

# World's Most Iconic PC's

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What do we mean by iconic? Here,  
we're talking about the influencers.  
The computers that changed  
perceptions of what computers could  
be, or inspired a new type of design

# Silent 700

Line of Texas Instruments portable computer terminals  
(1970s and 1980s)



The Silent 700, introduced in 1971, was a line of portable computer terminals manufactured by Texas Instruments in the 1970s and 1980s. Silent 700s printed with a 5 x 7 dot-matrix heating element onto a roll of heat-sensitive paper. Some models were equipped with an integrated acoustic coupler ...

Bubble memory held about 200 80 column card images

Modem was 300 bits/sec



**XEROX ALTO**

The cabinet-sized Alto may have stretched the definition of personal computer (only its screen and keyboard are shown here), but it defined many of the things we take for granted today. It ran the first GUI-based OS controlled by a mouse, it hosted the first WYSIWYG document system, the first email client, and the first network-based games. When Steve Jobs was shown its latest features in 1979, he said it was a "veil being lifted from my eyes".



**COMMODORE PET**

A computer so iconic that it can be recognized by its silhouette, the PET was Commodore's first computer—built to take advantage of the company's own 6502 processor (also used in the Apple II). At that point, Commodore was famous for its calculators and typewriters, and its legendary boss Jack Tramiel took some persuading that newfangled computers were worth a gamble. But thanks to Chuck Peddle, the chip's lead designer, Tramiel rolled the dice—and a long line of Commodore computers was born.

**APPLE II**

Compare and contrast the Apple II with the MITS Altair 8800 below. Only three years separated them, yet the Apple II looked stylish—by contemporary standards, at least—and still included all the expansion slots demanded by the enthusiasts expected to buy it. Plus, astonishingly for the time, it could output in color. What was a trickle of sales in the Apple II's first year (a few thousand) soon turned into a flood of millions, helped by the arrival of VisiCalc, the first spreadsheet program, and numerous iterative improvements to the hardware.



**MITS ALTAIR 8800**

Although it looks more like a prop from a bad 1970s sci-fi movie, the Altair 8800 was the first minicomputer kit. It came in various configurations, but the base spec included a 1,024-byte memory board and Intel's 8080 processor. Frivolities such as a keyboard or display weren't included. It caught the eye of a keen Harvard student called Bill Gates, who wanted to create a BASIC interpreter for the 8800 and worked part-time for the company, before starting a small firm of his own...



**SINCLAIR ZX80**

On May 2nd, 1979, Alan Mayne wrote in *The Financial Times* that personal computers "could drop to around £100 within five years". He was only out by a factor of 10 or so, with Clive Sinclair announcing the ZX80 in January 1980. You could buy it fully assembled for £100 (\$200), or build it yourself from a cheaper kit form. While the membrane keyboard had its issues and the 1K of memory was positively tiny, this cheap computer paved the way for computers in homes.

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1973

1974

1977

1977

1980



#### IBM PERSONAL COMPUTER 5150

"Welcome IBM. Seriously." That was Apple's response, via a full-page ad in *The Wall Street Journal*, to IBM's first personal computer in August 1981. It marked a departure for IBM, which had built its post-war reputation on mainframes and minicomputers. IBM's chairman Frank Cary was persuaded by Bill Lowe—"the father of the IBM PC"—that he could not only create a profitable new product line but build it from scratch in a year. With the help of a certain Bill Gates, who kept the rights of the OS to himself, the rest is history.



#### COMMODORE 64

For millions of schoolchildren in the 1980s, the C64 was their introduction to computers. Despite its physical similarity to the VIC-20, this was much more flexible. There was the 64KB of memory, compared to the 48KB typical of its rivals, but also sprites to make games slicker—plus a revolutionary sound chip. All this for \$595. Where the IBM PC legitimized the market for business computers, the C64 did exactly the same for home computers.



#### OSBORNE 1

Wikipedia describes the Osborne 1 as "the first commercially successful portable computer." Given it weighed 24lb, the word "portable" is doing a lot of heavy lifting. Nevertheless, the Osborne—brainchild of computer book publisher Adam—sold in droves, with its 4MHz processor, dual 5.25-inch floppy drives, and 5-inch CRT display winning admirers. At its peak, it was shifting 10,000 units per month.



#### COMMODORE VIC-20

Often consigned to the footnotes of history, the VIC-20 was actually the first computer to sell a million units, and introduced many people to programming, thanks to its detailed manual. And eking all they could from the miserly 1.5KB of memory. Perhaps most crucially, it proved to the Commodore board that there was a home market to be attacked along with the businesses that had embraced the PET. Next stop, the Commodore 64...

