

Thanks to all the members who sent in testimonials on how U3A membership has changed and is changing their lives and especially to those people listed below, whose individual submissions were selected to form part of the opening session of the conference.

Natalia Colthurst	Cheltenham U3A
Sue Smith	Redditch U3A
Val Davies	Swansea U3A
Norman Prescott	Cockermouth U3A
Joan Barrow	Cheadle U3A
Frank Bridges	Woodspring U3A
Ilse Cornwall-Ross	Winchester U3A
Carolina Kenealy	Buckingham U3A
Daffyd Evans	Cardiff U3A
Dr. Sally Carr	Oxford U3A
Susan England	Waltham Forest U3A
Frank Harbud	Pembrokeshire U3A
Mary McGregor	Llandovery U3A
Dennis Harkness	Bridgwater U3A
Judy Robinson	The Deepings U3A
June Youldon	Leatherhead U3A
Joyce Wayland	Harwich Peninsula U3A
Gren Gaskell	Malvern U3A
Barbara Tyerman	Pocklington and District U3A
Carole Day	Looe U3A
Irene Pain	Haywards Heath and Burgess Hill U3As
Hillary Stringer	Ross-on-Wye U3A
Audrey Gane	Wells U3A
Geoff Lenthall	Grimsby and Cleethorpes U3A
Joan Waugh	Ferndown U3A
Magda Sweetland	Sevenoaks and Knole U3As
Jean Thompson	Reading U3A
Gill Minter	North Wilts U3A
Gemma and Jasper	U4K9

THE THIRD AGE TRUST



THE UNIVERSITY OF THE THIRD AGE

Opening Session – meet the members

When we first suggested asking individual members to write about what their membership meant to them, the responses trickled in until Lin wrote to all the Creative Writing groups and suggested they might like to have a go. The result was that we finished up with over a hundred and thirty. Before we begin I would like to thank everyone who submitted a piece, but I must also explain that we simply couldn't use them all, fascinating though they were. It has given me personally several hours of pleasure reading and re-reading them all. It has also given me several days of headache as I tried to assemble them into some kind of order.

What has emerged is, as we hoped, an inspiring collection of statements, mostly prose but with a good proportion in verse. I have had to edit some of the contributions or we could have been here for several hours. With very few exceptions I shall give the name of the writer, the exceptions are either out of respect for the writer's vulnerability or because no name was attached. The readers are the two Vice Chairmen, Barbara Lewis and Beth Butler, the Treasurer, Terry Hardie, and one of the Regional Trustees, Hillary Stringer, included partly because one of the contributions is hers.

These pieces are written by individual members of individual U3As, so many members are taking a very active part in this Conference even *in absentia*. The Conference theme is one of celebration and the writers provide a glowing picture of the benefits they have found from belonging. However they express themselves, they will, I'm sure meet with an approving echo from you, the audience. You will hear an occasional, sincerely felt reservation about the way U3As are changing, though most comments are positive. You will also hear amusing anecdotes, including one from nearly twenty years ago.

Many contributors chose to express themselves in verse. Natalia Colthurst from Cheltenham wrote

1. *Once I had decided to retire*

BARBARA

I sought some kind of stimulus nearby

In case my active brain might still require

New knowledge and experience to try.

*Good fortune led me to consult a friend
On pleasant groups which functioned in the day,
She did not hesitate to recommend
The many choices in the U3A.*

A similar poem from Sue Smith of Redditch states

2. *I was frightened of ageing, of losing my sense,* HILLARY
*Of living life backwards, in the past tense.
Now I've been welcomed by our U3A,
Wonderful guides are lighting my way.*

We even had a few limericks, including this slightly unmetrical one from Val Davies of Swansea U3A, written to celebrate their 25th Anniversary;

3. *"Let's celebrate", we said,* BETH
*Be glad we're not yet dead.
Enjoying our classes
In NHS glasses
And even becoming well read.*

Norman Prescott from Cockermouth U3A came up with an interesting simile:

4. *A bit like a Mars bar is our U3A.* TERRY
It helps all its members to work, rest and play!

