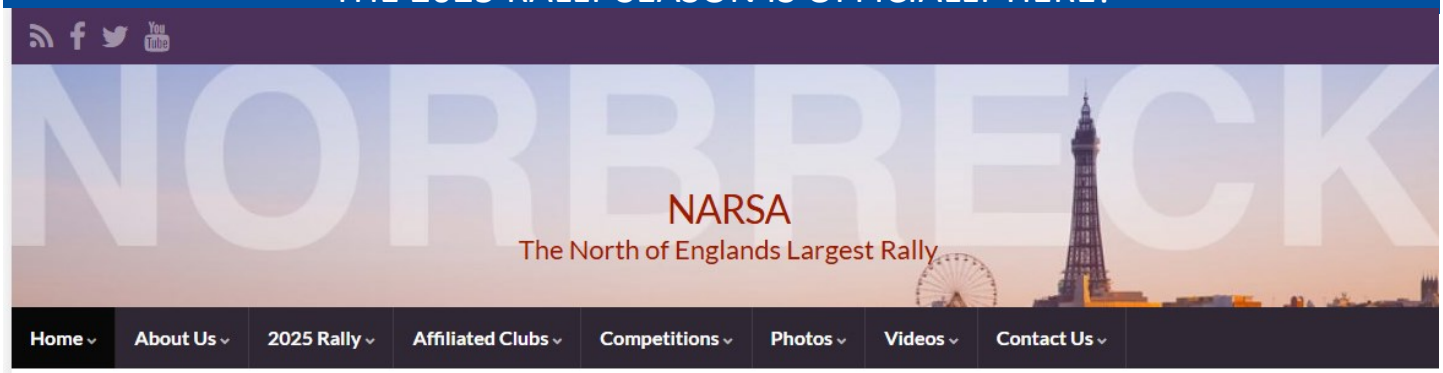
QRZ

ISSUE 23 APRIL 2025

THE MONTHLY NEWSLETTER OF THE HALIFAX & DISTRICT ARS

THE 2025 RALLY SEASON IS OFFICIALLY HERE!



Home

Venue : Norbreck Hotel, Blackpool : Doors Open at 10.30am

Venue : The Norbreck Castle Hotel, Queen's Promenade, Blackpool, Lancashire, FY2 9AA

Arriving by car : Yellow direction arrows will be posted on major junctions from the end of the M55. Please be advised that there are lots of speed cameras on this route.

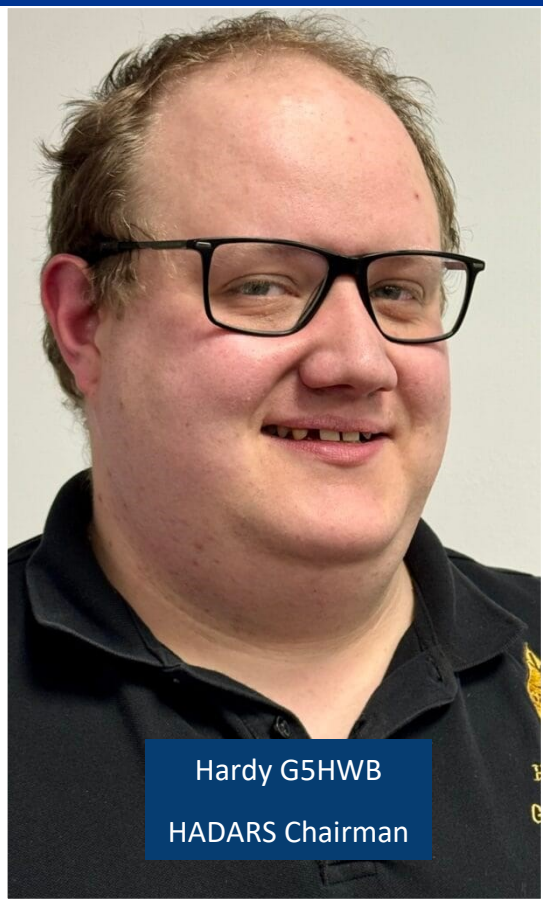
Arriving by car – Alternative route : Because of the extensive roadworks taking place in Blackpool a couple of years ago we used Google Maps to see if there was an alternative route to our normal signposted route, leaving the M55 at junction 3 instead of junction 4 (the end of the M55). It transits most of the A585 and appears to avoid most of the speed cameras. Furthermore, it goes through fewer built-up areas than the normal route, resulting is a possibly shorter journey time.

CLUB NETS & VIDEO CONFERENCES

- Monday from 7pm - the SSB and FM SSTV Net which alternates each week. 144.390 for SSB, 144.525 for SSTV. Pictures from the SSTV Net are usually posted on the HADARS Members Facebook pages.
- Tuesday from 7pm - 6m Net on GB3WY listen on 50.800MHz, transmit on 51.300MHz with CTCSS tone of 82.5Hz
- Wednesday from 7pm - 70cm Net on GB3HD listen on 433.225MHz, transmit on 434.825MHz with CTCSS tone of 82.5Hz
- Thursday from 7pm - Joint RAFARS/HADARS Net on 145.350 FM
- Thursday from 7.15pm - 'MS Teams' Video Technical Conference Call - see Hardy G5HWB for details
- Sunday from approximately 7pm onwards - 'MS Teams' Video Conference for license training and revision help. See Hardy for details of how to use your Web Browser to connect to the conference.

