

“I hated science and technology at school,” says Ann. “But then I spotted it at u3a and wondered – perhaps I’m a late developer?”

Ann went along to a few meetings and at first wasn’t too keen. “Then one day the group leader said that to liven things up - we’d all have to give a talk ourselves!”

Ann was a musician and she realised she could explain how instruments worked. “I was very nervous but I did know about percussion, string and woodwind instruments – as I explained, some you bang, some you twang and some you blow – so I did manage a talk. Everyone was so encouraging and it went down very well. Since then the group has got bigger and bigger and more and more knowledgeable – we have members from some very esteemed companies for instance - and now we never know what we’ll be hearing about. It could be on parts of the body, butterflies or even what it’s like to be a fighter pilot! It’s really quite gripping.”

“I went to Australia a few years ago for my brother’s second wedding,” says Annabel. “The Canberra Museum had so much fascinating information on the 19th century explorers that I bought a book on the subject.”

This proved a useful move when Annabel, once back in the UK, joined the 19th century history group. “We don’t have a leader but the ten or so of us take it in turns to give talks – and they’re certainly varied! We’ve heard about eccentric aristocrats, Victorian underwear and workhouses among other things.”

Annabel spoke about the early explorers. “They thought there’d be water in the centre of Australia – alas they were wrong and so many came to grief. But I think what struck everyone was the tale of the first camel ever taken on an expedition - this was in 1846. It was a cantankerous beast – it kept biting its owner, then tried to eat a goat, then the precious flour bags – and finally managed to shoot the expedition leader! It did this by butting him just as he was lifting his rifle – not a happy ending unfortunately. As there was no penicillin available, he died fairly quickly – but everyone remembers that camel!”

She adds, “Having to give a talk really makes you think and prepare. It’s more pro-active than attending a set lecture. It keeps the mind alive. And during the pandemic I was glad of the Zoom meetings, hearing other people’s voices, seeing their faces and having a good laugh.”

“It’s all about frustrating your opponents in a friendly way,” says Makis. “It’s very good fun! And there’s always lots of laughter.”

Makis is talking about the croquet group which he joined three years ago. Then last July he persuaded the Cheltenham Croquet Club to allow u3a members to play on their hallowed lawns with friendly help from their members.

“It was very decent of the Club to have us,” says Makis. The Cheltenham club is actually the oldest in Britain (started 150 years ago), also one of the largest and has 11 beautiful lawns. “We play a form called golf croquet in teams of two. The aim is not just to get your ball through the hoop but to stop your opponents from doing so too - either by knocking their ball out of the way or blocking the hoop with yours. It’s a great way to meet people as you have time to chat, discuss tactics and so on.”

Last July there were 18 members from u3a, but enthusiasm was so great that by September six had actually joined the Croquet Club and since then another five have joined the u3a group.

Gill and her husband decided to learn modern Greek because for many years they have been on one of a flotilla of yachts sailing round the Greek islands. “Then one time we had engine trouble and although we were in radio contact with the leading yacht, we realised that speaking Greek would have come in very useful,” she says.

For a year she and other u3a members were taught Greek phonetically by a member who had lived in Greece for many years. “When she stopped teaching we all carried on, learning from an online language course,” she says. “We recently rechristened ourselves the Greek Intermediary group as by then we had got quite far along and it wasn’t a beginner’s class anymore.”

Gill also joined a Theory of Music course which was aimed at beginners. But now the group has evolved into one called Understanding Music thanks to their gaining a mentor, an experienced musician. “He’s excellent,” says Gill. “Now we listen to much more music, which is something I’ve always enjoyed, but the difference is we’re now being taught how to appreciate it.”

The Travel Group was what attracted Val, especially when she found members had been to as far-flung and exotic places as Tonga, Kazakhstan and Antarctica!

“They’re places I would like to go to, too,” she says. “But I really would like to visit South America and one morning we actually had talks and photos from four members in a row, all of whom had been to different countries over there!”

This group was the first Val had joined and she was delighted at the warm welcome she received. “And we all quickly adapted to Zoom meetings during the pandemic,” she adds. Val also joined a walking group and although having lived in Cheltenham for many years she discovered new aspects to well-known places. “I’ve never forgotten one particular walk we did,” she says. “It was to the Chedworth Valley in lovely weather. I’d never realised what a variety of old cottages there were and what stunning views we’d see. We watched some dry stone wallers working, saw a buzzard and listened to a skylark high up in the blue sky. Everyone was talking about the mosaic only recently found at the nearby Roman villa and I think that was what sealed the day – yet again how friendly and welcoming everyone was.”

“In the summer we visit churches of historic or architectural interest,” says Robert. “And in the winter, we meet for talks on the same subject.”

The Historic Churches group has been running for more than 10 years and now has more than 100 members – “although they don’t all turn up at once,” says Robert. “We also have an annual coach outing and have gone as far afield as Chichester, Wells, Coventry and Lichfield Cathedrals – just for the day, that is.”

Usually, a member will have researched the church in order to give a talk and sometimes a church officiary will do so. “But it’s all good fun,” says Robert. “We go to out-of-the-way villages we would never normally have known about and discover some really ancient examples – for instance,

East Leach in the Cotswolds where there are two Norman churches and the fascinating medieval Keble clapper bridge. Another time was to St Nicholas in Saintbury where we watched some conservationists restoring long-hidden wall paintings from the 17th century.

"We were also lucky enough to visit the renovated Lady Chapel in Gloucester Cathedral before it re-opened to the public – we just never know what we're going to learn about next! And before an afternoon of exploration it's also a jolly good excuse for a hearty pub lunch in some really picturesque surroundings!"