

HOPS AT TEN – The Future of HOPS

Danny Scroggins. 1 January 2020.



HOPS is now ten years old.

We would like to thank everyone who has contributed their time, effort, feedback and patience to HOPS over the last ten years. HOPS is currently used to manage over 15,000 staff, over 11,000 of which are live users. There have been 21,000 users of HOPS over the last 10 years. We are grateful to all our users, admins and support licence customers who use HOPS and who between them contribute to the discussion of the direction of the development of the system.

HOPS is now about to embark on the biggest development project in its history!

HOPS is about to be re-written. Read-on to find out how you can shape it...

Like most things in our heritage and preservation world, HOPS's growth has been gradual, and by a much greater magnitude than ever originally envisaged. And like many things that grow gradually and unpredictably, some things have ended up in a way that wouldn't be the way we would plan it from scratch. One of these things that is particularly noticeable after 10 years is the structure, format and underlying code of the website itself.

Where, previously, we have concentrated on output rather than beauty, there are a lot of new tools available for improving websites' usability that HOPS isn't taking advantage of and that it would benefit from having. The website format and usability also hasn't maintained pace with the transition in users' preference to access it via mobile devices. We have tweaked and updated some parts over the years, such as the menu system, but the underlying framework and programming constructs of the site are past their best. The proposed work will deliver a better website, better user interface, better future development opportunities and more robust service delivery by HOPS.

We are delighted to say that, after a great deal of negotiation, HOPS has finally cultivated the right combination of staff, contractors, equipment and time to be able to confidently tackle this important upgrade work. The development of the Time Register system was a test run for these new arrangements, and we are pleased to say that was completed very satisfactorily.

New Website Structure

Although 'a new website structure' is simple in theory, and even available off-the-shelf, integrating it with existing HOPS will be challenging. We clearly need to maintain the functionality of HOPS during what could be a lengthy changeover, as it wouldn't be wise (and we couldn't afford) to re-write everything in one go for one massive launch.

It is planned that the new website framework and underlying code will be created, giving an improved look and feel to the website (but displaying the current HOPS body content). This will mean changes to the format and behaviour of the website, but not to its functionality. Changes will be things such as:

- the header and footer
- font sizes, formats, colours
- improvements to formatting, backgrounds, borders and shadows on page items
- positioning of items on the page
- improvements in the behaviour of menus
- standardisation of behaviour of HOPS components such as buttons being arranged in consistent places, etc.

Managing of Users' Expectations

The changeover will be *reasonable* to digest by users. The change won't be drastic to the end user, but as with all audience groups, there will inevitably be some who 'get it' immediately, and some who need extra help from their HOPS Admin.

While we recognise that 'no-one likes change' we can't avoid change simply for that reason. We will always do everything we can to minimise *negative* impact of the changeover, but HOPS can't shy away from change where it will bring longer-term benefit just because it is human-nature to not like the fact of change. While the changeover might be annoying to work through, the end result will be a much better HOPS product for everyone.

It is hoped that we will be able to have a Beta system, where HOPS admins and confident users can get early access to the new website format before it goes onto main production use.

Dates and times of changeover periods will be announced in advance, to HOPS Admins and on the site in general, in the HOPS Admin's Forum, and also in the HOPS Admins' Facebook Group – if you're a HOPS Admin we recommend joining that group.

Old Content, New Website

Initially, the current HOPS page body content will appear in the new website structure. This may cause some irregular formatting in the short term, such as:

- The content not taking up the whole width of the page
- The content not responding as elegantly as the website will to mobile devices, changes in orientation, etc.
- There may be some minor parts of the system that maintain the old website format after the changeover, so the format might change between different parts of the system.

Hopefully any issues arising from the new structure that inadvertently affect functionality or productivity will be identified in testing or Beta, but if not we will be on hand to make updates as required.

Content Re-write

Each page and component in the system will then be re-written, section-by-section, to deliver the full benefits of:

- modern programming methodology
- optimisation of content to the new website structure
- improvements to user interface elements, behaviour of forms, formatting, etc

This is expected to take approximately 18 months and will be prioritised on several factors:

- usage volume of each part of the system
- how well the part of the system copes with the old content in the new site
- development work taking place in tandem
- feedback

Re-writing each part of the system section-by-section means the development work on old and new system components can still take place. Rather than the whole system having to be 'frozen' from development while the entire changeover takes place, only each part currently being transferred will be stopped from development. All parts of the system will still work for clients, regardless of whether it is in old or new mode at the time.

Opportunities

The work described above presents a huge opportunity. When we first wrote HOPS we had no idea it was going to develop how it has or become as big as it has, but now we do, and we can take some pretty good guesses at where it needs to be ready to go in the future.

Not only do we have the opportunity to write the system with the benefit of that hindsight, but we can also write it for how we want it to develop in the future. And if each part of the system is going to be re-written, it is a perfect opportunity to incorporate some development that has been requested / suggested / enables further functionality, including some things we know you have been wishing for for a long time.

So, it's time to let us know...

- What would you like to see in New HOPS?
- What areas of railway / business management should HOPS extend into? Or keep away from? HOPS now has a number of features that are outside the scope of operations, such as our new Asset Management tools and Risk Assessment Register.
- Where would you like HOPS to be in another 10 years' time?
- Aside from software, what other services can HOPS delivery to the heritage railway and museum movement.
- Nothing is too outrageous or extravagant – if money was no object, what would HOPS do? (from experience, I imagine you will all come up with the same things, which could actually make it achievable!)

Crucially, we need to know how important these things are to you, so that we can prioritise. Are they...

- Nice to have, but not really *required*
- Something you'd like to actively promote
- Business critical
- Something that's currently a blocker to you using that part of the system

Finally, all this work isn't going to be cheap. So if there's developments you'd be willing to contribute towards the cost of, please let us know that. As always, HOPS delivers software tools at a fraction of the market rate to each individual client on the model of all clients contributing to the SLS. In many cases we have been able to match together clients who want the same development and share the cost to make it even more easily achievable. There are enough clients using HOPS that some very expensive luxury developments could become very cheap and achievable if everyone wanted them. So don't hold back!

Please feed back by email to danny.scroggins@heritage-ops.org.uk, or add comments to existing (or new) development tickets if you wish to.

We will examine all outstanding development request tickets as part of this process, but please feel free to add additional comments/weight to them now if you wish to.

We hope to start to formulate specifications and contracts in February, so please feed back by the end of January if you can (or let us know if you need more time).

We won't be able to include everything, but this is the biggest opportunity for a step change that you'll get for another 10 years, so this is your chance!