

The Founding of the U3A (University of the Third Age) in The Isle of Man

Ravina Talbot (Founder)

Over the years this successful organisation has continued to grow, and new members often ask me how it started, this has prompted me to produce a short scenario about the early days of establishing the U3A on the island.

In the 90's I was the senior manager responsible for establishing St Johns Mill operations, systems, and marketing. As an employee of The Open University, I had established an OU examination centre there and was curious when someone told me about the University of the Third Age being a product of retired OU Professors. They had heard about this model because it emerged in France and attached to universities. When they transferred the model to the UK, they dropped the University link but kept the name as it had an international and global brand,

I started to think we could use St Johns Mill to establish a group here and explored the possibility with the Trustees who were positive and enthusiastic. However, due to the mill being a new start up project, I had enough workload and so the idea was parked and didn't materialise.

In 2012, I revisited it as I was aware people were retiring early and living longer. I contacted National Headquarters who told me about the process for becoming an affiliated branch. I organised a lunch with ten friends and advisors to share the idea and they all were incredibly positive. However, when it came to forming a steering committee to get it established everyone of them had an excuse as to why they could not be involved. I was quite despondent and decided to drop the idea. It was my husband who suggested we put an advert in the press inviting people to a meeting at the mill to explore the possibility and agreed there may be people who have arrived here with previous experiences of U3As across.

At this meeting in 2012, I invited Andrew Swithenbank to chair, and my old educational mentor, Professor Peter Ventre gave a short address on why lifelong learning was good for wellbeing and the community. At the end of the meeting, I asked for volunteers to establish a steering committee to pursue the establishment of a branch on the island. This required considerable work as we had to organise a visit from National Executive and comply with all U3A policies and procedure. We had to do

it all again to comply with Isle of Man legislation. The initial committee was

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Ravina Talbot (Chair), Irene Jacques (member), Sarah Headley (treasurer), Joanne Moore (Speakers Coordinator), Diane Brown (Membership secretary), Penny Leventhorpe (Minute Secretary) and Midge Cringle (member), Shelia Powell (SIG coordinator), Pat Dupree(publicity).

National Executive sent over John Ellison to audit our compliance and we gained approval in 2013. Jenny Carley (Regional Trustee) attended a meeting to award us our certificate in January which was placed in St Johns Mill. Our initial goal was to become affiliated and establish a target of 50 members in the first year – we surpassed this by achieving 127 new members. My task was organising network meetings and establishing small special interest groups, and in the early days we had.

U3A Art Group, Herb Group, Latin Group, Bridge Group, and walking group. - these were added too rapidly as more people volunteered to host new groups.

National Headquarters gave us a small start-up loan which we used to hire the mill for monthly meetings with speakers. Dr Wardle and I went around the island offering free talks about the U3A and what we offered - most people did not know anything about U3A. We had a couple of visits from the U3A Northwest chair who were supportive in advice and information. The U3A (IOM) website was established early on as well as a social media presence to spread the word. In 2015, the committee did a research project to combat a growing ageist attitude in the media and politics. This was presented publicly entitled, 'Not Old but Gold' by Dr John Wardle, Professor Sarah Headley, and Ravina Talbot M.A. We lobbied for an older person commissioner for the island and David Cretney MLC offered to do it as part of his role, but it was not supported by the government of the day.

The U3A (IOM) is one of the island success stories thanks to the army of volunteers, who over the years have been fully committed to the principles of 'Learn, Live, Laugh'. The Isle of Man U3A was really an idea whose time had come and today thanks to everyone's commitment it continues to grow and develop.