Detector
Field Test

Garrett GTAx550

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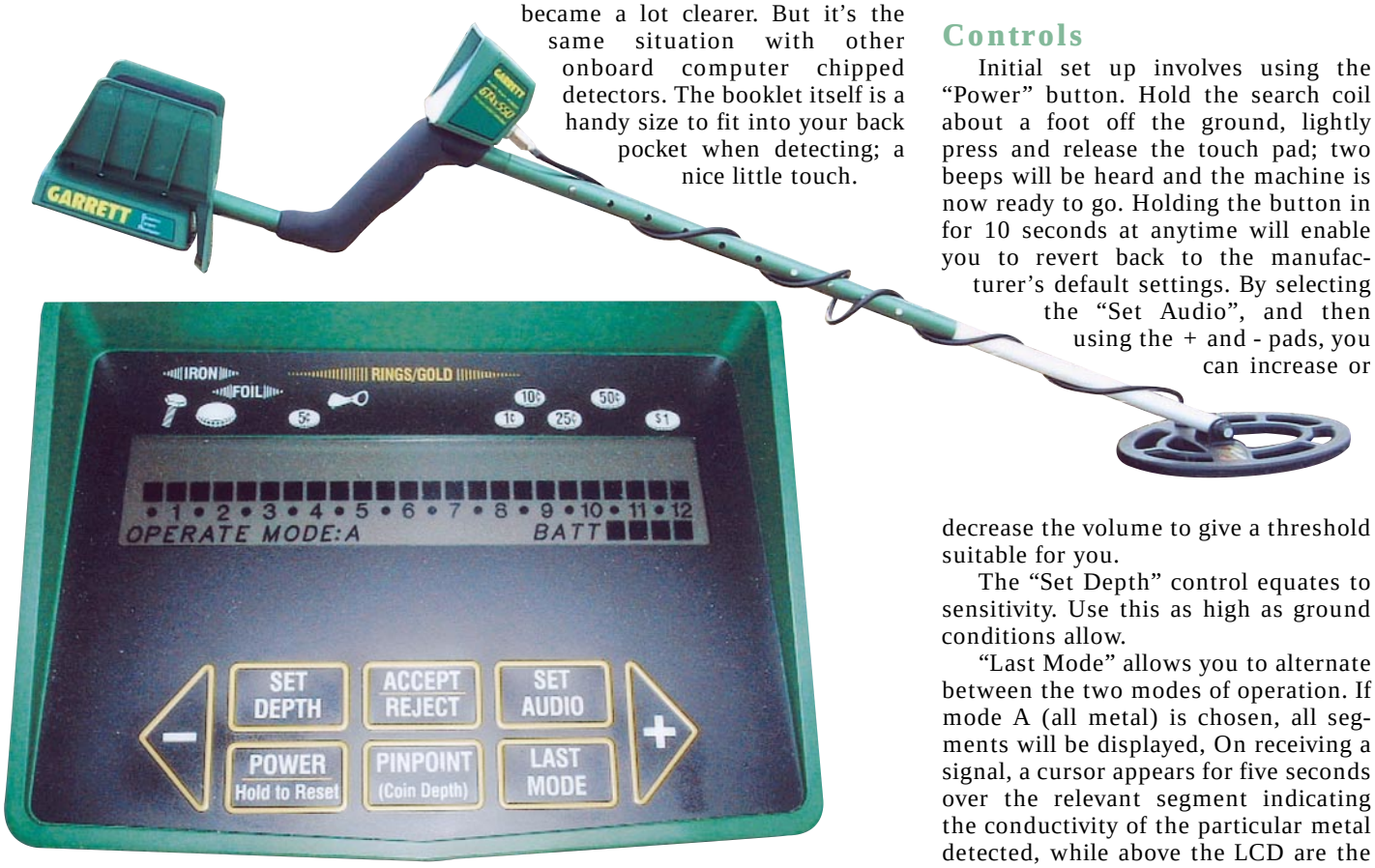
Isn't it funny how something can come along, alter your whole perspective, and give you an added dimension to metal detecting? Throughout my years in the hobby I have been very focused on becoming a good detectorist, understanding machines, ground conditions, sweep speeds, and so on. I was as keen as mustard: you name it, I read it, thought it, practised it at home, then put it into operation on the fields; more knowledge equalled more finds. Over the years I had to have the very best detectors and I didn't really give "middle of the road" machines a second glance.

So, when Nigel of Regtons suggested field testing the Garrett GTAx550 I had a few preconceived thoughts as to what I would make of this detector. However, these were pushed to the back of my mind when he readily agreed that both good and bad points would be allowed in print. I did mention that most of my land was now under crops, but he came back with, seeing that, that the detector is basically a coinshooter, I could try it out on some parks.

