

If we're to encourage new people into amateur radio, one of the key battlefields is the online world. Your club's website and social media presence is important, and may be long overdue for a review. If you run a club website, here are some ideas to consider. If you're a member of a local club and feel that your club's site needs some love, feel free to share these ideas with your club's committee.

Today, if someone has a passing interest in amateur radio – they are likely to turn to a search engine and try to find a local amateur radio club. Ideally – you'd like them to find your club, and perhaps become a member.

Before writing this guide, we reviewed dozens of amateur radio club websites, and this is what we found:

- ✓ Unfriendly sites with little to interest those new to the hobby
- ✓ Sites that were designed years ago and have evolved into unwieldy and hard-to-navigate beasts
- ✓ Sites that are little more than a historical record of old club meetings
- ✓ Sites with out-dated information, broken links or that haven't been updated in ages
- ✓ Sites not suitable for today's Internet (Not visible to search engines, or that don't work on smartphones)

We've come to the conclusion that many of the UK club websites are being almost exclusively run with existing club members in mind, not as tools to recruit new amateurs into the hobby. That may be just fine for your club – but if the hobby is to flourish, maybe we need to do better. Can more be done on your club site to inspire others?

Why change?

Sure – your site may be providing club members with details of upcoming events – but is that good enough? Here are a few reasons why it pays to review your club's website:

- To make it more attractive to new entrants into the hobby
- To make your club one that people want to join and be a part of
- To highlight the best of what you do, not just the last event you've done
- To show that amateur radio is an interesting, dynamic and relevant hobby

If you feel your site could be doing better – Here's a summary of some things to consider:

1. Who are you talking to?

This such an important question, and so often overlooked... who is your site aimed at?

- People keen to find out about amateur radio and maybe get started?
- Amateurs considering joining your club?
- Existing club members looking for club event news?

In an ideal world, an amateur radio website should cater for all of the above, but not many do.

Have a look at your club's site in the cold light of day – Is it just there to provide a list of events to members? Could it be made more attractive for those new to the hobby or looking to become part of your club?

2. Do you welcome Newcomers?

Imagine you have a passing interest in technology – A friend suggests you give amateur radio a look, and you do an online search for a local amateur radio group. You're then confronted with a typical local club site that shows photos of people sitting in a room watching a screen, pictures of old radios, incomprehensible solar data tables, and more jargon and acronyms than you can invert a Yagi at. Does your club's front page have anything like this on display?

- *"Join the GX0QQQ 2m net on Wednesday 145.225MHz simplex"*
- *"Callsigns GX0QQQ, GB1QQQ & M2Q – Affiliated to the RSGB"*
- *"QSL Policy: Via Bureau, LoTW and eQSL"*
- *"In September, we'll be QRV for the RSGB HF SSB NFD"*

All important stuff... but would someone new to the hobby understand it? Would they be put off? Probably!

If your site's aim is only to serve existing members, then this may be fine, but if you're looking to bring people into the hobby or your club, then you may need to re-think your home page. Is there a clearly-marked button or menu option for those new to the hobby?

Take a look at the following example to see how a simple change could make the world of difference:



The above example site offers a clear message mainly to non-members... **"Come and meet us"**.

Existing members know where to look on the site for the events list, and have already been 'converted', so they're not the main audience for the home page. You'll also see three clear links: **"Amateur Radio Basics"** (for those new to the hobby), **"About Us"** (for existing amateurs) and **"Club Pages"** (for members) – a clear route for all three types of visitor to the club's homepage. Jargon and QSL information can be tucked away and only seen by amateurs.

The home page to your site is the shop window for your club and the hobby – It's not the place for clutter, jargon, club night reviews, solar forecasts and QSL card information.

Could more be done on your site to inspire tomorrow's radio amateurs?

3. Understanding your Site Stats

Putting up a website and hoping, isn't good enough. You need to keep an eye on who's visiting and how people are using your site. Your club's website is hosted on a web server somewhere, and that server probably has a web stats feature. If it doesn't, there are plenty of solutions available.

