

## Mary Russell (1926 – 2023) and her contribution to Crawley u3a

*We were saddened to learn of the death of Mary Russell on Friday 14<sup>th</sup> April 2023.*

*This is the fuller version of the article appearing within the May 2023 Monthly Newsletter describing Mary's long and active involvement with Crawley u3a. The information for this article came from the Committee's archive collection of LILY and Crawley u3a newsletters, spanning the years 1982 to 2009.*

*We would like to thank Mary's son, [Ian Russell](#), for providing the two photographs featured here. The information for this article came from the archive collection of newsletters, 1982 to 2009.*



*Mary Russell*

Mary Russell joined Learning in Later Years (LILY), the organisation which was to become Crawley u3a, in autumn 1986. Her membership number was 19. LILY was a Crawley based organisation and was founded in 1981 by representatives of various local organisations involved with either adult education or the care of the elderly. The aim was to provide facilities for the elderly in Crawley to continue their interests in life and to develop new ones. The founding members of LILY itself were volunteers keen to assist with the achievement of this objective, rather than retirees hoping to be on the receiving end, though from the start retired people who were keen to avail themselves of the facilities were also encouraged to become members. The early committee members tended to be of the former member type, and Arthur Earl, who took on the role of chair, did so as part of his employment as Community Tutor at Thomas Bennett Community College (TBCC).

During LILY's early years there were no activity groups as such but there were programmes of more-or-less monthly speakers, much like our Friary monthly sessions, though the topics tended to relate to welfare matters (e.g. "Using your Community Health Council" and "Shopping and the Elderly") rather than providing entertainment. These meetings took place at TBCC. LILY also sought the attention of members, by means of its quarterly newsletter, short courses taking place in and around Crawley, considered to be of particular

interest to elderly people. These included some provided by the Open University with titles such as “Health Choices”, “Living with Change” and “Energy in the Home”.

The second edition of LILY’s newsletter, October 1982, featured an article on the University of the Third Age (U3A), a concept which originated in France in 1972 and the UK version of which had only been established in 1981. LILY soon realised that its aims were not dissimilar to those of the U3A and formally affiliated to the Third Age Trust (TAT) in March 1985, becoming one of the earlier groups in the UK to do so (its certificate was number 26) and the first U3A in West Sussex. At that point membership was around 50.

Crawley U3A still continued to use the LILY name until a decision was made at the July 1987 AGM to drop this in favour of Crawley u3a, some members having expressed concern that that LILY conveyed a horticultural organisation or even one running a “purity” campaign. It was at this AGM that Mary Russell first assumed a Committee position, that of Membership Secretary, and two years later she assumed the role of Honorary Secretary. By that stage there seem to have been four activity groups (then termed “Study Groups”) operating, Scrabble, Music, French and Poetry. In May 1991 Mary gave a talk at one of the monthly meetings on “Governing Schools in the ‘90s” based on her own experiences as a school governor in Crawley. By 1992 Mary was jointly leading the new Art Appreciation group and organised two trips to galleries that year, one to the National Gallery and the other to the Tate. She also ran a session on “Make your own Greetings Cards” in the November.

Mary continued in the role of Honorary Secretary until 1998, a period of nine years, and it is obvious from the newsletters that she put a great deal of work into the role. Back then there was no committee member in charge of either events or outings and she organised the speakers for the monthly meetings, the seasonal outings, and attended the then annual Third Age Trust residential conference and AGM in addition to undertaking the secretarial function. It was during Mary’s years of secretaryship that Crawley u3a formally registered as a charity.

After stepping down as Secretary in 1998 Mary immediately took on the role of Vice-Chairman, and in 1999 became Chair in place of Arthur Earl who had served in that position since 1983 as part of his role of Community Tutor at TBCC and was now retiring from that role after 37 years of working there. Arthur now assumed the newly introduced non-Committee role of President. By this stage Sussex u3a Regional Network (SUN, which existed up to 2022) was in existence and operating activity and study days across Sussex, and as Chair of Crawley u3a Mary had to attend the meetings held every two months down in Ringmer (online meetings being still 20 years in the future).

By 1999 the number of study groups in operation had grown to 25, and outdoor groups had made an appearance in the form of Amblers and Out and About. A swimming group also existed, meeting at the old Crawley Haslett Avenue Sports Centre. Painting and Drawing, Bamboo Pipes and the Book Circle, run by Mary’s husband Douglas were also active. Up until this point most of the monthly meetings seem to have taken place at TBCC, but from now on the Friary appears to become the main location, presumably because its location was more central.

In 2001 she became Vice-Chair of SUN with particular responsibility for u3as in West Sussex. During the period from 2002 to 2004 Mary took a break from Crawley u3a Committee duties, perhaps because she was now acting as Chair of the Sussex u3a Regional Association. Her husband Douglas took on her previous role of Secretary in 2003. They both attended the various u3a summer schools and together lead the Crawley Art Appreciation 1 group with regular visits to galleries in London. Mary still contributed regularly to the newsletter. In the June 2003 issue she wrote an article explaining what members received for the annual membership fee – which was then £7.50, of which £2.50 represented the Third Age Trust per capita charge (this £2.50 charge also covered the Third Age Matters costs). When making comparisons with today’s membership fees it should be noted that the £7.50 did not include attendance at monthly meetings – these were paid for on an as attended basis.

In 2002 Crawley u3a membership was reported to be 400. In November 2003 Arthur Earl once again became Chairman (so now his title was President and Chairman). By 2004 Mary was once again acting as Vice-Chair and in March 2006 Crawley u3a celebrated its 21<sup>st</sup> anniversary with a special edition of the newsletter, with colour photos on the cover.

The current archive of Newsletters ends in November 2009, at edition no. 98. Arthur Earl was still President and Chairman, and Mary Vice-chair. No fewer than four seasonal outings took place annually, now organised by a team of three non-committee members. 35 groups were in operation, still termed “study” groups. By now there was three Out and About groups and two other outdoor groups, Amblers and Walkers. Quizzing had not yet made its debut but there were four literature groups (Literature, Poetry, Play Reading, and another titled, confusingly, “Plays, Poetry and Prose”) in addition to three Book Circle groups.

Sadly, Arthur Earl died suddenly in September 2010 and Mary, as Vice-Chair, became acting Chair. The Committee applied to the Third Age Trust to have Arthur Earl included in their u3a Role of Honour, in view of his very long service. This application succeeded and the certificate exists in the archive. Mary was reappointed again as Vice Chair at the 2011 AGM, with Gillian Pitt becoming Chair. Membership stood at 543 (it is currently only around 20 more than this). Mary finally stepped down from the Committee at the 2013 AGM, by which time she would have been in her late 80s, and it was immediately proposed that she become the President.

So in total Mary served 24 years in Crawley u3a committee roles, two as membership Secretary, nine as Secretary, nine as Vice Chair, and four as Chair. This represents an incredible amount of work and in addition to this she led for varying periods Art Appreciation 1 and the Book Circle and was very active in teaching members the basics of computing, as one of tutors in the Computing group.

During her period on the Committee Crawley u3a grew and changed enormously and the number of activity groups multiplied by a factor of ten. Without her efforts over so many years we would not be where we are today.

Margaret Lloyd, Secretary 26<sup>th</sup> April 2023



*Mary Russell in her twenties*