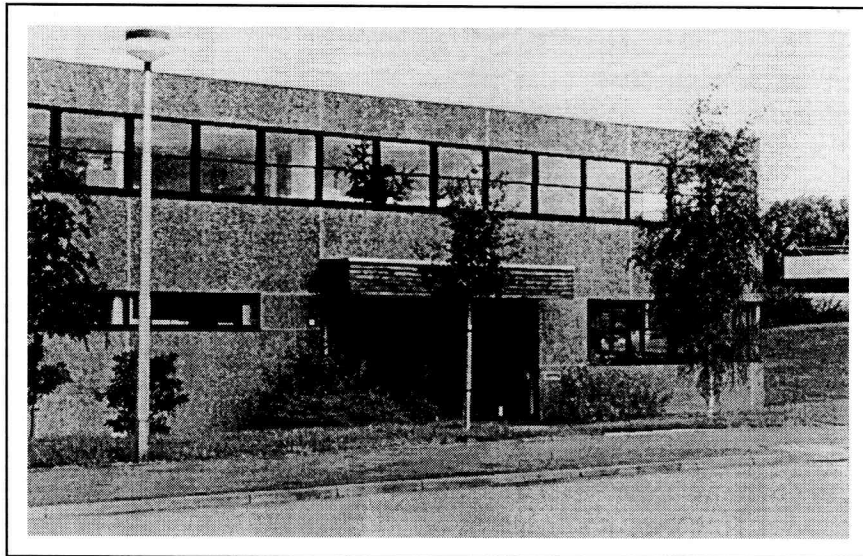
Oric's Cambridge Science Park premises

Chapter 3

Promises, promises

It wasn't until June/July 1983 that 'Oric Owner' issue 2 appeared. The principal hard news item was that Paul Kaufman had shaved off his beard! The promises continued unabated:

"In the near future we should be seeing joysticks, light pens, I/O cards, memory expansion modules and perhaps even a speech module".

As we have seen, the Oric-1 had not been entirely enthusiastically received by the press, to say the least. The bugs were noted, deliveries were sporadic, and production of independent software was inhibited because programmers hadn't got a clue about machine code routines and entry points. Mr. Kaufman responded with a will:

"Due to copyright and licence agreements Oric are only permitted to give out minimal information on the inside workings of Basic (!). Another reason is that as minor faults are corrected in the Basic so entry points may move up or down in memory."

That was my exclamation mark. It speaks volumes for the commercial instincts of the pioneers that Oric zealously guarded the details of the ROM - or perhaps as we have seen they had already realised the failings of the V1.0 ROM and decided not to encourage software for a machine they were even then deciding to replace? According to Paul Kaufman, however, there was a more simple reason. Tangerine had held a Microsoft licence for their BASIC. Oric did not bother to obtain their own licence, doubtless saving money, but forcing them to keep very quiet about the ROM code. This was not the official line, however:

"Problems causing delay in the production of Oric-1 have been resolved, which means that software and peripheral manufacturers can begin production of the goodies they have been promising. The mail order backlog is now cleared. Mail order is to be phased out over the next few weeks to allow dealers to take a greater share of the market".

Then Mr. Kaufman moved onto the attack:

"The printer is now in full production, at a cost of £169.95 plus £5.95 p&p, with a small quantity available mail order. 16k Orics are now in full production. Oric has cleared the backlog of 48k orders."

And back to the apologetic:

"The production of the 16k machine was delayed twelve weeks because the supplier altered the specification of the chip just prior to manufacture and we had to completely change the 16k circuit board."

It's an interesting mix of the good and bad, and typifies the up and down ride that Oric was having. And orders for delivery in 1983 now totalled "350,000 units"....

Tansoft weren't standing still either - Oricmon, House of Death, Multigames 2 and Oricmunch were announced. Other software was slowly trickling through, still mainly in Basic, such as 'Airline' and 'Dallas'. And that doyen of authors, Ian Sinclair, was the first to get a book

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"The Microdiscs and Modem are well on the way and could be released by September"

Paul

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in print, "The Oric and how to get the most from it" - it also wins the prize for the longest Oric book title ever! The main software advert that summer 1983 issue was from P.S.S. - Centipede, Invaders, Hopper, and Oric-Mon were available, with Light Cycle and The Ultra to follow. Arcadia advertised Invaders and Mushroom Mania for £5.50.

Sales Manager Peter Harding knew the sort of thing to say:

> "We sold 25,000 in February and 32,000 in May. A number of software houses have been commissioned to write software which is even now becoming readily available via various outlets... Our micro floppy discs are still being finalised and the drive should be in production for sale during September/ October 1983. We have opted for the 3" format. The long awaited Modem should also be available in July."

At least the 3" format was accurate. And what happened in March and April?! Mr. Harding now expected to sell 400,000 computers by February 1984 in the U.K. and Europe:

> "This figure does not include the considerable product we expect to be sold in Japan, S.E. Asia, Australia/New Zealand & the U.S.A."

Such is the stuff of which dreams are made....

So that was the June/July issue. Significantly, perhaps, on the 1st July 1983 a new Financial Director was appointed, one Allan Castle.

A software house known to all Oric users is I.J.K. In an interview in Home Computing Weekly on the 2nd August, 1983 their managing director Ian Sinclair (no relation) provided some balance to the mounting press criticism:

> "The machine's critics make far too much of the bugs in the machine and do it no justice in terms of its fantastic capabilities. We bought five Orics fairly early, and after spending a month finding its idiosyncrasies, we knew it had better graphics, keyboard and a more standard Basic than the ZX Spectrum

and was the machine for us."

In that same issue Juniper Computing of Malmesbury advertised their word processor for £17.25, together with a list of 18 software titles. All are familiar titles except one - 'Amazea of Moonstar' from Quark Data. Has anyone ever seen it? T.U.G. (the Tangerine User Group) advertised for Oric-1 recruits, and the Burslem Computer Centre offered the first bundle - an Oric-1 and '3 Games for Children' for £164.95 including post and packing.

Over in France, meanwhile, the importers,
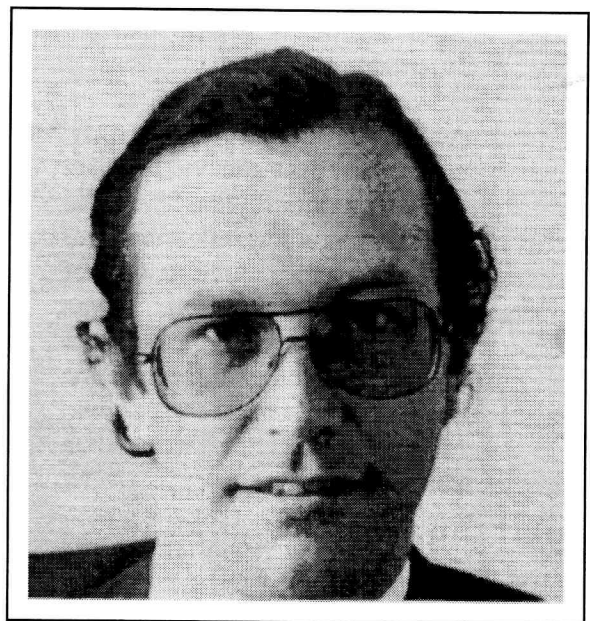
Allan Castle

A.S.N., launched their own magazine, Micr'Oric, in June 1983. It was to last for ten issues. The equivalent there of I.J.K. was Loriciels, and this summer of 1983 the leading French software house was already advertising programs of the quality of 'Le Manoir de Dr. Genius'.

Oric Owner issue 3 duly appeared for August/ September 1983. The printer resplendent in the grey and blue livery was seen in public for the first time at the Earls Court Computer Fair... and that was the news! I.J.K. (who had already released Candyfloss and 3D Maze) announced Xenon 1, Invaders, Fantasy Quest and Reverse,

and PASE their joystick interface. A deal with Melbourne House to produce 'The Hobbit' was revealed. And Paul Kaufman was not to be put down:

> "The Micro-Discs and Modem are well on the way and could be released in late September........"

Changes were afoot at Oric. In late September Philip Denyer (ex-Laskys) joined the company as Sales Controller, as did Mike Prymaka as Manufacturing Manager. Promotions within the company were Rosalind Zawadska from Training Manager to Dealer Manager, and Greg Wood of Tandata as acting Export Manager. What a lot of managers!

Both Oric and Tansoft exhibited at the Personal Computer World show at the Barbican on the 2nd October. Rob Kimberley reminisced in Oric Computing:

> "A bit of a disappointment really, as I half expected to see their new disc drives on show... I suppose I can wait another 6 months. No information available on a Version 2.0 operating system, but mind you it was a bit pointless asking, because most Oric sales staff don't seem to know the difference between a ROM and a hole in the head!..There were, however, some good points about the Stand, and these came in the form of the leggy young ladies in Majorette gear (that blonde one oh boy, the stuff that dreams are made of!!!)"

The real news, however, was that at about this time the price of the Oric was slashed to £99.95 for the 16k, and £139.95 for the 48k including a £40 printer voucher. The reality was that sales had just not happened as predicted, and Orics were by now lining the shelves of both dealers and Oric themselves. Significantly, shops like Rumbelows were advertising the VIC 20, Commodore 64, Texas TI994A and Spectrum to the buoyant market, but not a word for the Oric.
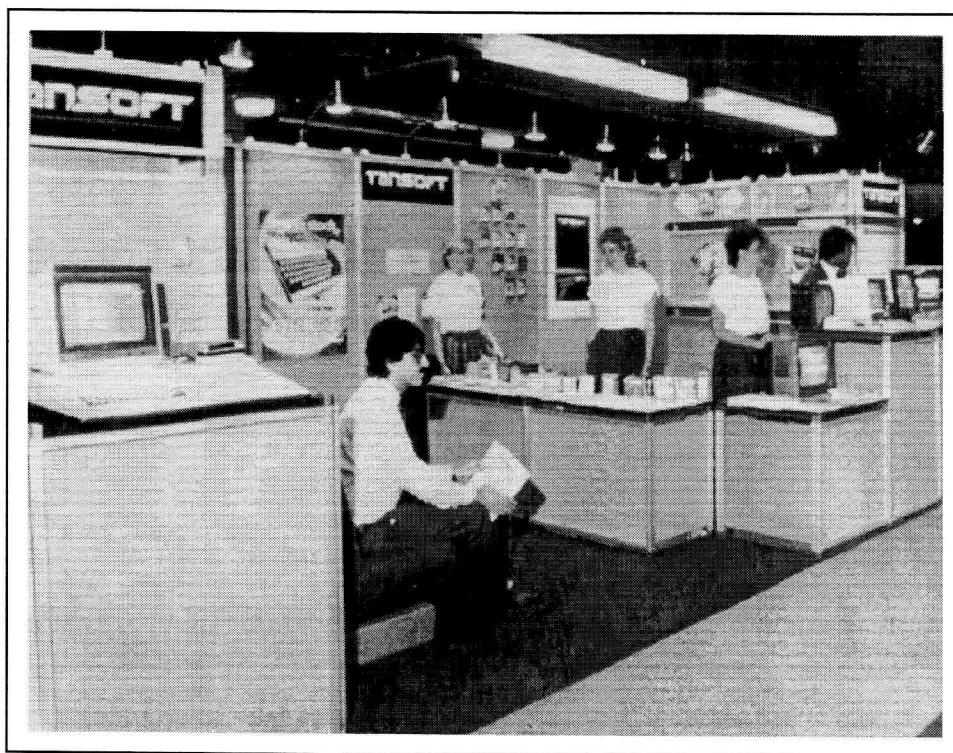
The Tansoft Exhibition Stand

The French 'Videor' award

Chapter 4

All's well that ends well

And in truth Oric were in trouble. It was at this point that Edenspring Investments (personified by Barry Muncaster) stepped in with a proposed cash injection of £2.25 million initially, with a commitment of up to £5.85 million - on condition that Oric achieved pre-tax profits of £2 million for the two years ending June 30th, 1985. Oric chairman John Tullis was reportedly confident that the deal would secure Oric's future. "The agreement provides a capital base for the expansion of the company over the next 12 months", he said. But Peter Jones, joint managing director of Edenspring commented that, "Oric's cash requirements are, well, quite pressing".

