



DAYSKIPPER – from a distance



New to boating and want to get certified? The usual first step is either evening classes or a weekend 'crash course'. But there's another option – distance learning. Pat Manley explains all

The official Royal Yachting Association's (RYA) Dayskipper and Yachtmaster shorebased (theory) courses have introduced thousands to the joys of navigating their own boats, seamanship, safety, weather and much more – all through night classes and weekend 'crash courses'. These are run either by sailing schools or Local Education Authorities (LEAs) endorsed by the RYA.

The RYA syllabus was designed to be completed in 40 hours of night school 'classroom' study, where there was plenty of

time to do homework before the next session – which in my experience adds a further 40 hours or more. It was, therefore, learning at a comfortable pace with the added bonus of a social meeting with other yachtsmen. Costs were subsidised by the LEA and were very reasonable.

But with the general withdrawal of LEA funding, these courses now cost anywhere between £120 and £280. And nowadays not everyone has time to commit to an unhurried course, so sailing schools run five- or six-day courses where the pace is anything but leisurely, needing homework

every night and with costs ranging from £250 to £350 or more.

The alternative is correspondence courses which can be paced according to the student's preference. Courses cost between £205 and £290, so can be an excellent alternative to night school.

RYA involvement

All distance learning courses leading to the award of an RYA certificate are assessed by an RYA appointed examiner, so all schools reach a minimum acceptable standard. Students receive a study pack containing charts, course notes, training almanac and electronic chart plotter software, plus the school's own teaching materials, exercises and software CD. Students will normally need to supply their own navigation tools.

Many courses use Adobe Acrobat for the tutorials (though not for animations) and this ensures compatibility with any computer. If the course uses a web-based browser system, then screen resolution and browser type can cause anomalies. Students may need to liaise with the school if there are problems, but these won't show up until after the software is installed.

Some schools supply only one part of the syllabus at a time, on paper, sending the next part after receipt of the completed exercise (though the full course is normally also supplied on a CD). Others send the full course in the initial pack.

Progress checks are made periodically, with completed work submitted either by post or email. Feedback is normally given within 24 hours.

Most schools suggest examinations should be taken within 12 months of course completion, although many are willing to discuss extensions. When sitting the end-of-course examinations students need someone to invigilate and attest that tasks were conducted in exam conditions. The test papers are then returned for marking.

A critical part of distance learning is contact with tutors. All schools allow email or telephone contact at reasonable times. Be sure also to look on the school's website to see if they have customer feedback.

All the schools that responded also do courses up to Yachtmaster, but due to lack of space we concentrated on Dayskipper.

DISTANCE LEARNING - CORRESPONDENCE COURSES

	Price Dayskipper	Course Notes	Study Notes	RYA Charts	RYA Electronic Chart Plotter	Training Almanac	RYA Notes	Colregs	Complete Course on CD ROM	Interactive CD	5011' Symbols & Abbreviations
Ocean Training	£290	On CD	All on CD	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Extracts
Tiller School of Navigation and Seamanship	£252 plus £39 for printed exercises	Paper	All on CD and 'online' Optionally printed	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	N
International Yachtmaster Academy	£205	Paper	On CD and Sequentially on paper or from website	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	Y
Chichester Maritime	£245	Paper	All on CD unlocked sequentially plus website	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	Y	Y	Y

extendable

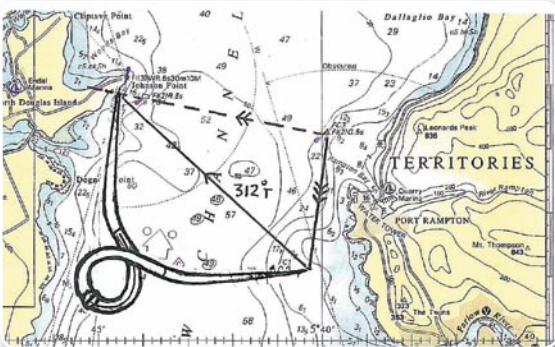
International Yachtmaster Academy

QUALIFICATION: DAYSKIPPER

COST: £205

■ In appearance and presentation this was unsophisticated, with the instructional information reminiscent of overhead projector slides – though it was the cheapest of the packages tested. After explaining the principles and giving examples the course introduced a series of fun exercises, complete with answers to confirm you're doing things right. On completion of the module the standard RYA exercises were given, which then had to be sent back and marked before the issue of the next topic.

