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welcome



Do you remember when retirement seemed so far off it was impossible to imagine? I can clearly recall being a teenager in the 1970s and wondering what on earth the 'older generation' did all day. Surely, I'd think, they must be very set in their ways, and lead the most boring, limited existence...

Well, fast forward several decades, and suddenly I am a woman of a certain age – and, frankly, I'd like to give my younger self a good talking to! Because there is absolutely nothing dull about the lives of people in this demographic these days.

Look, I'd say to Young Sharon, there's this movement called u3a – not even founded back then – which knocks all those old misconceptions firmly on the head. And why? Because its members are a shining example of what being older really means now, be it a proactive attitude; staying curious and learning new

things; keeping active and healthy; and, not least, having the most brilliant fun along the way.

If you need further proof, just look to the second member-led u3a Festival held this summer (see page 5). It truly demonstrates that today's 'third-agers' are a positive force to be reckoned with! And when it comes to retirement and what this actually means for so many these days, a key u3a report – which 10,000 members took part in – proves that life beyond full-time work is full of purpose and possibility. Read more on page 29.

Personally, I wish I'd had a crystal ball and seen that for myself all those years ago!

Sharon Parsons, editor

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connections

News and views to share what has been happening across u3a



Celebrity guest Johnny Ball is delighted to open u3a Festival 26

Festival fun

A true celebration

This year's fantastic u3a Festival has proved once again that our brilliant members are ready to learn something new, get involved and have fun, as **Hattie Beck**, u3a Communications Officer, reports

The second u3a Festival took over the University of York's campus for three days in July, building on the success of its 2024 debut with an even bigger programme and a turnout of more than 1,300 u3a members.

On the first morning, presenter and writer Johnny Ball cut the ribbon at the

opening ceremony, kicking off three sunny days of activities – from sports, crafts and music to fun, learning and connection.

Johnny, especially known to generations of children as a TV presenter, was here as an advocate for lifelong learning. “You, of the u3a,



CEO Iain Cassidy presents the trophy for the Walking Cricket tournament to Wakefield u3a

are gold,” he told the crowd, urging members to “go into the world with a confidence, go from strength to strength – and make a difference”.

Enjoying a game of pétanque



Successful results at the flower corsage workshop



Discovering new skills

By 10.30am on the first morning of the Festival, the campus was already in full swing, setting the scene for the days ahead: there were astronomy talks next to dance choreography, Egyptology alongside table tennis, and York walking tours between painting sessions. Busy days were followed by fun evenings, where activities and entertainment choices ranged from quiz shows to live bands. Many members even managed to watch the World Cup match at one of the university bars!

The opportunity to try something with no pressure to be good at it underpinned the whole event.

The beginners' painting session drew many members. "Some had never picked up a paintbrush in their lives!"

confirmed tutor Barry Appleby of both Derby and Burton-on-Trent u3as. "I would never have done anything like this before," said Adrienne Cleasby from Richmond u3a, "but now I'm tempted to go to another painting session." Fellow attendee Loraine Radcliffe, from Ilkley & District u3a, put it more broadly: "The whole programme has enabled all of us to be brave."

Jude Wells, from Heaton & Reddish u3a, picked macramé, something

completely new. "I like crafty things," she said, sorting through a rainbow of coloured thread, "so I thought I'd diversify and learn a new skill. You can't do things like this at home usually!"

Loraine was also to be found in the sports hall, trying pickleball for the first time. "I feel like I could go along to a beginner's group, now that u3a has given me this opportunity," she said.

Derby u3a's Pete Gill, who ran the sessions, noticed a similar theme: "It has encouraged people to go and start pickleball groups at their own u3as," he said. "We've had a really positive reaction!"

Exploring new ideas

Of course, learning was a key feature of the Festival. Member-led talks tackled everything from futurology and de-stressing to misogyny. The Online Climate Matters group ran two sessions and staffed a stall in the Exhibition Hall. "We want members to appreciate the scale of the problem and let them know what they can do about it, even if those are only small things," said Eleanor Brooks and Linda Creed, adding that the



The wine appreciation session proves very popular!

conversations at their stand had been "really positive".

AI lectures were very popular, leading Jackie Roche, from Havering u3a, to rethink what she thought she knew. "I didn't realise what AI could do. I've learned all about how it can affect me and what its future uses will be."

The variety of sessions was key to what made the Festival special for many members. "I've been using my head all day," said Clare Jenkins from Beeston u3a, as she carefully constructed a

“““
I think
the whole
programme
has enabled
all of us to
be brave



Plenty of members took part in lively, thought-provoking discussions



Getting crafty with macramé



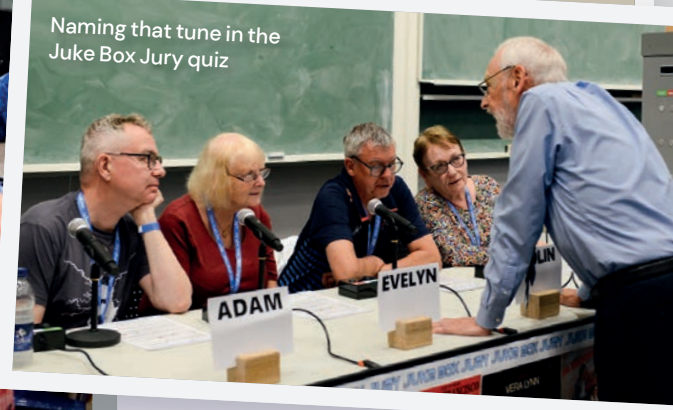
The crowd gathers for an audience with Johnny Ball



Painting pictures in an art class



Members make music with a steel drums session



Naming that tune in the Juke Box Jury quiz

delicate flower wrist corsage, “so I needed something relaxing and creative!”