Parks? I can't ever remember having been on any!

The parcel arrived the next day, and I must give Regtons full marks for service. That was the first thing to impress me. The second, while assembling the unit, was the build quality; these detectors are really well put together. You know what its like to sit in an upmarket car; you don't need to see the engine to appreciate the workmanship. The detector sports the unmistakable green and white livery of all Garrett machines and, needless to say, assembly was straightforward.

The pocket handbook wasn't. I read it through twice and was still confused. To be fair, when I read it step by step, in conjunction with the machine, it then became a lot clearer. But it's the same situation with other onboard computer chipped detectors. The booklet itself is a handy size to fit into your back pocket when detecting; a nice little touch.



The GTAx550 is the stable brother of the GTAx1250 and both come with a 7in x 10in elliptical widescan coil; this particular detector operates at 7.0 kHz. The battery box, which sits under the armrest, houses two drop-in pods each holding 4 x 1.5 volt AA batteries. If required, the control box has the facility to be removed for belt mounting. The headphone socket is situated at the rear of the box.

The name GTA derives from the initials "Graphic Target Analyser", which is microprocessor driven. It will show the probable target on the Liquid Crystal Display unit. With the power on, the LCD will display a segmented horizontal bar graph in half increments up to 12. This is utilised for both all metal and discrimination. A second graph appears when adjustments are made to audio, depth, and pinpointing. Below this are eight touch pads to set up the detector, which I'll run through later.

Controls

Initial set up involves using the "Power" button. Hold the search coil about a foot off the ground, lightly press and release the touch pad; two beeps will be heard and the machine is now ready to go. Holding the button in for 10 seconds at anytime will enable you to revert back to the manufacturer's default settings. By selecting the "Set Audio", and then using the + and - pads, you can increase or decrease the volume to give a threshold suitable for you.

The "Set Depth" control equates to sensitivity. Use this as high as ground conditions allow.

"Last Mode" allows you to alternate between the two modes of operation. If mode A (all metal) is chosen, all segments will be displayed, On receiving a signal, a cursor appears for five seconds over the relevant segment indicating the conductivity of the particular metal detected, while above the LCD are the

The hard pad.

usual icons depicting iron, foil, gold and silver coinage to give some idea of the target. In mode B (discrimination), by utilising the "Accept/Reject", a cursor is shown which can be moved up and down the graph by using the + and - touch pads; then, by repressing the accept/reject, segments will be removed. In this way you can personalise just what you want to discriminate out, and in actual fact the facility is a discriminator and notch facility combined.

The "Pinpoint" button needs to be held in when over the target; maximum audio will be heard with a corresponding graph. A second lower graph will indicate the depth (reading from left to right). This is calibrated for coin size objects.

"Battery" condition is signified by segments in the bottom right hand corner ("4" when full).

Finally, there is a bell tone, which normally sounds on highly conductive metals.

Does all this sound confusing? It did to me at first but, as previously mentioned, if you read the manual with the detector at hand, it all soon falls into place.

Field Trials

I had a spare couple of hours that afternoon, so I thought that I would go out and have a little play. I envisaged that there was no need for anywhere special - just somewhere to get myself accustomed to the controls. With most of the land now under crops, I decided to search a hard pad that a farmer friend used for standing his machinery; needless to say, I had not forgotten that this was next to a medieval field.

Although the Garrett weighed in at 3.9lb it wasn't necessary to hip mount, as the machine was well balanced and easy to swing. After touching the power-on, the discriminate mode B programme came on the screen; this was a factory preset programme and needed altering for this type of searching. It took little time to change to discriminating out the first two and a half segments to knock out the iron, using the accept/reject. The "Set Depth", because of the known conditions on the adjoining field, was taken down to 9.5 - straightforward enough.

Remembering to keep the sweep speed at 2ft a second, as advised in the book, I was surprised at how easy it was to handle the mineralisation with a dead steady threshold. Everything was running smoothly with the odd nail giving a chopped signal and reading 2.5. Two round flat pieces of lead came in at "8" on the graph, and one gave a bell tone! This was interesting because, on my other machines, lead comes in much lower down the scale. Following this came a crotal bell at 8.5, with a bell tone. I was very pleased with the find as it has been over a year since I found one of these. Unfortunately the "handle" was broken, otherwise it would have made a nice gift for the farmer. Every now and again I would get a signal where there would be two cursors on the graph: one in iron and the other much higher on the scale. These turned out to be bent nails or, in one instance, part of a knife (obviously if a dual cursor was shown and the lower one was above "3" this should represent a good target).

