

HALTON NEWSLETTER

May/June 2023

(Please note there will not be a separate Newsletter in June)

Lazing in the sun in
Victoria Park, Widnes



Photo courtesy of Patricia James

Message from the Chair - Jennifer Lewis

This month has seen an historic event with the Coronation of King Charles III. Most of us have memories of the Coronation in 1953, I suspect that we will not see another Coronation in our lifetimes. Whether you are a Royalist or a Republican the pageant and ceremony showed Britain at its best. Similarly whatever your feelings about Royalty they represent service to Britain and a continuity that many countries may envy.

The celebrations included street and garden parties and the great 'Help Out'. Both of these encourage people to get out and socialise while doing something worthwhile, giving people the opportunity to mix and make friends with people they may not

know. Loneliness is a great problem in our modern world and it has also been proved to affect health. u3a was founded with this in mind, allowing people to meet up, make friends and pursue interests together. Despite the University in the title not all activities are academic; two of our most popular groups are the Cinema Group and the Gardening Group. If you would like to share an interest in anything such as theatre, a concert, a stroll in a park or even just a coffee, modern technology makes it easy to share meeting times and venues sometimes at short notice. If you know anyone who may be affected by loneliness please tell them about u3a and encourage them to come along to a meeting. Halton u3a tries to be a friendly and inclusive group.

May General Meeting - John Wilson, Liverpool Seafarers Centre

John Wilson gave a very interesting talk this month. He explained how the centre was formed by uniting different missions in the city. They offer front line support to thousands of seafarers passing through the port each year. He reminded us how the majority of things we need in our daily lives come into the country by sea. The seafarers can spend up to nine months a year in uncomfortable conditions. John and his team board every ship and offer assistance and a place to relax to everyone free of charge.

Many seafarers have left homes months earlier unprepared for the colder conditions they find in Liverpool. The centre offers them warm clothing along with other small items. It was suggested that at the next General Meeting any members who were able to donate hats, warm clothing or items such as dvd's they no longer require could bring them to the meeting and John would gratefully collect them.

Time to Reflect - George Mullen, Halton u3a Member

We are approaching the day that will be the 79th anniversary of the Normandy landings which took place during World War II on 6th June 1944. It involved around 160,000 troops and the objective was to defeat Hitler and liberate Europe from Nazi occupation. The date was known as D-day and it was a joint operation by Allied Forces planned and supervised by General Dwight Eisenhower of the US. During preparations all details were referred to by code names. The most important code was Overlord and shortly before the scheduled date for the invasion this word appeared in The Daily Telegraph as the answer to a crossword clue. Espionage was suspected and there were fears that the massive operation would have to be cancelled. Lord Tweedsmuir, son of author John Buchan, was asked to investigate. Eventually he concluded that it was just a remarkable coincidence and the decision was taken to go ahead. It was one of the most significant campaigns in modern military history. It began at midnight on 5th June 1944 when six Horsa gliders took off from Britain carrying 181 men under the command of Major John Howard. Their mission was to capture two bridges which were strategic crossings of the Caen canal and the River Orne. The bridge over the canal was originally called Benouville Bridge after the local village. Following the war it was renamed Pegasus Bridge in memory of the troops

who captured it. Pegasus is the emblem of the Parachute Regiment, an airborne infantry regiment of the British Army. Built in 1934 the bridge is now part of the Memorial Pegasus Museum in nearby Ranville. The operation to capture the bridge was featured in an epic 1962 film called 'The Longest Day'. The bridge was guarded by a solitary German soldier who dropped his rifle and fled when he saw British troops emerging from the shadows. Usually film audiences find this amusing. The film doesn't explain that the German soldier was sixteen years old.

On D-day 29,000 British troops landed on Sword beach and suffered 630 casualties. Some years ago I spent an evening with a veteran of the landings, a man I'd known since childhood. He described the nightmare experience on the beach not knowing what lay ahead and the obvious fear of injury or worse. It seems hardly possible but in the middle of all the chaos and surrounded by thousands of Allied troops he suddenly found himself alongside one of his neighbours from Oxford Street in Widnes. He told me that the neighbour was my father. There are a lot of military cemeteries in Normandy and it can be a shock to see how large some of them are. One of the smallest is at Ranville but even that has 2,236 Commonwealth burials as well as 323 German graves. It is maintained by the Commonwealth War Graves Commission and details of individual burials can be searched on their website. I have visited Ranville several times and on one visit I chanced on the grave of a soldier from Widnes whose family I know well. His headstone describes him as a Commando. He was nineteen years old when he died.