Making connections

Nevertheless, for most members, the highlight was not any one workshop or activity, but the people. Ali Banham, from Wendover u3a, came alone and left with new friends: “It’s absolutely fantastic. Everyone’s really friendly.” Frank Velander, from Shrewsbury u3a, described the pleasure of being part of a community. “When you sit down

to dinner, you know there’s always someone to talk to: we all have a common denominator – u3a. It’s a fantastic way to make all sorts of connections.”

Frank Watts, from Spalding & District u3a, ran an evening music quiz that turned into quite the party. “Everyone threw themselves into it, singing along to the music and even dancing in the aisles!” Linda Matheson, a member of Ayr u3a, summed up what the whole event seemed to prove:

“It just shows how active older people can be. That’s the thing about u3a – it makes people get out and do things.”

By members, for members

The Festival itself was organised by a volunteer committee of u3a members, supported by the Trust marketing team. The result of months of hard work, it has been a celebration of “everything that is good about u3a,” said organising committee chair Karen Sawyer.

She added: “Lots of smiling faces, lots of interesting things to do, a dedicated team of volunteers, and staff who made it all happen.”

Programme organiser Margaret Fiddes agreed. “The team of volunteers who worked so hard are looking back fondly on a fantastic three days where more members met in one place than ever before,” she said. “We are grateful to those who volunteered to take a group, lead a session or act as a steward – without them, there wouldn’t have been a Festival!”

With many thanks to Ambassador Cruise Line, the proud sponsors of u3a Festival 26



Enjoying a good game of bridge



On court for netball



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Time for change?



To move forward and evolve as a movement, do we need to start thinking differently, asks Chair **Allan Walmsley**

The UK has a long tradition of cool, windy and showery summers, but in recent years

– particularly this one – we’ve witnessed very different weather patterns, haven’t we? Soaring temperatures have challenged the predictability of our lives. After many years of weather-disrupted carnivals, summer fayres and barbecues, suddenly we have amber and red weather alerts and all the associated problems that come with them – from train cancellations and hosepipe bans to even more potholes appearing on the roads! Not least, the heat can affect our wellbeing and quite definitely our energy levels, making it difficult to achieve the simplest of tasks.

It seems to me that this disruption to our lives has more impact simply because we’re not used to it. In other words, would we cope better if we were more familiar and even

comfortable with ever-changing circumstances? I’m not just talking about the weather, either.

“““
The challenge for the Trust now is how can we think outside the box?

Routines, patterns, traditions and habits are the cornerstones of our lives, but as a u3a movement, don’t we also need to change with the times? The pace of change in society is probably greater in our lifetime than for any earlier generation, and with examples such as AI, cashless payments, digital and mobile,

multiple apps and so much more besides, the pace seems to be ever quickening.

So, what might the u3a look like in 10 years’ time – and what do we need to be thinking about now to position ourselves as an inspiring, purposeful and effective organisation for our future members?

As I chat to members around the UK, there are two key issues that keep popping up: recruiting committee members (particularly officers) and the increasing administrative burden on u3as. While most are affected, the problems have a disproportionate impact on smaller u3as, eventually causing some to close.

What we’ve done over the last 43 years doesn’t really give us many pointers for the future. Of course, we all want to stick closely to the traditional u3a ethos, but the way we are structured was, by and large, designed for a different time.

The challenge for the Trust now is, how can we think outside the box? How can we provide advice, guidance and support to u3as to enable them to also think differently in order to evolve? How can we guarantee the future of the u3a movement as the country’s go-to movement for learning, social connection and positivity in later life?

As always, I’d love to hear what you think. How do you think the movement should be changing over the next 10 years?

Email editor@u3a.org.uk and head your email: **IDEAS FOR CHANGE**

PHOTO: PETER ALVEY

Website wonder



Is your u3a’s website in need of a polish? Look no further: our u3a SiteWorks team is ready to offer help and support, as Brent u3a recently discovered. “Our friend David Rose volunteered to help us, but although he had worked in IT, he had never built a website before,” explains Secretary Cathy Mercer. “He was put in touch with SiteWorks, and they

explained they have a standard website template that they encourage all u3as to use, which makes it very straightforward. After just a few Zoom tutorials, David was able to create our excellent site.”

Brent u3a compiled the content as a committee, and the Watercolour Painting group provided the fantastic artwork. (Take a look at: brent.u3asite.uk)



Brent u3a’s eye-catching new website features members’ artwork

For further information and support, go to: siteworks.u3a.org.uk

Airborne adventure

Silent soaring in the sky!

Gliding enthusiast **Richard Bryant** of Cranleigh u3a recounts a special day earlier this year when a group of members took to the skies

“**I** first flew in a glider in May 1976, and was immediately hooked – there is absolutely nothing like it. When you’re up there in the sky, it’s so peaceful: there is no engine noise, the cockpit is comfortable and warm... and, on a clear day, the views stretching out before you are amazing. It really puts life in perspective!

After a flying break because of work commitments, I retired and was then able to join Southdown Gliding Club and fly over the beautiful South Downs National Park. I also joined Cranleigh & District u3a and, in 2022, I arranged the first Cranleigh u3a Gliding experience, which proved a great success. (Four more fully-booked events have been held since then, with another one planned for this September – so it’s clearly a popular pursuit!)

Worryingly, the weather leading up to this year’s planned gliding experience on the 12 May was not good, but miraculously, on the big day, conditions were excellent. The 10 participants got ready for a full day of activity, both on the ground and up in the air. There is always so much to observe, and lots to learn too.