Not that this subdued Oric Owner Issue 4, October/ November 1983, spoke of a company called M.C.P. releasing a joystick interface including its own speech synthesiser, and planning to produce a digitiser, an RS232 interface, and a multichannel analogue/digital converter. Allan Castle maintained the heady atmosphere:

> "Sales are expected to reach 350,000 in the first year, a 600% increase on initial projections. Oric exports in large quantities to France and other European countries, and has recently set up joint ventures in Japan and Singapore to cover the Asian and Australasian markets."

Japan? What had occurred was that in June Oric had formed a new company (on paper at least) called Oric Japan, half owned by Oric and half by a consortium including one of Oric's far eastern manufacturers and Cosmic, a Japanese retail chain. Although they planned to, it seems doubtful whether Oric ever got round to developing software using the Japanese Kasna character set! Certainly Oric Japan never was more than a name. Norwegian distributors were, however, appointed, a company called AD Elektronik.

More on the rails, the magazine reviewed a preview copy of 'Author', the MCP40 printer, and the Peach 'Hicopy' printer dump.

"Oric's cash requirements are, well, quite pressing"

Peter Jones

October did see a real triumph. The Oric-1 won the 'Best Home Computer Award' in France, and was the top-selling computer there. Excellent software was being written, produced and sold, and undoubtedly at this time the Oric was the Spectrum of France. Unfortunately, though, the French were not buying the enormous numbers of computers that were being sold in the English market. Since the February launch in France, 35,000 Orics had been sold.

In H.C.W. for the 11th October, 1983 there appeared a hint of what was to come:

> "Oric is planning changes to its computer to add new BASIC commands and improve reliability. Barry Muncaster would only say no decision had been made on when or whether to introduce it. He did say that two or three software houses had seen samples because Oric were endeavouring to ensure that existing software would not be affected. Oric sales boss Peter Harding said that the company would be launching a new computer in late spring. He said 'It's going to be the Electron-Commodore 64 basher'."

In the same issue was a lengthy interview with

Paul Kaufman.

"I was a programmer at Shell - I just bought a Microtan computer from Tangerine as a hobby. One day I went to a computer fair and met someone from Tangerine - I told them their customer support was appalling. A few weeks later they rang me up and offered me a job."

Paul added some personal recollections:

"When Tansoft separated from Tangerine and became a company in its own right, there was an election to decide who the directors should be. I became one of the directors, and the other is Cathie Burrell, who is in charge of administration and dealer contacts. The business has expanded rapidly - just this month we've sold 100,000 programs."

Cathie Burrell

By this time Tansoft was using some five freelance programmers, of whom two were only 17 years old. Paul admitted having poached Andy Green from Quicksilva and John Marshall from PSS. No sooner was the interview published than drama struck.

On the 13th October, 1983 (no, a Wednesday!) the factory of Kenure Plastics in Berkshire,

where the Oric-1 was manufactured, burnt to the ground. The factory was rebuilt, minus a considerable stock of bits (including 15,000 old ROMs) that went to make up the Oric-1. In the meantime production was said to have restarted within 24 hours in a new factory. On the next day a neighbouring warehouse went up in flames. Police were said to suspect that the arsonist got the wrong place first time round...

It was about this time, too, that Tansoft upped sticks and moved to co-exist with Oric Research at the Techno Park, Cambridge.

At a shareholders meeting on Friday, 18th November, 1983 Edenspring approved the acquisition of Oric for shares. The net effect was that the Oric shareholders (John Tullis, Barry Muncaster, Peter Harding, Paul Johnson, British Car Auctions and IEM Singapore) exchanged their shares for shares in Edenspring, who in return made up to £4 million available to fund expansion.

An Oric press release said it all:

"From its take-over by Edenspring Investments plc and subsequent Over the Counter (OTC) sales of shares, Oric Products International Ltd has raised approximately £4 million in working capital to fund expansion and product diversification. After just ten months trading to October 1983, the company has shipped 120,000 of its Oric-1 8 bit 16K and 48K microcomputers and is looking at a first year turnover in excess of £10 million: putting Oric in the top league of British home computer makers. In addition to sustaining growth in the volatile home computer market, Oric is broadening its product base into business communications and opto electronic systems which are being developed at its new 11,000 sq. ft. Cambridge R & D centre - already equipped with the latest CAD and test equipment.

A substantial press and t.v. campaign is being prepared for the new year for which Oric has appointed KMP Advertising, a Saatchi & Saatchi subsidiary."

Edenspring directors Peter Jones and Nicholas

de Savary were appointed directors of Oric.

That same month Brian Howarth launched his well-known 'Mysterious Adventures' series - was he the most prolific Oric programmer ever? - and the Tangerine User Group transformed itself into the Oric Owners User Group. The first issue of their magazine Oric Computing appeared, complete with a type-in adventure entitled 'Coworth Park Horrors'. The magazine was to last for 5 issues only.

Oric Owner issue 5, December/January 1984 was notably silent about the financial crisis; it merely recorded that "Fourteen attractive Angels are in the field to support our 1,000 dealer outlets" - they were headed by one Marilyn Bell, but did you ever see an Oric Angel?!!

And P.C.N. awarded a Christmas prize of £20 to one G. Kendell of Rugby for this little ditty:

Hark the Oric angels sing
Sitting in an oval ring
We will help, not get you wild,
ROM and Oric reconciled,
V1.1 is here at last; V1.0 will feel the draught
Hear Paul Kaufman set new sights
V1.1 is still not right!
Maybe one day he'll proclaim
This damned ROM is still the same,
cursed by bugs right from the start
the Oric angels must depart,
Hark the Oric angels sing
Glory to our Paul - the King.
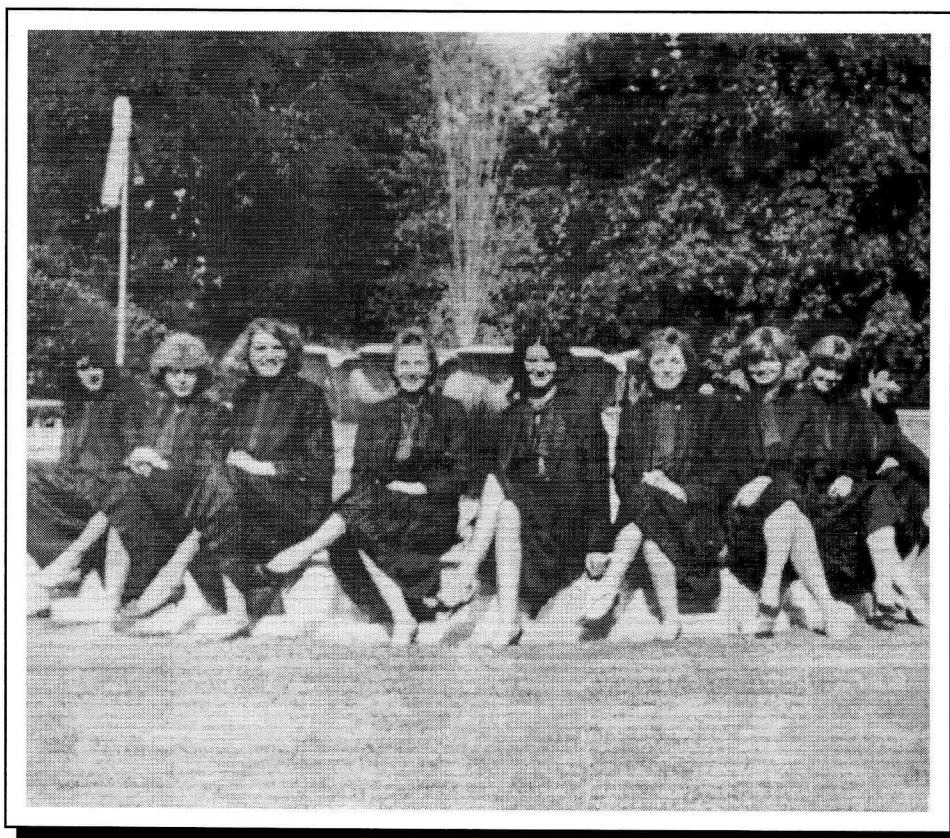
The Oric Angels at Coworth Park

The new Oric Atmos 48K.

Chapter 5

Enter the ....Atmos

By now the Atmos was much more than a gleam in its designer's eye. It is interesting to note here that as far back as the original launch party Peter Harding was contemporaneously quoted as saying,

> "Sales of the Oric-1 will last for 15 to 18 months before being replaced by the Oric-2 with a typewriter keyboard, followed by the Oric-3."

What now of all the theories about the V1.0 bugs causing a rethink that led to the Atmos? Those who had obtained their Oric-1s directly from the company were sent a "special Christmas offer" in December 1983. For £49.95 they could upgrade to an Atmos, said the personal letter from Terry Shurwood, Oric's new Sales and Marketing Director. Peter Harding was said to have assumed responsibility for "new vertical markets including Viewdata".

Oric Owner issue 6, February/March 1984, announced that the Oric Atmos had been in full production since the 16th January, 1984, and had been launched at the Which Computer Show in Birmingham. The price was £170 from Tansoft. It was admitted that the number of Oric-1's delivered in 1983 was 160,000. Observant readers will note that is less than 50% of the figure predicted when Edenspring injected their millions.

The Which Computer Show had been held on the 17th January, 1984, and Rob Kimberley was there again for Oric Computing:

> "Surprise surprise, not only a brand new Oric disc drive (prototype - no price yet),but

"The buying pattern of enthusiasts is going to shake out many of the manufacturers"

Barry Muncaster

a £170 revamped Oric called the 'Atmos'... My dictionary definition of 'atmosphere' is 'spheroidal gaseous envelope surrounding heavenly body'. OK, so it contains the new V1.1 ROM but that's going a bit too far! Personally I didn't like the new keyboard, but I'm so used to the nice positive click of my trusty Oric-1 that 'standard' keyboards feel sloppy and alien. The new Oric is a bit faster than the old, and comes with an extra 'Function key' - which unfortunately none of the Oric sales staff could explain to me (perhaps in the heat of the moment it was a mirage!)."

M.C.P. duly advertised their goodies in January's Oric Computing - a speech synthesiser/ joystick interface for £79.35, a programmable joystick interface for £23.70, an 8-channel A/D converter for £77, a hardware clock/calendar for £30, and an RS232 interface for £38.50. It would be interesting to know if anyone bought any of these items, and whether any still exist.