CHAIRMAN'S MONTHLY UPDATE : Hardy G5HWB

Kit and Caboodle.



An excellent start to the Kanaga Project is underway. With the first session undertaken by our eager members, excellent reports of fun and challenge have been coming in. It brings me delight to know that our members are finding this challenge in electronics and soldering to be a fun and worthwhile endeavour. A rewarding one too! Once again, a big thanks here to Max G4SDX for not only his great idea but execution of this marvellous project.

It did, however, highlight some interesting finds amongst participating members…

Soldering irons are an individual's choice, and many, many variations are available on the open market, but as I'm sure some of you have found first hand, they are not all equal. I would say that any "cheap" iron – especially sub £25 plug in irons, are only good for one job. That isn't to say they only have one purpose, but literally, one job, a single use, then they're often done.

They rapidly oxidise and the tips corrode at a rate that can be observed! From a safety perspective, I have known a particular brand, associated with tigers we shall say, glow like an off-brand lightsabre. This is of course, far, far too hot to be of any use in electronics, and just plainly dangerous. They are still on the market, so please watch out.

If you have not yet purchased an iron, please, have an ask around. You will of course get the same variation as you would asking for a favourite radio brand, but you will be pointed in a useful direction. I don't want to see anyone discouraged and frustrated, especially if the root cause is the tool and not the operator. Even the best and most experienced of us struggle with a bad iron. You don't need to break the bank, but you do want to invest.

It is also important to note, just because you struggle now, it doesn't mean you're not improving! Soldering is a skill, not only is it a perishable skill that must be kept up with, but it is a lot like playing an instrument, or using a lathe. The rate of improvement, and how comfortable you become with it vs time spent has a tendency of flattening out rapidly. Your general skill will improve quite quickly, but finer abilities and nuance come at a far slower rate. Keep going! You are all very capable of achieving some lovely solder joints, and pertinently a working, good looking outcome.

I hope you all have fun, and enjoy this project, and of course, all of the others to come.

All the best,

Hardy,

G5HWB,

H.A.D.A.R.S. Chair

CONTEST NEWS & EVENTS

Very little other contest news to report this month, but Richard G3UGF and Martin M0GQB are battling bravely away in the RSGB 80m CC, holding us in 17th place in the General Clubs section, around 500 points clear of the Gower Contest Club. I noticed from the results that Richard was using his fabulous new Icom IC-7760 as his contest tool of choice and, as it has replaced his Kenwood TS-890S which is an absolutely superb contest radio in its own right, it will be interesting to hear how he found the new Icom flagship radio on the noisy and fickle 80m band.

Gregg M0WRE, our Contest manager, has flagged up a couple of interesting events in April for those of you with an interest in digital modes. Over the weekend of 5th and 6th April, from 1200 UTC until 1200 UTC there is the International FT4 Activity contest. The RSGB provide useful help and guidance on their contest pages for this contest, so if you have WSJT-X running, why not dip your toe into the water and try out FT4 contesting?

Later in the month on the 28th April, there is another short FT4 contest from 1900 UTC until 2100 UTC, which is an ideal training opportunity. The contest runs on 80m, 40m and 20m. See the RSGB contest pages for more details.

Saturday April 26th is the big historic event for April, with International Marconi Day, once again organised by the Cornish Radio Amateurs Club. Their HQ station will run GB4IMD from Stithians Showground, near to the historic Poldhu transmitting station used by Marconi for his first transatlantic crossing. Other Marconi stations will be on the air in Italy and in other historic sites associated with the Great Man. Awards are available for this event.

The NARSA Blackpool Rally kicks of the spring Rally season here 'Oop North' on the 13th April, and is once again hosted at the Norbeck Hotel, near Bispham. Doors open at 10am on the Sunday. Quite a drive, but usually well worth it.

Not much to report on the VHF contest front in April, but the season will get underway in May with the Backpackers, and the other 'portable' events. More in the May edition of the newsletter.

The disruption to the Buildathon caused by illness and the need to shift the calendar forwards by one week, has made April's events a bit hit and miss at the moment. My own illness, and the exhaustion that has resulted from it, has also delayed and derailed my own planning and preparation for events in April and May. However, we hope to have a couple of informal talks arranged for April, and once we can get this organised I will update you all on the revised club night timetable.

APRIL 2025 CLUB & EVENTS CALENDAR - AT A GLANCE

Date	Event
Tuesday 1st April	**Hadars Buildathon final session** - help available to catch up with the program and to test the receiver.
Sat 5th and Sun 6th April	**RSGB international FT4 activity Day** - A chance to experience FT4 in a competitive format. Rules here RSGB FT4 International Activity Day and also this link to useful guidance and help in submitting a log Microsoft Word - FT4 Tips and Hints V15.docx
Tuesday 8th April	**Ad-Hoc activity night and Social evening** - License coaching available
Tuesday 15th April	**Ad-Hoc activity night and Social evening** - License coaching available
Tuesday 22nd April	**Talk and Demonstration -** To be advised ASAP
Saturday 26th April	**INTERNATIONAL MARCONI DAY - GB4IMD** will be operating, along with SES stations in the UK and Internationally, at sites associated with Marconi. SSB, and CW. Details here Official IMD Stations 2025 -
Monday 28th April	**RSGB FT4 Contest** - A short fun contest from 1900 UTC until 2100 UTC RSGB 80/40/20m FT4 Contest Series
Tuesday 29th April	**Ad-Hoc activity night and Social evening** - License coaching available

QRZ EDITORIAL - THOUGHTS of SPRING & ANTENNAS

March was an interesting month, in which we experienced a brief winter respite, with some early and welcome spring like weather (if only for a few days). My Facebook 'Memories' remind me that at the same time the year before, we were under two feet of snow. Nevertheless, it brought everyone out into the garden to try and get their grass cut, and a few actually managed it, although I was not one. My little Bosh electric mower finally fell to corrosion and serial neglect, and (I suspect) died of shame, as it spotted my OCD neighbour buffing up the sparkling engine cover on his own petrol lawn mower, and lovingly wiping fresh oil from its crank case filler cap.

