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WELCOME

From the Editor

People tend to forget how stunningly useful websites can be. Software, apps, browsers and Windows tools grab all the headlines, while websites just work quietly in the background, providing valuable information and performing clever tasks. They're reliable too: you never need to update or re-install them.

This issue's Cover Feature is an attempt to stop taking them for granted. Our emphasis is on 'usefulness' (though page 57 does stray into fun territory), so you'll find digital rulers, floor planners, calculators, route makers and tools for editing photos and music. You can create word clouds and flip books, see how much sun your garden gets, and learn how to tie the Gnat Hitch knot (it's bound - literally - to prove handy).

I hope we'll direct you to sites you've never visited before, but I'm sure you'll know many others that you think we should've included. That's what our Readers' Tips section (pages 42-43) is for. Email me your favourites and we'll publish the best.

Daniel Booth
editor@computeractive.co.uk

THIS ISSUE IN NUMBERS

67%
Proportion of text scams related to fake deliveries - *p9*

£22
Price of a rechargeable battery for Lenovo laptops - *p68*

17x306x194mm
Dimensions of the five-star HP Envy 13 laptop - *p22*

HOW TO USE SNIPCA URLs

We use snipcas to turn long URLs that are hard to type into ones that are short and simple. They aren't websites themselves, which means they won't be recognised if you type them into Google. Instead, you need to type them into your browser address bar, then press Enter. Doing this will take you to the correct website.

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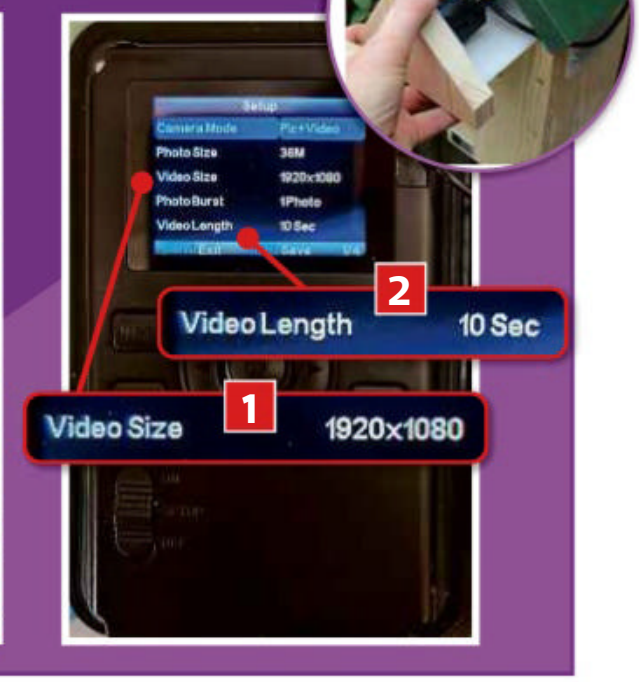


Install Windows 11 from ISO files as release nears

Microsoft has released ISO image files for Windows 11, letting users who have signed up as Windows Insiders perform a clean install of the forthcoming operating system.

You can do this either from the file itself, or by copying it to a USB stick or burning it on to a disc.

Until now, the only way to try Windows 11 was to update to a preview version from Windows 10. This new option should encourage more users to try it and provide feedback to Microsoft ahead of its release.

If you're not an Insider, you can sign up at https://insider.windows.com/register. The ISO images are available from Microsoft's website (www.snipca.com/39290).

Scroll to the bottom of the page and click the 'Select edition' dropdown menu. Here, choose either the Windows 11 Insider Preview (Dev Channel) (1 in screenshot) or the Windows 11 Insider Preview (Beta Channel) 2.

The Preview in the Dev (short for Developer) channel contains the latest features and updates for Windows 11, but will be more unstable and contain more flaws than the version on the Beta channel.

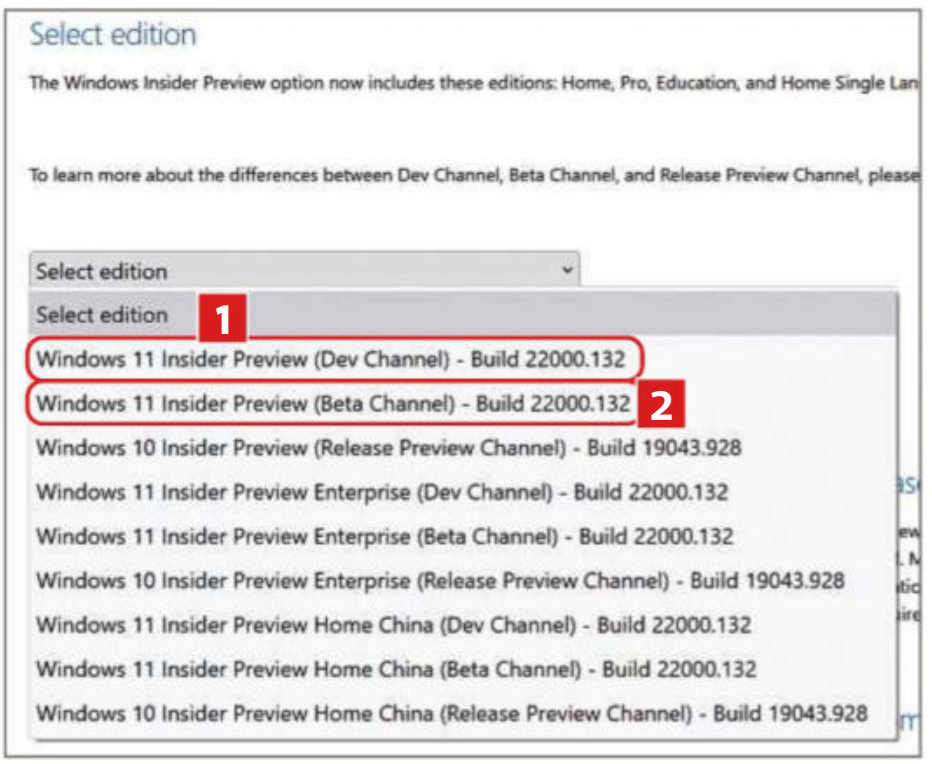
Whichever version you choose, you should consider running it on a spare computer or a virtual PC to minimise disruption to your main machine.

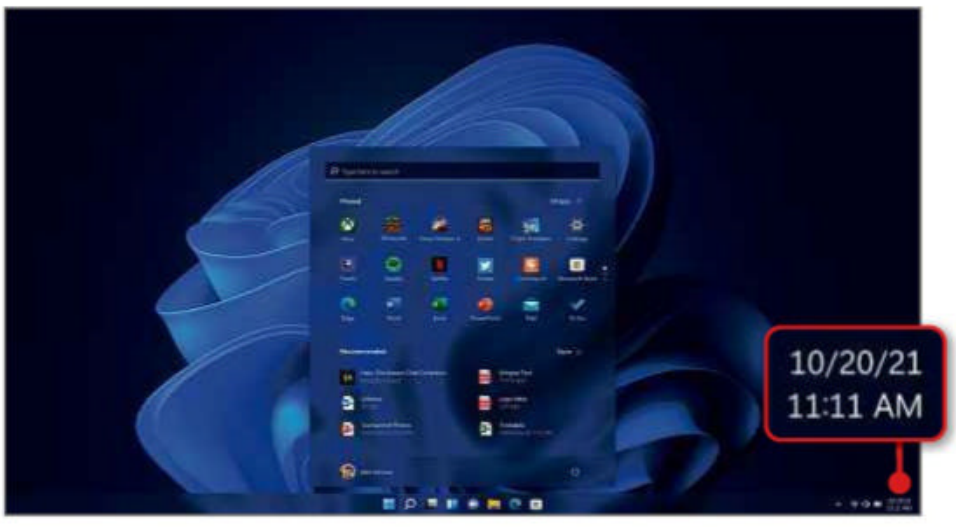
Once you've selected and clicked Confirm, choose your 'product language' and click Confirm again. Now click the blue Download button. The file is 5.11GB, so it will take a while to download.

You'll be asked for your Windows 10 product key as part of the standard installation process (follow Microsoft's instructions at www.snipca.com/39292 to find yours). However, you can skip this by clicking 'I don't have a product key', though this limits how you can customise the operating system.

To create a bootable Windows 11 USB stick, you'll need at least a 16GB stick, but 32GB is recommended to store other files or programs.

A standard DVD has only 4.8GB of space, so will be too small for the Windows ISO file. Instead, burn it to a dual-layer DVD, which can handle up to 8.5GB.





20 October release?

The release of ISO files marks a major milestone as Microsoft prepares for Windows 11's release this autumn.

The company may have subtly revealed the launch date in a recent tweet (www.snipca.com/39293) showing the Windows 11 desktop. The date at the bottom right is 20 October, 2021 (a Wednesday), with a time of 11:11am (pictured above).

However, the new operating system is likely to be released first on new computers, before being made available as a free upgrade early in 2022.

WHAT WE THINK

We've already put 20 October, 7.11pm (UK time) in our calendar, because we're confident that's when Windows 11 will officially arrive on new PCs. But we've a growing hunch that its availability as a free upgrade will be delayed beyond next spring, as Microsoft responds to criticism of the design. Don't rule out delays caused by Covid, either. While you wait for the upgrade, installing the ISO file to a spare or virtual PC is a great way to test the system without risking your main computer.

You'll like this...
Vodafone is offering free 20GB data to UK charities (www.snipca.com/39289)

but not this...
A hacker impersonated Apple staff to steal 620,000 nude photos (www.snipca.com/39294)

Cookies crumble: Govt plans to scrap GDPR pop-ups

You may see fewer requests to accept cookies in future after the Government announced plans to replace parts of the European Union's General Data Protection Regulations (GDPR), which came into effect in the UK three years ago.

The regulations force websites to ask users permission to store some of your personal data, but many people find the pop-up messages intrusive and annoying.

The core principle of GDPR is that businesses must have appropriate legal grounds for collecting your data, and must always seek your consent to use it.

But critics say the rules are restrictive red tape that stifle the UK's digital economy, while doing little to protect people's privacy.

Culture Secretary Oliver Dowden has outlined plans to replace "pointless" data regulations with "light-touch" rules that will help the British economy grow.

He told the *Telegraph* that he wants to cut "needless bureaucracy and box ticking", giving as one example the Church of England warning that churches couldn't advertise jumble sales in newsletters because it risks being classified as marketing and therefore needs consent from recipients.

He's also concerned that small companies and charities can't cope with the number of checks they must perform to ensure they follow the rules.

"We should not expect exactly the same from a small family run business as we do from a massive social media company," he said.

However, the proposals are likely to be opposed by privacy campaigners, who argue that the big tech companies already know too much about us, while the EU claims the regulations have strengthened data standards across the world.

• **Block cookie pop-ups using a browser extension - see Issue 609, page 38.**

Ditch your dish! Sky Q via broadband now 'imminent'

Sky looks set to launch a Sky Q TV box that connects to the internet rather than through a satellite dish. It would let you watch all of Sky's channels and content without needing to get a dish installed.

The company has already launched the Sky Q IP Box (pictured) in Germany, which requires a minimum internet speed of 6Mbps - enough to stream HD programmes.

Sources told the *Express* that the service is now being tested by selected customers in the UK, with a launch "imminent". Feedback from viewers will allow Sky to recommend minimum speeds.

The report also claims that the service will offer 4K programmes, and that you'll be able to save 1,000 hours of shows, as well as pause and rewind live content. However, the service may be restricted to Sky Broadband customers, which would help Sky keep a tight control over the speeds viewers will need.

Sky first announced plans to deliver shows over the internet in 2017. BT and TalkTalk have been doing this via YouView since 2010.

Sky already owns NOW TV, which uses hardware from Roku to stream channels and on-demand content, though it offers fewer channels than Sky Q.

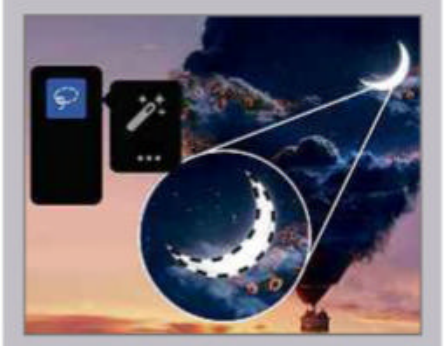
WATCH FREEVIEW UNTIL 2034

The Government has extended the Freeview licence until 2034, saying it will help commercial public service broadcasters such as ITV, Channel 4 and Channel 5 compete with "streaming giants" like Netflix. Read more on GOV.UK at www.snipca.com/39269.

IN BRIEF

ADOBE ADDS MAGIC WAND TO IPAD APP

Adobe has added the Magic Wand tool to its Photoshop app for iPads, making it easier to select, adjust and remove elements of an image (pictured). It has also added the Healing Brush, which lets you 'paint' over parts of an image to correct them. Read more at www.snipca.com/39265.

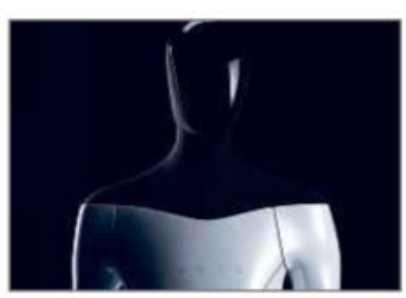


TURN ON GOOGLE SEARCH DARK MODE

Google is finally releasing a dark theme for its search results, after months of testing. To activate it, click the sun icon in the top right of a results page. To switch back, click the moon icon. It's not yet available everywhere or in all browsers, so keep checking.

TOMORROW'S WORLD

This is Tesla Bot, standing five feet, eight inches tall, and capable of "dangerous, repetitive, boring tasks". Elon Musk, Tesla's boss, says it will revolutionise work. But it was announced with the help of a dancer in a terrible bodysuit doing the world's worst robot impression (watch at www.snipca.com/39264). We'll believe it when pigs fly over Elvis on the moon.



IN BRIEF

KINDLE UPDATE ADDS LARGE SEARCH BAR

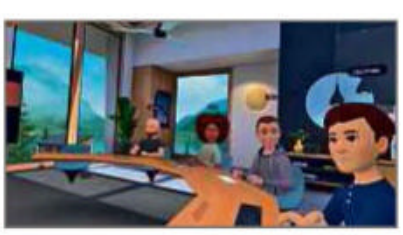
Amazon has replaced the toolbar on Kindle home screens with a large search bar (pictured) as part of a major update (version 5.13.7). There are two new buttons at the bottom – Home and Library – while an arrow at the top offers easier access to 'quick' settings such as Airplane Mode. You'll need a 7th-generation Paperwhite or 8th-generation Kindle or Oasis (or later). Connect the device to Wi-Fi to download the update.

SAMSUNG CUTS ADS ON PHONES & TABLETS

Samsung is set to remove adverts from its apps that come installed on its Galaxy phones and tablets, including Samsung Weather, Samsung Pay and Samsung Theme. It said the ads will be cut in an update later this year, adding that it wanted to provide the "best possible experience".

THE WORLD'S GONE MAD!

Nobody knows what the post-Covid office will look like, but we're prepared to bet several fortunes that it *won't* resemble Facebook's Horizons Workrooms. It actually thinks staff at home will want to wear virtual-reality headsets to take part in virtual meetings (pictured) with colleagues. Watch this absurdity at www.snipca.com/39281.



AI sensors to monitor social care patients at home

A group of social care patients are to be monitored using artificial intelligence (AI) to check their wellbeing.

Dorset Council is running a three-month trial in which sensors installed in patients' homes will analyse their movements and use of electricity.

Each home will have between six and nine sensors, but no cameras. They'll be able to detect unusual or worrying behaviour, such as frequent visits to the toilet during the night. But they'll also monitor more typical actions such as opening the fridge and switching on the kettle.

Lilli (www.intelligentlilli.com), the UK-based company that makes the technology, says it could cut the number of home visits health professionals need to make, saving councils money. Early schemes indicate that it will save 780 hours of occupational therapy time, amounting to

£250,000 a year.

Nick Weston, chief commercial officer for Lilli, said: "Using this technology, over-stretched health and social care providers can intervene earlier while monitoring at a distance, reducing the need for hospital admissions or residential care and lowering costs". He said more trials will take place in the north east of England, and south London.

Some experts have warned that monitoring patients remotely can increase loneliness if it leads to fewer visits. But Weston insists that the technology "will not replace care by humans, but will improve it".

He added that the system isn't just about saving money, but also making sure patients are receiving the most appropriate care.

To install the sensors, Lilli needs written consent from patients or someone authorised to give consent on their behalf. Data from homes is encrypted when transmitted and stored, and only the organisation providing care will be able to access it.

Woman used ex-partner's Alexa to torment his new girlfriend

A woman has admitted accessing her former boyfriend's Amazon Echo smart speaker to talk to his new girlfriend from 100 miles away, saying she should leave the house.

A court heard that Philippa Copleston-Warren (pictured), 46, also accessed remote CCTV cameras to spy on the couple, and turned the bedside lamps on and off using an Alexa app.

Copleston-Warren, from Chelsea, London, was charged when she uploaded to Facebook a naked photo of her ex partner with the caption: "Do I look fat??? My daily question".

Christian Meikle, from the Crown Prosecution Service, said: "Phillipa Copleston-Warren carried out a grave invasion of privacy. She left her victim feeling completely violated in his own home and online."

He added: "Posting naked images online in an act of revenge is illegal and offenders will be brought to justice".

Copleston-Warren pleaded guilty to disclosing private

sexual images with intent to cause distress, and will be sentenced on 6 October.

Defending her, Jacob Bindman argued that she didn't hack the victim's devices because she had joint access to them, and knew the passwords.

Delivery messages now the most common text scam

Messages about fake product deliveries are now the most common text scam in the UK, accounting for more than half of threats.

Millions of phone users have received the scams, as criminals continue to exploit the rise in online shopping triggered by the Covid lockdowns.

Security firm Proofpoint conducted a study from mid-April to mid-July, and found that 53 per cent of fraudulent texts claimed to be from a delivery firm. This compared with 23 per cent of messages claiming to be from a bank or financial organisation.

In the 30 days to mid-July the proportion of delivery scams rose to 67 per cent.

Typically the scams urge you to make a small payment to ensure the item is delivered. Other scams ask you to tap a link to track the item, or reschedule delivery.

Proofpoint presented the research to banking body UK Finance. Katy Worobec, managing director of economic crime at UK Finance, said: "Criminals are experts at impersonating a range of organisations and have capitalised on the

pandemic, knowing that many of us will be ordering goods online and awaiting parcel deliveries at home".

Scammers impersonate all the UK's main courier firms: Amazon, DPD, DHL, Hermes, Parcelforce, Royal Mail and UPS. Royal Mail company exposes recent scams on its website: www.snipca.com/39208.

You can report scams by texting them to 7726 (which spells SPAM on a telephone keypad). The National Cyber Security Centre uses this information to take down fraudulent website URLs.

COLLECT DPD PARCELS FROM POST OFFICE

Online shoppers can now collect DPD parcels from 250 Post Office branches across the UK. The service lets customers select a nearby branch when they place their order online. There's no extra charge for the service. Read more on the Post Office's site: www.snipca.com/39210.

Don't give pub apps your data when buying drinks

Pub apps aren't allowed to ask customers for "excessive" information when confirming drink orders, the UK's privacy watchdog has said.

The Information Commissioner's Office (ICO) warned that customers are so excited to be back in pubs and restaurants that they're unwittingly handing over too much data. It stated that businesses should collect only details that were "necessary, relevant and not excessive".

Many pubs introduced online ordering when they were restricted to table service only. However, it's remained popular even though bar service is now allowed in England, Scotland and Wales (not Northern Ireland), and now process millions of pounds worth of transactions every day.

Many of the UK's largest chains, including Wetherspoons, Greene King and Mitchells & Butlers are continuing to use their own apps alongside traditional bar service. They say it helps them serve drinks quicker, but it also gives them information about their customers that they didn't have before the pandemic, such as email addresses and possibly home addresses and phone numbers.

They all claim their apps explain how customers' data will be handled, but the ICO

doubts that many drinkers will read the terms and conditions.

"I think it's too easy to upload an app and straight away put your name, email address, payment details in, without actually understanding fully where that information may be shared and why it's being used," said Suzanne Gordon, director of data protection at the ICO.

She added: "Ultimately this is your data, it's your personal information and you need to be confident when you're handing it over and the reasons why."

IN BRIEF

NEW EE PAYG DEALS FROM £5 A MONTH

EE is offering new pay-as-you-go (PAYG) packages, ranging from £5 a month for 250MB of 4G data to £30 for 100GB. Every deal priced £15 or above per month comes with unlimited calls and texts. Customers on £10 packs or higher get a free 500MB data boost every two months on their second purchase for a full year. Read more on EE's site: www.snipca.com/39205.

'SILVER STREAMERS' FLOCK TO NETFLIX

Covid lockdowns have sparked a big jump in the number of Brits aged 65 to 75 subscribing to TV-streaming services, such as Netflix and Amazon Prime. Figures from consultancy firm Deloitte show an increase from 36 per cent in 2020 to 57 per cent now. Deloitte said this surge in "silver streamers" was particularly noticeable last winter when younger relatives created accounts for them so they stay entertained at home.

PLUSNET SCRAPS YOUVIEW TV BOX

Plusnet is emailing customers to confirm that Plusnet TV will close on 1 November, and it'll stop charging them for YouView. It's letting customers keep their YouView box so they can continue to watch Freeview channels and access apps. Unhappy customers can leave Plusnet without a fee if they contact the company within 30 days of the email.

Why would Samsung want to kill your TV?

It can pull the plug without you even knowing why

If your TV suddenly goes blank, you're likely to blame a power cut or a technical problem. Or if there are toddlers around, maybe one is playing a game of 'What happens if I pull out this plug?'. But there's another reason: it may have been deactivated remotely by the manufacturer.

That's unlikely to happen as you settle down to watch *Antiques Roadshow* on the new TV you've just bought from Currys. But it's happening to TVs that were looted from a Samsung warehouse in South Africa during riots in July.

The South Korean company has confirmed that its TVs come with a TV Block app that links to its servers the first time the TV connects to the internet. The app reports the TV's serial number, and if it's on a list of missing or stolen models it gets switched off permanently.

> "What if Samsung is hacked and the attackers disable all TVs worldwide?"

Being a tech company, Samsung didn't say it quite as succinctly as that. Here's what Mike Van Lier, director of consumer electronics at Samsung South Africa, said: "In keeping with our values to leverage the power of technology to resolve societal challenges, we will continuously develop and expand strategic products in our consumer electronics division with defence-grade security, purpose-built, with innovative and intuitive business tools designed for a new world".

That's a lot of jargon to simply say: we'll turn off your TV if it's stolen.

The company added, rather oddly, that the technology "can have a positive impact at this time, and will also be of use to both the industry and customers in the future". It was probably referring to its attempt to prevent looted TVs being sold on the black market, both in South Africa and abroad.

Samsung said that TVs will be switched back on if the viewer can provide a valid proof of purchase and a TV licence. It confirmed that it's using TV Block only on TVs taken from its warehouse, not stolen from homes by burglars.

Deactivating TVs from its warehouse is presumably fairly straightforward because Samsung would've been tracking the specific models stored there. In theory, viewers whose TVs are stolen would be able to report its serial code (assuming they had the foresight to note it – here's how to find it: www.snipca.com/39303), but Samsung hasn't responded to questions asking whether it's something they plan to offer to the public.

We wouldn't be surprised of it did. Knowing that a criminal is lumbered with a useless TV might soothe the pain of being burgled.

Alternatively, it may end up regretting being so open about the technology. Reaction online quickly went from 'That's interesting' to 'That's weird' to 'That's sinister'. People started asking what other reasons Samsung might find to disable TVs. Perhaps if they're sold or given to another person? Or connected to a streaming device it doesn't approve of? Worse, what if Samsung is hacked and the attackers disable all TVs worldwide?

Some people even said they were going to disconnect their TV from the internet, turning it from a 'smart' TV to dumb, freeing it from Samsung's reach. Others patted themselves on the back for never having connected their TV to the internet. For most though, it's another disconcerting reminder that tech companies have more control over your devices than you're ever likely to realise.

THE FACTS

- Samsung is remotely deactivating TVs looted from a South African warehouse
- It uses the TV Block app that is built into all its TVs
- TVs can be turned back on if the owner shows proof of purchase

Protect your tech

Scams and threats to avoid, plus new security tools

WATCH OUT FOR...

Fake coupon adverts on Android

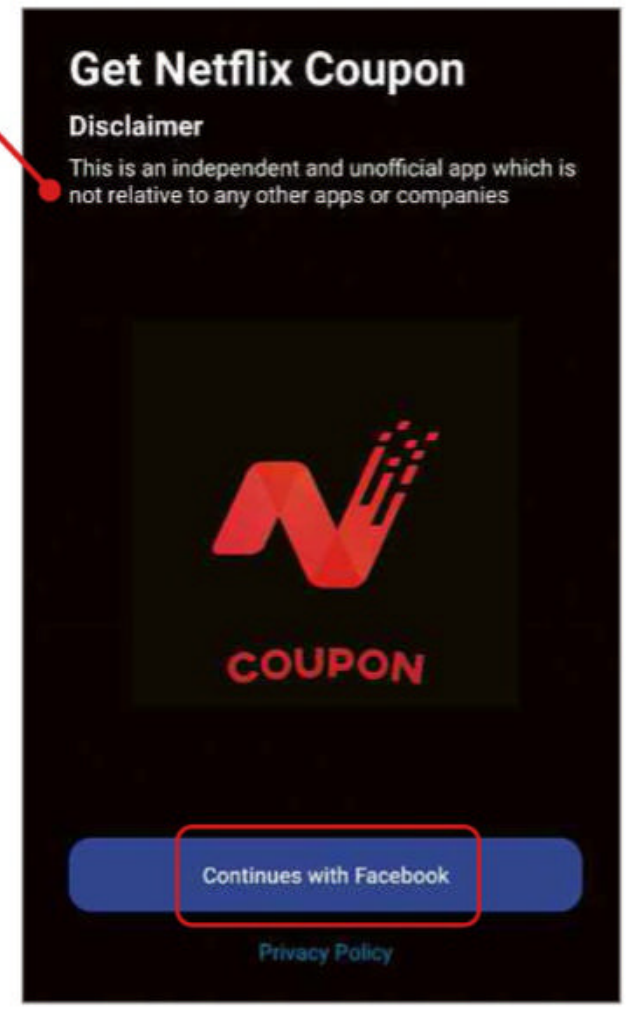
What's the threat?

Scammers have stolen personal information from thousands of Android users after tricking them into clicking adverts for Netflix coupons or tickets for football matches.

Once you click, you're asked to sign in with your Facebook account (see screenshot), only to be told that the offer has expired. The scammers now have access to your account, and use it to spread the fake offers and deadlier malware to other victims.

The adverts appear on phones and tablets if you install the app containing the malware, which has been named FlyTrap by researchers at Zimperium, the Texan company that spotted the threat. They traced the attack to a known criminal gang in Vietnam, which has infected over 10,000 devices in at least 144 countries, including the UK.

The scammers managed to bypass Google's security checks to get the app listed on the Play Store, though it has now been removed, and it no longer works on the devices it was installed on. However, it's still available on unofficial Android app stores not run by Google.



How can you stay safe?

Scroll to the bottom of Zimperium's blog (www.snipca.com/39204) and you'll see the names of the apps containing the malware. Check whether you've installed any, and if so remove them immediately. Also look at the screenshots on the blog showing the fake coupons and remember to avoid such 'too good to be true' offers. Note the poor English in the screenshot – 'Continues with Facebook' and 'not relative to any other apps'.

Finally, only sign into Facebook, or any other social-media site, through the official app or site, and never when told to by an advert or unrelated app.

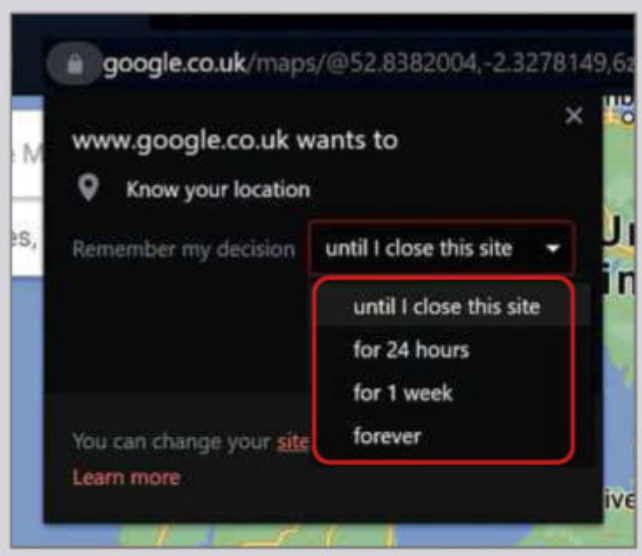
New tools

Brave's new permission options
https:/brave.com

When you browse in Chrome or Edge, websites asking for permission to know your location or access your webcam give you the options of 'Forever' or 'Never'. These extremes don't reflect normal life, where you may want Google Maps to know your location while you're on the site, but to ask permission again next time.

Brave now offers such time-specific settings. When you're next on a website that requests permission, it'll give you four options (as shown in our screenshot): 24 hours, one week, forever, or 'until I close this site' (which is the best balance of convenience and privacy).

These options have been added by default, so you don't need to activate them. Just make sure you're on version 1.25 or higher – click the top-right menu icon (three horizontal lines), then About Brave at the bottom. Brave explains more on its blog, including details of how it's fighting the rising threat of 'bounce tracking': www.snipca.com/39203.



ScamWatch

Readers warn readers

Don't 'verify' NatWest account

I switched my bank account from Lloyds to NatWest last year, so perhaps that's why I was targeted by scammers warning me that someone from a "different computer" had tried to access my account (see the email at www.snipca.com/39202). It looked convincing enough (with a logo, and no obvious mistakes), so I was half-tempted to click the link to verify my account. But something made me think twice, so I phoned NatWest to check. They confirmed it was fraudulent. Looking back at the email, I saw that it began 'Dear Valued Customer', which is a dead giveaway.

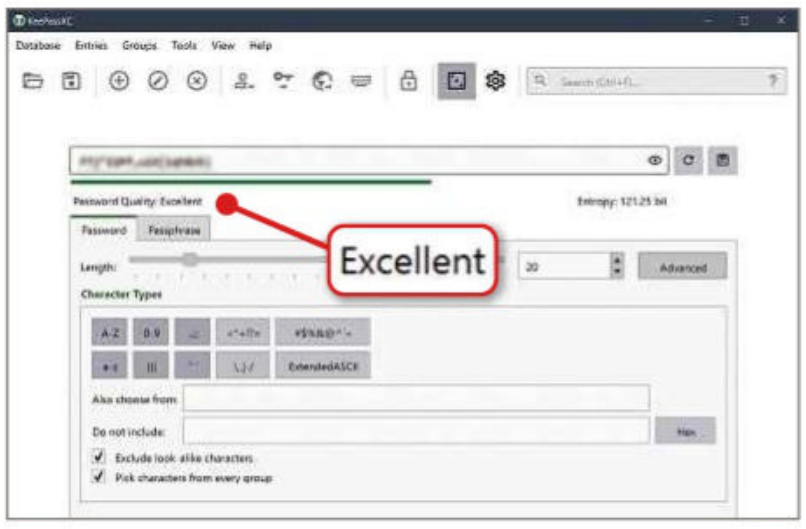
Ben Jenkin

Warn your fellow readers about scams at letters@computeractive.co.uk

Letters

Tell us what's on your mind

I'm sticking with random-character passwords



I use the KeePassXC password manager (https://keepassxc.org), which generates both random-character passwords and passphrase passwords. I've never used passphrases, so I tested the claim made by the National Cyber Security Centre (Issue 613, page 8) that three random words are safer than "complex" passwords.

I asked KeePass to generate a password containing 15 random characters, and it reported its strength as 'Good'. It then created a three-word passphrase, using title case, and came up with 'Exporter Squeezing Speech', which is 25 characters including the two spaces. It judged this to be a 'Poor' password. I then generated a password with 25 random characters, and got an 'Excellent' result (see screenshot above right).

On the basis of this admittedly unscientific test, I'll be sticking with my random-character passwords.

Ted Winter

YouTube's ads make it unbearable

YouTube has become unbearable to me. With *so* many adverts, it's wasting the precious years of life I have left as I approach 70. For many years, I've recorded ITV, Channel 4 and Channel 5 programmes on my Panasonic hard-drive recorder and edited out the adverts so my wife and I can watch in peace. An hour's programme on these channels has 45 minutes or less of actual content.

Is there an alternative to YouTube that would allow me to watch without the constant interruption from adverts?

Paul Feldhahn

CA SAYS **Many readers have emailed with similar frustrations over the past few months, and we've also noticed a sharp increase in the number of ads. Our solution is to switch from Chrome or Edge to Brave (https://brave.com), which blocks ads in YouTube not just before the videos play, but also *during* them. Brave, together with Vivaldi (https://vivaldi.com), is proving that you shouldn't assume the bigger browsers are always better. We'll be writing much more about these excellent tools to ensure our readers have credible alternatives.**

'Scared of change?' There's much to be scared of!

I'd like to respond to Rob Sedgwick's claim in Issue 613 that *Computeractive* readers are "scared of change". I too am of later years (very!), love technology and have computer experience that dates back to a just-launched BBC Micro B, which had its operating system burned into secure, stable ROM.

Later, the user-friendly Windows 3.1 arrived. Now we're at version 11, and Microsoft has assured us that each iteration in between was more robust and secure than the last. I think we were even promised 'bomb-proof' system files once.

Rob must have led a charmed life if he has never suffered from broken updates, legacy kit that's rendered worthless, hard drives croaking before their time and software incompatibilities. That's without the tsunami of hackers probing every chink of our systems.

Here's just one personal example. I dual-boot Windows 7 with Windows 10. The former works a treat and is completely stable. My fully updated Windows 10 suffers from intermittent freezes for no obvious reason, and system error logs give no clue. It's probably a hardware glitch, but changing my graphics card, SSD, sound card and Wi-Fi card had no effect. That leaves just the processor and motherboard, both allegedly compatible with Windows 10.

Of course we're scared, Rob. With good reason.

Tom Borg

Rob needs to realise that you can't simply assume every type of change is good. You see this every day, with tech companies backtracking on a whole range of issues. Microsoft did this when it announced Windows 11. Until June, the company was working on Windows 10X. This sounded like a radical change to Windows 10, but someone in the company decided it was a *bad* change, and Microsoft switched to Windows 11 instead.

What's the Issue...?

A few issues ago, you recommended Auslogics Duplicate File Finder (www.snipca.com/38540). This did a good job of removing duplicates, but I'm sure you also recommended a tool with a better search feature. What was it?

Stephen Newton

CA SAYS **It was AllDup (www.snipca.com/38541). We suggested both programs to reader Andrew Walker in Issue 608, page 19.**

I seem to recall you helping a reader find drivers for old Epson printers. I'm now in the same predicament, so can you direct me to the relevant issue?

Liz Poulter

CA SAYS **Yes, it was Issue 604's 'Problem of the Fortnight', on page 64.**

A little while ago, you published an article explaining how to create a list of the contents of USB sticks. I tried this and was very happy with the results. Now I want to do the same with my other USB sticks. Can you tell me which issue it was in please?

Jim Cox

CA SAYS **Certainly. It was Workshop 2 in Issue 581, page 40.**

In fact, I would go so far as to say that *most* changes are bad, and progress is best made by reversing them and producing something else.

Keith Sutton

Worth paying extra for CDs and DVDs

I agree with Garry Bryant (Star Letter, Issue 612) that the sound quality of CDs and DVDs is far superior to streaming. They may cost a little more, but it's definitely worth paying the extra if you like your music to have a bit of substance. Thankfully, Amazon doesn't feel the same way as Sainsbury's, which has said it will stop selling discs.

Perhaps the extra quality explains why DVD-rental service Cinema Paradiso (www.cinemaparadiso.co.uk) is still going. It appears to be the only one left (remember LoveFilm and ScreenSelect?). The company rightly points out on its website that "not everyone lives in an area that has a powerful or fast enough connection to support streaming, which is why Blu-ray and DVD remain so important. There's also the issue of quality when on screen, and the ability to pause, fast-forward and rewind without having to worry about bothersome buffering interrupting your screening."

That last point is a particularly good one. Why do some shows on Netflix have buffering 10 minutes before they end? If you miss a line of dialogue on Netflix or Amazon Prime and try to rewind, it seems to go too far or not far enough.

Frank Dieter Talbot

I still buy CDs, although I always rip them to my laptop, then play the files through my Hi-Fi setup. The sound quality is as good as playing the CDs directly. I would point out, however, that Garry's take on the audio quality of streaming services is out of date. At first, these services only offered heavily compressed MP3s, but this changed recently, first with better-quality MP3s involving less compression. Later, some offered CD-quality music, and now high-resolution (Hi-Res) streaming is available on several services - notably Tidal (www.tidal.com).

To take Garry's examples, Spotify moved to the highest quality MP3s for its Premium service about a year ago and will soon offer a 'Hi-Fi' option (though the exact quality is not yet specified). Apple Music currently offers Hi-Res streaming (24bit, 192kHz) for its standard £10-a-month service, which is great value when CDs are recorded at 16bit resolution with a 44.1kHz sample rate.

Stephen Murchieson

When it comes to streaming, it's not just audio quality that matters. I also think streaming devalues the music itself. I have a vast number of albums on my shelves which I value highly. My children tell me I could sell them and listen to my music on Spotify, which is the difference between generations. I treat music as a precious art form whereas they see it as a commodity.

Alan Duugan

My 20-year-old USB still works

Following Issue 613's Cover Feature on USB sticks, here's a picture of the very first USB 'Pen drive' I bought - around 20 years ago - with a capacity of 64GB, which was enormous at the time.

It was a revelation compared with using 3.5in floppy disks, but it cost £54! At around £1 per megabyte, that's at least 1,000 times more expensive than any of the drives you mention. And yet, although it's a bit bashed-up and now redundant (and of course I've lost the cap), it still works perfectly.

Adam Pride

CA SAYS **A few months ago, we asked readers to send us photos of the oldest phone they still use. We received loads of examples, including Roger Dyer's collection of Nokia phones stretching back to 1995 (see Letters, Issue 603). Adam has now thrown down the gauntlet for USB sticks. Can any readers boast an older stick that's still working?**

STAR LETTER

Over the moon about Amazon's grounded drones

I was delighted to read Issue 613's 'Question of the Fortnight' about the demise of Amazon's crazy project to fly delivery drones. I'm no great fan of Amazon, but I would have objected to *any* retailer's plans to drop items by air.

Question of the Fortnight

Have Amazon's delivery drones been grounded?

One of the arguments for drone deliveries was that it would mean fewer delivery vans clogging up the roads, but this is naive. If you gave shoppers a new delivery option (such as drones), it would encourage even more people to shop at Amazon, leading to more deliveries of *every* kind - vans, drones, and other Bond-style gimmicks. Maybe Amazon would eventually invent cars that turn into speedboats so they can deliver to oil rigs.

Online deliveries are a blight of modern life. I live in a little lane that seems to be permanently blocked by vans. These used to belong to gardeners, carpenters and builders. Now it's Amazon, DPD, UPS and DHL.

I suspect one reason Amazon pulled the plug on the drone idea is that the company realised it would never be accepted by the authorities or the public. The former would be too worried about the risks to grant permission. Just one serious accident would have been enough to crush the project. Can you imagine the negative headlines?

As for the public, a small anti-social minority would have targeted delivery drones. Criminals are in an arms race with tech companies. Before long, they would have worked out how to bring down the drones and steal their cargo.

Martin Ashmore

The **Star Letter** writer wins a **Computeractive** mug!

Consumeractive

We stand up for your legal rights

Can I get more expensive replacement under warranty?

LEAD CASE

Q I bought a £249.99 Wi-Fi-enabled 'smart' microwave from Currys' website in 2014, paying £49.99 for a five-year extended warranty that offered repair or replacement. I renewed this in December 2019, and since then the microwave has stopped working. Currys said it was beyond repair, so I looked for a replacement, but there were none available. I've now found one, but it costs £349.99 – £100 more than the original price. Am I entitled to this under the warranty?

David Bulford

A The warranty's wording says that if a repair isn't possible, any replacement must be of the same specifications. Therefore, if David has found the same model online, he's entitled to ask for it as a replacement, regardless of the price.

However, the price of specific models doesn't usually increase by so much after such a long time, so we've asked David to check if it's definitely the same oven. If it isn't the same model, David has asked us whether Currys might agree to cover the extra cost as a goodwill gesture. We think he's got a good case because Currys has left him in limbo for over a year. It has neither found him a replacement oven within the price limit, nor offered him vouchers to buy another model.

You might wonder why David hasn't used the Sales of Goods Act to pursue a refund. Whether he was able to depends on when the oven stopped working. This law lasts for six years after purchase, so at some point during 2020 he would have been forced to rely on the warranty only.

CASE ONGOING

Where's my money gone?

Q Because I don't have a credit card, I use a Visa cash card when shopping online. I used my banking app to transfer £600 to my card, but the money has disappeared. The card issuer says it's my bank's fault, while the bank blames the card issuer. So, who *is* responsible?

Linda Martin

A It's hard for us to point the finger of blame, but there's clearly a glitch that's preventing the transaction from being processed. Linda told us she went through the online security checks without a problem, but her cash-card issuer said the bank cited security reasons for not releasing the funds. The bank won't cancel the pending transaction, so her money is stuck in limbo.

Linda should now tell the card issuer to reject the transaction. Hopefully her money should be back in her account within four days. But she could also complain to the bank, asking for an explanation. She's been denied access to her money through no fault of her own. If she doesn't get a satisfactory explanation or apology, she can take the case to the Financial Ombudsman (www.financial-ombudsman.org.uk).

