

## PRODUCT REVIEW

GILES READ  
RSGB HQ, LAMBDA HOUSE, CRANBORNE ROAD,  
POTTERS BAR, HERTS, EN6 3JE

E-MAIL GILES.READ@RSGB.ORG.UK



G1MFG

**On impulse at Dayton a few years ago I** bought the recently launched Yaesu FT-817. But try as I might, I couldn't get on with its user interface. After a little while using it as a single-channel rig on 2m FM I gave up completely and it has languished in a cupboard ever since, alone and un-loved. Speaking to other hams, it seems that it's one of those radios you either love or hate, although everyone agrees it's a great performer.

bhi obviously heard similar comments about the 817, FT-857 and FT-897 – all of which have streamlined front panels – and decided to do something about it. The result is the Radio mate, an external 16-button keypad controller which makes operation a doddle.

**IN USE.** When I first connected the Radio Mate to my FT-817 it didn't work, so I read the manual and immediately discovered I had to change the FT-817's CAT interface speed from the default 4800 Baud to 9600. That done, it worked fine.

The Radio Mate has three basic operating modes: Modulation, Direct Frequency Entry and Memory. Each mode is accessed by a dedicated button on the right of the keypad. The LED changes colour to show the current operating mode – yellow for Modulation, green for Direct Frequency Entry (DFI) and red for Memory.

Pressing the Mod (Modulation) button lets you immediately select or change the modulation type. All nine are supported – CW, USB, LSB, FM, AM, CWR, Packet,



bhi Radio Mate (with 20p for scale)

## bhi Radio Mate

*This new keypad for the FT-817, FT-857 or FT-897 brings a new level of user-friendliness to these popular radios.*

**WHAT'S IN THE BOX?** The Radio Mate came well packaged in bubble-wrap inside a sturdy box. It was accompanied by a slim but comprehensive 12 page manual and some advertising literature for other bhi products.

**FIRST IMPRESSIONS.** The Radio Mate keypad is built on a solid 10 x 15cm black anodized aluminium plate with four rubber feet. The keypad dominates the panel; at the back is a plastic box around 2cm high which conceals the 'works'. There's an 8mm LED on the top panel, an on-off switch on the right side, and a 1m long connecting cable at the back which terminates in a mini-DIN plug. The cable connects to the ACC socket on the back of the radio, which also supplies power to the unit. The overall feeling is of a solid product built to last.

One thing I really liked about the keypad is its large buttons which are clearly labelled. The membrane keys are slightly recessed and easy to feel, making it much easier to use in poor lighting or if your eyes aren't what they used to be.

Digital and FM Narrow. All are selected by pressing the appropriately labelled button on the keypad. FM Narrow is a special case: the FT-817 doesn't support this mode, and may lock up if selected. To avoid accidents, you have to press 5 & 0 for FM Narrow. A useful safety feature!

Direct frequency entry is selected by pressing the Dir button. Frequencies can then be entered directly on the numeric keys – for instance, 14.100. Abbreviated entry is accepted: to set just the decimal part you can press the decimal point followed by digits; likewise, you can enter just MHz (followed by Enter), in which case the decimal remains unchanged.

Memory mode is interesting. I've been completely defeated by memories on my FT-817, but the Radio Mate makes it very easy. It uses its own system of 20 memories instead of those in the radio. Pressing the Memory button allows you to recall one of ten memories by pressing numeric keys 0-9; a second bank of ten can be accessed by holding the Memory button a little longer (the unit beeps twice to indicate 'bank two'). To write a memory you just press and hold a number until the

Radio Mate beeps. (Some very early versions used a slightly different method of writing to memories: bhi will install the latest version of the software for just the cost of postage).

The Radio Mate has a couple of other tricks up its sleeve. Pressing Enter (Tune) causes the radio to switch to FM on the current frequency and transmit for ten seconds – perfect for aerial tuning purposes. And the a/b button instantly swaps VFO A and B. If you hold the button down then it makes VFO b = VFO a.

**OTHER RADIOS.** Although I've concentrated on my FT-817, we also tested the Radio Mate with an FT-857 and FT-897 and found it operated in exactly the same way. Memories set on the FT-817 worked fine on the other radios.

**CONCLUSION.** The Radio Mate is a deceptively simple tool which has, quite simply, transformed my FT-817: I started actually *enjoying* it. The only possible criticism is that key presses are not immediately reflected on the radio display, but this is a limitation of the CAT control protocol. The Radio Mate was a pleasure to use and I was very sad to have to hand it back to bhi.

**The bhi Radio Mate costs £99.95 and is available from bhi (tel. 0870 240 7258) or Waters & Stanton (tel. 0800 073 7388. The RSGB would like to thank bhi for lending us the review sample.**