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What should you do?

You do **not** need to do anything until your provider contacts you.

But when you are contacted, it is important to **respond and take action**. Ignoring letters, emails or calls from your provider could lead to disruption to the phone or broadband services you rely on.

BT is here to support

BT knows that for some people this change may feel unfamiliar, especially if you have used the same phone service for many years. That is why support is available throughout the switchover.

If you or someone in your household uses telecare, or has additional needs, it is important to **tell your provider as soon as possible** so the right support can be put in place.

A change with support every step of the way

The old landline network is becoming less reliable and is reaching the end of its life. Moving to digital will help make sure customers have a phone service that is ready for the future.

BT is continuing to support customers across the UK with clear information, local outreach and practical help.

Please wait until you are contacted, but when you are, **don't delay**. BT is here to help you make the move with confidence.



D Stay connected, stay confident, and if you'd like to find out more information or to register your additional needs for support through the switchover, head to: www.bt.com/connected-together



u3amatters

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welcome



Someone recently asked what has surprised me most about the world of u3a since I began editing this magazine almost three years ago. The answer is easy: u3a members can never be pigeon-holed. The breadth of interests, pursuits and achievements, lifestyles and experiences, ideas and opinions is extraordinary and totally dispels lazy assumptions of what being a ‘third-ager’ means these days. In this issue, for instance, we meet members with passions ranging from disco dancing to kayaking, and astronomy to art. Then there are those involved in valuable initiatives to bridge the generations: some are writing and publishing their long-held book dreams; others have a passion for local history; still more are sharing personal stories that have shaped their lives.

A beacon for all of this – described to me as a distillation of everything u3as

do all over the country – is Festival 26. It has been such a pleasure to chat to some of the key people working so hard to ensure its success in York this summer – from the dedicated organisers to those members who have volunteered to lead everything from walks and talks to workshops and entertainment. You can read more on page 18 (and meet celebrity guest Johnny Ball, who is an active champion of lifelong learning and fun). We’d love to hear what all you Festival-goers think about the event, so do drop us a line afterwards to let us know!

Have a great summer!

Sharon Parsons, editor

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COVER IMAGE: GETTY



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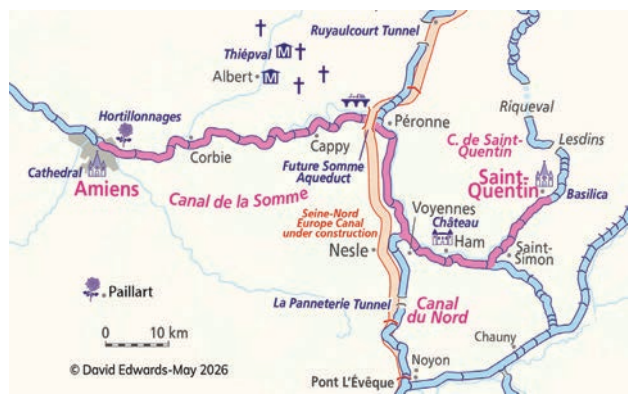
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explore locally to their chosen theme - gardens, battlefields, flea markets, vineyards, artisan breweries, birdwatching - there are so many possibilities.



connections

News and views to share what has been happening across u3a



John Travolta shows how it's done in *Saturday Night Fever*



Ilkley u3a make their moves on the dance floor

Afternoon fever

Let's go, disco!

Peter Higginbotham of Ilkley u3a shares how he and fellow members have rediscovered the joy of the disco



The Saturday night disco in my student days back in the 1970s is something I've always had fond memories of, but opportunities for getting back on the dance floor have seemed to become increasingly rare. Dancing in the kitchen to my smart speaker only goes so far, so in

2022 I decided to pitch the idea of a disco dancing group to my u3a in Ilkley, West Yorkshire.

The suggestion got a positive response and a local scout hall looked to fit the bill in terms of size and cost, plus it had on-site parking and good

access to public transport. A time slot was chosen – fortnightly on a weekday afternoon from 2-3.30pm, with a mid-session break for tea and biscuits so members can chat. To create a bit of atmosphere, the hall's shutters are closed and inexpensive flashing coloured disco party lights are fired up. ▶



Initially, I acted both as group leader and DJ – but my successor as leader, Fran Valiant, currently has a rotating team of three DJs who kindly provide the music. We primarily enjoy tracks from the 1960s-80s, with the odd tune from either side of that period. The DJ of the day compiles their own playlist, with members also contributing requests. Apart from all the well-known disco classics, such as Tamla Motown, pretty much anything goes, so long as it's danceable.

The hall we use has a built-in sound system into which our DJs plug their own laptop or tablet. These days, though, one or two portable Bluetooth speakers could equally well do the job. Having a large CD collection, I originally played music directly from my own laptop, but we've now moved on to streaming it.

The group's membership has slowly grown and we currently get around 20 people at a session. For a while, the membership was entirely female (apart from myself!), but we've now got a few

“” Daytime discos seem to have become quite a thing

men who have rediscovered their inner John Travolta. I've noticed that daytime discos, aimed at older people, seem to have become quite a thing. And dancing brings many physical, mental and social benefits, improving cardiovascular health, strength, balance and flexibility.

One thing has changed since those long-ago Saturday nights, though – there are no handbags in the middle of the floor to dance around!

Has your u3a got a disco dancing group – or are you tempted to get one started? Let us know – plus, what disco hit always gets you dancing? (Ed's note: Mine is *Dancing Queen* by Abba – always!)

CHART TOPPERS

Here are six favourites guaranteed to get Ilkley u3a's disco divas on the dance floor!

- *Hi Ho Silver Lining* – Jeff Beck
- *All Right Now* – Free
- *September* – Earth, Wind & Fire
- *Long Train Runnin'* – The Doobie Brothers
- *Reach Out I'll Be There* – Four Tops
- *YMCA* – Village People



Village People

A decade of understanding



Carol McCullough, a member of Exeter u3a University Liaison Team, explains how a relationship forged 10 years ago has brought valuable mutual benefits

Back in 2016, a Memorandum of Understanding was signed between Exeter u3a and the University of Exeter. Since then, both institutions have collaborated to share expertise, insights and a commitment to accessible lifelong learning.

