

# THE P&SC WEB SITE: scienceinparliament.org.uk



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I have now been managing the P&SC web site for six and a half years, since late 2004. I have worked with computers for most of my career, although as a practising scientist my 'day job' is in geological consultancy, I have worked with computers for most of my career, and for several years I have also managed web sites for clients both commercial and charitable – starting in 1995 when I was on a research contract with CSIRO in Australia for a year. Most web sites, such as World Gold Analyst magazine or the Ecton Mine Educational Trust, have been related in some way to the minerals industry. For the P&SC, though, the link is a little more tenuous. I was attending the International Geological Congress in Florence in August 2004 and bumped into Peter Simpson and Jane Plant in the lunch queue one day. Peter knew of my computing background we both worked together in the British Geological Survey in the 1970s,

and asked if I was interested in helping to set up a new web site for the Parliamentary and Scientific Committee. We agreed in principle there and then, and over the following months worked out the detail, leading to formal agreement at a specially convened Council meeting in Portcullis House on 15th November.

This detail includes a growing database of articles extracted from current and past issues of Science in Parliament – that, in my view, now constitute the most valuable online resource owned by P&SC. There are now 471 articles from every issue since Whit 2004. All articles from issues more than 12 months old are now publicly available. These are all indexed and searchable by author and title.

The website also hosts a free and regularly updated Guide to Science in Westminster by David Dent – the complexity of the overlapping scientific interests of government departments and parliamentary committees is made clear in a very accessible way.

For the Committee's members, probably the two most important areas of the site are the meetings page, which contains details of future meetings (including last minute changes to location or timing), and the Science in Parliament page which includes the latest issues downloadable in PDF format. This supplements the printed copies which are received by parliamentarians and all P&SC members, and it also provides free access to the publications to all employees of member organisations – provided that they know the login code! In the Westminster

Estate, all computers linked through the main parliamentary servers have automatic login access to the web site. Starting fairly recently, logged-in members can also download and view presentations given at many of the discussion meetings.

Perhaps, thinking that I had too much time on my hands once the main site was running smoothly, Peter then asked me three years ago if I would be willing to help with SET for BRITAIN (SfB). It seemed interesting, so I decided to take it on. For the 2010 competition, I transferred the rather complicated application form to a new web site, and enabled a simple email application system. However, it very quickly became apparent that the number of applications, combined with unpredictable behaviour of email spam filters, was leading to chaos for everyone, and most particularly the organisers and judges. As a result, for the 2011 competition the decision was made to replace this with a new online database system, where competitors are able to submit their applications online, and with organisers and judges accessing these directly from a database through secure private web pages. The database applications were set up and tested in collaboration with Sue Wharton who brought her invaluable knowledge of past competitions with Dr Eric Wharton. This appeared to work much better and also coincided with an increased number of submissions received. Not only did it mean less work for Sue and the judges, it also meant much less work for me, as I always prefer neat solutions that reduce unnecessary workloads.

One of the more interesting aspects of managing these two web sites has been the challenge of maintaining them whilst travelling the world on my 'day job'. More than once I have sat at a dusty desk in a client's office at a mineral exploration camp deep in the Russian taiga, sorting out email queries or loading a new issue of Science in Parliament via a dodgy satellite link. This year I was doing the same on a wi-fi connection at a bed-and-breakfast while on holiday in New Zealand. Such is the power of the Internet that physical location has become almost immaterial.

So where is our web site going next? We could accept the inevitable – and link to Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn, three of the most widely used social networking sites. We could set up a discussion forum on LinkedIn if that is considered desirable.

What else? The P&SC site is overdue for a facelift. It still has essentially the same design as when originally set up. Over the next months you will see some changes, with simplified navigation, and improved legibility. However, this is YOUR web site. What do you want to see? How do you want the site to be changed and improved? I have some ideas, and there are many things that can be done technically. But it isn't my ideas that are important, and technical gee-whizzery is pointless if it doesn't do what you want! Please use the contact form on the website, or email me direct on [steve@vmine.net](mailto:steve@vmine.net), to give me your views. Where should we go next?