An Oric press release gave details of the manufacturing side of things:

> "Oric Products International has formed a joint venture company with Kenure Plastics Ltd to manufacture PCB's, microcomputers and opto electronic systems. Called 'M3' the new company has already acquired a 20,000 sq. ft. factory on the Hampton Farm Industrial Estate (at the end of the M3 motorway) where the new Atmos 48K micro will be the first product to be made using the latest auto assembly and test techniques. Kenure Plastics already manufacture the

Atmos cases and assemble, test and distribute all the Oric micro computers. Till now, however, all the printed circuit boards have been manufactured in the Far East, at jointly owned plants in Singapore and Japan. Oric plans to retain this arrangement, whilst catering for the increased production requirements by manufacturing in the UK. To this end, Oric has also signed a PCB manufacturing agreement with Assembly and Automation Electronics in South Wales where some of the Atmos PCB's are already being made. When the £1 million 'M3' facility comes on line this summer, it will take over this work and produce around 10,000 units (a third of the planned production) each month."

The keyboards, incidentally, were manufactured by Stackpole in America.
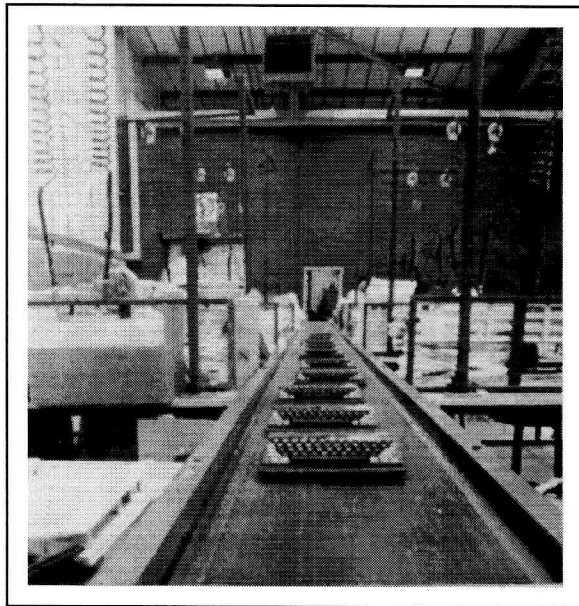
The Atmos production line

First with a review of the new Atmos was Personal Computer News on the 18th February 1984, written by Bob Maunder. Noting that the launch of the Atmos had been put in the shade by Sinclair's announcement of the QL, he described the new Atmos manual, published by Pan Books, as "aeons ahead of the Oric-1 manual". But then he tried to load the welcome tape:

"On typing in the appropriate command the message 'Searching...' appears at the top of the screen,soon followed by a 'Loading * C' and then 'Ready'. Instinct further dictates the typing of 'RUN', giving the disappointing result of another 'Ready' message. Further attempts with the cassette on the other side, wound on,and with other recorders still proved fruitless, and as the manual gave no information on the welcome cassette, it did not live up to its title."

Mr. Maunder had alighted on the now familiar faulty error checking routine in the first V1.1 ROM. He also found the new ROM to run BASIC routines at up to twice the speed of the V1.0 ROM. A second opinion from Bryan Skinner was caustic,

"At £170 for a 48k micro, the Atmos is considerably more expensive than its competition. Being so similar to the Oric-1, it offers much the same competition to machines with similar features as the Oric-1 did - virtually none."

The news pages that week were full of Oric items, not least Barry Muncaster's vision for Oric's future:

"The next Oric system will be an integrated micro. It will incorporate integral drives, a modem - probably with autodial - and could be based on a Z80. The likely name is Stratos, and it is due to be launched in the first half of this year... We feel that the buying pattern of micro enthusiasts is going to shake out many of the current manufacturers, leaving about four to make the most of the home market. Apart from Oric (of course) we will find (in descending order) Sinclair, Commodore and Acorn... Later in the year we hope to produce yet another member of the Oric family, this time based around the 8086 processor."

Our Barry strikes again!

On the 4th February, 1984, Oric set up a press demonstration of the new Microdrive - and then

The phantom Oric-1 disc drive

promptly cancelled it. Still we all waited.

Your Computer was the next to review the new machine. Again the tape loading came in for criticism,

> "The computer still seems to be over-particular as to the correct volume level set on the recorder playback... The level seemed to vary from tape to tape so it often took several attempts to load each program."

In April 1984 Oric duly purchased the Kenure (rebuilt) factory, production and servicing facilities, stating that 1200 machines per day were being produced. A further review of the Atmos appeared in 'What Micro?' that month:

> "If the tape loading problems on early machines can be sorted out it should do well as an all round machine. It may not have any great strengths that make it stand out above its rivals, but nor does it have their individual weaknesses."

It needs me to make no further comment on the tape-loading problem, save to note that Oric stubbornly kept using the first issue V1.1 ROMs until they were gone, and only then, much later, did they fit the second issue corrected ROMs.

In France, April 1984 saw the first issue of Théoric, undoubtedly the best and most professionally produced Oric magazine ever. The first print of 25,000 copies rapidly sold out, and a further 3,000 had to be printed. Oric, it was reported, were now aiming at Germany,

Italy and Spain, and were discussing a distribution deal for America. That month also saw the release by Loriciels of that peak of French Oric programming, 'L'Aigle d'Or' - and the announcement of an AZERTY keyboard for the Atmos, something that never did come to pass. And Oric Computing published a medical records type-in from Dr. Ales Satanak of Prague - proof at last that the machine had penetrated the Iron Curtain via Opel.

We left the official Microdisc story back in August 1983 - "could be released in September....". As far as I know, it never did appear in the blue and grey livery. But, in Oric Owner issue 7, April/May 1984 there was the advert - Atmos £170, Printer £150, Microdisc £260.

The same month ITL Kathmill launched their Byte Drive 500 disc drive, in development since the previous July, and first previewed in the press in December 1983; it was well reviewed in What Micro? that April for its extended instruction set compared to the Microdisc, but criticised because the DOS sat under screen memory. The BD DOS had been written by Peter Halford.

It was a summer when many bought their Atmos, and when things really were looking optimistic for Oric....

Disc drive production
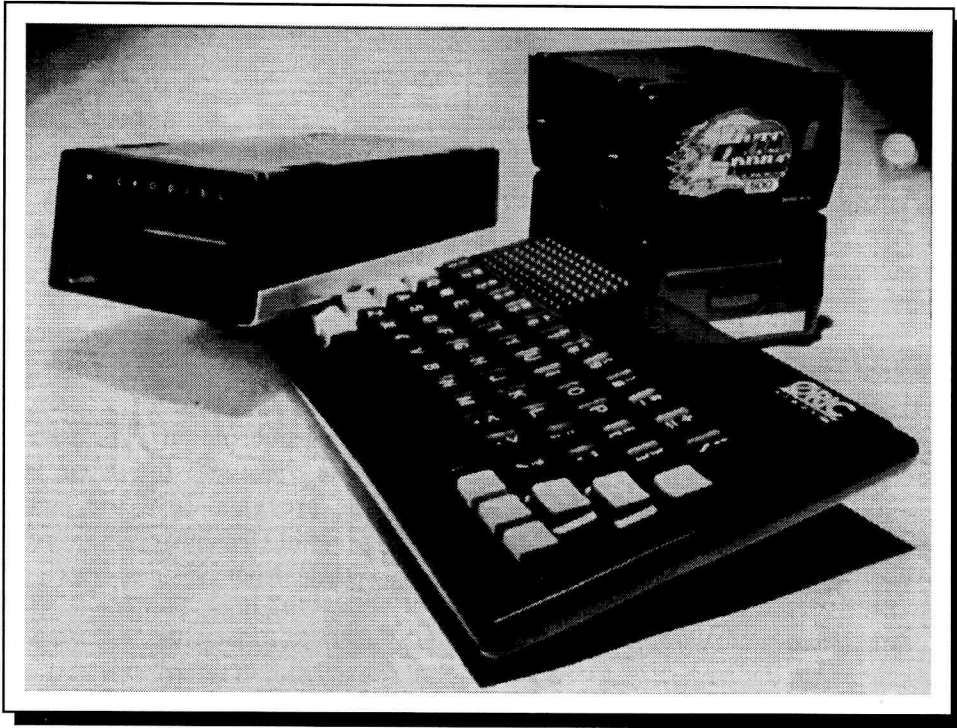
Drives for the Oric

Chapter 6

Summer madness

By the by, Oric's advertising campaign for the Atmos, comparing it favourably with the Commodore C64, came in for criticism at the end of April. The Advertising Standards Authority upheld Commodore's complaint about the assertion that "the 64 loses 26K of its 'Elephantine' memory in high-resolution graphics". The ASA said Oric failed to state that the Commodore provides 58K of usable memory when using machine code, and also when programming in BASIC the 64 allows high-resolution graphics to be placed underneath the operating system ROM, leaving the available Basic memory unaffected. The latter is therefore always greater than on the Atmos. In response an Oric spokeswoman said,

> "This campaign is no longer being run so it isn't relevant".

Oric Owner issue 8, June/July 1984, had some good news - it was to go monthly on the newsstands from the October issue. Atmos production was now 10,000 per month, and Microdiscs were available for the revised price of £299. And What Micro? in August 1984 at long last announced that the Modem was available... and believe it or not (don't), that an 80-column printer was shortly to be released.

In France the range of third-party peripherals was astonishingly wide: a voice synthesiser, an analog 8-line card, a 16-way input/output card, and a 3 slot expansion motherboard. Microdiscs were no less than 3,600 francs!

The July 1984 edition of Théoric said that in 1983 Oric had achieved a turnover of £25 million, and was anticipating £45 million for 1984. The magazine thoroughly reviewed the Microdisc, and the French producer of the competing Jasmin drive, TRAN, anticipated monthly production at between 700 and 1000 units.

Tansoft were featured in the Leisure Electronics Trader magazine in August 1984. Paul Kaufman was extensively quoted, and he bears repetition:

> "Tansoft will shortly double its range of titles once negotiations with a French software house are concluded - Tansoft will bring all that company's titles to the UK... With games, the way we do business is to develop a completely outrageous concept, as in Rat Splat..... Business software is generating a lot of interest now that the Oric discs are out. A suite of accounting packages is being developed and will be launched in September."

"The days have gone when you could end up with a Porsche after six months"

Cathie Burrell

And from Cathie Burrell (who had started as despatch lady at Tangerine):

> "The days have gone when you could end up with a Porsche after six months".

Which has to be a side-swipe at Barry Muncaster, who in the summer of 1983 had treated himself to a £46,000 Ferrari.

But the real interest over that summer was a dispute raging in France between Denis Taieb, the managing director of A.S.N., and the now thriving Théoric. It started with telephone calls. and was swiftly followed by a letter from Taieb to Sylvio Faurez, boss of Soracom, the publishers of Théoric, reproduced on the next page:

Sylvio Faurez

A lively editorial told Monsieur Taieb where to put himself!

Denis Taieb

The magazine also reported that the Oric-1 had sold 50,000 in France in 1983, and that the Atmos had sold 27,000 between February and June 1984.

Sir,

Following our various telephone calls in
July, I confirm that I have been
nominated Director of marketing and
after-sales service of Oric Products
International and am charged with
protecting their interests in France.

The distribution of your magazine
Theoric has not been met with approval
by the Board of Oric Products
International. There are two ways
forward:
1) You request our authority to use the
name Theoric and forward to me
personally two copies of each of the
first two issues by Recorded Delivery
2) You simply change your name

In addition, the information that you
divulge to your readers does not appear
to have any certain source. I strongly
advise you to submit to me a copy of
future issues so that your readers can
be properly informed of the development
of Oric products.

Yours faithfully,

Denis Taieb
Director of Oric France
Director of marketing and sales
of Oric Products International.

