

# Putting your society online

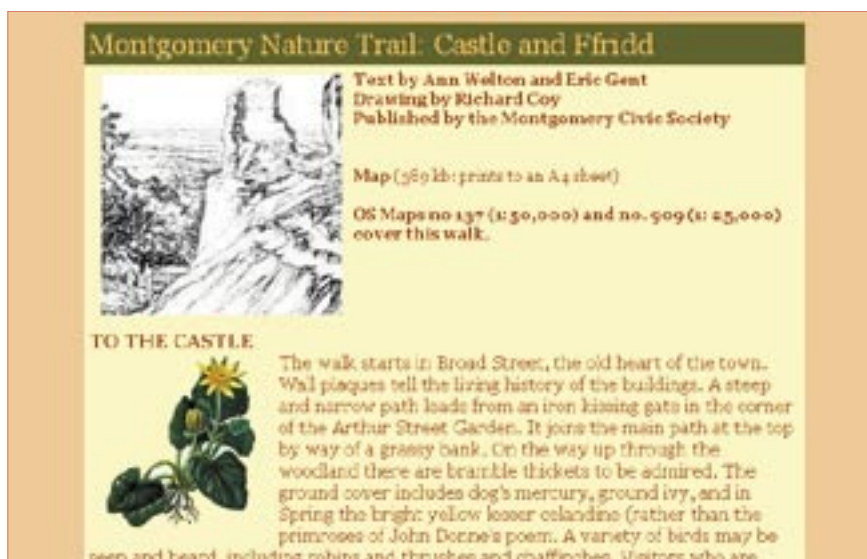
*According to an ICM survey, 50 percent of households in Britain now have access at home or at work to the Internet. From a minority interest, the web has grown to be an essential medium of communication, potentially the most democratic of all. Everyone can be a web publisher. For civic societies, there is an enormous opportunity to reach out through the web to the local community and beyond.*

*It's a mistake to think that the main function of a web page is to communicate with someone on the other side of the world. For voluntary organisations, it can be a great way of reaching out to the local community.*

*Of course, a web site can do other things as well... it's a splendid way of advertising publications, and promoting local attractions. In fact, the uses of a web site are almost endless... from news and information to online exhibitions and educational resources.*

*To do even a simple page well, however, make sure you look before you leap. This guide aims to give you some advice about how to get started and how to improve your skills and your ambitions.*

The beginning of a simple web page produced for the Montgomery Civic Society. A light background has been chosen and the page elements, including illustrations, have been contained within a simple table layout which centres content on the screen and will look good on any monitor.



## Remember these basic tips

- ✓ Content is king: if it isn't interesting, no one will bother to come back...
- ✓ Consider your audience and design accordingly...
- ✓ People have short attention spans, and good design will make your pages easier to read...
- ✓ Interactive gimmicks can take a long time to load... and drive people away from your site...
- ✓ Your site and its components need to be logically organised and accessible...
- ✓ Use images sparingly and well — learn to compress them so they load quickly...
- ✓ Many software packages claim to make web pages easy for the novice, but they will often produce bloated pages that are murder to alter quickly. Take the time to learn a little basic code, and work with dedicated software if you can.

# Design for beginners

There is always room for debate about what makes for good design, and this is as true about web pages as it is about print. What follows is a personal view!

I start from the point of view that some of the rules that make for good print publications transfer well to designing for the screen. If type is too small or too dense, or line length is too long, this tires a reader. This is all the more true if the reader is staring at a computer screen.

Secondly, just as **white space** helps to make a good magazine page, so it can be used to break up a screen page and make it more legible. Although you don't have as much control over what appears on screen because users have a great deal of freedom on configuring their browser settings, there remains a lot you can achieve.

Unless, however, you are writing for a well-understood audience, do not make web pages too text-intensive, or make them scroll down through text for more than two or three screens. Most users, especially those who are "just surfing" will find something less boring to look at.

A cardinal rule is to use **tables** to contain text and control line length; tables, divided into rows and columns, can also be used creatively to layout pictures, and set up coloured page elements, such as title and menu bars or page dividers. Avoid horizontal rules since these are, frankly, largely unnecessary if you use text, space and colour creatively. Contain text and images within a 600 pixel wide layout, or users may be forced to scroll horizontally if they use a 14- or 15- inch monitor.

