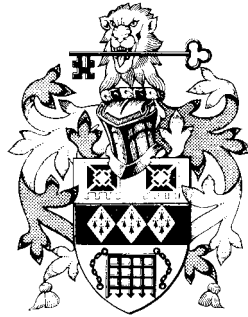


# SUSSEX aBaCuS

The Newsletter of the Sussex Branch of the  
British Computer Society



**Issue 18**

**February 2000**

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**A View from the Chair** - *Clive Craske Chairman, BCS Sussex Branch*

## Post-Millennium Blame?

**Greetings to all members of the BCS Sussex Branch, and a warm welcome to our new members who have joined since October 1999.**

So the millennium bug didn't really bite much after all - although it's certainly had a nibble here and there. Apart from the odd dead franking machine, problems with editing Word 97 documents created last year and that page on Microsoft's Web site (the Works 4.5 to 2000 Comparison Chart), which said it was 1970 in Seattle, (it's been corrected now)... Oh - there was the "minor" problem with those safety systems at Japanese and US nuclear powerplants, and the partial blackout of US defense systems (which used a 2-digit encryption date stamp). But credit where credit is due - ICT Professionals should be congratulated on their hard work and a successful outcome, rather

than being castigated for wasting money! I for one have learnt a lot about risk management and business continuity planning, and I suspect that the majority of our industry is now in a much more stable and better managed state than a couple of years ago.

But let us gaze into the crystal ball. Has standard application software got any future as a saleable product? Or will the Internet procurement of freeware become the norm? Will consumers become disenchanted with bug-ridden bloatware and give the monopolistic software vendors the boot? Is Linux really the Holy Grail? Hopefully there will still be specialist applications and bespoke software that developers can make money from though. Programmers may not be out of job, but will we be using Component Based Development more, or "Design by Contract"? What about later this century - how long until Quantum or Bio-computers become a reality?

**Branches Board Report** - *Roy Newell, Branches Board Representative*

A recent focus for the Board has been communication with members and that remit includes both the YPG and overseas members. Our own committee member, Edward Wolton, is the current National Chairman of the YPG and is working hard to maintain and develop its activities. Of increasing importance is the job placement scheme which is going from strength to strength and is likely to become international in its promotion and scope. The change to the YPG constitution which raised the age limit to 35 for general purposes and allows any full-time BCS student irrespective of age to participate is likely to further boost the group. The YPG Programming Competition will shortly be taking place and will again attract more and better teams than ever.

Overseas groups are flourishing and have an increasing number of inputs to Branch policy at both local and international levels now that email has become for them an improving basis for discussion forums and newsgroups.

The UK branch organisation and communication is going through a periodic review with the objective of improving inter-branch communications and the sharing of best practice. In this context, Gavin Richie, our Hon. Secretary submitted a discussion paper to the Branches Board which has been well received and is being discussed by over branches.

Branch's Board are also cooperating in the "PCs for Deprived Areas" project, <http://www.sevenseaconnect.com>, and one pack will be sent to each Branch. It is a project that I have been working on which has great potential for education and communities and is likely to include very substantial use of the BCS ECDL initiative.

**NEXT ISSUE** of aBaCuS will be on 17<sup>th</sup> of April 2000. Any submissions should reach the editor by the 17<sup>th</sup> of March 2000.

<p style="text-align: center;"><b>BCS Sussex Branch Autumn 1999 Programme Meeting Reports</b></p>
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20 October 1999

**XML – Just Another Hype or is it Here to Stay?**

*Presented by Aniello Sabatino of Zurich System House. Report by Stephen Ticehurst.*

A good start to this session of meetings, very well attended for our first meeting in the new location at the University of Sussex. After worries that members would not find this new location we ended up filling the room for what was an interesting night.

Based on SGML (Extensible Markup Language), the XML standard can be found at [www.w3.org/xml](http://www.w3.org/xml). Like the familiar HTML format, XML is ASCII based, but instead of describing the layout and content of a document, it describes the meta information of documents or online resources. This can be achieved through database access and communication with other applications.

