

Chester U3A Annual Report - 3rd November 2009 - June Hargreaves

Another year has passed, another successful one for Chester U3A, as diverse as ever. Our membership numbers now stand at 689, approximately a 3% increase on this time last year, though they rose to 723 in May.

There are some who think the chief activity of U3A is our monthly meetings, and these have continued, enlightening us on a wide variety of topics ranging from the Picos mountains in Spain to the work of the Cheshire Search and Rescue team and the archaeological Dig at Pulford. In spite of some atrocious weather, these meetings have all been well supported, averaging well over 200 members. It was found that the experiment of having two types of membership, offering 'group membership' to those who would not attend monthly meetings, did not have the intended result of reducing numbers at Tuesday meetings, so this idea has been abandoned; all members can now attend any U3A activities they wish, so long as there is room.

Partly in an attempt to reduce numbers at the Tuesday meetings, we have introduced a second meeting on the second Thursday of each month. Two frequent requests from members have been for a coffee-morning style meeting with opportunities to meet and chat with friends, and also for help with the use of computers; the Thursday meetings are intended to answer these needs, and also to provide a short talk of a practical nature. To this end we have had informal talks from those planning the introduction of the new bins, from the Police and Fire Services, on composting, on the impending digitalisation of television, among others. A recently started 'Book Swap' at these Thursday meetings is proving popular; no payment is involved, and any remaining books are taken to a charity shop. But the 'star of the show', is probably the Computer Help-Desk, and our thanks are due to John Hammond and the other computer-savvy members who organise this; it is now possible for members to access the internet on these occasions, which can be useful for those who cannot do so at home. We had hoped these enjoyable and useful meetings would be better supported; they will be continued for at least a further six months (except in those months when the first Tuesday & the second Thursday fall in the same week), and we hope they will grow in popularity. This month's meeting on Thursday 12th November will be centred round the activities of many of our interest groups.

Important as general meetings are, many members would say that the heart of U3A beats in its interest groups; it is indeed here that we find not only the widening and deepening of knowledge which is the essential core of the U3A movement, but also much of the friendship, fellowship and fun. One group, Beginners' French, has regrettably had to close, and our attempt to start a Swimming group unfortunately failed, thanks to the Government's introduction of free swimming for all Seniors. Six new groups have however successfully started – Ballroom Dancing, Table Tennis, Scribblers, Art Appreciation II, Needlecraft II, and a further walking group called 'Striders', though I believe it is not as energetic as that sounds. Many groups are thriving and growing, with the unfortunate effect that some become full and may have to disappoint those wishing to join; we are keen that new groups should be started, either on fresh topics, or with a different view on an existing subject. The limitation in scope seems to result from many people's reluctance to believe that they really could lead a group on that subject which interests them – help and support will be given.

But U3A also means the possibility of getting 'out and about', and we owe a debt of gratitude to our social team for the wonderfully varied programme they offer us. This year they have taken us on two holidays – to South Wales and to Northern France; how do they manage to show us so much of interest in a short time, in such comfort and with such good company?! (Not that they always organise the weather quite so efficiently!) They have also taken us to theatres, concerts,

art galleries, and many other places of interest, and we must not forget the very popular meals at the Bistro. Each occasion needs detailed planning and careful thought, and we are grateful to the team.

The series of Popular Science sessions has continued, thanks to the cooperation of the staff of the Bishops' School who make the facilities available to us when the school is not in session. We are indeed fortunate to have members who can instruct us so ably – and enjoyably – on topics such as genetics, computer skills, and matters concerning the environment and sustainable energy. Don't be afraid to come – you will come away enlightened, but not blinded, by Science,

There has been a degree of reorganisation on the wider scale of U3A. North-West England is now called the North-West Region, which has some exciting plans for region-wide activities. This area is divided into several smaller, less formal 'networks'; we are part of the Wirral and Deeside Network, only half the size of the former, somewhat unwieldy, Merseyside and Cheshire region. The National Conference in 2008 passed a resolution encouraging collaboration between U3A's; the Network should facilitate this, for example by forming interest groups across different U3A's where one would have insufficient numbers on its own, or by existing interest groups in different places holding an occasional joint meeting in order to enjoy a special speaker or activity. It is hoped that many of our members may benefit from such arrangements.

The Committee has met regularly throughout the year, caring for the regular activities of our U3A, and we all owe them a strong vote of thanks for their conscientious hard work. Mary Emery unfortunately felt she must resign, and we owe especial thanks to Carol Ferris, who is resigning at this AGM after unbroken service of ten years as Business Secretary. John Hammond is leaving the committee after devoting long hours to setting up both our website and our computer, but he will continue to be our webmaster. Connie Charlesworth is resigning after four years as a very efficient Committee Secretary. Beyond these I am not prepared to mention names in this report as I thank those who give so much support to us; there are just too many, and I shouldn't know when to stop! Throughout the year I have been constantly amazed at how many people give so much to our organisation. Much is involved in the monthly meetings, including setting out chairs and equipment, serving coffee, manipulating the sound system, and welcoming those arriving. The number of members who give sterling service to our organisation is incalculable – group coordinators and hosts, newsletter-producers, lift-givers, befrienders, and so many more. How can I thank them all?! It was to encourage and thank many of these that the coordinators' meeting this year took a rather different form, involving information about useful resources and an opportunity for group discussion; this was followed by a buffet lunch to which other helpers were invited. The valiant way in which all members of the committee worked in the kitchen proves that they are practical people, not just organisers!

As I come to the end of this year as Chairman, I feel I leave a strong and healthy organisation. I still plan to be an active member, but the time has come for me to take less responsibility. I know that I leave Chester U3A in the hands of an enthusiastic and capable Chairman and Committee. I wish them, and all of you, the very best for the future.