

Conway Club Website - Plain English Report

*Prepared by Philip van Bergen
For the Committee Meeting on 16 June*

This report has been prepared before speaking with Alfie Windsor, the current website administrator. That matters. Alfie may be able to explain why certain things have been set up as they are, what is still used, what is redundant, what is backed up, and where the main controls sit.

So this should not be read as a criticism of Alfie or of the existing arrangement. It is a first inspection from the outside, based on what can be seen by an ordinary logged-in member and from the page source. I have not yet had access to the actual control panels behind the site, so this is not a full technical audit.

Note on method

For clarity, I used AI to help analyse the page source and identify what systems appear to be in use. Manual inspection of every page, product, menu item, document link and hidden setting would take far too long at this stage, especially without admin access. I have not manually decoded the whole thing like Bletchley Park with a mug of tea.

The AI analysis does not make this a full technical audit, and it does not replace a proper conversation with Alfie Windsor. It has simply helped to spot the broad structure of the site: the public pages, shop, payment system, member login, member-only areas, document links and likely areas of risk.

That is also why some of the language in this report is cautious. I am not presenting myself as a current WordPress expert. I am saying that, with my older technical background and by using modern tools sensibly, I can get a useful first understanding of what we are dealing with and ask better questions before anyone starts making irreversible decisions.

The purpose of this report is not to argue that the website must be replaced. It may be that the best answer is to keep the present system, tidy it up, and bring it under better Club control. Replacement is only one possible option. Whether it makes sense depends on what the present system is doing, what constraints it imposes, and how easily those functions could be managed elsewhere.

Before considering options, it is worth explaining what the current website actually is. It is not just a collection of pages. It is several different systems working together.

The three layers of the website

First, there is the visible website. This is the part most people think of as the website: the homepage, Club history, events, people, shop pages, The Cadet pages, links, photographs and contact details. This is the shop window. It is the easiest part to tidy, redesign or replace, because it is mostly words, pictures and links.

Second, there is the working machinery behind the pages. This is the part that lets the Club sell items, take card payments, allow members to log in, show some pages only to members, and let an administrator approve people for access. This machinery is much more important than the appearance of the homepage, because it is doing actual Club work.

Third, there is the ownership and control layer. This includes the web address, the hosting account, the payment account, the administrator logins, the backups and the ability to recover the site if something goes wrong. This is the part that matters most if the person who normally manages the website is away, ill, unavailable, or no longer able to do it.

Plain English explanation of the main terms

WordPress. The present site appears to be built using WordPress. WordPress is a widely used website management system. In simple terms, it is the framework that lets people create and edit website pages without writing the whole site from scratch. It is not the website itself so much as the machinery used to build and manage the website.

WooCommerce. The shop part appears to use WooCommerce. WooCommerce is an add-on for WordPress that turns a normal website into an online shop. It provides the basket, checkout, products, orders and customer account pages. The Club shop includes Club items, membership products and links to some outside suppliers.

Stripe. The payment part appears to use Stripe. Stripe is a card payment service. It is the part that processes debit and credit card payments. The Club website should not be storing anyone's card details itself; Stripe handles that. The basket and checkout pages show Stripe payment machinery being loaded.

Membership add-on. The members-only part appears to use a membership add-on. A membership add-on is the part that decides whether someone is just a visitor, a logged-in user, or a full Club member who can see restricted pages such as The Cadet archive, Club accounts or AGM minutes. The member account area and menu structure show member-only sections appearing for logged-in members.

Document archive. The document archive appears to use ordinary uploaded files and links. That means The Cadet PDFs and other documents may simply be stored as files on the website, then linked from a members-only page. Hiding the page and protecting the actual files are not always the same thing.

Squarespace and Wix. There are also all-in-one website builders such as Squarespace and Wix. These are more packaged systems. Instead of having a separate website system, shop add-ons, hosting and design controls, they provide most of those things in one place. That can make them easier to use, but it can also make them less flexible if the Club needs a particular membership process.

Hosting. The site also needs hosting. Hosting is the rented server space where the website actually lives. If the domain name is the Club's address, hosting is the building at that address.