Computing is now getting more data centric with the database being the core applications in many businesses. XML allows easy extraction from such a database without having to deal with any deep and complex programming. The database can be anywhere on the Internet or possibly be a number of databases in various locations. Through meta handling within XML, you are able to extract the data and then display it in many different ways. An ideal application of this being the ability to put a friendly front-end onto legacy systems, or bringing data together from many loosely coupled distributed systems.

XML could be thought of as a digital representation of a document and its structure, able to store, process, and search the data within. With user defined tags, you are able to create your own data types and even include nesting. A document declaration outlines the rules within the file, the structure and the attributes.

17 November 1999

**Project Management – Why Do Big Projects Fail?**

*Presented by Nick Vine, M.B.C.S. Report by Clive Craske.*

There is no official definition to "What is a big project", but "Cannot be held in one person's head" and "Dates have to specify the year" fit quite well! An example might be a project that occupies 25 people over 3 years. In the public sector PFI (the Public Finance Initiative) has made government IT projects more visible. But only one in six projects succeed!

With teams of below about 20 people, corridor conversations and chatting in the pub can supply most of the required inter-personal communication. There is no pressing need for bureaucracy, formal meetings, or procedures. When considering scale we have to consider human factors, technology, business cycle and politics. The human element is the key.

So what is failure? "Slippage" is failure. So is not delivering what was originally asked for. This can be mitigated by cutting back on deliverables, or phasing the deliverables.

Moving everything forward an inch may be worse than moving part of the project forward substantially. Context switching - putting one thing down to take up something else - takes time. On the other hand, beware of fragmented thinking - leaving no time to take in the depth or underlying problems.

How could you achieve success? Keep things human scale. Uncertainty breeds fear, anger and politics. A sense of belonging and ownership of the project by the team - being able to make a difference as an individual in the team, and everyone understanding the bigger picture - can reduce that feeling of uncertainty. Watch out for team members who hide behind complexity - people enjoy being involved in difficult puzzles, but they can lose touch with broader issues.

Match the business cycle. The business cycle is also getting faster and faster. A project must be shorter than the business half-life if it is to live up to expectations and beat the competition. Similarly the definition phase must be shorter than the requirements half-life - otherwise you have the "Forth Bridge" syndrome - without any partial benefit. Death by 1000 changes!

Comparisons with traditional engineering. Big "hard" engineering projects rarely fail - why? It may be that IT systems are too easy to change. Alternatively it may be that bridges and buildings have simple functions - or simply that engineering is a more mature discipline, with standard models.

Turning things around. If the project is starting to fail, what can you do? You can't just turn reasons for failure into ways to succeed. "No code re-use" *can* be changed to "High code re-use" - but *how*? Reduce the scale. There is value in doing a project in chunks (for early payback). It also helps to loosen the coupling (be modular) - broadband networks facilitate this.

Project planning is the starting point. It provides the frame of reference. The secret is to control the variations. This requires clarity of thinking. The constraints on the project are the "3-Ds": Drivers (Why?), Deliverables (What?), and Dates (When?). Who and How can be flexed. Manage expectations above all - know your contract or specification.

Methodology can be a problem. The need for efficiency may mean that it can be millstone or end in itself. It's OK if pragmatism rules! It can also be useful to take an iterative approach. It is not tools, technology or methodology that determines whether a project will succeed - it's psychology - in other words *people*!

Improve communication. The "3-Cs" define Communication: Clarity, Conciseness and Consistency. It also helps to have transparency, visibility, accessibility and openness.

Every individual is motivated by survival and self interest to a greater or lesser extent. Manipulation, positioning and power games go on all the time. It is important that the project team feel collective responsibility, but also that individuals have single accountability for every deliverable or objective. Motivation is key, both on the macro level, (maintain all parties interests), and on the micro level, (align individuals with measurable milestones).

**This Year's Survey**

The time has come to ask you once again to spend five minutes helping us by filling out and sending back this survey. Alternatively you can fill the survey out online by going to the Branch website (address on front cover). The Branch Committee will use the list of topics preferred by the Branch membership to help decide the content of meetings to be scheduled in the 2000/2001 calendar. All filled in surveys can be returned to the newsletter editor.