The graves of Allied troops are very well tended and identified and easy to find by visitors. All soldiers carried two identification tags. Colleagues would remove one tag from a casualty and pass this back to HQ for recording. The second tag would be left to ensure proper identification at burial. German troops only carried one tag and this was removed. As a result German graves are often only partly identified relying on whatever was found such as a paybook or a letter from home. It's not unusual to see headstones with inscriptions such as Hans or simply A German Soldier. This must be very distressing for families.

Tours to the battlefields of Normandy are very popular and hopefully these may help us to learn from past mistakes and to recognise the futility of war.



Cafe Gondree



Caen Canal Bridge

The Prison Hulks - David Bissenden, Halton U3a member

In early May I glanced at the TV news and saw an item regarding an accommodation barge being refitted in Falmouth to house asylum seekers.

I was immediately reminded of the prison hulks which were a major feature of the British penal system in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. So how did the prison hulk emerge as the imprisonment of choice for the British government during those years?

Previously to the advent of the hulk many prisoners were incarcerated in castles and forts in fact recusants (people who missed church on Sundays) were locked up at our own Halton castle! This castle had its own courtroom from 1737 so prisoners awaiting trial were also kept in the cellars.

The first well known case of significant use of boats to house prisoners was probably in the summer of 1746 after the battle of Culloden. The defeated army of Bonnie Prince Charlie were dispersed all over the kingdom and several hundred were brought down the North Sea coast from Inverness to Tilbury on the River Thames. The fort was quickly full so the remainder of the prisoners were left on the ship 'Pamela' moored in the Thames. The boat was totally unsuitable for this task and prisoners had to sleep on the ballast in the ship's hull. The government doctor, Surgeon Minshaw, on trying to enter the ships hold to inspect them, was so overwhelmed by the smell that he had to stuff herbs up his nose! Conditions were not much better inside the fort and eventually many of those incarcerated, mostly Scottish prisoners, were sent to the colonies.

The 'Pamela' might be seen as an early blueprint for what was to follow. In 1776, the time of the American War of Independence, the use of boats to house convicts was sanctioned by King George III and the prison hulk was born. Typically the hulks were ex warships that were way past their best. They were stripped of all rigging and often painted with black tar. The three most popular locations for these to be moored at were: Portsmouth, Woolwich and along the Thames and Medway estuaries, north of Chatham. At Portsmouth and Woolwich the convicts were taken ashore daily to work at the naval dockyard and arsenal. There was less opportunity to work for those moored on the Thames. In comparison with the 'Pamela' conditions on board the boats were tolerable with hammocks to sleep in and food of dubious quality. However the boats must have been very cold and damp during the wet winters by the marshes.

This existence was brought to life by Charles Dickens, in his novel 'Great Expectations' where Magwich escapes from the hulk and meets Pip in Cooling churchyard - which is a real place five miles east of Gravesend. The sheer bleakness and flatness of the marshes made convicts easily identifiable and prone to being recaptured. As in the book, transportation of the convicts to the colonies such as Australia was also part of the penal offering.

As the industrial revolution grew in pace and more people came to the towns and cities for work even the mix of prison hulks and transportation were insufficient to meet the demand. In the 1850's the Victorians started building onshore prisons in great numbers and the age of the prison hulks was over.

NB: I am sure the new barges will not be like the hulks but more akin to very cheap cruise liners!

A Special Birthday

Our lovely u3a member Jean Lewis was 90 years young in April. Her family had planned a special afternoon tea for her. They had invited friends too, and some of us from u3a were lucky enough to be included! The room was beautifully decorated and the afternoon tea was scrumptious.



Group report - Paula Fox, Halton u3a Groups and Venues Co-ordinator

- **iPad Group (Group Leader, Paula Fox)** - After much searching for a venue that ticks all the right boxes, vitally, a reliable wifi connection, the iPad group has found a new home at Cranton Methodist Chapel. The first meeting there was at 11.00am on Thursday 18th May 2023. Please note the slightly later time owing to an earlier client using the hall. As with all new things, we will only know if the hall suits the needs of the iPadders by giving it a trial run, so watch this space.