Norman then went on to describe all the activities in the twelve lines we asked writers to limit themselves to, but he added a PS:

4(b) *There's lots of other things we do* TERRY
*That go from strength to strength –
I sadly couldn't fit them in
Within the stated length.*

Many writers stressed the enormous variety of interests encompassed. Typical is this piece from Joan Barrow of Cheadle U3A:

BETH

5. *In 1997 I worked part time and retirement loomed. How was I going to fill my days and seek out companionship?*

It is now 2011. I have tackled water colour painting, the basics of bridge, the joy of parchment craft, the miracles of geology, the wonders of the stars and planets, exercised by swimming, cycling, walking and country dancing, completed my family history, produced slide shows with Photo Media, identified birds with the 'Twitchers', travelled all over the world with Travel and Landscape and also enjoyed many lovely holidays, and made many lovely friends along the way.

The fun and friendship that I have had is such that I could not imagine my life without the U3A.

If that leaves you feeling breathless, then the record of Frank Bridges from Woodspring U3A is perhaps even more astonishing. Frank realised he has passed his twenty-fifth year of U3A membership and begins his comments as follows:

TERRY

6. *In pretty well all of that time I have led groups and have acted as Chairman, Secretary and committee member. As a Group Leader I've led and organised groups in walks, creative writing, poetry, philosophy, literature and art studies, together with more recently European classical literature, and I've enjoyed membership of history, social history, Italian, music, theatre, opera and science and technology groups.*

We shall return to Frank Bridges because he has something very interesting to say about the way the U3A has changed over 25 years, changes which are not only well observed but which provoke some thought about the way forward. The Third Age often turns out to be

like re-inventing the concept of Renaissance Man, with all-round knowledge of everything knowable.

Typical of many contributions was this one from Ilse Cornwall-Ross of Winchester U3A:

HILLARY

7. *In the confusing time after first retiring (at the age of 71) from teaching, it was the U3A that gave me a sort of anchor for my new life. I joined a poetry group and was soon asked to run it. This was wonderful for me, as I had enjoyed teaching and missed the excitement of stimulating students' minds. I found a group who had been meeting for a long time but they welcomed me with open arms. It was refreshing to become acquainted with people from all walks of life who were united by the desire to explore new ideas. Here in Winchester we meet in each other's houses and in doing so you have the stimulating experience of seeing how other people live. More recently, I have also joined a local history group which is run quite differently. We prepare a piece of research on aspects of local history within an agreed period and present it to the group. I am finding this also very exciting as not only does it increase my knowledge of my town and makes me feel more attached to it but when I mention that I am doing research for a U3A group and explain what U3A means, I am invariably treated with great respect. At various places of importance, including the record library, documents were made available to me readily and every possible help given. I would say that belonging to a U3A group is a very satisfying experience on a personal, social and intellectual level and gives many people the opportunity to expand their knowledge and bring stimulation into their lives, irrespective of what profession/or none they have had before retirement. At a time when evening classes have become so expensive this is an invaluable opportunity for learning.*

Some contributors described their experiences within one group rather than many. Some of these accounts were amusing, others quite simply impressive, all enthusiastic. Carolina Kenealy from Buckingham U3A, for instance, waxed more than lyrical about her Writers' Group:

BARBARA

8. *I am nose-y. The great thing about the U3A is that you can find yourself sitting next to someone you know vaguely, and have often wondered about and be rewarded with details of her divorce. This gives rise to that most delightful of conversations where the only responses required of one are along the lines of 'Really?' ... 'He didn't!' ... 'How disgraceful!'*

Belonging to a Writers' Group is like that only better. Almost without meaning to all writers, amateur and professional, reveal themselves in their work. When the revealer is there before you, in her hand-knitted cardigan, it is the most fantastic thing in the world to be given a glimpse of her life. I believe utterly there are no boring people anywhere in the world. The twists and turns of all our remarkable lives are wonderful to behold. The man over there in the corner who looks as if he is about to fall asleep, once climbed a hill and became a poet. He saw Patterdale stretched out before him, a mystic realm wreathed in mist. The lady in the centre row with a folding walking stick once danced naked on the stage in 'Hair'.

I know there are higher goals, like learning African click languages and how to cook limpets, but if the only outcome of all our strivings is to recognise the beauty in everyone around us then the U3A is doing a fantastic job.

How I agree with her about seeing the beauty in everyone around us! The extraordinary fact is that we may not be born equal, but we certainly all join U3A as equals and it is often only after many years that we discover the secret lives some of our fellows have lived. Often these days I find myself learning about the lives of former members when I attend their funerals; a while ago I attended one at which I learned for the first time that my 93-year-old friend was an OBE, a distinction he was awarded for keeping the power stations running throughout the Three Day Week days. Yet my memory of him was of his 90th birthday, when the Walking Group, of which he was a member still, treated him to a pub lunch and presented him with new walking boots!

