The nurture and care of Thunderbirds

by Andy Pepperdine

This paper is about some of the functions of the Thunderbird e-mail client program. It will attempt to describe what Accounts and Identities are; one way to use the folders it keeps; how to use filters to separate subjects; and what tags could be used for. There is a lot more to this free program, but that will be ample to get you used to some useful features.

How to get it

If you do not have Thunderbird, just put "thunderbird download" (without quotes) into your favourite search engine and you'll quickly get to http://en-gb.www.mozillamessaging.com/en-GB/thunderbird/ (if you're in the UK) where you will be able to get the latest one, which is version 3.

This paper is based on version 2 as installed from the Ubuntu 9.10 packages. The new features appear to be largely improvements to the interface, but the new wizards may make it easier for newcomers to get started. If anyone has tried TB 3, please let us know what you think.

Accounts

For each different e-mail address, you will be accessing a server to download the mail messages; for each of these addresses, you will create a single **account** under Thunderbird.

The dialog is reached from Edit → Account Settings... To add an account, hit the Add Account button at the lower left. This paper deals only with e-mail accounts, so ensure the Email account is marked and then hit Next.

More details of names (which you supply) and the server (which your e-mail provider will give you) will be needed. All of this information (except for the POP / IMAP decision) can be changed later, and indeed some extra settings can be changed only later; consequently this paper will now look only at the dialog for managing account details after the accounts have been initialised.

It is important to recognise that sending a message is a very different action from receiving one. Some ISP's will insist on using their outgoing servers for e-mail from your own accounts with the ISP. Others are more free and you can use their servers to send e-mail from other accounts. You may also have access to a different outgoing server that you can use and is not associated with your ISP at all.

Keeping your security data safe

Thunderbird keeps log-in details and passwords in order that it can log in to your e-mail servers to retrieve the messages. To keep these safe, and from prying eyes, you can save them all behind a single password, which also has the advantage of reducing the number of items you have to remember.

From the menu Edit → Preferences you are taken to the dialog for settings that control Thunderbird's behaviour overall as opposed to for each individual account. In this dialog, select the

Privacy icon along the top, and then the Passwords tab. Here you can set and change the master password to safeguard all the others.
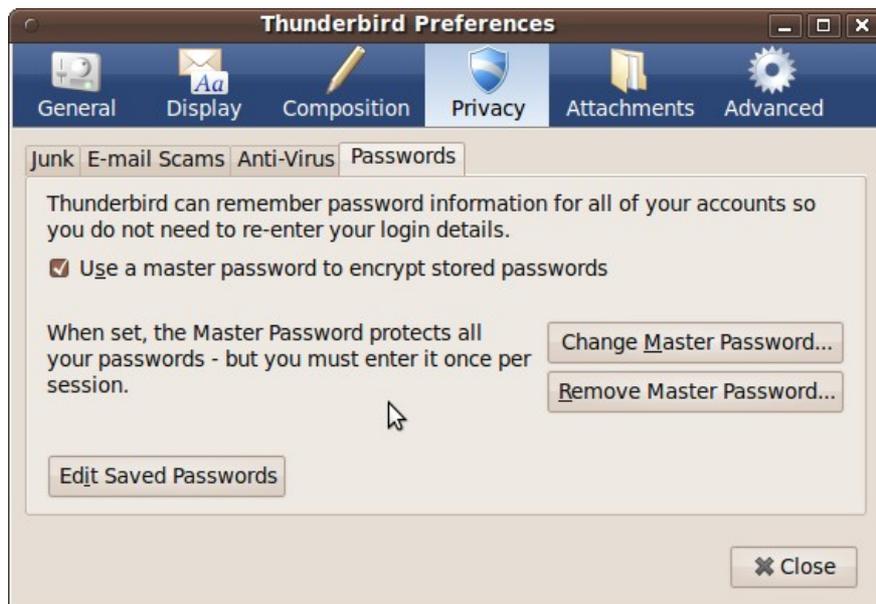
You will have to enter it once every session to give Thunderbird access to all the other passwords to fetch your messages.

