86 A grid dip oscillator

Introduction

When an inductor and a capacitor are connected, whether in series or parallel, they form a circuit with a natural (or *resonant*) frequency. The circuit stores energy, and this energy is being constantly shifted from the inductor to the capacitor and back again.

The dip oscillator is a simple instrument used to measure the resonant frequency of a tuned circuit without having to make any direct connection to the circuit. The circuit is more commonly known as the *grid dip oscillator* (GDO), from the days when the active device in the circuit was a valve. The FET or Field-Effect Transistor operates in a way which is very similar to that of the valve, so it is not quite a misnomer to call this instrument a grid dip oscillator, too.

The circuit

The GDO uses a calibrated, tunable FET oscillator in the circuit of **Figure 1**. It has a frequency range of 1.6 to 35.2 MHz in four ranges using a set of plug-in coils, shown in **Figure 2**. When the oscillator coil, L1, is placed near an external resonant circuit, some of its RF energy is coupled into the external circuit. A gain in energy of the external circuit must mean a loss of energy in the GDO circuit, resulting in a change of current through TR1, which is measured by the meter, M1.

The current through TR1 is of the order of 5 to 8 mA, but the change of current may be only a few microamps. To measure a very small

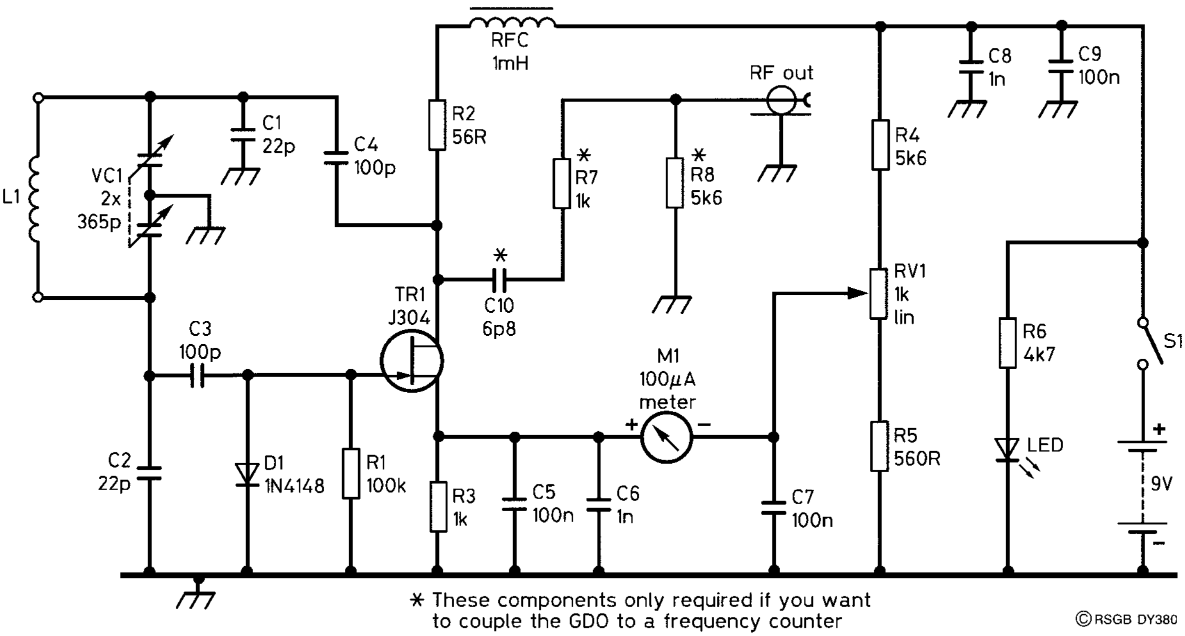

Figure 1 Circuit of an FET GDO. The coils are wound on DIN speater plugs, which provide both a plug-in base and a coil former

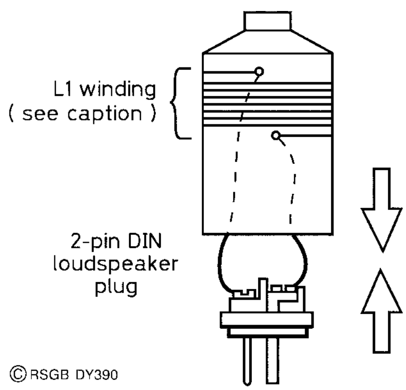

Figure 2 Details of coil construction:
Range 1: 1.6–4.0 MHz 55 turns of 30 SWG
Range 2: 3.3–7.9 MHz 27 turns of 30 SWG
Range 3: 6.3–4.0 MHz 14 turns of 26 SWG
Range 4: 11.9–4.0 MHz 7 turns of 24 SWG.

change superimposed on a much larger standing current, the method of *offset* can be used.

