Computer active

ISSUE 673 | 20 DEC 2023 – 2 JAN 2024

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From the Editor

At this time of joy and goodwill, spare a thought for CCleaner. Once the world's best junk-wiping tool, it will be spending this Christmas alone and unloved. It'll also be a bleak time for WinRAR, abandoned following recent Windows updates. And don't forget poor old LastPass, which many people wouldn't trust to protect their figgy pudding, let alone their passwords.

These are just three of the tools that we urge you to uninstall as we head into 2024. Robert Irvine has found plenty of other phone apps, browser extensions and Windows tools that should be avoided like mince pies licked by Rudolph. He recommends superior replacements for each, and also reveals which is the best program for removing stuff from your PC.

I'd like to thank you all for reading *Computeractive* during 2023. While the tech industry has gone bonkers over AI, we've continued to give advice for the kind of problems that actually affect people every day – from Wi-Fi to Windows, from broadband to browsers. I hope you've found it useful. Merry Christmas everyone!

Daniel Booth
editor@computeractive.co.uk

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Average time UK adults spend online every day, an increase of eight minutes from 2022 – *p9*

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£25
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HOW TO USE SNIPCA URLs

We use snipcas to turn long URLs that are hard to type into ones that are short and simple. They aren't websites themselves, which means they won't be recognised if you type them into Google. Instead, you need to type them into your browser address bar, then press Enter. Doing this will take you to the correct website.

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Microsoft extends Windows 10 support – but it'll cost you

Microsoft is to let individuals pay for extended support for Windows 10 – the first time it has done so for any version of Windows.

It plans to end existing support on 14 October 2025, after which it won't release any security fixes or offer technical support.

It normally lets businesses and organisations pay for Extended Security Updates (ESU) after ending support for a version of Windows, but has never previously offered this to individual users.

The current build of Windows 10 is 22H2. Microsoft ended support for 21H2 in June 2023.

Microsoft wrote on its blog: "While we strongly recommend moving to Windows 11, we understand there are circumstances that could prevent you from replacing Windows 10 devices before the EOS [end of service] date."

It confirmed that businesses will be able to buy an annual subscription to get "critical and/or important security updates" every month for three years. But it didn't say how much this would cost – nor how much it would charge individual users.

Charges for businesses extending Windows 7 support started at $25 (£20) a year per device. Prices for individuals for Windows 11 are likely to be cheaper.

20,000 sign petition to extend support

Microsoft's decision follows increasing calls over the past few months for Microsoft to extend support.

In October, non-profit US organisation Public Interest Research Group presented a petition to Microsoft signed by 20,000 people that asked it to keep providing security updates for the "millions of people who can't upgrade their computers" (www.snipca.com/48629).

Over a billion computers still run Windows 10, while 400 million run Windows 11. Many *Computeractive* readers have emailed us saying they want to upgrade from Windows 10 to 11, but have been unable to because their computers don't meet Microsoft's strict technical specifications.

Microsoft's decision is likely to receive a mixed response. Many users will be pleased that support is being extended, but they want it to be offered for free.

Speculation that Microsoft would extend support had been growing ever since it added some of Windows 11's latest tools to 10, including a new backup tool – see Issue 671's Workshop, page 38.

Rumours intensified when it announced that it will also add the AI tool Copilot to Windows 10.

As with Windows 11, it will have a Copilot button on the taskbar that you can click to open a sidebar for searching the internet and performing simple Windows tasks like opening Office apps and turning on dark mode.

WHAT WE THINK

We welcome this decision, though Microsoft had little choice – it simply couldn't abandon a billion computers. However, by charging individuals for extended support we think it's seriously misread the public mood. People understand that companies should have to pay, but most consumers think support should be offered to them for free. Calls to provide this will only grow louder following this announcement. Microsoft is making a commercial case for charging, but campaigners will respond with a moral argument: that it's just not fair. This controversy is far from over.

WINDOWS 12 'COMING JUNE 2024'

Microsoft will release Windows 12 in June 2024, according to Taiwan's biggest financial newspaper *Commercial Times*.

It made the claim based on comments by Acer boss Jason Chen and Quanta boss Barry Lam at the Taiwan Medical Technology Exhibition in December. Quanta is a PC and hardware manufacturer based in Taiwan.

They also said that "AI computers" will launch in 2024. These will have AI capabilities built into the processor.

Microsoft hasn't commented officially on whether it's planning to release Windows 12, but company sources have told our sister site Windows Central that it's working on a new version of the operating system that's powered by AI.

This will include an "advanced Copilot" that runs constantly in the background to enhance searches and perform tasks faster, they said.

There's talk also of a new logo, possibly incorporating the Copilot icon as imagined by our sister website Laptop Mag (pictured above).

You'll like this...
Microsoft is investing £2.5bn in UK AI infrastructure (www.snipca.com/48632)

but not this...
UK security chiefs say Russian hackers are influencing politics (www.snipca.com/48631)

Top tech firms sign Government charter to fight online scams

The Government has launched an Online Fraud Charter with 12 major tech companies in a "world-first" plan to fight online scams such as fake adverts and romance fraud.

Home Secretary James Cleverly met with representatives from Amazon, Facebook, Google, Microsoft and YouTube to sign a voluntary pledge to tackle fraud.

The other seven firms to have signed are eBay, Instagram, LinkedIn, Match Group, Snapchat, TikTok and X (formerly Twitter).

Commitments in the charter include quickly removing content and accounts suspected of being involved in fraud, and ensuring that adverts for investment schemes come from legitimate companies.

Match Group, which owns the dating websites Match.com, Plenty of Fish and Tinder, has pledged to let users make contact only with people who have chosen to verify their identity.

Ministers say the charter will be supported by "tough action to crack down on illegal adverts and ads for age-restricted products, such as alcohol or gambling, being seen by children".

An action plan, agreed by the Online Advertising Taskforce, has been published to explain how industry and the Government will strengthen protections for children.

The Home Secretary said the charter is a "big step forward in our efforts to protect the public from sophisticated, adaptable and highly organised criminals".

MoneySavingExpert.com founder Martin Lewis welcomed the pledges, saying: "We are in the midst of an epidemic of scams. We will be watching closely to check these companies work hard and work together to make good on their promises."

Fraud is the most common crime in the UK, the Government said, accounting for 40 per cent of all offences in England and Wales. In 2022, one in 17 citizens reported being a victim of fraud.

Read more on Gov.UK: www.snipca.com/48578

• New year, new scams – page 62

Roku recommends shows based on what you've watched

Roku is adding a 'What To Watch' section to include recommended shows based on what you've watched before.

It sits below the Home section in the main menu, and aims to give you a better idea of what you're watching and shows you may like to watch.

Roku says its recommendations will also be based on the time of day and which device you are using. Suggested shows will come from what you watch across a range of TV services, including Amazon Prime Video, Apple TV, Channel 4, Disney+, ITVX, Netflix and Plex.

You'll only be shown content you can watch for free, or is available through your existing subscriptions at no further cost.

This makes it different to many other services that recommend content you have to pay extra to watch. Amazon's Fire TV, for example, promotes shows from Prime Video whether or not you subscribe to it.

There's also a new Save Lists section where you can save shows to watch later. This

works only if you add shows through the Roku TV home screen, not any external apps.

Another new section is Continue Watching, which will keep track of how far through a show you are.

Roku launched these sections in the US earlier this year, and is now adding them to devices and services in the UK, as well as all Roku players and TVs.

IN BRIEF

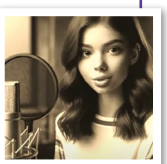
CHATGPT MOST VIEWED PAGE ON WIKIPEDIA

ChatGPT was the most viewed subject on Wikipedia in 2023. The page on the AI tool was viewed more than 49 million times, followed by 'Deaths in 2023' (42 million) and the 2023 Cricket World Cup (38 million). Other popular subjects included the films *Barbie* and *Oppenheimer* and the footballers Lionel Messi and Cristiano Ronaldo. See the top 25 at www.snipca.com/48597.

SONY REMOVES DISCOVERY TV PURCHASES

Sony is removing all Discovery TV shows customers have bought through the PlayStation Store. It has emailed viewers to say it'll wipe content from 31 December following the end of a licence agreement with Warners Bros, which owns Discovery. It hasn't mentioned possible refunds. See which shows are affected at www.snipca.com/48548.

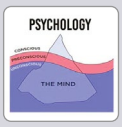
TOMORROW'S WORLD



You might think the pop charts are full of rubbish these days, but at least they've yet to be infiltrated by AI 'stars' like Anna Indiana. Every aspect of her dismal song *Betrayed by This Town* (www.snipca.com/48548) – melody, lyrics, vocals, tempo – has been created by automated software. Can't wait for her duet with Aitana (see page 8).

IN BRIEF

VISUAL LEARNING APP IS GOOGLE'S BEST OF 2023



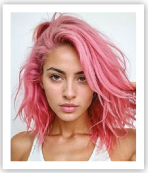
A tool that teaches subjects like business, psychology and technology in pictures rather than words has been named Google's app of the year. It said that 'Imprint: Learn Visually' (pictured) makes learning "engaging and memorable". Apple has also announced its apps of 2023, including AllTrails which shows local trails to hike, bike, run and walk. For details read Google's and Apple's blogs: www.snipca.com/48551 and www.snipca.com/48552 respectively.

ITVX TO SHOW ADS WHEN YOU PAUSE SHOWS

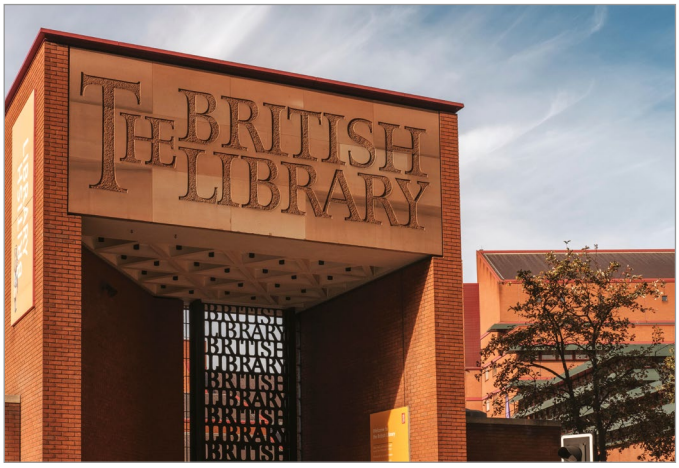
Streaming service ITVX is to start showing adverts when you pause a show you're watching. It plans to introduce these at some point in 2024. They'll be 'static' adverts, similar to banners that appear on websites. Several other streaming services already show ads when you pause, including Channel 4 and Peacock.

THE WORLD'S GONE MAD!

This model makes £8,600 an hour and yet she doesn't exist. The clue is in the first two letters of her name: Aitana. She's an AI creation from Spanish modelling agency The Clueless, which said it wants to avoid the "egos and manias" of real models. How long though until AI celebrities learn how to throw their own hissy fits?



British Library says hackers have leaked customer data online



The British Library has confirmed that hackers stole customer data and that it's been offered for sale on the dark web.

It said that attackers accessed its customer relation management (CRM) databases which "contain the name and email address of most of our users".

"For users of some of our services, these databases may also contain a postal address or telephone number," it added.

The library hasn't said how many people were affected by the attack, which took place on 31 October, but has warned members to change their password if they use it elsewhere. It added that customers' payment information wasn't stolen because it outsources payment processes to other companies.

Previously, the library had said the stolen data included internal documents such as training information and invoices, as well as the salary details of staff.

The attack is continuing to disrupt the library's website, online systems and some services provided on site. It said problems will "persist for several months".

The Rhysida ransomware group has claimed responsibility for the theft. It said it will auction the stolen data, and has set the price at 20 Bitcoin, which currently is the equivalent of £596,000.

Rhysida, thought to have members in Russia, Belarus and Kazakhstan, says it has already published 90 per cent of the data. This appears to include more than 490,000 files – totaling 573GB.

The gang has also attacked the Chilean army, the Portuguese city of Gondomar and the University of West of Scotland.

Visit the British Library's site for updates: www.snipca.com/48540.

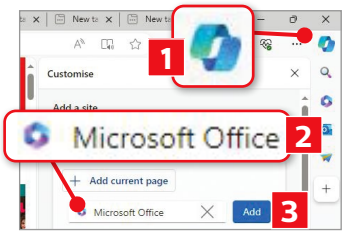
Microsoft axes 365 browser extension

Microsoft is ending support for the browser extension that lets you use its 365 apps through Chrome and Edge.

All support will end on 15 January 2024, meaning Microsoft will no longer update it with new features nor fix any security flaws. It will also be removed from the Chrome and Edge web stores.

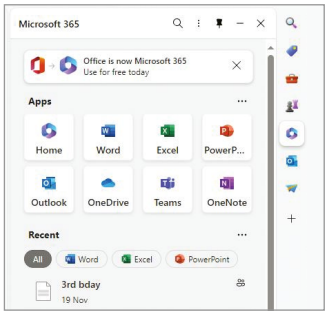
The extension, called simply Microsoft 365, has been downloaded over 10 million times. Microsoft recommends that users remove the app from their browser – see instructions at www.snipca.com/48514.

It didn't give a reason for ending support, but it probably wants users to access Microsoft 365 in other ways – such as from the Edge sidebar.



To do this, open the sidebar by clicking the top-right Copilot icon (1 in our screenshot above), or press the keyboard shortcut Ctrl+Shift+. (full stop).

Now type Microsoft Office into the search box 2, select it when it's suggested below, then click the blue Add button 3.



The Microsoft 365 icon will now appear on the right– simply click it to sign in and access Excel, Outlook, PowerPoint and Word (see screenshot above).

Sky viewers banned from sharing Netflix passwords

Sky viewers are being warned that they can no longer sign into Netflix using a password that's been shared by another household.

The broadcaster is showing the message 'Confirm this TV is in your Netflix Household' when viewers attempt to sign in (pictured).

It's a result of Netflix's crackdown on password sharing. Earlier this year it launched its Extra Members scheme, which charges you £4.99 a month for each person you share your password with outside your household.

However, until now viewers who get Netflix as part of a 'bundled' package from their broadband provider have been exempt.

Sky confirmed on X (formerly Twitter) that viewers are now seeing the message (www.snipca.com/48499).

But for the moment there's no way for Sky customers who get Netflix as part of their bundle to share passwords.

Sky says that "as your Netflix account is linked to your Sky bill, you won't be able to share it with a different household by adding extra members".

This restriction also affects customers who get Netflix in a bundle from other providers, such as BT, TalkTalk and Virgin Media.

The only way to share passwords is by paying for an Extra Member directly through Netflix's site: www.snipca.com/48502. In doing so, you have to decide who is part of your Netflix Household.

Primary Sky account customers can still watch Netflix on their phones, tablets and laptops outside of their household.

However, to do so they'll need to connect their devices to their home's internet every 30 days, which is when Netflix will be able to detect whether someone outside the approved household has logged in. At this point Netflix may decide to block access.

• **Share your TV passwords for free** – Issue 660. Buy it from www.snipca.com/48503

Brits spend nearly 4 hours online every day – mostly on phones

UK adults spent an average of 3 hours 41 minutes a day online in May 2023, eight minutes longer than a year earlier. This amounts to 56 days a year online – two more than in May 2022.

The figures come from Ofcom's Online Nation 2023 study, which analysed the behaviour of over 14,000 internet users aged between 13 and 84 during May.

Most daily browsing (2 hours 47 mins) is done on a smartphone. This amounts to 76 per cent, a rise from 69 per cent in 2022. Only 23 and 30 minutes respectively were spent online on tablets and computers, fewer than in 2022.

As in previous years, young adults (18-24 years old) spent the most time online (4 hours 36 mins), while over-65s spent the least (2 hours 46 mins).

Women continue to spend more time online (3 hours 58 mins) than men (3 hours 23 mins).

Seven per cent of adults don't have internet access at home, the same as in 2022. This figure rises to 18 per cent for those aged over 65.

YouTube has overtaken Facebook as the most visited social-media site, with 91 per cent of adults using it. Visits to Government and NHS websites have fallen sharply over the past two years due to the end of the Covid pandemic.

To read the report as a PDF click the link at www.snipca.com/48522.

IN BRIEF

SEND 'VIEW ONCE' PICS & VIDEOS ON WHATSAPP

WhatsApp is bringing back the option to send 'view once' photos and videos on its Windows and online version. These disappear from your chat after the recipient has opened them once. They also vanish if the recipient hasn't opened them within 14 days of being sent. You can already send 'view once' content using WhatsApp's phone app – see www.snipca.com/48527 for details.

WATCH 'GREAT!' SHOWS ON FREEVIEW & YOUVIEW

You can now watch all four GREAT! channels in YouView and Freeview Play boxes by using the new GREAT! Player. The main channel is GREAT! TV, which broadcasts classic shows including *M*A*S*H*, *Murder, She Wrote*, *The Persuaders* (pictured) and *Randall and Hopkirk (Deceased)*. The other three channels focus on action, Christmas and movies. Visit www.greatnetwork.com for schedules.

EVERNOTE LIMITS USERS TO 50 FREE NOTES

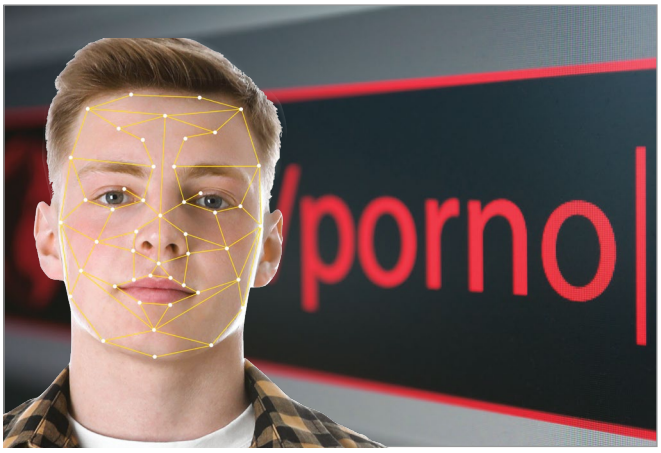
Evernote is running a trial that restricts users to one notebook and 50 free notes before asking them to upgrade to a paid-for account. It told the website TechCrunch that it's testing the restrictions with less than one per cent of users. It added that it hasn't made a final decision about the change, and it wouldn't affect any existing notes. For Evernote's pricing visit www.snipca.com/48526.

Will face scanning stop under-18s watching porn?

Ofcom wants tougher age checks to stop kids seeing sexual content

Porn websites might soon be forced to scan users' faces to make sure they are over 18. It's one of the measures suggested by Ofcom, as it enforces the Online Safety Act. This legislation, which became law in September, requires social-media sites and search engines to protect children from harmful content on the internet.

The problem of children watching porn is huge. The average age at which they first see online porn is 13, according to research by the children's commissioner for England. Shockingly, 27 per cent had seen sexual content by the age of 11, and 10 per cent aged just nine.



> "It wouldn't take long for children to work out they could use VPNs to beat the rules"

Most worrying is that nearly eight in 10 youngsters (79%) have seen violent pornography depicting "coercive, degrading or pain-inducing sex acts" before turning 18. Currently, some porn sites merely ask users to click a button to confirm they are an adult.

Ofcom's task is to force websites to introduce age checks that are "technically accurate, robust, reliable and fair" (www.snipca.com/48651). Does face scanning meet those tests? It's certainly accurate at identifying people, usually scoring over 99.9 per cent in studies, and can group people into age ranges.

However, it seems unlikely that face-scanning will ever be precise enough to tell whether someone is 18. Such technology can only "estimate" a person's age, Ofcom says. But it *can* be used to check that a person's identity matches the age it has verified for them. And that's where robustness and reliability come in.

Ofcom suggests that users could prove their age by uploading photo ID such as a driving licence or passport. Face scanners could then compare it to the live image of the person to check they're over 18. This process should work well, and is already used as a key component of passkeys.

But face scanning also needs to be robust enough to thwart the technical ingenuity of teenagers keen to beat the rules. It wouldn't take long for children to work out how they could bypass age checks by using VPNs to pretend they're outside the UK, for example. Adult siblings might also give them access.

Ofcom acknowledges that no age-checking system will be impossible to bypass, but says sites must "guard against simple tricks". It suggested they perform "liveness checks" of a user's identity to stop children using borrowed or fake ID and a photo of someone older.

And what about privacy? Critics of the law are worried about user information being exposed. Abigail Burke of the Open Rights Group warned that leaked data could lead to "blackmail, fraud, relationship damage and the outing of people's sexual preferences in very vulnerable circumstances".

However, Iain Corby, executive director at the Age Verification Providers Association, claims that data-protection laws prevent details being leaked. "Our members are tightly regulated and have done over a billion online age checks without any data breaches because we don't create any new central databases of personal information," he said.

As for being fair, experts admit that face scanning can have a problem identifying non-white faces accurately. But Whitehead said a lot of money is being spent to make sure the technology is trained using a diverse set of faces.

Whatever system Ofcom introduces, stricter rules are coming that'll affect the 14 million Brits who watch sex online. Porn sites will object to some of the toughest measures, but executives face prison if they don't follow the new rules. If they can't make face scanning work, there needs to be something just as rigorous instead.

THE FACTS

- Ofcom has suggested that porn sites could use face scanning to check users are over 18
- The average age at which children first see online porn is 13
- Campaigners say collecting sensitive personal information could jeopardise the safety of users and leave them open to blackmail

Protect your tech

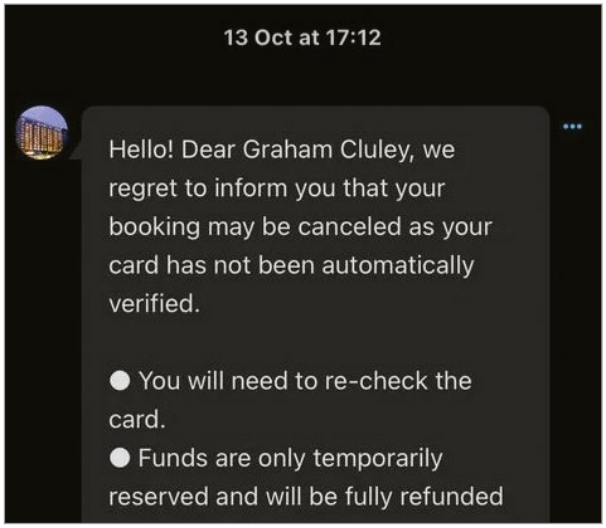
Scams and threats to avoid, plus new security tools

WATCH OUT FOR...

Fake emails from 'Booking.com'

What's the threat?

Scammers are increasingly targeting Booking.com customers after stealing their details from hotels they've stayed at. First, they email the hotel a link to Google Drive, saying it contains an image of an item they accidentally left in their room. Clicking this infects the hotel's computer with the malware Vidar Infostealer, letting the attackers access Booking.com's reservations. The scammers can then email customers from Booking.com's official app and trick them into sending money.



Credit: Graham Cluley

It's such a convincing scam that it almost fooled security expert Graham Cluley. In October, he blogged about a scam message that asked him to click a link to verify his payment card (www.snipca.com/48581, see screenshot). He realised it was a scam when clicking the link took him to a web page hosted at a domain that had been created just hours earlier – a sure sign it was fraudulent.

Since then, security firm Secureworks has found customer details being sold for $2,000 (£1,576) on the dark web. It said that the scam has a "high success rate" and is likely to remain a threat during 2024 (www.snipca.com/48580).

How can you stay safe?

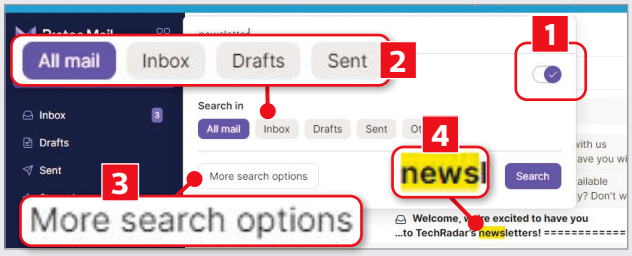
What makes this scam hard to spot is that the messages come from Booking.com's app or website, and give credible reasons why you might have to provide payment details to secure your reservation. To stay safe, treat every message from Booking.com with caution, especially if it asks you to click a link. Check whether it's real by phoning the hotel or Booking.com – see www.snipca.com/48582 for contact details.

Booking.com says that it'll never ask for credit-card details by phone, email, or text message – including via WhatsApp.

New tools | Search in Proton Mail

https://proton.me/mail

We've often recommended Proton Mail as a more private alternative to Outlook or Gmail, praising how it keeps you anonymous by encrypting messages so only you and your recipient can read them. We're pleased, therefore, that it now lets you search the content of your emails, making it a more plausible option as your main webmail service.



To use it, click the 'Search messages' bar at the top, then Enable. Proton will then download your messages to your browser, so it can make them searchable. Once that's done, click the Search bar again and make sure the tick slider is switched on (1 in our screenshot). Now choose which folder to search in, such as 'All mail', Inbox, Drafts or Sent 2. Click 'More search options' 3 to search by date, sender, recipient and address. Your results will be highlighted in yellow 4.

This search feature is one of 38 that Proton has added to its Mail and Calendar tools – in response to requests from users. It lists them all at www.snipca.com/48529, including some for its phone app that we'll highlight soon.

ScamWatch

Readers warn readers

'UK Lotto' win email

My spam filters on Gmail normally catch most scams, so I was surprised to receive an email saying I was a winner on the 'UK Lotto'. The message was addressed to 'Dear' (no name) and was short and sweet: "It is my pleasure to announce that you've won €233.72 on the Lotto. You can claim your price on our website. Congratulations!" It wasn't signed by anyone, just 'The UK-Lotto Team'. The email address was 'important-ict-alert', which screamed 'scam!'. There was a link to claim my prize, but I had no trouble ignoring it. Why didn't Gmail spot such a crude scam?

Terry Cunningham

Warn your fellow readers about scams at letters@computeractive.co.uk

Letters

Tell us what's on your mind

Microsoft extend Windows 10 support? That's wishful thinking

I admire Ben Arnold's optimism (Letters, Issue 672), but his hope Microsoft will extend Windows 10 support is wishful thinking. I was surprised when Microsoft said it would add Copilot to Windows 10, and can see why some people interpreted it as a sign that support would go beyond 2025. But Microsoft's decision surely has more to do with encouraging people to use Copilot than to offer extended support for what by then will be a 10-year-old operating system.

Microsoft is betting big on Copilot transforming how people use Windows and wants users to become reliant on it. That gives it the opportunity to say in 2025 that it can no longer support it in Windows 10, and that people must upgrade to 11 or 12 to use it. Sounds cynical? Maybe. But this is Microsoft we're talking about, remember.

Darren Carter

To continue the Windows 10 debate, I would like to see Microsoft extend support, and here's why. A couple of years ago I bought the cheapest multifunction printer from HP that qualified for its Instant Ink system, because I don't print a lot.

At this time my Medion PC was running Windows 10. I soon discovered that HP's software wasn't very good at scanning. Thankfully, I discovered the Windows Scan app (www.snipca.com/48405) which was much better. Eventually my PC was deemed suitable for Windows 11, so I upgraded only to find that the Windows Scan app couldn't find the scanner of my printer. I rolled back to Windows 10, with which I'm happy.

Jack Luxon

Our rather extensive family has a number of laptops and PCs. Some are capable of updating to Windows 11, some are not. Windows 10 runs smoothly without problems, so we won't upgrade until *all* our computers can upgrade. That will be determined by our older laptops getting replaced.

Windows 10 doesn't lack anything, so there's no urgent reason to make the change.

Robin Perry

CA SAYS Just as we were going to press Microsoft announced that it would be extending support – albeit at a cost. See page 6 for details.

Use passwords as a fall-back for passkeys

In the debate about passkeys I think one aspect has been overlooked, which is that you can also use passwords as a backup if you're unable to use your passkey for any reason.

I was initially put off passkeys because I was worried that losing my phone would mean I'd be permanently locked out of my accounts. But upon more research it seems that using passkeys doesn't mean that your passwords become redundant overnight. This is important to emphasise because so much of the hype around passkeys has been about them as a replacement for passwords, rather than them working *with* passwords.

My message to anyone sceptical of passkeys is that you can always use them in combination with passwords until you feel more confident about using them every time you log in. In effect, it means you can use passwords as a fall-back choice in case your passkeys fail.

Eric Langley

I was scammed by fake DPD driver

I am one of the "incredibly rare" people who have met a fake DPD driver, exactly as you reported in Issue 671's Protect Your Tech (page 11). After my identity was stolen from my water supplier, a £1,600 mobile phone arrived and a man with a DPD jacket asked for it back because "my colleague made a mistake". I refused and gave it to the police along with CCTV and photographs of the whole event. They said it wasn't worth investigating.

If the water company had encrypted its customer data and the police were prepared to prosecute thieves and the phone company had not sold a phone to one person and sent it to another, this type of scam wouldn't happen. If your identity is leaked, my advice is to change your bank account immediately, even though this can take several weeks and multiple visits to your bank. It will save you a great deal of aggravation and worry.

Bruce Hunt

YouTube's monopoly means we'll put up with adverts

You can moan about YouTube adverts all you like, but Google is simply capitalising on the site's dominance. Where else online could you watch the breadth of videos that YouTube offers? Google has followed the perfect business plan: let everyone make their content available for free, get the world hooked on watching this content, trick people into thinking they could block adverts forever, then – the final twist –

YouTube

What's the Issue...?

When did you last explain how to recover product keys? I desperately need to do this.

Oliver Franklin

CA SAYS That was in Issue 663, page 20 – buy it from www.snipca.com/48508.

I need to re-read your instructions on checking the health of SSDs. Wasn't it part of a recent Cover Feature?

Dave Edwards

CA SAYS Yes, on page 51 of Issue 655's Cover Feature – buy it from www.snipca.com/48509.

Can you tell me when you gave advice on getting the best prices when selling old devices?

Brian Edwards

CA SAYS That was in Issue 640's 'Turn your old tech into cash' Cover Feature. Read it on our 2022 Back Issue CD: www.snipca.com/44660.

tell viewers they'll lose this content unless they allow adverts.

YouTube is a monopoly, pure and simple – exactly as Google intended. If YouTube vanished tomorrow, I have no idea what website could replace it. I don't choose YouTube over any other site but I don't know any alternatives. That's not a cheery thought, and it means we have no choice but to put up with adverts, no matter how awful they are.

Mike Daniels

CA SAYS **YouTube's adverts aren't just intrusive and maddening, they can also scam you – see 'Named & Shamed' on page 21.**

TalkTalk's £25 for lost downloads is 'pathetic'

Like Gerald Schafer (Consumeractive, Issue 672), I'm a TalkTalk customer furious that I lost hundreds of films when it closed its TV store. I'm going to ask for the £25 compensation because it's better than nothing, but this really is a pathetic sum.

What I'd like to know is how can TalkTalk use "depreciation costs" as a justification for offering only £25? I've had some legal training, albeit many years ago, and was advised that depreciation relates to a product's usefulness diminishing over time. The keyboard on which I'm typing this is a good example. A couple of the keys are missing and the spacebar has a crack. It's clearly worth less than when I bought it several years ago.

But how can a film download depreciate in the same way? The video quality is the same as when I bought it, and the film itself is the same. I may not like it as much on a second viewing, but I can't see how this means it has depreciated. I would argue that its value is exactly the same as the day I bought it.

I've decided to cancel my TalkTalk broadband as a result of this shameless behaviour. Hopefully, enough people will do likewise and force TalkTalk to increase its compensation, or at least offer an apology.

Roddy Shaw

CA SAYS **TalkTalk has used 'depreciation' not to indicate a deterioration in quality, but to reflect that you can buy replacement shows and films elsewhere online "either for free or at a smaller cost than the initial purchase price".**

However, several TalkTalk customers say that download prices on other services aren't cheap enough to justify the company offering only £25 compensation (see its forum at www.snipca.com/48564).

Some are even threatening to report the company to CISAS, which is an independent adjudication service certified by Ofcom to resolve disputes between customers and communication companies. We'll let you know if it leads to anything.

STAR LETTER

Broadband firms 'exploit customer confusion about jargon'

My experience at a call centre backs up recent letters and news stories about broadband firms deliberately using jargon to confuse customers. I won't name the company I worked for (and I'm writing under a false name), but it was a major provider with millions of customers. I was told by several managers that customer confusion could be exploited to move them on to more expensive deals.

The secret was to sound sympathetic when a customer complained of not properly understanding all the jargon. They were more likely to trust you if you appeared to be just another member of the public, but one who is a bit more informed than average. If you came across as a patronising tech expert then they wouldn't relate to you.

Many customers would start calls admitting that they knew very little about broadband and didn't understand the difference in speeds. You should never say this. Support teams can take advantage of customer ignorance by encouraging you to sign up for speeds you don't need.

I didn't stick at the job for long

because I objected to the company's ethos. I naively thought I would be helping people, but it was more of a daily exercise in manipulation. Sadly, I don't think any measures from Ofcom forcing companies to use clearer terms will help much. Customers simply have to educate themselves better before speaking to companies.

In particular, they have to do more research on the speed they need to enjoy the internet services they use. If you live alone and never stream games or watch Netflix then you simply don't need the speeds that support teams will try to force upon you. As with everything, the more knowledge you have, the less easily you'll be fooled.

Michael Warner

The **Star Letter** writer wins a **Computeractive** mug!

SD cards can be fake too

In Issue 671 (page 40) Carl Hughes explained that the reason he stopped using USB sticks is that he found many of them were fake, with smaller capacities than advertised. Carl said he now uses SD cards, but the photo of a 32GB SanDisk card made me think of the last card I bought, a few years ago. It looked just like the card in your photo (pictured), but had only 1GB of storage, not 32GB as claimed.

I got my money back for this fake, but I didn't get any comment from Amazon, nor from the Marketplace seller. It wasn't even significantly cheaper than the replacement SanDisk card I bought from Currys, which looked identical.

Often you can be fairly sure that something is too good a deal to be true, but this card wasn't so cheap as to be obviously fake.

Jim Barton

Consumeractive

We stand up for your legal rights

Can Expert Telecom nearly double my broadband bill?

LEAD CASE

Q In October my internet provider Expert Telecom (www.experttelecom.co.uk) phoned me to say it was trying to keep costs down. Within three weeks my monthly bill had gone up from £35.77 to £63.97. Can it do this?

