History of Heathkit

1926-2026

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May 18, 2026

Agenda

- Introduction
- Origins: 1926-1940s
- Golden Age: 1950-1970s
- Computer Revolution: 1980s
- Decline: 1990s
- Resurrection: 2010s
- Legacy

Introduction

Most influential electronics kit company of the 20th century.

- Empowered generations of hobbyists, engineers, and students to build radios, test equipment, computers, and even televisions at home.
- Brand became synonymous with hands-on learning and DIY electronics.

Backdrop:

- 1900-1945: Hams build almost all their equipment from scratch
- Kits were non-existent
- Commercial radios available (e.g. Hallicrafters, Collins, etc), but prohibitively expensive

Post World War II: Heathkit changed the landscape

- Kits are happy medium between scratch build and commercial purchase
- Affordable with professional performance + appearance

Origins (1926–1945)

1926 - 1931: Edward Heath introduced a light aircraft kit, the Heath Parasol. Based out of Chicago

- Edward Heath was killed during a test flight in 1931

1931 - 1934: Company acquired by Walter Clinnin ➔International Aircraft Corp.

- Company went bankrupt in 1934

1935 - 1945: Howard Anthony bought bankrupt company at auction

- Restores name Heath Aircraft Company and bases it out Benton Harbor, Michigan
- Company produced small aircraft accessories , including aircraft radios.
- Company did well during war era with military contracts.

Origins (1926–1945)

The Heath Parasol

Under the Heath umbrella—airplanes and hi-fi kits

BY PETER M. BOWERS

Many readers are familiar with the Heath-kits assembled at home by electronics and hi-fi buffs. Few, however, are aware that this firm is a direct descendant of the Heath Airplane Company, Incorporated, which between 1926 and 1933 produced kits for lightplanes. The Heath firm, then based in Chicago, built several different models, but the best known is the one simply identified as the Heath "Parasol."

The company did not start out to manufacture airplanes. Owner Edward Bayard Heath had designed and built his first airplane in 1908 and subsequently managed to stay in aviation. After World War I, he had a successful aircraft surplus and supply business and a flying school, plus he modified an occasional airplane, notably the Heath "Favorite," a 1922 modernization of the war-surplus Curtiss JN-4 "Jenny."

Several events for lightplanes with engines smaller than 80 cubic inches at the 1924 National Air Races encouraged Heath to return to original designs. In 1925, assisted by Clare Lindstedt, he developed two models. The first was the design that was to become the Parasol and the other was an all-out racer. Both were powered with converted Henderson motorcycle engines. These were four-cylinder, in-line, air-cooled models that were then in wide use by the police and were becoming popular with the builders of ultra-light airplanes. There were no small-displacement airplane engines readily available at the time. The 1925 racer was not a big winner but did well enough to attract attention to Heath designs.

Heath's Parasol was a conventional, single-seat design with the pilot seated under the wing and directly on the center of gravity. (The parasol design is a monoplane with the wing held above the fuselage by struts, rather than being attached directly to it.) The fuselage was welded steel tubing with wire bracing, and the tail was a combination of wood and metal. Both were fabric covered. For the benefit of unskilled, amateur builders, the fuselage tubes could be joined by easily bent-to-fit, sheet-metal fittings secured by twopenny nails used as rivets, instead of by welding.

As a production shortcut, the first Parasol used the complete upper wings of a war-surplus Thomas-Morse S-4C Scout, the "Tommy." The thin airfoil of this wing did not produce much lift, and with the engine delivering a bare 23 hp through an inefficient, high-speed propeller, the first Parasol was a marginal performer. Subsequent models used the original wing design with the new Clark-Y airfoil but retained the 25-foot wingspan of the Tommy.

The improved Parasol was a success and encouraged Heath to expand the business to include the manufacture of complete Parasols, the production of Parasol kits and the modification of Henderson engines for aircraft use. He also built propellers. In 1926, the factory-built Parasol, complete, sold for $575, and a complete kit—less engine—was available for $188. The sale of uncertificated designs and do-it-yourself kits was legal then—civil air regulations, aircraft type certification and pilot licenses were not adopted in the United States until 1927.

