

History of Leicester U3A – the Early Years

In 2016, we celebrated the 20th anniversary of Leicester U3A, but you might not know who started it or that the first stirrings of its existence date from some time in 1994.

I have had conversations with some of those who were in at the start: Joy and Derrick Sharpe, Joan Campbell, Barbara Corlett, Colin Crossley, Hazel Glendening, Ann Kind, Dorli Meek, Margaret Naylor and Roy Priestley. Many of these people have remained active throughout the lifetime of our U3A.



Founding members of Leicester U3A: *left to right*, Hazel Glendening, Joan Campbell (behind), Margaret Naylor (in front) , Colin Crossley, Joy Sharpe, Ann Kind, Dorli Meek, *photographed in 2013*.

I've deliberately placed Joy at the head of that list because it turns out that it was she who really initiated the whole thing. In late 1994 Joy, following a conversation in a bowls club that she belonged to, came up with the idea that the Evington area of Leicester could do with a U3A. Luckily, she knew someone who, as a former MP and the then current editor of the Evington Echo, was able to tell her that the U3A had started nationally in 1982 and had a national HQ. He wrote a small "snippet" in the Echo to raise interest and about 20 people responded. Joy told me that her late

husband Derrick and particularly Colin Crossley were both of great help in the work that had to be done to get the thing started. A number of preparatory meetings were held in 1995 and on 3 October that year a launch meeting was held. Then, in January 1996, the first AGM was held and Leicester U3A was affiliated to The Third Age Trust. So we officially existed as a U3A from that time, with a membership of about 60 people.

As most members were from the teaching profession, people who were about to retire from Leicester University were approached and this swelled the membership considerably. Also, this meant that there was ready access to a pool of people who could give interesting talks to members. Roy, a former pharmacist tells us that, despite the predominance of former educators, there were a number of pharmacists and other professions, giving a degree of diversity in the expertise and the interests of members. Probably the first group to exist was the rambling group which was started by Derrick Sharpe. Colin organised several outings and he started a travel group. Margaret led a group on garden design and another on calligraphy. Then Doug Gray started an art group. A philosophy group was started by Barbara Corlett who ran it for many years, stepping down in 2014.

Originally, the founding team envisaged that the catchment area would be South Leicester but the Third Age Trust insisted that it should be open to people from the whole of Leicester. The first venue chosen was St John the Baptist church hall in Clarendon Park Road and it was only later when the membership grew to more than 80 that the move was made to Christchurch Hall.

Links with the U3A in Europe, which had started earlier than in the UK, were probably greater than they are now and a trip to Pavia in Italy was organised, though only Joy and Derrick Sharpe and one other person from Sutton U3A went on this trip. Joan emphasised the difference at that time between the U3As in this country and those on the continent, the latter often being based in university towns and having close links with those universities, even to the extent of running courses.

Hazel Glendening was the first secretary and she has been able to trace the other names of the steering committee. These were: Chair, Joy Sharpe; Vice Chair, Tony Martin; Treasurer, Freda Sandiford (later replaced by Audrey Cooper); Membership Secretaries, Peggy Odom and Mit Howlett; PR and telephone contacts, Nancy Milloy and Terry Warne; Group coordinator, John Bonner; Programme secretaries, Derrick Sharpe and Gill Oakley; Responsible for the hall, Joan Campbell and Trevor Dent. In 1998, Joy decided to relinquish the chair and Ann Thorne took over.

I think we owe a debt of gratitude to all of those interviewed for their early efforts that have blossomed into the vibrant U3A that we now all enjoy.

Alan Silvester