

History of Lichfield U3A – the first 25 years 1994 - 2019

Lichfield U3A was formed in 1994. It came about through four friends who had met at a local college history course. They were recently retired and were aware of the U3A movement which was developing throughout the country. The instigating four ladies were Phyllis Armitage, Jean Edlington, Jean Malkin and Janice Moore.

The first discussions had taken place in January and continued throughout the winter. They decided to seek advice from the Third Age Trust and as a result received a grant of £30 and arranged for a visit from Norman Richards. Leaflets were circulated and publicity in the Lichfield Mercury was organised advertising the first meeting.

It was on 18th May that this meeting took place at the Darwin Room of the Civic Hall with about 60 attending. The ladies were most surprised and encouraged by the number who came along. Lunch at the Little Barrow Hotel (now The Cathedral Hotel) with Norman from the Third Age Trust, had preceded this meeting in the Civic Hall (now redeveloped as the Garrick Theatre). Over lunch with Norman it became apparent that the ladies had not come prepared. Notes of the discussion were taken on a paper napkin by Janice Moore!

The one question which caught the local group off guard was “How much are you going to charge?” for no thought had been given to this in any previous meeting. A membership fee of £7.50 per annum was agreed and this proved to be a good calculation. The fee remained at this figure for many years and enabled the group to build up funds as recommended by the Trust. They also discussed what sort of groups might be created and one of the first ideas was Music Appreciation.

Norman Richards explained the philosophy and how a U3A should be organised. That day 30 subscriptions were collect but the founding members only added their names afterwards! Clipboards were passed round the meeting by Jean Malkin, for the groups that had been agreed, and members signed up.

On the 15th June John Sanders showed slides of Lichfield. A collection was taken to pay for the room and subscriptions of 30 members were collected.

The groups gradually took shape and in the first year these emerged: Astronomy, Ambles, Music Appreciation, Scrabble, History, Walking, Literature, Play Reading, Poetry, Discussion, Gardening and Cross Stitch.

Some of these group continue to this day. Others have closed but later been revived perhaps in slightly different form. Leadership has changed in most groups but founding members are still participating as members of groups.

At this first meeting a committee was formed with Phyllis Armitage as Chair and Janice Moore as the Treasurer. Phyllis was very good at “persuading” members to take on leadership roles – it was very difficult to say “no” to Phyl!

A few commemorations have been observed by Lichfield U3A over its first 25 years. Two trees have been planted at the National Memorial Arboretum at Alrewas, one for the U3A and the other in memory of Phyllis Armitage. A pipe in the organ at the Symphony Hall in Birmingham was paid for by the Music Appreciation Group. In November 2012 members and their families planted 107 trees for the Woodland Trust in Stychbrook Park.

Over the years since its inauguration in 1994 Lichfield U3A has continued with the pattern established in the early days. There is a monthly meeting with a visiting speaker. These meetings are usually at the Guildhall but other venues have also been used including the Methodist and Wade Street Churches. Individual groups meet throughout the month; some meet weekly, some every two weeks, and others monthly. The larger groups hire a hall, but others convene at members’ homes or even in the countryside (walking groups). The new Community Room at the Fire Station and another at Tesco supermarket have also become popular venues for groups to meet – particularly as there is no hire fee!

To celebrate the 21st birthday a special exhibition was held at the Guildhall. As well as static display by all the groups, all the musical groups performed in the Guild Room. The national U3A chairman, Pam Jones, came along to join us and was most impressed with how vibrant we were. She also said how much she liked Lichfield. The Mayor and Sheriff also joined us.

In addition to the monthly general or Main Meetings* three study days have been arranged. The first on “Georgian Lichfield and noted citizens” was held at the Garrick Theatre in March 2013. Dr Johnson, David Garrick and Anna Seward were subjects included in presentations.

The second at the George Hotel in March 2017 covered a variety of topics: Josiah Wedgwood, Albert Einstein, the Antikythera Mechanism, and Music for Health.

The most recent in 2019, again at the George Hotel, was on “The Changing Roles of Men and Women in the Twenty-first Century.”

Another feature which has developed during the last ten years is an exhibition in the Guildhall. All the groups put up a small exhibition about themselves and at the last one in April 2018 each musical group performed in the Guild Room. This one-day event is open to anyone considering joining Lichfield U3A as well as those members considering joining different groups.

The membership has grown over the 25 years of Lichfield’s U3A’s existence from its first 34 enthusiasts. With increased numbers the range of interests catered for has also increased. By the beginning of 2020 the membership had increased to nearly 700 and the number of interest groups stands at 65.

In 2019 the help of the U3A was enlisted by the City Council to carry out a survey of street furniture. This survey revealed any problems to be addressed from dirty signage to out-of-date direction posts around the City. The extensive and comprehensive document was well received and appreciated by the council.

When asked what the U3A in Lichfield has meant to Janice she said she liked to be involved and being Treasurer gave her the opportunity to get to know people. Surely that is what U3A is all about. Getting involved and getting to know people.

*The monthly general meeting was renamed the Main meeting to avoid confusion with the Annual General Meeting and to emphasise its importance as a means of communication with members.