

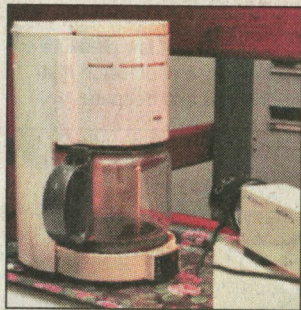
First star of the Internet goes to ground

By Joanna Bale

THE world's first Internet star is retiring after ten years in the spotlight.

The unlikely star is a £40 coffee percolator that made its debut in front of the camera when computer scientists at Cambridge University became frustrated at walking down several flights of stairs only to find the pot empty. They set up a camcorder, pointed it at the pot and wrote a program to relay the image to their screens upstairs, so they would always know when it was full.

When the World Wide Web was invented soon afterwards,



Watched pot: off the boil

they put it online as the world's first webcam. Although it is the Internet equivalent of watching paint dry, it became cult viewing, with 2.4 million visitors.

Since then, webcams have been pointed at almost everything imaginable, offering the virtual traveller panoramic views of country scenes, sweeping city skylines and other people's sitting room.

But now Cambridge's Trojan Room webcam and its subject are being consigned to the history books because the university computer department is moving. Dan Gordon, 33, a research scientist, said: "It will be turned off simply because there is no more need for it.

"It became very popular because it was up and running when there really wasn't very much else to look at on the Internet. We've kept it going us-

ing old machines, but it quite often breaks down."

Quentin Stafford-Fraser, the man behind the pot website, said: "I first rigged it up because we were fed up of traipsing half-way around the building to find there was no coffee in the pot. At first, the image was only updated about three times a minute — it is now one frame a second — but that was fine because the pot filled rather slowly, and it was only greyscale, which was also fine, because so was the coffee.

"This system only took us a day or so to construct but was rather more useful than anything else I wrote while working on networks."

He never imagined it would achieve cult status — and even transatlantic visitors. A couple from America once called into the Cambridge Tourist Information Office to ask if they could get a closer look. Mr Stafford-Fraser said: "I think they wanted to see where it lived and what the room was like. It is certainly a long way to come to see an old coffee pot — they didn't even get a cup of coffee from it."

The laboratory will move to a new building to the west of Cambridge later this year. In the meantime, the coffee pot can still be seen on: <http://www.cl.cam.ac.uk/coffee/coffee.html>