After fulfilling my wife's list of gardening jobs, my thoughts turned to a more speedy solution to erecting temporary antennas. I use temporary antennas a lot at home, both for testing new designs, and for making quick forays into bands that are usually not worth keeping metal in the sky for on a permanent basis (and of course, so as not to upset the neighbours too much). 6m Sporadic E is one such example.

My usual solution is to drag my portable mast and all the other gear from my portable box out of the garage, onto the lawn, then hammer in guy lines and drape the garden with cables. This is not generally well regarded by the head gardener, and it's a pain in the bum to be honest carting it all round the house every time I need to test something. What I need is a way to attach a mast quickly to the side of the house with a couple of quick release clamps, which will provide enough support to do without the guy lines, and provide a short coax run to the shack window, which I usually keep open as an improvised cat flap.

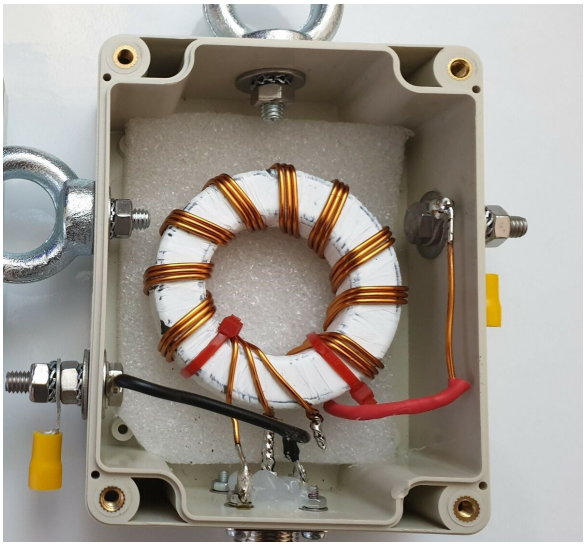
There are a few contenders for the mast – I have a 6m Fibreglass telescopic option that I bought from Moonraker some time ago, although it's not really high enough to clear the roof line and maintain rigidity with a decent size VHF Yagi on it. Or there's an 8m Aluminium mast that I use with the drive plate on the car, but its still a bit of a lightweight. Keeping a good robust telescopic mast dedicated to temporary operations at home is very tempting, but prices can be a little eye watering for a good one – like nearly £600 for the Spiderbeam 12m version.

The clamp and tilt mechanism is coming together in my head, and the fine detail will depend on how I intend to tilt the mast over to attach the antenna, but it needn't be complicated. The secret to quick attachment is something called a Half-Coupler, which are similar to scaffolding clamps, but are used mainly to rig temporary stage lighting setups for production tours. Much will depend on whether I can nab a prime piece of outside wall before the head gardener claims it for her tomato plants. Watch this space for updates!

73 Max G4SDX

9:1 UnUn BUILDATHON - UPDATE

As you may remember, our plans for the first half of 2025 revolved around the Kanga Little Roo Buildathon in March, followed by the construction of a 9:1 UnUn, similar to the photo on the right, in May of 2025, which would be suitable for an end fed long wire antenna,



Unfortunately, the procurement process lead times, and the time needed to machine the boxes and assemble kits of parts suitable for a club night project using only hand tools, has proven to be unachievable, given all the other club projects I am currently involved with.