CASE CLOSED

CASE UPDATE

Reader gives up on refund from sole trader

When deciding to pursue a case some readers decide that the potential reward isn't worth the hassle. That's what Keith Seed concluded. As we explained in Issue 613, he wanted a refund from an eBay seller after the secateurs he bought for £7.50 started to fall apart.

The seller agreed to a refund, but only if Keith paid to return the secateurs. We advised him to avoid this by signing up to PayPal's offer to cover up to £15 of return postage costs a year (www.snipca.com/39050). He would have had to sign up, return the item, then fill in a form and add a postage receipt. Faced with this, he decided to drop the complaint.

Keith's case is a reminder that while large retailers can ignore your rights, it's much harder to get refunds from sole traders, even though – unlike private individuals – they are bound by consumer law. Some sole traders might claim they're private individuals, and therefore not liable under law. To determine whether a seller is a trader, look for signs that they're running a business. They'll typically be selling multiple goods, new or second-hand, and have a long list of feedback from buyers.

They're also likely to have terms and conditions, though these might not be legal. We've seen some sole traders claiming they don't have to accept refunds for faulty goods. You should report these sellers to the site they're selling on, and also to Trading Standards and HMRC, which do go after sole traders as well as major retailers.

Contact us so we can investigate your case

Email: consumeractive@computeractive.co.uk
Please include your name, phone number and address.

Why is Currys emailing me when I've opted out?

Q **After buying a Samsung TV from Currys, I was surprised to receive two emails from the retailer about qualifying for free trials of Apple services. I had opted out of receiving advertising emails from Currys, so isn't it breaking the law by sending these?**

Keith Willcocks

A It's not as clear cut as that. Under the UK's General Data Protection Regulations (GDPR), companies are allowed to send emails to you when they think there's a "legitimate interest" (as explained at www.snipca.com/39228). This applies even if you've opted out of marketing emails.

Generally, legitimate interest is when a customer might benefit from being contacted. This definition forbids emails shamelessly promoting a retailer's products, but it could allow offers from other companies, such as Apple's promise of five months' free access to Apple Music, Apple Arcade and Apple News+. Also permitted are emails informing customers they're entitled to cashback as the result of a purchase.

Of course, one retailer's legitimate interest is another person's irritating spam. Keith clearly feels that Currys has no justification in sending the emails, and he could reasonably ask why Currys thought he would have an interest in Apple's services.

He can complain to the Information Commissioner's Office (ICO, www.snipca.com/39229), which has the power to investigate individual cases. Currys has asked us for Keith's details so it can talk to him to clarify his contact preferences.

CASE ONGOING

Can 'free' offers charge for postage?

Q **I often receive emails telling me that I've won an iPhone or some other gadget, or there's a free gift I can claim, but I have to pay postage. What I don't understand is if I have to pay postage, how can this be 'free'? Is this legal?**

Mark Trainor

A Yes, it is legal for a company to promote a gift or prize as 'free' even if you have to pay for postage to receive it. This is because, legally, the product itself is separate from the method of delivering it. This might break the law of common sense, but not consumer law. If the offer is genuine, you should consider whether the postage is worth paying.

However, it's not legal for a company to charge any other cost in order to claim what it calls a 'gift'. The definition of a gift is that it is free, except for postage. Companies could in theory try to get around this restriction by using a different word to describe the offer.

With gifts and prizes, it's important to distinguish between genuine offers and scams. With the former, your rights are covered by consumer law just as your purchases are. Companies must treat these offers seriously and fulfil them, not simply as ways to promote their products.

If you don't get what the email promises you, report the company to Trading Standards. It can investigate both emails that are obvious scams and genuine offers that companies are slow to fulfil.

CASE CLOSED

CREDIT WHERE IT'S DUE

Lenovo's help best in 20 years of using PCs

Initially I was underwhelmed by my Lenovo IdeaCentre PC because effectively it's a laptop in a metal box, without room for expansion. This was confirmed when I considered adding an SSD and discovered there appeared to be no space for it, despite the specification stating there's space for two drives.

Some time later I contacted Lenovo support because the HDMI port was not working. Their support was excellent and reasonably quick. After the first email the issue was not resolved, so the engineer tried to phone me, but I missed the call so they emailed instead. When it was still not resolved the engineer phoned again, but I was out. When it was all finally resolved the engineer phoned to check I was happy, and asked whether I had further questions. It was the best support I've received in over 20 years of using PCs.

Ken Daykin

Has a company impressed you with its customer service? Please let us know: editor@computeractive.co.uk

Lenovo

Contact
Lenovo

- **Email and live chat**
  www.snipca.com/39191
- **Phone** 03337 773 991

Grow Your Family Tree

If you want to put personal events in a global context, follow **Nick Peers'** tips to...

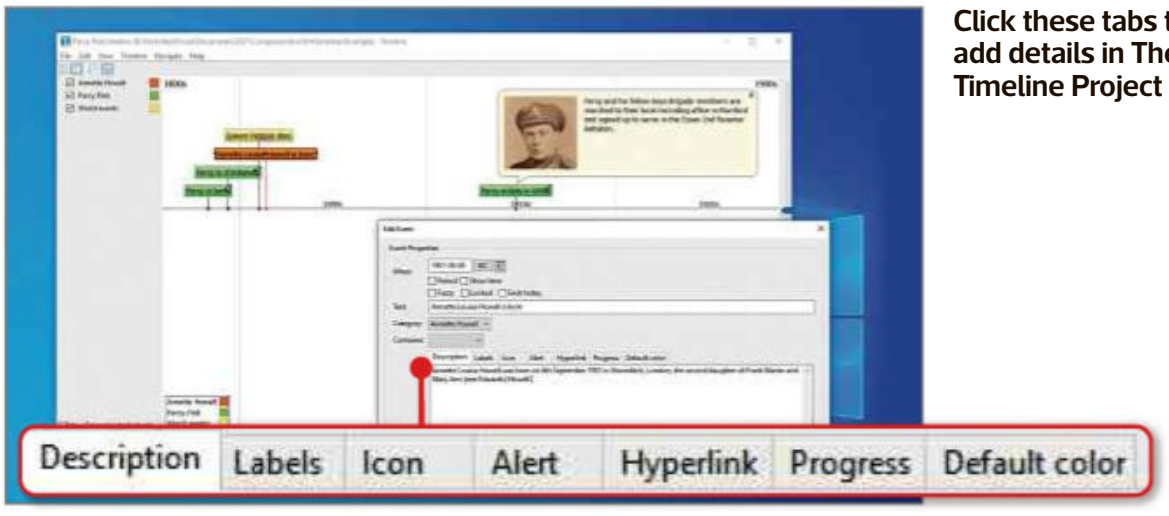
Build a visual timeline

Reader Barry Mansfield has used Family Tree Maker (FTM) to trace his family line back to 1600, and now wants to build a visual timeline of his *own* life, incorporating global events from the past 75 years.

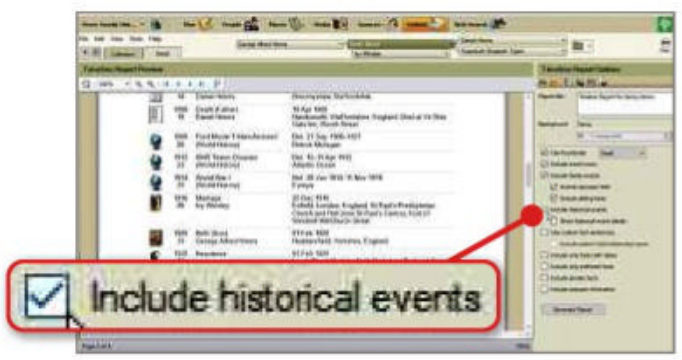
Use your family history program

Barry should start in FTM because, like most genealogy programs, it has a timeline option. Select the person you want to be the centre of the timeline, then switch to the Publish tab. Choose 'Person Reports' in the 'Publication Types' pane on the left, then select 'Timeline Report' from the list of reports and click 'Create Report' on the right.

You can configure the report using the options in the right-hand pane. Barry should tick 'Include historical events' (see screenshot below left) to add these to the report.



Click these tabs to add details in The Timeline Project



Tick 'Include historical events' to create a timeline in Family Tree Maker

Try dedicated timeline software

However, FTM's timeline is little more than a chronological list of items. You'll get better results adding world events yourself, rather than relying on a program. You could try Twile (https://twile.com), which is aimed squarely at family historians (we explained how to use this in Issue 560). Alternatively, if you have a Google account, you could try Timeline JS (www.snipca.com/39194), which turns Google Sheets into beautiful timelines you can share with others. Click 'Make a Timeline' for instructions.

If neither of those appeal, try The Timeline Project (www.snipca.com/39188). Once you've installed it, open it, then create a standard Gregorian calendar. Choose 'Navigate', Fit Century to zoom out of the timeline, then click and drag it to position it around the time of your chosen person's birth.

From here, choose Timeline, then Create Event. A new window will open into which you can set the event's date, provide a headline (under Text), then add more details into the tabs below (see screenshot above), such as thumbnail images as icons and hyperlinks for linking to web pages or files on your PC. After clicking OK, the event will appear on the timeline. Double-click it to edit it in the pane shown in the screenshot above.

When you roll your cursor over an event, any text or images you added will appear in a pop-up window. Events can be colour coded, letting you distinguish personal from global, for example. One little tip: items with a specific date are placed above the timeline in the centre of the screen; events that span a period (such as 1914-18) will appear below it.

Finally, Mac and iPad users should investigate Timeline 3D (www.beedocs.com/timeline3D/mac), which produces attractive timelines in 3D. You can build your timeline for free, but you'll have to pay £14.99 to unlock all the export options for sharing it.

Your **Genealogy** Problems Solved

Would you know whether the Greek Orthodox Church has its own records for births, marriages and deaths? Also, is there anywhere one can access similar records for Cyprus?

David Williams

Online records for Greece are primarily housed at the General State Archives (www.snipca.com/39190), but most births, marriages and deaths records aren't online. Instead, look at the Family Search Wiki pages for both Greece (www.snipca.com/39108) and Cyprus (www.snipca.com/39107), which provide expert advice on where records are likely to be kept.

Have a genealogy question for Nick? Email letters@computeractive.co.uk with 'Grow Your Family Tree' in the subject line.

Next issue: Find free microfilm records

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Best Free Software

Wayne Williams recommends new programs that won't cost a penny

OFFICE SUITE

LibreOffice 7.2

www.libreoffice.org

What you need: Windows 7, 8.1 or 10, macOS or Linux

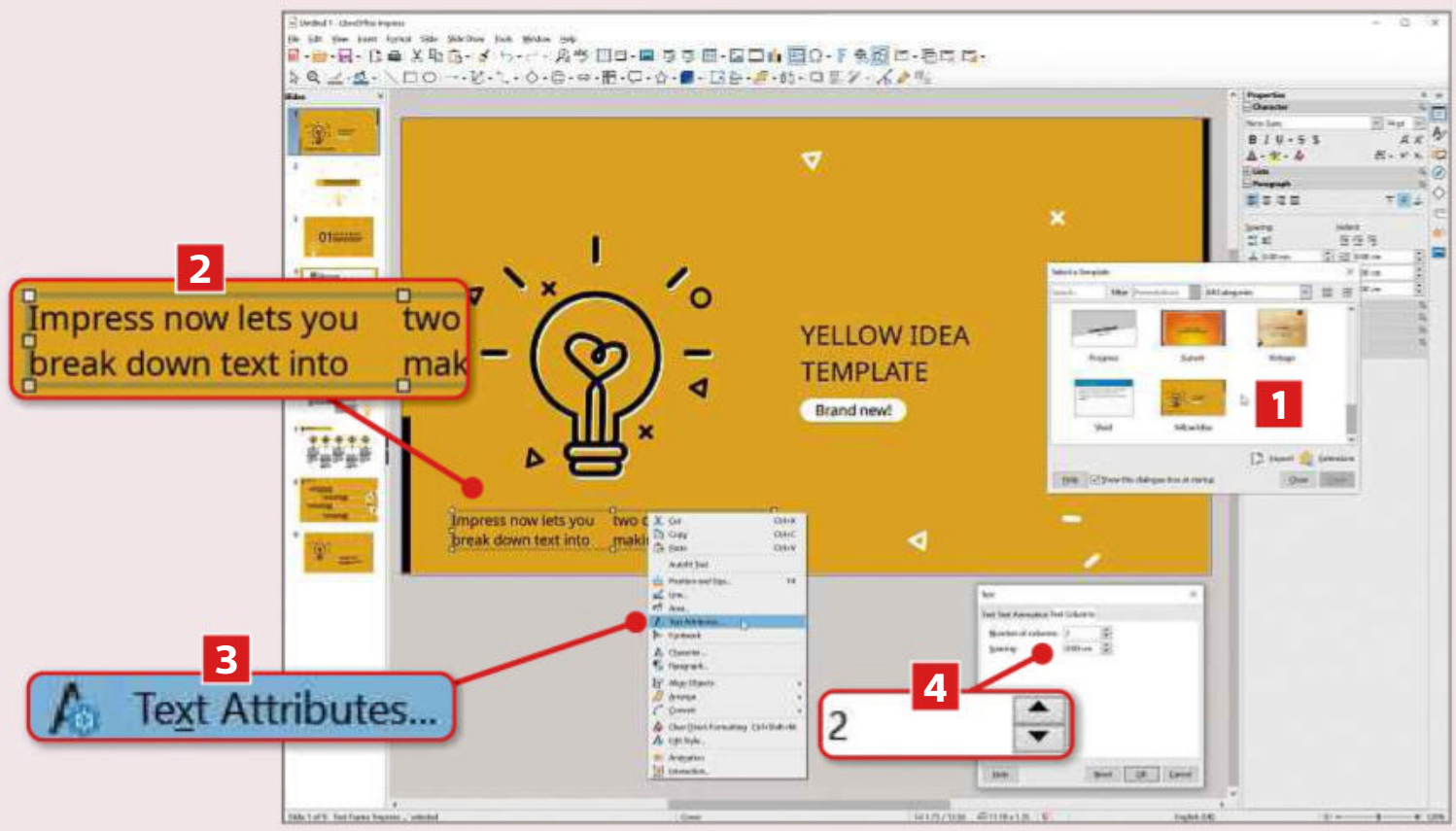
LibreOffice has just been updated with a long list of improvements, making our favourite free office suite even more useful. Many of the tweaks affect background processes, boosting the suite's speed and stability, while others make it work better when you import Microsoft Office files such as DOCX (Word) and XLSX (Excel). It's still not perfect, though, and if you open and save complex documents between Office and LibreOffice, you may occasionally encounter formatting errors.

Version 7.2 adds a new dark theme, a pop-up list of menu commands and a new List View for browsing templates. The word processor, Writer, now lets you add links in tables of contents and indices, which is useful when creating long documents. You can also apply background fills that cover the full page, extending beyond the margins – although this doesn't affect margins imposed by your printer. If you use Writer's mail merge tool, you'll now see a warning if you fail to link to a data source containing names and addresses.

A new AutoFilter option in Calc, the spreadsheet tool, lets you filter a spreadsheet's contents by text colour or background colour, and is available in the Data menu. There's also a new 'fat cross' cursor that's easier to see – you can turn this on in Options.

Both Impress (LibreOffice's equivalent of Microsoft PowerPoint), and Draw (its drawing program), gain new templates - Candy, Freshes, Grey Elegant, Growing Liberty and Yellow Idea (see below). Text boxes now allow for multiple columns in each box, which is a major improvement, because it means you don't have to create a separate box for each column of text.

There's also a special version of LibreOffice for new Mac computers equipped with Apple Silicon (M1 chips). You can download it from www.snipca.com/39268, although its developers warn that it's an early build and shouldn't be used for "critical work".



1 When you create a new presentation in Impress, it offers you a selection of templates you can use. These now include Candy, Grey Elegant and Yellow Idea - which we use here.

2 Search for a template, or click one you like from the selection on offer and click Open. The template you choose will open ready for you to tweak. Click some text to edit it.

3 Impress now supports multi-column text. Click your text, then right-click the box and select Text Attributes.

4 In the box that opens, click the Text Columns tab, then enter the number of columns you want. You can also change the spacing between columns. Click OK to make the change.

UNINSTALLER

IObit Uninstaller 11

www.iobit.com

What you need: Windows 7, 8.1, or 10

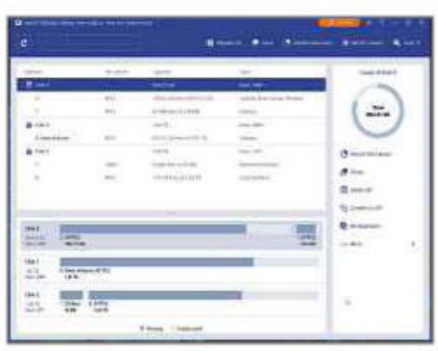
IObit Uninstaller removes unwanted programs and the junk they leave behind, such as temporary files and registry entries. This version adds support for Windows 11 and has a larger database of programs to remove, but its best new feature is the Software Health section, which identifies and fixes problems with programs you've installed. You'll need to upgrade to the Pro version to fix some of these, such as updating old software. But other options are free, including turning off 'disturbing notifications' (1 in screenshot), such as unnecessary messages in your notification area, and giving software permission to use specific parts of your PC where necessary 2, such as your webcam. When you've installed the program, It will prompt you to sign up for a newsletter and claim a free ebook. Just click No Thanks to skip.

PARTITIONING TOOL

EaseUS Partition Master Free 16

www.snipca.com/39296

What you need:
Windows 7, 8.1, or 10



If you have a very large hard drive, it makes sense to partition it. Splitting a 4TB drive into more manageable 1TB chunks will give you four separate 'drives', each with its own drive letter, that you can use for different purposes: one for Windows, another for photos, and so on. EaseUS Partition Master makes it easy to partition your drive and change drive letters. Version 16 has been redesigned so it's easier to use, and it can now merge non-adjacent partitions. This is useful if, for example, you have four partitions and need more space in partition 1, but only partition 3 is not in use. You need to enter an email address to download it, but it needn't be your main address (EaseUS doesn't send a confirmation email). Click the grey Download link in the box that appears to get the free version. When the installer runs, click the grey Install Free button.

WHAT SHOULD I DOWNLOAD?

We tell you what software & apps to use

What's the best free diary-writing program?

Q I've been looking for a secure program for writing a diary. I've looked in the Microsoft Store, but none were suitable. Others online claimed to be free, but then asked for a fee. Can you help?

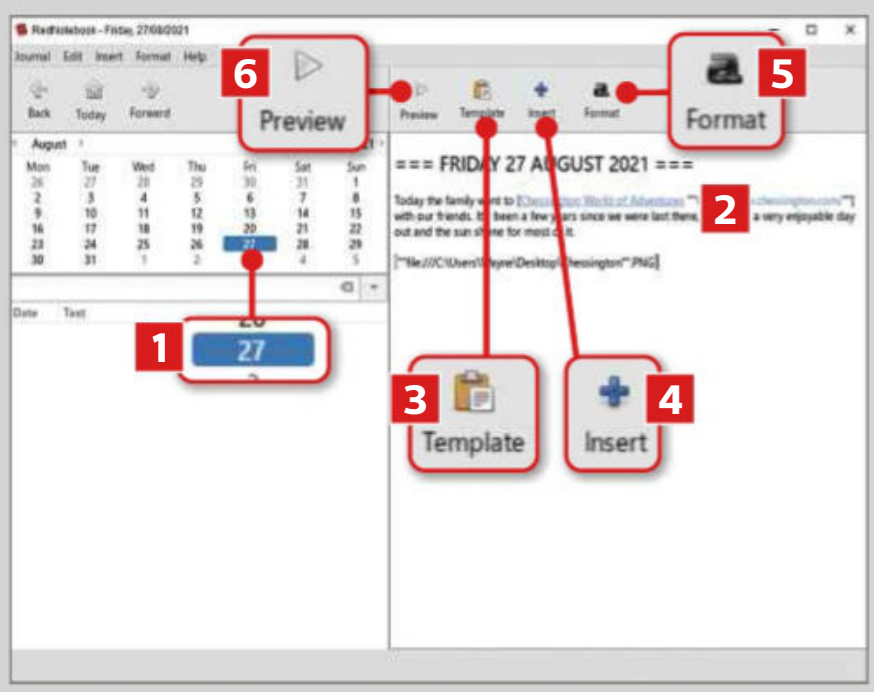
Hugh Rogers

A Most decent diary programs come with a price tag, but a good free option is RedNotebook from https://rednotebook.sourceforge.io. It's been around since 2008, but is still being improved and updated.

Its creator asks you to make a donation if you like the software, but you can get it for free by clicking the Windows logo at the bottom of the page, then clicking the blue rednotebook-2.22.exe link.

To add an entry, click a date in the calendar (1 in screenshot) and then start typing in the pane on the right 2. To create a template, click the Template button 3 and the program will load an example with instructions on how to change it. Click the Save button to make the changes.

You can also add pictures, files, links, bullet lists, titles (of different sizes), dates/time and more using the Insert menu 4. The Format button 5 is where you can format text, adding bold, italics, and underlines. Click the Preview button 6 to see how the entry looks without the formatting. Go to Journal to save your diary or export it in plain text or as an HTML file.



Do you need our advice on what software to use? Just email us at letters@computeractive.co.uk

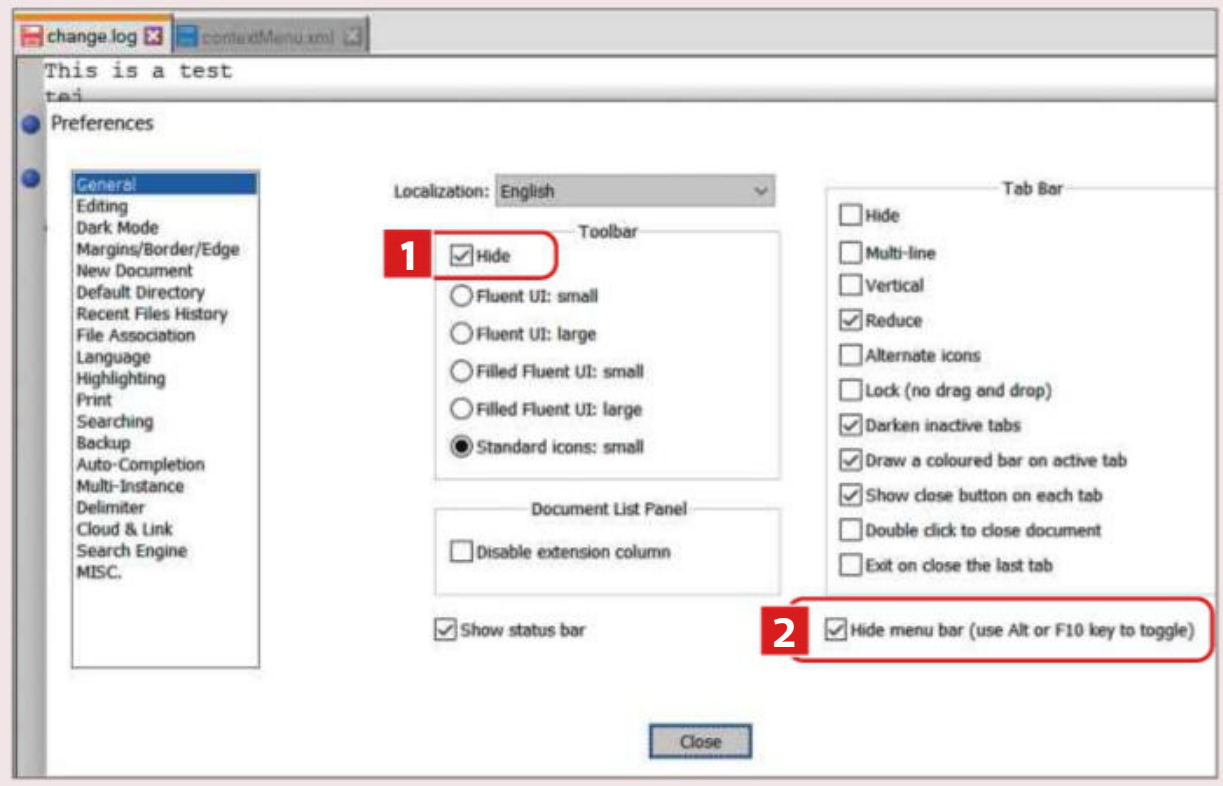
HOW I USE...

Notepad++

Will Stapley explains how this Notepad replacement lets him keep tabs on his text files

I mostly use Google Docs when jotting notes, not least because I don't have to worry about saving them (Google Docs diligently saves as I type). However, there are still times when I use Notepad – it loads in a flash and has a distraction-free design. As with other Microsoft tools, however, Notepad lacks one thing in particular: tabs. Consequently, I often end up with multiple Notepad windows open, meaning I have to hop between them using Alt+Tab (wading through all my other open apps in the process).

That's why I recently ditched Notepad for the similarly named, but much more powerful, Notepad++ (www.snipca.com/39288). This lets me open as many tabs as I like, then switch between them using the same Ctrl+Tab shortcut as my browser. Although Notepad++ is designed primarily for programmers, I've discovered many of its features are just as useful for simpler tasks, such as my note taking.



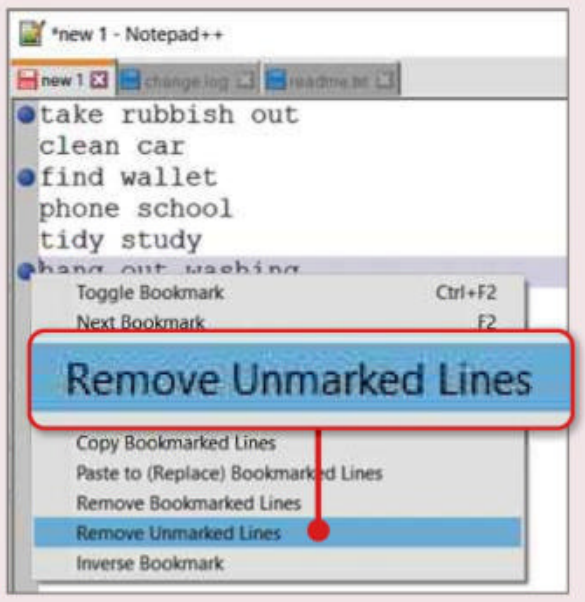
Notepad++ lets you remove unwanted menus and buttons

The left sidebar, for example, lets me mark individual lines with a small blue circle. I use this when highlighting the items I want to keep in an impromptu list. Once I've marked the ones I need, I can erase the rest by right clicking the sidebar, then selecting Remove Unmarked Lines (see screenshot left).

I'm not keen on the numbers that sit next to each line, however. Programmers use these to organise their code, but I've decided to ditch them by going to the Settings Menu, 'Preferences...', selecting 'Margin/Border/Edge' from the left sidebar, then unticking Display in the Line Number section.

I've also chosen to strip other unwanted elements from Notepad++, including the array of shortcut buttons in the toolbar (I find them distracting and prefer using keyboard shortcuts) along with the menus at the top (I can temporarily reveal these by pressing Alt). To do this, I select the General section in Preferences, then tick Hide (see screenshot above 1) and 'Hide menu bar...' 2. The result is a design that's cleaner than Microsoft's Notepad.

Notepad++ has features that Notepad could only dream of, including running web searches on words or phrases. I simply select what I want to search for, right-click it, then select 'Search on Internet'. Google is the default search engine for this, but you can switch to another by returning to the Preferences window, selecting Search Engine, then choosing from the various options (I've gone for the excellent DuckDuckGo, since you ask). I can even run a Wikipedia search on a word by selecting it, then pressing Alt+F3.



Once you've marked specific lines, you can quickly remove the rest

WHAT I'D LIKE TO SEE IN NOTEPAD++

I'm fairly sure the developers of Notepad++ don't have non-coding users like me at the top of their priorities, but I'd love to have a simple spell-check tool built into Notepad++.

There are lots of third-party plug-ins for Notepad++ (select 'Plugins Admin...' from the Plugins menu to browse them), including a spell checker, but despite my best efforts I can't get it to work – and a quick search online reveals I'm not the only person with this problem.

Named & Shamed

Jonathan Parkyn puts the boot into tech villains, jargon-spouting companies and software stuffed with junk

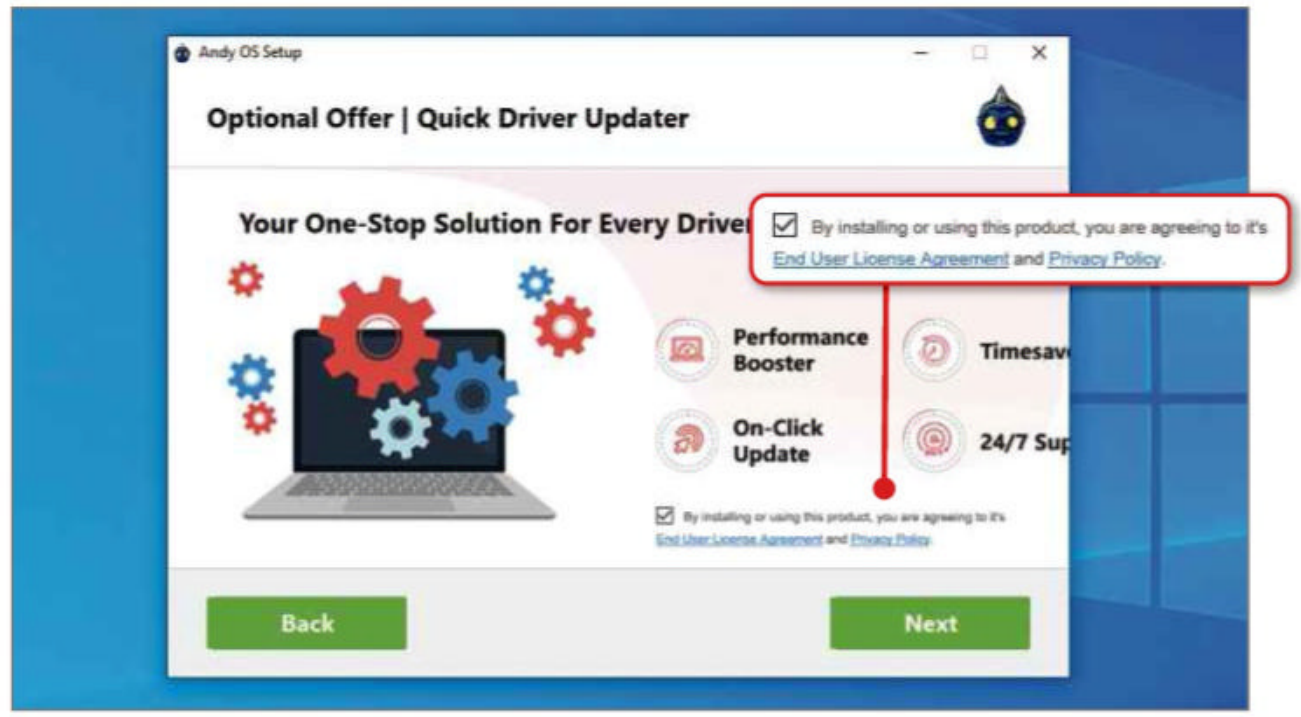
WARNING: JUNK AHEAD

Junk offender: Andy

Android emulators are tools that let you run a virtual Android device on your Windows PC. It's useful to have access to all your favourite apps – such as WhatsApp and Viber – on your computer's desktop, or try lots of free apps without worrying about filling up your phone's storage.

But before you rush to install such a tool, let me warn you about Andy. It sounds friendly (like a reliable plumber), and the website (www.andyroid.net) boasts that it's "the best Android Emulator". My personal experience, however, would suggest otherwise.

During the setup process, Andy will attempt to trick you into installing unwanted software on not one, but two occasions. The first test of your wits is a screen with an 'optional offer' for a tool called Quick Driver Updater. Here, you'll need to click the ticked box next to the practically illegible small print (see screenshot) before clicking Next. You may notice a Back button on this screen, but it doesn't work, so don't bother clicking it.



Squint and you'll just make out the box you need to tick to block Andy's junk

The next screen is even more devious. Here you'll need to click the button next to the 'Download without SpyHunter 5' option, or you'll end up with even more rubbish on your PC. Luckily, I was able to avoid installing any of this, largely because – at this point – the wretched software somehow froze my entire computer, forcing me to reboot and costing me several lost hours of work.

The good news is that we won't have to put up with junk-filled rubbish like Andy for much longer. One of the most welcome features offered by Windows 11 is its ability to run Android apps on your desktop. That'll be handier than Andy ever will.

WHAT ARE THEY TALKING ABOUT?

WHAT THEY SAY

Samsung www.snipca.com/39185

"Both feature unique form factors that come together under the umbrella concept of the Galaxy Z series. Elements that could interfere with the user's field of view have been shrewdly arranged to allow for visual symmetry and balance in both devices, and the refined designs of both Galaxy Z Fold3 (pictured) and Galaxy Z Flip3 are singular yet leave the same powerful impression that characterizes the 'Galaxy Z' identity."

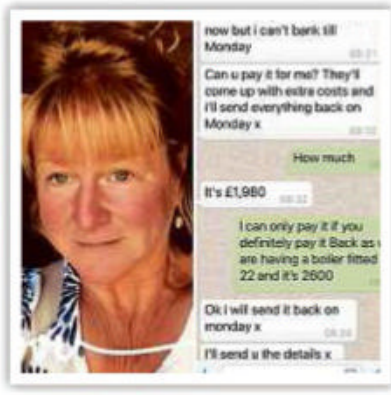
WHAT THEY MEAN

Our new Galaxy Z phones are both unique and like all the others in the range.

JONATHAN'S VILLAIN OF THE FORTNIGHT

Toni Parker's 'son'

Parents will do anything to help their children in times of need. Just ask 53-year-old nurse Toni Parker (pictured), from Wolverhampton, who didn't hesitate to lend her son, currently serving in the RAF, almost £2,500 when he sent WhatsApp messages (also pictured) claiming he needed to pay a bill. Except that the cries for help weren't from her son, but from an imposter.



One of the reasons she was fooled is that the scammer first sent several friendly messages claiming he was using an unfamiliar phone number because he'd dropped his old phone down the toilet. She realised she'd been fleeced when she checked WhatsApp later to discover that the messages had been deleted.

The moral here is make sure you call anyone who asks for money to check it's a genuine request.

LAPTOP | **£799** from HP www.snipca.com/39177

HP Envy 13

Lucky for some

The Envy 13 follows a familiar pattern of recent HP laptop designs – an angular body, a slightly raised palm rest and engraved detailing on the lid. It has a silver finish that looks and feels very upmarket. At 1.3kg, it isn't the lightest laptop we've ever reviewed, but it does feel reassuringly robust and the lid is very rigid. Measuring 17x306x194mm (HxWxD), it's a small laptop that will easily slide into a backpack.

> "Solid design, a decent screen, and graphics that can take on most games"

One casualty of its compact dimensions is the Enter key, which is wide but the same height as a standard key. We prefer Enter keys to be double-height so that it's easy to hit without requiring precise keyboard skills. Another gripe is that the power button is next to the Delete key, making it very easy to hit by mistake.

However, the keys are virtually silent when typing, and feel comfortable to use. Likewise, the 110x60mm touchpad, although plastic, is pretty faultless and very responsive. There's also a keyboard backlight (for those who like to type in the dark) and a dedicated button to use the decent 720p webcam. Another dedicated key opens the HP System Control app, which lets you put the Envy into one of its power modes, which can help you manage your battery life.

Connectivity is well catered for, with a drop-jaw USB 3.0 port on each side, as well as a USB-C port on the left (all pictured below). The USB-C port supports DisplayPort 1.4 output, which is just as well as there's no HDMI port.

Because it has a gloss finish, the Envy's 13.3in Full HD (1920x1080-pixel) 60Hz IPS screen can be difficult to view in direct sunlight, but otherwise it's perfectly fine. It's bright (up to 419cd/m^2) and excels at reproducing colours, which makes watching films a thoroughly enjoyable experience.

This is helped by the surprisingly high quality of the built-in Bang & Olufsen speakers. There isn't a great deal of bass but they're well balanced and, unusually for a laptop this size, make a decent stab of outputting music that doesn't sound tinny.

Also unusual in a small laptop is the standalone graphics hardware, based around the Nvidia GeForce MX450 graphics card. This has less power than the version you might find in a desktop PC, and it only has 2GB of dedicated video memory, but it adds more graphical power than you'd otherwise get from the Intel Core-i5 1135G7 quad-core processor.

As a result, it ran smoothly with respectable frame rates (40fps) when we tested it with several demanding games, albeit with many of the highest detail settings switched off. However, in a laptop of this size and price, it's unusual to have any gaming capability at all.

Battery life lasted 11 hours 21 minutes in our video-playback test, which is reasonable but falls well short of the Lenovo Yoga Slim 7's impressive 15 hours 40 minutes (see Alternative, below).

Overall, this is an impressive laptop, particularly for those looking for a small-screen compact model that's powerful enough to run a few games and is good for streaming entertainment. We'd still recommend the Lenovo Yoga Slim 7 over this for general use, as it has a larger screen and better Windows performance, but the HP Envy 13 is a solid option for those more focused on entertainment.

SPECIFICATIONS

Four-core Intel Core i5-1135G7 processor • 8GB of memory • Nvidia GeForce MX450 graphics • 13.3in 1920x1080-pixel IPS display • 512GB SSD • 720p webcam • Wi-Fi 6 • Bluetooth 5 • 1x USB-C port • 2x USB 3.0 ports • MicroSD card slot • Windows 10 Home • 17x307x195mm (HxWxD) • 1.3kg • One-year warranty www.snipca.com/39177

VERDICT A compact, affordable and powerful laptop, with a surprising amount of graphics power for such a small device

★★★★★

ALTERNATIVE Lenovo Yoga Slim 7 £749 This AMD-powered alternative runs Windows faster, but isn't as good for gaming and other graphics-based tasks

PC | **£1,500** from Chillblast www.snipca.com/39183

Chillblast Fusion Cruiser

Smashes through Windows

This striking PC has tempered safety glass on its front and left sides. Three fans light up the front fascia with a pulsating rainbow effect, but you can configure this – we ended up choosing a subtle white glow. This compliments the view through the side window, which displays the glowing light from the PC's two most important components: the AMD Ryzen 7 5800X processor, which comes with a water-cooling system; and the huge RTX 3060 graphics card.

> "A speedy Windows machine with striking looks and potential for upgrades"

Those who know their graphics cards may have been expecting a newer RTX 3070 in a desktop PC costing £1,500, so it's a slight disappointment to see the older RTX 3060 here. It's a great choice for games if your monitor is 1440p resolution, but it struggles if you want to play games in 4K resolution.

However, while Chillblast compromises on cutting-edge graphics, it makes amends in general Windows performance. The processor is powerful and its water-cooled system keeps the PC running at the peak of its powers with very little noise. In fact, it performed superbly in all our benchmark tests that measure Windows speed.

The processor was undoubtedly helped by the PC's generous 32GB of memory. Configured across two 16GB modules, this occupies only two of the motherboard's four memory slots. This means you could double it to 64GB fairly cheaply and easily by simply adding another two 16GB modules.

Chillblast supplies 1TB of storage via a fast M.2 SSD. This is probably plenty of space for those who aren't planning to install loads of games, but if you wanted to add more in future there's a second M.2 slot on the motherboard you could use. There's room for more storage via a SATA SSD mounting slot and there are two 3.5in hard-drive bays available. It's just a shame you would need to rip up Chillblast's tidy cabling to get to the relevant connectors.

One of the best things about Chillblast PCs is that they come with a five-year warranty, including two years of collect-and-return cover, which is far more generous than most rivals. The remaining three years cover labour costs only, but it's still above and beyond what most manufacturers offer.

SPECIFICATIONS

Eight-core AMD Ryzen 7 5800X processor • 32GB memory • Nvidia GeForce RTX 3060 graphics card • 1TB SSD • Wi-Fi 6 • 2x HDMI port • 2x DisplayPort • 6x USB 3.0 ports • Gigabit Ethernet • Windows 10 Home • 425x210x397mm (HxWxD) • Five-year warranty www.snipca.com/39183

HOW WE TEST

Computeractive is owned by Dennis Publishing, which employs a team of specialist technical reviewers. You'll often read references to our benchmark testing, which is a method of assessing products using the same criteria. For example, we test the speed of every PC and the battery life of every phone and tablet in exactly the same way. This makes our reviews authoritative, rigorous and accurate.

Dennis Publishing also owns the magazine *PC Pro* and the websites Expert Reviews (www.expertreviews.co.uk) and IT Pro (www.itpro.com). This means we can test thousands of products before choosing the most relevant for *Computeractive*.

FAIR AND IMPARTIAL

Our writers follow strict guidelines to ensure the reviews are fair and impartial. The manufacturer has no involvement in our tests.

OUR AWARDS

We award every product that gets five stars our Buy It! stamp of approval. It means we were extremely impressed by the product, and we think you will be too.

Every product that gets a four-star review is given the Recommended award. We highly recommend these products, although they just fail to meet the high standard of our Buy It! winners.

PRICES

Our reviews contain a link to the best price we found online at the time of press.

VERDICT With its colourful illuminations, this may look like a gaming computer, but is probably at its best as a general-purpose Windows PC.

★★★★★

ALTERNATIVE

Acer Predator Orion 3000 £1,499 With a GeForce RTX 3070 graphics card, this is a good bet if you're looking for gaming performance

LAPTOP | **£749** from Amazon www.snipca.com/39184

Huawei MateBook D 15

Not too bright

If the compact HP Envy 13 (see page 22) is too small for your needs, consider Huawei's latest offering instead. This is a larger laptop (17x358x230mm, HxWxD) with a 15in screen weighing 1.56kg, but is still light enough to carry around. For the very reasonable price you get an 11th-generation Core i5 processor, 8GB of RAM and a 512GB SSD.

