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Pen Lab Review

IBM ThinkPad 730TE

Superb pen tablet gets a faster CPU, more memory, and a bigger disk.

In October of 1994, Pen Computing Magazine ran a comparison test between two of the best pen computers ever made, the IBMThinkPad 730T and the Toshiba T200. We called it "Showdown of the Super Tablets" because those two machines truly represented the state-of-the-art at the time. Both machines underwent PenLab's rigorous benchmarking tests, and when the smoke cleared, we concluded "After 15 rounds, it's a draw."

This was 1994, and now it's 1995. How have the two machines weathered another tough year in pen computing's quest for acceptance? Sadly, Toshiba called it quits, retiring its T200 line. That is too bad. While not quite deserving the proud "Dynapad" name once coined by computer visionary Alan Kaye, the T200 was a terrific platform with lots of potential, and it is sorely missed. (Who said the Japanese always stay for the long term?).

IBM, however, is still in the race. And even though its main pen competitor retired, the company did not rest on its laurels. No, the company went ahead and improved its pen tablet once again. In our 1994 review we found much to like about the ThinkPad 730T, but we felt it was a tad slow, and 105MB of hard disk space was inadequate in today's world of storage-hungry applications.

Well, on October 27 of this year, IBM made available a new and improved version of its pen tablet, the IBMThinkPad 730TE. And guess what, the TE has a faster processor-a DX4/75 instead of the 486SL/33 of its predecessor-and a bigger disk-an Integral Peripherals Viper 260MB unit instead of the old 730T's marginal 105MB drive. In addition, the 730TE comes with 8MB of base RAM instead of the older unit's 4MB, reflecting the reality of today's memory-hungry programs.



Pen slate design

Other than that, the 730TE remains the purposeful, beautifully crafted, and rock-solid pen tablet it was, an almost perfect implementation of the original pen slate concept. The location of the controls and icons indicates that the 730, just like the 700 and 710 models before it, was designed for operation in portrait mode (Windows has a Rotate control panel to set screen orientation). Measuring 10.6 x 8.3 x 1.4 inches, the unit is primarily aimed at vertical market applications-field inspection, appraisals, sales, claims adjustment, health care, law enforcement, service, repair, inventory-where light weight (the 730TE weighs just 3.9 pounds), impeccable engineering and reliability count. Like most ThinkPads, and perhaps more so, the 730TE feels as if it was milled from that proverbial block of steel, and that's not far from the truth: there is no creaking and flexing in the 730TE because its entire bottom case is made of solid magnesium. The slim, battery-free Wacom pen is a pleasure to use. Just don't lose it. Since the physical design is unchanged, the 730TE inherits its predecessors' flimsy plastic latches, one of which houses the pen. Others cover the PCCard slots and the port replicator connector. Our guess is that they won't last long in field use.

Screen

Much of the 730TE's surface is taken up by a 9.5" STN transfective, backlit monochrome screen. Its contrast is somewhat marginal, but the "track right" edged surface has a very good paperlike feel for pen operation. The backlight can be turned on and off through touch controls on the left side of the screen, just like speaker operation, brightness, and sleep mode. A row of LEDs indicate battery status, disk activity, and power status.

Ports and expansion

Like its predecessor, the 730TE comes standard with a port replicator that offers a full complement of serial, parallel, SVGA, floppy, power, and PS/2 style keyboard ports. It'd be nice if those ports were built-in, especially since the replicator doesn't connect very securely to the main unit. The 730TE also has room for either two PCMCIAType II cards or three Type II cards (if one of them is an ICDRAMcard).

Recent issues





Operating systems

The 730TE offers a variety of operating systems, including PenDOS, Pen for OS/2 Warp, PenRight!, or Windows for Pen Computing (IBM supplies its own ThinkWrite recognizer instead of Microsoft's MARS). You can actually still get the unit with the late, great pen-centric PenPoint operating system (special order). At press time, there was no word whether IBM will release the driver libraries necessary for the 730TE to run Windows 95 with the 2.0 pen extension. We hope so. The 730TE is powerful enough to run Windows 95.

What could have been

Unlike IBM's other pen computer, the clamshell 360PE, which is manufactured in Mexico, the 730TE is made in Japan (our unit came with Japanese manuals). One can't help but wonder what would have happened had IBM given those clever Japanese designers free reign. Integrated Graffiti? A better on-screen keyboard? Some pen killer apps? But those are moot points. The 730TE, after all, is a workhorse vertical market pen tablet, and not a platform for pushing the state-of-the-art in pen computing.

Performance

How does the 730TE's faster chip and bigger disk affect performance? The results are somewhat inconclusive. In our benchmarks, the new unit predictably achieved better processor scores and powered to a truly stellar WinMark performance. Disk and video scores were mixed, despite accelerated VESA local-bus graphics. Overall, expect about a 25% performance increase over the 730T.

Power management

We weren't able to benchmark battery life. IBM's technical information claims that the 730TE's twin NiCAD batteries will power the unit for about 3.3 hours of continuous operation with the backlight on. Based on our experience with the older 730T, this seems about right. Expect up to five hours with the backlight off. You may get more in intermittent use. The unit can be put to sleep with a touch of the pen. Pushing a button wakes it up. Unfortunately, when the unit is on, pushing the same button turns it off. Not an ideal solution.

Pricing

Pricing of the 730TE is reasonable: \$2,849 for the 8MB diskless base unit, and \$3,499 for a 260MB disk version with your choice of operating system pre-loaded. If you want to peruse detailed specs, they're available on IBM's excellent World Wide Web site at <http://www.pcco.ibm.com/products.html>.

Bottom line is that the IBM ThinkPad 730TE continues to be one of the very best pen slates available. Thanks, IBM, for keeping the faith!