

A guide to reading RSS feeds

by James Head

Introduction

Those using the BOF website may have noticed that since the 5th of April this year there have been two "RSS feeds" available, one for news and the other for results. I've also included one for the BOF Map Group website and by the time you read this Lew will have added one to the Devon OC website.

This guide is meant to explain to novices what an RSS feed is and how to access them. Hopefully most of it should be easy to follow but if there are any queries please e-mail them to me. My e-mail address is published in the Devon OC membership list.

Depending upon who you ask RSS stands either for "Really Simple Syndication", "Rich Site Summary", "RDF Site Summary" and probably by the time you finish reading this a dozen or so other things as well. What it's called doesn't really matter; what does matter is that it's an easy way of keeping up to date with items published on a website and saves people time.

Basically an RSS feed is a list of items from a website, each item having a title, short description and a link to the relevant page on the website with more information.

An RSS feed enables people to see a snapshot of the contents of a website and any changes without actually having to visit that website first; thereby saving you time and keeping you up to date.

A good example of RSS is the BBC news website at <http://news.bbc.co.uk/> where there are a number of feeds available for different categories of news such as UK, Politics and Entertainment. If you were to view the BBC's RSS feed you may see something like:

UK News Lovely Samantha wins Mornington Crescent Championship.
..... Paula Nancy Millstone Jennings named as new Poet Laureate.
..... Spanish Inquisition spotted on London bus.

If an item interests you then you can select it and would then be taken to the relevant webpage.

Websites that have RSS feeds available often advertise these using a number of icons, some of which are shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1 RSS feed icons



Software for reading RSS

To start using RSS feeds you need to have a program that is capable of reading and displaying the feed. There are many programs available, known as RSS Readers that are capable of this. There are also add-ins or plug-ins for some programs you may already be familiar with such as Internet Explorer and Outlook.

In addition some web browsers have support for reading RSS already built in. Although Internet Explorer does not have RSS support built in as yet, it is very likely that the next version, released later this year, will.

I'm going to be going through how to use RSS with a handful of programs including a plug-in for Internet Explorer, a dedicated RSS reader and the Firefox web browser. The steps can easily be adapted for other programs.

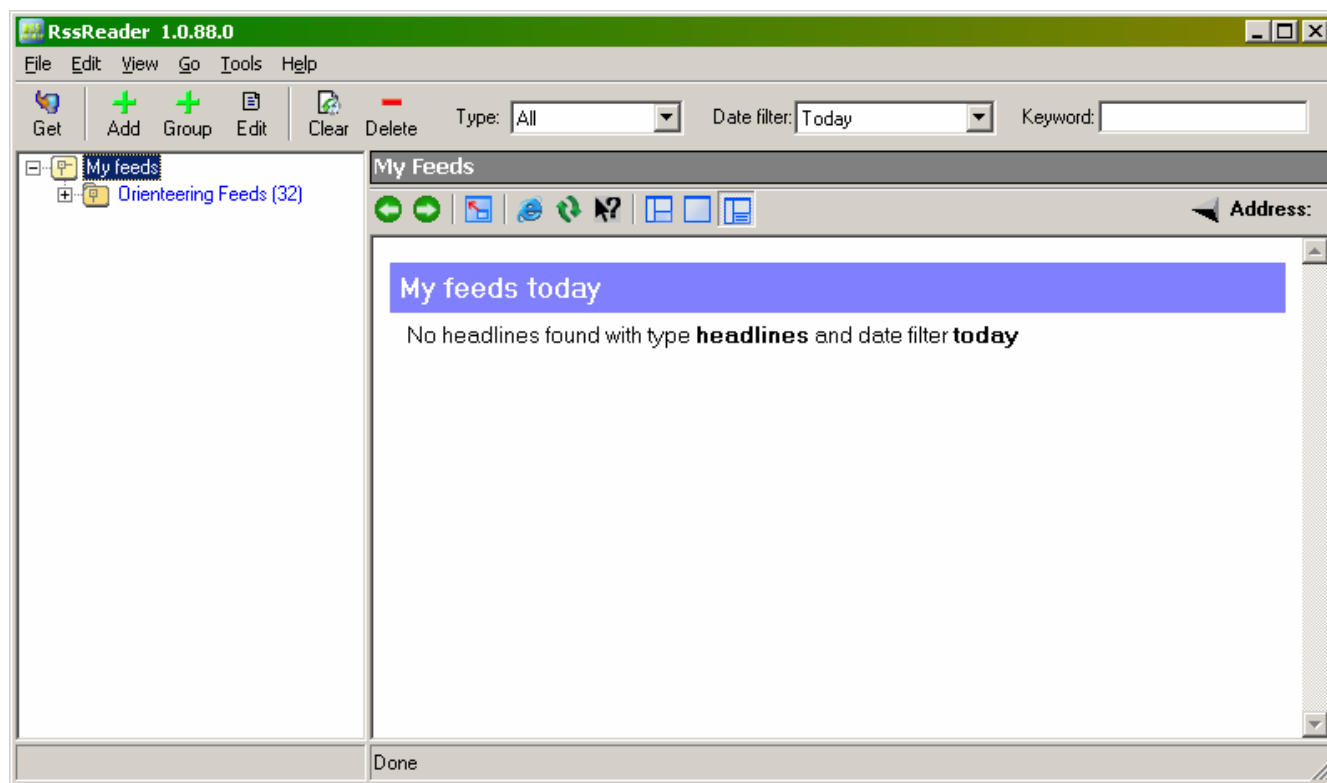
RSSReader

RSSReader is an easy-to-use program for reading RSS feeds. It can be downloaded free of charge from <http://www.rssreader.com/>. You install it by double clicking the downloaded file just as you would any other program.

There is a slight complication though; to run RSSReader you need Windows XP and you also need to have first installed something called the Microsoft .NET framework. You can download this from Microsoft website at http://msdn.microsoft.com/netframework/downloads/framework1_1/ or through Windows update at <http://windowsupdate.microsoft.com/>. Unfortunately it's 24 Mb large so it will take a while to download. Alternatively you can order it on CD for which Microsoft will charge you a \$6.95 handling fee.

