



Obituary: Adam Osborne - portable computer pioneer

The death was announced in March, of Adam Osborne at the age of 64 and following a long illness. Osborne achieved lasting fame as co-founder of Osborne Computer Corp., the company that launched the world's first practical portable computer.

The "luggable" Osborne 1 was introduced at the US West Coast Computer Faire in 1981. Specified by Osborne to fit the constraints of carry-on airline luggage, the machine was designed by his co-founder and chief engineer, Lee Felsenstein. Weighing 12 Kgs and equipped with a 52-column five-inch display, 4MHz Z80 processor, 64K RAM, CP/M operating system and two floppy drives, the Osborne 1 achieved another first by shipping with a comprehensive bundle of software applications; WordStar, SuperCalc, dBase II, and two versions of BASIC: CBASIC and MBASIC.

The machine was an instant success thanks partly to Osborne's willingness to pitch its price at what most credit card buyers could afford. In its first year OCC achieved sales of \$5.8 million, and \$68.8 million in 1982. But by 1983 IBM had placed its stamp on the PC's configuration, and there was also growing competition from others such as Compaq who had jumped on the portable bandwagon. OCC's meteoric rise was to suffer an equally rapid descent following Osborne's premature announcement to the press of a new IBM PC-compatible model before it was ready to ship. The outcome was to kill sales of the existing models, and with a

warehouse full of unsold stock OCC were forced into bankruptcy in September 1983.

Adam Osborne was born of British parents in Thailand in 1939, moving to the UK at the age of 11. He took a degree in chemical engineering at Birmingham University before emigrating to the US where he completed his PhD.

In the early 1970s Osborn became a technical author, writing instructions for Intel's new microprocessor. He later formed Osborne and Associates to write simple, easy-to-read manuals for computers, and his own publishing company, Osborne Books. In 1979, Osborne sold out to McGraw-Hill. In the following year he approached circuit board designer Lee Felsenstein about starting a hardware company that would not only produce an affordable PC, but would bundle software with it. Their association led to the forming of OCC and to the Osborne 1.

Following his company's collapse Osborne started a new venture, Paperback Software, to sell software at prices resembling mass-market paperbacks. But Paperback also hit problems when they were sued for copyright infringement by Lotus who alleged that their spreadsheet program's interface too closely resembled its own Lotus 1-2-3. Osborne lost the case and left Paperback in 1990. His health began to decline soon after leading him to move to Kodaikanal in India where he spent his remaining years with his sister, Katya.

Friends and former colleagues remember Osborne as an industry pundit, a man brimming with ideas for whom concepts ruled and business was secondary. He moved the personal computer industry into the consumer marketplace with his innovative all-in-one hardware-and-software packaging. A true visionary.



1 A Relational Model of Data for Large Shared Data Banks <http://www.acm.org/classics/nov95/toc.html>

2 Selective Sequence Electronic Calculator <http://www.columbia.edu/acis/history/ssec.html>

3 AM Turing award http://www.wikipedia.org/wiki/Turing_Award