Our enthusiastic members have attended diverse talks by around 100 academics, all of which are held on the university campuses so that members feel part of 'their' university.

A key phrase of the agreement is 'mutually beneficial' so, in return, u3a members have taken part in many different areas of research. Inevitably, a lot of it is to do with our ageing minds and bodies in the university medical school! While much of this research will not see results in time to benefit us directly, it could help to improve the lives of future generations.

We have also worked with undergraduate students on various

Exeter u3a member Jane Chappell, who takes part in a lot of research, with Dr Rob Meertens, associate professor in medical imaging



projects, including informal sessions with international students, giving both groups greater insight into a variety of languages and cultures.

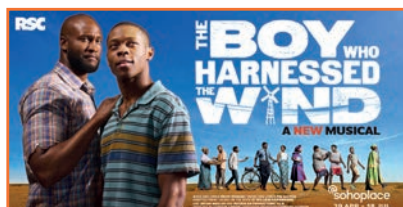
There has been fantastic feedback on both sides, and it's an initiative I wouldn't hesitate to recommend to other u3as.

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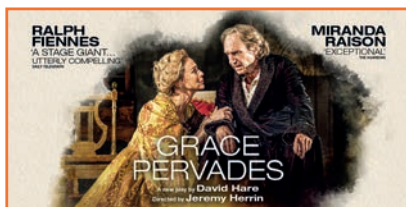
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The Boy Who Harnessed
The Wind



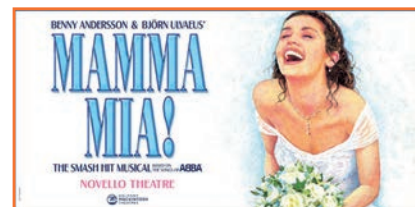
The Devil Wears Prada



Grace Pervades



Kinky Boots



Mamma Mia!



Oliver!



The Producers



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Visit Meiji Jingu, Japan's most famous Shinto shrine; then head to Tokyo Tower; explore Senso-ji, the city's oldest temple; learn the skill of bonsai tree shaping; and finally visit the Edo-Tokyo Museum.

Day 5: Ito Tour Highlight

Today we travel to Hakone, stopping at historic Kotokuin and Hase Temples, before exploring Owakudani Valley and visiting Hakone Shrine with views of Mount Fuji. We then check into a traditional onsen hotel and enjoy a traditional kaiseki dinner.

Days 6-8: Kyoto Tour Highlight

Arrive in Kyoto via bullet train and enjoy a traditional lunch with a maiko (apprentice geisha) performance, followed by a stroll through Gion. We visit Kinkaku-ji and Ryoan-ji Temples in Kyoto, and then explore Byodoin

and Mampukuji Temples in Uji, take part in a calligraphy workshop and matcha tasting.

Days 9-10: Hiroshima & Miyajima Island

We visit the moving Atomic Bomb Dome and Memorial Peace Park. Explore the island of Miyajima, including a local oyster farm, and the UNESCO-listed Itsukushima Shrine with its iconic floating torii gate.

Days 11-12: Okayama Tour Highlight

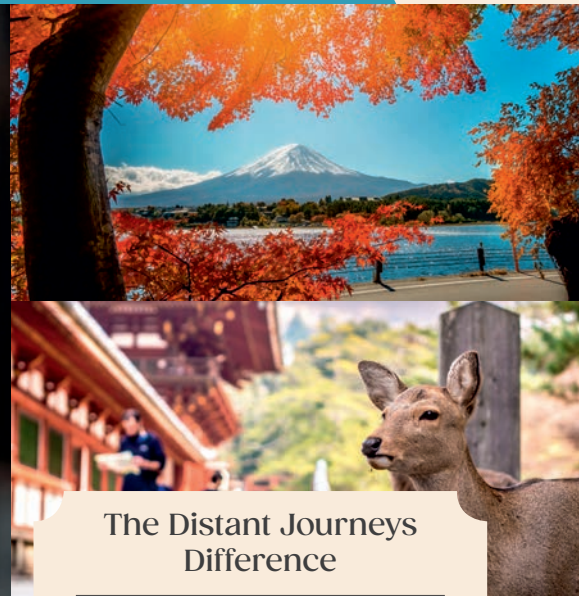
We visit Takehara's Old Preserved Area, the coastal town of Onomichi, and scenic Kurashiki Bikan Historical Quarter before arriving in Okayama. Explore the striking Okayama Castle, the beautifully landscaped Koraku-en Garden, and a lunch featuring locally produced sake.

Days 13-14: Osaka

We travel to Osaka, enjoying a sake brewery visit and lunch, then take in views from the Umeda Sky Building. Explore Nara's Todaiji Temple and deer-filled park before returning to Osaka to sample Dotonbori street food.

Days 15-16: Depart Japan / Arrive UK

Our final day in Japan is at leisure until our evening flight back to the UK.



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Finding the similarities



Appreciating what u3as and their members have in common paves the way for valuable connections and friendships, says **Allan Walmsley, Chair of the Trust**

I heard someone say the other day that the strength of the u3a movement lies in the wide-ranging differences between u3as, and that the independence of u3as has created significant differences in how each operates and responds to local needs. I think that's partially true, but based on the many visits I've made to u3as, networks and regional groups over the last two or three years, it seems that, while members and geography differ, there are in fact huge similarities in the ways that u3as are structured and operate.

Every u3a, large or small, operates through a committee, with interest group leaders and coordinators; each u3a has broadly the same challenges, whether it be recruiting committee members or encouraging new interest groups based on learning and

social connection; and most u3as operate in a similar environment with similar standards and values. In my view, by and large, the similarities between u3as and u3a members are more important than the differences.

“ ”

It's all about getting together and connecting with like-minded people

One of the key aims of the Trust's new mission is to strengthen the movement through creating more opportunities for members to come together via national events, activities and learning initiatives.

As I talk to different groups around the country, it's the similarities, not the differences, that bring members together, and in my experience it's these that make members comfortable with each other. People enjoy talking about how they deal with certain situations and so on in their u3a, and find it useful and interesting to discover how challenges are addressed elsewhere. It's all about getting together and connecting with like-minded people in sociable settings to generate ideas and create a sense of community.

