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welcome



This year, I was lucky enough to visit the Arctic Circle. I went in the spring, when the phenomenon of the midnight sun meant it never got dark (most discombobulating!), but I was especially interested to talk to local people who spend the winter months experiencing the very opposite. During the polar nights, when the sun stays below the horizon for 24 consecutive hours, it is perpetual twilight in this elemental place. One lady admitted that the past winter had been particularly hard – despite the Northern Lights swirling across the skies. "It was very cold, very dark – and very long," she told me, smiling nevertheless.

Indeed, despite these challenges, the people who live there seem incredibly cheerful (Norway – where we were – is ranked one of the happiest nations on earth). How do they maintain such a positive outlook? Well, it seems to be a combination of attitude and practical, proactive measures: getting out and about, staying sociable and keeping occupied are highly recommended – all of which very much reflect u3a's ethos.

On page 47, we suggest wellbeing strategies to manage these wintry months, and elsewhere you'll find plenty of inspiration to keep mind and body busy while having fun in the process. That could be anything from collaborating on a creative project to joining one of u3a's wonderful singing groups (see page 24). And no matter how you plan to boost your mood this winter, we'd love to know!

Enjoy the issue – and season's greetings!

Sharon Parsons, editor

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connections

News and views to share what has been happening across u3a



The Chandler's Ford u3a litter squad get stuck in!



Chandler's Ford u3a participated in their area's Community Showcase to promote u3a

u3a on form

What a week!

Many u3as demonstrated how vibrant, involved and fun our organisation is to both fellow members and the wider community during **u3a Week**

Our annual celebration of u3as and their many activities makes **u3a Week** so special. This year, the event also challenged members to broaden their horizons and try something new – proving the far-reaching benefits that can come from stepping out of that comfort zone. Here's how some u3as marked the occasion.

• **Chandler's Ford u3a** forged ahead to raise its profile in the local community, reports Chair Dave Claxton: "We participated in Eastleigh Borough Council's Community Showcase, which features many charities and organisations in the area that provide facilities and activities for the residents across all ages. This year we partnered

with **Monks Brook u3a** and had productive conversations with the mayor as well as community organisations that will hopefully help with transport and day trips for those who are house-bound or with limited mobility.

We spoke to organisations that can assist with activities such as fitness and wellbeing, and were on hand to talk about u3a with anyone who visited our display.

We also organised a litter pick in Chandler's Ford, with 10 of our members, suitably attired, up for the task. Local folk were most encouraging, and we certainly raised our u3a's profile, as well as many smiles. Who knows – this might become a more regular thing?"

• **Flintshire u3a** filled a morning with music, drama and spontaneous dancing, says Speaker Organiser Hilary Jones: "To highlight this year's theme 'Expanding Horizons', 160 members enjoyed songs from our Singing for Pleasure group; a great performance from our talented Music Live group; and a play about greed and a dodgy antiques dealer from the Drama group.

Members were also treated to an engaging story written by a member of the Writers Together group. Finally, the Juke Box group enveloped us with nostalgia, playing music from the 1950s, 60s, 70s and 80s. The dancing in the aisles was a new experience for many, but what fun!

It was a successful morning of celebrating our members' talents and encouraging everyone to try something new in the year to come."



Tiptree u3a's 'Dabble Day' proved a great success



Fife u3a's Walk in the Park group ventured into pastures new

• **Tiptree u3a** enjoyed a jam-packed week of activities, says Chair Alison Lawrence: "We used this year's u3a Week to celebrate and showcase who we are and what we do, with a focus on learning something new and meeting someone new.

Our group leaders and social events team worked hard to plan a week of exhibitions, events and activities, including a week-long exhibition in a local shop window showcasing the history of the village.

We ended the week with our biggest event yet – a 'Dabble Day' in our local community centre, where u3a members and anyone interested could come along and try out different activities, such as reflexology and different crafts. We had workshops in tai chi, easy exercise, hand-chime ringing and mindfulness, while various interest groups were on hand to talk to people interested in joining u3a. Not least, our Singers and Line Dancing group provided the entertainment.