On the subject of walking, I couldn't resist this bit of creative writing from Daffyd Evans of Cardiff U3A:

TERRY

9. Walkers came along the path through 300148's field regularly. She didn't like it, she grew sulky, and her milk yield dropped off. Then, suddenly, an idea formed. She chewed it over while she chewed the cud. That evening, after milking, she issued instructions to the herd.

'This is what you do.' She demonstrated. 'All of you, just like this.'

Next morning, the Little Posterton U3A Zimmer-Walking group approached the stile. The leader prepared to vault the stile one-handed in the manner recommended by U3A National Office when the General Secretary was out. He stopped. 'Would you look at that,' he said. 'We can't get past that.'

The path ahead was covered with perfectly placed cow pats. There was a steaming pile at the foot of the stile. It was impossible to walk through the field without getting covered in cow dung.

'Look at that cow,' the leader said. 'She's blooming well laughing at us.'

300148 was very happy.

How many, I wonder, know that Sally Carr, of Oxford U3A, is a Doctor of Philosophy, a qualified teacher, and has a string of sixteen letters after her name? She wrote:

BETH

10. Retirement gave me the chance to study languages and the arts and make new friends. An inspiring U3A group for Spanish introduced me to Cervantes and I gave slide shows with Heather Booth at Rewley House (Oxford University external

studies) demonstrating his influence on literature and book illustration world-wide.

This celebration was also presented for the U3A of Fuengirola, Costa del Sol, with Dr Lindy Jordan in 2005. New friends from Spain attended my U3A groups and encouraged me to offer French Conversation for Oxford U3A and this has continued despite my increased disability. Friends tell me about French chateaux and their visits to Quebec and Irish cruises as well as their other stories.

The intellectual stimulus of U3A is a lifeline for me and has encouraged me to offer Beginners' German soon. Even my increasing disability can be put to good use when I mentor other disabled members to encourage them to contribute to U3A rather than give in to physical difficulties.

We shall return later to evidence of how membership has helped people suffering from all kinds of problems, including physical impairment, to find a group of people who accept them and value them for what they can offer. In spite of all our efforts to keep both body and mind in trim, we mostly have learned tolerance, the willingness to accept people for what they are rather than what we would like them to be;

BARBARA

11. Ladies, why not be sexy at sixty?

It's fun to look good and to flirt.

Now don't get me wrong. I'm not flighty

No need to go dishing the dirt.

But who wants to sit and watch telly?

Learn instead how to dance with your belly.

I still aim to have lots of fun

Though I now have a rather large bum!

-The words of Susan England from Waltham Forest U3A, written as a response to Pam Ayres poem, 'Do I have to look sexy at sixty?'

But I'm sure we all are at times nose-y, like Carolina Kenealy, so this account by a former group leader of how one of his group revealed secrets from his past will no doubt intrigue and amuse. The group leader in question, Frank Harbud of Pembrokeshire U3A, relates how one member, Joe, revealed something of his distant past;

TERRY

12. On the day of our Armchair Travel Group meeting, Joe stood, a short stocky man with a shock of white curly hair and a weathered face. He announced he had no visual aids, no DVDs, no photos, nothing except a schoolboy's exercise book that he held aloft.

When Joe was 15 years old, his mother was widowed. He left school and signed on as a merchant seaman. After six months' basic training he went to sea on a tramp steamer and was not to return to his home port for two years. As a trainee he could not afford a camera. He bought tourist pictures and pasted them with a log of his travels into these cheap exercise books. At each port he was allowed ashore with the crew, but due to his low wage he did not indulge in the fleshpots beloved by all seamen, until they arrived in Japan.

To his surprise the skipper said he was not allowing him ashore this time as this port could be dangerous to a lone lad. Joe begged and pleaded, and in the end the bosun, who was an enormous Swede, agreed to look after him. The skipper relented

Ashore in the bosun's favourite bar he was kept on non-alcoholic drinks, despite which he had a cheerful time, listening to all the tall stories and gazing at the Japanese girls in their kimonos. Towards the end of the evening the bosun told him to stand up. He gripped Joe by the waist and hoisted him onto the table top. [Joe hastened to say at this point that he was a lot slimmer in those days.] But he

found himself slightly bewildered by the noise and shouts of encouragement from the patrons and from the bar girls. What was going on?

At this point in the narrative Joe paused. A cry went up from the audience, 'Don't stop there, Joe!'

'I was being auctioned off to the bar girls,' he said, 'As a genuine virgin'.

