

Chester U3A - Annual report 2006/7 – Neil Fitton

When I became your Chairman in November 2007, I had two developments in mind to mark my term of office. One was to foster closer links with the other University in the City. I had some ideas to put to them and accordingly I wrote to the Vice Chancellor and set up a meeting with his representatives. This took place in December 2006 at Burton Manor College where we were also joined by the Principal. Enthusiasm was displayed all round for fostering closer links and a few ideas were tossed about. Since then, in spite of further enquiries, absolutely nothing has happened and I am very disappointed at this outcome.

The second project I had in mind was to be prepared to take an initiative to set up a third U3A branch in Chester. I held the view that the squeeze on local authority adult education funding would lead to more demand for our activities in U3A. I made contact with the then Chairman of Cestrian U3A, Suzanne Mulder and we agreed to work together to monitor demand. I am now in contact with Joan Tilley, the present Chairman. As it happens Cestrians are still recruiting and our own decision to expand our numbers from 600 to 650 means that, at present, there is no case for a third branch. We shall need to keep this possibility in mind as my views on future trends could still be shown to be valid. In the meantime I hope we will do all we can to help our colleagues in Cestrian Branch and I have told them of our willingness to be of any practical assistance.

In the modern jargon we have engaged in a number of outreach activities. Regionally, we continue to attend U3A meetings and will encourage support for the various learning activities, which the North West Area and the Region arrange. Nationally we have submitted views on the constitutional consultation and we have again supported the Summer School at the University by helping the registration and stewarding functions. I have attended on your behalf meetings of the Chester Voluntary Action Network. In August I went to a meeting with Ivan Lewis, MP, the junior Minister with responsibility for older people attended by over a hundred people from many organisations in Chester. We took part in the national Adult Learners Week in May, taking a stall on the Town Hall Square alongside that other University, West Cheshire College, the Library Service and others. We have a fruitful link with Bishop's High School where we base a series of Science for All sessions and we have recently had an approach from Queen's Park High School offering similar facilities for Arts Courses. I hope to see that link flourishing, too. In all this external activity I believe it is important to fly the flag for U3A. It is not about recruitment but about making a positive contribution in forums where the interests of older people are being discussed and decisions may be taken affecting our members.

Thinking of our members it may not be generally known that it is the practice for the Chairman to send Get Well cards to anyone who is ill at home or in hospital. Sadly we also send condolence cards to relatives of members who have passed away. I inherited this custom and have been glad to keep it going. It does depend on someone letting me know the details. (Incidentally, the cards I send are all made by our Craft Group).

Your Committee has met on nine occasions. The significant changes we have overseen have included a complete overhaul of our membership literature devised by our Membership Secretary, Jenny Carley. We now have a new membership card introductory leaflet, and Group information booklet. In addition, Jenny, with the help of her son, produced our ICE card (In Case of Emergency), which has been well received.

David Kent, our Treasurer, is leading the drive to register the Branch for Gift Aid and we are grateful to all of you who have signed the form relating to your subscription. We do not yet know the full financial benefits of this move but, if and when we receive a windfall from the Inland Revenue, we shall consult you, the members, about what to do with it.

I am very grateful for the efforts of all our Committee during the year. We began with Pam Pleavin as our Vice Chairman but she quickly realised she had taken on too much in her life and has, thankfully, taken over from me in co-ordinating the Tuesday Creative Writing Group. We were extremely lucky that June Hargreaves was prepared to step in and I, personally, am delighted to have the immediate support of such an experienced and wise counsellor.

Carol Ferris manages our external relationships especially with U3A HQ and she represented the Branch at the national AGM in Falmouth in September. She organises our annual Christmas Lunches, which must be among the local bargains of the festive season. Brian Holyoak continues to provide us with a supply of good, interesting speakers and it is a testimony to his efforts that our attendance figures are so consistently high. Joan Hall has done an excellent job in Group Liaison, ably assisted by Val Quince who now stands by to take over this role. With so many active groups the co-ordinator's role is vital. We shall miss Joan but are confident that we have a worthy successor in Val. Doreen Bames joined the Committee for the first time last November and has slotted in nicely in giving assistance to Jenny Carley. Finally I should like to thank Connie Charlesworth, our Committee Secretary. Not only does Connie prepare the agenda for our meetings, she takes and distributes the Minutes and hosts our meetings with wonderful refreshments.

