



## To all Members, our 40<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Newsletter

This is the first of our three 2022 newsletters and it is special because it helps us celebrate our 40<sup>th</sup> Anniversary. In it you will find a short piece by Eric Midwinter about how Harpenden u3a came about in 1982 and then another article by Brenda Beale on the early days. There is also a congratulatory contribution from Liz Thackray, Chair of the Third Age Trust.

As well as the usual notices that you receive monthly from me in my bulletin, there are several other articles by our members, including a poem by our previous Chairman, Doug Nevell. This is especially poignant as Doug sadly died earlier this week in St Mary's Care Home in Luton. I will include a tribute to him in the next Chairman's Bulletin.

I feel very honoured to be Chairman of Harpenden u3a as we celebrate our 40<sup>th</sup> Anniversary. I must say that during the various restrictions and lockdowns we have suffered over the past two-and-a-bit years, there were times when I doubted whether we would survive. However, survive we have and, in fact, I think we are in a healthier place now than we have been for some time with expanding groups and an influx of new members. The next year looks very promising.

I look forward to seeing 70 of you at the 40<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Lunch to be held at the Harpenden Common Golf Club next week. We have a lot to celebrate.

With my very best wishes,

Viv

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### Members News

Welcome to our new members: **Anne Mawer, Rosemary Fenton, Pat Jackson and Margaret Morris.**

We have recently heard that **Geraldine Mockler** who was a member until she moved away in 2020 has died recently. Our condolences to her family.

### Dates for Your Diary

**12<sup>th</sup> May**

**40<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Lunch at Harpenden Common Golf Course**

**19<sup>th</sup> May**

**40<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Lecture** in the **Trust Hall** at 2.15 – A talk by Polar explorer, author, speaker and photographer **Alex Hibbert**, who has recently returned from his latest expedition. He will be sharing with us the story of

when plans had to be changed on one of his expeditions and they wintered in the High Arctic.

**9th June**                    **Members' Meeting** in the **Trust Hall** at 2.15 – **Sue Shanahan** of Hertfordshire Trading Standards will be talking to us about **Non-Internet Scams**. This will be followed by tea, coffee and biscuits.

**23rd June**                    **General Meeting** in the **Trust Hall** at 2.15 – TBD

**7th July**                    **Members' Meeting**: Pat Jacques presents 'Happenstance' followed by tea, coffee and biscuits.

**21st July**                    **Summer Social** at the **Plough and Harrow**

**For our new members** – please note that we usually hold two separate meetings a month. A General Meeting at which we will have a paid speaker talking for about an hour and between the General Meetings there will be either an outing or a guided walk or a Members' Meeting which is more 'home grown' with a shorter talk or contributions from members after which tea and coffee are served.

We also must point out that our hall holds a maximum of **80** people. So far, since we have started meeting again, we have not yet got near 80 people. However, if numbers increase at the Thursday meetings attendance will have to be on a **first come first served basis**.

## **Group News**

### **Local History**

Anyone interested in joining the reformed Local History group, please contact **Paul Gardiner** on 01582 768593.

### **Bus Pass Group**

Diana Brimblecombe is happy to get the Bus Pass Group up and running again. Anyone interested, please contact **Diana** on 01582 713135.

### **Singing for Pleasure**

The dates for the rest of the term are: 26<sup>th</sup> May, 16<sup>th</sup> and 30<sup>th</sup> June and 14<sup>th</sup> July, all at the Trust Hall as usual, commencing at 2pm. Just come along and try us out.

### **History Group**

All meetings take place in the Randall Room at the Harpenden Trust starting at 2.30. All welcome. Contact – **Roger Thompson** on 01582 620811. Next meeting is:

**10<sup>th</sup> May** – Viv Chandler will be giving a PowerPoint presentation on the entrepreneurial Victorian cricketing family, the Lillywhites, who founded the renowned sports store at Piccadilly Circus. It's a fascinating story covering aristocracy, royalty, murder, gold mining, cricket, of course, and ..... roller-skating!

**14th June** – Frank Ledger will give a presentation: 'A Different Approach to the Study of the Slave Trade'.

### **Family History Group**

The meetings take place on the 4<sup>th</sup> Tuesday of the month at 2.30 in the Randall Room. So, the next meeting will be on Tuesday, 24<sup>th</sup> May when we will talk about marriage customs. If you have any queries, please bring them along. All welcome. Contact – Viv Chandler on 01582 766147.

