

# NEWCOMER'S

## Getting a first rig for HF

Several people have asked how best to get a start on HF, especially wishing to know what rig to go for. Advising what equipment to buy is akin to advising what car to purchase, a task which is tied up with personal preference. But there are some basic guidelines. It is much the same with radio equipment — you can probably find a dozen rigs which meet your main needs, but in the end, the purchase may well depend on factors such as appearance and plain 'gut' feel. This is quite normal for humans, but everything that glisters is not gold!

You will have to battle against the recommendations of the various dealers and the advertisements, trying to decide whether the features offered are what you require, ignoring the dolly birds which seem to be popping up much as they do in car adverts.

### TX/ RX or RX only?

Your first decision is likely to be influenced by the depth of your pocket, or the generosity of your bank manager, and with very little available new for under £400 (except one semi-kit design at under £300) you may feel obliged to go for something in the secondhand market. I would suggest that there is another decision to make — do you initially need a transceiver, especially if you are to embark onto HF without any experience of it whatsoever?

In one of these past columns, I did mention that the act of initiation into the hobby is no longer by a period of general short wave listening, during which you pick up all the operating jargon, band characteristics, etc. Now it's more often than not via CB, with a wish to expand your horizons in more than one sense. There are also those who have a professional background in electronics, but still have no basic amateur radio experience. Whatever route you take, the day-to-day operating knowledge can only be gained by experience — no amount of reading, nor PhD can replace this.

It's a bit like the driving test — few would suggest that at the moment you have passed your driving test, however well, you are fully equipped to drive a car. What I am leading up to is to suggest that you buy a receiver only, or if

you do want a transceiver, discard the microphone for a while and control the urge to get on the air. This will give you the opportunity to listen, and gain a basic knowledge of what goes on in the world of HF, where things are rather different to the world of VHF FM. You won't necessarily have to flog the RX afterwards, especially if it is a general coverage type (ie it covers say 500kHz-30MHz, rather than just the amateur bands). Such a receiver can be valuable in later years.

### Take your time

Whatever you do, take time before parting with your hard-earned cash. There are many rigs to choose from, including a vast number of second-hand ones. Ask around, look at as many magazine reviews as you can (reviewers should be fairly impartial) and try to get your hands on as many as possible. If you ask people what they would recommend, bear in mind that personal opinions will always creep in — after about the tenth request you should be getting a idea whether any particular piece of equipment is getting a lot of mention (good or bad).

I will make no attempt at recommending particular models myself — I'll just say that there are plenty of very good rigs to be found on the s/h market for £100-200. Some may be up to 20 years old, but will still transmit and perfectly adequately, which is the most important thing. Yaesu and KW both made early models which will conduct themselves with perfect dignity today. Save your pennies for the LED's, PBT, VBT, memories etc., until the time comes when you can appreciate them and decide whether you actually need them. Frank and I are both of the opinion that eventually there will be a revolt, against the mass produced, high price 'bells and whistles' commercial gear in favour of simpler, cheaper gear which you might stand a chance of maintaining yourself.

There are still a number of good 'separates' (ie, independent transmitters and receivers) around, of which some can transceive if required. As a matter of interest 'transceive' is a modern phenomenon tied in with the advent of SSB and co-channel working. With separates, if you wanted to work co-channel, you find the station you wanted on the receiver, then 'net' the separate transmitter onto the frequency for zero-

beat using a low power transmit mode. It takes slightly more time, and is a positive disadvantage during contests, but otherwise perfectly OK for run of the mill contacts.

### Evaluating rig

You will have to judge a s/h piece of gear mainly by a short on-the-air test, and this is essential — I doubt you would buy a car without a test drive. There may be something you cannot live with, and even if you positively dislike a rig, there may be a couple of good points you can bear in mind in the future. The receive side is likely to be the main thing as there is little you can gain from transmitting except for audio quality reports. One tip — if the chap you are buying from has to look up in the manual before tuning it, or takes a long time to do so (or doesn't look as though he knows what he's doing) start asking why he doesn't use the rig much! There may be some perfectly valid reason, on the other hand, he may be concealing something nasty. Most private sales are usually genuine, with the ever present urge to upgrade being a factor, and a lot of people can't help telling you the odd foible about the rig.

A few points to look for are stability of the VFO (leave it listening to a contact while you are talking, and see if it stays on frequency). Also sensitivity (difficult to judge without a comparison — try listening for electrical interference on the lower frequency bands, if it is absent either there is a good blanker, or the rig is insensitive). Strong signal handling is another thing to check (try listening on 40m after dark or amateur CW stations. Can you only make out a mass of noise and rubbish?).

### Controls

Are the controls arranged in a convenient way for you, bearing in mind that you will be tuning around for long periods. Would you prefer a tuning knob that can be spun rapidly, rather than have to crank the thing continually? If you feel you may become a CW addict, then is the IF selectivity adequate, or can extra filters be added? (If so, at what cost?) Do you need a digital display (unlikely) or is an analogue version adequate? There are dozens of other considerations — try talking to fellow club