#### BBC MICRO

Realizing the importance of computers, in the early 1980s the BBC commissioned not only a TV series on computer literacy but its own computer and BASIC. That way, people could follow its programs with confidence rather than rely on someone else's hardware and software. It wisely chose Cambridge's Acorn Computers to partner with, and it wasn't long before a BBC Micro was in every school in Britain.





### EPSON HX-20

Several computers have claimed the "world's first laptop" crown, among them the Epson HX-20. Whether a computer with a screen that spans a mere four lines of 20 characters can be classed as a laptop is debatable, but it's impressive that it includes a tiny printer next to the display, albeit one that sounds and behaves more like a checkout register. Nevertheless, that Epson packed this all into a 3.5lb unit is impressive for the time, not least because it could run for hours on four AA batteries.



### AMSTRAD CPC 464

Anyone who's seen the British version of *The Apprentice* knows that Alan Sugar is easily riled, and in 1983 his ire was directed at Sinclair. If nerds like Sir Clive could make money from computers, so could he. And he'd do it by delivering a complete system that didn't need to be plugged into a TV. The small matter of creating it fell mostly on Roland Perry, who—in best *A-Team* style—set about creating an ace collection of programmers and electrical engineers. His plan came together, with the CPC 464 selling millions of units over its six-year life.

### COMPAQ PORTABLE

The Compaq Portable stretched the definition of the word: It weighed 28lb, ten times heavier than today's MacBook Air. However, this was 1983, and a computer that could be lugged around like a small suitcase was a minor miracle. The Portable had a nine-inch green screen, 128KB of RAM, and could accommodate two 360KB disk drives. It didn't have a battery, so much like a portable TV, you had to plug it into the wall. But despite these shortcomings, this IBM-compatible was a big hit at the time.



### SINCLAIR ZX SPECTRUM

The ZX Spectrum's rubber keys were about as useful as super-gluing your fingers together when it came to typing, but we can forgive almost all of the dinky Speccy's flaws. It was a ridiculously cheap introduction to home computing, with the 16K model costing \$200. Yes, the limited colors bled into one another; yes, you needed to plug in an external tape cassette to load games; yes, the sound was comparable to a faulty dishwasher—but it was the 1980s and everything was trash.

### APPLE MACINTOSH

Having been kicked off the Apple Lisa project, the Mac turned Steve Jobs' tortures around. Leading a small but talented team, his obsessive attention to detail and sheer charisma helped create a truly revolutionary computer. Complete with a graphical user interface and a one-button mouse, it was easy to get along with—if you had \$2,495 to spare. When Jobs introduced the Macintosh, he allowed the computer to speak for itself, thrilling the crowd of Apple shareholders. It took a while for the Mac to live up to everyone's heightened expectations—disappointing first-year sales, due in part to the paltry 128KB of RAM in those first models, led Jobs to leave Apple and start NeXT—but the Macintosh is arguably the most iconic and influential computer ever made.



WIKITRACK.COM / GETTY IMAGES



### AMSTRAD PCW

The Amstrad PCW was no oil painting, but it was a bargain. \$799 wasn't pocket money in 1985 (worth around \$2,600 today), but for that, you got the PCW, a printer, word-processing software, and a bunch of utilities. By comparison, the Apple Macintosh launched a year earlier costing \$2,500. It had its idiosyncrasies—the use of 3-inch rather than 3.5-inch floppies for one—but the PCW sold in its millions to a generation seeking affordable computing.



### TOSHIBA LIBRETTO

A decade before netbooks, Toshiba's Libretto defined the compact laptop. The size of a hardback book, it slotted between the PDA and laptop market of the time. The Libretto range was more popular in the Far East, with several models only released in Japan. To squeeze a full-blown laptop into a device weighing less than 2lb was some feat at the time, even if the 6.1-inch screen now seems almost quaint.

### ATARI ST

Amiga or Atari ST: Which horse did you back? The ST was one of the great PCs of the pre-Windows era and found a niche in several industries. Its built-in MIDI ports made it popular with musicians—Cubase and Logic Pro both started life on the Atari ST, and Fatboy Slim recorded his *You've Come a Long Way, Baby* album on one, all stored on floppy disks. It was a home gaming machine, too. If you've never played *Kick Off 2* on an ST, you haven't lived.



### COMMODORE AMIGA

The Amiga may have arrived in the mid-'80s, but it didn't become a mainstay of back bedrooms until the 500, 600, and (Dad got a promotion, did he?) 1200 arrived in the early '90s. These beige beauties dominated the home computing landscape until Commodore ran into financial woes in the late '90s. Readers of a certain age will remember boxes full of ripped-off games on floppies, wrestling with Workbench, and wobbling their Powerplay Cruiser joystick into the port.