Colin Sander

A It can increase prices, but under Ofcom rules it has to email customers with at least 30 days' notice. This may have ended up in Colin's spam folder, so we've asked him to check. If a provider doesn't email notice of a price rise, then you can cancel without paying a fee. You're also allowed to leave without a fee if your provider increases your bills mid-contract without stating in the terms and conditions that it might do this.

We did wonder whether Colin had reached the end of his contract and had been moved to a more expensive deal, but he's only been with the company since the start of the year. It seems more likely that Expert Telecom has simply made a mistake. If not, and its terms really do state that it can raise bills by nearly double, then this would almost certainly be deemed unfair by the courts.

We've told Colin to tell Expert Telecom, which is based in Strood, Kent, that it may have broken two of Ofcom's rules. We've also asked the company for more information, and contacted Ofcom which is now investigating.

If Colin can't resolve his complaint, he should ask Expert Telecom for a deadlock letter explaining how it tried to help, then take his case to the alternative dispute resolution ombudsman, which in this case is CISAS: www.snipca.com/48425. Any ruling they make will be binding on Expert Telecom.

CASE ONGOING

Why won't Amazon refund me?

Q I bought a Noco genius G3500 battery charger directly from Amazon (not a third-party seller) in February 2019. It has now ceased working. The warranty from Noco is for five years, but although Amazon says it has its own two-year warranty, it won't offer a refund or replacement. Posting the charger back to Noco in the US would be expensive. Shouldn't Amazon deal with it under the Consumer Rights Act?

Mike Rawnsley

A Amazon might have to help Mike, but because more than six months have passed since purchase he'll have to prove the fault is inherent. This is hard to do after all this time, but he could pay for an independent inspection. If it finds an inherent fault, Amazon must refund the inspection's cost, assuming it agrees with the examination result.

Amazon would also have to refund Mike for the original purchase of the charger, though it's allowed to deduct money to reflect how long he's used it. The charger is now discontinued, so it's unlikely Amazon would be able to offer a repair or replacement. We'll ask what it's prepared to do.

CASE ONGOING

CASE UPDATE

O2 gives refund after reader adds data not calls

Mobile networks offer so many packages that it's easy to get confused, as reader John Johnston found out. He thought he had put £10 for calls on his old 'emergency' pay-as-you-go (PAYG) phone with O2, only to find that he had added data instead (see Issue 672). This meant John was unable to contact his wife during a short stay in hospital.

John wondered whether O2 had taken the £10 as an unauthorised payment, but we thought it was more likely that a mistake had been made. We spoke to O2 and it confirmed that John had accidentally bought one of its Big Bundle deals (www.snipca.com/48237).

To its credit, O2 refunded this payment to John. It also cancelled the rolling subscription for the deal, so he wouldn't lose another £10. John was worried that he would be tied into a lengthy contract for a service he didn't want, but because it's a rolling subscription he would have been able to cancel at any time without paying a penalty – as long as he gave O2 30 days' notice.

To round off excellent service, O2 also suggested which packages are more suitable for his needs.

Can CeX deny refund if I 'broke' phone hinge?

Q In August I bought a Samsung Galaxy Z Fold 4 phone for £851 from CeX. At the time of purchase it never folded flat, but I didn't think that was a problem.

However, the Wi-Fi now crashes and will only start again if I restart the phone. CeX refuses to help, saying I damaged the hinges by removing the screen film cover. Its warranty states not to do this. However, I was told by the store that I could remove it because it was curling around the edges.

Can you help?

Eric Taylor

A We'll do our best because Eric doesn't want a repair, but a full refund. In theory he's entitled to this because he reported the problem to CeX within 30 days of purchase. This is outlined in the Consumer Rights Act (CRA).

But CeX is complicating matters by saying its warranty is invalidated if the phone's screen cover is removed. We think a court might consider this an unfair part of the small print. Even Samsung says that removing the screen cover doesn't invalidate its warranty.

In any case, we think it's highly unlikely that by removing the screen Eric would have damaged the hinges. And he removed the cover only after being advised to do so by a CeX employee in store.

CeX says it wants to examine the phone and it has every right to do this. But unless it can prove that Eric has damaged the hinges, it must offer him a full refund. It can't rely on its warranty, which is superseded by statutory law – ie, the CRA.

CASE ONGOING

Why has Virgin closed my ntlworld email?

Q At the end of September, Virgin Media blocked my @ntlworld.com email address without giving a reason or any notice. I've used this address for over 25 years and almost all my email contacts use it to contact me. I can't get an explanation from Virgin Media or find out what happened. Can you?

Neville Beynon

A We'll do our best. Like many other providers, Virgin is shutting old email addresses it used to run, or those belonging to companies it bought or merged with.

The association between Virgin and NTL dates back to June 2006 when NTL:Telewest merged with Virgin Mobile UK and Virgin.net to become the first UK company offering TV, internet, landline and mobile services.

According to Virgin's community forum, it stopped giving ntlworld addresses to new customers in May 2022, and also stopped existing customers creating secondary addresses (see www.snipca.com/48430). At the time, it said it would continue to support existing email accounts. However, more recent forum posts have accused Virgin of closing their ntlworld email, with one saying the company's "incompetence has cost me my business and my holiday" (www.snipca.com/48431).

We've asked Virgin to clear up this confusion. We'll also point out that if it closes email accounts without notifying customers, then it could be breaching their contracts and might have to pay compensation.

CASE ONGOING

CREDIT WHERE IT'S DUE

Ashampoo gave me product keys going back years

I'd like to say thanks to the software company Ashampoo for excellent service. Many years ago, when I had a Palm Pilot, I bought some software from them based on recommendations in *Computeractive*.

I still use some Ashampoo programs now, including Soundstage 2020 (www.snipca.com/48432), Snap 15 (www.snipca.com/48439) and Burning Studio 23 (www.snipca.com/48433, pictured). They're all easy to use and do everything I need.

When I bought these recently, Ashampoo were able to furnish me with the original activation keys for all the software I had purchased over the years. All these were sent to me in an email. This was a great help. After all, we all misplace product keys sometimes. They also made sure I had updates and the support I needed. Its customer service is always courteous. We all need service like that at times.

Ian Rawson

Has a company impressed you with its customer service? Please let us know: editor@computeractive.co.uk

Contact
Ashampoo

- **Store help** www.snipca.com/48437
- **Product help** www.snipca.com/48436

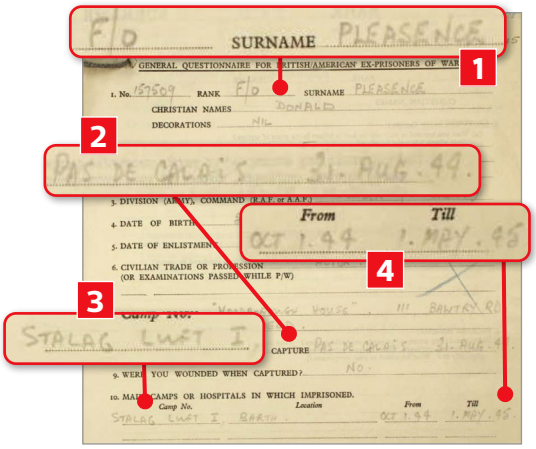
Grow Your Family Tree

If your ancestors were captured during World War 2, follow **Judith Batchelor's** advice to…

Search prisoner of war questionnaires

More soldiers were taken captive in World War 2 than in any other conflict in history. If your ancestor was a surviving British or Commonwealth prisoner of war (POW), held by Germany, Italy or Japan, they may be one of over 80,000 former POWs who filled in a questionnaire after liberation.

The records, originally top secret and catalogued as WO 344 at the National Archives, have recently been digitised and are available to search on Ancestry: www.snipca.com/48400. As well as the details of their capture, prisoners are asked about interrogations, escape attempts, sabotage and potential war crimes. Search by name and include details such as date of birth, date and place of capture, enlistment date, unit, service number and rank.

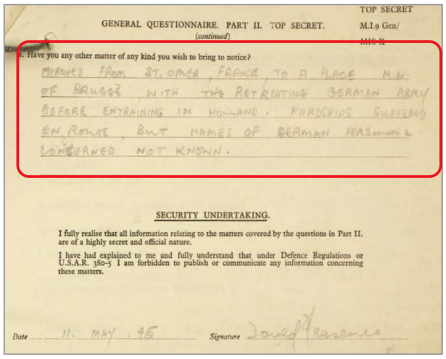


Actor Donald Pleasence was a prisoner of war in Germany from October 1944 to May 1945

POWs captured in Europe

Actor Donald Pleasence, who starred in *The Great Escape* and played Bond villain Blofeld in *You Only Live Twice*, spent time as a POW in Germany during the war. We searched for him on Ancestry and found that he had filled in a questionnaire. F/O Pleasence (1 in our screenshot left) of Squadron 166, Bomber Command, was captured at Pas de Calais on 31 August 1944 2. He reported that he had been imprisoned in Barth, Germany, at Stalag Luft I 3 from 1 October 1944 to 1 May 1945 4.

On the final page, POWs could add further information. Here, Pleasence reported that he had "marched from St Omer, France to a place n.w. of Brugge with the retreating German Army before entraining (sic) Holland. Hardships suffered en route but names of German personnel concerned not known" (see screenshot above).



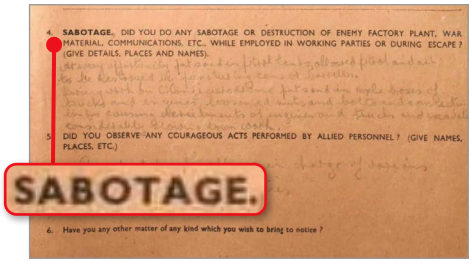
Pleasence was forced to march from St Omer in France to Brugge (Bruges), over 50 miles away

POWs captured in Far East

A similar questionnaire was drawn up for POWs held by the Japanese. We found one interesting example from F/Sgt Jack Holden of 59 Sqn Coastal Command, who was captured in Java on 12 March 1942 (see screenshot below).

When building the Changi Aerodrome in Singapore, he and his fellow POWs had committed many acts of sabotage. These included putting sand in the axle boxes of trucks and engines, and loosening nuts and bolts to cause their derailment.

For more sources on British and Commonwealth POWs in World War 2 and the Korean War, visit the National Archives: www.snipca.com/48401.



Prisoners gave examples of how they had tried to sabotage the enemy's war efforts

Your Genealogy Problems Solved

My 4x-great-grandmother was Jane Scott, born 1767 (possibly baptised in February) at Crailing, Roxburghshire. Her mother was Ann Scott, born around 1743 in Raeburn, Yarrow in Selkirk, and was married to Thomas Scott at St Boswells in 1766. I'd like clarification that Thomas was in fact Sir Thomas Scott born in 1731, and that Ann Scott was the daughter of William Scott of Raeburn.

Michael J Mann

Scott is a common name in the Scottish Lowlands, so you'll need strong evidence. First, view the original baptism of Jane Scott that you've found, because online indexes don't provide all the data you need. Search the Old Parochial Registers of Crailing, which you'll find on the ScotlandsPeople website (www.scotlandspeople.gov.uk). If the father of the child being baptised was indeed Sir Thomas Scott, his title and residence will be recorded.

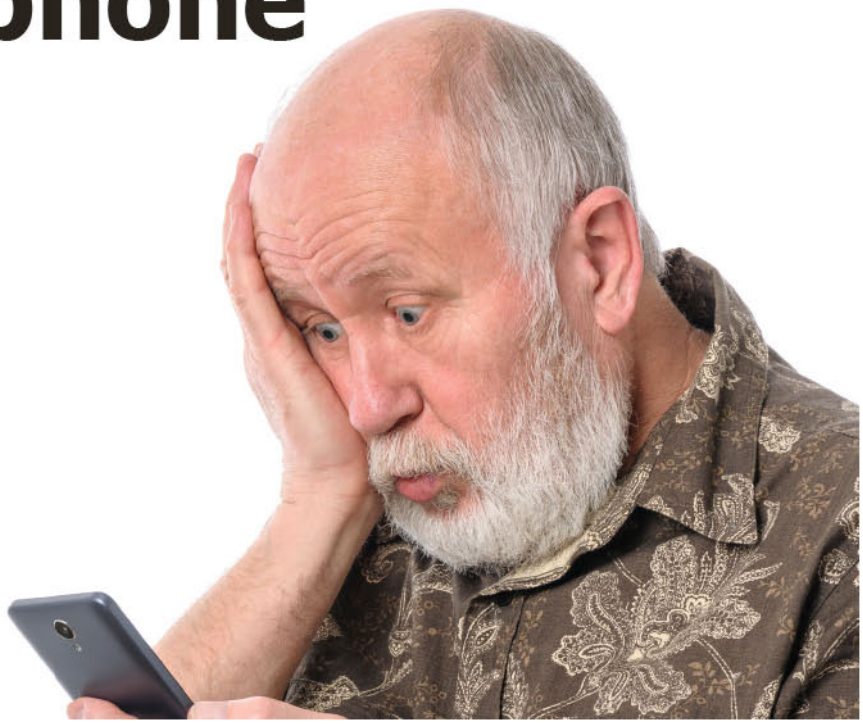
Have a genealogy question for Judith? Email letters@computeractive.co.uk with 'Grow Your Family Tree' in the subject line.

Next issue: Search ANZAC military records

Now's the time to tackle your smartphone

<u>Are you missing out</u> on everything you could do with it? With these helpful books, there's nothing to fear about using smartphones.

Find out more...



Modern phones can be baffling, but there's a solution...

Modern mobile phones (smartphones as they're called) can do so much more than just make phone calls – from browsing the web wherever you are, to checking train times, to acting as a sat-nav...

And best of all they can make it so easy to keep in touch with family and friends – in so many ways, from sharing photos to making video calls.

But using them isn't always as easy as you'd want – and that's putting it mildly!

Do the manufacturers do it on purpose?

Sometimes it can seem like the manufacturers deliberately make them complicated. It can drive you absolutely bonkers.

Whether you have problems with the basics or you're trying to do something slightly more advanced, it can be easy to use them... once you know how. But until you've been shown, it can be like talking a different language.

That's why we've published these books: *iPhones One Step at a Time*, *Android Phones One Step at a Time* and *Doro Smartphones One Step at a Time*.

Plain English... and that's not all

They explain how to use the phone, in plain simple language with pictures of the screen showing you exactly where to tap or slide your fingers. No jargon!

What's covered?

I can't list it all here. But amongst other things, you'll discover:

- The basics of controlling it – swiping, tapping, opening apps & so on.
- How to use it as a sat-nav... in the car or even on foot.
- Send emails from your phone.
- Instant messaging and how to use it.
- Most phones have a good camera built in – here's how to use it properly.
- Share photos with friends around the world – quickly and easily.
- Video phone calls – a great way to keep up with family who live a long way away.

And obviously, you can make phone calls and send and receive text messages. ("Voicemail" is covered, too). All explained nice and simply. (Find out more in the free infopack – read on...)

What one reader had to say:

"Thanks for a fantastic smart phone book. Very pleasant staff as usual.

I think this book should be sold with every smart phone. I have learnt so much from it, the info you get with the phone is non-existent.

Smart phones are quite complex, and your books speak in plain English."

Only half the story

That's only half the story, but I don't have room to explain here. I've put together full information on the books – who they're for, what they cover and so on. What's more, the books also come with a free gift – no room to explain that here either.

Don't buy now, do this instead

The books aren't available in the shops or on Amazon. Instead, send off now to get a completely free, no-obligation information pack. It'll explain what the books cover, who they're suitable for and so on.

Just email your postal address to **<u>PC1223@helpfulbooks.co.uk</u>** today – we'll post your full infopack to you straight away (and we'll keep your details private – we won't share them).

Or if you prefer, give us a ring on **01229 777606** and speak to Jade, Shanice, Shannon or Emma – lines open Monday to Friday, 8.30am-5.30pm. Or you can post the coupon to **The Helpful Book Company, 13B Devonshire Road Estate, Millom, Cumbria LA18 4JS**.

Best order your info pack now and soon you could be getting so much more from your phone – with much less hassle.

Yes, please send me a free infopack about the smartphone books. It's free & there's no obligation.

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Best Free Software

Robert Irvine recommends new programs that won't cost you a thing

SYSTEM TOOL

Microsoft PowerToys 0.76

www.snipca.com/48576
What you need: Windows 10 or 11

Microsoft has regularly updated PowerToys in 2023, though it has – perhaps thankfully – resisted the temptation to add its Copilot AI assistant to the system-utility suite. PowerToys 0.76 rounds off the year with a raft of improvements and useful new options, across its ever-expanding range of tools.

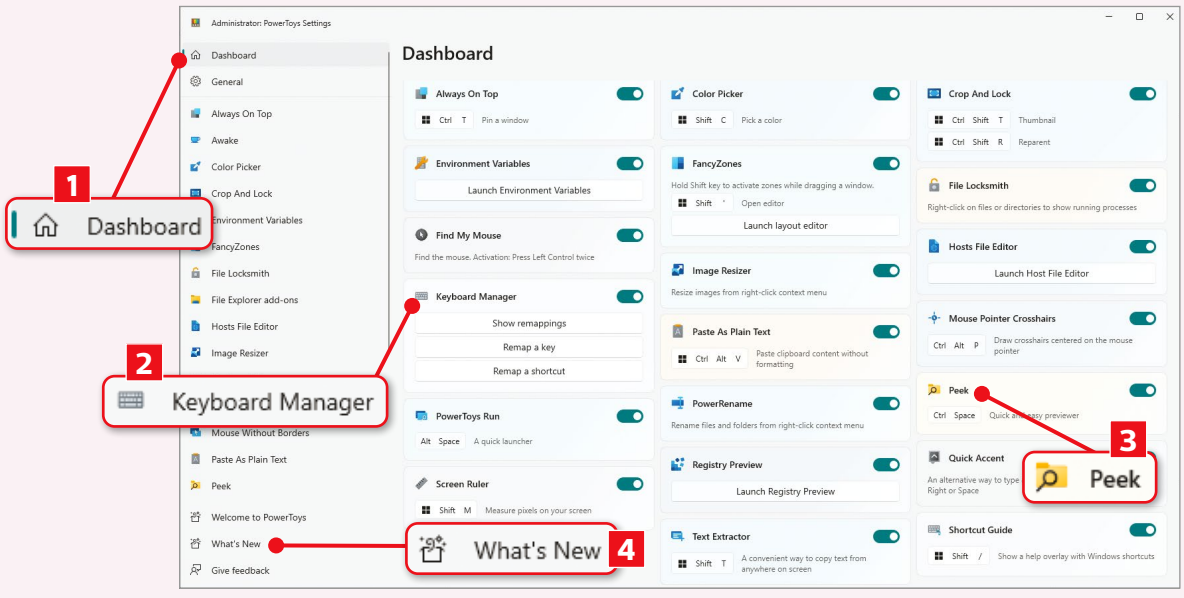
Several of these have been redesigned to give them a more 'modern look', including PowerToys Run and the floating toolbars for the Quick Accent and Text Extractor tools. Quick Accent, which lets you type accented characters for different languages, now supports Finnish, Greek and Welsh, as well as numerical fractions. Curiously, Text Extractor, which uses OCR to copy text from images, is now disabled by default in Windows 11 and advises you to use Snipping Tool's new OCR function instead.

PowerToys has improved its File Explorer add-ons to provide faster and higher-quality previews of files when you select them and press Alt+P. One new add-on lets you preview images in the QOI (Quite OK Image) lossless-compression format, which is being used by many web developers as an alternative to PNG.

The Peek tool, which lets you preview files full-size without opening them, has also been enhanced. When you display a video in a Peek window, by selecting it and pressing Ctrl+Space, you can now press the spacebar to pause and resume playback. Pressing Ctrl+W will instantly close the preview window.

The Keyboard Manager tool now lets you remap keys and shortcuts to insert short sequences of Unicode text. Although this will be of most use to programmers, it will also prove handy for quickly typing special characters and applying formatting – Wikipedia has a list of Unicode characters at www.snipca.com/48579.

Another notable change is that when you click a tool's name in the PowerToys Dashboard, it will open the relevant page so you can tweak its settings.



1 Introduced in PowerToys 0.75, the Dashboard tab provides a useful overview of the utility suite's many modules, and lets you easily switch them on or off. Click a tool's name to open its page of additional settings.

2 Speed up your typing by using Keyboard Manager to remap seldom-used keys and keyboard shortcuts. This lets you quickly apply special characters and formatting and – in version 0.76 – insert Unicode text.

3 The Peek tool lets you preview files without opening them by pressing Ctrl+Space to show them in a pop-up window. This has been improved to let you pause and resume videos by hitting the spacebar.

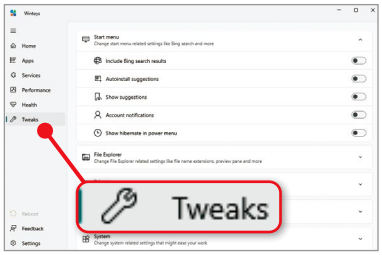
4 Ensure you always have the latest version of PowerToys by clicking the General tab and switching on 'Download updates automatically'. Version 0.76 adds a 'What's new' tab, which lists changes since the last release.

SYSTEM TOOL

Wintoys 1.22.02

www.snipca.com/48559

What you need: Windows 10 or 11



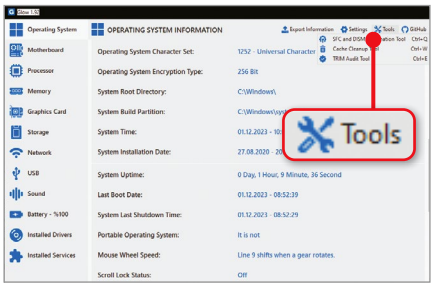
Wintoys was one of our favourite new tools of 2023, so it's fitting that it ends the year with a big update. This adds more ways to optimise and customise Windows, and makes the app (which is only available from the Microsoft Store) even easier to use. Most of the new options can be found on the Tweaks tab (see screenshot). These include disabling account notifications (such as backup reminders); removing app 'suggestions' from the Start menu and Lock screen; and turning off the Widgets feature in Windows 11. You can also add seconds to your taskbar clock by switching on 'Clock with seconds' in the System section of the Tweaks tab, and set the Snipping Tool to open when you press the Print Screen key. Usefully, Wintoys now lets you launch it from a desktop shortcut and displays your Windows licence key when you hover over the version number on the Home tab.

SYSTEM INFORMATION TOOL

Glow 1.92

www.snipca.com/48554

What you need: Windows 10 or 11



Glow's developer led us a merry dance in 2023, by repeatedly changing the program's download URL. Hopefully, it will now stay put because it has added several useful options since we wrote about it in Issue 667 (page 19). It now has a Tools menu in its top-right corner (see screenshot), which includes a Cache Cleanup Tool. This frees up space on your hard drive by deleting junk such as temporary files and old Windows updates. There's also an 'SFC and DISM Automatication Tool' for repairing corrupt system files, and a TRIM Audit Tool that checks whether your SSD's Trim feature is active. Glow's USB section now provides details of your USB controller, which manages your connected devices, while the Operating System section tells you when your PC last booted. Glow may trigger a security warning, but it's safe to use, so just click 'More info' then 'Run anyway'.

£ SHOULD I PAY FOR...?

Choose the right version of software

Stardock DeskScapes 11

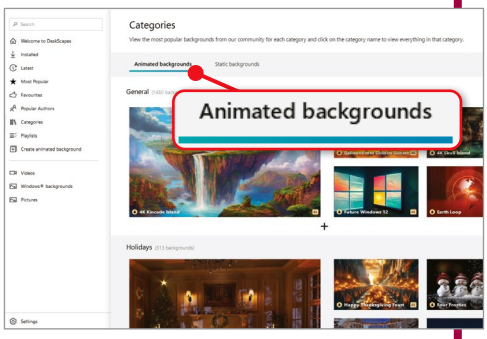
www.snipca.com/48557

Price: £3.99 **Free trial:** 30 days

What you need: Windows 10 or 11

Windows includes only a few alternative wallpapers for your desktop, which you've probably already tried and tired of. Stardock DeskScapes offers a more versatile and sophisticated way to personalise your workspace.

The program's simple interface lets you browse thousands of free, high-quality desktop wallpapers from sources including Bing's 'Image of the day' collection, Windows' own library and the thriving DeskScapes community. These include both static and animated backgrounds (see screenshot), and span categories including Abstract, Weather, Space, Vehicles, Landscapes, Seascapes and Animals.



Applying a picture to your desktop is as easy as clicking 'Download background' then 'Apply background'. You can choose whether to display the image on all your monitors or just the current one, and set it as your screensaver too. If you download an animated image, ensure your PC has enough memory and processing power to cope with it – most tell you whether they have low or high CPU usage.

The fun part comes with customising your wallpaper to suit your taste. DeskScapes lets you apply various effects to pictures to adjust their colour, texture and design; and show the time, date and system information. Select one of your own photos and you can bring it to life by choosing 'Create new animation from this background', or just edit and enhance it using the many options on the Effects tab.

It's slightly annoying that you have to enter your email address to activate the free trial, but you get a generous 30 days to experiment with DeskScapes before paying.

OUR VERDICT: Pay for it

For the price of a pint, Stardock DeskScapes offers countless ways to make your desktop look more appealing in 2024. It provides a huge range of wallpapers and lots of options for customising them and your own photos.

What should I download?

We advise you which software and apps to use

How can I remove duplicate music files?

Q My 20-year-old music library is in a mess. In the past I've used both MediaMonkey (www.mediamonkey.com) and MusicBee (www.getmusicbee.com) to manage it, but after the arrival of Windows 11 just about everything is duplicated. What can I use to sort this out?

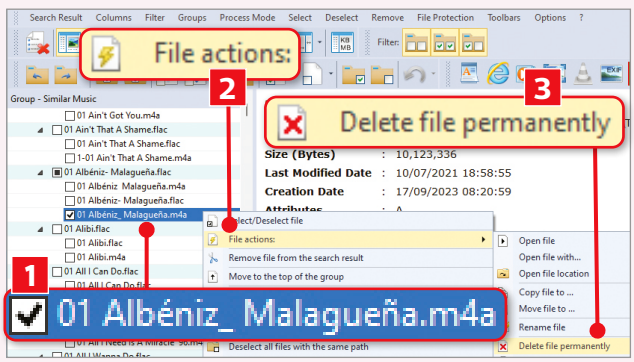
Hugh Manuel

A You need a program dedicated to removing duplicates. We'd suggest AllDup, which is free from www.snipca.com/48355. Before launching it, back up your music folder to be on the safe side.

Open AllDup, then click the Source Folders button and choose 'Add folder' from the dropdown menu. Select your Music folder or navigate to the folder containing your messy library, then click OK. Next, click Search Method followed by the 'Find duplicate files on the basis of their properties' dropdown menu and choose 'Find similar audio files'. The default settings (30-second scan length, 70 per cent match and algorithm number 4) should be fine.

Next, click the Start Search button and wait for AllDup to scan the entire folder looking for potential duplicates. The audio-file scan ensures any duplicate tracks are spotted by comparing the first 30 seconds of each song rather than matching them by file name or format. This can take hours to complete.

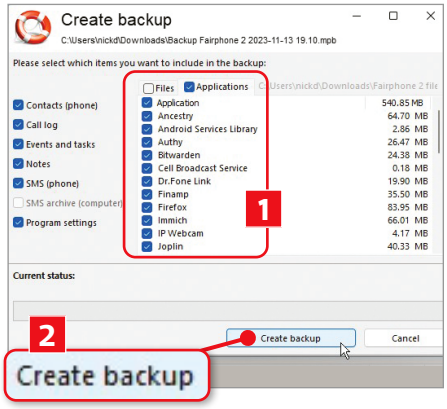
Make sure you tick 'Save search result' under 'After the search is complete' to save you having to perform the full scan again in future. Once finished, you'll be presented with potential matches on the left (1 in our screenshot below). To delete a duplicate, right-click it, then choose 'File actions' 2 followed by 'Delete file permanently' 3.



How can I back up from Samsung to Windows?

Q For some reason, Samsung Smart Switch (www.snipca.com/47326) no longer backs up my S22 phone and S6 tablet to my two Windows 11 laptops. Can you suggest a quality alternative?

Vic Storey

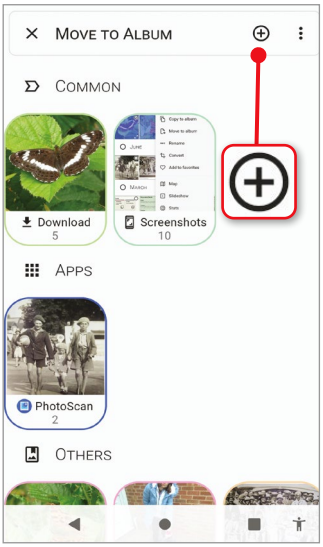


A Try MyPhoneExplorer (www.snipca.com/48356), which is free and lets you easily sync and browse the contents of most Android phones and tablets on your PC when connected via USB, Wi-Fi or Bluetooth. You can also use it to back up your files. Open the Extras menu, click Create Backup, then select where to save the backed-up file. Now decide what to include by ticking the boxes (1 in our screenshot), then click 'Create backup' 2.

Which app will organise my photos?

Q I'm looking for an app to replace Focus Go that lets me organise photos into albums on my Android 13 phone. What would you recommend?

Roger Price



A Aves Gallery (www.snipca.com/48357) does the job for free and works on Android 13 phones and tablets. Open the app, then tap to select photos. Next, tap the top-right menu (three dots) and choose 'Move to album'. Now tap the folder where you'd like to move your photos, or tap the plus button (see screenshot) to create a new folder.

Named & Shamed

Keumars Afifi-Sabet puts the boot into tech villains, jargon-spouting companies and misbehaving software

SOFTWARE WARNING!

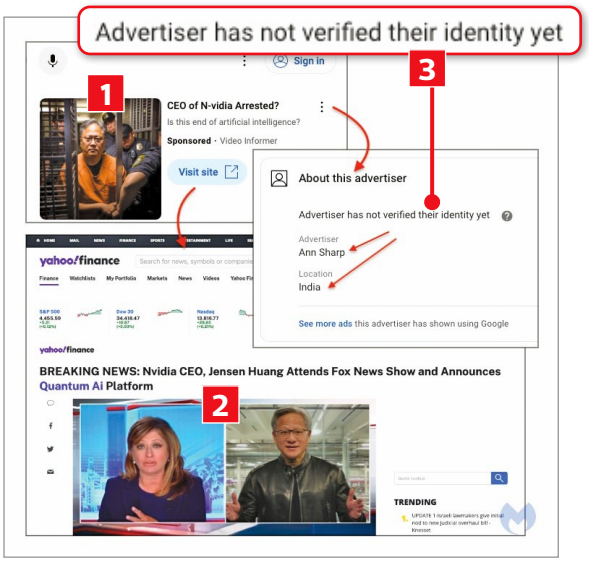
YouTube's 'unblockable' ads that scam you

Google's war on ad-blockers is having mixed results. Some ad-blockers like Adblock Plus (https://adblockplus.org) still work – or it did for me at least, at the time of writing – while all it takes to prevent ads in Brave is to open it in Private Browsing mode (by pressing Ctrl+Shift+N).

Google is also sending mixed messages. Researchers at Malwarebytes spotted that one advert YouTube is currently showing is for the browser extension Total Adblock. So, to get this straight – it doesn't want you to block ads, but is taking money from companies that let you do just that.

Malwarebytes wonders whether such inconsistency is a sign that YouTube doesn't have a grip on which companies it allows to advertise (see www.snipca.com/48484). Exhibit B is an advert for a fake news story ('CEO of N-vidia Arrested?' – 1 in our screenshot). As

Follow the red arrows and you'll see that this advert on YouTube is a scam



Malwarebytes' red arrows show, clicking 'Visit site' takes you to another fake news page promoting the scam cryptocurrency scheme Quantum AI 2.

Clicking the three dots for details about the advert reveals that the advertiser "has not verified their identity yet" 3. Well, that's reassuring. If a pricey YouTube Premium subscription is the only official way to stop seeing these ads, you can't blame viewers for wanting to install ad-blockers instead.

And it's not just on YouTube that Google is guilty of letting scams through. In the past few months we've reported how fraudsters have infiltrated Google's search results to place fake adverts for popular programs including 1Password, 7-Zip, Audacity, Bitwarden, LibreOffice and VLC Media Player. Tighter regulation of online ads might eventually force Google to act, but until then be very careful about what you click online.

WHAT ARE THEY TALKING ABOUT?

WHAT THEY SAY

Samsung
www.snipca.com/48495

"In line with the Galaxy brand philosophy of embracing new possibilities and striving for unique experiences, the Galaxy Z Flip series has pioneered a whole new era for smartphones. The Galaxy Z Flip isn't just a foldable device – it's a pocketable self-expression tool, offering numerous personalization options to help users express their unique identities."

WHAT THEY MEAN

The identity we *really* want you to express is someone happy to pay over £1,000 on a gimmick.

KEUMARS' VILLAIN OF THE FORTNIGHT

Mizzy

Celebrity pranks have become a lot nastier since the days when Jeremy Beadle would stick on dark glasses and dress up as a traffic warden. His larks were harmless compared with Mizzy's habit of cycling through supermarkets and invading people's homes, then posting the video on TikTok.

Mizzy, real name Bacari-Bronze O'Garro, has now been jailed for 18 weeks after breaching a criminal behaviour order forbidding him from filming people without their consent. Judge Matthew Bone spoke for the whole country when he told the 19-year-old: "put bluntly your pranks are not funny".

Thankfully we'll see a lot less of him after he's released because he's been banned from posting clips online for two years.

And that's no joke, Mizzy – a bit like your videos in fact.

MINI PC | **£544** from GMKtec www.snipca.com/48392

GMKtec NucBox K3 Pro

No mint chip

Following hot on the heels of the GMKtec NucBox K2 (www.snipca.com/48223), which we reviewed in Issue 672, the NucBox K3 Pro sounds like it ought to be something of a step up. And it is, if you only consider price. The K2 itself has gone up to $579 (around £464) from £390 since we published our review (for the 32GB RAM/1TB SSD model). However, the K3 Pro is even more expensive at $679 (around £544), and that's with less (24GB) RAM and a 1TB SSD.

> "A decent mini PC, but its performance levels don't justify its price tag"

We're quoting prices in US dollars because that's the currency the PC is sold in – direct from GMKtec's website. Before you do, check how much your payment card charges you for foreign-currency transactions, to ensure that you avoid any nasty surprises.