There was a shocked silence from the Armchair Travellers. I thought, that's torn it. Then with a roar of laughter everyone was demanding to know what happened next. 'How much did you fetch, Joe?' someone asked.

Joe waited calmly until he could be heard, then told everyone they would have to come back to the next meeting.

The next meeting was a sell-out.

There are not only consolations for living longer; there are downright advantages, too. It occurred to me the other day that if the average age of our members is, say, 70, and there are 270 000 of us, our combined experience is 18 900 000 years. Somewhere in all that there has to be some kind of wisdom, surely? Thinking along similar lines, Mary McGregor of Llandovery in Wales, wrote

HILLARY

13. As we gather for our meeting I look at our members and think 'Goodness, between us we have more than 2,000 years of knowledge and experience. And how far we have travelled! Add all the journeys we have ever made and how many times have we been to the moon and back? And between us how many languages do we speak? It is not only our own experience but that of our children and grandchildren we can draw on. Here's wealth. One of our founder members worked at Bletchley Park during the war. Another, after her husband died, took herself off around the world. During her travels she had the privilege of witnessing a Buddhist sky-burial in Tibet. There is also wealth in the ordinary day-to-day experience from which we are all able to give life to our researches from

book and internet. One of our members used to be a postman in London. He had walked the streets and had a close knowledge of the buildings which he spoke about in the talk he gave to the Arts and Crafts special interest group...

Now the U3A enters its 30th year. Oh, how young we are! We have so many worlds to explore'.

Age and beauty, what could we ask for more? I suppose the answer is wisdom, but that exists too.

Everyone talks from time to time of the great fun and laughter of U3A meetings. Dramatic happenings occur sometimes as well as amusing ones. You wouldn't think there was any danger inherent in a Creative Writing Group, would you?

BETH

14. One member of our Bridgwater Creative Writing Group keeps goats in a paddock near her house. Testing our latent agoraphobia, she urged us to have our meeting there on a July afternoon. How could we not agree? On our arrival the sun shone, a circle of garden chairs stood invitingly in the dappled shade of the apple trees, branches bowed towards us with their burgeoning fruit. The goats were safely penned. What could go wrong?

Behind the hedge lay the peaceful lane running from the village towards the picturesque Quantock Hills. Normally this thoroughfare is woken from its slumber only rarely as some local resident trundles sedately on some mission to the village post office.

This day was different. Harvest time! Every three minutes tractors came roaring past, either straining with a full load or speeding with its empty trailer in tow. And thank goodness, because the continual noise made it impossible for us to hear each other. And because of that we all moved our chairs closer. And because of that.. Well...

Everyone knows that the force of gravity operates in nature. Cliffs collapse under the onslaught of the storm. Yet few if any of us witness such a fall. Forest floors are strewn with dead branches, but whoever sees the dead wood crash to the ground?

Picture our group, huddled together in rapt attention as Yvonne read us her short story about a family mystery. If you could ignore the grinding uproar of tractors, this would be an idyllic scene in the Somerset countryside. Until suddenly we all leapt to our feet and stared in amazement at the spot where our hostess had sat before. For there on the grass was now an enormous bough, with its load of half-grown apples. Half a ton at least of timber, fruit and foliage. But our dear Judith, only a foot away from death, lives on. (Dennis Harkness)

The Third Age Trust offers competitive insurance rates for its members!

Judy Robinson of The Deepings U3A, belongs to a very unusual group, one which would certainly get royal approval:

BARBARA

15. As far as I know we are unique, as no other U3A has a carriage driving group. We are also a very select group. Because of the size of the carriage, our membership is limited to six. Although everyone in the group is fond of horses, and some have ridden in the past, none of the other five members had any experience of carriage driving before joining the U3A.

Weather permitting, we meet once a month on a Thursday afternoon between April and October. The season begins with a 'hands on' afternoon when we prepare the ponies for the summer ahead. We give them a thorough groom and wash their manes and tails.

For other meetings we usually take the carriage out for a drive round the local countryside or occasionally we might tackle an obstacle course in the field. Each summer we go for a picnic drive which is a longer outing and includes a stop at a village pub.

Our meetings provide the opportunity to learn a new and challenging skill. They are also great fun, and enjoyable social occasions. On a warm summer afternoon there are few things more pleasurable than driving through our pretty Lincolnshire villages to the accompanying clip-clop of trotting hooves.