DNS. The site also uses DNS. DNS is the internet signpost system. It tells browsers where to go when someone types in the Club's web address. The Club has paid Hostinger until 2030, so there is a strong practical argument for keeping Hostinger at least for DNS and domain control unless a clear reason appears to change it.

So, in plain English, the current website appears to comprise:

- A public noticeboard.
- A shop counter.
- A card machine.
- A membership desk.
- A login system.
- A members-only filing cabinet.
- A document store.
- An administration office.
- A web address and signpost system.
- A hosting account where the whole thing sits.

This is why the Committee should not judge the website only by how it looks. The visible pages are only the front of it. The more important questions are:

- What work is the site doing for the Club?
- Who controls it?
- Who can update it?
- Who can approve members?
- Who can access the payment account?
- Who can take a backup?
- Who can restore it if something breaks?
- Can an ordinary future Club officer manage it?

Replacing the website may be sensible. Keeping it may be sensible. Tidying it up may be the best answer. But deciding any of that before we understand the machinery behind it would be like deciding to replace a boat because the varnish is tired, only to discover later that the engine, batteries, fuel tank, keys and charts were all tied into the same arrangement.

1. What the current site appears to do

The current site appears to do several jobs at once.

- It provides public information about the Club.
- It runs an online shop.
- It takes card payments.
- It allows people to register and log in.
- It allows Club membership to be bought online.
- It lets an administrator approve or activate members.
- It shows member-only pages to those who have access.
- It holds or links to Club documents, including The Cadet archive.
- It provides account pages where members can see orders, membership details, downloads, addresses, payment methods and account settings.

That is why we need to treat this carefully. This is not just a case of moving a few pages and photographs.

2. Membership

Conway Club membership is a one-off payment for life.

That is important, because it means the Club does not need a complicated annual subscription system for ordinary membership. We do not appear to need automatic renewals, expiry dates or repeated card payments.

The current site sells membership as a shop product. The ordinary Conway Club Membership appears as a GBP 15 product. A person can register, buy membership, pay by card, and then an administrator checks whether they are eligible. Once they are approved, the administrator gives them access to the members-only areas.

So the important process is:

- Someone registers.
- They pay once.
- Someone checks they really are eligible.
- They are activated as a full member.
- They then keep access.

That is simpler than a subscription system, but it still requires one crucial thing:

Someone must be able to approve members and give them the correct access.

Any revised or replacement system must be able to do that easily. If it cannot, it is not suitable for the Club, however smart the homepage looks.

3. What members can see

When logged in, members see extra menu items that ordinary visitors do not see.

These include things like:

- Members.
- AGM Minutes.
- Club Accounts.
- Hon Sec's Notices.
- Cruising Association.
- Teaser Club.
- The Cadet.
- Online Copies.
- Newsletter.

This means the site is not simply hiding pages by not linking to them. It is changing what people can see depending on whether they have member access.

That is useful, but it is also one of the things we must preserve if we move or rebuild.

In simple terms, the website has different doors for different people. A casual visitor can see the public rooms. A logged-in member can see more. An administrator can change things behind the scenes.

That is exactly why the access arrangements matter.

4. The shop and payments

The shop is not enormous. It should be manageable to move if we need to, although that should not be done casually because products, orders, customer records and payment links may all be involved.

Some products are sold directly through the site. Others appear to be links to outside suppliers.

The payment side appears to use Stripe, which is a standard card payment provider. That is good. It means the Club does not need to handle card details itself.

The ordinary Club membership payment appears to be a one-off card payment, not a recurring subscription. That is also good news. The payment side does not look horribly complicated. The basket page shows the Conway Club Membership in the basket at GBP 15.

The tricky bit is not taking GBP 15. The tricky bit is making sure that, after the payment, the right person gets the right member access.

That distinction matters. Lots of systems can take a payment. Not all of them can combine payment, manual eligibility checks and lifetime member access in a way that ordinary Club officers can manage without swearing quietly at a laptop.

5. The Cadet archive and documents

The Cadet archive is on a members-only page.

