

University Card

First year undergraduates starting in October 1996 were issued with the new University Card which identifies them as a member of the University of York, allows them to borrow Library books, allows them to access Computing Service facilities and can be used for payment at outlets on campus.

The Computing Service was involved over the summer in both the management and programming effort required to provide this new facility and is more than happy to encourage its success by accepting the card for payment at the Information Desk.

Brian Souter

Computing Service Courses

Attendance for staff and students of associated institutions

The Information Desk has recently had enquiries from members of various institutions associated with the University by agreements, treaties, mutual non-aggression pacts and other instruments as to whether they can attend Computing Service Staff and Graduate courses, and if so, under what conditions.

We have consulted the University authorities and have received the following clarification:

Staff and students of the York College of Further and Higher Education, and the University College of Scarborough, are welcome to take up unfilled places after the course closure date at no charge in the same way as York undergraduates. The closing date is normally 5pm on the Friday prior to the course. If necessary they will be issued with temporary course user identifiers, but these will expire immediately after the end of the course.

John Illingworth

Christmas Opening Hours

The Computing Service building, including the Information Desk and entrance lobby, will be closed over Christmas from noon on Tuesday 24 December until 8am on Thursday 2 January. Computing Service equipment in the colleges will be available as usual, but the availability of the King's Manor PC classroom should be checked with the porters. Computing Service staff are not on duty during the holiday period but someone will attend to the printers and check the network on Monday 30 December.

The porters should not be expected to report problems to Computing Service staff unless they are of an extreme nature and form part of the standby arrangements set out by Estates and Security. Computing faults will be dealt with as part of the scheduled check or when staff return after the holiday period.

Brian Souter



Computing Service Review

The Report of the Working Group reviewing the Computing Service has been considered by the Information Committee, the Computing Committee and the Computing Forum. Planning Committee will consider these responses, together with those from Heads of Department, at its meeting on 13 November with a view to defining the general direction to be followed in the implementation. We hope to be able to report on these plans in the next issue of Keynotes.

Mike Jinks

Student Societies

Over one hundred and twenty student societies enjoy the privilege of having a computer account. The Computing Service has always allowed societies to register to use the central facilities although it does cause considerable overheads in administering them. Experience has shown that society accounts are more likely to be misused than personal accounts and, whenever there is a problem, there are calls for even more administrative control. Ultimately, we may have to withdraw society accounts if we are unable to justify the administrative effort.

Following recent problems, we are looking at introducing a new form for society accounts and we will require applications to be countersigned by a member of staff as not all societies are ratified by the Student Union.

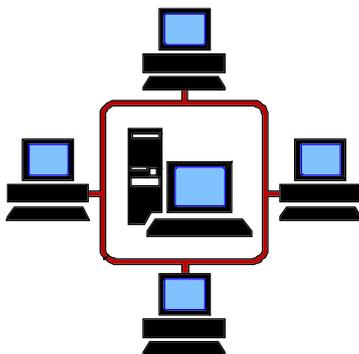
Also, we intend to stick rigidly to annual renewal and will insist on being notified of any change of ownership. All very bureaucratic but absolutely necessary when we are called on to deal with a serious breach of University regulations.

In the meantime, students who currently own a society account should consider their role and responsibility towards managing these accounts.

So often, we are called on to divulge a password for a society account to the incoming officers when the previous owner has long gone, still with his signature against the original declaration. Apart from keeping a firm check on who has access, it is very important for the individual, the society and the Computing Service that any transfer of ownership is managed properly.

Brian Souter

Guidelines for Connection of Equipment to the Campus Network



Users, departments and research groups are reminded of the guidelines which apply to all equipment connected to the Campus Network. The guidelines are produced by the Computing Service and approved by the Information Committee. Though the guidelines are currently being reviewed any changes will be of a technical nature, the basic principles remaining unaffected.

The main points from the guidelines are:

- All components attached to the network must conform to the University standards, which specify their hardware and software characteristics. Installation work must comply with Health and Safety standards.
- Permission to connect equipment to the network will only be given when the type of equipment, network address, protocol(s) used and physical location are acceptable.
- It is recommended that the advice of the Computing Service is sought prior to the purchase of any equipment intended for connection to the network.
- Account must be taken of security issues when providing facilities to staff and students. (The Computing Service will provide advice on request.)
- The Computing Service may disconnect equipment or segments of the network from the network if the integrity of the network is threatened.

In practice the above rules should not cause problems for most users. Any equipment purchased through or on the recommendation of the Computing Service (e.g. AST, Dan or Viglen PCs, Silicon Graphics or Sun UNIX Systems) will be compatible with the network unless specifically stated at the time.

Further advice and information on connecting to the Campus Network is available from the Computing Service.

Peter Roberts

Changing your password

Choosing a good password

Your password is the first line of defence for your programs and essays held on the computer. It is in your interest to make sure that your password is effective as a security device. If someone else finds out your password, they can do anything they like to your work – including deleting it entirely. They can also print files using your charge account.

A good password should:

- be at least 6 characters long
- contain at least one digit, preferably more
- not be the same as any previous password you may have used
- not have any connection with you, your family, partner, pets, hobbies or other easy to find information.

In particular, **do not** use any single word as your password, in English or any other common language. Hackers have access to programs that can try tens of thousands of possible passwords in a very short time. If your password is a single dictionary or colloquial word, they **will** find it in a determined search.