A different form of physical endurance was described by Frank Harbud and his wife, when relating their experience of the Summer School in Cirencester: Frank's wife tells the story:

HILLARY

16. We arrived early only to be drenched with horizontal rain. The domestic staff had to cope with widespread floods so we were delayed getting to our room. When we did get in it was to find one bed was soaked and the other had wet bedding. The two strong men bringing the replacement mattress commented it was a new one. The significance of this was not apparent until the next morning when I complained that the springs of mine had gone twang all night. Frank refused to swap beds. He also found the exhortation on the pegboard that, 'All shotguns have to be handed in on arrival.' And 'Any student bluetacking pin-ups to the walls will be heavily fined'. All rather alarming.

Frank, - now don't laugh -, was to study 'Story Telling'. He protested that the WEA had instructed him that he was not to wave his arms or pick his nose when addressing the public. Now here he was told to do just that, and more. He overheard the comment, 'We get one in every class'. Things went downhill after that, and it wasn't until he told the story of his father, which has been included in the recently published book by our own Francis Beckett, 'Firefighters and the Blitz', that he beat the 'Myths and Legends' crowd...

Most U3A activities involve at most gentle exercise, like Tai Chi or walking [I am still totally dumbstruck that Sheffield U3A has no fewer than 32 walking groups! Thirty-two!] However, what sometimes holds someone back is not the lack of physical strength, but the courage to take up something new. One of our greatest achievements as an organisation is surely that people join us timidly, wanting to come to meetings and sit at the back, but after a while find they gain enough self-confidence to take a fuller part, make a contribution to the

discussion, even take on a leadership role. For many such individuals the result can be a kind of epiphany as the latent ability is at last given free rein. The following account must surely owe a great deal to the self-confidence gained by becoming a member of U3A. It was written by June Youldon of Leatherhead U3A;

BARBARA

17. With the confidence I had achieved after joining the Leatherhead U3A I decided to attempt something which had been a lifetime dream by sailing as part of the crew on a tall ship.

People whom I had met at our monthly meetings had done and seen many things I had not, so nothing ventured...I embarked at Southampton on the Jubilee Sailing Trust's 'Lord Nelson' in awe and wonder at the sight of the ship in all her majesty. ..

When the white sails billowed in the wind, the sun shining above the spumed waves of an almost impossibly blue sea, it was perfection for the seven of the nine days of our voyage. We called at the Channel Islands on our return journey and then the weather changed as we entered the English Channel. The sea became grey, more distressed and turbulent with a life of its own, making identification of the Needles lighthouse very difficult, but the sheer joy of the won battle with the sea added only to my exultation as wet through, tired but triumphant, we finally berthed in harbour.

Throughout all these submissions there are numerous references to the self-confidence gained, the development of the person from 'average' into a real individual who reawakens to the value of his or herself. We take it for granted that this should be so, but we shouldn't. It is something to be immensely proud of and thankful for.

BETH

18. I have always been rather reserved and introverted, but earlier this year I stood up in front of a large gathering of members of the local branch of the U3A and described a walk which I had been on with the walking group. Admittedly I was

only one of several members who each gave a short description of the walks we had taken during the past year, but it was still quite a daunting prospect and something I wouldn't have believed possible a few years ago. However, I found myself enjoying it.

So wrote Joyce Wayland of the Harwich Peninsula U3A. She is typical of many. There are also plenty of people who missed out on educational opportunities as a child, leaving school early for all kinds of reasons. Their experience of the U3A comes as a revelation in many cases; Gren Gaskell of Malvern U3A begins with a word I had to look up, 'opsimath'; it means someone who learns late in life:

TERRY

19. I am an opsimath. It would be interesting to know how many of us there are in the University of the Third Age.

It was made clear to me as a child that I didn't need much education. We were a family of coal miners and books and education seemed alien to the life we led. Although I was an avid reader throughout my youth, access or motivation towards formal learning was never thought of as an option toward a different or better life.

How different my life is now. Am I the happiest of men? I feel I must be one of the luckiest.

A widower in my sixties, I moved to this lovely town and at my very first U3A meeting met a woman who was to become my wife. She is a retired teacher and together we attend many different groups in this wonderful organisation. With her encouragement and support I became leader of our large travel group. I had hardly travelled at all, so I revelled in my first visit to a museum, an art gallery, a concert of classical music and the unforgettable first holiday in Paris to have my photograph taken alongside the portrait of Emile Zola.

I lead two music, poetry and prose groups and have been elected Chairman of what could well be the friendliest of all U3As.

This is truly the time of my life.

