

A Silver Thread

A Short History of Ringmer U3A

by

Bob Cairns

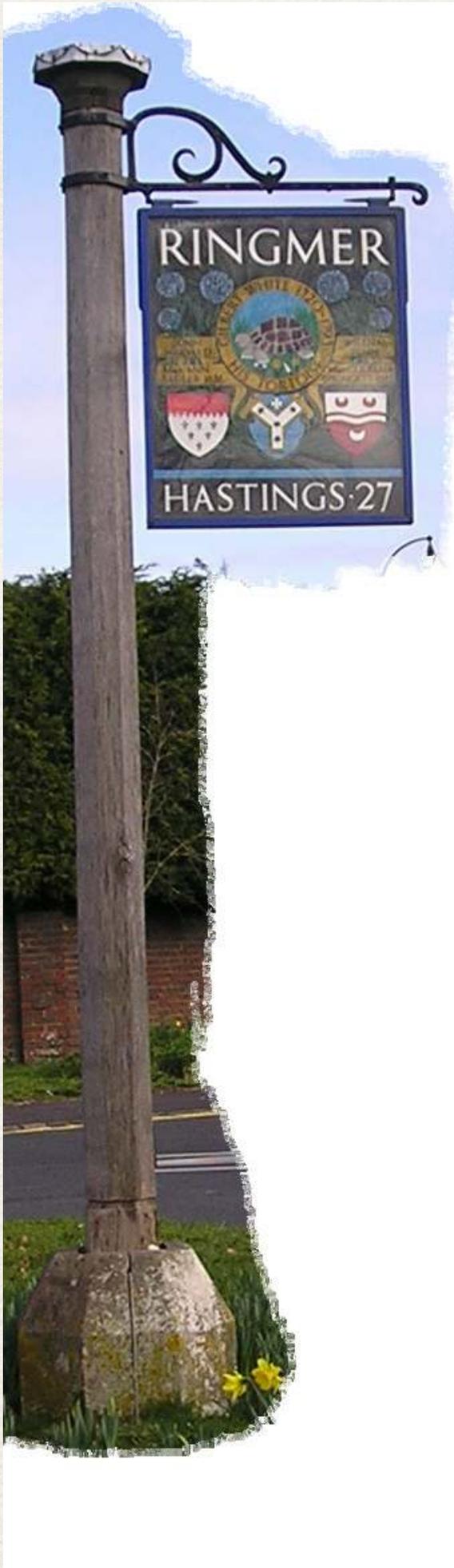
25 YEARS

Celebration Lunch and Book Launch

On Thursday 6th August 2015 a celebration lunch and book launch took place in Ringmer Village Hall. 42 members attended the lunch and catering was provided by Red Pepper Catering. Each member received a person printed version of the book.



These photographs were taken by Gordon Person from the Photography Group



Foreward

Every successful organisation must look to the future, but it is always helpful to review what has taken place over the years. An anniversary provides the idea milestone for this. Your committee therefore decided that this being our 25th Anniversary year it would be appropriate to produce a document that reflects on the activities of Ringmer U3A since its conception in 1990. Past Chairman Bob Cairns kindly agreed to research and write up our history and as you will see he has done an excellent job. I wish to record my sincere thanks to him for his help with this. The book launch took place at a Celebration Lunch in Ringmer Village Hall on Thursday 6th August 2015. A copy of the book was given to all current members.

You will see from this book that Ringmer U3A has achieved a great deal over the years. There are not many village U3As and it is a credit to our predecessors that they had the foresight to set up and then keep the group going. It is now up to existing members to ensure that the next 25 years are equally productive. We can only achieve this by all participating in activities, volunteering to help - no matter how small the task - and encouraging others to join.

Ian Loughborough
Chairman
Ringmer U3A

It's never too late to learn with Ringmer U3A!

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Sources and acknowledgements

The main sources have been the newsletters of the group, although there are gaps in the archive, the minutes of the committee and of the Annual General Meetings. Past and present officers and members have also shared their memories and special thanks are given to Flor Grindley, Avice Harbottle, John Harbottle, Rosemary Harris and Gwen Smith. All errors and omissions are the responsibility of the author and

Introduction

It is unlikely when a small group of retired Ringmerians decided in the summer of 1990 to establish U3A in the village that they would have envisaged the growth and success it was to achieve. But in Autumn 2015 Ringmer U3A was 25 years old. In that time became one of the largest village groups and probably had more active members than any other.

Silver is traditionally associated with celebrating a 25th anniversary and is thought to be of Germanic origin. In medieval times husbands would give their wives a silver garland to wear in recognition of 25 years of marriage. Silver represented harmony.

