

Open Forum 1

Web Site Transcript

Chapter 11

A = Museum Docent, B = Visitor 1, C = Visitor 2

A: OK, everyone, if you'd like to come over here to our next exhibit. OK, so we're continuing to learn about the history of the home computer. Now, does anyone recognize this amazing machine? No? Well, anyone who grew up in Britain in the 1980s would immediately recognize this. It's the famous BBC Microcomputer. You've all heard of the BBC, right?

B: Of course, it's the television company in England.

A: Right, the British Broadcasting Corporation, or BBC is Britain's national, state-run television and radio network.

C: So why did a TV station make a computer?

A: That's a really interesting story. It starts in the early 1980s. BBC television showed a program called "The Mighty Micro" in which a professor, his name was Dr. Christopher Evans, he predicted the importance of the microcomputer—what we today just call the computer or the personal computer. Now, you have to remember that in 1980, there were no computers in homes, in schools, in libraries. Computers were big and expensive, so they still weren't something that a family or a student would go out and buy. But Dr. Evans made a prediction—a guess about the future. He predicted that computers were going to get smaller. Technology was making it possible to build a whole computer in a box that could fit on your desk. That's why the first home computers were called "microcomputers"—"micro" meaning "small."

OK, so Evans argued that the microcomputer was going to change everything, and that Britain's children needed to learn how to use a computer in order to be prepared for the future.

Now, it just so happened that a lot of important people watched that program, and Evan's predictions caught the attention of many people in Britain. In fact, even the British Parliament—the government—ended up discussing the program and Evan's predictions.

So the BBC decided to start a new project: to build a computer that was affordable, but that had lots of functions—text, graphics, sound, music, programming, even artificial intelligence. The BBC planned to sell its microcomputer to homes and especially schools around the country.

C: So the BBC made the actual computer?

A: No, actually they didn't. The BBC was... and still is... in the business of making television and radio programs, not computers. So they wanted to find a computer company that could make the computer and put the BBC's name on it. In Cambridge, England—home to the famous, old university—a small company called Acorn heard about the project. It just so happened that Acorn was already making its first computer, but it wasn't quite finished yet. The Acorn employees worked through the night and finished that first computer. It was called the Proton. They showed their brand new creation to the BBC and won the contract. It's really an amazing story of a small company beating all the bigger corporations.

The first BBC computer—they called it the model A—came out in 1981, and the model B came out not too long afterward. And that's the computer you can see here—the BBC Model B Microcomputer.

The computer was an immediate success, mainly because schools in Britain bought many of them to teach computer skills to students.

B: Excuse me, what could you do with a computer like this? I mean, what was it capable of?

A: Well, the Beeb—that's the nickname for the BBC Model B Microcomputer—was an amazing computer for its time. You could write programs, draw pictures in 8 colors, write music. The computer could even speak words in English! And you could play games. Today you would find them very simple, but they were pretty cool in the early 80s.

There was also a lot of educational software—programs that taught children English, math, science, and history. Math teachers loved the BBC Buggy—a robot that you could control using a BBC computer. And of course you could use the computer for word-processing. It was really new for most kids to type their essays and then print them. It was very exciting.

B: Was the BBC computer used in elementary schools?

A: Eventually, yes, but not at first. I have British friends who first used this computer when they were in middle or high school.

Things have certainly changed, right? I mean nowadays some children are using computers even before they go to elementary school!

Ok, any more questions before we move on to the next exhibit?