



# YOUR OLD PC IS WORTH £85,000 IN THE WRONG HANDS

## Are you leaving yourself open to identity theft?

### TALKING POINTS

- Criminals are targeting discarded PCs as part of the lucrative trade in personal information
- Auction sites and council tips are an identity fraudster's hunting ground
- What you can do to protect yourself



You'd be surprised at how easy it is for your data to fall into the wrong hands, as *Which? Computing* reader Alexander Skipwith (pictured, right) found out.

Alexander's family pictures, bank statements, and more were 'held to ransom' by a man in Latvia late last year.

Alexander's files had been found on a faulty hard drive that Mesh Computers had replaced.

Finding Alexander's contact details on the drive, the Latvian sent an email asking Alexander if he wanted to buy his hard drive back. He attached one of Alexander's most personal pictures to show he meant business.

What ensued was a terrifying game of cat and mouse where Alexander attempted to downplay the importance of the information to assess whether the holder of his data simply wanted to recover the money paid for Alexander's drive, or whether he had sinister motives.

The hard drive was the same one that Mesh Computers had taken away weeks earlier. The engineer, who called at Alexander's London home, assured him that the faulty drive would be wiped of personal information before being returned to the manufacturer.

Mesh has investigated Alexander's case. Its records show the hard drive was returned and wiped (complying with Data Protection rules) before it was sent to the manufacturer. It is now investigating with them. However, a Mesh spokesperson admitted that it is possible for someone with the right equipment and resources to recover the wiped data.

Alexander finally agreed a £100 fee plus expenses

for the return of his information from Latvia but the data he's getting back is worth much more than that – estimates suggest that the average UK citizen is worth £85,000 to an identity fraudster.

Alexander said: 'It's been a terrifying experience. I feel let down by Mesh and felt my files were being held to ransom.'

Alexander's case shows how valuable our computers have

become because of the information they contain.