Barbara Tyerman from Pocklington & District U3A writes;

BARBARA

20. My life has been immeasurably enhanced since joining Pocklington and District U3A. I joined primarily to participate in the 'Singing for Pleasure' group, brilliantly run by Pauline Atkinson. I was soon keen to join the recorder group, and to take on the considerable challenge of learning to read music.

Were it not for Pauline's endless support, patience and skill (plus of course the U3A itself) I would never have had this opportunity to learn and develop the skill of playing a musical instrument.

Down in Cornwall, in that lovely little port of Looe, Carole Day, of the Looe U3A Morning Group, explains how a group of twelve members undertook a considerable challenge;

BETH

21. Last year about twelve of our group took part in a play writing course. We were nearly all complete beginners. Over several weeks we received excellent tuition from a professional writer, exchanged ideas and techniques and even wrote our own plays. The worthy winner of our group, Rosemary Robinson, was lucky enough to have her play, 'Hell hath no fury', performed at the Hall for Cornwall by professional actors. I recently co-wrote and directed a play for our own U3A groups which they also performed at some of our local residential homes. It was an extraordinary experience to hear words that I had written actually being performed by our own Thespian Group in front of live audiences. There was also of course the fun of all the rehearsals and the worry of 'will it be all right on the night'. I have to thank the U3A for that wonderful experience.

There were numerous similar comments from individuals who had learned something new, achieved things they had never dreamt of. Irene Pain of Haywards Heath and Burgess Hill U3As wrote:

TERRY

22. I left school at 15 with no qualifications as due to family circumstances it was necessary for me to find employment. I have been very fortunate in that the education which I did have was excellent, so I did well in the workplace. However, I always felt I needed more, and I read books on every subject under the sun.

When I retired I joined the U3A very hesitantly, as everyone seemed to be frighteningly intelligent! However, I was encouraged to participate, and eventually talents came to the fore, which I had forgotten I possessed, and I even became a Group Leader.

The U3A has given me confidence to undertake tasks which previously I would not even have considered, and through this wonderful organisation I have made three very good friends who I would not otherwise have met.

Yes, I have changed, an academic part of my life which had been neglected is now back with a vengeance, and Gosh, am I enjoying it!

But I want to move on to another aspect of U3A life which I believe is not only common but also intensely valuable. The U3A has the power to transform lives in many ways, and that quality comes to the fore at times of specially stressful transition. A very common transition occurs with bereavement, and both men and women find themselves suddenly without the partner of many years. It is a trauma which many of our members have experienced and been helped through. Bereavement can be a time of despair but it can also be turned, in time, into a new beginning. One of our trustees, Hillary Stringer (Ross & District U3A) , was faced recently with two traumatic experiences in succession. She entitled her submission 'A new start'.

HILLARY

23. Imagine waking up and being unable to move or feel anything below your neck. Now fast forward the image through six months of hospitalisation, rehabilitation, and you now have to start afresh.

You find a new home, one which accommodates your wheelchair and has no stairs or other access problems, but you are in a new area, a new town, amongst people you don't know. What will you do to meet people and find friends?

In 2005 this happened to me, and faced with the question I chose to join my local U3A, Ross and District. Encouraged by the fact that the general meetings were held at a venue which I could access even if I needed my wheelchair, I attended my first meeting.

I was looked after like a long lost friend, introduced to other members, and made very welcome – those members never knew how much this meant to me. Time passed. I chose to join an interest group. Gaining confidence all the time, I joined another. 'Would you like to be on the committee? We need some new blood'. I was hooked.

I was elected Chair in 2007.

At a local network meeting we were informed that we no longer had a Regional Trustee. After a lot of thought, consultation and wonderful support from my husband, I decided to give it a go.

After six short months my husband died. Although we had been in Ross-on-Wye less than five years, I received over 200 cards from U3A friends offering help, support and, yes, love –enough to convince me to continue what we had started together. In September 2010 I was elected as Trustee for the West Midlands.

Audrey Gane's story (Wells U3A) is typical of many:

BETH

24. The U3A came into my life at a time when I was wondering what to do with the rest of it. My husband had died after a short illness and I realized it was 'me' time.

A close friend had often told me about U3A, so in no time at all I had gone along with her to a Singles coffee morning to see if I would like it. I did and soon

became involved in deciding what I could join out of the mammoth list of activities.

The creative writing group claimed my attention first. This proved most enjoyable and encouraged me to buy a computer and take IT lessons. The Play reading group was good and the Singing for Pleasure group enjoyable. Whatever one is interested in there is a group for it...