Of course, there's a great example of this coming up: u3a Festival 26 will see over 1,000 members create the largest 'family gathering' in our history (see details on page 18). While there will be myriad brilliant activities and sessions keeping everyone busy, it's the down time that members also truly value: it's then that they can catch up with old friends or get to know new ones, swap stories and ideas, and have fun – and in doing so share the connection that bonds u3a members together. I'll be there for all three days, so come and say hello and tell me what you enjoy most about being a u3a member.

What great ideas do you have for bringing members of u3as together to strengthen the bond between us all? Email: editor@u3a.org.uk and head your email: GETTING TOGETHER

PHOTO: PETER ALVEY

Cycling conversations

In our Spring 2026 issue, a letter from a member suggesting that helmets with a registration number on them should be compulsory for cyclists had an enormous response.

We simply don't have the space in the magazine to share the many diverse and detailed opinions received, unfortunately, but would like to thank everyone for taking the time to write.

Many agreed with the member, and some shared experiences of bike riders weaving their way at speed through pedestrianised shopping centres, for instance. Others pointed out that there are millions of experienced and responsible cyclists on our roads, and that very often it's thoughtless vehicle drivers that cause danger.

There were also many other views and alternative suggestions

regarding this member's campaign idea. Not least, of course, many readers who belong to u3a cycling groups addressed the considerable health and fitness benefits that come with taking to the road on two wheels (see page 30 for an example).

As an organisation, u3a welcomes polite debate and discussion among members, but for those who expressed concern, rest assured that u3a will not be involved in this particular campaign idea and will, of course, leave any related initiatives to the experts.

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Time to travel

Discover u3a getaways!

Exclusive holidays for u3a members



We're delighted to introduce a new chapter of discovery, fun and shared experience with the launch of *u3a getaways*, bespoke holidays exclusively for u3a members and friends.

Every *getaway* blends relaxed, well-organised travel with enriching

and immersive experiences. Designed to reflect the spirit of u3a, each tour goes beyond traditional sightseeing, offering added value through talks and workshops and shared adventures.

We have teamed up with The UK Holiday Group, a highly respected name in travel with over 40 years' expertise in creating exceptional excursions. Imagine discovering historic landmarks with expert insight, enjoying behind-the-scenes visits, engaging in cultural activities, or simply sharing conversations and

laughter with like-minded people. Whether you're travelling with friends, or setting off independently and looking to meet others, the atmosphere is warm and welcoming.

This launch marks the beginning of an exciting journey. Members can look forward to a continually evolving collection of itineraries. Themes include *Appreciating Shakespeare* in Stratford-upon Avon and *The Agatha Christie Story* in Torquay, plus breaks for wine lovers, aviation enthusiasts and those who enjoy the great outdoors.

Find out more at: theukholidaygroup.com/u3agetaways or scan the QR code, right. You can also call the dedicated *u3a getaways* phone line: 01603 886773



What a star!

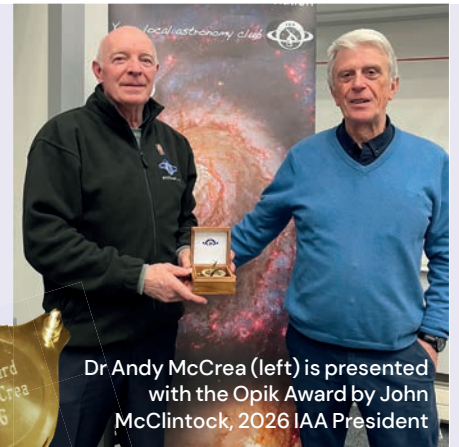
The sky's the limit

A u3a member's dedication and services to amateur astronomy have been rightly recognised

Astronomer and leader of North Down & Ards u3a Astronomy Group, Dr Andy McCrea from Bangor in County Down, has received the Irish Astronomical Association's (IAA) prestigious Opik Award for exceptional services to amateur astronomy. The award has only been given twice previously in the IAA's 50-year history – the last time was 21 years ago. It is named after Ernst Opik, a noted Estonian astronomer and astrophysicist who spent the second half of his career (1948–81) at Armagh Observatory.

Andy's interest in astronomy began when he was a schoolboy, and his abiding fascination with the subject has taken him across the globe chasing total solar eclipses – he has witnessed 12 so far. He has also amassed the autographs of more than 650 astronauts, and met 16 Apollo astronauts and nine moonwalkers.

Not least, Andy has been a member of the IAA for over 60 years, holding various posts and most notably serving as president eight times. He is also the current



Dr Andy McCrea (left) is presented with the Opik Award by John McClintock, 2026 IAA President

editor of the Association's quarterly magazine *Stardust*. He leads monthly meetings of the u3a Astronomy group in Bangor's community hub, as well as at its observatory on the Clandeboye Estate.

"I have been lucky enough to be in the company of brilliant, enthusiastic amateur and professional people and enjoyed every moment of my time in their company," says Andy. "To receive the Opik Award is a huge honour."

Question time

Taking the chair

Carolyn Rowe of Heatons & Reddish u3a proved a worthy contender on *Mastermind* recently. Here's what happened...

“ I have been a fan of *Mastermind* since 2014, when

I moved here from California to marry my British fiancé.

I'd applied to be a contender a few times, and was finally chosen for an audition last year. I'd always wanted my specialist subject to be the television series *Upstairs, Downstairs*: the drama was my late mother's favourite, and we always enjoyed watching it together.

My goal was to get all my specialist subject answers correct, and hope for the best with the general knowledge: as a relative newcomer to the UK, I was aware that my knowledge of popular culture might be lacking. I made over 200 *Upstairs, Downstairs* flash cards of numerous characters and the actors' names, along with synopses of each episode and its title, and my husband patiently went through them with me a couple of times.

When the big day came, it was stressful, but all the production team were so nice – they really want all the contenders to do well, and the presenter Clive Myrie was very approachable and



friendly. It was surreal sitting in that black chair though!

Despite the nerves, I answered all my specialist subject questions correctly – all that prep was worth it! – and although I got three general knowledge questions wrong, to my amazement I was the winner and went through to the semi-final.