**Group Leaders** – if you would like the programme for your group to be publicised in the monthly bulletin, please let me have the details by the end of each month.

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Our stall at the Harpenden Seniors' Fair organised by the Harpenden Trust and held in the Eric Morecambe Centre last month.

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## **In Vino Veritas; Harpenden u3a's Origin by Eric Midwinter**

It all started with a glass of red wine. A group of neighbours were gathered for drinks and, when he was suitably plied, I persuaded the legendary Reg Davis to start a u3a. It was the spring of 1982. My full-time job was as first Director of the Centre for Policy on Ageing, a think-tank itself only a few months old. It became part of my work to oversee, as its General Secretary, the spread of u3as and I was able to join Reg on several Thursday afternoons in the Harpenden Trust Hall – yes, that has been an enduring tradition – along with some score or more of doughty pioneers, we amounted to what would now be called an ‘interest group’, except that we tried a different ‘interest’ each week, enabling me to feedback ideas and what worked and what didn’t to the other nascent u3as. And all these exercises were participatory; in true u3a style, there was not one passive member.

What fun we had! Here are a few samples. Sometimes one of the groups would lead a discussion; the idea of inviting, let alone paying, a ‘Second Ager’ to do a talk was alien to our gang...reminiscence (I tried to get them to talk about a day in their life when they were seven; a day? I barely got them past breakfast, there was so much to relate) ...everyone recited a poem and said why they liked it...ditto a record clip of favourite music...ditto a relic or object of sentimental value...a ‘Why I’ session; everyone began a short chat beginning thus...a choral speaking session... a community singing session...very memorably, a mime-cum-charades session: the death of Nelson was one tableau, whilst they also paired off to do mimes of the month of the year. I particularly recall the twosome who pretended to dance around a *May-pole*.

Visitors abounded. From, inter alia, Stevenage, Hitchin, St Albans, Hatfield, Welwyn Garden City, Watford, Dacorum, Luton. And many of these visitors went back to their native towns and started u3as there. Reg was asked to give talks around the county, another contributory factor in the early excellent u3a coverage of Herts. Reg even went with another stalwart, Wilf Plimmer, to Dublin to spread the gospel in Ireland.

So, Harpenden began in quite a lively fashion. It has had a long and chequered career with a few ups and downs. Happily, we are now enjoying a decided and thriving ‘up’. Long may that continue – and long may the memory of those trailblazers be commemorated.

**Eric Midwinter**

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## Early u3a Memories from Brenda Beale

My husband Alan retired at the end of 1990 and one of the first things we did was to venture into the library for him to get a library card. On the wall was a poster advertising Harpenden u3a. Then it was called the 'University of the Third Age' and "I'm not studying any more" was my first reaction. Alan agreed!

However, we ventured forth to see what it offered to us. Plenty as it happened.

We were greeted by the legendary Reg Davis, whom I knew well and I recognised several other members. We attended the first three meetings and then signed up enthusiastically for several groups. Four of us started the History Group which was led so ably by Gerald Cuff for many years. He succeeded our founder, Helen, the widow of a Bishop of Manchester. She died tragically soon after but with the able assistance of her sons we raided the library for books soon afterwards. The group has remained a great success ever since.

We travelled extensively during his years of retirement and met many people from other u3as. Whenever we mentioned that we knew Eric Midwinter, there was an electric reaction.

The Walkers and latterly the Strollers covered most Saturday mornings, followed by a pub lunch, of course.

We were particularly fond of the outings and travelled far and wide. Stately homes and museums were our favourites with their history and art. Trips to the theatre, opera and ballet were 'musts'.

If I had to pick out one outing, it would have to be our first visit to Bletchley Park. It was newly opened and very run down but Roy Evans (another legendary Chairman) had obtained tickets for us to visit. I believe it was an invitation open initially to u3as. Among our number that day were several ladies who had worked there for Alan Turing. Such was the secrecy of their work that they didn't know each other. Several of their husbands didn't know their roles there either!

In the early days, the members of Harpenden u3a were very academic and there were some real characters including Fred Sims who had come to England by Kindertransport and was interned on the Isle of Man. He was a marvellous speaker and his uncle was a Canon at the Abbey and reached 100.

