

Ham Radio (PSK) Deluxe and HRD Logger

Another “Tell-It-As-It-Really-Is” Review

By Dick Whittering SV0XBN/9 and Dave Aldridge G3VGR

This is a ‘double’ review as Dick looks at PSK and Dave looks at the Logging Software within HRD.

Dick’s bit...

I will start this look at the PSK part of HRD by being honest. I first looked at this software, then called PSK Deluxe, back in late 2004 and wrote a scathing review of it in the BARTG magazine Datacom April '05 edition. I took another look at it a year or so later and, as the software had not changed, neither had my opinion.

According to the author, the software has now been revamped, much has been added and the whole suite is now called Ham Radio Deluxe although I am just looking at the PSK side of things. It is free software and is written by Simon Brown, HB9DRV, ex GD4ELI. Within the HRD suite there are programmes for SSTV, Satellite, logging, mapping and a distance programme so you can see how far you have worked.

The software can be downloaded from: www.ham-radio-deluxe.com and when you first look at the HRD site, you are faced with various bits of information, adverts and news items, and one of these I found quite amazing. The main ‘news’ item at that time was that Simon had traded in his Elecraft K3 for a Yaesu FT950. From whichever way you look at it - this is surely a huge step backwards – but I digress. On this opening page, click on ‘Downloads’ and you have the option of getting the software from either the US or Switzerland. The size of the file is some 34 Meg.

Now for a bit more honesty:

I do not like this ‘CAT’ idea. I do not understand why anyone would buy a rig, with dials and switches and buttons, and then go and replicate this on a computer monitor so they can ‘see’ what is going on. Yes, I know people use this sort of thing for contest logging and band changing etc and I can understand this, but surely this is total overkill for your average PSK QSO?

The reason I point this out now is because when you go through the help (I use the term loosely) file, full emphasis is put on this CAT interfacing. It is as though this is the only way of doing things and that to use the knobs and buttons on the actual rig itself is some form of crime, punishable by death. There are pages and pages of how to set this and that up even down to the way that your mouse scrolls through the band or the way the buttons look on your monitor, but it is never mentioned that you will probably need two monitors: one for the ‘view’ of your rig (which is probably sitting on the desk next to the PC) and one to show the PSK screen. This fact is mentioned nowhere. Yes, you can resize the screens but then you will need a bloody magnifying glass the either read the PSK being sent to you or to see the rig controls. Why not just look at the rig that is sitting next to the PC?

Just a quick word here about a demo video on the ML & Sons website for the SB-2000 USB interface unit. They use the interface with HRD on PSK and show the virtual rig details, i.e. the frequency and other details on the laptop screen WHILE THE SCREEN IS SITTING ON THE RIG! Bloody pointless.

In the ‘help files’ (surely calling them this is against the Trades Descriptions Act) there is nothing to help you to get any form of screen up so you can operate PSK. You just have to click away on anything and everything until you eventually get the ‘user’ screen in front of you. This is shown below and even though it is a small image, you can see that it is a cluttered mess. It is yet another example of someone over-complicating something that is basically so very simple. Just a word here that you also have to put up with adverts for either Martin Lynch or Signalink before you can even get to the page shown below.

