Building and using a touch keyer

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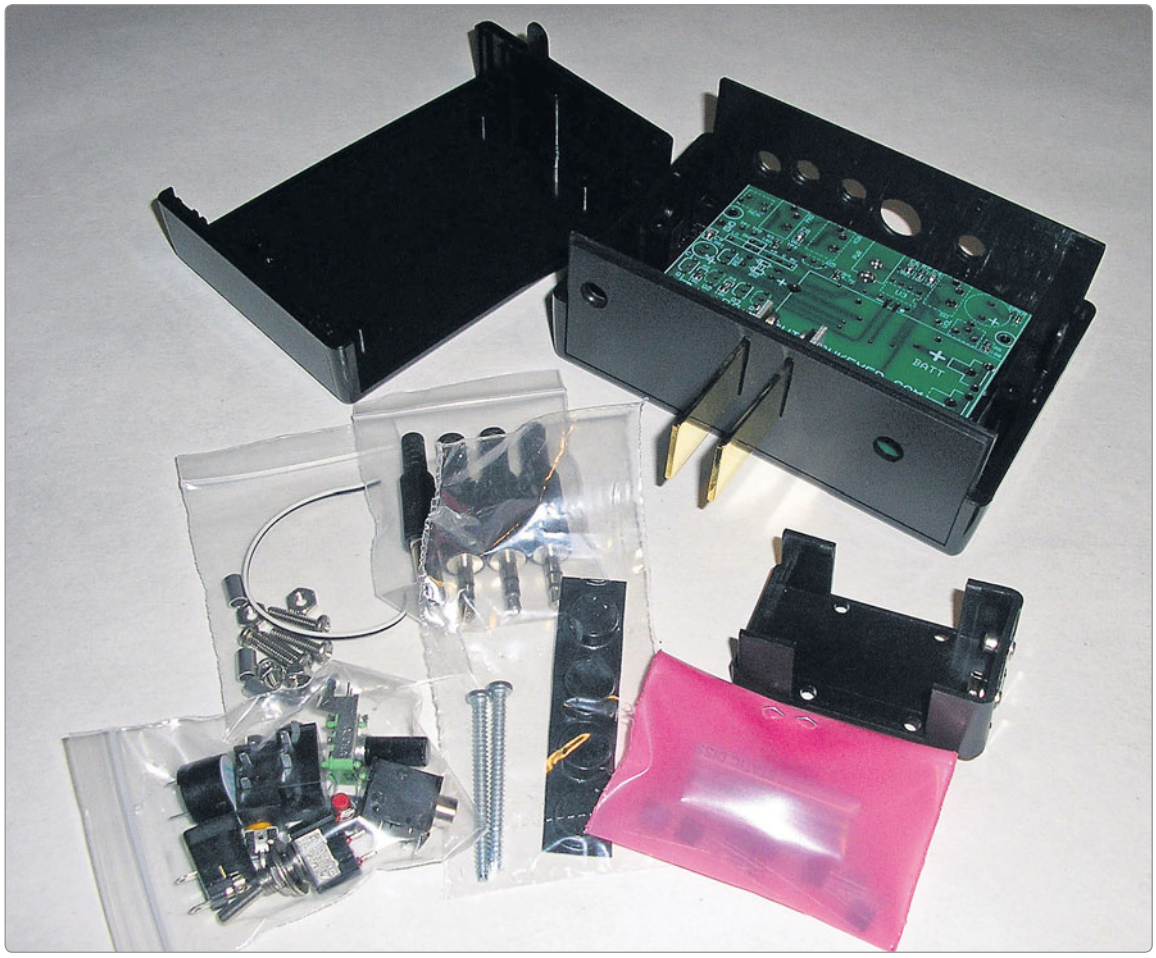
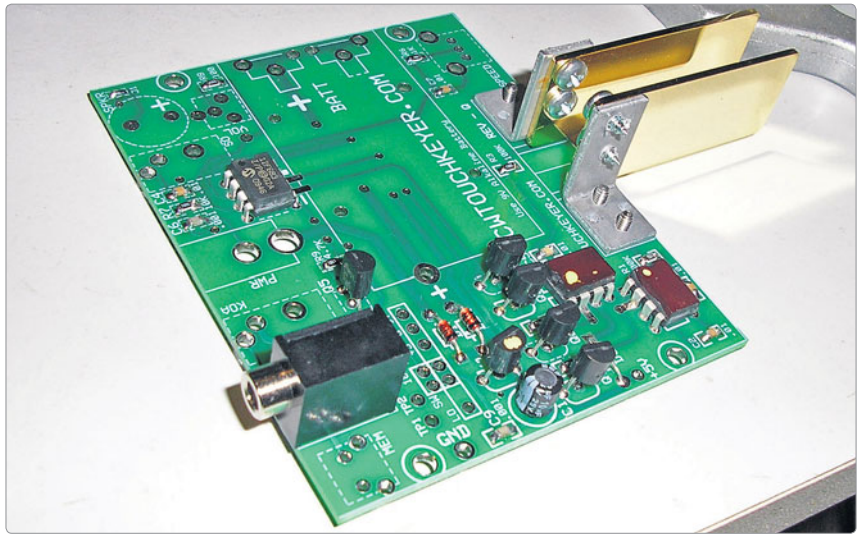