We now hope to launch three completely new interest groups and expand some of our others into a second group. On the day, we also signed up six new members and recruited a new committee member. All in all, a great success!"

> "u3a week celebrates who we are and what we do

• **Fife u3a** members were encouraged to try something new, explains Ruth Cross, a member of the Promotions Subcommittee: "Fife u3a put up daily suggestions on our website, challenging members to do something different, and linked it to an interest group page.

We put out a message to all our members the previous week, and a reminder at the start and end of u3a Week.

We also reached a wider audience through our regular inclusion in two local newspapers and several Facebook noticeboard sites.

Initial feedback suggests people took up the challenge. Some of our members joined a Writing for Fun group, others enjoyed discovering tai chi, while our Walk in the Park group got together and, making the most of their bus passes, ventured beyond their usual territory!"



Flintshire u3a's Music Live group in action

BROADENING YOUR HORIZONS?
Are you – or your u3a – planning to try something completely different in the coming year? Whether you're taking up a sport or activity, learning something totally new, or getting involved with a community initiative, we'd love to know all about it!
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Planning the priorities



PHOTO: PETER ALVEY

Chair of the Trust **Allan Walmsley** reflects on a busy year, looks ahead – and wonders how to spin all the plates successfully

As 2026 begins drawing to a close, I've been reflecting on the past year and wondering what I can do better in the one to come. It's always the same with me – continually juggling the diary to try and fit family commitments, holidays and social events around Trust meetings and u3a visits, and I always aim to prioritise the right things as best I can.

It's always a stretch to fit everything in, but I guess I'm no different to many dedicated volunteers within the organisation!

In addition to the usual round of Board and committee meetings (and fantastic events like the terrific u3a Festival in York in July), this year, I've visited u3as, networks and regional teams in the London, East and West Midlands and Wales regions; witnessed the hard work and success of some truly superb u3as; and met hugely enthusiastic and committed members along the way. I've seen innovative practices, along with new and fascinating interest groups, and observed how members consciously juggle their 'u3a time' with everything else going on in their lives – from spending time with loved ones to taking holidays and even volunteering with other charities. Each member decides where to draw the line and, of course, one member's priorities are unlikely to be the same as another's.

> "Here's to a year full of hope and great initiatives"

As a trustee at any level within the organisation, I'm sure we all recognise the importance of being committed to carrying out the role to the best of our abilities, and while in my case family will alway come first, it's often fun trying to "pour a quart into a pint pot".

Looking forward, I'm sure that for me the busyness of a packed diary will continue in 2027! There are still two regions – South West and South East – that I would like to spend more time in; there's the Fit For The Future changes that still need bedding in; and there are always, of course, the many opportunities to help promote the movement and support u3as, particularly the ones that struggle with recruitment and retention.

I hope that my wife and family agree that I've got my priorities right. Like a great many u3a members in positions of responsibility, I could not serve the Trust and the movement as much as I do without their support – and, indeed, the support of my fellow members.

Here's to a new year full of hope, great initiatives, new friendships and, not least, a true sense of commitment and community.

What are you and your u3a planning to achieve in 2027? Big or small, we'd love to know! Email: editor@u3a.org.uk, and head your email: 2027 PLANS

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Our ever-popular u3a diary is back – don't miss the opportunity to get yours!



The 2027 diary with its stylish soft cover in blue with classic ribbon bookmark is neat and practical, measuring H :143mm x W:95mm.

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The other-worldly rock formations of the Giant's Causeway

Rock stars

Geology journey



Dennis Kell, a member of East Suffolk u3a, looks back on a fascinating field trip he took with his Geology group this spring

Each year, members of our group organise a field visit to a contrasting locality in the UK or further afield to experience the geology. Past visits have included Northumberland, Assynt, Cornwall, Shropshire, the Isle of Wight and even Cyprus.