The software CD contained the complete course, with the contents being identical to the printed pages. A nice touch was that at the end of most topics there were some questions on collision regulations (Colregs). The day skipper course comprises eight separate packs plus the final exam pack. The meteorology content is pretty basic and students would probably be rewarded by also studying a met book written by a yachting meteorologist. There was no interactive content on the CD, but navigating the topics was easy. Contacting the school for help and guidance is by freephone or fax, manned every day until the late evening, and also by email. Demonstrations of some of the coursework are available on the school's website.



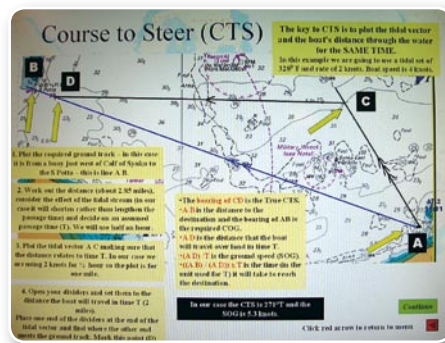
▲ **International Yachtmaster Academy:** simple presentation, but easy to use and modestly priced

Tiller School of Navigation and Seamanship

QUALIFICATION: DAYSKIPPER

COST: £252 (PLUS £39 FOR A HARD COPY)

■ The contents of the box were presented very professionally, with detailed instructions on how to make the best use of the course and how to organise your sessions. Also included was an excellent guide to reading a chart and a much needed hard copy version of the instructions for using the RYA's electronic chart plotter. Otherwise all the course contents, including interactive material, were on the CD. To obtain the printed material you either have to print it yourself from the CD,



▲ **Tiller School of NaS:** excellent instructions along with clear text which aims to answer most questions

or pay an extra £39 to have it supplied. The instructional material seems to anticipate the many questions students inevitably ask and weaves this into the very clear text. Coloured text boxes tell you when to do the exercise papers. The standard RYA exercises are used for judging your progress and these are sent back to Tiller for marking and comments. Navigating the CD was easy, with the coursework being provided in the form of Adobe Acrobat content, plus a mixture of interactive animations and MS PowerPoint. Contact is by phone or fax (an 0845 number priced at 4p per minute) and email. There are currently no demos of coursework on their website (which is being developed to include this) but student feedback can be read.

Ocean Training

QUALIFICATION: DAYSKIPPER

COST: £290



▲ **Ocean Training:** regimented and requiring strict personal discipline, but professional and ergonomic

■ Apart from the RYA Student's Pack, there's only a covering letter telling you how to start the CD and stressing the need to work through the complete course step-by-step. You can't work directly from the CD since the software first needs to be installed on your computer. Once you've done this, navigating the course index and individual topics is easy using a button bar at the bottom of the screen and a directory tree on the left. All course information is on the CD. The instructional text is clear and professional – excellent step-by-step animations with dialogue are used to demonstrate the techniques. At the end of each module there is a self-assessed test, and at the end of each third module there's a tutor-marked assignment that needs to be emailed to Ocean Training for evaluation and comments. This course is intended to be highly regimented in order that the student keeps to the 'path', but with a bit of dexterity using the Adobe index you can find your way to specific parts if you need to jump around. Contact is by phone, fax or email. Interactive demos on their website allow you to see the excellent interactive content offered by courses. Student feedback can also be found.