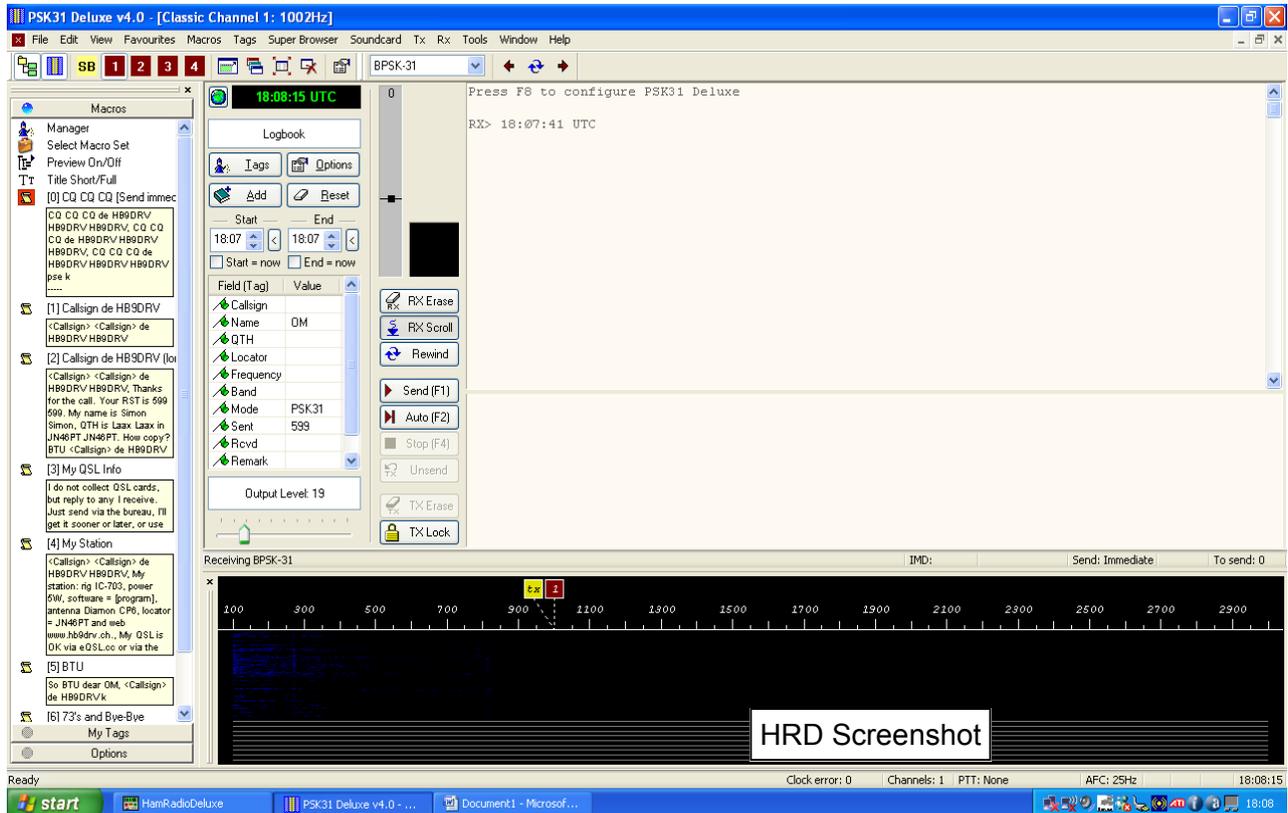
Just so you know there are no ‘help’ files on the PSK screen. Yes there is a help button, but it assumes you are permanently connected to the internet in order for it to work – well, it doesn’t really work as a help file as it assumes you are part of the HRD ‘Forum’ and instead of looking at a



help file to find out what you want to know, you have to post a question on the forum. How stupid is that when I am parked in a village halfway up a mountain and with no internet?

Under the title bar are the usual File, Edit, View etc. tabs and these are self-explanatory, well, sort of, but it is the Toolbar below this where things get complicated as there is no reference to these buttons or symbols anywhere.

The screen, as shown opposite, has several 'panes' and these show, from left to right, the Macros and what's in 'em, the log details (this is where you type in the call of the chap you are working) the squelch and RX/TX buttons come next with the received text and TX text screen filling the rest of the screen. The waterfall display is underneath.



Earlier I said that this programme "is yet another example of someone over-complicating something that is basically very simple" and this can easily be proved by pressing F8, known as the Options button. Now, all PSK programmes have options, obviously, I mean Digipan has about 13, but to show how unnecessarily complicated HRD is, having pressed F8, take a look at the Waterfall Display options. There are three options which include: "Root - data is 4th root of linear FFT power" or if that does not seem complicated enough, how about: "Log (as above) with 10% to 90% baseline clipping". There cannot be an average PSK user who knows, or even needs to know, what all this gibberish means.

Going back to our 'user friendly' screen, amongst the odd-looking icons, there are four brown buttons in the tool bar. Clicking on these puts a numbered 'tag' on the Waterfall display. Nowhere in the help files does it tell you what they do or why they are there. Having clicked on one of these brown buttons, a numbered 'tag' is put on the Waterfall display. What is this for? How do you get rid of them? Again there is nothing to help you, but I did find that if you switch to what is called 'Super Browser', i.e. the screen shows all the PSK signals decoded at once, then switch back to 'normal' by pressing the first brown button, you are back to where you started.

Again the help files don't and I never did discover why they are there.

