

Belfast University of the Third Age (U3A)

Belfast U3A originated in October 2000 when Brian Connors, having visited *Foyle U3A*, held an open meeting in Belfast Castle to discuss the possible formation of a U3A for Belfast, as part of the wider *Third Age Movement*.

The first *University of the Third Age* was started in France in 1972, after which the idea spread internationally and came to the UK in 1982 and to Northern Ireland in 1991. The U3A model used within the UK and proposed for Belfast was one of a learning organisation for those in the 'Third Age', based on the principles of self-help and of peer-learning.

As a result of the enthusiasm of Brian and of the early participants, further meetings were held in *Ruby Tuesdays* café on the Antrim Road and as people offered their skills and knowledge, some interest groups were set up.

In May 2001, *Belfast U3A* went live, when full membership was granted by the *Third Age Trust* (the UK co-ordinating body) with Brian Connors as Chairman, Robbie Mc Elhinney as Treasurer and Ann Hayes as Secretary.

By August 2001, a growing membership and additional interest groups meant that a larger venue was required and the Education Room in Belvoir Forest Park became available. The first meeting was held there in October 2001. The first Newsletter, edited by Margaret Campbell, was issued in March 2002.

Following a landslide near the Education Room in Belvoir Forest Park, a new home for meetings was required urgently and in May 2003, the first *Belfast U3A* meeting was held in Belvoir Players Theatre.

Monthly meetings were held in this venue until March 2019, when increasing numbers of members necessitated the search for a new larger meeting place and a move was made to the Balmoral Hotel in Dunmurry. Since then, some interest groups continue to meet at Belvoir Players Theatre, while others use a diverse range of community facilities and outdoor venues. The Newsletter which started in 2002 continues to be an important method of communication between members, to which we have added a website, emails and online meetings.

Belfast University of the Third Age (U3A) continues to grow and is now just one of many U3As in Northern Ireland and throughout the world.