Account settings

Details about your accounts can be examined from the Edit → Account details... dialog. On the left hand side, you will see all your receiving accounts with various options available on each. The default account will be shown in bold at the head of the list; and at the bottom, some information about the Local folders, where you can keep all your messages; finally details about the servers you can use to send e-mails. It is worthwhile setting up the outgoing servers first as each account will need to say which outgoing one to use when writing messages.

Outgoing servers

The owner of the server will give you information about how to access the server to send e-mail. They are all sensitive to misuse of their facilities and will require you to "log-in" in some way to their server before sending any e-mail. For example, ISP's may insist on you being connected via their line before access to the outgoing server will be allowed. Google will have you log-in using your Gmail address and password before allowing sending a message, and in addition they use a non-standard port number. Thunderbird will handle this automatically once the details about the servers has been given.

Each server will need a separate entry in the list of outgoing servers. Selecting the Outgoing server (SMTP) entry in the left pane shows the list of servers you have access to.
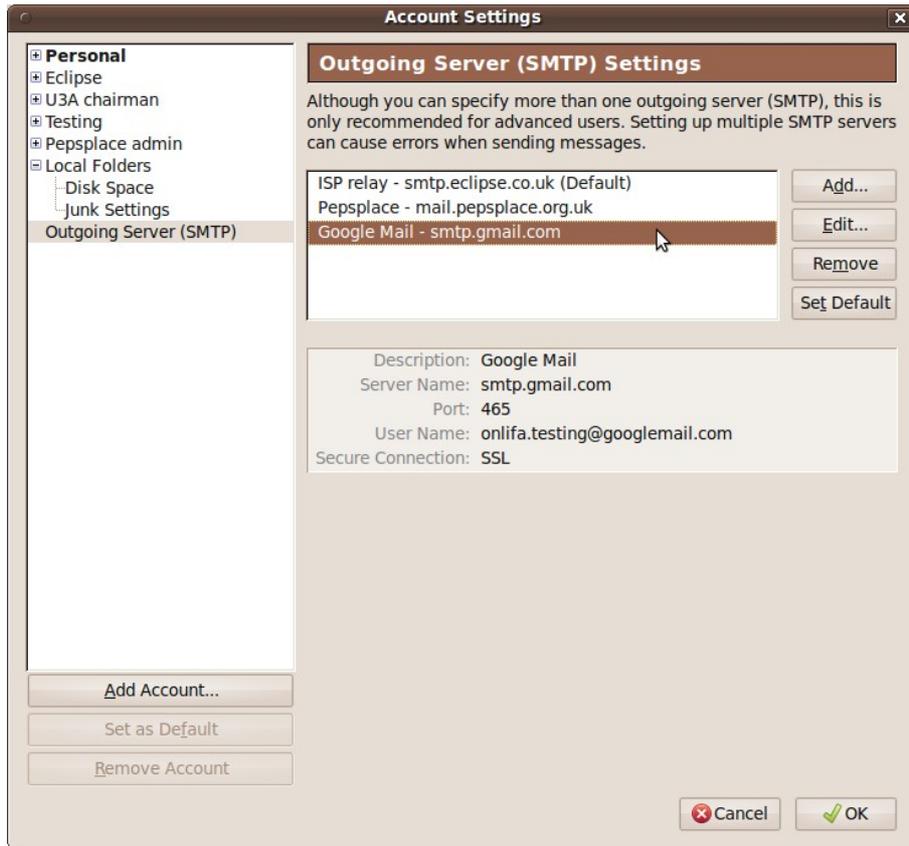
Some servers require you to set up secure encrypted access, whereas others will manage with simpler methods.

Expanding any of the accounts in the left pane will show a number of headings. Selecting an account shows a dialog for that account. The outgoing server is set here. You must ensure that you are using an appropriate one for each account to ensure that new messages can be sent.

Identities

Each account can have multiple **identities**. Clicking on the Managing identities... button will open a window that will enable you to create and edit identities.

Clicking on the Edit... button will show what is set already, and the Add... button takes you to the same dialog, where all the fields are blank – the only thing set is the outgoing server.

Identities can be used to separate cryptographically signed from unsigned e-mails you send. They can also be used to set an alternative reply address by giving the e-mail address as one in some organisation that forwards it to you at the current account address.