Théoric did not take this lying down. A telex winged its way back:

30

Chapter 7

Optimism confounded

It is from this point in time that we can trace the beginning of the end. Oric Owner failed to appear in August or September. Scanning the newsstands in October, there was no sign of it.

Probably the first indication of trouble was a report in P.C.N. on the 4th August, 1984. Under the heading 'Pan claim shocks Oric', it reported that Pan Books, owed £120,000 by Oric for the Atmos manual, intended to serve a writ if payment was not made that week. They had talked to Allan Castle two weeks before, and had been told that Oric owed £2 million to 12 major suppliers. P.C.N. spoke to Mr. Castle:

> "The debt position is broadly correct. We generally owe 25 suppliers some £2.5 million at the end of any given month. We are ploughing money into production for the Christmas rush, and this time of year is usually tough on cashflow. Pan have been kind enough to allow us more credit than one would normally expect, and Oric will be paying them shortly. Our current position is by no means unusual in the micro business."

P.C.N. followed up the story on the 25th August:

> "In the past week Oric's debts have been put as high as £4 million, and it has even been suggested the company might pull out of the UK market. Oric has helped things along by cutting 15 staff at its Ascot HQ... To allay fears about its liquidity Oric is claiming $2.75 million worth of orders for its new German keyboard for the Atmos. These have gone to Germany, Austria and Switzerland,

"Our current position is by no means unusual in the micro business"

Allan Castle

with $2 million made up by two major German retail chains... The company is still on the receiving end of discounting in the major retail chains. Just a few weeks ago Oric increased the price of the Atmos by £20, but prices in the shops are still around the £150 mark rather than the £190 Oric would like."

And again on the 8th September:

> "Major creditors of cash-starved Oric Products were due to get together this week to work out ways of seeing the company through its current problems. The current cash problems were made worse last week when Oric went to court to answer a writ from KMP, its advertising agency, claiming £200,000 in unpaid bills. The court threw out a counterclaim from Oric that KMP had provided it with wrongful advice and ordered the company to pay the money it owes alo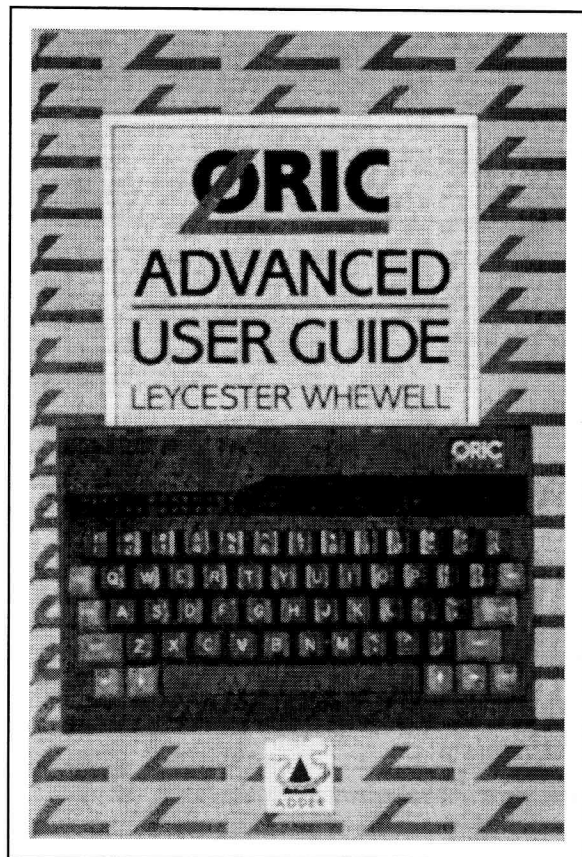ng with KMP's legal costs... Assembly and Automation Electronics, the company that manufactures the Atmos, is taking a sympathetic view of Oric's difficulties... Also involved in the discussions is Hitachi, which supplies disc drives and other components to Oric... A likely outcome is that Oric's creditors will agree to reschedule the debts so that the money will not have to be paid until pre-Christmas sales start to take off."

That indeed was the result of the creditors' discussions in mid-September that year.

Then came Oric Owner issue 9, October/ November 1984. Not surprisingly, we learned that plans to go on the newsstands had been

abandoned. Instead the 'Oric Club' was launched, with a club magazine called "Oricall". And it was confirmed that the Modem was now available - 18 months after it was first announced - for £100. And:

"Oric are to take a substantial number of pages on Prestel to create an Oric database."

In reality, of course, they did nothing of the sort. Indeed, nothing but a dummy issue of Oricall was, so far as is known, ever prepared.

It is interesting to compare the selling prices of the competitors in the home computer market at Christmas 1984 - Atmos £179, Spectrum 48k £129, Electron £199, Vic 20 £129, and CPC464 £349

Published at this time was the 'Advanced User Guide' by Leycester Whewell, probably the most used book after the manual by those who possess it.

The French meanwhile were making hay while the sun shone. October, 1984 saw No Man's

Land at one fell swoop release a 23 title range of Oric software in the U.K. We began to realise what we had been missing. Not to be outdone, Cardiff dealers Butex were advertising Oric goodies in French magazines - "au prix anglais". And there were new peripherals - both the Protek programmable joystick and DK'Tronic dual port joystick interfaces were launched that October.

But events in France now confirmed the first hints of trouble. The boss of the importers A.S.N., Denis Taieb, resigned on the 1st October. The French newspaper Hebdogiciel collared him:

"I remain with Oric International in a consultative capacity. But this is affected by the difficulties facing Oric U.K. They have financial problems with Pan Books, publishers of the Atmos manual. They created a storm in a teacup, but Oric have now agreed a debt moratorium with them... Last April our retailers in France refused to make payment with their orders (as Oric U.K. demanded of ourselves), and insisted on monthly credit terms. We imposed the same terms on Oric U.K., and really from that moment they had problems... I was unable to
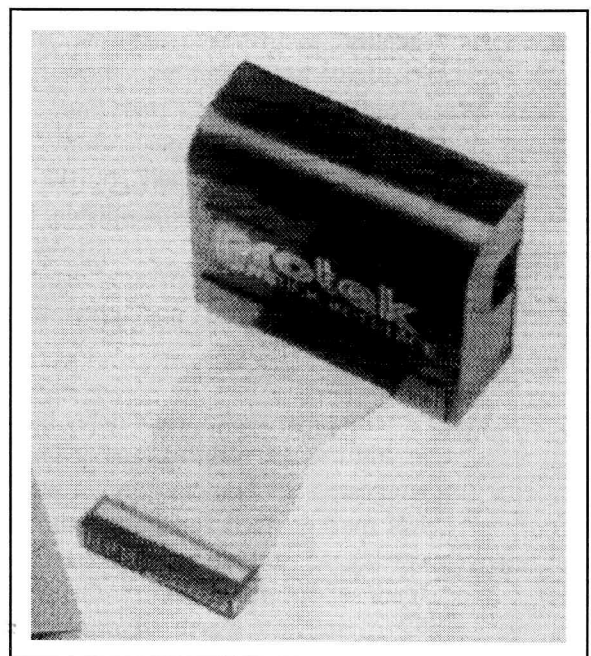
The Protek joystick interface

reconcile the views of Oric France and Oric U.K."

There were indeed problems in May 1984. A stock of twenty thousand machines had been sequestered by the bank. A.S.N. stepped in and purchased the stock in return for a five year contract, the rights to the names Atmos and Stratos in France, and the right to manufacture machines in France should they wish to - according to A.S.N.

Monsieur Taieb also revealed a further dispute about the Oric name. Having tried to stop Théoric using the letters 'oric' in its title, he then tried to stop third-party disc drive manufacturer Jasmin from using "for your Oric" in their adverts!

So Hebdo turned its attention to the new boss, Claude Taieb (Denis' brother!):

"Oric International has negotiated assistance from the British government so its finances have returned to normal. [*Note: the only reference I have ever seen to such a move - JH*] Six months ago Amstrad asked us to distribute their machine, but we refused because we were faithful to the Oric, because we believe in the machine... I hope to arrange a new form of collaboration with Oric U.K. - when the personalities change, the politics change."

The Oric Modem
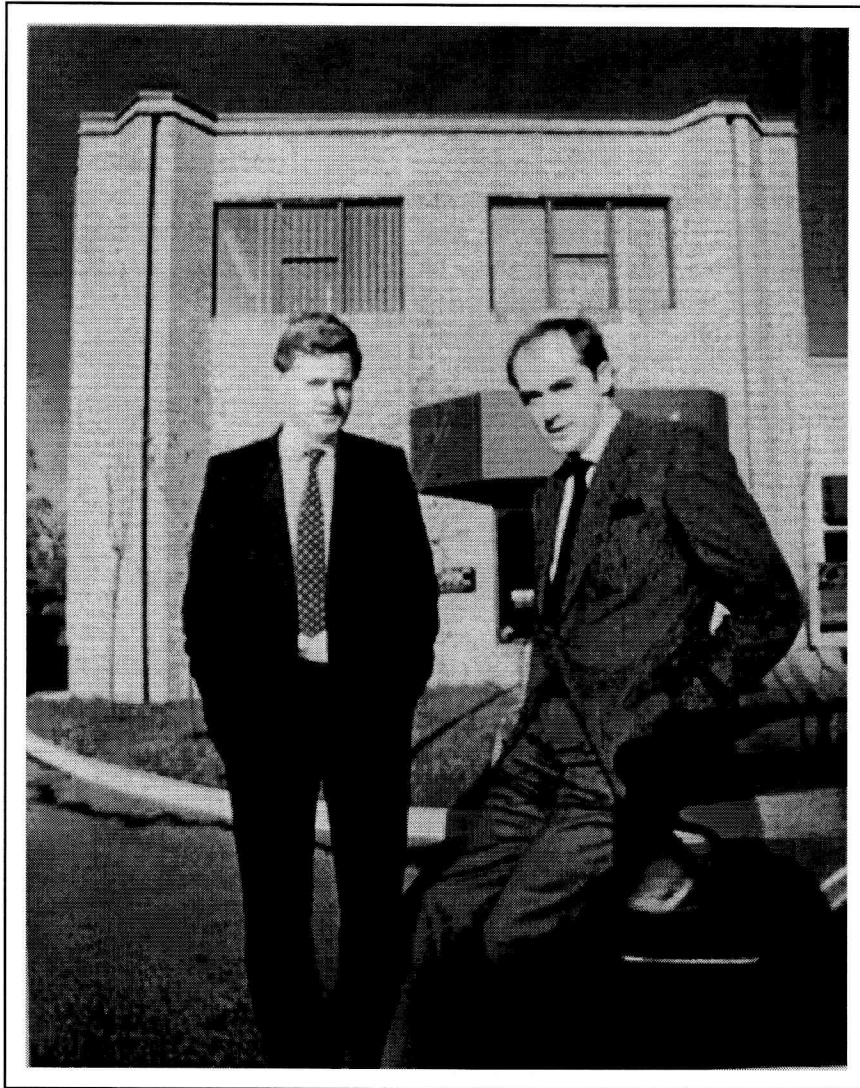
Bruce Everiss and Barry Muncaster
outside the new Techno Park premises

Chapter 8

The final rites?

Changes were indeed now in the air. Muncaster and Johnson bought the majority shareholding in Tansoft, and Paul Kaufman and Cathie Burrell promptly left to set up Orpheus with Geoffrey Guy and Geoff Phillips. Said Paul Kaufman,

"The split between us and Tansoft is amicable, there is no acrimony involved. Orpheus has obtained financial backing from two private investors, one in this country and one in France - we plan to develop a high profile in France."