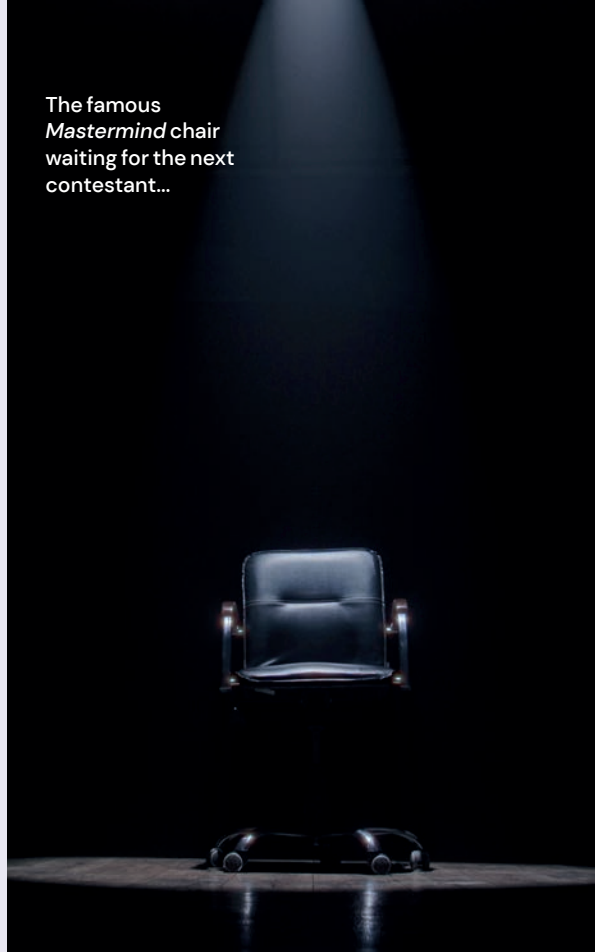
Contenders aren't allowed to repeat their specialist subject, so I had to choose another topic, which I settled on quite by chance. I like to listen to documentaries while doing housework, so when a documentary about Amelia Earhart, the American aviator, popped up on my YouTube feed,

“ ”
Despite the nerves, I answered all my specialist subject questions correctly

I thought she would make an interesting subject. She was quite a remarkable woman, and I was really pleased with my choice.

Although my fellow contenders and I knew more about what to expect for the semi-final, we were still nervous – perhaps even more so than before! Afterwards, Clive and I had a laugh about a really silly answer I gave during the general knowledge round. (Because of the

The famous *Mastermind* chair waiting for the next contestant...



rules in case of a tie, most contenders try very hard to answer all their questions rather than passing.) When my mind went blank under pressure, I blurted out something laughable.

Looking back, it was such a wonderful experience, and I'm so glad I had the courage to take part. I would urge any u3a member to give it a go – and show that we third-agers really can excel!”

You can see Carolyn's great *Mastermind* performances on BBC iPlayer. Episode 18 (her first heat) aired on 17 November 2025 and Episode 30 (the semi-final) aired on 13 April this year.

And your specialist subject is..?

Tell us about the topic that would be *your* specialist subject – and why – in no more than 100 words. It can be about anything you like!

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Discussion point

Ageing well or just looking the part?

In this series, we debate the topics that affect u3a and wider society. Here, CEO **Iain Cassidy** considers what being 'good' for our age should really mean



As the warmer weather arrives, conversations about looks, wellbeing and self-improvement seem to grow louder: everywhere we look, it seems, we're being urged to make big lifestyle changes to defy the years – whether that's to shed a few pounds for summer, or update our looks and what we wear!



Underscoring all this are those familiar headlines celebrating 'ageless' celebrities who appear to have discovered the secret to staying forever young: we've all seen those images of mature stars caught looking tanned, toned and active on sandy beaches, haven't we? While some of this coverage may be motivating – to a degree – I would argue it also promotes a very particular idea of what later life is *supposed* to look like.

While many older celebrities are commended for 'defying age', such praise is strongly tied to maintaining a youthful, fit and stylish image. At the same time, those who take a different approach – such as actors who embrace more mature

roles – are invariably described as moving on from their days playing the 'lead role' as if this is something of a disappointment. And when some decide to embrace their grey hair (or no hair!), or defy convention to reveal what they truly look like when they wake up every morning without make-up, it sparks a huge amount of judgement – not all of it kind.

All of this seems to highlight how unusual it is for normal, natural ageing to be visible and accepted in today's society. Research from the Centre for Ageing Better found that almost half of people don't think they will look good as they get older. Indeed, it can sometimes feel as though ageing well is all about *looking* a certain way – while all the other benefits that come with the years are somehow overlooked.

It's very easy to get swept up in the idea that we *should* be ageing in a certain way. But ageing well doesn't have to be a performance. It can just be about finding what feels right and having the confidence to go with it.

Perhaps ageing well is much simpler than we sometimes make it – and it's

very personal. For some, that might mean running marathons or having a wardrobe that sparks joy. For others, it could be a long chat over coffee, picking up a new hobby, or simply enjoying a less frenetic pace. Looking good – whatever that means – is just a small part of ageing well.

Surely, the things that matter as we age have more to do with adapting to our current life stage, being resilient, looking after ourselves as best we can, staying curious and remaining flexible. Doing things that are personally meaningful (and feeling part of something) are invaluable. These are all the things that u3a aims to support and inspire members to achieve.

I'd love to hear what ageing well means to you. Do these picture-perfect versions of ageing in mainstream media, for instance, feel like helpful inspiration, or more like a nudge (or shove!) to be a certain way that is more dispiriting than inspiring?

To share how you feel, email: editor@u3a.org.uk, and head your email: AGEING WELL

Save the date: 14 October

Don't miss our AGM 2026

The 43rd Annual General Meeting of the Third Age Trust will be held on 14 October 2026. Our AGM is a great way to find out more about the wonderful work of the Trust and our

future plans and strategy. Members will be able to attend online or in person.

For more details, visit our website: u3a.org.uk/agm



A true celebration

FESTIVAL IN FOCUS



Our u3a Festival 26 in York, to be held between 1 and 3 July, is an event organised by members for members. Meet just some of the enthusiastic team working hard to make it a success...

Leading the way

Karen Sawyer is not only the Chair of York u3a, but has taken on the role of Chair for Festival 26 too – it’s fair to say she has a lot going on!