This month's iPad workshop at Apple in Liverpool One was great fun as we had to 'age' our Memojis which we had first created five years ago. However, imagination and creativity got the better of us with the choice of hundreds of facial options, hair styles, colours etc, with some hilarious results.

iPad group meetings are on the first and third Thursday of the month. First Thursday - at the Apple shop, Liverpool One, 11.30am - 1.00pm,. This is a free workshop each month. Third Thursday - Cranton Methodist Chapel, Chapel Lane, Cranton, WA8 4NT. 11.00am - 1.00pm. Free car park opposite the chapel. Beginners welcome.

- **Bowls Group (Group Leader, Paula Fox)** - The group meets every Tuesday morning when the weather is dry and not too cold, but since the start of the season in April, there has been quite a bit of rain which hasn't always been conducive to play. Instead, the members have enjoyed some lively chat over a cuppa in the clubhouse. Lately, there has been a good turnout of members plus one or two guests, and a few decent ends have been played with the usual good humoured banter. It's a great way to spend a sunny Tuesday morning, with a friendly group and a bit of gentle exercise too. Beginners are very welcome and spare bowls are available to borrow. Meetings are every Tuesday 10.00am - 12.00 noon at Hough Green Bowling Club, Hough Green Park, Royal Avenue, Widnes, WA8 8HL. Park on the road.

Jennifer and Chris recently brought their Indian guest along. Despite never playing before he did remarkably well. They first met Amit in India nearly twenty years ago when he was leading an Indian railway tour. He has been to the UK often since then mixing business and pleasure. He loves English pubs and enjoyed this new recreation for him.



- **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)** - This month the group read 'Agnes Grey' by Anne Bronte. The text was Anne's first book and was published in 1847. Considered to be mildly autobiographical the story follows Agnes' struggles as a governess to wealthy families. She volunteered for this work as her father's bad investments had put the family at risk of ruin. The real engine of the story is Agnes' essential goodness when faced with disturbed young children, and what can only be described as seriously twisted elder children. Rosalie, a key character in the text does her best to make Agnes' life a misery, even attempting to charm and seduce the object of Agnes' desire, the curate Mr Weston. However, in the end although Rosalie manages to marry a rich man and have the mansion with extensive grounds, she is treated badly and is completely unhappy, whereas Agnes finally marries Mr Weston and has a happy

life. I suppose the message from the book is a simple one, status and money do not mean you will be happy, and that love is usually necessary for a happy life.

- **Photography Group (Group Leader, Barry Cotterill)** - The group continues to meet monthly at Rivendell Garden Centre, Widnes at 10.30am on the second Wednesday in the month. New members are welcome, you don't need a fancy camera, phone images are fine.

This month the group travelled to Manchester with the ambition of visiting the elevated railway line in Castlefields which has been turned into a park, (somewhat similar to the Hi Line in New York City). However we were foiled by the Manchester weather; torrential rain most of the time. We opted to visit the Science Museum instead and did get some good shots of the beautiful old machinery on display, and enjoyed a feed at the museum cafe. It was sad to hear the neighbouring Aerospace Museum has closed permanently and that the exhibits have been scattered across the country. The North West loses out again. But despite the rain, all in all a good day.

- **Science is for Everyone (Group Leader, Bob Roach)** - The group meets at St Paul's Church Hall at 1.00pm on the second and fourth Mondays in the month.

In the last four weeks, the group has only met on one occasion due to Bank holidays etc. We are continuing to find out about how Homo Sapiens split away from chimpanzees to be what we are now.

We are now up to the Neolithic Age, when our hunter gatherer ancestors were replaced by immigrants from the Middle East who brought with them a settled existence and farming. However, it has been suggested that giving up the 'carefree' life of chasing your food when you were hungry was Homo Sapiens biggest mistake', due to the ceaseless drudgery of farming. We have looked at the evidence for such people in Britain, e.g. building Stonehenge.

At our next meeting, we will consider how those early farmers were replaced by another wave of immigration from the east!

New members most welcome to our chatty sessions.

- **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. The group has only met once in the last month. We are continuing with our 'shared learning' approach, looking at the British monarchs and their eras over the last 500 years. Watching the recent Coronation, it was interesting to see several traditions that were established centuries ago.