Tansoft was now being headed by Adrian Rushmore, its former marketing manager. "We are concentrating our support on the Atmos", he quipped.

On the 15th November, 1984 P.C.W. revealed Oric's latest plans - to launch three new micros in Spring 1985. They were a £250 successor to the Atmos, the Stratos, to be known as the IQ164 in this country, a £400 8086 IBM compatible desktop (with cassette interface!), and a £3000 8086 portable. These early 'clones' were to be Oric-badged products from America.

Oric Owner issue 10, December/January 1985 was as ever optimistic. The new editor was Carolyn Grunewald, former advertising manageress. The 'Oric IQ164' was announced to its readers; Bruce Everiss was now appointed Managing Director of Tansoft and gave a typically memorable quote:

"My first aim is to establish the Oric Atmos in its rightful market position."

As memorable is Paul Kaufman's response on

hearing the news:

"His reputation says it all. The only thing that annoys me about his appointment to managing director is that he is now driving around in what used to be my Mercedes."

And that was the last issue of Oric Owner - a useful, if not particularly spectacular magazine and of course apart from the 5 issues of Oric Computing the only professionally produced English Oric magazine ever. No mainstream publisher ever felt justified in producing an Oric specific magazine, though the 'games' magazines covered the Oric quite well. In France, meanwhile, Théoric went from strength to strength, going monthly and selling many thousands of copies a month in the newsagents. It was a magazine packed with a host of useful articles and some excellent program listings.

> **"My first aim is to establish the Oric Atmos in its rightful market position"**
>
> **Bruce Everiss**

And Bruce Everiss did it again in P.C.N. on the 8th December:

"The IQ164 will have more modes than the BBC."

What Micro? in December 1984 reported a price reduction for the Atmos to £120, and said of it:

"A Micro that should have been a top seller, but now it seems too late."

P.C. Games' Oric Game of the Year that December was 'Classic Racing' from Salamander, and we close 1984 with another quote from Paul Kaufman:

Carolyn Grunewald

"If Oric survives Christmas, it will survive 1985."

The problems facing Oric now were highlighted in early January, 1985. Oric's head office in Ascot was closed, and the ancillary staff made redundant.The future of the U.K. factory was dependant on sales in the first half of 1985. Oric were negotiating in France for a production plant at Longwy, near the Luxembourg border; according to Lorraine Horne (Oric's 'operations executive') the plant would be operational by the middle of the year, producing for France and Europe. The French government was to subsidise the operation with grants of some £150,000 and low interest loans. Oric and A.S.N. were each investing £500,000. And Bruce Everiss was very frank for once (in a trade journal):

"Oric's performance in the U.K. this year was a total disaster. The company built up massive debts and is scheduled to repay £3.5 million to creditors by March."

The best-timed example of Oric optimism was, however, yet to come. In Your Computer for January 1985 there was a lengthy interview with Barry Muncaster and Bruce Everiss, accompanied by lots of pretty pictures. It was a double-page spread worth framing, and certainly an interview worth quoting:

"On the starting blocks are five new computers. They range from the Stratos, a £200 machine based around the Atmos, through an MSX, to a QL-style 68008 computer, with an IBM compatible and a lap-held at the top of the range... Although 1984 was the year that Oric almost disappeared from the British micro market, confidence for 1985 is based on two assets, a booming European sales - and expertise in ULA design... 350,000 units were sold in the first two years... The Stratos is to go on sale in France from February."

Sure enough the magazines in France were full of the Stratos in January, 1985. Science & Vie Micro reported in detail on its capabilities, but sounded this note of caution:

"Several points are unclear, particularly the date of release. While Oric say the end of January in France, the importer, A.S.N., prudently says March or April. It is unclear where the machine is to be made. There has

Bruce Everiss

been talk for some months of a factory at Longwy in France, but there is 'nothing concrete at present', says Claude Taieb. He adds that the machine will not be sold in England; 'Oric asked me how many we could sell', he explained. 'We said 20,000 and they said O.K., we'll go ahead. Barry Muncaster announced that the machine would be released in England, but after France.'"

So it was that at the Frankfurt Computer Show on the 1st February 1985 the Oric Stratos was launched, complete with cartridge ports, extended Basic and a host of other excellent features. Steve Hopps of Opelco was there. The blow was not long delayed. On Thursday, 2nd February, 1985 Edenspring put Oric into receivership. Oric had debts of no less than £5.5

million and assets of only £3 million - well behind Edenspring's conditions. According to Bruce Everiss Oric had been looking over its shoulder at the receiver for the last 6 months:

"Two factors affected Oric the most - a split within A.S.N. which vastly reduced sales in France (the Amstrad is the cult machine now), and a UK exclusive distribution deal with Prism, which did not work out."

In fact Oric had sued Prism for £4 million and obtained summary judgement for £320,000, as a result of which Prism were also in receivership!

The Oric 'Stratos'
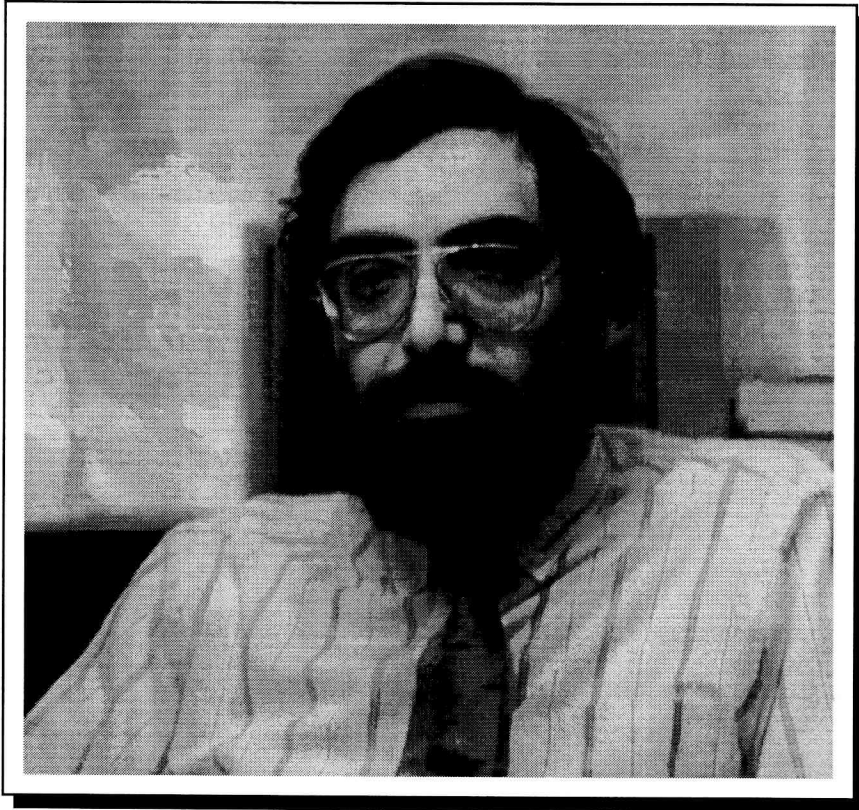
Jean-Claude Talar

Chapter 9

A Phoenix arisen

Now the dominoes fell. ITL Kathmill went into receivership on the 20th February, 1985, owed £100,000 by Oric. The first 'private' user group was formed by a Mr. J. Hibbons, the 'Byte Drive User Group'. When ITL went under Peter Halford had, interestingly, been in the final stages of perfecting a Z80 second processor board for the Oric, using CP/M 2.2 software. ITL had even purchased a CP/M licence from Digital Research.

The scene now turns to the Receiver's efforts to dispose of Oric. There were apparently at least six bidders - A.S.N. itself, the A.S.N. former managing director, Denis Taieb; the Spanish owners of Dragon, Eurohard SA; a French company, S.P.I.D.; an Indian company; and last but not least the irrepressible Barry Muncaster and Paul Harding, who according to 'Hebdo' in France were associated with Denis Taieb. For three months they all wheeled and dealt with the Receiver, Dennis Cross of Chater & Myhill.

Plans to set up at Longwy were fading fast as French micro makers Thomson and Matra put pressure on their technology minister (one Edith Cresson) to drop the project. Dennis Cross kept on a skeleton staff of five at Oric's Feltham factory "just in case a buyer interested in UK assembly could be found". The company's main asset was its £3 million worth of unsold stock, mostly Atmos machines, plus "a sizeable book debt from A.S.N.", and designs for the Stratos.

On the 5th February Cross went to France to assess "the best bet I have". Meanwhile Edenspring had to write off its £2.7 million investment in Oric. Its annual accounts revealed that the company (of which Barry Muncaster

_____

"We want to make Oric a French company"

Jean-Claude Talar

_____

was M.D.) had made payments of £607,000 to companies owned by Barry Muncaster and John Tullis for "management services and reimbursement of expenses".

During February Tansoft released 'Land of Illusion' and a little piece of plastic to cover the Atmos expansion port, I.J.K. released 'DPTLQ', Orpheus released 'Megabase', and Gary Ramsay in April 1985 founded the Independent Oric User Group with Issue 1 of the group's bi-monthly newsletter.

On the 5th March Dennis Cross advertised Oric for sale in a slightly truncated advertisement in the Financial Times, reproduced overleaf.

In its April 1985 edition, the editor of Micr'Oric kept his readers up-to-date:

"More than 120,000 Orics in France... Oric Products International has had remarkable growth. At the present moment, as you will have read, the company is in the hands of a receiver. A solution for the future is being sought. It seems that a factory in France is envisaged, which bodes well for we Oric enthusiasts."

The same issue included an order form for the Stratos for 2995 francs, with delivery anticipated for June. The next issue was not to appear until the end of the year, and that would be the last.

By the end of April, 1985 Jean-Claude Talar of S.P.I.D., quoted in Personal Computer News, was confident:

"We want to make Oric a French company"

ORIC COMPUTERS

FOR SALE AS A
GOING CONCERN

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computers with other related
products**
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**J.D. Cross, FCA MIPA
CHATER & MYHILL
Sussex House, Hobson Street
Cambridge CB1 1NJ
The business and assets including
the manufacturing rights for the
Telex: 817975 G**

The likely cost, he said, was between £½ and £1 million. At a creditors' meeting on the 1st May it seems that no final decision was taken. André Fisher of Hitachi, spokesman for the fourteen major creditors of Oric, was helping the receiver to evaluate the offers - not surprisingly, he seems to have been less than enamoured with the idea of returning Oric to the 'triumvirate'.

May itself was quiet, but by June, 1985 Tansoft had had enough - they too went into liquidation and Opel, who had long been Oric distributors to Europe outside France, bought all the Tansoft stocks and U.K. software rights, and reportedly took over ITL's Z80 board, subsequently producing it for export to Eastern Europe.

The June Micr'Oric in France had a notable change in its advertisements - gone was the Oric Microdisc, in its place was the French Jasmin drive. The gulf between A.S.N. and Oric was now apparent in the editorial:

"Oric no longer exists in England. The factory is closed, and Oric France has no further connection. It seems that plans to resume production of the Oric have been dropped, and existing stocks are being sold off. Oric France retains a small stock of parts to service its clients. those who buy elsewhere will not be served. A.S.N. will now distribute Goldstar MSX products...."

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That same issue contained a major project to construct a 16 out of 4,096 colour card for the Atmos.

