IBM AUSTRALIA SHIFTS INTO TOP GEAR

After several months of un-characteristic inactivity, IBM Australia has finally opened the floodgates with a variety of PC product announcements. Within the space of a few weeks, a mouth-watering smorgasbord of PC products and services has been presented to a hungry local market.

First of all came the local announcement of the IBM 4700 Personal Computer, only weeks after its US premiere (see PC Hotline). This PC variant links in the widely-used IBM 4700 Finance Communication System (FCS) with the advantages of standalone PCs.

The 4700 PC can interface with magnetic card readers and keypads for entering PINs (personal identification numbers), as well as passbook printers, encryption/decryption units and other devices in the 4700 FCS family. Options were also announced to add these features to existing PCs and PC XTs, although, like the 3270-PC, the range of 4700 PC products is only being marketed through IBM directly, rather than through authorised PC dealers.

Only a few days later, the Infosearch electronic help database for PC users was announced (also described in PC Hotline), as the mainframe-based system finally came on line at IBM's new corporate headquarters in Cumberland Forest, north-west of Sydney.
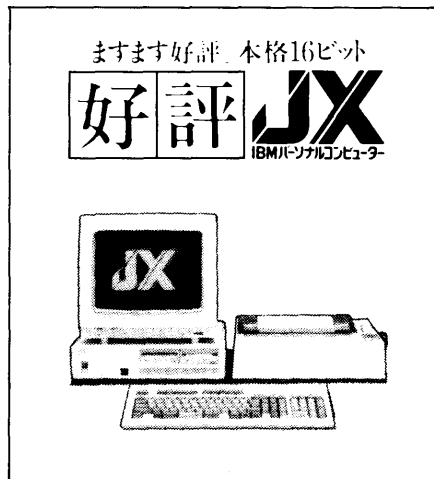
The 43XX mainframe nestles in the basement of the new complex, sharing an environmentally-controlled room with some of the most powerful and well-protected computers in the country. (A deep trench surrounds the basement as prevention from possible terrorist attacks, and both indoor and outdoor cameras monitor the area 24 hours a day.)

The Infosearch announcement reflects similar services that have long been available in the US and Europe, and signifies IBM's recognition of the increasing importance of being seen to support PC users, many of whom are at the stage of considering buying additional systems.

Just over a week later came what was perhaps the biggest and best announcement by IBM Australia — the local release of the Enhanced Graphics Adapter, Enhanced Color Display, Professional Graphics Controller, Professional Graphics Display and the PC Graphics Development Toolkit.

These products have been long

The PC JX has been heavily promoted in Japan.

awaited in Australia, and many observers believed that IBM had possibly been stalling their release until the PC AT was available. The new graphics products adhere to the Graphical Kernel System (GKS), which now stands a good chance of becoming the new standard in high-resolution PC graphics. (GKS is described more fully in the article on page 69).

The new IBM graphics products were announced as part of a larger package known as the PC Engineering/Scientific series. This series also includes the PC Data Acquisition and Control Adapter (with distribution panel and software support), the PC GPIB Interface Bus Adapter and PC Professional Fortran — a complete ANSI-77 version with extensions. In contrast to the 4700 PC financial products, all of the Engineering/Scientific series are available through authorised IBM PC dealers.

Despite this flurry of announcements, several questions remain — when is the PC II going to be released in Australia, and what about the PC JX? The answer to the first question is still anybody's guess, but the second question is far more intriguing.

The PC JX is an enhanced version of the PCjr, developed by IBM Japan and released late last year. In a surprise move, the Victorian Education Department recently announced that it considered the JX suitable for purchase for schools, despite the fact that the low-end system had not been officially announced in Australia by IBM, and perhaps never will be.

The JX contains 3½in Matsushita disk drives, which represents a potent force in establishing this as the future microfloppy disk standard. Even more interesting is the fact that the JX has not been released in the US, raising the possibility that Australia is being used as a test market by IBM, which has already burnt its fingers once with the ill-fated PCjr.

Whatever the outcome, IBM's recent PC-related announcements are merely the harbinger of a further, more exciting series, including the long-awaited laptop portable and (eventually) the PC II.

— IAN ROBINSON