

Venturing into e-commerce

The BGS Internet shop

by Chris Green, *Keyworth*

Through its National Geoscience Information Service (NGIS), the BGS is the UK's leading supplier of geoscience information to users and customers both national and international. NGIS sells, via a well-developed mail order system and a network of approved suppliers, the publications (books, reports, guides, maps, and popular publications) resulting from its national geoscience surveying, mapping and monitoring programme and its non-confidential commissioned research programme. NGIS also licenses the digital data that often result from these programmes.

In recent years the BGS has joined enthusiastically the Internet revolution and NGIS operates and maintains a large information web site at: www.bgs.ac.uk. This site not only tells visitors what we do and what our

products are, but also offers free access to a large amount of geoscience reference material by providing online database searches and downloadable reports and magazines.

We have sought to improve still further our delivery of information and services to our customers by venturing into e-commerce. We have established, as part of NGIS, a fully commercial web site — an Internet Shop. This shop enables visitors to order, and pay online for, a large number of BGS products and services. Whilst the first step has been to implement an online version of our publication catalogue, thus making it available to wider audience than by conventional channels, there is a longer-term objective. The establishment of an Internet shop is seen as essential to service the delivery of our increasing portfolio of digital products and, in the

future, to provide online consultancy and advice services.

The route we adopted to move into e-commerce was with a commercial technology and business partner, Compaq, who proposed to waive up-front charges for establishing and operating the site in exchange for a revenue share. Apart from being financially attractive to a public sector body such as the BGS, a public-private partnership of this type is prototypical of the type of relationship envisioned in the recent Baker Review as important for national development.

The necessary IT infrastructure was already available at Compaq's hosting centre in Reading where they have a server 'farm' — capable of hosting twenty to thirty sites. To communicate with the BGS it has 16Mb optical fibre links and 64kbit ISDN lines. Besides hosting the technology, Compaq's data centre provides the facilities for secure online credit card payments via Netbanx, and it generates management reports. Using the high-speed links, the BGS can communicate with its host server to update and modify the product list, and to create publicity pages for special offers.

The BGS's Internet Shop (www.british-geological-survey.co.uk) was launched in April of this year and it is the first fully commercial site operated by a public sector research establishment in the UK. It has been running successfully since its launch and already attracted customers worldwide. It is under continuous development, and the BGS has regular meetings with Compaq to plan extensions to the site and the introduction of new products and services.

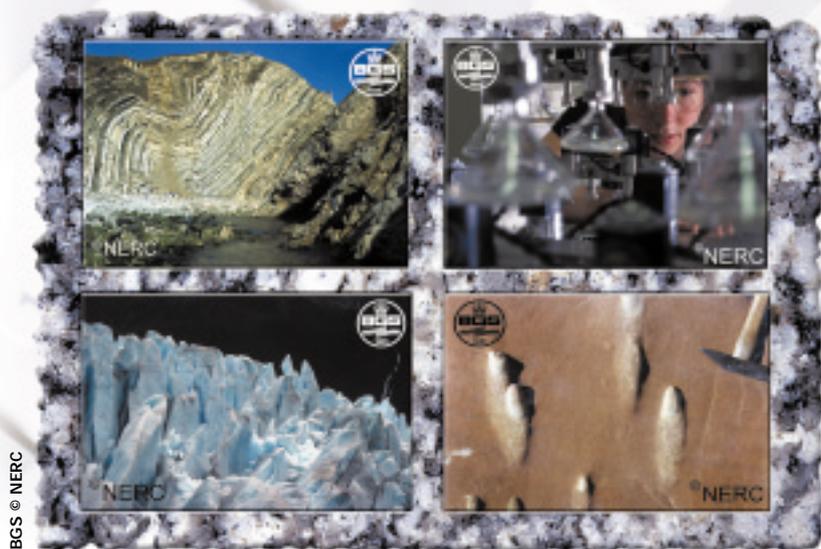
Currently, as planned, the main feature of the BGS Internet shop is online access to the BGS's extensive catalogue of conventional products, but some digital products delivered by electronic download are already available and others are in preparation. Another attractive feature of the shop is a photographic library selected from the BGS's extensive archive of photographs dating back to the 1900s.

For further information about the BGS Internet Shop contact:

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A selection of photographs currently available through the BGS Internet Shop.