First, we watched the K21 gliders being towed out of the hangar, along with the two tow planes. These are always thoroughly inspected by qualified club members and signed off as airworthy. Then it was off to the classroom, where the u3a visitors were welcomed by the instructor in charge that day. A briefing followed covering weather, clouds and the possibility of thermal lifts.

Then it was time for the main event! I escorted the group to the launch point (this is a ‘live’ airfield, so visitors can’t just walk where they want). The way it works is that each member in the group takes it in turns to fly: the time in the air depends on lots of factors, but most flights usually last for around 30–40 minutes.

This time, one of the first to take to the skies was member Jan McCall. As with every gliding visitor, a careful procedure was followed. She was introduced to her instructor Graham

The beautiful South Downs from the sky
Below: Jan McCall strapped in and ready for her first flight



(a qualified pilot), who explained how the glider works, demonstrated the controls, and helped her don her parachute before she was assisted into the cockpit and her straps were fastened. Cameras and mobile phone cameras are permitted in the cockpit, but must be secured: outside the glider, meanwhile, photographs are taken to record the event – including, of course, the launch!

When all is ready, the glider is attached to the towplane and both move forward gradually, picking up speed. Being lighter, the glider is off the ground before the towplane. I always find the tow to be exciting, and I’d briefed Jan in advance on what to expect – it’s a bit like formation flying! Then, at 3,500 feet, the towrope is released, and the glider is free.

Jan was given the opportunity to ‘follow through’ on the controls with straightforward manoeuvres, although for more difficult moves like steep turns Graham would take the controls. Similarly, if Jan wanted to simply admire the view, he would take charge, leaving her to look at the clouds, fly *around* the clouds, and keep an eye out for red kites and buzzards – these are all magic moments.

When Jan came down to earth, she was thrilled and delighted that I’d encouraged her to give gliding an go – and, needless to say, she plans to be flying again soon!”

“““
On a clear day, the views stretching out before you are amazing



Member Richard Bryant is always keen to fly!



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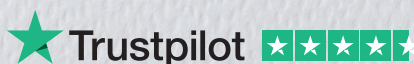
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Playback time

Rewind and remember...

Share the soundtrack of your youth

What songs take you straight back to your younger years? *u3a Rewind* is a new project celebrating the music that shaped our lives. Through the songs we loved, we want to explore the youth cultures and social changes that influenced a generation.

Together, we're creating a lasting archive of members' memories of growing up in the 20th century. Whether you were a teddy boy or girl, a mod, a rocker, a hippie, a punk or a new romantic – or simply loved the music of the time – we'd love to hear your story.

We're looking for:

- Your favourite songs and the memories they evoke

- Photographs of you, music memorabilia, concerts or fashions from the period
- Stories about dances, clubs, gigs, record shops or memorable musical moments
- Reflections on how music influenced your life, identity or friendships.

Please also nominate one favourite track for our *u3a Rewind* Spotify playlist, which will celebrate the diverse range of music enjoyed by our members across the 20th century.

Every contribution will help build a unique collection of memories that future members can enjoy, showing not just what we listened to, but how music reflected the changing times.



What track will you nominate for the *u3a Rewind* Spotify playlist?

Find out more about this exciting project and submit your memories at: u3a.org.uk/u3a-rewind

Tommy Steele in 1958



Shoppers on Carnaby Street in London, 1968



David Bowie in the 1970s



Good game!

Keep up with kurling!

Dry kurling – the indoor version of the Olympic ice sport – is gaining traction, not least in u3a! Here are two stories...

New goals

Stephen Emery of Stourbridge u3a is game for a new challenge, as he explains

“Within the past year I unfortunately broke my hip in a fall. This led to ongoing mobility issues, which in turn meant I had to relocate from Kent to Stourbridge in the West Midlands to be closer to my family.

Obviously, that also meant I left behind all the friends, neighbours and haunts I’ve enjoyed for almost all of my 90+ years. However, my son discovered Stourbridge u3a and I’m so glad he did. Among all the pursuits available is a Kurling group: while it’s the norm to stand up to play, I learnt that the activity could be enjoyed sitting down. As I currently need a wheelchair, I agreed to give it a try.



Kurling in action!

The Kurling group meet twice a month in Wollaston Village Hall, and my granddaughter or son help to line up my chair while I concentrate on trying to accurately hit the stones close to the target.

It has been great for me to get out and about, not only finding a physical activity that can be done from a wheelchair, but spending a relaxed time with others, taking ‘sport’ (another loose term) in a casual manner.

I’ve been made to feel very welcome right from the start... even though I miss that pesky target at the other end of the hall more often than not. I blame my wheelchair pusher: I think they’re one of *The Traitors*!

It’s not easy relocating at this time of life, but meeting new people, a little mild exercise and some light-hearted banter has made such a difference. Perhaps you should give it a go yourselves ... kurling that is, not relocating!”

Team spirit

Hilary Jones, Chair of North Wales Network u3a, shares how this new activity is being met with enthusiasm by members

“Many of us found the curling at the 2026 Winter Olympics compulsive viewing, and now two members of Flintshire u3a have brought an accessible version to North Wales.

Jane and Ray Moore started a Dry Kurling group last June and the group has grown rapidly. This version is similar to the ice sport with the principle of sliding



One of the teams in Stourbridge u3a’s Kurling group

a ‘stone’ towards the centre of a target. But there’s no need for ice as a wooden floor will do just as well – and no need to contort yourself to get low down on the floor either, as a pusher is provided.