When the program is run then the initial RSSReader screen will appear as shown in Figure 2.

Figure 2 RSSReader initial screen

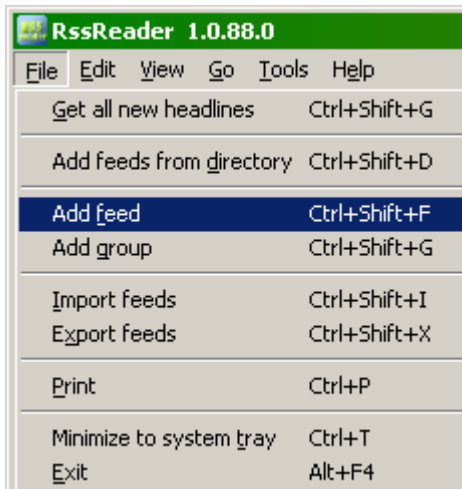


To add an RSS feed to the list of "My feeds" you can either press the green + Add button (Figure 3) or from the menu select "Add feed" (Figure 4).

Figure 3 RSSReader Add button



Figure 4 RSSReader Add feed



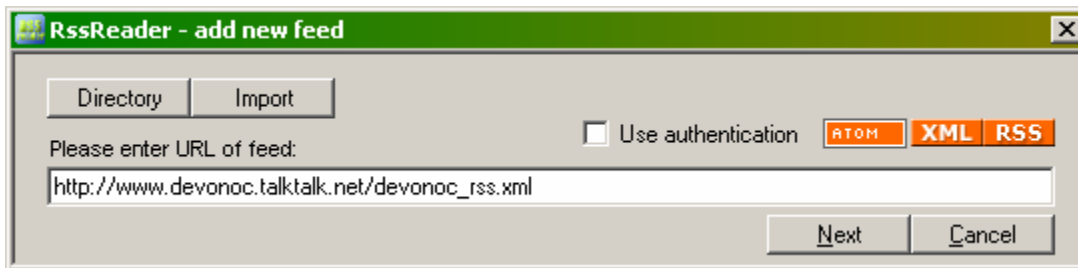
RSSReader will then open the dialogue window shown below in Figure 5.

Where it says "Please enter URL of feed:" you should enter the URL or address of the feed. For the Devon Orienteering Club website this is:

http://www.devonoc.talktalk.net/devonoc_rss.xml

Then press "Next".

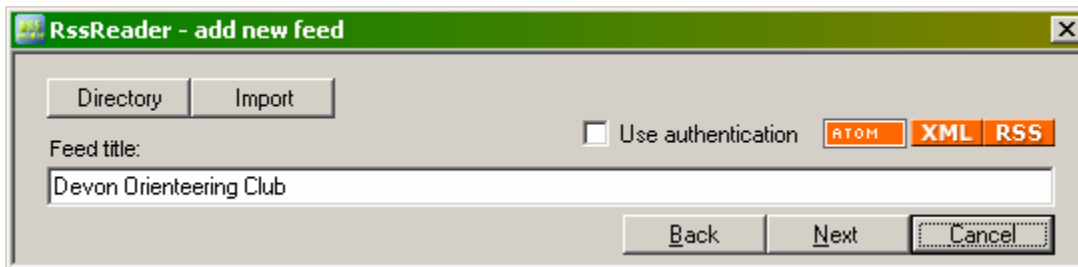
Figure 5 RSSReader Add Feed (1)



The dialogue window will then change to that shown in Figure 6.

Where it says "Feed title:" you should enter your own descriptive name for the feed you are adding, such as Devon Orienteering Club.

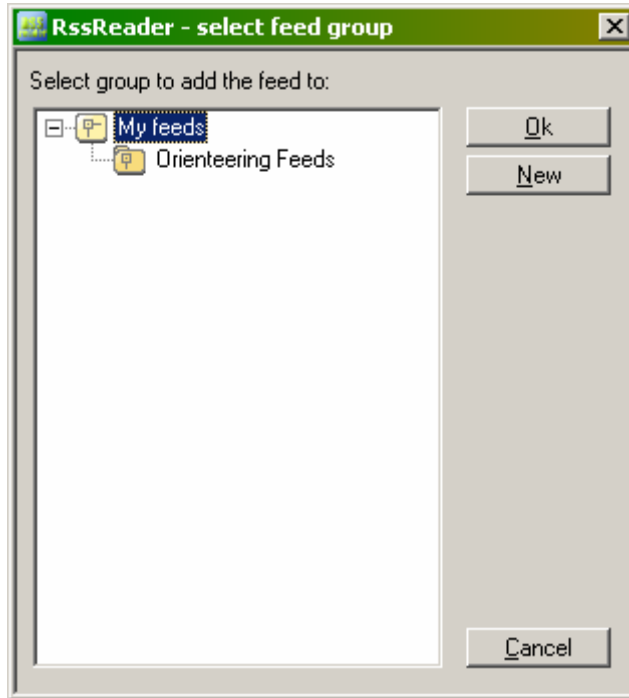
Figure 6 RSSReader Add Feed (2)



Then press "Next".

Next the dialogue window shown in Figure 7 will appear. This allows you to select a folder to keep your new feed in and organise your feeds from different websites. You can create a new folder by pressing "New".