However, the magazine files themselves appear to be ordinary uploaded PDF files. This probably means the page is protected, but the actual PDF file may not be protected if someone has the direct link. One issue also appears to be linked through Google Drive.

That may or may not matter. If the Club is comfortable with that level of protection, then moving the archive should be fairly straightforward.

If the Club wants the PDF files themselves locked down properly, that is a higher standard and needs to be specified clearly.

In simple terms:

- Hiding the page is easy.
- Protecting every file properly is a bit more work.

The Committee needs to decide which it wants.

If The Cadet archive is regarded as member-only but not especially sensitive, page-level protection may be enough. If the Club wants strict control over the files themselves, that needs to be built into the future requirements.

The same question should also be asked about more sensitive documents such as Club accounts, AGM minutes and committee papers.

6. Hosting, domain and DNS

There is a small but important distinction here.

The domain name is the Club's web address.

The DNS is the set of signposts that tells the internet where to send people when they type in that address. It is like the harbourmaster's notice telling visitors which berth to go to.

The hosting is where the actual website lives. That is the server space holding the website files, images, documents and database.

At present, the Club has paid Hostinger through to 2030. That means there is a strong practical argument for retaining Hostinger at least for the domain and DNS. There is no need to throw away something already paid for, especially if it is doing the basic signposting job perfectly well.

This also means that even if the Committee later decided to tidy the website, rebuild it, or move the visible site somewhere else, the Club could still keep Hostinger as the place where the domain and DNS are controlled.

Hostinger does not necessarily have to host the finished website in future, but it can sensibly remain the place where the Club controls the web address and internet signposting.

For example:

- If we keep the current WordPress site, Hostinger can continue hosting it.
- If we rebuild the site elsewhere, Hostinger can still point the domain to the new site.
- If we use Squarespace, Hostinger can still manage the domain and DNS, while the actual site sits on Squarespace.

So the hosting decision and the website decision should not be muddled together.

The immediate question is not whether to abandon Hostinger. Given that it is paid through to 2030, the wiser starting point is to retain it for DNS and domain control, make sure the Club has proper access, and only change anything if there is a specific reason.

That reason might be poor performance, lack of control, security issues, support problems, or some technical limitation. But absent one of those, moving away from Hostinger simply because we are discussing the website would be unnecessary churn.

We do not need to move the signpost just because we may decide to repaint, tidy, rebuild or relocate the shop behind it.

7. The real issue - control

The biggest risk is not the design. It is control.

We need to know:

- Who controls the domain name?
- Who controls the DNS?
- Who controls the hosting account?
- Who controls the WordPress admin account?
- Who controls Stripe or any payment account?
- Who can approve new members?
- Who can export the member list?
- Who can take a backup?
- Who can restore the site if it breaks?
- Who else can do this if the current person is away, ill or no longer available?

At present, we may be too dependent on one person. That is not a criticism of that person. It is just bad Club housekeeping, and it is exactly the sort of thing that clubs often drift into without quite noticing.

A Club system should not rely on one set of private keys in one private pocket.

There is a real Conway example of this.

I run the Conway IO Group. I created it after a previous Conway chat group disappeared because its owner took umbrage at a comment and closed it down. Fortunately, being technically minded at the time, and, I confess, a nosey bastard, I had already taken a copy of the members' email addresses. That meant the group could be resurrected.

That was luck, not governance.

It is precisely the sort of problem the Club should not repeat with the website. We should not be in a position where one person can, deliberately or accidentally, take away access, lose the member list, close down a system, or leave the Club unable to recover its own data.

The lesson is not that people are untrustworthy. The lesson is that Club assets should be under Club control. The website, member data, shop, payment account, documents, backups, domain and DNS should not depend on one individual's goodwill, memory, health, patience or continued enthusiasm.

That is not bureaucracy for the sake of it. It is basic seamanship. You do not keep the only chart in the pocket of the one chap who might decide not to come aboard next weekend.

The Club needs shared institutional control. That does not mean everyone should have full access to everything. It means the Club should know who has access, what each person can do, and how access can be recovered if needed.