One connection to the meter goes to the source of the FET, while the other goes to a variable offset voltage set by VR1. M1 has a full-scale deflection (FSD) of 100 µA. If the current through TR1 changes, the voltage across R3 changes. When there is no resonance, the voltage at the wiper of VR1 is set to be very slightly greater than that across R3, and there is a 75% FSD meter deflection. When the voltage across R3 decreases very slightly, due to external circuit resonance, a significant 'dip' in the meter deflection is produced, hence the name of the instrument.

The circuit is not difficult to make on standard matrix board. Provided you can follow a circuit and translate it into a good component layout, then this project is probably only an evening's work.

The most important part of the GDO is the tuning capacitor and its associated frequency-calibrated dial. New, air-spaced tuning capacitors can cost you up to £20, so it is worth delving around in junk boxes, or scouring the tables at a local boot sale or rally. The tuning capacitor from an old transistor radio should be perfect. It may even have a slow-motion drive and a dial which can be remarked for the project.

Choose a coil plug and socket arrangement that is practical. Think about crystal holders or phono plugs and sockets. The prototype shown in Figure 1 and Figure 2 used 2-pin DIN plugs, with the coil wound on the outside of the plastic plug cover. Figure 2 shows the coil construction and the winding details.

If you use a variable capacitor, VC1, with a value different from that shown in the parts list, then the frequency ranges will be different. This does not matter, as it will be taken into account during calibration.

Position VC1 so that the dial will be easy to see and to operate, while locating the coil socket as close to it as possible. **Figure 3** shows the traditional layout of the GDO.

Calibration

Because the GDO also radiates a very small amount of energy, a general coverage receiver can be used to calibrate the dial. Don't try to aim for great accuracy and clutter the dial with marks and figures! If you include C10, R7 and R8 in your circuit, you can connect a frequency counter directly to the GDO and leave it in circuit all the time.

The GDO in use

Always try to place the external tuned circuit with its coil coaxial with the plug-in coil, as shown in Figs 1 and 3. If the coils are at right angles, the GDO may not produce any resonance. Set the offset control to give about 75% FSD and slowly tune L1 through its whole range. If no dip occurs, you may have the wrong coil plugged in. When you eventually find a dip, move the external coil further away until only a minute dip is seen. You may have to retune the dip meter as you do this, but it gives a much more accurate reading of frequency.

Remember that you cannot 'dip' a coil by itself – there must always be a capacitor present.