I was beginning to enjoy my searches with the Garrett, especially

The two crotal bells before cleaning. W.G. can be seen.

Henry II penny.

when a Henry II penny (at 5) came to light, followed by a lead strap end (6.5). The bell tone would give off the odd "bong", but this was a one way non-repeatable signal. To top everything off, I found another crotal bell (was the bell tone a mating call?) I was amazed to have found two in under two hours, and the second example was whole, so the farmer wouldn't miss out after all.

After more buttons and suchlike, I came away with the feeling of what a pleasure the detector was to use. I had no great expectations and, disregarding the finds, I thoroughly enjoyed using it. None of the items were that deep and seeing that I hadn't detected on the pad before, I felt the best thing I could do was to detect the same area the following day using one of my own machines.

The next day I tracked my previous path and really concentrated. I had missed only three good signals. Rather than digging these up, I marked them and went over them again with the Garrett. It responded to all three, so obviously my search pattern was at fault rather than the machine.

I had yet to try the detector out on a park, but rather than do this I took it down to the beach.

At various positions 50-gallon drums had been placed along the beach for the people to throw their rubbish in. Most of them seem to have missed.

I decided to start my search amongst the beach huts in the dunes, using the all-metal mode A. My reasoning was that when anything unwanted turned up I could then notch it out. I had thought of taking a coin of each denomination and just notch these in, so that everything else would be discarded.

Finds from the hard pad.

Lead Saxon/early medieval strap end.

Gas cartridge and coins - mostly pre-decimal from parkland.

However, it then crossed my mind that I might be lucky enough to find rings or jewellery. Using the sensitivity on "11" and after finding a couple of pieces of foil, I notched out 2.5, and 3 (rather than using a "blanket" discrimination up to 3). The reason for this is that I found if the very first segment is left on, you gain a couple of inches of depth! Taking the twelfth segment out in Mode B also improves the discrimination.

Buried coke cans caused a problem to begin with, but that was my fault. For quickness, I'm used to switching to all metal and identifying them by a long signal. Both modes on this machine give the same signals, but I had forgotten about the pinpoint. When using this, it gave a note that gradually intensified and showed a shallow depth; there were no problems from then on.

While on the subject of pinpointing, I found this facility to be easy to use and very accurate. The only problems I came across were with ring pulls; these have the same conductivity as a 20p piece. After digging up quite a few ring pulls, I decided that I wasn't that fussed about 20ps anyway.

I did get the odd rusty nail when near the huts, but at all times these were identified; those that were lengthways-on gave a double beep, while objects of the same length but a higher conductivity produced only a single bleep.

The GTAx550 works well on the dry sand. Finds were being made at a steady rate and although I was working in all metal, each signal was identified on the readout. Separation of close together signals, understandably, needed a little more care, but was achieved. On the odd occasion a coin

would be out of range of the meter but still give a definite two way audio signal; obviously such signals need to be dug. As to be expected the standard of performance of this detector will drop when used on wet sand.

I finally found a park to search. I'm pleased that I did, for some old copper coins - including a couple of threepenny pieces - came to light, a few of these at really respectable depths. The bell tone worked well with this type of coinage, although still sounding out on some larger unwanted items; these, though, were easily identified. Amongst all the rubbish encountered in the park, mode A did have the edge and gave the better depth.

Conclusions

Garretts are currently celebrating their 40th anniversary in the detector business. To have lasted this long they must be getting most things right, and yet their name is not the first on people's lips when discussing the latest detectors. It seems that we all get to hear about the latest machine and it becomes the flavour of the month until another takes its place (rather like the car industry). However, there are certain marques of cars that aren't the fastest or the most frugal but they have the reputation for quality and longevity. This I feel, after testing the machine, is where Garrett rightly stand.

Selection of coins from the park.

Two brass threepenny pieces.

There's no fuss or worries about this detector - it just gets on with the job. If you're not into ground balancing, or tapping in a programme (and then wondering when you come off the field if it was the right one) this detector is well worth thinking about.

Obviously it has its limitations - there are no pretensions of it being a top of the range machine. However, for the price, the amount of extras you get in the form of the up-to-date technology to give you ease of use, bang the scales firmly down.

I was particularly impressed with the all-metal audio with visual discrimination, and the maintained steady threshold on mineralised soil. It opened up my eyes to the fact that this hobby of ours doesn't have to rely on how many hammered you need to pull in order for you to enjoy yourself. Quite a number of detectors have passed through my hands, good and not so; this has been by far the quickest to get to grips with and a pleasure to use. TH