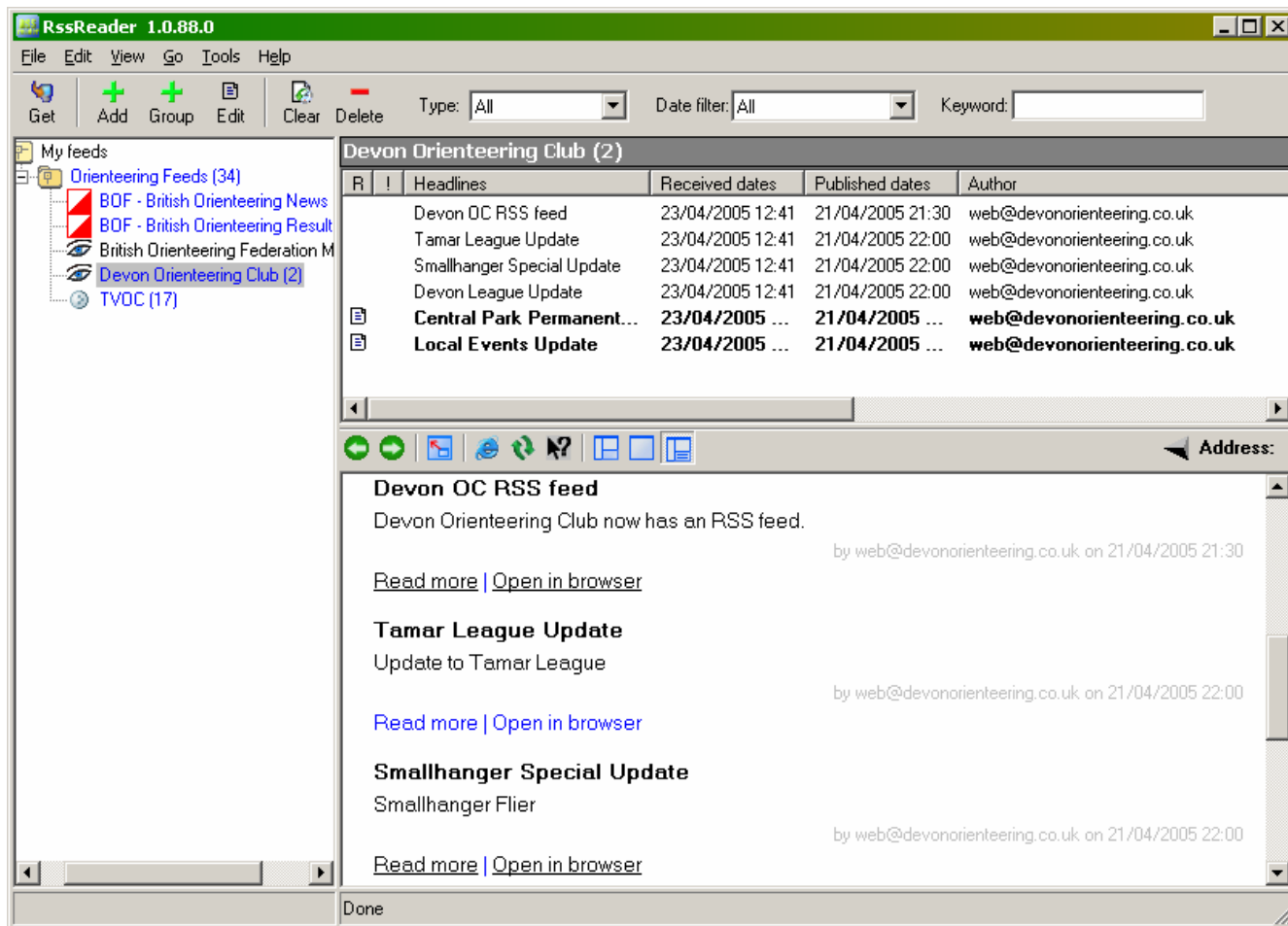
Figure 7 RSSReader Add Feed (3)



After you've selected a folder, or just opted for the default "My feeds" then press "OK".

You can view the contents of your new feed by simply selecting the feed in the left hand part of the screen. The items or headlines in the feed are shown in the top right pane of the window and in more detail in the bottom right pane.