8. Possible administration by a Club officer

One practical point is that I may be able to help administer the existing website, if the Committee wants that as part of the future arrangement.

I was a programmer many decades ago, and I have built websites in HTML, also many decades ago. That does not make me a modern website developer, and I do not pretend otherwise. But it does mean I am not frightened by the basic ideas: pages, links, files, menus, user accounts, forms and the general difference between what people see on screen and the machinery working behind it.

I also run the Conway IO Group, so I already have some practical experience of keeping a Conway online system alive, managing access, and thinking about continuity rather than just convenience.

In practical terms, I would probably be able to help with ordinary website administration, such as:

- Updating pages.
- Adding notices.
- Uploading PDFs.
- Editing The Cadet archive.
- Changing menu items.
- Adding or editing shop products.
- Checking orders.
- Approving members.
- Creating or removing user accounts.
- Keeping written notes on how the system works.

However, there is an important warning attached to that.

The Club should not simply move from being dependent on one person to being dependent on another. That would not solve the problem. It would just change the name on the keyring.

I would not want to be the only person with the knowledge or access. Nor should I be expected to deal single-handed with the riskier parts of the system, such as major software updates, payment changes, membership rule changes, security problems, database work, hosting migration or anything involving custom code.

The sensible arrangement would be:

- At least three Club officers have proper access to the essential accounts.
- There is a written guide to the basic admin tasks.
- There is a known backup process.
- There is a named external WordPress/WooCommerce person available for anything risky.
- Routine updates and membership admin can be handled internally.
- Major technical changes are not done casually by whoever happens to be holding the laptop at the time.

So my position is this:

I am willing and probably able to help administer the present site, particularly the routine content, membership and document side. But the Club should not make me, or anyone else, the single point of failure.

That point matters whichever option the Committee chooses. A website is not properly under Club control until more than one trusted person can operate it, recover it and understand the basics of how it works.

9. Options before the Committee

The Committee does not need to decide immediately that the website should be replaced. The more sensible decision is to establish what the current system does, what risks it carries, and what the Club's future requirements are.

There are several broad options.

Option 1 - Keep the present system and tidy it up

This is probably the safest technical option.

The present system already appears to do most of what the Club needs. It has public pages, a shop, payments, member registration, member login and member-only pages.

This option would mean keeping the existing arrangement, but making it cleaner, better documented and properly controlled by the Club.

This would include:

- Checking backups.
- Checking security.
- Updating or replacing old add-ons.
- Simplifying the site where possible.
- Making sure several Club officers have the right access.
- Documenting how membership approval works.
- Making sure the Club owns all accounts.
- Retaining Hostinger for DNS, given it is paid through to 2030.

The advantage is that we do not have to rebuild everything from scratch.

The disadvantage is that the current system needs proper maintenance. It cannot just be left to gather barnacles.

Option 2 - Keep the present platform but rebuild or simplify parts of it

This may be a good middle course.

The Club may not need a completely new platform. It may simply need a cleaner version of what it already has.

That could mean keeping the same underlying system, but improving the layout, simplifying menus, removing unused functions, tidying the shop, checking the membership process and making the admin side more understandable.

This option recognises that the present system may be broadly right, but badly understood, poorly documented or untidy.

That is not unusual. Many websites become sheds with a front door. They still work, but nobody is entirely sure why the lawnmower is on top of the Christmas decorations.

Option 3 - Move to Squarespace

Squarespace is an all-in-one website building service. It provides the editing tools, hosting and design templates in one package. It is generally easier for non-technical users than a more open-ended system.

Squarespace may be a reasonable option if the Club wants something simpler and more modern-looking.

It could probably handle public pages, simple shop items, payments and member-only pages. But we must test whether it can handle our exact membership process:

- One-off payment.
- Manual approval.
- Lifetime member access.
- Member-only pages.
- Simple document archive.
- Easy administration by ordinary committee users.

If it can do that cleanly, it may be worth considering.

If it cannot, then it is not suitable, however pretty it looks.