1. How often do you attend Branch meetings? [0 to 5 times per annum]

2. Do (or will) you attend the Branch AGM in May? Y/N

3. If a talk was on one the following topics, which would you attend?

- |  |     |
|--|-----|
| 1. UML (Universal Modelling Language)                  | Y/N |
| 2. An Introduction to Quantum Computing for beginners  | Y/N |
| 3. Enterprise Java Beans                               | Y/N |
| 4. The History of Modern Computers                     | Y/N |
| 5. Games Programming                                   | Y/N |
| 6. Data/Voice/Telephony; ADSL v ISDN; Services/Content | Y/N |
| 7. Network technology                                  | Y/N |
| 8. New Data Protection legislation                     | Y/N |
| 9. Quality - ISO9000 (new version)                     | Y/N |
| 10. Security   | Y/N |
| 11. Employment for the disabled through IT             | Y/N |
| 12. E-Commerce - building E-Business applications      | Y/N |
| 13. Data mining  | Y/N |
| 14. Steganography/Information hiding                   | Y/N |

4. Please list any other topics for talks that you would attend:

5. Is Sussex University, Falmer, Brighton a convenient venue? Y/N

6. Would you prefer a central Brighton venue? Y/N

7. Members often continue discussions in The Swan pub in Falmer village nearby after our meetings. Would you prefer a venue with its own bar or lounge for after meetings? Y/N

8. Please list any locations/venues that would be more convenient for you:

9. If a site visit was to one the following locations, would you attend?

1. Bletchley Park (HQ of WWII code-cracking, first electronic computers, etc.) Y/N
2. ADT (Worthing Auto Engineering High-technology) Y/N
3. Thompson Simulation (Crawley) Y/N
4. Gatwick Airport (control tower and other systems) Y/N

10. Please list any other organisations that you would like us to visit:

11. Home location [Town/postcode, e.g. Brighton, BN1 6WE

12. Work location [Town/postcode, e.g. London, W1H 1DS]:

13. Are you a speaker yourself, who could address a branch meeting? Y/N  
If Yes, please give details:

14. Please give us any other comment you may have on Branch activities:

15. [optional] Your name:

**Assistive Technology – information resource** *Ken Hobbs, Disability Liaison*

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In the course of 1999, I contacted Disability Support Liaison Officers at other BCS branches which the following enquiry:

*“I feel there should be a repository of information on techniques, tools, etc which would aid disabled people to use computers and computer systems. I have no wish to either "re-invent the wheel", nor to undertake what could be a phenomenal amount of work in setting-up such a repository. I am aware of Ability-net and its constituent partners, especially the Computability Centre. There are also several information services for disability matters, but these do not, as far as I know, deal with computer aids”.*

Those who responded, perhaps inevitably, mainly suggested of the name of a website or two, most of which I knew about already. In this article, I aim to document the most worthwhile leads, which will extend to next issue. If any reader knows of other sources, then please would they pass them on to me. Any qualitative comments on sources would be especially welcome.

### **The Computability Centre/AbilityNet**



[www.abilitynet.co.uk](http://www.abilitynet.co.uk)  
[tccadmin@bham.ac.uk](mailto:tccadmin@bham.ac.uk)  
01926 312 847

I've written about these entities before in aBaCuS. TCC will give advice informally for free, but would normally charge for an assessment of an individual's needs. They will try to create aids where nothing suitable exists. Contact: TCC at PO Box 94, Warwick, CV34 5WS. AbilityNet itself has definitions and guides to what kinds of assistive technology are available. Factsheets are available for free download, although these are currently only available by post at the moment because they are being re-written. If you know nothing of assistive technology, then start here. Note that this charity is a 'co.uk', not the 'org.uk' which you might have expected – it fooled me when I was looking for the site!

**Disability Specialist Interest Group**

My first port-of-call, but, sadly, they did not respond. The group's journal, Ability, lists several people in the SIG with remits for different aspects: e.g. visual impairments, learning difficulties, IT-Can-Help Network. The magazine is probably the best source of contacts in the SIG, or try phoning C. Goldsmith. Try the SIG website, but it is very simple, with no links or information.