But probably the most common distinction between them is the signature text that is added automatically to the end of each e-mail sent. This can be used to give as much or as little extra information relevant to the identity as is required. For example, if you have a number of different rôles, then you may need to point to different websites, or job descriptions, so that the recipient knows who they are dealing with. It's like using headed notepaper when writing a letter.

For example, I am the secretary of the maintenance company for the block where I live, and so if I send mail out in my official capacity as secretary, then I can append the appropriate signature text.

Another example, I have an account at OpenOffice.org under the login name of andypep. This account is set up to forward any mail it receives to my personal account at pepsplace.org.uk. Consequently I can create an identity for the OpenOffice mailing address which is part of the pepsplace Thunderbird account by hitting Add... in the screen shown above.

The resulting dialog allows you to set all the usual values in the four tabs shown in the next picture. It is convenient to add text to your name so that you can easily identify this identity, and it is obvious what it is associated with.

You do not need to set the Reply-to address unless you want replies elsewhere. The other fields and tabs are copied from the account settings.

In addition, when setting up an account or identity, you can say where you want copies of mail that you have sent to be saved. Look under the Copies & Folders tab where you can tick the "Place a copy in:" box and then select the folder where they are to be saved. By default they are all saved in the Sent folder under Local Folders, but if you want to keep your identities separated, then you can save them under the Sent folder for the account.

If you are keeping work separated into clear categories, then you can save replies to messages in the same folder as the message being replied to. If you have filtered messages according to the task (see later), then you can keep the full conversation in the one place without having to move messages around much. The next picture has that box ticked.
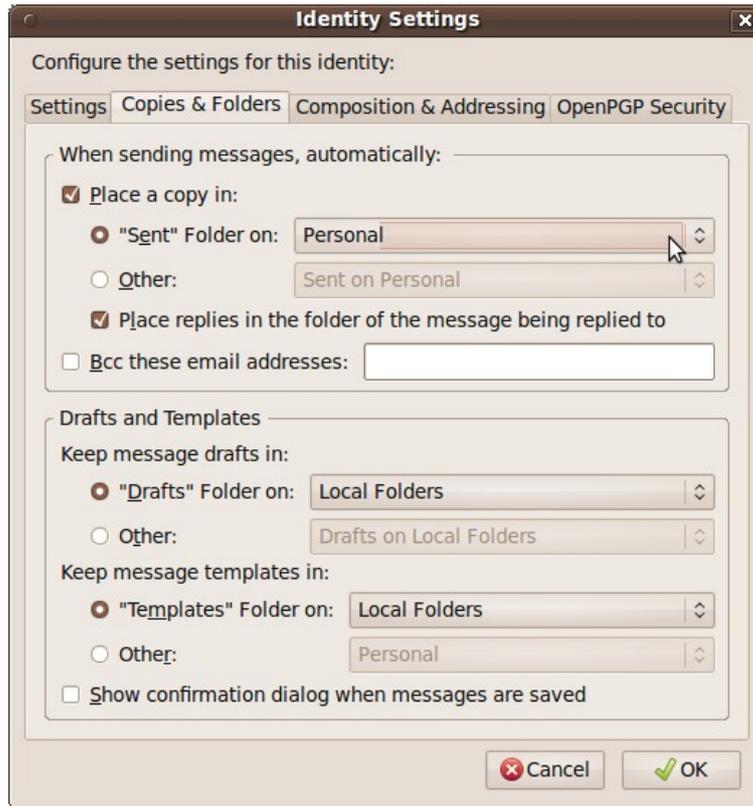
Important: You may find that you have to change the SMTP server listed because messages sent from this identity will appear to come from a different user and the server may refuse to forward them. It depends on the methods of authentication the server uses. If you keep the same e-mail address for all identities within a single account, then this will not be a problem.

Sending mail

When composing a message, the window shows a drop-down list against the e-mail address you are sending from.