Finally, in July, 1985 the news broke - on the 1st June S.P.I.D. had bought Oric for "several hundred thousand pounds". Production of the Atmos was to be moved to its computer peripheral plant in Normandy by the end of the month, and by September "Eureka will decide whether to go ahead with the Stratos."

P.C.W. added some detail. The Cambridge office was to be disposed of (it had been leased). According to Cameron McSween, a consultant who handled negotiations between Eureka and the receiver, a substantial part of the technology relating to the proposed IBM compatible machines was available to Eureka, but work on

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*
EUREKA 649385F
158 1035
817975 CHAMY G
0396 85-06-07 09:37

817975 CHAMY G

FOR THE ATTENTION OF: MR TALAR - S.P.I.D.

RE: ORIC INTERNATIONAL PRODUCTS LTD
     (IN RECEIVERSHIP)

THIS IS TO CONFIRM YOUR PURCHASE OF THE SOLE
RIGHTS TO ORIC AND ITS PRODUCTS.

THE AGREEMENT BETWEEN ASN AND ORIC HAS BEEN
TERMINATED FOLLOWING THEIR REFUSAL TO SETTLE
THEIR DEBT.

ASN HAVE NO FURTHER CONNECTION WITH ORIC AND
i WILL BE TAKING ACTION AGAINST THEM TO
RECOVER THE OUTSTANDING DEBT.

