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Introduction

In the 1980s, computers invaded British homes for the first time, a wave of cheap and futuristic *microcomputers* that allowed millions of people to discover for themselves what a computer was and how it worked. For most of their earlier history, computers were too large, too expensive and too complicated for the general public to understand; they were machines for big science, big government, big business and perhaps even Big Brother. Yet with the development of the microprocessor in the 1970s, the tiny ‘computer on a chip’, dramatically reduced the cost and size of computing, and brought prophecies of an information technology revolution that would change the world. Against this backdrop, Britain embraced home computers as introductions to information technology, passports to the future that would prepare people for the changes to come.

As home computing boomed manufacturers developed a staggeringly diverse array of computers to meet the demand. They came in different shapes and sizes, but shared many common features too. Most were intended originally as affordable and user-friendly introductions to computing; comparatively simple devices of limited power and sophistication, but with enormous potential for people to tinker with and learn to program. Home computers were there to be explored, experimented with and understood, but beyond this there was only a vague idea of what they were actually for. They were open to a wide range of different interpretations, and 1980s Britain imprinted itself on this eminently malleable technology in many different ways: to the state and educationalists it became a tool of computer literacy, a way to remake the British economy and workforce; to bedroom programmers computers were a means of expressing themselves in creative ways, as they wrote games to push

machines beyond designers' expectations; to Thatcherites they were a symbol of the nation's enterprise and inventiveness; to millions of people around the country computers became entertainment platforms, information terminals, household aides, office tool, or whatever other uses users could conceive. The home computer boom was not just about computers, but a huge period of experimentation to find out what they could do, and the coming together of all these different groups and agendas created a curiously British cultural event.

After every boom follows a bust. By the mid-1980s disillusionment with cheap home computers was setting in: familiar computer companies went bust; home computers were reduced to the status of toys as gaming blossomed and users turned to more sophisticated 'real' computers; the IBM PC standard killed much of the diversity of the boom years. The home computer should have died then and there, but it did not. Embedded in personal and popular memory, and kept alive by collectors and retrocomputing fans, the machines of the 1980s are living an active semi-retirement three decades later. But more than that, the legacies of the home computer boom are all around us in a world where computers have become boringly commonplace. Yet as news today fills with stories of digital revolution and digital literacy, the promises of information technology to deliver disruptive change remain as strong as ever; twenty-first century Britain is rediscovering and recreating the promises of 1980s home computing anew. This is the story of the home computer boom, and how Britain stopped worrying about microchips and learned to love the computer.