Synopsis

British Telecommunications (BT) Prestel database can be accessed through the Edinburgh Regional Computing Centre network (EDNET) through the PSSE gateway. This User Note is intended to inform EDNET users how to do so.

Keywords

EDNET, Micronet 800, Prestel, PSSE, Teletext

1. Introduction

Prestel is a 'Viewdata' service provided by BT, containing over 300,000 pages of information on a wide range of topics. Most of this information is made available by organizations other than BT, so called Information Providers (IPs). A full list of IPs can be found in the Prestel Directory, ranging alphabetically from 'AA Travel' to 'Zimbabwe Tourist Board'. Services include:

- information from 'Viewtel', an electronic news service;

- travel and tourist information;

- banking and insurance information and services mainly for the business sector;

- information from Government departments, such as the Meteorology Office weather forecasts;

- electronic mail between users, and between users and IPs, including ordering goods and travel and hotel bookings.

Prestel Directory, incorporating Prestel Magazine, is published quarterly for BT. It includes a full list of IPs, a subject index as well as information on using Prestel and a magazine section with features and news. It is sent free to Prestel users and is available on annual subscription (£10, October 1986). A potential Prestel User should be able to get a free copy of the current directory from BT.

There are several Closed User Groups (CUGs), access to which requires extra payment or which are open only to members of certain professional bodies. Prestel Education is an example of one.

Contact BT for details of how to join Prestel and its associated CUGs (Appendix I.I).

Prestel uses 'Teletext' which is a generic term for the display of textual information on television screens. Other well known databases using Teletext are Ceefax and Oracle from the BBC and ITV respectively.

2. PRESTEL Education

This service is a CUG for schools, colleges, other educational establishments and has recently been extended to universities. Prestel Education includes information on higher education courses, information for careers advisers and communication links for schools, as well as microcomputer information including down-loadable software. Information is provided from over 150 educational organizations such as the British Library, Health Education Council, City and Guilds Institutes and some universities.

Subscription to CUGs also covers the standard Prestel Service. Included in Prestel Education is Prestel microcomputing, called Micronet 800 which provides telesoftware, a microcomputing news service with hardware and software reviews, readers' letters and contributions and technical help. Software specifically for educational purposes for schools is provided, some of which is free (that is, no page charge is levied).

3. Accessing PRESTEL

3.1 Telephone Line Access

The usual mode of access to Prestel is through a telephone line using a Prestel handset or microcomputer and modem. However, the University exchange lines are unsuitable for this kind of communication. A departmental facility would require a direct BT exchange line. Together with the hire or purchase of a Prestel receiver or modem the cost of Prestel access becomes rather high. These costs can be eliminated by the use of an existing departmental microcomputer connected to EDNET. Prestel host computers can be contacted via the Packet Switching System Exchange (PSSE) gateway on EDNET.

3.2 PRESTEL via EDNET

Two Prestel hosts can be found on the PSSE gateway:

- 'PREST2'

- 'PRESTEL'

The host 'PRESTEL' can be used without Teletext formatting software, on an ordinary terminal although the display is not entirely satisfactory.

The host 'PREST2' sends Teletext graphics and colour codes and requires appropriate software to be sensibly displayed. Accessing 'PREST2' with Commstar software on a BBC-B microcomputer is described in detail below. Other computers can be used such as the IBM-PC with Chit-chat software but the software cost is usually higher than for the BBC.

Teletext on BBC

This method of access, through the host 'PREST2', has been tested and is recommended. The equipment required is a BBC-B (or Master) computer with connections to EDNET, and a Pace Commstar ROM. For use with the BBC Master Series, a Commstar ROM version 1.4 is required. Earlier ROMs will be swapped for the latest version by Pace. The Commstar ROM is incompatible with ECONET. Other ROMs may also be satisfactory but have not been tested. The Swansea Uniterm ROM, while appearing to offer Teletext, was found to have an incomplete implementation.

A colour monitor greatly enhances the effect of the display but is not essential for most information. Some pages display maps and charts which are difficult to interpret without colour.

Details of log-on procedure are in Appendix I.II.

PRESTEL without Teletext

The host 'PRESTEL' can be called via PSSE from ordinary network terminals (including microcomputers using X-Talk). Call PSSE in the usual way (User Note 69) and select 'PRESTEL' as host (Appendix I.III). The text should be legible but the block graphics and large lettering are not displayed properly. When entering page numbers in Prestel on most terminals use the <#> key instead of <RETURN>to terminate the entry. On the BBC use the underscore (unshifted<£> key).

4. Costs

Assuming a BBC and connections to EDNET are available, the only equipment needed is the formatting ROM. The Commstar ROM costs about £35 including VAT (October 1986).

Recurring charges are shown below for the Prestel Education CUG (standard Prestel costs are given in parentheses where different):

Quarterly subscription	£18(£20)
Connect time (Note a)	4p/min(6p/min)
Page charges (Note b)	0p-50p/page
Software costs (Note c)	variable
ERCC PSSE charges	see Note d

Notes:

a. Connect time is charged from 08.00-18.00 Monday to Friday and from 08.00-13.00 on Saturday. Other times are free.

b. Most pages are free. Charges are levied for some pages by the IPs, and seem to be highest where they are frequently updated or where the information is of commercial value. Exceptionally pages may cost more than 50p.

c. Prestel Education service provides down-loadable software for the BBC microcomputer and a few other machines. This is mainly for use in schools although a wide range of applications and utility software is available. There is a charge for much of the software and this may be several pounds.

d. PSSE charges for Edinburgh University are covered by the Computer Board (at present, October 1986) but ERCC levies a local charge of 10% of the PSSE cost to cover maintenance and administration of the gateway. See User Note 69 for more details.

