



Advent 3565P
£899



Evesham 1600-
£998



Mesh XP 1700 Plus
£997



Pacard Bell Media 5106
£999



Time Machine 1600-MU Flex
£940



Tiny Performance 1700 Plus
£999

Time to eXPand?

If you want to try Windows XP, it's likely you'll need more than a software upgrade. This month, we put six of the best new Windows XP systems through their paces



By **Darren Lock**

Photos **Alan McFaden**

THE MICROSOFT PUBLICITY machine roared into life recently with the launch of its new

operating system, Windows XP. Many of you will have already pondered on its benefits, but if your PC is over two years old, it's likely you won't get the full effect from a simple software upgrade. One option is to add to your current hardware set-up, but it might make more sense to invest in a new PC altogether, perhaps one designed with Windows XP in mind.

But what are the benefits of Windows XP? Gone is most of the archaic code from Windows 95 and its ancestors – XP is based on the more reliable Windows 2000 infrastructure, an operating system designed for business users who wouldn't stand for the crashes consumers took as the norm. The new software also has an improved recovery system, allowing you to retrieve information if anything goes wrong. And if you've seen any screenshots, you'll know Windows has been given a makeover, with larger icons and user-friendly menus.

Internet functions have also been improved, with the introduction of Internet Explorer 6 and a new connection

manager, to get the best from your web experience. Multimedia files are handled by Windows Media Player 8, which can play DVDs and burn CDs on the fly. Windows XP is geared towards the total integration of everyday tasks, so as soon as you start it up, you can surf the net, download email, play MP3 files and burn CDs without having to buy any extra third party software.

Two years ago, you would have been pretty proud of your new Pentium III 500MHz processor with its 64Mb of memory and 6Gb hard disk. But now this computer would probably struggle to deal with Windows XP as it gobbles up 1Gb of hard disk space and needs at least 128Mb of memory.

In the past two years, both AMD and Intel have developed 1GHz microprocessors, and it's likely that 2GHz chips will appear by the beginning of 2002. Combine this with the fact that PC memory and graphics cards have also been given a speed boost and you might start to see the benefits of a new computer. So if you are thinking of taking the plunge, look no further, as we've checked out six XP-ready systems which will cost you less than £1,000.



Webuser
GOLD
AWARD

Evesham 1600+



£998

- AMD Athlon 1600+ processor
- 256Mb of memory
- 40Gb hard disk
- 17in Samsung Syncmaster 753 DFX monitor
- 64Mb nVidia GeForce2 video card
- www.evesham.co.uk

Webuser
SILVER
AWARD

Time Machine 1600+ WU Flex



£940

- AMD Athlon 1600+ processor
- 256Mb of memory
- 40Gb hard disk
- 17in LG Flatron 775F monitor
- 64Mb nVidia GeForce2 video card
- www.timecomputers.com

Specifications

Advent
Evesham
Mesh
Packard Bell
Time
Tiny

★★★★★
★★★★★
★★★★★
★★★★★
★★★★★
★★★★★

In terms of hardware, only a whisker separates the computers on test here. They all use nVidia GeForce2 video cards and they all have 40Gb hard disks. Five come sporting an ample 256Mb of memory except for the Mesh, which has 512Mb. The rule of thumb regarding memory is you can never have too much, so it can be a good idea to opt for the machine with the most, or ask the manufacturer how much it would cost to slot some more in.

Of the six, four of them are based upon the new AMD Athlon microprocessor range, while the Packard Bell and Tiny models use Intel Pentium 4 chips. The Athlon chips certainly appear to have an edge over the Pentiums, which seem slightly sluggish. But if you want power at a lower price rather than chips marketed with a Windows XP seal of approval, go for the AMD chips. Recently, AMD controversially rebranded its range of microprocessors, numbering them according to their relative performance. So an AMD 1700 chip isn't actually running at 1.7GHz but produces a similar benchmark to a Pentium 4 1.7GHz. If you are an Intel snob, you will

pay more for an equivalent Pentium 4 machine, but at least you are guaranteed software compatibility.

DVD and CD-RW drives are a standard feature of the computers tested and all had 56k modems fitted as standard. Only the Evesham and the Mesh systems came with a genuine Creative Labs sound card, while the other units relied on lower quality sound output from the motherboard. Keep this in mind if sound quality is important to you.