And a similar point is made by another contributor:

BARBARA

25. The U3A provided a signpost at two important crossroads in my life. The first one came when I retired and decided to join. At that stage it provided a way of winding down from work and gave me a selection of new interests, and opportunity to acquire new skills and also a chance to make new friends.

The second occasion was when my husband died after a long and happy marriage. At that very sad time I received a great deal of comfort and support from understanding people. This has enabled me to adjust to life on my own and move on again in a different direction.

Geoff Lenthall from Grimsby and Cleethorpes U3A began his piece with "It could be said that the U3A has been my saviour as, after my wife died in 2007 I was feeling very depressed and lost the will to live". Joan Waugh wrote, "I joined Ferndown U3A in September 2001 as my husband died in June that year" and goes on to say of her membership, "I feel very blessed by the opportunity and I now feel completely fulfilled. I think U3A is a brilliant organisation and have met several people whose lives have been transformed by it".

Just occasionally someone comes along whose problems are quite different. The following submission is truly inspiring and at the same time very sad. I have withheld the name of the member for obvious reasons, though she included it after thinking hard so that we could give it, if we wanted.

HILLARY

26. I was broken – unhappy, depressed and lonely. You could be forgiven for thinking I was one of those unlucky people with no family, friends, home, health or money. But you would be wrong. I had all those things. So why the self-pity and how could I be lifted back into the world of the living?

The first question is easy to answer. My loving, caring husband of 25 years is an alcoholic. Consequently nobody comes to visit, and we go nowhere. My wonderful friends always included me in dinners, theatre trips and days out, but they are couples and I sometimes felt like an intruder or, worse still, jealous. [They would be devastated to know I felt like that.]

Then one September I was invited along to a U3A open day. Perusing the many choices of topics, I nervously registered for two classes – Quilting [I had always sewn] and Exploring London on Foot. I had lived and worked in London but had never had time to notice anything.

Like a chrysalis I found my wings! During my three years' membership I have discovered interests that fill my every waking moment. I have learnt more skills than I did at school – calligraphy, wood carving, tai chi, family history, book binding, ten-pin bowling, not forgetting quilting and the History of London, the two original courses which I still do. But most of all I have found people who are non-judgemental, who understand why I can't hold sessions in my own home, and who have taken me under their wing and who care. Some are widows, some married, some single and some, like me, with husbands who are unwell or dying. Our common interests have given me a new family – and I am thriving.

Nothing has changed at home. I still walk through the door after a great day out with trepidation and a sense of foreboding, but I have plenty to keep me busy, people who are depending on me and a reason to keep going. The U3A has literally given me a new life and I will be eternally grateful.

Any comment of mine would be crass, but such statements go a long way towards justifying our existence.

Among the other submissions were some from long-standing members. An email to Lin from Magda Sweetland (Sevenoaks and Knole U3As) expressed her surprise at being included on the Trust's Roll of Honour and the words, "Of course, what the U3A has provided me with can't easily be summarised. I still believe in its life transforming capacity for so many people, and for a whole range of reasons" and she adds, "It's certainly not the straightforward study based organisation I thought it was at the beginning".

The life transforming capacity is revisited in another piece, this time from Yorkshire and the Humber Region:

TERRY

27. The tunnel was getting longer, darker and narrower, and the thought of cave dwelling was starting to look attractive. Back in 2009 I did not realise I was slowly becoming a hermit. Trips to the supermarket were a challenge, and knots formed in my stomach every time I had to venture out from the confines of my home. Local friends were thin on the ground. Twenty-two months down the line, my thinkings and feelings have changed. I belong to the Wine Appreciation Group and The Silver Dream Bikers. The social side of my life is now in full bloom and I have found a number of true friends. The U3A has led me down my personal Road to Tarsus.

When you hear such comments you find yourself rethinking at least in part the purposes of the U3A movement. While we are not, as one contributor to the recent survey pointed out, part of the Social Services, the contribution we make to the well-being of our members is not something we should discount or disparage. It is one of the considerations we must take into account when we consider the future.

A former Chairman of the Trust, JeanThompson, of Reading U3A remembered a Conference in 1990. [Jean has attended every conference since 1988.] On this occasion the guest

speaker was Dr Peter Laslett, one of the founders of U3A in the UK. Jean spotted him leaving by a door which led to the dustbin area and followed him.