The Heath conversion of the Henderson engine, later to become the Heath B-4, is worthy of separate mention here because of its importance to Heath's own Parasol line and because it is one of the few non-aircraft engines in its day to be adapted successfully

A pair of early Heath Parasols is shown above. The 1925 prototype, back, has the thin-section Thomas-Morse wing. Subsequent models used the Clark-Y airfoil. The Parasol below is equipped with flat-bottom wooden floats. Until modern ultralights, the Parasol was probably the lightest floatplane ever built.

Post - World War II Era

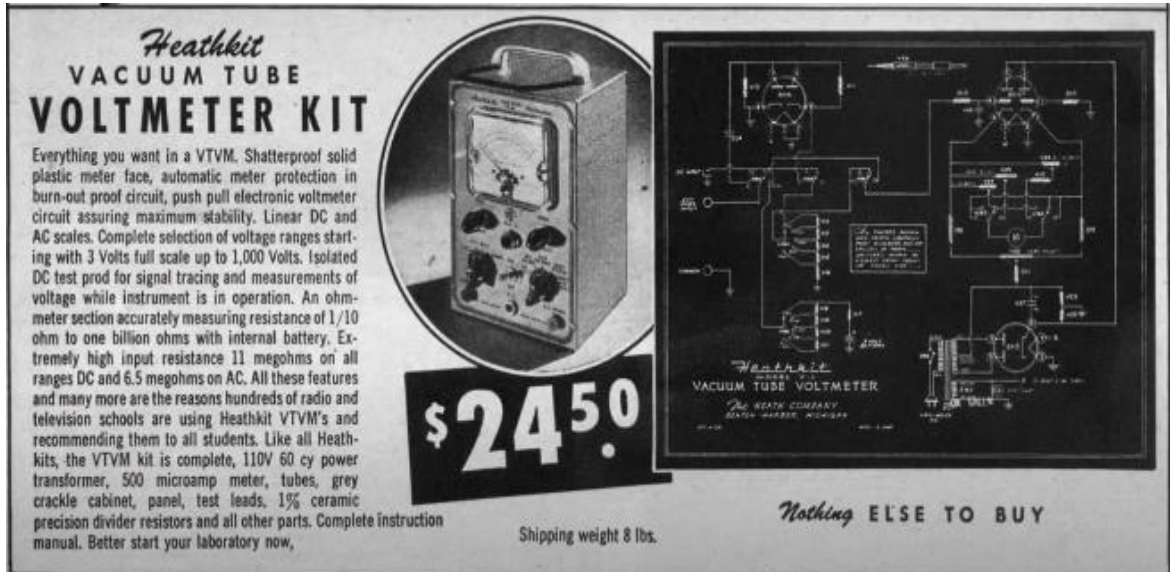
Post-WWII Surplus Opportunity

- Late 1945, aircraft business slumped with end of wartime contracts.
- Anthony buys large stock of war-surplus electronic and aviation components with no game plan in place.
- The foundation for Heath's entry into electronics kits is laid through a serendipitous event

Post - World War II Era

1946: Light Bulb Moment

- Surplus purchase contained large quantity 5BP1 CRTs used in radar installations
- 5BP1 were repurposed for oscilloscope kits
- Heathkit's 1st electronic kit (O-1 oscilloscope) would debut 1947
- First kits: Oscilloscopes, Voltmeters and Signal Generators



Golden Age (1950s–1970s)

In the following decades Heathkit expanded into:

- Amateur radio gear
- Hi-fi audio equipment
- Televisions
- Scientific instruments
- Educational kits

1950's: Heathkit selling millions of kits per year

1954: Anthony killed with five others in plane crash from Pontiac, Michigan to Florida

1955: Daystrom Inc acquired the Heath Company

1955: Heathkit introduces its first amateur radio kits:

- AT1 transmitter and AR3 receiver

Golden Age (1950s–1970s)

1956-1964: Heathkit produces numerous iconic AM/CW amateur radio kits

1962: Schlumberger buys the Daystrom Inc

- DX60 transmitter (crystal control) and HR10 receiver
- Mobile Cheyenne transmitter and Comanche receiver
- Apache transmitter and Mohawk receiver (SSB with external adapter)

Golden Age (1950s–1970s)

- 1965-1973: Heathkit SSB transceivers: HW100 and SB101 are knocks off of Collins KWM2
- Individual transmitter SB401 and receiver SB301 SSB station also available
- Amplifier line included SB200 (2 x 572Bs) and SB220 (2 x 3-500z)