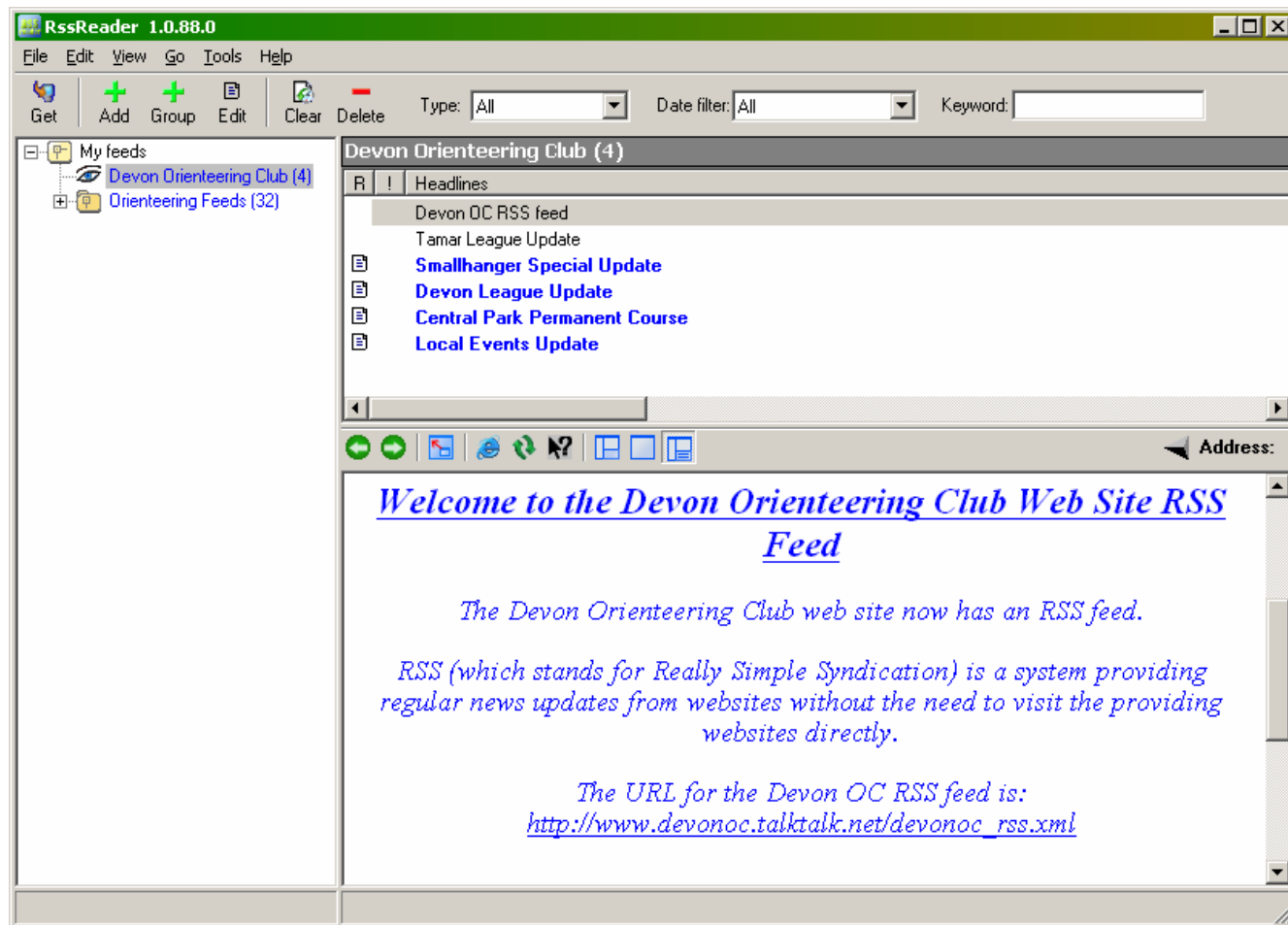
Figure 8 RSSReader displaying a feed



If you select a headline then the bottom pane changes to show that particular item only.

You will notice that for each item there are two hyper links: "Read more" and "Open in browser". If you were to press "Read more" then RSSReader will load the relevant webpage from the website providing the feed, displaying it in the bottom left pane as shown in Figure 9.

Figure 9 RSSReader displaying a webpage



If you were to press "Open in browser" then your default web browser, probably Internet Explorer, will open and automatically open the requested webpage.

RSSReader is a very good and easy to use program for RSS feeds. There are many other programs that are very similar both in operation and design; a few are listed later.

The Firefox Web Browser

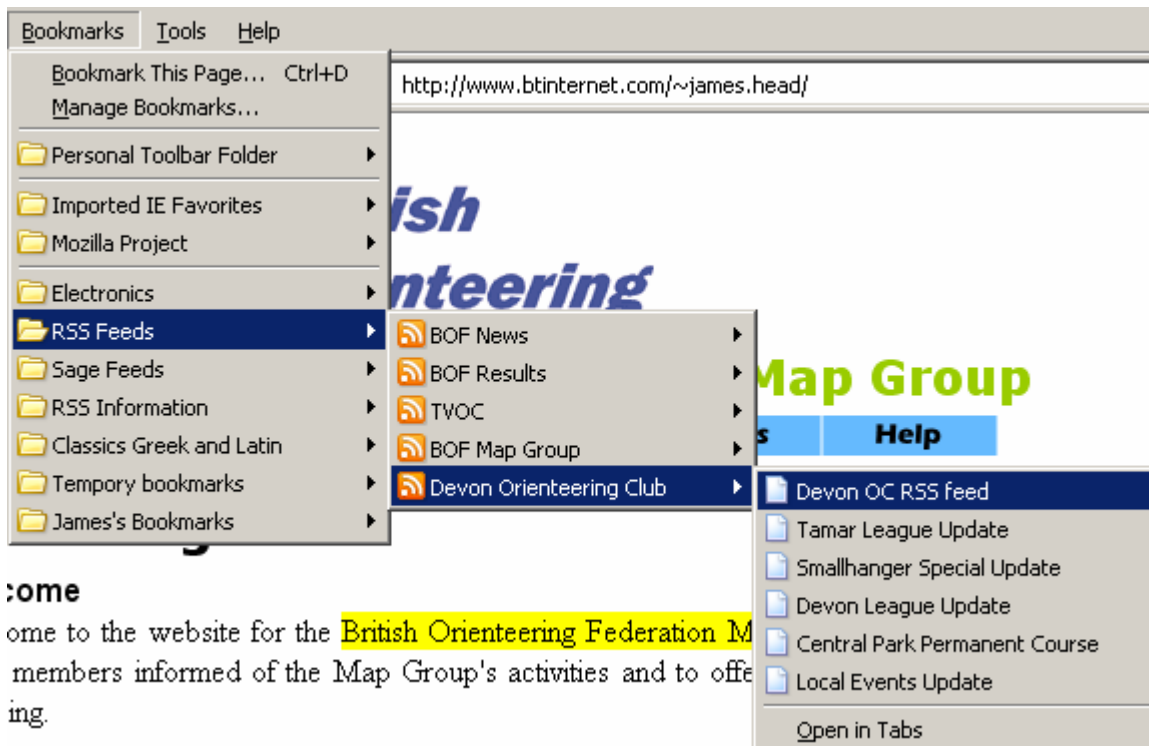
Mozilla Firefox is a web browser, like Internet Explorer, for viewing websites, that is available free-of-charge. You can download a copy from <http://www.mozilla.org/> (about 4.7 Mbytes or 20 minutes) or find it on popular computer magazine cover disks such as PC Plus, PC Pro or PC Advisor.

Unlike RSSReader you do not have to install the Microsoft .NET framework to use Firefox and it runs on Windows 98, ME, NT 4.0, 2000 or XP and a other systems most people will not of heard of!

In addition to normal bookmarks Firefox has a feature called "live bookmarking". This is similar to your favourites in Internet Explorer but instead of showing just a single bookmark to a website you can see a list of different bookmarks to different areas of the same website.

An example can be seen in Figure 10:

Figure 10 Live bookmarks in Firefox



ome
 ome to the website for the **British Orienteering Federation** M
 members informed of the Map Group's activities and to offe
 ing.

The live bookmark is in fact the RSS feed from the website. In Figure 10 you can see the feed for the Devon Orienteering Club website showing the seven most recent items that Lew has added to the site. Clicking on either one of these will take you straight to the relevant page in the site. After about a month, and after the site has changed, the live bookmark will automatically show the new most recent changes without the user having to visit the website.

There are two methods for adding a live bookmark to Firefox. You can follow these examples by visiting the BOF map group website at <http://www.btinternet.com/~james.head/>.

