

Peter Bingham, Our First Chairman



Peter, together with his wife Delia, was instrumental in founding our u3a. He has been involved in several Interest Groups and other u3a activities over the last 30 years. As part of our Anniversary Celebrations we discussed his views of our u3a, past, present and future. His recollections and views make essential reading for every one of our members.

John Munson



Firstly, I asked Peter about his role in founding Swanland u3a.

There was a clear need for an organisation that enabled retired people to meet together; follow their existing interests and take up new ones. To begin with, Delia and I intended to

join Hessle u3a and were placed on a long waiting list so, if it had been a little shorter, we may never have joined Swanland.



We were astonished at the enthusiasm and support for the u3a. We had originally booked the Scout Hut for the first meeting but swopped with the Creche in order to move to Christchurch. We were taken by surprise at the number of attendees - over 80! of course, we had to explain about the background and purpose of the movement, emphasising that it was all about enjoying learning for its own sake with members contributing their knowledge and skills for the benefit of other members.

Our first activity was a joint walk with Hessle u3a; it was a pleasure to see how our Interest groups established themselves with many continuing today. Indeed, it is a humbling thought that our u3a is still going!

Throughout our interview Peter emphasised the contribution of others in helping establish our u3a particularly Mr. Jim Wilson who sadly is no longer with us.

Today we have computerised technology such as QR codes and Social Media to help advertise our u3a - what methods did you use 30 years ago?

Good publicity is obviously very valuable. We advertised in local Parish Magazines as well as the 'free paper'. Indeed, I became the 'Swanland Correspondent' for the latter which enabled me to ensure good publicity! My abiding memory of that time was walking around the village posting membership forms by hand - I have never ceased to be amazed at the variety of letter boxes!

In common with many of our members over the last 30 years I am grateful to the u3a for helping to make my retirement a positive experience. Do you recognise that sentiment?

Indeed. I feel that the u3a was (and is) necessary for a happy retirement. It certainly changed our lives and that was due to the knowledge, skills and commitment of everyone involved. An example of this are the wonderful trips abroad which were very popular. I particularly remember a trip to Trier in Germany, the base of the Emperor Constantine

organised by Jenny Thomas who used her experience as a travel courier to provide the most interesting itinerary for her fellow members.

The social aspect of the u3a has also been a consistently important part of its appeal.

This was something I realised through the Walking Group. As an activity walking is very pleasurable but if you walk in a group, you also talk to others. Our first walk was in the Huggate area; after the walk Delia and I said that we were having lunch at 'The Wolds Inn' if anyone would like to join us. Thereafter lunch after a walk became a regular event helping to create many friendships over the years.

Walking and other physical activities are the 'laugh' and 'live' aspect of our motto 'learn, laugh and live.'

It is important that u3a's provide a balance of activities - Interest Groups can be about anything at all. Surely this is one of the strengths of the u3a - so much is possible and all that is needed is the enthusiasm of members. I understand that there is even a 'Belly Dancing' Group in one u3a.

I believe so. Also, Swanland u3a has the only 'Wild Swimming' Group in the country. But whatever the group, there must be a convenor. They are at the heart of what the u3a is about.

Very much so. They have to be good communicators; well organised and reliable. And of course, they are volunteers - volunteering brings many benefits to the individual as well as the group. And the Committee is also vital - they are involved in everything from finding convenors, accounts, liaising with the national leadership and organising tea and coffee.

Moving on to the present day I see two difficult issues for every small / medium size charity: Recruitment and Volunteering. In the background to these is Covid...

Attracting new members is a big issue as without them there is the danger of stagnation. Yes we have to continue with publicity and open days but every member must see it as their responsibility to 'sell' our u3a to others. And our u3a must present itself as dynamic and outgoing at every opportunity.

During my term as Chair, some new members approached me for advice as they felt out of their depth in their Interest Group and were beginning to think that perhaps the u3a was not for them.

That is a great pity as every group has to be 'mixed ability' accommodating those new to a subject as well as those who wish to continue and / or further, a particular interest. Delia and I considered ourselves accomplished singers so we organised a Christmas Recital out of which came our Choir. We were only too pleased to contribute what expertise we had.

I have always thought that it is quite acceptable to attend a group and just listen!

Quite so! And the novice in a particular subject can always help the Convenor and the group in many different ways.

Another barrier to recruitment seems to be the word 'University' in our title.

Yes, it is very off putting. The idea is that the u3a is 'unlimited' and open to all, it has no entry requirements in terms of qualifications or prior experience and there is no distinction between learners and teachers. The u3a movement originated in France where individual u3a's were attached to universities. Our three Founders, Peter, Lazlett, Eric Midwinter and Michael Young approached Cambridge University to help but were turned away - driving home they realised that the University was not needed as retired people could run their u3a's themselves. I think that they have made a very good job of doing just that!

Jenny Thomas once organised a lecture with a member of the Royal Shakespeare Company. On arrival he looked at the u3a audience and asked me: 'What sort of people are these?' I explained about the u3a; he adjusted his talk and proved to be a very witty and erudite speaker who was thoroughly appreciated by all present.

The use of 'Technology' enabled us to continue through the Pandemic but the latter seems to have deterred many people from joining group-based activities.

All I can say is that it was a dreadful time.

One criticism that I have never heard levelled at Swanland u3a is that the yearly subscription is poor value for money.

It is excellent value for money - if you attend every Thursday lecture you can have a free cup of coffee with biscuits which recoups your subscription. Then there is the insurance for activities plus the national magazine - free of charge. The only cost is for incidentals and things such as coach travel for any trips.

There has not been an Event Day for several years but this year to mark our 30th we have 'Community, Culture and Heritage' at Lazaats on May 7th Tickets £30.

I hope this marks a new beginning for these days as they have always been extremely popular. They have always been open to members of other u3a's and the quality of speakers has been excellent. I shall buy my ticket for the May 7th event this afternoon!

Moving on to the future I think it a shame that an increasing number of u3a members do not always feel part of a national movement with a national structure. This was something Pauline Dennison felt strongly about.

The national structure is very important as is the fact that the u3a is an international movement. Swanland u3a's Choir Convenor, Di Ford was a National Advisor for many years and I feel that the current range of advisors is a real strength of the u3a. They can be approached over any aspect of the subject and I have found that they can always be relied upon to help.

Finally, what would be your message to new members?

Keep an open mind, volunteer and take part. 'Volunteer' is the most important word.

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