It looks the same as the K2 because it comes in the same case with standard mini PC dimensions (45x105x105mm – HxWxD). This also means that the K3 Pro has the same selection of ports, including one USB-C, three USB 3.0, one USB 2.0, two HDMI and one Ethernet port.

The key difference between the two models is the processor. Where the K2 was built around an AMD Ryzen 7 7735HS, the K3 Pro has an Intel Core i7-12650H chip – a 12th-generation unit that doesn't add a great deal to performance levels when compared with the cheaper AMD processor.

This was demonstrated in our benchmark tests, in which the processor is pushed to its limits. The i7 processor in the K3 Pro ran 15 per cent faster in single-core tests, but was no better in multi-core performance.

In Windows tests the K3 Pro was 13 per cent slower, and in graphical tests, which show its prowess when gaming or editing videos and images, the built-in graphics hardware of the K2 chip was streets ahead.

Put the K3 Pro up against our current favourite mini PC, the Geekom Mini IT 13 (£699 from www.snipca.com/47789) and it falls even further behind, with the Mini IT 13 benefitting from a significantly more powerful processor.

Its i9-13900H chip is current generation, has more cores and ensures better performance across the board than either GMKtec model. Also, you can buy it in pounds stirling, which saves you any currency-conversion costs.

Reviewed in isolation, this mini PC would probably have fared better, because there's not much wrong with it and it's unlikely to disappoint anyone looking for a decent mini PC to do a good job running Windows 11. However, with such stiff competition around – including from its own stablemates – it falls short of expectations.

SPECIFICATIONS

Ten-core Intel Core i7-12650H processor • 24GB RAM • Intel UHD graphics • 1TB SSD • Wi-Fi 6 • Bluetooth 5.2 • 1x 2.5Gigabit Ethernet port • 2x HDMI ports • 1x USB-C port • 3x USB 3.0 ports • 1x USB 2.0 port • Windows 11 Pro • 45x105x105mm (HxWxD) • One-year warranty www.snipca.com/48392

VERDICT A reasonable Windows 11 mini PC, but its older processor can't keep up with current rivals

★★★★★

ALTERNATIVE

Geekom Mini IT 13 £699 An Intel i9 processor gives this more power in Windows, and it can be purchased without currency-conversion costs

LAPTOP | **£799** from Argos www.snipca.com/48407

Microsoft Surface Laptop Go 3

Small change

Back in Issue 635, we awarded four stars to the Surface Laptop Go 2. It cost £729 and came with an 11th-generation Intel Core i5 processor, 8GB of RAM and a 256GB SSD. It had a decent 12.4in screen and was small and light to carry around, but battery life wasn't great.

This new model offers a few improvements on those specs, including the processor and battery, but much of the rest stays the same. Most surprising of all, it still has just 8GB of RAM and a 256GB SSD – an upgrade to 16GB RAM pushes the price up to £999.

> "It carries out basic tasks well, but its screen is too glossy and keyboard too small"

The processor has been upgraded but only to a 12th-generation Core i5-1235U model. That's fine for everyday Windows tasks, but it struggled when we started to test its limitations, and lagged well behind our current favourite laptop – the Huawei MateBook 16s (£1,100 from www.snipca.com/47772 – see page 30) by a significant margin in almost every area.

It has the same screen as its predecessor – a 12.4in panel with a 1536x1024-pixel resolution. It's fairly high quality and the 331cd/m² peak brightness level is fine indoors, but doesn't really cut it outside in bright sunlight, which is a drawback for a laptop you're likely to carry around with you. Its glossy, reflective finish doesn't help either.

The aluminium case has also remained unchanged. It accommodates a keyboard that's a tad small, but inevitably so given the modest size of the laptop. If you have particularly large hands you might find the whole thing a little cramped, but it's otherwise pleasant to type on. The Go 3 has a limited amount of connections, though, with only one USB-C and one USB 3.0 port.

The 41Wh battery is replaceable, and battery life is reasonable for such a small device – lasting 8 hours 49 minutes in our browsing test, which is better than the battery in the Laptop Go 2.

If you're looking for a simple, compact laptop for a bit of web browsing, email handling and office work while you're out and about, the Surface Laptop Go 3 will just about do the trick. For anything over and above, though, it's worth looking elsewhere.

SPECIFICATIONS

Ten-core Intel Core i5-1235U processor • 8GB RAM • Intel Iris Xe graphics • 12.4in 1536x1024-pixel screen • 256GB SSD • 1x USB-C port • 1x USB 3.0 port • Windows 11 Home • 15.7x278x206mm (HxWxD) • 1.1kg • One-year warranty www.snipca.com/48407

HOW WE TEST

Computeractive is owned by Future PLC, which employs a team of specialist technical reviewers. You'll often read references to our benchmark testing, which is a method of assessing products using the same criteria. For example, we test the speed of every PC and the battery life of every phone and tablet in exactly the same way. This makes our reviews authoritative, rigorous and accurate.

Future PLC also owns the magazines *Maximum PC*, *PC Pro* and *T3*, and the websites Laptop Mag (www.laptopmag.com), TechRadar (www.techradar.com) and Windows Central (www.windowscentral.com). This means we can test thousands of products before choosing the most relevant for *Computeractive*.

FAIR AND IMPARTIAL

Our writers follow strict guidelines to ensure the reviews are fair and impartial. The manufacturer has no involvement in our tests.

OUR AWARDS

We award every product that gets five stars our Buy It! stamp of approval. It means we were extremely impressed by the product, and we think you will be too.

Every product that gets a four-star review is given the Recommended award. We highly recommend these products, although they just fail to meet the high standard of our Buy It! winners.

PRICES

Our reviews contain a link to the best price we found online at the time of press.

VERDICT An attractive, slick and compact laptop, but its ageing components mean it lags behind the performance of rivals

★★★★★

ALTERNATIVE

Huawei MateBook 16s £1,100 A larger, more expensive laptop, but its performance level is vastly superior

LAPTOP | **£429** from Currys www.snipca.com/48421

Acer Chromebook Plus 515

Standard bearer

The 'Plus' branding of this Acer Chromebook stems from an initiative devised by Google. The company's idea is to set a bare minimum level of specifications – 12th-generation Intel Core processors or the AMD equivalent, 8GB of RAM, 128GB of storage and a Full HD screen – so that if people see a Chromebook Plus logo they know the laptop reaches a certain standard.

Asus, HP and Lenovo have all updated existing laptops with the Chromebook Plus branding, while Acer upgraded its existing Chromebook 514 and 515 models with superior processors, 8GB RAM and 256GB of storage. This model has a Core i3-1215U chip, and it runs ChromeOS like a dream.

> "Demanding web apps work better than on Windows laptops"

Complex web pages launch in an instant, and features such as Magic Eraser (the editing tool that's now part of Google Photos) are incredibly responsive. The laptop also copes well with demanding web apps like Photoshop Online, which feels far snappier in the Core i3 model than it would on a Windows laptop.

In benchmark tests, it wasn't as fast as the Acer Chromebook Plus Spin 714 we reviewed in Issue 666 (£599 from www.snipca.com/47409), and upgrading to the faster i5 processor adds another £170 to the price.

Expect battery life to last roughly the duration of a working day, while the Core i5 version went for eight hours 57 minutes in our video-playback test.

At 1.7kg it's too heavy to be an ideal travelling companion, but it's slim at 20mm and robust. There's even a certain style to its grey plastic case, with its brushed metal finish across half the lid.

It takes around 90 minutes to fully charge from zero, and Acer has sensibly moved away from supplying its own chargers, instead resorting to USB-C. Two USB-C ports sit on either edge, with one USB 3.0 port and an HDMI socket on the left. That's a solid selection, and it's great to see Wi-Fi 6E built in.

Removing the base (by removing 11 screws) reveals a replaceable battery, though the RAM and SSD are both embedded in the motherboard so can't be swapped out.

One thing you can't expect at this price is a stunning screen. And you don't get one – the 15.6in Full HD panel here meets Google's minimum specifications and no more. It covers 54 per cent of the sRGB standard and its peak brightness is a modest 251cd/m². We instinctively found ourselves optimistically attempting to make it brighter as we typed away.

Whites lack the purity of IPS screens, but perhaps the biggest issue is the 1920x1080-pixel resolution across a 15.6in diagonal, which just makes text look fuzzy. At least the screen has a matte finish, so you needn't worry about reflections.

The keyboard is far better. The keys are quiet and feel comfortable to type on, and aside from a half-height Enter key we have no complaints about its layout. It helps that Acer resists the temptation to squeeze in a number pad. The trackpad is genuinely excellent, with a smooth glass coating you don't normally find on machines at this price.

We can't say the same about the speakers, because music sounds bearable but a little tinny. The built-in webcam operates at a resolution of 1080p, but produces video with little detail and some obvious compression. You can get by with it on work video calls, but no one's going to be praising the quality of your feed. At least the mics capture voices clearly.

If this laptop cost £600, we'd be more critical of its shortcomings, but at £429 with a promise of updates to ChromeOS until 2033 and an attractive design, it's great for the price.

SPECIFICATIONS

Six-core Intel Core i3-1215U processor • 8GB RAM • 15.6in 1920x1080-pixel resolution IPS screen • 256GB SSD • Wi-Fi 6E • Bluetooth 5.1 • 2x USB-C ports • 1x USB 3.0 port • 1x HDMI port • 1x 3.5mm audio jack • ChromeOS • 20x361x238mm (HxWxD) • 1.7kg • One-year warranty www.snipca.com/48421

VERDICT An affordable Chromebook that makes compromises on the screen, but otherwise runs smoothly and is great value for money

★★★★★

ALTERNATIVE Acer Chromebook Plus Spin 714 £599
More expensive, but comes with a faster, newer processor and a better screen

PC MONITOR | **£270** from Amazon www.snipca.com/48472

BenQ GW2790QT

Beyond the pale

Most monitors that pass through our test centres are black or grey, so the mostly white finish of this BenQ model is an unusual and welcome change. Use it with a similar-coloured laptop and peripherals, and it'll make for a clean, clinical addition to any desk. It's made from high-grade plastic that doesn't creak or squeak and has attractively curved edges. For the price, it looks and feels very impressive and it's fairly heavy at 8.4kg, so isn't going to slide or wobble easily.

> "An attractive model with a vivid screen and plenty of ports"

The base's footprint is 280mm wide by 230mm deep, so it won't rob you of too much desk space. The stand has plenty of adjustment options, including a 20-degree swivel left and right, 110mm of height adjustment, a 90-degree pivot (again to both left and right), and tilt down of five degrees and up 20 degrees.

The monitor has a wide selection of connections, including one HDMI and two DisplayPorts (one connects to your PC; the other can pass through to a second monitor). It also offers the option of connecting another monitor through one of its two USB-C ports. This USB-C port can also charge your laptop, offering up to 65W of power. There are three USB 3.0 ports for connecting peripherals as well as a 3.5mm audio jack.

With a resolution of 2560x1440 pixels stretched across its 27in diagonal, the GW2790QT has a pixel density of 109dpi, which is perfectly adequate for everyday office tasks. You have to look very closely to notice any pixelation. The screen has a matte finish, which helps keep reflections to a minimum – handy if your desk is next to a window.

Maximum brightness level is a solid 347cd/m², while the contrast ratio is perfectly sufficient at 1000:1. It also reproduces colour pretty accurately, managing 73 per cent of the DCI-P3 standard.

Its two 2W speakers won't fill a room with sound but they're fine for music or films in a room with no other distracting noises. They certainly work well for video calls, and with the monitor's excellent built-in microphone, you only have to add your own webcam.

BenQ's price is a fair hike compared with the similarly sized AOC 27P2C (£208 from www.snipca.com/41609), because AOC's monitor has a lower resolution of 1920x1080 pixels. That means its screen doesn't look as sharp, though that might be a compromise worth making if you have a tighter budget.

SPECIFICATIONS

27in IPS screen • 2560x1440-pixel resolution • 75Hz refresh rate • 5ms response time • 1x HDMI port • 2x DisplayPorts • 2x USB-C ports • 3x USB 3.0 ports • 614x534x239mm (HxWxD) • 8.4kg • Two-year warranty www.snipca.com/48472

VERDICT A robust monitor with an impressive screen and attractive white appearance, but there are more affordable options at this size

★★★★★

ALTERNATIVE AOC 27P2C £208

Another 27in screen at a cheaper price, but it has a lower resolution so images won't look as sharp

CHOOSE THE RIGHT SPECS

Night vision

What does it do?

Night vision lets your security camera see in the dark, so it can record video footage and images in low light and through the night. Most security cameras come with some form of night vision, including Google's Nest Cam (pictured).

How does it work?

There are two types of night vision. Put simply, one type can record in colour and the other can't. Colour night vision uses an extremely sensitive sensor to pick up whatever information and detail it can from minimal levels of light. The most effective of these cameras can function fairly well on a moonlit night, but may struggle in pitch darkness.

Black-and-white night vision can work in absolute pitch blackness, because it uses its own LEDs to flood the viewing area with infrared light. This isn't visible to the human eye, but can be picked up by a sensor within the camera. However, because infrared light is beyond the visible light spectrum, it can't display any colour.

What are the specs?

Camera specifications usually just state whether a camera has colour or black-and-white night vision. However, the latter may also carry information about how far the camera can see in the dark. This is limited by how powerful the camera's LEDs are and how far they can cast their infrared.

Can I change it later?

No. Night vision is built into the hardware of the camera and its components aren't accessible for security reasons. If you want improved night vision, you'll need to replace your existing camera with a new one.

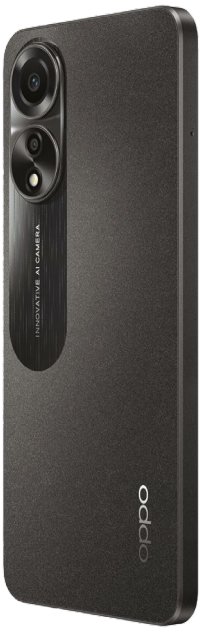
PHONE | **£219** from Oppo www.snipca.com/48455

Oppo A78

No photo opportunity

This is one of the cheapest phones around, but feels and looks more expensive. While it has a few obvious budget features, such as the flat-edge design and the tear-drop notch that hosts the front camera, it feels more like a premium phone than many rivals at this price.

For instance, there's no cheap, tacky plastic case. Instead, its glossy, textured rear panel accommodates a fingerprint scanner that works well. Its IP54 rating means it's fairly resistant to water and dust – it can cope with being splashed but not submerged in water, for example.



The A78 also runs surprisingly smoothly, despite its relatively low-end processor and modest 4GB of RAM.

In our gaming tests, which involve the most demanding software, it functioned with barely any stuttering or other glitches. The audio quality from its stereo speakers is pretty impressive, too, meaning you can watch streaming TV or films at a fairly high volume. The generous 6.5in screen helps here, though the resolution is slightly disappointing at just 1612x720 pixels.

> "A budget phone with a big screen and decent speakers, but its camera is a let-down"

As you'd expect, there are compromises. Far too many unnecessary apps come installed as part of ColorOS13 (Oppo's version of Android 13). We often see more bloatware than we'd like on budget models, but this was crammed with unwanted extras, including 18 games.

The phone's 50-megapixel camera's specifications sound impressive, but it proved to be disappointing in practice. Pictures came out grainy, fuzzy and dull, even when the light conditions were reasonably good.

If you don't mind spending time deleting unwanted software and have an alternative means of taking high-quality photos, the Oppo A78 is a bargain. However, we suspect the disappointing camera will be a deal-breaker for many.

SPECIFICATIONS

Eight-core MediaTek 6833 processor • 4GB RAM • 128GB storage • 6.56in 90Hz 1612x720-pixel LCD screen • 50-megapixel rear camera • 8-megapixel front-facing camera • Wi-Fi 5 • Bluetooth 5.3 • ColorOS 13 (based on Android 13) • 164x75x8mm (HxWxD) • 188g • Two-year warranty www.snipca.com/48455

VERDICT A budget phone with a large screen that runs smoothly, but its camera produces dull, grainy pictures

★★★★★

ALTERNATIVE

Google Pixel 7a £379

More expensive, but with a superior camera and and a clutter-free Android operating system as Google intended it

WHAT SHOULD I BUY? We solve your buying dilemmas

What's the best PC for my photos and graphics?

Q My PC is seven years old and is becoming very slow. I'd like to upgrade to a faster Windows 11 PC. I do photo editing in GIMP (www.gimp.org) and digital artwork using Inkscape (https://inkscape.org). However, on my current PC, both programs keep freezing or crashing.

Can I use the Palicomp Cobra (see page 30) or a mini PC from Geekom or Beelink (see page 32)? Or do I need a PC with a separate graphics card?

Lee Tennant

A A graphics card is the best bet for anyone who plays games with graphical settings turned up and uses demanding video-editing tools. Photo-editing software like GIMP can certainly benefit from a graphics card, but it's not essential, and you'll find it runs perfectly well on any of the PCs you've mentioned. Inkscape isn't designed to use a graphics card, so will only benefit from a faster processor and more memory.

The Palicomp Cobra's larger case will make it easier to upgrade in the future. However, the superior processor and extra RAM in the Geekom Mini IT 13 (pictured) will run your graphics software more smoothly.

Do you need advice on what you should buy? Email us at letters@computeractive.co.uk

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GAMING MONITORS

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Full HD | VA | 1ms | 100Hz | HDMI DISPLAY PORT | BLACK TUNER | AMD FreeSync

Find your monitor
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Reviews

KEYBOARD | **£99** from Amazon www.snipca.com/48435

Yunzii AL71

Lights up but weighed down

Mechanical keyboards, which use a spring-loaded mechanism to press a physical switch to produce a more tactile typing action, tend to be more expensive than other types of keyboards. However, the Yunzii AL71 strikes a sensible balance. It's a high-quality wireless mechanical keyboard at a very reasonable price.

It has a robust build that helps to deliver a fantastic typing experience, and it comes with the kind of features that are typically absent from keyboards priced around £100.

The fun starts with the design – it's available in a variety of colours. The darkest version (pictured) comes with attractive cream keys, but it's also available in all-white, pastels, and an eye-catching red and black version.

It lacks a number pad, so doesn't take up too much space, but it retains dedicated cursor keys. The base is made from aluminium, which means the whole thing isn't particularly light (1.6kg), but it will survive a few knocks and scrapes. Being this heavy means it won't slide around on your desk, though this does make it less portable.

The keyboard also features RGB lighting and can be lit up like a Christmas tree if that's what you prefer.

There's a choice of connection – the AL71 supports 2.4GHz wireless (using the supplied dongle), Bluetooth and wired (via its USB-C port). The wireless options are incredibly reliable, and you can easily switch between connectivity options using the function keys. As well as Windows PCs, you can use it with MacOS, Android and iOS devices.

SPECIFICATIONS

Wireless 2.4GHz USB dongle • Bluetooth 5.1 • USB-C port • Rechargeable battery • Supports Windows, MacOS, Android and iOS • 67x428x155mm (HxWxD) • 1.6kg • One-year warranty www.snipca.com/48435

VERDICT A sturdy mechanical keyboard that's packed with features, though it's a bit heavy to lug around

★★★★★

ALTERNATIVE MSI Vigor GK50 Elite £80 An even cheaper mechanical keyboard replete with a number pad, but it's wired only

EARBUDS | **£75** from Amazon www.snipca.com/48438

Sony WF-C700N

Hear, hear!

Sony's earbuds hit something of a sweet spot between price and quality. They aren't particularly expensive (reduced from £100 to £75 at the time of writing) and still offer the level of noise-cancelling that'll satisfy most of us.

They are impressively small, meaning they won't look (or feel) bulky when sitting in your ears. They're comfortable to wear and easy to fit – you simply slide them in and twist into place in the lower portion of your ear. They nestle into place nicely, with the flexible silicone eartips providing an excellent seal. The net result is that you'll barely feel them, whether you're going for a jog or on a short walk to the shops.

The buds come with a cylindrical charging case that slips easily into your pocket. The case has a USB-C socket for charging and an LED light that indicates charging levels. The buds are held in place magnetically and are drawn into their charging slots as you lower them into the case.

The circular pads you see pictured on the outside of each earpiece aren't touch-sensitive surfaces, but are in fact physical buttons. Through the app you can customise either the left or right buttons to control volume, playback (including via your voice assistant of choice) or switch noise-cancelling on or off. However, you can only control two of these features at any one time through the buttons.

Sound quality is superb for the price. Bass notes rumble satisfyingly while higher notes are rich in detail. We also tested them for making calls and the audio quality remained impressive.

SPECIFICATIONS

Bluetooth 5.2 • 7.5-hour battery life • Noise-cancelling • Charging case extends battery life to 15 hours • 4.6g each • One-year warranty www.snipca.com/48438

VERDICT You can get superior sound quality by paying significantly more, but these are excellent earbuds for the price

★★★★★

ALTERNATIVE

Bose QuietComfort Earbuds II £280 These are much more expensive, but are easily the best noise-cancelling earbuds we've ever tested

DIGITAL CAMERA | **£499** from Amazon www.snipca.com/48523

OM System Tough TG-7

Hard case

Computer active RECOMMENDED ★★★★

The one problem with having your phone as your only means of taking photos is that there may be occasions when you don't want to risk using it. Taking holiday snaps on the beach or in the driving rain after hiking up a mountain could expose your smartphone to hazardous amounts of sand or water.

> "It takes photos in places your phone may fear to tread"

OM System (previously known as Olympus) solves the problem with a robust, waterproof digital camera that harks back to the compact models that were popular before the advent of smartphones.

As its name suggests, it can withstand a certain amount of rough handling, including being dropped from up to two metres and getting crushed by weights of 100kg. It can survive being submerged in water (up to a depth 15m) and being exposed to dust, sand, dirt and cold temperatures (down to -10 degrees centigrade). Despite these impressive specs, it's lightweight at 249g and small enough to slip into a trouser pocket.

The camera uses a 12-megapixel sensor and can record video up to 4K resolution at 30 frames per second (fps), or 1080p resolution at 60fps. It has an internal optical 4x zoom lens to help you frame your shots – a feature most smartphone cameras lack.

The Tough TG-7 has various buttons and dials that will make it familiar to fans of compact cameras. You can select scene modes that help ensure the correct settings are used when taking common types of photos, such as landscapes, portraits and night shots.

During testing we got some colourful, vivid shots when there was sufficient light. There is a built-in flash that can help with darker conditions, but we found it tended to wash out subjects that were too close to the camera.

The Tough TG-7's photos couldn't match the quality of those taken by our smartphone, probably due to the phone's automated processing of images. That ignores the point of this camera, though – that you can take it where you want without worrying that it's going to get wet or damaged.

If you'd rather keep your smartphone in your bag or pocket when in rough terrain, this tough little camera is a handy alternative that'll take care of itself.

SPECIFICATIONS

12-megapixel sensor • 4000x3000-pixel maximum resolution • 4x optical zoom • 3in screen • SD card slot • Built-in GPS • 66x114x33mm (HxWxD) • 249g • One-year warranty www.snipca.com/48523

VERDICT A tough camera that can withstand hard knocks in places you'd prefer not to use your phone

★★★★★

ALTERNATIVE

Kodak Pixpro WPZ2 £159 A cheaper waterproof camera with similar specifications, but it isn't as robust as the Tough TG-7

DO I REALLY NEED...

A flat mechanical keyboard?

What is it?

Keyboard manufacturer Lofree has launched a flatter mechanical keyboard for those who want the mechanical feel without the chunky dimensions.

What does it do?

The Lofree Flow (£136 from www.snipca.com/48505, pictured) uses shallow Kailh Phantom Tactile switches that are smaller and have less travel than regular mechanical switches. This helps create a lower profile.

What's the catch?

By reducing the distinctive feel of a mechanical keyboard it won't feel as satisfying to type on. If having a flat keyboard is essential, then consider cheaper models with membrane switches, such as the Logitech K380 (£31 from www.snipca.com/44356).

So can I do without it?

Yes. You just need to decide what's more important – how typing feels or how thick your keyboard is.

NEXT ISSUE

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Dell Inspiron 14 2-in-1
A versatile laptop with a 360-degree hinge and AMD processor

Amazon Fire TV Stick 4K
Amazon's updated TV streaming device is faster than ever

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Buy It

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Our pick of products that have won the Buy It award

LAPTOP

Huawei MateBook 16s 2023
£1,100 from www.snipca.com/47772
Tested Issue 669

In all our years of testing no laptop has ever performed Windows tasks as quickly as this. This breathtaking speed is down to the powerful Intel Core i9 processor. It also has a sharp 16in screen, 16GB RAM and long battery life.

ALTERNATIVE Honor MagicBook X 16 2023 Also has a 16in screen and is great value, though it's not especially fast. £450 from www.snipca.com/47868

DESKTOP PC

Palicomp AMD Cobra
£400 from www.snipca.com/43515
Tested Issue 643

This fast PC is a mouth-watering bargain, with 16GB of RAM, a 1TB SSD and a six-core processor – though it lacks USB-C ports and built-in Wi-Fi.

ALTERNATIVE Wired2Fire Ultima WS Home Office Workstation Blisteringly fast PC, powered by an overclocked eight-core processor and 1TB SSD. £644 from www.snipca.com/41500

APPLE iPAD

PRICE DROP

Apple iPad 10.2in
£319 from www.snipca.com/48634
Tested Issue 623

The 9th-generation of the basic iPad, released in 2021, is now the best-value Apple tablet. The 2022 version looks better and has a faster processor, but it's not worth paying £130 extra for.

ALTERNATIVE iPad Mini With an even better, but smaller, screen than the 10.2in iPad, the Mini also supports the Pencil and has 64GB of storage. £569 from www.snipca.com/33050

ANDROID TABLET

Samsung Galaxy Tab S9
£759 from www.snipca.com/47493
Tested Issue 667

With a much brighter screen than our previous favourite – the Galaxy Tab S8 – this is perfect for watching TV. It also has a faster processor, so tasks feel smoother, even with several windows open. It's a great buy at its full price of £799, but look for discounts that make it even better value

ALTERNATIVE Lenovo Tab P11 Pro It's slower than the Tab S9 and the screen is duller, but has a detachable keyboard so you can use it as a laptop. £370 from www.snipca.com/45244

APPLE iPHONE

Apple iPhone 13
£599 from www.snipca.com/43498
Tested Issue 627

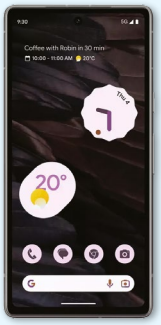
Now £200 cheaper than its 2021 launch price, the iPhone 13 has a superb screen, long battery life and an excellent camera – particularly for taking quick snaps without blurring. You could pay £799 for the newer iPhone 15, but we're not convinced it's worth the extra money.

ALTERNATIVE iPhone SE With a single camera and smaller screen but the same powerful A15 processor and 64GB storage as the iPhone 14, it's great value. £429 from www.snipca.com/34773

ANDROID PHONE

PRICE DROP

Google Pixel 7a
£379 from www.snipca.com/46332
Tested Issue 660



A cheaper version of Google's flagship phone, this uses AI to add clarity to photos, and lasts an impressive 10 hours. Has a fast processor and 8GB RAM to supercharge performance.

ALTERNATIVE Xiaomi Poco F3 This remains an excellent phone, with 6GB RAM and 128GB storage. The only phone under £450 that's faster is the iPhone SE. £259 from www.snipca.com/44553

Advertisement

Buy It

Our pick of products that have won the **Buy It** award

MINI PC

NEW ENTRY

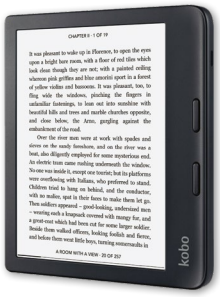
Beelink GTR7 7840HS
£749 from www.snipca.com/47875
Tested Issue 670

With a 1TB SSD, 32GB RAM and plenty of ports, this is the best all-purpose mini PC we've seen to date. The eight-core Ryzen processor performs Windows tasks quickly, and it's great for games too. Comes in green, blue, grey or orange.

ALTERNATIVE GMKtec NucBox K2 Has the same SSD and RAM, but fewer ports and weaker processor. Delivery is from the US. £460 from www.snipca.com/48223

EBOOK READER

Kobo Libra 2
£170 from www.snipca.com/40645
Tested Issue 624

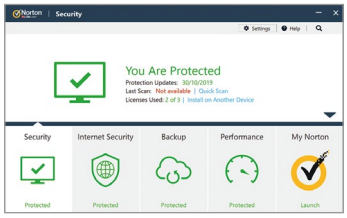


A fantastic 7in screen, 32GB of storage and Bluetooth connectivity make this a rival to Amazon's Oasis ebook reader, yet it's much cheaper. Battery life is superb – we managed 54 hours of use per charge. It supports OverDrive, so you can borrow ebooks from libraries.

ALTERNATIVE Amazon Kindle This low-cost option is a good choice, especially now it has 16GB of storage. £85 from www.snipca.com/44221

SECURITY SOFTWARE

Norton 360 Premium
£19.99 from www.snipca.com/33247
Tested Issue 629



Norton has always performed strongly in our antivirus tests, regularly making the top three. Owned by US firm NortonLifeLock, it's available at a discount on our Software Store. Use the link above for a 10-device, two-year licence. Other versions are available, including Norton 360 for Gamers.

ALTERNATIVE Bitdefender Total Security Another top performer that we're offering at a discount. £19.99 from www.snipca.com/41141

WEBCAM

Logitech C925e Business Webcam
£68 from www.snipca.com/41104
Tested Issue 608

Despite the name, this webcam is also great for home users. Its standout feature is automatically adjusting itself to keep your picture looking sharp. It offers a 78-degree field of view, which is fine for everyday video chats with one person in front of the camera.

ALTERNATIVE Anker PowerConf C300 Good image quality, crisp audio and lots of features. £90 from www.snipca.com/41105

PC MONITOR

PRICE DROP

Iiyama ProLite XU2492HSU-B1
£102 from www.snipca.com/39701
Tested Issue 618

This 23.8in screen is superb value, with a resolution of 1920x1080 pixels. Colour is good, covering 88 per cent of the sRGB colour range. Connect your computer via HDMI, DisplayPort or VGA, and there's a USB hub to connect your mouse and keyboard.

ALTERNATIVE AOC 27P2C This also has a 1920x1080 resolution but it's 27 inches, so pixel density is lower. But you'll only notice if you look really closely. £193 from www.snipca.com/41609

SOLID-STATE DRIVE

Corsair MP600 Pro LPX 500GB
£60 from www.snipca.com/41547
Tested Issue 630

In our tests, this M.2 SSD hit speeds of 7,364MB/s and 6,870MB/s when reading and writing data – astonishingly fast scores. It's compatible with the new PCIe 4.0 standard, which is twice as fast as PCIe 3.0. The 1TB model costs £64; 2TB costs £130.

ALTERNATIVE Crucial MX500 500GB As fast as an SSD can get in the traditional 2.5in SATA format, this is a great-value upgrade. £41 from www.snipca.com/37304

COMPETITION

Win 1 of 4 Anker soundcore Space One headphones

Winner of a Recommended award in Issue 669, Anker's soundcore Space One headphones are expertly crafted to block mid to high-frequency sounds, delivering an unparalleled noise-reduction performance.

They have adaptive noise-cancelling (ANC) to detects external sounds and sound leakage. It means you can enjoy flawless music whether on a noisy train, in a crowded café, or even when your Bluetooth headphones are not perfectly positioned on your ears.

The 40mm customised dynamic drivers to help produce high-resolution audio, with LDAC compatibility that offers a sound experience three times as detailed as standard Bluetooth. And with 40 hours of ANC play time, you can listen to the headphones on long journeys without worrying that the battery will run out. Play time is even longer (55 hours) with ANC turned off.

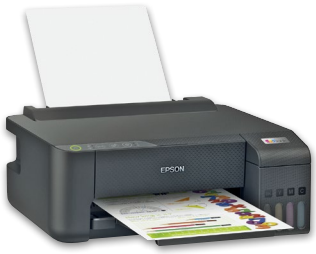
Once you're wearing them, the headband evenly distributes pressure for comfortable use, while the rotating ear cups adapt to your head's shape.

To enter this competition, answer the question at www.snipca.com/48364 and submit your details. It runs until midnight Tuesday 2 January, 2024. Good luck!

You can buy the **Anker** soundcore Space One for £89.99 from www.snipca.com/47806. For more information on Anker products, including earbuds and speakers, visit https://uk.soundcore.com and 'like' www.facebook.com/soundcoreaudio.

PRINTER

Epson EcoTank ET-1810
£160 from www.snipca.com/41232
Tested Issue 628



An inkjet printer that comes with enough ink to print 4,500 mono and 7,500 colour pages, making it exceptionally cheap to run. It's not the fastest printer, but quality is good, especially on photo paper – we've never seen better on an inkjet.

ALTERNATIVE Brother DCP-J1140DW
Compact multifunction model with rare features at this price, including double-sided printing. £140 from www.snipca.com/43670

SMART TV

Samsung Q60B
£430 from www.snipca.com/45083
Tested Issue 652

With our former favourite – the TCL 55RP620K out of stock – Samsung's 43in set is our new pick. It has excellent colour reproduction in well-lit scenes, and the picture is wonderfully sharp – especially in 4K.

ALTERNATIVE LG OLED42C3
LG's 42in TV is more than double the price, but unlike TCL's model it has an OLED screen, boosting picture quality considerably. £1,029 from www.snipca.com/47271

ROUTER

Asus RT-AXE7800
£238 from www.snipca.com/47586
Tested Issue 665

This router has Wi-Fi 6E, so will be capable of the fastest possible speeds on the 6GHz network over the next few years. It has five Ethernet ports and also a USB 3.0 port to connect a hard drive or NAS drive.

ALTERNATIVE Synology WRX560
Our previous favourite remains an excellent choice, delivering speeds of up to 791.5Mbps. Add more units to set up mesh Wi-Fi. £213 from www.snipca.com/44696

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14 pages of easy-to-follow workshops and expert tips

35 Digitise your old audio cassettes
38 Share files between your PC and phone for free
40 Readers' Tips
42 Browser Tips: Browse anonymously using a free VPN

PLUS
44 Phone & Tablet Tips
46 Make Windows Better
47 Make Office Better
48 In the Club: Use live video in PowerPoint

HOW TO...

Digitise your old audio cassettes

by Nik Rawlinson

What you need: Audio cassettes; cassette player; leads; Audacity software
Time required: 20 minutes for setup; several hours for recording and editing

Cassette tapes are enjoying a renaissance. Popular artists are releasing new albums on the format – alongside downloads, vinyl and streaming – in the knowledge that their most loyal fans will buy one of each to complete their collections. Many will be packed away in a cupboard for safekeeping, never to be played. But what about the cassettes we've all hung on to from the past?

