

Thoughts about Ware U3A from our previous Chairmen

In the beginning:-

Following an exploratory meeting in the first quarter of 2008 attended by over 130 people at Wodson, it was agreed that a Steering group with the objective to form the Ware U3A be set up. This group comprised of about 12/14 volunteers who all had a vision of an independent Ware U3A, we all saw a clear need and one that could be achieved.

I volunteered because I felt that my experience as manager and company director could be helpful in setting up the group. It gave me the chance to put back something into society and Ware, for what had been a very enjoyable and rewarding life. I never expected to become Chairman and initially only took on the role on a temporary basis. Fortunately, in forming the working group I soon realised that a very special and talented group had come together and we could achieve an a lot. Part of my vision was that we should keep it simple, friendly and let commonsense prevail.

An amazing amount of work had to be done, a constitution sorted various tasks shared out and undertaken, areas of responsibility agreed, bank accounts set up, fund raising undertaken, remember at this stage we had no money, all of our meetings were in our houses and not once was I asked for any expenses.

Eventually, we arrived at the point where we felt we were ready to launch Ware U3A and arranged to hire Leaside Church Hall set out about 150 chairs and invited the people of Ware to come and join us. We were simply overwhelmed, as many of you will remember, we had a queue of people down the High Street, we had to move the meeting from the Hall into the Church and still there was not enough room.

Following this meeting groups and group leaders were sorted out, membership numbers rapidly grew and the Ware U3A was well and truly underway.

Vic Martin

Ware U3A – Growing from 2009 to 2012

In November 2009 the membership had grown to 560, through its fabulous first year, tapping into an unmet need in the town and surrounding villages. During the subsequent three years to November 2012 the growth rate slowed – much to the relief of the committee – and had reached 852 in November 2012.

In late 2009 it was time to take stock, see what was working well and what could be done better. The ongoing commitment of the committee was very important together with the continuing enthusiasm of the whole membership. New groups were proposed and formed; already established groups such as Exploring London were very popular and over time needed to form a second group, and then a third and so on Keeping up with the demands and needs of members was very important.

But behind the scenes, other boring things had to happen, such as relating to the Third Age Trust, the umbrella body for U3As in the UK. They provide support and guidance in a variety of ways, including the management of individual U3As, running the finances and advising on a suitable constitution as a framework to cover our activities. We were able to adopt much of this advice whilst augmenting their proposed constitution to meet our own specific circumstances. During 2010, we invited Mike Long to one of our committee meetings – he was one of the small group of people

working in TAT. We asked him for advice about other U3As of a similar size and age. His reply was that we were unique – no one else had grown as large as fast as us. He was rather looking for pointers from us as to how we had managed it. In addition, we had to register ourselves as a charity, more complex than we had expected. This requires an organisation like ours to be transparent financially, which even affects the way we handle money in our groups. As I said before, boring but necessary. We started off with a common sense approach – don't invent rules we don't need, don't mend it if it isn't broken – and our U3A has sought to carry on in that way.

But enough of that, we are all about serving the needs of people to help them in their lives, and that is what developed further during the period from 2009 to 2012. One of the most heart-warming comments came to light when in July 2012 we asked members to give us 'testimonials' of their views of the effect of Ware U3A on them. Here is an excerpt from one given to us anonymously – *'Six years ago I lost my best friend, my wife. Some friends invited me to go to the first Ware U3A meeting; it was so crowded but in a strange way, funny and interesting. I love walking into the monthly meeting, I don't care who the speaker is. People wave, smile and say hello. I belong here, it's my U3A.'*

You see, it doesn't matter too much about the subject of the groups, or the speakers, important though they are. Our U3A has shown itself to be about people sharing and caring. During this period the members of the committee changed, group leaders handed on to others, but still the whole organisation continued on with the same friendly atmosphere and ethos. One of the benefits of responsibilities being passed on is that the organisation doesn't get stale, and fresh ideas enable us to 'move with the times'. There isn't only one way to do things, members' ideas and suggestions and willingness to get involved are what matter and that is what marked this period of consolidation and more measured growth.

As we got bigger, and more mature, we became involved in projects in the town. These projects included smartening up the station and maintaining flowers through the seasons, reviving the sensory garden at The Priory and supporting the arrival of the Great Bed of Ware in the museum. However, I was disappointed through this period that local councillors in the town, at local authority and county level were not aware even of our existence. As shown by the example above, we make a difference to people's lives, with our large numbers of members. So we did try to raise the level of understanding by putting on an event at Broxbourne with our neighbouring U3As, not only to show what each individual U3A was doing to our neighbours, but specifically for all of our councillors to understand that we are an organisation with a large number of members who use key facilities that they provide. That process of recognition of the value we bring locally still has some way to go.

May we long continue to make a difference in people's lives. Our U3A is a precious thing that continually develops and it belongs to all of us.

Peter Radley

Thoughts about Ware U3A

My earliest recollections of the University of the Third Age (U3A) was in a long-since forgotten free magazine. To me it sounded like an extension of the Open University (OU). This brought back scary memories of exams, tests, homework, tutorials but mostly done on-line!

My next encounter was a result of extensive publicity in Ware announcing that there was to be a public meeting to consider setting up U3A in the town. On the day, the Leaside venue was teeming with crowds of people necessitating moving to another building to accommodate everyone. It turned out to be several months later that I realised the significance of this gathering which I am sure will be accurately recalled and reported by others.

So my U3A journey started off with a monthly meeting. I was pleasantly surprised that I recognised quite a few people and was made welcome. I had soon joined up for some Groups – Bridge, Food Appreciation, Table Tennis and more recently Choir. A “would you consider joining the Committee?” soon followed! After a pint (or was it two?) with Vic our founder Chairman, he convinced me. I've heard it said that our phenomenal growth in membership was one of the fastest ever in the U.K.

For that to happen we must thank our pioneering Committee and particularly our first wave of Group Leaders. Their enthusiastic leadership and organisation provided the foundation for the 77 Groups we enjoy today. It's an indicator of their commitment that several are still serving us a decade later.

During my time as your Chairman I was pleased to see that we took Ware U3A into the town. We started a Computer Course at Chauncy School which has now migrated to Ware College. We have taken part in Ware Week and Dickensian Evening which provides an excellent opportunity to explain the learning, fun and friendship offered by our U3A.

So let us celebrate our 10th Anniversary with our thanks to those who have got us here and encourage all of us, past, present or future to ensure we continue to give much enjoyment to many more in the years ahead.

Mike Tucker