A “passphrase” (two or more words strung together) is usually much safer. If it contains digits as well, so much the better. For instance, “WAFFLE” is a bad password, but “WAFFLE25PLUG” is a good one. Using an acronym is also a good idea, eg all that glisters is not gold = ATGING.

You should change your password on a regular basis – at least every three months, or immediately if there has been a security scare or you suspect someone may have seen you typing your password in, or found it out in some other way.

Do not let other people know your password for any reason – they may not be as discreet as you. It is not necessary to give out your password in order to share data.

Password Requirements

Passwords must be at least 6 characters long, but **only the first 8 characters are significant** – any further characters are ignored. Thus, your password should be a “good” password in the first 8 characters. You can use any characters – even punctuation – to make up your password. Passwords are case-sensitive, so “ABC” is different from “abc”. In general, passwords which use mixed case are more secure.

At present, the UNIX systems do not automatically expire passwords, so it is even more important that you change yours regularly. In particular, you **MUST** change your initial password when you first use any of the UNIX systems or PCs.

Your password is *the same* on the Tower and Ebor compute servers, the Indigo

and Indy UNIX workstations and on the networked PCs controlled by the Computing Service.

To change your UNIX and PC password, log onto any UNIX system and type the command “chpass” (do not try to use the “passwd” command – it will not work). On a workstation you can also change your password by selecting “system” and then “change password” from the toolchest menu in the top left-hand corner of the display. On a Supported Connection PC, double click the UnSupported Utilities & Extras icon, then the Change my Password icon, and follow the instructions given on the screen.

Note that when you change your password it can take up to half an hour for the change to take effect.

Laurence Tyler

The Colour Printer

We would like to apologise for any inconvenience caused by recent problems with the colour printer which was out of service for nearly two weeks.

Although the printer is over five years old and due to be replaced, we are assured by our maintenance contractors that it is still serviceable.

The recent fault required an unusual spare part which was not readily available and which needed to be fitted using precision tools in their workshop.

Brian Souter

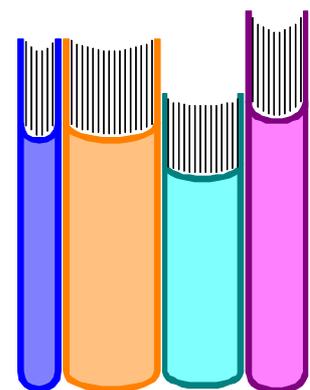
The Library blazes another trail in technological innovation

In 1980 we were the first library to provide campus access to our catalogue, and the first also to provide the facility for readers to check their own records. We followed this with online bookings for Reserve items, again a first, and were one of the leaders with self-renewals and self-recalls, all available over the network and all used extensively.

The latest technological development in the Library is the introduction of a self-issue workstation which is fully integrated with our Dynix library management system software and with our new security system. The workstation is already in constant use. It works by scanning the barcode on the reader's library card (the Mondex card and all the older cards are equally readable), and

verifying it as an acceptable barcode and the reader record as valid. Screen graphics show the reader how to place the books on the cradle so that the scanner can read the book barcodes. The system then performs all the checks of the regular issue system for validity of barcode, if the book is borrowable, whether the reader has reached the loan limit etc, and when all the conditions are satisfied issues the book to the reader. Finally the workstation desensitises the security tag in the book. When the reader's card is removed, a receipt is printed listing all the book titles issued with their due dates.

One benefit of self-issue is the possibility of bypassing queues at the Issue Desk, and, even more significantly, we can



now offer a lending service on Sundays, when we are otherwise open for reference only. This self-issue workstation is one of the first in use in universities in the country, so, once again, the University of York Library blazes the trail!

*Elizabeth Heaps
J B Morrell Library*

Troubleshooting your modem connection

Introduction

Today many people are using modem technology to connect from home to the Internet. Often the ideal of “plug and play” can be achieved but occasionally, irritating problems may cause hours of frustration. With so many possible configurations of hardware and software it is an impossible task to provide a universal panacea, but here is a brief guide to help you through the more common problems.

Most of the examples given are based on the Motorola 3400 Pro modem. You should check your manual if you have a different modem.

How to talk to your modem: The Hayes command set

The Hayes command set is a de facto method of issuing commands to modems. You should be aware, however, that there are subtle variations of implementation and you should always check the manual of your own particular modem.

The one common feature is that the commands are always prefixed by “at”.

To talk directly to your modem you will need to use a terminal emulation program such as Windows Terminal, correctly configured to use the appropriate COM port and speed. Within Terminal you should click on **Settings** on the menu bar, then select **Communications**. Good settings would be:

Baud rate	19200
Data bits	8
Stop bits	1
Parity	None
Flow control	Hardware
Connector	COM2

Once satisfied, type **at** followed by return. If all is well you should get an **OK** back from the modem. It is always advisable to establish this basic connectivity before proceeding further.

Error correction

Any connection faster than 1200 bits/sec should be made with error correction enabled. Most modems will do this by default but you can check that your modem is doing so fairly easily.

Some, such as the Multitech ZDX, have an LED marked “EC”, which is lit when a connection is in progress using error correction. As an alternative you can use the modem’s response codes to give you more detailed information about what it is doing. Check your manual on how to set up “verbose” response codes and you should see something like the following when you make a connection:

```
OK
atdt433830
CONNECT 28800/V34/V42/V42BIS
```

Be sure you set the correct code to display modem-to-modem information (in the case of the Motorola the command is **atlv4**). If you see V.42, LAPM or MNP then your modem is using error correction.

