



Andrew Simpson

Monthly musings

Yacht surveyor and designer Andrew Simpson cruises with his wife Chele in his own-design 11.9m (39ft) yacht *Shindig*. Read his blog at www.offshore-sailor.com



The RYA VHF radio course: 'enlightening in its content and as a reminder of how quickly technology can leave us behind'

Received wisdom

A VHF radio course confirms the value of refreshing one's knowledge base and keeping abreast of technology

Forgive me for sounding self-satisfied, but one of the bonuses of being a yachting journalist is being invited to attend training events in the role of observer. Amongst such opportunities this past winter, one saw me attending a VHF radio course, not as an actual candidate for the Short Range Certificate but certainly as an interested participant.

Let me say that I found it enlightening, both in its content and as a reminder of how quickly technology can leave us behind. Earlier generations had more time to adapt. For example, had an 18th century navigator spotted the sextant stowed in one of *Shindig's* lockers he would have known its purpose in an instant. Yes, the engineering and optics are now much better, but he would have seen

lots of similarities with the relatively crude instruments of his own era. Over two centuries development had certainly occurred, but only nudging forward in tiny increments.

Compare that with the VHF radio we have just replaced. When *Shindig* was launched, it was considered cutting edge. It would transmit and receive and do a few more tricks, but little else besides. We were entirely satisfied with it; yet 12 years later we decided it was time to upgrade, so we plundered the cruising fund and made our choice. Apart from a small screen, the replacement looked almost identical. It almost fitted into the same enclosure. Yet I knew that within its sleek, weatherproof enclosure all sorts of fantastic black arts resided – all of which had to be unpacked and tamed if the goodies contained were

to work their magic.

There was DSC and MMSI, for instance. The first stands for Digital Selective Calling – a facility that allows your radio to transmit information digitally, not just by voice – and the second stands for Maritime Mobile Service Identity, a nine-digit number which is a bit like a telephone number for boats and ships. But knowing what they are doesn't help with the actual doing. I know, for instance, what bagpipes are, but that doesn't mean I can play them. That calls for skills I don't have, meaning there are things to be learned. And therein lies a problem. Faced with such challenges, my thought processes typically dissolve into insubstantial mist and I slide into the same sort of panic responses that impel me to collar a nearby nine-year-old to steer me through the hidden

mysteries of my tablet.

Unfortunately, my reaction to what I see as technological quicksands ahead is usually to pretend they are really not there. I told myself that behind that blinking screen with its array of buttons lurked a basic VHF radio, the workings of which I could associate. You're sinking or on fire? It's Mayday, Mayday, Mayday time. You want to talk to that ship bearing down on you? Shine a light on the sails and resort to Ch16.

Downright perverse

Now, of course, this is pure laziness. Having decided you can't live without those extra bells and whistles, it's downright perverse to turn your back on them. And, as is the nature of such things, procrastination plays its part. The first season slid by without me liberating those absent facilities. Frankly, we lapsed into old habits and didn't miss them. It was just as before, but with a somewhat more decorative radio.

They say that fortune favours the brave, but the truth is, it turns out, also occasionally the indolent. It was certainly fortunate for me that both Chele and I were invited to sit in on a scheduled RYA VHF radio course. Along with students working towards the appropriate certificate, we would spend a few hours fiddling with functional (but in broadcasting terms mute) educational radios, and trawling through the vocal formalities that reduce misunderstandings over the air.

Most of it was very familiar territory to us, but light was shone into corners that had been discouragingly dark – including the murky world of DSC and MMSI. The genies are out of the bottle. So, my thanks to the good folk who run that course. As I wandered off, I pondered on the fact that there must be many old-timers like me who have done more hours than they can count but now find themselves floundering in the wake of modern developments. Brief refresher courses, maybe? 