Since its inception Ringmer U3A has been fortunate to have had a series of harmonious groups of people prepared to give their time and energy as officers to run its affairs. This silver thread has held the group together through bad times and good and our short history is a testament to them and their commitment to the ideals of shared learning in the third age. Details of all the officers are given in the appendix A and the groups and their leaders in appendix B.

Formation and the Early Years

Information about the group's formation and those who initiated it is limited. We have to assume that David Smith, Charles Johnson and Margaret Peto, who were the first officers, were involved as were probably the other leaders of the study groups, namely Alf Corlett, David Roland and Nan Summers and the Butlers and Lucy Stone who made their houses available. Rosemary Harris suggested that Edna Wright and John Grey had also been involved, with the U3A Joint Committee for Sussex (now SUN) providing cash for the set up. At the 1995 AGM, "The Chairman, David Smith, recalled the birth of Ringmer U3A in Autumn 1989 when 12 people were present and a steering group was set up". Given the words of the first newsletter in Autumn 1990 it obviously took another year to set up the first groups and to get going and Gwen Smith confirmed this. The founders were mainly retired from education and decided, for convenience and probably from habit, to start from the following September.

The first newsletter in autumn 1990, written by David Smith the first Chairman and perhaps the greatest individual driving force behind the group's formation, doesn't help with the early history but does set the scene well. The first part of the newsletter reads:-

"U3A, the University of the Third Age, is a mutual help organisation of people of retirement age who want to go on learning and contribute their knowledge and experience to each other. Study groups are mounted in response to the expressed needs and interests of the community and meet in the afternoon. A varied selection of such groups will start next month for the Autumn term in Lewes and these are available to those who join the Lewes and District Branch. An informal steering committee is exploring the possibility of organising facilities in Ringmer, and five study groups are proposed for the Autumn term.

These groups will be small and informal. Each led by a volunteer with knowledge of the subject. A minimum of 6 participants is needed to make a group viable, and as most meetings will be in private houses, the maximum must be set at about 10 or 12. All will start promptly at 2.00 pm and last about two hours so as to finish before dark. The enrolment fee is £1 for the term for each group, to be collected at the first meeting....."

The five groups mentioned were:-

Practical Art	Alf Corlett
Current Affairs	David Roland (at the Butlers' house)
The Environment and Us	Charles Johnson
Listening to Music	Nan Summers
Play Reading	David Smith (at Lucy Stone's house)

and it was hoped quickly to create groups for French and Literature. Of those original groups Play Reading is still running and Current Affairs and Listening to Music only disappeared two or three years ago. There were visits in the early days to Batemans, Sissinghurst, Rodmell and Felpham and later to the Royal Shakespeare Company.

The following year Poetry Reading, which still exists, and talks on Places to Visit were added to the programme. Art did not continue and Art related groups have come and gone through our twenty five years. In 1992 Ringmer formally joined the U3A Trust which was celebrating its tenth anniversary.

By 1993 the Poetry Reading had become the Poetry Circle and Margaret Diggle had become the group leader, a position she held until 2007 when, aged 102, she moved to Uckfield. At Christmas members were invited to join Lewes U3A again for a party at St. Thomas Church Hall. They were invited to bring food and £1 for drinks.

In the Spring 1993 the newsletter carried the first of what would become regular appeals:-

“APPEAL FROM THE CHAIRMAN

This programme is based on replies to a questionnaire circulated last July to find out what subjects are most in demand. However the groups for Literature, Poetry, Current Affairs and even Alf Corlett's outstanding talks on Art Appreciation have not attracted the numbers that we expected or that we feel they deserve.

We are persevering with these subjects but are concerned that if they do not get more support their viability is threatened. May I therefore appeal to you to bring the Ringmer U3A to the notice of your friends, or for that matter to anyone who could be seen as a potential member. Publicity, including copies of our programme, is available from the Secretary; we will always welcome suggestions but otherwise it is difficult to see what more your committee can do. We do need your active support if U3A is to survive in Ringmer.”

Clearly a number of groups were struggling and in the next newsletter we read that there were only 30 members and still the five core study groups. On the positive side the name of Rosemary Harris appears for the first time alongside those of Elisabeth and Gordon Harvey. They, along with David Smith and Sydney Butler, provided the Group's backbone to the end of the millennium and beyond.

The earliest AGM minutes to survive are for 1993. It might have been the first as there is no mention in them of the minutes for 1992. The meeting was held at 2 The Elms, the home of the Secretary Charles Johnson. It was attended by three officers and twelve members from an overall membership of 32.