Co-opted to the Committee are our two main social events organisers Mary Vives and Barbara Wright. Where would we be without them? And thanks too, to their team of helpers including Norma Hardy and Beryl Parkinson. The decision to co-opt Mary and Barbara arises, not just because we value their input, which goes without saying, but because of the changes we made to our banking arrangements. When I became Chairman I asked them to set up an account, which would include U3A in its title and would avoid them having to use their own private accounts with any attendant risks involved. After some shenanigans with the bank it became clear that the two key signatories to the new account had to be Trustees of the organisation, hence the need for us to co-opt them both. We are delighted to have them at our Committee meetings and their contribution to our Branch affairs remains immense. They and their team of assistants, consistently deliver a varied and stimulating programme. A disappointment has been the relative lack of support for the weekend breaks leading to cancellation of a visit to East Anglia and the survival of the Scottish weekend only by the narrowest of margins. We need to do better by our organisers.

Outside the Committee, I am more than happy to try to thank some of the other key players in our Branch activities. I am bound to forget someone because there are so many of you and that is a major characteristic of U3A work. We are a voluntary body and the spirit of volunteer work is writ large in everything we do.

Alex Davis is far more than just the editor of our newsletter. He does a tremendous job there and how he combined it with the role of Chairman I will never know. He is a great help to me. He would also be the first to pay tribute to his wife Ann, who is such a stalwart supporter.

John Hammond, our Webmaster, has developed a first class site, which is growing all the time and is a credit to him and a wonderful advert for our Branch.

Ray Pulsford is our sound man. I often think of the scene in The Wizard of Oz when Dorothy and her friends finally enter the inner sanctum and there is the Wizard behind his curtains working his magic!

Another technological wizard is Gordon Bowyer who regularly sorts out the needs of our speakers and maintains our impressive bank of equipment.

Brenda Smith sorts out our tea rota; Peter and Ada Sargent count us and welcome us in and help with our seating as does Godfrey Harrop, Harry Barton and other regulars. May Clarke is a main meeter and greeter and it is so important that people should feel welcome when they come to our meetings.

Gwen Facer and Bertie Brown take us out for Sunday at Seven meals thus widening our knowledge of Chester and Cheshire's gastronomic delights.

Howard Sherman has continued to foster our links with Bishop s High School and the staff there have been marvellous in their support of his popular science days with up to 40 attending on occasion. I am delighted that Barbara Wnght has volunteered to do the liaison work with Queen's Park High School on the Arts side.

There, now I have picked out a list of individuals and, as I said earlier, I know I will have missed someone and I ask them to accept my apologies.

Finally let us all pay a warm tribute to our Group Co-ordinators, without whom we would not function as the great learning organisation that we are. My own background in education means I may be biased in favour and support of U3A as a genuine university where people learn something new from their meetings in someone's home to their visit to Liverpool Philharmonic to their trip to Norway or Scotland to their attendance at a monthly meeting. I have beaten this drum on your behalf at meetings in Chester with other voluntary bodies. I do get quite evangelical on this kind of theme,

The Committee was happy to recommend no increase in our subscription rates for 2007/8 and this is a sign of good health and good stewardship. I believe our rates are one of Chester's bargains and no wonder people are clamouring to join us. In some ways we may become the victims of our own success and the Committee have been pondering the problem of the capacity of St Columba's Hall and whether we may have to, in some way, limit our attendances. Nothing will happen without our consulting you the members, but it would be imprudent not to consider contingency plans. For my second and final year of office I shall look forward to working with the new Committee as I have enjoyed my time with the existing group. It has been and is a pleasure to serve as your Chairman.

Neil J Fitton
November 2007