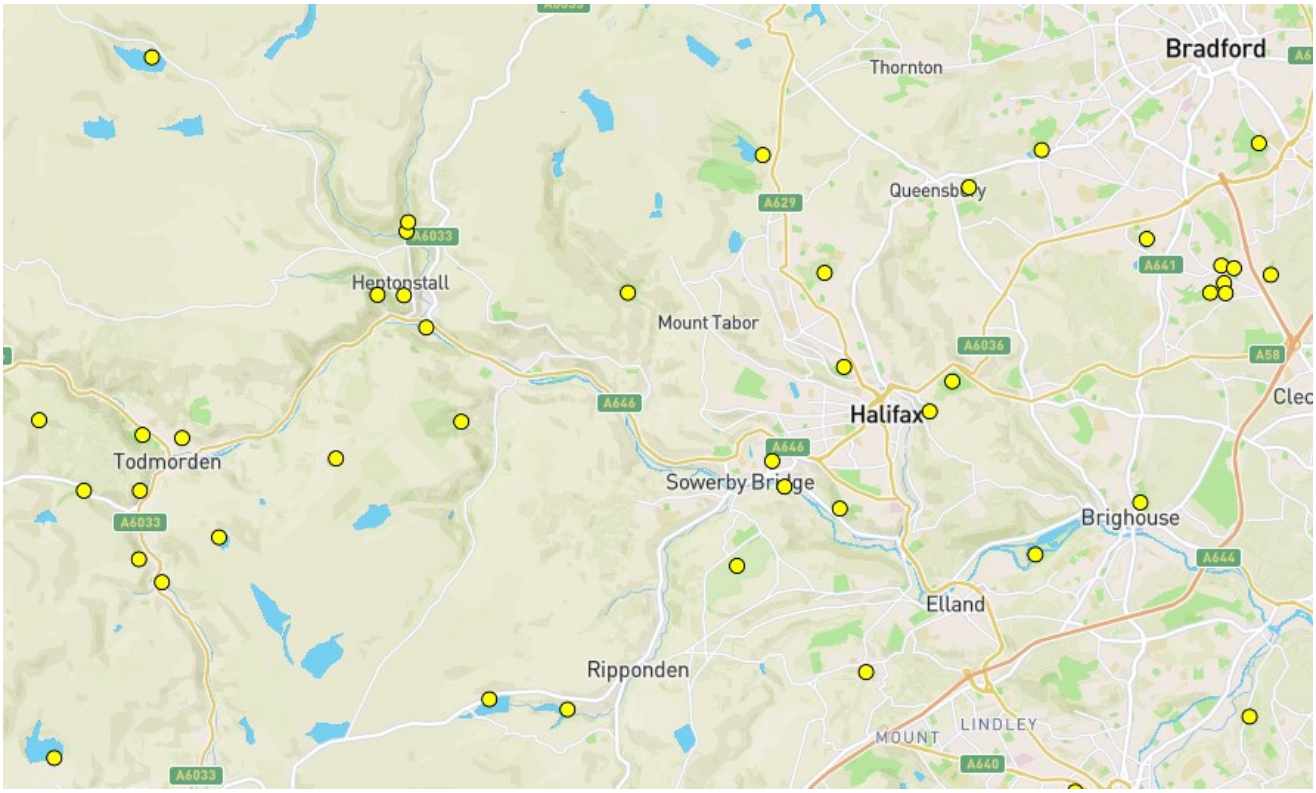
I will revisit this project later in the year, probably as part of the early autumn/winter schedule, but I do need to know how many people would be interested in this. The cost in parts will be around £35 - £39 for the kit, which will contain everything you need to fully assemble the UnUn. I will know more when I've had chance to build the prototype, but as things stand that will not be until June or July at the earliest. Please let me know ASAP if you think this is something you would like to take part in so I can judge numbers.

POTA POTTY

The big news this month seems to have crept up on us, and I can't seem to find out exactly when it all happened. It all started when Hardy G5HWB texted me to say, "Check out the POTA Website!" POTA, as I'm sure you will be aware, stands for Parks On The Air, an American invention that spread in a somewhat limited way to the UK, with certain National Parks, Heritage Sites, or Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB's), being given POTA Reference Numbers. You can either activate a park using the POTA number, or chase the activators and collect awards.

Until very recently, the POTA website only listed a very small number of activation sites within striking distance of our club catchment area, mainly Hardcastle Craggs and Gibson Mill, Ogden Water Country Park, and a little further afield, St Ives Park near Bingley. Both Hardcastle Craggs and Ogden Water can present practical challenges, one being in a steep and heavily wooded valley, the other a tourist mecca that gets very busy on just about any fine day, with parking almost impossible anywhere within half a mile, unless you get there very early.

All that seems to have suddenly changed, however, and for the better. Suddenly, the POTA map for our local area has become populated with many different POTA locations, both large and small. Roughly 40 POTA registered parks and AONB's are now within a short drive (or even walk!), and many offering excellent access, good take off, and ample parking. Each Yellow dot in the map below shows a newly created POTA site.



There are still one or two challenging sites, especially those parks and nature reserves down in the valley bottom, but with HF, you can usually get out over the surrounding high ground on NVIS bands like daytime 40m, and be sure of plenty of interest from other UK and European chasers.

The POTA site has great mapping, but isn't good at producing detailed search lists sorted by zone or area – the numbering system seems somewhat haphazard too, but I've managed to pick out the main places of interest in the Halifax & surrounding areas. The addition of Shibden Park is sure to trigger both local and national interest with activators, after the publicity it got through the Gentleman Jack TV series, on the life of Ann Lister.

Registering as an activator, or chaser, is easy on the main POTA website, by following this link here [Parks on the Air | POTA] and following the help guides for getting started, using this link [Docs Home - Parks on the Air Documentation] .

POTA POTTY (Continued)

A listing of all the local (to Halifax) POTA Sites that I've been able to glean from the world map on the POTA website is shown in the table below. It may not be fully comprehensive, as it relies clicking on each dot on the POTA map to reveal the location of the site - as I said, POTA isn't good at generating lists of sites by location, other than on a rather global level.

So, no excuse for not getting out over the summer and activating a few of the new POTA entities! A small ('ish) antenna for discreet operation (so as not to make you the focus of one of Calderdale's Hi-Viz jacketed health and safety stormtroopers) on a band like 20m, should get you plenty of attention, once you post your activation on the POTA website.