REGARDS
DENNIS CROSS
RECEIVER AND MANAGER
+
EUREKA 649385F
=
-D=02:18-R:30A................
```

them was unlikely to continue. And discussions had been held with Barry Muncaster, of 'Oric Products Export' with regard to making the French-built machines available in the U.K.

Interviewed in the July/August edition of Micro-Systemes, Jean-Claude Talar was coy about the

price of the deal:

"We prefer not to reveal that... The Atmos will be available for 990 francs, and we have taken an interest in ATV Electronique of Vire in Normandy to enable us to manufacture the Oric in France... As for A.S.N., we will not be triumphalist. Our door is open to all of good will. But it must be said that A.S.N. are poor losers. I will give you a copy of a telex that you may publish and which clearly explains the position of A.S.N. vis-a-vis Oric."

The telex (previous page) does speak volumes about A.S.N.'s contribution to the downfall of Oric. According to Théoric in July, their debt to Oric was "several million pounds". As Sylvio Faurez put it in his editorial,

"A page has been turned; thankyou to A.S.N. for having introduced us to the Oric. Here, we will try only to remember the good things!"

An event worthy of note that July was that Cumana, brave souls, launched their Oric disc drive for £235.
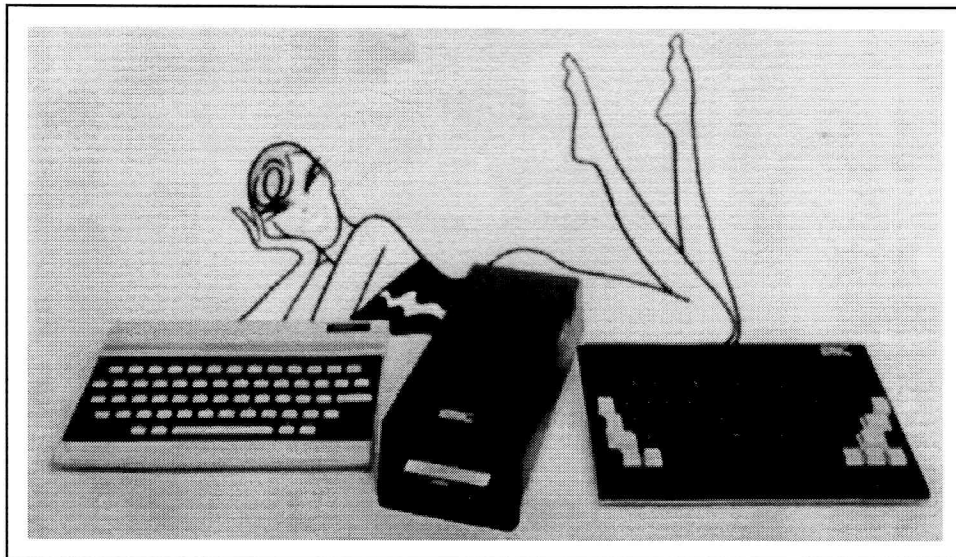
The French way to advertise...
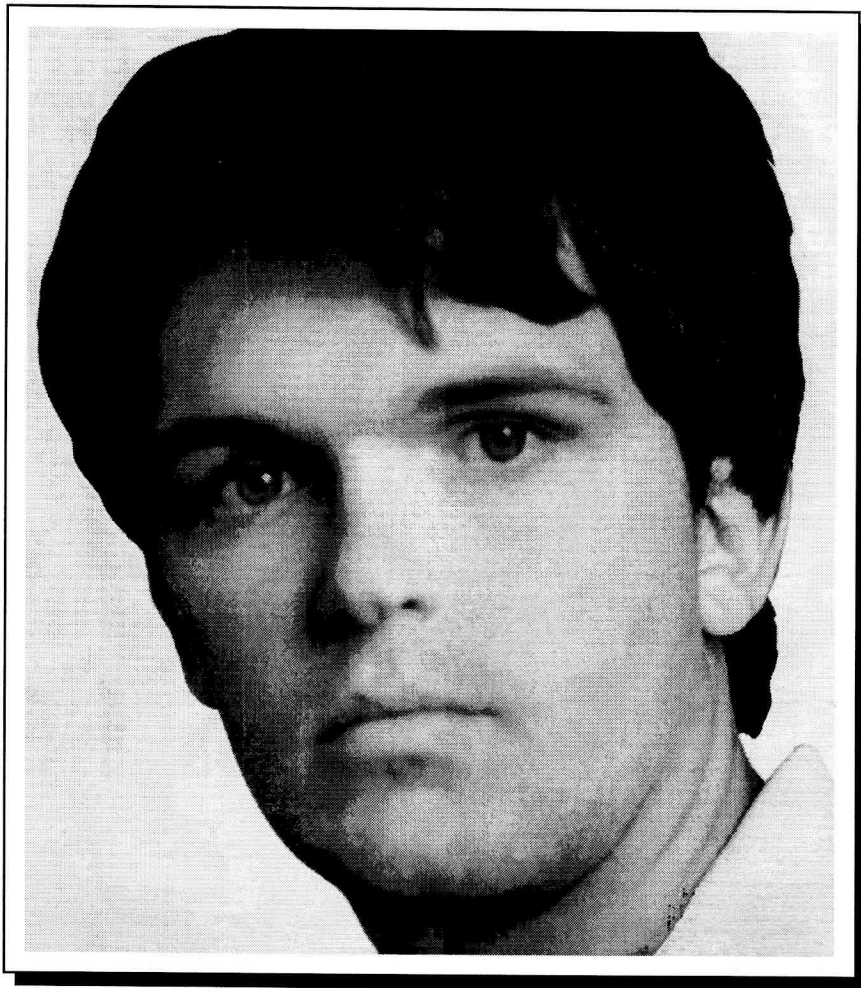
Fabrice Broche

Chapter 10

Eureka!

From now the scene shifts to France. In August, 1985 Oric International (Eureka had adopted the old name) employed Fabrice Broche (see Ch. 1) and Dennis Sebbag to complete a new Disc Operating System for the Oric, called Sedoric.

There was a lot of talk of a subsidiary company being set up in England, but it never happened. In September, 1985 Oric announced that Dudley Langmead Enterprises of Hitchin were to be the official U.K. agents - by November that year the deal had fallen through.

A 'French' Atmos duly appeared, put together in the Normandy factory. Théoric paid a visit to Etouvy, near Vire that September:

> "ATV Electronique have 41 employees, mostly female. Production is not over-automated, enabling the company to switch lines from day to day. Jean-Claude Talar was there, smiling because a Yugoslav company had just purchased a licence to make 5,000 machines. 120,000 Orics had been sold in France, he estimated, and there was potential for at least a further 50,000, an optimism justified by the 2,000 Atmos machines sold in just three weeks. And the factory would operate the after-sales service, which would be significantly more efficient than A.S.N. had been. To all who thought the Oric dead, we say that there are now people who are determined to restore the Oric to its rightful market position."

Shades of Bruce Everiss!

The revamped machine had some badly needed tweaks, notably a transistor which cured the unreliability of the cassette interface, and a chip to amplify the bus signal strength of the clock output. It also had a French specific monitor output. The verdict? Leading computer mag Tilt thought its future uncertain -

> "The recent innovations may perhaps give the Atmos a second wind, but it remains an outsider."

Meanwhile, Oric International had decided to press ahead with the Stratos - except that A.S.N. had registered the name as a trade mark of their own! - but totally to revamp it to make it specific to the French Minitel on-line network - a variant of Prestel, but free to French phone subscribers, and therefore with over a million terminals in French homes. In November 1985 Fabrice Broche started work on what was, not surprisingly, now to be called the 'Telestrat'. He had finished Sedoric, which was duly launched that autumn to wholly justified approval and praise. It augured well for the long-delayed Stratos. The Microdisc was re-released in an improved form, with a heat sink and on/off switch added to the power unit.

In its October/November editorial Théoric could not resist a final swipe at A.S.N.:

> "Oric is now well on its way back, with excellent new software and hardware being released. In parallel with this, A.S.N., ex-importer for Oric is playing the politics of the ostrich in affirming that 'Oric France is disconnected' and that no more Orics are being made. That ignores the efforts of Eureka which is doing all it can to assure the

---

"*Oric is now well on its way back*"

Théoric

---

future of Oric. On the other hand A.S.N. ('Oric France') has said it will continue to serve its existing clients. Don't hesitate to contact them, even harass them, if the Oric you bought from them has a fault!"

The final Winter 1985 issue of Micr'Oric confirmed A.S.N.'s departure from the Oric scene. Adverts were for the Goldstar MSX and electrical components, although to be fair there was still a full Oric Atmos components and software order form. There was not a single
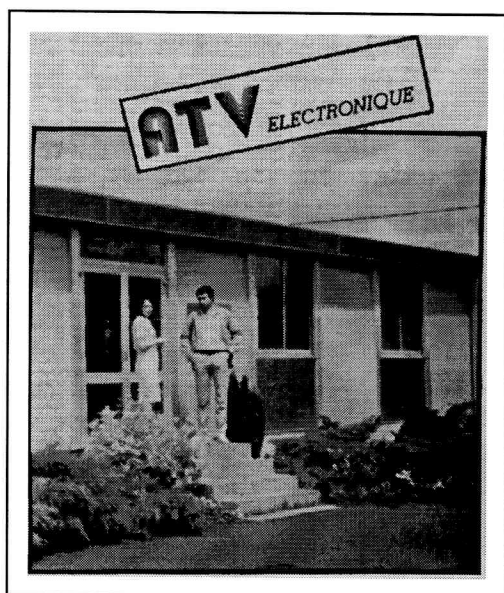
ATV's 'factory' at Etouvy

mention of the Stratos. Jean Taieb (yes, another brother!) was interviewed:

"A.S.N. always supported Oric Products International. We twice saved it from receivership in August and October 1984 by massive buying of their stocks. But the price war in England was so great that the financiers began to doubt the longevity of the company. Oric wasn't the only victim; Acorn and Prism went into receivership, and Sinclair is in real difficulties."

And of the attacks against A.S.N. in Théoric and Hebdogiciel:

"They do not bother us. We have never

The first F.G.C. advert

attacked others; these attacks only emphasise our own competence and market position. Our purpose is always to satisfy our clientele, and it is our success in that that has prompted these comments by others. It's curious that each time we are attacked our sales rise

considerably and we struggle to meet the increased demand."

The last word, as usual, came from Théoric:

"A.S.N. is still selling the Atmos, for 890 francs. What is rather less interesting is the

44

offer to part-exchange your 'old' computer for a Goldstar MSX. The prices they ask are so unrealistic that we don't dare to print them..."

The vacuum in the English market was now filled in part by F.G.C., Ken Smalldon's enterprise started back in February, 1985 as Oric crashed, and by O.J. Software, who first advertised in October, 1985.
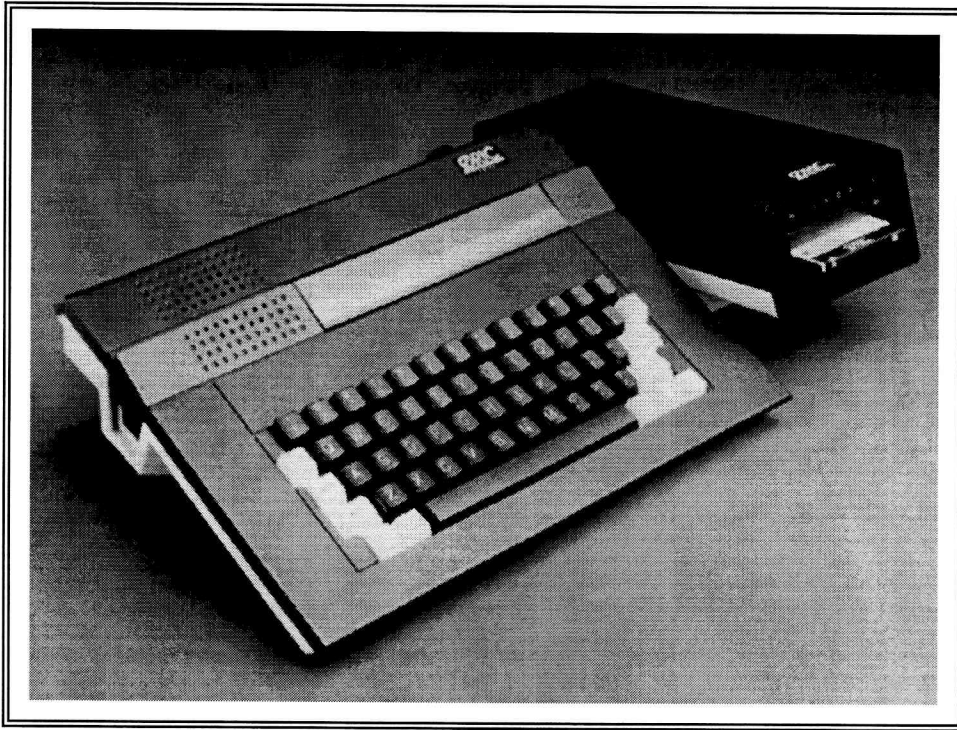
The major event of November was the release of Sedoric, the new disc operating system for the Atmos and Microdrive. It gives pause for thought to imagine where we would all be today without this DOS, which still has the best performance of any home computer DOS. We should be eternally grateful for the efforts of Talar and Fabrice Broche.

The New Year of 1986 saw the Telestrat announced in France - though it was to prove as premature as the old Oric's Microdisc pronouncements! But appear it did, at least for review, and it received a reasonably enthusiastic welcome in the French press. It was described rightly as an original machine, dedicated to communication, and coming complete with a double-sided 3" drive, eleven input/output ports, compiled BASIC, and the necessary software to run a Minitel board. And Eureka echoed a long-forgotten sales pitch when they announced that the machine was "aimed at the professional, such as local shops which could provide a catalogue and ordering service via Minitel, or offices who could use it to send and receive messages and make appointments". Remember Paul Johnson's hopes in February, 1983?

And as proof again that the Atmos did reach other parts, that January a German firm, MSE of Düsseldorf, announced a 5¼" drive for the machine. TRAN, the French disc drive manufacturer, announced in March, 1986 hat it was to produce an add-on card for the Atmos and their drive which would convert the Oric into a fully compatible P.C.! This, commented Théoric wryly, "really would breathe new life into the Atmos".

ABOUT FACE

JJ Nurgfumbler
Company creep

The photograph of Paul Kaufman, taken at the recent PCW Show and published in *MicroScope* (12 September), has caused unnecessary hurt and anguish by its unflattering nature, to Mr Kaufman's friends and family.

We would like to submit a more up-to-date photograph of Paul Kaufman portraying him in his normal debonair and intellectual image.

A Paul Kaufman special...

The Oric Telestrat

Chapter 11

Plus ça change...

Come April the Telestrat had still not appeared. Théoric was getting impatient:

> "The machines on show in the dealers' shops have demonstrated the capabilities of the telecommunications cartridge; it is the Basic that is late, but we are told it will as a result be free of bugs. Why such a delay?"

The cause in fact was yet another company going into receivership, this time ATV in Normandy. Eureka swiftly established a production facility at Livarot, which was intended to begin manufacturing at the end of May.

And an interesting release that month was a liquid crystal screen for the Oric! Manufactured by S.O.L.E. of Essonne, it plugged into the Atmos' expansion port and gave a display of 24 lines by 80 columns in text mode, and 640 x 192 in 8 grey scales in Hires mode. The predicted cost was under £70. Also released in April, 1986 was 'Nibble', the well known disc editor.

Opelco entered the U.K. market in March, 1986 with their first mail shot; in April 1986 the inimitable Fabrice Broche published the best ever Oric book, 'L'Oric a Nu' (the Naked Oric), a fully commented disassembly of both V1.0 and V1.1 ROMs, and in June W.E. Software primly announced that they had accepted the U.K. agency for Eureka Informatique - and promptly mirrored every Oric announcement ever made:

> "We shall launch the Telestrat in five weeks for £420, and are considering producing a Prestel cartridge."

"It is the Basic that is late - why such a delay..."

Théoric

And still the receiver struck, this time at Dattel, the company that made the Jasmin drives for TRAN. All that TRAN could do was to assure users that it would continue to provide a repair service. At the same time they announced that they would not be proceeding with the PC-card - it would cost more than a PC! Instead they were launching... a PC.

To be fair, though, the latter half of 1986 saw a marked revival in Oric fortunes. 'Your Oric' magazine was launched in the U.K. in June. In the same month Théoric reduced its price by 50 pence. The Telestrat did finally appear in late September (just as French Telecom upped the price of local calls), going on sale in France for £399; the Atmos was still selling there (and here) for £99. Indeed that summer I personally saw the Atmos on sale in Andorra!

Oric International, who planned to sell 10,000 Telestrats in the first year, offered shares to the public on the French stock exchange in October, and they quickly doubled in value. W.E. Software provided a comprehensive service (at a price), and began to sell some of the excellent French software, and even a Telestrat or two.

In November, 1986 Opelco launched a new range of disc drives - £184 for a single drive, £235 for a double, with two DOS variants. And I.N., publishers of 'Nibble', offered an Atmos 2 - a sort of one-way mini Telestrat to be connected to the Minitel network.

In January, 1987 Club Oric International was launched in France, with a quarterly magazine

Fabrice Broche's masterpiece

on tape or disc and a catalogue of over 600 software titles. And Théoric went from strength to strength. It was a time when all the tribulations of the previous year faded into the background, and one just dared to hope....

In France, however, opportunities were once again being lost. The Telestrat was too specific to one market, and too expensive, an adventurous product at a time when consolidation was needed. If only the Stratos had been produced straightaway in July, 1985 for £200... if only Eureka had supported the Atmos properly... but in March, 1987, production of the Atmos ceased, never to be restarted.