Choose **colour** carefully. Nothing looks worse than clashing colours. Page backgrounds are best in white or pale cream; body text is most legible when it is black or dark in shade. Contrasting colours can be used effectively for titles and sub-heads, but use a limited palette of no more than three colours. Occasionally, a dark page background *may* be effective (pale text can look good on this, so long as there isn't too much of

it, and black can be a good canvas for striking images. **Avoid** patterned backgrounds; I cannot think of any instances when these work; they are a sign of the naive designer. Likewise avoid flashing coloured bars, or animated images that do not contribute to the message you want to convey. Clipart collections are stuffed full of useless examples. Worst of all is the futile "under construction" animated GIF!

You have a more limited choice of **type** when designing for the web. Body text needs to be set in typefaces that you can expect to find on your readers' computers; that means Times New Roman, Arial and their Mac equivalents. Trebuchet, Verdana and Georgia will be on most PCs. Good layout programmes will help you set up strings of alternative faces to cope with both PCs and Macs (e.g., "Arial, Helvetica, sans-serif" or "Georgia, Times New Roman, Times, serif"). If you need to use a fancy type, you will need to create your text as a graphic.

This needs to be done sparingly, a rule that applies to the inclusion of any graphic in a page, since the bigger the image file the longer it will take to download (see back page feature on compressing images for the web!).

Lastly, **navigation**. Your users need to work out where they are even in a small site and get from page to page and back home easily. Menus at top/top left work well, and a navigation element should be repeated at the bottom of a long page. If you create a navigation bar as an image, offer a text alternative for users who have switched images off in their browsers. Consider making external links open in a new window, to keep your user in touch with your site as long as possible. Unless you know what you're doing, avoid creating a frame-based site.

**HOT TIP: Look critically at sites you visit. What annoys you about their design? What approaches do you find legible and accessible? Don't be afraid to plagiarise.**

## Cracking the code

If you remember DOS wordprocessors like WordStar or WordPerfect 5.1, you won't find HTML code a mystery. This is not computer programming, simply a way of applying formatting codes to text. But even if you are using a WYSIWYG layout programme like Dreamweaver or FrontPage, you'll find it helpful to know what's going on under the surface and how to adjust your code when you need to.

A simple example of HTML code follows:

```
<p><b> My text.</b> <p>
<p>  Caption<br>
<i>More caption.</i> </p>
```

This creates a new paragraph and puts "My text." in bold. The next new paragraph has a picture aligned left with

an adjacent caption, part of which, separated by a line break, is set in italics. The next piece of code creates a hyperlink to another site.

```
<a href=
"http://www.civictrust.org.uk"
target="_blank">The Civic
Trust website</a>
```

Note the opening "`<a href>`" and closing "`</a>`" codes. The "target" code opens the site in a new browser window. Code can become complex, especially when laying out tables, but it retains a simple structure, and can contain ready made scripts to generate interactive elements that you should never need to fiddle with.

This is not the place for a tutorial. Get yourself a good, cheap, text book, or log on to a site like [www.netmag.co.uk](http://www.netmag.co.uk) and

follow the excellent beginners' tutorials that assume you are using Frontpage Express. Three or four hours playing around should dispel all the mysteries and give you a lot more confidence. There is nothing arcane about laying out a web page or about HTML; in the long run it will be your design skills you will want to hone, rather than coding — unless you are some sort of masochist.

### Recommended text:

Elizabeth Castro, *HTML 4 for beginners* (the Peachpit Press, 2000), £14.99.

# Software selection

## Word processors

You can keep design issues to the fore even if you choose to use your word processor to design and layout pages. Whether you use **Word**, **WordPerfect** or **Word Pro**, you have the quick and dirty option to save your work in .html format (web pages end with .htm or .html extensions).