The list lets you select the identity you want to send the mail from. Each account has a default identity which will be chosen when writing from that account (see Folders later). Switching identities will automatically change the attributes you have set for composing, so that some can have signatures, and others not; some may be cryptographically signed, others not, etc.
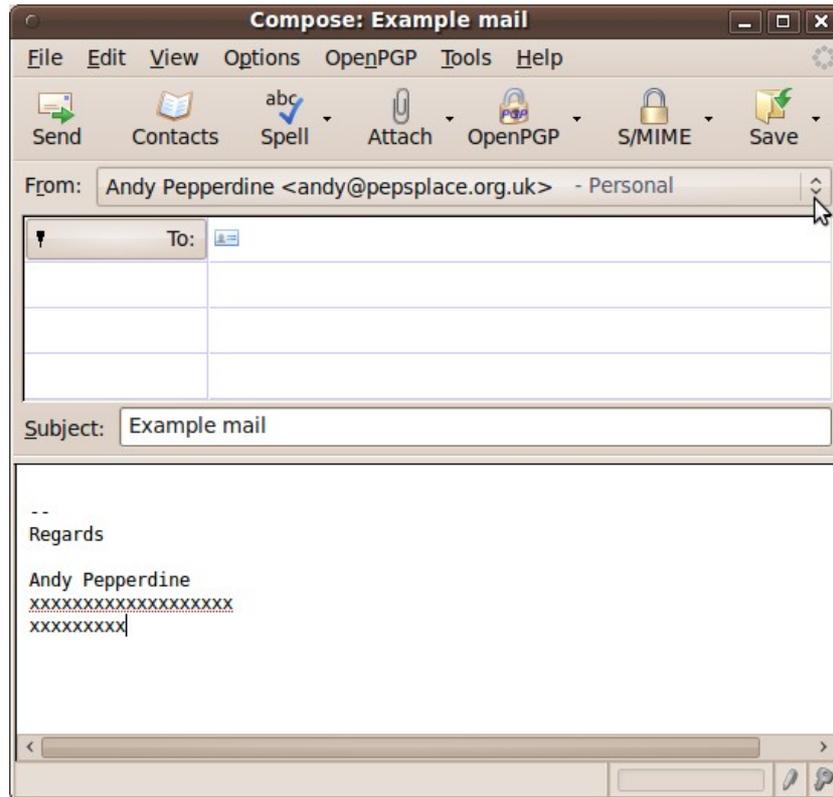
Identities are not as flexible as I would like. For example, there is no way to associate a language with an identity to give spelling checks from the appropriate dictionary; you have to use the drop down list from the Spell icon on the Compose window. Thunderbird seems to pick up dictionaries that have been installed from the package manager in Ubuntu. The default language can be changed under Edit → Preferences → Compose → Spelling. If you do change the language, then it stays changed until it's changed again – it does not revert after a single message has been sent.

Folders

In Thunderbird, a folder holds messages. Some folders are pre-determined, and others you can create for your own purposes. They are a good way to keep your correspondence organised.

In the left hand pane of the Thunderbird window, there is a list of folders in a hierarchy. New folders can be created by right clicking on a folder and selecting New Folder… when you will then be given a chance to give it a name. The folder will appear in the hierarchy below the one on which you right clicked.

Clicking on a folder name will display the messages that it contains in the upper right pane. Messages can be moved from the one being displayed to another by selecting the message header and dragging it to the folder where you want to put it.

You can say where new messages for a particular account are placed by Edit → Account settings... and then selecting Server Settings. At the bottom of the dialog window, there is a box labelled Local directory with a browse button to find the relevant location. I think this defaults so that each account has its own Inbox.

In the left hand pane of folders, when a message arrives, the folder it is placed in is made bold to show that messages are there. If the folder is clearly visible, then it will also show the number of

unread messages.

At the top on the right of the pane of folders, there are two small arrow-like symbols. Clicking on the right hand one of the two will remove all folders from view except those which contain unread messages. This is useful if you have lots of folders and need to find all the new messages easily. Clicking on the left one restores the hierarchical view of all folders.

Filters

The normal case is for Thunderbird to place new messages in an Inbox folder according to your settings when you created the account. Filters are instructions to Thunderbird to find messages that have certain characteristics, which you specify, and then do something else with them. Normally they apply to new messages immediately they have been placed in the Inbox. But there are a number of options you can set for when and how they operate.