[www.bcs.org.uk/siggroup/sg16.htm](http://www.bcs.org.uk/siggroup/sg16.htm)  
01245 242924

**Computers & Integration for the Disabled**

This is a charitable organisation who have gathered a great deal of leaflets/info over the years, but do not have this on any sort of relational database at present. Contact there is: Computers and Integration for the Disabled, 4 St James Place, Inverurie, Aberdeenshire AB51 3UB. The Development Officer is Claire Hughes, and the Chairman is Ken Brown. (Thanks to Norman Burns, Admin. Assistant for this).

[cid.ltd@zoom.co.uk](mailto:cid.ltd@zoom.co.uk)  
01467 623600

**The Ace Centre – North**

Offers a range of services around the use of assistive technology and alternative and augmentative communication (AAC) resources and systems for pupils, students and adults with physical and/or communication impairments. The Centre offers its services across the North of England, North Wales and Northern Ireland. Website has a suppliers' list.



[dSPACE.dial.pipex.com/town/terrace/ac969/](http://dSPACE.dial.pipex.com/town/terrace/ac969/)

**TRACE**

An organisation in the USA, which has categorised many assistive devices and some software. Their website gives access to their indexes. Contact: TRACE R&D Center, S-151 Waisman Center, 1500 Highland Ave., Madison, Wisconsin ZIP 53705-2280 fax (01) 608-262-8848. **Try this website first!**

[trace.wisc.edu](http://trace.wisc.edu)

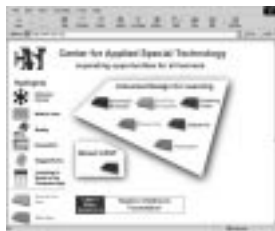
**ACE Centre (Aids to Communication in Education)**

Information, training and assessment of special needs for children and young people in education., usually through the school or college. Contact ACE at: Ormerod School, Waynflete Road, Oxford OX3 8DD. Fax: 01865 750188. However, The ACE Centre Advisory Trust is at: 92 Windmill Road, Oxford, OX3 7DR Tel 01865 759800 Fax 01865 759810. The website contains a software list, downloadable, some software will have fees payable.



ACE seems to be tied in with the Access Centre. Address: 1 Broadbent Road, Watersheddings, Oldham OL1 4HU. Phone: 0161 627 1358. Fax: 0161 627 0363.

[info@ace-centre.org.uk](mailto:info@ace-centre.org.uk)  
[atschool.eduweb.co.uk/acecent/](http://atschool.eduweb.co.uk/acecent/)  
 01865 63508

**CAST**

Founded in 1984, CAST is an educational, non-profit organization that uses technology to expand opportunities for all people, including those with disabilities. Lots of links & lists of h/w s/w

[www.cast.org](http://www.cast.org)

This list will continue next issue. There are, of course, other very informative sites which do not provide information on computer assistive technology directly, although enquiry for a particular problem may throw such stuff up. These include DisabilityNet ([www.disabilitynet.co.uk](http://www.disabilitynet.co.uk)), and Disabled Living Foundation ([www.dlf.org.uk/advice/centre](http://www.dlf.org.uk/advice/centre)).

On another topic: I had hoped to feature a new training programme, IT2000, for disabled people to learn to use computers. However, the launch has been delayed until March, so it will keep for a later aBaCuS. It might interest people in the very west of West Sussex, as it's actually going to be out-of-county in Portsmouth, Hampshire, at the Beneficial Centre. No accessibility problems there, I'm sure. This might be another 'can of worms', but does anyone know of anything similar happening in greater Sussex?

**BCS, Sussex Branch – Autumn and Winter Programme 1999**

All meetings (unless otherwise stated)  
7.15pm for 7.30pm  
Engineering 1 Lecture Theatre,  
University of Sussex, Falmer, Brighton.  
Free to members & non-members.

More details 07071 787378  
rupert@pavilion.co.uk. Further updates will be  
posted on our website at  
<http://www.pavilion.co.uk/bcs>

15<sup>th</sup> March 2000

**The Rise and Rise of Linux**

*Presented by Toby Bryans and James Acketts of Navaho Internet Systems Ltd.*

Since last aBaCuS, Linux has not yet taken over the world. We are probably not expecting it to. However, it does go from strength to strength with Corel committing themselves to their own flavour of Linux, along with their now established Office suite of applications ported over to the operating system. Adobe are have released their first beta of Framemaker for Linux, the popular technical word processor. Popular software library company GreenLeaf have ported their communications routines to Linux opening up huge potential for all developers using their libraries. The latest RedHat offering includes a graphical installation making the process even more straight forward than before (I myself find it much easier to install Linux than Windows NT4).

