

LIVING BY NUMBERS

They said it was impossible but Mike Aldrich has proved them wrong. Carol Price reports on the personal computer system which he hopes could revolutionise our lives.

Two years ago, the GPO launched its Prestel viewdata system as the complete domestic home information centre; you could find out the prices of rooms at the Hotel Santa Ponsa Park, Majorca, or discover the susceptibility of Majestic potatoes to tuber blight without leaving the comfort of your armchair.

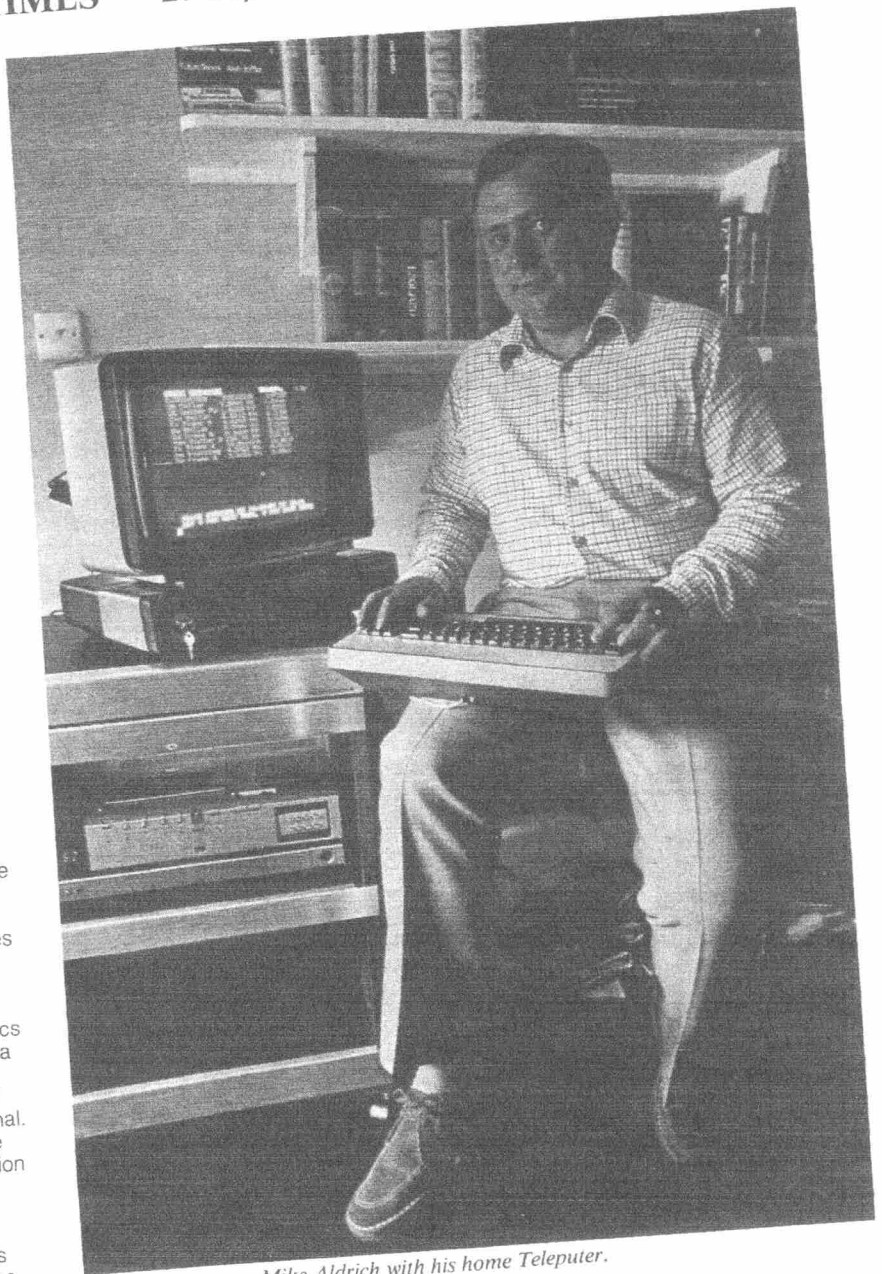
The 'teleputer', to be launched next Tuesday, manages to make those facilities look positively old hat. Because the teleputer — brainchild of Mike Aldrich (right), managing director of Rediffusion Computers — does what many electronics experts said could not be done: it links via some complex micro-chip circuitry, a personal computer, teletext receiver, TV set, video recorder and computer terminal. "You might say it has everything but the kitchen sink," commented one Rediffusion Computers spokesman.

The 14in. colour television set is equipped to receive viewdata (Prestel), and has facilities for playing video tapes and discs; the personal computer can be used to communicate with the office, friends, shops, banks etc (providing they are also linked by computer).

"We know there are plenty of other people thinking of the idea," said Mike Aldrich, "but it's actually making it that counts." Having worked in computers for 20 years, he joined Rediffusion four years ago; there he got a group of staff together and "brainstormed" until the teleputer idea materialised.

Provisionally it has been dubbed "the office of the future", but Aldrich believes it will also prove to be a great asset for the home. Certainly it has great potential as an educational tool — providing software companies produce the appropriate type of video film, to teach Arabic, brain surgery or whatever. Such films would set questions, and you would punch out the answers on the computer keyboard; if you got the answers wrong, the computer would tell you. And it also offers the easy way of going shopping.

Mike Aldrich has a horror of "the big Friday shop", which he finds needless "and so boring. Every Friday evening my local Sainsburys has 21 checkouts 50 deep with people." He now sees a time when teleputer owners will be settling down at the end of a busy week, shopping list in hand, and feeding an order for cornflakes and soap powder through to the



Mike Aldrich with his home Teleputer.

- ★ WHAT THE TELEPUTER USER CAN DO:
- ★ LEARN A LANGUAGE OR A SPECIFIC SKILL — LIKE CARPENTRY
- ★ CHECK ON AVAILABILITY OF FLIGHTS TO SAY, SAN FRANCISCO, ENTER YOUR BOOKING ON AN AIRLINE'S COMPUTER AND GET A FIRM RESERVATION
- ★ CHECK CURRENT STOCK EXCHANGE PRICES AND SEND AN ELECTRONIC MESSAGE TO YOUR BROKERS
- ★ SEND AND RECEIVE ELECTRONIC MAIL
- ★ BOOK THEATRE TICKETS
- ★ WATCH AND RECORD A PLAY ON TV
- ★ MAKE BUSINESS APPOINTMENTS FROM HOME
- ★ SHOP AT HOME FROM STORES (PROVIDED THEY HAVE TELETXT ENTRIES)
- ★ BOOK A HOLIDAY AT A TRAVEL AGENCY
- ★ PLAY VIDEO DISCS
- ★ TAP A VAST SOURCE OF ELECTRONIC GAMES

informational nerve centre of an out-of-town warehouse. They would then pay by credit card, and a computerised trolley (as used in car factories) would collect the goods. The first human in the whole transaction would be the van driver.

Of course, admits one of Aldrich's colleagues in the development, "you would still have to go out and buy something like a dress."

Deliveries of the new teleputer will begin early next year. Initially Rediffusion estimate that it will cost £70 a month to

rent, and £3000 to buy outright. Rediffusion Computers believe that their first customers will be businesses, as was the case with Prestel; they then hope to branch out into the domestic market in the mid-Eighties. By then, teleshopping, telebanking and telecommunicating could be widely accepted as the way of life of the future. "It's amazing how 50 years' progress seem to have gone by in about 18 months. Even a year ago, the mere idea of the teleputer sounded like something out of *Star Trek*."