

Ask About Ireland - a User Centred Approach to Digitised Cultural Content

Ireland
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The *Ask about Ireland* website at www.askaboutireland.ie, was developed by The Library Council in 2002 to provide online access to the wealth of local studies material held in local libraries and to digitise important national datasets. The national digitisation strategy for public libraries, outlined in the report of the initial pilot project, *Our Cultural Heritage: a strategy for action for public libraries*¹, set out the main elements of the strategy:

- to provide a single point of access to local collections in public libraries
- to develop digitisation expertise in library authorities
- to encourage the development of individual public library local studies websites and online local studies content
- to encourage the take-up of the Internet through the provision of quality, relevant content for the general public and for targeted groups including primary and secondary level students.

AskaboutIreland.ie is now one of the best used Irish cultural websites. In 2011, the website attracts up to 24000 visits per week, each user spending an average time of 6 minutes on the site per visit.

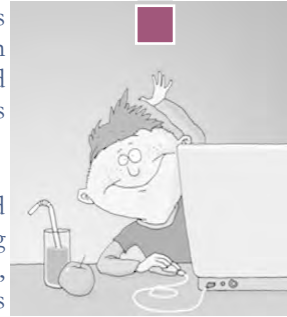
Additional national datasets were funded by the Department of the Environment, Community and Local Government for digitisation, including the Irish Times Digital Archive from 1856, Griffith's Valuation of Ireland, the Ordnance Survey Historic Maps interface, and digital books.

In 2009, in line with its policy of developing shared services to achieve efficiencies in the management of services and to maximise synergies for the end user, the Department requested that www.enfo.ie and

www.change.ie be developed and managed as part of the www.askaboutireland.ie service. In 2010, the Department added www.greeningcommunities.ie to the site, and is currently under development.

The *Ask about Ireland* team incorporated user research into its development planning from the start of the project. School students, who are regular users of the local studies sections of their local libraries for history, geography and environmental science projects, were identified as a major target user group. Resource mapping to meet the curricular needs of students was also undertaken for the Social, Environmental and Scientific Education (SESE) curriculum.

The Primary Students' content was developed initially for the new curricula in History and Geography and across all age groups within primary schools. It has been created in consultation with the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, the National Centre for Technology in Education, and the



Primary Students' homepage on AskaboutIreland.ie



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Primary Curriculum Support Programme. An Education Consultant also worked with the team throughout the project.

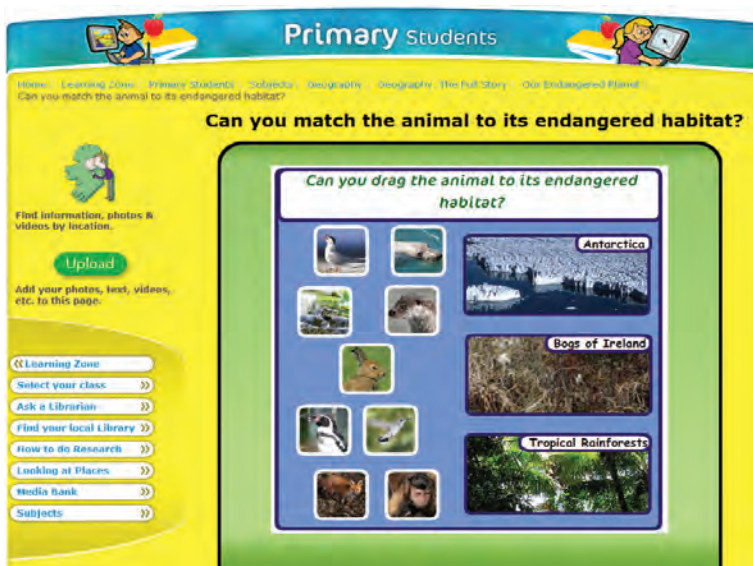
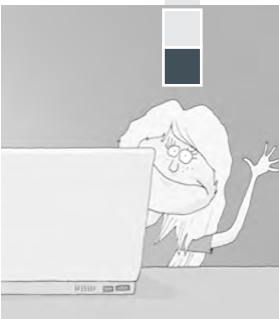
It became apparent early in the development of the Learning Zone that the content must be specifically relevant to the curriculum and age appropriate in order to be used in the classroom by teachers. For this reason, the original content was prepared by teams of primary school teachers working with local studies librarians who provided the cultural heritage content on which the curriculum units were based. Each class group has its own section for each subject. All content units are accompanied by teachers' notes to provide teachers with guidelines for making the best use of the content and for expanding on the topic. Content is added on an ongoing basis, in History, Geography, Environment, Science and Irish, and in additional subjects over time.