Even if Squarespace were used, Hostinger could still remain the DNS and domain control point. Squarespace would host the visible website, while Hostinger would continue to point the Club's web address to the right place.

Option 4 - Move to Wix

Wix is another all-in-one website building service. It can do public pages, shops, payments and member areas.

However, my first experience of it was not encouraging. I found it slow, intrusive and irritating.

That matters because a Club website must be editable by normal volunteers. If the editing system annoys people, they stop using it properly.

I would not rule it out completely, but I would not put it first.

Option 5 - Build a custom site

A custom site could be made to look and work exactly as we want. But unless it includes a simple admin area for ordinary Club officers, it risks becoming another one-person system.

That would not solve the problem. It would merely move it.

A custom site is only sensible if future officers can use it without needing a programmer.

A beautiful custom system that only one person understands is not a Club asset. It is a hostage situation with better typography.

10. What we should do before choosing anything

Before deciding whether to keep the present system, move to Squarespace, or do anything else, I should meet Alfie Windsor, understand the current arrangement properly, and report back. Alfie lives about 30 minutes from me, so a face-to-face handover or exploratory meeting should be practical.

That meeting should establish what access exists, what is backed up, how members are approved, where the payment arrangements sit, what parts of the website are still actively used, and what should not be disturbed.

We need:

- Hostinger login details.
- DNS access and screenshots of the current DNS settings.
- WordPress admin login details.
- Stripe/payment account access.
- Full website backup.
- Database backup.
- Copy of all uploaded files.
- Export of products.
- Export of members/users.
- Export of orders, if needed.
- List of all add-ons and what they do.
- List of all administrators.
- Notes on how members are approved.
- Notes on where payments go.
- Alfie's explanation of what is current, what is old, what is redundant and what should not be disturbed.

This is basic housekeeping.

It is not glamorous, but neither is checking the bilges. You still do it before setting off.

11. Recommended decision for 16 June

I suggest the Committee does not decide on 16 June whether to replace the website.

Instead, I suggest the Committee agrees that:

- I should first speak with Alfie Windsor, the current website administrator, and establish exactly what the current site does. Alfie lives about 30 minutes from me, so a face-to-face handover or exploratory meeting should be practical. I can then report back to the Committee with a clearer picture of what is current, what is redundant, what access exists, what is backed up, and what should not be disturbed.
- The Club must confirm who controls the domain, DNS, hosting, payment account, admin access, member data and backups.
- Given that Hostinger is paid through to 2030, the Club should retain Hostinger for DNS and domain control unless a clear reason emerges to change that.
- The Club must obtain full access and backups before making any major decision.
- The Club must write down what the website needs to do in future.

Only then should the Committee decide whether to:

- Keep the present system.
- Tidy and simplify it.
- Partly rebuild it.
- Move to another platform.

The two main options worth serious comparison appear to be:

- A cleaned-up version of the current WordPress-based site, probably retaining Hostinger for DNS and possibly for hosting.
- A Squarespace rebuild, but only if it can handle one-off lifetime membership, manual approval and member-only pages.

Wix can be kept as a possible fallback, but should not be the first choice at this stage.

A custom-built site should only be considered if ordinary Club officers can manage it without technical help.

12. My provisional view

My provisional view is that keeping the current system and tidying it up is probably the safest route, because it already does most of what the Club needs.

However, it must be brought under proper Club control. We need backups, shared access, documentation and a clear handover process.

Squarespace may still be worth testing. It might give us a simpler, cleaner site. But it must be tested against the real membership process, not just judged on how nice the homepage looks.

The Club's problem is not simply that the website needs refreshing.

The problem is that the website has become part shop, part membership office, part filing cabinet and part locked members' room.

The intention need not be to replace it. Replacement is only one possible answer. The first task is to understand the present system, the constraints it imposes, and whether those constraints are acceptable.

This report has been written before talking to Alfie Windsor, and his input may change some of the detail. But I doubt it changes the main point: before we replace it, tidy it, move it, or leave it alone, we need to know exactly what is inside it, who has the keys, and whether anyone has remembered where the spare keys are kept.