This spring, we chose to cross the Irish Sea in order to visit the North Antrim coast. Blessed with fantastic weather, smooth crossings and excellent local guide Ian Enlander, it turned out to be one of the best. We were based in the lovely seaside town of Ballycastle, and from there Ian led us to some fabulous locations, teasing out our knowledge to help understand the complex formations that unfolded around us.

Over five days, we gradually began to familiarise ourselves with the rocks. The oldest dates back to Precambrian times – some 600 million years ago when what is now the UK existed in a very different part of the globe. Some rocks had volcanic origins, while others comprised the remains of a huge mountain range once standing in Scotland. Yet more were formed in warm, shallow seas, similar to the chalk in our home region of Suffolk. Fossils, including diamond-patterned Carboniferous *Lepidodendron* bark, were also found.

Ian comprehensively explained how the many different rocks came to lie where they are now, and the processes that had shaped them: this included the opening of the North Atlantic and the relatively recent Ice Ages. He also explained the economic consequences of what had evolved, which related to the important industrial and agricultural history and development in the area.



The group enjoyed five days of discovery on the Northern Ireland coast

> "We gradually began to familiarise ourselves with the rocks

Two highlights included visiting the UNESCO World Heritage Site of the Giant's Causeway, with its amazing assemblage of over 40,000 interlocking hexagonal basalt columns, and the unique conservation area of Rathlin Island.

The island lies about 6km north of Ballycastle and is specially protected as its geology, including 30km of chalk and basalt cliffs, has created habitats supporting marine life and birds, as well as a small population of residents. Rocks, faults, puffins, fulmars and razorbills were among the many highlights of our visit, but the sight of a distant sea eagle being mobbed by buzzards was a special memory.

With Ian's help, we now have a much better understanding of the geology in Antrim and how it relates to the rest of the UK, as well as global events over time. We also understand more about how geology influences the landscape, industry, history and wildlife of an area. Above all else, the group learned and laughed together over a lovely week in a beautiful part of the British Isles.



The wild beauty of Rathlin Island

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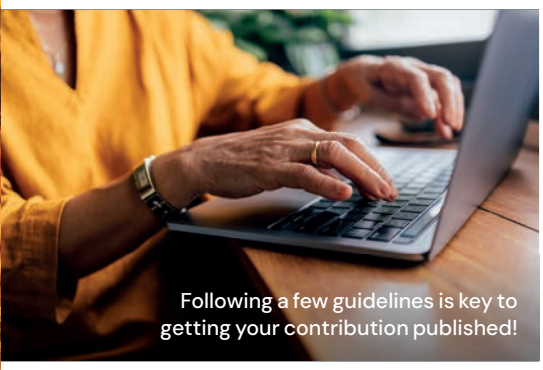


Following a few guidelines is key to getting your contribution published!

In a recent u3a podcast,* editor Sharon Parsons offered some tips for members who want to contribute to *u3a Matters*. In case you haven't had an opportunity to listen yet, here is her key advice:

- **Watch the word count!** Sadly, we just don't have the space to include really long submissions. As a useful measure, a one-page story or account in the magazine is about 500-600 words long.
- **Consider the content.** Look carefully at the format and style of the magazine: where will your submission best 'fit'? We receive lots of members' wonderful short stories and poetry, for instance, but right now, unfortunately, there just isn't a place for these.
- **Think about the readers.** Will your piece be of interest to the wider audience? Your fantastic u3a activities and events truly showcase just how strong our community is, but bear in mind that your account will be read by members who live far and wide, so some in-depth descriptions or 'local' personalities or details won't resonate, and might be better in your local newsletter.

We hope that helps!