The Primary Students' section of the Learning Zone is designed to be as interactive as possible, to encourage the students to think, to

develop their own research skills, and to learn about their local place today and in the past. Each section includes a wide range of interactive activities, photos, educational games, animations, audios and video clips; ideal resources for use with data projectors and interactive whiteboards. This material is not just confined to the individual class group sections; students can search the website mediabank to locate materials from over 15000 items on the website. The mediabank provides a substantial resource for students and teachers alike: for research, for projects or just for curiosity.

Other features include *How to do Research* pages, and a *Looking at Places* section providing local information on the history and geography for each county in Ireland, with links to a map-based interface allowing pupils to search for information on their local area in greater detail. The new *Talking eBooks* section provides senior and junior versions of a range of traditional Irish stories in both English and Irish. In the junior versions, each short page of text can be listened to in one playing or each word and sentence can be played individually to assist with the development of reading and pronunciation skills.

The Secondary Students' section offers a wide variety of content to support the Post-Primary Curriculum and provides students with authentic materials to support a researched-based learning approach. The strong interactive element to the *Learning Zone* encourages students to learn through exploration and inquiry and especially supports the development of critical thinking skills. There are lots of original photographs, maps, drawings, pictures and audios from all over the country, together with a wide range of educational games.



Interactive activity in the Primary Students' section

SHORT

ARTICLES

FROM

CLOSED

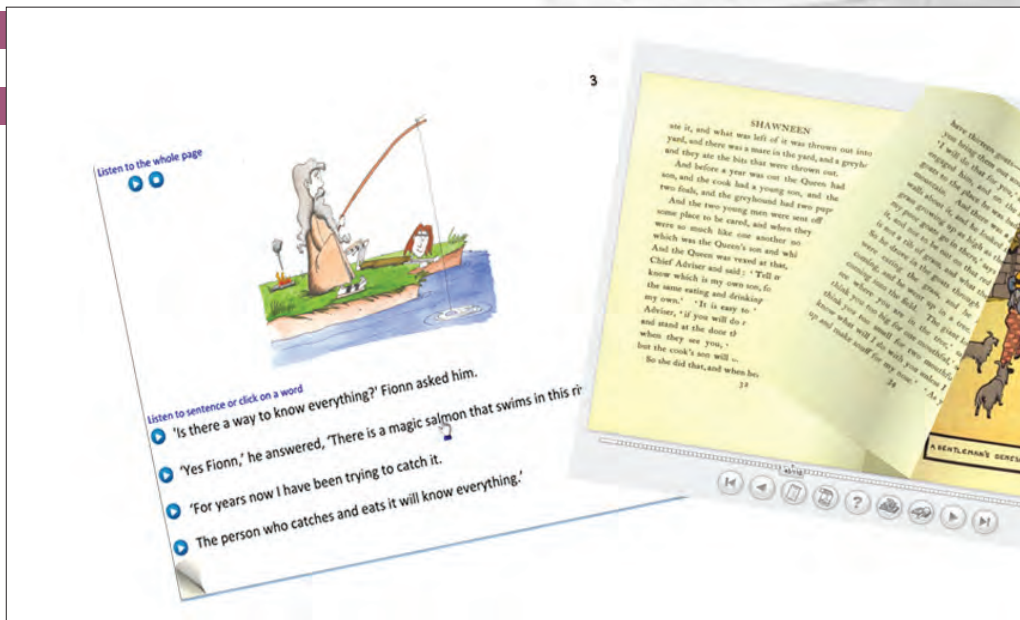
DOORS

TO OPEN

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Talking eBooks and Flickbooks on Askaboutireland.ie



The new *ENFO Kids* section of the site provides a broad range of information on many aspects of the environment with illustrating photographs, interactive activities, audios and games. Interactive learning resources on popular environmental topics for pupils and teachers are included in the sections: Habitats, Climate Change, Biodiversity, Waste, Recycling, Water, Animals, Birds and Sea Life. The animated characters and interactive activities in the *ENFO Kids* section help children identify ways to protect their local environment and offer practical suggestions on how schools can take action to become more environmentally friendly. Useful educational resources including nature fact sheets for kids, environmental posters and exhibitions are also available for download.

In addition to the primary and secondary content, the other main features of the site provide a substantial resource for students learning. The *Reading Room* offers access to



Secondary Students' homepage



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