

# The building of a website – a personal perspective

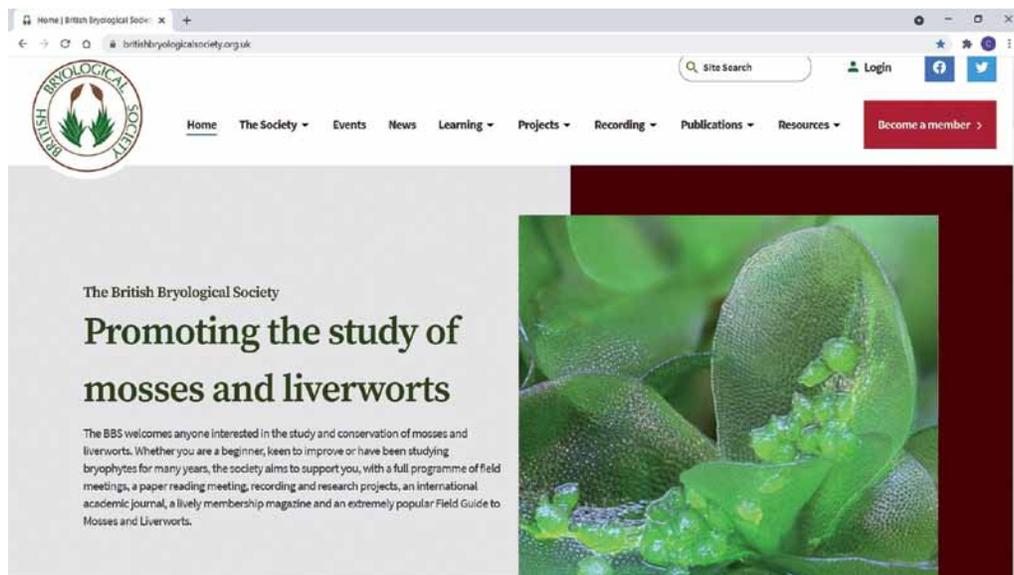
**Claire Halpin** tells the story behind the Society's splendid new website

I first got involved with the BBS website back in 2018. Like many members I was frustrated by the existing website, which at the time was rarely updated, didn't work properly on smartphones and tablets, and was very difficult to navigate to find what you were looking for. It held an incredible amount of information, but had just become too unwieldy and difficult to maintain. This was hardly surprising as it was launched in June 2003 (Newton, 2003). According to Wikipedia, the average life of a website nowadays is estimated at 2.66 years!

Well, maybe that is true of a commercial website. But you get the idea. Technology moves on at an ever-increasing rate and websites quickly become out of date. The old website had managed to cope for a good 15 years by the time I started grumbling, so I think Jonathan and Edward Sleath, who designed and developed it, should be justifiably proud of their achievement.

Anyway, I had some conversations with Peter Martin when we were out bryologising. He was a Council member and knew something of what was going on. It transpired that there were plans

▽ A screen shot of the opening page of the new look British Bryological Society website.



afoot to develop a new website. A subgroup had been set up at one point to discuss requirements but, for one reason or another, early attempts to get the project off the ground had stalled. The sole website editor at the time – Ambrose Baker – was now struggling to find time to keep the existing website up to date, let alone think about a new one. These conversations ended up with me offering to help with updating the existing site.

### Project kick-off

Fast forward a few months, and the existing website was relatively up to date. But there had still been little progress on a new website. At the autumn 2018 meeting (which neither Ambrose or I attended) Sharon Pilkington offered to try to get things moving. One of the first things she did was to ask me if I would mind getting involved, provided Ambrose agreed. It had been noticed that I had more time on my hands. I agreed, as did Ambrose – probably relieved at the thought of sharing the responsibility and work needed.

Ambrose, Sharon and I put our heads together and came up with a plan of action: Ambrose volunteered to find some possible website developers, while I made a start on documenting requirements so that we could obtain some estimates for discussion at the next Council meeting. Well, at least I tried to. Although a new website had been talked about for at least two years, with requests for input including one to all members in *Field Bryology* in 2017, there didn't seem to have been any real decisions about what it should do and how it should look.

The few bits of information I could glean amounted to the following:

1. We needed a members' area
2. It needed to work on tablets and smartphones
3. The existing website had an awful lot of useful

stuff on it and we didn't want to lose any of this

4. It should be developed using WordPress because that's a popular platform and it will be easier for non-technical people to maintain it in the future.

One problem I had was that I'd never attended a BBS meeting other than local group meetings. I didn't know anyone, or even know who was who. As far as working out what was needed, I was in trouble. Not only did I not know my 'end user', but I didn't even know who to talk to.

So, I started out by getting to know the old website. I discovered things I'd never seen and probably only a handful of people knew about. I found pages that weren't even accessible via the website navigation, you had to know the URL to get to them. It later transpired that many Regional Recorders didn't even know that the Vice-county pages existed! I listed all the pages, their content, and whether I thought the information was still relevant, needed updating, etc.