POTA Ref.	Location
GB-3385	Shibden Park, Halifax
GB-2028	Beacon Hill (Cunnery Wood), Halifax
GB-2598	Beechwood Park, Holmfield, Halifax
GB-3377	Shroggs Park, Halifax
GB-4126	Crow Wood Park, Sowerby Bridge
GB-3669	Milner Royd Nature Reserve, Sowerby Bridge
GB-3376	Longwood Scarr Nature Reserve, Copley
GB-2422	Norland Moor
GB-2423	Cromwell Bottom, Nature Reserve, Brighouse

POTA Ref.	Location
GB-4127	Shaw Park, Stainland
GB-2891	Baitings Reservoir, Ripponden
GB-2892	Ryburn Reservoir, Ripponden
GB-2507	Scammonden Dam, Scammonden
GB-4411	Marsden Moor Scenic Viewpoint, Marsden Moor
GB-3558	Jerusalem Farm, Wainstalls
GB-2419	Colden Clough, Heptonstall
GB-3729	Heptonstall Park, Heptonstall Village
GB-3252	Calder Holmes Park, Hebden Bridge

TRAINING NEWS

After much hard work, the HADARS on-line Foundation Training Course will go live on the Website sometime in April, once James has finalised the setting up of the Learning Management System, which is the portal through which we post content and on-line revision material, and through which we enrol new students who have taken up the offer of club membership. Access to all training material is free to members, and we hope to begin getting word out into the amateur radio community very soon about the new course. We're keeping it as a member benefit for now, to encourage growth in membership and hopefully, more bums on seats at club night meetings as a result.

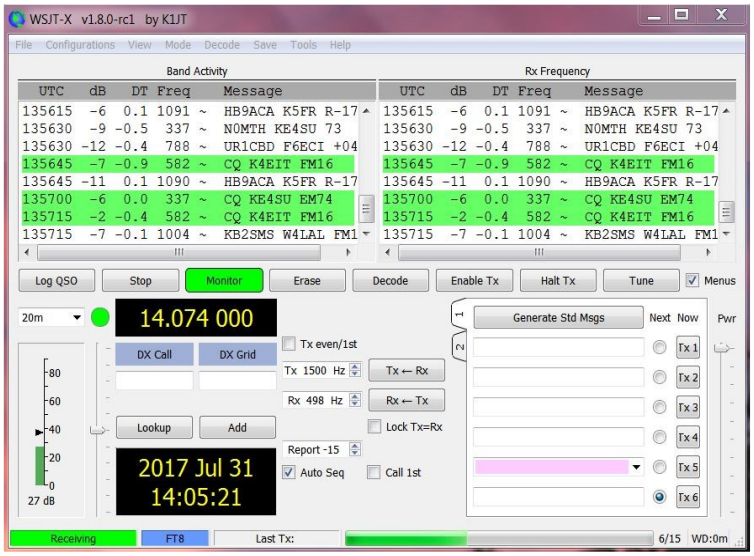
Its been quite a project, and once I began it, it took on a life of its own, suddenly growing in size and complexity at an alarming rate, until it virtually took over my life. Over 100 separate animated and narrated slides to create in MS Power Point, then transferred to video for editing into training modules. Over 120 four part multiple choice test questions covering every syllabus subject to write, so as to ensure copyright over the content.

Thanks to the help of Matt Hardy M7EUP for his YouTube and Video Editing skills, and James G5JCC for setting up the LMS system on the website, I think we have a very competitive package that is fully up to date with Version 1.6b of the new syllabus. Not only that, but we will be one of the few independent clubs who are able to offer this service, along with tutor support, to prospective new amateurs, other than the established big name providers like Essex Ham.

I shall be taking a rest for a few months now to recharge, and get on with my own radio projects and summer portable work, but the intention is to begin looking at producing limited tutorials for some of them more complex subject matter at Full License level, as we progress into the late autumn of 2025. One to one coaching will still be available on request, and one ad-hoc club nights over the summer, so if you are already studying, we will still be supporting you.

Finally, the war of words between Essex Ham and the RSGB seems to have reawakened. A recent post (Friday 28 March) on the Essex Ham Facebook page is highly critical of the way training organisations and clubs have been excluded (again) from the exam question appeal process. I am watching the responses with interest!

“IT’S NOT REAL RADIO!” (A Grumpy OM’s Guide to Going Digital)



There are many things we ‘think’ we dislike, and at times (especially with things like medical procedures), we’re right. However, as far as our free time is concerned, I’ve always gone along with the old adage that you shouldn’t really knock something until you’ve tried it. As amateurs, we do tend to be a rather traditional bunch, and hold opinions (some might say prejudices) that are rather rigid, with regard to the hobby, and how it should be conducted.

Contesting is one such activity that polarises the hobby – you are usually either for it, or against it. It is either ruining the bands, or is an adrenaline fuelled activity that hones your skills, and offers the ultimate challenge. The other is, of course, Digital Modes – FT8 in particular.

“Not Real Radio” is the cry. And, yes, I have been inclined to be less than charitable towards it. I have for many years held a belief that you should achieve success by your own hand (or rather ears), or by none. I’m the same with my dislike of ‘Spotting’ on DX Clusters, which to me are just a lazy way to work DX – like not bothering to get off your backside and go shopping, but waiting for a mate to tell you the butcher has a new batch of pies in the window. You still get the pie, but lack the sudden joy of discovery while walking past the shop and finding them oozing warm jelly in the window!

This was my initial reaction to FT8. It seemed like getting a computer to listen to a dead band, to decode something that no human could ever hope to copy, was not really a test of your hard earned skills and experience. . At least as far as my traditional prejudices were concerned.