Reasons why your connection might go away

Login timeout

The Annex server will wait for 2 minutes for you to authenticate yourself.

If you do not login in that period it will clear the call:

```
OK
atdt433830
CONNECT 28800/V34/V42BIS

Checking authorization, Please
wait...
Annex username:
Login Timed Out

NO CARRIER
```

Inactivity timeout

Once a call is in progress if no input is received from you for 20 minutes the Annex server will reset the port and clear the call. This is an example of what you would see:

```
ebor 10%
*** Annex Port Reset Due to
Inactivity Timeout ***

NO CARRIER
```

Loss of carrier

Poor quality telephone lines may result in sporadic loss of the carrier signal. Typically, if modems detect a loss of carrier from more than 1.4 seconds they will drop the call. It is possible to configure your modem to allow carrier loss for a longer period. This is done by changing a value held in an S register, usually S10. Be sure to check what units are used to express the value!

This example shows the value of S10 being checked and then changed on a Motorola 3400. The units here are tenths of a second:

```
ats10?
014
OK
ats10=20
```

Remember to save the new configuration! Typically the command to do this is **at&w**.

Transient loss of DTR

Your computer almost certainly uses a signal known as Data Terminal Ready (DTR) to tell the modem that it is alive and well. With some systems, especially those running Windows 3.11, this signal may drop out sporadically. Modems will detect this, assume the computer has gone away, and drop the call. The safest option is to tell the modem to ignore DTR altogether. On the Motorola the command is **at&d**. Again, don’t forget to save your configuration when you have made this change!

Things to try

Cabling

It may seem obvious, but it really is worth checking that all connections are firmly in place. A connector not quite making contact for example can waste inordinate amounts of troubleshooting time!

Connecting to the Campus Network from a study bedroom

Reduce the equipment on your line

You can increase the likelihood of getting a high speed connection by minimising the amount of equipment on your line. The additional load placed on the line by an array of extra telephones, fax machines etc can affect modem performance.

Reduce the complexity of your configuration

For testing purposes ignore any clever scripts which you may have set up or any communications programs which may hide the details of what is happening.

Use a simple-minded product like Windows Terminal to try basic connectivity testing. Get an OK back from your modem and just try to dial the University service thus:

```
atdt433830
```

If you can get a connection set up with this method, then you need to check that your usual comms program is not using modem initialization strings to configure the modem in a strange way.

Reduce your modem speed

The quality of connection may not be sufficient to support 28800 bits/sec. Try reducing the speed of your connection. Sometimes a small reduction to, say, 26400 bits/sec makes all the difference. The command to set the maximum speed to 26400 bits/sec on the Motorola 3400 is **at%b15**. Bear in mind that the quality of telephony can vary wildly from area to area. Some parts of the network are simply not capable of supporting higher data rates reliably.

Get your telephone company to check your line

With most domestic lines the increase in signalling power as the signal is boosted (known as gain) is variable. This is fine for voice traffic but can be problematic for modems. On request BT will reconfigure your line from variable gain to fixed gain, and where appropriate will balance the line (which will require a home visit). Call the usual 151 number.

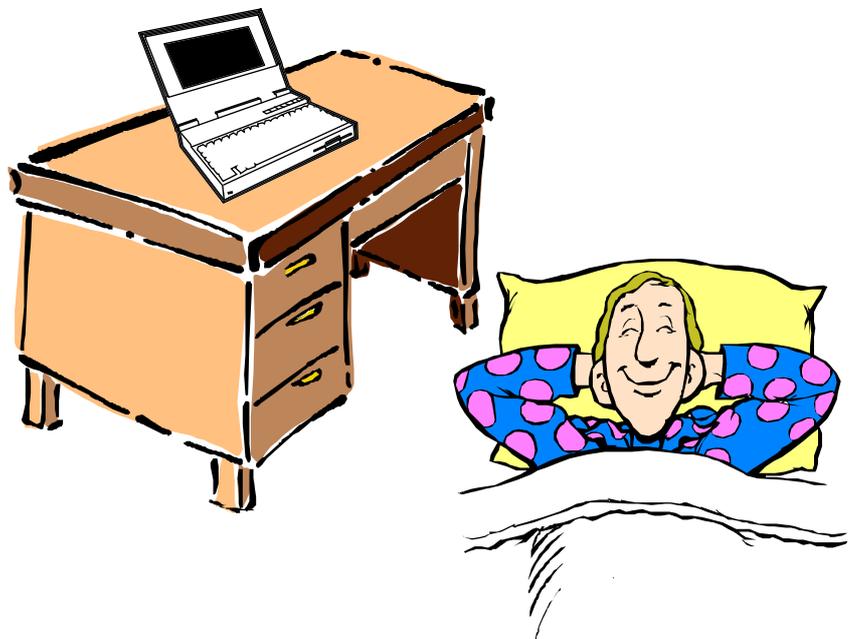
Robert Demaine

If you are lucky enough to be resident in Alcuin E Block or James A, B or C Blocks you are probably aware that you are eligible to have a serial data connection activated in your room. You may then make use of the Campus Network to access local and remote computers without getting out of bed!

Details of the service are given below. If you wish to take advantage of the service, you should visit the Information Desk in the Computing Service and complete a form.