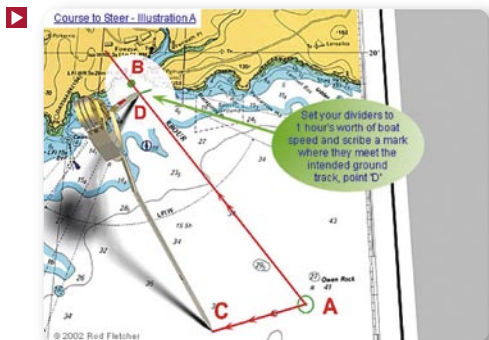
Chichester Maritime

QUALIFICATION: DAYSKIPPER

COST: £245

■ A comprehensive book explains the method of study and appraisal, and also how to use either the CD or online modules downloaded onto your computer. The course is browser-based, and if you don't use one of the supported web browsers by default you'll need to liaise with Chichester Maritime in order to run the software. Your computer will also need to be Javascript-enabled. Users of supported browsers should find no problems, but as my browser was not one of the supported ones the Chichester Maritime program was the most complex to set up. Once running, however, the interactivity by hovering the cursor over any coloured text was worth all the effort: the quality of the animations was excellent

Plotting Tools	Exercise Return	Time Limit	Display	Contact Number	Email	Website
N	Post	1 year	Acrobat	01451 860435	tedmiley@aol.com	www.oceantraining.com
Pencils	Post	1 year# £49 extra year	Acrobat	08456 123466	info@tiller.co.uk	www.tiller.co.uk
N	Post Fax & email	1 year #	Browser	02890 314789	enquiry@yachtmaster.co.uk	www.yachtmaster-training.com
Pencils & Eraser	email and website	1 year	Browser	0207 0601126	cm@cmonline.co.uk	www.cmonline.co.uk



▲ Chichester Maritime: high-quality animation and interactivity, plus a strong online presence

and there were no buttons to press. All the animations appeared on the left hand side of the screen with the text still in view. Moving around the course is either via the contents link or the slider bar at the side of the screen. Detailed instructions on the use of the RYA chart plotter are also included. Contact is by phone (an 0871 number at 10p per minute), fax, email, or directly on the student section of the website. Students have their own personal secure access to Chichester Maritime's website in order to download course notes, ask questions and submit assessments for marking – this is an excellent way to make contact. There is also feedback from past students along with interactive demos on the website, so you can get a flavour of the course contents and style.

Conclusion

Having studied for my airline pilot's license by correspondence while serving in Aden many years ago, I know first hand that self-discipline is required. But, given this, anyone should be able to succeed using distance learning.

I've made no attempt to rate the different courses against each other – how you react to each one is very subjective, and each has its own merits.

All the courses reviewed will allow you to study the material, complete the exercises and take the final assessments, and all have been approved by the RYA. Apart from attending a sailing school or adult education classes they are the only other way to get a shore-based certificate.

All have a rapid turnaround for queries and marked assessments. Yachtmaster Academy provide a course much like a textbook, but with the ability to obtain help from your tutor at any time. Ocean Training and Tiller's animations are accessed separately from the descriptive part of the course, while Chichester Maritime use Internet hyperlinks to display the animations on the same screen as the text. You can see demos of how Ocean Training, Chichester Maritime and Yachtmaster Academy go about it on their websites. Only Ocean Training's animations have a spoken commentary. Speaking to a school's principal on the phone could also be useful in forming an idea of how well you will relate to the course.

Interactive stand-alone CDs

There are many interactive CDs on the market that allow you to study particular aspects of shore-based theory, there's even one that covers the full RYA syllabus – but you can't get any qualifications from their use. Where they can be very helpful is in gaining practice and familiarity with the various topics.

RYA shore-based CDs (Competent Crew, Day Skipper, Coastal Skipper/Yachtmaster)

Ocean Training Shore-based Course Tutor

COST: £50

RECOMMENDED



■ This excellent CD uses all the animated graphics from Ocean Training's Day Skipper and Yachtmaster correspondence courses. The written text of the narration can be

displayed, and you can pause the animations whilst studying the text to give you more time to absorb the methods being discussed. Some of the sections also have quizzes which work well as a revision aid. The software is run directly from the CD, so doesn't need to be loaded onto your computer's hard drive. An excellent study aid.