The Evesham unit also scores points because it comes pre-fitted with three Firewire ports used to connect digital video cameras and other performance hardware. This is an excellent feature to have, especially as Windows XP comes with Movie Maker software, so the Evesham system can edit video footage without buying any extra hardware or software. It also has a matching Samsung DVD and CD-RW drives, which we think are a nice touch.

Build quality

Advent
Evesham
Mesh
Packard Bell
Time
Tiny

★★★★★
★★★★★
★★★★★
★★★★★
★★★★★
★★★★★

The first evaluation computer from Advent was faulty, but the nice people at PC World quickly replaced it with a fully working

unit. There's nothing attractive about this PC though – its case can only be described as plain and functional. It is based upon AMD's new 1500+ processor and, despite having reasonable specifications such as 256Mb of memory, the computer is sluggish to use and our experience was marred by a noisy hard disk, which became irritating.

The Mesh XP 1700 Plus on the other hand, simply oozes distinction with its solid case and excellent build quality, and when we opened up the PC, we found some of the prettiest insides we'd seen. We were particularly enamoured by the care taken to tie back all the cabling so none of the wiring went astray. There's also plenty of room inside the case – a boon if you are planning to upgrade in the future. The only problem we had with the Mesh computer was it was shipped with a faulty modem, but the Mesh staff were helpful and supplied a replacement the next day. We were, however, left to fit it ourselves.

Aesthetes will instantly be taken with the Packard Bell iMedia 5106 as it sports a very compact, eye-catching chassis. The matching monitor and keyboard certainly separates this computer from all the other formulaic looking PCs on the market. Bonus points are also scored for the inclusion of front and rear access points for USB connections. Some people may think that the candy colour scheme is a bit sickly but we have a sweet tooth and really enjoyed staring at its flavoursome designs.

Both the Time and Evesham units come

webuser
BRONZE
AWARD

Mesh XP 1700 Plus £997



- AMD Athlon 1700+ processor
- 512Mb of memory
- 40Gb hard disk
- 17in Mitsubishi Diamond Plus 73 monitor
- 64Mb nVidia GeForce2 video card
- www.meshcomputers.com

with nice functional cases but they lack any personality and look bland. Build quality is good for both units but there is nothing that makes them jump out and grab our attention. However, all of this pales into insignificance when looking at the Tiny computer. It comes in a very small, cramped case that wouldn't have looked amiss in the Dan Dare comic strip of the fifties. The front fascia is plasticky and comes in an ill-conceived metallic finish – the overall effect can only be described as cheap and nasty.

Points were also deducted from the Time and Evesham units that come with boring generic mouse and keyboard kits, while all the other units in this test come with a far fancier Microsoft mouse and keyboard combination. The Packard Bell system bucked the trend with its custom keyboard and mouse matching the case and monitor.

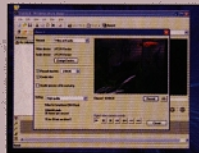
Ease of use

Advent	★★★★★
Evesham	★★★★★
Mesh	★★★★★
Packard Bell	★★★★★
Time	★★★★★
Tiny	★★★★★

The marketing drive behind Windows XP is that it is very user-friendly, but one of its more controversial features is that the user needs to activate the software within a 30-day period or it will stop working. The

Making the most of XP

Windows XP has a range of new features. But which PCs make the most of them?



Video Windows XP comes with a video editing package called Movie Maker already installed. It's a fairly basic application but if you have a Firewire port (like the one fitted on the Evesham PC) or a video card that can handle video input, then you can connect a video

camera and digitise your home movies. These can then be converted into a highly compressed format, making them easy to post in an email or put on a web page. If your PC doesn't have a Firewire or video input port then you will have to buy one and install it. Because it can handle a video camera without any extra hardware, the Evesham is a clear winner here.



Audio visual Another new feature of Windows XP is an enhanced version of Windows Media Player 8. This allows you to encode CDs into a highly compressed audio format claiming to take up half the space of MP3 files. It also allows you to burn CDs as long as you have a CD-RW drive. You can even

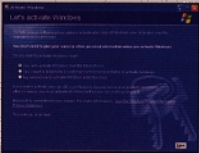
playback DVD disks using the same player, though you will need to install the third-party DVD software supplied with each system. All the PCs in our test come with CD-RW and DVD drives so we were able to burn CDs from the MP3 files we'd downloaded from the net and then relax and watch a movie. So all the computers in our test got the best from the enhanced audio visual functions of Windows XP, but it was those with the dedicated Sound Blaster 5.1 sound cards and speaker systems that stood out here – the Evesham and the Mesh.