In the Spring 1994 newsletter is the first mention of a Sussex (Joint Committee) U3A event and Ringmer have been good supporters of SURA (Sussex U3A Regional Association) and SUN (Sussex U3A Network) events through the years. In fact for ten years or more SURA held its meetings in Ringmer Village Hall. Gordon Harvey, who became Secretary this year, did much to forge and encourage links to these and other local groups and, being the first to obtain a computer, got the group better organised.

The Summer talks included one by John Saunders on 'The Weather Vanes of Lewes'. The first lunch party was held in December at Delves House with refreshments being followed by the Play Reading group giving a prepared reading of Next, a one-act play, with contributions also from the Poetry Circle and other groups. Margaret Peto, the first Treasurer, handed over to Sydney Butler as she moved away from the village.

Consolidation and Middle Years

A year later membership stood at 41 and by Spring 1996 had hit the magic 50. The programme still only offered the five core groups but a short series of talks by Peter Shave on Beethoven and his life, music and times proved so popular that there was a ballot for the 15 places available although, in the event, 17 people attended. Summer talks included The European Union and Auctioning Antiques.

In 1996 the Practice Nurse at Ringmer Surgery asked if the U3A could arrange guided strolls around the village to encourage people to take more exercise. It was suggested that the walks should be about 3 miles with no stiles, be at a leisurely pace and possibly end with a pub lunch. By the following spring nine strolls had been arranged attracting between 3 and 12 people. Although arranged by U3A the walks were open to everyone. The group became the Ringmer Strollers and continued until 2012 largely thanks to the efforts of Elisabeth Harvey and, from 2006, Ann and Peter Ballance.

During the year lunches switched to the Caburn Pavilion where they would remain for fifteen years. Entertainment was largely provided by the groups in the early years with the occasional guest speaker such as Dennis Wicks on his career in opera and Marion Biggs on butterflies.

By now the ideals of U3A were deeply entrenched as best illustrated by David Smith writing in the newsletter about the death of a founder member:-

"...the U3A aim of 'providing low cost, educational, creative and leisure activities'. But this is a formal objective and it is gratifying to think that this small branch with its limited resources was nevertheless able to enrich the last years of Mary's life - and surely this is what U3A is all about? With sufficient self discipline most of us could pursue our own interests in isolation but without the companionship, the exchange of ideas and congenial surroundings it would all seem less satisfying and would probably be short lived...."

The late 1990s saw Peter Shave moving on to Brahms and Mozart and Art Appreciation, Mah Jong and Scrabble had become established. Current Affairs was the largest group attracting almost half the membership to its meetings and its meetings could at times become very lively Sonia Allen took over the financial reins in 1999 after Brenda Terry had held them on a temporary basis for six months.

It seems that the early years of hard work and doggedness had been rewarded and Ringmer U3A was established and on the local map. Indeed at the 1999 AGM, and in anticipating the 10th year, David Smith commented on the eight groups, the 9 Sussex study days and U3A being known throughout the village. Furthermore he felt the term member to be inadequate as everyone was now a friend. A very good ten years indeed but better was to come.

Expansion and the Noughties

The century started badly when, following heart surgery, David Smith stood down as Chairman at the AGM. Luckily an ideal successor stepped forward when Rosemary Harris volunteered to take over the reins. Unfortunately Rosemary's warm words of thanks to David for having helped establish and sustain our branch were not recorded in detail unlike hers for Gordon Harvey the following year when he retired as Secretary after six years. She wrote:-

"... You will agree that the satisfaction of a job well done is his. The impact he made to our organisation has been much needed and appreciated. The regular arrival of new programmes and the way he has brought us into the computer age are only two examples of what he has done. Keeping in touch with the wider world of the U3A is another."

By now membership was up to 64, Mah Jong and Summer meetings had gone and there were four lunch meetings each year. Peter Shave presented Schubert and Elgar, Elsie Bowler began her thirteen years of leading the Music group and the dynamic duo of Avice and John Harbottle became Secretary and Treasurer respectively.

The branch was never wealthy and benefited enormously in 2001 when the Parish Council made a grant of £100 to be used towards the cost of buying a slide projector and screen and again in 2008 when it granted another £100 to pay for speakers at the lunches.

In 2001 Gordon Harvey presented a three week programme on Memory Training which proved to be so popular that it was repeated twice in 2002. Who remembers it now? Tom Hollobone ran a medieval 'Call My Bluff' at one lunch meeting and quizzes at others. In 2003 a new constitution was agreed and the committee was established comprising of officers and elected members. Prior to that all officers and group leaders had met to make the decisions. In 2004 Bob Cairns joined the committee and took on the new role of liaising between the committee and group leaders. The committee was further streamlined in 2007 to the constitution it now has. By the mid 2000s membership had increased to 80 and the number of groups averaged eight a year although some, including Bird Watching and Art Appreciation, were intermittent.

