

10 Years On - GeoPlace Awards 2015



The day's play at Edgbaston might be summarised as addresses comfortably coasting to victory while streets are just beginning to get to grips with a sticky wicket! Robin Waters, who is one of the Exemplar Award judges, reports from a rain-affected match being played in front of a smaller crowd than the GeoPlace 'Everything Happens Somewhere' event in Birmingham.

The event took place at Edgbaston Cricket Ground on 19 May 2015 - the third day of a county match between Warwickshire and Durham. The home side's first innings 450. Durham finally skittled out for 185 in front of our very eyes (well a few of us) and forced to follow on.

No, I have not quite retired – and I won't be watching much cricket when I do. It started with day one of the gazetteer fest laid on by GeoPlace for all those hardworking people who cooperate to provide the National Gazetteers for Land and Property, and for Streets. In fact, it is the 10th anniversary of the GeoPlace annual conference, exhibition and presentation of the Exemplar Awards. Your reporter was also on the jury for those awards which go some way to make up for the low regard in which gazetteer custodians are often held by the press and many ignorant politicians.

Green Councillor 'Gets It'

Not so councillor Jason Kitcat, immediate past leader of Brighton and Hove City Council who spoke very enthusiastically and very succinctly about the need for well-coordinated information sharing across and between councils. He specifically challenged us and our elected representatives to treat legal advice as advice and not as absolute instruction when questions are raised about the legalities of sharing data. He closed a very short speech (no slides) with an exhortation to be bold, to be proud and to be change agents! Someone has got the message!

There were over 300 in the audience who were welcomed as usual by Richard Mason, GeoPlace managing director, who reminded us that the first meeting in Manchester in 2005 had only 75 attendees. Of course, the nitty-gritty of gazetteer creation and maintenance took centre stage but Richard drew our attention to the almost complete transition that has now taken place from Ordnance Survey's original address datasets to the AddressBase products derived from the national land and property gazetteer compiled by GeoPlace from local authority inputs.

He emphasised the recent 'opening' of access to UPRNs, which are now free to use in any way and which he called a 'golden thread'. This linkage is already being used in the majority of authorities to enable the exchange of information between their many databases. Four councils – North Somerset, Huntingdonshire, Camden and Newport already claim to link more than 20 different databases through their gazetteers and only 26 (out of 400+) are linking less than five sets of information.

Postman and Valuer

Last year, at Old Trafford cricket ground with no match to watch, the conference pioneered the knowledge exchange sessions with eight to ten people discussing specific issues on 30 tables with a facilitator on each. I listened to a really heartfelt plea to ensure that nondomestic rating information from the Valuation Office Agency used a compatible set of attributes to those required for the NLPG. It must be very frustrating to find that all your hard work has been nullified by a system that cannot cope with a particular set of attributes. Richard Mason's table encouraged participants to say 'what they wanted from GeoPlace' and the overwhelming answer was more support in convincing their employers – officers and elected councillors – that gazetteers were necessary if not sufficient for the effective digital transformation of any council. There was also a call for a better set of processes for dealing with Royal Mail which currently seems to vary widely across the country. The privatisation seems not to have made much difference to addressing processes and the Address Management Unit continues as before. Now they have settled down it is GeoPlace's intention to tackle some of the outstanding issues relating to the allocation of addresses and postcodes.

Attentive GISPro readers will know that the Land Registry has now been mandated to take over responsibility for the land charge searches required for all conveyancing. This required local authorities to provide their current land charge databases from several different systems and formats and also to codify much 'local knowledge'. On one table I saw an advocate for the new system run into some very sceptical questioning from current local authority practitioners and I can certainly see many hurdles to be overcome before Land Registry will be able to deliver a 100% service. Issues arise from the use of addresses (presumably with an AddressBase point coordinate) in some places but the use of Basic Land and Property Unit (BLPU) polygons in others. What I had not fully realised was that we are actually moving full circle – some of the land charge information was previously provided (in a pre-digital age) by HMLR. The main reason for the change championed by the government is to provide a consistent and cost-effective service across England and Wales. We will see!

Exemplar Awards

And so to the Awards which were presented by Claire Holloway, chair of the Local Government Association, which coowns GeoPlace with Ordnance Survey.

The main Exemplar Award was won by Bromley Borough Council which demonstrated impressive savings by creating a street gazetteer based schedule of streets and paths for tendering their street cleansing contract. They were thereby able to visualise and model different frequencies and projected potential savings by reengineering schedules of work. This resulted in substantial annual – sustainable – savings of £800k.

The local digital award went to Northumberland County Council but no single winner could be found for the Peer Award. In fact, it was awarded to both Glenn Dobson of Hull City Council and Pauline Clifford from Reigate and Banstead Borough Council for their work in their own councils but also for their contribution to the national scene. Most improved address data was in South Lakeland DC and most improved Street data was in Hampshire.

So, with the mention of another first-class cricket team, we leave Edgbaston with the feeling that this event is very well focused. It is also well supported by several companies which provide software to help the custodians; provide some of the raw data that meshes with the gazetteers, or build on top of the GeoPlace products. There is no doubting the dedication of most local authority employees – one might wish that they were better supported by their bosses – elected or otherwise.

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