The internet

Both Internet Explorer and Outlook Express have received a makeover in this incarnation of Windows. But surfers also have Windows Messenger and MSN Explorer at their fingertips, which bring all the elements of chat, surfing and email together. All the computers

in our test have no problem connecting to the internet, with the improved connection wizard a breeze to use. Windows XP enhances your internet experience but you will only get the full show if you have a computer as powerful as one of these.



Activation

The Windows Activation System has been a moot point for many consumers. Some say it is an invasion of privacy while others believe it is unfair to the home user, who can no longer make multiple installations with one copy of Windows. Each copy of

Windows has to be activated once installed onto the PC. This involves connecting to the internet and sending details of your PC to Microsoft. Systems from Advent, Tiny and Time will therefore be of interest to those of you who would prefer this to be done before your PC is delivered.

£899

Advent 3966SP



- AMD Athlon 1500+ processor
- 256Mb of memory
- 40Gb hard disk
- 17in Samsung Syncmaster 753F monitor
- 64Mb nVidia GeForce2 video card
- www.pcworld.co.uk



activation process is pretty painless, as the software generates a unique code number by auditing the hardware in your computer and then does funny mathematical things with this and the software's serial number. This information is then sent to Microsoft via your internet connection. But this has caused some dissent from pro-privacy groups who believe it is a way for the company to spy on its customers. Microsoft claims it doesn't take any personal details during the activation process, but if you are worried about security, choose a PC with XP already activated before it is delivered.

In this group test, we were particularly aware of the need for clear, colourful user guides to lead you through the potential minefield of setting up a PC. All of the computers in our test come with set-up instructions and Windows XP pre-installed. The Advent comes with a set-up poster and user guide, which is colourful and easy to follow. Windows XP is pre-installed and there is no need to activate it, so you could really take this out of the box and surf the net without delay.

Mesh, meanwhile, disappointed us with its set-up instruction booklet featuring some very cramped, annotated black and white pictures, which would probably confuse rather than clarify the process for a user setting up a PC for the first time. Windows XP on this computer had not been activated and told us we only had 22 days left to activate our copy. There's always the chance that users could be locked out of

their PC if it shipped late, leaving the hassle of calling Microsoft before their computer will work. But despite this, the Mesh works well straight out of the box and within minutes of being set up, we were online and surfing the internet.

The Evesham package comes with an excellent set-up guide poster, and impressed us by being the only machine to come with a Windows XP recovery CD-ROM and all the hardware driver software. Windows XP is already installed but it hadn't been activated and we were alarmed to see that we only had 11 days left before the Windows Activation period ran out. Again, this is an issue that needs to be addressed by the computer vendor.

When setting up the Packard Bell system, we noticed this had a completely different Windows XP set-up process compared to any others we had seen. We were asked to enter our details and even to add the serial number of the included Packard Bell monitor before we could start using the computer. The Activ Doc application included with this package is impressive as it compiles a very detailed electronic guide to your PC based on your personal configuration.

The Tiny PC already has Windows XP activated and features a well thought-out user guide. The downside is that it lacked a restore CD, and its set-up poster was missing from the carton. The Time computer is the most user-friendly machine in this category as it already has Windows

Packard Bell iMedia 5106

£999



- Intel Pentium 4 1.5GHz processor
- 256Mb of memory
- 40Gb hard disk
- 17in Packard Bell monitor
- 64Mb nVidia GeForce2 video card
- www.packardbell.co.uk



activated and all the bundled software is installed and ready to run.

But the one thing which alarmed us about the PCs in this test was that all of them, bar the Evesham, lack a Windows XP restore disc. Even the Packard Bell, whose computers have always come with an excellent restore CD in the past, lacks this essential feature. So the Evesham gets a big thumbs up while all the other computers should hang their collective heads in shame.