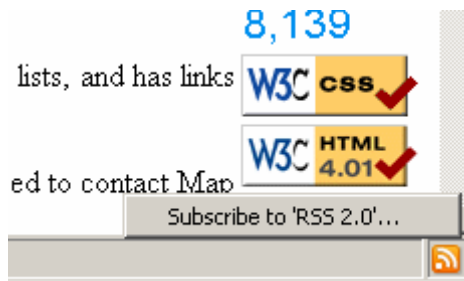
The first and most simple method relies on the website editor having added a special instruction to a webpage. If, when you visit a website, you see a small orange icon in the bottom right corner of the Firefox window, similar to the one below in Figure 11, and those shown next to each RSS feed shown in Figure 10.

Figure 11 Firefox's live bookmark icon



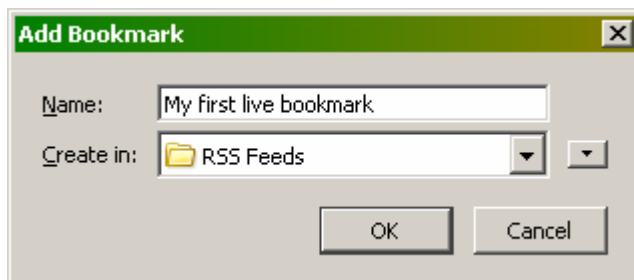
If you click this icon you will see a little button pop up as shown in Figure 12.

Figure 12 Firefox Subscribe to... button



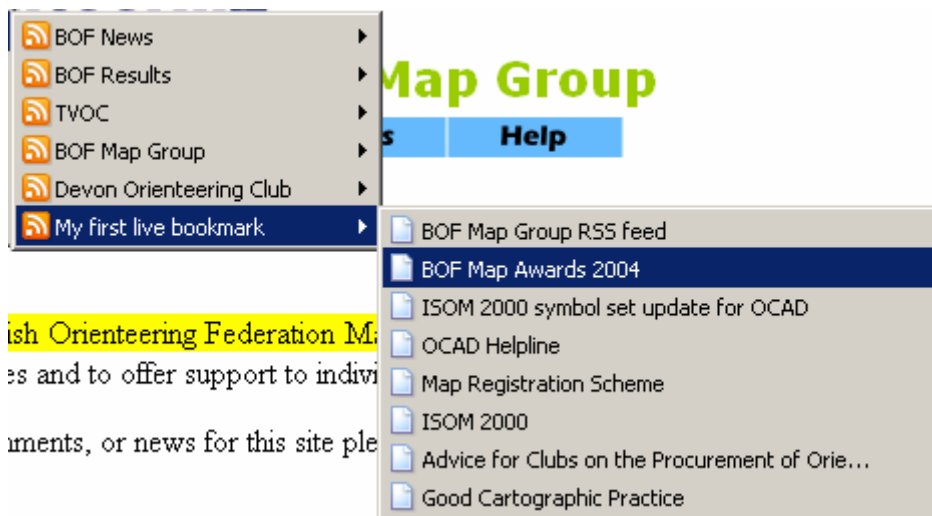
If you press the "Subscribe to 'RSS'..." button then a new dialogue window will appear, as shown in Figure 13. Next you just need to enter a name for your new bookmark and select the folder (if any) you want to organise it under.

Figure 13 Firefox Add Bookmark dialogue



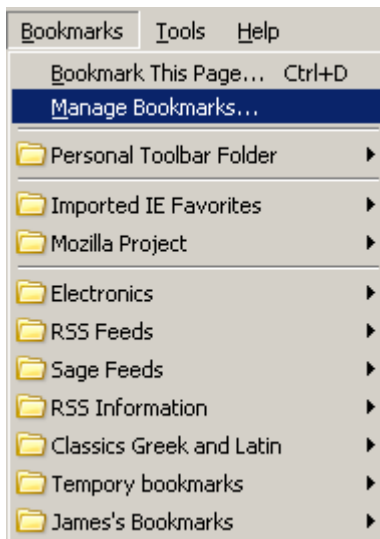
You should now see your new live bookmark, similar to Figure 14, when you click on it from the Bookmarks menu option. You may have to wait a few seconds whilst it loads.

Figure 14 The new added live bookmark

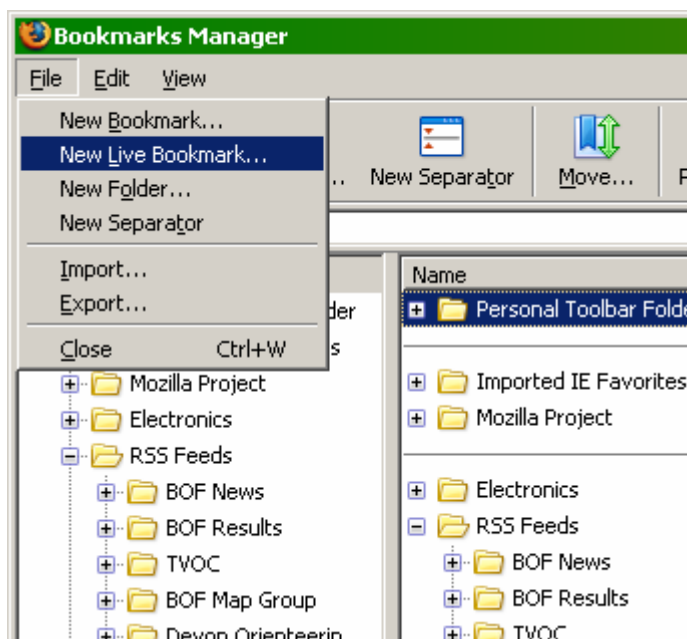


The second method of adding a live bookmark is used if you can't see the icon in the bottom right corner of the Firefox window, but you do know, or can find out, the address of the RSS feed.

To use this method first open the Bookmarks manager by selecting from the menu "Bookmarks" and "Manage Bookmarks..." as shown in Figure 15.