Photo 1: The kit as it arrived.

Taking part in the recent WIA Centenary QRP Contest highlighted a need in my shack; I could do with a side tone generator. The problem arose as I had decided to use my trusty homebrewed 125 mW Pixie 2 transceiver. I have always been amazed at the performance of this minimalistic rig, but operating without a sidetone to allow you to hear the code you are sending is challenging to say the least.

So I decided to see if I could rectify this in time for the next QRP contest. A quick trawl of the web brought up numerous schematics for simple keyers, but the one that caught my attention was CW Touch Keyer, *http://www.cwtouchkeyer.com/*

Photo 2: Work in progress, populating the PCB. The gold plated paddles and surface mount components were pre-installed.



I was immediately attracted to the Model P1, which is a touch paddle with built in electronic keyer. It is also available in kit form. As an avid homebrewer, this looked like the solution to my problem.

After placing my order, the kit arrived from the US within a week. Everything was there, so I was raring to go.

The kit went together effortlessly and worked first time. This, I have to admit, was something of a rarity for me as I always seem to have a little troubleshooting to do before I can get kits to work. So, what exactly is a touch keyer and what is it like to operate?

This little gem, which sells for US$99 plus around US$16 for shipping, is basically a paddle without mechanical movements. The paddles do not move at all and do not rely on the resistance of your skin to work. The paddles, incidentally, are solid gold plated. They are super responsive and produce flawless CW.

Another big plus for me is that there are no annoying clicking sounds to distract me when in the thick of a long over. There is a tuning pot which allows you to adjust your speed from anywhere between 5 and 50 words per minute. Power is supplied via an onboard 9 V battery or an external power source of anywhere between 6 - 12 V DC.



Photo 3: The completed PCB inside its custom enclosure. Note space for the internal 9 V battery, which is optional.

The touch keyer is also highly programmable, with two 80 character memories in addition to an 80 character call sign memory. Another nice feature is that it is easy to reverse the paddles for dots and dashes if you so wish. I know some right-handed operators like to use their left hand for operating the paddles as this frees up their right hand for writing.

Photo 4: The Touch Keyer alongside the more traditional Black Widow paddle.



The side tone, which can be switched on or off, can be heard from a small internal speaker, something I will be using with the Pixie 2. Another thing I like about this keyer is that it can be used in three ways, as an electronic keyer on rigs that don't have in-built keyers, as paddles only with rigs that do have keyers, and as a stand-alone unit using an external speaker. The keyer is also really heavy and does not move about on the bench during sending. It comes complete with a custom made weight that fills the bottom of the enclosure.

So, what is it like to use?

I join thousands of other operators who now swear by them. I have never experienced anything like it. No longer do I have to fiddle around trying to get a comfortable set of gaps on my paddles. With the touch keyer, this is a non-issue. There are no gaps to set. The paddles are self calibrating and are just perfect to use. I have often wondered how I managed without them. My code speed has improved nicely and I send more fluently. The paddles have an ultra-soft touch and have a smooth, quick and positive response. In a word, they are fabulous.