The three of us worked on a more logical structure for the new website. We had inconclusive discussions about whether to put the Bequest Fund details under The Society, or Resources; where exactly do the BBS Library details belong; should we include a top level Conservation menu given that BBS hasn't really been directly involved in conservation for some time (it is indirectly involved, in collaboration with organisations such as Plantlife and Alliance for Scotland's Rainforest); how on earth can we organise the wealth of useful information currently found under Resources, or maybe Recording, or various other places. This debate was to continue for much of the life of the project.

In the absence of further input from other BBS members, I put my imagination to work and envisaged how different kinds of people

(amateur bryologists like myself, Regional Recorders, research scientists and interested members of public) might use the website. This gave rise to the new ‘Some common bryophytes’ page and sowed the seed of an idea for a section with pages of images for each species.

I then pulled everything together into a Requirements document which we circulated to Council members and other interested members for feedback. Once agreed, we sent it to the potential web developers that Ambroise had identified. For the moment, we were just looking for ball-park figures to take to Council. By the end of April 2019, based on the figures we received, we had increased our agreed budget from £3000 to a maximum of £10,000 – and there was no reason for further delay.

### **Deciding on a developer**

But delay we did, or should I say procrastinate. Sharon was now too busy to help, and Ambroise and I had no idea how to proceed with finding the best web developer and then negotiating a contract with them. So, I spent a good deal of time updating the content within the old website (knowing that this had to be done sometime), and Ambroise busied himself with work and family. So passed the summer, and we had embarrassingly little progress to report at the Autumn Council meeting, a year after we had kicked off the project.

Fortunately, at the 2019 AGM we were able to get advice on the best way forward from more business-savvy members, Nick Law amongst others. With their help, we got some momentum back, and soon after Christmas we had obtained more detailed and firm estimates from six developers. Again, with some feedback from more experienced members, we narrowed these down to two companies that we both felt could deliver a good website and would be

there to support us in the longer term. To help us choose (and actually on the recommendation of one of the candidates), we decided to meet up with both in person. Luckily, we (Ambroise and I) were able to travel and meet with both less than a week before the whole country was locked down because of Covid-19! We unanimously agreed that Castlegate IT in York was our preferred developer, although they were slightly over our already-increased budget. It took a little bit of work and justification to persuade Council members around to our way of thinking. However, we did manage to talk everyone around, and were given the go ahead at the Spring 2020 meeting.

### **Full steam ahead (or, let’s not let a little thing like lockdown stop us)**

Work with Castlegate started in earnest before the end of April 2020, via Zoom of course. Suffice it to say, they made the whole process very straightforward and enjoyable. They spent time getting to know us, and what we thought we wanted from the website. Before our first meeting, their lead designer had discovered some of Des Callaghan’s photos on the internet and was very happy to be told we had permission to use them! They produced template designs early on, which from the outset were almost spot on. They talked through the content organisation with us and we discussed the functionality that the website needed to provide: the members’ area, events and meeting administration. Their experience with designing other websites meant that they had alternative approaches to things which we would never have thought of. Where we had requested a page with links to the Field Guide species accounts, and another page with links to Atlas pages, they suggested one hub with a page per species including both links. Hence my germ of an idea for species pages with photos



△ A key role of the website is to keep members informed of news and events.

became reality from day one.

As we progressed through each phase of development, we signed off the previous phase: design, functional specification, development, testing. It was a very collaborative, iterative process – quite different to the rigid, inflexible development cycles I had been used to. It took a little longer than estimated, but given the disruption of Covid-19 to everyone's lives, this was hardly surprising.

Castlegate delivered the working website to us in the middle of December 2020. And then our work began in earnest. To clarify: Castlegate's job was to provide a server with WordPress installed on it, a number of custom-built template pages and a membership database. Our main task was to create pages based on these templates and add text and images. We had approximately 300 pages to transfer from our old website to the new one. It wasn't really feasible to automate this transfer as we needed to update and re-work the text and images to fit our new templates.

Fortunately, Christmas 2020 was cancelled in Wales, and so I had some unexpected free time. In fact, Covid-19 and the new website were remarkably good for one another and for my sanity. If it hadn't been for Covid-19, I would have been champing at the bit to get away from the website and do other things. And if it hadn't been for the website, I might have become a daytime TV addict.

Some long 12-hour days followed. Thankfully the BBS had generously made an additional £3000 available to help with the content editing and transfer, and we were fortunate that Sharon was able to help out again. She created several of the new Species pages amongst others, contributed many photos – and it has to be said she put in far more hours than she was paid for. Ambroise helped when he could, but whereas Covid-19 gave me more free time, home-schooling and having to prepare and teach students online took up most of his time.

By mid-February, most of the work was

done and it was time to set a launch date. Some last-minute tweaks, and on 8 March 2021 we switched over to the new website and crossed our fingers. It wasn't too nerve-wracking. The Taylor & Francis link didn't work straight away – but people were used to that being glitchy, so were fairly forgiving. Other than this, we received a fair amount of positive feedback and very few complaints – none really serious – and happily, continue to do so.