So, was I being hypocritical disliking something that I hadn’t tried? After all, I did that for years with contesting, before having an epiphany and actually entering one. There was only one way to find out – and I suspected that was (like the prospect of a medical procedure), going to be painful.

Why painful? Well, it would involve connecting a radio to a computer for a start. I have, through many bad experiences, a firm belief that computers, along with the people that make them, and program them, are a malevolent force of evil, inflicted upon mankind by a vengeful god.

I can, and I have, taken a brand new computer out of a box, switched it on, and before installing anything useful, have been reduced to a wild eyed, foul mouthed, spittle ejecting rage, within five minutes of trying (and failing) to boot it up for the first time.

Why, at the end of the first quarter of the 21st Century, can’t we just plug something in that just works? – my Auto AMU does just that, for example. Social media and YouTube are littered with pleas for help from people who have tried all logical solutions to installing and running FT8, fruitlessly trying to accomplish what should be a simple interface procedure. If you search the internet and social media, you will find dozens of different ways where people claim success setting up the very same radio, with the very same operating system, and nearly all of them seem to be completely unreproducible when someone else tries to replicate it.

The radio manufacturers don’t always help, with different systems and protocols for each radio, and there being little standardisation between manufacturers, or even between models. My Yaesu FTDX10 and FT710 are a prime example of significant differences in the digital mode menu systems.

I will admit right now that two weeks before I wrote this article, I knew absolutely nothing about FT8, or how it works, or how to use it. I only became interested as I watched Hardy’s talk at the club some weeks ago. I hate computers as much as they hate me (if that’s even possible), and my success record using other digital programs, like FLDIGI, and HRD’s DM780 is abysmal. So, as Jeremy Clarkson once said, “How hard can it be?” This then is an honest account of my journey from absolute novice, at an age when I should probably know better, into the wild eyed world of digital communications.

“IT’S NOT REAL RADIO!” (A Grumpy OM’s Guide to Going Digital)

OK, let’s get to the factual stuff, and that means explaining why I decided to do this. There are a few reasons, but mainly, I’m getting curious to know why it’s so popular. Coming from a traditional analogue attitude to DX, where your eyes, ears, brain, and hands, are revered as the tools of the trade, it’s an odd place to find yourself, watching a machine do all the work. However, like my attitude to contesting, I’ve been very wrong before. Secondly, as I move towards my mid 70’s, my hands are getting stiff, my reflexes slower, my dyslexia becoming more noticeable, and my fingers are slowly becoming less cooperative. If I’m honest, I’m starting to struggle a bit sending fast morse, even with a paddle key.

There are also transformational changes in how DX is being worked on some of the lower VHF bands, 6m in particular. Even the very traditional UK Six Metre Group, are calling traditional analogue modes ‘Legacy Modes’, with FT8 and other digital modes now taking over for serious DX hunters. FT8 helps to keep the band open longer than it would be using Voice and CW modes, and is a good indicator if the band might open later for analogue – many say they use it in preference to beacons for judging how the band might be opening up, as FT8 signal reports improve. There was also a recent article in RadCom where one operator managed to work FT8 using EME, and a modest 8 element Yagi – if its that good, I really can’t ignore it.

My journey didn’t actually start that well, to be honest. I had a couple of Windows 10 mini-PC’s that were left over from a work related project some years ago, and I dug the newest one out from under the bed to see if it still worked.

It had probably not run since about 2021, but it wasn’t a bad machine in its day. Sadly, as with all windows PC’s, as soon as it had a sniff of electricity after its long sleep, it ignored my urgent attempts to stop it, and decide it had a “Critical Security Issue” on Windows 10, and decided to fix itself. It began downloading the entire contents off one of the Microsoft servers, and then proceeded to choke itself to death. It sat there with its little blue balls going round, trying to decide if it wanted to restart, or shut down, for four and a half hours, until it got so hot I could cook on it. Eventually, I could stand the torture no longer, killed the power, pulled the plug, and left it in a corner to die quietly.

My next step, while the old mini-pc sat gently smoking in a corner, was a visit to Amazon for a new one. A Minix Z300 ‘fanless’ model with 16GB RAM and a 512MB SSD Drive. I chose this because it was super-compact, offered lots of USB and Video ports, including USB-C, (unlike my laptop which has just two Standard USB ports). It has a good WiFi performance, and most importantly (and because I know nothing about computers), it looked really cool, with its chunky heatsink (sorry, I meant the “Zero dB Cooling System”) and its pair of rabbit ear WiFi antennas. It also looked like a cheap WiFi router, which was a real bonus for avoiding awkward questions over new radio equipment!

The initial Windows setup was suspiciously easy, and before I went any further, I had to decide on the radio I was going to use. My eye fell on the Yaesu FT710, which, when not being used for portable contest operation, was getting a bit dusty and forlorn. The user manual said it had special presets for FT8 (whatever they were) so it had the honour of being the chosen one.

My first port of call was YouTube, as I had absolutely no idea what I was doing, and there are usually plenty of other people on YouTube, who can make a slick video about what they don’t know, but far more convincingly. However, one guy by the name of ‘Ham Radio’, seemed to know what he was talking about, and was setting up WSJT-X from scratch on the FT710. His method of setting up the comm ports was one I had not seen before. Usually, with a new install on a new Windows 10 or 11 machine, you have to faff around adding legacy hardware, to even see the comm port list in device manger.