“It’s really heart-warming that so many members booked to attend this year’s Festival as soon as tickets became available because they’d either been to the first one in 2024, or had heard how good that event was. My abiding memory is of the incredible amount of enthusiasm and energy generated by members all having a great time together – it was infectious. So how could I resist when I was invited to be the Chair of u3a Festival 26?

My previous career as an international internal auditor, plus work in governance, means that I’ve always been very organised and process-driven: that approach is definitely standing me in good stead as I steer us steadily (I hope!) towards what promises to be a fantastic event.

Much of my role involves coordinating and leading our committed core team of seven, and there is a lot of decision-making to work through. There’s also a raft

of legal conditions and so on to fulfill, and the Third Age Trust has been incredibly supportive in this regard.

To ensure that everything runs as efficiently as possible, I’ve created a documented plan that breaks down all the requirements into manageable stages. This helps me see where we are – essential! – and means the team are right up to speed too.

We’re all fairly spread out, so have regular Zoom meetings. We all got together and went to the University of York to work through various details, from where visitors who have booked accommodation will check in, to catering arrangements that ensure everyone will get fed.

There are myriad different activities planned, and it’s a huge relief when members commit to hosting a workshop or talk, leading a group or providing entertainment: we wouldn’t have a successful Festival without them, so we really appreciate all the time and effort they volunteer.

Indeed, this Festival truly showcases what can be achieved when we all pull together – and needless to say, despite the hard work involved, we can’t wait to do it all again!”



The first u3a Festival in 2024 paved the way for a fantastic event

““
This Festival truly showcases what can be achieved when we all pull together



Take a walk through historic York on a special guided tour



The Blue Boar pub – Dick Turpin’s last resting place

Good foundations

Margaret Fiddes of Sherburn & Villages u3a is this year's Festival Programme Organiser, and has been part of this event from the start.



"Several years ago, when I was on the Board as the Regional Trustee for Yorkshire and the Humber, the former Chair, Liz Thackray, had an idea for a Festival that would be a distillation of everything that goes on in u3as all over the country.

We all agreed it was a great initiative, but required a lot of thought, organisation and, not least, the right venue: we needed appropriate spaces for so many diverse activities, as well as accommodation, places to eat, easy access and so on. I soon realised that the University of York would lend itself to everything we wanted to achieve – and, of course, it is perfectly located in a beautiful city!

Luckily, the university agreed, and so the inaugural Festival 24 was born! It was, of course, a huge learning curve for all of us on the planning committee,

but it was all to prove worthwhile. Seeing hundreds of members come together over three designated days to share such a fantastic range of interests, passions and skills was incredibly rewarding. Everyone was so enthusiastic and good-humoured, and while it was jolly hard work, the event was deemed a huge success.

For Festival 26, I'm responsible for booking all the workshops, talks, walks, activities and entertainment, working with both sports and music coordinators. It's a huge jigsaw as I aim to ensure every session has the right 'slot'! Some of these are really popular and may get booked up in advance, but lots of other activities welcome 'walk-ins', so there's something for everyone. (And just to make sure I am really fully occupied, I'm drawing on my career as a florist to host two sessions!)

As organisers, we are all so proud of what has been achieved during a relatively short time, and really excited about this year's event. Our u3a Festival really showcases 'learn, laugh, live' – so let's make the most of it!"

Creative spirit

Nicola Down, a long-standing member of Wetherby & District u3a, will be very busy at Festival 26, hosting a diverse collection of creative workshops and talks.



"I am a great believer in 'creative ageing' because it keeps the mind active, engaged and curious. There's something very rewarding about members sharing so many different experiences and interests – and the fact that people might choose to come along to a specific talk or activity is really gratifying.

I'm looking forward to hosting workshops and talks, several of which tap into my past experience as a television production manager. To this end, I'll be hosting a practical session on script-reading, as well as giving a talk on my TV life behind the scenes – I worked on everything from historical dramas to entertainment shows and serious investigative journalism... it was never dull!

I'm also hosting a craft workshop on making macramé dragonfly keyrings – try it, you'll be hooked! – and giving a talk called 'Slow Boat to China': this tells the true story of Reverend Joseph Russell Race, who travelled to China in 1870 to become a missionary. Let's just say there's a twist to the tale to share with my audience!"



Walking with history

Richard Taylor has been a member of York u3a for five years, and will offer fascinating insights on two social history walks with Festival-goers.



"I've always loved history, and was lucky to have a career as a script writer for museums – in essence, I would write the pieces that accompany exhibitions or audio tours.

When I started leading u3a history tours in York four years ago, I was keen to veer away from the usual Viking or medieval themes, and choose subjects that would bring the everyday lives of people into focus instead – it's

amazing what unexpected tidbits are waiting to be discovered once you start!

For Festival 26, I've chosen two great walks: 'Street life' explores the hubbub of Georgian society in the city, while 'Scoundrel' is all about the highwayman Dick Turpin: this one concludes in the basement of The Blue Boar, where his body was displayed after he'd been executed and the public could pay a penny to view it.

Festival 26 is such a fantastic concept and really celebrates everything u3a has to offer. It will be such a pleasure to introduce members to this historic city – and reveal some of its secrets..."



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HOLIDAYS

Immersed in nature

Jan Plumb of Southampton u3a will be encouraging members to discover the benefits of forest bathing at the Festival.



"I started an allotment and gardening group at my u3a several years ago, but as much as I love working outdoors, I felt I needed to spend more time just being in nature. I decided to study forest bathing, and did an online course to attain a diploma in the subject.

The practice – *shinrin-yoku* – was developed in Japan and translates as 'taking in the forest atmosphere'. It focuses on engaging all five senses to immerse yourself in nature, and has been scientifically proven to bring a multitude of health benefits.

I feel strongly that everyone can benefit from such a meaningful practice, and now lead a u3a group to enjoy forest bathing in quiet green spaces twice a month. I'm so delighted to be inviting members at the Festival to join me – there are some beautiful peaceful places on campus to try forest bathing – and I hope that members will find it as absorbing, enjoyable and truly beneficial as I do!"



Making music

Pete Gostling has been a member of Lichfield u3a for 12 years and is looking forward to entertaining the crowd with his fellow u3a band members in Don't Fret.



