

Taking Coals to Newcastle: How I Sent Notes Scripts to Edinburgh

Ian Gent*

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1 Some Curiosities

When I think of the Dream group, I think of friends. And thinking of friends bring to mind some little curiosities.

Let me start with Helen Lowe, who died last year in 2004. We somehow ended up competing for the same jobs over and over again. She got a PhD place with Alan Bundy that I applied for. After we finished PhD's, I got a postdoctoral fellowship that she had applied for. She got a lectureship at Napier I'd applied for. And though there was a less direct link, some time after I left Strathclyde for St Andrews, she left Caledonian for Strathclyde.

In 1992 when I came to Edinburgh on that postdoctoral fellowship, the Dream group contained three Ian's and an Ina – Ina Kraan and the other Ian's being Frank and Green. And I'd first met Ina at the Marktoberdorf meeting before coming to Edinburgh where I also met my wife, Judith Underwood, for the first time.

Talking of Ian Green and Judith, a not entirely coincidental link is that I used to share an office with Ian in the early 90s, and now Judith shares an office with him at Telelogic in Rose St. Not coincidental because Judith heard he might be looking and invited him to apply.

2 Bringing Coals to Newcastle

When I moved to Strathclyde in January 1995, Toby Walsh and I continued to research Satisfiability and related topics. We quickly decided that these were of little interest to most dreamers, but of significant interest to others at Strathclyde, especially Patrick Prosser. So we didn't submit notes on the topic to Blue Book notes. But we didn't need to look far to for an idea on how to preserve interesting and inchoate research ideas. We started our notes series the same month. Three months later, Barbara Smith joined us to found the APES research group, and we had to deal with a significant distribution of notes. For no particular reason they became known as Footnotes.

We did keep folders of notes (black ones, not blue). As in Edinburgh we wrote in note titles by hand when we added notes.¹ But notes also found their way into an ftp archive that Barbara also had access to. This solved the immediate problem of distribution between Strathclyde and Leeds.

Notes came thick and fast. It wasn't long before we had a lack of any electronic index. Fortunately, Stuart Grant, who was Barbara's PhD student, had typed in

*School of Computer Science, University of St Andrews, St Andrews, Fife KY16 9SX, United Kingdom. ipg@dcs.st-and.ac.uk

¹This is 10 years ago so I'm not really sure we did!

all the titles in a simple plain text file. We started to update this when we added notes, an index file living in the ftp site.

Another student in APES, Dave Clark at Strathclyde, wrote some lovely Perl scripts. These took the index file and produced a web page providing links to the notes. I don't remember how this happened. I think Dave just did it one day. The resulting HTML files were not put on the web, but stayed in the ftp repository – but even in those dark days of the web, browsers could deal with this if you typed in the password.

This is how things stayed for a long time. Dave had given us a really neat view of notes. We set up cron jobs to run the script every once in a while (every day or five minutes, depending on the year.) A little while after you added a note, the scripts would run and update the index.

Eventually the group became more distributed and the big change happened when everyone had left Strathclyde. The support people there naturally wanted us to move the notes, so I volunteered to host them at St Andrews. The problem now was that I had mugged myself, because we didn't have a site with ftp access. So I had to upload notes as people emailed them to me. Usually this only took a few seconds although occasionally there would be problems. In any case it was an irritant.

In November 2000, I decided to learn Perl and did it on holiday at my mother's house, where I had taken my daughter Sarah. I used Dave's notes scripts as a starting point to help me learn, and rewrote them very extensively. The most visible thing I added was upload of notes from an HTML page, which saved me doing the work. Undoubtedly the cutest thing I added was the ability to guess the details of note number, authors, title and date from the tex file uploaded. This saved a lot of typing or cutting and pasting for authors.

When I put this online, I achieved something I don't think I have matched, before or since. In a short space of time, all of Barbara, Patrick and Toby gave me unsolicited praise for some work I'd done. No contribution to AI in a paper or footnote has ever achieved that!

Certainly these scripts get over the basic problems of allowing read/write access to people for a blue book/footnote-like notes series, though they are fairly kludgy to use, fairly horrible code, and awful to install.

Once I'd got those going, I've offered them around to interested people. I know they were used in Cork when Toby set up a copy of the notes idea there (called 4thoughts since the research centre is called 4C for Cork Constraint Computation Centre.)

And yes, I did send them to Newcastle, i.e. Edinburgh. I had the feeling when I started this that I had been told they were used in Edinburgh – but I can't find any email to that effect so I may have remembered, or misremembered, a conversation. I have no idea if they are used now.

The funny thing is that APES no longer uses the scripts. My student Andrew Rowley rewrote the scripts into PHP, using now I think no part of Dave and my Perl scripts. Andrew's scripts are far more maintainable and robust, and are easier to use in a number of ways.

This note is dedicated to Helen Lowe