* u3a.org.uk/podcast

IMAGE: ISTOCK

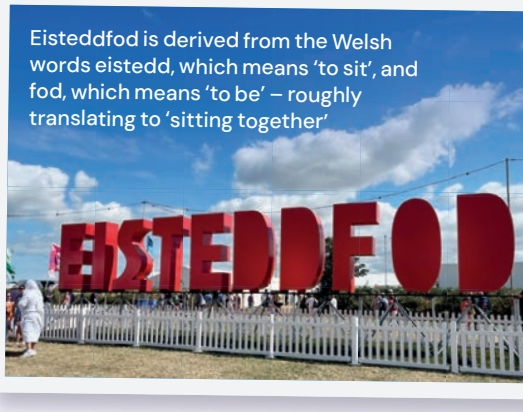
Coming together

A Welsh celebration



Hazel Towle, Chair of West Wales Network u3a, shares members' involvement in a very special traditional Welsh festival

West Wales u3a Network was at the National Eisteddfod in Llantwd, Pembrokeshire, in August to promote the u3a. This is Europe's largest touring festival, celebrating Welsh language and culture, and has over 1,000 events for all the family. This year the traditional festival was celebrating an incredible 850 years since the first Eisteddfod was held in Cardigan Castle, very close to this year's venue.



Eisteddfod is derived from the Welsh words eistedd, which means 'to sit', and fod, which means 'to be' – roughly translating to 'sitting together'

Our u3a had a table in the Voluntary Organisations marquee so we could meet other groups as well as promote our movement. Willing volunteers manned the stall in two-hour stints during the two days, and we gave out leaflets, keyrings and sweets to encourage people to talk to us about the u3a.

All our literature had to be in Welsh or bilingual, which set us quite a challenge, and many of the volunteers had to be Welsh-speaking. There were Welsh-language learners too, which gave us a chance to practise!





u3a members welcome visitors with a smile!

There is so much happening at an Eisteddfod, and I would encourage anyone to go along and immerse themselves in Welsh culture. We met Ann Davies, the Plaid Cymru MP for Caerfyrddin, and Mabon ap Gwynfor MS, the Welsh minister for health, and chatted with both about the benefits of the u3a.

It was altogether a successful and enjoyable experience, thanks to everyone involved. As we say in Welsh, *da iawn* – well done!


Esther was made a dame in 2015

Obituary

Remembering Dame Esther Rantzen

A good friend to u3a, Esther's compassion and determination to make a difference to people's lives will not be forgotten

We were deeply saddened to learn about the death of Dame Esther Rantzen, who we collaborated with on a number of projects and events. The u3a movement was privileged to benefit from her warmth, wisdom and generosity. She shared deeply-held values that resonate strongly with our community: curiosity, active citizenship, and the belief that every stage of life offers opportunities to learn, contribute and connect.



We are especially grateful for the time Esther gave to u3a. In particular, she was involved in a National Kindertransport Day event in 2021, where she hosted and conducted interviews with u3a members who had personal or family connections to the Kindertransport rescue programme.

During that event, Esther interviewed members about their experiences and helped bring their stories to a wider audience through our online u3a programme and related recordings. The event formed part of the u3a Learning Team's initiatives to preserve and share members' historical memories and experiences.

Not least, for many years, Esther was a valued friend of u3a and a regular columnist for this magazine, sharing her insight, warmth and commitment to positive ageing with members across the UK.

Her work as founder of Childline and later The Silver Line demonstrated her unwavering dedication to supporting vulnerable people, including tackling loneliness and isolation among older adults.

Esther had a remarkable ability to bring people together. She listened with compassion, celebrated the richness of lived experience, and reminded us that every story matters. Those qualities lie at the heart of u3a.

On behalf of the u3a movement, we extend our gratitude for her support and inspiration. Her legacy will continue to encourage us all to remain interested, engaged and committed to making a positive difference in our communities.

Looking forward

Our AGM in brief

In October, u3a members, Board and Council members, and staff came together at the historic Midland Hotel in Manchester for the Third Age Trust's 2026 AGM.