> "A solid Windows machine, but the screen is dull and the battery life lacking"

The keyboard is spacious and quiet, even if the key action lacks a little feedback. Another irritation here is that it retains Huawei's standard hidden webcam, which pops out of the keyboard between the F6 and F7 buttons. It's positioned too low, providing an odd angle on your face that points up your nostrils. More sensibly placed is the combined power button and fingerprint scanner, which is separated from the keyboard. There's no backlight, but the 120x73mm Precision trackpad is responsive, even into its corners.

The laptop has one USB-C port (which doubles as the charging socket, but can't be used to connect to a monitor), one USB 3.2 port and two USB 2.0 ports. Video output is handled by an HDMI port and there's also a 3.5mm audio jack (all pictured below). When you want to connect wirelessly it supports Wi-Fi 6 and Bluetooth 5.1.

The screen is a decent size but offers disappointing quality. It measures 15.6in across the diagonal and operates at Full HD 1080p resolution (1920x1080 pixels). It uses IPS technology but is just too dim, with a maximum brightness level of 135cd/m². It wasn't very good at reproducing accurate colour in our tests either (with an sRGB coverage of 55.8 per cent), which is fine unless you often edit photos or videos. Delta E colour accuracy was also pretty dreadful at 6.04, and only the contrast ratio of 1,365:1 was in line with what we could have hoped for

There's much better news when it comes to its Windows performance. The processor is a four-core Intel Core i5-1135G7 and Huawei has tweaked it to perfection here, where it performed very well in our benchmark tests. It produced the best set of Windows performance results we've seen to date from a laptop with an i5 processor.

Unlike the HP Envy on page 22, however, this laptop doesn't come with separate graphics hardware, relying instead on Intel's built-in graphics. This impacts gaming performance and means the laptop will just about run most games at a decent frame rate as long as you stick to 1080p resolution and keep the graphics settings low. Having said that, we really wouldn't recommend this laptop to anyone wanting to run the latest games.

Battery life isn't that brilliant, either, lasting for 7 hours 10 minutes in our video-playback test. That's not a great result but it's better than the 5 hours 50 minutes that the previous version of this laptop managed.

If you're looking for a reliable and good-value laptop with a large screen, the Huawei MateBook D 15 is a decent option. Although the screen isn't great, it's fine for browsing the internet and doing a bit of office work, and the high-performance processor is fast enough for this kind of activity. We wouldn't recommend it for games, however, and its dull screen is lacklustre for other entertainment activities.

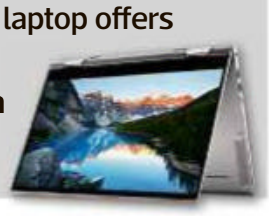
SPECIFICATIONS

Intel Core i5-1135G7 processor • 8GB memory • Intel Iris Xe graphics • 15.6in 1920x1,080 pixels IPS screen • 512GB SSD • Wi-Fi 6 • Bluetooth 5.1 • 1x USB-C port • 1x USB 3.2 port • 2x USB 2.0 port • HDMI port • Windows 10 Home • 17x358x230mm (HxWxD) • 1.56kg • One-year warranty www.snipca.com/39184

VERDICT The latest Huawei MateBook D 15 offers exceptional Windows performance for the price, but lets the side down with a dull screen and a short battery life

★★★★★

ALTERNATIVE Dell Inspiron 15 2-in-1 £729 Dell's 15in laptop offers a screen you can fold back, but it comes with a smaller 256GB SSD



ROUTER | **£200** from Amazon www.snipca.com/39200

TP-Link Archer AX90

Tri, tri and tri again

Most routers that conform to the latest Wi-Fi 6 standard are dual-band models, with a 5GHz radio that works with your fastest Wi-Fi devices, and a 2.4GHz radio that communicates with older devices that aren't compatible with 5GHz networks.

However, if you have a busy family network, and want to ensure that you keep some fast networking bandwidth clear for important home working or uninterrupted media streaming, a tri-band router with a third radio is one way to do it. The downside is that they generally cost more. The tri-band Netgear Nighthawk AX12, for example, costs £340 (www.snipca.com/39201), while Netgear's cheapest dual-band Wi-Fi 6 router costs less than £100 (www.snipca.com/39218).

> "A versatile and affordable router for busy households"

With the Archer AX90, TP-Link has come up with a clever way to keep the cost down. Instead of using two matching high-speed 5GHz radios as the Nighthawk AX12 does, the AX90 combines one high-speed 5GHz transmitter (offering a theoretical maximum speed of 4.8Gbps) with a slower 5GHz one (up to 1.2Gbps), alongside the slower 2.4GHz radio (574Mbps). The result is a £200 router with the versatility of a tri-band model.

To make room for all of these radios, the router's eight external antennas are fixed to the unit's edges. Round the back, you'll find a pair of USB ports (for sharing storage) and five Ethernet ports, including one that supports speeds up to 2.5Gbps.

As is usual with TP-Link routers, you can set it up using either a browser-based interface that's hosted on the router or the Tether mobile app. The latter is the easier option: we used the app on an Android phone and it let us simply scan the QR code on the underside of the router to connect. The router doesn't have its own modem so needs cabling to an existing modem or router via Ethernet.

So how did it work in practice? Both the 5GHz radios performed excellently at short range, when there's just a single wall or floor to penetrate. Once we moved further away, the difference between the two became very clear. The slower radio kept up a solid signal all around the house, but transfer speeds were only in line with what we'd expect from a much cheaper router. On the faster band, however, the router acquitted itself superbly, with transfer speeds rivalling those we've seen in more expensive routers, including the Netgear Nighthawk AX12.

This makes it a great affordable alternative. It requires a little more setup to ensure your individual devices are using the most appropriate radios, but it's great for busy households that need a wider choice of network options in an affordable router.

SPECIFICATIONS

Tri-band Wi-Fi 6 • AX6600 speed rating • 5x Gigabit Ethernet ports • 2x USB ports • WPA3 • 174x207x311mm (HxDxW) • Three-year warranty

www.snipca.com/39200

VERDICT A tri-band Wi-Fi 6 router that gives you more options and greater control over a busy network, helping to ensure your Wi-Fi speed is always at its optimum

★★★★★

ALTERNATIVE

Netgear Nighthawk AX12 £340 This tri-band Wi-Fi 6 router has two high-powered 5GHz radios, but it's a lot more expensive

CHOOSE THE RIGHT SPECS

Wi-Fi security

What does it do?

Wi-Fi security protects your router from interlopers who try to connect their devices to your Wi-Fi network. It also encrypts the data that's sent between devices once they're connected. Security has always been a part of the Wi-Fi Alliance's Wi-Fi standards, but early devices that use the original WEP (Wired Equivalent Privacy) and WPA (Wireless Protected Access) protocol are no longer considered secure.

How does it work?

The router that manages a Wi-Fi network secures it with a password. You can connect a device, such as a PC or smartphone, to a Wi-Fi network by typing in this password when prompted. Alternatively, if you have physical access to the router, you may be able to connect by pressing the WPS (Wi-Fi Protected Setup) button. The latest WPA3 standard also lets you use a scanned QR code to connect. Once the connection has been established, communication between the router and the device is encrypted, so even if someone could intercept the signal, they wouldn't be able to interpret what it says.

What are the specs?

Since Wi-Fi first appeared there have been four main security specifications: WEP, WPA, WPA2 and WPA3. WEP and WPA were phased out over 15 years ago, so you should now be using WPA2. New devices should now also be compatible with WPA3, announced in 2018, which is even more secure. However, WPA2 will still protect older devices for the time being.

Can I change it later?

If your device uses an older security standard you're stuck with it. You'll need to buy a newer alternative if you want to strengthen your security.

WEBCAM | **£180** from Dell www.snipca.com/39206

Dell UltraSharp Webcam

Up the resolution

4K webcams are still fairly rare because 1080p cameras are perfectly sufficient for most video chats and cost significantly less. This 4K webcam from Dell costs £180, while a decent 1080p webcam is unlikely to set you back more than £100. Most people won't be seeing your image at full screen on a 4K monitor, so the extra pixels aren't really necessary.

However, there are a few reasons why this webcam's extra pixels aren't wasted. First, the camera can digitally zoom into your face, so no matter where you're sitting (and even if you're moving around) the camera will crop the video and follow your face, while your contact will still receive a clear, high-resolution image. You may also need a high-res camera if you record presentations and online classes or make YouTube videos.

This camera is very solidly built. The barrel is constructed from metal, and both the lens and its protective element are made from glass. It also comes with a monitor mount and a separate tripod adapter, both metal. These sit sit neatly in a magnetic cavity on the underside of the webcam, making it easy to swap between the two. The webcam comes with a two-metre cable and supports Windows Hello, so you can sit down at your computer and log in without having to touch the keyboard.

There is one major feature missing, however, and that's a built-in microphone. Voice calls are always better using a dedicated USB microphone or headset, but it would have been useful to have a built-in microphone for emergency situations.

Picture quality is excellent. Video is captured at 3840x2160 pixels at up to 30fps with a default field of view of 90 degrees, and the image looks crisp and detailed. It's even good in low light.

When it comes to the crunch, however, unless you've got a particular reason to record your face in 4K, you probably don't need it. In which case a decent 1080p camera, such as the Anker PowerConf C300 (£99 from www.snipca.com/39207), will serve you perfectly well.

SPECIFICATIONS

4K (3840x2160-pixel) video resolution • 30fps • No microphone • USB-C • 9.4x32x65mm (HxWxD) • 112g • One-year warranty www.snipca.com/39206

VERDICT Dell's 4K webcam shoots clear, detailed, extremely high-resolution images for video calls, but doesn't come with a built-in microphone

★★★★★

ALTERNATIVE

Logitech Brio 4K £165

Logitech's take on the 4K webcam is slightly cheaper than Dell's and has a microphone

WHAT SHOULD I BUY? We solve your buying dilemmas

Should I replace iPad Air 2 with Galaxy Tab S7+?

Q I currently have a six-year-old iPad Air 2, which still works extremely well, but I'm not a fan of iPadOS and the screen is fairly small (9.7in). I am very tempted to replace it with a Samsung Galaxy Tab S7+ tablet (pictured), mainly because it has a larger screen. I'm a musician and this would let me see my music more easily. If I traded in my iPad Air 2 and bought the S7+ do you think I would end up regretting it?

Paul Sparks

A The main problem with switching from an iPad to an Android device is that you can't take your apps with you. If you have any paid-for apps, you'll have to buy them again to run them on your new Android tablet. However, the 12.9in iPad Pro starts at £999 and the 12.4in Galaxy Tab S7+ starts at £799, so Android is the cheaper choice for a bigger screen.

The newer Galaxy Tab will almost certainly run faster and more smoothly than your existing iPad Air 2, so we don't think you'll regret the change.

Do you need advice on what you should buy? Email us at letters@computeractive.co.uk

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intel CORE i7

PRINTER | **£440** from Amazon www.snipca.com/39187

Canon i-Sensys MF744Cdw

A right touch

We're used to seeing apps on our phones, but apps on our printers is still a novelty. This colour laser printer puts its generous 5in touchscreen to great use here, with a library of apps that provide customisable tools that are easily accessible.

The apps include options for one-touch scanning to particular destinations (such as your email or computers on your home network), and there are templates you can use if you often print the same thing, such as blank to-do lists or standard forms. The one thing it lacks is direct printing from online storage services such as Google Drive or Dropbox.

SPECIFICATIONS

1200x1200dpi maximum print resolution • 600x600dpi optical scanner resolution • 27ppm print speed • Wi-Fi 4 • Gigabit Ethernet • USB 2.0 • 460x471x469mm (HxWxD) • 26.7kg • One-year warranty www.snipca.com/39187

The scanner has a 50-page duplex sheet feeder, so you can copy and scan two-sided documents automatically. At the bottom, there's a 250-sheet paper tray for holding all the plain paper you'll need.

A full set of toner cartridges is included, with enough toner to print 2,300 pages of black and 2,100 pages each of Cyan, Magenta and Yellow. This makes the relatively high price a little easier to swallow. Once its toner runs out, replacing it with Canon's high-yield cartridges will work out to around 2p per page for mono prints and 11p per colour page. This is slightly cheaper than average for a laser printer, so could save you money in the long run.

The printer is also reasonably fast, churning out text pages at its quoted speed of 27 pages per minute (ppm) or 21ppm when printing on both sides of a sheet. Mixed documents with text and graphics printed at 23.6ppm. There are other printers that are faster, but this model's easy-to-use apps could still save you plenty of time.

VERDICT A speedy, easy-to-use multifunction printer that's ideal for anyone who has to print in bulk, either for work or for a club or society

★★★★★

ALTERNATIVE Xerox VersaLink C400dn £320 If you don't need the scanner, the Xerox VersaLink C400dn is an even faster (33ppm) colour laser printer

PC MONITOR | **£275** from HP www.snipca.com/39186

HP E27q G4

Screened out

This HP monitor won't set your pulse racing with amazing features, but it's a dependable 27in model that, with its resolution of 2560x1440 pixels, would make a very welcome upgrade for anyone currently using a 24in 1080p model.

To connect to your PC you can choose from DisplayPort, HDMI and D-SUB connectors, so it should be compatible with most desktop PCs, including fairly old ones. However, it doesn't have a USB-C port, so won't connect to a laptop that doesn't have a standard video-out port. The monitor has a built-in four-port USB hub, though, which is handy for connecting peripherals such as keyboards and mice.

SPECIFICATIONS

27in IPS screen • 2560x1440 pixels • 60Hz refresh rate • 5ms response time • 1x HDMI port • 1x DisplayPort • 1x D-SUB port • 4x USB 3.0 ports • 366x613x47mm (HxWxD) • 7kg • Three-year warranty www.snipca.com/39186

The base smoothly pivots 90 degrees, making it easier to access these ports. It also has 150mm height adjustment. Colour accuracy was excellent in our tests, reproducing 98 per cent of the sRGB colour standard. It isn't as bright as we'd like, however, peaking at 233cd/m2.

For tweaking the settings, you'll need to use four buttons below the bottom edge of the screen. This makes it easy to change the brightness levels or switch between input sources, but using the full menu is very fiddly.

The biggest problem is that it doesn't offer anything special for the price. You can buy higher-quality 27in 1440p monitors for less, such as the £249 Iiyama ProLite XUB2792QSU, which is brighter and has even more accurate colours (see Alternative below, www.snipca.com/39189).

VERDICT A solid, dependable monitor, but it doesn't have enough going for it to justify its price

★★★★★

ALTERNATIVE Iiyama ProLite XUB2792QSU £249 A brighter and more accurate 27in monitor with the same resolution and a lower price

SMARTPHONE | **£200** from Amazon www.snipca.com/39219

Nokia X10

Call of nature

Competition among mobile-phone manufacturers is fierce, with Chinese firms such as Xiaomi producing exceptional phones at affordable prices, which are proving hard for other companies to beat.

In an attempt to break the cycle, Nokia has taken a different direction with its new X10 model, appealing to our ecological consciences rather than our desire to get the latest phone at the best price. It does this with a compostable case, the promise to plant a tree and the presumption that you can use the charger from your last phone instead of supplying a superfluous new one. It's a nod to more sustainable products, but this isn't an impressive example.

> "Its green credentials can't disguise its poor performance"

Weighing 210g and measuring 9.1mm thick, this is a fairly chunky handset. Its plastic shell doesn't feel quite as satisfying in the hand as metal or glass, but it does feel robust enough to take a knock or two.

At 1080p, the screen resolution is standard for the price range but lacks a high refresh rate and AMOLED panel. It's not a bad screen, though, and achieved reasonable colour reproduction (87 per cent of sRGB) and high brightness levels (528cd/m²) in our tests.

Where the phone falls down is with its internal components. Its Snapdragon 480 chip has eight cores with 5G connectivity, but it's designed for low-end phones. Paired here with 6GB of RAM, it's not powerful enough to run a modern Android phone. We found nearly all tasks were hindered by this limitation, from opening apps and playing games, to swiping through the interface. There's a degree of hesitancy and lag, which at best is inconvenient and at worst is distracting. It isn't demanding on the battery, however, which lasted just over 18 hours in our video-playback test.

An eight-megapixel camera on the front takes selfies, while the rear features a quad-cam setup with one 48-megapixel standard sensor and a five-megapixel ultrawide lens. These take fairly average pictures, as you might expect of a camera at this price.

Anyone with £200 to spend on their next camera should certainly look elsewhere. Our current Android favourite, Xaiomi's Poco F3 (www.snipca.com/38395), is a much better option if you can afford to get closer to the £300 mark, while the Poco X3 NFC (www.snipca.com/39224) is a better option for only a few pounds more.

SPECIFICATIONS

Eight-core Qualcomm Snapdragon 480 processor • 6GB RAM • 64GB storage • 6.67in 2400x1080-pixel 60Hz LCD screen • 48-megapixel main rear camera • 5-megapixel ultrawide camera • 8-megapixel front camera • Android 11 • 9x167x80mm (HxDxW) • 210g • Three-year warranty www.snipca.com/39219

VERDICT Its worthy environmental credentials aren't quite enough to make up for its poor performance when running even basic Android tasks

★★★★★

ALTERNATIVE

Poco F3 NFC £211 A better phone with a Snapdragon 732G processor, a 120Hz AMOLED screen, a 64-megapixel camera and a large 5,160mAh battery

DO I REALLY NEED...

1TB smartphone?

What is it?

Tech analysts Wedbush (www.wedbush.com) are predicting that the iPhone 13, due in September, will be the first smartphone to come with 1TB of storage. iPhones currently max out at 256GB, though some Android phones offer 512GB, such as the new £1,699 Samsung Galaxy Z Fold3 5G.

What does it do?

A 1TB smartphone can store much more of everything – 250,000 12-megapixel photos or 500 hours of 1080p video (that's almost 21 days).

What's the catch?

Only that it'll be expensive. The iPhone 12 Pro costs £1,299 for 512GB, so you can add a couple of hundred pounds to that for a 1TB model. However, once it appears on the iPhone, it shouldn't be long until cheaper Android phones also also offer 1TB of storage.

So can I do without it?

Yes. 256GB might be starting to feel a bit restrictive, but 512GB is still plenty of storage. Even better news is that 512GB phones will become cheaper when the most expensive models come with 1TB.

NEXT ISSUE

On Sale Weds 22 Sept

HP Pavilion 14
A £650 laptop that looks and feels like it should cost more

Amazon Fire TV Stick Lite
Amazon updates its most affordable TV streamer

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Buy It

Find out what other products we liked.
Buy our new 2020 **Back Issue CD**:
£15 from **www.snipca.com/38164**

Our pick of products that have won the Buy It award

LAPTOP

Lenovo Yoga Slim 7 (256GB)
£749 from www.snipca.com/38429
Tested Issue 601

Weighing just 1.16kg, this is an excellent lightweight laptop with a great screen and an AMD processor faster than many Intel rivals. It has two USB-C ports, two USB 3.0 ports and a microSD card reader. Battery lasts nearly 16 hours.

ALTERNATIVE Dell XPS 13 New Intel CPUs and a taller screen make this a more powerful, all-round slim laptop. Prices start at £1,399 from www.snipca.com/36642

DESKTOP PC

Palicomp
Intel Mercury
£600 from www.snipca.com/34223
Tested Issue 576

If you don't need advanced gaming, your money's well spent here on a six-core Intel i5-9600K processor overclocked to 5GHz. 16GB of memory and a full terabyte of fast SSD storage round off a powerful PC with good expansion potential.

ALTERNATIVE Chillblast Photo Zen Fast Ryzen 7 CPU plus adequate GPU makes a superb work PC. £1,760 from www.snipca.com/35840

APPLE iPAD

Apple iPad 10.2in
£329 from www.snipca.com/36178
Tested Issue 566

The basic iPad is great value, especially now it's been updated with a powerful A12 processor and iPadOS 14. It includes Scribble handwriting recognition with the £89 Apple Pencil. Storage isn't expandable; consider 128GB at £429.

ALTERNATIVE iPad Mini With an even better, but smaller, screen than the 10.2in iPad, the Mini also supports the Pencil and has 64GB of storage. £399 from www.snipca.com/33050

ANDROID TABLET

Lenovo Tab P11 Pro
£600 from www.snipca.com/38585
Tested Issue 609

A fast tablet that comes with a magnetic stand and keyboard that means you can also use it as a laptop. It has an outstanding screen, 128GB storage and a 17-hour battery life, while its excellent dual mics make you sound clear in video chats.

ALTERNATIVE Samsung Galaxy Tab S6 Lite Slower than the Lenovo Tab P11 Pro, but the 64GB storage and decent 10.2in screen make it good value. £311 from www.snipca.com/38606

APPLE iPHONE

Apple iPhone 12
£799 from www.snipca.com/36582
Tested Issue 595

The latest iPhone has a modest increase in already exceptional processing power plus even better photos and videos from the front and twin rear cameras. It comes in a redesigned case with aluminium frame and even tougher glass. Consider paying the £50 extra for 128GB of storage.

ALTERNATIVE iPhone SE With a single camera and smaller screen but the same powerful A13 processor and 64GB storage as the iPhone 11, it's great value. £399 from www.snipca.com/34773

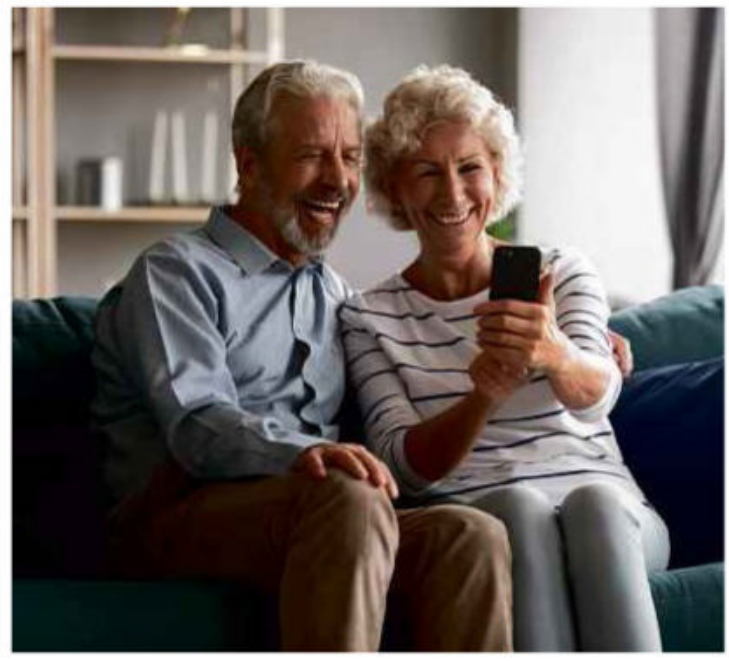
ANDROID PHONE

Xiaomi Poco F3
£299 from www.snipca.com/38395
Tested Issue 608

This is a phenomenal phone for the price. It's 5G, has a brilliant screen, and comes with 6GB of RAM and 128GB storage (256GB costs £349). Performance is exceptional – in fact, the only phone under £450 that's faster is the iPhone SE.

ALTERNATIVE Google Pixel 5 Cheaper than previous Pixels, this has great cameras, wireless charging and a superb screen. Battery life is 23 hours. £599 from www.snipca.com/36586

Now's the time to tackle your smartphone



Suitable for iPhones and Android smartphones like Samsungs, and DORO (not sure what phone you have? Best send off for the free info pack)

<u>Are you missing out</u> on everything you could do with it? With these helpful books, there's nothing to fear about using smartphones.

Find out more...

Modern mobile phones – smartphones as they're called – can do so much more than just make phone calls.

From browsing the web wherever you are, checking train times, acting as a sat-nav... And best of all they can make it so easy to keep in touch with family and friends – in so many ways, from sharing photos to making video calls.

But using them isn't always as easy as you'd want – and that's putting it mildly!

Do the manufacturers do it on purpose?

Sometimes it can seem like the manufacturers deliberately make them complicated – and how you do things is often hidden away. It might be easy once you know, but until you've been shown the easy way, it can drive you mad.

In fact only yesterday I was talking to someone whose Mum had got a new all-singing-all-dancing phone – but she couldn't work out how to answer a phone call on it! She's not daft – it's just that it's different from what she'd used before and the phone didn't come with a manual telling her what to do.

Whether you have similar problems or you're trying to do something slightly more advanced, the thing is, it can be easy to use them... once you know how. But until you've been shown, it can be like talking a different language.

That's why we've published these books: *iPhones one Step at a Time*, *Android Smartphones One Step at a Time* and *Doro Smartphones One Step at a Time*.

Plain English... and that's not all

They explain how to use the phone, in plain simple language with pictures of the screen showing you exactly where to tap or slide your fingers. No jargon!

What's covered?

I can't list it all here. But amongst other things, you'll discover:

- The basics of controlling it – swiping, tapping, opening apps & so on.
- Send emails from your phone.
- Most phones have a good camera so you can take photos: here's how to use it properly (and for videos).
- Video phone calls – a great way to keep up with family who live a long way away
- Share photos with friends around the world – quickly and easily.
- See updates, photos and video clips from friends and family – as soon as they "post" them.
- Browse the web at home or out and about.
- Instant messaging and how to use it.
- Make it easier to read the screen.
- How to use it as a sat-nav... in the car or even on foot.
- Choosing and downloading apps.
- And obviously, you can make phone calls and send and receive text messages. ("Voicemail" is covered, too)

All explained nice and simply. (Find out more in the free information pack – read on...)

What one reader had to say:

"Thanks for a fantastic smart phone book. Very pleasant staff as usual.

I think this book should be sold with every smart phone. I have learnt so much from it, the info you get with the phone is non-existent.

Smart phones are quite complex, and your books speak in plain English."

Only half the story

That's only half the story but I don't have room to explain here. I've put together full information on the books – who they're for, what they cover and so on.

What's more the books also come with a free gift – no room to explain that here either.

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The books aren't available in the shops or on Amazon – only direct from the publisher. Send off now to get a completely free, no-obligation information pack. It'll explain what the books cover, who they're suitable for and so on – showing you just how it could help you.

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Even if you don't know what type of smartphone you have, the information pack will show you how to tell.

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Our pick of products that have won the Buy It award

EBOOK READER

PRICE DROP

Amazon Kindle (2019)
£55 from www.snipca.com/31621
Tested Issue 555

Now with built-in light and audiobook support, this budget model is fine for most users, though limited by its 4GB of storage. The Paperwhite (£120) is even sharper, waterproof, and has bigger storage options as well as a cellular data option (£100 extra).

ALTERNATIVE Kobo Clara HD
Not waterproof, but has more lighting options to avoid blue light. £110 from www.snipca.com/32586

SECURITY SOFTWARE

Kaspersky Internet Security 2021
£14.99 from www.snipca.com/21532
Tested Issue 564

Kaspersky Internet Security has won our past nine antivirus tests and the 2020 version is now available at an exclusive reader discount on our Software Store. Go to the link above for a one-year, one-device licence or buy a two-year, two-device licence for just £32.99.

ALTERNATIVE Norton 360 Deluxe
Almost as good as Kaspersky, but blocks more legitimate software. £15 from www.snipca.com/32069

WEBCAM

Logitech C925e Business Webcam
£75 from www.snipca.com/38385
Tested: Issue 608

Despite the name, this webcam is also great for home users. Its standout feature is automatically adjusting itself to keep your picture looking sharp. It offers a 78-degree field of view, which is fine for everyday video chats with one person in front of the camera.

ALTERNATIVE Anker PowerConf C300
Good image quality, crisp audio and lots of features. £90 from www.snipca.com/38752

PC MONITOR

BenQ GL2780
£150 from www.snipca.com/34834
Tested Issue 581

This budget 27in screen offers accurate sRGB colour with good contrast, plus auto brightness and low blue light modes. Speakers are built in. Using TN LCD rather than IPS, it needs to be viewed straight on, but works well for games too.

ALTERNATIVE Philips Brilliance 241B7QPJEB With a great picture, stylish design and speakers, this 24in Full HD IPS is an excellent smaller screen. £266 from www.snipca.com/37096

ROUTER

PRICE DROP

Netgear Nighthawk RAX80
£240 from www.snipca.com/39013
Tested Issue 603

This is the fastest Wi-Fi 6 router we've ever tested, transferring data at speeds of 520Mbps in the same and adjacent rooms of our test house. Also works with Wi-Fi 5, and comes with four spare Ethernet ports and two USB ports.

ALTERNATIVE Asus RT-AX82U
Slower than the Nighthawk on Wi-Fi 6, but faster on Wi-Fi 5, so a better choice for older devices. Has four Gigabit Ethernet ports. £171 from www.snipca.com/37675

PRINTER

PRICE DROP

Canon Pixma TS8350
£199 from www.snipca.com/38079
Tested Issue 606

For an affordable general-purpose printer, its photo prints are stunning. They come out in phenomenal detail, with rich, bold colours and deep blacks. It uses six cartridges, so stick to Canon's own reasonably priced XXL cartridges to reduce running costs.

ALTERNATIVE Epson Expression Premium XP-6105 This six-ink printer/scanner/copier is a good choice for photos first and text second. It's easy to use, but ink costs can be high. £90 from www.snipca.com/37995

COMPETITION

Win 1 of 6 TP-Link RE505X Wi-Fi extenders

This powerful extender, which won a 'Recommended' award in Issue 611 (page 24), is one of the first to work with Wi-Fi 6 routers, pushing your signal into the furthest corners of your home, eliminating blackspots from basement to loft. It also works with older Wi-Fi 4 and 5 routers.

It's a dual-antenna, dual-band extender, delivering speeds of up to 300Mbps over Wi-Fi 4 on the 2.4GHz band, and 1,200Mbps over Wi-Fi 6 on 5GHz. It also has a Gigabit Ethernet port, so can double up as a wired access point if you want to connect a PC, smart TV, NAS drive or games console.

Setting it up is easy. It plugs into a wall socket and shows its status using four LED indicators: a power light that blinks green during startup then glows blue once the extender is up and running; a signal light; and one each for the 2.4GHz and 5GHz bands.

To enter this competition, answer the question at www.snipca.com/39217 and submit your details. It runs until midnight Tuesday 21 September. Good luck!

You can buy **TP-Link's RE505X** for £59.99 from www.snipca.com/38875. For more information on TP-Link products visit www.tp-link.com and follow @TPLINKUK on Twitter.

MESH ROUTER

BT Whole Home Wi-Fi

£200 from www.snipca.com/26990
Tested Issue 496

BT's set of three discs, managed from an Apple or Android app, connects to your broadband and spreads high-speed Wi-Fi all around the house. Reception is far better than a single router, and the price is lower than any rival.

ALTERNATIVE Zyxel Multy X
These two pillow-shaped boxes are powerful enough for most homes and provide four Ethernet ports apiece. £265 from www.snipca.com/27309

SOLID-STATE DRIVE

Samsung 970 Evo Plus 500GB

£78 from www.snipca.com/31265
Tested Issue 552

Although its price has fluctuated since we tested it at £99, this is a very fast (over 3GB per second) M.2 SSD unfazed by tests that make others slow to a crawl. Also consider the Adata XPG SX8200 Pro if you find it a bit cheaper.

ALTERNATIVE Crucial MX500 500GB
As fast as an SSD can get in the traditional 2.5in SATA format, this is a great-value upgrade. £60 from www.snipca.com/37304

SMART SPEAKER

Google Nest Audio

£90 from www.snipca.com/36475
Tested Issue 593

Produces a rich, clear sound, and better understands your questions than Amazon's Echo devices. You can use Google's app to control audio from other units around your home (pair two of them for £160). The clever Ambient IQ tool increases the volume if it detects external noise, such as a hairdryer.

ALTERNATIVE Amazon Echo (4th generation) The latest version of the Echo changes the shape from a cylinder to a ball, which improves sound quality – though the Nest's is still superior. £90 from www.snipca.com/36602

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Workshops & Tips

14 pages of easy-to-follow workshops and expert tips

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HOW TO...

Capture photos and videos of wildlife in your garden

by Will Stapley

What you need: RSPB Nature Camera (or similar); SD card reader **Time required:** 60 minutes

Are you curious to find out which animals use your garden as a play area at night? Want to keep an eye on nesting birds? A wildlife camera lets you do all this, but with lots of different models available, knowing which to buy isn't easy. Here, we explain the different types, how you can reuse old memory cards with them and which settings you should tweak to achieve the best results.

1 Choose wired or portable

There are two main types of wildlife camera: wired models, which work like CCTV cameras and stream live footage directly to your TV or computer, and portable cameras, which run off batteries and record video when they detect movement.

The **Wired Garden Camera** from Wild View Cameras (£79 from www.snipca.com/39270 - pictured below) is one of the cheapest. It's designed to be attached to a wall and comes with a 30-metre cable that connects to your TV via a Scart adapter. If your TV has only HDMI inputs, you'll need to buy a Scart-to-HDMI adapter (£17 from Maplin www.snipca.com/39271). Like most wildlife cameras, it has a night-vision mode (more on this later). However, you may have to sit up all night just to catch a glimpse of whatever's traipsing through your garden, because the camera can't record video – it only displays live streams.

If you're more interested in birds, consider the RSPB's **Nest Box Camera** (£149 from www.snipca.com/39272, see photo below left), which houses a tiny camera inside a wooden box so you can keep tabs on nesting birds. Like the Wired Garden Camera, it connects directly to your TV using a 30-metre cable. You can also buy a USB adapter (£29 from www.snipca.com/39273), which lets you connect the camera to your computer to watch live video and record it using the included software. If your budget allows, go for the IP version (£199 from www.snipca.com/39274). This has a similar design but uses an Ethernet cable to connect directly to your router, so you can access the camera's live footage from any computer, phone or tablet.

If you want to capture video of occasional visitors to your garden and don't want a cable trailing back to your house, we recommend buying a portable wildlife camera. These are battery powered, so you can place them anywhere in your garden (or even further afield), and have passive infrared (PIR)

The Wired Garden Camera connects directly to your TV to provide live video, day or night

Keep an eye on nesting birds with the RSPB's Nest Box Camera

sensors that trigger photo and video recordings when they detect movement. Our favourite - and the one we explore in more detail later - is the RSPB Nature Camera (£189 from www.snipca.com/39275 – pictured below). Although you can't use this camera to watch live video footage, it captures all recorded activity on an SD card, allowing you to review the night's events each morning. The camera runs off eight AA batteries - in our tests, the low-battery warning appeared after 10 night-long recording sessions.

2 Check the specifications

Once you've decided which type of camera you want, take a moment to check the rest of its specifications.

Night vision

To capture the activity of your garden wildlife at night, your camera must have some built-in infrared LEDs (all the cameras mentioned earlier have these). The more LEDs a camera has, the clearer its night-time footage will be. The RSPB's Nature Camera has 40 infrared LEDs, which managed to illuminate objects up to around three metres away in our tests. When positioning your camera, make sure there are no leaves blocking the LEDs, as this would reduce the camera's ability to capture clear footage in the dark.

The Nature Camera's 40 infrared LEDs are hidden behind a large black panel

How I use my wildlife camera

Earlier this year, I carefully created a nesting opportunity for hedgehogs by dumping a bag full of Red Robin hedge clippings at the bottom of my garden (at least that's what I told my wife – I was mainly just avoiding a trip to the local tip). After hearing some odd snuffling noises during the day, I trained my RSPB Nature Camera on the mess of leaves in the hope of capturing something.

Overall, I'm very happy with the camera. It can't produce anywhere near the same video quality as my Samsung Galaxy S20 phone, but its night-vision is excellent. My only complaint is that the menu system is horribly fiddly, and despite having used it for more than a month, I still press the wrong buttons at times.

So far, the camera-shy hedgehogs have failed to make an appearance, but my kids' guinea pigs kindly agreed to be, well, guinea pigs. I've uploaded a clip of them in their hutch, illustrating the Nature Camera's excellent night-time performance, along with some other sample videos and photos, at www.snipca.com/39282. If the hedgehogs make their video debut over the next couple of weeks, I'll upload a video to the same Dropbox link.

Have you set up a wildlife camera? Please let us know: letters@computeractive.co.uk

Image quality

A camera's quoted resolution only tells you how big the photos and videos it produces will be - and bigger doesn't necessarily mean better. For example, a 14-megapixel photo will be smaller than a 36-megapixel photo, but it might look sharper and show more fine detail. It all depends on the quality of the lens and sensor inside the camera. The only reliable way to judge a camera's image quality is to look at sample images and videos from it. If the manufacturer of your chosen camera doesn't provide samples on its website, contact the company directly to ask for some. We've uploaded some samples from our RSPB Nature Camera to our Dropbox account at www.snipca.com/39282.

You can use microSD cards in SD slots – simply insert them into an adapter like this

Storage

Some wildlife cameras come with built-in storage for your recorded footage, but don't worry if your preferred option doesn't. Memory cards are now incredibly cheap - SanDisk's 32GB SD card costs just £7 from Amazon (www.snipca.com/39276). However, before you spend money on a new memory card, it's worth checking whether you've got any cards from devices you no longer use, such as old cameras, phones and tablets. If you've got a spare microSD card and your wildlife camera takes SD cards, you'll need an SD card adapter. These often come with microSD cards, but if you don't already have one, you can pick one up for just a few pounds. This SanDisk adapter, for example, costs £3.50 from Amazon www.snipca.com/39277 (pictured left). Simply slot a microSD

card into the bottom of the adapter (pictured below left), then use it just like a normal SD card.

3 Set up and position your camera

The precise steps for setting up your camera will vary depending on the make and model, but we're using the RSPB Nature Camera. Before you can access its settings, you need to insert an SD card. Open the camera's case by unlocking the two metal clips on the right-hand side, then push the card into the slots on the underside of the chassis. The card only fits one way and will click into place.

Next, move the mode slider to Setup (middle position) and you'll see a live view of the camera, allowing you to judge the field of view when placing it in your garden. Before you do anything else, we recommend turning off the ludicrously loud 'beep' that sounds whenever you press a button. To do this, leave the camera in Setup mode, press the Menu button, then use the down arrow to locate the Beep Sound setting and turn it to Off. As with all other settings, you need to press OK to save your choice.

When the Nature Camera detects movement, it can take a photo, record some video or both. To set this up, use the Camera Mode setting at the top of the screen (pictured). The settings below this let you adjust the resolution of photos and set how many shots the camera should take when the PIR sensor is triggered. You can also change the resolution and length of videos.

If you're using a memory card with a relatively small capacity, it's a good idea to reduce the video resolution. At the Nature Camera's maximum resolution of 1920x1080, for example, a 1GB card would be able to store only nine one-minute videos. Reduce the resolution to 1280x720 (see photo 1) and the clip duration to 10 seconds 2, and you'll increase this to just over 100 videos.

You can also choose from three sensitivity levels for the PIR sensor. We found it best to leave this set to High, although on windy nights you may want to try a less sensitive setting, because branches blowing in the wind can trigger the PIR sensor, causing your memory card to fill up quickly.

To prolong its battery life, you can set the camera to operate only during the hours when activity is most likely. In the settings, switch the WorkHour mode on, then set appropriate Start and Stop times.

The RSPB Nature Camera comes with a strap for securing it to an object such as a fence or tree stump, while several sharp plastic points on the rear of the chassis help stop the camera slipping. If you find this makes it difficult to angle the camera correctly, you can use the mounting point on the underside to attach a tripod (such as this Amazon Basics tripod - £4.82 from www.snipca.com/39279).

Once you've applied all the settings you want, move the mode slider to On (the top position), then close the camera's case. On the Nature Camera, this involves securing two metal clips to create a waterproof seal.

When using a low-capacity memory card, reduce the resolution and length of videos

4 Review and transfer your footage

If your camera has a screen, you can view your footage directly on the device. To do this on the Nature Camera, select Setup mode, press the Play button, then use the up and down buttons to cycle through clips. Press the Camera button to play a selected video.

Of course, a much better way to view your footage is to see it on a big screen. The easiest way to transfer videos to your computer is to remove the SD card and insert it into the SD slot on your computer. If your computer doesn't have an SD card slot, you'll need a card reader such as Integral's, which is £4 from Amazon (www.snipca.com/39280).

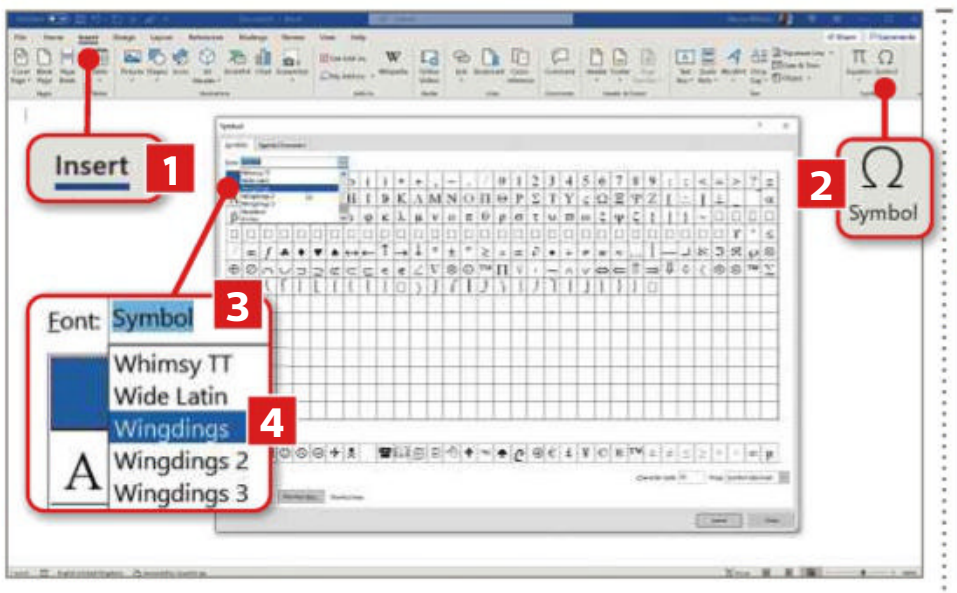
With the SD card connected to your computer, open File Explorer (press the Windows key+E), select This PC from the menu on the left, then double-click your SD card. You can then drag the footage to a folder on your computer, double-clicking individual files to view them in your default media player. The RSPB Nature Camera saves videos in MOV format, which Windows' default Photos app can play. If you have trouble opening the video files from your camera, try using VLC (www.videolan.org), which supports all major video formats.