This is definitely much easier than the Olympic event, but good exercise and great fun, as our national Chair, Allan Walmsley, found when he visited the North Wales network in April and called in to Flintshire’s Dry Kurling group. He was encouraged to have a go, along with the Network Chair and the Chair of Network Link. He was quite good at it too!

As Allan said afterwards: “Dry kurling is a great activity and particularly suited to u3a members. It combines moderate physical effort with the competitive spirit valued by many u3a members and it’s ideal for the types of venues frequently used by u3as.”

Could this pursuit take off across u3as – like pickleball? I hope so!”



Chair Allan Walmsley joins in with Flintshire u3a’s Dry Kurling group

What new sport or activity is your u3a involved with at the moment? Let us know at: editor@u3a.org.uk, and head your email SPORT GROUPS

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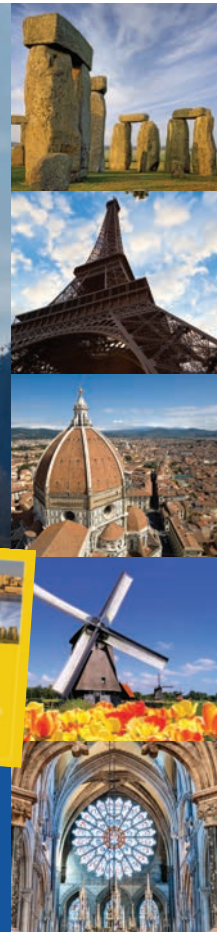
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Obituary

Memories of Mo

Northumbria u3a's appreciation of Mo Brown



Mo was, for many, Northumbria u3a (now u3a North East Region). She embodied all that it stood for and the strapline Learn, Laugh, Live surely described her well.

You rarely saw her without a smile on her face, and she was the first person that people went to for advice. She listened, asked relevant questions and then put you on the right track, always following up to see that all was well. She was always a voice of reason.

Mo was Chair of Northumbria u3a for three years and at the quarterly meetings, which were held in person, she was

one of the first to arrive and last to leave. She was never alone: someone always wanted to speak to her.

Mo ran the North Northumberland Network and the region's IT Network, along with the Group Coordinators Network. She, along with Jane Mathieson, Pam Taylor and Kelvin Rushworth, were the first Trust Volunteers in the North East.

She was a proofreader for the national u3a and her computer skills were brought to the fore especially during the pandemic, where she quickly realised the benefits of Zoom, both for the region and nationally. She often helped with national meetings and organised breakout rooms.

A great teacher with an amazing memory, Mo's wisdom, patience and kindness are legendary.

Mo is already missed, but her memory will live long through the help and advice she willingly offered.

Small steps

Sowing the seeds

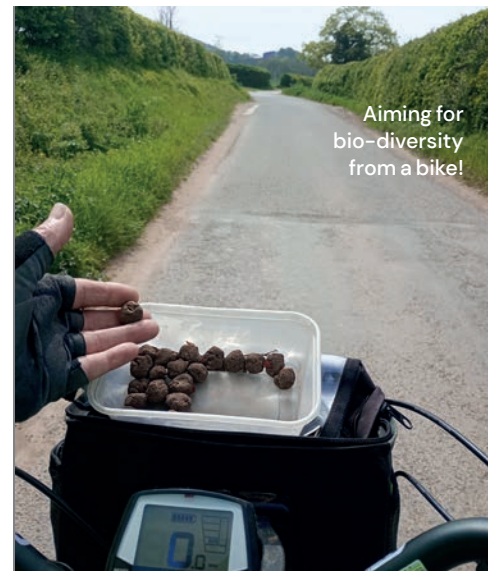
What are the small ways you – or your u3a – have aimed to create positive change in our environment? Here **Steve Holder** of Ross & District u3a tells us about his nature project



“**W**hen I'm cycling along the lanes of Gloucestershire and Herefordshire, I have noticed that while many are green and pleasant, they are often bordered by hedges planted with just a few native species, which is a great shame. A diverse hedge of age can be identified by its mix of native species – it's a wildlife corridor.

I made a list of native UK species with the advice of an ecologist friend, and now during my rides I take breaks to collect

seeds as they ripen and are ready to fall. Back home, the smaller, lighter seeds are mixed with soil, a little water and flour to bind, and are then formed into marble-size seeded pellets and left to dry. These, along with the larger seeds, travel with me in my bicycle bar bag from which they can be taken and aimed at a chosen roadside spot.



Ecologists to whom I've mentioned my seed distribution have all voiced their approval, and spreading a little bio-diversity as I ride along the lanes is an added bonus to the health benefits of cycling. Surely some seeds will take!"

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Discussion point

The joy of surprising yourself

In this series, we debate the topics that affect u3a and wider society. Here **CEO Iain Cassidy** suggests letting go of self-limiting beliefs about our capabilities

“**T**hat’s just not me.” It’s a phrase most of us have used at some point. I’m not musical. I’m not creative. I’m not good with technology. I’m not the sort of person who speaks in front of a group.

The interesting thing is that many of these conclusions were reached years ago, sometimes decades ago, most likely within a formal education system that rewarded certain ways of thinking and doing things, while leaving less room for others. What felt like a definitive verdict at the time may have reflected the environment we were in, rather than our true abilities or potential.

Perhaps you were told by a teacher that you couldn’t sing or that you weren’t artistic, and over time came to accept that view as a fact about yourself. Maybe a difficult experience at work convinced you that leadership wasn’t your strength. Or perhaps you tried learning a language at 15 and concluded it simply wasn’t for you.