We have had three sessions on the lengthy reign of Queen Victoria. As well as her life, we have considered the massive developments within the nation and numerous wars that Britain was engaged in during that era.

We will now consider the Edwardian era, when Victoria was succeeded by King Edward VII who had been heir for some 60 years. But as he died some nine years later we may well have just one session on his era.

New members most welcome to our chatty sessions

- **Rather Leisurely Walkers Group** - Bob Roach has recently retired from leading the Rather Leisurely Walkers Group. If anyone would like to take over this group please contact our Secretary, Chris Lewis. Bob is happy to provide support and encouragement.
- **Family History Group (Group Leader, Alec Hough)** - The Family History Group now meets only once per month - on the third Monday of each month - so the next meeting will be on Monday, 19th June 2023.

We meet from 2.00pm to 3.30pm in Room 11 at Widnes Library, Victoria Square, WA8 7QT. There are car parking places and bus stops nearby. Those attending pay £2 per session to cover the cost of hiring the room. All members and prospective members are welcome, it doesn't matter if you haven't started researching your family tree or even if you have no intention of doing so. At our latest Monday afternoon session we have been looking into DNA testing for family history research.

For those who do want to research their family history but aren't sure how to start, we offer one-to-one sessions at dates to suit you in your local library to show you the basics and get you started. You may be surprised at what you find out about your family."

- **Living History Group - (Group Leader, Geoff Dutton)** - Geoff is leading a visit to Chester Walls on Thursday, 25th May 2023, meeting at Little Roodee car park at 10.15am with lunch at 1.00pm at the Bear and Billet. Geoff is hoping to arrange a walk around Lymm Dam in June.
- **Gardening Group - (Group Leaders, Chris and Colin McConnell)** - We had the Green Shoots Gardening Club meeting at Rivendell Garden Centre on Monday, 15th May 2023. It was another good turnout by the members and we discussed the visit we had to the National Garden Scheme on Sunday, 14th May 2023 at Stonyford Cottage which was set around natural tranquil ponds. This Monet style landscape has a wealth of moisture loving plants, woodland paths with shade and bog plantings and wild natural areas. We had an excellent and enjoyable afternoon with ukuleles playing in background.

The next NGS visit will be at Hall Lane Farm on Sunday, 18th June 2023 which we are all looking forward to.

Julie Thornett spoke to the members about tulips from Amsterdam and her wild garden which were very interesting topics. Julie intends to organise a coach trip to Shrewsbury Flower Show on Saturday, 12th August 2023; anyone interested in going should contact her with names by the end of May.

The next Green Shoots Gardening Club meeting will be held at Rivendell Garden Centre WA8 3UL at 10.30am on Monday, 19th June 2023.

Southport Flower Show - Last year Southport u3a created a winning show garden, gaining a Large Gold Medal and a Silver Trophy. After TV appearances and more the u3a certainly made its mark – Southport Flower Show want us all back!

Southport Flower Show are offering all u3a members a discount off their advanced ticket price - members get tickets for just £19.00 each instead of the £28 .00 'at the gate' price.

Simply add **SFSU3A** in the Promo code section when you book online at <https://www.southportflowershow.co.uk>



Photos from the recent visit to Manley Knoll by Gardening Group members

- **The Cinema Group ((Group Leaders, Hazel Landon and Judith Byrne) -**
The Cinema Group will meet 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 Whats App Group. We have had 19 members sign up already.
 - A film we may see that has been recommended is 'Empire of Light'.

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, Chis Lewis.

Next General Meeting and Coffee Catch up

The June General Meeting is on Thursday, 8th June 2023, and will be a talk on Medical Detection Dogs.

The June coffee catch-up is at 2.00pm on Thursday, 22nd June 2023, venue to be confirmed.

The July General Meeting will be on Thursday, 13th July 2023, the speaker will be Mahmoud Ahmed. The talk is titled 'My Life and My Career with Lancashire Constabulary'. It has been described as engaging, funny, illuminating, informative and most of all inspirational!

September is Heritage month so it will be a speaker about local history, to be confirmed.

Please note there will be no newsletter published in June, Chris Lewis will send out any important messages.

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 Secretary, 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 20th of the month.**

Further information and contact details can be found on the Halton u3a website at www.u3asites.org.uk/halton