"One of the best things that happens during a performance is when the entire audience joins in. When everyone starts singing something like *Sweet Caroline* or *Sweet Sixteen* together, there's nothing like it! That seems to sum up what u3a is all about somehow.

I've been a member since fully retiring as a teacher in 2013, and our band Don't Fret – which started as a guitar group – was established the following year. There are currently eight of us in it, and we all came to be musicians in different ways. (I didn't start playing until I was 50: I went out to buy a computer and came back with a guitar!) The longevity of the group is due to us all contributing fully to everything, and have become really close friends in the process.

The music we play is really eclectic: we cover everything from 1960s classics, blues and rock and roll to Irish ballads and country music. We have played hundreds of free gigs,

made two albums and raised almost £24,000 for our local hospice.

We played at u3a Festival 24, and it's an honour to be asked back to such an uplifting event. We're looking forward to having a great time entertaining the audience – and to more rousing singalongs!"

““”

There's nothing like it when an entire audience joins in ... it sums up what u3a is all about



This way, please!

Jean Blackburn of Bradford u3a is one of the essential stewards who will be on hand to assist and guide visitors at the Festival.



"One of the great things about u3a is that you meet so many people who share the same ethos: there's an immediate sense of trust and camaraderie among members, and you always feel included.

That sense of community is very much in evidence at the Festival: I was also a steward at the first one, and it was

simply brilliant. My 'duties' included being on registration and generally letting people know what was going on and where... but it wasn't all work and no play! We were given plenty of opportunity to join the lectures and events – there were so many different things to do and try. One of my personal highlights was doing two life drawing classes: I'd never done anything like that before and I really loved it.

I'll be at this Festival for all three days and am staying on campus too, so it's fair to say I'm fully invested!"

On top of his game

We're delighted that the accomplished entertainer, presenter and author Johnny Ball is guest of honour at u3a Festival 26 – not least because his enthusiasm for life, learning and having fun at every age mirrors the organisation's long-held philosophy. We caught up with the 88-year-old to find out more...

Tell us how you keep your mind and body active...

In the morning after my puzzle page hour, I do a five-minute exercise routine and am then in my office working. That – and the dog walk – are part of my routine every day.

I am very lucky in that people often get in touch to ask me something, or remind me of past events. I am overjoyed to be invited to think about a particular subject, or reminisce about past experiences that have shaped my life, and perhaps have helped or influenced others too.

I love meeting people from all walks of life... I confess I am a happy man in a pub, although I only ever have two pints! I go to spend time with others and talk on any subject, old or new. I seek out people who might stimulate my mind and hope I do the same for them.

On a practical level, if I don't have a project, I create one – it's so important to have a purpose and always have something to think about and do.

Do you think we must all stay curious and connected to get the most out of life?

Yes! Be open-minded and positive – if you want to tackle something new, just get on and do it. There's that old adage: 'You can't teach an old dog new tricks!' Well, we're not dogs and are very capable of learning something totally new every day! What's more, provided we like where our mind is being taken, we're often amazed at how we can take to a new skill...

And take up invitations too, however unexpected, because you never know where they may lead. Recently, after performing a show for The Magic Circle and doing a trick based on

mathematics, I was invited to become a member. I am thrilled and certainly never thought that would happen to me, that's for sure!

How do you personally motivate people to learn something new?

I was a successful stand-up comedian for 17 years, so not surprisingly I would advocate a funny, light-hearted

“ ”

Events like the u3a Festival help us to challenge the stale perception of what being in the 'third age' really means

approach to encourage and inspire people – learning is meant to be fun, not prescriptive or difficult! I wrote and presented 20 series of TV programmes based on maths and science, and always applied comedy to the subject matter – it's essential to take an audience with you, and I think that a comedic approach helped to do just that.

What are you most looking forward to at Festival 26?

Meeting u3a members who will tell me how learning new things, trying something different and being part of the u3a community has opened up their minds and broadened their horizons. Even the simplest pursuits



Johnny Ball is looking forward to meeting u3a members

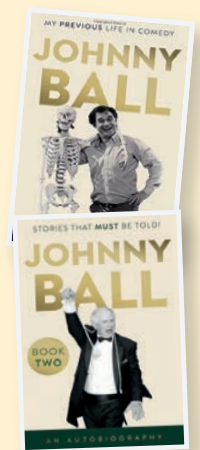
can offer a new lease of life – it's lovely. We're living longer and are healthier than previous generations, so let's make the most of it!

Not least, we're all in a position to challenge the stale perception of what being in the 'third age' means – and events like the u3a Festival can really help to demonstrate and change that.

Read all about it!

Johnny has recently written two fascinating autobiographies: *My Previous Life in Comedy* and *Stories That Must Be Told!*

(both published by The Book Guild). *Wonders Beyond Numbers: A brief history of all things mathematical* is published by Bloomsbury Publishing.



For more about Festival 26, go to: u3a.org.uk/festival-2026

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Age is no barrier when it comes to embarking on a sport or activity that brings with it a sense of adventure. Within u3a, there is a wide range of options, from paddleboarding and sailing to hiking, climbing, wild swimming, marathon running... the list goes on.

“The idea that being a certain age means you must slow down and do less is so outdated,” states former GP and health author Dr Juliet McGrattan. “This is the time to take a different approach and look

for the opportunity to do more with activities that challenge and push you out of your comfort zone. This is a really powerful way to counter age-related societal attitudes.”

So many benefits

Both scientific research and anecdotal evidence recognise that such activities not only bring a sense of achievement and empowerment, but have a positive impact on cognitive health too. That's because learning new skills that are challenging creates new neuronal connections, which in turn can help keep the brain sharper.

““
Look for activities that push you out of your comfort zone

There's also a lot to be said for doing such activities with others. “Not only do you get support and encouragement from fellow group members, but it's also likely you will benefit from expert knowledge, especially if training is required,” points out Dr McGrattan. “Being part of a community of like-minded people boosts our sense of belonging – and it means you're more likely to commit and keep going.”

Not least, any activity enjoyed in the fresh air means you're engaging with nature, and that in itself is known to bring immeasurable health benefits – from reducing anxiety to boosting the immune system and providing a good dose of essential vitamin D in the process. So what are you waiting for? Get out there!