The problem is that we often carry these judgements around for the rest of our lives, treating them as facts rather than old opinions. But u3a has shown me that when learning is free from exams, competition and the fear of getting things wrong, we begin to let go of old assumptions and self-limiting beliefs. In the right setting, hidden interests, talents and confidence can emerge, revealing a fuller version



of ourselves that may have been there all along.

One of the things I enjoy most about meeting u3a members is hearing stories that bring this idea to life. The member who discovers a passion for painting after a lifetime of claiming they “can’t draw”. The reluctant public speaker who ends up chairing a committee.

“”
In the right setting, hidden interests, talents and confidence can emerge

The person who was convinced technology was beyond them, only to become the one helping others navigate Zoom meetings and online groups.

What strikes me is that the surprise is rarely the activity itself. The bigger surprise is discovering that an old belief about yourself was wrong. In some ways, later life gives us a unique opportunity to revisit these assumptions. Many of the labels we carried through adulthood were shaped by circumstances that no longer exist. We are no longer defined by school reports, career paths or the



expectations of others. Retirement can create space to ask a question that busy working lives often leave little room for: who do I want to be?

The answer may be quite different from the one you arrived at decades ago. This isn’t really about becoming a different person. It’s about recognising that we are all ‘works in progress’. Curiosity, confidence and capability don’t stop developing at a particular age. Sometimes they simply need the chance to emerge.

Perhaps one of the greatest benefits of trying something new isn’t learning a new skill at all. It’s discovering a new version of yourself. And that can be genuinely surprising!

I’d love to hear your thoughts. If there were no fear of failure and no pressure to be good at it, what is one subject or activity you’ve always thought was beyond your abilities that you would love to try?

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

For more about members discovering talents they never thought they had, turn to *Find your creative side*, on page 24.



u3aweek is coming!

Save
the date:
19-27
September

This year, it's all about the joy of doing something new

As everyone knows, one of the great things about u3a is having the chance to try out hobbies purely for the enjoyment of it – not to be the best or hit a particular goal. That's why this year, alongside the many open days and local events that take place during wonderful u3a Week, we'd love members to take this opportunity to try something completely different, no matter how big or small.

Alongside your own initiatives and ideas, there will be a programme of free online talks that aim to

challenge members to learn and try something new too.

Across our social channels we'll also be asking people to expand their horizons and try something new, just for fun.

We'd love to hear from members who are ready to get curious and see what they might discover for the first time. The sky's the limit!

Let us know what you and your fellow u3a members try for the first time during u3a week. Email communications@u3a.org.uk.

Be inspired!

Here are 10 ideas to get you started...

1. Give a craft like origami a go
2. Bake something really special
3. Try a different cuisine at a local restaurant or cook a new dish
4. Learn to count to 10 in a language you don't know
5. Write a poem or short story
6. Host a quiz night
7. Plan a vegetable patch
8. Learn a dance routine
9. Research a topic you're curious about
10. Explore the history of where you live at your local library



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Take a break

Join us on a getaway!



Exclusive trips for u3a members

The first u3a getaway to Devon exploring the world of Agatha Christie has proved really popular – and there's plenty more to come! These bespoke trips are designed to create opportunities for u3a members to come together to learn, discover and explore.

Every getaway blends relaxed, well-organised travel with enriching and immersive experiences. Beyond sightseeing, you can enjoy talks, workshops and shared adventures that build lasting friendships. Look at what's coming up:

Appreciating Shakespeare STRATFORD-UPON-AVON: 12-15 OCTOBER

This break includes a one-day course with an expert, as well as visits to Shakespeare's Birthplace, New Place and Anne Hathaway's Cottage, and free time in Stratford-upon-Avon.



Enjoy a masterclass in chocolate-making in York

Yorkshire Festive Treats

YORK: 18-20 NOVEMBER

Experience one of Britain's biggest Christmas markets and discover York's rich confectionery heritage, learning new skills with an informative chocolate-making masterclass.

Aviation Heritage

**MILTON KEYNES AND DUXFORD:
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This three-night break is perfect for those with a keen interest in aviation and history. Spend a full day at Shuttleworth and the Imperial War Museum at Duxford. Meet the experts, discover vintage aircraft and veteran vehicles, and explore an historic airfield.



Learn about animal conservation at Dartmoor Zoo

Going wild in Dartmoor

TORQUAY: 9-11 APRIL 2027

In partnership with the Dartmoor Zoological Society, learn about its conservation work, participate in animal enrichment, and find out about animal habitats in the wild. An enlightening experience for anyone interested in animal conservation and wildlife.

To find out more about all these trips, and book your place, go to: theukholidaygroup.com/u3agetaways. You can also call the dedicated u3a getaways phone line on **01603 886773**.

Immerse yourself in the world of Shakespeare in Stratford-upon-Avon



Discover more about aviation

■ If you're joining the Agatha Christie trip this September, we'd love to hear all about it! Send us an email for the chance to be featured in the next edition of *u3a Matters*. Email: editor@u3a.org.uk and head your email: AGATHA CHRISTIE

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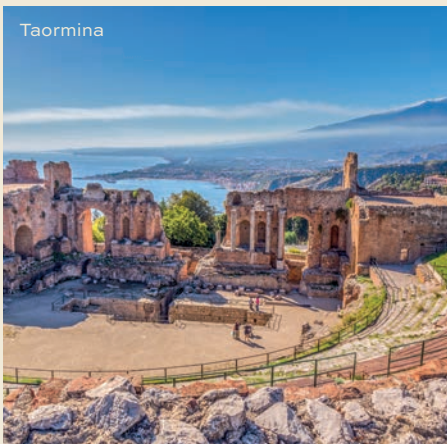