The ‘Approved’ way to install a comm port driver, is to use the Windows Comm Port Wizard to find the driver file and install it for you. This is not always spectacularly successful, and comm port errors are not uncommon (ask me how I know!). Also, you are warned to never ever plug in the radio USB cable until the comm port drivers are installed.

The method this chap used was first to connect the radio to the power supply, but leave the actual radio switched off. Then, plug the USB lead from the radio into the PC, which creates an unassigned pair of comm ports, one standard, the other enhanced, that are immediately viewable in Windows Device Manager without the performance of having to install the legacy hardware option – This seems to allow the computer to see the USB Cable, create the port labels, but not try to install the drivers from the device it’s connected to.

He then downloaded the Yaesu Silicon Labs drivers into a folder, extracted the contents, and then updated the driver for each unassigned comm port separately, by pointing them to the Yaesu FT710 drivers in the downloaded folder, one port at a time. This effectively kicks the Windows ‘Wizard’ up the posterior, and out of your way. It worked a charm, and with that, I went on to download WSJT-X.

Part 2 of the YouTube channel went on the detail how to instal WSJT-X on Windows 11, and how to configure the radio, including the mysterious presets that Yaesu have included for digital modes. The WSJT-X installation went amazingly well, and it was ready for configuring in no time. The link to the channel is here for those interested Yaesu FT-710 PC operations basic tutorial - video 2 of 2 - Installing and configuring WSJT-X (FT8)

A quick check of the audio settings, to switch over to USB Audio, was all that was necessary to get the radio to talk to the computer, and both CAT control and PTT were responding to their commands. I suspect that with the mini-PC having no built in higher level audio interfaces in terms of speakers and microphones, there wasn’t much choice in the audio driver menu that could confuse it.

As far as the radio was concerned, ‘Preset 1’ for FT8 in Data-U Mode on the FT710 menu, can be used virtually unchanged when Data-U is selected, except for lowering the Hi-Cut frequency to 2800Hz (although I have since been advised that this might be a bit narrow), and dropping the USB Output Level from ‘50’ to ‘3’. This seems to be the key to getting good audio without overdriving WSJY-X. With this set, the WSJT-X Power Slider gave just a hint of ALC at around 50% on the power slider setting. A quick check on power output confirmed full power was being produced, with just a sniff of ALC indicated on the meter. I retired to make a cup of coffee amazed at my newly discovered ‘Genius Level’ in all things digital.

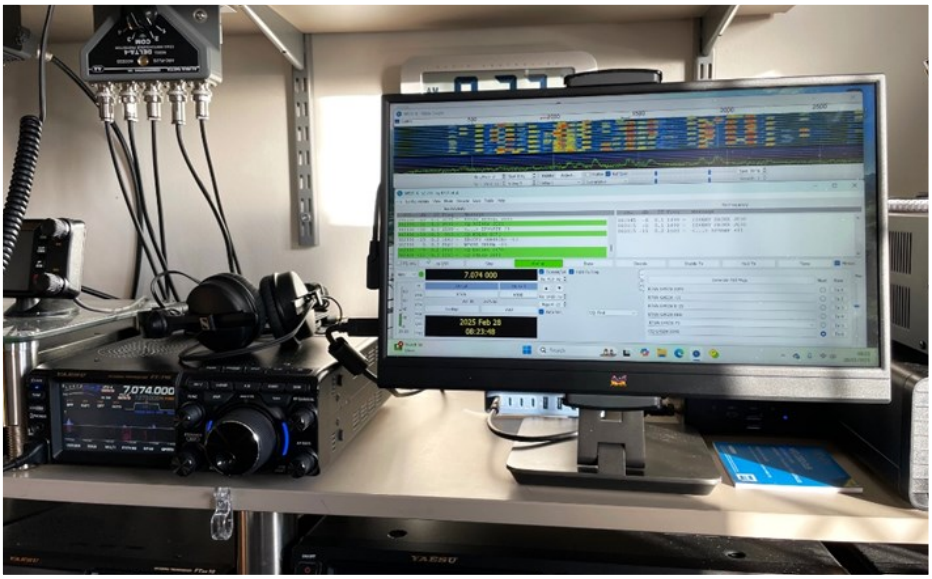
The FT710, for some reason, does not have the ability to set maximum TX power level by mode, as you can on some other radios. So, I wound the power down manually to 30 Watts, which to me seems about right for a digital mode on a compact transceiver, with a fairly heavy duty cycle.

Then, with hot coffee in hand, I returned triumphant to the radio and decided, again without reading the instructions, to fiddle about with the control panel as signals were being decoded by the waterfall. I poked about with the mouse cursor, double clicking on stuff, but being puzzled at the lack of response. How wrong I was.

Now, in my defence, I rarely read manuals apart from looking at the pictures. I had, for some reason, assumed that FT8 ran like RTTY or PSK31, where you manually set up short scripts for the exchanges, and then use function keys to trigger the various reports and greetings, after first making contact with another station. Imagine my surprise when after double clicking on the band monitor, I noticed out of the corner of my eye, my callsign popping up, seemingly chatting away to a Russian station on 40m. I only just managed to curb my usual paranoid response in these situations, which is to hide in the wardrobe after yanking the power plug out of the wall.