CEO Iain Cassidy shared the new Vision and Mission for the Trust, Derek Harwood provided the financial update and Sam Dukes laid out the Trust's new evidence-led marketing strategy. This has a new focus on bringing together the Trust's national marketing resources with the expertise and networks of local u3as.

Trust Chair Allan Walmsley discussed the work being done to improve efficiency and bridge communication between the Trust, u3a Council and u3as. He stressed the need for the u3a movement to adapt if it is to have longevity, pointing out that the new generation of members will have very different backgrounds, experiences and needs.

u3a Council Chair Sue Russell shared an update on council priorities for the next year, and the day ended recognising all the u3as that have celebrated milestone anniversaries.


CEO Iain Cassidy, Chair Allan Walmsley and Treasurer Derek Harwood

Watch the AGM in full on the u3a website: u3a.org.uk/AGM

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Learning with like-minded people is enriching

Discussion point

Learning beyond the classroom

In this regular column, we debate the topics that affect u3a and wider society. Our CEO **Iain Cassidy** considers the value of learning and the benefits it can offer both personally and within the community



Traditional ideas about learning often focus on what it is for: a qualification, a new skill, a better job or something useful to put on a CV. But u3a has always approached this a little differently.

Some of the most valuable learning happens simply because we are curious. We want to understand something, make something, discuss something or spend time with people who are interested in the same things we are. There doesn't have to be an exam, a certificate or even mastery of a subject. You don't have to excel at something to enjoy learning about it.

And while we often associate learning with schools and universities, u3a learning happens across and within communities, with relatively few barriers to taking part.

There has been a lot of discussion in the media and among medical professionals about the benefits of social connection in recent years. The government is increasingly looking at it as something that affects our wider wellbeing. But it makes me wonder whether learning belongs in that conversation too.

A u3a interest group might appear to be about local history, Spanish, photography or walking. But as we learn how to order paella, or how to frame a shot, something else is happening. We're seeing the same people every week and friendships are forming. Someone notices when you haven't turned up.

As well as keeping our mind active, learning can also give us a reason to come together. Joining a group on your own can feel daunting to some, but learning takes some of that pressure away. You arrive because you want to know more about jazz, archaeology or gardening – and there's immediately a shared focus. Connection happens almost by accident.

> **“Learning can give us a reason to come together**

Yet traditional approaches to adult learning can still place greatest value on economic outcomes. Recent research from the Learning and Work Institute found that only one in five UK adults is currently taking part in learning of any kind. Perhaps that should concern us for reasons that go well beyond skills and employment.

We invest in parks because people need places to be. We invest in transport because people need ways to reach one another. We protect libraries because access to knowledge and shared public space matters. Could we start thinking about lifelong learning in much the same way, as something that benefits individuals and strengthens communities?

For those of us in u3a, this may not feel like a radical idea at all. For more than 40 years, our movement has been built on people learning together simply because they want to. No exams. No qualifications. No expectation of mastery. No requirement to turn that knowledge into something productive. Just curiosity, shared freely.

Perhaps that is the real joy of learning. It isn't only what we discover about a subject – it is what we discover about one another along the way. And perhaps that is why we should think about lifelong learning not simply as something we choose to do, but as something fundamental to strong, connected communities at every stage of life.

I'd love to know whether this reflects your own experience of learning with u3a. What has learning with u3a brought into your life that you didn't expect when you first joined? Let us know by emailing communications@u3a.org.uk. Head your email LEARNING

IMAGE: ISTOCK

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Take a trip

Let's getaway!