In April, 1987 Oric, true to form, opened a shop in Paris (shades of the Oric Club?) and launched a double-sided disc drive - both 18 months too late. They did, however, then produce an increasing range of cartridges and peripherals for the Telestrat. Cartridges that went on sale included Tele-Ass (an assembler), Tele-forth, and a 64k RAM extension. A proposed Midi cartridge never did appear. A real-time clock card that functioned with both the Telestrat and

the Atmos was released, but not a proposed 80-column card for the Teletrat. It was, as ever, a mixture of the good and the bad news.

By June, 1987 'Your Oric', now on issue 7, was asking "Is this the last issue?". Response and letters from the readership of 250 had fallen dramatically.

It is quite remarkable how history repeats itself. In September, 1987 Oric International announced a new machine for November release, the Telestrat 2, with a metal case, two 800k disc drives, a separate key board and an 80 column screen....

However, the first note of concern was struck that month in Théoric:

"We require 4000 subscriptions to continue publication beyond December, 1987; sales are down 50% since December, 1986."

In the same month the first issue of Robert Cook's Oric User Monthly appeared. It was possible to buy an Atmos from Opelco for £49.

And then, in December, 1987 came the second crash. Oric International went into receivership, owing substantial sums to the taxman. The final issue of Théoric appeared, only 700 subscriptions having been received. And to cap it all, the final issue of Your Oric, issue 8, appeared after a six month gap. Ken Smalldon announced a clearance sale, and in March, 1988 closed down, as that month did Phildata.

The general downturn was reflected in O.U.M. in May, 1988:
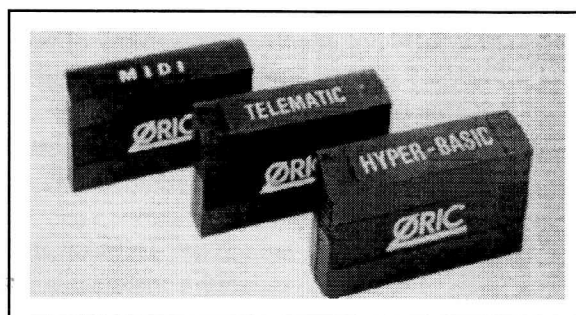
Telestrat cartridges

"O.U.M. doesn't want to finish, but it seems that even our most loyal readers are giving up. I don't want to close, O.U.M. does desperately want to expand, slowly at first, but eventually reach 25 pages long. That might well seem like an impossibility..."

O.U.M. was then a regular five pages long!

Surprisingly, the Receiver in France continued to trade Oric. In March, 1988 a 3½" disc drive was launched, and the final classic game, 'Willy', was released. It was a limbo that was to persist until as late as December, 1988, when the shop in Paris was finally closed, the company wound up, and a company named I.R.I. set up to dispose of the remaining stocks and the name. Oric had sold 6,000 Telestrats in all.
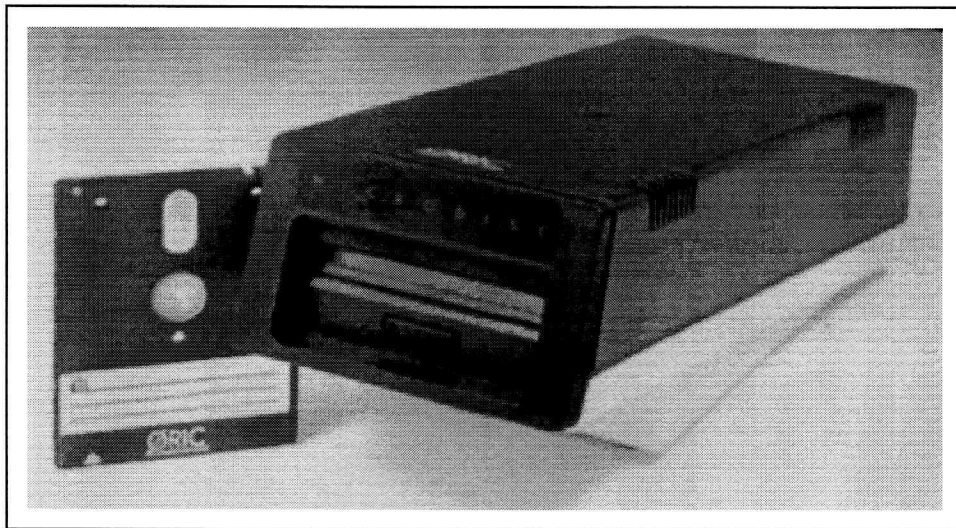
The French Microdisc drive

ØRIC

USER MONTHLY

with Oric Enthusiasts

Europe's longest running
Oric Magazine

Number 62

October 1992
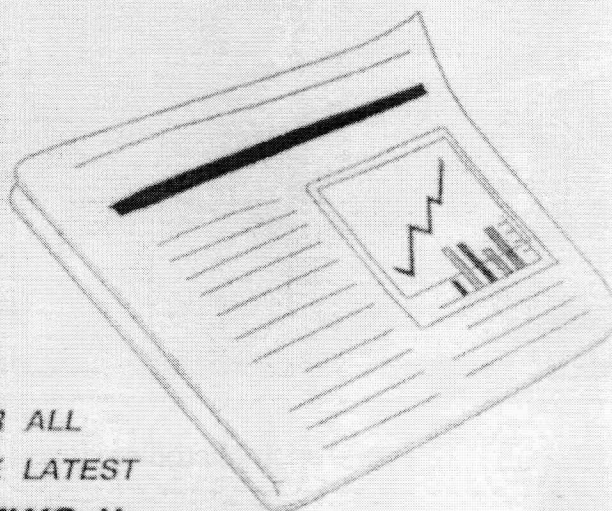
FOR ALL
THE LATEST
NEWS !!

Chapter 12

Dream a little dream...

Meanwhile in England Allan Whitaker took over F.G.C.'s stocks and commenced trading in July, 1988 as H.G.C. An Atmos could be had for £40, an Opelco drive for £120-£140, and there was an abundance of software available. Allan mooted for the first time the idea of a P.D. Library. And O.U.M. had in fact expanded to seven pages a month.

Of considerable importance that autumn was the first chance ever for Oric owners to meet one another at the Alternative Micro Show on the 12th November in Birmingham. H.G.C. had a stand, and many 'names' became real people. Over in France Club Oric International released its fourth disc magazine and then promptly renamed itself Club DiscOric.

An all Oric show in Wrexham mooted by Paul Kersey-Smith for December alas came to nothing. Maybe he should have proposed Aylesbury!

Sadly, I.O.U.G. was brought to an end by Gary Ramsay with issue No. 23 in February, 1989. The newsletter had become delayed more and more, and it was not an unexpected demise. Fortunately Club DiscOric was just starting its own printed magazine, and O.U.M. was improving by the month (it now had a cover for the first time since issue 4, and a new section headed 'Dave's Data'!), and to its credit has published regularly every month since the first issue. It is one of the most consistent performances of any Oric-related organisation. Mind you, in March 1989 Robert Cook was writing:

"This is O.U.M.'s first nine page issue, I can't really see O.U.M. expanding very much further.."

In March, 1989 Dave Utting bought Cumana's remaining stock of disc interfaces, selling them for £49 and bringing the blessings of a disc drive to more Oric owners. Over in France, a major Oric retailer, Ordielec, negotiated to purchase substantial stocks of Oric bits from the receiver, and even spoke of resurrecting the Telestrat if the demand was there. Sensibly, perhaps, they thought better of the idea.

April, 1989 saw the Second Alternative Micro Show in London, and the first English edition of Club DiscOric's journal.

"And yet still today the story cannot be concluded..."

It also, less attractively, saw the launch of 'Wolsoft' by a gentleman in Northampton, claiming to supply every software title ever made for the Oric. The reality, I'm afraid, was that a substantial number were pirated copies, and once this became known he rapidly disappeared from the scene.

Over in France Club DiscOric organised its first Meeting in Paris that September. Meanwhile A.S.N. were still receiving enquiries about the Oric that autumn. In November, 1989 the first edition of this little tome appeared at what was to prove a decisive Third Alternative Micro Show. No less than three dedicated Oric stands - Allan Whitaker with H.G.C. doing a roaring trade, Robert Cook with O.U.M., and myself for Club DiscOric. And even W.E. software were there, disgorging Atmos bits and pieces, software and books. Present on the O.U.M. stand was one Dave Dick, enthusiastically expounding the virtues of the Atmos to all willing to listen...
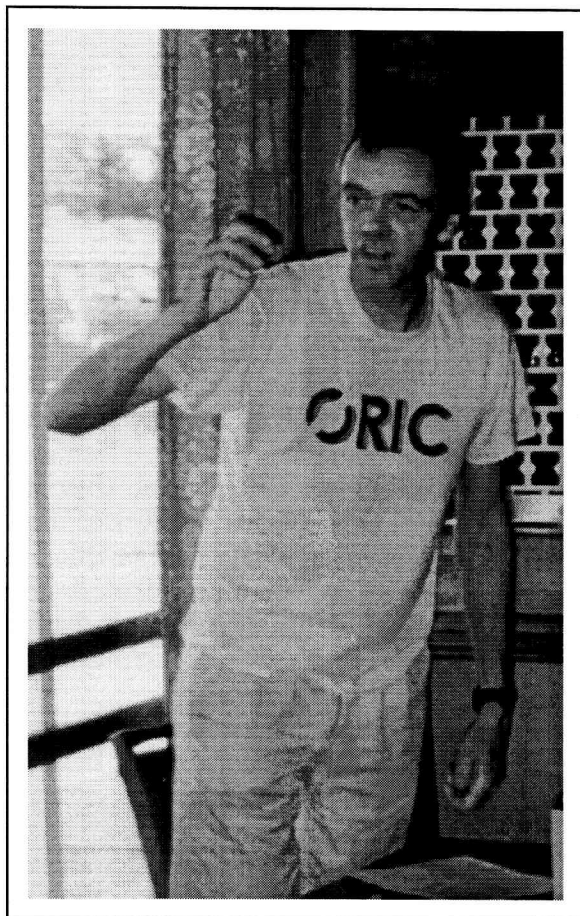
Dave Dick

A letter from an Oric user to the old ITL Kathmill premises that month resulted in the discovery of a batch of Byte Drive power supplies on a storeroom shelf. The new occupiers, Astrosyn, kindly preserved them and sold them on to Allan Whitaker.

On the 28th March, 1990 Club DiscOric renamed itself Club Europe Oric, and registered as a legal charity in France. It also acquired a British 'agent', subscribers reached around the 100 mark, and have remained there or thereabouts ever since.

The P.D. Library became a fact in March, 1990, and rapidly expanded to 86 titles. Over 250 copies of programs were distributed in the first year. In May the Sedoric Manual appeared in English, and a clear move towards disc drives began to happen.

A big change came in June 1990. Robert Cook

retired as editor of O.U.M., and from the July issue (no. 35) Dave Dick took over with a readership of 56. His energy was to carry O.U.M. forward at an accelerating pace, and to celebrate he organised the first O.U.M. Meeting at Aylesbury on the 23rd June. Present amongst the 30 there were both Paul Kaufman and Geoff Phillips, and from France Vincent Talvas and Alain Weber.

In October 1990 O.U.M. overtook even Théoric to become the longest running Oric magazine ever. At the fourth Alternative Micro Show in Stafford on the 10th November, it was agreed that Allan Whitaker would close H.G.C., handing over commercial software distribution to Dave Dick, and that he would start 'Oric Enthusiasts', concentrating on shareware and writing a regular section in O.U.M. At the same time Club Europe Oric took the decision to end its quarterly disc and tape magazine, replacing it with a regular printed magazine in both French and English editions and a software only disc or tape. One Laurent Chiacchiérini took on the formidable task of producing the English edition, with notable success in terms of quality and regularity of the magazine.

Saturday, 9th February, 1991 was a memorable day - the Second O.U.M. Meeting took place on the weekend of the worst snowfall seen for years. Those who struggled through saw the unveiling of 'Wordspeed', converted to Sedoric DOS from the Byte Drive version by Dr. Ray McLoughlin. He it was who subsequently tweaked Sedoric to give us full use of 3½" drives with V2.0.

In April 1991 O.U.M. affiliated itself to the British Association of Computer Clubs - and left when the organisation all but collapsed in November. Sadly, in May 1991 the C.E.O. magazine reported the death of François Guilleme, the author of Nibble, the superb Sedoric disc editor. The O.U.M. meeting became an annual event with the third taking place on the 13th July, 1991; O.U.M. was now averaging over twenty pages per issue, with membership approaching the 100 mark.

1992 proved to be a year of consolidation, with new software, O.U.M. and C.E.O. continuing to

expand in both quantity and quality, and the annual O.U.M. Meeting on the 18th July attracting no less than 50 visitors. In response to the increase in disc users, C.E.O. dropped its quarterly cassettes. The Telestrat was beginning to make an impact in Britain, with a small number of buyers queuing for their own machines. O.U.M. celebrated its fifth birthday in August with a 42 page double issue.

The big story in France in October 1992 was the rebirth of the Oric! There was the advert for the Oric shop at Surcouf, a permanaent PC show in Paris. A range of nine PCs were promised:

> "Almost 200,000 French users discovered computing through the Oric-1 and then the Atmos. Today Oric is offering a range of PCs at astonishing prices. Nine models are available and multimedia products should be introduced soon."

They surely don't have Bruce Everiss working for them? Yet even now the promised shop failed to open, and the owners of the centre could only say that Oric were not able to supply their machines in time for the show opening. We did learn however that the Oric name had been sold several times since the receivership, but attempts to track down the current owners have drawn a blank so far. There may yet be material for another chapter in the next edition...

And so to date, with the tenth anniversary of the Oric-1's launch upon us, the 64th issue of O.U.M., the 31st issue of C.E.O.mag and perhaps a time for reflection....

We can dream of what might have been; the reality is we have witnessed a roller-coaster ride for almost ten years. Oric itself lasted precisely two years and six days, and in its reincarnated form just eighteen months, plus a further year in receivership. Given that sorry track record, what went wrong? Principally, I think, a heavy dose of over-optimism throughout, coupled with numerous crass marketing and pricing decisions. The failure to ensure plenty of good software early on was fatal. The computer itself could have been a world-beater, and who knows what might have happened if Oric's 1985 plans had come to fruition? But they didn't, or rather

couldn't in the circumstances.

And yet still today the story cannot be concluded. The Oric name remains a tradeable commodity... O.U.M. goes from strength to strength... Allan Whitaker has every intention of maintaining Oric Enthusiasts for the benefit of us all... Club Europe Oric fulfils an important role in France and in England... and those now left enjoying their Oric computers as a pure hobby, or using them regularly for word processing, are in the main unlikely to stop doing so in the foreseeable future... The unattached have left; the attached are likely to remain so, perpetuating the name of a brave venture launched in the heady days of amateur enterprise, a venture which succumbed to the realities of a harsh market-place.

Let us allow ourselves the hope that the Oric name will indeed never finally die, but will live peacefully in retirement for many years to come.

ORIC

NOT THE END

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OUM Meeting, July 1992