

Choosing Commercial Equipment for the VHF/UHF Bands by Chris Lorek, G4HCL

When choosing equipment, everyone will naturally have a budget in mind. But within this budget, it's often totally useless asking "what's the best transceiver to buy?" This is because each person will have his or her own particular interests and operating restrictions, or indeed lack of them. For those just starting out on the hobby, or those seeking a beginners licence class, the best advice would be to initially either go for a general coverage multi-mode receiver, even better or for a HF/VHF transceiver if your budget allows for this, in either case, possibly a second-hand model so that its resale value, when eventually 'trading up', isn't compromised too much. Once licensed, or on the verge of getting a licence, a transceiver is a better bet, but in this case it is useful first to decide where your interests primarily lie and then your operating possibilities.

If you're restricted in terms of the size and height of antennas you can erect at home, yet want to work long distances, aim to get a transceiver that can also be used in portable and mobile situations, such as from a local elevated site using either a mobile antenna or a temporary portable mast-mounted antenna. If however you're only interested in operating through your local 2m or 70cm repeater, a simple single-band or dual-band FM transceiver will suffice. But beware, once the 'bug' bites, you may quickly want to move on to bigger and better things.

One of the best improvements you can make to your station is to get a better antenna system; it is of little use having a £2000 transceiver operating into a compact mobile whip mounted in the loft or on a window ledge when you've a large garden or house rooftop at your disposal. You'd usually be a lot better spending somewhat less on the transceiver and rather more on improving the antenna system, provided of course that you can physically get something more substantial erected without falling foul of restrictive covenants, planning laws or the neighbours!

Take some time to sit back and think what you're interested in and where and who you'd like to contact. If you enjoy a challenge, then either low-power 'QRP' operation, possibly with a home-built transceiver (but again with the very best antenna system you can manage) is one way to go. Another could be the challenge of gaining operating awards and com-

peting against other amateurs around the world, in which case you'll need the utmost in transceiver performance and transmit power level, again not forgetting a good antenna system. If however you're keen to use the hobby more as a social outlet and technical discussion scenario, typically having 'ragchews' with local amateurs and exchanging information, then it would be more appropriate to have a transceiver system that's easy to operate from a comfortable position, without scores of tiny knobs and buttons on the front panel.

If you'd like to be able to have a wide choice of operating bands, modes and facilities, there are several reasonably priced multimode transceivers offering HF, VHF and UHF all combined in a compact portable 'carry around' unit which can also be used at home and in the car. Once you get more experienced and you possibly find your interests lie in a more defined aspect of the hobby, a transceiver and antenna system dedicated to this can be obtained, with your earlier transceiver being used either as a 'trade-in' or as a secondary transceiver for other modes and bands. The growing use of D-Star on VHF/UHF FM for digital voice and text communication is another aspect which you may be interested in, with worldwide communication possibilities from your handheld or mobile transceiver.

Whichever transceiver or receiver you go for, bear in mind one final but very important point. Even if you're not immediately considering integrating computer control into your station, do ensure that whichever transceiver/receiver you eventually choose for your base station (or even portable / mobile station) has this facility built in. You will certainly want to take advantage of the plethora of the very powerful freeware and shareware programs which are available for download or on CD/DVD. These offer everything from simple transceiver frequency control right up to complete station management including automatic log keeping (taking the frequency, mode etc automatically from your transceiver), QSL card printing (again with time, date, callsign etc entered for you), DX Cluster handling and automatic tuning to the frequency of that rare station on your 'wanted' list, automatic antenna rotor control to the identified station, satellite tracking and automatic Doppler shift correction, even down to automatic generation of award sheets for you after a contest.