8<sup>th</sup> May 2000

**The Small Enterprise Guide to E-Business**

*Presented in association with the Institute of Management*

Terrace and Orange Rooms, University of Sussex, Falmer, Brighton.  
1:00pm to 6:00pm. Tickets £40 with discount for BCS and IM members.

This will be a major Sussex event with seminars, presentations and workshops and is aimed directly at small and medium sized enterprises in all sectors. It is intended to be of practical help to the local business community.

A special issue of abacus will be sent out before this event with full details of the days programme. A supporting website containing latest news and registration details can be found on the branch website (see front cover).

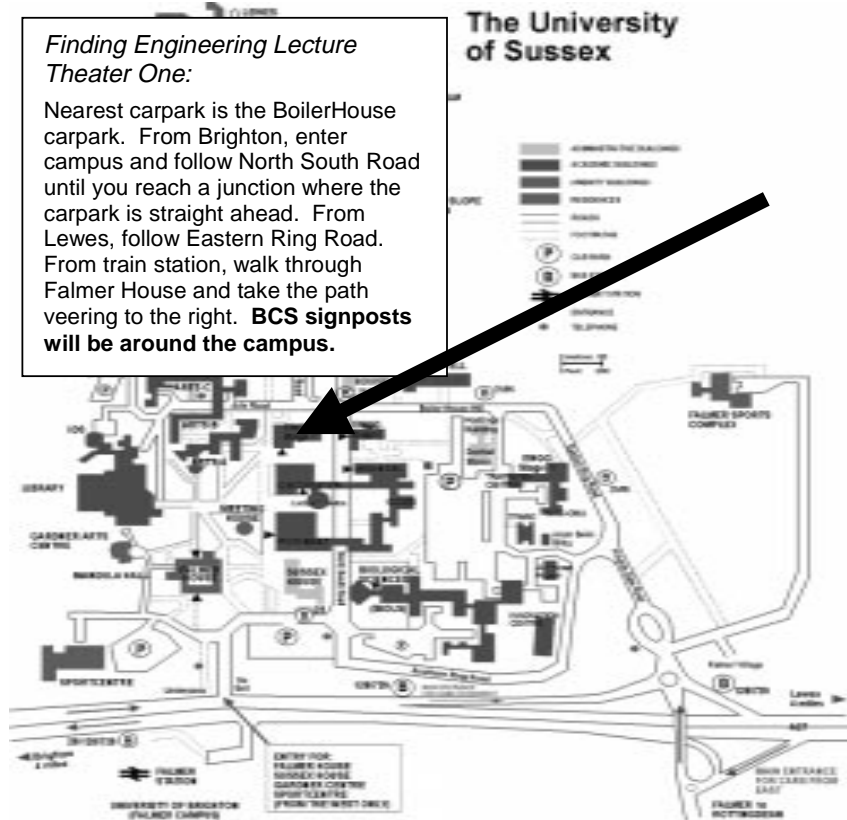
10<sup>th</sup> May 2000**Whither the Communications Revolution?**

*Presented by Dr. David Hartley, President of the BCS. To include Branch AGM..*

The world of communications changes all the time, sometimes even daily. Last year saw the merger of two major telecoms companies in the States, we have yet to see if this has been for the good or bad. The world is looking for speed, at a time where we have maybe gone through a number of communication revolutions and have quite an established communications infrastructure, getting more data down limited bandwidth could be thought of as the important factor. Do telecom companies dig roads up and lay more fibre optic cable, possibly an expensive and long process, or do they look into new technology to cram even more data down an existing overloaded system.

**Finding Engineering Lecture  
Theater One:**

Nearest carpark is the BoilerHouse carpark. From Brighton, enter campus and follow North South Road until you reach a junction where the carpark is straight ahead. From Lewes, follow Eastern Ring Road. From train station, walk through Falmer House and take the path veering to the right. **BCS signposts will be around the campus.**



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