Many of these are irreplaceable. They may be albums that are no longer in production, or precious home recordings featuring voices from loved ones who have since passed on. One day you might no longer be able to play them back, because either your only tape player has stopped working or, more worryingly, the cassette itself has worn out, been stretched or snapped. If you want to continue enjoying your cassettes well into the future, it makes sense to create a digital copy today, before it's too late.

One option is to use a dedicated MP3 recorder. There are many cheap devices to buy on Amazon and other sites. They're easy to use, with a USB port for a stick and the ability to detect gaps between tracks so they can separate them into individual files.

However, we've had reports that they don't work as smoothly as advertised, including several we've tested. Therefore, we're going to show you how to digitise cassettes using a tape recorder at home, a cable that connects it to your PC, and the excellent free audio-editing program Audacity.

1 Set up Audacity

To download Audacity visit www.snipca.com/48262. There are several options to choose from but, unless you have a very old computer, you'll most likely need '64 bit installer (recommended)'.

Click 'Download .exe' to the right of this heading and, when the installer has arrived in your Downloads folder, launch it and step through the installation instructions. If you're still using Windows 7, the most recent compatible version is 2.3.3, which you can download from www.snipca.com/48263.

Launch Audacity, then select your audio source. Start by taking a look at the ports on your computer.

You'll almost certainly have a headphone socket, which you can ignore for the moment. But you should also have a Line In and/or microphone socket, which you can use to connect your tape player. This will be a 3.5mm jack socket, often with a picture of either a microphone or writing beside it.

Don't worry if you don't have either a mic or line-in input: you can instead use a USB audio device, which has a line-in or mic socket at one end and a regular USB plug at the other. When you connect your tape player to it using the same double-ended jack cable you'd otherwise use to connect the player directly to the computer, it converts the signal from analogue to digital before passing it on to the computer.

Now check the outputs of your tape player. If you're using an old Walkman or consumer tape machine, it will most likely have a headphone socket that you can use. In some high-end devices, this will be a quarter-inch socket, but most consumer players have the same 3.5mm jack as used by your computer.

If you don't have a headphone socket, you may have a pair of RCA or phono connectors, which are 8.3mm (0.33in) in

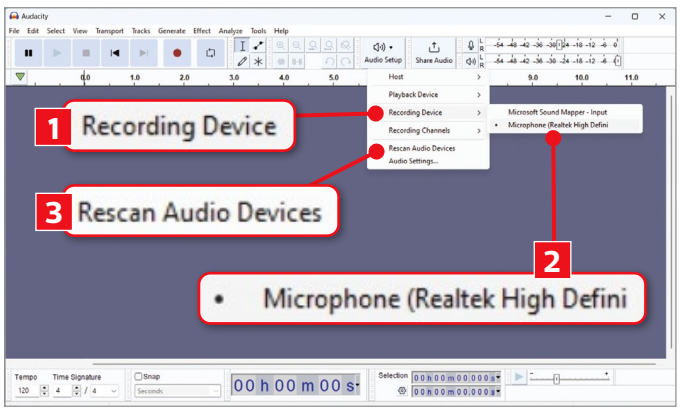
This lead has phono plugs (red and white) at one end, and a jack connector (black)

diameter, with a silver outer and a coloured plastic insert. These are often coloured red and white for the right and left audio channels respectively (which you can remember because red and right both start with R). It's less likely that you'll have RCA or phono connectors on your PC, so you'll need to use a cable with these connectors at one end, and a regular 3.5mm jack at the other – see photo above.

Once you've connected your computer and tape player, make sure you've selected the correct audio input in Audacity, as it may be set to record an internal audio source when it should be paying attention to your external connection. Click 'Audio Setup', then hover over Recording Device (1 in our screenshot below) and select your input source from the menu that appears 2.

If you've connected a USB sound adapter and it's not showing up, click Rescan Audio Devices 3 at the bottom of the Audio Setup menu, then revisit the menu to see if it's appeared.

If not, check whether it's showing in Device Manager by opening Windows' Start menu, typing device and clicking Device Manager. Click the dropdown arrow beside 'Audio inputs and outputs' and check that your device is listed (see screenshot above right). If it isn't, this means it's not been recognised by Windows, so try disconnecting and



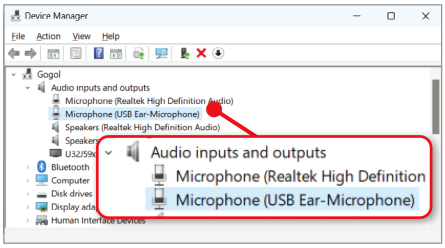
Make sure Audacity is set up to record from the correct input

How I digitise old recordings

Somehow I've ended up as the family archivist, with boxes of old photos, cassettes and other media stacked in a spare room. I 've been digitising them in odd moments for several years and putting them on a (hidden) website to share with the rest of the family. Not only does this share the joy, it also means they're preserved in a format that will prevent any further degradation, and I can recycle or responsibly dispose of the originals to reclaim some physical space.

Nik Rawlinson

How do you digitise your old recordings?
Please let us know: letters@computeractive.co.uk



Click the arrow beside 'Audio inputs and outputs' to check that your device is listed

reconnecting it. Check, also, that you've installed the most up-to-date driver available, if it needs one.

2 Set sample rate and format

Click 'Audio Settings' at the bottom of the Audio Setup menu. This is where you'll find the different settings that control the quality of your recording.

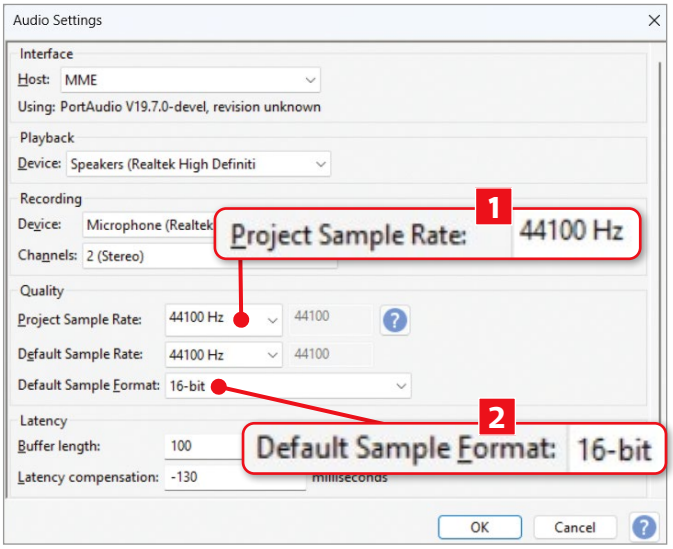
Double-check that the correct device is selected in the Recording section, where you can also choose between mono and stereo. If you're recording a mono source, like some old albums or many home recordings, it makes sense to opt for mono as you will end up with a smaller file.

Make sure that the Project Sample Rate is at least 44100Hz (1 in our screenshot above right), which is the standard sample rate for CDs. If you've not come across the term sample rate before, it's how often the program grabs a chunk of audio and adds it to the digital file. If it was running at 1Hz, it would sample one tone every second. 2Hz would sample one every half a second, and so on. As you can probably work out for yourself, as there's no gap between the tones that we hear, higher numbers, which equate to a greater number of samples every second pressed up against each other (each of which is shorter), result in a clearer sound.

You can visualise it the same way you would pixels in a digital photo. If your photo is only 800x600 pixels and printed at A4, it will appear to be of lower quality than one printed at the same size comprising 4000x3000 pixels. That's because the pixels eventually become too small for our eyes to discern, just as the individual samples in the audio file become too short for our ears to detect where one stops and the next begins.

Similarly, select an appropriate Default Sample Format, which is a measure of the range of discrete tones that can be used when making up your waveform. These tones are like colours in the photo analogy we mentioned above. If you imagine that your camera was sensitive just to pure white and pure black, you'd have a hard time trying to recreate the Mona Lisa despite having access to both ends of the spectrum, no matter how many individual pixels made up your image.

But if the scale was broken down into 300, 3,000 or 3 million different shades, each sitting somewhere between white and black, you could make a far more faithful reproduction of the original.



Choose a sample rate and format to balance recording quality and file size

In the same way, you can make a more accurate copy of your audio cassette if the high-to-low scale used to record the audio is broken down into a finer range of discrete tones.

CDs, which are usually considered to be of higher quality than cassette tapes, typically use 16-bit encoding, so for the purposes of this How To feature, that should be fine here, too – and Audacity itself advises that "16-bit is a good general purpose high quality setting... suitable for vinyl records".

Changing the Default Sample Format setting from its 'default' of '32-bit float' (which has 65,000 times the dynamic range of a CD – or 65,000 times the number of steps in the tone scale) to '16-bit' 2 is therefore unlikely to significantly reduce the quality of your digitised file. It can also result in a reduced file size.

3 Record your cassette

Finally, you're ready to make your first recording. Close the Audio Settings box, press the red Record button on the Audacity toolbar, then press play on your tape.

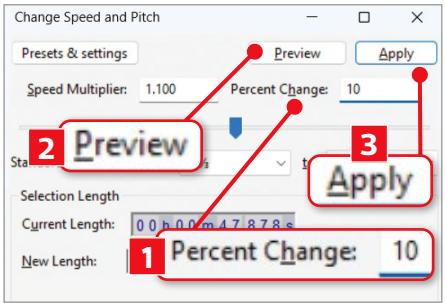
It's up to you whether you press Stop in Audacity after every track, but our preferred way of working is to record the whole thing in one take, then cut it up afterwards. Doing this means we can apply corrections to the whole recording if necessary, rather than having to repeat the edit on each individual track.

Let's imagine you're recording a much-loved home tape that's been played so often it has started to stretch. As a result, family members' voices may be slightly lower in tone, and they may be singing or speaking more slowly than they usually would. You can fix this by selecting the whole of your recording (Ctrl+A), then clicking Effect and hovering over 'Pitch and Tempo'. Click 'Change speed and pitch' on the menu that appears.

Click in the Percent Change box and type, to start with, 10 (1 in our screenshot above right), to increase the speed by 10 per cent.

Now click Preview 2 and see whether the subject is singing or speaking at their usual rate. Don't worry for a moment that they will have a higher-pitched, slightly cartoonish voice. If it's not quite right, reduce or increase the number in the Percent Change box until you're happy with the result. When you are, click Apply.

Now you need to return their voice to its usual tone. Click 'Effect', hover over 'Pitch and Tempo', and click Change Pitch. Click in the Percent Change box and, as a starting point, type in the opposite of the Percent Change you applied in the previous step. So, if you sped up the recording by 10 per cent, type



Changing the pitch of your recording can speed it up or slow it down

-10 here. Similarly, if you entered -15 to slow down your recording in the previous step, enter 15 for the percentage increase in pitch.

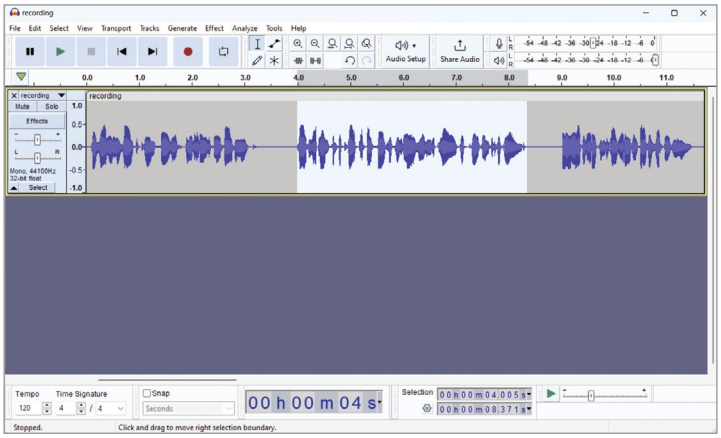
Now click Preview to see what effect it has and, if it's not quite right, adjust the value in the Percent Change box until you get what you're after. When you do, click Apply 3.

4 Slice and save your tracks

Once you've corrected the overall recording, you need to slice it up to create individual tracks. The easiest way to do this is to select and copy each one into a new file. You can see where they start and end by looking at the waveform, which will become a flat line where there's silence between them (see screenshot below).

Click at the beginning of a track, then hold the mouse button while you drag to the furthest end. If you need to zoom in on the waveform to do this accurately, press Ctrl+1 and, if you need to zoom out to get the whole of the track in view, press Ctrl+3.

When you've selected the whole of a track, press Ctrl+C to copy it, then Ctrl+N to create a new, blank file. Press Ctrl+V to paste the track, then save it in the usual way with Ctrl+S.



The highlighted part of the waveform is a single track, with silence either side shown as flat lines

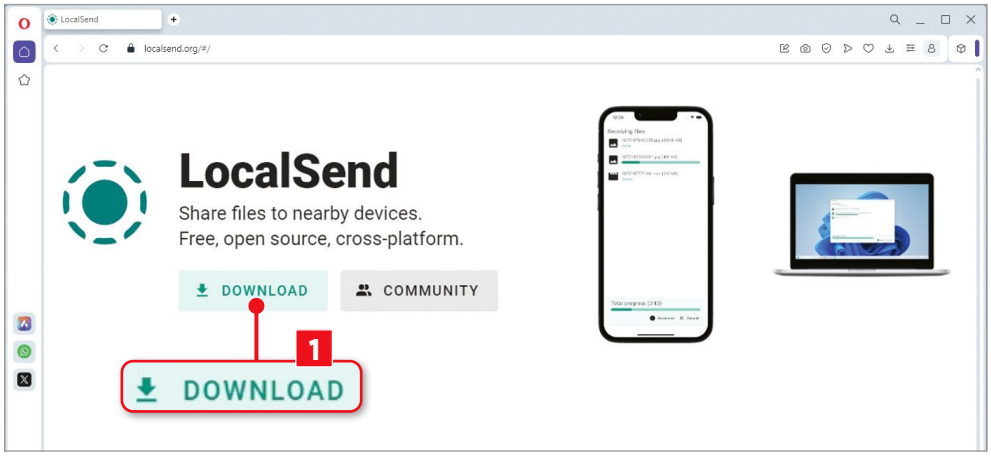
Share files between your PC and phone for free

What you need: LocalSend for Windows, plus iOS or Android
Time required: 30 minutes

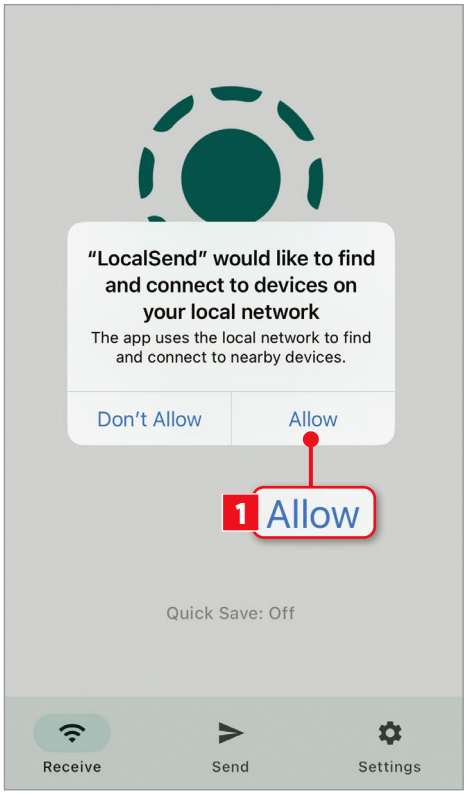
Cloud services, like Google Drive and iCloud, simplify the task of sharing files between your phone and computer. The trouble is, when you share this way, it's easy to end up with loose files cluttering your cloud storage once you've completed the transfer.

This wastes disk space, so, unless you tidy up after yourself, you may one day need to pay for additional storage. Or, you could use LocalSend, which, rather than routing files via the cloud, sends them directly across your network. It's completely free, with no restrictions.

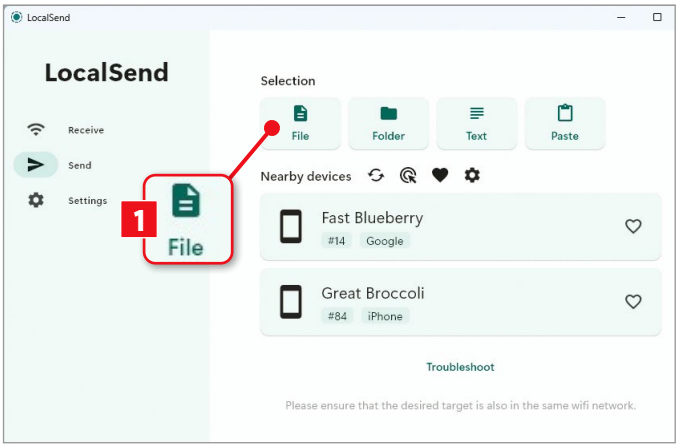
STEP 1 Open www.localsend.org and click Download 1. Click Windows on the following screen, followed by MSIX. This downloads a version of LocalSend you can install. Launch the downloaded file and click Install. If you prefer a version that doesn't need installing, click 'Zip (Portable)', extract the compressed files, then launch 'localsend_app.exe'. If a box appears warning that 'Windows protected your PC', click 'More info' followed by 'Run anyway' to launch LocalSend.



STEP 2 Download the free LocalSend app for Android (www.snipca.com/48227) or iOS (www.snipca.com/48228). If you have an iPhone, it will ask for permission to find devices on your local network. In our tests, we've found that while refusing this doesn't stop an iPhone receiving files from a PC, it does prevent it from sending them. So, tap Allow 1. Android doesn't ask this question.

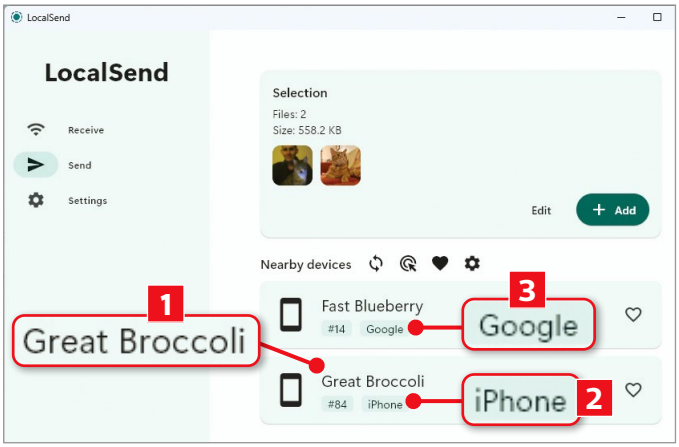


STEP 3 With both your phone and your computer connected to the same wireless network, you can now send files between them without needing usernames or passwords, or any intermediate service like Dropbox. Notice how every device that you've connected has been given its own unique name. As you can see from the photo, our iPhone, Android phone and PC, each have a fruit- or veg-based name by which we can identify them.



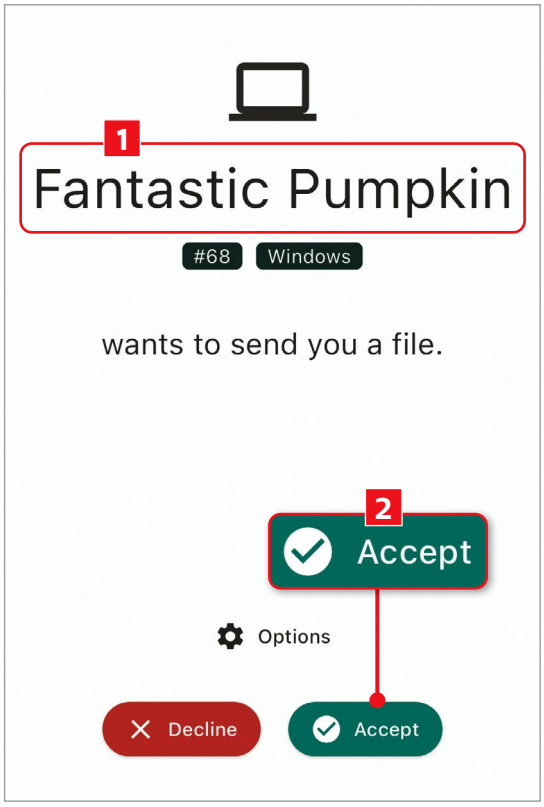
STEP 4

To send a file from your PC to your phone, click Send, then click the closest match in the Selection section to what you want to send. We're going to send a photo from our computer to our iPhone, so we'll click File 1. Navigate to the photo in the File Explorer window that appears, select it, and click Open. The file will replace the original contents of the Selection panel, where a new 'Add' button will appear. Click this and repeat the process if you want to send several files simultaneously.



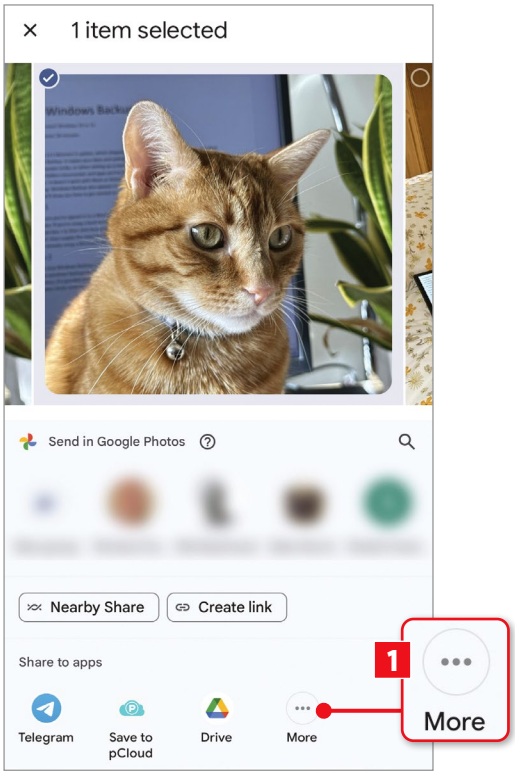
STEP 5

Click the device to which you want to send the selected file. Here, because we want to send the file to our iPhone, we'll click Great Broccoli 1. We know this is correct because it's marked as an iPhone 2 in the 'Nearby devices' panel, whereas the Android device is labelled Google 3. If we had multiple iPhones or multiple Android devices, you can make sure you're sending files to the right one by matching the name in this panel with the one displayed on the phone screen.



STEP 6

Check your phone screen, where you'll see an alert that your computer wants to send you a file. As long as the name on the screen 1 is the same as the name of your computer (so you know the file is coming from your own PC and not someone else using LocalSend), tap Accept 2. While our Android phone automatically saved the transferred photo to our Photos library, our iPhone asked permission to add it to Photos. If yours does this, tap OK.



STEP 7

The process works the same in the opposite direction. To send a file from an iPhone to your PC, open it, then tap the share button (a square with an arrow pointing up out of it). Scroll the second row of icons, tap LocalSend, then select your PC's fruit or veg name as the destination. On Android, open the file you want to send and tap Share (it looks like a left-pointing chevron). Tap More on the 'Share to apps' line 1, then tap LocalSend, and tap the name of your PC. The files are saved to your PC's Downloads folder.

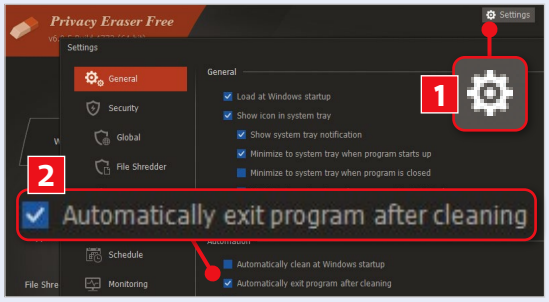
Readers' Tips

TIP OF THE FORTNIGHT

Close Privacy Eraser after cleaning your PC

I can't recall why, but I stopped using Privacy Eraser (www.snipca.com/48050) a few years ago. I decided to download it again after reading about the new version in Issue 670 (page 19). I remembered instantly how easy it is to use. Every setting seems to be in just the right place.

What I also like is that the settings it enables by default all seem to be the most sensible option – except one. If you click the Settings cog at the top (1 in our screenshot) and select General on the left, you'll see an unticked box next to 'Automatically exit program after cleaning'. Tick that box 2 followed by Apply at the bottom and Privacy Eraser will close itself after ridding your PC of every bit of junk it can find.



There's also an unticked box for the 'Automatically clean at Windows startup' option. I commend Privacy Eraser for leaving this unticked by default because the user should have the ultimate say when to clean their PC. For some it makes sense to do so when booting, but for most probably not.

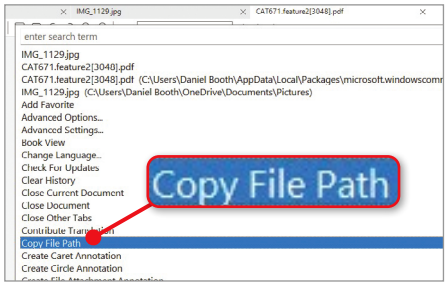
Richard Bennett

Richard wins a copy of our 2022 Back Issue CD **Buy it from us at www.snipca.com/44660**

SOFTWARE

Copy file paths in Sumatra PDF editor

As a follow-up to Rob Haslam's tip (see Issue 672) on keyboard shortcuts for the PDF editor Sumatra (www.snipca.com/48052), here's a tip for copying a file path to your clipboard to make it easy to paste somewhere. Press Ctrl+K, then click Copy File Path (see screenshot below left). And that's it. Before I discovered this shortcut I was pressing Ctrl+D then clicking Copy To Clipboard, which would copy *all* the information about the PDF. That can be useful too, but mostly I just need the file path.



Mike Randall

PHONES

Add 'ICE' before the names of emergency contacts

Sarah Palmer's idea to add ICE (which stands for 'In Case of Emergency') after names in phone contacts is a great idea (Issue 671, page 41). But I think placing ICE *before* a person's name would be even better. As your contacts list is alphabetical, then all your ICE contacts would be on one page together. This would be useful should any emergency arise.

Jim Winnett

APPS

Install APK files on your phone or tablet

In Issue 669 (page 20) Richard Senior wrote that he couldn't find the APK file for the reading app Bookari (www.bookari.com), which he'd previously installed on his Android tablet. I had the same problem, though I used the app on my phone. My solution was to install File Manager Plus from the Google Play Store (www.snipca.com/48265, pictured above right). I looked in the Apps folder, then selected the app and the

Why I stopped using...

YubiKey 5 Nano

I was already predicting the demise of passwords some years ago, so bought the YubiKey 5 Nano security key (£61 from www.snipca.com/48384). It works fine, but it's just too small and I kept losing it. Yubico wasn't joking in calling it 'Nano'.

And what I use instead...

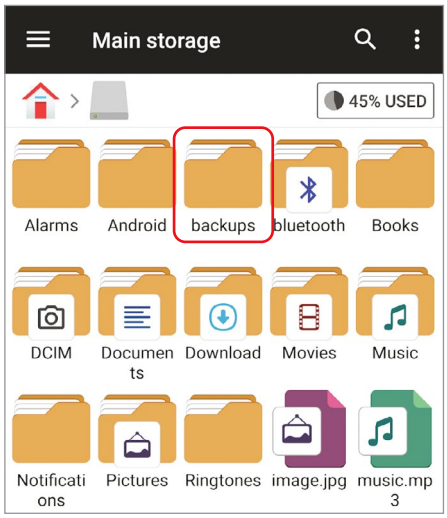
I needed a bigger security key that's easier to remove. The Nano is only 130x119x30mm (HxWxD), making it hard to unplug unless you have long nails. So I bought the more conventionally sized **YubiKey 5C NFC** (£58 from www.snipca.com/48386, pictured), which is similar in size to a household key. It also has the double bonus of being both USB-C and having NFC. That should mean it stays functional for many years.

It works with my Android devices and my Windows 10 PC. I mostly use it to log into my Gmail account, my password manager (Dashlane) and Facebook. It can easily fit inside a wallet, though I keep it hanging up in a secret place. There's a 'Y'

that glows green when it's connected, which is handy.

Len Riordan

Tell us why you stopped using a website, app or program: letters@computeractive.co.uk



backup option. It located the APK file in the backups folder, so I then moved it to my new phone, having told it to allow installs. Worked a treat.

Roy Houghton

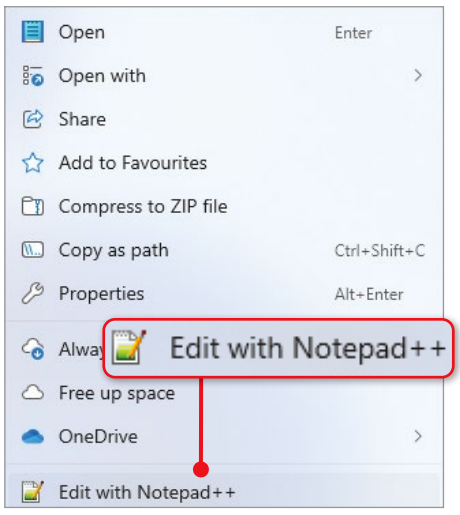
SOFTWARE

Use Notepad++ instead of WordPad

In Issue 671's Letters, David Tennant lamented the demise of WordPad, but there's no need to use it, and hasn't been for over 20 years. Notepad++ (www.snipca.com/48402) is free, fast and vastly superior. If nothing else, it has syntax highlighting and the ability to open multiple files. It's just as simple to use as WordPad (and Notepad) and you can use it from the command line or in the context menu (see screenshot below) by right-clicking your mouse.

I last used WordPad around the year 2000, then switched to TextPad (www.textpad.com), then Notepad++, though now I use Visual Studio Core more (www.snipca.com/48403).

Rob Sedgwick



Reader recommends...

TP-Link Tapo C420S2

£140 for a twin pack from www.snipca.com/47986

I agree with the four-star Recommended rating you gave these security cameras in Issue 670 (page 29). Every Tapo product I've used has been decent and affordable, and comes with good customer support. With these cameras, it's worth noting that they detect movement with a PIR sensor, which means they won't work through glass, such as looking through a window.

I was disappointed with the colour night vision because it's just an illumination with the built-in spotlights, but you can use infrared only, which is the classic black-and-white.

Although you can't record 24/7, you can see a live view at any time on the app. However, because the SD card is in the hub, not the cameras, they won't record if your Wi-Fi goes down. The upside is that if the camera is stolen you don't lose the card.

They come with spare batteries, which you can charge separately, or you can buy a solar panel to keep the batteries topped up. They fit a standard tripod, and being wireless you can attach them to a GorillaPod (www.snipca.com/48422) and move them around the garden to capture wildlife.

Geoff Burgess

Want to recommend hardware or software to fellow readers?
Email letters@computeractive.co.uk

Wi-Fi

Use powerlines to stretch your signal to garage and garden

In response to Tony Carlton's query about how to get a strong Wi-Fi signal in his conservatory and garden (Issue 670, page 69), I had success by avoiding the usual advice. I use a set of Netgear PLW1000 powerline adapters (£118 from www.snipca.com/48266) to extend my Wi-Fi to my dining room, garage or garden as required.

The sender unit connected to the router is plugged into a four-way extension lead along with the router and landline phone. When using Skype in the dining room, the receiver/transmitter is needed to improve the signal – and it's plugged into a four-way extension lead shared with the laptop.

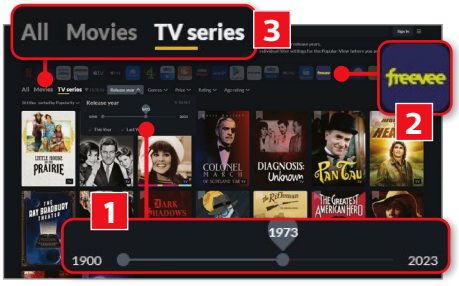
To listen to streamed services via my phone and Wi-Fi in the garage or garden, I move the receiver to a socket in the garage, which is on a different circuit to the sender socket some 30 metres away.

Don Dobson

TV STREAMING

See every show available on Freevee

I was interested in watching Freevee (www.snipca.com/48033) after reading your section on it in Issue 667



(page 51), but of the five shows you highlighted the only one that really appealed was *Columbo*, starring the great Peter Falk. I needed a bit more persuasion, so looked online for an index of everything you can watch on the channel.

I found it at JustWatch (www.snipca.com/48340), where you can apply various search filters. The most useful (for me at least) is 'Release year', because I can eliminate modern shows that hold no appeal. It doesn't work perfectly though. When you click 'Release year', you'll see a slider from 1900 to 2023 (1 in our screenshot above). To select a year, you have to move the slider from the right (ie, from 2023), not from 1900 on the left. Just release the slider at the year you want.

A couple of pointers. Make sure the Freevee logo is selected at the top right 2, otherwise JustWatch will search every streaming service. And also select All, Movies or 'TV series' at the top left 3.

Harry Pullman

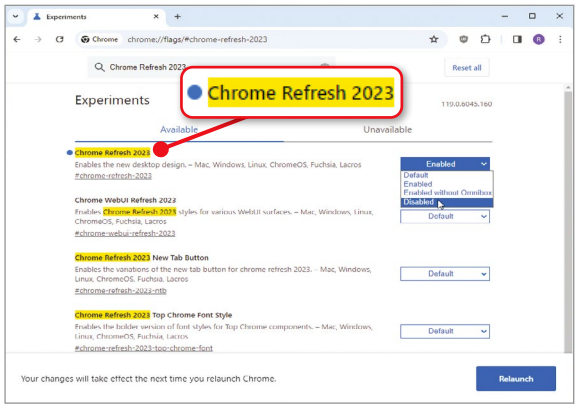
Browser Tips

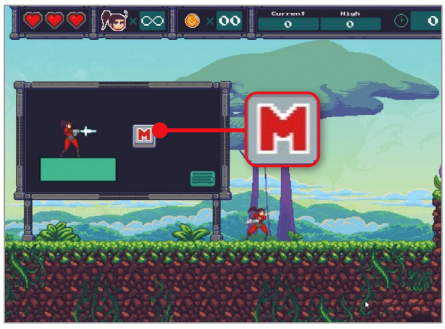
CHROME
Enable or disable Chrome's 2023 redesign

Google waited until September to roll out Chrome's 2023 redesign, to coincide with the browser's 15th birthday (and Google's 25th). However, some users still don't have the new look, which gives Chrome a brighter and more modern appearance, with rounded corners, clearer icons and more spacious menus. Other users have received the Material Design update, but prefer the way Chrome looked before.