If used properly, your club's webstats can tell you all sorts of things about visitors to your site, such as:

- Number of unique visitors a month – How big is your audience and is it growing or shrinking over time
- Most popular pages – Handy for working out which pages need regular updating
- Pages Not Found – Where someone has tried to access a page that no longer exists
- Search Phrases – What are people typing into a search engine in order to find you
- Time on site – How long are visitor spending on your site? If less than a minute, you have a problem
- Returning vs new visitors – Are the same people visiting, or are you drawing newcomers in?
- Bounce rate – The percentage of people who take one look at your site and hit "back"
- Pages per visit – How many pages a visitor looks at. Are they just there for one page, or do they look around?



It probably won't come as a surprise to hear that amateur radio websites aren't hugely popular. With only a potential 60,000 amateurs in the UK, chances are, the number of people hitting your local club website is going to be pretty low. For that reason, it's important not to get hung up on the numbers, but the trend.

The trick is to get a baseline number for things like monthly visitors and time-on-site, and track them over time. Don't be discouraged if your number of visitors is low – the aim is to see that number increase month-on-month.

Review your stats, get an understanding of how people use the site, fix any broken links, and track whether or not your site is slowly building an audience.

4. Are you up-to-date?

There's nothing worse than visiting a site that's not current. Some of the crimes we've seen:

- 'Last updated' or © copyright date that isn't in the current year
- List of events that's not current or includes past events
- "Winner of the xxx Award 2007" – You were great once, but not for the last few years?
- A message from the Chairman discussing plans for a year ago
- "Club Night – TBC" – Does that mean there may or may not be a meeting, or you've not booked a speaker?

If your site looks out-of-date, broken or unloved, people won't engage with your site, or your club. Bad news if you have nearby clubs that take their online presence seriously.

5. Site Design

This is the tricky one. Design is a hotly-debated subject, and attempting to get your club's incumbent webmaster to consider a redesign can be a challenge in some cases. Some diplomacy, and selling the benefits of moving to an easier-to-manage system may be required!

Originally, websites were hand-coded using the web markup language known as HTML – Pages were often created using a web page editor such as Dreamweaver, Frontpage, or even in good old Windows Notepad.

Things moved on apace with the introduction of CSS – These are Style Sheets that separate things like the font colours, sizes and alignment from the content, making for a more consistent style across the site.

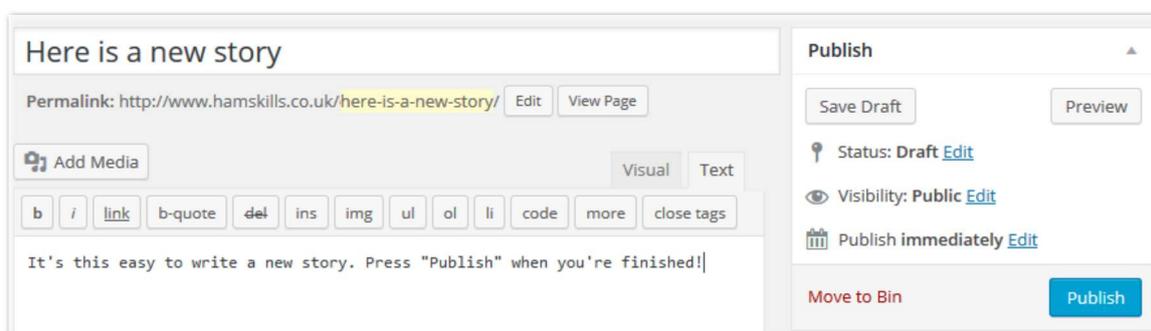
Today's websites are generally put together using something called a CMS (Content Management System). Common platforms are Wordpress, Joomla and Drupal. These allow the site design to be totally separate from the content. This means that a webmaster could set up the basic site template (layout, colours, etc), and let an editor handle the stories, words and pictures, without the need for them to learn code or risk breaking anything.

A lot of amateur radio club websites are running with a hard-coded HTML site that requires the one skilled person in the club to make the updates. They need web editing software, software to upload page changes, and the magic passwords to make changes. When the expert's on holiday – no site updates.