Other characters were Gordon and Helga Innes who I remember particularly because I was at school with Helga. Her husband was a Professor at London University and was an expert in and spoke several African dialects. They had had quite a chequered life in Africa. Sadly, he refused to speak at any meetings but attended them all with enthusiasm. He was painfully shy. Helga was also highly academic and spoke of their years working in Africa which had moments of high danger. I wish I had recorded her story of their experiences for posterity but her "high German" saved them on one trip. At members' afternoons in later years Helga played the accordion with great enthusiasm. That was her project during retirement. She had always nurtured a wish to learn the instrument and couldn't play a note when she commenced.

Harpenden founded the inter-club Quiz tournament. The first one was held at St. Nicholas Church Hall. Our teams were formidable as we covered every category, usually at PhD level! The excellent buffet afterwards was very popular as an added attraction and, although our early supremacy was slightly eroded down the years, it has been very popular.

Inevitably the past two years have hit all u3as very hard and we have yet to return to normality, but I would finally like to thank Doug and Viv for their wonderful efforts to keep all of us so fully informed and their committees have achieved miracles in support.

I'm glad that we made that first tentative visit to the Trust Hall.

**Brenda Beale**

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### **Message from Liz Thackray, Chair of the Third Age Trust**

Turning 40 is one of those landmark birthdays most of us tend to remember. Maybe because of the old saying that life begins at 40, or maybe it is a time when we tend to take stock, plan what to do next and celebrate what has gone before. A 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary is a landmark for any organisation. It demonstrates that the founders recognised something that needed to be done, planted the necessary seeds and tended them so that they grew and matured. Over the past 40 years the u3a movement has faced challenges, but it has grown to be recognised as an important part of the voluntary sector in the UK – and it enjoys links with other later life learning organisations throughout the world – we may be different from each other in appearance but we share the same ideals.

On the occasion of your 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary, I would like to congratulate you on your achievements over the years and to offer a special birthday greeting to Eric Midwinter, thanking him for his vision in birthing the u3a movement. As you enjoy your anniversary celebration, I wish you all many more years of learning, laughing and living the u3a way. Please accept my very good wishes to you all – and especially to Eric and his wife.

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### **Exploring our near neighbour - a fascinating walk around Wheathampstead**

Once upon a time Harpenden was a village and it continues to be referred to as such by many older residents, notwithstanding the fact that our immediate local government officials now sit on a **town** council. There is no such equivocation about our near-neighbour community to the east, Wheathampstead, whose character happily remains that of a delightful **village**.

It is quite likely that much of Wheathampstead's heritage as well as its historic charm were unknown to the 22 Harpenden u3a members who embarked on our early-April organised walk around the village. We were reminded by our enthusiastic and necessarily knowledgeable guide Tony Berk – himself a denizen of Wheathampstead – that its history as a place of habitation, and in parish terms, goes back further than Harpenden's.

At the end of the last Ice Age, Mesolithic hunter-gatherers left some of their flint tools close to where the River Lea now flows through Wheathampstead. Iron Age farmers kept cattle and lived in round houses beside Devil's Dyke (alongside which Dyke Lane now runs), a defensive ditch up to

100ft wide and 40ft deep excavated by Celtic warriors. Cassivellaunus led resistance to the Roman incursion on the site in 54BC.

A document of around 1060 tells of Edward the Confessor's gift of his manor of 'Hwaethamstede' to the newly-founded Westminster Abbey. The village's parish church of St Helen's has Saxon origins and may have been a minster with royal connections. Under the Danelaw Treaty of 886, the River Lea formed the boundary between Saxon and Viking England.

On our walk around the village, starting from the car park behind the 16<sup>th</sup> Century (with 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> Century additions) Bull Inn we paused at the bridge where the High Street passes over the River Lea. A useful (and modern) signpost pointing up- and down-stream told us that we were 13 miles from the river's source at Leagrave and 29 miles from the point where (after changing its spelling from Lea to Lee) it flows into the Thames at Bow Creek, near the Blackwall Tunnel.

Across the road outside a flower shop on the site of the former Two Brewers pub Tony Berk told us more about the village's history and prepared to take us behind the High Street buildings into a fascinating part of Wheathampstead unknown even to most of us who drive through the village regularly. We were introduced most notably to the Crinkle-Crankle walls – unique to Hertfordshire and surely rare in any other part of the country.