Thankfully, it's possible to enable or disable the new design, depending on your preference – though the option may eventually be removed from the browser. Type chrome://flags into the address bar and press Enter to load the Experiments page. Find the entry Chrome Refresh 2023 (see screenshot below) and click the dropdown menu next to it (you can ignore the other Chrome Refresh entries).

Select either Enabled to apply the redesign or Disabled to revert to Chrome's 'classic' design. Relaunch the browser to confirm the change and start 2024 with Chrome looking the way you want.

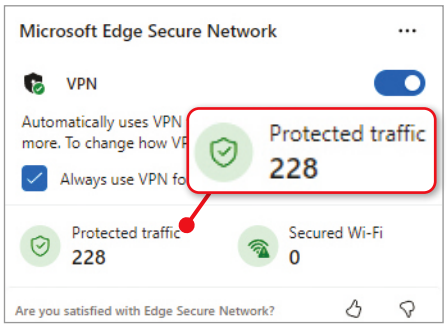




VIVALDI
Play the free arcade game Vivaldia 2

Vivaldi has launched a new but retro-style arcade game, Vivaldia 2, which you can play in the browser for free at www.snipca.com/48410. The original Vivaldia was released in 2020 (www.snipca.com/48411), and the sequel picks up the story of the eponymous heroine. Vivaldia is transported to a Lost Valley of perilous jungles, lava fields and swamps, where she must battle robots and dinosaurs to save the world from the malevolent Robot Overlord.

Use the cursor keys and Spacebar on your keyboard to make Vivaldia run, crawl, climb and jump, and the M key (see screenshot above) to fire at her foes. The game is very well made, with an authentically 1980s-themed soundtrack. Unlike the original, you can play Vivaldia 2 in other browsers, but you get the best experience in Vivaldi.

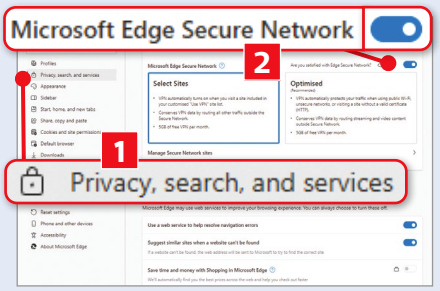


EDGE
Browse anonymously using a free VPN

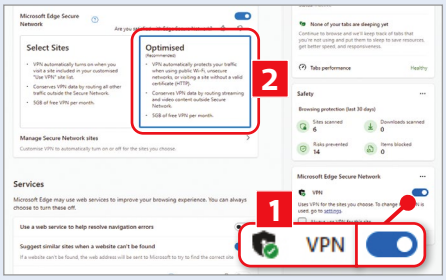
Edge's built-in VPN, which Microsoft has been gradually rolling out throughout 2023, is now available to all users. It's called Edge Secure Network, and is really a proxy rather than a fully fledged VPN, because it only encrypts your internet connection within the browser, not across your whole PC.

However, Secure Network is still a convenient way to stay anonymous online without installing additional software. It's powered by security company Cloudflare, gives you 5GB of free data each month and prevents websites from detecting your location by concealing your IP address. Unlike other VPNs and proxies, it doesn't let you choose from servers in different countries, but assigns you a virtual IP address that's close to your current region. This means you can at least get relevant local information without being tracked, with the VPN telling you how many trackers it's blocked (see

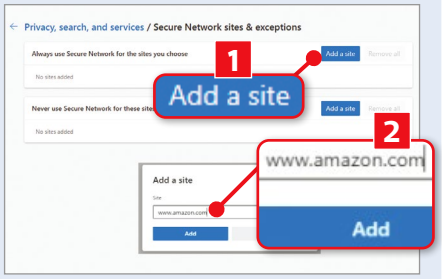
WORKSHOP Switch on Edge Secure Network



1 Sign into your Microsoft account, then click Edge's three-dot menu button and choose Settings, then 'Privacy, search and services' 1. Scroll down to the Security section and switch on the option Microsoft Edge Secure Network 2.



2 The first time you do this, Edge's 'Browser essentials' panel will open. Click 'Get VPN for free' to enable the feature 1. Click 'Optimised' 2 to activate the VPN automatically on public Wi-Fi, unsecured networks and HTTP sites.

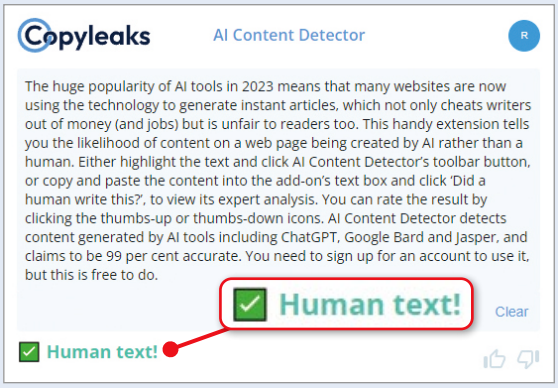


2 Alternatively, click Select Sites, then 'Manage Secure Network sites' to specify sites on which to use the VPN. Click 'Add a site' 1 next to 'Always use Secure Network for the sites you choose', then enter the site's URL and click Add 2.

BEST EXTENSION FOR... Detecting AI content

AI Content Detector
Chromium
www.snipca.com/48414

The huge popularity of AI tools in 2023 means that many websites are now using the technology to generate instant articles, which not only cheats writers out of money (and jobs) but is unfair to readers too. This handy extension tells you the likelihood of content on a web page being created by AI rather than a human. Either highlight the text and click AI Content Detector's toolbar button, or copy and paste the content into the add-on's text box and click 'Did a human write this?', to view its findings (see screenshot). You can rate the result by clicking the thumbs-up or thumbs-down icons. AI Content Detector detects content generated by AI tools including ChatGPT, Google Bard and Jasper, and claims to be 99 per cent accurate. You need to sign up for an account to use it, but this is free to do.



If you don't like that, try...
DetectGPT
Chromium
www.snipca.com/48415

This similar extension doesn't require an account, but only works with GPT-based tools. Some reviewers have objected to the add-on flagging their work as AI-generated.

screenshot above left). More annoying is that protection is automatically disabled on streaming sites such as Netflix, "to conserve bandwidth".

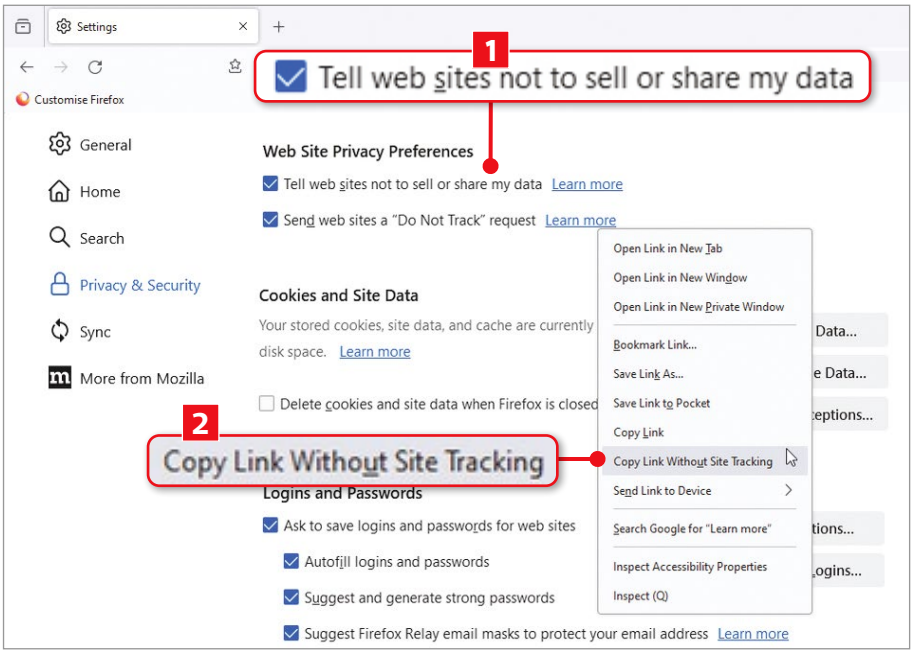
See our Workshop below left to learn how to start using Edge Secure Network.

FIREFOX
Stop websites selling and tracking your data

Firefox 120, which was released in November, adds two welcome privacy features to the browser. The first lets you enable Global Privacy Control (GPC) in Firefox to complement the existing – and increasingly ineffective – 'Do Not Track' option.

GPC, which is enabled by default in rival browsers DuckDuckGo and Brave, tells websites not to share or sell information about your browsing session. Although sites aren't obliged to comply with your request, tech companies that support GPC hope it will eventually become legally binding.

To turn on the new GPC option, click Firefox's three-line menu button and choose Settings, then 'Privacy & Security'. Scroll down to the Web Site Privacy Preferences section and tick the box next to 'Tell websites not to sell or share my data' (1 in our screenshot below). Also ensure that 'Send web sites a "Do Not Track" request' is enabled.



The second new privacy feature lets you remove tracking elements from URLs when you copy them from web pages and Firefox's address bar. Some sites add these strings of characters to the end of web addresses, so they can identify and track you. To copy a clean link without this compromising data, right-click it and choose 'Copy Link Without Site Tracking' 2. Again, this option is already available in Brave, which added it at the start of 2023 (see Issue 651, page 42).

CHROMIUM
Speed up and mute ads in YouTube videos

YouTube's war against ad blockers looks set to continue into 2024, so developers are coming up with new ways to evade the site's clampdown. We recommended FadBlock (www.snipca.com/48137) in Issue 671 (page 67), which skips ads in videos rather than blocking them outright. However, some users have reported that the extension no longer works reliably – possibly because YouTube has caught onto its trick.

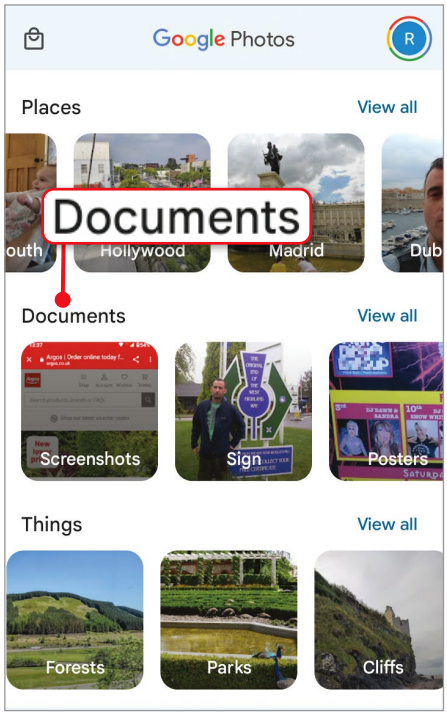
Another option is Ad Accelerator (www.snipca.com/48412), which detects when adverts start playing in YouTube videos then mutes the volume and speeds them up – so that ads whizz by up to 10 times faster. It's not as effective as blocking ads, but it makes them less annoying, doesn't trigger a warning from YouTube and means that video creators don't lose revenue.

Phone and Tablet Tips

ANDROID & iOS

Find documents faster in Google Photos

The latest update to Google Photos improves the app's organisation of screenshots and photos you take of items containing text – including documents, posters and receipts. It now uses AI to better identify and categorise these images and sort them into appropriate albums. This makes it much easier to find text-based pictures without having to scroll through your whole photo library.



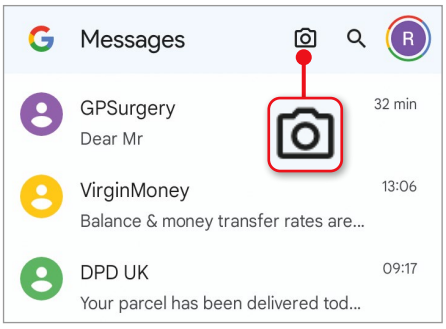
Tap the Search tab at the bottom of the Photos app and you'll see a new Documents section between the Places and Things rows (see screenshot below left). Here you'll find albums with labels such as Screenshots, Posters, Menus, 'Book cover' and 'Identity document'. If you find – as we did – that Google has placed some images in the wrong categories, tap the tick box next to them, then press the three-dot menu button and choose 'Remove photos'. You can optionally select a reason for removing the picture, to help the app improve its accuracy.

Google now lets you set reminders in your calendar from screenshots and photos that include dates of upcoming events. For example, if you have a screen grab of a train ticket or a picture of a concert flyer, tap 'Set reminder' to add the date to your calendar, and get a reminder nearer the time. You can also choose to automatically archive screenshots and documents after 30 days, which will hide them in your main gallery but keep them accessible in the relevant albums.

ANDROID

Capture photos through the Messages app

One of the benefits to using Google's RCS (Rich Communications Services) technology instead of standard text messages is that you can send people photos without being charged by your mobile network. To make things even easier, Google has updated its RCS-enabled Messages app with a camera function. The app comes installed on Android phones and is also available from the Play Store (www.snipca.com/47255).



The new Camera button is located to the left of the search icon above your Messages inbox (see screenshot above). Tapping it opens the default camera app on your phone, so you can quickly take a photo. Press the tick button to save the picture, then select the person you want to send it to.

The photo will be inserted in a message, so you can share it for free – provided both you and the recipient have RCS switched on. To check, tap your profile picture in the top-right of the Messages app and choose 'Messages settings', then 'RCS chats'.

Apple has finally agreed to support RCS on iPhones, so you should soon be able to send photos to iMessage users with no loss of quality or network charges.

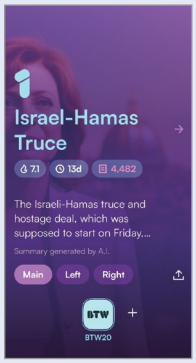
BEST NEW APPS What you should install this fortnight

Break the Web

Free

iOS www.snipca.com/48426

This AI-powered news app tells you which stories are 'trending' across the web and summarises their key points. It checks multiple sources from around the globe, and lets you choose Left or Right to read viewpoints from each end of the political spectrum. You can also track the coverage of topics over time.



Bring Me

Free

Android www.snipca.com/48434

Bring Me reminds you when and where you last had specific belongings, so you can quickly find them if they go astray. Add an item such as your wallet, keys or bag, then tap With Me to save the time and location. Choose 'Map View' to see the item on a map, mark it as At Home and add notes and a photo.

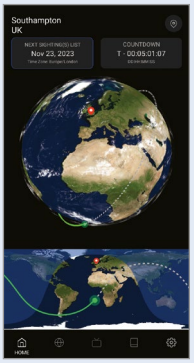
Spot the Station

Free

Android www.snipca.com/48444

iOS www.snipca.com/48445

Following the relaunch of NASA's main mobile app (see Issue 672, page 44), this new app lets you track the International Space Station (ISS). Allow it access to your location, and the app will start a countdown to the next potential sighting. It shows you the station's trajectory on 2D and 3D global maps.

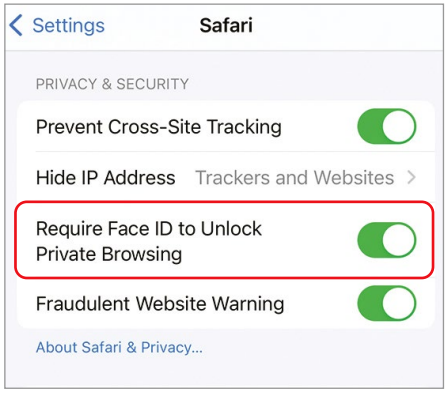


iOS

Secure your private browsing in Safari

Like most browsers, Safari for iOS and iPadOS has a private-browsing mode that stops details of the websites you visit being stored on your iPhone or iPad. In iOS 17, the Private Browsing feature offers even more protection against prying eyes, both online and off.

It's now possible to lock your private tabs, so nobody but you can see the sites you've been looking at. To activate this option, open the Settings app, tap Safari and scroll down to the 'Privacy & Security' section. Switch on the option 'Require Face ID to Unlock Private Browsing' (see screenshot below) or 'Require Touch ID to Unlock Private Browsing', depending on which method you use to secure your iPhone or iPad. This means your private tabs in Safari can only be unlocked by using *your* face or fingerprint.



Private Browsing in iOS 17 automatically strips the tracking data from web addresses, so companies can't follow you around online (a feature recently added to Firefox – see page 43). To apply this protection to standard browsing too, tap Advanced on the Safari screen in Settings, select 'Advanced Tracking and Fingerprinting Protection' and choose All Browsing.

Additionally, Safari in iOS 17 lets you change the default search engine in Private Browsing mode. Tap 'Private Search Engine' on the Safari screen and choose a more private option – preferably DuckDuckGo.

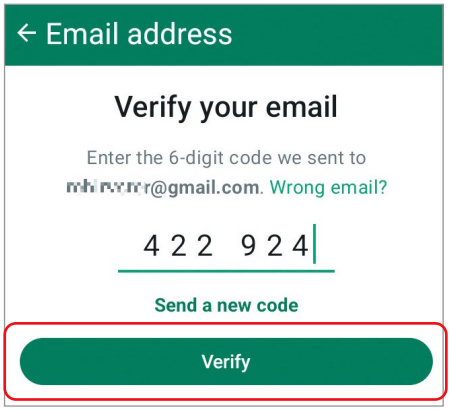
ANDROID & iOS

Add your email address to WhatsApp

As we reported in Issue 671 (page 7), WhatsApp has introduced the ability to associate an email address with your account. This enables you to access your WhatsApp account by entering your email address when you're in an area with no mobile signal, and can't use your phone number for verification.

To set up the new feature, tap your profile picture in the WhatsApp app and select Account. Tap 'Email address', enter your email and press Next. Type in the six-digit verification code that WhatsApp sends you and tap Verify (see screenshot right) to confirm.

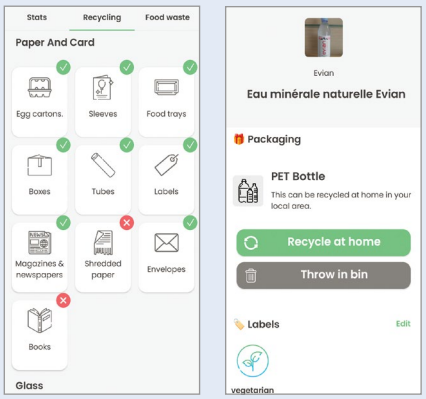
At the time of writing, the 'Email address' option was available in the WhatsApp app for iOS and its beta version for Android – it should have rolled out to the stable version by the time you read this.



BEST APPS FOR... Recycling unwanted stuff

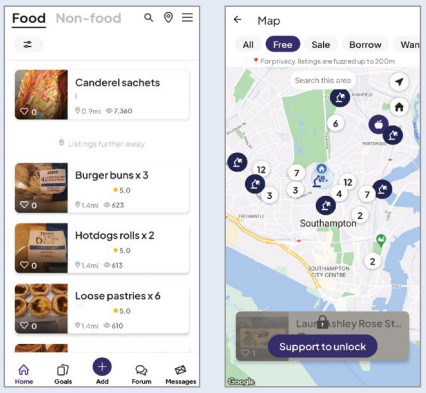
Horizon Sustainability Scanner

Free
Android www.snipca.com/48446
iOS www.snipca.com/48447
Horizon makes recycling household waste much easier by telling you how and where to recycle. Enter your postcode to find local collection points, then scan the barcode of packaging for recycling instructions. The app covers more than 24,000 products, sets regular community challenges and is packed with useful information.
Best For Recycling plastic and packaging



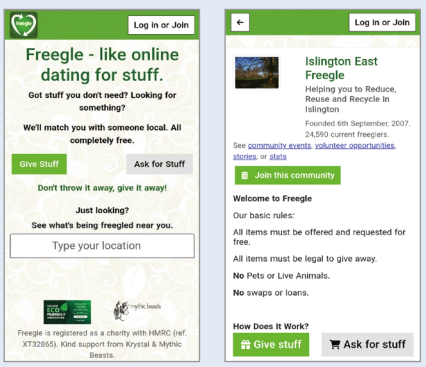
Olio

Free*
Android www.snipca.com/48448
iOS www.snipca.com/48449
Olio combines decluttering with altruism by letting you give away things you don't need to those who do. It connects you with people in your area, then lets you list surplus food, drink, clothes, furniture and other items, for your neighbours to come and collect. You can also browse and request their unwanted stuff.
Best For Giving away surplus food



Freegle

Free
Android www.snipca.com/48450
iOS www.snipca.com/48451
Freegle has been around since 2009 (when it split from Freecycle), but the app is still going strong. List an item you don't need – furniture, kitchen appliances and artwork are popular – and wait for someone in your Freegle community to contact you and arrange collection.
Best For Offloading unwanted furniture



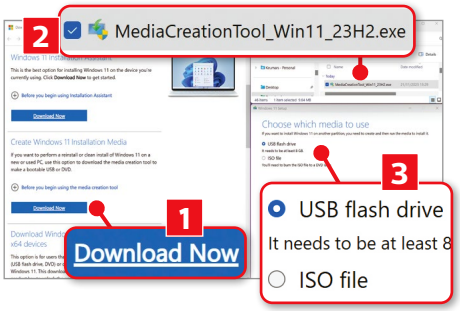
*Contains in-app purchases

WINDOWS 11

Install version 23H2 via the Media Creation Tool

Microsoft has now made its 23H2 update available as a clean install using its Media Creation Tool. This lets you download Windows to a USB stick or disc so you can reinstall it.

Visit Microsoft's website (www.snipca.com/48409), then click Download Now under Create Windows 11 Installation Media (1 in our screenshot below). You'll now download the 10MB file 'MediaCreationTool_Win11_23H2.exe' 2. Double-click the file, click Accept, then click Next. In the 'Choose which media to use' menu select 'USB flash drive' or 'ISO file' 3. Click Next again, select your file path, and you'll begin downloading Windows 11 version 23H2.

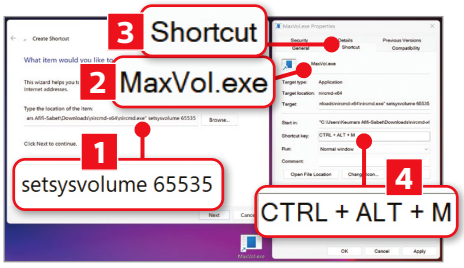


WINDOWS 10 & 11

Add a 'maximum volume' keyboard shortcut

Most computer keyboards come with shortcuts that let you increase/decrease your PC's volume, but none come with a key that lets you raise your system's volume to its maximum level. You can create this shortcut using the excellent free tool NirCmd from NirSoft, one of our favourite independent software developers.

Download NirCmd by visiting www.snipca.com/48423 then scrolling to the bottom and clicking the 'Download NirCmd 64-bit' link. Right-click the ZIP file, select Extract All, then click Extract once you've specified the file destination. Next, right-click 'nircmd.exe' and select 'Copy as path'. Right-click your desktop and hover over New, then choose Shortcut. In the text field, Press Ctrl+V to paste the file path URL, tap Space once, then type setsysvolume 65535 (see 1 in our screenshot below left).

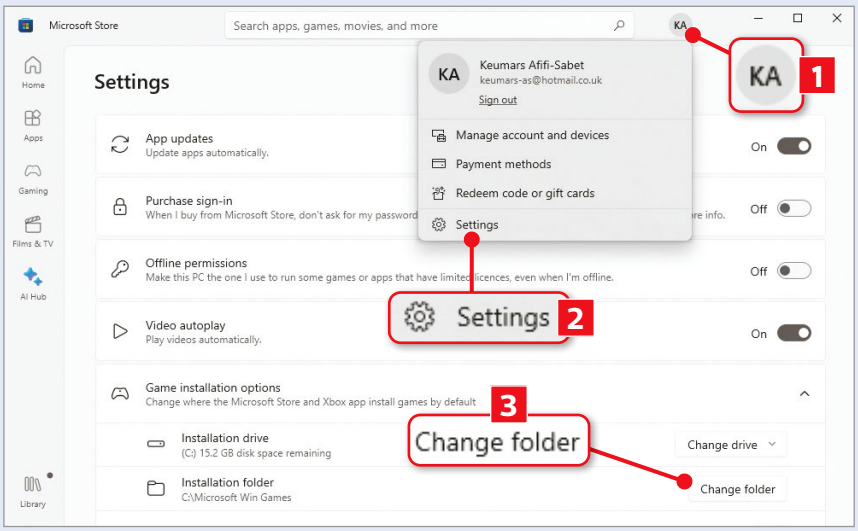


Click Next, type a name for your shortcut (for example, MaxVol 2), then click Finish. Next, right-click the shortcut and choose Properties. Select the Shortcut tab 3 then click in the 'Shortcut key:' field. Press M, and the shortcut will change to 'CTRL+ALT+M' 4. Click Apply. From now, tapping that shortcut will maximise your PC's volume.

WINDOWS 10 & 11

Change the install destination when downloading games

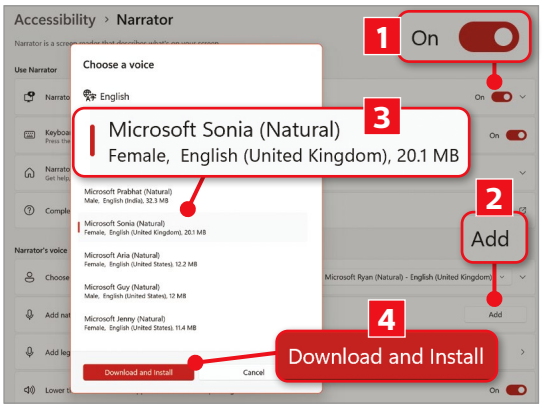
Microsoft has updated its app store (to version 22310) so you can choose which drive or folder on your computer you want to install games. Open the app, click your profile icon (1 in our screenshot), then Settings 2. Under 'Game installation options' you can change the 'Installation drive' from C: or change the folder. In our example, we clicked 'Change folder' 3 next to 'Installation folder' and File Explorer opened, letting us choose a new destination to save games. We created a new folder called 'Microsoft Win Games' then clicked Select Folder.



WINDOWS 11 INSIDER

Preview new voices on Narrator

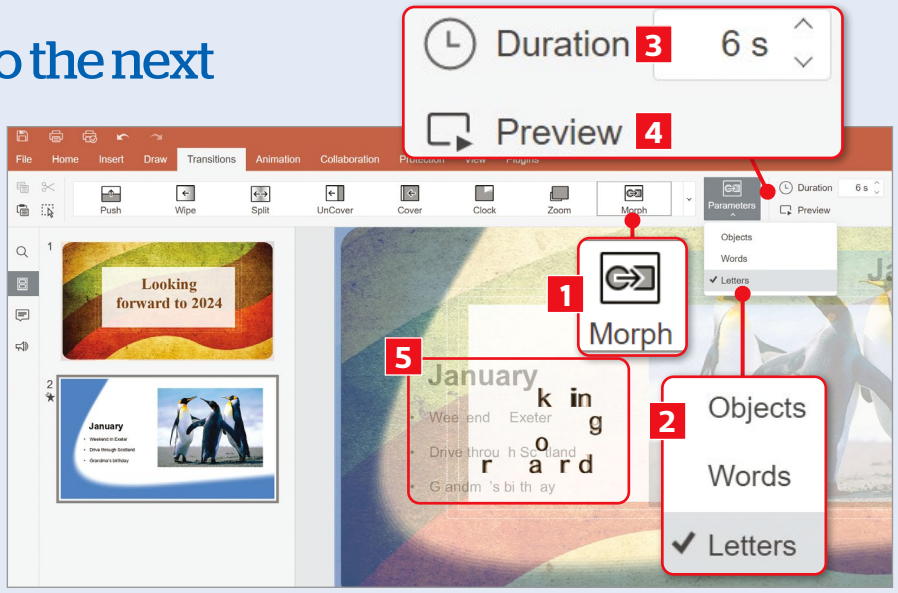
If you're a Windows Insider you can now listen to previews of voices on Narrator to see whether you like them. Previously, you had to download the voices to find out whether they suited you. The change is part of build 22635.2771, available on the Insider Beta channel (www.snipca.com/48424).



First, open Narrator Settings by pressing Windows key+Ctrl+N. Now turn Narrator to On (1 in our screenshot above). Under the 'Narrator's voice' heading select Add 2 next to 'Add natural voices'. There are two 'UK English' options – 'Microsoft Sonia (Natural)' 3 and 'Microsoft Ryan (Natural)', which we've already installed. Click a voice to hear it. If you like it, click 'Download and Install' 4. It will be the default voice for Narrator. You can switch voices by clicking the dropdown menu next to 'Choose a voice'.

ONLYOFFICE

Morph one slide into the next



New in OnlyOffice 7.5 is the Morph effect for presentations that makes objects, words or letters form part of the transition between slides – as one fades into another. You can see an example at www.snipca.com/48408.

Click the slide you want to add the transition to in the left-hand navigation panel, then click Transitions in the top toolbar. Next, click Morph (1 in our screenshot) followed by the Parameters dropdown menu and choose whether objects, words or letters 2 will morph between your slides. We chose Letters, and changed the duration setting to six seconds 3.

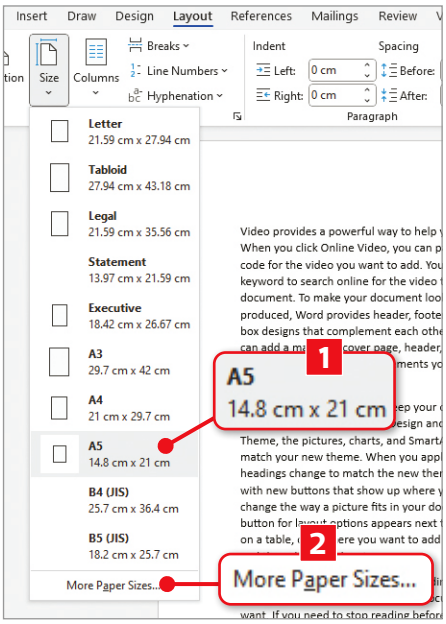
Once you've finished the transition, click Preview 4 to see what it looks like. In our example, some letters from the first slide are 'morphing' into letters from the second 5.

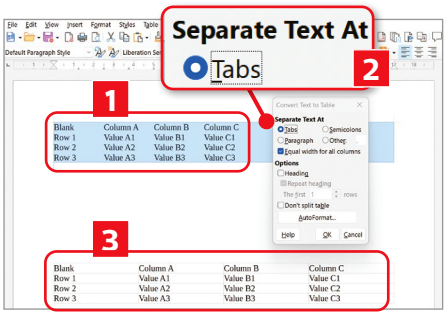
MICROSOFT WORD

Change the page size of your document

After you've created your document, you can change the size of the page at any time. This is useful if, for example, you need to resize it so you can print in a specific format.

Click the Layout tab then the Size dropdown button. In our example, we set our page to A5 (1 in our screenshot below). Click 'More Paper Sizes...' 2 to open the Page Setup settings menu and change options, including margins and page orientation.





LIBREOFFICE WRITER & MICROSOFT WORD

Turn text into a table

When adding a table to a document, it feels natural to create an empty table then add your data. But both LibreOffice Writer and Microsoft Word let you type your data first and then convert it into a table. This is particularly useful if you don't know how many rows or columns you'll eventually need.

In Writer, type your data, including any column or row headers. It makes sense to separate each column by pressing the Tab key. Next, highlight the data (1 in our screenshot above), then click Table at the top. Next, select Convert, then 'Text to Table...'.

In the box that appears, choose Tabs under 'Separate Text At' 2. Alternatively, separate text using semi-colons, paragraphs or your own choice. Click OK and your data will be placed inside a table 3.

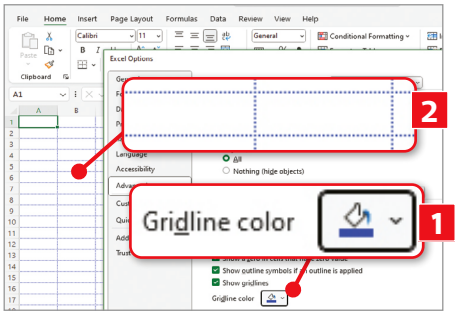
You can also do this in Microsoft Word. After typing your data, highlight it and click the Insert tab at the top. Click the dropdown menu next to Table and select 'Convert Text to Table...'. The box that appears is arranged differently, but follow the same steps as above and the data you type will become a table just as it does in LibreOffice Writer.

MICROSOFT EXCEL

Change the colour of gridlines

The gridlines in Excel spreadsheets are light grey by default, but you can change this through the settings menu to any colour of your choosing.

Click File at the top, then Options to open the Excel Options window. Next, click Advanced in the menu on the left, then scroll down until you see the 'Display options for this worksheet:' heading. Click the paint-bucket icon by 'Gridline color' (1 in our screenshot below) and choose from the colours available. We picked Blue in our example 2. Click OK to confirm.



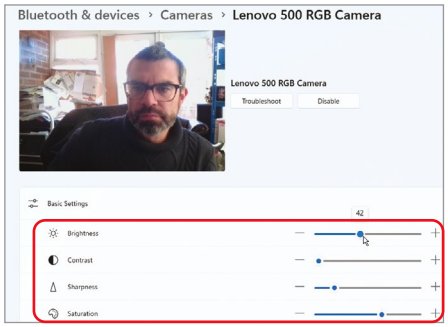
In The Club

Run a club or society? Here's how your tech can make it easier

Use a live video feed in PowerPoint

Presenter view in Microsoft PowerPoint makes it easy to deliver all kinds of material – from photo slideshows to background information like an itinerary or statistics. But what if you're not in the room when your presentation is being delivered? Or you're delivering it over the internet? In these situations you can use PowerPoint's Cameo tool to insert yourself into the presentation via a live webcam feed.

First, you need to set up your webcam to use in PowerPoint. In Windows 10 or 11, open Settings and click 'Bluetooth & devices' followed by Cameras. Selecting your camera should open a preview window that lets you make changes like brightness, contrast, sharpness and saturation (see screenshot below). Once done, scroll down to click Camera Privacy Settings and check that 'Let desktop apps access your camera' is switched on.