The 2005 AGM was special with members having a party to celebrate Margaret Diggle's 100th birthday. In January 2006 the indefatigable Avice resigned owing to ill health. In various minutes she had been described as 'imaginative and skillful' and 'carrying out sterling work'. Flor Grindley took on the Secretary role which she was to carry out for three excellent years. In 2007 Bob Cairns became Chairman after Rosemary's eight years of excellent leadership. At the AGM he, "...thanked Rosemary for being such an efficient Chairman for so many years... she had put a lot of time and energy into Ringmer U3A and would be a hard act to follow." Bob was joined by Jenny Charman who took over the treasurer role

from John Harbottle. A questionnaire that year indicated a strong interest in a wide range of new groups and over the next few years the committee worked hard to widen the programme. Gordon Harvey died early in the year. He, with David Smith, had been Ringmer's driving forces; David as the figurehead and Gordon as the engine room.

In November 2008 Margaret Diggle died aged 103 having moved to Uckfield in 2007. She had had a successful university teaching career in the USA and UK following an education at Girton College, Cambridge, of which she was a Fellow. On her death their flag was flown at half mast. She had run the Poetry Group from 1990 until 2007 when she was aged 102. This was, perhaps, a unique achievement and certainly one which typifies and exemplifies the contributions which have been made throughout U3A to shared learning by such dedicated and generous people. How good it is to see the group still thriving albeit taking a different shared management approach.

There was a major expansion in February 2009 with the formation of the Family History group. Ian Loughborough, who had suggested it, became its leader supported by a planning team of four. Twenty five of its 40+ members were new to U3A and gave a fresh impetus to the Ringmer group.

Later in the year Jenny West became the new Secretary, a role she still carries out quietly and efficiently today. In the Spring newsletter the Chairman wrote:-

"...we have received many suggestions for new groups but unfortunately without names for group leaders. Nevertheless we are including these on the enrolment form so as to gauge the levels of interest and in the hope that in true U3A style volunteers will come forward to start the groups off as Ian did with Genealogy. He is now helped by a planning group of four other members. This could be the way forward for any of the following:-

Wine Appreciation, Sharing Hobbies/Interests, Calligraphy, Gardening, IT/digital Cameras, Astronomy, Language (Spanish, French and Latin have been suggested), Needle craft, Learning Music/an Instrument, Chess for Beginners, Faiths of the World and Travel."

As it turned out the support for most groups was strong and over the next few years leaders emerged to establish permanent groups and short courses were organised by the committee. The latter included Roy Skan on the Development of English, Derek Bastide on Faiths of the World, History of Ringmer led by John Kay, Digital Photography with John Price and Understanding Ceramics with Neil Morgan. All were very well attended with Ringmer's History heading the list with 24 attendees.

August 2010 saw the first of what has become our annual visit to The National Archive and the RHS Kew Gardens organised by Ian Loughborough. Also in that year four new groups were established namely, Gardening, French, Spanish Conversation and Spanish for Beginners. They were followed in 2011 by Chess for Beginners and in 2012 by Astronomy and German for Beginners. The membership consequently had increased to 125 in Autumn 2011 and further to 146 a year later. Unfortunately the long established lunch parties ceased because of poor attendance although there had been a good range of speakers including Norman Baker M.P. Sue Hall became the treasurer in 2011 taking over the excellently kept books from Jenny Charman.

Recent Years

In 2013 Ian Loughborough took over from Bob Cairns as Chairman. At the AGM Sue Hall on behalf of the committee *'thanked Bob for his personal enthusiasm and drive which had been at the heart of Ringmer U3A's success.... and that they would like to record their deep appreciation for his hard work, good humour and excellent networking in the village to find the necessary group leaders...'* Bob and his committee had engineered the growth of the group and broadened its membership base. Ian Loughborough immediately built on this with a further six groups being established. A second Gardening group in 2013 was followed by Knit One Chat One, Out and About, Photography, Mah Jong and Walking in 2014. In that year Ian steered through our first written constitution based on the U3A Trust recommended template.

Sadly on 7 June 2013 David Smith died in Chichester. He gave twenty years to Ringmer U3A including ten as the first Chairman and had been nobly supported at all times by his wife Gwen and her organising skills

As we approach our silver jubilee in August there can be great satisfaction with the previous 25 years. With more than 150 members, sixteen groups, many with waiting lists, and the possibility of others in the pipeline the next twenty five years should be equally successful.