Suppose you are a recipient of regular e-mails because you are on a list for them. Typically, these will all have an identifiable character string in the subject line of each message. For example, the BBC daily e-mails always have for their subject: "Your daily e-mail from the BBC". You can use filters to place all these e-mails in their own folder for you to read when you want to, instead of them clogging up your Inbox.

Filters are edited through Tools → Message Filters... when a dialog appears allowing you to edit your filters and to add more.
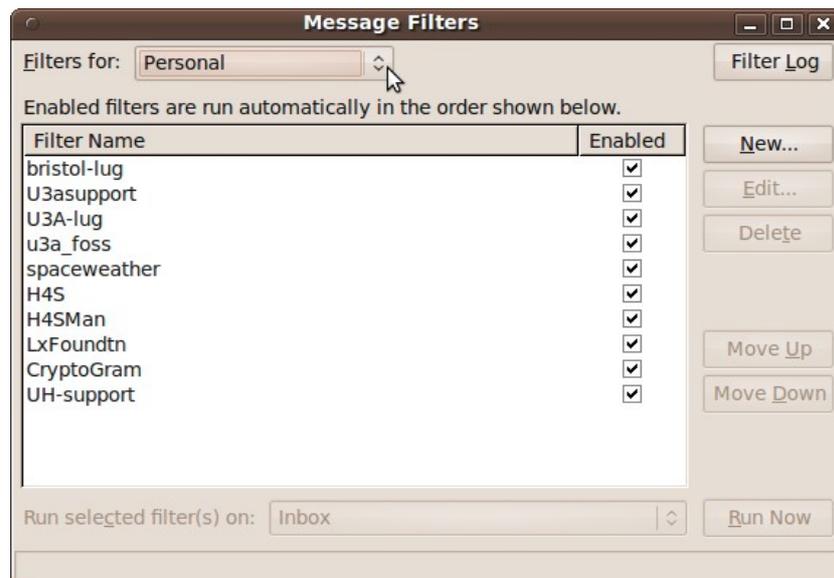
The drop-down list at the top of the window lists the account you want the filters to apply to. When you've selected the correct account, hit the New... button to add a new filter. It will come up with text to be replaced in the Filter Name field. Put an easily recognisable name in there so that when you come to edit later you know which filter is which from their names.
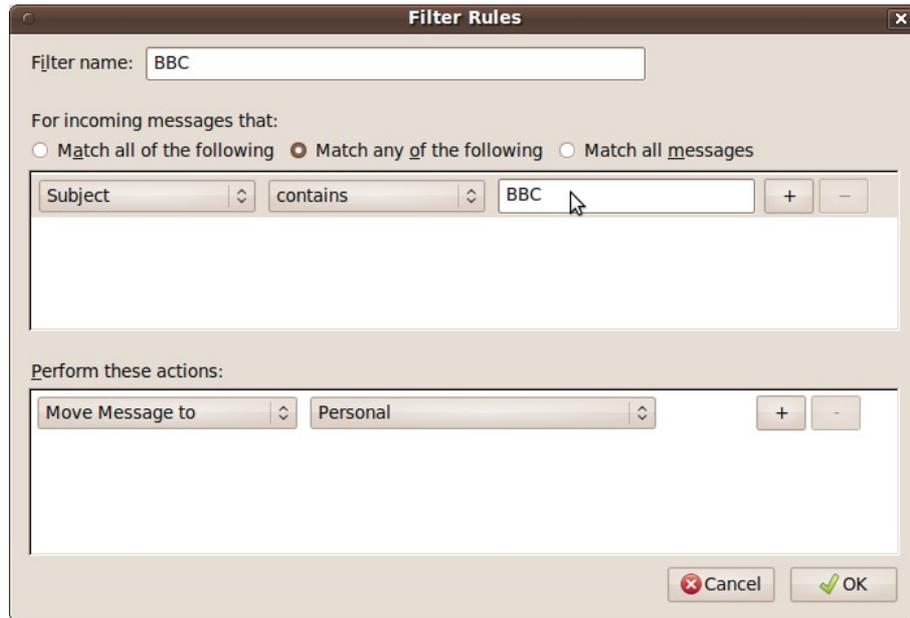
The drop down on the left of the upper pane contains a number of possible fields that can be tested for. In this case, Subject is right. In the middle drop down list you can test for various things, but again "contains" is right as we are going to look for the contents of the Subject line of the message to have. In this case, I've just put BBC as it does contain that string.