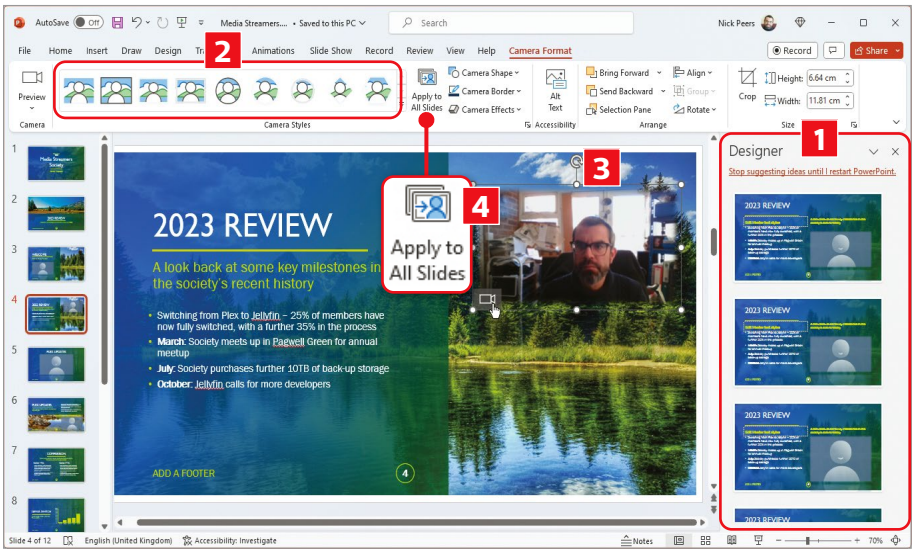


Tweak your webcam's brightness, contrast and sharpness

Prepare your slides

You're now ready to set up your presentation. Open your document in PowerPoint and click the Record tab, where you'll see the Cameo button in the Camera section to the left (1 in our screenshot right). Click this and you'll be given the option to insert a live feed into the current slide or paste it on every single slide in your presentation 2. For now, choose This Slide to add the feed to the current slide only.

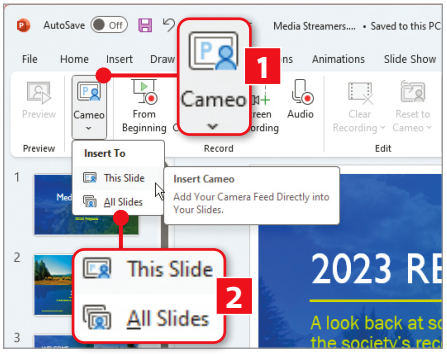
Click the Preview button on the left of the Camera Format tab and after a short pause you should see your webcam's feed appear in the frame. By default, it will appear displayed inside a circular frame that's placed in the bottom-right corner of each slide.



You can choose from alternative layouts and frame templates

You'll see a Designer panel appear on the right offering alternative layouts for the frame (1 in our screenshot above). Choose one, or resize and position the frame yourself using its picture anchors – the white dots around the outside. You can also choose a different shape by clicking the Camera Format tab that appears when you select a frame.

Next to the Preview button are nine different frame templates 2. Hover your cursor over each and the frame will update to give you a preview. Click a template to select it, or click the Camera Shape, Camera Border and Camera Effects buttons to the right to explore more options, including shadows, reflections and soft edges. Having looked at the options, we moved our video frame up, and chose the Soft Edge Rectangle template 3.



Move your video feed to where you want it, then add effects like soft edges

Click the 'Apply to All Slides' button 4 and your video feed will be duplicated across all your slides, including any changes you made to the frame. You can then go through each slide in turn to further tweak the size, placement and shape. Use the controls in the Arrange and Size section of the Camera Format tab to help position the feed so that it doesn't obscure other information on the selected slide.

Present to your audience

Once your presentation is ready, you'll need some way to stream your screen to your audience. If you're not broadcasting on a video chat platform such as Microsoft Teams, we suggest using OBS Studio (https://obsproject.com) to set up a live broadcast – see Issue 614's In The Club for instructions.

Once you've set up your stream and started broadcasting, return to PowerPoint and switch to the Slide Show tab. Click 'From Beginning' to start presenting to your audience.

Next issue: Create and share a club calendar for 2024

What's All the Fuss About...

Cocreator

Produce images from anything you type using Microsoft's new tool

What is it?

A new tool in Microsoft's Paint app that uses artificial intelligence (AI) to turn your typed suggestions into images. It's powered by the pioneering AI technology DALL·E 3 (www.snipca.com/48530).

Can it turn anything into an image?

It certainly has a good stab at it. Feeling festive, we typed 'Father Christmas using a laptop while drinking mulled wine in a pub', and chose the Oil Painting style. Thirty seconds later it produced three images, the best of which was the picture you see on the right. It's a suitably cosy scene, though Santa is asking for trouble by balancing his drink on his laptop. From our tests, Cocreator is fast, accurate and easy to use. That's the good news.

What's the bad news?

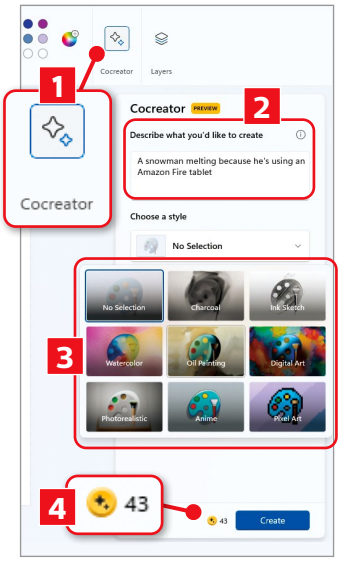
It's only available in Windows 11. Microsoft launched the tool for Windows Insiders in September, and has now added it to the full version of the operating system.

Will it come to Windows 10?

A few months ago we'd have said definitely not. Back then, Microsoft was sticking to its plan of not updating Windows 10 with new features. But it has recently added some of Windows 11's latest tools to 10, including a new backup tool, a redesigned Settings and – most significantly – the AI tool Copilot. This has sparked rumours that Microsoft will extend support for Windows 10 beyond October 2025. That still seems a long shot, though it wouldn't surprise us if Microsoft keeps adding smallish tools like Cocreator as a sop to Windows 10 users.

So how do I use it?

First, bear in mind that Microsoft is adding it to Windows 11 PCs gradually, so you may not have it yet. But it has appeared on our machines, and many people online say they've got it. To find out, search for and open Paint, then look for the Cocreator button on the toolbar (1 in our screenshot below). Click this, skip through Microsoft's instructions, then type a description in the panel that appears 2. Now click the 'Choose a style' dropdown menu and pick a style for the image 3. As well as Oil Painting options include Charcoal, Watercolor, Digital Art and Photorealistic. Click the blue 'Create' button at the bottom and after about half a minute Cocreator will produce three thumbnail images.



Type a description and pick a style – but keep an eye on how many credits you have left

What can I do with them?

Double-click one and it'll appear in Paint, where you can edit it. Alternatively, click the three dots at the top right of the thumbnail and you can save the image. Don't waste your creations though – Microsoft only gives you 50 to use. You'll see how many credits you've got left at the bottom 4.

What happens when you run out?

Microsoft hasn't said – though it might update this page with details: www.snipca.com/48531. It probably wants to limit the use of Cocreator for now to avoid teething problems. If you do run out, or you use Windows 10, you can also create images on Microsoft's search engine Bing which, like Cocreator, is powered by DALL·E 3.

How do I do that?

Visit www.bing.com/chat, then type a request to draw something and press Enter. The more details you give – such as a style, mood and colour – the better the images will be. Bing will then show four images, and give you options to tweak them.

Email us any masterpieces you create and we'll publish the best on our Letters page. Who knows – they might be as good as these: www.snipca.com/48536.

What You Must UNINSTALL in 2024

Don't let unsafe software, awful apps and dodgy extensions give you an unhappy new year. **Robert Irvine** reveals the rubbish PC and phone tools you should remove today

WHAT YOU CAN DO

- Permanently remove Microsoft Edge from your PC
- Banish the new Copilot tool from Windows 10 and 11
- Open files in RAR format without using WinRAR
- Edit and sign PDFs without paying for bloated software
- Ditch 'free' programs that keep nagging you to pay
- Stop using useless video downloaders and ad blockers
- Uninstall dangerous mobile apps that spy on you

In our 'Best Free Downloads for 2024' Cover Feature in Issue 672, we recommended lots of fantastic programs, apps and other freebies you'll be able to download in the coming year. However, the start of a new year is also the perfect time to start planning what to get rid of – not only to make room for the good stuff, but to purge your PC and phone of junk.

In 2023, we've seen plenty of once-great software become bloated with pointless tools, continually nag you to upgrade to a paid-for version and suffer serious privacy and security flaws. Browser extensions and mobile apps have been secretly injected with malicious code to spy on users and steal their data, and hackers have capitalised on the AI craze by creating fake and dangerous copies of popular tools.

Sadly, these trends look set to continue into 2024, along with new types of scams – see our feature on page 62. This makes it all the more important to tackle potential annoyances, rip-offs and threats now – before it's too late.

In this feature, we explain how to future-proof your computer and mobile devices by uninstalling everything that could compromise them in 2024. This includes unsafe programs, dodgy apps and useless extensions, and built-in Windows tools you never use. We also reveal the best free uninstallers to rid your PC of this rubbish.

WINDOWS TOOLS YOU CAN NOW UNINSTALL

Preinstalled Microsoft apps

One of the biggest annoyances in Windows 11 – and to a lesser extent Windows 10 – is the number of Microsoft apps that come already installed. These include tools such as Microsoft Photos, Xbox Game Bar, Paint 3D, To Do and Mixed Reality Portal, which you probably never use – or perhaps tried once before switching to a better alternative.

Although you can ignore these apps, they still clutter your hard drive and Start menu, so it makes sense to remove them. However, when you try to get rid of certain Microsoft tools through the Apps section of the Settings app ('Apps & features' in Windows 10), you'll find their Uninstall buttons are greyed out – meaning you're stuck with them.

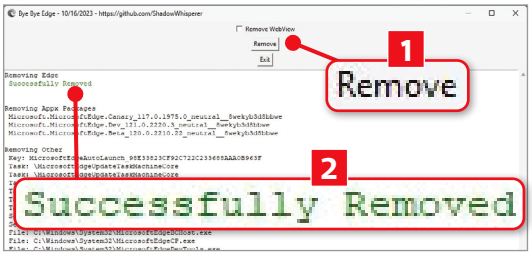
Happily, in 2024 Windows 11 will be updated to allow you to uninstall more Microsoft apps, including Camera, Cortana, Photos, People and Remote Desktop (see www.snipca.com/48452). In the meantime, you can remove these unwanted tools – and others with greyed-out Uninstall buttons – using the brilliant O&O AppBuster (www.snipca.com/48453).

Download and run this free program – it doesn't require installation – then click its Windows tab to see all the apps (as opposed to traditional desktop programs) installed on your Windows 10 or 11 PC.

The list includes apparently unremovable Microsoft apps, hidden apps that aren't visible but still take up space and apps you've downloaded from the Microsoft Store. Select all the junk apps you want to get rid of (1 in our screenshot below) and click the Remove button 2. You can choose whether to uninstall them for all users of your computer or just you.

Microsoft Edge in the UK

Microsoft recently announced that all Windows 11 users in the European Economic Area (EEA) will soon be able to uninstall Edge, in accordance with the European Commission's Digital Markets Act, which comes into effect in March 2024. But because the UK is no longer part of the EEA, the change won't apply to us.



Uninstall Edge from Windows 10 and 11 using Remove-MS-Edge

If you really don't want Edge on your PC, you can uninstall it from Windows 10 and 11 using Remove-MS-Edge (www.snipca.com/48454 – click the 'RemoveEdge_GUI.exe' download link).

This free tool may trigger a security warning from your browser because it's 'not commonly downloaded', but it's safe to use, so click 'Continue download'. If Microsoft Defender SmartScreen also shows a warning, click 'More info' then 'Run anyway'.

When Remove-MS-Edge opens, untick the 'Remove WebView' box and click Remove (1 in our screenshot above right). Once Edge is uninstalled, you'll see a 'Successfully Removed' message 2. You can always reinstall the browser later if you change your mind.

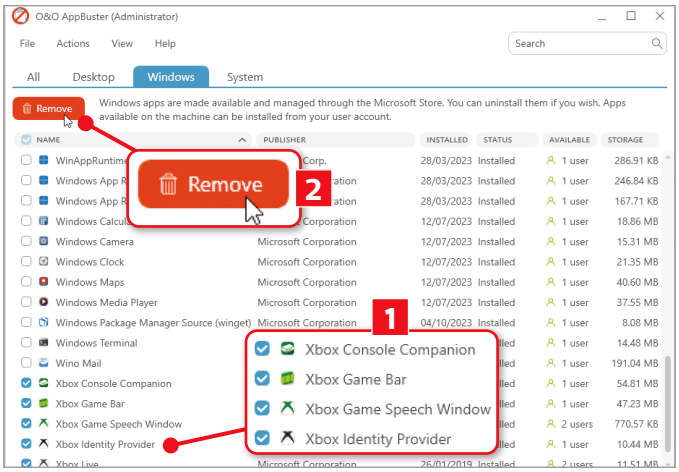
Microsoft's new Copilot tool

If you're not keen on Microsoft's new AI tool Copilot, you may want to remove it from Windows 11 – or from Windows 10, when it gets the feature in 2024 (see Issue 671, News, page 6).

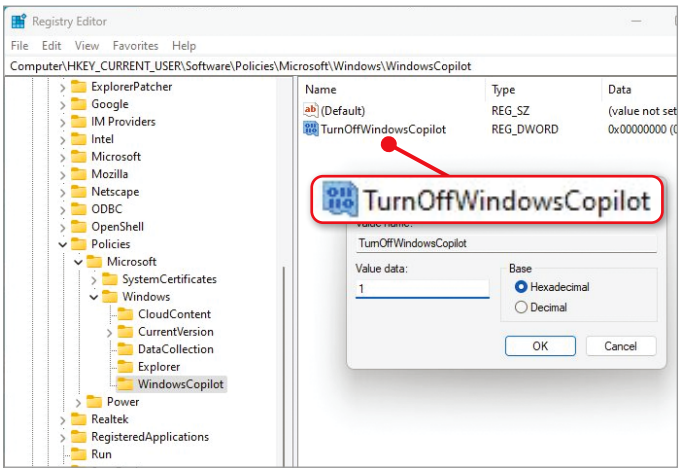
You can hide Copilot by right-clicking the taskbar, selecting 'Taskbar settings' and switching its setting to Off, but – because it's now baked into Windows 11 – you can't uninstall it completely. The closest solution is to disable the AI feature, so it doesn't run in the background or reappear.

If you have Windows 11 Pro (or Windows 10 Pro when Copilot arrives), you can do this via the Local Group Policy Editor. Press Windows key+R to open the Run box, type gpedit.msc then press Enter. When the Local Group Policy Editor opens, click the arrows next to User Configuration then Administrative Templates, followed by Windows Components. Select 'Windows Copilot' then double-click 'Turn off Windows Copilot' and choose Enabled. Click 'OK' or Apply to confirm.

In Home editions of Windows, you'll need to tweak the registry to disable Copilot. Type regedit into the search box and click 'Run as administrator' under Registry Editor. Navigate to the key **HKEY_CURRENT_USER\Software\Policies\Microsoft\Windows**. Expand the Windows key and select the WindowsCopilot subkey. Right-click in the right-hand pane and choose New then 'DWORD (32-bit) Value'. Name this value TurnOffWindowsCopilot (see screenshot below), then right-click it and choose Modify. Enter a 'Value data' of 1 and click OK to Confirm. Restart your PC and Copilot will now be gone. To get it back, either delete the new registry value or change its value data to 0.



Use O&O AppBuster to remove apps Microsoft has installed on your PC



You can disable Copilot in Windows if you don't like the new AI tool

SOFTWARE YOU MUST UNINSTALL

Google Chrome

In 2024, Google will make two major changes to Chrome that prioritise its own profits over the privacy and convenience of the browser's three billion users.

First, it will start phasing out third-party cookies in favour of its own ad-tracking system called Topics, and expects websites to adapt accordingly.

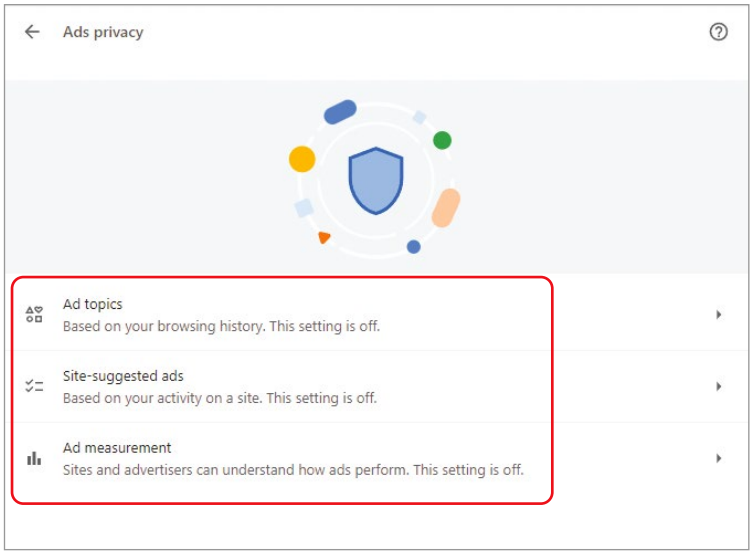
Google claims Topics, which is part of its Privacy Sandbox initiative, offers greater privacy than cookies, because it groups you with other Chrome users with similar interests, rather than using unique identifiers. However, cookies generally are easy to block, whereas Topics puts all the power in Google's hands. As the privacy group EFF says: "Even if it's better than third-party cookies, the Privacy Sandbox is still tracking, it's just done by one company instead of dozens" (www.snipca.com/48462).

Currently, you can opt out of Topics in Chrome by disabling the 'Ads privacy' options (see screenshot above right) in the browser's 'Privacy and security' settings. However, this may change as the year goes on, and while we're no fan of tracking cookies, we don't believe Google's plan is the only viable alternative.

Second, despite widespread opposition, Google is planning to drop support for Manifest V2 extensions in Chrome, and force developers to use its new Manifest V3 framework. This will stop many ad blockers working properly, because it limits the number of rules they can use and restricts them to blocking specific URLs.

Google says Manifest V3 will improve user security, but as the company has been clamping down on ad blockers on YouTube, we suspect it has an ulterior motive. Perhaps Google is trying to distract us from the serious problem of Chrome's weak security. In 2023, it had to issue numerous emergency security updates to patch zero-day vulnerabilities in the browser, including one that could be used to install spyware (www.snipca.com/48478).

As we recommended in our 'Stop using browsers that track you' Cover Feature in Issue 668 (get it from www.snipca.com/48463), Brave (www.brave.com) is the best and most private alternative to Chrome. Its powerful Shields system automatically blocks most ads and trackers, and won't be affected by the Manifest V3 update.



You can opt out of Chrome's new ad-tracking system – but that may change in 2024

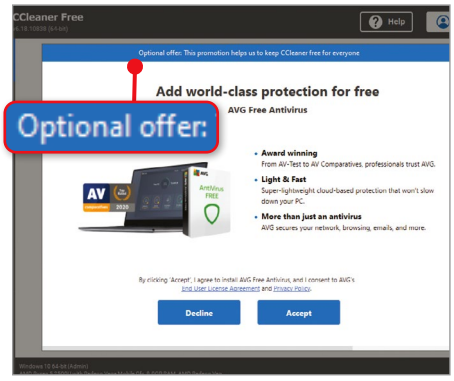
CCleaner

We wish that 2024 was the year we could start recommending CCleaner again, but sadly there's now even more reason to uninstall this fallen giant. In October, the PC-optimisation tool admitted that the names and contact details of some users had been stolen in a major security breach and "exposed on the dark web" (see Issue 671, page 8).

This was far from the first security incident to affect CCleaner in recent years – it has been hacked several times and even used to distribute malware, which is ironic considering it's owned by cybersecurity company Avast.

CCleaner now comes bundled with 'offers' for other Avast products such as AVG Antivirus (see screenshot below) and restricts many features to its paid-for versions, which cost from £24.95 a year.

For a free – and junk-free – clean-up tool that won't compromise your privacy, we recommend BleachBit (www.bleachbit.org), the relaunched System Ninja (www.snipca.com/48468 - see Issue 669, page 38) or – when it finally launches fully in 2024 – Microsoft's PC Manager (www.snipca.com/4828).



It's time to ditch CCleaner in 2024 for a safer, less restrictive and junk-free alternative

WinRAR

WinRAR will celebrate its 29th birthday in 2024, but perhaps it's time this ageing compression tool was retired.

In August, it was reported that a serious zero-day vulnerability in the software had been exploited by hackers since April to create malicious RAR and ZIP archives (www.snipca.com/48470). Although WinRAR released an update that fixed the security flaw, Google warned in October that "many users still seem to be vulnerable" (www.snipca.com/48471) because they were still using an older version.

That's perhaps unsurprising because WinRAR doesn't include an Update button, other than an option to buy a licence (see screenshot below). Once the only program to support the RAR format,

Why bother with WinRAR when there are easier ways to open RAR files?

it looks increasingly redundant now that more versatile free compression tools such as 7-Zip (www.7-zip.org) let you open RAR archives, as does Windows 11 since the 23H2 update (www.snipca.com/48473). Unless you're one of the few people who specifically needs to create (as well as open) RAR files, there's little point using WinRAR in 2024.

Foxit PDF Reader

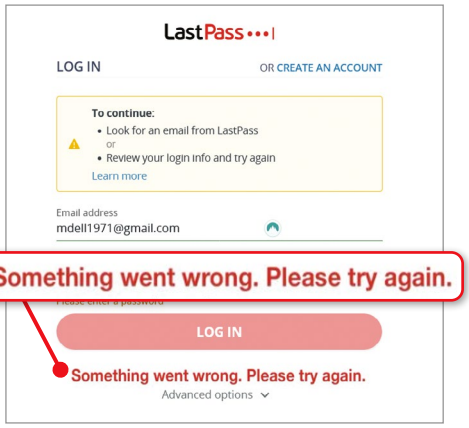
Once one of the best free alternatives to Adobe Acrobat Reader, Foxit PDF Reader is now more frustrating than useful.

Not only is it slow, but many of its features require you to pay for Foxit's eSign service or PDF Editor program, which costs a whopping £91.48 a year following a 14-day free trial (see screenshot below). Ads for these, Foxit's mobile apps and third-party companies such as office-supplies store Staples litter its interface.

The latest version of Foxit PDF Reader adds an AI assistant, which summarises the content of PDF files and answers questions about them, but this is only available if you register for a Foxit account. It also suffers frequent security flaws that could be exploited by hackers – most recently a year ago: www.snipca.com/48474.

A much better alternative for 2024 is the fantastic PDFgear (www.pdfgear.com). This combines PDF-viewing, converting and editing tools in one free, easy-to-use program, which doesn't require an account or nag you to upgrade to a paid-for version.

PDFgear introduced an AI assistant long before Foxit and it's particularly useful for creating and signing forms – see our 'Create a fillable PDF form for free' Workshop in Issue 659 (page 38).



In June 2023, LastPass locked some users out of their accounts

SUPERAntiSpyware has become the type of annoyance it's designed to remove

LastPass

If 2023 was a dreadful year for LastPass, it was even worse for the password manager's poor 30 million users, when it emerged that two security breaches the company suffered in 2022 were even more serious than thought. Hackers got their hands on unencrypted data that included usernames, email addresses, phone numbers and IP addresses, and later used this information to steal cryptocurrency from LastPass users (www.snipca.com/48476).

LastPass responded by telling its customers to change all their passwords, including their master password, but in June some users were locked out of their accounts when they tried to reset their two-factor authentication (2FA) method (see screenshot above). With several features now limited to its paid-for version – including access to your passwords on more than one device, and support for YubiKeys – we advise giving LastPass a hard pass in 2024.

Switch to Bitwarden's free plan (www.snipca.com/48477) to sync your passwords across all your desktop and mobile devices, and be assured that they're encrypted and secure. As we explained in our Workshop in Issue 672 (page 38), Bitwarden now supports passkeys to give you an even safer and easier way to sign into online accounts.

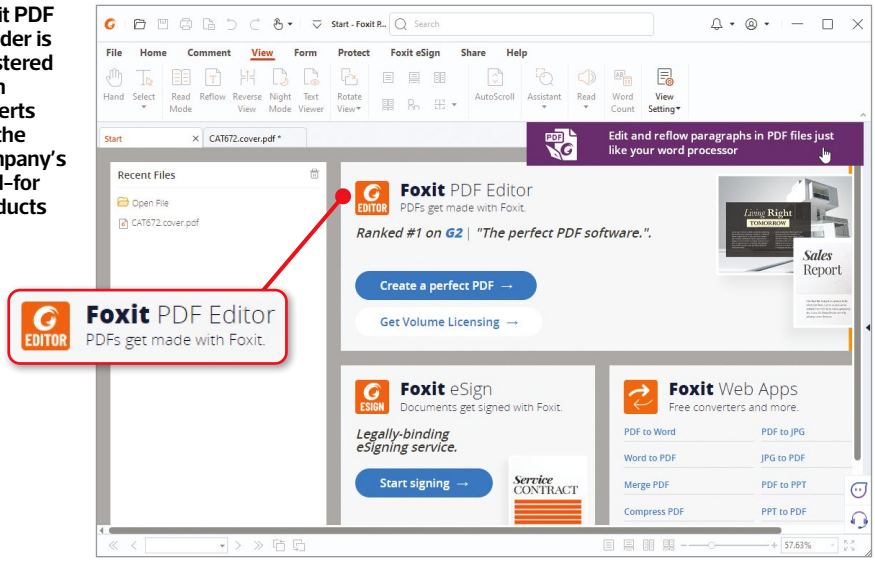
SUPERAntiSpyware

Similar to CCleaner, which was an excellent program until its developer was bought by a larger company, in 2023 the security tool SUPERAntiSpyware turned to the dark side following its acquisition by Californian company RealDefense.

Formerly adept at scanning your PC for threats including spyware, adware, keyloggers, Trojans and browser hijackers, SUPERAntiSpyware has now itself become a potentially unwanted program (PUP). Its Free Edition is stuffed with messages urging you to upgrade to the Pro X version for $20 (£16) a year, and locks most of its features until you comply. It even opens tabs in your browser that take you to the checkout page for the software, and adds three different entries to your Start menu, including SUPERAntiSpyware Registration Activation. Talk about pushy!

Also alarming is SUPERAntiSpyware's updated privacy policy. This asks you to agree to "provide your personally identifiable information to third parties", and authorise the company to "obtain various information and reports about you". As the program is supposed to prevent spying, not engage in it, we strongly advise uninstalling it in 2024.

Microsoft Defender Antivirus – which is part of Windows Security in Windows 10 and 11 – offers reliable, real-time protection against the latest security threats, and if you need a second opinion download the free version of Malwarebytes (www.snipca.com/48491).



Foxit PDF Reader is plastered with adverts for the company's paid-for products

Computer active

READER OFFER!

Buy Windows 11 Pro for just £79.99!

In this special offer you can buy **Windows 11 Pro** for just £79.99 – that's £140 cheaper than Microsoft's full price of £219.99.

To buy **Windows 11 Pro**, visit **www.snipca.com/41588** and click the red **Buy Now** button on the right.

If you have any questions about your order please email **editor@computeractive.co.uk**

JUST SO YOU KNOW...

This offer can be used by one person only, and expires at midnight on **2 January, 2024**. It's a lifetime licence for one computer.

BROWSER EXTENSIONS YOU MUST UNINSTALL

Dodgy video downloaders

Tools that let you download videos from websites are among the most popular extensions for Chromium browsers and Firefox – though YouTube downloaders are banned from the Chrome Web Store. However, they're also often dubious, containing code that hijacks your browser, displays ads and steals your data.

Even video downloaders that aren't malicious may fail to work as promised or ask you to pay to unlock certain settings. User reviews may warn you about these dodgy extensions, but their ratings can be offset by fake reviews, so it's best to be cautious.

Shockingly, a downloader called SaveFrom.net Helper (pictured above right), which Panda Security flagged as malicious back in May because it "collects user data like IP addresses and browsing behaviour" (www.snipca.com/48488), is still available in the Chrome Web Store. Stick with video-downloading tools that work independently of your browser, such as 4K Video Downloader+ (www.snipca.com/48487).

Fake AI extensions

The popularity of AI tools such as ChatGPT in 2023 inevitably led to a rise in malicious browser extensions that exploited interest in the new technology.

As one security expert warned in June: "Most ChatGPT extensions available on the Chrome Web Store are alarmingly high risk. They can steal sensitive personal information and login credentials, display unwanted targeted ads and slow browser speeds, and inject malicious code" (www.snipca.com/48492).

One notorious example copied the name of a legitimate add-on, 'ChatGPT for Google', and stole data from 9,000 users before it was identified and removed. Others, which you should uninstall immediately if you have them include 'ChatGPT Assistant - Smart Search' and 'Quick access to Chat GPT'.

That's not to suggest all AI add-ons are risky – we've recommended some in our Browser Tips section in 2023 – but they require extra vigilance. Always check the developer and required permissions, study reviews carefully (in case they've been generated using AI) and watch out for suspicious activity such as page redirects and pop-ups.

The dodgy downloader SaveFrom.net Helper is still available from the Chrome Web Store

Awful ad blockers

As adverts became more pervasive – and therefore difficult to avoid – in 2023, it's no surprise more extensions appeared that promised to block them. Not only were most of these ad blockers ineffective, but some also contained malicious code and mimicked the names of popular add-ons to trick users into installing them.

In October, AdBlock warned that extensions with similar names "may contain adware or malware that can infect your computer" (www.snipca.com/48494 – see our screenshot below for an example).

Other dodgy ad blockers included Crystal Ad Block (which attracted five million users before removal), Alfablocker and Adblock Dragon.

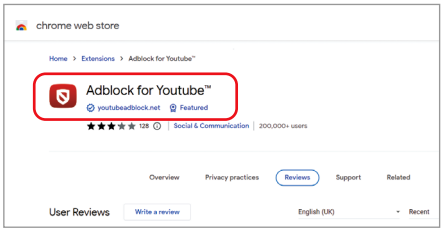
In our 'Switch your ad blocker' feature in Issue 664 (get it from www.snipca.com/47812), we recommended uBlock Origin (www.snipca.com/47086) and AdGuard (www.snipca.com/48497) as the most powerful and trustworthy tools for blocking ads. You'll find links to their extensions for different browsers on their websites, if you're worried about being tricked by malicious copycats.

Free VPNs

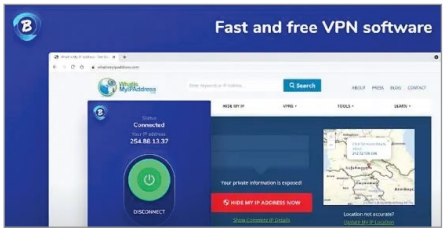
Installing a free VPN extension can compromise your privacy rather than protect it, as you risk details of your browsing activities being shared, sold and used to target you with ads. For example, in June an extension called Brisk VPN (pictured below right) was removed from the Chrome Web Store after some users reported that it contained malware. The free VPN was declared "risky to use as it requires a number of sensitive permissions that can potentially harm your browser and steal your data" (www.snipca.com/48619) – which is confirmed by Hola's privacy policy (www.snipca.com/48622) and FAQ (www.snipca.com/48623).

There are also privacy concerns about the popular extension Hola VPN. The independent VPN-review site Top10VPN states that this free VPN "logs all of your online activity, shares your information and doesn't encrypt your connection" (www.snipca.com/48621).

Because VPN extensions are technically proxies, you're safest to use tools from official VPN providers such as NordVPN, ProtonVPN and Windscribe, though you may need a subscription.



Dubious ad blockers like this replicate the names of popular tools

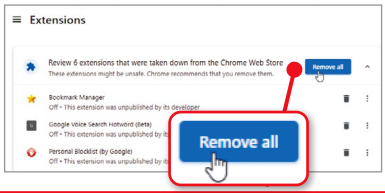


Be wary of free VPNs like Brisk VPN, which may steal your data

Get alerts about malicious extensions

If you stick with Chrome, you'll be pleased that version 117, released in September, introduced a long-overdue security feature that warns you about potentially unsafe extensions. This tells you which tools you've installed have since been removed from the Chrome Web Store, usually because they've been found to contain malware or privacy threats.

You'll find the new option in the 'Privacy and security' section of the browser's Settings under the 'Safety check' heading. It lists the names of extensions that have been taken down from the Chrome Web Store and recommends that you review them. Click 'Remove all' (see screenshot) to uninstall the risky add-ons listed.

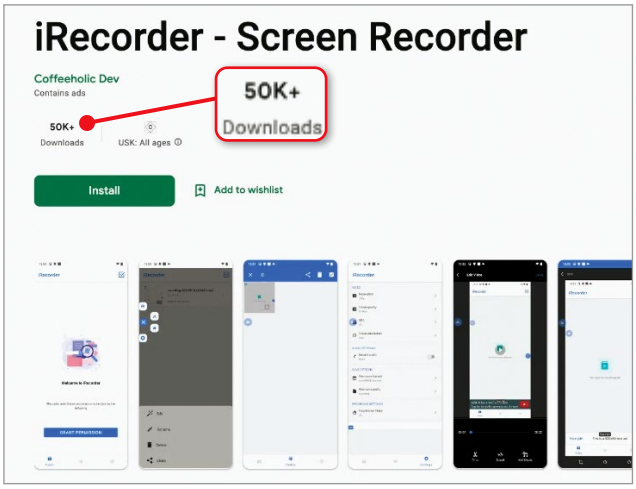


PHONE & TABLET APPS YOU MUST UNINSTALL

Spying screen recorders

According to Kaspersky, Android apps containing malware clocked up over 600 million downloads from the Google Play Store in 2023 (www.snipca.com/48504). One of the most devious examples was screen-recording app iRecorder, which was updated with malicious code a year after it was first listed on the store.

This remote-access Trojan code enabled the app to record and upload audio from a device's microphone every 15 minutes, and steal documents, media files and browsing data. More than 50,000 users installed iRecorder (see screenshot right) before it was removed from Google Play in May, so make sure it's not present on your phone or tablet. If you need a screen recorder, try the versatile AZ Recorder for Android (www.snipca.com/48519) and iOS (www.snipca.com/48520).



The malicious app iRecorder has been downloaded 50,000 times

Chinese file managers

Apps with Chinese origins such as TikTok and Temu were among the most popular of 2023, but two you must uninstall are 'File Recovery & Data Recovery' (pictured below left) and File Manager, from the developer Wang Tom. In July, these Android file managers – which had been installed by more than 1.5 million users – were exposed as spyware by mobile security company Pradeo (www.snipca.com/48506).

