

## A History of the BSS Web Site

### History

- BSS's first foray into using the Internet had come about by using the good offices of Piers Nicholson's Sundials on the Internet (SOTI) website which he had started in 1996. The Society had mentions there (as it still does) but at that time BSS made an annual payment to Piers in respect of the value of this. As a result his web page contained the advertisement 'Sponsored by the British Sundial Society'. This ad is still there incidentally even though BSS no longer makes any payment to SOTI.
- Over time it became clear that BSS's Internet presence wasn't keeping pace with others. NASS had already established its own dedicated web site and Piers hadn't the time to devote to keeping our mention on his site up to date with all our needed announcements etc. There was no one on the BSS Council responsible for web content and there were aspects that we would like to have mentioned that could not be accommodated by the SOTI sponsored page format. There was no way for example, to have temporary content that would keep pace with Society events, being put up in advance of (say) a conference and taken down after it.
- BSS therefore decided to go its own way and in line with increasing use of a dedicated website it first reduced its subscription to SOTI and later terminated it. The BSS owned website was implemented by Ian Wootton a little after he had passed the Register to Patrick Powers in 1997 and had 'nothing to do!'. Ian looked carefully at available domain names and noting that SOTI had taken *sundials.co.uk* and NASS had taken *sundials.org*, in 1999 he selected *sundialsoc.co.uk*. At that time the best search engine was AltaVista and this had some trouble with marrying up domains with company names and it was thought that we needed to take out other names to help with this and also (erroneously as it turned out) to prevent others' use of similar domain names. In 2002 the secretary, Doug Bateman, therefore took out the domains *britishsundialsociety.org.uk* and *sundialsoc.org.uk*. BSS retains these names to this day. These last two were never publicised on literature and have only been used for development of a new website. At other times they are set to link to the main web page so anyone linking to them gets sent to the main BSS website.
- Ian only wished to be involved in the start up of the website and so, soon after it was 'up' on the web, the day to day running of it was taken over by our second webmaster, Peter Scott whose own business operated a motor parts catalogue service that used HTML. He only said he would do it for something like two years and he did a good job though inevitably for the time, he used his own proprietary web editing facilities. After the two years came and went (!) Chris Lusby Taylor (probably around 2004) offered to take on the role. Chris was presented with some difficulty in not having an integrated editor. Now this was before the society had realised the importance of imposing an IT software policy and since Chris did not use Microsoft software on his PC let alone the Microsoft FrontPage web package and because Open Office and Open software generally wasn't around then he found it necessary to use a variety of free web editors that were available to all from the Internet. Not surprisingly this left the society with what is called in the industry a 'knife and forked' solution which could not be transferred to any modern web editor which by then were in much evidence and even beginning to use Cascading Style Sheets (CSS) for easy maintenance and design.
- In 2007 Patrick Powers was involved in asking BSS Member Richard Mallett to design a completely new website from scratch. Richard, Chris and he had several meetings at Patrick's house and it was agreed

that all new development would be done on the *sundialsociety.org.uk* domain using the then new Microsoft package 'Expression Web' which, unlike 'FrontPage' and indeed many other packages of the time, generated code which was compliant with the latest standards.

- This separate BSS domain was used so that the current one could be maintained by Chris without it affecting Richard. A small BSS sub-committee of other trustees was duly set up to advise on the appearance of the new site which was to be blue based rather than use the previous green.
- Richard did this work completely free of charge to the Society and because he had to learn Expression Web, it took longer than might otherwise have been the case. He also had to get around the fact that in its early versions and quite unlike FrontPage, Expression Web did not handle photogallery images – an external package had to be used and the outputs 'married'. A further problem was the near impossible task of transferring the Glossary and making it compliant. The Glossary had been developed by NASS for their web site using John Davis's data and BSS had a licence for its use. In the event it was at first left out and later inserted as a PDF. The new website went live during late 2009/early2010.
- Within a short time of Richard's site going live it quickly assumed a high position in world rankings. The BSS site continued to be the world's highest ranked sundial society web site until a further change was started in 2012 by a later Council.
- Just as before, the 2010 website was still being irregularly maintained. By far the greatest problem was the paucity and irregularity of updated information emanating from those Council members and Specialists having responsibility for page content.
- Patrick Powers by then had just taken over as conference organiser (he was working on the Exeter Conference) and his ideas for a special conference web page were fully endorsed by the Council. However this required a very fast page update – often daily. His offer to maintain a separate web page for the society conferences was accepted. It was agreed that this should provide booking, travel and other information before the conference, details of the forthcoming papers and dial tour during it and an analysis of the conference and AGM afterwards. It would have been useful to use one of the spare BSS domains for this special conference webpage but because his own site did not use Expression Web this would have damaged the compliance of the new website. Patrick had already set aside some pages of his own website to trial new Council initiatives, storage of minutes and policies and even ideas for internet council voting etc and it was agreed that he should similarly develop his conference pages on his own website as another set of orphaned pages (that is ones only accessible from a specific link, e.g. from the BSS site) which would use the same colour scheme and logos as the BSS one so as to appear seamless with it.
- This worked well. It allowed all information to be very current and it provided a means whereby members who couldn't get to the conference could see the programme and even abstracts of the forthcoming papers and obtain an early summary of how things went and the outcome of it. It was felt that this might encourage subsequent attendance from those who previously had not done so. This indeed proved to be the case until the conference page concept was dropped for the Edinburgh meeting, whereupon attendances fell.