- The cost is £25 per term including the following vacation.
- A connection cable comes as part of the deal.
- Our technicians normally carry out the work on Thursday mornings. You will need to make an appointment when you complete the form. **Please ensure that you are in your room at the time you have asked for the technician to call.**
- You require a computer that can use RS232 serial communications and emulate a VT terminal, preferably a VT320.
- You should give as many details as possible about your computer, especially about the serial communications socket. If you can say it's a 25-pin male sub-miniature D, for instance, that would be wonderful.
- You are responsible for providing your own communications software, but if you have a PC or Mac the technicians will provide you with a copy of Kermit when they make the connection. If you have anything else, you should have your terminal emulator ready when the technicians call so they can perform a complete test.
- The Computing Service is not responsible for the well-being of your computer, but we are responsible for the lines working. This means that in the case of a reported communications breakdown we would take steps to check the line and fix it if necessary, but we would not fix your computer.

Anne Worden



Progress on the Windows 95 service

We hoped that on the roll-out of phase II of the trial service on 14 October we would have most of the software in place and people participating in the trial service would see something closely resembling the final thing.

For various reasons, this didn't happen. While we could provide the operating system, technical problems with the installation of applications software meant that you couldn't run any software mounted from the file servers, although it would have been possible to install personal applications.

We've surmounted most of the technical problems we had and where necessary have developed special installation software to make the installation of networked software considerably more straightforward. This should allow us to make up lost time on the software installation side of things.

Connections to the trial service have been going slowly too, partly because of the software problems and partly because it's been a learning experience for us, but we hope to get up to speed now.

The trial service this term is a beta, and our experience so far has demonstrated the need for a comprehensive beta test, especially when implementing a radically new service such as the Windows 95 service. There are some areas in which our investigations are still continuing:

Classroom support

Classroom support is really 'support for diskless clients'. In one sense there is not a problem as we could support diskless clients by means of a small dedicated NT server for each classroom. Unfortunately small NT servers cost money, and for that reason we are pursuing discussions with software providers regarding solutions to allow diskless Windows 95 clients to boot from our existing UNIX based servers.

Unsupported connections

It is already possible to have an unsupported Windows 95 connection, but a number of departments have asked us if we can provide an 'Unsupported Connection Plus'. This would be an unsupported connection with network printing and authentication and perhaps the provision of a set of packaged network access tools such as a mail client, web browser, newsreader etc., but leaving departments free to install their own applications software on local hard disks on their machines.

We may well provide such a service in the future but we do not have the resources available at the moment. I take the view that it's more important to get both the office service and diskless client support in place before providing an additional level of service.

Mail client

Currently we provide PC-Pine as a mail client. It may not have the most wonderful user interface in the world, but it is extremely robust. We hope to replace it with a graphical client, i.e. one with an interface not unlike that in ECStmail, but have not yet found a suitable, robust, cost-effective alternative, although there are a couple of promising beta products.

If and when we replace PC-Pine on the Windows 95 service it will be available as an unsupported utility for some time after to give PC-Pine users time to migrate.

Telnet client

We will be providing the telnet client (terminal emulator) that comes with Hummingbird NFS initially. This client functions perfectly well as terminal emulator for most computer systems, but it does not provide a particularly useful emulation of 132 column mode for access to the MAC system.

We are currently evaluating a range of third party telnet clients for Windows 95. Ideally we would like to end up with a single site-licensed product rather than have to support a single special client for use with the MAC system only.

Doug Moncur

Fund the Gap with email!

If you send an email instead of making a long distance phone call, *especially* an international one, you will save the University real money.

For those who can't believe it's as simple as that:

Much of the national and international networking infrastructure that we use is financed nationally. The University pays a flat rate for its connection to the network based on the capacity of the link. Until our local capacity is saturated and we have to upgrade the email system, there is no marginal cost per email message.

John Illingworth



Windows 95 applications software progress

As the Windows 95 service takes shape, more software items will be added. The following applications packages are either currently available or imminent: Genstat, Maple, Minitab, Netscape, Paradox, Quattro, SPSS, Stanford Graphics, WordPerfect.

John Illingworth

Windows 95 – network management issues

Windows 95 and workgroups

Windows 95 and Windows NT include the concept of ‘workgroups’, which among other things allows groups of consenting computers to share resources.

Up till now anyone with a number of unsupported connections has been able to create private workgroups without reference to the Computing Service. As Windows 95 and Windows NT grow in popularity the proliferation of workgroups across campus could cause severe management problems for the campus network.

We propose to implement a workgroup allocation scheme similar to the scheme introduced some years ago to solve an analogous problem caused by the proliferation of AppleTalk zones.

In the proposed scheme individual departments would initially be allocated a single workgroup into which those machines that wished to share resources would be placed. In the case of large departments with large numbers of machines in their workgroup it may be possible to split the workgroup thematically for example into Organic Chemistry and Inorganic Chemistry.

The Computing Service is in the early stages of planning the workgroup allocation scheme. Anyone with concerns or views regarding the introduction of such a scheme is urged to email Doug Moncur (dgm1@york.ac.uk) as soon as possible.

Doug Moncur

Windows NT domains

To simplify management of the Campus Network a domain registration scheme for Windows NT will be introduced.