### IBM THINKPAD

The distinctive ThinkPad has been an unmistakable mainstay of the laptop market ever since it arrived in the early 1990s. That iconic red trackpoint in the middle of the keyboard remains a must-have for many buyers, even in the age of super-smooth trackpads the size of swimming pools. ThinkPad keyboards have always been top-notch, even after the range was sold to Lenovo. And who can forget that slide-out Butterfly keyboard on 1995's ThinkPad 701?

1985

1985

1985

1992

1996



### APPLE IMAC G3

Without the original iMac, none of the other Macs on this list would have been made. This was the computer that saved a company, arguably the most iconic PC of them all, with its transparent plastic casing. The iMac wasn't only a design classic, it was a boundary pusher. It propelled floppy disks into landfill, for example, and helped to standardize the USB port.

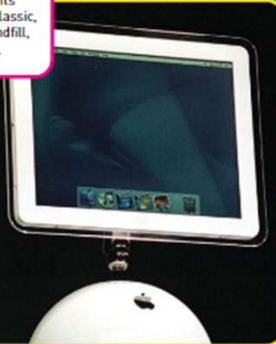


### APPLE MACBOOK PRO

The MacBook Pro has not only set the standard for pro-grade laptops for over 15 years, but it has also been the vehicle for a series of Apple innovations. It was the first laptop to include a MagSafe connector, preventing laptops from being yanked off desks when a foot got tangled in the power cord—an innovation that Apple recently reintroduced on the M1 MacBook Pro. It was also the first to incorporate the unibody design that's now commonplace, as well as the less successful Touchbar.

### APPLE IMAC G4

It's 20 years since the iMac G4 launched, yet it still looks like something from the future. The domed base contained all the computing power, while the arm allowed the screen to be positioned at almost any angle. The 15-inch screen looks tiny now, although there was a widescreen 20-inch version. The G4 was the mainstay of reception desks in fashionable London offices for a few years, before it was discontinued abruptly in 2004.



### ALIENWARE AREA 51 PREDATOR 1

If a gaming PC isn't a riot of RGB lighting these days, we're disappointed. In 2003, however, PC cases were a lot more mundane, which made the Alienware Area 51 an icon. Looking like a prop from *Alien*, the rounded lime green case was fitted with the kind of grilles you'd normally find on a Porsche. The internals were equally punchy, but the fact those cases are still changing hands on eBay tells you all you need to know about the design. Little wonder that boring, corporate Dell bought the brand in 2006.



### ASUS EEE PC

There was a time when cheap, tiny laptops were all the rage. In the pre-tablet, nascent-smartphone age, buyers couldn't get enough of netbooks as cheap ways to get on the internet. The Eee PC wasn't much to look at, and buyers soon tired of netbooks' sluggish performance, cramped keyboards, and small screens, but for a couple of years, netbooks flew off the shelves, and the Asus Eee PC had set the ball rolling.

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1998

2002

2003

2006

2007





### MICROSOFT SURFACE TABLE

Microsoft's first Surface wasn't a tablet, it was a table. A \$10,000 cabinet-sized slice of the future, or so Redmond wanted us to believe. It was an astounding piece of technology when touchscreens were still novel, but it never found its *raison d'être*. Still, it blazed a path for future touchscreen initiatives, even if we aren't sorting our digital photos by swiping through a 'puddle' of shots on our 200lb coffee tables.



### RASPBERRY PI

Unlike many of the iconic computers here, the Raspberry Pi was no looker. But that didn't stop you from buying one or more of those little green boards, did it? Partly that's down to its price—a computer for \$35 is too good to ignore. The Pi's sheer flexibility has seen it become the darling of coders, hobbyists, and tinkerers all over the world. And for the Brits, it was an echo of that 1980s micro era that got many people involved with computers in the first place.

### SAMSUNG CHROMEBOOK

In 2011, Google proudly announced the arrival of a revolutionary new type of laptop: the Chromebook. Acer and Samsung both launched products in June, but it was with more of a fizzle than a bang. Early Chromebooks were criticized for being slow, and it took a couple of iterations before they started to gain traction—in schools, in particular. In 2021, Chromebooks outsold MacBooks. Now, Google is making a push into the business world on the basis that its secure, long-lasting, and always-up-to-date Chromebooks are perfect for people who have to work anywhere.



### APPLE MACBOOK AIR

When Steve Jobs took the first-ever MacBook Air out of a manila envelope in 2008, Apple had changed the computer industry once more. Even at its thickest point, the MacBook Air was thinner than even the slimmest Windows competitor, the Sony TZ series, as Jobs pointed out with a scarcely concealed smirk. It's a design that's served Apple for well over a decade and still doesn't look the least bit dated.