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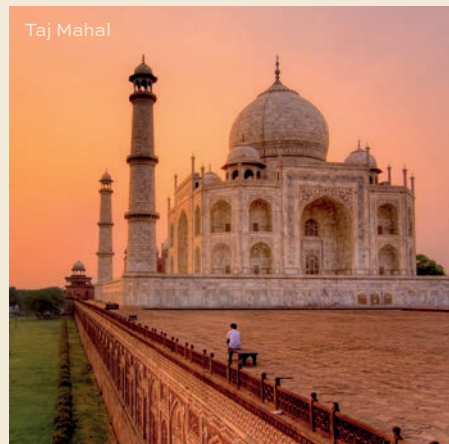
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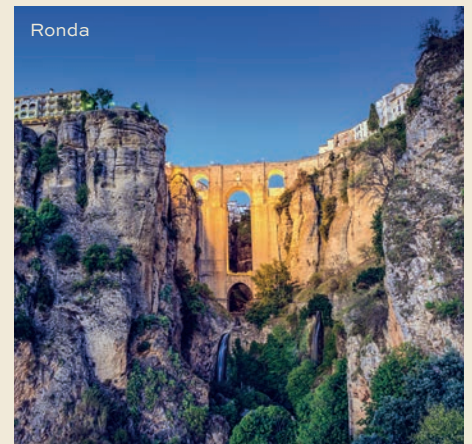
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Ronda



Find your creative side

You may have spent years believing you don't have any artistic talent – but, with a little encouragement, you could really surprise yourself

Are you someone who used to love art as a child, but somehow found that as the years went by you never had the opportunity to develop your talent, and now don't know where to begin? Or perhaps you were actively discouraged by others from pursuing a creative 'journey' and now lack the confidence to try.

"Very often, past experience can have a really negative effect on how 'good' we believe we are at something," points out clinical psychologist Dr Marianne Trent.*

"If you were told at school that your artwork wasn't any good, for instance, you are likely to take the message that you can't paint or draw through life – and that probably isn't true. Just give yourself permission to try."

Creative pursuits can also make you feel self-conscious about expressing yourself artistically – not least, showing others the results. "It's natural to feel vulnerable, especially at first," says Marianne. "But bear in mind that in a supportive environment you'll be encouraged by everyone there. Many will be at exactly the same stage you are, and those with more experience will be able to give you valuable tips and ideas. Before long, you'll be doing the same when other new people join!"

If you need further convincing, creative pursuits offer a raft of wellbeing benefits too. The challenge

helps to maintain cognitive function, and improves memory. Being thoroughly absorbed can cause a calm meditative state called 'flow', known to reduce stress. Seeing your artistic project develop provides a sense of purpose, and being part of a creative group can offer a great sense of community.

With hundreds of thriving creative interest groups nationwide, u3a provides a wonderful opportunity to get involved in an artistic pursuit. Here, two u3a members who have established inspiring groups tell us about the fantastic effect these have had – proving that it's never too late to find your creative side!

“““
Creative projects offer a raft of wellbeing benefits

Fresh focus



Ian Smith of Leyland u3a describes how establishing a photography group has inspired members to develop new skills as well as confidence

When I look back over the past three years, it's hard to believe just how far the Leyland u3a Photographic group has come. When I was initially asked to run the group, I was knee-deep in a photographic MA course at the University of Bolton and had too much going on. But in 2023, I accepted the challenge from social secretary Pam Carroll, and group coordinator Stella Pearson.

Our group's first meeting, held in the back of a pub, attracted only three members with varying experience – but it was a start. Right from the beginning my aim was to provide practical information, supportive feedback and plenty of encouragement – whether members had been shooting for years or picking up a camera for the first time. This, of course, presented a challenge, but keeping things hands-on and jargon-free, covering camera basics and simple ways to get better results, along with one-to-one coaching if required, ensured that everybody felt included.

As the group grew, we came up with an idea that was to prove transformative for us all. Our Perspectives on the Past project – supported by a council grant – was established to showcase the rich source of heritage in this area – from historic buildings to landmarks: these are often right under our nose, yet many people didn't even notice them!

Members who once doubted their abilities found themselves researching local history, learning architectural photography, experimenting with printing techniques and mastering their cameras in ways they had never imagined over the 15 months the project ran. All of this culminated in a hugely acclaimed six-week exhibition in Worden



An acclaimed project exploring local heritage was to prove transformative for Leyland u3a's Photography group

Park, and this year the work has been on display at Chorley Central Library. For members who thought they'd never be 'good enough', seeing their work professionally displayed was a huge source of confidence and pride.

Not surprisingly, after the success of this exhibition, the group was buzzing, and to keep that energy alive, I decided to shift our focus to portraiture, and we spent five weeks exploring lighting and camera skills. In addition, we've also embarked on a wide range of different projects – from capturing the spirit of ceilidh dance to shooting an orchestral rehearsal and concert – along with workshops that look at technical challenges and ways to overcome them.

What has struck me most is not simply the quality of interesting photographs that have been produced but the camaraderie of the group, which now numbers 15. There is no competitiveness or ego. Tips and tricks are shared freely, and encouragement is constant. The group's achievements are a testament to their enthusiasm, curiosity and willingness to step outside their comfort zones. As one member said about Perspectives on the Past: "I feel that my frame of mind has changed since starting this project. It's given me new roads to go down and different

things to look at – it's been a fresh challenge."

People outside our circle have noticed too, which helps to strengthen the reputation of the u3a in our wider community. And in tandem with Leyland u3a's incredibly supportive committee, we're producing a calendar for 2027 based on the images from our Perspectives on the Past project which will be available to u3a members and hopefully beyond.

