

The Sphinx in the Cloud

The ESC Website – fit for purpose, welcome to the 21st century

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When our much-missed colleague Edmund Hall, for health reasons, asked for a volunteer to take over the Egypt Study Circle website, I had little sense of what I was stepping into. I did not imagine that, a decade later, I would still be stewarding his legacy - or that I would have acquired the skills to take the foundations he built and rebuild the site from the ground up.

The catalyst, as so many good Circle initiatives are, was a typically astute comment from Mike Murphy. He observed - gently but unmistakably - that perhaps the time had come to update the website, so it matched the standards of other leading philatelic organisations. That single remark set off a chain of events that led to a complete transformation of our digital presence.

What followed was a crash course in HTML and the wider web ecosystem, alongside Python and modern frameworks that did not exist (or were not mature) when Edmund built the site. Those who have coded will remember how early HTML could be clunky and browser dependent. What Edmund achieved with the tools of the day was genuinely pioneering. But technology moved on and the old site was left increasingly out of step with modern expectations and ever harder to maintain without unintended side effects.

After many late nights, occasional moment of the new ESC website: **This is more than a technical upgrade; it is a shift in how we present ourselves to the world** experiments, and the despair, we have arrived at faster, cleaner, more resilient, and - most importantly - more focused on what members need.

One of the most significant changes is that the site is no longer “fixed”. Improved expertise and advances in web technology mean that it can now evolve quickly. Whether the change is a committee update, a new discovery in Egyptian philately or a member’s correction to an older reference, revisions can be made in minutes rather than hours or days.

That is more than a technical upgrade; it is a shift in how we present ourselves to the world and to each other. The improvements fall into several practical areas.

First, the site now has a modern, responsive design. The old site was built when desktop screens dominated; today, many members browse on phones and tablets as readily as on laptops. Pages now adapt automatically, so members can read articles, browse material, or check meeting dates wherever they are, without tiny text, broken columns, or endless sideways scrolling.

Second, navigation has been rebuilt to reduce friction. The previous site could make it unnecessarily difficult to find specific content quickly. The new structure introduces clearer menu hierarchies, consistent layouts, improved search and faster loading across all sections. The aim is simple: less time hunting for information, more time enjoying it - because philately is detail-rich, and a digital home for philatelists should help you reach the detail, not hide it.

Third, the archive engine has been rewritten. The Circle’s greatest asset is our collective research, and it deserves a platform worthy of its depth. The archive is now designed to handle larger volumes,

support richer metadata, and improve cross-linking between articles, studies, exhibits and reference pages. Good research is rarely linear. A stronger archive makes it easier to trace themes across decades and discover connections you were not originally looking for.

Fourth, visual presentation has improved because philately is unavoidably visual. The new site supports higher-resolution images, better galleries and more flexible formatting for long-form work. That lets us present material with the clarity it deserves—whether it is a subtle shade variation, a cancellation detail, or a full-page exhibit scan that previously would have been awkward to display.

Fifth, there is greater editorial flexibility behind the scenes. The platform allows rapid updates without complex re-coding each time. News can be posted quickly, corrections can be made instantly, and new pages can be created without rebuilding whole sections. In short, the site can now keep pace with the Circle’s activity rather than lag behind it.

It is also more robust: modern hosting, cleaner structure and routine backups reduce outages and accidental loss, while performance gains mean pages and images load faster, even on slow connections.

This enables a more member-driven model. Any member can submit a request for a new page, a content update, or a correction, and - when the request is clear and the material is to hand - we can often meet a “one-hour” standard and push it live the same day. The website is designed to be maintained, not merely endured.

All of the above would still be only remained trapped in physical back forward for members is therefore the research material: a digital treasury research, education, and community, accessible from anywhere.



*Neil Hitchens, right,
and his predecessor,
Edmund Hall*

half the story if the Circle’s content issues. The most significant leap vastly improved catalogue of supporting the ESC’s mission of and providing a world-class library

Several major digitisation milestones now underpin that library. The *QC* has been fully digitised, making decades of articles, research notes and announcements searchable and readable in high definition. One of the most ambitious undertakings - *L’Orient Philatélique* - now stands at 99% per cent digitised and available, representing an almost complete record of one of the most prestigious journals in our field. In addition, the entire run of *Egyptian Topics* has been uploaded, ensuring that even niche lines of research are preserved and usable by the next generation of collectors and students. Alongside these, research monographs continue to expand, adding depth month by month.

Looking ahead, this rebuild is not an endpoint but a foundation. The architecture is modern, modular and maintainable, which means future enhancements are feasible without another “once in a decade” overhaul. The underlying structure is finally fit for purpose.

The Circle has always valued both tradition and progress. This website honours Edmund’s pioneering work while embracing the tools of the present and the opportunities of the future. If there is one message I hope members take from the relaunch, it is that the site is now alive -capable of growing, adapting, and reflecting the Circle’s best research as it develops.