If you set your camera to capture photos as well as video, these will appear alongside the video files. The Nature camera saves photos as JPEG files. Text along the bottom of each image tells you the time and date it was taken, as well as the temperature – although we found that the temperatures recorded were much hotter than they were in reality.

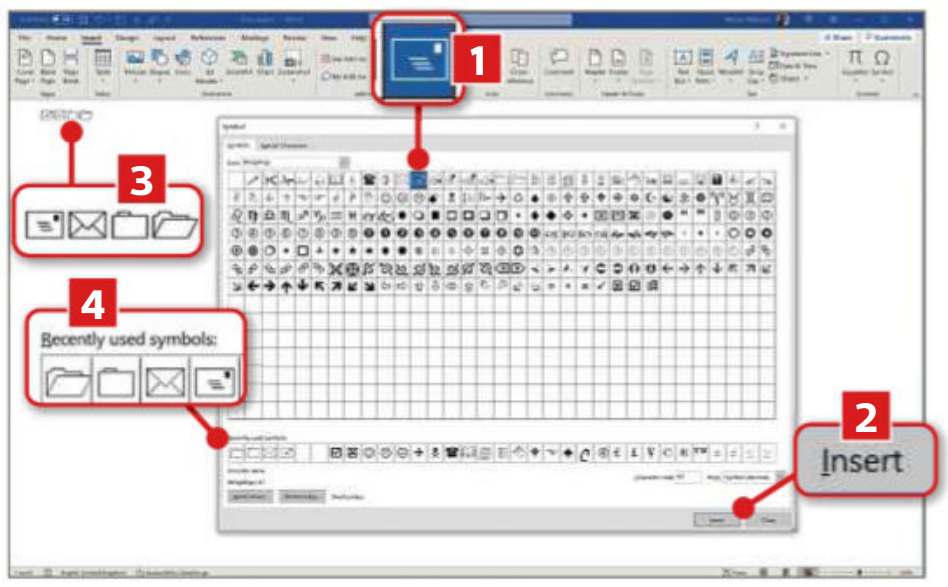
Add special symbols to docs and spreadsheets

What you need: Microsoft Office or LibreOffice
Time required: 20 minutes

You may already know that you can add special characters such as accented letters to Word documents and Excel spreadsheets, but did you know you can also insert pictorial symbols? Once you've added them, you can change their appearance using editing options such as outline and glow. You can also create your own keyboard shortcuts for symbols you use regularly. Here we explain how to use symbols in both Microsoft Office and LibreOffice.

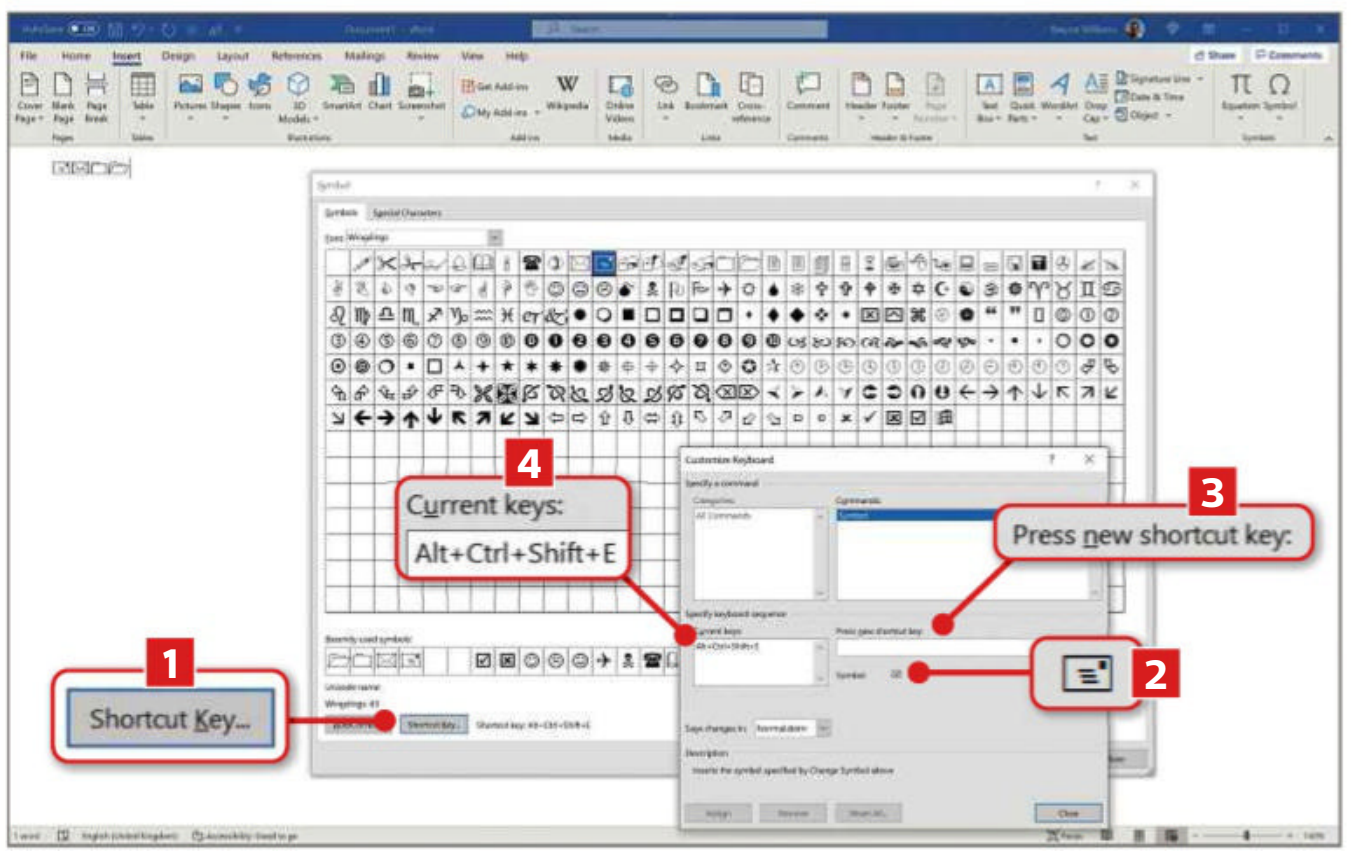


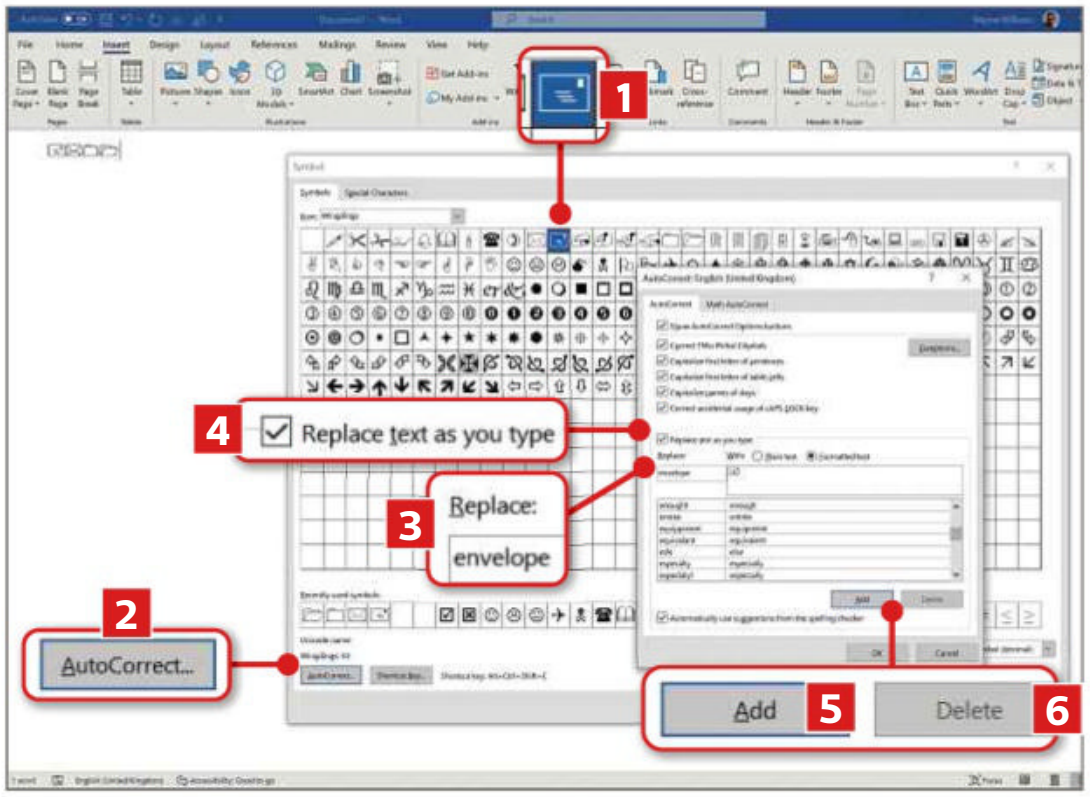
STEP 1 To insert a symbol in **Word**, click Insert 1 at the top, followed by Symbol at the top right 2, then More Symbols. The Symbol box will open to show all the available symbol fonts 3. The default font is 'Symbol', which includes arrows, squares, playing card suits and mathematical symbols. The widest collection of symbols is found in Wingdings 1, 2 and 3, so select one of these in the dropdown box 4.



STEP 2 Inserting a symbol into your document is easy – just click it 1, then click Insert 2 (or simply double-click it). The symbol will appear wherever you cursor is in the document 3. Once you've inserted a symbol, it also appears in the 'Recently used symbols' bar 4, so you can quickly add it again by selecting it from there rather than opening the dropdown box.

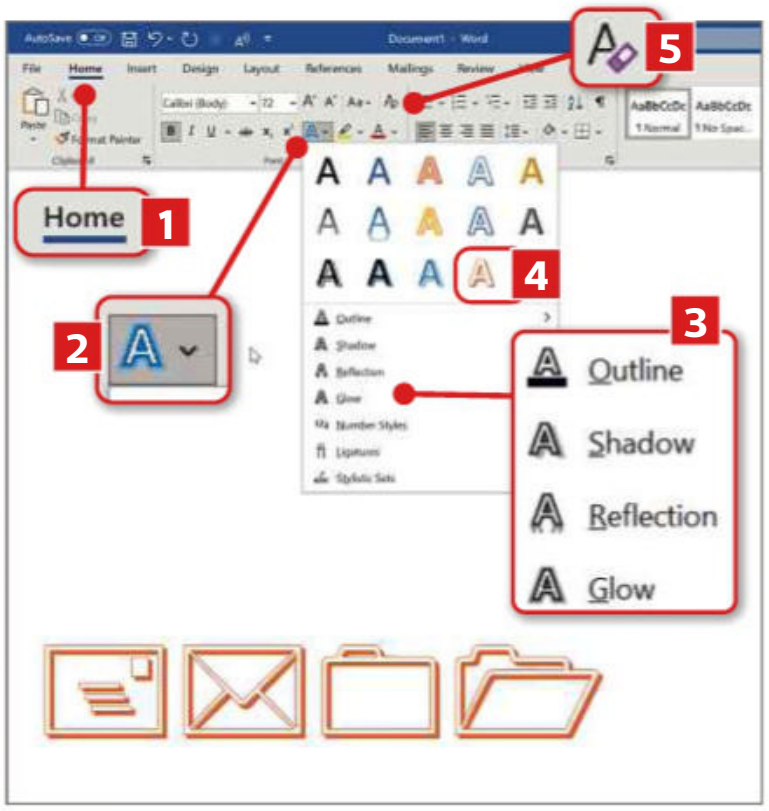
STEP 3 Some symbols have a keyboard shortcut, but you can change this – or assign a new one for *any* symbol – by clicking Shortcut Key 1. Make sure you've selected the correct symbol 2, then click in the 'Press new shortcut key' box 3. Hold down the keys you want to use for your shortcut. They'll appear in the Current Keys box 4. Click Assign, then Close and the shortcut will be active.





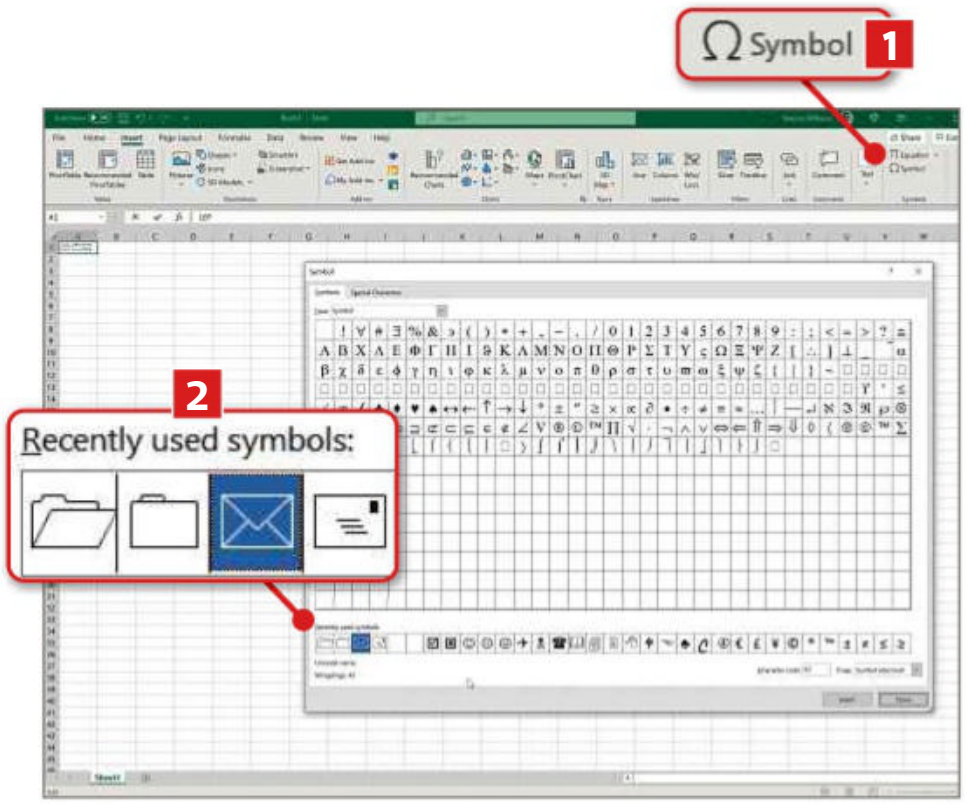
STEP 4

If you use the same symbol regularly, you can add it to Word's AutoCorrect tool so that each time you type a particular word or phrase, Word replaces it with your chosen symbol. For example, if we wanted an envelope symbol to appear each time we type envelope, we'd select that symbol 1, click AutoCorrect 2, then type envelope into the Replace box 3. Make sure 'Replace text as you type' 4 is selected, then click Add 5, followed by OK. If you change your mind, you can undo this command by selecting it and clicking Delete 6.



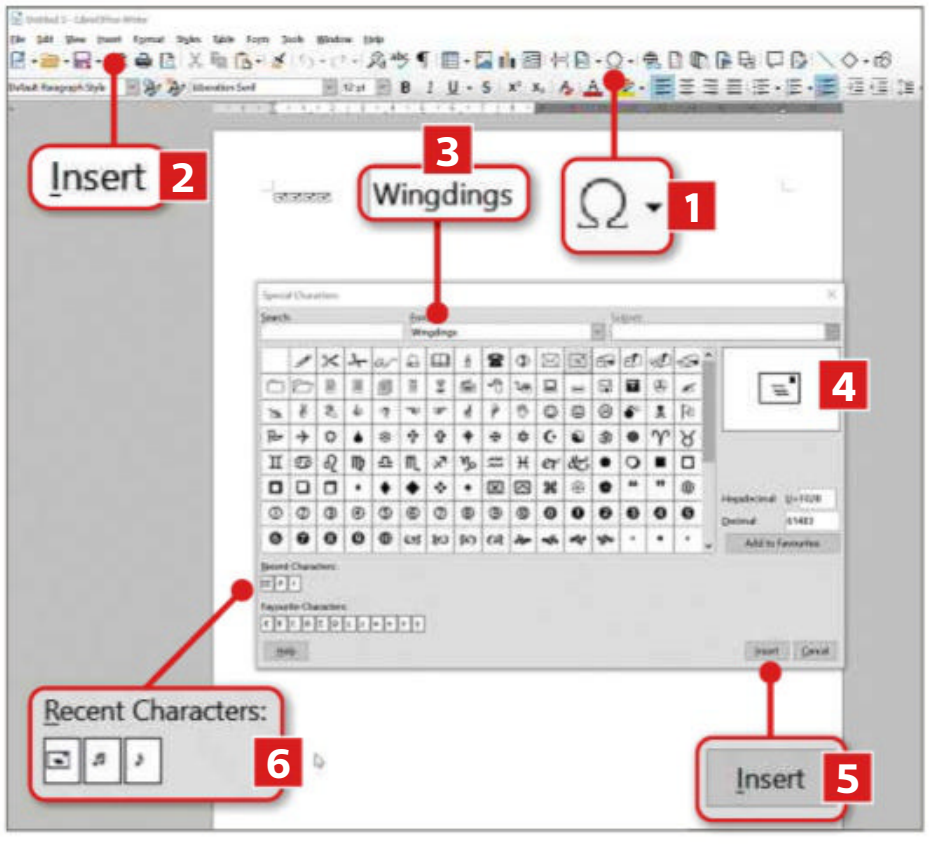
STEP 5

Word treats symbols like any other text character, which means you can adjust how they look in the Home 1 menu. Select the symbol in your document and you can adjust its size, formatting (bold, italics, underline and so on) and colour. You can also use the Type Effects button 2 to add outlines, shadows, reflections and glows 3. There are some Type Effects presets you can apply – such as the effect we've added to the envelopes 4. To restore a symbol to its original appearance, click the Clear All Formatting button 5.



STEP 6

In **Excel**, open the Insert menu, then click the Symbol button 1. You can use any available symbol to spruce up your spredsheets, and you'll notice that the Symbol box contains the same recently used selection from Word 2. You can't use Word's keyboard shortcuts, however, and Excel doesn't let you create new ones.



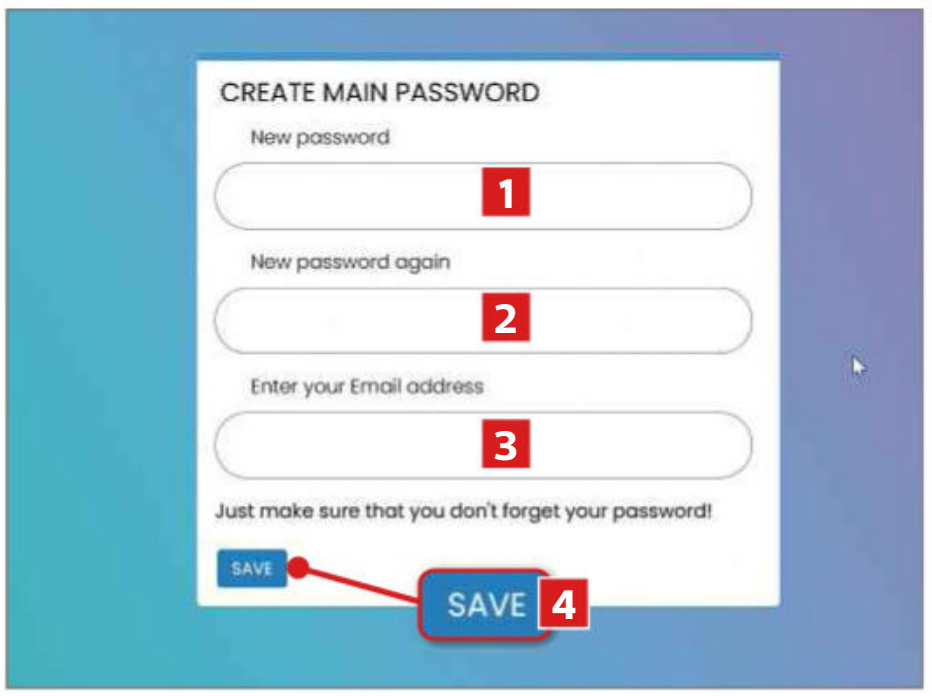
STEP 7

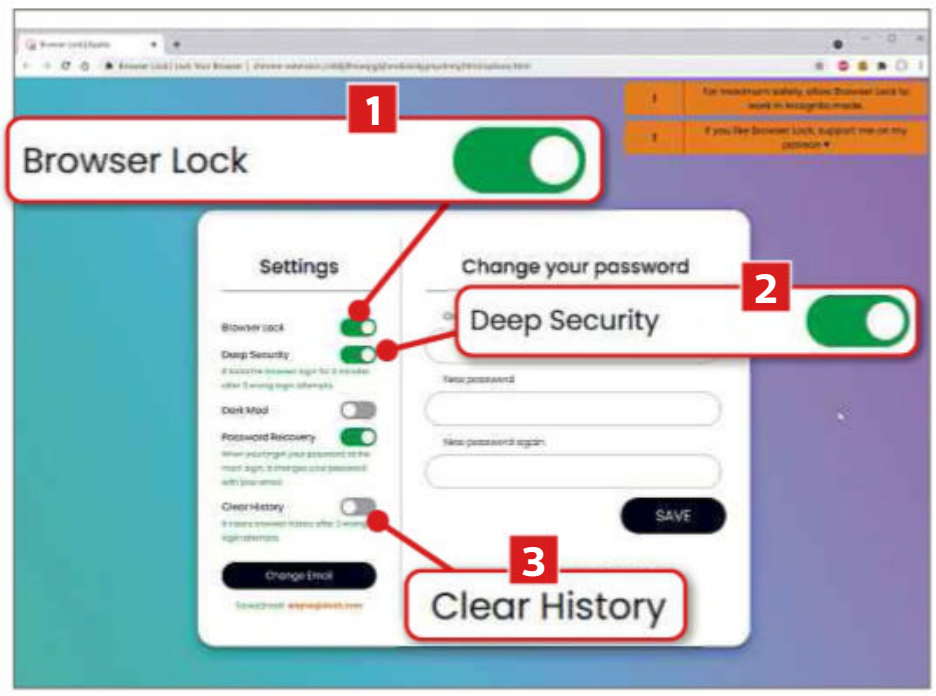
If you prefer **LibreOffice**, you can insert symbols into Writer and Calc in a similar way. Click the Insert Special Characters button 1 on the toolbar and select More Characters. Alternatively, click Insert in the menu 2 and select 'Special Character...'. Choose Wingdings in the Font box, 3 then click a symbol you want to use. A preview will appear 4. Double-click the symbol to add it to your document, or select it and click Insert 5. Recently used and favourite characters (as chosen by LibreOffice) appear in the bottom left 6.

Lock your browser with a password

What you need: Windows 7, 8.1 or 10; Web browser
Time required: 10 minutes

If you share your computer with other people, you probably share your browser with them too, which means they can easily see your browsing history. It also means they can mess around with your preferred setup, installing unwanted extensions and changing the home page or default search engine. Worse, a thief or scammer would be able to see where you've been online. Here, we'll explain how to lock your browser with a password, so only you can open it.

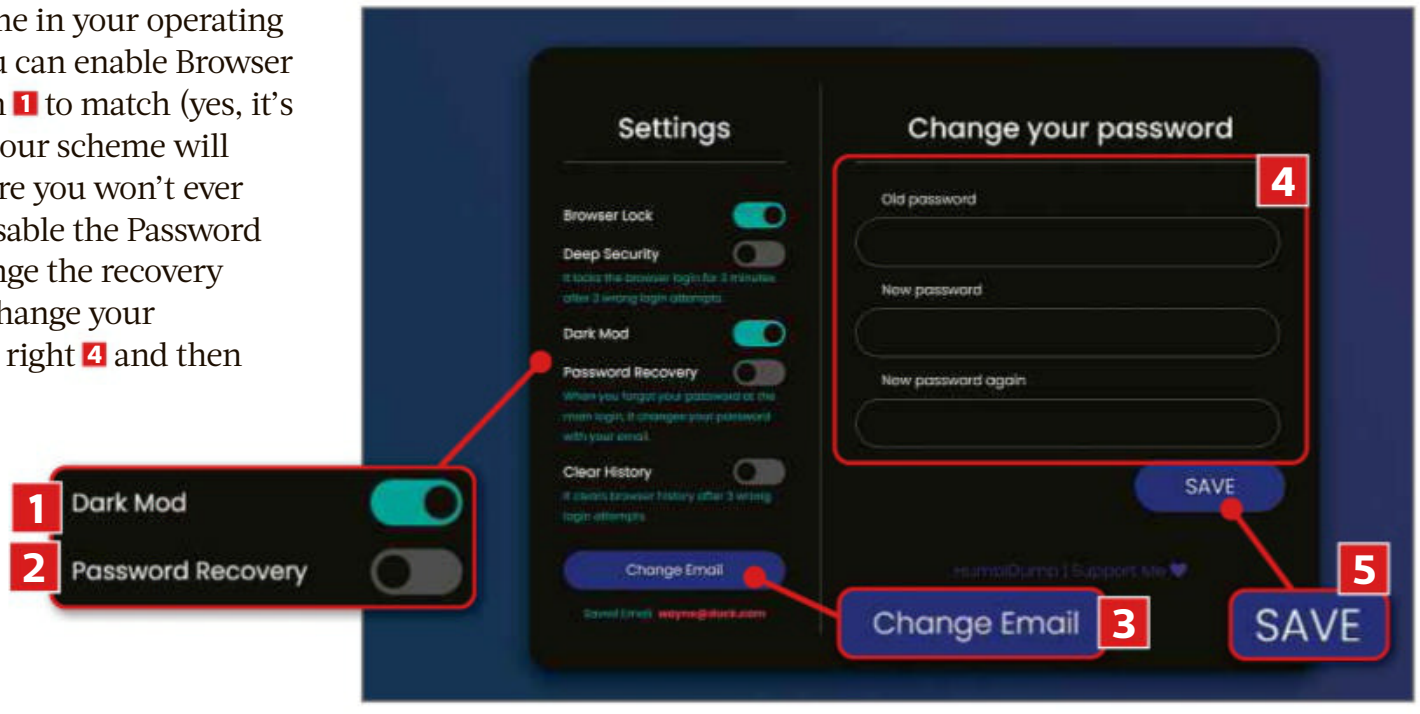


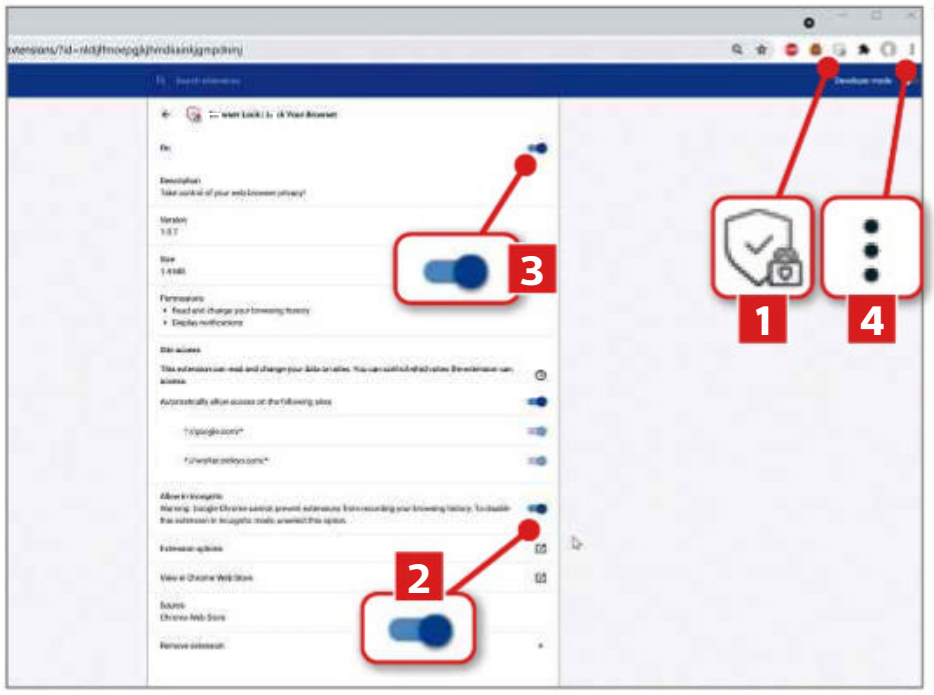


STEP 1 Google's **Chrome** doesn't have a password option, so you'll need to install the Browser Lock extension from www.snipca.com/39221. Click the blue 'Add to Chrome' button on the page then click 'Add extension' in the box that appears. You'll be prompted to create a new password 1, confirm it 2, and enter your email address 3. Your email will be used to allow you to recover the password if you forget it. Click Save 4.

STEP 2 The Settings page will now load. From here you can turn it on or off 1, and enable Deep Security 2, which will lock the browser for three minutes after three incorrect login attempts. If you want the highest level of security, turn on the Clear History option. This wipes your browsing history if someone tries and fails to log into your browser three times. Any changes you make are applied instantly.

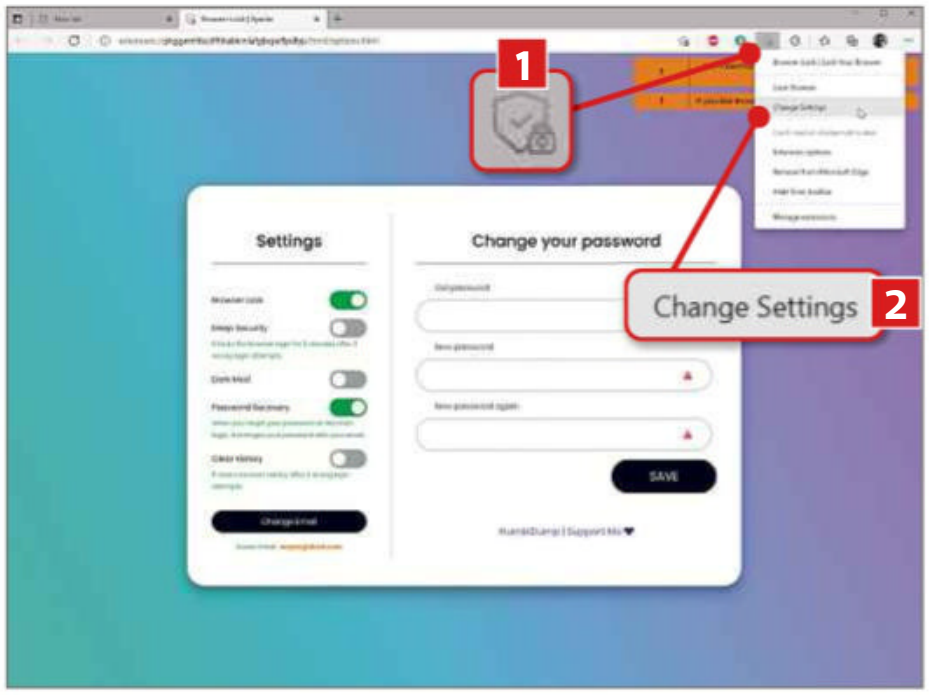
STEP 3 If you use the dark theme in your operating system and browser you can enable Browser Lock's Dark Mod option 1 to match (yes, it's called 'Mod' not 'Mode'). The colour scheme will change immediately. If you're sure you won't ever forget your password you can disable the Password Recovery option 2. You can change the recovery email address here 3, and also change your password using the fields on the right 4 and then clicking Save 5.





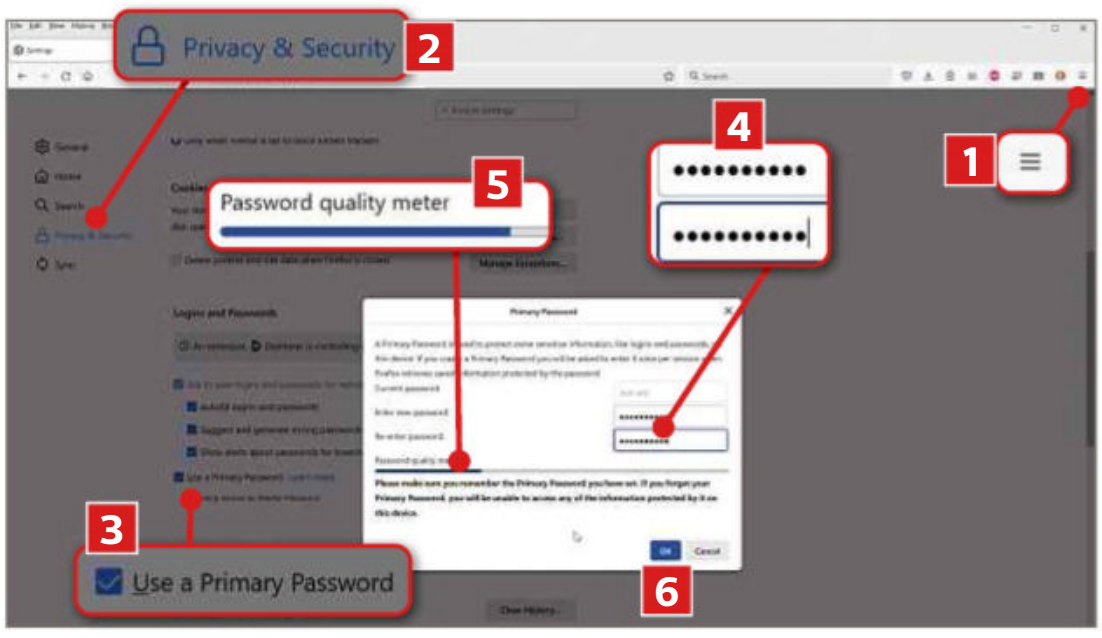
STEP 4

You should allow Browser Lock to work in Incognito mode. Do this by clicking the extension's button at the top of your browser 1, then selecting Manage Extensions, and clicking the 'Allow in Incognito' option 2 on the settings page. Here, you can also turn the extension on and off 3. If you can't see the Browser Lock button at the top of the browser, click the three dots at the top right of Chrome 4, go to More Tools, followed by Extensions then click Details in the Browser Lock tile and click the slider to turn it on.



STEP 5

Browser Lock is available for other browsers built using the Chromium source code. To use it in **Edge**, visit www.snipca.com/39222, then click Get, followed by 'Add extension'. It installs in the same way as the Chrome version. You can change the options by clicking its icon 1 and selecting Change Settings 2. You can also add the extension to **Opera** (www.snipca.com/39223), while **Brave** and **Vivaldi** users can use the Chrome version by following Steps 1 to 4.

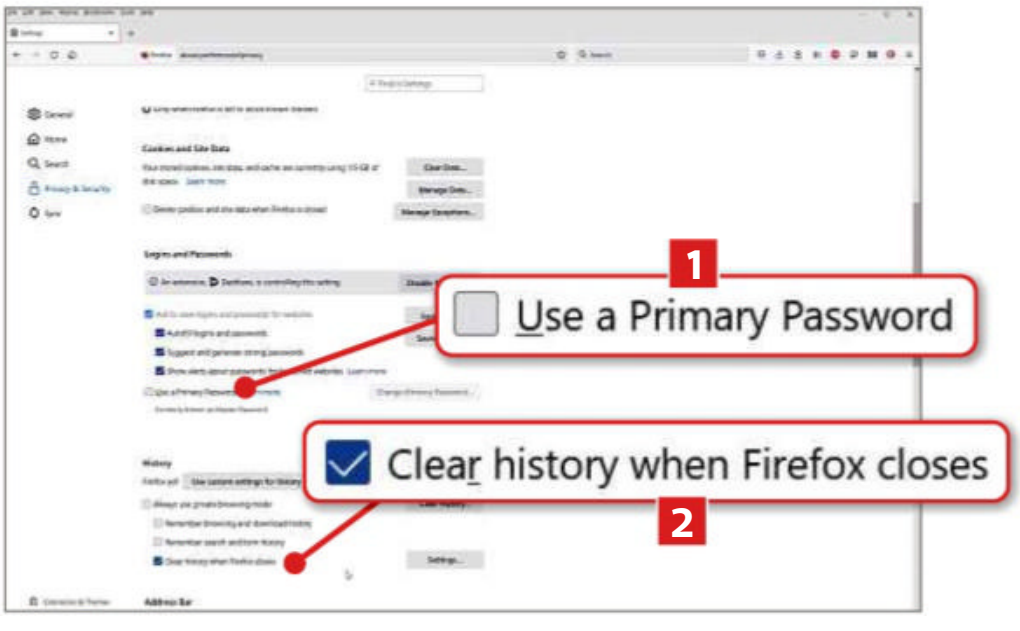


STEP 6

There's no need to use an extension in **Firefox**. Instead, secure your account with a primary password (Firefox's name for a master password). Click the menu top right 1 then open Settings. Click 'Privacy & Security' 2 on the left, then scroll down to 'Logins and Passwords' and tick 'Use a Primary Password' 3. You'll be prompted to enter your password twice 4 and its strength level will be shown below 5. Click OK 6.

STEP 7

You'll need to enter this primary password whenever you start a new browsing session to give Firefox access to other passwords you use in the browser. You can change it at any time on the settings page, and disable it by unticking 'Use a Primary Password' 1, and entering the password you set. The same settings page lets you tell Firefox to clear your history when it closes 2.



Readers' Tips

TIP OF THE FORTNIGHT

Download free PNG files from the web

I spend much of my spare time working with PNG files, which for those who don't know are ideal for online logos and icons. What makes them so valuable is that they have transparent backgrounds, so you can easily add your own.

For years I've gone through the hassle of making my own PNG files transparent using a variety of expensive editing tools, but I've now found an online database of PNGs that are ready to download and use. This magical treasure trove is called CleanPNG (www.cleanpng.com).

I don't know how many images there are to choose from, but searching for 'Wi-Fi' (see screenshot) brought up 12 pages. I searched for 'Computer' and got 60 pages. If the results are too much of a mish-mash, click the top-left All Filters button

then narrow the search by size, type or colour. It's free too – you don't even have to register.

Harold Fry

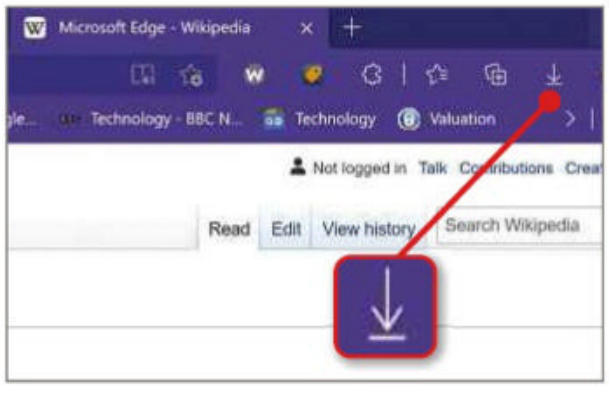
Harold wins a copy of our 2020 Back Issue CD **Buy it on Amazon www.snipca.com/38164**

BROWSERS

Add Downloads button to the Edge toolbar

I'm sure this short tip won't win any prizes, but I've found it useful. In Edge, click the three horizontal dots top-right, then right-click Download and select 'Show in toolbar'.

The Downloads button (a down-pointing arrow) will now appear at the top in Edge (see screenshot below).



Just click it to see all your recent downloads.

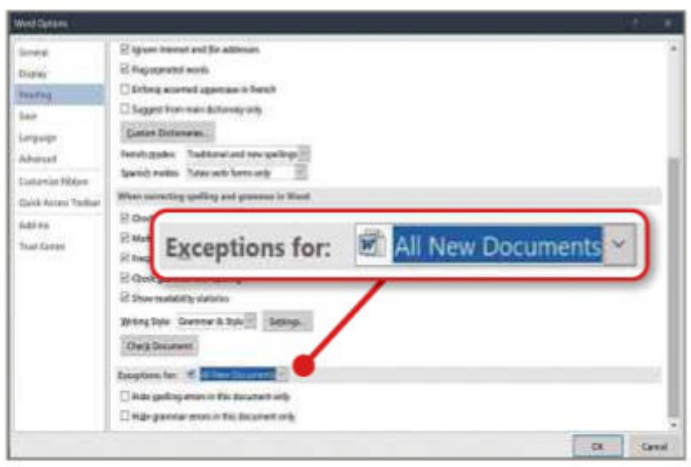
David Mendoza

OFFICE

Make sure spell-check works on new Word docs

I've just found out why Word's spell-checking wasn't working across all my documents. Somehow I had selected options to make 'exceptions' for new documents, meaning the spell-check and grammar tools weren't being applied to new documents I opened.

To fix this, click File at the top left of a document, then Options at the bottom of the blue sidebar. In the new box that appears, click Proofing on the left, then untick the two 'Hide...' boxes at the bottom, and make sure the 'Exceptions



for' dropdown menu is selected to All New Documents (see screenshot above).

Alison Littlejohn

PAYMENTS

Use Google Pay abroad and for large purchases

Helen Millward (Readers' Tips, Issue 611) is right to draw attention

Why I stopped using...