- 1950-70's: Heathkit produced variety of consumer kits in addition to amateur radio and test instruments
- Heathkit catalogs were thick and gave many hours enjoyment day dreaming about future projects

End of an Era

1974: Heathkit introduce solid state transceiver SB104

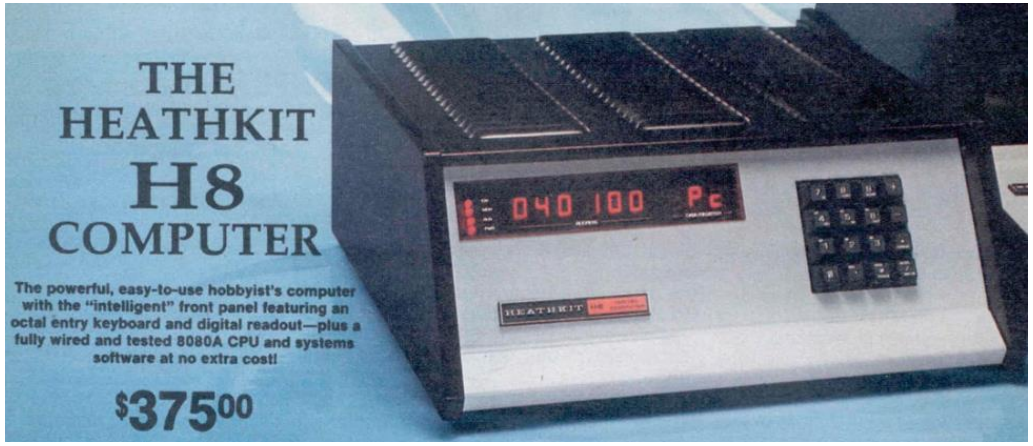
1982: Heath Company sells last amateur radio the SS-9000