Dodgy file managers like this one could be sending your private data to China

Although the Google Play Store pages for both apps claimed they didn't collect user data, Pradeo found they were secretly sending sensitive information to malicious servers in China. This included contacts lists, media files, user locations, network provider codes and details of phone models and operating systems. However, there is a trustworthy file manager for Android, called File Manager (www.snipca.com/48521), which won't share your data.

AI chatbot apps

As with browser extensions (see page 55), dubious AI chatbot apps have flooded both the Google Play Store and Apple App Store over the past year, hoping to cash in on the current craze.

In May, Sophos warned that many such apps are 'fleeceware', which means they lure users with free trials before coercing them into paying for expensive subscriptions – and bombarding them with ads if they don't (www.snipca.com/48511). Some even have names that mimic popular AI tools, such as 'ChatGBT' instead of ChatGPT. Now that the latter is available on Android (www.snipca.com/48512) and iOS (www.snipca.com/48513), it's much wiser to use its official free app rather than one of the thousands of rip-offs.

Adware games

In September, security company Doctor Web found adware lurking in several games in the Google Play Store, including Agent Shooter, Rainbow Stretch and Rubber Punch 3D (pictured below), with two million downloads between them (www.snipca.com/48515).

Once these apps were installed on Android devices, they hid from users by making their icons and names transparent, and even pretended to be the Chrome browser. The adware runs stealthily in the background, displaying ads that earn money for criminals. If you have any of these games, or others that slow your device and obstruct your screen, get rid of them now.

Rubber Punch 3D is one of many Android games that contains adware

Scan Android apps for privacy risks

Google has responded to the frequent reports of malware-infected apps in the Play Store by adding real-time scanning to its Play Protect feature. This will now thoroughly scan the code of all apps you try to install on your Android phone or tablet, and warn you not to proceed if it detects anything suspicious.

But what about apps you've already installed, which may be quietly updated with elements that compromise your privacy and security? To expose these hidden threats, search for the name of an Android app or paste its Play Store URL into the privacy-audit site Exodus (www.snipca.com/48510).

This will tell you the number, names and nature of trackers the app contains, and the permissions it requires – even when it doesn't mention them on its Play Store page. If these details concern you, uninstall the app straight away.

Alternatively, if you want to keep using the app without being tracked, install DuckDuckGo Private Browser and switch on its App Tracking Protection option.

We explained how to do this in our DuckDuckGo Cover Feature in Issue 662 (get it from www.snipca.com/48111).

BEST FREE UNINSTALLERS FOR 2024

GOLD AWARD

BCUninstaller

www.bcuninstaller.com

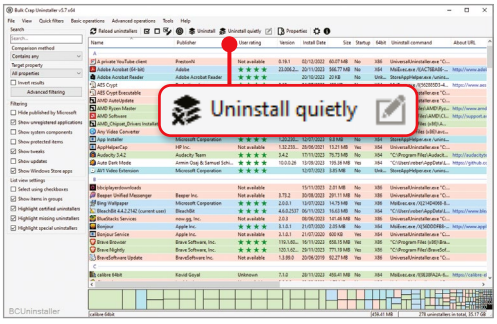
BCUninstaller – short for Bulk Crap Uninstaller – is the most powerful free program for removing rubbish software. It detects all the programs and apps you have installed, and lets you sort them by name, size, publisher, installation date, user rating and many other criteria.

On our PC, it listed 278 entries totalling 35GB, including tools we had no idea were there. BCUninstaller also provides a handy 'treemap' of storage consumption to help you identify the biggest space hogs on your hard drive.

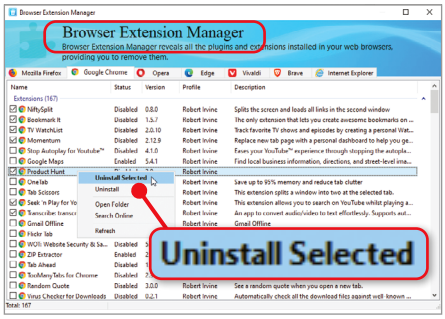
As well as removing programs using their own uninstallers, you can manually uninstall software that doesn't have that option and use BCUninstaller's 'Uninstall quietly' feature (see screenshot below) to avoid having to click confirmation prompts. There's also a Target function, which lets you remove a program by dragging a crosshairs icon over its open window or installation file or folder.

BCUninstaller excels at removing leftover traces of software such as old data files and registry keys, and usefully indicates which ones are safe for you to delete. You can also erase empty folders by choosing 'Clean up "Program Files" folders' in the Tools menu.

With so many options, BCUninstaller can seem confusing at first, and it's slower than rival uninstallers, but it's the most reliable way to purge your PC of junk.



BCUninstaller offers several ways to uninstall software, including 'quietly'



HiBit Uninstaller includes a useful feature for removing browser extensions

SILVER AWARD

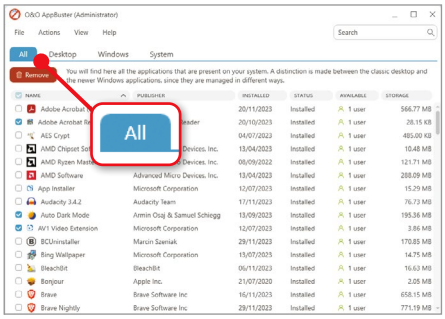
HiBit Uninstaller

www.snipca.com/48528

HiBit Uninstaller doesn't go as deep as BCUninstaller when removing software, but it has a less intimidating interface. This tells you the names, sizes, publishers and install dates of your PC's programs, then lets you uninstall multiple entries in one go.

Initially, HiBit Uninstaller might seem to have missed some of your software, but this is because its default view only lists desktop programs – 163 on our PC, consuming 29GB of space. Click the Tools menu to access additional uninstallers for Microsoft Store apps, old Windows updates and program components, such as drivers and language packs. We particularly like that you can view and remove extensions from your web browsers (see screenshot above), which saves you a great deal of fuss.

There are also options for cleaning the registry, deleting junk files and empty folders, repairing shortcuts, managing startup items and background processes, and more. Incredibly, considering the number of tools it offers, HiBit Uninstaller is completely free to use – with nothing restricted to a paid-for version – and you can even customise its design to suit your taste.



O&O AppBuster now lets you uninstall Windows apps *and* desktop programs

BRONZE AWARD

O&O AppBuster

www.snipca.com/48453

As we mentioned on page 51, O&O AppBuster is the easiest way to remove Windows apps – whether they were installed by Microsoft, your PC's manufacturer or you. Its streamlined interface makes uninstalling unwanted apps as simple as ticking their boxes and clicking Remove, with the option to create a system restore point first.

In April 2023, O&O AppBuster became even more useful by expanding its remit to include desktop programs too. These are listed alphabetically alongside apps on the tool's All tab (see screenshot above), or you can browse separate lists on the Desktop and Windows tabs. Uninstalling these programs is as straightforward as removing apps, though AppBuster detected nine fewer than HiBit Uninstaller. It also lists system tools, but as these can't be uninstalled, this is for reference rather than removal.

Other than letting you reinstall apps, O&O AppBuster doesn't offer extra options, so is less versatile but more convenient than our Gold and Silver award winners. It's portable by default (whereas they have portable versions) and a mere 2MB in size. ca

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USE A VPN without being banned

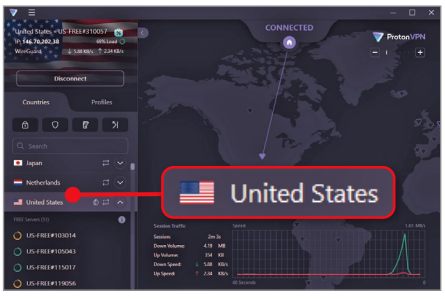
Some websites block and even ban you for trying to access them with a VPN. **Robert Irvine** explains how to retain your privacy online by disguising that you're using a VPN

A VPN is the best way to browse the web privately, but it can also get you in trouble. Websites including Netflix, BBC iPlayer, Amazon, eBay and US streaming service Hulu prohibit you from using a VPN to access their content and services by disguising your IP address. If they detect you're running a VPN, they can not only block your connection but also suspend your account, and even permanently ban you.

Here we explain the best ways to bypass VPN blocks while remaining anonymous online.

Connect to a different VPN server

When a website detects you're using a VPN, and warns you that its content 'isn't available in your country', the first thing to try is switching to a different server. Obviously, if you're attempting to access US Netflix you'll already have selected a US-based server, but it's possible that particular server's set of IP addresses is on the site's blocklist.



Proton VPN lets you choose from dozens of free servers across the US

Services including Netflix, Hulu and Max (formerly HBO Max) are known to keep lists of IP addresses associated with VPNs, so they can block them automatically. Any VPN worth its salt will regularly update its choice of servers to combat this problem, so try connecting to another one in the same country.

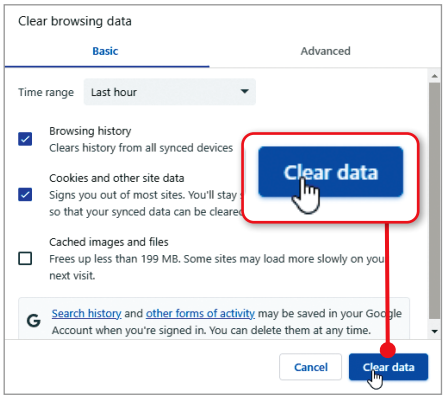
You don't need to pay for a VPN to get this flexibility, even for US servers. Windscribe's free plan (www.snipca.com/48534) lets you choose from servers in 10 US cities, including New York, Los Angeles and Atlanta, while the free version of Proton VPN (www.snipca.com/48539) has 51 servers in unspecified US locations (see screenshot below left).

If the content is only unavailable in the UK, you can try servers in other countries until you find one that isn't blocked. And if none of them work, consider downloading a different VPN.

Clear your browsing data

Although a VPN disguises your location from the moment you connect to a server, data stored in your browser's cache may expose where you *really* are. If a website detects you've previously visited British sites from a UK IP address, it's unlikely to believe you're now suddenly in the US or Japan.

To avoid revealing that you're using a VPN to conceal your whereabouts, clear your browsing history, cookies and site data before you connect to a server. In Chrome and Brave, go to Settings, then 'Privacy and security' and click 'Clear browsing data'. Select 'Browsing history' and 'Cookies and other site data' and click 'Clear data' (see screenshot above) – be aware that this will sign you out of most websites.



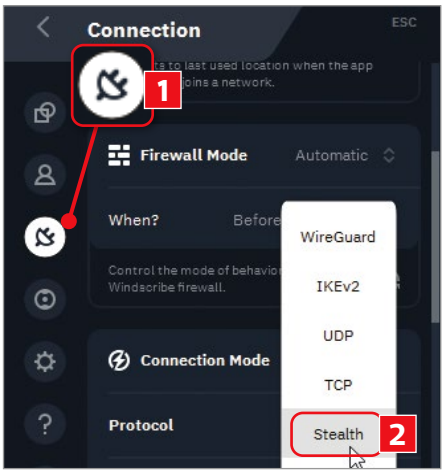
Delete your browsing data to stop websites detecting your real location

In Edge, you'll find this option under 'Privacy, search and services' and in Firefox it's in 'Privacy & Security'. You could also try visiting restricted sites in your browser's private mode.

Activate your VPN's 'stealth mode'

Many VPNs offer a 'stealth' mode or protocol that can bypass most blocking methods. This redirects your internet connection through a special 'obfuscated' server, which disguises that you're using a VPN.

Stealth mode works by making VPN traffic look like normal internet traffic to the site or service you're trying to access – as well as to your ISP and any government



Windscribe's Stealth mode stops sites detecting you're using a VPN

Should you use Tor instead of a VPN?

Tor Browser (www.snipca.com/48550) is the best alternative to a VPN, and similarly hides your location, encrypts your data and unblocks restricted content. Because it's designed to circumvent censorship, it's less likely to be blocked by websites, though you may get occasional prompts to confirm you're not a robot.

On the downside, Tor slows your connection more than a VPN and only encrypts what happens in the browser, not across your whole device. Unlike a VPN, you can't choose a server in a specific country, but instead connect to websites through a series of random relays around the world. This means if you want to watch US Netflix, you'll need to keep refreshing your Tor 'circuit' until it ends with an American IP.

You can combine the benefits of both by using NordVPN's 'Onion over VPN' option (www.snipca.com/48549) or Proton VPN's 'Tor over VPN' (paid-for plans only). This disguises that you're using a VPN and doubles your privacy and security (albeit at the expense of your browsing speed).

snoopers. Its obfuscated protocol won't be recognised by Deep Packet Inspection (DPI) data-scanning technology, which enables companies to identify that you're using a VPN. This adds an extra layer of protection to your encrypted connection, unblocks restricted content on sites that usually detect VPNs and prevents your account from being banned.

Residents of countries where VPNs are outlawed, such as China and Iran, rely on stealth mode to browse anonymously without getting caught.

Paid-for VPNs with a stealth or obfuscation option include NordVPN (www.snipca.com/48532), Mullvad VPN (www.snipca.com/48535) and Surfshark (www.snipca.com/48533), which calls it Camouflage mode. ExpressVPN (www.expressvpn.com) obfuscates your data automatically when it detects a site is using DPI.

You can get the feature for free from Windscribe (www.snipca.com/48537). Open the VPN's desktop app, click the Connection option on the left (this looks like a plug – 1 in our screenshot above) and select Manual next to Connection Mode. Click the dropdown menu next to Protocol and choose Stealth 2.

Proton VPN offers a Stealth protocol in its Android, iOS and macOS apps, but hasn't yet added the feature to its Windows version (see www.snipca.com/48534).

Change your VPN's tunnelling method

If your VPN doesn't have a stealth or obfuscation mode, changing its tunnelling protocol – the method it uses to connect your device to its servers – may stop some sites detecting and blocking VPN traffic.

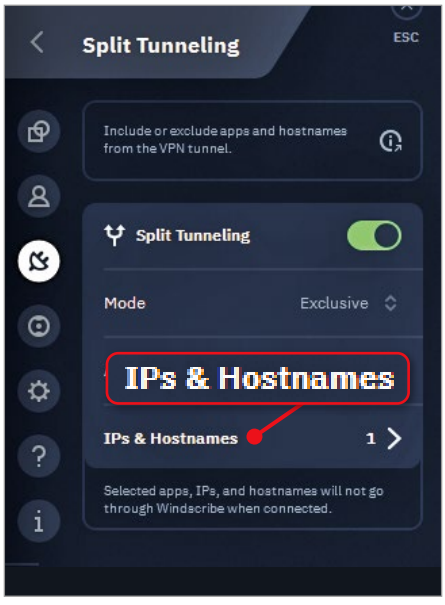
WireGuard, OpenVPN and IKEv2 are the fastest and most reliable protocols, but this also means they're most likely to be identified. Check the Protocol section of your VPN's Connection settings to see if there's another, newer option that may bypass VPN blocks.

Some VPNs offer their own protocols, such as ExpressVPN's Lightway and NordVPN's NordLynx (which is based on WireGuard). Also look for a Split Tunneling option, which lets you restrict your VPN to certain websites, programs and apps. For example, you could exclude iPlayer from the VPN tunnel so the BBC doesn't block you from using it in the UK.

In Windscribe, select Split Tunneling in your Connection settings, choose Exclusive then click 'IPs & Hostnames' (see screenshot below) and enter the domains of sites to exclude.

Get a dedicated IP address

If the website you're trying to access has banned IP addresses from all your VPN's servers, another option is to get a 'dedicated' or static IP address. This is a unique address only you can use, which means sites won't blacklist you because of behaviour by other users with the same IP.



Split tunnelling excludes specific websites from your VPN's encryption

A dedicated IP address helps you avoid being banned for using a VPN

Additionally, rather than be assigned a random IP address each time you connect to a VPN server, a dedicated IP ensures you always have the same address. This stops websites questioning why your IP address keeps changing and banning your account for suspicious activity. You'll also skip CAPTCHAs asking you to prove you're not a robot.

The catch is that you need to pay for a dedicated or static IP address, on top of your monthly VPN subscription, with the price depending on which country you want to pretend to be in.

Surfshark charges from $3.75 (£3) a month for a dedicated IP address (www.snipca.com/48543, see screenshot above) while NordVPN charges from $5.89 (£4.70) a month (www.snipca.com/48544). Windscribe only lets you buy a Static IP add-on if you subscribe to its Pro plan (www.snipca.com/48545). ca

New Year, NEW SCAMS

Fraudsters will target WhatsApp, your phone number, QR codes and more in 2024. Daniel Booth explains how to protect yourself from the latest attacks

Fake WhatsApp Web adverts

Throughout 2023, scammers impersonated friends and family on WhatsApp. They sent messages claiming that their phone was lost or damaged, which 'explained' why they weren't messaging from their normal number. The message typically begins with a generic 'Hi Mum/Dad' and asks for money to buy a new phone or to pay an urgent bill (see screenshot below).

In a new version of this scam, criminals place a fake advert for WhatsApp Web in Google search results. This is a genuine tool that lets you use WhatsApp on your computer. To use the real version, you have to type https://web.whatsapp.com into your address bar (1 in our screenshot below right) and scan the QR code 2. Clicking the fake advert takes you to a bogus site imitating WhatsApp, complete with fake QR code.

If you scan the code, the scammer gains access to your WhatsApp account. Then they start messaging your friends and family to ask for money to cover an emergency, such as medical fees or overdue rent. If the scammer acts fast enough and offers a convincing enough sob story they can collect a lot of money.

Phone calls impersonating loved ones

It's not just on WhatsApp that scammers pretend to be a family member in need. They're also using AI to clone a person's voice – usually taken from an online video or audio clip. All they need is a three-second voice sample to create a fake phone call that sounds authentic. The AI tools are so advanced they can add effects such as nervous laughter, or emotions like fear. Research from McAfee found that one in 12 Britons have been targeted.

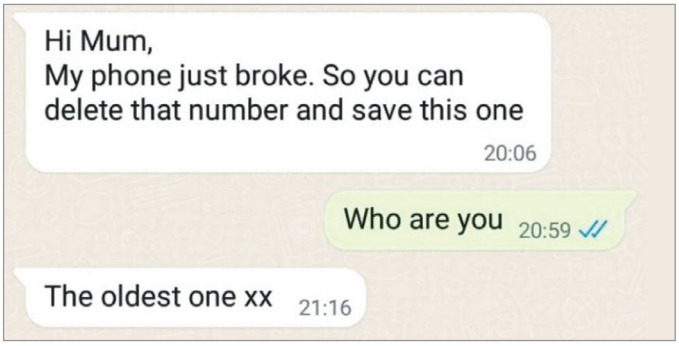
What's worrying is that these scams are so effective even though the technology is still quite primitive. Experts predict that voice-cloning tools will improve greatly in the next year, tempting more scammers to use them. So far most of the scams have adopted the same 'Hi Mum/Dad' strategy of tugging on parental heartstrings. If you receive such a call – no matter how realistic it sounds – always phone your child back on their normal number to check.

And if you think you'll always be able to distinguish an AI voice from the genuine article, listen to these recordings of Prince Harry, Oprah Winfrey, Barack Obama, pop star Miley Cyrus and actor Kevin Hart: www.snipca.com/48561. Guess whether they're AI or real, then check your answers at the bottom of www.snipca.com/48562.

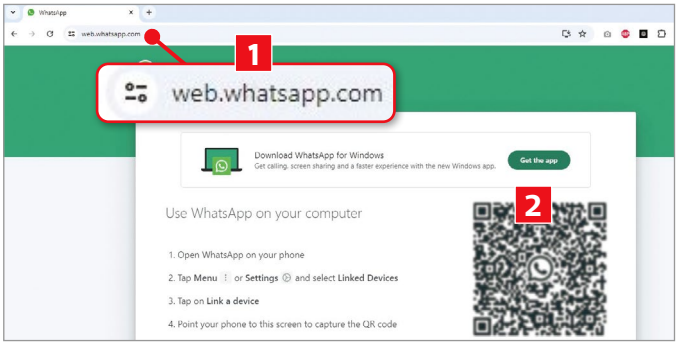
Celebrity deepfake videos

As the above recordings show, it's not difficult to clone the voices of famous people. Combine that with convincing footage of a celebrity and scammers have another method to swindle you.

This was amply demonstrated in 2023 when fraudsters created a video of MoneySavingExpert founder Martin Lewis recommending a fake investment scheme run by tech entrepreneur Elon Musk – watch it at www.snipca.com/48563



Scammers contact parents pretending to be children needing help



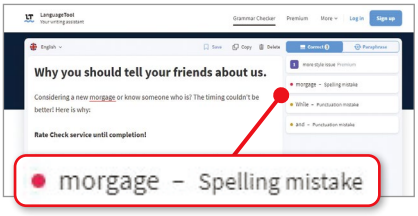
To use the real WhatsApp Web, type its URL and scan the QR code

Why scammers' grammar is getting better

Typically, scam emails have been riddled with grammatical errors, making them reasonably easy to spot. But that's changing – and it's not because scammers are taking night classes in literacy. Instead they're asking AI where to place apostrophes, commas and semicolons, and when to avoid glaring mistakes like there/their and you're/your.

The National Cyber Security Centre (NCSC) – which is part of the UK's intelligence agency GCHQ – says criminals are using AI to "produce more convincing scam emails, fake adverts, and bogus websites" (www.snipca.com/48568). They're also using AI to create more realistic images, such as company logos.

Meanwhile, Google said that scammers can use AI to "translate and clean up translations", making it easier for them to launch global attacks. It also warned that AI lets criminals tailor scams to specific individuals. However, while their emails are better written, fraudsters still use the same psychological tricks, such as creating a false sense of urgency by claiming you have a limited time to respond, or referring to current events to make their scams seem more plausible.



If you're worried about an email, copy and paste it into https://languagetool.org and look for any spelling and grammar errors (pictured).

This deepfake video impersonated Martin Lewis to recommend a fake investment scheme supposedly run by Elon Musk

(pictured above). They followed this with a similar scam featuring the cloned face and voice of BBC presenter Fiona Bruce (see Protect Your Tech, Issue 665).

These scams are called deepfakes and they're going to get more credible in 2024 as AI improves. Be extremely wary about any celebrity-endorsed advert online, particularly if it's promoting an investment scheme. They're most likely to appear on places where they can be easily shared, such as Facebook and WhatsApp. We also expect plenty of political deepfakes during the UK and US elections, though these will be trying to influence your vote not steal your money.

SIM swaps

Scammers don't have to steal your phone to gain access to your accounts. All they need to do is persuade your mobile network to redirect calls to a SIM card the scammers own. This hijacks your phone number, letting them see your messages, listen to your calls and – most damaging – view any two-factor authentication codes you receive. Scammers can use these to log into your bank account and go on a spending spree.

Instances of SIM-swap attacks have soared in recent years, probably because scammers are finding it easier to steal customers' personal data. They need this to persuade networks to switch calls to a new SIM.

The first sign of an attack is that your current SIM card loses all service. You'll be unable to receive or send texts or calls, or access the internet through your data plan. Your network might send you a text informing you that the swap is taking place. If so, phone them immediately to say you didn't request this. Also phone your bank and credit-card company to stop all payments.

You'll also need to create a new email account and associate all your online accounts to it, making sure you don't enter your stolen phone number as a login detail.

Fake QR codes at car parks

We received many emails in 2023 from readers frustrated that councils have removed the option to pay for parking with cash, forcing them to use phone apps instead (pictured below). As well as being inconvenient, this is a safety risk because scammers are sticking fake QR codes at car parks in an attempt to steal money from motorists. Scanning the code takes you to a fake payment site that looks very similar to the real thing.

The amounts stolen can be much more than the £5 it costs for a few hours' parking. In August, one woman lost £13,000 at Thornaby train station in North Yorkshire after scanning a fake code. These attacks are on the rise. Action Fraud said more than 400 offences were reported in the first nine months of 2023, compared with 112 in 2020. Officials have investigated over 1,200 incidents in the past three years.

There's a rising threat of fake QR codes at car parks

Companies are finally beginning to take the threat more seriously. TransPennine Express, which manages Thornaby station, has now removed QR codes from payment signs at all of its 14 car parks. However, we think most people still don't realise they can be scammed by scanning a QR code. Criminals will continue to exploit such ignorance in 2024. And if QR codes do disappear from car parks, we wouldn't be surprised if scammers start sticking fake phone numbers on machines instead.

Charity requests

The United Nations said that the past few years have seen the highest number of "violent conflicts" since World War 2. With many of those conflicts looking unlikely to end in 2024, be prepared for more fake charity appeals arriving by email, text message and phone call.

In November, the FBI warned about "fake humanitarian donations" relating to the Israel-Hamas war (www.snipca.com/48567). It said that scammers had hacked into the email accounts of individuals in Israel and sent requests for help. Other scams involve being taken to fake charity sites. Often the scammers claim to be working with new charities that have sprung from the ongoing conflict.

Always donate through the charity's website, never by clicking a link in an email. In particular, ignore requests to give money in cash, gift cards, wire transfers or cryptocurrency. Most charities have web pages explaining which scams to look out for, such as Oxfam at www.snipca.com/48569. ca

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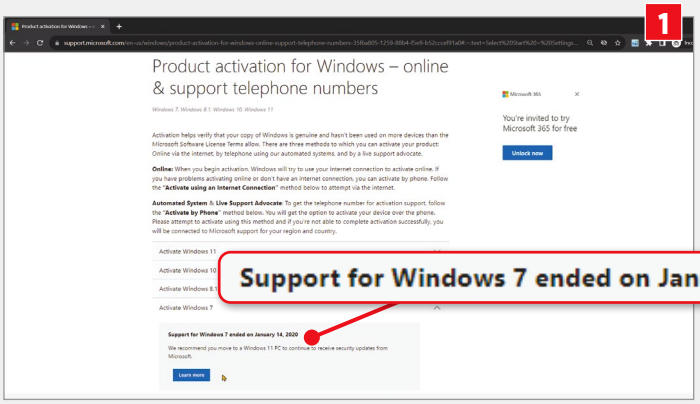
PROBLEM OF THE FORTNIGHT

How do I reinstall Windows 7?

Q Recently, while working on my computer there was a power cut, which lasted for about 30 minutes. When the power was restored I got a message saying that my Windows was not genuine. I have the original CD. How can I reinstall Windows without losing anything? I'm running Window 7, incidentally. Also the taskbar is now at the top of the screen. How can I return it to the bottom? Finally, something called Total WebShield has appeared – but I don't know how to remove it. Can you advise?

James Simpson



Windows 7 hasn't been supported for four years

A There's a fair bit to work through here. First, you can't reinstall Windows 7 without losing everything. So, if you want to retain everything the only option is to reactivate your copy, because the power cut apparently caused a glitch that resulted in your operating system being deactivated.

However, that in itself could be a problem, because Windows 7 is no longer *officially* supported by Microsoft (and hasn't been for four years now – see screenshot 1). Unofficially, Microsoft's servers still seem to allow the activation of Windows 7 – but the company could stop that at any time.

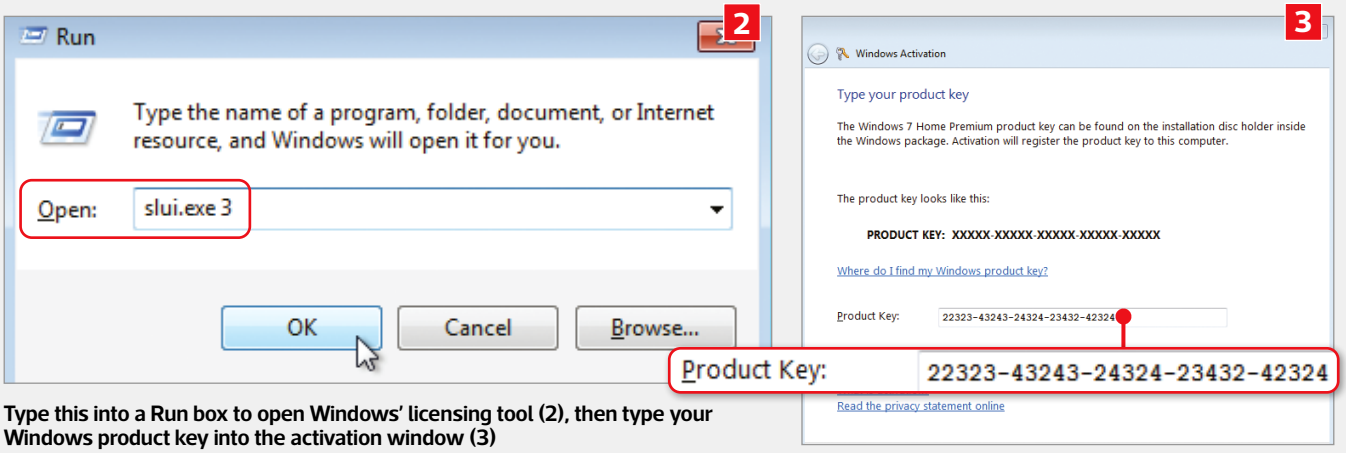
To try, make use of Windows 7's Software Licensing User Interface tool (SLUI). First, press Windows key+R to open a Run box, then type slui.exe 3 (including the space – see screenshot 2). This brings up the Windows activation window, which opens in the Product Key box. Here, type the product key from your original CD (see screenshot 3), then click Next and follow the prompts.

Hopefully, it will now activate your Windows. However, you might be directed to call Microsoft (on 0800 018 8354) and complete activation by phone. In that case, you may need to explain circumstances to a Microsoft customer-service agent, and hope they authorise the activation.

Next, the taskbar is an easy fix. First, simply right-click any blank part of your Windows taskbar then choose Properties. Then, in the box that opens, in the 'Taskbar appearance' section, click the 'Taskbar location on screen' dropdown menu and choose Bottom. Click OK to apply the change.

Finally, Total WebShield is a browser extension, which can either be downloaded and installed directly or as part of the TotalAV security suite. WebShield is heavily advertised online, so we suspect that at some point you've clicked a link and installed the extension – because you'd probably remember if you'd installed the whole TotalAV package.

To remove it from Chrome, for example, first click to open the menu top right (three dots) then choose Settings. Next, on the left, click Extensions then, on the right, in the Total WebShield box, click Remove – and then simply confirm by clicking Remove again.



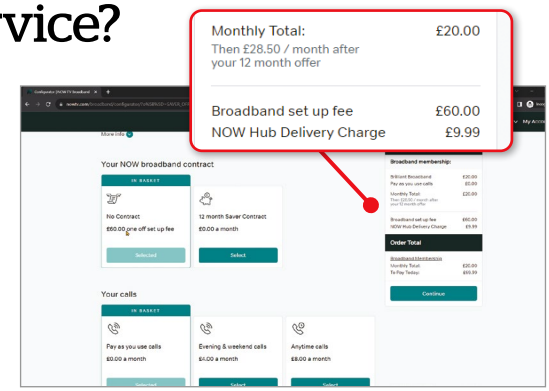
Type this into a Run box to open Windows' licensing tool (2), then type your Windows product key into the activation window (3)

Can I get a temporary broadband service?

Q Thanks first of all for a fantastic magazine and all the useful information in it. My broadband is currently supplied by Openreach but – living in rural Cumbria – all I get is a paltry 10Mbps (on a good day). However, broadband provider Voneus has recently started some works to bring much-needed fibre to the village. It can't give me a definite installation date yet, but it estimates next spring. The problem is that my contract with Openreach is due for renewal in January and obviously I don't want to commit to another two years. So, my question is: what are my options? Is there a provider that offers a monthly contract? Incidentally, mobile broadband isn't feasible here either, because the signal is very weak.

Norm Wilson

A While it is indeed Openreach that pipes broadband into your houses your contract will not be with that company but with an internet service provider (ISP) – and we're guessing that's BT. Now, Openreach is a subsidiary of BT, but legally they're separate companies. So, your contract will be with BT or another ISP, not Openreach directly.



Now offers broadband service with no long-term commitment

BT's broadband contracts are generally 12 or 24 months in length. At the end, you don't have to 'renew'. Instead, your service will simply continue, but any terms attached to your original contract will come to an end. Your monthly fee might go up a bit as a result, because the contracted period probably included a discounted price. On the plus side, you can cancel at any time, without any penalties contained in the original contract.

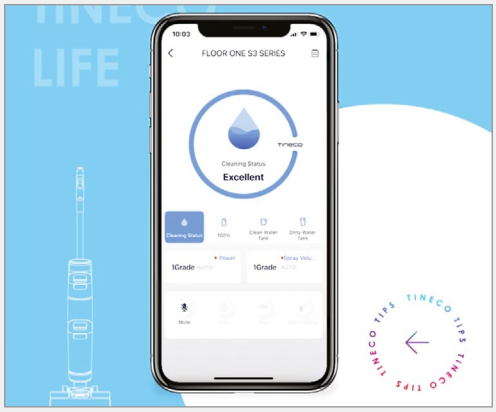
In other words, your problem pretty much solves itself. Your BT contract ends in January, but you can just carry on with it, probably at a slightly higher price, and then just cancel as soon as you've got your Voneus deal set up.

Finally, just for completeness – or in case you've simply just had enough of your current ISP – there are a handful of providers that offer no-commitment 'rolling' contracts for broadband. You pay a chunky upfront fee but then you can quit without notice. Now (www.nowtv.com), for example, charges £60 upfront and then £20 a month for its basic Brilliant Broadband package on a 30-day rolling contract (see screenshot).

Does my floor cleaner really need my router password?

Q I bought a Tineco floor cleaner (pictured right) that required an app to operate it properly. The app (pictured far right) asks for my router password, which started alarm bells ringing, as it goes against all security advice about sharing passwords. Potentially, this could give access not only to my computer, but also to my router's settings. I've recently bought a Tapo security camera that's also asking for my router password. I realise they need to connect to function correctly, but do they really need my router password, or am I worrying over nothing?

David Wynne



The apps for smart devices – like Tineco's floor cleaner (left) – require your network password, but not your router's

A This is an interesting question and possibly borne out of a little confusion. Many such 'smart' devices need a Wi-Fi connection to work (or to access full functionality). But for this, they require the password for a Wi-Fi network, not the password for the router itself – because that is a different (and distinct) security measure.

Handing out your router's password would be a bad idea because, yes, it allows access to the router's admin page and settings. The Wi-Fi password is the admission ticket to the network created by the router, and also the wider internet. You should also be cautious about sharing this password, but without it, none of your Wi-Fi-enabled devices would be able to get online. Smart products from both the brands you mention have legitimate reasons for wanting a Wi-Fi connection, and hence your Wi-Fi password. So there's nothing to worry about here.

Can I ignore this startup warning about my PC's fans?