Audacity

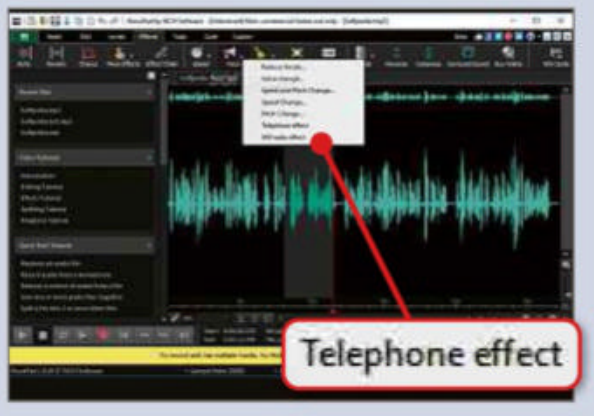
I know Audacity's new owners (Muse Group) have insisted they won't gather data from users (Issue 611, page 7), but you can't blame me, and thousands of others, for being suspicious. Also, independent programs have a habit of deteriorating when bought by bigger companies (just look at CCleaner).

And what I use instead...

For my money, feature by feature, **WavePad** (www.nch.com.au/wavepad) is just as good as Audacity.

Since switching I've been astonished by how many audio effects you can add to your recordings. The telephone effect (see screenshot right) has quickly become a favourite of mine. Echo is good too.

I often have to edit hour-long audio files, but WavePad makes it easy because you can bookmark sections. I've also noticed that you can edit the audio from a video without having to separate the two using a video-editing program,



though I've not tried this yet.

Simon Collard

Tell us why you stopped using a website, app or program: letters@computeractive.co.uk

to the usefulness of Google Pay (https://pay.google.com), and to suggest an inexpensive phone (the Nokia 3.4 – £94 from www.snipca.com/38673) that has the NFC function required for contactless payments.

I'd like to point out some extra benefits of Google Pay. One is that the contactless transaction limit that applies to cards does not apply. I've used it for transactions of several hundred pounds (I believe the limit, subject to the discretion of individual merchants, is as high as £999).

Second, Google Pay doesn't recognise international borders. The credit cards I use don't work contactlessly in either France or Italy, and I assume that's the case in other countries too. But Google Pay *does* work. During a recent trip I used it regularly, even for small transactions such as in bars and greengrocers (although some bars had a €10 minimum spend). Italy, in particular, has recently seen a massive increase in the availability of contactless terminals, driven by the need for hand hygiene during the pandemic.

However, before using Google Pay for small purchases, check the credit card linked to it doesn't charge a fixed fee for transactions made in a foreign currency.

Tom Kirk

Reader recommends...

Canon Pixma G650 MegaTank printer

£249 from Wilkinson Cameras www.snipca.com/38817

Your review of the Canon Pixma G650 (Issue 610, page 25) seemed to be written just for me. Like your reviewer, I've looked in vain for an ink-tank printer that competes with cartridge printers on both photo quality and value for money.

It took me 10 minutes to decide to buy it, and about the same time to set it up using the idiot-proof instructions. I noticed the quality with my first printed photo. The two extra colours Canon has added (red and grey) make photos richer and more accurate. No printer I've ever had before came close.

You mentioned that it's more expensive than older MegaTank models, but for me 1p per colour page is easily affordable. This is my first MegaTank printer. If it continues to impress, it won't be my last.

Adam Castle

Want to recommend hardware or software to fellow readers?
Email letters@computeractive.co.uk

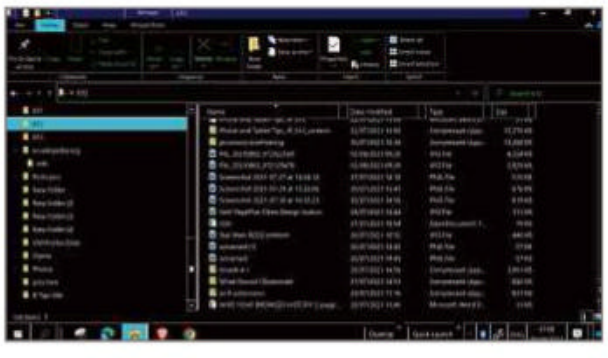
WINDOWS

Turn on high-contrast with a keyboard shortcut

I thought I knew most of the useful keyboard shortcuts for Windows, so I was surprised and rather delighted to discover a new one. Press Shift+Alt+Print and Windows will switch to 'High Contrast' mode (see screenshot below), changing what was white to black and vice versa. You'll be asked whether this is what you want, so select Yes.

The reason this shortcut is useful is because I find high-contrast is helpful only on certain sites. Having it switched on all the time would be too much, so a shortcut to turn it on and off is ideal.

Roger Crown



HARDWARE

Move transmitter to get keyboard working

Going into my 70th year, one of my bucket-list jobs was to build my own PC. I managed extremely well (in my opinion!), but my Logitech MK710 wireless keyboard – which I really like and have used for years – stopped responding. Sometimes it would 'catch up', and lots of text I'd typed would suddenly appear. Other times, nothing at all.

In desperation, I looked at Logitech's website, which said that the keyboard doesn't like USB hubs. Now, I had the transmitter plugged into one of the USB sockets on top of the case. I reckoned this might, in effect, work as a hub because when I built the PC I had to plug a lead from these ports into the motherboard.

So, I moved the transmitter into a USB port on the back of the case, which was on the actual motherboard. Hey ho, problem solved! If only I'd thought of it sooner, I wouldn't have wasted weeks trying several other keyboards trying to work it out!

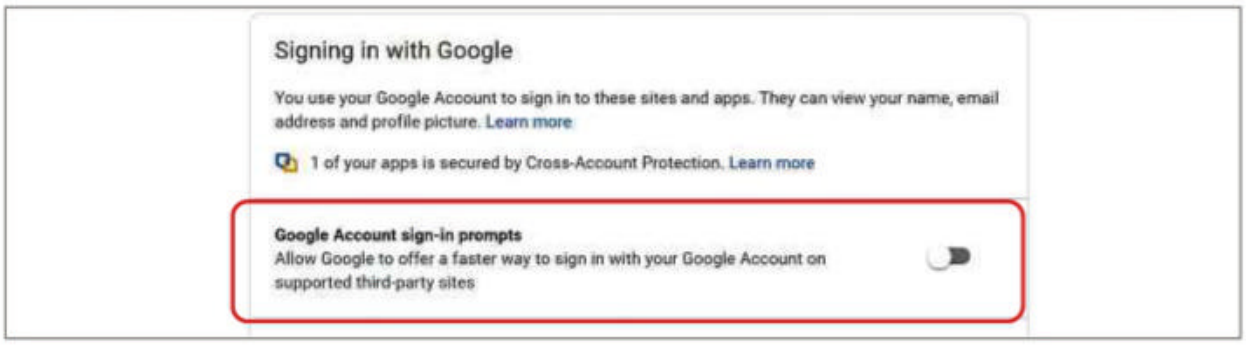
David Lee

INTERNET

Disable Google's sign-in messages

There are lots of annoying 'sign-in' messages on the web, but I now get one fewer after deactivating the 'Sign in with Google' pop-ups. You can do this by logging in at www.google.com/account and clicking Security on the left. You then need to scroll down to the 'Signing in to Other Sites' section and click the 'Signing in with Google' option. On the next page, look for the 'Signing in with Google' section and turn off the 'Google Account sign-in prompts' slider (see screenshot below). The 'Updated' message, bottom left, will confirm the change.

Simon Woolwich



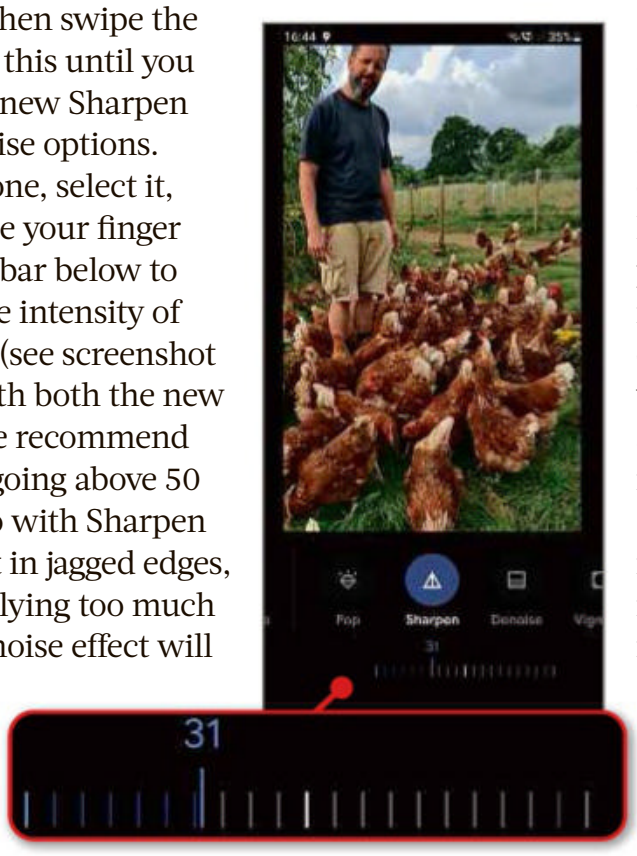
Phone and Tablet Tips

ANDROID

Enhance your images in Google Photos

Modern phones take amazingly high-quality photos, but sometimes even the best shots need a little touching up. The latest version of Google Photos includes two new tools that let you sharpen and remove noise from your photos.

Make sure you have the latest version of Google Photos installed (check for updates in the Play Store app), then launch it. Open the photo that you want to enhance, then tap it once and select the Edit option that appears at the bottom. Swipe the bar just above the Cancel and Save buttons to reveal the Adjust option. Tap this, then swipe the bar above this until you reach the new Sharpen and Denoise options.



To use one, select it, then swipe your finger along the bar below to choose the intensity of the effect (see screenshot right). With both the new effects, we recommend avoiding going above 50 – doing so with Sharpen will result in jagged edges, while applying too much of the Denoise effect will make your photos look blurred. Google Photos displays a preview as you make changes – it's worth using two fingers to zoom in on the preview as the changes are sometimes noticeable only when viewed close up.

Once you've made your changes, tap Done, then 'Save copy'. You'll now have a version of your photo with the effects applied in your photo library, along with the original.

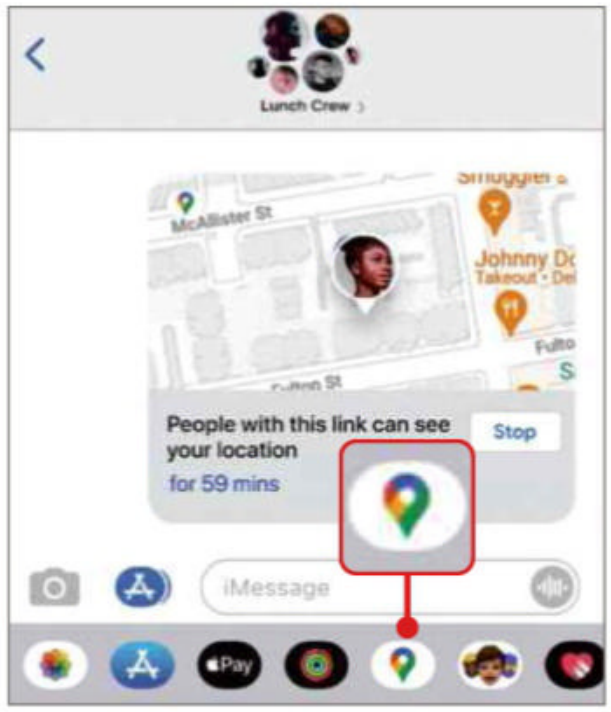
iOS

Share your live location in iMessage

The latest version of Google Maps for iOS lets you quickly share your location while sending a text message.

To use it, open the iMessage app on your device, then either create a new message or open an existing one. At the bottom of the window, tap the Google Maps icon (a multi-coloured pin – see screenshot above right). You'll now see your current location on a map along with your approximate street address. Tap the 'Share your real-time location...' option and Google Maps will insert a small map image into your text message. If you want to add a message alongside it, enter it into the text box as normal.

To send your location to your contact, tap the blue up arrow. The person receiving the message will now see your live location for a period of one hour – they can tap it to open your location in the Google Maps apps on their device. If you want to stop sharing your live location before the hour is up, tap the Stop button within the message. Alternatively, tap the remaining time (listed in blue below the map) to extend the amount of time your location is shared.



ANDROID & iOS

Review Facebook's new privacy settings

Facebook has again updated the security and privacy settings in its app. It says these are now easier to understand and use, but they're actually scattered across different sections rather

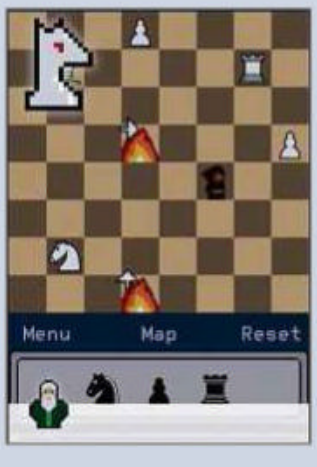
BEST NEW APPS What you should install this fortnight

Chess Puzzle Adventure

89p

iOS: www.snipca.com/39300

This is chess, but not as you know it. You control a wizard who uses the rules of chess to capture enemy pieces, some of which can hide behind rocks. You'll have to use all your chess knowledge to improvise tactics across the 100 levels. Beginners will also find it a fun way to learn the principles of the game.



Google Data Restore Tool

Free

Android: www.snipca.com/39301

Already buried in Android's settings, the Data Restore Tool is now available as an app, which makes it easier for Google to update. It lets you move data, such as apps, contacts, photos and your Google account, from an old phone to a new one over a cable or the internet. Download this app and keep it tucked away for when you buy a new phone.

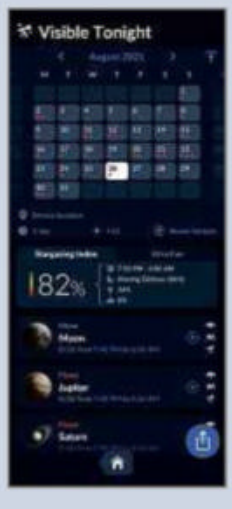
Sky Tonight

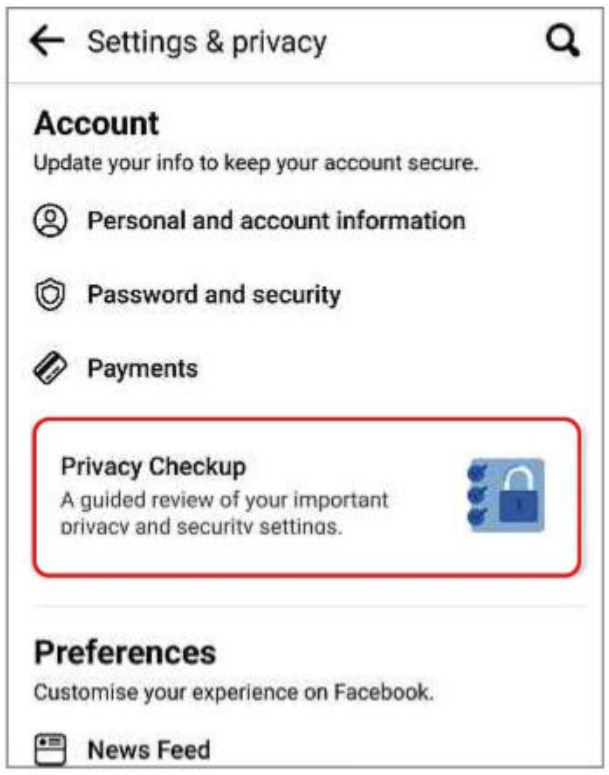
£4.99

Android: www.snipca.com/39297

iOS: www.snipca.com/39298

Point this app at the night sky and it tells you not only what you're looking at, but also what lies beyond. You can even use it to plan your star gazing – tap the telescope button and you'll see a list of astronomical items to look out for in the coming days, along with visibility ratings based on factors such as light pollution and cloud cover.





than being in one place.

To access the new settings, open the Facebook app, tap the menu button (three lines, top right), then tap the 'Settings & privacy' section to expand it. The 'Settings' section lets you review everything from your account settings (password, payment cards associated with your account and more), through to the usage information Facebook holds on you (such as your activity log).

If you don't have time to review all of these settings (there are more than 30 sections, each with plenty of individual settings), tap the Privacy Checkup option located at the bottom of the Account section (see screenshot above). Here, you can select from five themes (including topics such as who can see your data and your ad preferences). Facebook will guide you through the main privacy settings for each.

The sheer number of privacy options should serve as a stark reminder as to how much Facebook knows about you.

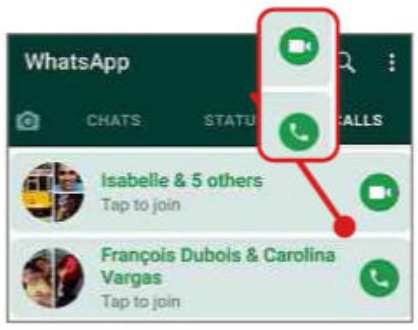
ANDROID & iOS

Join missed WhatsApp group calls

There will be times when you want to avoid a group video or voice call. However, if you missed a call that you actually wanted to join, the latest version of WhatsApp lets you hop in the conversation as a latecomer. If the the call is still in progress, you'll see it listed in your recent messages list, shaded in light green and with a 'Tap to join' option. The entry will also show either a telephone icon (for voice calls) or a camera icon (video calls) – see screenshot above right. When you tap the entry, you'll be added to the call.

You can also now rejoin a call that's continued after you left (so take care not to bad-mouth someone who's just left a call – they may have rejoined by the time you let rip). As before, use the 'Tap to join' button on the relevant entry in your recent messages list.

As well as meaning you'll never miss another group call, this new feature also lets you check who's in a group call before you join it. When you receive a WhatsApp notification that someone has invited you to a group call, tap the Ignore button, then Join. From here, you can preview who's currently in the call along with people who have been invited but are yet to join. If you're happy to join the call, tap Join a second time.



BEST APPS FOR... Tracking boats and ships

CruiseMapper

Free

Android www.snipca.com/39195

iOS www.snipca.com/39196

This app is designed primarily for tracking commercial vessels such as cruise ships. Select a vessel to show its recent movements, then tap its name at the top of the screen to view detailed info about the ship and recent itineraries. You can also view the deck plan, right down to individual cabin numbers.

Best for: Tracking cruise ships

MarineTraffic

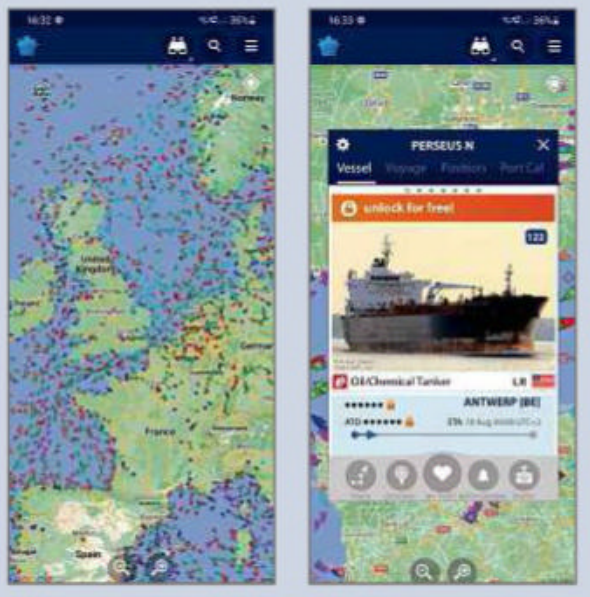
Free*

Android www.snipca.com/39192

iOS www.snipca.com/39193

MarineTraffic provides real-time positions for over 100,000 vessels worldwide. As well as browsing the full-screen map, you can also search for specific marine items – the latest version lets you filter the results by category, including vessels, ports, stations and lighthouses. Tap a vessel to get a photo along with basic information. For full vessel details, you'll need to upgrade to the Starter Plan (£9.49 per year).

Best for: Tracking all vessel types



Boat Watch

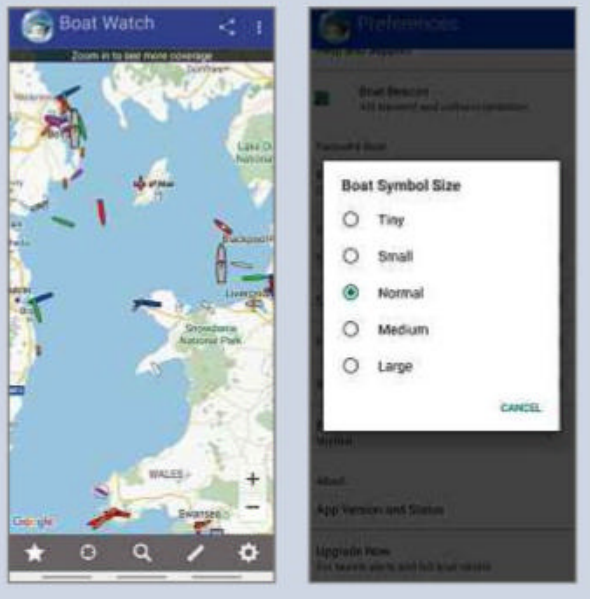
Free

Android www.snipca.com/39197

iOS www.snipca.com/39198

If you have no need for advanced tracking tools and simply want to identify passing ships while on the beach, Boat Watch is ideal. Thanks to its simple design, the app is very easy to use. Settings are limited to switching between standard and satellite map views and adjusting the size of the vessel icons. There's also a search tool that lets you find specific vessels.

Best for: Simple boat tracking



*Contains in-app purchases

Make Windows Better

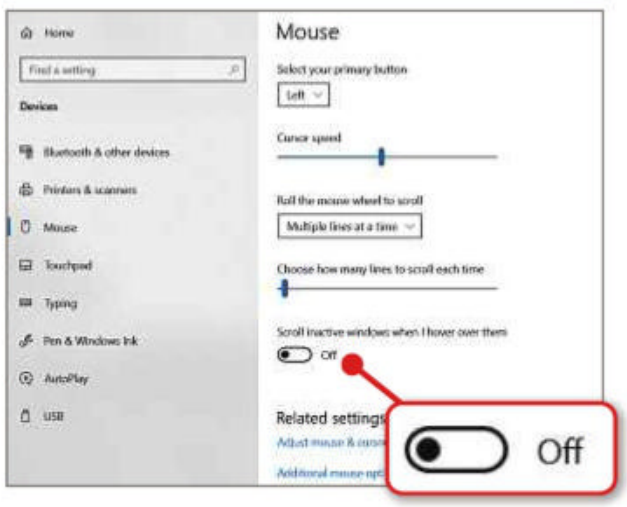
Expert tips for every version

WINDOWS 10

Restrict scrolling

Windows lets you scroll any window on your desktop without having to click it first. This means you can be browsing a website, then hover over a Word document and use your mouse's scroll wheel to move up and down through its pages. While this is sometimes useful, it also means you can end up scrolling the wrong window by accident – particularly if you've got lots of windows open.

If you'd rather limit scrolling only to the window you're currently using, open Settings (press the Window key+I), select Devices, then Mouse from the list on the left. Now move to the right-hand side of the window, locate the 'Scroll inactive windows...' section, then click the slider so that it reads Off (see screenshot below).

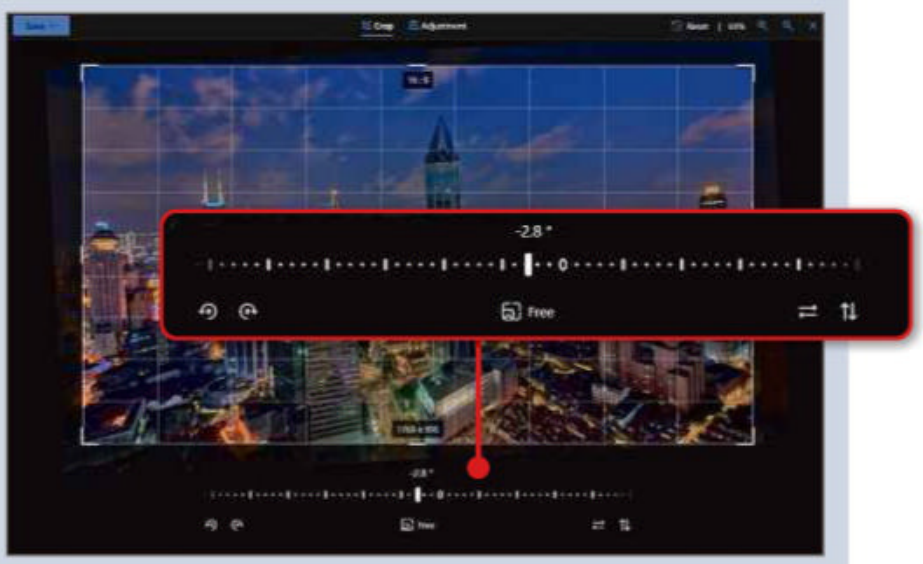


WINDOWS 7, 8.1 & 10

Edit your photos in OneDrive

Microsoft has just added a new feature to OneDrive that lets you edit photos stored in your account without having to download them. To use it, open OneDrive in your browser by going to https://onedrive.live.com. Log into your Microsoft account (if you don't have one, first go to www.snipca.com/39291 and click 'Create a Microsoft account'), then navigate to the folder containing your photos. Double-click the one you want to edit, then click the new Edit button in the top toolbar. You can now crop the photo by dragging the four corners to select the part you want. If your photo is lopsided, click and drag the horizontal bar located just under your photo (see screenshot). As you rotate the image, OneDrive will zoom in to prevent black edges appearing around the borders. You can apply further edits to your image by selecting the Adjustment option at the top. This reveals a sidebar on the right-hand side, with individual sliders for Brightness, Contrast, Exposure and more.

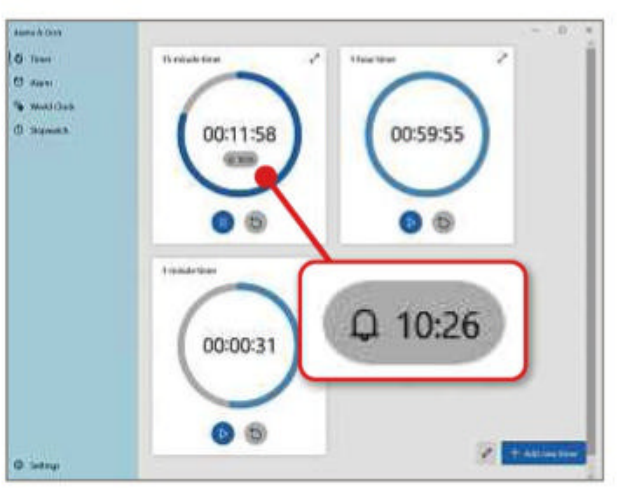
Once you've finished editing your photo, click the blue Save button in the top-left corner, then choose whether to overwrite the original image (click Save) or save your edited version as a separate image ('Save as copy'). We look at more ways to edit images online in our Cover Feature (see page 52).



WINDOWS 10

Set, view and re-use your timers

Earlier this year, Microsoft quietly updated the Alarms & Clock app in Windows 10. The new app has a neater design and makes it easier to manage your timers. To open the app, click the Start button, type clock, then select 'Alarms & Clock' from the results. You'll see all your timers listed in the timer section, with the blue part of each timer circle indicating how much time is left. Timers that aren't currently running have a play button beneath them. Those that are running have a pause button, along with a box showing when the timer is due to end (see screenshot below left). You can edit or delete timers by right-clicking them. To create a new timer, click the 'Add a timer' button in the bottom-right corner.

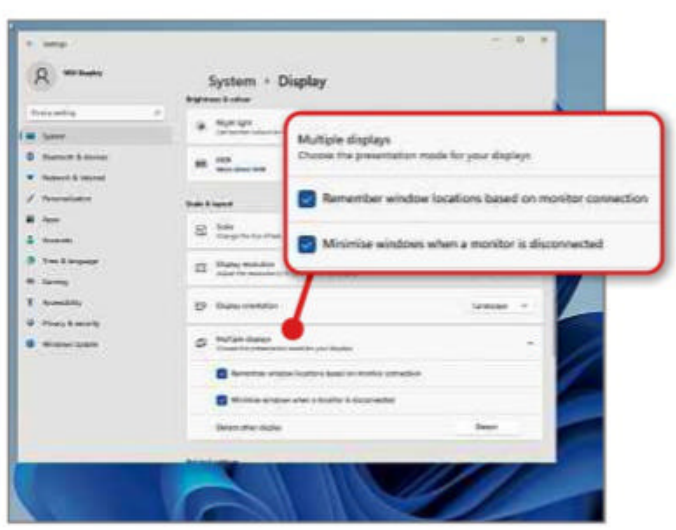


WINDOWS 11

Use multiple screens better

If you have more than one monitor connected to your computer, you'll know how frustrating it is when you disconnect one - Windows simply dumps all your open windows on to your remaining monitor. Windows 11, which looks set to be released in October, fixes this by adding two new options. To view them, right-click the desktop and select 'Display settings'. Next, scroll down the Settings window that opens and click the 'Multiple displays' box to expand it (see screenshot right). Ticking the 'Remember window locations...' box tells Windows to save the location of each window on your monitors, so when you disconnect a monitor then reconnect it, your windows will be exactly where you left them.

To stop Windows moving all your open windows to your remaining monitor when you disconnect your second screen, tick the 'Minimise windows...' box. If you want to try these new features before Windows 11 is released, you can now install it using ISO files - see page 6 for more.



MICROSOFT EXCEL

See ways to illustrate your data

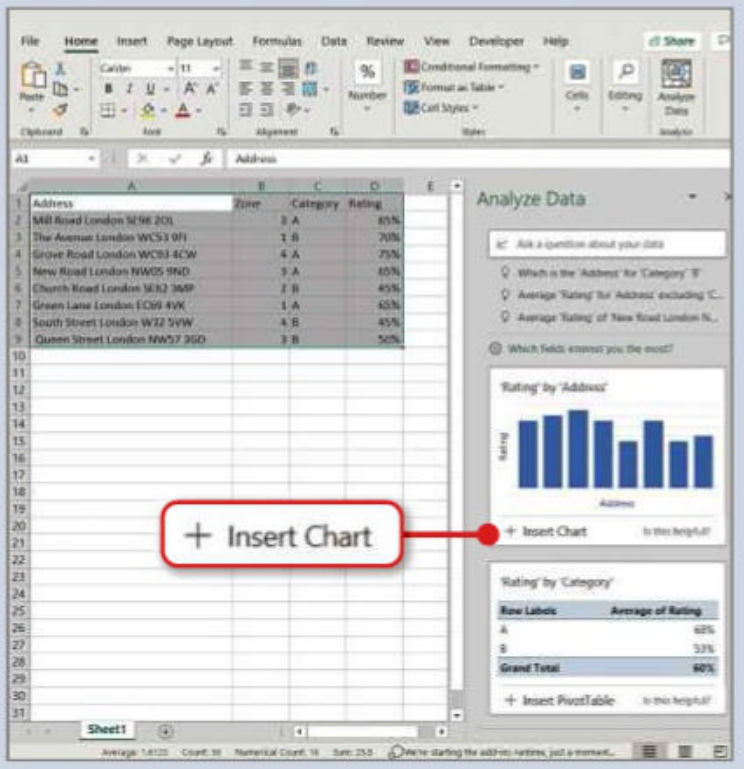
Microsoft has launched a tool in Excel that provides suggestions on how to illustrate your data. To use it, you'll either need to be running Excel 2019 or the online version of Excel at www.snipca.com/39295 (it works with free accounts – click 'Create one' to set one up).

Select the data you want to illustrate, then click the Home tab at the top, followed by the Analyze Data button on the toolbar (you may need to maximise the Excel window to see this button).

Excel will now open a panel on the right-hand side of the window, showing different charts and graphs for your data.

If you spot one you like, you can add it to your spreadsheet by clicking Insert Chart at the bottom-left corner of the graphic (see screenshot right).

If you want more suggestions, click the 'Which fields interest you most' link at the top of the panel, then choose the columns in your selected data that you want to concentrate on. Excel will then update the suggested illustrations accordingly.

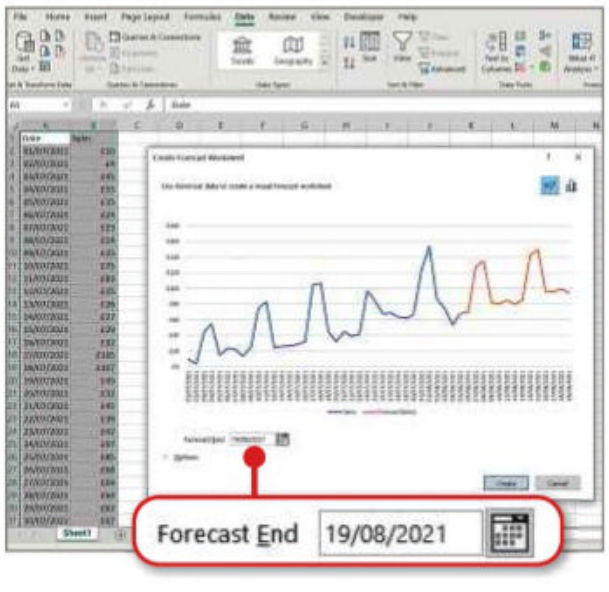


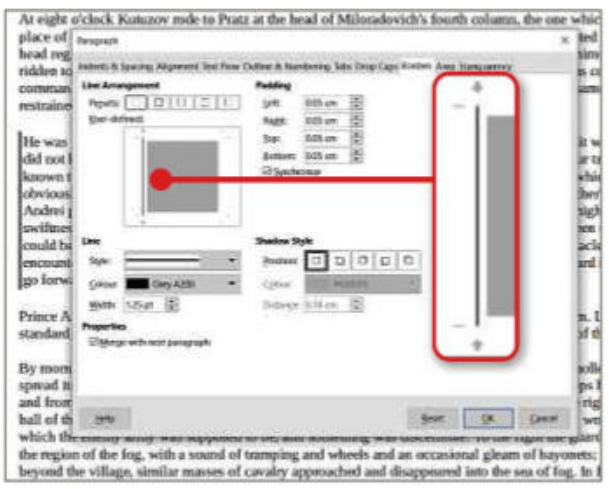
MICROSOFT EXCEL

Forecast trends based on data

Excel (version 2016 onwards) includes a Forecast Sheet tool that lets you predict future trends based on existing data. To use it, first select your data – in this example, we've selected data showing club merchandise sales over a period of a couple of months. Next, select the Data tab at the top of the Excel window, then click the Forecast Sheet button (you'll find this in the Forecast section at the right-hand side of the toolbar).

Excel will now display a graph showing your existing data in blue and predicted data in orange. If you want to adjust how far in the future the prediction goes, click the Forecast End box (see screenshot below) and select the date you want it to end on. You can also view the data as a bar chart (click the chart icon in the top-right corner). To insert the chart into your spreadsheet, click Create.





LIBREOFFICE WRITER

Add vertical lines to documents

Vertical lines let you highlight specific sections of a document – there are two ways that you can add them in LibreOffice Writer. If you want to highlight an entire paragraph with a vertical line, select it then open the Format menu at the top and click 'Paragraph...'. In the window that opens, select the Borders tab. Next, click the left edge of the preview window to add a border to it (see screenshot above). You can change the style, colour and width of the line using the options below the preview window, while the Padding boxes (top right) let you set the size of the spacing between the line and your text. Click OK and the line will be added to the paragraph. If you add or remove text from the paragraph, the size of the line will adjust accordingly.

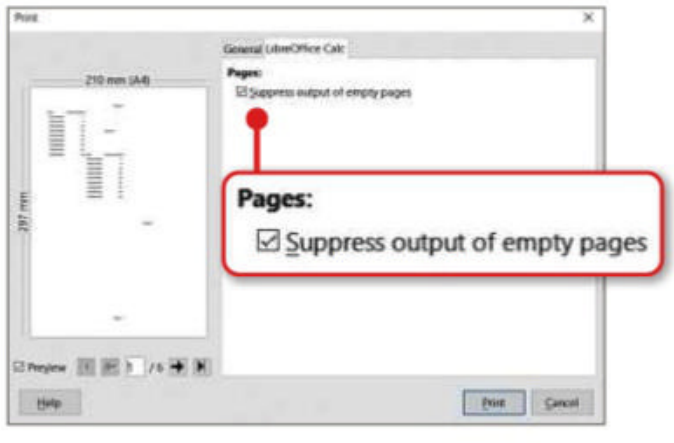
Alternatively, you can simply draw a vertical line alongside the appropriate section of your document. Click the Insert menu, Shape, Line (twice), then draw the line directly on your document.

Although this gives you greater freedom as to where to place it, the line won't be linked to your text as with the paragraph method explained above. So if you edit your document, you may need to move the line so that it's alongside the correct section.

LIBREOFFICE CALC

Skip empty pages when printing

When you're printing a large spreadsheet in LibreOffice Calc that includes lots of empty cells, you may find some pages come out blank. To avoid this, you can tell Calc to skip empty pages. When you're ready to print, click File, Print, then click the LibreOffice Calc tab (top-right corner of the window). Tick the 'Suppress output of empty pages' box (see screenshot below) – the print preview window on the left will update and you can use the page buttons under it to check how each page will print. Next, return to the General tab, make sure the other printer settings are as you want them, then click Print.



In The Club

Run a club or society? Here's how your tech can make it easier

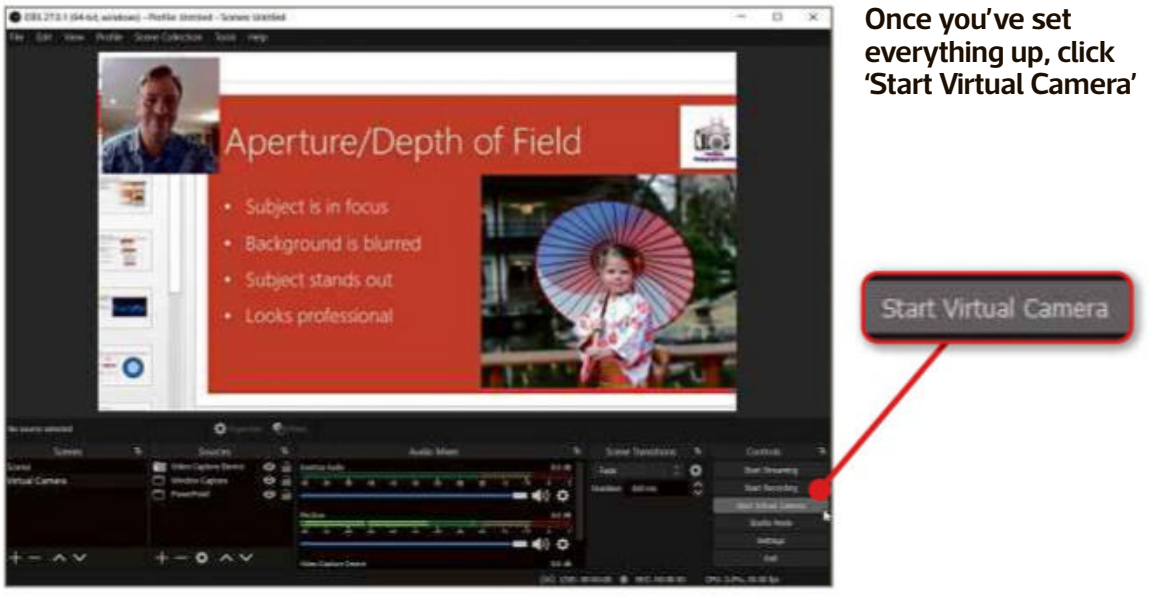
Use virtual cameras in Zoom meetings

If you want to talk with club members on Zoom while walking them through an on-screen document or demonstrating how to do something, you should install OBS Studio (https://obsproject.com, OBS stands for Open Broadcaster Software). This free program lets you add multiple sources as 'cameras', including any open program window, such as a PowerPoint presentation or web page.

Add your virtual cameras

When you first run OBS Studio, select the third option ('I will only be using the virtual camera'), then click Next and you'll see the recommended settings for recording quality, resolution, and frame rate. Leaving these as they are should be fine, but you might want to lower the resolution or frame rate if you're on a slow internet connection. Click 'Apply Settings' to close the box.

Once you have the program open, click the plus sign in the Scene box at the bottom left to create a new scene, then name it 'Virtual Camera' and click OK. Now you need to add some 'cameras', so click the plus sign under Sources. You should include yourself in the chat by selecting Video Capture Device. In the box that opens you can give the source a new name or select the default ('Video Capture Device') then click OK. Click the Device dropdown menu and select your webcam from the list of options.



Once you've set everything up, click 'Start Virtual Camera'

The output from the webcam showing yourself will appear in a window in the corner of the screen. You can adjust its size by clicking and dragging the handles around the video window. Press Alt while doing so to change the width of the window. In our example, we're going to show a PowerPoint presentation on screen, so we'll reduce the size of the video window and move it to the top-left corner.

