

HALTON NEWSLETTER

January 2024

Now there are four!



Photo courtesy of Patricia James

Message from the Chair - Chris Lewis

I am starting to write this in Leiden, Holland. Another year has passed, every year seems to pass more quickly than the last. I caught Covid later in the year but very mild; now it has become less of a threat it has enabled me to indulge in my hobby more, that is travelling on trains. We started the year in Switzerland and visited it twice more as well as Holland, Austria and Germany finishing off the year in Maastricht. Some of our members are abroad visiting relatives, one in South Africa and one in Australia.

Like most members I am sure, we have had sad times with the death of friends in 2023 and some members I know have lost relatives. Just before Christmas I heard of the death of someone at 97 who interviewed me at University in 1968 and looked after me for my first few years at Laporte. I am going to his funeral in Scotland.

Moving on to Halton u3a I hope we have managed a seamless change of Chairs but I still have Jennifer beside me to keep me on the straight and narrow. As you know she is continuing to lead the General Meetings as I think you would all want. Several new groups have been formed during the year and I think we have an impressive number considering we only have a membership of just over one hundred. During the year we have gained a Ten Pin Bowling Group (as well as the Crown Green Bowling Group), a Cinema Group, a Walking Group, a Pub Group (to indulge me) and a proposed Lunch and Outings Group.

I have a strong Committee supporting me and I thank them. We have several new Committee members as well as retaining ones from the past to have their experience with us. I think this is important. However, I ask you all to give thoughts to writing small articles for the Newsletter please. I am sure some of you are very capable of this and could write items of interest to members. These do not have to cover items connected to u3a. Lastly, we need someone to assist Anna, our Website Administrator. Please read her article below and hopefully we will find someone.

New Year in Holland. - Chris Lewis, Halton u3a Chair

In the past, mainly before Covid, we have spent New Year abroad with friends visiting various countries including Germany, Switzerland, Austria, Spain and Portugal, (interestingly not France!). You may be surprised they have always involved railways. With two other couples we looked at Switzerland and Austria this year but decided to visit nearer home and decided on Maastricht and Leiden in Holland. One couple then couldn't come so we arranged to meet Ray and Sue in Maastricht. We travelled by Ryanair from Manchester to Eindhoven then train to Maastricht. Ray and Sue stayed the night in St Pancras to catch the Eurostar to Brussels but unfortunately it was the day the Thames Tunnel flooded so they joined us a day late. This meant they missed a ride on the steam train near Maastricht, the reason for staying there. However the firework display on New Year's Eve from the bridge over the River Meuse had to be seen to be believed.



Fireworks in Maastricht

We stayed four nights in Maastricht before making the three hour train journey to Leiden for two nights. We stayed in a converted army barracks, now a boutique hotel. Like many Dutch towns it has retained its old buildings and it was market day when we arrived. Very few English towns have preserved markets as the Dutch have. The next day we visited Delft another very attractive town. We left Leiden by train for the short journey to Schipol Airport and Easyjet to Manchester arriving 10 minutes early.

I first went to Holland in 1967 and visited many times since then particularly when my brother lived there in the 1970's. It tends to get dismissed as a flat and boring country but has many attributes as I was reminded.

Christmas Quiz Answers - George Mullen, u3a member

Here it is, the moment you have been waiting for. Your patience is rewarded.



