

History Special –

SINCLAIR QL – AN OLD RELATIVE

When the Amiga was introduced in 1985 it didn't excite people with just its outstanding multi-media capabilities, but also because of its use of the, at the time, brand new 68000 processor from Motorola. Just like the Apple Macintosh and the Atari ST it was a representative of a new generation of computers. But at that time there was another competitor in this new market: The Sinclair QL. In this special we would like to take a closer look at this relatively unknown competitor.

Don't be afraid, we are not turning Amiga Future into "68000" magazine (who remembers that) and will naturally stay true to the Amiga. But from time to time it's interesting to look a bit beyond the confines of the Amiga and look at other computers with a 68000 processor that competed with the Amiga in the mid 80s. The Apple Macintosh has made it into mainstream by now and is, albeit in a changed form, a fixed factor in the computer market. Something the Amiga, after the Commodore affair, unfortunately didn't manage, just like the old arch enemy Atari ST. Both systems still have a truly active community and continuing development in software and hardware. But what happened to the Sinclair QL?

ZX83

It's best to start at the beginning. Following his world wide success with the 8-bit home computers ZX80, ZX81 and Sinclair Spectrum, Sir Clive Sinclair (knighted in 1983) wanted to create a new and revolutionary computer that would mainly be targeted at "professional" users, businessmen and small companies. In addition, the device should not only be more powerful but also cheaper than the competitors. The ambitious project started in the late summer of 1982 and spanned some 18 months. A small team consisting of Sir Clive Sinclair himself, Nigel Searle, David Karlin, Tony Tebby (QL-operating system), Jim Westwood, David Southward, Martin Brennan, Rick Dickinson (Design) and Jan Jones (SuperBasic) developed a completely new computer, the Sinclair QL, under the codename ZX82. Interestingly enough, the QL originally should have been a portable device with a built-in LCD monitor and battery. This intention wasn't quite technically feasible at the time and so it was decided to release a desktop computer instead. What stayed, was the compact form-factor: the complete computer is housed, complete with two Microdrive drives, in an elegant black keyboard case that is smaller than most current keyboards.



German Sinclair QL with Monitor and printer

First 68000

When it became known in 1984 that Apple would also introduce a new computer using the 68000 processor some haste was in order because Sir Clive Sinclair really wanted to be the first to introduce a new computer using the then new Motorola processor. This intention succeeded. A whole 12 days before the presentation of the Apple Macintosh the Sinclair QL was introduced at the International Hotel, Hyde Park Corner in London. Together with a powerful Office package from the firm Psion, the built-in SuperBadic and two integrated Microdrive drives the QL was priced just under 400 GBP. Making the QL cheaper than most 8-bit computers on the market but even more powerful. It was priced about 1/6th of the new Apple Macintosh. However, the Sinclair had used the more economical 68008. This had 20 external registers, as opposed to the 24 of the 68000 and a smaller databus. This had the consequence that the 68008 can address a maximum of 1 Megabyte of memory and at the same frequency is slower than a 68000 processor. Internally however the Sinclair QL works with 32-bit as well and is fully compatible with its big brother.

Quantum leap

By the way, the "QL" stand for "Quantum Leap". This somewhat immodest attribute has some justification however because the Sinclair QL really offered in 1984 (one year before the launch of the Amiga) some revolutionary features.

Links

RWAP Software:

<http://www.rwapsoftware.co.uk/index.html>

TF Services: <http://tfs.firshman.co.uk/ql/>

Jochen Merz/QL Today:

<http://www.j-m-s.com/smsq/index.htm>

Q60: <http://www.q40.de/>

QPC: <http://www.kilgus.net/>

QDT: <http://www.jdh-stech.com/QDT/qdt.html>

Launchpad: <http://www.dilwyn.me.uk/gen/launchpad/launchpad.html>

Quanta: <http://www.quanta.org.uk/>

QL on the Amiga:

<http://www.mswift.unisonplus.net/ql/index.html>

<http://www.dilwyn.me.uk/emu/index.html>

QL/Mac event

http://www.qivsajuar.homepage.bluewin.ch/index_no_frames.html



Sir Clive Sinclair with Sinclair QL at the launch in 1984

It wasn't only the first 32bit-microcomputer with a Motorola 68xxx processor on the market but also offered a powerful operating system with pre-emptive multitasking. "Qdos", developed by Tony Tebby, was stored completely in ROM just like the SuperBasic programming language, that featured powerful functions like recursive procedures. Another interesting feature is the integrated network "QLAN", which could network up to 63 QLs in a very simple manner. Another in-house development of Sinclair were the dual built-in MicroDrive drives. The Microdrive cartridges that came with it are about the size of a Compact Flash card and were in principle mini tape cassettes with about 5 metres of continuous tape that the drive could wind through in about 7 seconds. Up to 110 kB of data could be stored on the very compact media. The graphics and sound capabilities are, compared to the Amiga that appeared a year later, not spectacular (512x512 in 4 colors, 256x256 in 8 colors, beeper), but the QL was designed as a business computer and thus a direct competitor to IBM and Apple Macintosh. The Apple Macintosh at that time offered for example only monochrome graphics with 512x342 pixels