BETH

28. I couldn't leave a distinguished guest to wander round the dustbins in the dark. He was explaining that he had to leave now and was going back to his car when he realised he had mislaid his briefcase, containing valuable papers. Back we went and I roped in every member we met to help in the search. Eventually the briefcase was discovered in the bar and off we went again, this time to the car park. Peter explained that he did not drive so his wife was waiting for him in the car.

I was horrified. 'She must be frantic by now, wondering where you are – and there are several car parks'. But we found the car and his wife inside waiting patiently. 'Happens all the time', she said calmly as she drove off.

A further comment from Frank Bridges is relevant, from a submission we quoted earlier. Frank comes from Woodspring, in Somerset:

TERRY

29. Over these 25 years the U3A has changed vastly. In my early days it was a much more seriously educational enterprise. I gave groups reading lists and set them homework – which was often done. My attitude was magisterial exactly because I had had the education and experience which enabled me to share it with my colleagues whose education had been different or less extensive than mine. Now the magisterial role seems inappropriate and redundant because of the fundamental change which has occurred in the availability of knowledge or – perhaps better – information. Often now the Group Leader is not the source of knowledge but the co-ordinator of the input of those members of the group who are willing to give a presentation...Information is now cheap and readily available

and the educational purpose that I saw 25 years ago has diminished. Many meetings are now seen far less seriously, perhaps regarded even as a more or less entertaining side-show.

I can't agree personally with all that Frank says, since he fails to distinguish between the acquisition of information and the wisdom to interpret and use it which I believe to be fundamental to good education. But this is not the time or place to start such an interesting debate.

Instead I should like to end this review of the evidence submitted by so many of our members on a lighter note.

Some of the more amusing accounts relate to unusual group activities, not always unusual in the sense that they were surprised by falling apple-trees, though I shall never forget the monthly meeting of my own U3A in Cornwall, when two members of the audience fainted one after the other and we called an ambulance; we ended up with both the ambulance service arriving by road and the air ambulance landing outside on the grass. The speaker had scarcely paused in mid-sentence as the two ladies were taken off for a check-up. They were fine, as it happened, but the way in which the speaker continued through the sound of their falling from their chairs, then through the sound of whirring helicopter blades will remain for ever etched on my memory.

Gill Minter, from North Wilts U3A, tutors the Beginners Latin group:

HILLARY

30. Our Beginners Latin group was not yet a year old. It was therefore somewhat rash to accept an invitation to provide entertainment at the North Wilts Group's Christmas Party.

Our first act – Ten Green Bottles (Decem urnae pendent ex muro) went down well with the aid of a crib, audience participation and a stock of wine bottles. Then came our sketch.

I had written a piece based on our Teach Yourself book, which involved lecherous medieval clergy, a mule and a pair of furtive lovers. I read out bits of the story in English, my fellow-tutor repeated what I had said – in Latin – then the cast acted out the passage using memorable and demanding phrases such as ‘O me miserum!’ ‘Salve, Pater’, and ‘Virgo sum’. This last was from a 60-year old and was directed at her bemused husband in the audience. Rehearsals had been spasmodic. It showed. As a result the dubious hero ended up shaking hands with the mule, despite the latter looking suitably asinine astride a hobby horse.

The audience were kind on the whole except for one regular complainer who said she ‘hadn’t understood a word of it’.

There was enough material in the submissions to continue with this for many hours and it was as varied as the U3A movement itself. I should like once more to thank all those people who sent in their writing and to apologise to all those who didn’t get a mention. Our readers have quoted from about 30 pieces altogether but there were over 130. I’d like to thank them, the readers, as well.

There is no doubt that this great movement is in rude health, ‘Oh brave new world that has such creatures in’ t’, in Shakespeare’s words.

But let us finish with one of the more original pieces submitted. It comments on the unexpected collateral damage which can arise from membership of the U3A. It was submitted by a non-member, called Gemma, and is entitled “Down with the U3A”. I should add that Gemma and her friend Jasper are both dogs.

BARBARA

31. And to think that I was quite enthusiastic at the beginning; he was happier, and our activities increased. The monthly meetings were the highlight of his life, each one different and moreover they did not encroach onto our time very much.

Things started to go downhill when I heard about all the different interest groups, every single day of the week crammed with activity from history to singing and art to science. Mind you I perked up when I heard about the walking, only to have my hopes dashed because you have to be a member, so I couldn't go. Still, I should look on the bright side. I get plenty of peace and quiet now that he spends his time with the U3A.

Jasper and I are going to start a U 4 K 9 – no humans allowed.

And with that it's thank you, and time for a break.