
Subject: The QL has landed - Sinclair delivers!
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(or is it Crash-Landed)

Six months after the first announcement, the first batch of Sinclair QL's are being delivered up and down the country.

For new readers, this successor to the ZX series (QL stands for Quantum Leap) is 68008 based, with a basic 96k of RAM (excluding screen memory), colour display (32k RAM is allocated for the display), twin micro-drives (based on a continuous tape loop), and a proper keyboard, and comes with operating system QDOS, "Super-Basic" and four application programs. All this for the UK price of 400 pounds. Since it was announced in January, there has been delay after delay. The reason for the delay has been mainly in the development of the software.

Part of the problem was that the software is bigger than expected. Instead of the intended 32k, it at present is allocated 48k, and occupies 44k of that. As a result, 3 16kx8 EPROM's are needed instead of two. The very first machines came with the extra ROM hanging off the back, in the slot for ROM cartridges, but now two are arranged in nasty piggy-back form in one ROM socket. That's going to be fun to replace when updates come along.

Updates will be necessary. The software seems to have lots of bugs hiding below the surface. The machine essentially works, but anyone trying something slightly complex may find that it fails in some unexpected way.

The documentation, such as it is, appears to have been hurriedly thrown together. Information on the commands appears to be there, but there is no index! You have to know what you are looking for, or scan every command to find the information you want.

The operating system is supposed to be multi-tasking, but there is no documentation of it, and there is a little demo program included to set up an asynchronous task - which doesn't work! It is definitely not the user friendly system promised at launch time, one comment is

"It makes CP/M look friendly"

The "Super-Basic" is an enhanced version of the language,

with structured constructs (conditions and loops) and recursive procedures and functions with parameters and local variables.

The colour graphics are based on true bit-mapping, so that any of the eight colours (4 in hi-res mode) can be used anywhere on the screen. It's bit-mapped only, though, so you can't PEEK to find out what characters are on the screen.

The microdrives seem quite nice. Each holds about 100k, arranged in 512 byte blocks. Since it takes about 8 seconds to scan through the complete loop, access times could be a bit slow, but it seems that the free memory is used as a buffer to remember recently accessed blocks.

Sinclair say QDOS documentation will be produced sometime, but don't promise when, and also a revised User Guide is promised to everyone when they get it right.

I haven't used the supplied programs yet, but someone else's comment was that the word processor, QUILL, seemed very slow, and was little more than a text editor. No doubt, updates of that will also be around.

The overall impression of several people is that it is a machine for hackers, not the first-time and business users it appears to be aimed at, and that it will need a good bit of straightening out before it can be relied on. Still, for the price, you get a machine with random-access backing store, and once the software writers start producing packages for it, it could have quite a market.

It's only being sold mail-order yet (supply hasn't caught up with demand) but watch out for when it makes it across the Atlantic.

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