Domains can be thought of as something akin to Windows 95 workgroups, but consist of groups of NT servers that share authentication and user information. Domains can be interlinked for authentication purposes by means of what are termed ‘trust relationships’. The NT domain mechanism is analogous to NIS (Yellow Pages) in the TCP/IP world.

Machines running NT workstation can participate in a domain or not.

These domains are distinct from TCP/IP domains. TCP/IP domains are used to describe part of the Internet, while NT domains refer only to NT machines.

Initially there will only be two domains, one for supported Windows systems and one for unsupported systems. In time the supported domain will be partitioned into separate domains for departments, and some partitioning of the unsupported domain may also take place to optimise network performance.

Anyone with particular reasons to require a private domain will be able to request one from the Computing Service.

Queries regarding the domain registration scheme should be sent by email to Andrew Smith (abs4@york.ac.uk).

Doug Moncur

New teaching software on the Windows 3.1 PC network

The Computing Service has acquired a file server especially to hold large teaching software packages that are too big to duplicate onto every PC file server on the campus. You will see this machine as disk N: on your supported PC. Software for Archaeology, Maths and Physics has been mounted, as well as research databases for the CRD and the Industrial Development Office.

If you or your department have any software which you think might be suitable for the Windows 3.1 PC network, please let us know as soon as possible, as preparations for the addition of software need to start mid-term to ensure their smooth introduction to the system.

John Illingworth

York FTP archive gets honourable mention in dispatches

Everyone likes to be appreciated, especially by one’s peers, so it was particularly gratifying when Hummingbird, the company that produces eXceed and the MaestroNFS product used by Windows 95 and NT, included the York ftp archive when they mailed out a list of useful sources of NFS related material to their email support and discussion lists. Now we know someone cares!

Doug Moncur

Data Warehousing – the way forward

Since the introduction of the data warehouse approach, the range of uses of the data has diversified and requests to incorporate data from other sources have been received. The evidence is that the data warehouse will form a strategic resource for the University and needs to be viewed in this light. We have thus reviewed the purpose and implementation of the concept in both the light of experience and possible further uses to define a strategy for development.

The initial objective of the data warehouse was to provide a mechanism for developing a flexible reporting capability. Subsequently many additional uses have been found for this projected data. Thus the future purpose of this system is to provide easy access to core administrative information from a PC.

A variety of potential uses are envisaged:

- reporting
- analysis to inform planning
- basis for local administrative systems
- form letters
- marketing
- PR
- historical analysis
- 'live link' to other applications.

The principal factors affecting implementation are:

- access to core data from a variety of University operational systems
- easy incorporation of selected data
- controls on access
- minimise data duplication
- flexibility
- departmental diversity.

The proposed method is to store the data warehouse records in an Interbase relational database. A mechanism has been developed to extract the operational data from the MAC Powerhouse files and transfer it into the Interbase file structure. Interbase has the capability to deliver data in a variety of formats, thus providing flexibility to transfer data to standard PC packages. Further investigations in several areas are currently taking place and if these investigations do not uncover major problems it is hoped to have a basic system operational by January 1997.

A demonstration of the development system will be given at the Data Warehouse Technical Forum on 2 December in the Computing Service Seminar Room.

*Mike Jinks
Trevor Bolton*

Data Warehouse News

Student Records

The format of these records may have to change due to the upgrade D14. Please contact Sue Flockhart, Planning Assistant (ext 4048, email sf6), for details.

Finance, Research & Consultancy

The system is now available and if you have any questions regarding the data content, please contact Richard Shephard, Management Accountant (ext 2129, email rs16).

Estates Manager

Selected data from the Estates Manager will be placed in the next version of the data warehouse. For further details contact Martin Penny, Management Accountant (ext 2178, email mbp1).

Technical Forum

The next Data Warehouse Technical Forum will be held in the Computing Service Seminar Room on 2 December at 9.30am. The agenda will be:

- | | |
|-------------|---|
| 9.30-10.30 | Student Data |
| 10.30-11.00 | Technical questions and demonstration of the next version of data warehouse |
| 11.00-11.30 | Finance, Estates, Research & Consultancy |

Trevor Bolton

UCAS applications

The UCAS applications will continue to be populated in the ADVAX2, DEPT A/C for this current cycle but will be discontinued from the 97/98 cycle. The data warehouse should be used in place of the ADVAX2 DEPT A/Cs.

WPS and Lotus 1-2-3 to disappear soon!

The wordprocessing system WPS will be withdrawn from service on 7 January 1997. A document which you might find useful when transferring to WordPerfect is 'Migration from WPS-Plus to WordPerfect', available on YorkWeb at:

<http://www.york.ac.uk/services/cserv/admin/wpsptwp/intro.htm>

The spreadsheet system Lotus 1-2-3 will also be withdrawn from service on 7 January 1997.

Trevor Bolton

MIS Training

Training courses arranged for this term are as follows:

- **Introduction to PowerHouse**
Thursday 21 November in L/117, 9.15-11.15
This provides an introduction to the MAC system.
- **Introduction to PowerHouse and MAC Student Records**
Monday 2 December in H/B40, 9.30-5.00 (*FULL*)
- **Further features of WordPerfect for the letter and document producer**
Wednesday 4 December in L/117, 9.15-11.15 (*FULL*)
Thursday 12 December in L/117, 2.15-4.15
This will cover such areas as merge and tables.

These courses may be booked by contacting the Information Desk, email infodesk, ext 3838 or in person. Please contact the MIS Trainer, Richard Jardine (ext 3739, email rrj1), if you have any detailed questions on these courses.