The Future

With a growing elderly population, the continuing lack of public investment in further and community education and a burgeoning Ringmer our U3A is bound to continue its growth. A recent study suggested that 74 is now the average age when old age begins and until then we are still middle aged. Make of that what you will but there is no denying that older people are enjoying healthier and longer lives and many look to continue their learning as an important part of their leisure activities. We can expect to see an increasing and broader range of groups in U3A in Ringmer and, hopefully, an annual flush of new members to sustain them. The leadership style of some groups, such as Family History and the Poetry Circle has changed and there will be less reliance on leaders and more on convenors and collective management. With our current group of very capable officers and committee members under Ian's leadership and, in anticipation of a continuing stream of high quality volunteers to replace them in due course, the silver stream of the past 25 years is guaranteed to become a golden one.



Author and Chairman at
the book launch

Appendix A: Officers of Ringmer U3A

Chairman	1990 - 1999	David Smith
	1999 - 2007	Rosemary Harris
	2007 - 2013	Bob Cairns
	2013 -	Ian Loughborough
Secretary	1990 - 1994	Charles Johnson
	1994 - 2000	Gordon Harvey
	2000 - 2006	Avice Harbottle
	2007 - 2009	Flor Grindley
	2009 -	Jenny West
Treasurer	1990 - 1994	Margaret Peto
	1994 - 1999	Sydney Butler
	1999 acting	Brenda Terry
	1999 - 2002	Sonia Allen
	2002 - 2007	John Harbottle
	2007 - 2011	Jenny Charman
	2011 -	Sue Hall

Appendix B: Interest Groups over the years

Art	German
Art Appreciation	Knit One - Chat one
Art Workshop	Listening to Music
Astronomy	Literature
Bird Watching	Mah Jong
Chess for Beginners	Out and About
Cookery	Photography
Creative Writing	Places to Visit
Current Affairs	Play Reading
The Environment	Poetry
Family History	Readers Circle
Finding out about Art	Scrabble
French Conversation	Spanish
Gardening	Walking

Groups that exist in August 2015 are in blue.

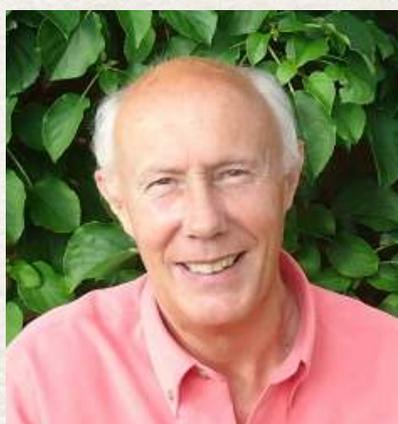
Appendix C: Executive Committee in August 2015

Ian Loughborough	Chairman & Newsletter Editor
Jenny West	Secretary
Sue Hall	Treasurer
Ann-May Bridger	Membership Secretary
Barbara Cruttenden	SUN Representative
Sylvia Coleman	Group Convenor Coordinator
Wendy Morgan	New Courses Coordinator
Julia Middleton	Committee member

Chairman

Secretary

Treasurer



Appendix D: Interest Group Convenors in August 2015

Astronomy	Brian Wignal	16 in group
Basic French	Denise Hadley	6
French Conversation	Jenny Hill	11
Family History	Ian Loughborough	47
Gardening	Liz Mollington	13
2 Garden	Teresa Keen	15
Knit One Chat One	Sue Hall	10
Mah Jong	Julia Middleton	5
Out & About	Valerie King	39
Photography	Martin Whitlock	23
Poetry	Elsie Bowler	10
Readers Circle	Janet Beirne	6
Spanish	Conchita Wiggly	10
Walking	Lynne Booth	14
What the Papers Say	Sue Wilkins	5 in group

Some Past Officers



David & Gwen Smith



Rosemary Harris



Gordon & Elisabeth



John & Avice Harbottle



Flor Grindley

A Photographic Record

Relaxing after research at The National Archives



Walking with Llamas



Founder members of Family History Group



First annual visit to The National Archives at Kew



Enjoying a Christmas Social meeting



Desk Top Publishing



Knitting



Working up an appetite for lunch



Improving their French



Sharing experiences and memories with fellow members



Recruiting new members



Learning together



A social outing by the sea at Seaford



Astronomy Group watching the solar eclipse

Footnote

This publication was produced by Ringmer U3A. Bob Cairns researched and wrote the text. Ian Loughborough produced the publication and arranged printing by Tansleys Printers in Seaford. This E-Book version was also produced which is available on the Group web site www.ringmer.info/u3a.

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