There are loads of reasons why switching to a system that separates design from content makes sense:

<u>Older hand-coded HTML sites</u>	<u>Newer CMS sites</u>
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Needs editing and uploading software	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Just needs a web browser for updates
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Needs a skilled HTML person to make updates	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Content can be changed easily by anyone in the club
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Hard to manage / maintain / refresh	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Easy to use. No code knowledge needed
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Can result in a design that looks dated	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Offers endless flexibility & easy re-design
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Can look poor on smartphones and tablets	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Responsive themes & plug-ins that auto-adapt
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Doesn't support newer, 'sexy' features	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Huge choice of plug-in extras that just work
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Usually less friendly for search engines	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Designed with search engines in mind
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Generally not compliant with current standards	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Platform patched regularly to meet new standards

The most common platform is Wordpress. The software is free, hundreds of templates are available, and permissions can be set so that authorised club members can safely make changes without breaking things. This screenshot shows how easy it is for someone with no experience to add a story:



Wordpress is a free download from www.wordpress.org. It will require your website expert to upload the software using FTP and set it up. They'll also need to set up something called an SQL database. Anyone capable of uploading HTML web pages should have no trouble installing and setting up a Wordpress website – assuming they want to!

6. Site content

Here are some ideas for what you could put on your website to make it more relevant and engaging:

For those not familiar with amateur radio

- An overview of what amateur radio is all about, with suitable pictures
- A video showing the various aspects of amateur radio. There are several available on YouTube. UK clubs are welcome to embed our promotional YouTube videos. See the selection at www.sxham.uk/vids
- Details of how to get started in amateur radio, and information about the Foundation course

For those looking to join the hobby

- If your club runs training, sell your courses! Just listing upcoming dates isn't enough... consider:
 - **Explaining what's involved** – A summary of subjects, Foundation practicals and the exam
 - **Using photos and videos** - Many potential amateurs haven't been in a classroom for decades – it can be daunting, so show people what to expect on a course. If you're looking for a video explaining Foundation, you're welcome to link to or embed ours. See www.sxham.uk/trainvid
 - **Promoting an alternative course** - Not everyone wants to wait, or is able to make your course dates. Whilst clubs don't want to lose potential students, think of the hobby - not just your club. Link to a nearby club, the RSGB's Club Finder, or a distance-learning course such as www.hamtrain.co.uk
- If your club doesn't run training, that shouldn't stop you explaining the process and pointing them at a friendly local club, the RSGB Club Finder or an online Foundation course, so they can start their journey.

For existing amateurs & club members

- **Sell your club!** Instead of pictures of chaps sitting watching a talk at your last club night, or hunched over a rig at a recent field day – what about showcasing your successes? Proudly show pictures of popular field days, exam passes, that busy JOTA event, or just people having fun with radio.
- **Upcoming events:** Your members probably want an up-to-date list of what's next... times, date, place and maybe a map. If guests are welcome, make that clear. Also remember that existing members know where you meet, but visitors don't - so make the address obvious, with a map and notes about access
- **Be 'sticky':** If you only update the site a couple of times a month, it won't be long before your visitors stop visiting. Make them want to come back – new pictures, articles from members, a "for sale" section, or even a free news feed from the RSGB, Southgate or Essex Ham to make the site look up-to-date
- **Be social:** Twitter and Facebook launched in 2005/6 and like it or not, they're part of our lives. It's amazing that some clubs just won't get on board. Is it that hard to write 140 characters of text a month on Twitter, or post a photo or two on Facebook? For every UK amateur, there are 530 Facebook users. Social media offers a great opportunity for free word-of-mouth PR. Who'd not want that?
- **Allow interaction:** Does your site have a forum, can people comment on your news stories and events? Is there an option to sign up for email alerts? Do you make it easy to share content? If not, why not?

Hopefully that's given you some ideas on how to get more from your club website.

More tips, checklists and ideas can be found at www.essexham.co.uk/clubsites