- 1. Gilbert Harding was Chairman of Twenty Questions. He was famous for his irascibility aka rudeness when he was a panellist on TV's What's my Line. The press once labelled him the rudest man in Britain. After graduating from Queens' College, Cambridge he had several jobs including a brief spell as a policeman in Bradford.***
- 2. Baron Bigod is a British brie style cheese made in Suffolk.***
- 3. We have just one bone in each ear.***
- 4. Cicchetti is a meal consisting of small plates. It is Italy's version of tapas. Interestingly tapas is an anagram of pasta.***
- 5. Plenty to go for here. A group of pandas is called a pack, bamboo, bunch or cupboard but more commonly an embarrassment.***
- 6. False. Italians prefer pasta cooked 'al dente' and use dried pasta. There is too much moisture in fresh.***
- 7. Canada has the longest coastline in the world.***
- 8. Ice is frozen water so it's H2O.***
- 9. Ljubljana is the capital of Slovenia.***
- 10. According to Guinness World Records Bing Crosby's 1942 recording of White Christmas is the best selling single of all time.***
- 11. When I wrote this question the answer was Italy but they have recently been replaced by France for the first time in nine years. But it's a Christmas quiz so I will accept either.***
- 12. Glamorgan sausage.***
- 13. Ashley Way is named after former Widnes crane driver Jack Ashley who became an MP and then a prominent member of the House of Lords. His daughter Jackie, a well known journalist, is married to Andrew Marr.***
- 14. St Vincent.***
- 15. Vatican City.***
- 16. Edward Heath.***
- 17. Madeira.***
- 18. An Arbroath Smokie is haddock which has been hot smoked using strictly regulated methods within a five mile radius of Arbroath.***
- 19. Graham Kerr was a TV chef with his show called The Galloping Gourmet which was filmed in Ottawa, Canada. It was broadcast from 1968 to 1972. He was born in London but was a New Zealand National.***
- 20. False. Authentic Bolognese is nearly always made using tagliatelle and not spaghetti.***



On the Grapevine - George Mullen, Halton U3a member

The most recent data issued by the European Commission has revealed a big drop in wine consumption across Europe with falls of 7% in France, 22% in Germany and more than a third in Portugal. In Bordeaux growers have agreed to remove almost 10,000 hectares of vineyards due to over supply. Globally the decrease amounts to 1%. Some of this is attributed to lower demand in China where Baijiu has been part of the drinking culture since the Ming Dynasty. This is a colourless liquor made by fermenting grains especially sorghum which is one of the top five cereal crops in the world. Baijiu is the fourth most consumed alcoholic drink in the world. Wine is in second place while the top spot goes to beer. In fact, after water and tea, beer is the most popular of any drink in the world. Despite this fall in wine consumption interest in learning about oenology and viniculture (winemaking to you and me) is probably higher than ever. In Britain there is a network of local wine schools providing live and virtual tastings as well as study facilities. In our region there is one in Chester, two in Manchester and one in Liverpool. A national company organises tastings and courses in eleven UK cities including Liverpool. In addition some wine merchants occasionally organise live and virtual events including Woodwinters and The Great Grog Company both based in Edinburgh. There is an organisation called The Wine and Spirits Education Trust, known as WSET, which organises courses both online and live in several world locations including St Petersburg in Russia. For the really dedicated they provide a series of examinations at three levels, then a Diploma and eventually a degree level qualification called Master of Wine. As of now there are just 416 Master of Wines in the world of which 149 are women. Britain's Jancis Robinson was the first person outside the wine trade to achieve this. It is interesting to discover the various routes taken by leading gurus before ending up in the wine business. Tom Cannavan graduated from the famous Glasgow School of Art before becoming a wine journalist, a judge at international wine festivals and a presenter of wine events on Scottish TV. Anne McHale read French and Classics at Christ's College Cambridge. Anna Spooner read English Literature at university. Jancis Robinson went to St Anne's College, Oxford and read Mathematics and Philosophy. I went to Oxford Street University, Widnes, now called St. Gerard's, and read the Daily Mirror.

Blethering's - George Mullen, Halton u3a Member

We are just a short time into another year and I wonder how many New Year resolutions have already been broken. When I was a youngster it was common for everyone to try to recover from the damage done by Yuletide festivities by resolving that such bad habits would never happen again. It's doubtful if many resolutions made it to Easter. It's a long time since I can remember anyone even making the effort. In those very young years my resolutions had nothing to do with Christmas excesses. Every night I would consider the world from the privacy of my bedroom and wonder why my parents sent me to bed just because the clock said so even though I was wide awake. I spent hours listening to the sound of trains crossing the 'old bridge' on their journey from Liverpool to London. I promised myself that one day I would take that train and find out what lay at the end of the line. My resolve led me to checking out everything I could about London. Eventually I succeeded in making my dream journey.