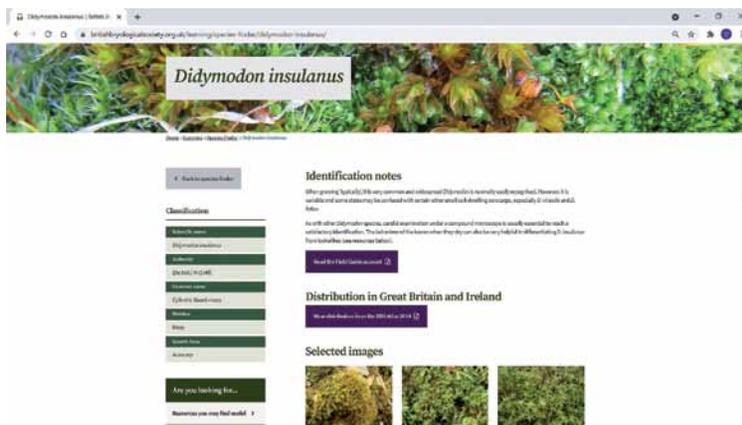
### Now what?

So, what of the future? One of the aims of a new website should always be to provide scope for growth. Websites aren't like books, where you can only really afford to produce a new edition every few years. A website can and should, I believe, be constantly added to and improved.

One of the main areas where I believe the website can really make a difference is in providing a library of reasonable quality, named and annotated images of species and key characters used in identification. Mark Lawley in his article 'Pregnancy and post-partum' (2011) suggests that perhaps the BBS should think about turning its ambition to preparing a 'multivolume *Bryoflora of Britain and Ireland*,

lavishly illustrated with a multitude of colour photographs'. How likely is this, I wonder, given the work required to get the Field Guide off the ground? However, we *can* upload colour photographs to the species pages on the website (with no real limits on how many), we can add captions to these photos and general notes as text on the pages. We can do this *now*, one species at a time with no deadlines – and perhaps, at some time in the future, we could create a printed *Bryoflora* based on these pages.

Bryophytes images, particularly accurate, validated photomicrographs, are an area where I feel the internet is lacking in general. USB camera technology now facilitates focus stacking of microscope images, but this is a fairly recent advance and as yet there aren't many good images on the internet, certainly where bryophytes are concerned. As a beginner bryologist, I was often unsure what I was supposed to be looking for under a microscope. What exactly do trigones look like; what is the difference between ringed and unringed pores in *Sphagnum* hyalocysts; when alar cells are described as 'inflated', what does that mean...? The new Species pages could fill this gap and really help beginner bryologists – who are often also beginner microscopists –



◁ A library of images of species is already being developed. This will provide an important reference source for both beginners and more advanced bryologists.

understand what they are seeing and what to look out for.

If we do build this library of images, I would like – at some point – to make it searchable, so that you can view all images tagged with the keyword ‘capsule’ for example. This would require some more development work (and money). For the moment we are at least trying to ensure that each image we upload is tagged with suitable keywords.

Another area I would like to see developed is a section devoted to habitats. One of the really useful parts of the Field Guide is the section with habitat lists at the back. When you have absolutely no idea what a specimen is, it’s quite a good place to start! We could relatively easily create a page or set of pages for some of the main habitat types, with a brief description and lists of species that you might find there. We could do this now – but it needs people with the relevant knowledge to write the content.

Something else we could do now is to create little video clips demonstrating techniques. Wouldn’t it be great for beginners if we had videos showing different section-cutting techniques? Or video-clips taken with a microscope camera, focussing up and down on papillae, or *Sphagnum* pores, or porose cell walls...

One of Ambrose and my roles as website editors is to ensure that the website is accurate and up to date. Castlegate described this role as ‘content curating’ which I think is apt. We are reliant on other people to provide content, i.e. text, images and documents relating to their interests, just as *Field Bryology* and *Journal of*



△ The new website is fully compatible with smartphones.

*Bryology* are reliant on other people submitting articles for publishing. Over the last two years I have got used to emailing people I don’t know, asking for help, advice, photos, updates to website content etc. Fortunately (as my husband used to tell me) I am good at nagging, or, as I prefer to say, I can be persistent. But it would be nice if more people volunteered content, as there’s a limit to both my persistence and my knowledge of what is going on in the bryological world. After all, the website is the world’s window onto the Society and it is in all our interests to make it interesting, active and vibrant... a sign that the

Society is worth being a part of.

### Acknowledgements

Ambrose and I would like to thank everyone who has contributed to this project – from advice and opinions, to page content and wonderful images. We are grateful also to the BBS Council, who approved ever-increasing budgets and trusted our judgement on choice of developer. And, of course, thank you to Castlegate IT, who were (and are) smart, professional and great people to work with.

### References

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