- In the openness of the time when Chris Daniel was the Chairman, all conference information came to be mentioned on the conference web page, including the post conference and post AGM discussions, delegate comments and an on line analysis of the delegate questionnaires. One of these was the ensuing discussion after the Cheltenham conference over the extraordinarily faulted analysis of the then new Council's membership consultation.
- Faced with what was a near complete demolition of the Council's document by Graham Aldred's exacting analysis, the Council was keen to salvage something from it by announcing that the only real outcome of the questionnaire had been that the website was in some need of improvement.
- Some six months earlier, in 2011, Patrick Powers (see Appendix) had added to Jackie Jones's earlier suggestions for further website enhancement by the suggestion of provision of a Content Management System whereby individual Trustees could change their parts of the web site without the need for involvement of the webmaster. This now became 'urgent'. Richard indicated that he had no prior experience with this technology (indeed as had no one in the Society then) and there was a change of webmaster from Richard to Dariusz Oczki with Richard remaining as the overall web consultant.
- Instead of an apology or even any correcting action from the Council about the faulted questionnaire, it decided that embarrassing Council errors should not be disclosed to the membership! The Chairman and Secretary then peremptorily decided that it was not the job of the conference organiser to publish such things – though of course the Council had not taken the trouble to ask about the history and earlier Council approval of just such summaries! When in June 2012 it was inconveniently pointed out that BSS as a charity should not be in the business of hiding the truth from the membership, the link to the special conference page from the BSS site was suddenly broken and, without discussion or permission, its copyrighted content was copied to the BSS website and then actually altered there so as to remove all critical content. The membership were not informed of this.
- This of course was a serious issue. A legal *Cease and Desist Order* had to be served on the Society to remedy it. This threatened proceedings under both English and American law since the material in question was hosted on American servers based in America. The material was immediately removed and Bill Visick subsequently became the Society's webmaster. The membership was denied a full summary of the Cheltenham conference on the BSS site (though it was maintained on the SunInfo site) as a result of this.
- It appears that little provision has since been made to maintain the 2010 web site whilst the 'new' one is being developed. As of a year later – in mid 2013 - the BSS website is desperately out of date in many sectors and its new reincarnation is still awaited. Sadly, the high world rating of the BSS website as seen in Richard's time has fallen.

## **APPENDIX**

### **Suggestions made in October 2011 to the Council for Website Modification and Improvement**

#### **Introduction**

Jackie Jones has already circulated her list of suggestions for further improvement. All of them are to be recommended for implementation. The Google translate facility is most important but as Jackie points out it doesn't have to be at the top of the page.

#### **Further suggestions**

Above all we need to ensure that we do nothing that might cause us to be propelled into using external services without a serious study of the consequences. Using any external services for web design or for simple maintenance is hugely expensive and always results in the use of proprietary software which in turn eventually locks us into that supplier. We have been through this once and must not rashly go through it again. We should retain in house control as far as possible for as long as possible.

I believe the following additional ideas should be considered in any review.

