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Britannia Developments, Unit M28, Cardiff Workshops, Lewis Road, Cardiff CF1 5EB.

Romboard rivals!

Vax looks at a solution when the chips are down

Honeysoft ROM Board

"Review this ROM board for me will you?". Review it? You don't review ROM boards, you plug ROMs in them. Well, this one is sufficiently different to rate a review. It differs from most other boards in two respects; it plugs in to the top of a Maxam board and it only costs twelve quid.

It all comes in a little white box labelled "Honeysoft ROM board" (logical eh?). This box contains a manual and the 3" x 4" ROM board.

The board contains four sockets, four sets of links, four capacitors and four resistors. Hence only twelve quid.

The manual contains adequate instructions on the setting up of the board and warns the user against plugging or unplugging the board with the power on, and stirring cups of hot chocolate with it. The manual is however excellent for standing said hot chocolate on.

The board takes either 8k or 16k ROMs, but they must have an access time of 200ns or better. Unfortunately, different manufacturers have different ideas of what 200ns is. Some NEC ROMs claiming to be 200ns did not work in any ROM board. Utopia, Maxam and the Micropower Toolkit all worked fine in it though.

The ROM numbers are selected by swapping small plastic links. These now have a small plastic tail on them to assist extraction. The old ones were almost impossible to extract with the unaided fingernail and tended to be converted into short-range ballistic missiles when prized out with a screwdriver.

The ROMs can be numbered between 0 and 6. ROM 7 is reserved for the disc ROM because Amstrad got there first. This looks like a good point to show some of the

more common locations for ROMs:

| ROM | Usual Inhabitants |
|-----|-------------------|
| 0 | BASIC |
| 1 | — |
| 2 | — |
| 3 | — |
| 4 | — |
| 5 | Maxam |
| 6 | SI0 ROM |
| 7 | Disc ROM |

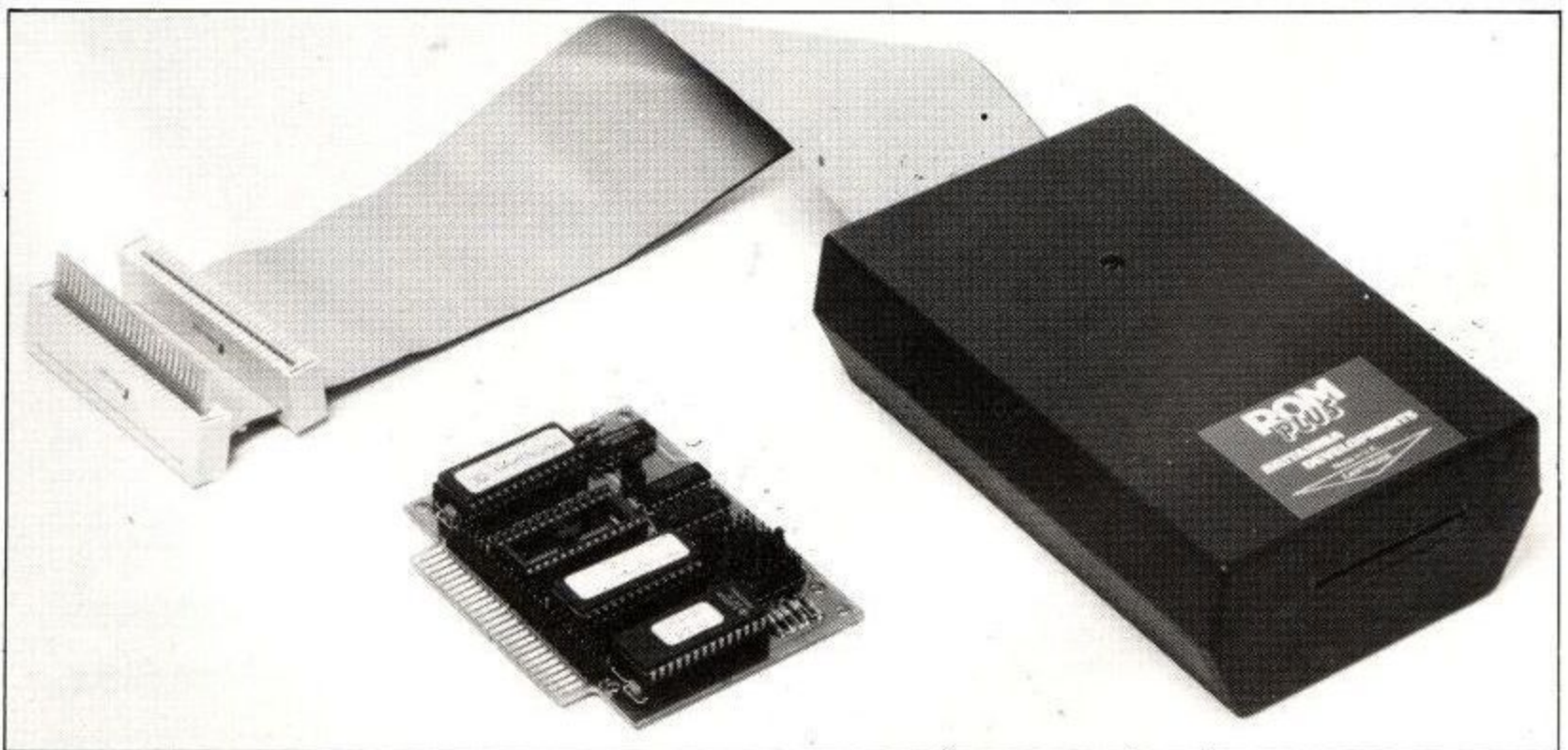
Now you see why there are only four ROM sockets.

