



Ham radio tunes in to a new generation

As he sits in a shed on the outskirts of Cambridge, Martin Atherton twists a radio dial and picks up a message being sent in Morse code. The audio dots and dashes, familiar from black-and-white war films, might seem to be relics of a past era. But more than a century after it was first used, this mode of communication appears to be making a comeback. Since 2006 the number of amateur radio licences, which allow holders to send Morse and voice messages, has increased by almost 60 per cent, according to the Radio Society of Great Britain. Last year the number of 13 to 44-year-olds

viewing the society's online tutorials, which cover topics such as "improving your Morse skills" and how to build your own equipment, more than tripled.

Allowing people to reach out to distant lands on a shoestring budget, the hobby could have been tailor-made for lockdown. The Netflix series *Stranger Things*, in which a "ham" radio set is used to contact another dimension, has also been linked to an increase in interest.

"Teenagers are picking it up, so are retirees," said Atherton, 69, a member of the Cambridge University Wireless Society. Nikolaos Thatte, 22, another member, adds that amateur radio is



Martin Atherton and Nikolaos Thatte of the Cambridge University Wireless Centre are part of a boom influenced by lockdown and *Stranger Things*, left

many hobbies in one. Some enthusiasts enjoy soldering together homemade circuits. Others specialise in sending signals very long distances by bouncing them off the ionised plasma created high in the atmosphere by meteors, or spend their weekends hiking to

mountaintops to contact other continents.

There are also competitions. Nick Tottel, 63, from Sheffield, will spend this weekend attempting to reach as many people as possible using Morse code, a wavelength of 160 metres and an 18 metre-fall mast he

has built in his garden. Thousands of amateurs from around the world will enter the contest.

"People ask why we do it when you can communicate with anybody using the internet," he said. "It's about doing it with your own resources. It's the difference between

walking up Mount Snowdon and getting a helicopter to the top," Professor Cathryn Mitchell, of the University of Bath, has found the amateur radio community helpful for her research into how the upper layers of the atmosphere — used to deflect radio signals

around the world — are affected by "space weather", the stream of charged particles emitted by the Sun.

"Their background knowledge is phenomenal," she said. "There is a sense of courtesy and kindness that I think is incredibly valuable."