On a school trip in 1951 I had a memorable experience singing in a choir in Westminster Cathedral. But an even more fascinating experience was seeing a man walking down Piccadilly actually wearing spats which were the height of fashion in the 1920's. My first trip to London was a year earlier attending the Rugby League Cup Final when Warrington beat Widnes 19-0. I cried all the way back to Euston. But this was the start of the annual ritual in my teens of travelling 'up for cup'. This involved catching the Friday midnight train from Lime Street and arriving in Euston in what seemed like two days later. But we were always in good time for our traditional full English in our favourite greasy spoon in Tooley Street before inspecting the guards at Buckingham Palace. One year we miscalculated our time for leaving the pub near Wembley Stadium and in our rush one of the group, Ian, missed by inches being knocked down by a car carrying the Queen who was attending to present the cup. That would have been an interesting insurance claim!

In later, and more mature, years one of my favourite London visits was to the crypt of St Martin-in-the-Fields to listen to a performance of Pachelbel's Canon No. 4. As Del Boy would say 'My most favourite piece of music in the world'. It's the sort of music we enjoyed in Simms Cross where I grew up. That area of Widnes was the breeding ground of such notables as George Nicholls, Rugby League's first Man of Steel, Eric Hughes who appeared on BBC's Superstars, 'knocker upper' Mary Anne, after hours street singer Arthur Blackburn, wonderfully unforgettable Billy O'Shea and, of course, our very own Marie Thornett who was one of the experts behind the development of Warfarin. My first marital home was there in Timperley Street. It has since been converted into Marks and Spencer's cafe. Every time I go there for a coffee I feel I should be making it myself.

Terry Venables and Memories of Council Housing - David Bissenden, Halton u3a Committee Member

The death of Terry Venables, ex England footballer and manager, at the end of November has prompted me to write about the town of his birth, Dagenham, and how this may have shaped his career. It then also made me think about the council housing he was brought up in.

Terry was born in 1943 in Bonham Road, Dagenham, which was the major part of the council estate of Becontree situated on the edge of London and Essex. Becontree was one of the new towns, created before new towns existed, in the 1920's after the end of the Great War. Politicians keen that the working classes should be looked after, and not revolt like the Russian peasants had in 1917, decided to create 'Homes fit for Heroes'. Thus Dagenham was born and it soon expanded as the giant Ford Motor Company moved to the town in the early 30's and set up its massive plant alongside the River Thames in the south of the borough - an area known as Dagenham Dock. In fact Fords had its own jetty and could bring in supplies by boat and send out exports the same way. It even had its own ferry to bring workers across the river from Thamesmead in the south to its factory on the north bank.

Dagenham was an interesting place in that all the houses looked the same, all the streets looked similar and it was easy to get lost because of this lack of landmarks. (It does look identical to Speke, which was also built to house Ford workers - this time at Halewood.) Houses had all the mod cons for the time, bathrooms, galley kitchens, living rooms and often 3 or 4 bedrooms, as birth rates were still high. They also had generous back gardens delineated by chestnut paling fencing at the rear and sides. The front gardens

had privet hedgerows. In fact a photo of Terry Venables' road taken in the 1960's shows every house with a hedgerow the same height - about three foot, there are also few cars parked in the road. So sparse was the car ownership when the estate was built that often the pavements were as wide as the road because more people walked than drove. Also in the picture, but not discernible because it is in black and white - all front doors were the same colour, by decree of the council.

Dagenham was a breeding ground for footballers - another great England player Jimmy Greaves lived nearby. So why should such a place encourage boys to become footballers? The answer lies in the fact that for boys, there was little else to do but go over to the local park and kick a ball. Dagenham, like many 'new' towns never had enough facilities, not enough shops or doctors or dentists. There was no theatre or art gallery or museum. Despite this the town was still a sought after place to live for working class families - back in the days of black and white television. Which begs the question where did it all go wrong? Why is council housing, now called 'social' housing, seen as a last resort, and not something to aspire to?

There are probably three main reasons for its demise.