### DELL XPS 13

The moment we saw the XPS 13 in 2012, we knew a Rubicon had been crossed. This, at last, was a Windows laptop with enough style to rival Apple. But it wasn't trying to mimic its rival but do something on its own, squeezing a 13.3-inch panel into a chassis the size of a 12-inch laptop. With an SSD and one of Intel's fancy new Core processors, plus a screen protected by Gorilla Glass, the only downside was its price.

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2008

2008

2011

2012

2012



### LENOVO YOGA

Windows 8 had its problems, but one of the best things it did was inspire a range of new form factors. None in that era was better than the Lenovo Yoga, named for its ability to flap and fold into a variety of configurations. It folded flat against its base to form a (chunky) tablet; it could be stood in tent mode for watching movies, or it could be used as a conventional laptop. The Yoga brand lives on, proving that this most flexible of laptop designs had iconic staying power.

### GOOGLE PIXELBOOK

Google doesn't have much of a hardware pedigree, but the Pixelbook remains the best Chromebook ever. Its 2400x1600 display still looks sharp, and the 3:2 aspect ratio was a welcome, sensible change at a time when widescreen laptops were in vogue. However, the standout feature of the Pixelbook was its keyboard: Soft yet perfectly responsive, it's still one of the best keyboards we've seen on a laptop. The Pixelbook was a premium piece of hardware in a sea of cheap plastic rivals.



### MICROSOFT SURFACE

Some argue that the Microsoft Surface isn't iconic. That it hasn't had an effect on computer design since the ill-fated Surface RT in 2012. But we have one eye on the future when we say that its kickstand-based approach and detachable keyboard marked a radical departure from the conventional clamshell laptop and may yet become the dominant design for mobile computers. Or may not. At least Microsoft dared to do something different.



### APPLE IMAC M1

The iMac wasn't the first Mac to benefit from the M1 processor but it was the first M1 machine to get a significant redesign. Stupendously slender, it looks like a massive iPad on an angled frame. In a call back to the first iMacs, it comes in a range of colors. Being M1-based, it's fiercely powerful without making a sound. It's elegance in electronic form.



2012

2012

2017

2021

## THE NEAR-ICONS



### ACORNATOM (1980)

The Atom was the predecessor to the BBC Micro, and with 2022 goggles on, looked much more stylish than its successor.

Neat fact: The manual for the computer was called *Atomic Theory and Practice*.

### DRAGON 32 (1982)

We love the story of the Dragon 32—a Welsh toy company deciding to build a computer was so mid-1980s—but it was really just a copy of the Tandy TRS-80.



### ACORNELECTRON (1983)

Acorn's attempt to build a cut-down BBC Micro was beset with difficulty, leading to long delays. By the time it was available, the demand had gone.



### SINCLAIR QL (1984)

This could have been the British Mac, based around a 16-bit Motorola processor, and with a brilliant multitasking OS. Plus a full suite of office software. But poor build quality and delays ultimately strangled the QL at birth.



### ACORN ARCHIMEDES (1987)

Not iconic in terms of looks, but this was the first ARM-based computer—admittedly, it's taken the world some time to catch up. It went on to be a stalwart in schools for the next decade.

### APPLE POWERBOOK (1991)

The predecessor to the MacBook Pro laid the foundations for Apple laptops. Thank the silicon gods that the trackball embedded beneath the keyboard was one of Apple's lesser-copied innovations.



### PSION SERIES 5 (1997)

Yes, yes, yes, the Series 5 was a PDA, but "The World's Most Iconic PDAs" would be a short feature, so it earns an honorable mention here for that brilliant sliding clamshell design and the best mobile keyboard ever.



### SONY VAIO X505 (2003)

Before the MacBook Air, there was the VAIO X505—a ridiculously slender laptop, given the components of the time. It was only 0.38 inches at its thinnest point, although the front-loaded keyboard was an acquired taste.

### TRS-80 Model I

## TRS-80



TRS-80 Model I with Expansion Interface and display

Manufacturer	Tandy Corporation
Type	Home computer
Release date	August 3, 1977; 45 years ago <sup>[1]</sup>
Lifespan	1977–1981, 4 years
Introductory price	US\$599.95 (equivalent to \$2,680 in 2021)
Discontinued	January 1981; 41 years ago
Units sold	100,000+ (as of 1979) <sup>[2]</sup> 2.4 million (all models) <sup>[3]</sup>
Operating system	TRSDOS, LDOS, NewDos/80
CPU	Zilog Z80 @ 1.774 MHz
Memory	4–48 KB