Ocean Training Navigation and Safety

COST: £30

RECOMMENDED



■ This CD allows you to practice your recognition of such things as lights, shapes, flags, buoys and chart symbols. Some of the exercises are taken from the correspondence course CD, while

others are new. Great fun and a good learning tool is the *Avoid the Danger* game, where you need to turn your boat the correct way to avoid crashing! You'll need to practice a bit first to get the idea, as things happen quite fast; the helm only becomes active quite late in the game and you can't recognise the buoy until you're fairly close. The game can also be practiced under various navigational conditions, such as during day- or night-time, and rain or fog. It also runs from the CD, eliminating the need for prior installation.

TeachMe Interactive – Teach Me To Sail: Coastal Skipper

COST: £60



■ The CD covers many of the topics in the RYA syllabus, but not in any great depth. There is an interactive text-only glossary provided, along with quizzes to test your knowledge. The graphics are adequate though not very inspiring, and I couldn't adjust the software's screen ratio on my computer. The CD is offered to sailing schools for sale to students, as a teaching aid, and can be upgraded to the correspondence course for the additional price of £270. It needs to be installed on your computer hard drive.

Longbow Sail Training The Complete Course

COST: £49.95



■ This covers the RYA syllabus of both Day Skipper and Coastal Skipper/Yachtmaster courses. The syllabus coverage is comprehensive, even featuring a whole section on maintenance. There are one or two exceptions though – I was unable to find 'sea breezes', for example. The animation is plentiful though ordinary, and I was unable to display the course at full-screen on my computer. Although called *The Complete Course*, there is no way you'd be able to take the exams other than by enrolling on a proper course. Buyers have been known to ask schools if they can take the exam but, of course, that's not possible as the RYA also takes into account the students progress throughout the course. There is a second CD available which contains course exercises and exams, but you can't do these unless you have enrolled. It can be run directly from the CD or installed on your hard drive.

RNLI Sea Safety The Complete Guide

COST: FREE OF CHARGE
HIGHLY RECOMMENDED

■ This CD comes with a book of the same name. It covers such topics as weather, tides, safety equipment rules of the road, emergencies and much more. The animations are excellent and there are videos as well. The helicopter rescue video is well worth watching, but don't turn down the sound volume because it really is that noisy in real life! The book and CD should be compulsory reading and viewing for all boaters, whatever their interest. Even if you had to pay for it, this would be excellent value – so why not give a donation to the RNLI?

Lightmaster GPS Tutorial

COST: £19.95

■ While most users can operate their GPS, many are unaware of the underlying way in which it works, and the real dangers of getting it wrong. This tutorial shows the fundamentals of operation and how to use your GPS as a safe tool to assist with navigation. All the simple 'tricks of the professionals' are detailed, with animations to show how to use them. Excellent for learning how to get the best from your GPS set. This tutorial software can be run from the CD or installed on your hard drive.