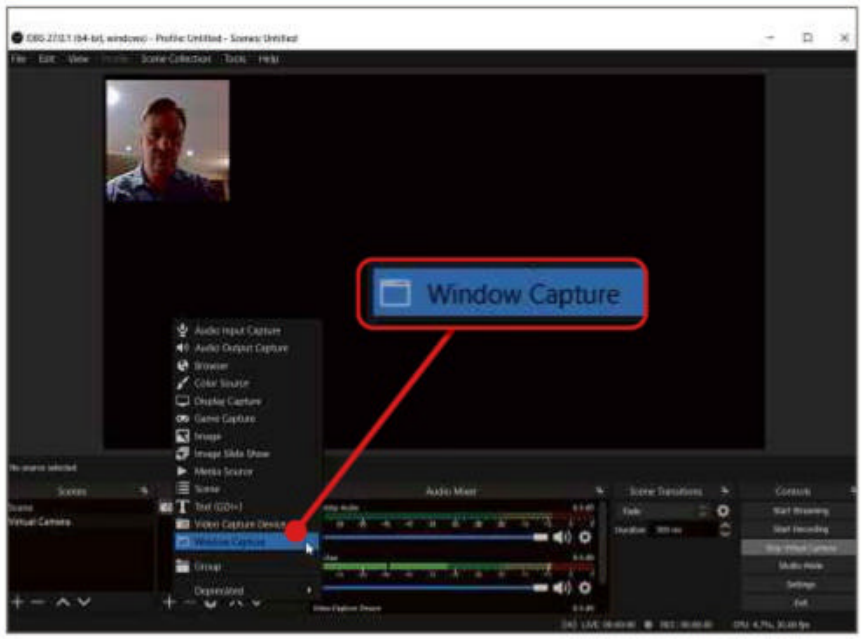
Add a PowerPoint presentation

Once we've opened a presentation in PowerPoint, we'll switch back to OBS and click the plus sign under Sources and select 'Window Capture' (see screenshot below). In the window that opens we'll rename it 'PowerPoint' then click OK. Next, we'll click the Window dropdown menu and select our presentation from the list of open windows.

At this point the video will be hidden underneath the PowerPoint window. We'll change this by clicking and dragging the PowerPoint entry in the Source box, pulling it below Video Capture. Any changes we make to the presentation will be shown live to your audience through OBS.

To add another source such as a web page, click Sources, choose Window Capture, then select your browser in the dropdown menu. We can switch between the web page and presentation by clicking the eye icon next to a source. We can show both by resizing the windows so they fit on screen.

Once everything is set up how you want it, click Start Virtual Camera in the box at the bottom right (see screenshot above). As you'll see, our video feed is at the top left, with the presentation taking up most of the screen.



Add several sources to your virtual cam, such as webcams and program windows

Select your cameras in Zoom

Now you're ready to start your club meeting. Open Zoom, then click New Meeting, followed by the arrow next to Start Video and select OBS Virtual Camera as the source and the output from that (in our example, showing us and our PowerPoint screen) will appear on screen. The image will be reversed, so click Video Settings in the same window and untick 'Mirror my Video'. Once you close the window you're ready to let people join the meeting.

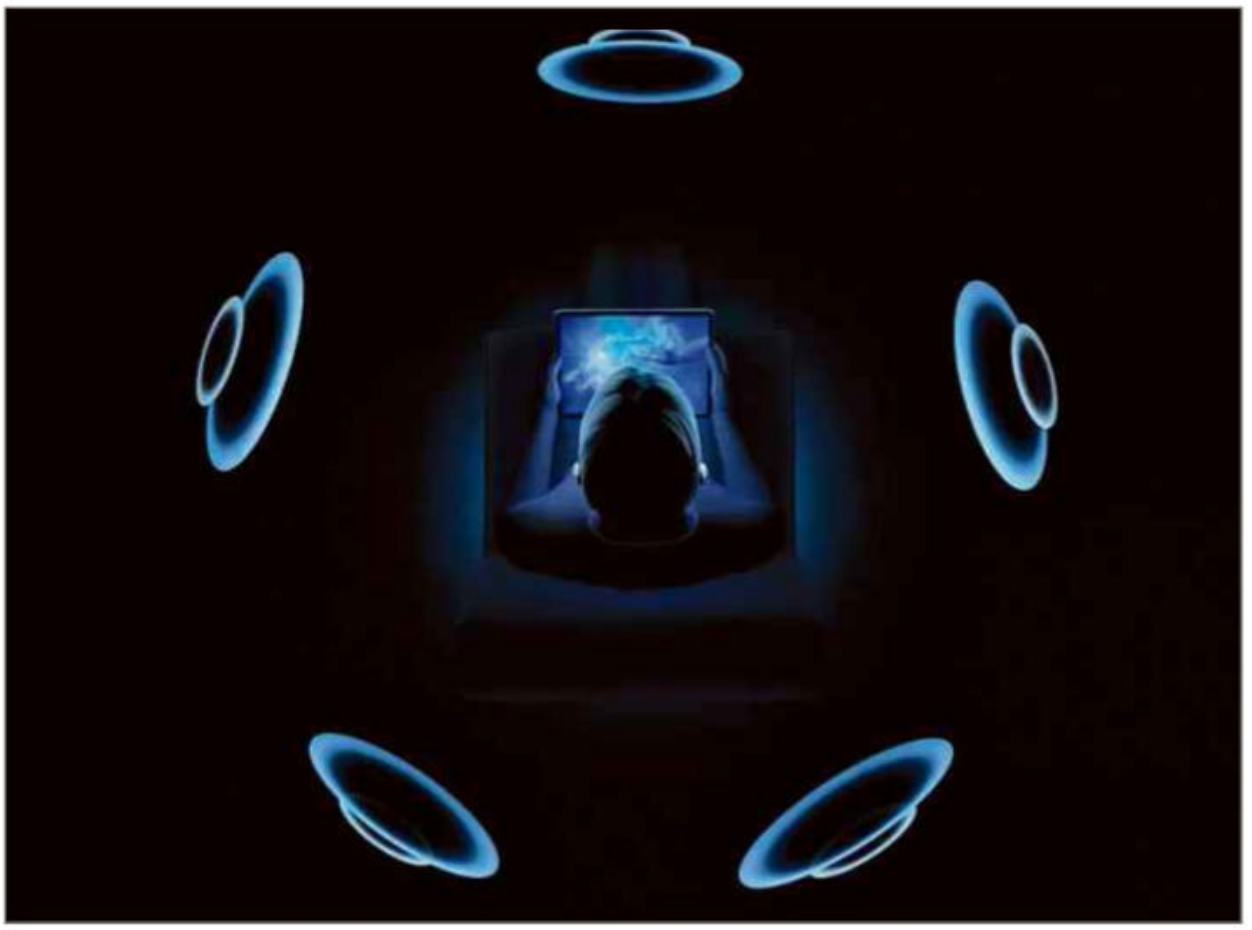
Next issue: Create attractive templates for your email newsletters

What's All the

Fuss About...

Spatial Audio

Apple's sound technology is hear, there and everywhere



What is it?

New technology from Apple that enhances the "multidimensional sound and clarity" of audio so that it appears to be coming from all around you. The system adjusts the frequencies each ear hears so that sounds can move virtually anywhere in 3D space. The result is that sounds seem to come from all around you – in front, the sides and even above. See the main image for Apple's rather sinister attempt at visualising this.

So is it like being in the cinema?

Yes. It supports the same Dolby Atmos technology that produces surround-sound in cinemas but recreates it for use with headphones. It arrived in September 2020 as part of iOS (for iPhones) and iPadOS 14, but only for films and TV. Then in June, Apple added the technology to some of the content on its Apple Music subscription service (£9.99 a month) as part of the 14.6 update. Oliver Schusser, vice president of Apple Music and Beats, said it feels "like magic" (www.snipca.com/39239). So you'll probably like it. Not a lot, but you'll like it.

Is the technology brand new?

No. Dolby launched 'Atmos for Headphones' in 2017, and it works on Windows PCs, Android smartphones and Xbox games consoles. Sony, meanwhile, has a 360 Reality Audio format for music, and delivers 3D audio in some PlayStation 4 games through its Platinum Wireless Headset.

Sounds expensive: Apple's AirPods Max support Spatial Audio, but cost £549

So how is Apple's technology different?

Apple's system uses accelerometers and gyroscopes in headphones to judge where your head is, then 'positions' the sound for the best effect. It also tracks how you hold your iPhone or iPad to ensure the audio is consistent. If, for example, you turn your head to the right so it's further away from your device, the sound will be more prominent in your left ear because it's closer to the screen. The effect is more noticeable when watching films and TV, because the audio has to synchronise with what appears on the screen. It makes following dialogue much easier.

Do I need to use Apple headphones?

For video, yes - you'll need a pair of AirPods Pro or AirPods Max (www.apple.com/airpods), which are the only headphones that can track your head position. They're not cheap, though: the Pro costs £249, while the Max is an eye-watering £549. For music, however, you can use *any* headphones, not just Apple's. You may need to fiddle with your iPhone or iPad settings, though, as Apple explains at www.snipca.com/39238. The same page also lists the iPhones and iPads that have compatible built-in speakers, so you might not even need headphones. You can get Spatial Audio on your Android device, too, as long as it supports Dolby Atmos and you have the latest version of the Apple Music app.

Is it available on all music, TV and film?

No, and that's the biggest downside. Apple says only "thousands" of tracks are currently available in Spatial Audio (listen to some at www.snipca.com/39247), despite Apple Music having 75 *million* tracks. The problem is that songs (old and new) need to be specially remixed to play in Spatial Audio. Not all TV-streaming services support it, either, although it works in Apple TV+, Disney+ and Plex, while after months of rumours, Netflix has confirmed it's getting the technology too. But despite that, it's unlikely to catch on if you have to remortgage your house to afford a pair of compatible headphones.

MOST USEFUL WEBSITES EVER!

You can have lots of fun online, but what makes the internet so vital is the vast number of incredibly *useful* sites. Will Stapley reveals what you should bookmark today

WHAT YOU CAN DO

- Enhance your MP3s using an online graphic equaliser
- Turn any photo into a large-format, printable poster
- Play Minesweeper in a Windows 3.1 emulator
- Track planes, trains and even sharks
- Find out how much sun your garden gets throughout the year
- Turn your PDFs into online 'flip books'
- Plot a route for a hike in the country

Chrome or Edge, Brave or Vivaldi - no matter which browser you use, the most important thing is the websites you load on them. And with 1.88 billion websites at the last count (www.snipca.com/39278), there's an awful lot of choice.

Over the next few pages, we'll remind you just how fantastically helpful the web can be. Don't worry, we won't bore you with big-name websites you've already heard of (and probably already use). Instead, we've scoured the internet to uncover less well-known sites that let you perform genuinely useful tasks - all for free.

As there's so much to cover, we've divided our selection of websites into six categories. Here you'll find everything from clever online calculators that let you measure, convert and number crunch, through to powerful websites for editing and enhancing your photos, music and more. We finish by showing you how to play classic MS-DOS games directly in your browser, including a retro version of 'A Question of Sport' from the 1980s.

We also want to hear what *your* favourite websites are - email your recommendations to **letters@computeractive.co.uk** and we'll share the best.

MEASURE, CONVERT & CALCULATE

Get a ruler on your screen

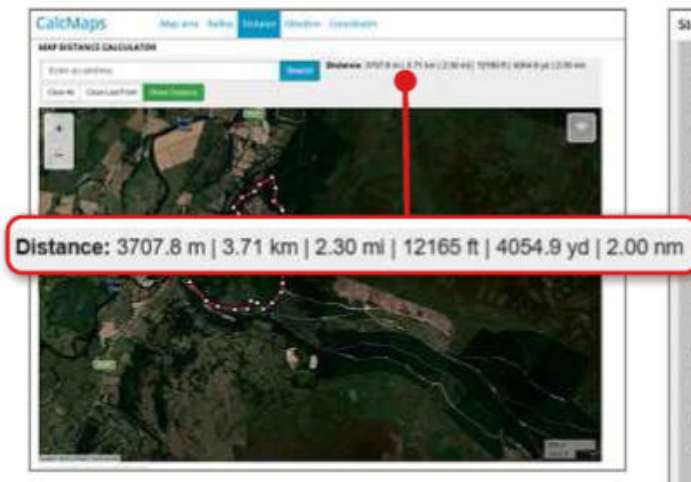
When you need to measure the size of a smaller object, don't waste time looking for a ruler. Instead, use iRuler (www.iruler.net) to place a digital ruler on your screen.

To ensure the ruler is accurate, the website will detect the size and resolution of your monitor. In our tests it was slightly out with the screen size - if you have the same problem, click the 'select your monitor dimension' under the ruler, then enter your screen size and resolution (you can find your resolution by right-clicking the desktop, then selecting 'Display settings'). You'll then have a perfectly proportioned ruler on your monitor.

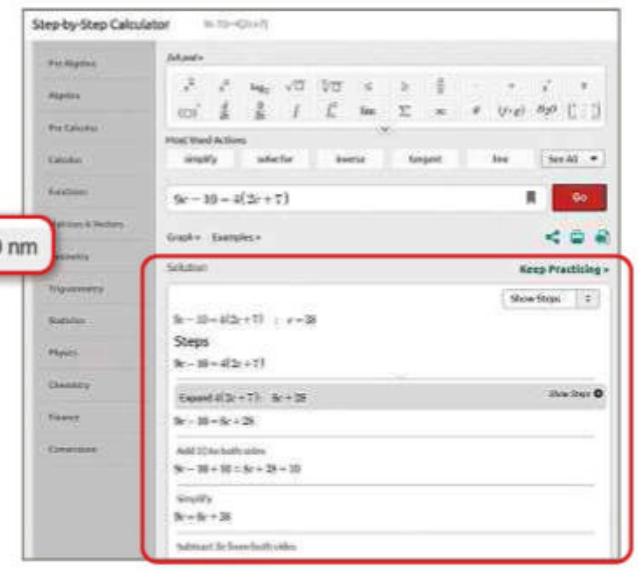
If you're not able to hold the item up to your computer's monitor, why not print a ruler instead? OnlineLabels provides a PDF of a 30cm ruler at (www.snipca.com/39212). The PDF includes instructions on how to print the ruler, but the most important thing is to not scale the PDF when printing (set the Scale option in your printer settings to None, Actual Size or similar).

You can use the web to measure the precise distance between two locations – whether that's as the crow flies or the route you walk. Google Maps includes a measurement tool, but we prefer the much simpler one at CalcMaps (www.snipca.com/39213).

Use the box top right of the map to switch between satellite and road views, then zoom in on your starting point and click your mouse. Each subsequent mouse click adds a new point along the route, with the total distance displayed at the top in various metric and imperial units (see screenshot above right). Once complete, click 'Print map' to send it to your printer, or 'Download map' to save it as a PNG file.



Calculate distances quickly with CalcMaps



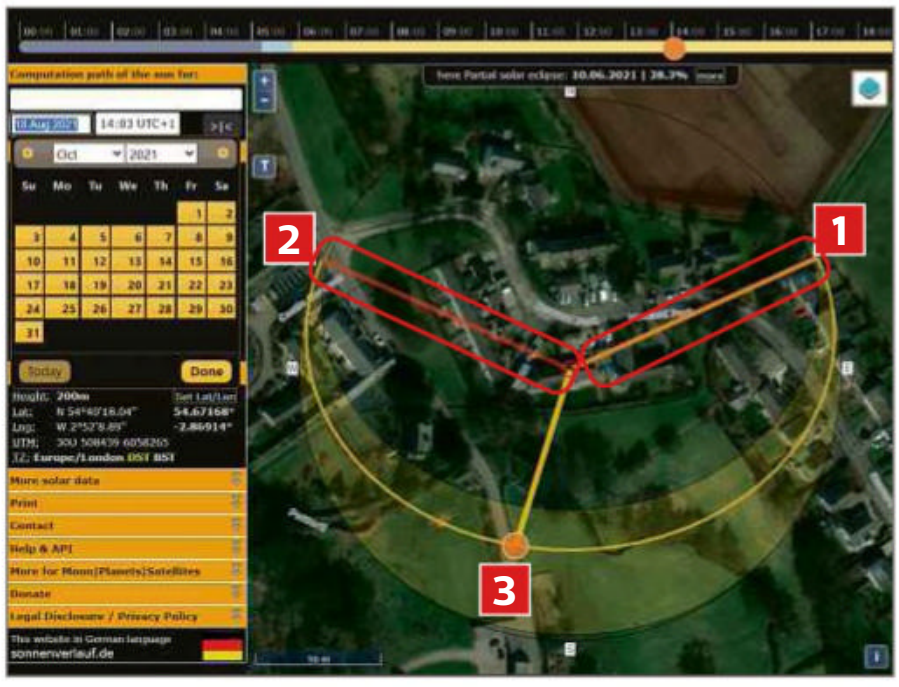
Symbolab simplifies algebraic equations and shows its workings

Carry out calculations online

We love old calculators (see how many you recognise in the Calculator Museum at www.snipca.com/39214), but with sites like Omni Calculator (www.omnicalculator.com) there's little need for physical calculators these days. This site has nearly 2,000 calculators for all kinds of tasks, from simple conversions to working out compound interest rates, gravitational force and more. Best of all, it has a simple and uncluttered design. Search for your calculator or browse the categories on the home page, enter the values in the relevant boxes, then pore over the results.

If you prefer a more traditional look to your calculator, try the scientific calculator at GeoGebra (www.snipca.com/39215). Use the buttons at the bottom to enter your calculations and the results will be displayed in the top section, line by line. Click the Settings button (cog icon, top right) to increase the size of the text.

When your mathematical workload involves algebra, go to Symbolab (www.symbolab.com). This clever tool not only solves algebraic problems, but also shows how it worked them out step by step (see screenshot above right), so you can at least pretend to understand what it all means.



Check how much sun you'll get throughout the year with SunCalc

Make home improvements

Don't waste time and effort lugging furniture around your room just to see how different layouts look. Instead, use a web-based design tool. The free version of SketchUp (www.snipca.com/39216 - unlike the paid-for versions, it's solely online) is the most powerful. However, learning how to use it takes time and it's probably more than you need if you just want to rearrange your lounge.

FloorPlanner (https://floorplanner.com) is much easier to use. Sign up for a free account, select 'Create project', then use tools in the left-hand menu to create your virtual rooms. You can then add from over 150,000 furniture items and try different room layouts without lifting a finger (except to click your mouse). If you have a printed floor plan for your home, speed things up by selecting 'Upload image' when creating a new project – the image will then be added as a temporary background, on which you can draw each wall.

If you've had enough of DIY and plan to move house instead, use SunCalc (www.suncalc.org) to find out just how much sun you'll get in the garden of your prospective new home. Don't let the wide array of buttons and controls put you off – it's actually simple to use. Click the layers button (top right) and select 'Esri Satellite', then centre the map on the property. The yellow arc indicates sunrise (1 in our screenshot left) and sunset points 2, while the orange circle 3 indicates the sun's current position. To see the sun's position on different days of the year, use the boxes in the top-left corner of the window.

EDIT & ENHANCE YOUR IMAGES

Switch to an online editor

Image-editing programs such as GIMP (www.gimp.com) and Paint.NET (www.getpaint.net) are great, but they take up a lot of hard-drive space. In contrast, web-based editors take up no space at all, and you can use them on any computer – perfect for quick image editing on public computers, for example.

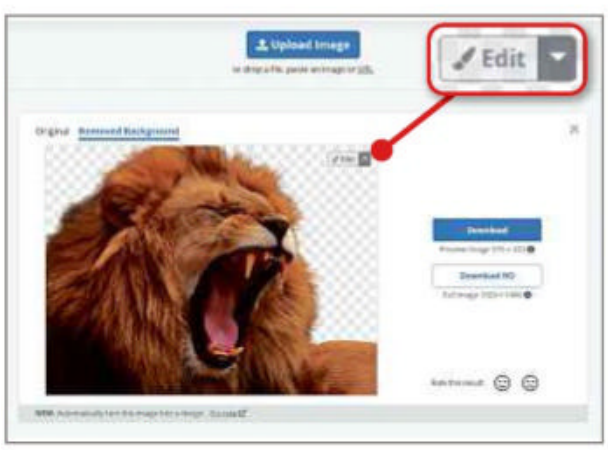
Polarr (www.snipca.com/39225) is our favourite. As well as letting you upload and edit JPEG, TIFF and PNG formats, it also supports RAW images (those saved by your camera before it applies effects such as exposure and colour balance). There's no need to create an account – simply load the website, then press Ctrl+O to upload an image. You can then use the toolbars down the left and right side to browse the options - in our screenshot above right, we've used the Curves tool to adjust the colour balance of a RAW image. To download your finished photo, press Ctrl+S.

If you want to quickly edit an image before sending it to someone via WhatsApp, don't get in a mess trying to edit it on your phone's screen. Thanks to a recent update, you can now edit images on your computer using WhatsApp Web (www.snipca.com/39226).

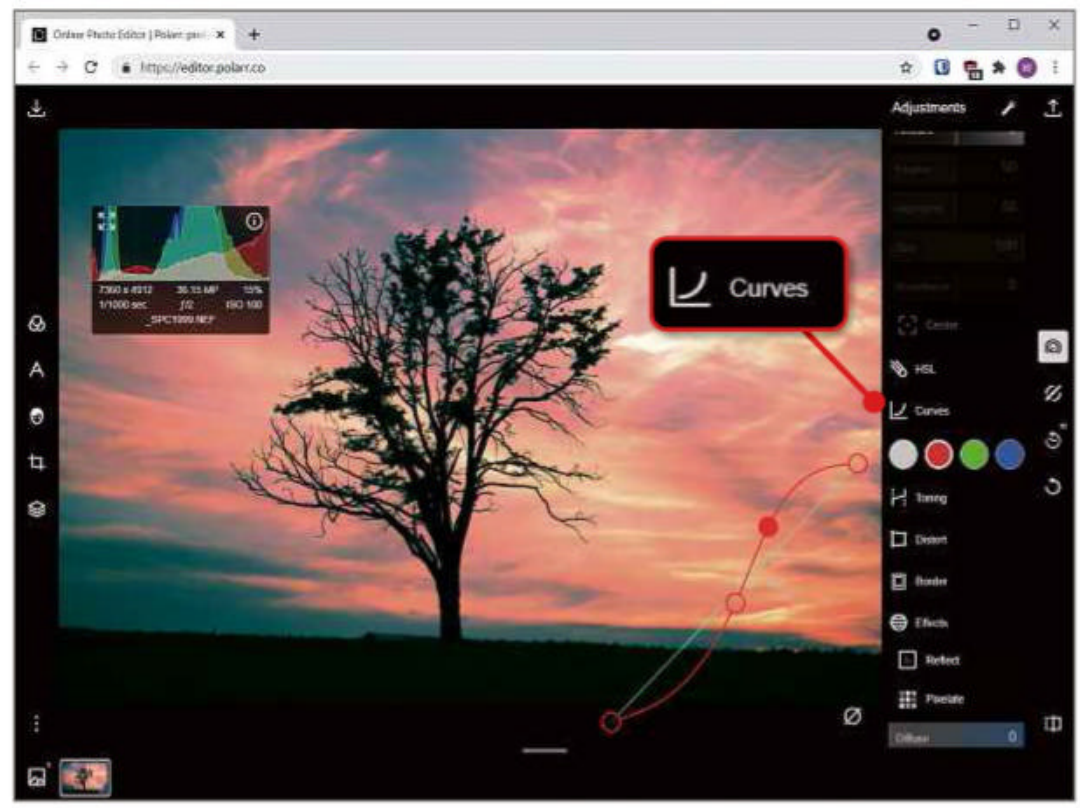
To link WhatsApp Web to your account, open the menu in the app on your phone, tap 'Linked devices', then Link A Device and point your phone at the QR code on the website. Next, open the chat in which you want to send the photo, then click the paperclip button followed by the 'Photos & Videos' button. Select the photo you want to share, then choose from the editing options at the top to crop, draw on it and add text to it.

Perform one-click edits

Old, printed photos are great, but they're often blighted by cracks, creases and other blemishes. Reinvigorate your old



Erase the background of an image with Remove.bg, then click Edit to apply a new one



Use Polarr to carry out advanced image editing, including colour balancing, directly from your browser

albums by scanning the photos to your computer, then uploading them to Hotpot's Picture Restorer tool (www.snipca.com/39227). Click the Upload box in the middle of the window, make sure the 'Has Scratch?' slider is set to On (ie, coloured green), then click Restore.

The quality of the restored photo depends on the state of the original. Click the Download link under the restored photo to save it to your computer.

Whether you want to swap the background of a photo (perhaps to turn cloudy skies blue) or just remove the background altogether (useful when uploading photos of items to eBay), doing it yourself in an image editor isn't easy.

Save yourself time by using Removebg (www.remove.bg). Simply drag your image into the website and, in just a few seconds, the background will be gone. You can then either apply one of the preset backgrounds (click Edit – see screenshot left), or download the image and add a background of your own in your favourite image editor.

You'll need to pay to download high-resolution images (starting at £8 per month), but the free version lets you download as many standard-definition images as you like.

Enlarge your photos

When you want to make a photo bigger (for example, just before printing it), simply resizing it in an image editor will reduce its quality and show lines as jagged edges.

Although there's no way to enlarge an image while maintaining the original

Rasterbator lets you turn any photo into an impressive multi-page poster

quality, you can minimise the extent to which it's degraded by using PhotoEnlarger (www.photoenlarger.com). Click 'Browse', then locate the photo you want to enlarge. Now use the slider to specify how large you want it, then click Enlarge. PhotoEnlarger will then present four versions, each resized using a different algorithm. Select the one that looks best (use the zoom slider to view them close up if needed), then click Download and choose which format you want.

Rasterbator (www.rasterbator.com) enlarges your photos in a very different way. Instead of attempting to maintain your original photo's quality, this website gives it the 'Tate Modern' treatment by turning the image into a series of large dots. This lets you create huge, multi-page posters regardless of how big your original image is. You can tweak settings such as the colour, size and shape of the dots (see screenshot above), before creating your poster by downloading, printing and piecing together the various sheets.

We'd love to see your creations – read the box on page 53.

IMPROVE YOUR AUDIO

Edit your music

Audacity is our favourite audio-editing program, but there are plenty of online alternatives that are just as good for basic editing – and they don't require you to download or install anything.

If you simply want to trim an audio file, use AudioTrimmer (https://audiotrimmer.com). Click 'Choose file', select the audio file, then drag the green markers to the start and end of the section you want to keep. If you want to delete your selection, click the Mode button so that it reads Remove (see screenshot above right). The other settings let you specify precise start and end points for your selection, and include fades at both points. When you've finished editing, select a format for the output file, then click Crop, followed by Download.

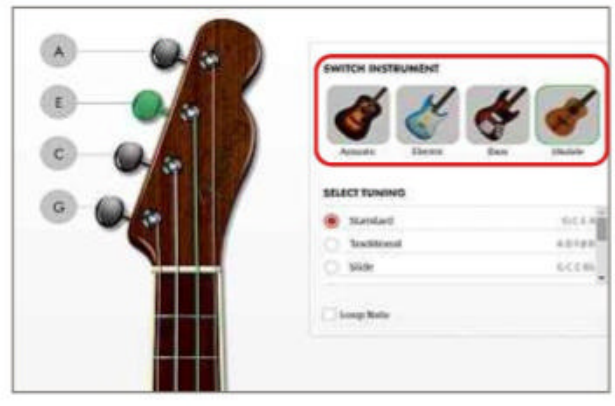
For more advanced audio edits, use AudioMass (https://audiomass.co). Comprising just 65KB of JavaScript code, this powerful online audio editor will run smoothly on even the slowest of computers and internet connections. Open your audio file, then click the Effects menu to apply everything from reverb and noise reduction, through to removing silences and changing the speed. You can also create an offline version of AudioMass, which will carry on working in your browser even if your internet connection goes down – open the Help menu, then select Store Offline Version.

Although AudioMass can remove silence from your audio files, it can't remove the vocals from a song. If you're planning a karaoke night or just enjoy singing along to your favourite songs, use Vocal Remove (https://vocalremover.org) to wipe the original singer's voice, leaving only the music. Click 'Browse my files', upload your MP3 file then wait for a few seconds while the website does its work.

Once it's finished, you'll see two tracks – one for the music (green), the other for the vocals (purple). Click the Play button to hear your MP3 file with only vocals removed. Removing vocals isn't a perfect science and you may find some of the music also disappears. To rectify this, press Play, then slowly increase the volume slider next to the vocals track until the music sounds better (you should only need to increase it a small amount). Once you've achieved the perfect mix, click the 'Music + Vocals' button to download it. Alternatively, click the Music or Vocals button to download only that track.

AudioTrimmer lets you mark a section of a track, then delete it

Use Online Audio Equaliser to create your own graphic-equaliser settings



Use Fender's site to keep your guitars and ukuleles in tune

Make your music sound better

If you enjoy fiddling with the graphic equaliser on your Hi-Fi system, you'll love Online Audio Equaliser (www.snipca.com/39230), which lets you do the same for your digital audio files.

Upload the MP3 file you want to tweak, press the Play button (bottom-left corner), then select one of the preset equaliser settings (Dance, Pop and so on) or use the individual sliders to get the audio sounding just as you want. When you've finished, click the Save button to download your tweaked track.

As well as improving your audio files, it's also worth checking that whatever you're using to listen to them (headphones, earbuds or external speakers) are up to scratch. Head to the AudioCheck site (www.snipca.com/39231), where you'll find a series of tests for everything from checking your stereo channels are working through to low-frequency and distortion tests. Each test comes with an audio file and instructions on how to interpret what you're listening to. We recommend ensuring your volume is set to 50 per cent or lower before running these tests – as we discovered, running the High Frequency Range Test at full volume can leave your ears ringing.

You can also use the web to make sure your physical instruments are at their best. Fender's online tool (www.snipca.com/39232, pictured above) lets you tune string instruments from bass guitars to ukuleles – simply select what you want to tune, then click the individual strings to hear how they should sound.

For other instruments, use Tuner Ninja (https://tuner.ninja). Once you've given it access to your microphone, it will tell you what note it's heard, letting you tune your instrument accordingly.

Send us your posters

Computeractive readers are a creative bunch, so we know you'll make great use of these sites. Rasterbator (see page 52) in particular should keep you busy for days. If you want to share any posters you make with it, just take a screenshot or photo and email it to us (letters@computeractive.co.uk). We'll publish as many as we can.

Computer active

READER OFFER!

ADD A DISC FOR £5.95

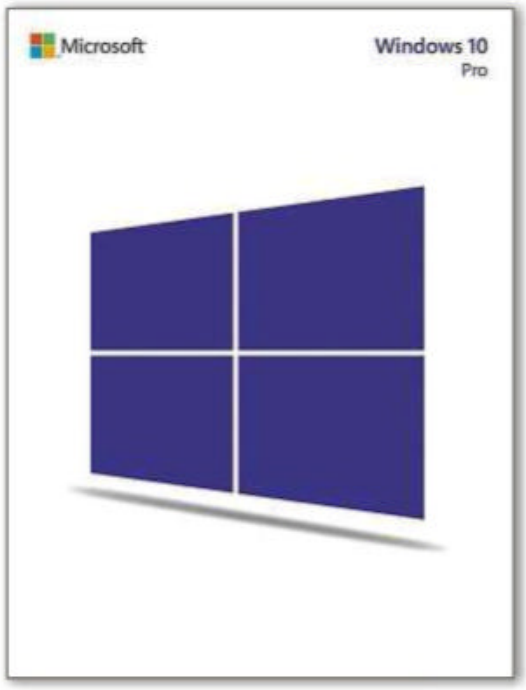
Buy Windows 10 Pro for just £69.99!

In this special offer exclusively for *Computeractive* readers, you can buy **Windows 10 Pro** for only £69.99.

That's a whopping £150 cheaper than Microsoft's full price of £219.99.

To buy **Windows 10 Pro**, visit **www.snipca.com/38398** and click the red Buy Now button on the right.

If you buy this you'll be able to upgrade to Windows 11 for free – if your computer is compatible



JUST SO YOU KNOW...

This offer can be used by one person only, and expires at midnight on **21 September, 2021**. It's a lifetime licence for one computer.

HOBBIES AND THE GREAT OUTDOORS

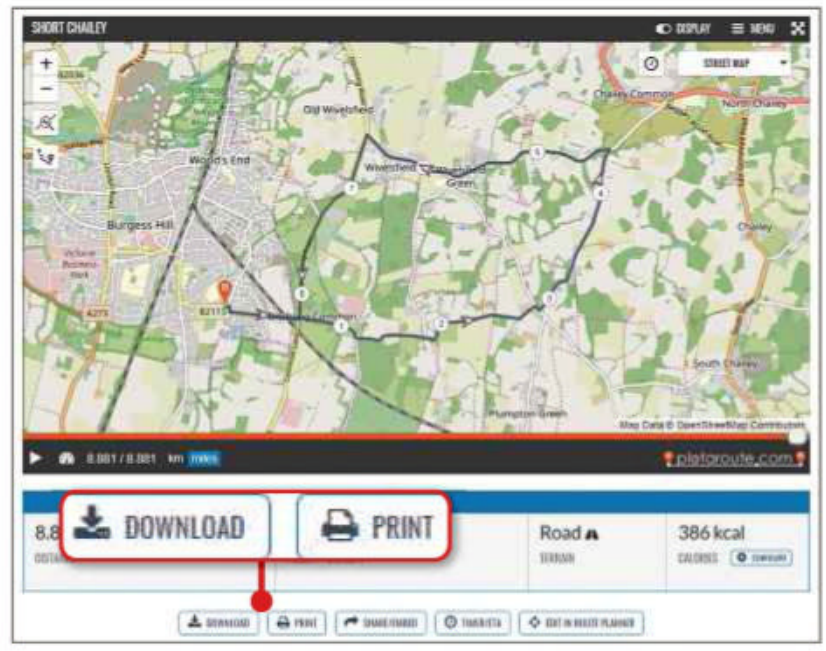
Plan walking and cycling routes

Fancy trying a new walk near where you live? The 'Route Finder' tool on Plotaroute.com (www.snipca.com/39240) lets you browse thousands of walks, all of which are uploaded by its users. Click 'Search Nearby', then select a walk from the list in the left-hand menu to view it on the map.

If you like the look of it, click the orange Select Route button at the top and you'll see an animated preview of the route, along with details such as the elevation, points of interest and even the calories you're likely to burn. Scroll down and you'll find options to print the map, as well as save it as a PDF (see screenshot above right), which you can then transfer to your phone for reference on the walk.

For those who prefer travelling on two wheels, there are cycle maps on OpenStreetMap (www.openstreetmap.org). To plan your route, click the Layers icon (three stacked squares on the right side of the screen), then select Cycle Map. You'll now see all national, regional and local cycle paths highlighted in orange, purple and blue respectively. The map, which you can pan and zoom in and out of using your mouse, lists nearby repair shops and cycle parking, too.

You can also use a hidden tool within Wikipedia to include local areas of interest in your route. Go to www.snipca.com/39241 and allow Wikipedia to access your location. You'll then see a list of all Wikipedia pages relating to notable buildings, monuments and more nearby.



Find a nearby walking route on Plotaroute.com, then print it or download as a PDF

Examine Nasa's meteorites

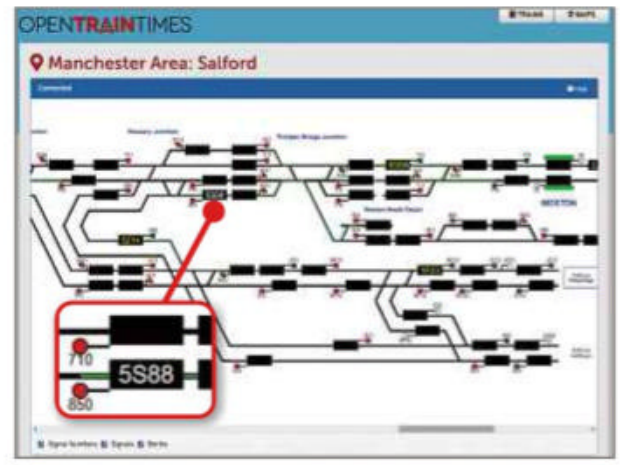
Last December, Nasa launched a site that lets you examine its collection of meteorites in high-res 3D. Go to the Astromaterials 3D website at www.snipca.com/39242, select an origin for the meteorites (the Moon, Mars and beyond), then choose from the available samples and click Open This Sample. Use your mouse to move and zoom into the meteorite, and the controls in the right panel to fine-tune your virtual microscope.

If you're keen to find out what's going on in space right now, head to the Space Dashboard (https://spacedashboard.com). This real-time site tells you how many humans are currently in space, along with forecasts for viewing the aurora borealis, live video feeds from the International Space Station and even close-up footage of the sun (see screenshot below left).

Get live, out-of-this-world updates from the Space Dashboard

Train and plane spotting

OpenTrainTimes (OTT - www.opentraintimes.com) maps all tracks, stations, signal points and trains across the UK. Click the Maps option in the top-right of the screen, then enter a location in the search box or select from the regions. Each train is shown on the map by its train reporting number (TRN). If this is listed in white text (as in our screenshot above right), you can click it to see the train's calling points. The website updates in real time, but because it takes each train's position as it passes a signal point, you won't see the trains move smoothly. Instead, they hop from one signal point to the next along their journey.



The OTT website lets you track trains as they hurtle (or not) across the UK's rail network

If you prefer to spot planes, you're probably already aware of real-time tracking sites such as FlightRadar24 (www.flightradar24.com). Freedar's Military Radar map (www.snipca.com/39243) is similar, but lets you keep an eye out for Chinooks, Hawks and more from across the globe (although for security reasons, not all aircraft appear). Click an item on the map to reveal details such as its altitude, speed and recent flight path, while the menu in the top-right corner lets you select a military airfield to view.

Learn how to tie knots

From Gnat Hitches to the Sliding Slice, every knot has a purpose. Learn how to master them at Animated Knots (www.animatedknots.com), which tells you their history, what they're best used for and – most important of all – provides videos explaining how to tie the blighters.

The website also includes a couple of knots for shoelaces, but if yours keep coming undone or just look plain messy, head to Ian's Shoelace Site instead (www.snipca.com/39244). You might discover that you've been tying yours incorrectly all these years.

ENHANCE OFFICE DOCUMENTS

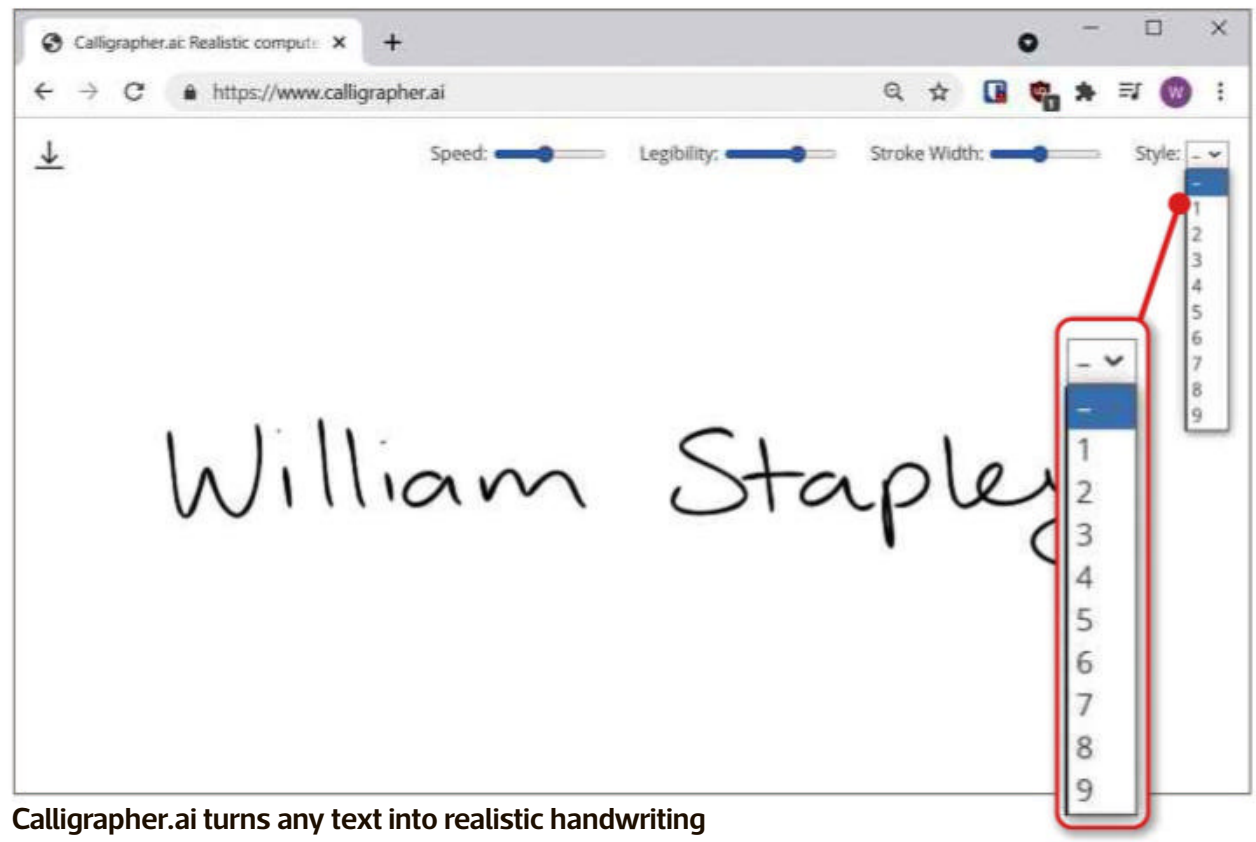
Add your handwritten name to documents

Rather than typing your name at the end of a document, you could use Calligrapher.AI (www.calligrapher.ai) to mimic handwriting. Type your name into the box at the bottom, then click Write (bottom right). Unlike handwriting fonts (which we'll look at in a moment), this site uses artificial intelligence to mimic the imperfections of handwriting. The screenshot (right) shows how repeated letters look subtly different (look at the two l's in 'William').

We found that the default settings made the writing look a bit messy, but you can tidy it up by moving the Legibility slider to the right. You can then experiment with the Speed and Stroke Width sliders to tweak the text, while the Style dropdown box offers a choice of 10 different styles, as the screenshot shows. Once you're happy with how it looks, click the Save button (top left) to download the text as an SVG file, which you can then import into your document and resize as necessary.

Calligrapher.AI limits you to 50 characters, so you can't use it to create an entire document. However, you can always download a handwriting-style font instead. Google Fonts (https://fonts.google.com) has a large selection of free fonts, including those than mimic handwriting, but none are better than Autography (www.snipca.com/39253) from the DaFont library at www.snipca.com/39252.

