BACKGROUND

The Council will be aware that, during February and the early part of March, the server which hosts the village website experienced multiple attacks by hackers – causing both interruptions to the availability of the site, as well as forwarding visitors to various unsavoury destinations. At the last Council meeting, I said I would make a recommendation about how we should respond to such attacks.

RECENT EXPERIENCE

The interruptions have been several and hugely irritating, taking up many wasted hours. There is no easy or cheap way to reach clear water, unfortunately. Back in 2007, the site was designed and built by two colleagues of mine - Paul Martin and Jo Donnelly. Paul is still providing us with shared space with his hosting provider, at a nominal £30 a year. But, now married and with a first child, he is no longer available to me for out-of-hours (and unpaid) support work. So I've moved onto another ex-colleague, Richard, who I've worked with for more than five years, and who is happy to assist, up to a point. The last few weeks have been quite testing to our relationship since it has taken so much time to put out the fires, constantly having to search the backend of the site for malicious code, eradicate it and then upload a clean version back to the hosting provider. Richard and I have spoken on the phone and by e-mail every day for about three of the last six weeks and the freebie points are running out. Nonetheless, in the short term, Richard is available to clean the site each time a new gremlin invades, but I cannot expect him to do it within the same day, necessarily. As I write this (March 23rd) we have been clear of gremlins for 8 days and this may be a sign that the hosting provider company itself has put in place more robust defences, which will possibly buy us some time to work on an upgrade. It would be a huge mistake to relax, however, or to assume that we will not suffer the same annoyances again in the future. For that reason, we need to look at the underlying situation, and take preventative action.

WHY IT'S HAPPENING

We're on a CMS platform (= Content Management System) that is now four years old (autumn 2007) and which, given the pace of these things, is showing its age. What we did four years ago was absolutely right for the time, and I have been pleased with the way that it has performed, up until this current outbreak of pain. However, it is clearly vulnerable to the type of hacking that has appeared in 2012. Upgrading the current platform (to a later version of the same one) is not practical given that we are so many versions behind. Each upgrade has to be applied sequentially, and the site re-tested, before moving to the next. The original site was given multiple customisations to achieve the look and feel that we sought. Such customisations may well not survive the upgrade. It's Richard's view (that I share) that the time spent applying these upgrades would a) be without guarantee of success and b) not be very different from the time spent rebuilding the site elsewhere.

THE GAME PLAN

The plan is to create a new edition of the site, on a new CMS platform – one that is thoroughly up to date and which has the latest anti-hacking defences built in as standard. Basically we'll have to take the existing site, extract all the key bits (pictures, text) and re-build it somewhere else, using a different software platform that is up to date, more resistant to the attacks that we've seen (and hopefully, the platform version itself will be more easily updatable than the old one was). We'll also take the opportunity to move the hosting to the UK

(from the US) since there is some evidence to suggest that US providers are more popular targets for the bad guys.

I'm now working on a *proof of concept* of this site with Richard, with two principle objectives:

- To satisfy me (and the Council, if interested) that we can get what we need in the new style CMS, in terms of functionality and appearance, *before* we ask for Parish Council investment.
- To allow Richard to better estimate the cost of building the entire site, ie his time.

There will be no cost for the proof of concept stage, and no commitment to continue with it. I hope that it will be ready before the *next* Parish Council meeting, so that we can then discuss an accurate cost.

LIKELY COST?

We'll know better when we've done the proof of concept.   As before (2007), the cost will be for Richard's time. He knows we don't have an allocated budget, and he is prepared to do this in his spare time, over perhaps 2 months, and at a heavily advantageous mate's rate of less than £100 per day. The exercise will, unfortunately, require as much of my time as his, for which of course I will make no charge. So we're probably looking at a cost adjacent to the original 2007 budget of £800 or so. While this may seem like an unpleasant shock, I would point out that there have been *no* maintenance costs (outside of Paul's £30 *pa* hosting fee and the domain name purchase price) since the launch of the site in 2008.

I would also expect there to be some windfall benefits to this effort since clearly one can do a whole lot more with software than in 2007/8; so I would anticipate our new site being easier to upload information to, and to offer some more whizzy features in terms of the user experience.

IS THERE A CHOICE?

No, I don't think so. For the reasons explained earlier, we're already on borrowed time. While we could throw in the towel, I don't want to do that yet. I have invested - on average - 4 hours per week for the past 4 years, and I'm not yet ready to chuck away the results. We have built a good audience[1] and, if we can get the upgrade done in a timely fashion without (first) losing traffic because of the hacking outages, then we'll take that audience with us. Neither am I prepared to revert back to the cheap-and-dirty (or free) type of sites that the Parish Council had previously, which are hard to navigate, horrid to look at and nothing to be proud of.

MEANWHILE…

I would hope that the PC will endorse the proof of concept plan, at least. But if you have questions about any of this, or suggestions as to new features which you'd like to see in the next manifestation of the Pitton and Farley website, please do let me know.

Doric

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[1] Google analytics: 22nd March 2011 – 22nd March 2012:
10,347 visits
5,787 visitors
29,390 Page views