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Making a splash

'Introducing third-agers to kayaking is a joy'

Pam Phillips, a member of Waltham Abbey u3a, is a keen kayaker involved in a fantastic initiative. She also leads her u3a's Water Babies group when they take to the water



"I've always been a bit of an adrenaline junkie, so in 2015 I jumped at the chance to attend a six-lesson kayaking course at Lee Valley White Water Centre (LVWWC): this venue hosted the canoe slalom events at the 2012 Olympic Games, and the course was funded by Sport England's initiative 'This Girl Can'.

Well, this girl did! At 65, and having never even sat in a kayak before, I took to it like a duck to water and loved learning something so new. The subsequent challenge of tackling the centre's simulated white water rapids was – and still is – exhilarating.

In 2019, I was asked if I would be interested in forming a liaison between the LVWWC and u3as in the Essex and Hertfordshire regions: the idea was to offer a course of kayaking lessons specifically tailored for senior beginners. It was to be funded by Lee Valley Regional Park Authority and delivered by coaches at the centre.

Needless to say, this initiative was a huge success. Since then, the u3a Kayaking Project has gone from strength to strength: this is our seventh year, and it's wonderful that so many who have taken up the challenge are still enjoying it.

It's especially reassuring for those new to watersports to know they are in a safe, controlled environment, with

plenty of support: two coaches for every 18 participants on hand, plus me and another experienced kayaker.

Separate from this annual project, I also take a u3a group – we're called the Water Babies! – to the centre a couple of times a year, which is great fun.

“” The u3a Kayaking Project has gone from strength to strength

You do need to be reasonably fit as there's a lot of physical effort involved – even down to carrying your kayak – and ideally you need a sense of balance and rhythm. The biggest fear beginners have is falling in, so we work around that by getting them to capsizе their kayak on the first lesson and discovering it's not so bad!



Kayaks at the ready!

It's not a cheap activity, though. Those who sign up for the project (which now costs £6 for six lessons) are provided with all the gear, but if you take kayaking up yourself it's undoubtedly an investment: my carbon fibre paddle was several hundred pounds, for instance, and these days an hour on the Olympic course is almost £20.

Nevertheless, the pleasure and sense of achievement I've enjoyed over the years makes it worth every penny for me. At 76, I'm the oldest person in our group now. I admit it is rather nice when I'm told I'm an inspiration!"



The Lee Valley White Water Centre provides a safe place to learn the sport

Pedal power

‘Every u3a member who joins us for a ride loves it’

Billy Martin is a member of both East Renfrewshire u3a and Bearsden & Milngavie u3a. Both have off-road cycling groups, which go out together



“I took up cycling again once I retired 10 years ago. Off-road especially appeals to me because I love getting out into the countryside and exploring the quiet roads and lanes – that might be rural cycle tracks, canal or railway paths, although we often go up into the hills or catch the ferry over to some of the islands on the west coast such as Cumbrae and Bute.

We cycle around 20–25 miles on our weekly sessions (I’m the facilitator of the East Renfrewshire group), and always stop for a coffee or a spot of lunch. It’s a friendly, sociable crowd, and we all look out for each other.

There’s a good mix of men and women: some have e-bikes (I’ve just invested in one!), while others have well-maintained bicycles that might be 20 years old. We all wear helmets, but other than that it’s just a case of comfortable

layers of clothes and sturdy footwear – you don’t need expensive cycling shoes.

People often assume you have to be incredibly fit to take up off-road cycling, but that’s not strictly the case. Some of our routes are a bit hilly in this area, so you need a certain level of fitness, but there are plenty that are far less challenging – a flat canal path, for instance, is easy. We have a range of abilities in our group, so we do our best to ensure there is something for everyone to enjoy: some members may choose to go halfway, then turn back – and that’s fine.



We ask everyone to heed the advice on risk assessment on our u3a website and we take great care when we’re out and about: one of us leads, while another experienced cyclist brings up the rear, so can always spot if someone is having difficulties – or gets a puncture!

I’d say to anyone who’s interested to just come and give it a try – you might surprise yourself!”



Fit for it?

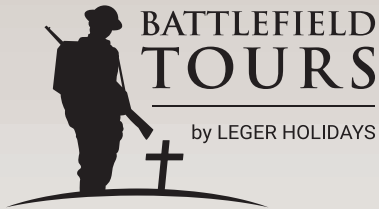
Taking up an active pursuit will undoubtedly get you fitter, but it will also help to future-proof your health. “Increasingly, we know that just doing cardiovascular exercise to raise the heart rate is not enough,” says Dr McGrattan. “Building muscle mass and keeping bones strong are also vital

at this age, as is improving balance, and all of these can be helped with the right activity: it’s recognised, for instance, that people who are active are less likely to suffer joint pain.”

If you have health conditions or concerns, speak to your GP before embarking on a new pursuit or activity that is more demanding than you’re used to. Finally, build up exercise gradually if you’re not used to it. “Take

it slowly, and expect recovery to take longer than it once did,” advises Dr McGrattan. “That’s perfectly normal – but no reason to stop!”

The Third Age Trust provides third-party liability insurance. However, extreme sports and high hazard activities may not be covered. Please check with the u3a office before running an activity.