The 10ft-high Crinkle-Crankle brick walls, built between 1840 and 1850, surround a quiet and attractive garden, adjoining St Helen's churchyard. Their 'serpentine', that is wavy, 'Flemish Bond' brickwork construction confers great strength, crucially without the need for buttresses, while their curved alcoves were found by the Victorians to be ideal for growing and ripening fruit.

From the garden we had a fine view of St Helen's parish church which, according to the poet John Betjeman, has the loveliest spire in England – and surely one of the most unusual in shape. The spire in fact dates from only the 19<sup>th</sup> Century but is said to resemble an earlier medieval version.

We then walked into the churchyard for a closer look at the church whose origins pre-date the Norman conquest of England, but has undergone successive restorations and extensions, though the central tower (below the distinctive spire) is the oldest part of the building, dated at about 1290AD. It is worth noting that for many years up until 1859, St Helen's was the mother church of St Nicholas in Harpenden, which for the first time then became a parish in its own right.

St Helen's is built of flint rubble, or [Totternhoe clunch](#), with [flint](#) facings and [limestone](#) dressings. Inside is an early massive 14<sup>th</sup> Century font, positioned on an area of the floor comprised of medieval tiles. Nearby is an elaborate 17<sup>th</sup> Century 'relief statue' dedicated to the memory of John Garrard, his wife and fourteen children.

One-time Lord Mayor of London, he was an ancestor of local hero [Apsley Cherry-Garrard](#), a member of Scott's ill-fated South Pole expedition. But he survived to record his experiences in his book 'The Worst Journey in the World' and is buried in the north-west corner of the churchyard.

At the end of our extensive tour of Wheathampstead (pronounced 'Wheat'm'stead' by many, especially the generation who still refer to Harpenden as 'The Village'!) we all felt our local geographical knowledge had been valuably enhanced.

**Alan Bunting**







## Memories of Shetland

Watching the recent series of "Shetland" on BBC1 brought back memories of a wonderful trip we did there in 2016.

A word of warning first! It was 28°C at Gatwick as we flew to Aberdeen Airport in September, and was 24°C the next day in Aberdeen. We boarded the overnight ferry for Shetland wearing summer clothes. The next morning, we docked in Stornoway greeted by a howling gale and 14°C. People who had been before were all wearing corduroy trousers and quilted jackets, while we shivered in our summer clothes! As was pointed out to us, Shetland is closer to Bergen than it is to Edinburgh.

Soon we were heading off to Sumburgh Head with its amazing colony of puffins and other seabirds. By then, we had salvaged our cagoules from our suitcases and had some protection from the ferocious wind and flying spray. The steep cliffs and raging seas made it an exhilarating experience. Incidentally the Sumburgh Head Visitor Centre played the part of a hotel in the first series of "Shetland".



We stayed in Lerwick, and the next morning saw blue skies and less wind as we set off by coach for Jarlshof. This is a truly amazing settlement where people have lived from 2500 BC until the 16<sup>th</sup> century.





We were able to wander around the circular stone buildings now set deep in the ground, admire the Bronze Age Smithy with its exquisitely crafted tools, and see the base of an Iron Age Broch. The remnants of a Norse Long House are clearly visible, and there is even the remains of a small 16<sup>th</sup> Century castle. Everywhere is evidence of high-quality craftsmanship, and the whole experience was a delight.

After that we set off in a tiny ferry boat to the little island of Mousa. The key attraction here was the 2000 year old, fully preserved, Broch. They were communal structures used as a shelter and defence against marauders. The islanders would retreat into these wide towers with their precious cattle at the first sight of hostile vessels. The brochs have staircases built inside their double walls, and the defenders would rush to the top rampart and hurl rocks and spears down to deter the invaders. We just climbed to the top to admire the view – no rocks or spears needed.





Mousa Island is a nature reserve managed by the Scottish RSPB, and we were delighted to see a colony of Great Skuas, known as "Bonxies" in Shetland. These are pirates of the sea, known for stealing fish off other birds and dive bombing anyone approaching their nests. There was also a sandy bay, home to a lovely colony of grey seals.

The next day we drove to St Ninians Isle, linked to the main island by a wonderful strip of beautiful white sand beach (also featured in the earlier Shetland series).