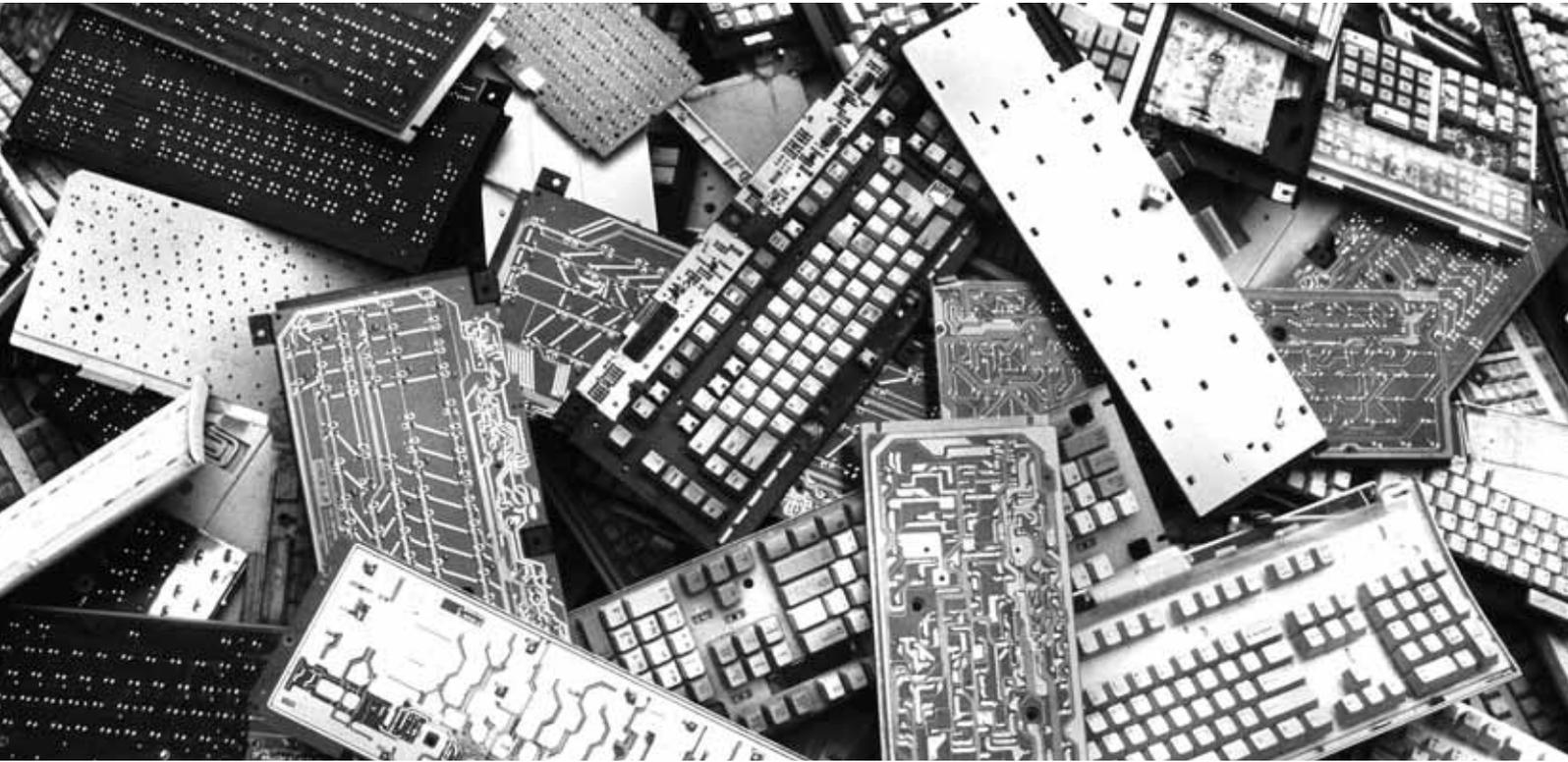
But *Which? Computing* has found that you could just as easily fall victim to identity thieves even if you delete your personal data and dispose of your PC carefully.

This is because criminals are trawling computers from council tips and internet auction sites and will recover deleted data with the help of specialist software, says Tony Neate, head of Get Safe Online.

He said: 'Opportunists might use free software they download from the internet to recover data. More serious organised gangs are prepared to spend money to recruit IT expertise.'

### INVESTIGATION

Serious organised gangs are prepared to recruit IT expertise to recover data



And with more people shopping on the internet, using social networking sites and taking digital photos, our PCs contain more valuable personal information than ever.

Your CV, for example, contains your name, address, telephone number, email address and in some cases your National Insurance number. With this information an identity thief could apply for a credit card. If they get a document bearing your name and/or your address, a fraudster can take over your bank account or even apply for a mortgage in your name.

### EASY PICKINGS

To find just how easy it is for a criminal to get their hands on your data, we bought eight second-hand hard drives from auction site eBay. The cheapest cost a penny.

Some sellers hadn't even deleted their files, meaning we were able to view their data simply by connecting the hard drive to another PC.

But there's still more to find, if you're got the right tools. A simple Google search pointed us towards a wide range of data recovery software, ranging from basic-but-effective free tools to more complex suites costing a few tens of pounds.

We used PCTools' File Recover, a simple piece of software that exists to help consumers recover accidentally deleted files.

On one drive, that had initially appeared empty, the software helped us find an astonishing 22,000 files that had once been deleted. Not all of these could be successfully recovered, but we found images, music files, and spreadsheets that could be easily viewed, despite their original owner having deleted them.



**Alexander Skipwith was the innocent victim of careless data disposal**

DARREN FILKINS, PANOS

## Take ACTION

It's not just home users who are at risk from carelessly discarded hard drive data – the Metropolitan police told us that hard drives from decommissioned cash machines were bought by crooks keen to get hold of the bank details.