My own motivation comes from watching the group grow – not just in photographic skills, but in confidence and courage. They arrive at every session with the same spark of curiosity and interest that started this whole adventure – and more than anything that keeps me fully invested too. ▶



New perspective



Ian Welsh, formerly of Heswall u3a on the Wirral, and now based in Whitstable, explains how he encouraged members to discover their artistic talents

This year, Heswall embarked on a creative journey in pencil drawing, sparked by a casual conversation between two members who expressed a desire to learn how to draw. This chat planted the seed for a new course and, as a retired lecturer, nursing the idea of writing a new curriculum was exciting, although I am only a hobby artist and certainly not an expert!

I proposed a 10-week Pencil Drawing course, with each session lasting two hours, and submitted the outline to Jo Yuregir, our supportive short course organiser. To ensure everyone received the attention and feedback they needed, I capped the course at 10 participants.

The course quickly filled up, and we started this February. To set the stage for

success, I sourced top-quality materials, and when everyone arrived for their first session, they found a tote bag containing pencils of varying grades, sketchpads, erasers and

a sharpener – everything needed to begin their artistic adventure.

The course was designed for absolute beginners, and my opening exercise made that clear – most participants hadn't drawn since childhood. We began with simple mark-making, exploring how holding a pencil differently produced various effects. The first exercise using this technique resulted in an 'a-ha!' moment when they realised they had just drawn a stone wall!

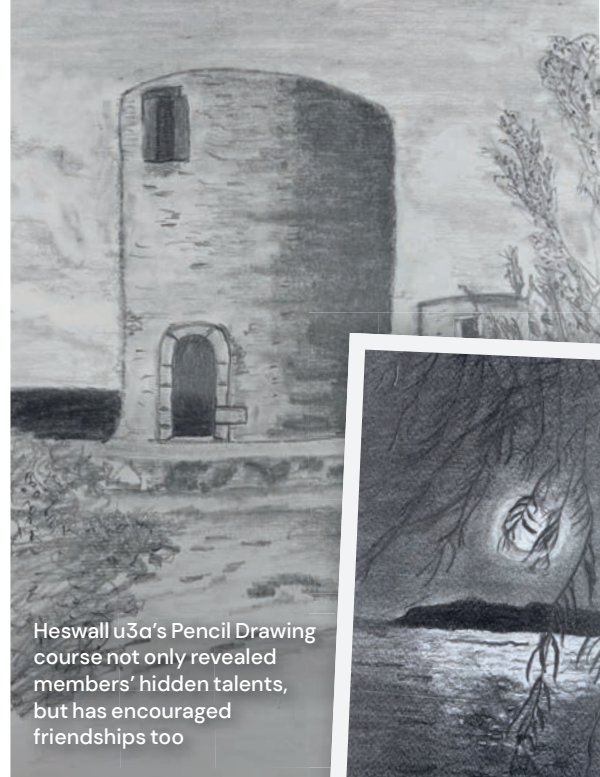
As the weeks progressed, the group's confidence steadily grew, and soon the members were drawing subjects such as a local sandstone wall and a set of worn stone steps.

“”
The group's confidence steadily grew

Throughout the course, I introduced exercises that built skills step by step, from basic shapes and texture studies to more complex compositions. We experimented with drawing hands, which heightened observational skills, then progressed to drawing complex shapes. I used my

prior experience of helping students to learn by encouraging participants to reflect on their progress and share their sketches, sometimes emailing them to me for feedback between sessions.

In week 10, the group exhibited their work at a u3a meeting, which was met with considerable acclaim. The final evaluation, thoughtfully collated by Jo, reflected the group's transformation. Initial doubts had given way to confidence, and participants spoke warmly of learning in a relaxed and friendly environment. This was important, as some had previously commented that although they enjoyed art at school they'd been put off by negative comments from teachers. Many commented that they now



Heswall u3a's Pencil Drawing course not only revealed members' hidden talents, but has encouraged friendships too

observed the world with more attention to detail and enjoyed connecting with fellow beginners.

For me, leading the course was deeply rewarding. I felt a renewed sense of purpose and satisfaction, knowing I'd inspired others to embrace creativity.

In my career as a lecturer, I never just aimed to help students pass exams – I wanted them to feel inspired to keep on learning, so it was really satisfying when the members who had participated said that they would like to continue and form a regular drawing group – testament to the value they found in learning collaboratively. Sadly, I will not be able to join them as I have just relocated to Whitstable!

It's clear that the Heswall u3a's Pencil Drawing course not only developed artistic skills but also sparked friendships and a shared enthusiasm for further learning.

I would say to apprehensive members that if you want to learn something new, don't let past experiences put you off: u3a offers learning opportunities that bring personal satisfaction. And to anyone with a subject to teach, just do it – seeing others share your love for a subject is very rewarding. ●

What creative u3a groups have helped you to discover your artistic side? Email editor@u3a.org.uk and head your email CREATIVE PURSUITS



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Insight

'The value of friendships, old and new, is priceless'

Lesley-Anne Williams, a member of Hay u3a, shares her thoughts on how rewarding friendship can be throughout life

I'm 69 and have never given up hope of 'finding my tribe'. Although we're all unique, it's the connections between us that can make our time on Earth so much more rewarding.

As a child on the outside of friendship groups, I preferred two companions whom I felt an affinity with through music, books, nature and animals: with these two, I continue to have a vibrant and happy time 60 years later. Together, we have navigated marriages, children, moves to far-flung places, bereavements, serious illnesses and injuries, and still enjoy exploring the same things that interested us then.

