

## U3A Climate Summer School, Centre for Alternative Technology, Wales

In early September, thirty U3A members from all over Britain gathered at the Centre for Alternative Technology at Machynlleth (pronounced something like ma-chun-tleth, ch as in “loch”). We represented Edinburgh U3A, and indeed Scotland.

We were attending the “Climate Change and the Environment” summer school, organised by the [Countdown to CoP](#) group. The group operates under the umbrella of [Interest Groups On-Line](#) (formerly Trust U3A), and is open to all U3A members wherever they live. This was its first Summer School, and the first opportunity for some of its members (as well as spouses and friends, as long as they were U3A members) to meet face to face. We’re sure it won’t be the last!

We travelled there on a grey Monday, winding along undulating roads that became narrower, bendier and steeper as we approached our destination. The Centre, known as CAT, is in a disused slate quarry on the side of a mountain, a few miles north of Machynlleth. The final part of the approach was up a water-energised funicular railway!

This year is CAT’s 50th anniversary. It has outgrown its hippy-ish beginnings, and was very busy, with several other groups there as well, including high-powered politicians from councils and the Welsh Government. Buildings and facilities are an eclectic mixture. Early experimental efforts, many now fallen into disuse, sit cheek by jowl with modern and comfortable accommodation, lecture rooms and catering facilities. Building insulation was exemplary. Solar panels were everywhere.

The best thing about the summer school was the excitement of meeting and sharing ideas and experience with like-minded people. The programme of lectures and tours was interesting and varied, starting with a tour of CAT led by Anne McGarry – who lives in Machynlleth, and worked in the centre for nearly 30 years – and continuing with a series of excellent [talks and discussions](#), some led by centre staff and associates, some by members of our own group. Four participants brought electric cars, which was really interesting. Owners liked them. Even our self-confessed “petrol-head” was totally happy with hers, a long range dual-motor Tesla 3.

The rooms were comfortable and spacious. The catering was vegetarian, which was fine, and apparently working to a tight budget. (Enough said!) The bar was a convivial focus for the evenings, with interesting local ales.

Much of the conversation was about peoples’ efforts – generally very successful – to maximise comfort and minimise energy consumption of their homes and lifestyles. There is no need to sacrifice creature comforts in pursuit of a low carbon lifestyle, though we should rid ourselves of the habit of accumulating unnecessary “stuff”!

We drove home via a windfarm a few miles from CAT, where the cloud lifted briefly to let us enjoy the view. There was a lot to think about. We returned inspired and enthused to accelerate our own efforts to retrofit energy savings measures to our house, very grateful to the organisers for their efforts and to the other participants for their company and conversation.

*Hillary and Rona Sillitto, Edinburgh U3A*