

QUANTA HELPLINE 05 - Published in Vol 25 Issue 4, Aug/Sep/Oct 08

HELPLINE: MY BLACK BOX

This was sent to me by Mike Kennedy (not a member at the time anyway), who gave permission for it to be included in the newsletter to help other "black box" owners. I am very grateful to Tony Firshman for assistance with some of the replies.

Hello Mr. Jones,

I stumbled across your website about the QL (great site, thank you) after I recently got my old QL and Trump card out of the attic after many years in a cardboard box. I was delighted to see it still worked after all this time!

Nostalgia got the better of me and I found most of my floppy discs and microdrives still worked, although the microdrives were a bit rough and noisy.

Very soon I realized I could remember more superbasic than I'd forgotten! Happy days again. I enjoyed using the QL back then and now I'm retired the interest is coming back again.

My grandson came to visit one weekend and I got him interested. He was surprised when I told him it was a computer from 1984 - he didn't think computers that old were much more than glorified calculators. He seemed amused by how quick and easy it was to write simple little programs in basic and soon he was asking me if he could use it.

Shortly after that I got another QL at a local car boot sale. The woman sold it to me for £1 because she thought it didn't work. All it needed was a new fuse in the mains plug and a bit of a clean. We set it up alongside my QL using a portable TV for display and you should see my grandson's face light up when he saw we'd bought him a QL of his own, even if it was only an unexpanded QL and a TV set! We even got a network cable and linked the two machines up so he could save and load to my floppy disc drive.

I have a few questions to ask if I could beg a moment of your time.

1. The second QL is a bit dirty. I've washed the case with a moist cloth, which got some of it off, but I'm loath to use any strong cleaners because I don't know what the plastic will withstand. Is it OK to use a soapy detergent, or is there a recommended cleaner or something? The last thing I want is to damage my grandson's pride and joy after spending so much on it :-)

TF> I use isopropyl alcohol, or white spirit as a last resort, and a toothbrush for the grooves.

2. It only has 128K of memory. Is there any way of adding some more memory inside the case, e.g. by unplugging the ram chips and plugging in bigger ones? We're not too worried about the lack of a disc drive as we have a few microdrives and can use the network while we watch out for another £1 bargain at the car boot sale :-)

TF> Waste of time, as ram access is slower. Even though he doesn't use floppies, he should get a disk interface. Mind you the extra cost of a pair of disk drives will be small.

DJ> Most disk interfaces have extra memory on board - usually about 512K, although the

Gold Card has 2MB and the Super Gold Card has 4MB. Most don't protrude much from the QL to increase clutter and space requirements, and usually don't mind if you connect them without a disk drive attached.

3. Is there any way of networking with a PC? It might be handy to be able to download QL games from the internet and print using the PC's printer.

TF> Serial port. 3.5 floppy to a PC emulator though is the best bet.

DJ> There is software called Sernet which is used to network a QL and a PC running a QL emulator by connecting the two computers with a serial cable. It can be fiddly to set up and of course is no use if the PC has no QL emulator. Sernet runs on a QL emulator, not in Windows. Details in an article on my website

<http://www.dilwyn.uk6.net/gen/serial/serial.html>

(scroll down to the bottom of the page for the Sernet article). There is also a program called WXQT2 which is a Windows program for copying files between QL filing systems and DOS or Windows systems. It was written by Jonathan Hudson and you can download it from www.daria.co.uk/qdos/

4. My QL has a toolkit in the trump card. Can we still get this toolkit for the other QL?

DJ> Toolkit 2 can be downloaded from my website at

<http://www.dilwyn.uk6.net/pe/index.html> Transferring files to a QL floppy disk can be a little bit tricky if you have not done so before, but there are a couple of pages of advice on my website about this. Go to my home page at www.dilwyn.uk6.net/index.html and scroll down to near the bottom of the page where you'll find links to a couple of pages about transferring files and for those like yourself returning to the QL after some time.

TF> Most floppy interfaces will have toolkit II of course.

5. The microdrives work, but they are rough and noisy sounding and don't inspire confidence. Is there a quick fix for this?

TF> Check the rollers have not risen up. Otherwise no.

6. Does anyone still sell the little plastic feet which prop up the QL? I didn't get any with the second QL.

TF> I don't think I have any left - I will check.

DJ> Try the QL traders to see if they have any spare. List of traders on my website. eBay can be a good source of second hand QL bits and pieces. Also, try Malcolm Cadman at the London QL group, as he acquires and sells a lot of old QL hardware. His email address is ql@mcad.demon.co.uk. Quanta treasurer John Gilpin also gets second user hardware from time to time, you could contact him at thegilpins@btinternet.com to see if he has any spare.

7. How can I connect a PC monitor to the QL? I have a spare VGA monitor, if only we could work out what type of adaptor cable was needed to connect the QL.

TF> Not practicable to a standard QL.

DJ> This question has been asked of me many times, and I have never yet found a solution to this. Of course, anyone who could come up with a suitable cable or interface to adapt the QL

TTL RGB video signals to an analogue VGA or SVGA monitor input would be on to a winner I'm sure, based on the number of times I've been asked this question!

8. The TV set is OK for short use, but it doesn't have a good picture. It has a scart socket on the back, is there any way of connecting this for a better picture?

TF> Yes - I can do a lead for £10. There should be second hand ones - try London Quanta. (see Malcolm Cadman email address above)

DJ> Richard Cook wrote an article in QL Today magazine about this very subject several years ago. The article is available on my website. It does involve soldering and obtaining a few resistors and the relevant plugs. See the article at <http://www.dilwyn.me.uk/docs/hardware/index.html>

9. The network works OK with the little cable we use, which is only about 4 or 5 foot long. How long can a network cable be? It would be nice if we could extend it into the bedroom he uses while staying with us, which I guess would need a cable of about 16 to 20 foot long if it went straight through the wall.

TF> I use one at home that is 150 foot long. It **must** though be a twisted pair. One pair of a cat5 cable would do connected to std 3.5 mono jack plugs.

DJ> Also, see the QL manual, Concepts section, Network page, which says:"If you are planning to connect several QLs on the network, or use a long piece of cable, then you should wire it up with low-capacitance twin pair cable, such as 3 amp lightflex or bell-wire. Take care to connect the centre of each jack to each other, and the outsides to each other. You will find that although the software can handle 63 stations, the hardware will not drive more than about 100m of cable, depending on what type it is. If you are only connecting a few machines with the leads supplied, you need not worry."