Requests for training in different parts of MAC should be addressed to the relevant Database Administrator:

Module	Contact Name	Tel	email
Finance	Michael Evans	4413	mse3
Research and Consultancy	Michael Evans	4413	mse3
Student Manager	Margaret Orr	4877	mo4
Estates Manager	Janet Hodgson	2197	jh33

Courses in the use of the data warehouse are planned for the spring term.

Richard Jardine

Information on WWW

MAC overview

General MAC information is now on YorkWeb. It comprises a brief overview, list of contacts, and training details. These pages can be viewed at:

<http://www.york.ac.uk/services/cserv/admin/mac.htm>

Introduction to Powerhouse

The training notes for the 'Introduction to Powerhouse' course are now available on YorkWeb, at:

<http://www.york.ac.uk/services/cserv/admin/powerhse/powerh.htm>

MAC software upgrade

The next upgrade for the MAC software is D14. This will take place for MACTEST on Monday 11/Tuesday 12 November and for MACLIVE on Saturday 24/Sunday 25 November. Detailed changes to the software will be provided to the application Database Administrators.

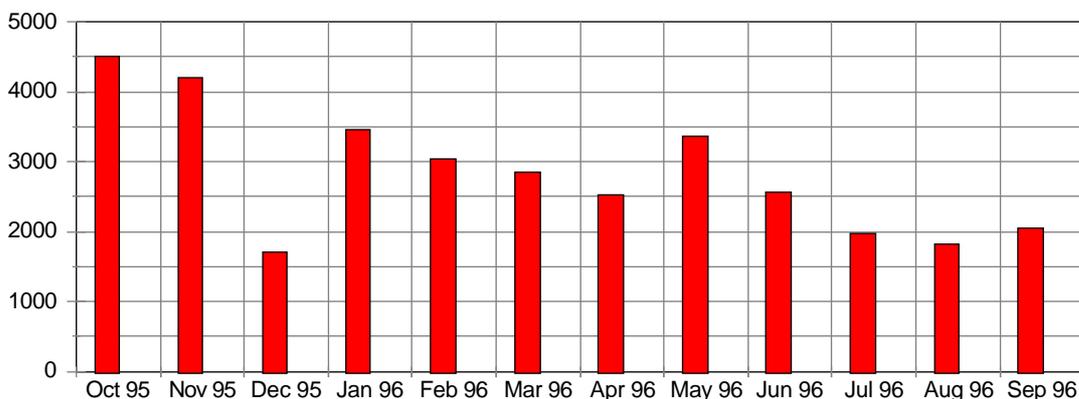
The D15 upgrade is due in April 1997.

INFORMATION DESK

Up to 4500 transactions per month!

The graph shows the total number of transactions per month which were dealt with by the Information Desk during the last academic year. The average number of transactions per day ranged from 200 in November to 86 in July.

Brian Souter

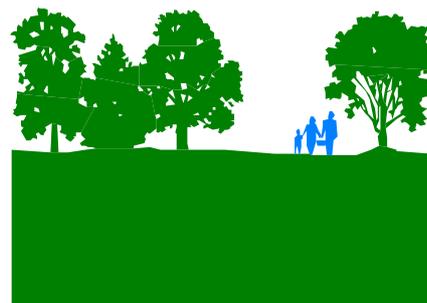


Finding information on the Internet: Environment

There is a huge amount of environmental information on the Internet provided by a range of organisations including governments, campaign groups, research institutes and commercial companies. The Internet has proved especially useful for publishing reports and data which are not necessarily available in printed form.

York Information Connections provides a starting point from the environmental information sources page at <http://www.york.ac.uk/services/library/subjects/eemint.htm>.

Links to all the resources discussed below (and to many others) are available from this page. Remember that it is always faster to explore the Internet before about 12 noon (before the Americans wake up!).



Directories

If you need a more comprehensive collection of resources three sites will be of particular interest. EnviroLink (<http://www.envirolink.org/>) claims to be the “largest online environmental information resource on the planet”. It organises resources by very broad subject categories (e.g. air, water) and also provides an alphabetical list of subject headings. The environmental sections of the WWW Virtual Library (<http://ecosys.drdr.virginia.edu/Environment.html>) and Yahoo! (http://www.yahoo.com/Environment_and_Nature/) are also worth browsing. These sites are also searchable using keywords.

Government information

The UK Department of the Environment (<http://www.open.gov.uk/doe/doehome.htm>) and the Environment Agency (<http://www.environment-agency.gov.uk/>) provide information on government policy and access to briefings, newsletters and press releases. The US Environmental Protection Agency (<http://www.epa.gov/>) provides an extensive information service on US policy. At an international level the United Nations Environment Programme (<http://unep.unep.org/>) provides information on treaties and conventions.

Campaign groups

Organisations such as Greenpeace (<http://www.greenpeace.org/>) and Friends of the Earth (<http://www.foe.co.uk/>) are using the Internet to publicise their activities. You will find information on current campaigns plus access to databases of reports and links to other related sites.

Data collections and research information

The World Conservation Monitoring Centre (<http://www.wcmc.org.uk/index.html>) maintains a large, varied and growing collection of databases concerning nature conservation (e.g. the National Biodiversity Profiles provide facts and figures on the state of biological diversity for a number of countries and the Species Information Service provides data on threatened plants and animals).