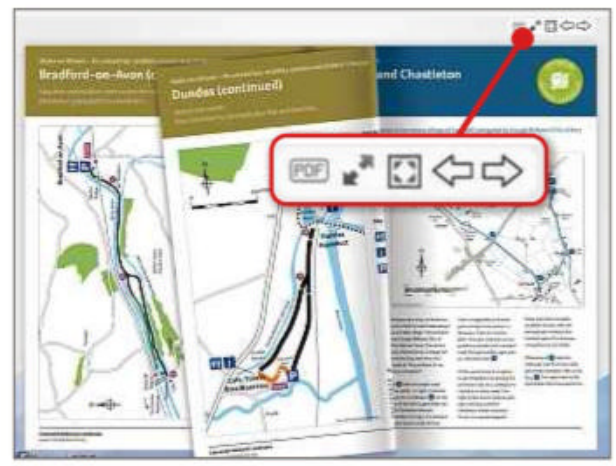
Once you have found a font you like, click the Download button, open the ZIP file, then double-click the font file - this will usually have a file extension of '.ttf' or '.otf'. Once installed, the font is available in all word processors on your computer.



Calligrapher.ai turns any text into realistic handwriting

Turn your PDF into a 'flip book'

To make your PDFs more interesting to read, turn them into flip books (www.flipbookpdf.net) – virtual books with realistic pages that turn as if you were reading a physical book. Click 'Upload', locate the PDF on your computer, then click Convert Now. When FlipBook has finished converting your PDF, click the link under 'Your FLIPBOOK URL...' to view the book version, or copy and paste the URL to share it with others. Use the controls at the top of the screen to turn the page or zoom



Transform your PDFs into digital books that you can share with others

(see screenshot above). Alternatively, click and drag to turn the page (complete with page-turning sound effect), then click once to zoom. Flip books work particularly well on phones and tablets, letting you swipe through with your finger. The free version limits books to 40 pages.

If someone has sent you a PDF containing photos and other images that you'd like to save separately, don't use a screenshot tool to grab them, because this reduces the image quality. Instead, use PDF24's image-extraction tool at www.snipca.com/39249. Drag your PDF file into the yellow box on the website, wait for the tool to scan it, then click 'Extract images'. The site creates a ZIP file containing all the images, which you can then download.

Add clip art and create word clouds

Images are a great way to make your documents more interesting, but you don't have to limit yourself to the clip art images built into Microsoft Word and LibreOffice Writer. Openclipart (https://openclipart.org) has a library of over 150,000 high-quality (and free) images, including some excellent vintage drawings.

You can also use the web to create images that help illustrate the data in your documents. For example, if you're compiling the results of a questionnaire, you could include a word cloud to highlight the most common responses. Free Word Cloud Generator (www.snipca.com/39250) is the easiest to use. Select 'Paste/Type', paste the text you want into the box below, then click Visualize (see screenshot below). Your word cloud will appear at the bottom of the screen. You can then adjust the size, colour and style of the text before clicking Download to save it as an image that you can use in your document.

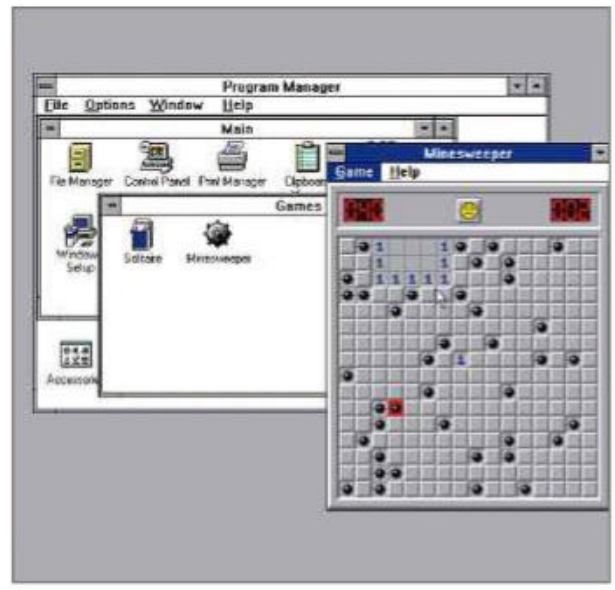
Use Free Word Cloud Generator to create a word cloud to add to your documents

PLAY CLASSIC GAMES

We all have our favourite old games, but getting them to run in Windows can be tricky. Even if you've still got the original installation disc, Windows 10 is likely to tell you that it's not compatible. The good news is that all your old favourites are probably available on The Internet Archive (www.snipca.com/39254), so you won't have to download or install a thing. Simply search for a game in the 'Search this collection' box, select it, then click the Play button in the middle of the screen to load it (this can take a few seconds).

If you can't work out the controls, scroll down, because they're usually listed in the comments section. We had fun testing our sports knowledge with the 1988 version of *A Question of Sport* (www.snipca.com/39255), especially trying to work out the sporting celebrities from the low-res images. For the best experience, click the Full Screen button (see screenshot below).

If you prefer playing cards with friends, avoid the countless 'free' sites that bombard you with pop-up ads and require you to create an account. PlayingCards (https://playingcards.io) gives you a virtual table and as many decks of cards as you like, so you can use it to play whist, canasta or even a simple game of snap. The home page includes table templates for most popular games. Once you've set up your table, invite others to join you by sharing the URL. All players will see the same table and can drag the cards, click to flip them and move them to their 'hand' – a section at the bottom of the screen that only they can see. PlayingCards doesn't have its own built-in chat tool, so we recommend running a group Zoom call alongside it.



Relive the good old days by playing Minesweeper within Windows 3.1

If you simply want to pass the time with a bit of Minesweeper, don't bother downloading the version on the Microsoft Store, which is loaded with ads and has annoying sound effects. Instead, opt for the authentic retro experience by playing it within Windows 3.1 using Classic Reload's emulator (www.snipca.com/39257, pictured above). Click the Play button in the middle of the screen to load it. Once you can see the Windows 3.1 desktop, open the games folder, then double-click Minesweeper.

The emulator also lets you explore other parts of Windows 3.1, so once you've finished with Minesweeper you can remind yourself just how beautifully simple this classic operating system was.

The Internet Archive has a collection of classic games you can play in your browser

It's goodbye from me

My editor vetoed some of my more unusual suggestions for this feature, but because this is my final contribution for *Computeractive* before I move on to new pastures, I've decided to sneak them in behind his back. Enjoy... and farewell!

Will Stapley

Drive & Listen

www.snipca.com/39258

Remind yourself what a foreign holiday feels like by taking car journeys in cities all over the world, complete with local radio playing in the background.

Shark Tracker

www.snipca.com/39259

It's not only planes and trains that you can track online in real time (see p55). With this website you can also keep tabs on what GPS-tagged sharks are up to.

T-Rex Illusion

www.snipca.com/39260

Download, print and assemble this dinosaur illusion, then marvel as its head follows you around the room.

This is Sand

www.snipca.com/39261

You don't need to travel to The Needles on the Isle of Wight to create tubes of multicoloured sand. This website lets you pour and stack sand of every colour, right on your desktop.

Pink Trombone

www.snipca.com/39262

Discover how your vocal tract lets you make different noises. Make sure your speakers are on and (for your neighbours' sake) your windows closed.

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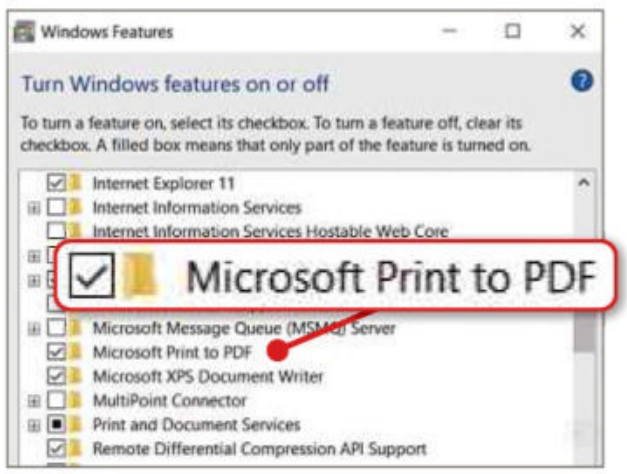
DITCH your printer

Printing is expensive, bad for the environment and leaves you with a mound of paper to manage. **Nik Rawlinson** reveals his top tips for going paperless at home

‘Print’ documents to PDF

Rather than creating physical copies of documents, you can ‘print’ them as digital PDFs. These retain all the formatting of your original files and are easily shared with other people (as we’ll explain). Plus, you can always print them on paper later if needed (see page 67). First developed by Adobe, PDF has become a standard that’s now used widely for long-term document archiving. This ensures any documents you create today should still be readable decades from now – even if you no longer have the computer, program, fonts or pictures you used to create the original.

PDF-creation tools were at one time premium products used only in the publishing industry, but today they are built into Windows 10, so can be used in any program that offers a print option. Get started by creating or opening the document you want to convert, then click Print. When the Windows print box appears, select ‘Microsoft Print to PDF’ in the Printer section (see screenshot below).

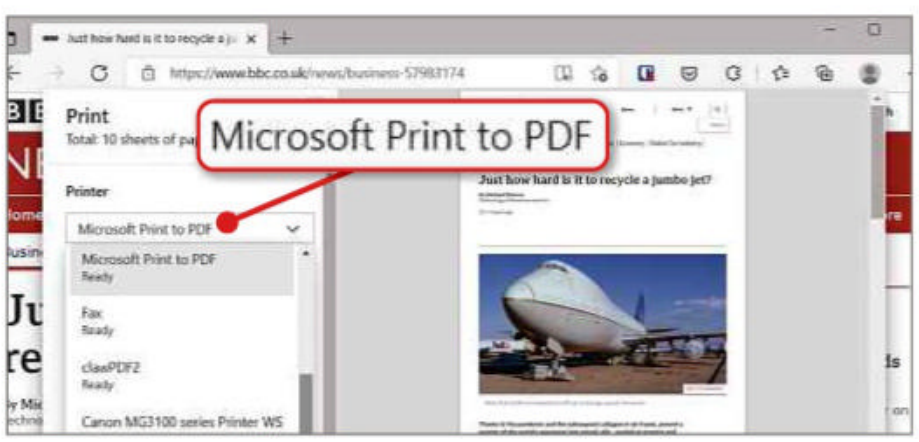


Make sure the ‘Microsoft Print to PDF’ option in Windows is enabled

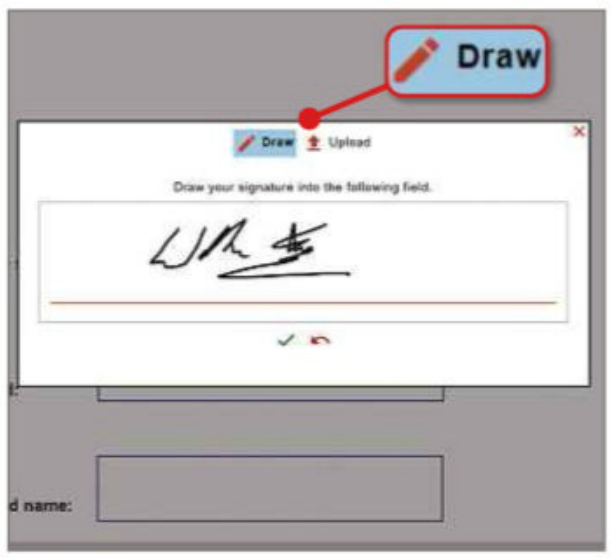
If you don’t see this option, it might be disabled on your computer. Press the Windows key, type windows features, then select the ‘Turn Windows features on or off’ option that appears in the results. Scroll down and make sure the box next to ‘Microsoft Print to PDF’ is ticked (see screenshot above).

Sign documents digitally

If you’re sent a document that requires your signature, you don’t need to print it.



Select this print option to create PDFs in Windows 10



Scribble your signature with your mouse, then insert it into a PDF where it’s needed

Instead, grab a dark-ink pen and scribble your signature on a piece of plain white paper. Make sure you’re in a well-lit room, then use your phone to take a photo of your signature (avoid using your phone’s flash because this can reduce the image quality). Next, transfer the photo to your computer – the easiest way is to email it to yourself, then download it.

To insert your signature into a Word document, locate your signature image file in File Explorer (press the Windows key+E), then drag it directly into your document. Your signature will now appear in the document, but will probably be too large. Click on your signature to reveal grab handles on the corners or edges, then drag these to resize it as needed.

To sign PDFs, install PDF24 (https://en.pdf24.org), then select the Sign PDF option. Drag the PDF you need to sign

into the PDF24 window, then click the pencil icon at the top. In the window that opens, click the '+' button, Upload, then select your signature image file and click the tick symbol. Alternatively, you can scribble your signature within PDF24 – click Draw (see screenshot below left), then use your mouse to scrawl your signature.

Manage your money

Most banks let you opt for paperless statements, meaning they will be available for you to download from your online account. However, these are usually available only for a limited period (often just two years), so you need to get in the habit of downloading them regularly. Your bank may charge a fee for a statement that's no longer listed on your account.

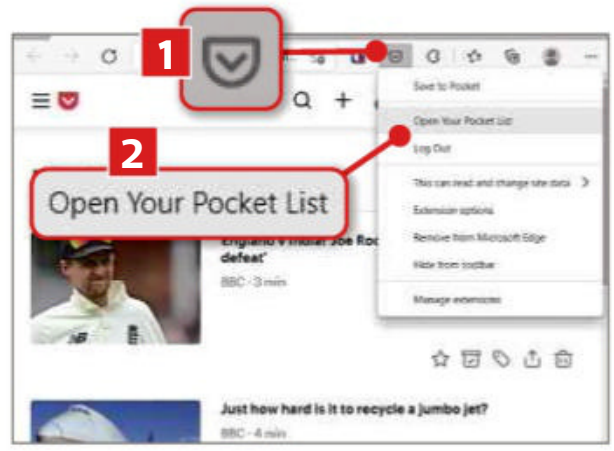
Better still, export your statements as OFX files (most banks support this), then import them into the free HomeBank personal accounting software (www.snipca.com/39160). HomeBank not only stores your records for as long as you want, but also makes them easier to search and produces helpful charts to keep track of your spending. See Issue 610, page 20 for more on importing statements into HomeBank.

Save web clippings to Pocket

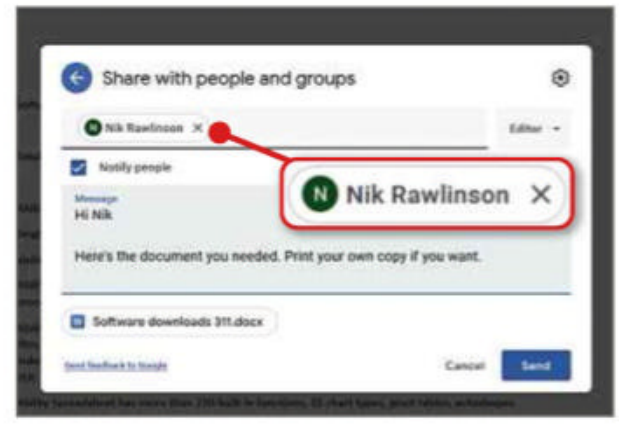
If you want to save web pages for reference, don't print, hole-punch and store them in a binder. Instead, use the free Pocket service to save digital copies, then access them from any computer, phone or tablet.

To get started, you'll need the Pocket extension for your browser – it's built into Firefox, but for all other browsers go to www.snipca.com/39163 and click the relevant link within the For Your Computer section in the side menu (for Edge, Brave, Vivaldi and other Chromium-based browsers, select Chrome). Next, click the Pocket icon (top right of your browser – see 1 in our screenshot above), then create an account. When you visit a web page you want to keep, simply click the Pocket icon to save it to your account. To view your saved items, right-click the icon, then select Open Your Pocket List 2.

As well as linking to the original source, Pocket creates plain-text versions of most pages, which makes them easier to read in the associated Android (www.snipca.com/39161) and iOS (www.snipca.com/39162) apps. You can even read your saved pages in your Pocket account on your ebook reader. On a Kobo device, simply install the Pocket app (follow the instructions on Kobo's site at www.snipca.com/39164). Although there isn't an official Pocket app for Kindle devices, you can use the free P2K service (https://p2k.co) to link the two.



Save web pages to Pocket for access across a wide range of devices.



To share a document, upload it to an online storage service like Google Drive

Share documents faster

Need to share a document that you've created in Microsoft Office or LibreOffice? Don't print and post it – upload it to Google Drive instead. If you don't have a Google account, sign up for one by clicking 'Create account' at www.snipca.com/39168.

Once your account is set up, log in, then drag the document you want to share from your computer into Google Drive within your browser. Next, open the file in Drive, click the three dots (top right), Share, then enter your recipient's email address (see screenshot above).

Get photos printed for free

As well as being expensive, printing photos at home will give you lower-quality results than you'd get from online printing services.

One of the best is the FreePrints app for Android (www.snipca.com/39166) or iOS (www.snipca.com/39166), which gives you up to 45 free 6x4in prints per month. You'll have to pay delivery, which starts at £1.49, but that means if you order 45 shots at a time it works out at 3.3p per print which, when you factor in ink and photo paper prices – not to mention the convenience – is a pretty good deal.

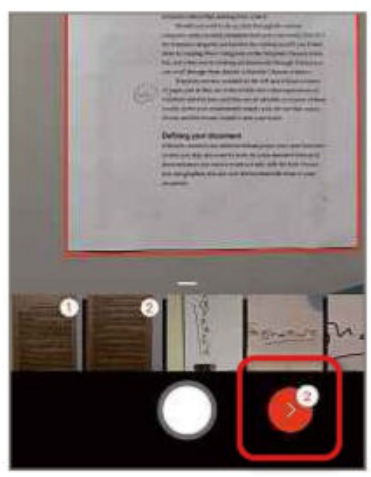
Avoid printing labels for letters and parcels

Royal Mail makes it easy to pay for postage online at www.snipca.com/39172 – you just need to know how much your letter or parcel weighs and where it's going. You don't even need to print the label yourself – once you've paid for the postage, Royal Mail will email you a QR code, which you can take to the nearest Royal Mail Customer Service Point (this will probably be at your local delivery office). You can then take the package, scan the QR code (you can scan it directly from your phone), and the label will be printed for you.

If you don't know where your local delivery office is, enter your postcode at www.snipca.com/39172 to generate a map of Royal Mail services in your neighbourhood. ca

Scan from your phone or tablet

Most printers have a built-in scanner and if this is the only thing stopping you getting rid of yours, you should consider downloading Microsoft Lens for Android (www.snipca.com/39169) or iOS (www.snipca.com/39170). This lets you turn printed documents into PDFs using your phone or tablet.



As well as allowing you to ditch a bulky piece of kit, it's actually much quicker than using a traditional scanner because it automatically detects the document edges and crops it accordingly.

Simply frame each page on the screen, press the white, circular shutter button, then the red circle to produce your PDF.

To turn multi-page documents into a single PDF, scan each one before pressing the red button (this will show how many pages you've scanned – see screenshot).

Microsoft Lens will store your PDFs on your phone or tablet, and you can also upload them to OneNote and OneDrive.

Master Windows Sysinternals

The hidden tools in Sysinternals are too good to ignore. **Will Stapley** explains why you should use start using them

Windows tools don't get much more powerful than Sysinternals – a collection of programs to tweak your desktop, manage your files and reveal what Windows is getting up to in the background. Launched in 1996 and bought by Microsoft 10 years later, Sysinternals is still regularly updated by one of its founders, Mark Russinovich.

You can download and run each tool individually (browse the full list at www.snipca.com/39284) or just get the Sysinternals Suite from www.snipca.com/39285, which includes all the tools in a single 43MB ZIP file (for each tool mentioned below, we've included the full file name so you'll know which one to run). You can even run the tools online, as we explain in the box (opposite right).

Boot Windows faster

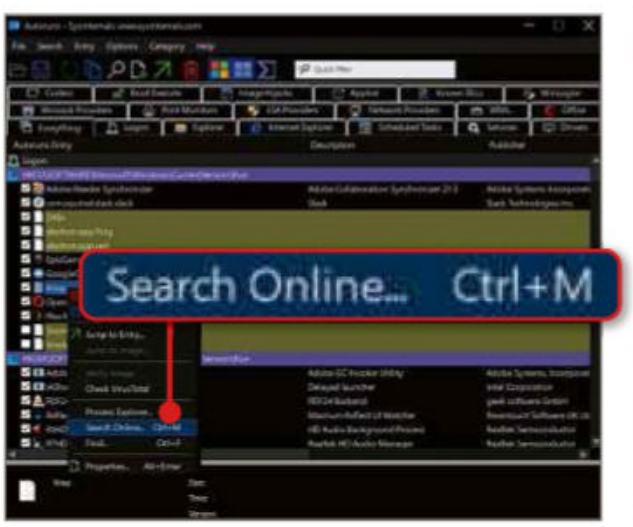
Your Windows user-account password helps prevent other people accessing your files, but if you're the only person who uses your computer it's a pain having to enter the password each time you turn your compute on.

Autologon (autologon.exe) speeds things up by storing an encrypted version of your password, then entering it for you when Windows launches. To use it, run the tool, enter your Windows password in the box at the bottom (Autologon will fill the other fields for you, based on the account you're currently using), then click Enable. When you next launch Windows, you'll whizz past the login screen and straight into your user account. If you want to log in to a different account, simply hold the Shift key down while Windows is starting. To turn off Autologon, run the tool, then click Disable.

Remove startup items

Another way to make Windows launch faster is to remove unnecessary startup items. **Autoruns** (autoruns.exe) lists not only which programs are set to launch when Windows boots, but also drivers, codecs and much more. You can view each category by selecting the relevant tab, or use the Everything tab to see the whole lot in one go. To prevent an entry from running when Windows boots, simply untick the box next to it (only untick items that you recognise).

If in doubt, right-click an entry, then select 'Search online' to run a web search on it (see screenshot below). The latest version of Autoruns, released in August, includes a new dark mode – click Options, Theme, then Dark to turn it on.

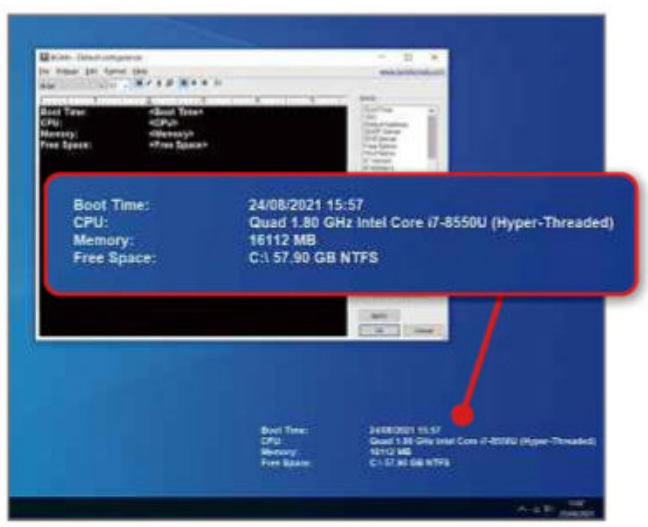


Search online via Autoruns to find out more about startup items

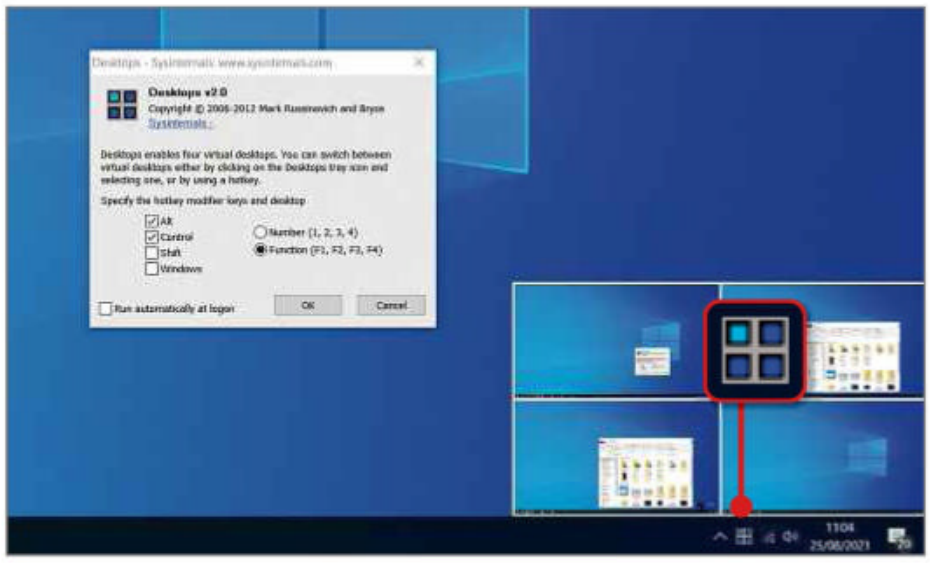
Add system info to your desktop

BgInfo (bginfo.exe) makes your desktop more useful by overlaying it with text showing system information such as how much hard-drive space you have left, the time and date Windows last booted, and how much memory is installed (pictured below). By default, BgInfo displays all available information on your desktop, but you can change this by deleting items from the pane on the left (white text on a black background). If you want to add an item, double-click it from the list (top right) – to add multiple items, hold Ctrl while selecting them, then click Add. You can also change settings, such as the position of the text (click 'Position...'), while the options along the top let you adjust the size and colour of the font.

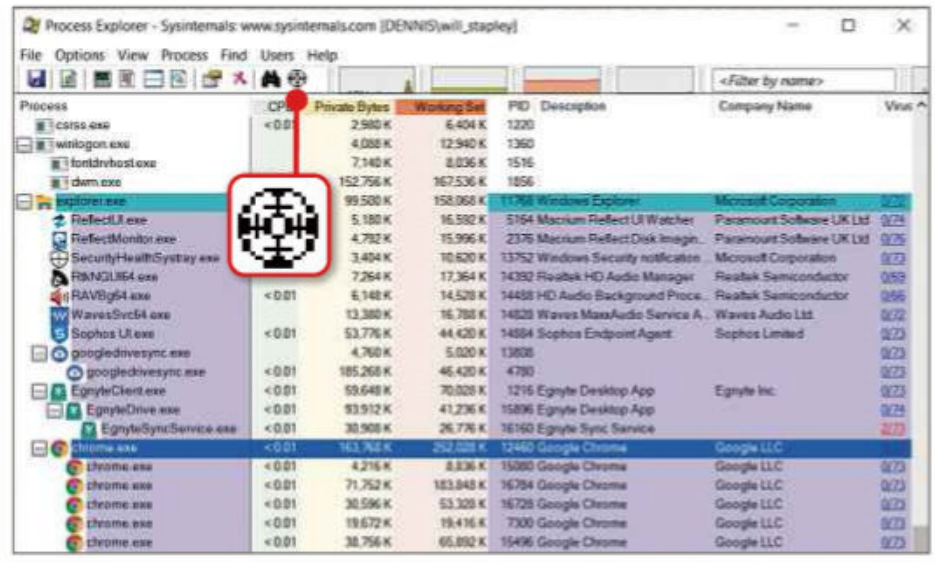
All text will be wiped from your desktop when you restart Windows. If you want to clear it without rebooting, open BgInfo, select all text in the right-hand pane, press Delete, then click Apply.



BgInfo lets you add system information to your existing desktop background



Create shortcuts for your virtual desktops with the Desktops tool



Process Explorer shows which processes belong to which programs

Create virtual desktops

Windows 10 has a virtual-desktop tool that lets you create multiple desktops (press Alt+Tab, then click the '+' button at the top), then switch between them. If you're running an earlier version of Windows – or just want to try a more customisable virtual desktop tool – run **Desktops** (desktops.exe). This lets you create up to four virtual desktops and choose the keyboard shortcut to switch between them – right-click the Desktops icon in the system tray (see screenshot above), select Options, then make your shortcut selection. You can also switch between desktops by left-clicking the Desktops icon, then selecting the preview window for the one you want to use.

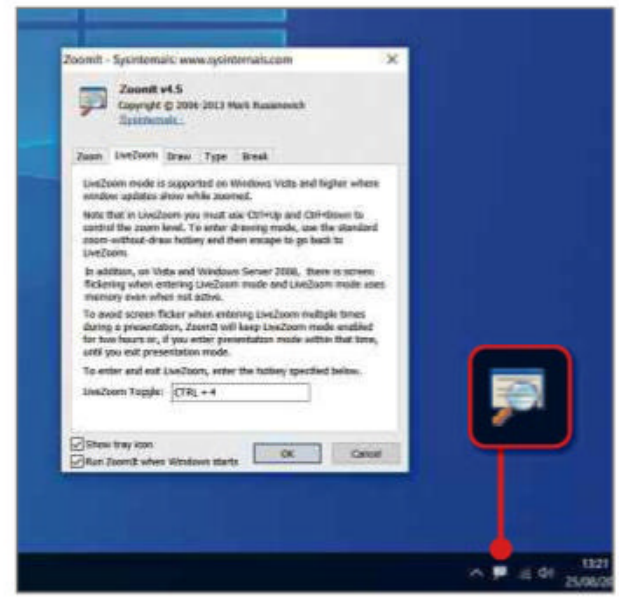
Manage tasks better

Task Manager (press Ctrl+Shift+Escape) lets you quickly close programs that have frozen – simply select the appropriate entry, then click close. But what if you can't find the relevant task? That's where **Process Explorer** (procexp.exe) comes in. Run the tool, then click and drag the target icon in the top toolbar (see screenshot above right) on to the window of the program that's not responding. Process Explorer will now highlight the process belonging to that program. To kill it, simply right-click and select Kill Process or just press Delete.

Process Explorer also colour codes all running tasks so you can see which are taking up the most system resources (darker colours means more resources), and lets you quickly find specific tasks using the search box (top right). It even links up with VirusTotal to scan your tasks for known viruses. To enable this, open the Options menu, then select Check VirusTotal. You'll now see a new VirusTotal column in Process Explorer that shows how many antivirus engines (Kaspersky, Norton, McAfee and so on) consider the process to be a potential virus. Click on the VirusTotal score to see a detailed breakdown of the results.

Analyse folders

When you want to find out how many files are in a specific folder and how much disk space they're using, **Disk Usage** (du.exe) tells you in seconds. It's a Command Prompt tool, so to run it you need to open File Explorer (press the Windows key+E), navigate to the folder containing your Sysinternals tools, press Alt+D to highlight the address bar, then type cmd and press Enter. In the Command Prompt window, type du, followed by the folder you want to scan. So to scan your Users folder, type du c:\users. Disk Usage will then scan this folder along with all subfolders, before returning the results.



ZoomIt lets you zoom and add annotations to your screen

Zoom and annotate your desktop

When you're sharing your desktop during a video call or presenting at an event, you may want to zoom in on a detail or annotate what's on the screen. Run **ZoomIt** (zoomit.exe), then click OK. To perform a simple zoom, press Ctrl+1, then use your mouse's scroll wheel to zoom in and out.

If you want to annotate what's on the screen, press Ctrl+2 – this freezes your screen, letting you draw on it using different coloured pens (hold the Ctrl key and use your scroll wheel to adjust the pen's thickness).

Ctrl+Z lets you undo the last annotation, which clears the screen. If you want to add text to your annotations, press T, then start typing– to return to annotating using the pens, press Escape.

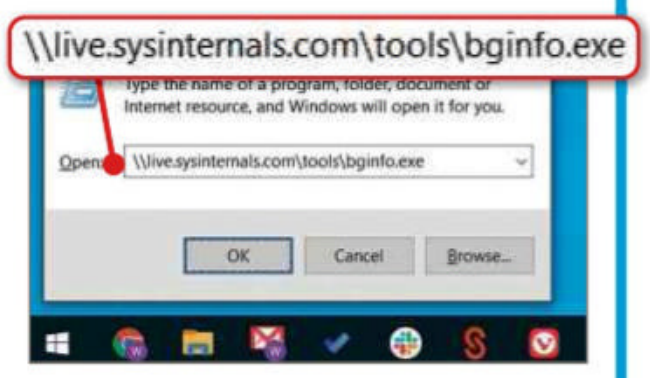
To change the shortcuts, double-click the ZoomIt icon in the system tray (see screenshot above). ca

Run Sysinternals in your browser

All Sysinternals tools are also available online, so you can run them without having to download anything. They take a little longer to load, but it means you'll always be running the latest versions.

To run a tool online, press Windows key+R to open the Run box, then type \\live.sysinternals.com\tools\, followed by the file name of the tool. So to run BgInfo, you'd type \\live.sysinternals.com\tools\bginfo.exe (see screenshot).

Click 'Run' in the box that appears and the tool will then launch, just as if you'd downloaded it to your computer.



Problems Solved

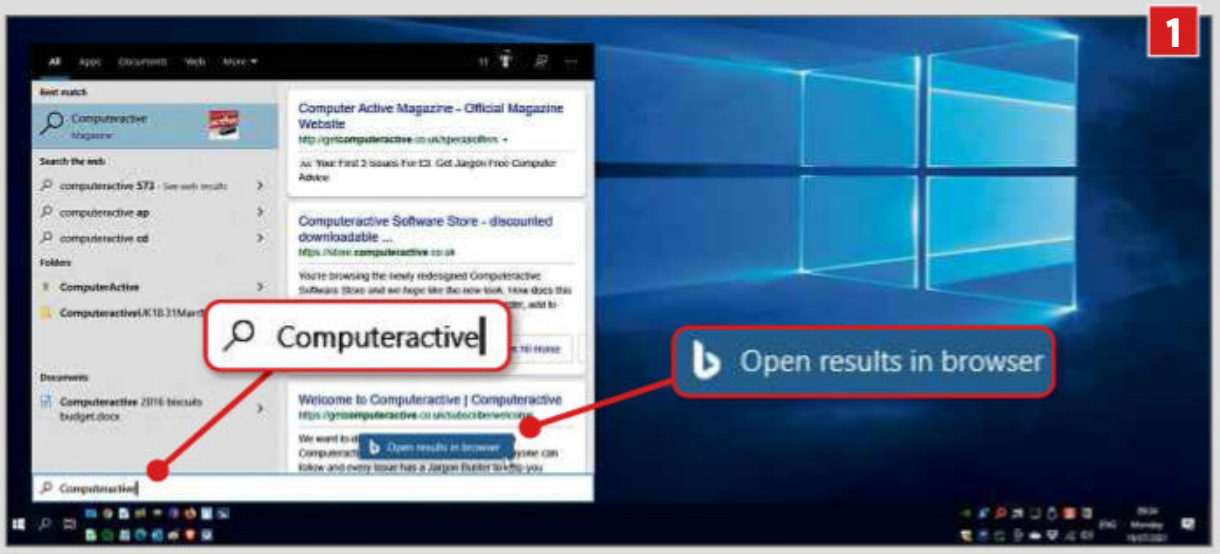
Our experts solve all your tech problems

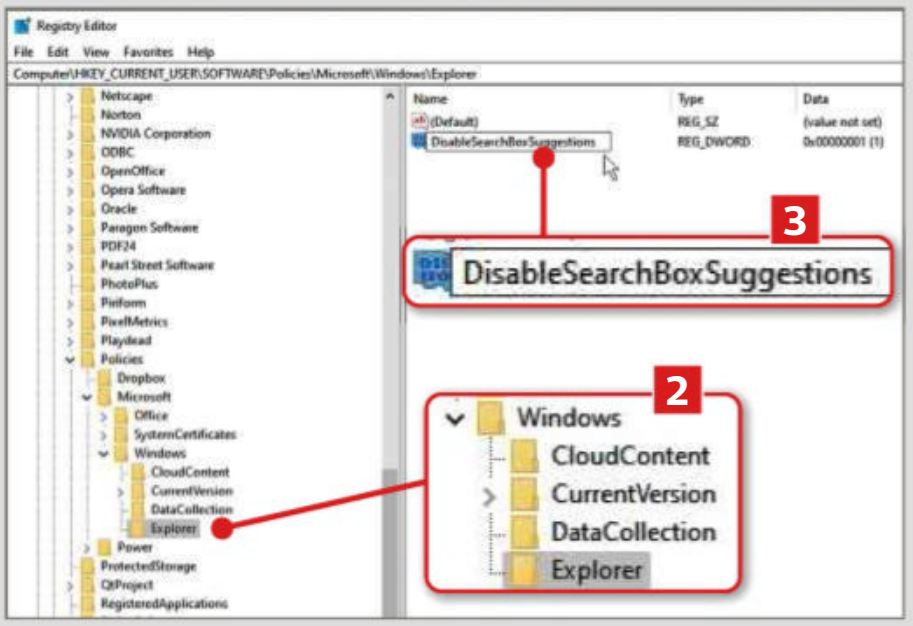
PROBLEM OF THE FORTNIGHT

Why are Edge and Internet Explorer creating files on my PC?

Q I use Firefox and DuckDuckGo for browsing the web and searching. I never use Edge or Internet Explorer (IE). However, when I clean up using BleachBit (www.bleachbit.org), I notice there are always files that need clearing related to both Edge and IE. Where have they come from? Is Microsoft up to something I don't know about?

Michael Harry





Typing a search term into the Start menu links that information to Bing (1). Under the Windows 'parent' key, select 'Explorer' (2). Type this as the new name for the new key (3).

A Yes, it is. For historical reasons, many aspects of Windows 10 still call on IE components in the background. Nor is that a situation that's about to go away because, while the IE web browser itself will be removed from Windows 11, some of the underlying code will remain – precisely because various aspects of the operating system still rely on the IE 'engine'. This is primarily a case of digital waste, and not too much to worry about.

The Edge stuff is more intrusive. If you type a search term into the Start menu search box, that information is passed to Bing, via Edge (see screenshot 1).

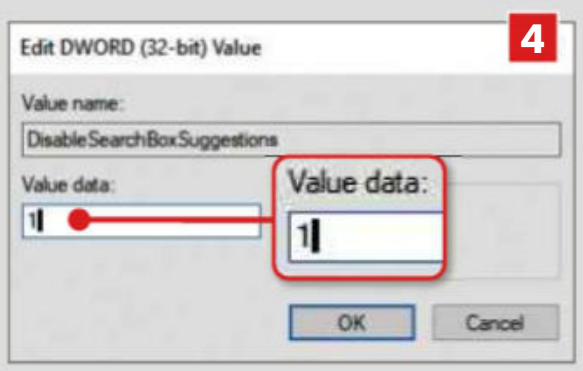
Of course, opting not to use the Start menu search will prevent this from happening. However, it's an integral part of Windows 10 and, remarkably, there's no straightforward way to change the Edge and Bing integration – or even just disable it.

It can be achieved with a registry hack, though. Do back up any important files before proceeding. Then, press Windows key+R to open a Run box, type regedit and press Enter. Next, in the Registry Editor window that appears, use the left-hand page to navigate to **Computer\HKEY_CURRENT_USER\SOFTWARE\Policies\Microsoft\Windows**.

If in the right-hand pane you see a registry key called Explorer, double-click that now. If not, in the left-hand pane, right-click the Windows 'parent' key then, on the pop-up menu, point to New then click Key. Type Explorer as the name for this new key, then press Enter. Now, in the left-hand pane, click to select the newly created Explorer key 2 and then, in the right-hand pane, right-click a blank area, then point to New and click 'DWORD (32-bit) Value'. Type DisableSearchBoxSuggestions as the name for this new key 3, and then press Enter.

Finally, right-click this new key and choose Modify – or double-click it – and, in the 'Value data' field, type a 1 4 (a number one, not the capital letter I).

You'll need to sign out of your Windows 10 account and log back in for the change to take effect, but you'll now no longer see any Bing results from the Start menu search queries – and Edge won't gather the data either.



In the 'Value data' field, make sure you type the number 1 (not a capital letter I)

How do I disable Ethernet to stop ransomware?

Q When the scourge of ransomware attacks first appeared, advice I read on the safest way to avoid them was to disconnect the computer from the internet when it wasn't being used. My wife and I have followed this advice scrupulously ever since.

It's easy to disconnect a Wi-Fi connection by clicking on the Wi-Fi icon in the notification area and then clicking Disconnect. However, the procedure for disconnecting an Ethernet connection is more complex, involving digging down through multiple Settings pages, and then the reverse to reconnect. Is there an easier way? Or should we just leave the Ethernet connected and rely entirely on our security software for protection?

Mike Whitehead

The easiest way to disconnect a wired Ethernet connection is to simply pull the cable out

A For better or worse, it's just not as straightforward to disable a wired connection as it is a wireless one – for precisely the reasons you describe.

At least, that's if you do it through Windows 10. However, there is a very easy solution staring you in the face. The one very rapid way to disable an Ethernet connection is to literally just pull the plug! Assuming you have no online work that is unsaved, then no harm will come of removing the cable from the socket – either at the computer or router end. When you're ready to go back online, plug the cable back in and Windows 10 will do the rest. It really is that simple.

