A £100,000 Apple from a bygone age

By Toby Walne Mail On Sunday
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If you stumble across a tatty bit of circuit board in the attic --something that looks as though it fell out of the back of an old wireless set - the chances are that it is just a tatty bit of circuit board.

Or just possibly you may be looking at the very first Apple, worth £100,000.

'There is nothing in modern life that is unaffected by computers, but only recently has their groundbreaking role in our culture and history been appreciated,' says computer engineer and collector Jason Fitzpatrick, 39, chairman of the Centre for Computing History in Haverhill, Suffolk.

Pure joy: Jason Fitzpatrick says nostalgia for old models means they are a rarity

'Nostalgia for the early computers comes from enthusiasts who are eager to buy the first models they ever used. These are becoming rare finds.'

It took until 1975 for the development of small semiconductors and circuit chipboards to enable practical personal computers to be made.

The first was the 1975 MITS Altair 8800, which was sold in kit form by inventor Ed Roberts from New Mexico for $439 through the Popular Electronics magazine.

This box-sized binary device boasted a panel of lights instead of a TV screen and had an array of switches for a keyboard. Binary code, which uses combinations of zero and one, was fundamental to the development of computing.

Jason bought the third Altair 8800 ever made five years ago for £11,111 (a 'binary code bid', as he points out) on eBay and believes it could now be worth £20,000.

He says: 'It is a fantastic piece of history and looks as if it is related to Hal, the red-eyed spaceship computer from the classic film 2001: A Space Odyssey. It has its own bank of red lights and the first model was programmed to play the song Bicycle Built For Two --just like the movie computer.'

Despite its geeky appearance, the 8800 was a landmark that captured the imagination of techie fans, including a student called Bill Gates. He created BASIC software for the 8800 with fellow techie Paul Allen through the first software company, Micro-Soft.

Following a different approach, Steve Jobs and Steve Wozniak decided to hand-build 200 of their own personal computers in 1976. These became the Apple I.

The prototype sold for $666.66 as a fully assembled circuit board. The wooden case, power supply, keyboard and display were all extras. The circuit boards alone would fetch £100,000 at auction.

The fully encased Apple II came out in 1977 and was a major step forward and sold six million worldwide - explaining why survivors are worth just £100.

The term 'PC' was not coined until 1981 with the arrival of the IBM 5150 Personal Computer. These can sell for up to £1,000.

Jason says: 'Early computers are not just museum pieces to admire, but are usable and fun to use today - if a little slow. However, you need the original manuals as these include programming and wiring instructions, without which you cannot operate the computers.'

The early Eighties saw an explosion of interest in personal computers, many of which were used for games. The Sinclair ZX80 cost £99.95 when it was launched in 1980. Today, an example will fetch double this if it comes with instructions and the original box.

Acorn Computers dominated the fledgling British market with the BBC Micro launched in 1981. Thanks to nostalgia it can still sell for £100. Early competitors that soon became obsolete are possible investments - the Mattel Aquarius of 1982 can fetch £100 or more.

But much of the Eighties were dominated by ugly, beige brutes requiring hours of patience. Few are anything but junk. But check before you head for the tip. Unusual models, such as the Amiga 2000, can change hands for £300 while the Amstrad CPC 464 Plus may sell for £100 upwards.

More recent models have yet to achieve collectible status. Despite its iconic design, the first Bondi Blue iMac, introduced in 1998, can sell for as little as £50 even boxed.

Jason believes that is because the fledgling market is so fragmented and he suggests that a good place to start is on

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