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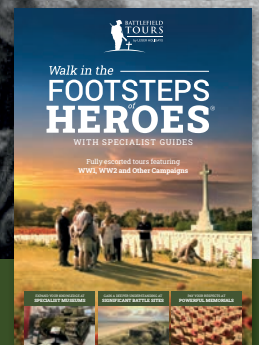
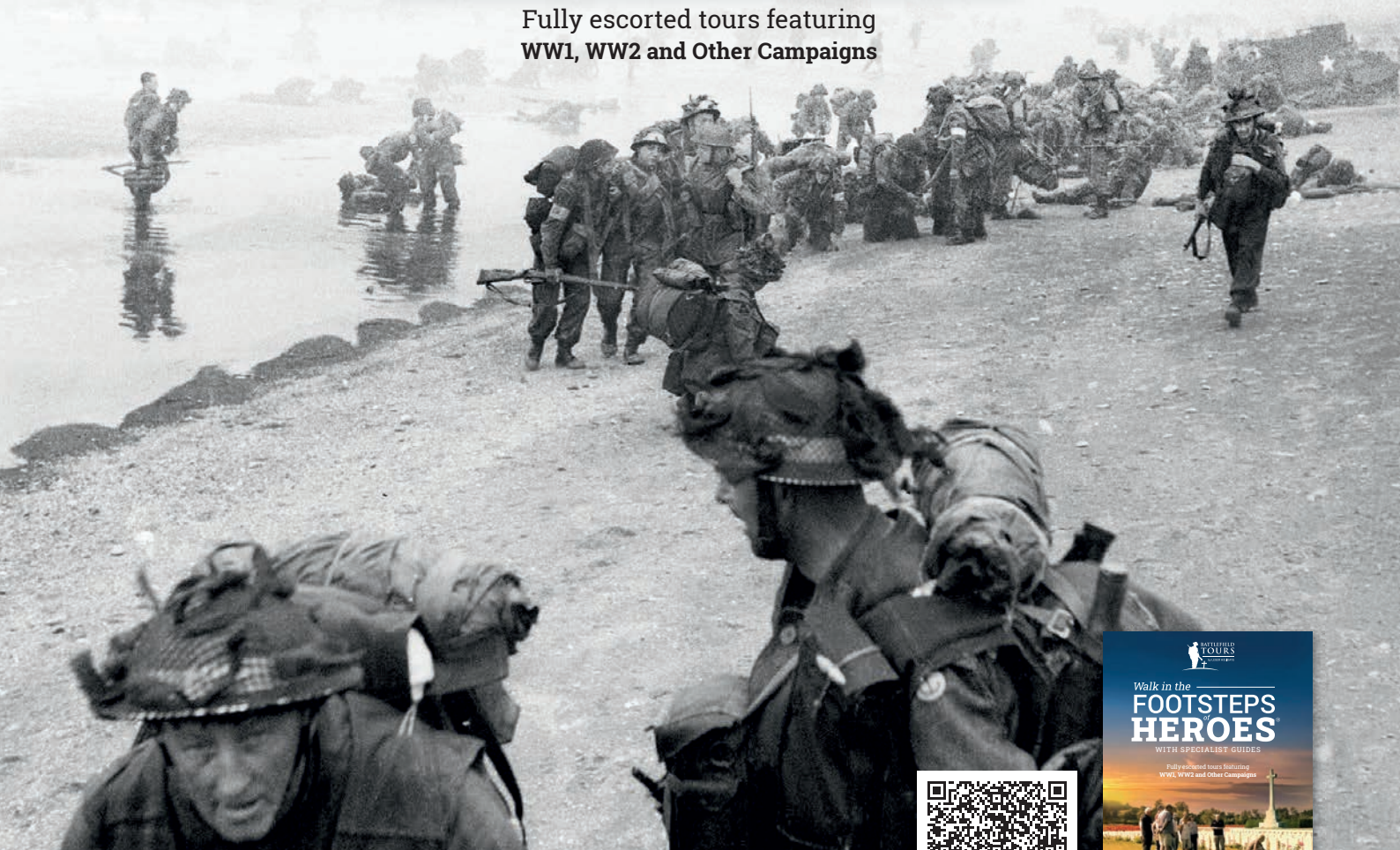
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Insight

'At this stage of life, embrace and enjoy the coda'

Judy Condie, a member of Banstead u3a, discovers a word that perfectly sums up how she feels about life now

Recently, at the age of 64, I've felt slightly uncomfortable, not quite belonging, and bewildered by the stage of life I'm now in. But then I heard the phrase 'enjoying the coda' on a television programme. Always keen to search for the meaning of an unfamiliar word or phrase, I checked it out – and discovered coda (which is actually the Italian word for 'tail') offered me the perfect description of my life stage now.

Coda is described as 'the exhilarating conclusion evoking triumph and closure in equal measure', and usually refers to the end of a dance or piece of music. For me, however, it encapsulated all my feelings in one go. The pride in my life's achievements; my awareness of everlasting nature; and the realisation that I will not be here forever. The flourish of my last decades, perhaps.

Ironically, given my name, the Beatles' song *Hey Jude* is one of the most famous codas in musical terms. There are those extra four minutes that no one wants to end, as we all belt out the inane words 'La, la, la, lalalala...' in the powerful knowledge that we can't mess it up!

Coda truly represents the tail end of life, when perhaps we don't care if we make a mistake anymore because these days we are safely encased in the

familiarity and repetition of a life well lived. I now approach my days with a more relaxed attitude, knowing I have done well in this life, been good to others and contributed enough to make my stay here worthwhile. I smile at my memories, revel in my children and grandchildren, and am proud to see them all thrive. Any work I do now is a benefit, not a necessity.

“ ”

It is a privilege to have got here in the first place

The truth is that in 100 years' time, no one will remember me very well. My grandchildren will be very, very old (if they are still here at all) and their children may possibly just remember hearing my name or seeing my photograph. Hopefully they will read the book I have written about the reasons why I decided to backpack 30,000 miles around Australia and beyond, and hopefully it will help them to understand such an important part of my life.

They will never know my own wonderful parents and the childhood they gave me, and all of our names

will be preceded by the word 'great' ad infinitum. My work will be long forgotten, unless I invent something life-changing, and my house will have been lived in by several families, if it is still standing on the edge of the present-day green belt. My once treasured possessions will be in lofts or in and out of numerous charity shops, valued only for their gold content. I hope, though, that some will remain loved, even if the custodians have no idea where they came from.

This conclusion of mine will be felt, and I hope recognised, by all my fellow 'third-agers' as we realise that decades do not go on forever. This is not a bad thing by any means: it is a privilege to have got here in the first place, let alone experienced it for so long. We do not have to cycle around the country, skydive or swim with sharks to prove we are still alive and fearless. Being proud of our lives so far and the people we have helped or influenced in a positive way is achievement enough.

Whether this is our last performance or our life's reward, does it really matter? Just enjoying the coda is enough. ●

If you'd like a copy of Judy's self-published book, *Caught in a RIPtide* (£10, plus p&p), please email: editor@u3a.org.uk (head your email RIPtide). We will pass all requests on.

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