Beat the winter blues by booking a springtime break

Our **u3a getaways** are exclusive u3a trips, bringing members together to learn, discover and explore, all around the UK. Every getaway includes a stay in a lovely local hotel and includes breakfast, dinner and a welcome drink on the first evening. Here's what's coming up in 2027:


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AVIATION IMAGE: THE SHUTTLEWORTH TRUST/DARREN HARBAR

All about Agatha

Our first u3a getaway took members to Devon to explore the world of Agatha Christie. Here's what two who joined this fabulous trip had to say:

"I very much enjoyed this holiday in Torquay. The company of so many u3a members who came from all over the country was excellent. Lyn, our holiday representative, was always with us, and nothing was too much to ask. All our outings were so well organised, and I had an excellent time."
Betty Howard, Tenterden u3a

"Some outings had been planned, and there was a nice balance between pre-arranged trips and time to do what you fancied. We had a good time, the



weather was excellent, Lyn was a great host and we met interesting people. We're looking forward to joining another u3a getaway!"
Barbara Sellors, Bradford-on-Avon & District u3a

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Let's all sing something...

Group singing taps into a communal activity that humans have been drawn to do for thousands of years – and it's so much more than simply holding a tune together

WORDS: SHARON PARSONS

There's something about singing with other people – whether that's joining an impromptu pub singalong, or being part of a dedicated ensemble or choir – that has proven far-reaching effects.

For a start, group singing has been found to foster a deeper level of psychological wellbeing than singing alone: combining your own voice with other people's brings a great sense of belonging and connection. Even those who profess not to be able to sing – but are willing to give it a go anyway – feel united when they join in with others, and soon become more confident (see *Too shy to sing?*, page 27).

Good vibrations

The positive mental effects of group singing are astonishing. The activity releases feel-good hormones such as serotonin and dopamine, which in turn promote a sense of wellbeing, and consequently lower levels of the stress hormone cortisol. Group singing also has cognitive benefits, engaging the brain to follow neural networks that are connected to movement, emotion and language.

> **Singing with others enhances wellbeing**

On a physical level, singing with other people can aid general health, boosting immunity, lowering blood pressure and even relieving pain (thanks to those feel-good endorphins). With a bit of effort, it can also offer a



workout that is similar to a good brisk walk or treadmill session!

Join in!

u3a has a fantastic range of singing groups for members to join – whether it's an informal 'singing for pleasure' gathering where the emphasis is on having fun rather than being pitch perfect, or a group that allows you to make the most of the talent you're lucky enough to have, and perhaps learn more in the process. Here are just a handful of unique singing groups to inspire you. All together now... ▸

IMAGE: GETTY

Top tunes

'Singing together puts a smile on everyone's face'

Steve Mclaren has been running Cupar u3a's Singing for Fun group for almost three years



"The name of our group says it all – we sing songs we enjoy together and have a really good time.

People often think they can't hold a tune, but in a sociable gathering like ours, there's absolutely no pressure – and people soon relax and stop worrying! A new member who's originally from Germany says he has never been to a group where he feels so welcome: even if he isn't familiar with all the songs and lyrics, he just taps his feet in time with the music. That's exactly the point – everyone feels comfortable.

I have three songbooks and we look at these to decide what we fancy – we all have a pre-printed copy of the lyrics from each one. It's an eclectic mix – it could be a song from a musical like *Chicago* or a hit by Amy Winehouse.

Then at our fortnightly get-togethers, we simply ask the smart speaker to play what we've chosen – it's like singing along to the radio at home, but with 10 or 12 people present! What's helpful is if we're singing something like *Take Me Home, Country Roads*, we've got John Denver accompanying us, and his voice acts as our vocal guide. It's the same with Olivia Newton John's *Banks of the Ohio* – that's a favourite, and we've sung it so often that now some of the group even do the harmonies.

Last year we sang at our u3a's Christmas party singalong, and we'll often sing for our local friendship charity or care home – needless to say, everyone joins in!"



Cupar u3a's Singing for Fun group do exactly that!