If that is not a sufficient test, then you can add a further test by hitting the button labelled "+" and adding the test as in the next picture, but remember to change the "Match" choice correctly above the upper pane. We want to "Match all of the following".

In the lower pane, you select the action (Move the message in our case), and also can select the folder to put it into from the right drop down list of folders.
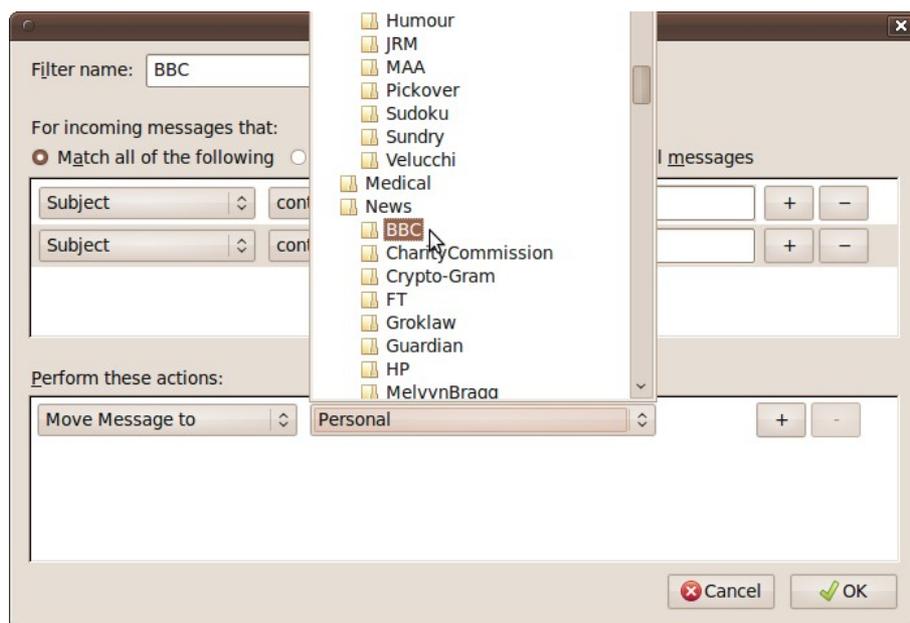
Then hit OK. The new filter will appear at the top of the list of filters. By selecting the filter, it can be moved to another position if you wish. You can also run it against the Inbox by selecting it and hitting Run Now.

When you do this, and the mail has not been read, Thunderbird will highlight the folders containing unread messages in bold in the folder list in the left hand pane of the main window. If the hierarchy is hidden, then the upper level will be made bold to show there are messages in the subfolders somewhere.

Tags

Tags are used to identify messages for special treatment by you. There is at the moment no easy way to filter on tags after they are set, although if you are downloading all your messages to your local machine, then there is an ungainly way round it. But if you are using IMAP and leaving them on the server, then you cannot do this. But see Message Source later in this document, and the further reading list.

To set a tag on a message, use either the icon Tag with its drop-down list, or Message → Tag, and select one of the 5 pre-defined ones, or New Tag... and make you own, giving it a colour with the small rectangle on the right of the name box.

Types of messages

Sometimes, someone may refer to encodings and html and text and such like. What are these? And why might they be important?

Html or Text?

You may have heard of "html" messages, or "text" messages, and wondered what they were and why it mattered. Well, at the beginning of sending e-mail, there was only text; html was not even an idea in anyone's mind. But once html was invented, then people wanted to send messages that were more jazzed up than boring old type. But there was a problem. Not all e-mail clients could

understand html and so could not read the new formats well. Even now, there are some people who use, for one reason or another, remote connections that simply do not have the features necessary to display them – think of a command line interface, for example. Others will assume that anyone sending out messages in html format must be trying to sell something and will filter them out straight into the waste basket. If you do not know what your recipient has, and it is important that they can read and understand what you write, then there is no substitute for using text messages and not html. The settings for this can be found under the Composition and Addressing of the Account Settings window. Tick the first box if you want to use HTML messages. There is a similar tab for each identity as well.