Figure 15 Firefox menu for Manage Bookmarks

In the Bookmarks Manager dialogue window that opens, from the menu, select "File" then "New Live Bookmark" as shown in Figure 16.

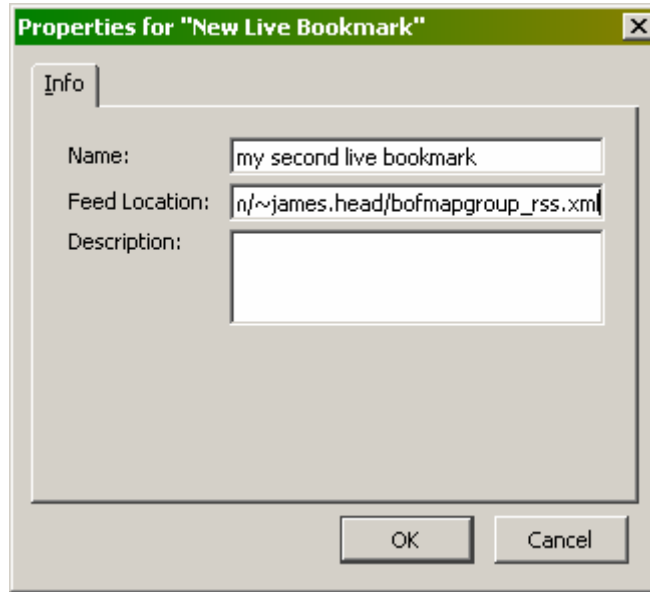
Figure 16 Firefox menu for adding new live bookmark

Next a new dialogue window, titled "Properties for "New Live Bookmark", will appear as shown in Figure 17. Next to "Name:" you should enter your own descriptive name for a particular RSS feed. Next to "Feed Location:" you should enter the URL or address of the RSS feed just as you would enter a website address in your browser. For the BOF Map Group website the address of the RSS feed is:

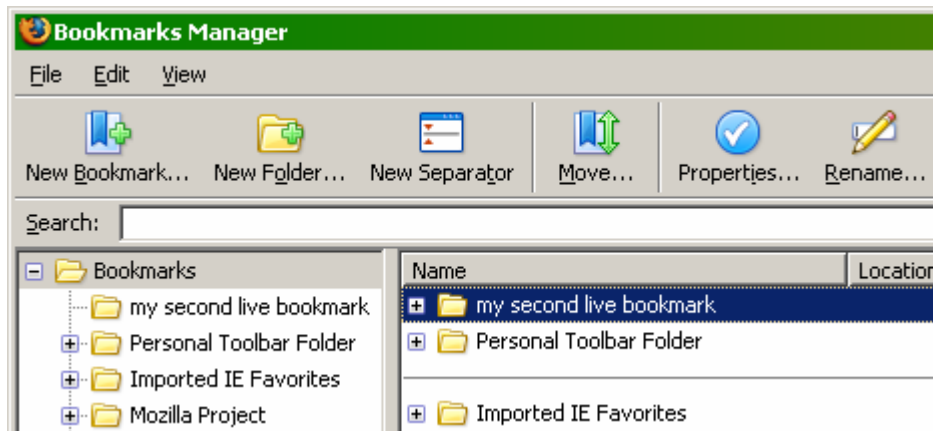
http://www.btinternet.com/~james.head/bofmapgroup_rss.xml

A list of other relevant Orienteering feeds is given at the end of the article.

You can enter a description where shown if you like but this is optional.

Figure 17 Firefox dialogue Properties for New Live Bookmark

After pressing OK you should see a new folder appear in the list of bookmarks for your new feed, as shown in Figure 18.

Figure 18 Bookmarks in Firefox

After you close the Bookmarks Manager dialogue window and return to the main Firefox window you will find your new live bookmark available under the Bookmarks menu just as in Figure 14.

There is also a plug-in available for Firefox, called Sage, that displays RSS feeds in a different way, similar to the way Pluck displays feeds in Internet Explorer. If you want to look at Sage then it can be downloaded and installed from <http://sage.mozdev.org/install/>.

The people behind Firefox also produce an e-mail program called Thunderbird that also has RSS support built in. This program displays RSS feeds in a very similar way to RSSReader described earlier. Thunderbird can also be downloaded from <http://www.mozilla.org/>.

The Pluck Plug-In for Internet Explorer

As stated earlier, Internet Explorer currently doesn't have built-in support for RSS feed however it will probably be added to version 7 available later this year. In the meantime there are plug-ins available to add support. I'm describing "Pluck" which is available free of charge from <http://www.pluck.com/>.

After downloading you install Pluck by double-clicking on the downloaded file just as you would other programs. As part of the installation process the program does ask if you want to set up a Pluck account – this is free and entirely optional. It is not necessary for using the basic RSS Reader but just offers more in the way of searching.

Once Pluck is installed you will see the Pluck tool bar in Internet Explorer (

Figure 21). To turn this on or off, just press the Pluck button shown in Figure 19 or click with the right mouse button on the Internet Explorer toolbar and select "Pluck Toolbar" from the list, as shown in Figure 20.