The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) Data Set Catalog (<http://www.esdim.noaa.gov/NOAA-Catalog/NOAA-Catalog.html>) is a forms-based tool that allows you to search for publicly available environmental data held by public and private sources throughout the world. Data sources include descriptions related to climatology, meteorology, ecology, pollution, geology, oceanography, and remote sensing satellites.

The Natural Environment Research Council (<http://www.nerc.ac.uk/>) is the leading body in the UK for research, survey, monitoring and training in the environmental sciences. It carries out research in a wide range of environmental topics and gathers key environmental data into unique databases, some of which now span several decades. It also hosts the UK Global Environmental Research Office (<http://www.nerc.ac.uk/ukgeroff/welcome.htm>) which has made available the *UK National Strategy for Global Environmental Research*.

News services

Environmental news services include EnviroNews (<http://www.envirolink.org/environews/>) which provides environmental news from news wire services throughout the world and the Environmental News Network (<http://www.enn.com/>) which gathers material from many sources, including wire services, government agencies, industry, special interest groups, correspondents and environmental professionals. The *ENDS report* (<http://www.ends.co.uk/ab.html>) combines advanced warning of legislative and policy developments in the UK and European Union with case studies of how companies or business sectors are responding to environmental pressures.

For more information please contact Chris Ellwood (Science Librarian; email cve1).

*Chris Ellwood
J B Morrell Library*

New Graduate Study Pages set the style!

In February of this year Administrative Planning Committee decided that information for graduates should appear on the web, and when I was appointed in June this became my first major project.

Although most departments do provide information about postgraduate courses and research opportunities, this has been done independently; the level of provision varies enormously and there has been no easy way for an external user to find all the information they might want. My remit was to design the central graduate study pages and to co-ordinate the provision of graduate-related information within departments. Accordingly, a working group was set up consisting of John Byrne, Simon Willis, Philip Simison, Phil Stanworth and myself. The aim was to get a working set of graduate study pages that required as little adaptation of current material, and as little maintenance, as possible, bearing in mind that my post is only funded for a year in the first instance.

There was considerable discussion about whether academic information should be held centrally or whether there should simply be links, via indexes, between the core material and departmental pages. Centrally held material could be produced more quickly and would have a consistent style, but there would be a risk of

duplication because departments would probably wish to keep their own pages. The distributed model was adopted because most departments had already committed time and energy to putting information on their own web pages, and in many cases it is more detailed and up to date than the printed prospectus.

There are additional advantages: academic departments keep direct control over the content of their information, which should minimise factual errors; and within certain style guidelines, departments are free to design their pages as they wish, in keeping with the individualistic, decentralised spirit of the Internet.

Administration and service departments are also included; the Library, Careers Service, Nursery, Accommodation, Computing Service and International Office maintain their own pages for graduates. The central Graduate Study Pages are maintained by Philip Simison of the Graduate Schools Office. Guidelines for information providers are on the web at <http://www.york.ac.uk/admin/gso/docs/guide/>.

When we began to look at sample screen designs it became obvious that the current logos, while attractive in print, are not easy to work with on screen. Web Steering

Group had also discussed this and it was agreed that we could rework the corporate id for the web. Another working group, consisting of John Byrne, Hilary Layton and myself, was set up to organise this.

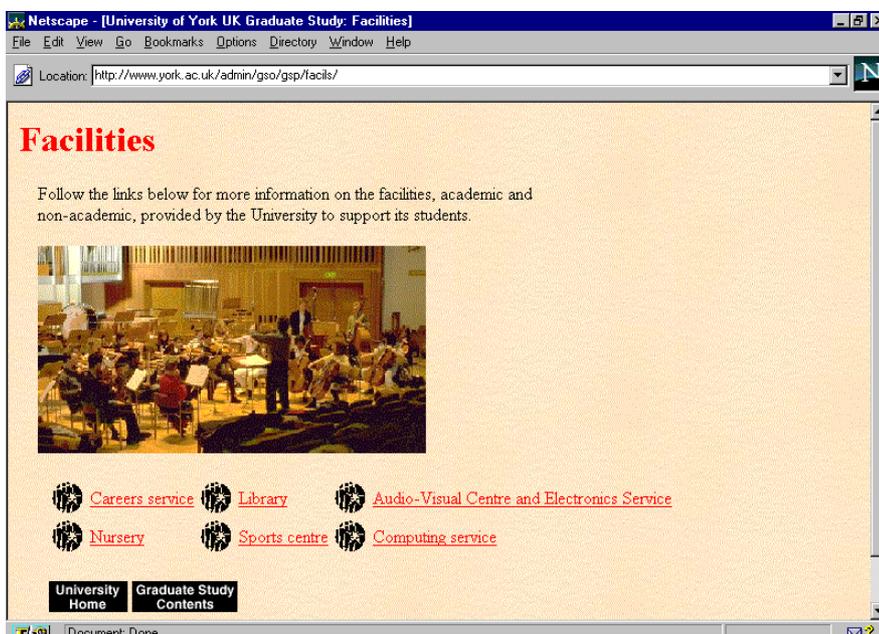
We wanted a design that was instantly recognisable as the University of York, but adapting the current logos proved to be quite a challenge. Accordingly, Gavin Ward of the IoAAS was commissioned to rework our corporate id into something more web-friendly. He came up with the banner heading which you can see at the top of the main contents page, and on the International Office site: <http://www.york.ac.uk/admin/intnat/>. This includes the distinctive logotype and woodcut which maintains consistency with our printed material and, most importantly, it is screen-shaped.

