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October 2005 article. Page 1 of 2

How to Lock up Your Documents

by Allan Naguit. October 2005.

The computer guys are coming to fix your PC but you'd rather they couldn't look at your private files. Or maybe you share a family PC. There are personnel files for your business. Details about your finances. Your secret diary. What can you do? How can you keep private files private?

You could move your files somewhere else, like onto a memory card, USB key, CD or DVD and delete them from your computer. Of course, you'll have to put them all back in once the coast is clear.

Or, you could use a file encryptor.

What is a file encryptor? It's something that scrambles files so they become unreadable unless you supply the right key.

I found an easy way to do this.

It's a product called **EncryptOnClick**, from a company called **2BrightSparks**. They're giving it away as a free download (1.23 MB, 100% freeware) from their website at: http://www.2brightsparks.com

Windows XP has the ability to encrypt files, called the Windows XP Encrypting File System (EFS). However, it's not in the Home Edition and only works on NTFS volumes. Learn more from Microsoft's website at: http://support.microsoft.com/default.aspx?scid=kb;en-us;307877&sd=tech

So, for those who don't have the right version of XP, you can try EncryptOnClick. It's free for commercial as well as for personal use.

EncryptOnClick: What does it do? It allows you to easily encrypt a file or the contents of an entire folder.

Got a diary? Encrypt that file. Got a business folder full of confidential documents? Encrypt the entire folder! All this with just a few clicks and a password.

How do you use EncryptOnClick?

Let's look at an example of a folder with files we want to keep confidential.

Below are some test files I put in a folder I imaginatively called "EncryptOnClick Test Folder". In here I have a lot of "sensitive documents". There's a diary, personnel and payroll details, a backup of my finance data. I also threw in several other file types (ZIP, MP3, a movie file, my PDA's backup, web browser and email backups) to see how they might get affected.

Name	Size	Type
Palm Date Book.dba	164KB	DBA File
My Money Backup.mny	3,080KB	Microsoft Mon...
manah-manah.mpeg	606KB	Movie Clip
Firefox 1.0 (en-US) - 20.01.05.pcv	296KB	PCV File
Thunderbird 1.0 (en) - 20.01.05.pcv	30KB	PCV File
Diary.txt	1KB	Text Document
Personnel File.txt	1KB	Text Document
Payroll File.txt	1KB	Text Document
Passwords.txt	1KB	Text Document
mahnamahna.mp3	2,172KB	Winamp media...
FileZilla.xml	11KB	XML Document
PC Backup.zip	4,471KB	ZIP File

Figure 1: My "EncryptOnClick Test Folder" with sample files.

To run EncryptOnClick, double-click on the icon (which went on my Desktop when I installed it):

Figure 2: The desktop icon

The EncryptOnClick program looks like this:

Figure 3: The EncryptOnClick program menu

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October 2005 article. Page 2 of 2

This program allows you to Encrypt and Decrypt things – either individual files or entire Folders.

Encrypting a single File

To test, I encrypted my Diary. Let's pretend that I didn't want anyone to find out which movie actress I currently have a crush on. I clicked on File (under Encrypt) and was prompted to choose my file:
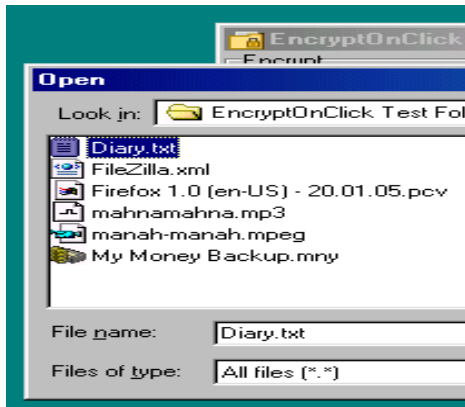
Figure 4: Single file encrypt: my Diary

I browsed until I found my Diary document and clicked on it. I was prompted for a password which I entered twice to confirm.
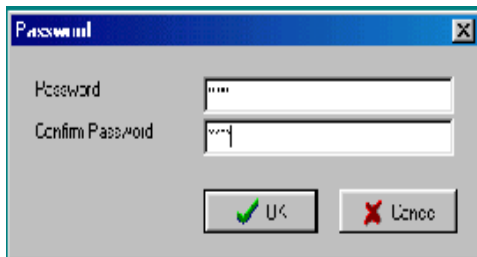

Figure 5: Setting the password

(Important note: Don't lose this password! You won't be able to unlock your file afterwards if you do! If you need help keeping track of passwords, I wrote an article about it which you can read online here: http://www.funai.com.au/funai-ezine-passwords.html)

EncryptOnClick turned my Diary from a Text Document to an "EncryptOnClick" type of file.

Figure 6: My Diary, encrypted

So, I pretended to be a tabloid reporter/snooper and tried to open my Diary. I double-clicked on the Diary file and was prompted for a password. I got it wrong on purpose and I got a window with some text that ended with "The password is incorrect". I tried to open the document (in this case, via Notepad), and got a page full of gibberish. I even tried to rename the file back to "Diary.txt" and open it: again, a page of gibberish. Foiled! There you go: encryption in action.

Encrypting an entire Folder

As we saw before in Figure 3, we can encrypt an entire folder. It's a very similar deal. This time, browse until you find the folder you want to encrypt. You'll be prompted to set a password. **EncryptOnClick** will then encrypt each file within that folder, one at a time. In effect, it'll be like you encrypted each file, one by one, with the same password.

Figure 7: The entire folder's contents, encrypted.

What happens when it's time to unlock? Simple. Just use the proper Decrypt option (File or Folder), enter your password, and you're done! The file type goes back to normal. Or, double-click on individual files, enter the correct password, and the file will be automatically decrypted, ready to be accessed by the right program.

A note about virus-cleaning and other PC servicing: Your anti-virus (and computer guy) *may* need total access to your files in order to work properly. As I expected, my anti-virus program didn't detect a (test) virus-infected file when it was encrypted, but it did detect the virus when the document was decrypted. Something to keep in mind.

Final words: EncryptOnClick - wonderfully easy to use, it works, and it's FREE! Just be very careful not to lose your password(s). And make sure you have proper backups before you go encrypting your entire My Documents folder – just in case. (My article on backups is online here at: http://www.funai.com.au/funai-ezine-backups.html.)

As for my diary and my secret crush? That's encrypted!