Firstly - As the decades moved on from the 'Homes for Heroes' of the 1920's and 30's, councils started trying different forms of housing, often built on the cheap. Tower blocks and higher density housing moved away from the original concept of two storey dwelling houses with front and rear gardens. New estates with too many tower blocks seemed to get a bad reputation with vandalism and broken lifts being examples of a general deterioration.

The second, lesser known, reason was that in 1977 the rules changed so that unemployed people could become council tenants. Whilst well meaning, this moved things away from the settled working families that had been the backbone of the communities.

The final nail in the coffin was the 1981 'Right to Buy' scheme promoted by Margaret Thatcher. This eventually led to local authorities being denuded of housing stock. Unfortunately little effort was made to fill the shortfall, meaning that there are now fewer and fewer council properties available for rent. Even cosmetic changes to this situation through the creation of Housing Associations and 'social' housing did little to rectify this.

So now the world of Terry Venables' childhood and mine is confined to history. In those days there were always parks within walking distance of home to play football in and no one cared about children being out of the house all day. The mobile phone was something out of science fiction, and in any case many houses did not have phones at all but relied on their friendly neighbours for urgent messages.

Looking back it was a good life. In that world, work and council housing were guaranteed for most hard working families and therefore people were probably more content. Everyone you knew also lived in the same kind of house, so there was not much to envy. Something perhaps we should aspire to now.

Halton u3a Website - Volunteers Needed - Anna Higgins, Halton u3a Website Administrator

Over 700 u3a groups, including Halton, currently use Site Builder as the website tool to publish and publicise their activities. This relatively easy to use system has been in operation over 10 years. For various reasons a decision was taken in 2022 to seek an alternative. The new system will have the qualities of the old system as well as the potential to add more features and enhancements in the future. The WordPress system software has been selected to be the replacement for Site Builder. Neighbouring Frodsham u3a was one of the first in the country to move to the new system. If you would like to take a peek at their website the link is: <https://frodsham.u3asite.uk/>

The move to this new system is slowly taking place over a period of time. We don't know yet when Halton's website will move over but it will probably be at some point this year. At the moment our website is administered by one member and one group leader who kindly manages a group page. It seems the ideal time to try to build up a small team to share this task. Our secretary Caroline has already volunteered some help. It will certainly involve some training in how to use and maintain the new system and will once trained be a task that you can do from home, providing that you have access to a computer. You would also need to have reasonable keyboard skills. It's not possible yet to pinpoint any dates as to when we might transfer although it will probably be sometime this year. If you have any experience already of using WordPress or think that you might like to be involved please contact either Chris Lewis or myself via the contacts page on the current website.



Photos from our Christmas event at the Masonic Hall

Group Reports

- **iPad Group (Group Leader, Paula Fox)** - On the first Thursday each month members attend a free workshop at Apple, Liverpool One. These fun sessions have been invaluable in helping members gain confidence and to get the most from their iPads. On the third Thursday each month we meet at 11.00am in Cronton Methodist Chapel Hall, Chapel Lane, Cronton, WA8 4NT, to follow up and revise what was learnt at the Apple sessions and also to share tips and know-how, and learn from each other. If Santa brought you an iPad for Christmas but you're not sure what to do with it, come along to the group to discover the wonderful world inside your iPad.
- **Bowls Group (Group Leader, Paula Fox)** - The group meets to play at 10.00am every Tuesday from April to September at Hough Green Park Bowling Club, Royal Avenue, Widnes, WA8 8HL. No experience necessary and bowls are available to borrow. Bowling has not taken place over the winter months and the green is currently undergoing a maintenance programme for when play commences in April. In the meantime, the group will meet at the clubhouse for a social get-together over a cuppa on Tuesday, 16th January 2024 at 10.30am.
- **Bridge Group (Group Leader, David Burrows)** - The group meets every Thursday at 10.00am in Ditton Community Centre, Dundalk Road, Widnes WA8 8DF. The group is running well, back in our original room at Dundalk Road with usually between 3 and 4 tables playing. We are a friendly group with all levels of bridge skills and welcome members new to bridge but familiar with whist. We have a library of tuition books free to borrow to get new players familiar with bidding and techniques. Meetings usually start with an analysis of a hand played elsewhere and a discussion of how the hand was bid and played which is both informative and appreciated. Sessions vary between free play and themed instruction with a short talk followed by play based on the theme of the week which is stay-man and transfers. Several of our members also belong to local Bridge Clubs, details of which widens the possibility to play more than once a week. Bridge is a great way to meet people and have fun exercising the grey cells.
- **Reading Group (Group Leader, Barry Cotterill)** - The group met up at The Woodlands, Hough Green, Widnes in December where we enjoyed a lovely lunch. There was plenty of lively chat but we only briefly touched upon our book of the month which was 'Small Pleasures' by Clare Chambers. We agreed that we would carry on with discussion about this book when we meet in January as well as talking about our next read 'The Foundling' by Stacey Halls. The group usually meets at 10.30am on the third Wednesday of each month at Widnes Library. We sit around a table in an open area of the ground floor of the building. A vending machine is available in the building for liquid refreshments. All of our books are provided free of charge by Halton Libraries. You can get a taste of what we will be reading this year by looking at the list on the Reading Group page on the Halton u3a website. New members and guests are welcome. If you come along and are unable to recognise any faces the library staff will point you in our direction.