Our final port-of-call on Shetland was Scalloway, the ancient capital. It has a splendid small museum and we were intrigued to discover the role Shetland played in the second World War. The "Shetland Bus" was the nickname of the clandestine special operations group that ran a permanent link between Shetland and German occupied Norway. The crews were mostly Norwegian using, initially, fishing boats of various sizes. They started in the summer of 1940 evacuating British soldiers and residents stranded in Norway after the German occupation.



The importance of their work was recognised, and in October 1943 the USA transferred three submarine chasers to the operation. The group then become an official part of the Royal Norwegian Navy. By May 1945 the group had made 198 trips to Norway, transporting 192 agents and 389 tonnes of weapons and other supplies. They brought out 73 agents and 373 refugees, but sadly lost 44 of their own members. A truly remarkable achievement.



*HNoMS Hitra entering Scalloway Harbour (Wikipedia)*

Later that day we set sail for Orkney – but that's another story. . .

***Jean Rapier***

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## The Great I Am by Alan Bunting

For those of us who treat the overt, or even more subtle, left or right bias of most of our national newspapers with disdain, the ‘*i*’ is a politically happy compromise. It evolved from *The Independent* which was launched in the 1980s – and now available only online – its title proclaiming its nonalignment with any strand of party dogma. The surprising choice of not only a single but also a lower-case letter as the (front page writ large) title of a daily paper has done nothing to inhibit its healthily growing circulation – currently some 143,000 – and readership.

Some ‘i’ readers were disturbed by the paper’s acquisition last year by the owner of the unquestionably right-leaning *Daily Mail*, though the take-over was accompanied by an assurance that its editorial (and hence political) impartiality would be maintained. And, to date, as evident from the ‘i’s unflinching attacks on the Conservative government, there has been no interference ‘from above’.

The letter ‘i’, in either lower or upper (‘I’) case form, was described in an episode of *Yes Minister* by Sir Humphrey Appleby – in a wriggling and reluctant admission of wrongdoing – as the ‘perpendicular pronoun’. It has accordingly been called ‘the slenderest word in the English language’; it is, after all, like ‘a’, a word in its own right, albeit always, in a sentence, as a capital.

It shares that latter distinction with ‘O’, as in ‘O for the wings of a dove’, O Come All Ye Faithful and indeed the opening lines of nearly a hundred of the *Hymns Ancient & Modern*; though unlike ‘I’, it can rarely be found in the middle of a sentence.

So what justifies the ‘I’s ‘capital treatment? We are told it all started with the Greeks, who took a vertical line used as a symbol by the Phoenicians and adopted it as the letter *iota*. Then the Romans borrowed it for their alphabet and later clerics and scholars followed suit. Then in the 13<sup>th</sup> Century English speakers, referring to themselves as *ic*, *ich*, *ik* and similar variants, shed some letters and just wrote ‘i’, though sometimes ‘j’ with which it shared the overhead dot.

But the scribes of the time, who led the way lexicographically, considered the miserable little stroke with a spot on its head failed to do justice to ‘the mighty self’, so the more dignified capital ‘I’ became standard. Chaucer was an early adopter with *The Canterbury Tales* – and the arrival of the printing press in the late 15<sup>th</sup> Century consolidated the upper-case ‘I’s dominant usage.

It has been suggested that it betokens a certain self-importance, at least when uttered by a speaker who is keen to make an impression, very often wanting to talk boringly of little but himself (less frequently herself); hence the cynical reference to such a character as ‘the great I am’.

**Alan Bunting**

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## **There was a Time.....**      Doug Nevell

### **When**

In my small world, whatever came to hand  
I had to give my best – you understand –  
When strength of limb and clarity of mind  
Delighted any challenge one might find.

### **Thus**

I'd climb a Scottish mountain for a whim,  
Do a thousand (?) press-ups in the gym.  
If I said I'd swum the channel I'd have lied ;  
More likely be canoeing with the tide.

### **Then**

By bike I rode the length of our UK  
Then, for a change, I crossed the other way  
On foot: St David's Head to Harwich Quay  
To fund a sorely needful charity.

### **But**

By now, my limbs have mostly lost their tone;  
I rarely solve the crossword on my own.  
My world has shrunk, I'm forced to compromise;  
Assistance I most need my pride denies.

### **So**

Although compared with zest of years gone by  
My scope is limited, whate'er I try  
There but remain those memories of yore  
Which in my mind still hold their rich allure.

*This poem is taken, with Doug's permission, from a booklet put together last year by his granddaughter, Annabel, which she entitled 'Doug's Musings'.*

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