Q My HP Pavilion PC 570-p0xx desktop PC warns me on startup that the CPU fan is not operating correctly. I've used an air duster on all the fans and monitored them over a few hours, and all appear to be spinning fine. After ignoring the warnings and starting Windows as normal over the last few weeks, everything works without any problems – and there's no signs of overheating.

So, can I permanently disregard this warning?

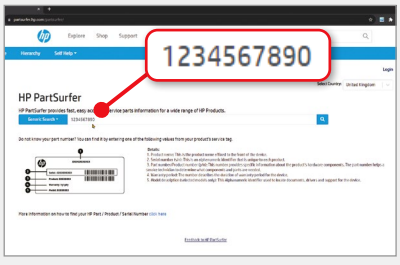
Geoff Poole

A Perhaps, but it would be wiser to figure out the cause. It's possible that the fan isn't spinning fast enough, for example, or that the sensor is misreporting the fan as slow or stopped.

You've already done some remedial work, but do also check the fan's four-pin header connector is firmly fixed in place. If doing this doesn't remove the warning, consider buying a replacement fan from HP.

Make a note of the part number on top of the fan, then type it into HP's PartSurfer tool at https://partsurfer.hp.com (see screenshot below).

Alternatively, you can just carry on as you are while accepting the risk that the CPU might eventually overheat. Most likely this would just crash your PC, but it could result in permanent damage.



Use HP's PartSurfer website to buy replacement parts for your PC

Will Microsoft Flight Simulator work on my PC despite warnings?

Q I was recently given Microsoft Flight Simulator (Standard – pictured right) as a present. After loading all 10 DVDs I typed the activation code as instructed and started the program.

However, I immediately saw a message telling me that my computer does not meet the minimum requirements, and that I might experience errors during the game. Having used the activation code on this PC, presumably it will not work on a new computer?

I was probably a bit silly not to read the system requirements in the handbook beforehand.

Eric Kent

Microsoft Flight Simulator should run on PCs with lower system specifications – albeit with the odd glitch

A There are two aspects here. First, the warning message you've received suggests that the game *will* actually run on your current PC but that you may experience a few glitches. So, if it runs and you're happy with the performance, there's really not much to worry about.

However, to answer your question, you'd actually be able to install this on a different PC. Use of the activation code adds a digital license to the Microsoft account you're logged into, which is presumably *your* Microsoft account. In other words, as long as any future PC is logged in with the same Microsoft account, you'll be able to install and use Flight Simulator. We don't envy you ploughing through that 10-disc process again though!

Q: Why can't I open my old Word documents?

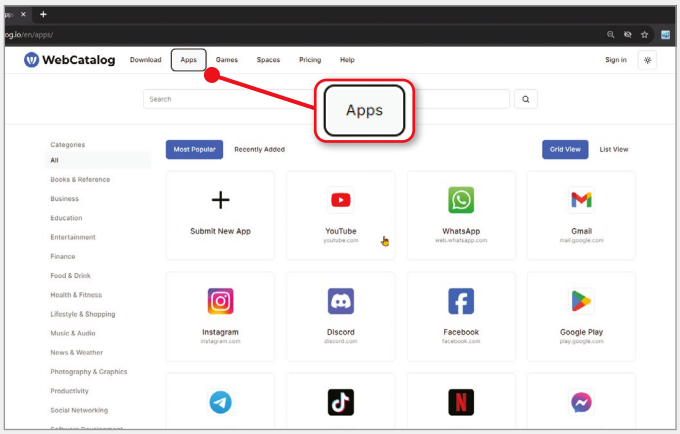
A: Issue 642, page 65 – find it on our 2022 Back Issue CD

Buy it from www.snipca.com/44660

Is this WebCatalog tool safe – and what does it do?

Q I recently came across a Windows program called WebCatalog at https://webcatalog.io. It seems to be some sort of open-source emulator that allows the user to run Android and iOS apps on their PC. Its website address ends in '.io', which is the British Indian Ocean Territory (BIOT). An online search told me this domain has been widely used by technology companies – and that it's unofficially considered a generic top-level domain by many. I can't remember this being reviewed in *Computeractive*. Do you think it's safe, and worth paying for?

Frank Topp



WebCatalog lets you turn any website into a 'web app' that can be opened from your taskbar

A Let's start with the '.io' domain. It was originally associated with BIOT, but these days it's just another top-level domain, like .com, .co.uk and .org – so there's nothing questionable about that.

Next, you'd like to know what WebCatalog does. In simple terms, it lets you turn more or less any website into a 'web app' that can then be pinned to your Windows taskbar and opened from there. So, it doesn't let you 'run' Android or iOS apps, as such, though its catalogue of websites does look a lot like mobile apps (see screenshot).

Therefore, while we're fairly confident WebCatalog isn't a scam, we're not convinced it's worth paying for. There is a free tier, but to launch more than a handful of apps you have to pay. However, while we're again simplifying a little, modern browsers let you replicate one of WebCatalog's main features, which is to put websites on your Windows taskbar, so you can launch them like apps.

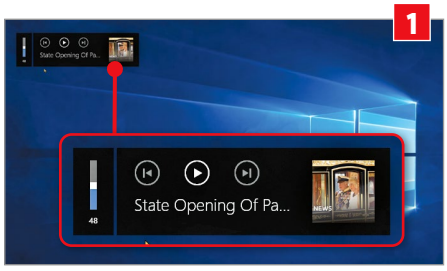
To do this in Chrome or Edge, for example, first visit the website you want to turn into a 'web app'. Next, open the browser's main menu (three dots, top right), then hover over 'More tools'. Finally, click either 'Create shortcut' (Chrome) or 'Pin to taskbar' (Edge).

How do I disable this volume panel?

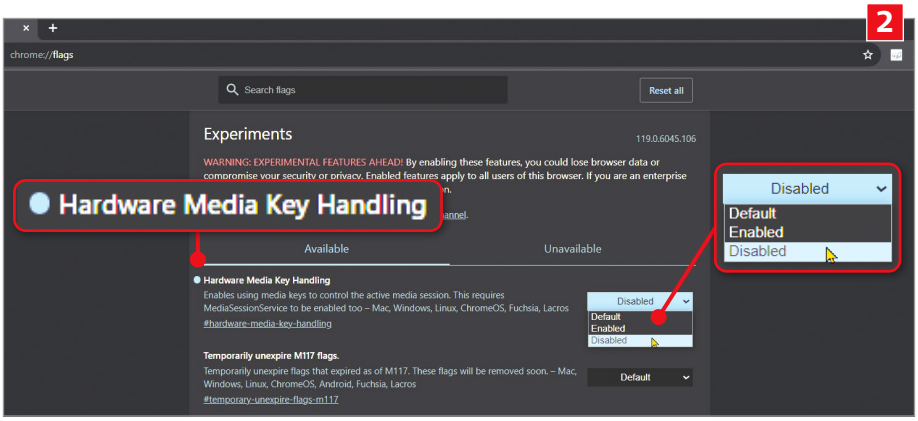
Q Previously, when I changed the volume on my Windows 10 laptop a little pop-up appeared at the top left showing the level. Now when I do this while watching something in YouTube, for example, it pops up a larger pane with the name and a thumbnail image of the video I'm watching (see screenshot 1).

That's mostly no big problem, but I noticed that this panel seems to 'remember' whatever it was I last watched, even when I've closed the associated tab in Chrome. So, I can go to adjust the volume and the panel pops up to show what I watched before. This is a privacy lapse in my opinion, as I don't want someone wandering behind me to see what I've been watching previously. I've looked for a way to stop this, but with no luck. Do you know how to stop this?

Trevor Richardson



Changing the volume while watching a video in YouTube pops up up this window...



...to stop it appearing disable this option in Chrome's Flags page

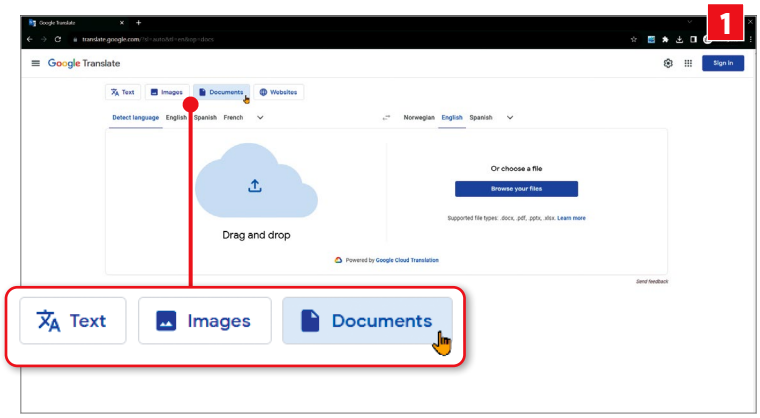
A This is one of those features that seems to appear out of nowhere, with the intention of being helpful – but actually with annoying consequences, as you describe. It's actually down to Chrome, and specifically a feature called Hardware Media Key Handling.

Fortunately, it can be disabled. To do this, first – in the address bar – type chrome://flags and press Enter. Next, in the 'Search flags' box, type media key. Next, under the Hardware Media Key Handling heading, open the dropdown menu and choose Disabled (see screenshot 2). Finally, restart Chrome and you're done.

Is there a way to translate foreign-language PDFs?

Q I have a number of handwritten and typed documents, letters and magazine articles in the Norwegian language. Can you advise me about any free translation programs that will translate scanned PDFs into English?

John Potier



In Google Translate click the relevant tab at the top depending on your source material...

A You can do this with Google Translate (https://translate.google.com). In fact, it'll work with PDFs, images and pasted plain text. So, while we're not entirely sure what you mean by 'scanned PDFs', there's no need for any kind of scanning – you can just upload the PDFs directly.

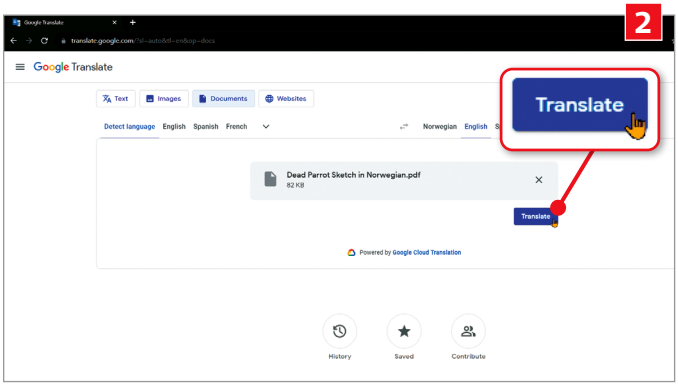
If you've already scanned documents and therefore now have them as images, Google Translate can handle those, too – but the translation accuracy would be better with the original PDFs, because the text is stored in digital form.

As for handwritten documents, the service's performance with scans will obviously be highly variable, depending largely on the legibility of the original handwriting.

Regardless of all of the above, the starting point is to click the Text, Images or Documents button at the top of the page (see screenshot 1), depending on the source material.

With text, you can use the Control (Ctrl)+V shortcut to paste it into the box. For images or documents, just drag and drop the file on to the cloud icon. Next, click the Translate button (see screenshot 2), wait a few moments for the service to carry out the translation then simply click the 'Download translation' button to finish.

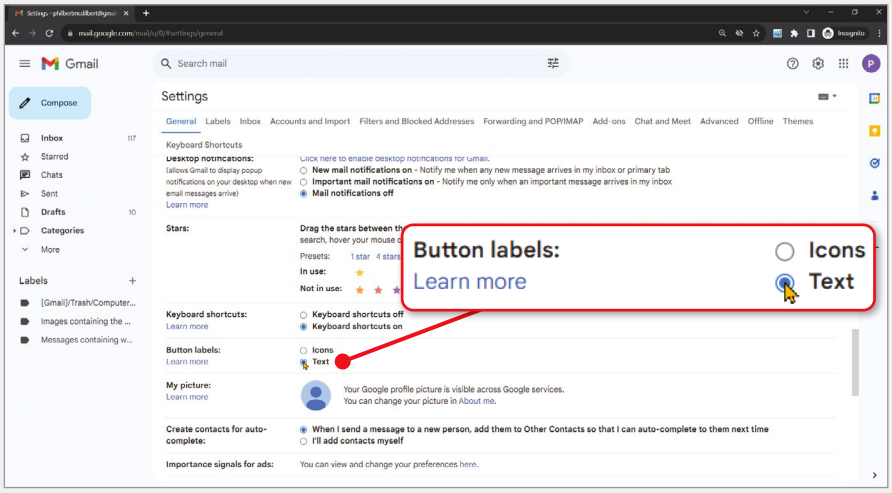
...then click the Translate button and wait a few minutes



How can I replace icons with labels in Gmail?

Q In recent months I've noticed in screenshots in your magazine that some of your Gmail accounts have text labels where I have small icons in mine. Just to clarify: if I select an email, at the top of that email is a row of icons – like a dustbin for Delete. However, in some of your screenshots you have the word Delete. I'd like my Gmail to show the same icons. How have you achieved this?

Ken Sinclair



Select this option in Gmail's settings to display labels above your selected email instead of icons, such as a Delete bin

A This is thanks to a little-known option buried in Gmail's settings. First, in Gmail, click the Settings cog at the top right then click 'See all settings'.

Next, at the top, make sure the General tab is selected and then scroll down to find the 'Button labels' section. Here, select the Text option (see screenshot) and, finally, scroll down to the foot of the page and click the Save Changes button.

What's the difference between... Kasa and Tapo?

Q Years ago, I bought a Kasa smart plug to control a lamp in our living room via our single Amazon Echo speaker. That's worked really well, so recently I thought it'd be nice to add another to control a bedroom lamp.

My original Kasa plug is no longer available, but I found the current version on Amazon (pictured right). While there, I saw a recommendation for a Tapo model (pictured far right) as a cheaper option.

Both are made my TP-Link, so I wonder what the difference is? If I buy the cheaper Tapo plug, can I use it with the Kasa app I've been using all these years?

TP-Link is not really clear on the differences on its website.

Leslie Young

A The confusion here is entirely of TP-Link's creation – and entirely avoidable!

Both Kasa and Tapo are brands owned and operated by TP-Link. Kasa came first, in 2015, followed a few years later by Tapo. The product ranges sold under these two banners are very similar, being a variety of 'smart home' gadgets. Until recently, each was a distinct standard and therefore incompatible with the other – but we'll come back to that.

Why did TP-Link create two brands for very similar product ranges? We really cannot say. Certainly, there's very little to differentiate them. Products in both ranges have their fair share of pros and cons and the company insists both brands will continue to coexist.

However, recent events suggest that TP-Link sees the younger Tapo brand as the future. Back in May, the company updated the Tapo app so that it can 'link' to a Kasa account to control Kasa – but the reverse is not currently the case. So, if you install the Tapo app, you can now control both Kasa and Tapo equipment. But the Kasa app controls only Kasa devices.

It's all very easy, and setup is handled automatically when you sign into the Tapo app using your TP-Link or Kasa credentials – just follow the app's prompts to allow the link to go ahead.

Want to know the difference between technical terms? Email noproblem@computeractive.co.uk

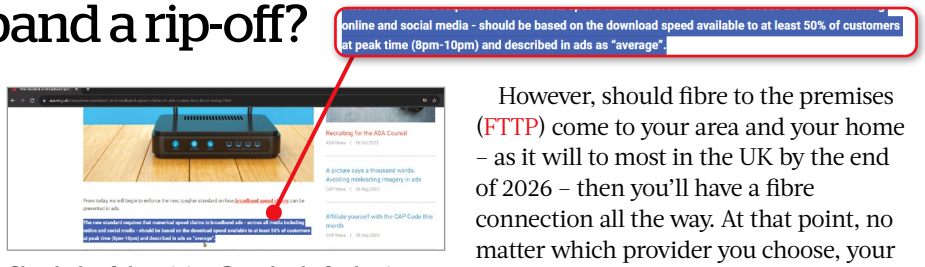
Is my copper broadband a rip-off?

Q I pay for 36Mbps internet and yet my pair of copper wires from the street cabinet cannot support more than 17Mbps. I think that makes a mockery of all the stuff I keep getting offered about faster internet. It doesn't matter who the provider is – it's all about the condition of the network. I wonder how many more people like me are paying for more than they are receiving?

Michael Bourne

A What you say is true up to a point, and we know plenty of your fellow readers put up with speeds far lower than they'd like. However, there are a few things to consider here.

First, for the past few years, broadband providers have had to be more honest in their advertising. So, while we don't know who supplies your connection, the speed for the tier you're on will be described as an 'average' – and at least 50 per cent of customers should be able to achieve that average during peak hours. You can read more about these guidelines at the Advertising Standards Authority website at www.snipca.com/48302 (see screenshot).



Check the Advertising Standards Authority website for guidelines on advertised broadband speeds

Another factor is the looming copper switch-off (in December 2025). It sounds like your home currently has, at best, a fibre-to-the-cabinet (FTTC) connection. In this setup you're right to say that the physical copper cables to your home create the ultimate restriction on the achievable broadband speeds.

However, should fibre to the premises (FTTP) come to your area and your home – as it will to most in the UK by the end of 2026 – then you'll have a fibre connection all the way. At that point, no matter which provider you choose, your achievable speeds will be much closer to the advertised average.

Next Issue

ON SALE Weds 3 Jan

- Should I put up with a dead pixel?
- Why won't my Office install?
- Can I enable AutoCorrect in Edge?

...And many more

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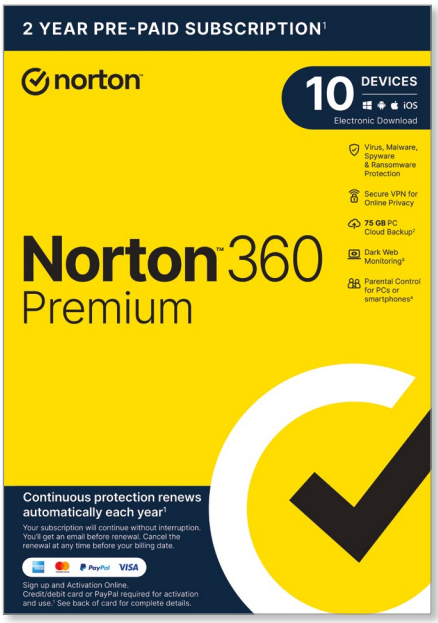

Norton is made by NortonLifeLock Inc – a standalone company dedicated to consumer cyber safety. It has always performed strongly in *Computeractive* antivirus tests, so we highly recommend it.

10 devices for two years NOW ONLY £19.99*

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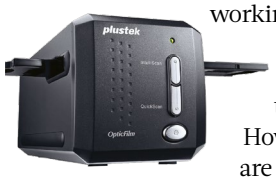
How can I digitise mounted 35mm slides?

Q In Issue 670's 'What Should I Buy?' (page 26), reader AS Darlington asked which film scanner you'd recommend for digitising 127mm and 120mm negatives, as well as 35mm slides. You suggested buying the Lomography DigitaLIZA Max, priced £85 from www.snipca.com/47949.

I have the same requirement, but I also need to digitise mounted 35mm slides as well as strips of negatives. Having visited Lomography's website, it's not clear to me whether the DigitaLIZA Max is capable of processing mounted slides. Can you find out for me please?

Gordon Bell

A We asked Lomography, and it told us that you can't scan 35mm mounted slides with the DigitaLIZA Max, adding that the masks are designed only to insert/feed the film. It doesn't currently make a product that lets you scan mounted slides, but said it's working on an accessory for the DigitaLIZA Max to let you do this.



Plustek's OpticFilm 8200i SE uses infrared scanning to remove dust and scratches

However, there are some scanners that work with mounted slides. Our sister title *Digital Camera World* recommends the Plustek OpticFilm 8200i SE (£299 from www.snipca.com/48490, pictured above). 'SE' refers to SilverFast software which contains advanced scanning tools, including infrared scanning to remove dust and scratches on the surface of the original negatives and slides.

Should I download photos Google can't scan for viruses?

Q I was impressed by the photos taken by Aurel Manea, and decided to use them as my desktop wallpaper – just as you suggested on page 57 of Issue 672's Cover Feature ('Best free downloads for 2024'). I visited the site you mentioned (www.snipca.com/48346) in Chrome and clicked the download links, but I got the message 'Couldn't preview file'.

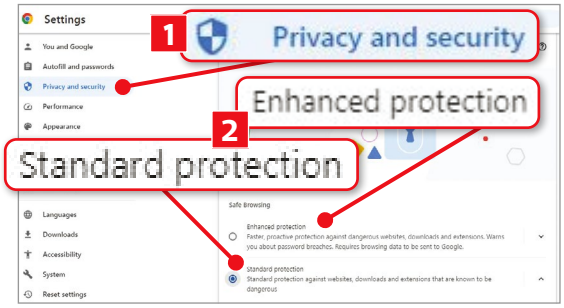
I clicked Download anyway, but another message popped up saying the file is too large for Google Drive to scan for viruses. There's an option to 'Download anyway'. Should I click that?

Ron Ellis

A Yes, it's perfectly safe to click 'Download anyway'. Google doesn't scan files larger than 100MB for viruses because doing so can take a long time and slow down Drive. Downloading Aurel Manea's full archive of 4,700 hi-res photos takes up 15GB, while a smaller collection of 240 photos is 1GB. Both of these far exceed Google's limit.

Several people have sought help for this problem on Google's support forum (www.snipca.com/48486). In response, Google recommends checking the file's name and extension to check that it's safe, and scanning it using your antivirus software. You could upload a file to VirusTotal (www.virustotal.com) for scanning, though this has a size limit of 650MB.

Chrome itself also scans files for viruses. Click the top-right menu (three vertical dots), then Settings followed by 'Privacy and security' (1 in our screenshot above). You can also get to this section by typing chrome://settings/security in your address bar. Make sure that Standard or Enhanced protection is enabled 2. If Chrome detects that you're downloading a dangerous file, it will show a message saying it has blocked it.



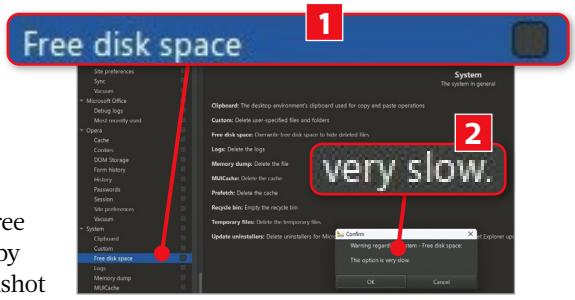
Select Standard or Enhanced protection to make sure Chrome scans your file downloads for malware

Why have BleachBit scans become so slow?

Q I've been using BleachBit for a while, and updated to version 4.6 (www.bleachbit.org) as you recommended in Issue 671 (page 19). Ever since doing this, it takes longer to carry out a scan. It may be a problem in the new version, but I also fear I've made an error by changing some of the default settings. Should I have left them alone?

Norman Illingworth

A We haven't read any reports of BleachBit 4.6 slowing scans, so we wonder if you've ticked the 'Free disk space' box (1 in our screenshot below), which is in the left-hand menu under System. This wipes any free hard-drive space by creating a large, empty file. If you select it, BleachBit warns you this option is "very slow" 2. Elsewhere, it says it's "generally recommended" that you disable this setting (see www.snipca.com/48493). If it is selected, untick it to see if that speeds up your scans.



BleachBit warns you that the 'Free disk space' setting slows its scans, so untick it

Jargon Buster

4K Video with a resolution of at least 3840x2160 pixels.

1080p Of the common types of high-definition video, this is the best quality: 1920x1080 pixels.

4K Video with a resolution of at least 3840x2160 pixels.

AI Artificial intelligence. Intelligence demonstrated by a machine rather than a person. Often used to describe technology that can perform human-like tasks.

APK Android Package Kit. The file format Android uses to install apps.

Bandwidth A measure of how much data can be transferred through a connection at one time.

Benchmarking Comparing software and products with an accepted standard.

Bloatware Unwanted software built into a new device.

Browser hijackers Programs that change your default browser, its homepage and search engine, without prior warning, when you install them.

Cache A temporary space for storing data. Can be memory on a PC's processor, or space on a hard drive used by a web browser.

CAPTCHA Distorted text you have to type to prove you're a human.

cd/m² Candela per square metre. Standard unit of brightness.

Chatbot A computer program designed to recreate conversation with human users, especially over the internet. Typically used to offer automated customer support.

Clean install An operating system installation that overwrites all other content on the hard drive.

Code Describes the various programming languages used to create software.

Contrast ratio A measure of the difference between the darkest and lightest shades a screen can show. Screens with higher contrast ratios are better for watching movies or playing games.

Cookie A small text file stored on your computer by a website. Used to store browsing preferences, website log-in details and so on.

Core Units on a processor that carry out program instructions.

Cryptocurrency A digital currency not backed by any country. The most popular is Bitcoin.

Dark mode Showing white text on a black background.

Dark web Websites that can only be accessed using special software such as the Tor browser.

DCI-P3 A colour space that has a wider spectrum than sRGB.

Domain These are used to identify one or more IP addresses.

dpi Dots per inch. A measure of printed image quality, or the size an object will be shown on screen.

Driver A file that helps Windows work with an external device.

Dynamic range The difference between the lightest and darkest shades in an image. Computers can be used to combine multiple images, creating a High Dynamic Range (HDR) image.

Emulator A program that makes one computer act like another, allowing it to run that computer's software.

Ethernet A standard used for almost all wired computer networks.

File path Shows the location of a file within Windows.

FTTC Fibre-to-the-cabinet. A broadband technology that uses fibre-optic cable between a telephone exchange and residential street, before transferring to the normal telephone wires.

FTTP Fibre to the premises. Fibre broadband that goes straight to the doorstep. Faster than fibre-to-the-cabinet (FTTC).

GDPR General Data Protection Regulation. 2018 EU law strengthening people's privacy.

GHz Gigahertz. A measure of how many instructions a chip can process per second. 1GHz is equal to 1,000MHz.

Graphics card A component in a computer that produces the image shown on the monitor.

HDMI High-definition media interface. A type of connection that transmits high-definition video and audio signals.

HTTP Hyper Text Transfer Protocol. The technology that sends data between your browser and the web.

IP54 Provides limited protection from dust and water. Will withstand some water, but not heavy rain or being submerged.

IP address Internet Protocol address. A unique set of numbers used to identify computers and websites on the internet.

IPS A screen technology. Monitors that use it have wider viewing angles and better, more accurate colours than monitors that don't.

Keylogger A piece of malicious software that records all the letters and numbers typed on a PC in an effort to steal passwords or other valuable information.

LED Light-emitting diode. An electronic device that emits light. Used on almost all electronic devices, and to provide the backlight for some LCDs.

Lossless Music file formats that take up more space but provide higher sound quality.

Membrane keyboard Keyboards that use rubber domes that connect to small electrical contacts. Have a softer typing feel, and are quieter and cheaper.

NFC Near-field communication. A technology that lets two devices communicate by being placed near each other. Can be used to pay for items in some shops using compatible mobile phones.

OCR Optical character recognition. The process by which printed text is scanned and converted into documents that can be edited.

Open source Software that can be modified by anyone, rather than just by the employees of the company that created it.

Passkey A method for signing into accounts by typing a one-off code, or using fingerprint or facial recognition, rather than a password.

Phono Standard stereo (red and white) audio connections.

PIR Passive infrared sensors that measure infrared light from people and moving objects that emit heat.

Plain text Text in a document that doesn't contain any formatting, such as bold characters and italics.

PNG Portable Network Graphics. A format for images that shrinks file sizes using compression but without discarding any data.

Product key A unique serial number issued by software companies that must be typed in by the user before a program will launch for the first time.

Proxy server A computer that sits between your computer and the internet and filters the connection. Sometimes used simply to remove internet threats such as viruses, but can also be used to block access to websites and internet services as well as masking the identity of a computer, giving its user anonymity on the internet.

QR code Quick Response code. A barcode that can be read using smartphones and dedicated QR-reading devices.

RAM Random-access memory. The computer's working area, used for data storage while the PC is switched on. Its capacity is measured in gigabytes (GB): the more memory your PC has, the more things it can process simultaneously and the faster it will seem. Any information in RAM will be lost when the power is switched off.

Ransomware Malware run by hackers who lock files on your PC and demand a payment to release them.

RAR Roshal Archive. A format for storing compressed files.

RCA Connector used to carry audio and video signals.

RGB keyboard Advanced type of LED-backlit keyboard that uses combinations of red, green and blue lights to generate colours.

SD card Secure Digital card. A popular type of memory card.

Security key A series of letters or numbers that you have to type to access a wireless network. Allows you to stop others using your network without permission.

SIM Subscriber Identity Module. The smart card used by all digital mobile phones. The SIM card carries the user's identity and phone number for accessing the network.

Spyware Software installed (usually surreptitiously) to monitor and report back on a computer's use. Spyware can also be used to record keyboard strokes and change settings.

sRGB A standard RGB colour space for use on monitors, printers and the internet.

SSD Solid-state drive. Storage that, unlike a hard drive, uses no moving parts. Faster but more expensive than conventional hard drives.

Switch Mechanism under a keyboard that determines whether a key has been pressed.

System restore point The collection of system files stored by System Restore on a given date and time to which Windows can revert if a problem occurs.

Temporary file Created by sites and software to store info for a specific purpose, but not meant to be stored permanently.

Travel The distance the keys of a keyboard have to be pressed before the keystroke is recognised.

Trojan A malicious program that's disguised as a different, harmless program. For example, a Trojan may be disguised as a game but is actually a program that steals your user names and passwords.

Two-factor authentication A system that uses two different means to identify the user. For example, a code sent to your phone in addition to a password.

Unicode A universal standard that assigns a code to every character and symbol in every language. For example, 'A' is U+0041.

USB 2.0/3.0/3.1 Faster successors to USB.

USB-C A new connector that's reversible, letting you plug it in upside down.

VPN Virtual private network. Keeps all internet communication safe and private.

Waveform An image that represents an audio signal or recording.

Web apps Programs that are stored on a web server rather than your computer, and which you use through your web browser.

Wi-Fi 6E Wi-Fi 6 extended to include the 6GHz band.

Zero-day vulnerability A previously unknown software flaw that can be exploited by malware or hackers before it's fixed.

ZIP file A file that contains compressed documents or files.

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Know How

Determined to reclaim his data from old online accounts, **Robert Irvine** tries to...

Wipe his digital footprint

The end of the year is always a good time to declutter, so you can start the new year with a comparatively clean slate. But since I disposed of most of my junk before I moved house, I don't have much stuff to chuck out, and it would be very ungrateful to stick unwanted Christmas gifts straight in the bin. Especially socks, which I never have enough of, as I'm not a loafer-wearing hipster who goes without them in winter.

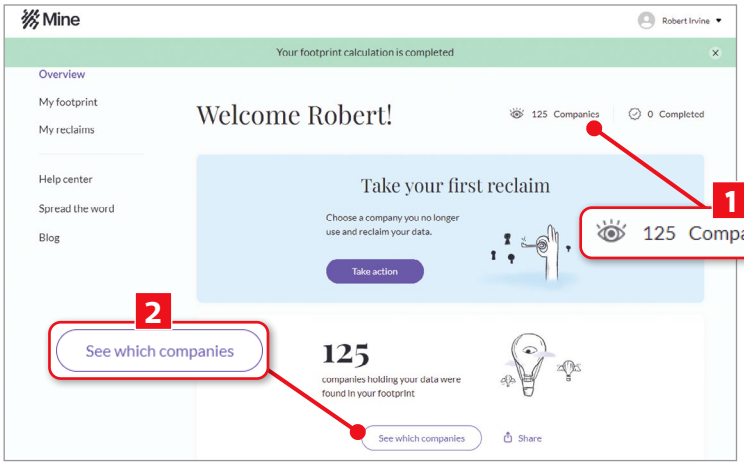
> I was shocked to discover that 125 companies were holding my data

So instead I've been performing a digital declutter – streamlining my icon-stuffed desktop, uninstalling unused software and deleting space-hogging files. A trickier prospect is trying to untangle my email account from the myriad sites and services I've linked to it over the years.

Although GDPR has reduced the number of marketing messages I receive, I'm still unsure which companies have my email address and other personal details stored in their databases.

Determined to wipe my 'digital footprint' – as privacy boffins call it – I decided to investigate a tool called Mine (www.saymine.com). This helps you "discover where your personal data is online", by scanning your inbox for companies that hold your information, then lets you take action to remove it.

To test the tool, I went to www.snipca.com/48419 and clicked 'Sign in with Yahoo' to connect Mine to my Yahoo Mail account (yes, I do have Gmail and Outlook addresses too, but one thing at a time). This involved granting some worrying permissions – giving Mine access to "complete email messages and attachments, and allowing message sending, editing, moving and deleting" – but its privacy policy (www.snipca.com/48420) explained why these were necessary.



Robert was shocked to discover that 125 companies were holding his personal data

I clicked Agree, confirmed my account details and Mine got to work calculating my footprint. This took a while – apparently because Mine is "obsessed with perfection" and thankfully not because it was sending rude messages to all my contacts.

Once the footprint calculation was complete, I was shocked to discover that 125 companies were holding my data (1 in our screenshot). Sceptical about this high result, I clicked 'See which companies' 2 and, sure enough, they were all sites and apps I'd signed up with over the last few years.

The companies in my footprint included streaming services, online stores, estate agents, utility providers and takeaway aggregators. Scarily, Mine's 'Explore' tab warned that 21 of these had access to my 'financial info'.

Selecting a company displayed useful details such as the type of data I'd shared with it, the risk of said data being exposed in a breach and how often I used the service. Mine also revealed the average time it would take to reclaim my data from that company and how many users had already done so.

To start the process, I clicked Reclaim for the LastPass entry and Mine created a 'Request details' email. This asked for my LastPass account and data to be deleted, and would be sent directly from my email address – not through Mine, which might look spammy. I clicked 'Send request', then 'My reclaims' and noted the LastPass request was now pending.

While waiting, I submitted requests for other companies in my footprint that caused me concern.

Over the next few days, I received several emails acknowledging receipt of my deletion requests, plus a couple of bounce-backs from inactive addresses. Mine's handy auto-reply feature responded to these messages with my details, so I didn't need to do anything except wait for the companies to confirm they'd closed my accounts and deleted my data.

This means I can kick off 2024 with a smaller footprint – and plenty of socks to accommodate it.

Need help with deleting your personal data from sites you longer use?
Let us know: noproblem@computeractive.co.uk

Next issue: Robert tries to control AI with his voice

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