



Reaching the World

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Abstract

The RCHME has a long tradition of supplying heritage information: we are seeking to maintain that tradition into the developing information society to ensure that we remain relevant to our users. Communication is a critical part of this process and the Web has been identified as a powerful route for this communication. The setting up of www.rchme.gov.uk and the response of users are briefly described. This is set within the context of changing from the passive supply of information to the active response which will meet the challenge and opportunity of the information society. The aim is to reach the world - now and into the next millennium and beyond!

The Royal Commission (RCHME) has defined its main aim as "to compile and assess, curate and make available the national record of England's ancient monuments and historic buildings for the use of individuals and bodies concerned with understanding, interpreting and managing the historic environment"¹. We make information available to all enquirers, as part of our remit as a public body, through the unique resource of the National Monuments Record (NMR).

In recent years much of the record has become accessible in digital form through:

1. MONARCH, the Commission's database of heritage information
2. the Listed Buildings System, a repository of statutory information which is being linked with digital images in the Images of England project
3. and the RCHME Web site.

As part of a process of change, in common with many public bodies, the RCHME has been restructured and reorganised and is now aiming to reach out to a wider audience. This should increase opportunities for income generation and enable us to respond to an expectation from users for the remote delivery of information.

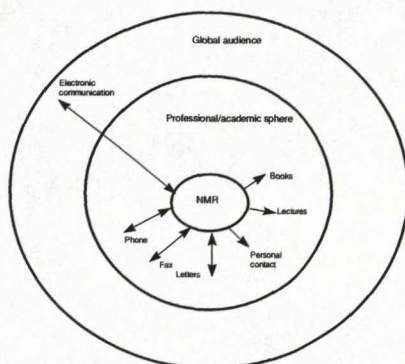


Figure 1: Communication is the key

Communication is the key to this process (Fig 1). The NMR has traditionally dealt with a professional and academic sphere, communicating by conventional means such as

telephone, fax, books and lectures. Electronic communication can break this boundary and help us to reach out to the wider world, sharing information easily with other organisations and bringing greater awareness of our work. Electronic information can have added depth for those that need it and thus greater value, while rapid feedback helps us to improve our responsiveness.

During 1995, we became increasingly aware of the potential that a Web site could bring to our work and how it could place us in the global information society. It took six weeks to carry out background research, develop the framework or storyboard, learn how to code in HTML, procure the necessary software and equipment and get connected to the Internet. A further six weeks were then spent in creating the pages, using simple design principles and adding a selection of images which were scanned to be of low resolution and of small file size to deliver rapidly over telephone connections.

The Web site was launched in October 1995 and, in essence, forms an electronic brochure of our work and information sources² with the navigational links taking the user to discrete areas of information. The resource required to set up the Web site and provide it for one year is the equivalent of that required to produce one printed book, making more information available for less resource. We have continued to develop the Web site with regular updates and the addition of new features from time to time.

The Web site has generated a good response among users and we track the user figures on a weekly basis. We have seen an increase in the number of visitors from around 200 per week to around 500 with a strong emphasis initially from the academic user community. These visitors are largely from the United Kingdom, as would be expected for an organisation promoting information on England's heritage, but there has been a growing trend of users from across the world. Simple analysis has shown that around half of the UK users come from the academic sector, ie one of our traditional user bases, while the other half come to our site from commercial domains, representing company accesses and individuals connecting through information service providers.

Despite the limitations of bandwidth and download times, we have found that images are popular and a key part of our product. Hotlinks to other organisations are also useful to the user and help to reinforce the connections between heritage organisations, developing the sense of community that is growing around heritage Web sites. The provision of information about the diverse nature of our work has helped to reinforce those activities and further raise awareness, while feedback from users (both in user figures and analysis of them and in comments sent in about the site) helps us to develop the site and adds to our responsiveness.

We now need to build further on the expectation that the Web site has brought. We will work towards linking our databases through a Web interface, so that users can interrogate our information systems easily and retrieve digital images files: such activities are likely to be accessed by some form of on-line charging, perhaps based on the depth of information retrieved, for example. To help us in providing more up-to-date information on the Web site and to enhance our response systems, we are working towards an internal Web site, or Intranet, with e-mail connections for all staff. We believe that this will truly help us to turn our data into information.

By taking part in the information society, we have raised our profile and also the expectations of our users, and by responding to that expectation we will further increase expectation. Our internal systems, both human and

technological, have to be able to respond to these demands, and this may require further organisational adjustment to ensure that we can truly deliver what people want, when they want it. This activity should also make us ready for the next millennium, when we believe that heritage information will be shared on a global basis via seamless links, although we are conscious of the danger of outstripping the individual requirement when too much information can lead to overload.

The RCHME has a long tradition of supplying heritage information: we are seeking to maintain that tradition into the information society to ensure that we remain relevant to our users. Society is undergoing radical change and the RCHME is responding to this change by fundamentally altering the way in which we work and respond to user demand. The Web offers a powerful route for communication which is a critical part of this process. We are seeking to change from the passive supply of information to the active response which will meet the challenge and opportunity of the information society. We are truly reaching the world - now and into the next millennium and beyond!

Notes

1 RCHME 1996. Strategic Plan. Royal Commission on the Historical Monuments of England

2 www.rchme.gov.uk

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