

DEVELOPMENT OF THE ACES WEBSITE

PHASE I

In 2000 the ACES Council decided to set up a website for the use of ACES members and the responsibility for setting it up was duly delegated to Colin Bradford as our first webmaster. One of the initial tasks was to find a suitable web address but that turned

out to be less straightforward than we expected. Our preferred choice of "www.aces.org.uk" was already in use by an American football team based in Loughborough and one of the other "www.aces.xxx" options was found to be the website of a gay bar in Porthcawl. The first ACES website was therefore set up early in 2001

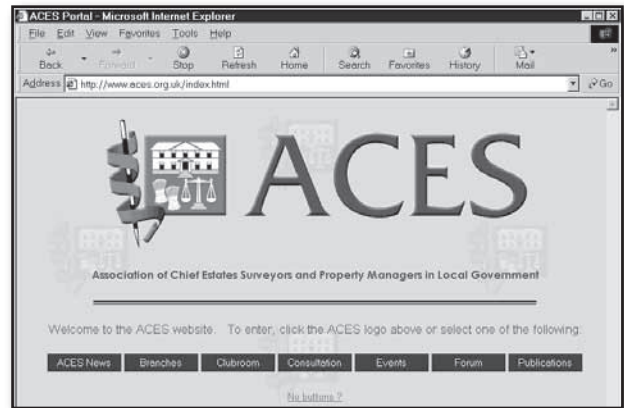


Steve Howe

at www.aceswebsite.org.uk. It was a fairly empty website built to test the overall design, layout, structure and internal links of the site. A great deal of work was done on building the structure but most of the pages were still just shells. Meanwhile, negotiations were continuing behind the scenes and by May of 2001 we had been able to acquire the domain name from the American footballers. The ACES website then moved from www.aceswebsite.org.uk to its permanent home of www.aces.org.uk.

The website was developed using Microsoft FrontPage and the main features, apart from general news and events, were:

- Public pages accessible by all;
- Private pages accessible only by registered members;
- Branch pages;
- Discussion forums, one private, one public;
- Document downloads.



With the domain and the structure in place, Colin Bradford stepped back and responsibility for adding and updating content (i.e. text and photographs) was shared around the Association. After a couple of years' experience it became clear that:

- The ready-made discussion forum which came with the MS FrontPage software was not stable enough for our purposes;
- There was a small number of very committed and enthusiastic users of the forum but most ACES members made very little use of the website discussion groups;
- The internal arrangements for adding and updating content were not functioning effectively.

PHASE II

In January 2004 Malcolm Dawes organised a presentation on potential improvements to the website to be given to the ACES Council by Lewis Plummer, a website developer who had already had experience of working with ACES members when he designed a new website for the London Borough of Newham Property Directorate. Lewis Plummer described recent advances made in website design and explained how much easier it should be to update the site with the improved technology. It was agreed that Lewis Plummer would work up a proposal for submission to the ACES Council in September.

The submission to the Council contained the features in the Phase I website and also incorporated:

- Members' information held in an on-line database that can be updated online;
- Much more robust discussion forum;
- An easy-to-use Events Diary;
- Easier arrangements for members to upload documents, minutes, agendas, news items etc.;

- Improved arrangements for Branches to update their own pages;

The proposal from Lewis Plummer was endorsed by the ACES Council as offering the opportunity to create a new, exciting and informative ACES website which would become a positive advertisement for the Association.

An ACES Website team was established under the chairmanship of Steve Howe, the new ACES webmaster, to work with the website developer to draw up the specification for the site and approve the work as it progressed. Several meetings were held with the developer who was able to take on board all the requirements of the Association. The development work was completed by early 2005 and, following testing, was launched at the Newcastle conference in May 2005.

Feedback from members showed that the site was easy to use



and gave them the opportunity to share information through the documents section and seek advice through the members' forum. However, reflecting earlier experience, usage statistics produced in 2006 showed that only 25% of ACES members were actively using the site. This was disappointing as the site was seen as a real step forward for the organisation.

The site has since been promoted regularly by successive Presidents on their branch visits and at ACES conferences together with articles and advertisements in *The Terrier*. Members receive weekly emails listing the current topics in the members' forum to encourage them to visit the site. Usage is increasing but promotion of the site will continue to persuade more members to access the site.

RURAL

The Rural Practice Branch showed great initiative and drive in managing to secure external funding to go towards the cost of a specific, and very extensive, rural-focussed part of the site at www.aces.org.uk/rural/.



PHASE III

Following feedback from members during 2006 and 2007 a work plan of improvements was drawn up for implementation in 2007. These included:

- A "public" version of the branch pages showing diary events;
- The creation of "branch super-users" for editing key documents on the site;
- Improved layout of parts of the site to enhance usability;
- The creation of a new publications database to enable copies of ACES publication to be uploaded and accessible to members and public.

The improvements to the publications area was seen as the biggest improvement with copies of the *Terrier* and *Asset* going back to 2006 being published on the site. New versions of the publications are now simultaneously published on the website as well as being sent to members. This gives non-members the ability to catch up with the work of the Association and helps raise our profile.

CONCLUSION

The improvements to the ACES Website have enabled the organisation to communicate to members and the wider public in a modern and efficient way. The modern look of the site compares well with similar sites in the public sector. The site is a good advertisement for the organisation and reflects the progressive nature of ACES in the modern world. The site will be continually improved to utilise future changes in technology and to reflect the changing needs of our members.

Steve Howe and Colin Bradford