I mentioned Digipan earlier and will compare the two programmes with a very simple example: You are using Digipan and listening on or around 14,070 and scrolling up the screen is ZA1AA in Albania, and he is calling CQ. You have not worked him before as he is a new country for you. You double-click on his call and it is automatically put in the 'Call' box at the top of your screen,

you hit the button that you have set up to answer such CQs, and sit back and wait for the ZA to come back to you.

Now, when you setup Digipan, you set the Macros so that when you click on F2, for example, the rig goes into transmit, calls the station, which has just been put in the 'Call' box, gives your call and then switches back to receive.

Not so with HRD. You see ZA1AA calling CQ. You can type his call into the Field (Tag) box, or, if you feel brave, you can highlight his call and then get several options at this point as the software does not seem to know what a callsign looks like, even one as distinctive as ZA1AA, as you get a drop-down box with choices of Callsign, Name, QTH, Locator, Frequency or Band. Now, when you have obviously chosen 'Call', you then have to click on the relevant macro to put the text into the transmit window and then you have to hit F1 to get the thing to send it. Having done this, you have to wait until the text has been sent before you have to hit F4 in order to stop the rig transmitting a long single tone after the text has been sent. This is a complete nonsense and is another example of overcomplicating what should be a very simple operation.

It is exactly the same when you try to send CQ using HRD. Let's just assume for a minute that in a moment of total madness you have changed the default call to your own. Hit the CQ macro and wait. You get the usual three lines of CQ and your call and then the 'pse k' at the end, but the software does not switch to receive. It just sits there sending out this tone until you hit F4 to stop it. This is crap.

I did find out that you can make the macros stop sending when they have finished by adding [stop] to the end of the text but again the help files do not tell you about this. I could find no way of getting a Macro to transmit without first double-clicking on it in order to get it in the transmit window and then having to press F1 in order to get it to send.

Now, I use PSK quite a bit and whenever you receive details of the other chaps station you never see anyone using HRD. It is not surprising. The whole thing is a waste of time and money, and, seeing as HRD is free, that says a lot. One of the reasons may be the constant pop-up box that appears asking you to send money for using the 'free' software. This is very annoying.

There is so much that is just 'wrong' about HRD it is difficult to know where to start. For example, open up PSK and the default frequency comes up as 14,235. Why? This is up in the phone section of the band and well away from 14,070 the 'normal' 20m default freq. Yes, I know it can be changed, but for a PSK programme, it shouldn't need changing, should it?

Dick's Conclusion: I found the whole software package a total mess from beginning to end and I am willing to bet that there are few at the Club using HRD. However, if you *are* using it, then I ask the following questions: "Who conned you into using it?" or are you using it as some form of bet? Are HRD paying you to use it, or are you some form of masochist? There are far, far better programmes out there for PSK including, Digipan, WinPSK and the new 'AirLink Express' - This is an excellent PSK programme where the help files actually help.

Once again we have a piece of software that has been written to show what someone can do rather than write something that is useful.