- Too complicated as a kit, offered as factory assembled only

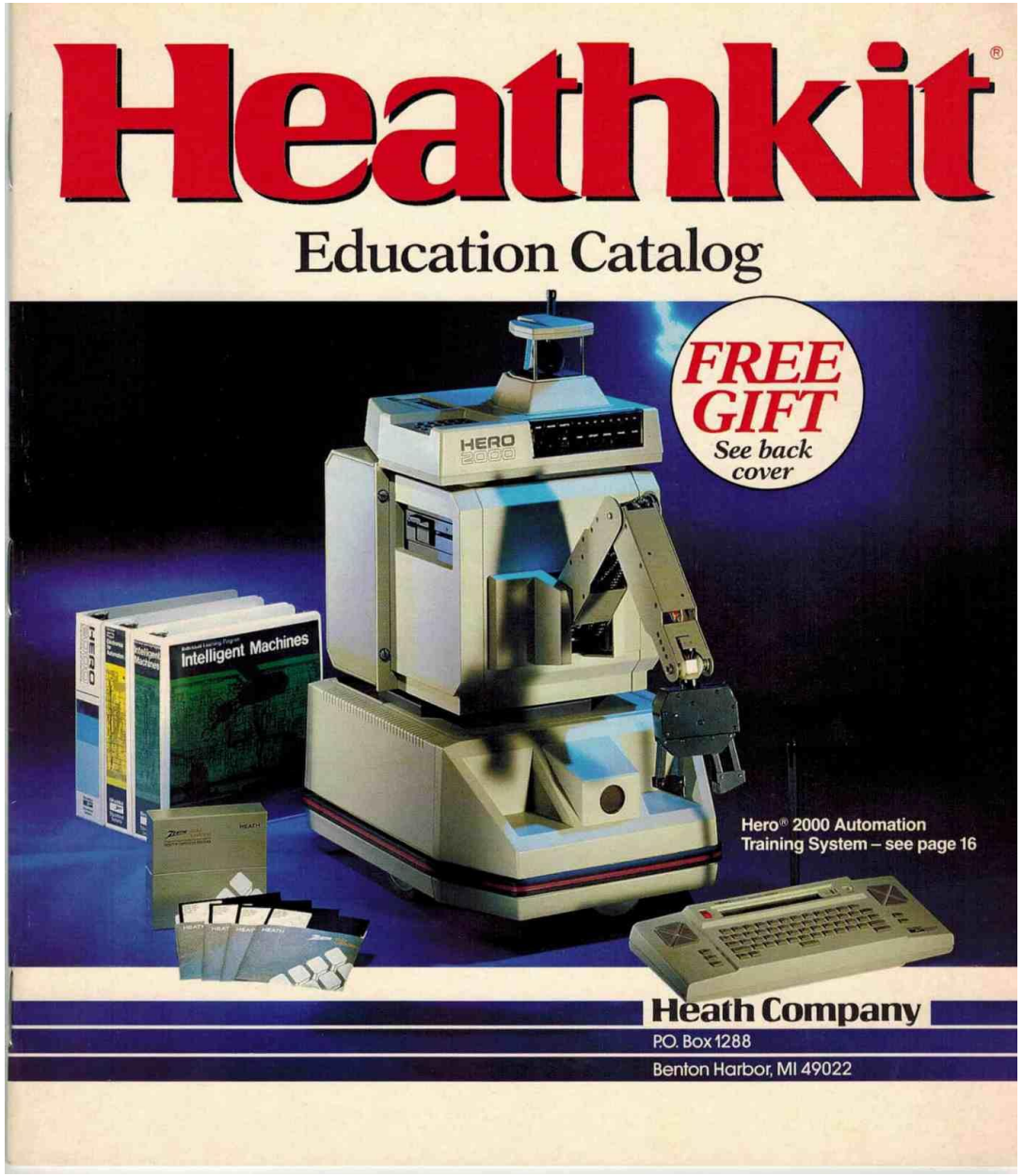
Amateur Radio kit production ceases

Computer Revolution (1970s–1980s)

- 1977: Heathkit starts offering computer kits
- 1979: Heathkit was acquired by **Zenith**, becoming **Zenith Data Systems**.
- Entered personal computer market early with **H8** and **H11**.
- Their most famous computer, the **H89**, became popular in schools and labs.
- The kit business continued for a while, but the rise of cheap, mass-produced electronics made kits less competitive.
- Hero Robot introduced in 1982 for $1500