What is an encoding?

You may also have seen messages that did not look right. What should have been a Euro symbol was instead something else. Or some foreign language characters were not displayed correctly making them difficult to interpret. The exact bit pattern for each character in a message is known as the **encoding** used for the message. There is a standard defined by ISO for a representation called **Unicode**, or **ISO 10646**, which currently needs a maximum of 21 bits per character. This can be reduced to a portable form (8 bits per character) by an encoding known as **UTF-8**. It is easily the most flexible and complete method to use when sending messages containing non-English letters and symbols. It is implemented almost everywhere, and increasingly replacing the older methods.

However, Windows has traditionally used its own methods of encoding languages which is more restrictive, but which will nevertheless often be encountered. To make matters worse, when using the Windows encodings, the messages occasionally do not say what encoding they are using. This makes receiving them problematic if you do not know which is in use and have to try several alternatives until one makes sense.

Message source

How do I tell what sort of message it is? The answer is to look in the full text of the message, not what has been extracted to allow you to read it. The way to do that is to select the message , and then either hit (CTRL+U) together, or go to View → Message Source, when an edit box will come

up showing the exact content of the message. In the example below, the message contained the characters ô and ï, neither of which are in the basic character set. When it was sent Thunderbird marked it as to be encoded in UTF-8.
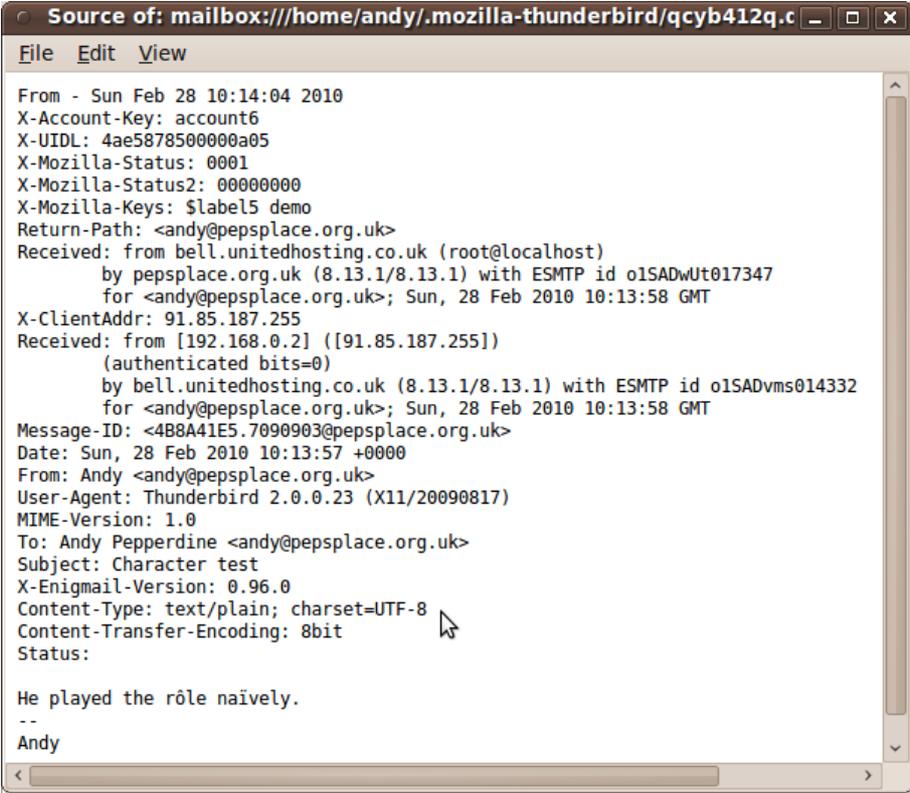
```
Source of: mailbox:///home/andy/.mozilla-thunderbird/qcyb412q.c  _ □ ✕

File  Edit  View

From - Sun Feb 28 10:14:04 2010
X-Account-Key: account6
X-UIDL: 4ae5878500000a05
X-Mozilla-Status: 0001
X-Mozilla-Status2: 00000000
X-Mozilla-Keys: $label5 demo
Return-Path: <andy@pepsplace.org.uk>
Received: from bell.unitedhosting.co.uk (root@localhost)
        by pepsplace.org.uk (8.13.1/8.13.1) with ESMTP id o1SADwUt017347
        for <andy@pepsplace.org.uk>; Sun, 28 Feb 2010 10:13:58 GMT
X-ClientAddr: 91.85.187.255
Received: from [192.168.0.2] ([91.85.187.255])
        (authenticated bits=0)
        by bell.unitedhosting.co.uk (8.13.1/8.13.1) with ESMTP id o1SADvms014332
        for <andy@pepsplace.org.uk>; Sun, 28 Feb 2010 10:13:58 GMT
Message-ID: <4B8A41E5.7090903@pepsplace.org.uk>
Date: Sun, 28 Feb 2010 10:13:57 +0000
From: Andy <andy@pepsplace.org.uk>
User-Agent: Thunderbird 2.0.0.23 (X11/20090817)
MIME-Version: 1.0
To: Andy Pepperdine <andy@pepsplace.org.uk>
Subject: Character test
X-Enigmail-Version: 0.96.0
Content-Type: text/plain; charset=UTF-8
Content-Transfer-Encoding: 8bit
Status:

He played the rôle naïvely.
--
Andy
```

