



15 March 2011

CHALLENGING TIMES FOR ELECTRONICS

Over 100 delegates assembled at the Royal Sothorn Yacht Club at Hamble to hear a series of presentations by experts on modern electronic navigation systems. This workshop, the second of its type to be held by the Royal Institute of Navigation, highlighted the challenges of modern navigation when using chart plotters, radar and AIS and reinforced the need to maintain a constant lookout.

Several manufacturers introduced their latest developments, such as auto-routing, route development, mix'n'match overlays and hazard highlighting, with the emphasis on ease of use of modern electronics. A new, optional system from Navionics that allows local user input to update their cartography prior to its validation raised a few eyebrows. Two speakers, top racing navigator Hugh Agnew and Simon Jinks, the former RYA Chief Cruising Instructor, outlined the deficiencies that they had found when using electronic chart cartography, square rigger soundings and modern, accurate GPS positioning. Many delegates wondered why the hydrographic offices and cartography developers were not doing more to up-date their charts.

Following a discussion of easily portable smartphone navigation apps, Dag Pike commented that these work and are cheap but the built-in GPS is not too effective and the unit is not waterproof and has a limited battery life. It is for use as a back-up system rather than as a primary one.

The second session was dedicated to detection and collision avoidance covering thermal cameras, radar and AIS and well as radar reflector systems to enhance the visibility of small craft. There was a lot of discussion about the merits of Class B AIS with Chris Hoyle, a Southampton pilot, saying that many ships' officers would be likely to switch off Class B AIS reception in crowded waters in order to identify charted features. The consensus was that AIS should be used primarily in open waters. Faced with a choice of AIS or radar, the vast majority of delegates indicated they would opt for radar, provided they could access an adequate power supply.

The overriding message that came out of this Royal Institute of Navigation workshop was that electronics can make navigation much safer but that it is still essential to maintain a visual lookout and conduct visual navigation. Despite the accuracy and reliability of GPS, there was concern about the frailty of the satellite signals and their vulnerability to jamming and solar flares. There is a compelling need to have a back up position fixing system available on board at all times. For more information, contact Tony Fyler on 020 75913133 or editor@rin.org.uk. For more on the RIN, visit www.rin.org.uk.

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