On a 664 or a 6128 you can have 16 ROMs altogether, but not with this board. This tends to result in a ROM getting logged on twice. All is not lost, you use the Maxam ROMOFF command to nobble the extra one. Some ROMs are smart and know when they have been wound up.

The only fault I could find with this board was that the ROM sockets did not contain the usual notch which tells you which way up the ROMs go. As the manual tells you which way round they go anyway, this is not much of a fault. If you have a Maxam and need a ROM board, I have no hesitation in recommending this one, especially if you have a fetish for hot chocolate. Still, let's see what one of the opposition has to offer.

The Britannia ROM Board

This is going to impress a few people, mainly because it has a flashy, colour printed carton and a plastic box



holding all its electronic guts in. Unfortunately, this is about all it does have going for it.

First step is always to read the instructions (yea, well...), if you can find them. Their instructions are printed in English, French, Italian and German (wot, no Esperanto?) on the sides of the box. Yes folks, all the instructions are crammed in a 2" by 6" area.

The instructions do not tell you how to plug the gizmo into the back of your 464, 664 or 6128. Do you need to be told? Yes, you do - because the device has a very long ribbon cable coming out of it which has two sockets on the end of it as well as a through bus coming out of the side.

Knowing a bit about the Amstrad RS232 interface, I guessed that the first socket should have an adapter in it for the disc drive. The reason why you don't plug the disc drive into the through bus is that the 464 and its kind do not appreciate long cables, hence the adapter.

All this would not have been so bad if the connectors were keyed. As things stand, it is easy to plug in the unit the wrong way round. The Honeysoft connector is not keyed either, but the instructions for that one tell you which way is up.

Next we have to put in some ROMs. The instructions waffle a bit about the foreground and background ROMs and then tell you to put any foreground ROM in socket one. Now the clever bit: They have not numbered the sockets. They tell you in the instructions what is what, so don't lose the box and ignore the bit of PCB track that just happens to look like a one and is next to socket six.

Which way round do they go? Well, the instructions say that the notch goes on the left. The sockets are not marked as with the Honeysoft board, and the other chips on the board go every which way so don't use them as a guide. After fitting your ROM, you must change a dip-switch and then put the lid back on. Flicking these switches is somewhat easier than fiddling with the Honeysoft links as the dip switches are numbered.

The instructions also mention ROM cartridges, which can be plugged in to the back to expand your machine to "untold limits". Anyone with a firmware manual can tell you that this previously untold limit is 252 ROMs. Unfortunately, I have never seen an expansion ROM of this type, nor have I seen one of the cartridges. I am inclined to think that this idea is a non-starter. A case in point - when did you last see a Spectrum ROM cartridge?

Synopsis

If good looks alone counted, the Britannia offering would probably win. They don't though, and the Honeysoft board wins my vote, even if you do need a Maxam or Protex board to use it. For non machine-code hackers who don't know what a Maxam is, the Britannia board is no worse or more expensive than any of the other run-of-the-mill-units. The Honeysoft ROM board is available from Circuit (0992) 44111. The Britannia board costs £42.50 details from Britannia on (0222) 481135.

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