The Beccles u3a Choir are in total harmony

Choir practice

'Singing with the choir enriches my life'



Joanna Hogarth is a member of the Beccles u3a Choir

"There are currently 12 of us in our choir and we come together every other Monday afternoon. It's a really friendly group, and everyone gets involved, sharing tasks like putting out chairs or making the tea. But the main reason we're here is to sing 'properly' together, and it is an absolute delight. Everyone in our choir can sing and has musical experience of some kind. We might practise different arrangements of folk songs, or Latin church music, and we usually warm up with a round.

I especially enjoy what are called 'part songs': as an alto, for instance, I sing the middle part of a piece along with other singers in that range, and then others sing higher and lower parts around it.

It's entirely without pressure – we don't meet to rehearse for a concert or performance, so while we occasionally sing for other people in our community, there's no stress or obligation.

When all of us are 'in the moment' and fully concentrating on what we're all doing together, it's glorious. That only comes when we have a piece that we have practised together for some time, and we can look up from the music and share breathing and timing by watching and listening to each other. That is the joy of singing with others."

All in tune

'There's a lot of camaraderie and chat between the songs'


The Odd Wednesday Men – they've even got the t-shirt!



Peter Fowler of Stubbington u3a is the founder of the Odd Wednesday Men

"I started our Men's Singing group 10 years ago because I thought it would be a good opportunity for chaps who enjoy singing to get together: while there are traditionally lots of mixed and ladies-only singing ensembles, there aren't so many that are just for men!

We started out with five members, and now there are 20 ranging in age from 65 to 92. We're called the Odd Wednesday Men because – as the name implies – we meet to rehearse on odd Wednesdays!

Our repertoire is mainly folk songs and sea shanties – the rousing old 'work' songs that tell our social history so vividly – and, in winter, we often sing ancient wassailing songs. It's a great feeling when we're all singing these wonderful pieces together, or doing the verses in turn before all joining in the chorus. We regularly sing at local venues, care homes and schools, and at special events like the Gosport sea shanty festival.

Over the years, the Odd Wednesday Men has become a really important part of our lives – not just because we have so much fun singing together, but because of the camaraderie. Men of our generation aren't always good at sharing what's on their mind, and our group gives us all a chance to talk about things, good and bad, in a relaxed, familiar environment between the songs. That companionship, along with the banter – and the singing, of course! – help to make our group really special."

Making music

'Our A Cappella Group helps to keep this ancient style of singing alive'



Stephanie Dixon is a founder member of this singing group in Sheffield u3a

"In Italian, *a cappella* means 'in the style of the chapel' because it formally began as church music. Singers use their voices to create rhythms, harmonies and so on, rather than musical instruments or backing tracks.

Our A Cappella Singing group was founded in 2012. We're a mixed group of 20 members who all have experience and can read music, but after we'd been going for a few years, we were joined by Fran Wells, a retired music teacher and talented musical director, and he has really helped to lift our game! The group meet in a local church once a fortnight, and it's so friendly – everyone does their bit to help.

We sing SATB – that's a choral arrangement for soprano, alto, tenor and bass voices – but often split a piece into more parts. We also sing in a variety of languages, such as Italian, French, Spanish and German, though recently we also attempted a beautiful Japanese song: luckily we have printed song sheets to follow!

Thanks to Fran's hard work we have built quite a reputation of singing to a high standard, which we all appreciate. Our repertoire includes traditional pieces including folk songs, along with hits from the 1960s, and occasionally religious pieces. My personal favourites are the madrigals: these songs date back to the 16th century and are very jolly and often quite naughty! We enjoy fun songs that have been composed for unaccompanied voices too.

We sing for lunch clubs and charity and u3a events. And at Christmas, of course, we sing carols, which always sound absolutely wonderful when given the *a cappella* treatment!"



The A Cappella group are in very good voice

Too shy to sing?

If you'd like to join a singing group in your u3a, but haven't much confidence or feel rusty, these tips may help...

It's natural to feel nervous about singing with other people at first. However, as founder of Singing Attitude (an online vocal coaching platform) Liuba Doga explains, confidence usually grows through small, repeatable experiences – not by waiting for fear to disappear. Here she suggests six ways to find your voice...