73

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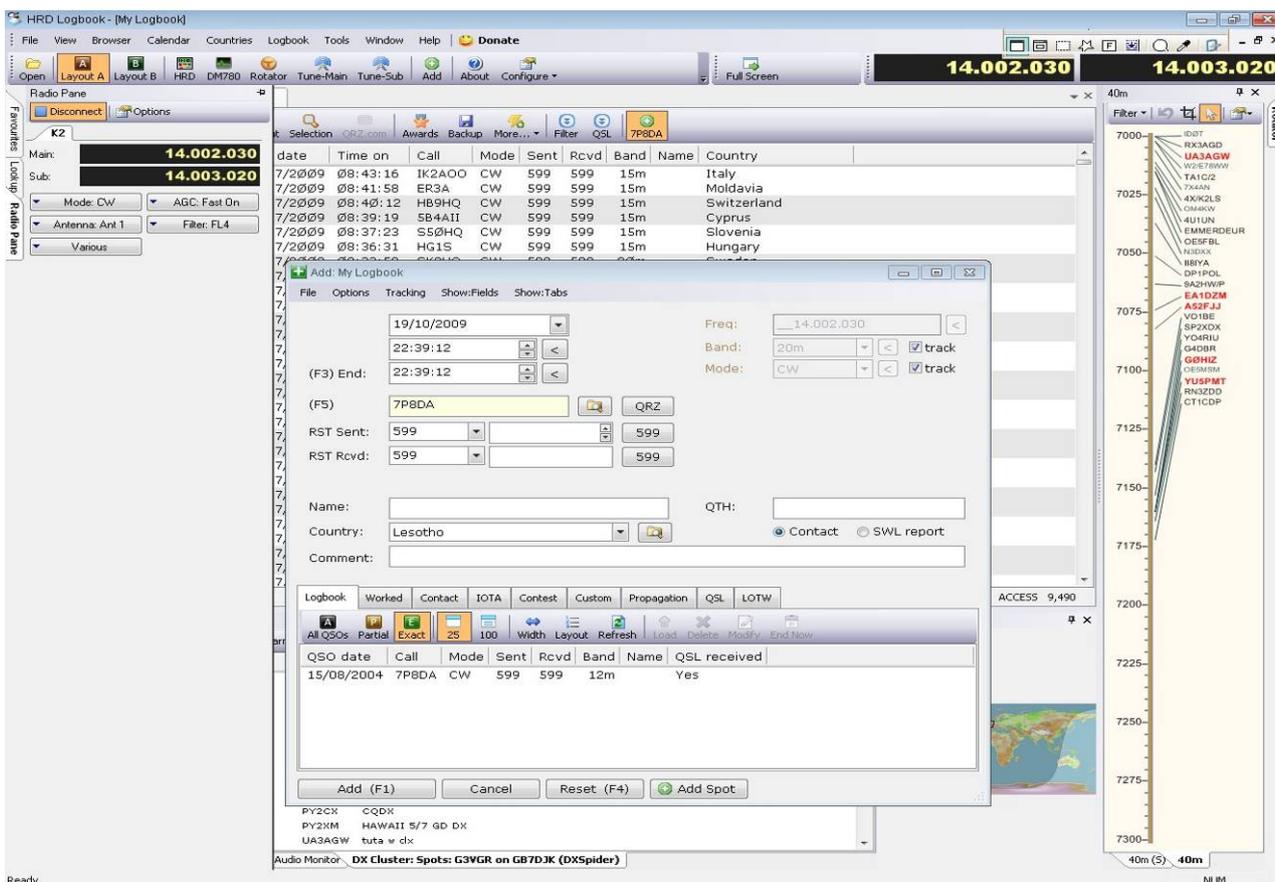
Dave G3VGR now reviews the HRD logger...

I've used logging software for quite a few years, originally for contesting. Firstly, I used DOS programs, my favourite being N6TR's TRLog, which as well as being able to communicate with the rig, also functioned as an electronic keyer with the paddle connecting to the LPT port.

Using a homemade CI-V interface with my IC735, I no longer had to worry about checking that the correct band or mode was logged and the program's spot map facility made Search & Pounce operating more efficient. After starting to dabble in datamodes around 1999, I moved to using YPLog, a Windows program that was configurable for all contests and also supported general logging with QSL and award tracking. This was far more flexible than standalone DOS programs and worked great with Windows 98, but the move to Windows 2000, with its multitasking features, resulted in timing problems with using the LPT port for generating CW. K1EL came to the rescue with his Winkey Keyer IC and I wrote a program to use it with YPLog. After support for YPLog ended around 2005, I tried many other logging programs before settling on N1MM's Logger for contests and K4CY's Logger32 for general purpose logging. Both programs support datamodes by using the MMVARI engine.

When I read the rave reviews of the new standalone HRD Logbook by HB9DRV, I decided to try it to see if it was any improvement over Logger32, so downloaded the 51Mb file. This installed easily and I started HRDLogbook, only to find it wasn't standalone at all and requires that HRD also be started. The two programs communicate via TCP/IP and are very resource hungry, so the performance is quite sluggish. HRD uses 51Mb of memory, whilst HRDLogbook uses 38Mb plus another 105Mb of virtual memory which compares badly with under 50Mb for either N1MM or Logger32.

My 17" flat screen monitor doesn't really have enough real estate on the screen to display all the jazzy windows of the logbook. All windows are highly configurable with drop-down boxes and menus, allowing one to play for hours trying to set up an acceptable desktop.



Screenshot showing useless radio pane and enormous log entry window

After setting up HRD to "control" my K2, I noticed it didn't support all the K2's front panel options anyway, although it did have many useless bells and whistles as an alternative. The HRDLogger



program now displayed my VFO frequencies in multiple places on the screen and I had the option of displaying the "Radio Panel" or "Radio Screen" to see even more displays of the rig's frequencies. Neither the radio screen nor panel provided any useful options, such as VFO functions A/B, A=B, SPLIT to allow working DX on split frequencies. The Radio Screen also obliterates all the useful windows by overlaying them with an enormous world map which includes VFO frequencies in a very large font. It has no other discernable purpose.