Figure 19 Pluck Toolbar Button



Figure 20 Pluck Toolbar Selection

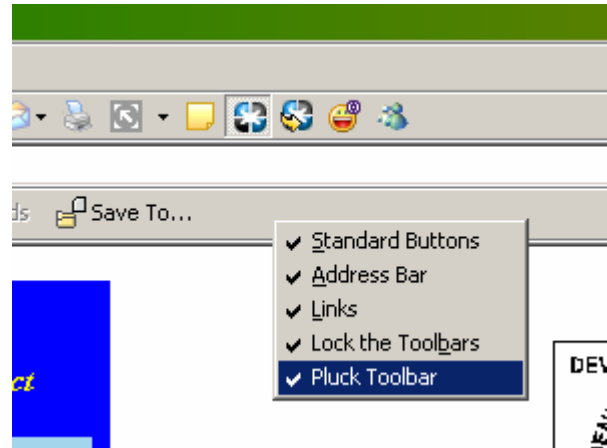
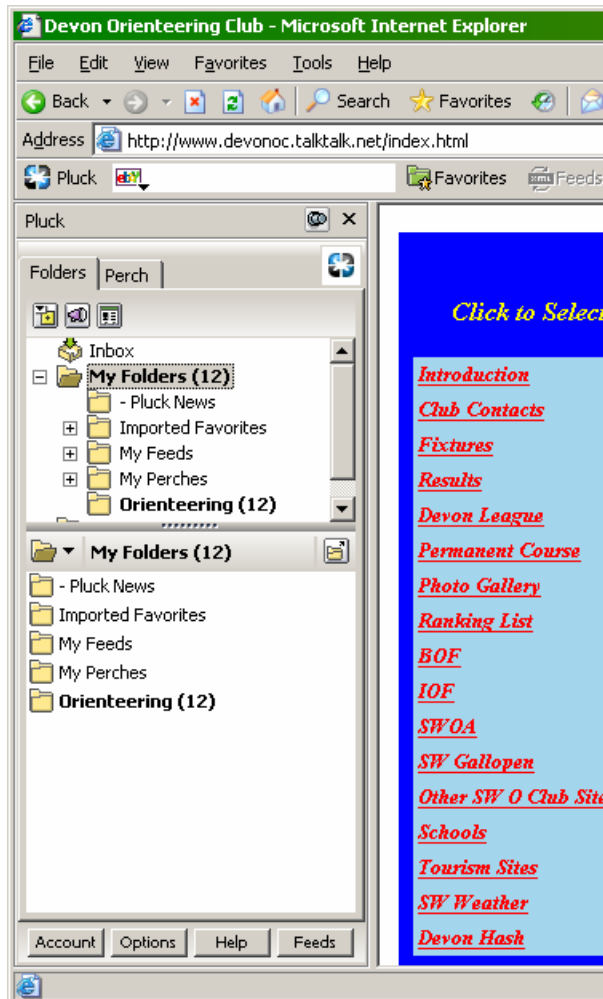


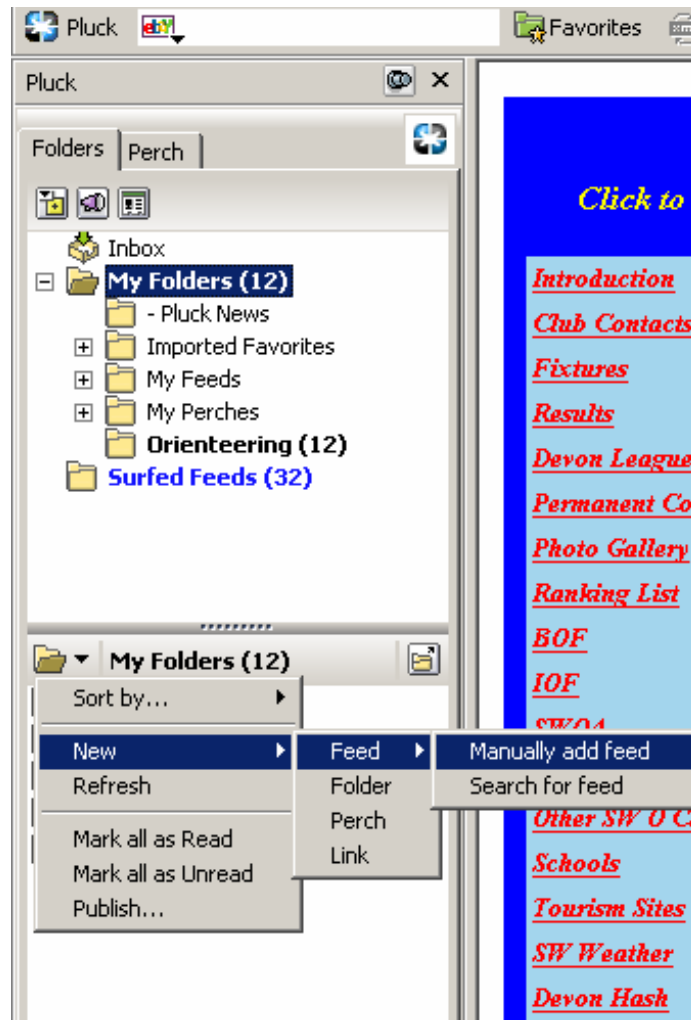
Figure 21 Pluck Toolbar



Pluck shows shortcuts to your favourite RSS feeds in the top half of the toolbar.

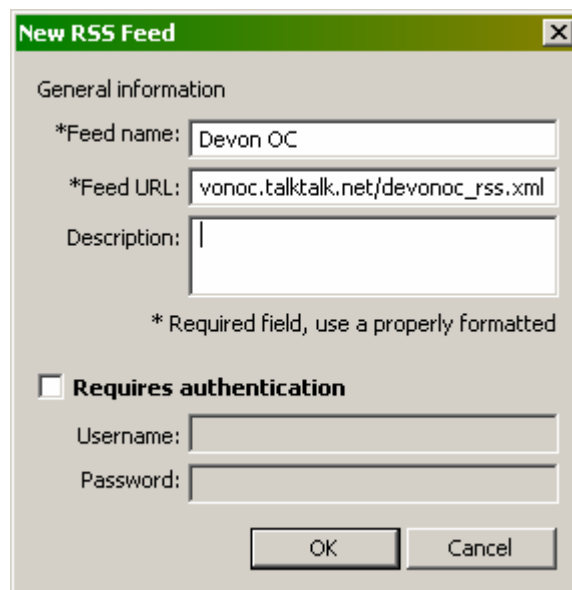
To add an RSS feed to Pluck click on the button marked with a folder and downward pointing arrow, next to "My Folders" in the bottom half of the Pluck tool bar. Next select from the small menu that appears "New" then "Feed" and then "Manually Add Feed" as shown in Figure 22.

Figure 22 Manually Adding a Feed to Pluck



A New RSS Feed dialogue window will open, similar to the one shown in Figure 23.