Value for money

Advent	★★★★★
Evesham	★★★★★
Mesh	★★★★★
Packard Bell	★★★★★
Time	★★★★★
Tiny	★★★★★

In terms of value, there's not much separating these six computers. It's really down to whether or not you want a complete system with everything attached, or a powerful standalone unit that does away with the bundled gubbins. If you already own a PC and are looking for an easy upgrade it might be an idea to look for a package like the Mesh or the Packard Bell, while the first-time buyer will probably get the best value from an all-round package like the Time or Tiny systems.

In terms of pure power, the award for the best value system goes to the Mesh, with its superior AMD 1700 CPU and its whopping

Tiny Performance 1700 Plus

£999



- Intel Pentium 4 1.7GHz processor
- 256Mb of memory
- 40Gb hard disk
- 17in LG Flatron 795FT monitor
- 64Mb nVidia GeForce2 video card
- www.tiny.co.uk

512Mb of memory. Couple this with the fact that it comes with a genuine Sound-Blaster 5.1 sound card, speakers and a three year warranty and you are looking at an attractive proposition. But if you are an Intel snob and don't fancy making the change to an AMD processor, then the Packard Bell, with its good looks and sound construction, represents good value. Both computers come with the minimum of extras and are good purchases for those who want a straight upgrade.

If you want a PC with all the trappings then the Time Machine 1600+ is definitely a model to consider. With respectable specifications, a gamepad, joystick and digital camera, as well as a software bundle, this is something for the beginner. But those of you looking for something more streamlined may want to look elsewhere.

Webuser
GOLD
AWARD

Verdict

Webuser
SILVER
AWARD

Time

Webuser
BRONZE
AWARD

Mesh

The Evesham 1600+ wins Gold due to its great features. Time is second as an excellent starter package, while the Mesh comes a close third

Advent

Evesham

Mesh

Packard Bell

Time

Tiny

★★★★★

★★★★★

★★★★★

★★★★★

★★★★★

★★★★★

All the computers on test here are more than competent at running Windows XP, but with the advanced multimedia functions of the operating system, we were looking for a PC utilising these functions and standing ahead of the crowd. Bearing this in mind, there could really only be one winner and it is the Evesham 1600+. It may not be the fastest system on show but it has some great features, like the front and rear USB ports and a Creative Sound Blaster 5.1 sound card. However, it was the inclusion of a Windows XP recovery disk and the foresight to offer three Firewire ports that was the deciding factor for us in our test.

Coming second is the Time Machine 1600+, the cheapest package in our test, which came

with loads of extras and is an excellent starter package. This is the box to buy if you are looking for an all-in-one solution and want a gentle introduction to the world of computing. It's these extras that put it just a nose ahead of the Mesh XP 1700 Plus - the fastest and most powerful Athlon-based PC in our round-up.

A special mention must be made of the Packard Bell, which proves you don't have to put a PC into a boring beige box and you can produce a system that is good looking and doesn't take up much room either. The iMedia is a nice computer, but it lacks performance (probably due to the slower hard disk), which is a shame because, if it had matched the other computers in the test, it could well have been a winner.

Name	Processor	Memory	Sound card	Monitor	Price (inc VAT)	Contact
Advent 3966SP	AMD Athlon 1500+	256Mb	On motherboard	17in Samsung Syncmaster 753F	£899	www.powersoft.co.uk
Evesham 1600+	AMD Athlon 1600+	256Mb	Creative Sound Blaster 5.1	17in Samsung Syncmaster 753 DFX	£998	www.evesham.co.uk
Mesh XP 1700 Plus	AMD Athlon XP 1700+	512Mb	Creative Sound Blaster 5.1	17in Mitsubishi Diamond Plus 73	£997	www.meshcomputers.com
Packard Bell iMedia 5106	Intel Pentium 4 1.5GHz	256Mb	On motherboard	17in Packard Bell	£999	www.packardbell.co.uk
Time Machine 1600+ iW Flex	AMD Athlon XP 1600+	256Mb	On motherboard	17in LG Flatron 775FT	£940	www.timecomputers.com
Tiny Performance 1700 Plus	Intel Pentium 4 1.7GHz	256Mb	On motherboard	17in LG Flatron 795FT	£999	www.tiny.co.uk

All PCs come with 40Gb hard disk, 640Mb Nvidia GeForce2 video card, 56k modem, DVD drive and CD-RW drive