Lightmaster Radar Plotting Tutorial

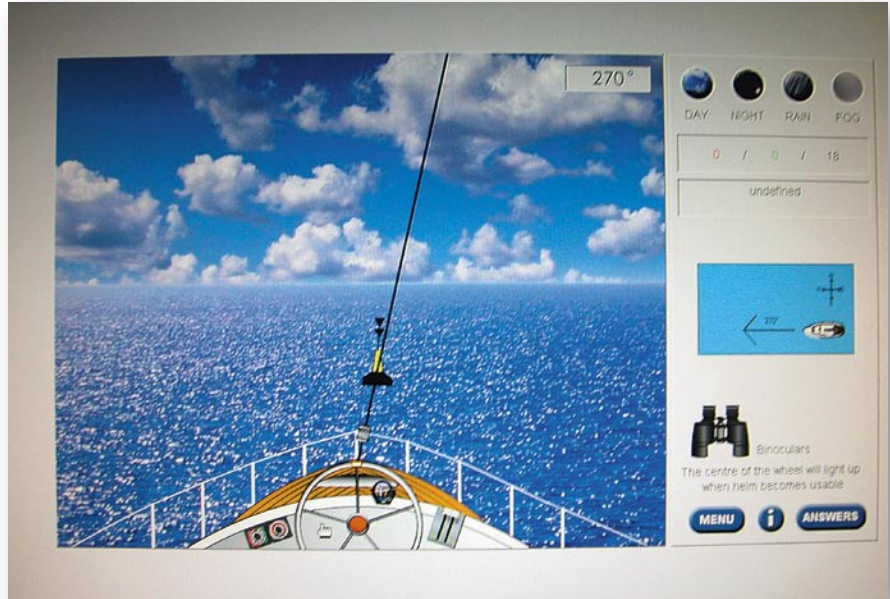
COST: £19.95

■ It's a legal requirement that if you have radar fitted and operational, it must be used for collision avoidance AND you must know how to use it. Ideally, you'll attend an RYA Radar Course, but you can get some excellent practice on your own using this tutorial. There are excellent animations of the various facilities, such as ARPA, SART recognition and collision risk, plus you can also practice plotting. The only thing you can't do is set up the radar itself.

Lightmaster Radar Simulator 2

COST: £59.95 **RECOMMENDED**

■ The new simulator is streets ahead of the Mk1 version, which served very well in its time. You can choose either a CRT display, or LCD display, modelled on Raymarine sets. Firstly you can practice setting up the radar for best results, and then you can practice the many exercises which can have a number of different ships, buoys, moving weather, sea clutter and rain clutter. You can also select ARPA and warning zones.



▲ Who says learning has to be tedious? Ocean Training's Navigation and Safety features danger avoiding games

You can even construct your own exercises if you wish. This is a very powerful tool and you may become so absorbed with it that you forget you are not on an actual boat. Bought as a package with the tutorial for £69.95, this has got to be a good buy.

Lightmaster VHF DSC Tutor

COST: £19.95

■ In order to use your DSC set unsupervised you must hold a Certificate of Competence, which can be obtained by direct examination or by attending an RYA DSC course. This tutorial will teach you how to use a VHF/DSC set. All operations, such as the use of squelch, generating a distress alert, and so on, are all demonstrated while explaining both incoming and outgoing functions. It is a bit like reading an animated book and at the end you should be able to answer the examination questions. This is excellent preparation for the Short Range Course.

Lightmaster VHF DSC



Radio Simulator

COST: £19.95

■ This simulator only allows the choice of two different Simrad radios, but don't let that put you off if you have a different make. The very different logic design of these two radios can help you to appreciate how the generic content of the teaching can be applied to any set, whatever the make or model. Using the menu system on a DSC radio often deters users from using their DSC at all. You can make and receive all the different types of DSC call and, importantly, you can press and hold the DISTRESS ALERT button to see what happens on your set and also what the receiving sets' displays show. The simulator also allows you to set up calls on a remote DSC to see what happens on your own set when these alerts are received. If you need to learn what the controls do, press F1. This is a good way to gain confidence in using the DSC functions of your radio. Practicing with both the tutor and the simulator (bought together as *VHF DSC Tutor Plus* at £29.95) will make your Short Range Radio course easy, or if you've already got the Certificate the simulator will keep you up to speed.

Contacts

Name	Tel No	Email	Website
Ocean Training	01451 860435	tedmiley@aol.com	www.oceantraining.com
Lightmaster	020 8405 8200	sales@lightmaster.co.uk	www.lightmaster.co.uk
TeachMe Interactive	0808 1601006	email@tm-i.co.uk	www.tm-i.co.uk
Longbow Sail training	01726 844400	info@longbow-uk.com	www.longbow-uk.com
RNLI	0845 1226999	info@rnli.org.uk	www.rnli.org.uk