I have never ignored synchronicity, either. There are people who cross our path as if by accident. For me, being open to these unexpected coincidences has meant I've met many different people, had great adventures, and made new friends throughout my life.

Of course, there have been difficult times too. Over the years, I've lost three close friends, and suffered catastrophic grief for each one, but society as a whole isn't focused on providing support to bereaved friends. Perhaps it's because we don't have a formal 'role' when it comes to mourning them, yet these relationships can be stronger than the ones we have with blood relatives.

Feelings of grief and loss can occur when relationships run their course too or change dramatically. I am slowly losing a dear friend to dementia, noticing first the missed Christmas letters and birthday cards. Now her life is a mist of confusion, punctuated by her ability to reminisce about the fun we had 40 years ago.

“ ”
**I feel energised
when I'm with
others**

Having a good friend – or friends – is important on so many levels: knowing that someone has your back and 'gets' what makes you tick (and vice versa) is invaluable. These are the pals who will check in to make sure you're OK; provide a sympathetic ear and a laugh; or offer wise counsel when you can't find your way.

Companionship can be a huge source of contentment in later life, not least after loss. At 65, five years after divorce and following a busy career in leadership, I moved to an isolated farmhouse in rural Herefordshire with just my dogs and cats for company. I joined in with my local community, taking the first step to feeling connected once again. Yet undoubtedly the

most significant move – which introduced me to people who share my lifelong personal interests – was joining Hay u3a.

Through the lively Book group, I have met some fantastic members who share their wisdom and wit in equal measure; the Music-All group takes me right back to the live concerts I went to with friends in the 1970s; and the Current Affairs group allows me to share my knowledge of national and local affairs with others who have widely differing opinions, in the convivial surroundings of a local pub.

I feel energised when I'm with others, and it is such a joy to find new friends who are on the same page as me. We may be connected by age, gender, interests, passions and place, but it's also fascinating to find out about other life experiences, opinions, passions and dreams. Being curious is so rewarding, and keeps you open to fresh ideas and different perspectives.

With so many u3a members and such a strong network nationwide, finding like-minded people in this organisation isn't difficult. I certainly feel I've found my tribe here. ●

Lesley-Anne is a professional accredited life coach and bereavement counsellor (lesley-anne.co.uk)

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Performed only once every decade in Bavaria's Oberammergau, The Passion Play is a remarkable tradition dating back nearly 400 years. First staged in 1634 after villagers vowed to portray the life and suffering of Christ if spared from the plague, it continues to honour that promise and draws visitors from around the world. The entire community participates, creating an authentic and deeply moving experience. Thanks to Viking's long-standing partnership with the organisers since 2010, guests benefit from reserved seating and expertly planned itineraries. For 2030, special journeys combine The Passion Play with Viking's *Danube Waltz* and *Rhine Getaway* itineraries, showcasing destinations such as Vienna, Budapest, Salzburg and the Rhine. With every detail thoughtfully arranged, this is a rare opportunity to experience an extraordinary cultural tradition.

**EXCLUSIVE BENEFIT FOR u3a MEMBERS AND FRIENDS:
QUOTE 'u3a' AND RECEIVE A FREE DRINKS PACKAGE,
PLUS £100PP ONBOARD SPEND***

Oberammergau with Salzburg

Oberammergau to Budapest
12 days, 10 guided tours
Departing May-October 2030

Prices from £5,795pp

From price is based on a 3 August 2030 departure in a Standard (F) grade stateroom.

YOUR JOURNEY

Enjoy 4 hotel nights and an 8-day cruise

Days 1-2	Oberammergau, Germany
Days 3-4	Salzburg, Austria
Day 5	Salzburg, Austria Passau, Germany
Day 6	Passau, Germany
Day 7	Linz, Germany
Day 8	Danube River, Austria Krems, Austria
Day 9	Vienna, Austria
Day 10	Bratislava, Slovakia
Days 11-12	Budapest, Hungary

Oberammergau, Innsbruck & The Rhine

Amsterdam to Munich
13 days, 11 guided tours
Departing May-September 2030

Prices from £6,195pp

From price is based on a 10 August 2030 departure in a Standard (F) grade stateroom.

YOUR JOURNEY

Enjoy 5 hotel nights and an 8-day cruise

Day 1	Amsterdam, The Netherlands
Day 2	Kinderdijk, The Netherlands Waal & Merwede
Day 3	Cologne, Germany
Day 4	Koblenz, Germany Rhine River, Germany Rüdesheim, Germany
Day 5	Speyer, Germany
Day 6	Strasbourg, France
Day 7	Breisach, Germany
Day 8	Basel, Switzerland
Days 9	Innsbruck, Austria
Days 10-11	Oberammergau, German
Days 12-13	Munich, Germany

Call to book now on 0800 101 3500 and quote 'u3a'

The 'u3a' offer cannot be used in conjunction with any other Viking offers. *Free drinks package and £100pp onboard spend applies to new bookings only on 2027 European river journeys. Free drinks package offer is not valid on Viking's Nile journeys. Drinks package is only valid whilst on board and not applicable on any land arrangements. Restrictions apply to drinks package. Please ask for details. To book please call Viking call centre and quote 'u3a' to receive a free drinks package and £100pp onboard spend. Prices are based on flights from London and excludes any loyalty discounts that may apply to booking. Flights are available to/from London and selected regional airports only. The offer price may vary for departures from other regional airports or where departure is within 70 days of the date of booking. The obtaining of any required visas is your responsibility and is not included in the price. Price and availability are correct at the time of going to print but are subject to change. All prices are per person based on double occupancy. Single supplements apply. For full terms and conditions and the most up to date pricing information, please visit viking.com



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