On returning to YouTube for some instruction after this debacle, I found out that FT8 is fully automatic, and runs the entire QSO, exchanges and all, on your behalf. Well, that’s all right then. No fear of an angry Russian hunting me down through my QRZ pages and posting free bottles of scent through my letterbox (unless of course he wants to)!

“IT’S NOT REAL RADIO!” (A Grumpy OM’s Guide to Going Digital)



With further suggestions from club members, I’ve got my time clock synchronised using Net Time, and the whole thing seems to have settled in without some of the drama I’d heard about on social media. Or maybe I just got lucky!

I’m quite pleased with the space saving installation, with the little Z300 PC tucked away behind a small 16” portable HD monitor, that’s not much bigger than a large iPad. Both the PC and the monitor will run on 12V USBC power, so a power bank will allow a bit more freedom in summer.

All in all, I think a rather successful project so far, and it’s starting to work its magic on me just a little bit, although It took me quite a bit of self-flagellation to begin to realise where my prejudice lay. I think the way to look at this, is to see FT8 it for what it is – a totally different way of communicating, with its own challenges and tricks. You can’t compare it to analogue DX’ing, because it’s not like that, and the challenges and skills of either mode are not superior, either in one way, or the other – they’re just very different.

This is where I think the trouble with the perception of FT8 has arisen. This head to head comparison and rivalry between FT8, and SSB/CW in terms of retaining ‘Purity’ in the way we conduct our DX hunting, is unfair on both Analogue, and Digital devotees.

You can’t say that just because FT8 allows you to get DXCC in weeks, rather than years, it is cheating, or it is easy. DXCC for that first 100 DXCC entities may well be a lot easier on FT8, especially at the peak of the sunspot cycle, but everyone using FT8 is on the same playing field, and it’s not the same one used by CW/SSB operators, nor is it even the same ball, or the same game.

Once you realise this difference, the epiphany begins, and you start to lean more towards it. Working a VK6 Station on just 30 Watts, during mid-morning on the 10m Band, certainly helped grab my attention. Did it feel like I’d made an amazing DX Contact into Australia, half way round the world? Well, not quite, I have to admit. Certainly not the feeling I would have had if I’d working him on the key, that’s for sure, because some of the burned in tradition is still smouldering deep down inside, but there is hope for me yet. At least I’m trying, which is really the point of this whole article!

So, at the risk of killing a few sacred cows, can FT8 be accused of killing Amateur Radio and taking over the bands? No, it’s certainly not. In fact, with its ability to make the best of low power, sub-optimal antennas, and our increasingly urban lifestyles, it may well be its saviour. Especially as it is a communication system that will resonate with younger people – as an ex-teacher, I can say that for certain. Had I been able to demonstrate FT8 to my class during lunchtime workshops at school, before I retired, I can be sure that while a CW QSO might have grabbed their attention for novelty value, FT8 would have generated lots of questions from kids staying behind afterwards. As for taking over the bands, it seems to run on the bandwidth of one SSB QSO on most of the bands I’ve been monitoring.

FT8 is FT8, and the challenges presented are within it, not outside it. The thrill of the chase is the same, but the challenges are different, and are (in my opinion) unique to that mode of communication, not in contrast to it. While using digital modes on HF is interesting, the possibilities for portable VHF and UHF operation (and beyond) are really something that needs further investigation, and will be the focus of my next move into digital modes, especially with the Sporadic E season only a couple of months away. If like me, you’ve regarded FT8 with a jaundiced eye, then all I can say is to try it and see how you feel afterwards. Apart from maybe a little frustration as you get used to it, there is nothing to be lost! 73 - Max G4SDX

HADARS BUILDATHON

The first group session of the HADARS Buildathon got underway on Tuesday 18th March, after a delayed start, where few members (myself included) went down with flu-like symptoms the week previously. Five members joined in the first session, where the plan was to complete the voltage regulator circuit of the Kanga 'Little Roo' 40m receiver kit. We were joined by Richard G3UGF who brought along a new bench top video-microscope/camera to show us, and reveal the true quality of our soldering!

The event proved very popular, and the social atmosphere that surrounded it boded well for the prospect of future similar events. Club tools, soldering irons, and technical help was on hand from our training team, although the group members had obviously been practicing, and were managing to follow the Stage 1 instructions, and produce good work without much need for intervention. The event will run into early April when we should all be in a position to test and adjust our receivers, and hopefully, make use out of them.

If anyone would like help and support to catch up with missed sessions, or if you feel like you're falling behind, we can help you catch up during these sessions. Just ask me, or one of the team and we'll get you fixed up in no time.

The second planned 'Buildathon' we hade pencilled in for May of this year, was for a 9:1 UnUn that would be used with an end fed long wire antenna. Unfortunately the kits of parts (pre-drilled boxes, fittings, and electrical components) will have to be produced in-house, and this takes time that just isn't available at the moment. I will defer this project until later in 2025, when I've had chance to get to grips with finding, and batch machining suitable boxes and toroids.

AND FINALLY ….

With the late Easter holidays over the weekend of Friday 18th April to Monday 21st April, there is just a chance that the weather might be kind to us and encourage a bit of Portable work. Have a great Easter wherever you are and whatever you are doing, and please think about writing a few lines for the newsletter about any radio activity you get up to over the Easter Holidays!

73 and HAPPY EASTER from the HADARS Committee