1 Start where you feel safe. Hum along, sing quietly or only join in during the chorus. Participation does not have to be all or nothing.

2 Listen for connection, not perfection. Group singing is about making one shared sound. You do not need to have the strongest voice, or get every note right.

3 Breathe before you begin. Let your shoulders soften, release your jaw and take an easy, unforced breath. A calmer body helps the voice respond more freely.

4 Choose a helpful focus. Instead of wondering what others think, notice the words, rhythm or feeling of the song. Giving your attention a positive job reduces self-consciousness.

5 Be patient with your voice. Past criticism can linger, but it does not define what you can enjoy now. Treat each rehearsal as practice in being heard. If you lose your place, pause, listen and rejoin when you are ready.

6 Keep it in perspective. Remember that most singers are concentrating on their own part, not judging yours. Confidence is not the absence of nerves: it is giving yourself permission to sing while they are present.

singingattitude.com



Insight

‘Gratitude, in all its many facets, is life enriching’

Dr Peter Rookes of Birmingham Kings Norton & District u3a, and Subject Adviser for Exploring World Faiths, reflects on gratitude

As life gets increasingly busy, many of us feel the need to pause and take stock of what we are grateful for, considering the things we may still hope to achieve (our bucket list!) and even any regrets.

For people with a religious faith – whatever that might be – prayer expressing gratitude is usually central to a religious practice. But simply appreciating what is around us or where we find ourselves in life – be it the astonishing beauty of the changing seasons, or the joy that comes from a special occasion with loved ones – can bring a profound sense of gratitude to us all, regardless of our beliefs.

It is relatively easy to think of the good experiences we can be thankful for: our health and way of life; our parents or those who may have made sacrifices for us in the past; or the people who have inspired or encouraged us as the years have gone by.

Conversely, it may seem strange to be grateful for the disappointments we’ve experienced, but often the chagrin we feel when something didn’t quite work out can stir us out of our inertia and lead to something more positive.

Family relationships and friendships have their ups and downs – there are times of joy, and moments of disagreement. But when life becomes challenging, we are always grateful that the people we are closest to are there to support us (and sometimes tell us what we may not want to hear but need to!).

Of course, it goes both ways. In our day-to-day lives, when we show appreciation, there’s a ripple effect. We’ve all noticed the smile on the face of the bus driver or the supermarket cashier when we say thank you with sincerity. It’s infectious and really makes everyone’s day, as does something as simple as a ‘thank you’ card.

> “When we show appreciation, there’s a ripple effect

Many of us express our gratitude by volunteering in our community in some way or serving on our local u3a committee. Here is the good news – volunteering doesn’t just help others. There is evidence to show it also enhances the wellbeing of those giving too.

Looking back on my own life, I know I have much to be grateful for. When I left my parental home aged 17, my grandfather had written out a series of one-liners to guide me, such as ‘I can if I will, not I will if I can’, and ‘You are the product of your decisions, not of your circumstances’.

As a working-class lad who grew up on a council estate, these homilies had a profound effect on me. They taught me to be grateful for the gifts I had been given, the opportunities that came my way, and the capacity to turn misfortune around. I have always been particularly grateful to be accepted for training as a student nurse, without any educational qualifications, because my nursing career has been so rewarding. The gratitude from patients, and their families, is so humbling, even when the outcome is not always what had been hoped for.

I was also greatly privileged to work for 12 years in healthcare in Sub-Saharan Africa and Asia-Pacific, which involved trekking through challenging terrain to isolated communities that have none of the facilities we take for granted, such as tarmacked roads, electricity and tap water. It was particularly meaningful to support people rebuilding their lives after they had lost everything in the Papua New Guinea Tsunami in 1998.

Living among people who were so grateful for the little that they had was a life-changing experience. Even with so little, they took pleasure in sharing. It’s a valuable lesson for us all. •

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