Even in a word processor, you can, as advised opposite, use a simple table structure that will prevent text flowing from one side of the screen to another. You can insert pictures, and you can create hyperlinks that jump your reader from page to page or site to site. It's well worth experimenting to find out what you can do... but be careful. Above all, be careful if you are using MS Word, because these programme produces "round trip code" that is designed to enable documents to be opened as web pages or as files for word processing while retaining their original layout. This works quite well on an intranet where everyone uses MS Office, but the web pages created will contain swathes of unnecessary code, meaning longer downloads, and will probably be unviewable in any browser other than Internet Explorer 4 or higher.

If you have taken the trouble to learn some code, it's always possible to edit such pages, but this can be a very laborious process.

## Desk top publishers

Simple but effective sites can also be produced using the web page creation facilities in **MS Publisher** (especially the 2000 and 2002 versions) or Serif's **Page Plus** (now in version 7). But these are primarily desktop publishing programmes; you will have limited control over how your files are saved, and your pages are likely to suffer from bloated code that will be hard for a novice to change without going back into the original programme to unpick things. Above all, anything other than normal text tends to get converted into large graphics files — once again generating long downloads that will drive your visitors away. The deplorable results of this kind of approach can be seen in many primary school sites. These programmes can be used well, but if you know what you're doing you would be better off using proper software!

## Free software

Why not accept a gentle learning curve and start by working with the free software that used to come with Internet Explorer (**Frontpage Express**). Express is quite easy, since it has the familiar Microsoft interface. You will quickly work out how to layout pages and tables, format text and insert graphics and hyperlinks, and while the code isn't perfect it will work with IE4+. Netscape's equivalent, **Composer**, is quite easy to work with if you have mastered the idea of table structure.

And don't forget or despise the **Notepad** programme that comes with Windows. This is a text editor and web pages are pure text files. You can produce text files in **Wordpad**, too. Get yourself a cheap primer (see facing page), and work through a few chapters writing simple code and opening the results in your browser. You may even become a code junkie, eschewing the simplicities of WYSIWYG (what you see is what you get) layout programmes for the geekish joys of working in text alone. If that is your scene, then you can graduate from Notepad to one of the freeware coding programmes distributed with internet computer magazines (Arachnophilia, Ace, or the awesome and totally free **First Page 2000**).

Even if you don't follow the path of the truly righteous (and not otherwise engaged), getting some basic code under your

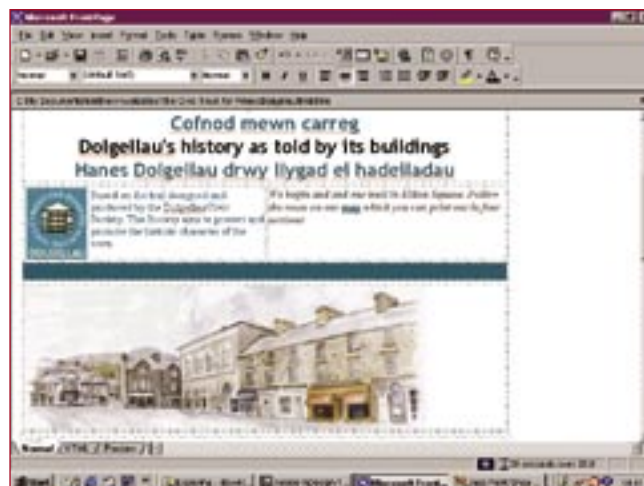
belt doesn't take long, and will mean that you work more efficiently with WYSIWYG programmes designed to produce great pages without too much code crunching. It will also mean that when you look at the code underlying other peoples' sites (a great way to learn — go to *view/source* in Internet Explorer to open pages as text files) you will be able to make sense of the tricks that have produced simple but effective design.

## The right stuff

At the higher end of the market you should be looking at programmes such as Front Page 2000/20002 (Microsoft — quite easy to learn if you're familiar with Office), Dreamweaver 4 (the professional choice), or Adobe Golive 6 (works well with other Adobe programmes. Macromedia's **Dreamweaver 4** is our favourite. Once you crack the unfamiliar interface it's surprisingly easy, and very flexible, allowing you to work with code if you want to, or stick in layout mode. Societies with charity status can get these programmes at massive discounts, and you can usually get trial versions on magazine cover disks to try before you buy.



▲ The Dreamweaver screen



▲ Microsoft FrontPage 2000