Figure 23 Pluck New RSS Feed dialogue



Next to "Feed name:" enter your own title for the feed you want to add. Next to "Feed URL:" enter the URL or address of the feed you want to view. For the Devon OC RSS feed this is:

http://www.devonoc.talktalk.net/devonoc_rss.xml

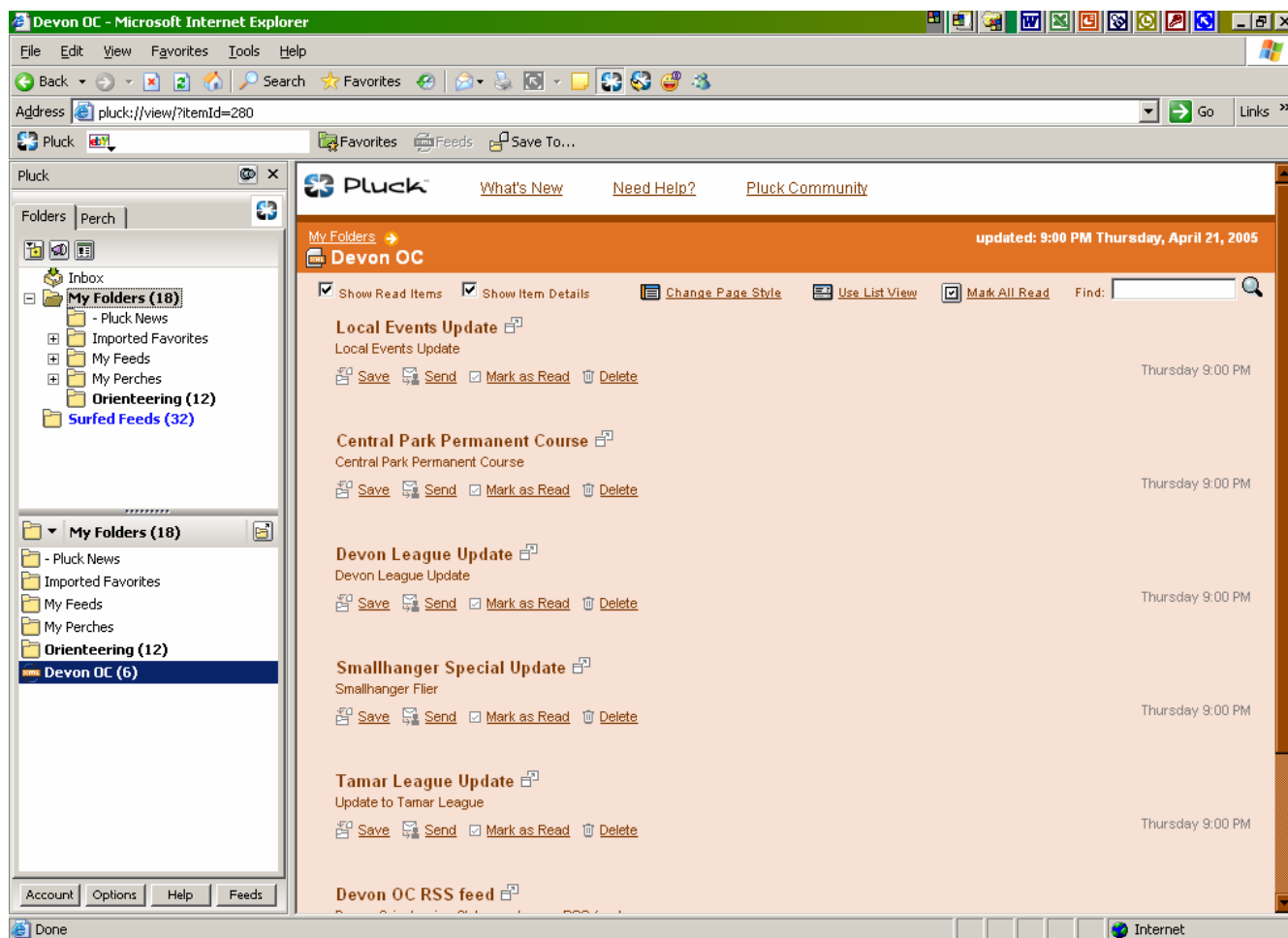
Then press "OK". You will then see a shortcut to your new feed appear in the bottom half of the Pluck toolbar as shown in Figure 24.

Figure 24 The added feed



If you then select the new shortcut then your newly added feed will appear in Internet Explorer as shown in Figure 25. Items along with a description are listed and clicking on an item will take you direct to that item on the main website.

Figure 25 Pluck displaying an RSS feed



Pluck does have more features and ways of using RSS feeds but I'll leave you to discover these on your own.

Orienteering RSS Feeds

Now we've wet your appetites, here are the addresses for some useful Orienteering RSS feeds:

Devon Orienteering Club	http://www.devonoc.talktalk.net/devonoc_rss.xml
BOF News	http://www.britishorienteering.org.uk/NEWS_RSS.XML
BOF Results	http://www.britishorienteering.org.uk/RESULTS_RSS.XML
BOF Map Group website	http://www.btinternet.com/~james.head/bofmapgroup_rss.xml

RSS Reading Software and Links

RSSReader	RSS Reader (Windows XP)	http://www.rssreader.com/
SharpReader	RSS Reader similar to RSSReader (Windows – no versions specified by author)	http://www.sharpreader.net/
RSS Bandit	RSS Reader similar to RSSReader (Windows 98, ME, NT 4.0, 2000, XP)	http://www.rssbandit.org/

RSSReader, Sharp Reader and RSS Bandit all require the Microsoft .NET framework installed.

.NET	Microsoft .NET framework http://msdn.microsoft.com/netframework/downloads/framework1_1/	
Firefox	Web browser with RSS support (Windows 98, ME, NT 4.0, 2000, XP)	http://www.mozilla.org/
Thunderbird	E-mail client with RSS support (Windows 98, ME, NT 4.0, 2000, XP)	http://www.mozilla.org/
Sage	Firefox plug-in for RSS (Windows 98, ME, NT 4.0, 2000, XP)	http://sage.mozdev.org/
Pluck	Internet Explorer plug-in for RSS	http://www.pluck.com/