It can be seen from the above prices that if Prestel is to be used for more than one hour 40 minutes in a quarter, during office hours, then the Education service works out cheaper than standard Prestel.

Prestel customers are billed quarterly.

Warning

It appears that if one of the EDNET computers being used to link to Prestel goes down while logged onto Prestel, there is no time out mechanism on the Prestel host until 18.00. This means that the user will continue to run up connect charges until 18.00. It is unlikely that there will be any improvement in this situation in the foreseeable future. However, during fairly extensive use of Prestel the author did not experience this problem.

Please note that ERCC will not be liable for Prestel charges incurred through a communications failure.

5. PRESTEL from X-TALK

If there is sufficient demand, it should be possible to provide a Teletext emulation within the BBC X-Talk ROM. This will remove the need for an extra ROM, which may well be competing for limited spare sockets in the computer. Contact ERCC Advisory to register interest in having this done.

6. Demonstration Database

BT has made available a Prestel demonstration database which can be accessed without a Prestel accreditation, and is free. The customer identity number is 4444444444 and the pass code 4444. This contains a small subset of full Prestel together with details on how to join and the up to date costs involved in using the service. You can also ask for an application form to be sent to you.

7. PRESTEL Demonstration

The author of this Note will be able to demonstrate Prestel access via EDNET to prospective users for a limited period after the Note's publication.

References

Trew, A.S.   Logging on to Local and Remote Computers, ERCC User Note 69, September 1985.

Hood, A.   Commstar; ROM Based Intelligent Communications Facility for BBC Micro., Pace Software Services Ltd.

I. Access Details

I.I. Setting yourself up to use Prestel

- Get your microcomputer connected to EDNET. For details contact
  John Livingstone, ERCC User Liaison (tel. 031–667 1011 ext. 4562).
  If you do not have a microcomputer available and are considering
  the purchase of one also contact ERCC Service Support to discuss
  your requirements.

- Obtain a user number to access the PSSE gateway. Forms for this
  purpose are available from the ERCC Advisory Service (tel. 031–667
  1081 ext. 2976 or 031–667 1011 ext. 2300 or electronic mail to
  ADVICE).

- If a BBC microcomputer is being used Commstar software can be
  obtained from J. Robertson at ERCC Administration (tel. 031–667
  1081 ext. 2613) who will also advise on the current price
  (approximately £25 + VAT, October 1986).

- If you want help fitting the ROM contact ERCC Small Systems Unit
  (tel. 031–667 1081 ext. 2661)

- Obtain a Prestel registration number from British Telecom.
  Telephone 01–882 1100 for general Prestel information or 01–882
  1064 for details of Prestel Education.

Contact the author of this Note for details of Teletext formatting software for
microcomputers other than the BBC.

I.II. Using Commstar on BBC

Note that Commstar redefines the <RETURN> key to <#> which is used in Prestel to
terminate a line of input. Before reaching Prestel, that is while logging onto PSSE, use
<CTRL M> where <RETURN> would normally be used. When in Prestel use <RETURN>
where a '#' is prompted. Documentation on using Prestel is sent with membership
details on joining. Functions specific to the communications software, such as a
facility for page tagging, page capture and software down-loading are documented in
the Commstar manual.

The following is a list of key strokes needed to set up the Commstar ROM for
accessing Prestel through EDNET:

c<RETURN>	to run the Commstar ROM;
#	toggle to Prestel emulation;
i	initialize communication parameters;
5	set communication parameters;
s	press 'S' several times to set send baud rate to 1200;
r	press 'R' several times to set receive baud rate to 1200;
<RETURN>	exit to Prestel menu;
c	enter 'chat' mode to begin communications.

Now log onto PSSE in the usual way (User Note 69). Remember to use <CTRL M>
instead of <RETURN>. Type:

CALL PREST2 <CTRL M>

to call the Prestel Host when logged onto PSSE. Successful logon is indicated by *Connected* message followed by the Prestel logo and a request for your Prestel customer identity.

After leaving Prestel at the *PSSE/Command:* prompt type:

STOP <CTRL M>

I.III. Using X-Talk and dumb terminals

Log onto PSSE in the usual way (see User Note 69). In response to the prompt *PSSE/Command:*   type   **CALL PRESTEL** <RETURN>.

II. PRESTEL Commands

After connection to the Prestel host enter the 10 character customer identity followed by the 4 character password as prompted. When onto the first page you can move around Prestel by keying numbers shown in the menus or by going directly to a particular page. The latter is achieved by typing ***page number** followed by <RETURN> (# or underscore if not using Commstar). Note that when moving by menu numbers, do not press <RETURN> unless told to do so.

Some useful pages and utilities (terminate with <RETURN>) are:

*90	to leave Prestel;
*92	current Prestel bill;
*3	local information;
*199	alphabetic list of information;
*198	alphabetic list of IPs;
*170	new Prestel features;
*9	user facilities;
*	go back to last page.

The following commands do not require <RETURN>:

**	cancel keyed instruction;
*00	repeat displayed frame;
*09	repeat displayed frame including updates.