- **Photography Group (Group Leader, Barry Cotterill)** - We are currently meeting on a monthly basis at Rivendell Garden Centre at 10.30am on the third Monday of the month. The next three meetings are as follows, Monday, 15th January 2024, Monday, 19th February 2024 and Monday, 18th March 2024. Adverse weather and other commitments have made group outings difficult to arrange so we have set individual challenges for the group. January is open to any photos you wish to share, February's topic is the weather so anything from clouds to puddles to flying trampolines and March is anything to do with spring.



New members very welcome You don't need a fancy camera, phones and iPads are fine. If you would like to join us please come along to one of the meetings. Any photos you wish to share with the group ideally need to be on a memory stick or card so we can show them on a laptop..

- **Science is for Everyone (Group Leader, Bob Roach)** - The group held its final meeting under Bob Roach discussing various subjects. The group will continue but the next meeting will be in February when its format for the future will be discussed. If you haven't already expressed interest in its future please let Chris Lewis know.
- **History (Group Leader, Bob Roach)** - The group meets at St. Paul's Church Hall at 1.00pm on the first and third Tuesday in the month. Continuing with our approach of 'shared learning', we have now nearly completed the era of George V as King of United Kingdom - he reigned from 1910 to 1936. We still need to do a little bit more about the rise of Adolf Hitler in that era and how the severity of the peace terms imposed on Germany at the end of World War 1 possibly contributed to his emergence. We will then go on to discuss the short reign of Edward VIII before he abdicated, with George VI (father to Queen Elizabeth and grandfather to King Charles) unexpectedly becoming king. New members most welcome to our chatty sessions. Please contact Bob Roach through the website.
- **Family History Group (Group Leader, Alec Hough)** - The group meets on the third Monday of each month from 2.00pm to 3.30pm in Room 11 at Widnes Library, Victoria Square, WA8 7QT. Our next meeting will be on Monday, 19th February 2024 when we will be having a presentation on the use of DNA in Family History research. All members are welcome whether or not they have started researching their family's history. For those who want some help in getting started, we offer one-to-one sessions at dates to suit you in your local library to show you the basics. You may be surprised at what you find out about your family.