1. We should set up a password protected Members area where Society related material like the Miscellany, Constitution, Newsletters, past editions of The Recorder, notifications to Members, society questionnaires and their results, post conference follow up information and maybe even some back issues of older Bulletins can be available to Members without being accessible by the public. This will alert every viewer of the site to the fact that there are 'benefits' to membership and properly set up, this will also permit much improved communication within the Society.
2. The part of the website that is open to public view should be recast with the main purpose of attracting new members. This especially applies to that part of the home (or index) page that, in the parlance of these things, is "above the fold". We need to make the layout attractive and not as a tabular listing as now. We need to devise a whole new way of encouraging people to join and this means that we need to review how much information we give away freely and how much we give away only to Members. This will need careful balancing since our need to meet the CC's Public Benefit requirement must not be forgotten.
3. I personally would prefer to see the page template changed so that colour was maintained toward the edges with the main page background set to white. I think that looks 'cleaner' and the eye is drawn into such an area. However this may not be how others see it.
4. I think there might be a case for a few (but only a few) videos on the site. These can easily be implemented via YouTube links or they can be embodied within the site.
5. We should add a site map and a search facility to make it easier for those visiting the site to locate areas that they may know are (or might be) there.
6. A mechanism needs to be found whereby those Trustees responsible for areas of the site where information changes on a regular basis can, after instruction and within certain limitations of layout, maintain their own pages. This is often called a Content Management System and there are many such available. Joomla is an open source version that might suffice. It is used by nearly 3% of the Internet and is compatible with the cPanel and Apache software used by our web site hosting company.
7. All Trustees with responsibility for page content must be encouraged to keep their pages up to date. Richard cannot be expected to do that.

8. A special facility will be needed if the new Conference Organiser wants to be able to operate his own web page such as that which we have used for Exeter, Wyboston and Cheltenham. These pages need daily update on occasion and special access is needed. For these I have used a page on my own website linked from the Conference page of the BSS site but, as from 2012 a different way will be needed. I suggest an orphaned page in one of our other domains or perhaps a subdomain might be used along with a Content Management System or separate upload facilities.

9. Now that the system of 'Generic Addressing' (that is the use of email addresses of the form conferences@sundialsoc.org.uk or secretary@sundialsoc.org.uk etc) has been in safe use for three years for conference communication, we should re-implement it society wide. These addresses allow a permanent email address even as Trustees change and they hide personal addresses from spammers. An earlier perceived problem with it was not a consequence of the system per-se and is now no longer a problem.

10. We should implement a 'Contact Us' web mail facility that goes to the Secretary's email. However we should do it using code that sends a copy of the message back to the sender. The Secretary's address on our contacts page should be that of the RAS and not the Editor. The current system is unprofessional and conveys the impression that the Editor takes all queries.

11. We need to add reciprocal links to our newly created Facebook page since this will aid publicity. We might also consider Twitter and Google+ too. Twitter may however require rather too much management. If we do permit any of these to solicit comments then those comments should not be reflected in the publicly visible area since it will be almost impossible to monitor misuse.

12. As Jackie has already suggested, we should group the page links into a deeper menu system so that visitors are encouraged to explore the site.

13. We should reconsider the use of a floating menu on the left hand side. This is a menu which always stays visible as a visitor peruses a long page so making it unnecessary to go back up to see something else. Some people don't like this or have reservations. I was to be so classed at one time. However after seeing some imaginative recent uses I think it is worth reconsidering.

14. We should implement PayPal purchasing (which also permits the use of all major credit cards) for membership fees, books, conference bookings and any other web selling we may use.

15. As all will know, BSS Member Peter Ransom has almost single-handedly brought sundials into the Mathematics National Curriculum. It is surprising and disappointing that on the BSS site there is no mention of this or even a link to his facilities etc. I think we should make the most of any initiative that brings dialling to youngsters. Peter is very busy and almost certainly will not want to sit on the Council again but I am sure that he would welcome a dialogue on how both of us might benefit from some collaborative work. This would be especially valuable if what we upload could be interactive. If anything can bring in more members in the future it has to be this. Perhaps we could have a young members programme? Maybe we should upload Peter's origami sundial?

16. Now that deposits are being made we should shortly be alerting the public, as well as our Members, to the use of the Borthwick Archive in York. There should be one or two pages of our website devoted to the importance of this, to how the material is archived and how it can be accessed by the public. Publicity of this important agreement (and the more so if the FDR also comes to be accepted by them) will much enhance our status as an academic society and might even attract membership as a consequence.

I am sure that there are very many other aspects that might be considered but the above must serve for now.

P Powers 16.10.11