

# Websites

**A website is not only a platform for you to get the word out about your project, but can also be a good tool to interpret your site. Most potential visitors will look for a website before they decide to visit, and will be influenced by an interesting and importantly a user friendly website.**

## Strengths

- Allows pre-visit planning.
- A website provides a link between sites and facilities.
- Websites can be easily updated.

## Weaknesses

- Producing a user friendly and attractive website can be a difficult task; therefore specialist help may be needed.
- To work best websites should be kept up to date, which can be time consuming.
- The two-way flow of information must be screened and monitored.

## Audience

- Day and staying visitors.
- Special interest.
- Young people.
- Education and Life Long Learning.
- Special needs.

## Advice on websites from Steve Wood

(Chair of Uttoxeter Canal restoration project, interpretation consultant, web and IT specialist).

Your web site is probably the most important tool you have to tell people what your project is about, what you are doing and what you want people to do for you (donate, join your work parties, attend your events etc.) Most people will look online before they turn to books or other sources for information. However, an out of date website could be worse than no website at all if it gives people the wrong impression of your project. Fortunately keeping your website up-to-date is more easily achieved today than it was just a few years ago.

### Content Management Systems

The arrival of eBay then Facebook introduced non-technical people to the idea that they can create pages directly in their web browser without needing to know how it works behind the scenes. These Content Management Systems power both small and large sites and needn't cost a fortune to set up. The software is generally free (open source to be precise) and two or three days of advice from a website developer, who may even be a member of your society and able to assist for free, will set you on the right track.



## Websites

By far the most popular CMS in use today is Wordpress, but many others exist including Drupal and Joomla. Some organisations use commercial CMS software to meet more complex needs, but it is unlikely that a canal society will gain any benefit from doing this. Some of the world's largest sites are built with open source software.

You will need to pay to register the name of the site and to host it on a web server (a type of computer, designed specifically to display web pages) but the total cost of name and hosting for a basic content managed site should only be in the region of £100 a year. Share the load of keeping content up to date by making different people responsible for their own sections of the site, probably connected to the role they hold within your organisation.

There is a small learning curve but it is not beyond the ability of anyone who has ever listed an item on eBay, for example. Your team of editors will then be able to work on different pages from different locations at the same time.

### Contents

Once your website has been built you can expand the content areas to help people learn more about your project. Sections telling the history of both the canal and your restoration project are both important. You may decide to put studies and other documents online but make sure that you have copyright clearance of anything you publish in this way.

OS maps are one example of content that generally cannot be published online. You are telling a story to your audience much as you would in a booklet or on display boards. Remember that as well as the general public, it will be looked at by the media and by any funders you apply to, so make sure that you tell the story clearly and in an engaging way.

As time goes by you might decide to add an online shop, private members area or other useful functions but none of this is necessary to get you up and running. A CMS is designed to constantly evolve and grow as you do.

### Social media

Do consider promoting your project on social media. As much as some people dislike Facebook and Twitter, the reality is that there are thousands of people already using them to talk about canal projects, and who will be interested in what you are up to. It is certainly the quickest way to announce what you are doing, so finding someone in your organisation who is happy to spend a few minutes a week posting updates will be time well spent.

Waterway Recovery Group volunteers in particular are very active on Facebook and love it when you post lots of photos of what they have been doing on your canal! Links to your site from social media will help more people to find out what you are doing and so in turn help grow your organisation.