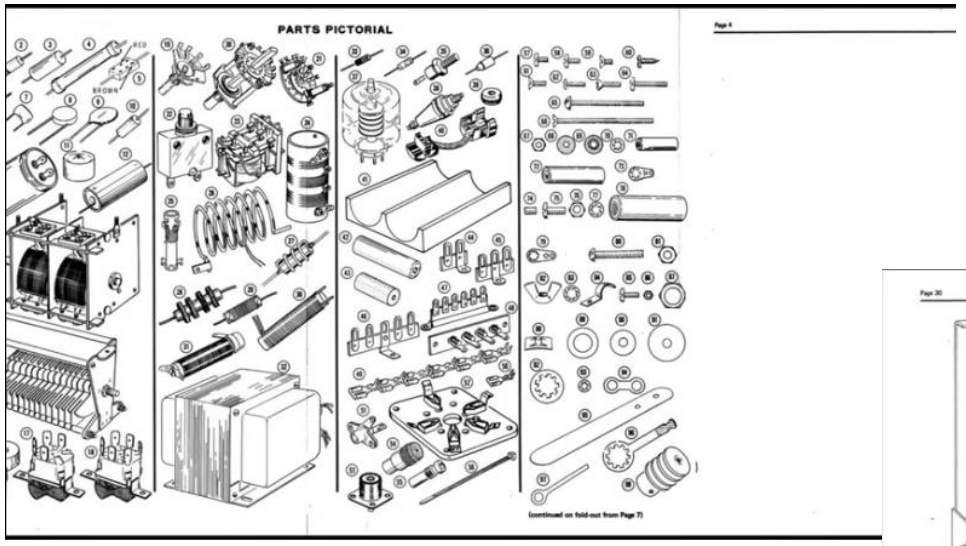


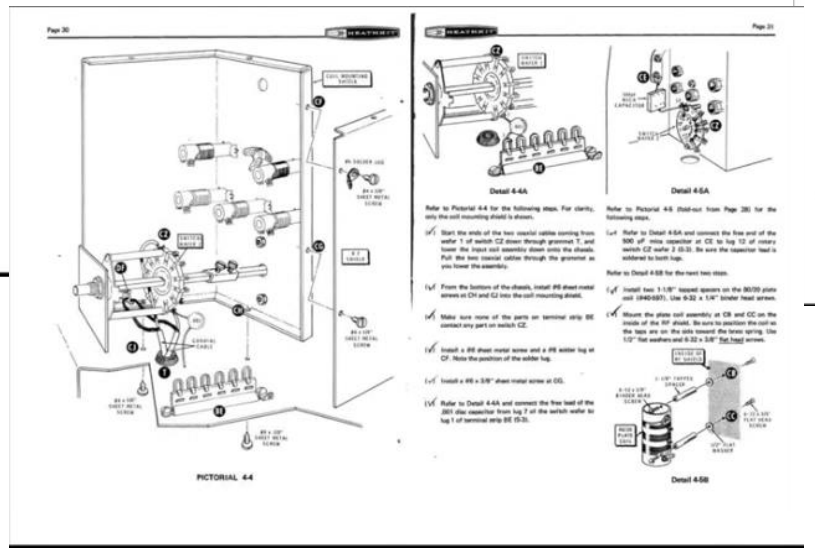
- 1980: Heathkit discontinued most kits and shifted toward educational materials.

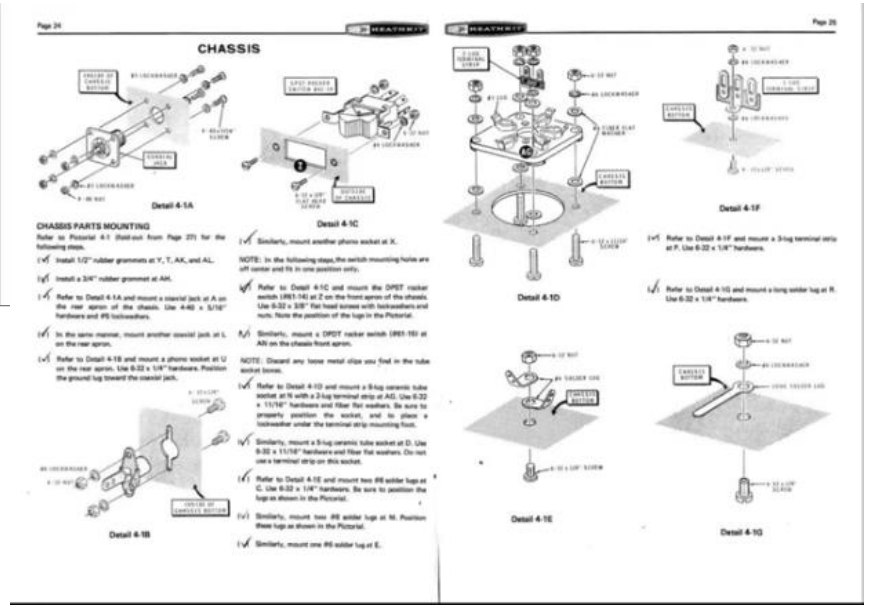


Why Heathkit Was Revolutionary ?

- Kits were **high quality**, **affordable**, and **educational**.
- Manuals were famously detailed, teaching electronics step-by-step.
- Building a Heathkit often cost far less than buying a finished product.







Decline (1990s)

By the early 1990s, the economics of DIY electronics had changed.

1. Integrated circuits and surface-mount components made home assembly harder.
2. Litigious Atmosphere

Example, 1969 Heathkit GR78 assembly/user manual contained absolutely no warnings what-so-ever.

No warnings about the danger of lead solder, high voltages and other hazards.

Today a Heathkit manual would need at least 3 pages of legal disclaimers for everything from getting paper cuts from manual pages to being in the same room with a few inches of lead solder.

The kit era on a large scale effectively ended.

Ownership changes many times during final years

- 1989: Zenith Data Systems sold to Groupe Bull (France)
- 1992: Heathkit as kit producer ends production
- 1995: Bull sold Heathkit to a private investor group called HIG
- 1998: Heath/Zenith name and products sold to DESA International
- 2008: DESA filed bankruptcy
- 2012: Heathkit company exists for few years as **Heathkit Educational Systems**

Finally, company filed for bankruptcy

Modern Revival (2010s–Present)

The Heathkit brand was revived in 2013-2015 with new leadership.

They began releasing boutique kits:

- Small radio kits
- Educational electronics projects
- Retro-inspired products

While no longer a mass-market force, Heathkit remains a beloved name in maker culture.

➔ Entire current Heathkit product on next three slides:

Limited Edition Heathkit GC-1006 Clock with Clear Top Panel

$317.00

A Clear Upgrade.