- **Living History Group - (Group Leader, Geoff Dutton)** - Due to the bad weather Living History Group's peregrinations around the area have been limited. I hope to resurrect our Brewery trip to J.W. Lees Middleton Brewery for the summer.
- **Gardening Group - (Leaders, Chris and Colin McConnell)** - We did not have a Green Shoots Gardening Group meeting on 18th December 2023 due to members having other commitments for Christmas, etc. We did hold a coffee and cake morning at Rivendell Garden Centre for the rest of the members for a social catch up. We will be holding our 'New Year Lunch' at the Griffin, Bold Heath, Widnes WA8 3XT, meeting at 11:30am on Monday, 15th January 2024. The next Green Shoots Gardening Group meeting is at 10.30am on Monday, 19th February 2024 at Rivendell Garden Centre, Mill Lane, Widnes, WA8 3UL.
- **The Cinema Group (Group Leaders, Hazel Landon and Judith Byrne)** - The Cinema Group meets on a Tuesday afternoon (usually around 2.00pm) when a 'good' film is showing. This will not be every week; it is a come when you like group.
 - Sometimes it will be short notice, information will be published on the Cinema What's App Group as films for the week are only released on a Sunday.
 - Tickets are usually about £5.95. You can get a Combo ticket for an extra £1 which includes a drink.
 - We meet in the Foyer so that we can get a row of seats together.
 - Car share is encouraged, as is bring a friend.
 - If you are interested, please let Chris Lewis know along with your contact details, so that Judith can put you on the Cinema What's App Group.
- **Ten Pin Bowling Group (Group Leader, Davis Bissenden)** - The Ten Pin Bowling Group meets at 10.00am on Wednesdays at Widnes Super Bowl, apart from during school holidays. Two games of bowling, including coffee and bacon roll, cost £7.99 under the 'Nifty Fifty' option which is only available to over 50's Monday to Friday, 9.00am to 11.00am (two games take a little over an hour - one game option is also available at £6.99). Participants are of course responsible for their own fitness and ability to take part and should supply emergency contact details. Members interested can contact me through the website or just turn up.



- **New Group - Visits to Interesting Pubs (Group Leader, Chris Lewis)** - The group is looking to visit pubs or bars that have character, not run-of-the mill estate pubs. The first meeting was at the Society which is under the railway bridge between Runcorn station and the Mersey. The main room is the old Cooperative butcher shop. The owner is renovating the building and has exposed the original tiled walls. The food served, mainly of eastern Asia variety at a very reasonable price, was enjoyed. But most importantly to me one beer is hand pumped and of excellent quality. Jennifer and I have been going there for over four years. It was certainly unique for our first get together.

After meeting in the Society in Runcorn in November an impromptu meeting was held in the same venue a few days before Christmas. Well, Jennifer and I were going there anyway! The group members have been circulated with details of the next visit. Because the evenings get dark early we are not combining these visits with a short walk

before but intend to in the spring. If you would like to be on the group mailing list please let me know.

- **New Group - Walking Group (Group Leader, Rob James)** - The first walk is scheduled for Wednesday, 24th January 2024 leaving at 10.30am from and returning to Rivendell Garden Centre Car Park walking to Bold Forest Park, with an optional loop to the Dream Monument. The plan at the end of the walk for those interested is to chat and take refreshments in the Garden Centre Restaurant. Another walk will be scheduled for mid February and then if there is enough interest two walks per month will be organised commencing from March onwards. If you wish to join the group please contact me through the contact page on the website. A Whats App Group has also been set up for those interested.

A big thank you to Bob for his valuable insight and support in reinstating the Walking Group.

- **Proposed New Group - Lunch and Outings Group** - Details to follow shortly.

If you are interested in any of our groups and would like further information, Group Leaders can be contacted through the contact page on the Halton u3a website, or you can contact our Secretary, Caroline Nesbitt.

Next General Meeting and Coffee Catch-up

The February General Meeting will take place at 1.30pm on Thursday, 8th February 2024 at the Masonic Hall, Widnes. The speaker is Jennifer Lewis who will talk about 'Train Travels in the 21st Century'.

The January coffee catch up will be at 2.00pm on Thursday, 25th January 2024 at Rivendell Garden Centre, Widnes.

The February coffee catch up will be at 2.00pm on Thursday, 22nd February 2024 at Rivendell Garden Centre, Widnes.

If any members would like to give a presentation at a future event, or would like to contribute a short article to the newsletter, please contact our Chair, Chris Lewis, or send articles to the newsletter editor through the contact page on the Halton u3a website. Please note the last date for contributions to the newsletter is the 10th of each month.

Further information and contact details can be found on the Halton u3a website

