

Newsletter 2023



Dear Member,

Welcome to the November newsletter. Last month we had a last-minute change to our talk at our Open Meeting as the scheduled speaker could not attend. However, we had an excellent talk from Richard Haigh on the 'Cosa Nostra' as you can see from my summary below. This month we welcome back Professor Peter Edwards, who always gives us an entertaining talk.

Have you booked your place for our Christmas Lunch yet? If not, you can do so at our November meeting or by post. You must have your money and choices in to Fenella by December 6th. For more details, please see our website or pick up a flyer at the November Open Meeting.

Liz Ouldrige (Chair)

Important dates

November 15th Open Meeting at the Boniface Centre: Professor Peter Edwards 'The Life and Times of Galileo.' Refreshments from 9:30am, the talk starts at 10:15.

November 21st Monthly coffee morning for all at 'The Hayloft' Mole Avon Country Store from 10:30am.

November 28th Exeter Community Energy public meeting 10-12am at the Elephant on the Green

December 19th Monthly coffee morning for all at 'The Hayloft' Mole Avon Country Store from 10:30am.

December 20th Christmas Lunch at the Waie Inn. See the flyer or website for more details.

News from the Groups

The Energy Action Group has arranged a public meeting with Exeter Community Energy, who offer a range of services, including home energy saving advice, help with access to grant funding for homeowners, and grants to community projects. Everyone is welcome to attend for what looks to be a very important meeting.

October's talk: 'Cosa Nostra' by Richard Haigh

Richard started by telling us a little about the history of the *Cosa Nostra* or *Mafia*. Italy is a relatively new country being found in the middle of the 19th Century, Before then, Sicily was part of the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies. This covered both Sicily and southern areas of Italy. Sicily was a largely agricultural almost feudal society. The language spoken was Sicilian and they regarded themselves as distinct from the rest of Italy. The wealthy landowners lived in towns like Palermo. They rented their land to the Gabellotti, small entrepreneurs. The Gabellotti were ruthless in protecting their assets, often using threats and violence. After unification, little attention was paid to Sicily by central government, and as old social structures fell apart, the Gabellotti established new systems which eventually became the *Cosa Nostra* or *Our Thing*. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, many Sicilians emigrated due to poor economic prospects in Italy. This led to branches of the *Mafia* becoming established in America, particularly New York. The American *Mafia* maintained strong links to Sicily.

The *Cosa Nostra* is a loose network of criminal gangs with initiation rites and a code of strict silence (*Omertà*). The basic group or gang is known as *the family* or *Cosca*. Each *family* has a distinct territory. They derive their income by extracting protection money (*Pizzu*) by setting up illegal agreements and transactions such as the illegal drug trade. They act as an unofficial police force,

enacting draconian punishments for perceived transgressions. For a long time, they were the effective government of Sicily, their activities being largely ignored by central government. In fact, government institutions were widely infiltrated by them. Berlusconi, the ex-prime minister, had strong links. Even the Vatican had its share in the corruption.

Throughout the 20th century, *Cosa Nostra* kept an iron grip on Sicily. When Sicily was liberated from the Nazis in 1943, *Cosa Nostra* took advantage of the situation by infiltrating the government and aid structures set up by the Allies. When they did not approve of officials, the officials were simply assassinated. In 1947, seven recently-elected Sicilian mayors were assassinated. After the war, fear of communist take-over in Italy led US aid to go to the Christian Democrat party. This party was strongly anti-communist but also strongly infiltrated by the *Cosa Nostra*.

In the second half of the 20th Century, the Italian State started to take action against *Cosa Nostra*. However, their activities were hampered by systematic corruption in all institutions. There were many assassinations both of officials and infighting between the *families*. Today some progress in successful prosecution of *Cosa Nostra* members has been achieved. The high levels of violence that were seen in the 1970s and 1980s came to a sudden halt in the early 1990s. We don't know why. Is the *Cosa Nostra* in decline or have they reached a compromise with central government? The story continues.

The Role of the u3a Committee: Groups Coordinator – current holder Jo Penning



Special Interest Groups are an integral part of u3a and close liaison between the groups and the committee is essential. The function of the Groups Coordinator is to facilitate the start-up of new Interest Groups and to support the Group Leaders (Organisers) of existing groups. Jo, our current Groups Coordinator is indefatigable in her work on her behalf. You can meet her at the Open Meetings, where she will chat to you about joining a special interest group or about setting up a group. You can also meet her at our monthly coffee mornings. In the last couple of years, she has been key in setting up several new groups including the Book Groups, Theatre Visits, boules and Short mat bowls.