Shop now

AMSAT CubeSatSim Kit - Heathkit Edition Educator Pack

$1,369.00

Back In the Amateur Radio Game.
Make Space.

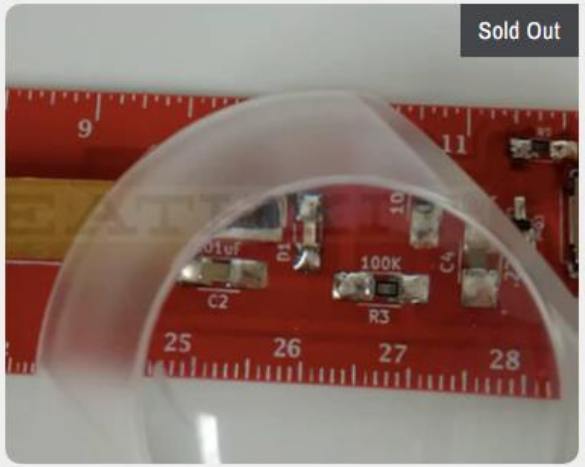
Shop now

AMSAT CubeSatSim Kit - Heathkit Edition Educator Pack

$1,369.00

Davis Wireless Vantage Pro2 Weather Station with Standard Radiation Shield and WeatherLink Console - SKU 6252, 6252M

$1,369.00

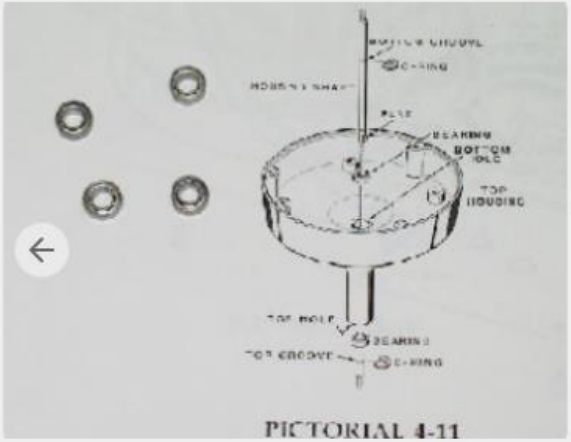


HeathRules™ CPO Active Ruler™: Surface-mount solder skills learning kit - ER-1001 (Code Practice Oscillator)

$83.00

Adjustable DualView™ magnifying loupe for surface-mount soldering- GDP-1800

$17.00



Weather Station Stainless Steel Bearings- 455-643P

$62.00

Weather Station Temperature Sensor - 100-1727-1

$35.00

Weather Station Wind Cup Assembly upgrade kit - 266-939-1

$49.00

Wind Cup assembly upgrade kit for ID-1290/ID-1590 Weather Station anemometer - IDA-1590-1