I had problems setting up the DX Cluster as it would not log on to the K1TTT cluster. This was because it doesn't support AR-Cluster, which is a shame, because I have a login script on K1TTT that sets up all the filters I need each time I log in. I configured it to use a DX-Spider site instead which worked fine except I was unable to configure the program to filter on modes or continents. The bandspot window is cribbed directly from N1MM Logger, but does not automatically switch bands. It is also cluttered with spots of modes I have no interest in (e.g. SSB) and there appears no easy way to filter out the unwanted spots and band segments.

I tried setting up the Winkey support from HRD, but this didn't seem to work properly and was almost totally unusable anyway due to its poor configurability. After 30 minutes, I gave up and used my own QD Keyer program instead. It was quite obvious the author has no inkling of what is required.

I was almost ready to use the program, but first needed to import my 10000+ QSOs from an ADIF file created by Logger32. I was impressed by HRDLogbook's import facility and a quick check of the DXCC Award Status showed that my confirmed totals were correct. I examined the award facilities in greater detail and noticed only a few awards are supported (DXCC, WAS, WAC, WAZ, WPX, IOTA) although the author is under the mistaken impression that there are seven continents required for WAC. No facility exists to add other awards. I currently have over sixty awards and am actively chasing a couple of dozen more, so would have appreciated some support in this area.

The logbook entry window also supports callsign lookup either with a web lookup from www.qrz.com, or a Hamcall or QRZ Callbook CD. I prefer to use the RAC (original "Flying Horse") callbook, which has more non-US addresses than the other two products. Again, this isn't supported.

The QSO entry window seemed to have far too many options for entries, so I configured it to remove many of the less useful entries, although the end result was still unappealing. I used the program to log a few entries and it showed previous QSOs with stations logged, although didn't automatically update the QSO files with information from the previous contacts.

Another annoyance when entering a call was that it didn't show whether that entity was already worked / confirmed on the current band.

When I tried to use the program to work DX, I was appalled by its usability. I saw 7P8DA spotted on 14002, so clicked on the bandmap spot, the rig QSY'd to his frequency and his call appeared in the already opened call entry window. The window showed a previous confirmed QSO on 1/6/09 on 12m. I heard him sending "UP 1" so had to work split.

This meant Alt-Tabbing to the HRD window and clicking on the buttons on a radio panel that looked nothing like the K2's actual panel to set up split. I then had to continually click on the A/B button to find where he was listening. There were no keyboard shortcuts configurable to quickly provide these functions. I had to then send my call and the exchange with QD Keyer's function keys.

After eventually working him, I had to Alt-Tab back to HRDLogbook to enter the call in the log, having to first remember to change the start time of the QSO which had remained static through the time it took to work him through the pileup.

By now, I'd decided enough was enough of this fine product, so used the export facility to create an ADIF file with the new contacts, which were then imported into Logger32. After that was verified, I uninstalled the HRD bloatware and went back to eHam.net to read the glowing reviews and wonder who writes them.



I did manage to find three positive features with HRDLogger:

It uses a MS Access database, so you can use Excel or Transact-SQL scripts to generate all sorts of useful (?) reports.

It uninstalls quicker than it installs.

It is free (although there are begging request for donations).

Overall, I get the impression it was written by someone who has absolutely no idea of what constitutes a logging program and most likely never actually goes on the air. N1MM is a contesting "big gun" and K4CY wrote Logger32 to handle the pileups he generated at 9K2ZZ. Their experience is reflected in their programs.

During my evaluation, I found one of Simon's disciples, IW1QLH, had written an add-on program to print QSO labels, so I downloaded it and discovered it to be the worst piece of software I'd ever come across.

The program supposedly prints labels from an ADIF file, although it is only configurable by manually hacking an XML file (which is uncommented) and has no support for standard Avery labels. I didn't want to waste a box of labels trying to set this up correctly, so uninstalled it too.

IW1QLH's is also begging for donations on his website for the "opportunity to help me with the goal of providing quality software".

I can only assume he intends using the donations to hire someone who can write decent code to achieve his goal.

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