The first line of every message, by Internet convention, starts with the 5 characters "From ". The next lines essentially define the characteristics of the message and always have the format of a keyword followed by a colon and then values associated with that keyword. The one we are interested in here is the line starting "Content-Type:" and you will notice it contains the value "charset=UTF-8" which tells Thunderbird how to interpret the text of the message. The first line that is not of the header type indicates the start of the body of the message.

To see what the defaults are for both outgoing messages, and undefined incoming messages for the various languages supported, go to Edit → Preferences, select the Display icon, and the Formatting tab. Then hit the Fonts... button. A window will come up showing you more options than you really want to know about.

Keywords and filters

It is these keywords that can be searched for in filters. So when you want to filter on special types of messages not covered by the standard ones, then you can look at the source and pick out the keyword you need and customise a filter for it. For example, if you want to filter on the tags you have set then search for the tag "X-Mozilla-Keys" to contain the name of the tag you have defined. Note: The first 5 tags are pre-defined and are labelled specially by Thunderbird $label1 to $label5 in the header of a message. Those you define appear with the string you gave to the tag. The message above had been given the pre-defined tag "Later", and the customised tag "demo".

Views

In the Windows world, Outlook Express has some security deficiencies that mean it is safest not have the preview pane visible. If you want to hide the equivalent pane, (for example, if you typically have very large inboxes that you wish to see fully laid out) then use View → Layout → Message Pane, or you can toggle between it hidden and not using the F8 function key.

It is not so important in Thunderbird to do this as by default it does not expand html unless asked to do so. In the menu View → Message Body As you will find three alternatives given for how html messages should be displayed. Each of these interprets a different amount, but they will, by default, all only show what is local to the message. Pictures fetched from external sites will normally not be shown as this is a potential security hole. Instead you will be shown along the top of the message a yellow panel giving the option to fetch them if you feel it is safe to do so.

Thunderbird also has three standard layouts for the usual panes. These are called Classic, Wide and Vertical all found under the View → Layout menu. Classic is the default, but it is easy to try the others to see whether they appeal.

Extensions

There are a number of useful extensions available for Thunderbird. To get them, use Tools → Add-ons. Here are the ones that I have installed:

When you select one, it shows its status, as in the British English Dictionary above.

Enigmail is useful for handling encryption and signing of messages.

Lookout is invaluable if you ever receive a packed message from someone using Microsoft Outlook (not Outlook Express). Outlook is used in companies more and when forwarding other messages, for example, can pack their contacts up in a Winmail.dat attachment. Without this add-on you will have trouble extracting the parts of the message and reading them; but with it, it happens automatically.

To see what else you can get, click on the Get Extensions hyperlink – when I went there, in the six listed categories there were nearly 1300 in total.

Further information

Filters are described at http://kb.mozillazine.org/Filters_%28Thunderbird%29

For the pedant, Unicode and ISO 10646 are not identical legally. The gory details are at http://unicode.org/faq/unicode_iso.html.