$42.00

Wind Cup replacement kit for upgraded Weather Station anemometer - 266-939-2

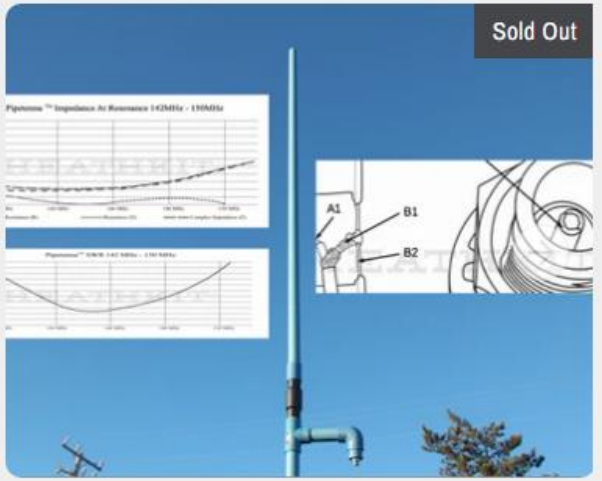
$14.00

Display upgrade for Heathkit AJ-1510 / AJ-1510A FM Stereo Tuner - AJA-1510-1

$69.00

Factory Repairs - recent models

From $56.00



VHF/UHF stealth antenna kit - Amateur Radio 2m/440 - AN-P2L Pipetenna™

$207.00

Upgrade Dial Kit for classic HG-10 / HG-10B VFO - 464-19

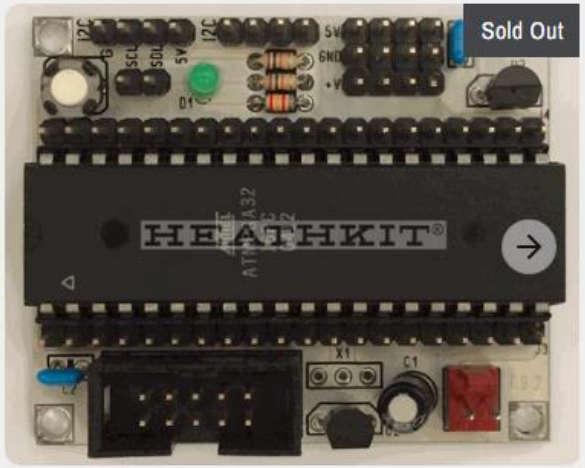
$28.00

THD Improvement kit for IG-18 series audio generator test equipment (meter buffer board ONLY) - IGA-18-2

$35.00

THD Improvement kit for IG-18 series audio generator test equipment (complete kit) - IGA-18-1

$42.00



Introductory microcomputer/microcontroller experimenter kit - Heathkit Educational Systems® EX-1001

$69.00

Impressions of Current Heathkit

Current Heathkit is different company than original company. New owners bought iconic trademark looking for quick cash.

- No focused product lines; random collection of kits and parts
- No catalog with hundreds items, just random items on website
- New kits are very expensive
- Many of their kits sold out perpetually.
- Do not see this phase of the company lasting long.

Suggestions for a successful Heathkit:

1.Reboot classic kits using old and modern technology

- HW8 and HW9 QRP transceivers (new technology; e.g. SDR, uC)
- HW101 and SB101 transceiver (new technology)
- Linear amplifiers (SB200, SB200) Tube and solid-state versions
- Audio amplifiers: Tube and Class D solid state versions
- Stereo tuners: Incorporating internet streaming
- Digital design and experimenter kits

Suggestions for a successful Heathkit:

2. Focus on new areas with specific product lines

- Affordable ham radio kits like QRP Labs and QRP Guys
- Leverage Arduino / Raspberry Pi into STEM products for schools:

Examples

- Smart Plant Health Monitor
- Air Quality Monitor
- Intelligent Energy Monitoring System
- AI Security Surveillance System
- AI-Powered Doorbell
- Smart Mirror
- Autonomous Delivery Robot
- Robot with AI vision
- AI Pet Companion Robot
- Portable Cybersecurity Toolkit

Legacy

- Heathkit shaped the DIY electronics movement.
- Its manuals are still admired for their clarity and educational value.
- The company inspired:
  - Amateur radio operators
  - Engineers
  - Computer pioneers
  - Makers and hobbyists worldwide
- Heathkit's influence lives on in today's maker movement, Arduino culture, and STEM education
- The kits became a rite of passage for electronics enthusiasts.
- Heathkit is no longer amateur radio or computer kit powerhouse. Others have filled void.
  - Amateur radio kits at affordable prices are sold by QRPLabs and QRPGuys
  - Entry level experimenter computers at affordable prices sold by Arduino and Raspberry Pi

100 years of Heathkit

- 1926-1934: **Aircraft kits**
  - 1931: Edward Heath dies in aircraft accident
  - 1931: Walter Clinnin buys Heath Aircraft Company
- 1935-1945: **Avionics**
  - 1935: Howard Anthony buys Heath Aircraft Company
- 1945-1950: **Test Equipment**
- 1950-1975: **Consumer products (TV, HiFi, Musical, etc) and Amateur Radio**
  - 1954: Howard Anthony dies in aircraft accident
  - 1955: Daystrom buys Heathkit
  - 1962: Schlumberger buys Heathkit
- 1976-1983: **Computers**
  - 1979: Heathkit was acquired by Zenith
- 1984-2012: **Educational**
  - 1989: Zenith Data Systems sold to Groupe Bull (France)
  - 1995: Bull sold Heathkit to a private investor group called HIG
  - 1998: Heath/Zenith name and products sold to DESA International
  - 2008: DESA files for bankruptcy
  - 2012: Heathkit exists for few years as Heathkit Educational Systems and finally files for bankruptcy
- 2013-present: **Boutique kits**
  - 2013: Restructured under new ownership
  - 2023: Bought by Kirkwall

Questions ?