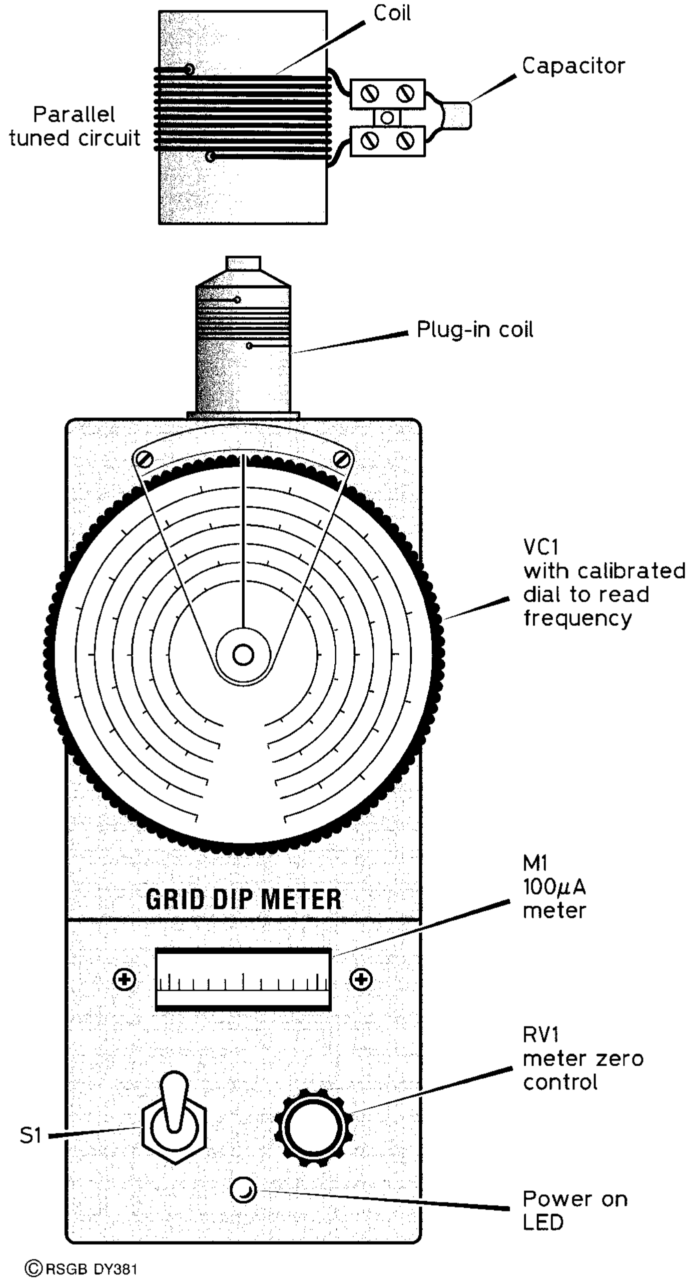

Figure 3 Layout of a typical GDO. The dial, meter and the location of the coil to the circuit under test can all be viewed at the same time. It is shown measuring resonance of a tuned circuit

Aerial resonance

Figure 4 shows how to check the resonance of a dipole aerial. Disconnect the coax feed at the aerial and place a short piece of wire, terminated with crocodile clips, across the centre insulator to short together the two ends of the aerial. By placing the GDO close to the shorting link, a dip should be seen on the meter while VC1 is turned. Alternatively, a loop in the element can be made around the coil, as in Figure 4, or the shorting link can be made long enough to loop over the coil. The latter method does not require tampering with the mounting and tensioning of the dipole wires.

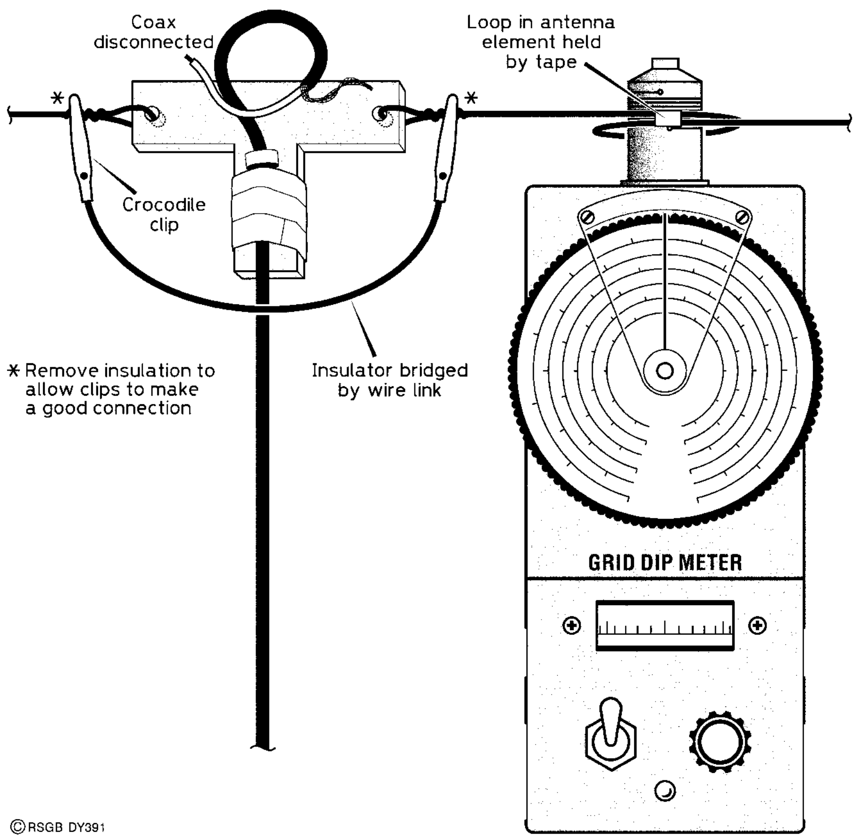

Figure 4 A wire antenna element can be looped into a single turn coil for increased coupling to the GDO

Parts list

Resistors: all 0.25 W, 5% tolerance

R1	100 000 ohms (100 kΩ)
R2	56 ohms (56 Ω)
R3	1000 ohms (1 kΩ)
R4	5600 ohms (5.6 kΩ)
R5	560 ohms (560 Ω)
R6	4700 ohms (4.7 kΩ)
R7	1000 ohms (1 kΩ)
R8	5600 ohms (5.6 kΩ)
VR1	1000 (1 kΩ) linear

Capacitors

C1, C2	22 pF
C3, C4	100 pF
C5, C7, C9	100 nF (0.1 μF)
C6, C8	1 nF (1000 pF)
C10	6.8 pF
VC1	2 × 365 pF

Semiconductors

TR1	J304 or similar
D1	1N4148
LED	

Additional items

L1	See Figure 2
RFC	1 mH
S1	SPST
M1	100 μA

Source

Components are available from Maplin.