### 1 DELETE YOUR DATA PROPERLY

It's your data on your hard drive, so it's your responsibility. Even if you give your PC to a charity, it doesn't have to delete your data unless it says it will.

### 2 THINK ABOUT IT

Avoid storing sensitive data (such as credit card numbers and passwords) on your PC. If you really need to store this data, encrypt it.

### 3 DELETION SOFTWARE

Our tests showed these to be effective at obliterating data, so use one to remove your files before dumping your PC.

### 4 DESTROY YOUR DRIVE

If you want to be sure that no one will ever access data on your hard drive, destroy it. Hit it with a hammer, drive a large nail through it, or smash it with an axe.

### 5 DON'T WORRY!

If you're careful, no one will ever recover your personal data.

We deleted all these files and destroyed the drives, but there was plenty of information, including websites visited and personal pictures that the users wouldn't have wanted to fall into unscrupulous hands.

Professor Andrew Blyth heads the University of Glamorgan's Information Security Group. His team has looked into the information that can be recovered from second-hand computers. 'We've found CVs, credit card numbers, bank statements and National Insurance numbers,' he said.

'It's all there, and it's all worth money to a criminal.'

### COMPUTER TOOLS TO STAY SAFE

So, is there a safe way to remove information from a hard drive? To find out, we put a number of methods of data deletion to the test.

Files that had just been emptied from the **Recycle Bin** (see p37) presented no challenge at all: all our test files were easily recovered.

Often experts advise reinstalling the **operating system** before selling a computer. Reinstalling Windows Vista on our test machine was easy. Once we'd finished, it looked like a new machine – no files on the desktop, nothing in the My Documents folder. But after a bit of browsing, we found all our files nestling in a newly created directory ready for anyone to find.

Next, we tried **reformatting** the hard drive. This process erases everything from the drive, making it ready for use as if it were brand new. We found our files were gone for good. But make sure it's a full format as the quick format option wasn't enough to expunge our data.

### SHREDDING SOFTWARE

There is commercially available software that claims to act as a kind of digital shredder and remove data. We tried The Shredder that comes with McAfee's Internet Security Suite ([www.mcafee.com](http://www.mcafee.com)).

Once we'd carefully selected the files we wanted to permanently delete, we found that The Shredder securely removed them from our hard drive.

Another easy-to-use package is TuneUp ([www.tuneup-software.co.uk](http://www.tuneup-software.co.uk)). Like McAfee it offers other functions in addition to file deletion, and was effective at removing our files. It costs £30 to buy, but there's a free trial available on its website.

If you don't have any of the above software and are reluctant to buy it, check out DPWipe ([www.paehl.de/english.php](http://www.paehl.de/english.php)) – scroll down to find the download). It's a small **freeware** program that worked well, though it was a little harder to use than the paid-for packages we tested.

### THE ULTIMATE SOLUTION

There is one sure fire method of getting rid of your personal data, though it might seem drastic at first.

Get Safe Online's Tony Neate said: 'PC hard drives are cheap and easily replaceable. Although there are dedicated programs that will securely delete your files, if you want to be absolutely sure, remove the hard drive from your PC and destroy it with a hammer.' ■



## Step by step

## HOW TO REMOVE YOUR HARD DRIVE

Removing the hard drive from your computer isn't tricky. If you're just going to recycle your old PC then you don't need to worry about replacing the drive. However, if you want to have a working computer to sell then you'll need to install a new one – you can pick up a basic hard drive for around £30.

**1** First, open up the case of your computer. Case designs vary, but usually you'll remove a side panel to access the insides.

Now you need to identify the hard drive. This will typically be mounted at the front of the PC. Look for a silver box about the size of a paperback book.



**2** Disconnect all the cables from the drive, then remove the screws holding it in place (some cases may have a quick-release mechanism instead). Carefully slide the drive out of its mount. You can now store the drive for safekeeping, or destroy it with a hammer.



The sure-fire way of getting rid of your hard drive is smashing it with a hammer!