Gavin Ward also designed woodcut-style buttons to complement the new banner. Rob Fletcher is currently reworking these in a choice of colours, making sure they are as small as possible. The banner and buttons will be available, along with the new style guidelines, in early November.

The central Graduate Study Pages are now live and you can access them at <http://www.york.ac.uk/admin/gso/gsp/>. The indexes linking to departmental information are being altered as and when departments are able to adapt their information to the new structure, but everything should be in place by 1 January.

Although in the future I will be working on University projects such as the redesign of the central pages and the undergraduate study pages, it is also part of my job to promote authorship and best practice. I am happy to discuss the structure and visual appearance of departmental web pages, and am always keen to hear constructive comments and new ideas about our web presence. If you want to contact me you can email kf7@york.ac.uk, or drop in to see me in the International Office.

*Kriss Fearon
Web Co-ordinator*



A day in the life of...

... an Information Desk Assistant

To be an Information Assistant for the Computing Service is rather like being a cross between a Public Relations Official for Yorkshire Water and the person who rings you up to tell you that you have just won the National Lottery. The second person rapidly becomes the most important person in your life, whereas the Public Relations Official is considered to be of little more worth than an ashtray on a motorbike. In fact, this assessment is probably true of any information helpdesk service in the computing industry.

I am just one of three full-time employees on the Information Desk and we all try to present (to quote one eminent staff member) the human face of information technology. For many people computers are still something of an unfathomable mystery, requiring limitless patience and hours of frustration in order to produce just one page of printed text.

One of the most frequently asked questions first thing in the morning is:

"I have just printed my assignment but I can't find it anywhere."

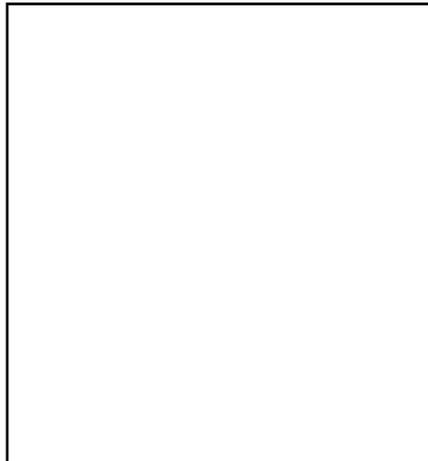
"May I ask where you have looked?"

"I don't know!"

"Which computing classroom were you working in?"

"What do you mean? Look, you must do something, it has to be handed in in fifteen minutes ... there is obviously something wrong with your network!"

As stated in A Guide To Using the Information Desk, 'the real strength of the Desk is in getting users started and keeping them going'. To achieve such ends one has to be extremely resourceful – I remember the job advert required applicants to be 'able to demonstrate and explain complex procedures in a non-technical way'. The above scenario requires patience, for it could be that we have a network fault I don't know about, or that the user (technical term for any person 'using' a computer) simply has no idea what they are doing and wants me to do it all for them. Like many



problems I get, this requires investigation, patience and a sense of humour.

We publish user guides for the various facilities available and I refer people to them whenever possible (TRUMPET TIME: earlier this year I was at a meeting of staff from other university information desks and they all voted York's user guides to be the best!), but these guides cannot hope to cover all of the topic areas that users wish to raise. Amongst the routine tasks of taking course bookings, crediting print accounts, registering new users and selling software, come other daily tasks covering everything from the bizarre to the outrageous.

With well over 6000 users at the University covering a great many disciplines from all corners of the world, we find ourselves dealing with over 4000 queries per month during term time. For example, I find myself dealing with the novice user:

"Hello, can you help, I can't see anything on my screen?"

"Have you tried turning the power switch on – it's located on the lower front right of the screen?"

"No I haven't, what do I do?"

"Just press it and see if the screen comes on."

"Oh yes, you're wonderful, thank you."

or:

"I am using MSDOS to check my hard disk space and it says I have 19355648 bytes available on disk and 655360 total memory. Please could you tell me roughly how many words I can enter onto my hard disk?"

"Hmm...."

or:

"Hi... I know this is a 'bit' weird, but I understand that one of my ancestors was executed in York and his head placed on one of the gates to the City for stealing a horse and that there is a plaque there commemorating this moment... Do you know where it is?"

Answers on a postcard – I've tried every technical manual but can't find any reference!

To say that the job is pressured at times is an understatement. With incoming queries from personal callers, stacking phone calls and escalating email, things can get a little fraught on both sides.

Handing out the Kleenex to users in the last stages of despair is not unknown. On the other hand, receiving unexpected boxes of chocolates etc gives a great boost to our energy levels.

To solve a user's query is a matter of human interaction first and the technology second. I see the Information Desk as not simply providing yes/no answers, but as a starting point for encouraging the growth and confidence of a user in developing their IT skills (if you can turn the machine on then you have a skill, I say).

A gentleman came to me one day. ***"I've been told that members of the public can surf the Net here, please tell me where I go for this... Not for public use? But I am a York citizen and I pay taxes... little ivory towers, that's what you all live in, you academics... Oh really, a Cybercafe in York you say... And I could get onto the Net there?... well you've been most helpful"***. All in a day's work, sir!