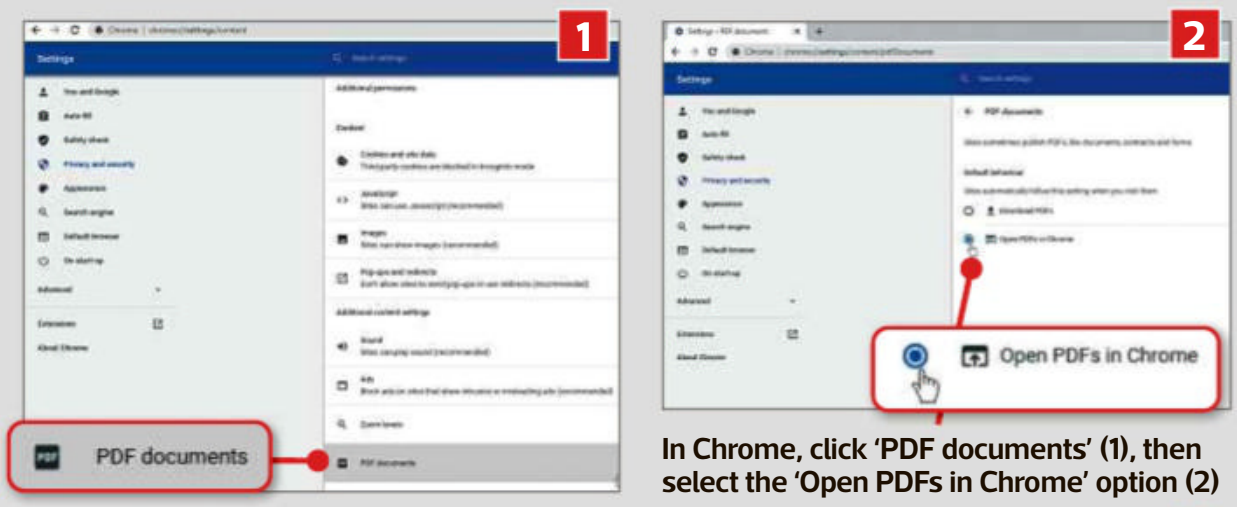
Of course, we accept that – unless you're using a laptop, or happen to be sittng next to the router – removing a cable isn't necessarily all that practical. So that brings us on to your second question, about whether you should just stay connected. And, while we wouldn't deny that a disconnected computer is practically immune from internet-borne malware, we do feel it's probably overkill. If your PC is protected by good security software, then most of the online risks will come when you're using it rather than when you're not.

In other words, while an internet-connected computer is always at risk of attack, most harms come from the stuff you actively do online.

How do I make PDFs open automatically?

Q When clicking a PDF attachment, there's usually a choice of Open or Save, along with the option to automatically save the PDFs in future. Recently, in being too quick, I inadvertently clicked the option to automatically save PDFs. Now, of course, I can't open a PDF without saving it. Is there a way this can be reversed?

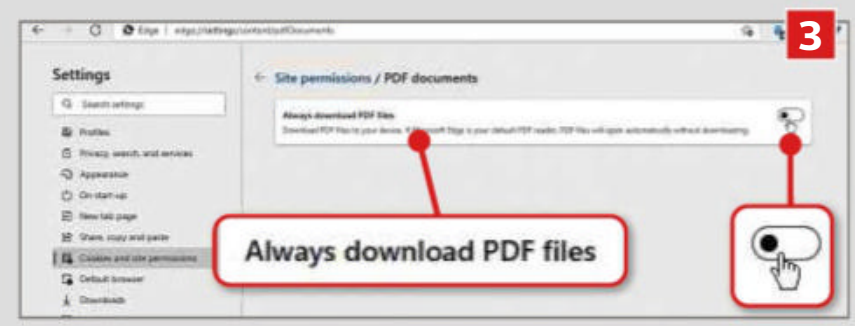
Eric Webb



In Chrome, click 'PDF documents' (1), then select the 'Open PDFs in Chrome' option (2)

A The precise method depends on the web browser you're using. From your description we think that's Chrome, but it could be Edge – so we'll run through the fixes to this problem for both.

In Chrome, first click the main menu button (three dots, top right) then choose Settings. Next, on the left, click 'Privacy and security' and then, on the right, click 'Site settings'. Now scroll down to find the Content heading and, below that, click 'Additional content settings'. Next, under the 'Additional content settings' heading, click 'PDF documents' (see screenshot 1) and, finally, click to select the 'Open PDFs in Chrome' option 2. Now restart your browser for the change to take place.



In Edge, switch off the 'Always download PDF files' slider

In Edge, open the same main menu followed by Settings. On the left, click 'Cookies and site permissions'. Then, on the right, click 'PDF documents' and then click the 'Always download PDF files' slider to its off position 3.

Can we send Audio Description to headphones only?

Q My elderly mother is nearly deaf and she listens to the TV through plugged-in headphones, while we listen through the speakers. Sadly, she's also nearly blind. Sky provides Audio Description on many of its programmes, which helps – but obviously if we are also watching we don't want to hear that. Is there any way to allow only her to hear Audio Description through the headphones while we hear the normal sound?

Sarah George

A We're afraid not. This wouldn't be difficult for the industry to implement, but currently the Audio Description feature is embedded in show and movie soundtracks in such a way as to make what you want to achieve impossible – so it's either on or off, basically. Sky has no direct control over this.

TV and film companies might eventually make this possible, but there's no indication that it's one of their priorities. So, we're afraid we don't think there's any way to achieve what you want, but we're happy to publish your problem in case any of our readers have some bright ideas we can pass on to you.

Audio Description can't yet be switched on for headphones and off for speakers

Why has Norton stopped working?

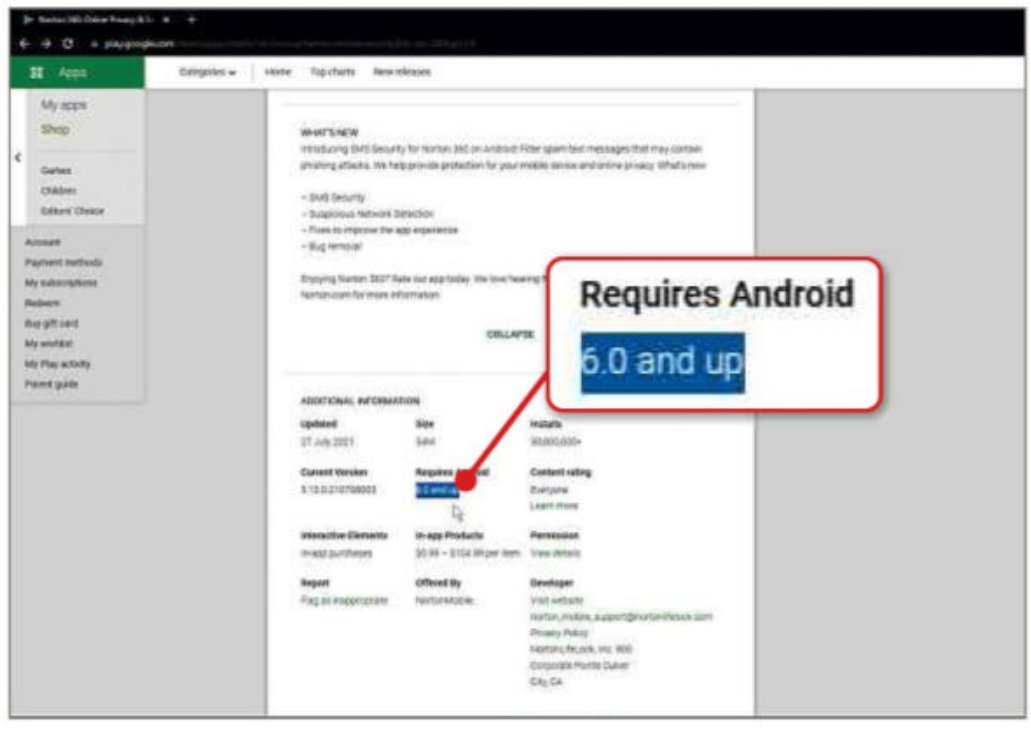
Q I bought Norton 360 Deluxe antivirus for five devices, and set it up on a Windows 10 laptop and my two Samsung tablets – an SM-T280 from 2016 (pictured right), and a more recent SM-T290. This initially worked fine, but recently Norton stopped working on the older tablet. I tried reinstalling it but the Google Play Store says my device isn't compatible with this version (see screenshot below). It's still working fine on the SM-T290. However, this does not give me much confidence to renew Norton next year, so I've installed a McAfee product instead. I'd appreciate your thoughts on this problem.

Roger Stacey

Samsung's SM-T280 tablet

A The simple problem here is that the latest version of Norton 360 now requires Android 6.0 (Marshmallow) or later, but your 2016-vintage SM-T280 runs Android 5.1.1 (Lollipop). There is no official upgrade to later Android versions. Your SM-T290 is from 2019 and came with Android 9.0 (Pie). It's upgradeable to 10.0 and should continue being compatible with Norton 360 for years to come.

Now, it is often possible to root older tablets to install unauthorised later versions of Android. However, according to the forums of the XDA Developers website (https://forum.xda-developers.com) – containing instructions for any Android owner interested in rooting – this just hasn't proved possible with the SM-T280. In other words, the device looks set to be forever stuck with Android 5.1.1. This means Norton 360 is no longer compatible, so you'll have to use the McAfee software you've installed instead.



Google Play Store says the SM-T280 isn't compatible with the newest versions of Norton 360

Q: Can I make Microsoft Money compatible with Windows 10?

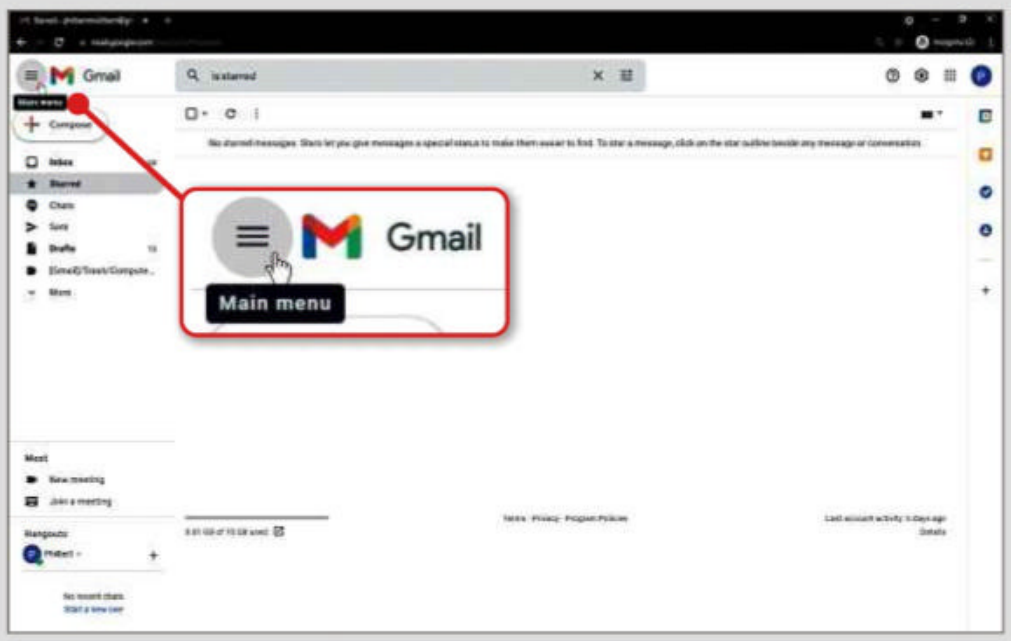
A: Issue 579, page 67 – find it on our 2020 Back Issue CD

Buy it from www.snipca.com/38164

How do I stop my Gmail sidebar shrinking?

Q I've used Gmail for years, enduring various interface updates – not all of which have been that good in my opinion. Now, the left-hand column where all my folders are listed has shrunk to a thin strip of icons that are hard to decipher. I've worked out that by hovering the mouse pointer over the big Google-coloured plus button the Compose button appears, bringing with it all the clear labels and folder names that used to be fixed on the left. However, as soon as I click that button or move the cursor away, this sidebar once more rolls up into the awful strip. Is this a recent interface change from Google that I missed? If so, do you know of any way to get things back to how they were before?

Charles Martin



Click Gmail's 'Main menu' to open and close the left-sided menu

A This isn't actually the result of a recent refresh of the Gmail interface. Rather, it's a feature introduced during a revamp a couple of years ago. It's all too easy to activate by accident but, by contrast, not remotely obvious how to undo.

Fortunately, putting things back to how they were is simple – when you know how. And that trick is to click the 'Main menu' button at the top left of the Gmail window (see screenshot above). Of course, in many programs this three-line icon does actually open a menu, but in Gmail it merely switches between whether the sidebar is fully expanded or displayed as the thin strip that you describe.

When you click it, the background colour changes subtly and the sidebar shrinks, but beyond that, there's really no visual clue as to why this has happened. So just click it again to go back to how things were.

How do I print PDFs?

Q I have many emails arrive with PDF attachments, but I can no longer print them. The printer apparently must have a 'Print to PDF' facility. I've tried watching YouTube videos on the matter, but I was still none the wiser. I'm sure your magazine would have the ability to provide an old geezer with straightforward instructions on how to print a PDF document without me having to take a course in digital science!

Clive Tear

To print a PDF, select 'Print' under the File menu (1), then find your printer in the Printer dropdown menu (2)

A We think you've gotten yourself a bit confused, which is easy to do with any aspect of modern technology.

Printers do not have, or need, a 'Print to PDF' feature. Rather, that's a feature of Windows 10. It does literally what the phrase suggests, which is to 'print' a document (from Microsoft Word, say) to PDF – so a Word document becomes a PDF file, for example. It's been 'printed' to PDF.

But printing a PDF is just the same as printing any other document. That's to say, in either Adobe Reader or your web browser – depending which one is set as the default PDF viewer – you just click the File menu and then click Print (see screenshot 1).

We guess the Printer field on your computer's Print menu might be set to 'Microsoft Print to PDF', but if you just click next to Printer you'll see the full list of printers. Your actual printer should be right there, in the dropdown list 2. Click to select it and then click Print – and that's that.

Problems **Solved**

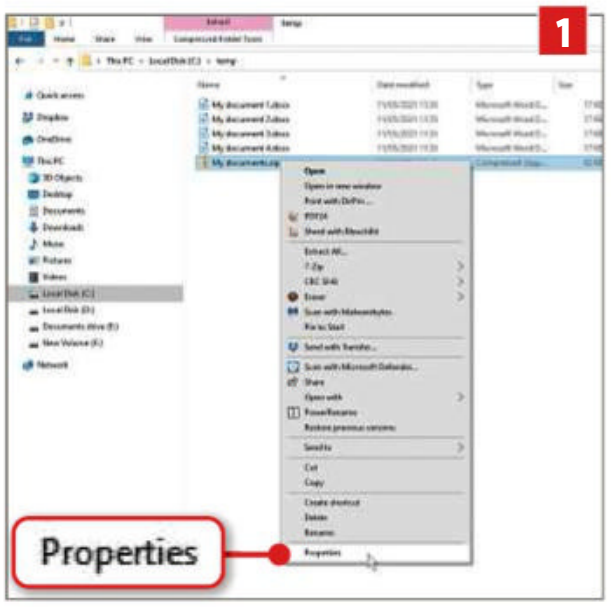
How do I password-protect ZIP files?

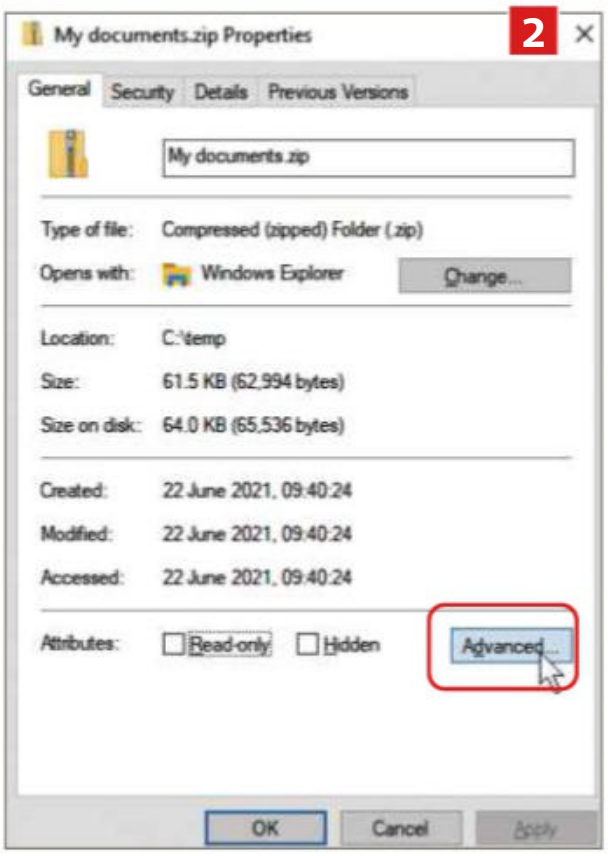
Q In Issue 609's Problems Solved pages you answered Geoff Long's interesting question about hiding file names in ZIP files. I didn't even know it was possible to add passwords to ZIP files! Unlike Geoff, I'm not particularly concerned about encrypting the file names within a ZIP, but I do like the idea of creating archives that only I can open. I know how to create ZIP files with Windows 10, but how do I add a password?

Gary Martin

A The options are limited in Windows 10. The Pro edition does offer an encryption option that means a ZIP file can be accessed only by you, once logged into your account. To enable this, first right-click the ZIP file and choose Properties (see screenshot 1). Next, in the Properties menu, in the Attributes section, click the Advanced button 2. Then, under 'Compress or Encrypt attributes', tick the box 'Encrypt contents to secure data' 3, then click OK followed by Apply. Next, click to select 'Encrypt the file only' and then click OK.

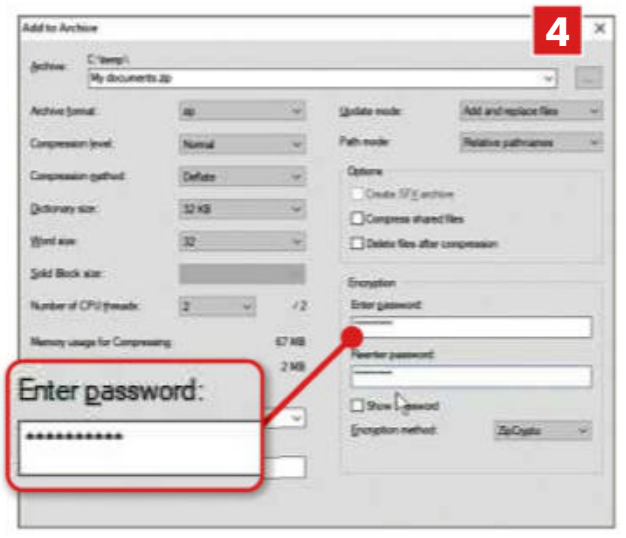
However, that's not much use if you want to password-protect a ZIP file to send to someone else. Moreover, this feature isn't available in Windows 10 Home, with the option greyed out – so it's totally useless to many people.





In Windows 10 Pro, select Properties (1), then Advanced (2) and then 'Encrypt contents... ' (3)

Instead, we'd suggest using a third-party program, such as the free 7-Zip (www.7-zip.org). Create a new compressed file by right-clicking a file or selection of files and then choose 7-Zip followed by 'Add to archive'. Next, open the 'Archive format' dropdown menu and choose 'zip'. Set any other options you fancy and then, in the Encryption section, type your password 4 and again to confirm and then click OK.



In 7-Zip, you can create a compressed file and then enter a password for it

Why is my Lenovo battery flat?

Q My Lenovo G50-80 laptop has done sterling work for years, connected to the mains. We recently had a power cut, but the battery didn't take over. The indicator tells me it's flat, not recognised by Lenovo and that a Lenovo replacement is recommended. The battery is an original Lenovo unit. What's gone wrong and how can it be fixed? As a pensioner, I'm wary of expensive, unnecessary replacements.

Geoff Mascall

An RDY battery that will work with a Lenovo G50-80 laptop

A Rechargeable batteries don't last forever and it sounds like yours is simply dead.

We're guessing it's completely dead, as the laptop doesn't recognise it at all. If you don't actually need a battery you can just carry on using the mains. If you do, cheaper generic models exist, such as the pictured RDY model (around £22 from www.snipca.com/39069).

Note that years of non-stop charging can shorten battery life, so it's worth removing a replacement cell if it's not likely to be needed for a while. However, do attach it every now and then so it gets some use, because long periods without charge can also shorten the life.

WHAT'S THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN...

Mobile and landline texts?

Q I use my smartphone only away from home. Conversely, my Panasonic KX-TGA856E landline is always connected, and supports SMS. Years ago, both my doctor and dental surgeries used to send text reminders to my home number. However, they now tell me they can send texts only to mobile numbers. The same applies to most of my online accounts, which only accept mobile numbers. Is there perhaps a security issue involved or is there a technical reason?

John R Varley

A At the core, there's no difference between an SMS text message sent to and received by a mobile phone and one that's sent to and received by a traditional landline phone. However, there are good reasons why some companies refuse to send text messages to landlines.

First, it's important to understand that, unlike more modern messaging systems and services – such as WhatsApp – there's no guarantee that a sent traditional SMS text message will get through to its destination, nor any indication to the sender that it has done so. That's true of SMS texts sent to either a mobile or a landline.

However, while almost all mobile-phone networks – and mobile phones – still support the ageing SMS system, the same is not true of landline providers. Moreover, even fewer landline handsets support the display of SMS text messages. Your model (pictured right) is in the minority that does.

Where landline providers do support SMS texts, as with the BT Text service (www.snipca.com/39070), customers generally must opt in. Many don't realise this, or don't want to. Then, for those without a landline handset like yours that's capable of displaying SMS texts, received messages are read out by a robot voice – but the proliferation of automated scam calls means many people are suspicious of automated speakers, so hang up. There are also sometimes cost implications, as service providers might charge more for sending texts to landlines, where text-to-voice conversions have to be performed.

The Panasonic KX-TGA856E can show SMS text messages

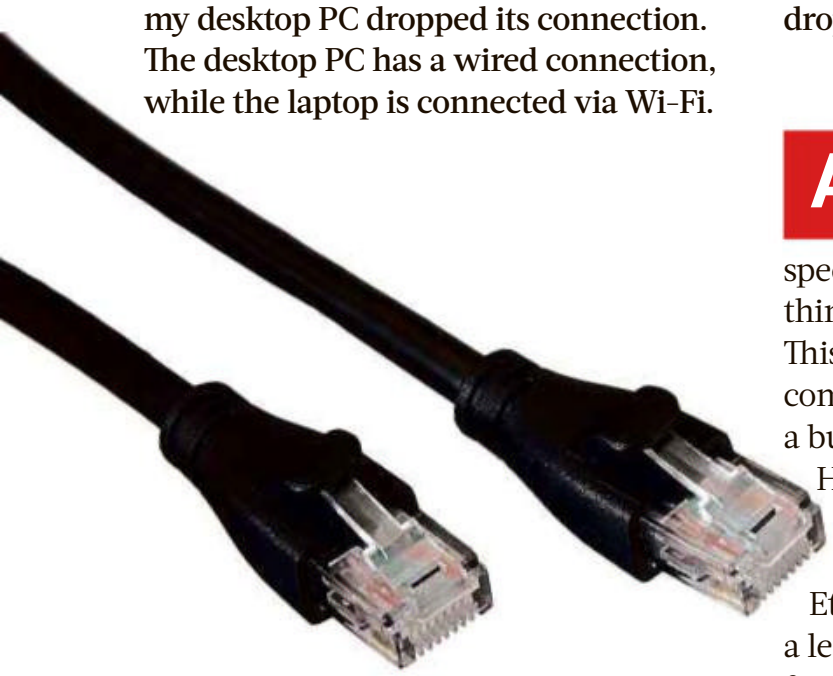
All of this makes sending SMS messages to landlines a hit-and-miss affair, so many organisations have simply decided that it's not worth the bother.

Want to know the difference between technical terms? Email noproblem@computeractive.co.uk

Why does my wired connection drop?

Q I've been blaming TalkTalk when my PC drops its internet connection, which happens several times a week. Recently, though, I noticed my laptop remained online when my desktop PC dropped its connection. The desktop PC has a wired connection, while the laptop is connected via Wi-Fi. **I'm struggling to make sense of this. The router is showing all green lights, and it is only my desktop that drops the connection. Is there a setting somewhere that I could check when the connection drops? Or do you have any ideas?**

Chris Ellison


A new Ethernet cable may solve the mystery of a wired internet connection that fails

A Sometimes, mysterious problems can have simple solutions. You didn't tell us what specific TalkTalk router you have, but we think it's probably the Huawei HG633. This is one of two basic models the company sends to subscribers, and it has a bunch of green lights on the front.

However, what those lights won't tell you is whether the Ethernet is working correctly. Rather, the single Ethernet light indicates whether there's a lead plugged into any of the four ports.

So, we this think could be as simple as a broken (or rather, dodgy) Ethernet cable or port. The cable is the most likely culprit, but first try it in one of the three other ports to see if this fixes the problem. If not, new Ethernet cables are as cheap as chips: the pictured Amazon Basics cord costs around £10 for 3m length (www.snipca.com/39068).

Next Issue

ON SALE Weds 22 Sep

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- Do I need to update my recovery drive?
- How do I stop sending unfinished emails?

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Problems **Solved**

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Can I move Brave to a secondary drive?

Q In Issue 611 (page 53) you recommended Brave for web browsing, which I'm impressed with. However, you didn't point out that you can't install it on a secondary drive. Instead, it defaults to the main drive. In my case that's a 250GB SSD that's running out of space. I'd like to install it on my secondary hard drive, as this has loads of free space. Can it be moved once installed?

Clive Brown

A Windows 10 does have an option to move programs – click Start followed by the Settings cog. Next, click Apps followed by the relevant app then the Move button. However, not all programs support this function, and Brave is one of them. In hindsight, we should've have flagged this annoyance under the 'What we don't like' heading in our article.

This is actually a long-standing gripe with Brave, and one that only the developers can remedy. However, one option is to grab a 'portable' version of the app, from www.snipca.com/39072 (see screenshot below). This isn't an official release, as such, but Brave itself is open source – meaning anyone can take the browser's code to make unofficial versions.

It doesn't need installing in the traditional sense but, when you run the setup file, it'll ask you which drive you'd like to use for the files – so here you can specify your external drive.

To save precious drive space use the portable version of the Brave browser

Was your SMS advice incomplete?

Q In Issue 609's Problems Solved section, you answered Michael Finlay's question about the inability to receive SMS texts at home, due to no mobile signal (page 66). I believe you overlooked a more secure option for people in Mr Finlay's position, which is that text messages can be sent to compatible landline phone systems. BT offers this, and it also works with landlines on EE and Plusnet (I can't comment on non-BT companies). When you are at home, send an SMS message to your landline and try the system.

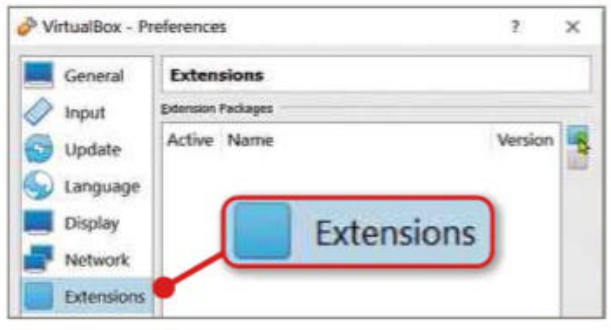
Andrew Nummelin

A This is indeed the case, and we perhaps should have mentioned this. However, for many reasons, SMS-to-landline services aren't always reliable, and so they're not necessarily suitable for the emergency alerts Michael needed to receive. Coincidentally, another reader asked us about these landline SMS services and how they differ from those on mobile phones – see page 69 for our full explanation.

Why does my webcam and sound not work in Windows 11?

Q Following the instructions in Issue 610's Cover Feature, I got Windows 11 beta running in a virtual PC. Maybe I'm expecting too much from a virtual environment, as I was hoping my Logitech webcam and Realtek sound card would work. Instead, VirtualBox (www.virtualbox.org) reports no mic or webcam installed, even though I downloaded the Logitech software from a Chrome browser within the virtual PC. Checking Device Manager shows no webcam installed or connected. Similar for the sound card. Any suggestions?

Jay Smith



Download and open VirtualBox's Extension Pack to use certain hardware with it

A There are a couple of things to unwrap here. First, to use USB 2.0 or 3.0 devices – and some other peripherals – in a VirtualBox virtual PC, you need to install the VirtualBox Extension Pack. This is a free download from www.snipca.com/39111. Just click the 'All supported platforms' link to download it. Next, in VirtualBox itself, open the File menu and choose Preferences. Next, click the Extensions tab (see screenshot above) followed by the small plus (+) icon, then select the Extension Pack file just downloaded and click Open.

Next, for the audio side of things, in the VirtualBox Manager window, first click to select your Windows 11 machine then click Settings. Next, click the Audio tab and check that Enable Audio is ticked, that the Host Audio Driver dropdown menu is set to Windows DirectSound and, below that, check that the Enable Audio Output box is ticked.

Finally, as you point out, Windows 11 is beta software, and so you shouldn't expect everything to work perfectly. This would be true even if it were running on real hardware, but it's even more so on a virtual machine, where all manner of settings might need tweaking to make things work properly.

As it happens, we don't think the beta status of Windows 11 is the cause of the failings here, and we're confident our advice above will sort you out. However, we can offer no more guarantee than Microsoft itself that Windows 11 beta will run smoothly in all circumstances.

Jargon **Buster**

3G/4G/5G Technologies that deliver faster mobile broadband.

4K Video with a resolution of at least 3840x2160 pixels.

720p/1080p/1440p Common types of high-definition video of 1280x720, 1920x1080 and 2560x1440 pixels respectively.

Accelerometer A sensor that detects movement. Typically used in smartphones to decide whether or not to display a portrait or landscape screen, control games or even work as a spirit level.

AMOLED Active-Matrix Organic Light-Emitting Diode. An alternative technology to LCD for creating flat-panel displays. Most commonly used in smartphones, tablets and smartwatches.

Antivirus engine The core component of an antivirus program that detects malware.

Bandwidth A measure of how much data can be transferred through a connection at one time.

Benchmarking Comparing software and products with an accepted standard.

Beta A version of software that's being tested. Beta versions are often released so problems can be ironed out.

Bootable Describes a DVD or USB stick with system files on it so it can be used to start up your computer.

Buffering Downloading a certain amount of data before starting to play a video. Can cause delays to your streaming.

cd/m² Candela per square metre. Standard unit of brightness.

Clip art A collection of drawings that can be inserted into documents or presentations.

Clean install An operating system installation that overwrites all other content on the hard drive.

Code Shorthand term that describes the various programming languages used to create programs.

Codec Short for Compressor/Decompressor. A file that tells a computer how to record or play a type of media file.

Cookie A small text file stored on your computer by a website. Used to store browsing preferences, website log-in details and so on.

Core Units on a processor that carry out program instructions.

D-SUB An old port for connecting external devices to a computer. They're being replaced by more efficient ports, such as USB and Thunderbolt.

Delta E A measurement that shows how the human eye perceives different colours.

DisplayPort A new socket for connecting monitors.

Driver A file that tells Windows how to work with an external device.

Drop-jaw A port you can drag down to fit in larger cables, such as USB-A.

Dual boot To set up a PC with two operating systems, so that one must be chosen each time it starts.

Dual-layer DVD A writeable DVD that holds up to 8.5GB of data.

E-ink Electrophoretic ink. A special type of ink used to display content in electronic devices.

Emulator A program that makes one computer act like another, allowing it to run that computer's software.

Exposure The amount of light collected by a digital camera's sensor.

Forked When developers take source code from software to make another related program.

Fps Frames per second, normally used to indicate gaming performance.

Frame rate The number of still images, or frames, shown per second to create a moving image. Higher frame rates make games appear smoother and more realistic.

GDPR General Data Protection Regulation. 2018 EU law strengthening people's privacy.

GHz Gigahertz. A measure of how many instructions a chip can process per second. 1GHz is equal to 1,000MHz.

Graphics card A component in a computer that produces the image shown on the monitor.

HDMI High-definition media interface. A type of connection that transmits high-definition video and audio signals.

Hyperlink A clickable link that takes you to a new document or website.

IPS A screen technology. Monitors that use it have wider viewing angles and better, more accurate-looking colours compared with monitors that do not use this technology.

ISO file A type of image file that contains all the data from a CD or DVD.

JavaScript A 20-year-old programming language developers use to make web pages interactive.

JPEG Joint Photograph Experts Group. A common type of image file created by most digital cameras. Some image quality is lost with each save.

M.2 A standard specification for internal PC expansion cards and connectors

Mail merge A tool included in most word-processing programs that allows you to create letters or envelopes, each customised, using a list of names or addresses.

MicroSD card A small type of memory card. Can be converted to SD size using an adapter.

MOV A type of video file that can be played using Apple's QuickTime software.

NFC Near-field communication. A technology that allows two devices to communicate by being touched together or placed near to each other. Can be used to pay for items in some shops using compatible mobile phones.

Noise Visible dust-like speckles that appear in some camera and TV images. In photos, they are caused by the camera's own sensor.

OFX Open Financial Exchange. A way of digitally exchanging financial information.

Open source Software that can be modified by anyone, rather than just by the employees of the company that created it.

Partition A large hard drive can be split into two or more partitions or 'virtual' drives. Once partitioned, each section is treated by Windows as though it were a completely separate, smaller hard drive.

Plain text Text in a document that doesn't contain any formatting, such as bold characters and italics.

Plug-in A small program that adds extra features to software or to your web browser.

PNG Portable Network Graphics.A format for images that shrinks file sizes using compression but without discarding any data.

Pop-up A window that is displayed by a website, usually over material already on the screen.

Precision trackpad A touchpad standard Microsoft is asking manufacturers to adhere to.

Product key A unique serial number issued by software companies that must be typed in by the user before a program will launch for the first time.

QR code Quick Response code. A barcode that can be read using smartphones and dedicated QR-reading devices.

RAM Random-access memory. The computer's working area, used for data storage while the PC is switched on. Its capacity is measured in gigabytes (GB): the more memory your PC has, the more things it can process simultaneously and the faster it will seem.

Ransomware Malware run by hackers who lock files on your PC and demand a payment to release them.

Refresh rate Measured in Hertz (Hz), the number of times per second that the image on your monitor is redrawn. Slight changes in the image each time it is updated combine to give the illusion of movement.

Registry The part of Windows that stores information on all hardware and software installed on your PC. The registry can be edited to tweak settings but incorrect changes can damage the PC.

Registry keys The Windows registry equivalent of a folder.

Root To perform tasks on Android devices that aren't permitted by the manufacturer.

SATA Serial ATA. An interface for connecting hard drives and optical discs to a computer.

SMS Short Message Service. More commonly called text messaging.

Sound card An expansion card that lets a PC create game sound effects, music, and so on. Almost all PCs have a sound card built in as standard but more powerful sound cards can be bought and fitted.

Source code Program instructions written in a high-level language that are readable by people but not computers.

sRGB A standard RGB colour space for use on monitors, printers and the internet.

SSD Solid-state drive. Storage that, unlike a hard drive, uses no moving parts. Faster but more expensive than conventional hard drives.

SVG Scalable vector graphics. A file format that enables images to be expanded without loss of details.

TIFF Tagged Image File Format. A standard file format used to store graphics images.

Ultrawide Offering a field of view that's wider than traditional digital cameras.

USB 2.0/3.0/3.1 Faster successors to USB.

USB-C A new connector that's reversible, letting you plug it in upside down.

Virtual PC A Windows tool that enables you to run a second 'virtual' operating system on a PC, such as running a version of Windows 7 in a Windows 10 computer to use older programs.

Water-cooling Lowering a PC's temperature using water rather than fans.

WEP Wired Equivalent Privacy. Security standard that encrypts Wi-Fi data. Now superseded by WPA.

Wi-Fi 6 Wi-Fi standard with speeds up to 10 times faster than 802.11ac. Also called 802.11ax.

Wi-Fi card Adds Wi-Fi connectivity to a computer.

WPA Wi-Fi Protected Access. System that protects data over wireless networks. Superseded by WPA2.

ZIP file A file that contains compressed documents or files.

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Easy when you **Know How**

Determined to make a good impression in his new job, **Robert Irvine** tries to...

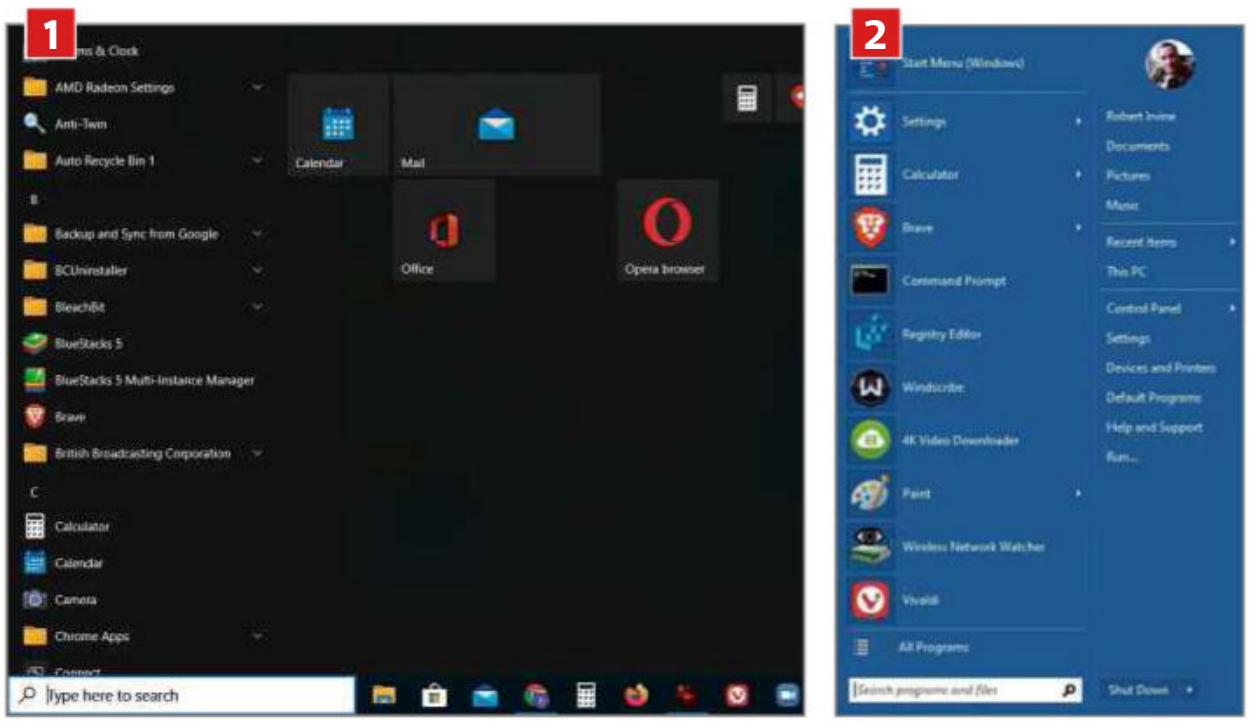
Replace the Windows 10 Start menu

I'm not a fan of those inspirational quotes that people share on Facebook, usually against a photo of a picturesque landscape or sunlight breaking through the clouds. "Hold the vision, trust the process". Come again? "Believe you can and you will". Bit vague. "The same boiling water that softens the potato hardens the egg". Saves using two saucepans, I suppose. But the other day, I came across one that actually seemed relevant to my situation.

> Start Menu Reviver's clunky interface was seemingly designed by an insane robot

Attributed to the Chinese philosopher Confucius but possibly dreamt up by an HR manager in Reading, it said: "Choose a job you love, and you will never have to work a day in your life". Which is why I'm pleased to announce that, after 10 months of freelancing for *Computeractive*, I've finally joined the team, as Deputy Editor (as hinted at in this column last issue). Because the job will entail writing about things I love, such as USB sticks, privacy settings and why you consider alternatives to Google, it's safe to say I'll never have to work again!

To celebrate my fresh start, I decided my PC needed a literal fresh start, by replacing Windows 10's default Start menu. Over the last few years, my menu had become increasingly bloated and unwieldy, and I dreaded clicking the Start button just to be greeted by its awfulness. I thought that removing unwanted 'tiles' would help to streamline the monster, but it just left lots of blank space, which looked even worse. So I resolved to find an alternative that was as pleasing on the eye as it was on my mouse cursor.



Robert's old Start menu 1 was ill-befitting of the new Deputy Editor of *Computeractive*. OpenShell provided him with a tidy and vibrant Start menu 2 to reflect his fresh start

The first contender was Start Menu Reviver (www.snipca.com/39235), which sounded promising and claimed to combine "the best of Windows past with the direction of Windows future". It also bragged that nearly two million people had downloaded it. Sadly, I suspect most of them uninstalled it pronto because Start Menu Reviver looked horrendous, like all the worst elements of Windows 8 and 10 crammed into a clunky interface that was seemingly designed by an insane robot. It was blighted further by a huge, unremovable tile for the program's developer. No thanks!

Next, I turned to Start10 (www.snipca.com/39236) from the Windows customisation specialist Stardock. This tool was so sophisticated that it provided a 30-second trailer guiding me through its many features, but it also cost £4.99. Now forgive my language, as I'm still new around here, but I'm not paying a fiver for a bloody Start menu!

My final contender was a program called Classic Shell, which I remembered fondly from many years ago, but I quickly found it had ceased development in 2017. Fortunately, the program was then forked by members of the GitHub developer community into an open-source tool called OpenShell (www.snipca.com/39234). How nice of them, I thought – a bit like adopting your neighbour's cat after they pass away and renaming it "OpenKitty".

I downloaded and installed OpenShell, and was relieved to find it did indeed work just like Classic Shell, displaying a simple, speedy and attractive Windows 7-style Start menu, with tidy sub-menus and no wasted space. There was also a button for switching back to the standard Windows 10 menu, should you want to.

OpenShell's default Metro interface is a fetching shade of translucent blue, but on right-clicking my new Start button and choosing Settings, I found there were even more designs to choose from. These included a shiny metallic skin that was a bit too fancy, and a classic look that was too basic and grey (much like my hair).

I stuck with OpenShell's vibrant blue option to give my fresh start a suitably fresh feel. I look forward to "working" with you all!

Need help customising your Windows 10 Start menu? Let us know: noproblem@computeractive.co.uk

Next issue: Robert builds command chains in Vivaldi

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