

u3a Wirral

<https://u3asites.org.uk/wirral/home>

Dear Wirral u3a member

We've again had a couple of excellent speakers this month – not only in terms of content but also in their manner of delivery. It was good to see some new faces at these meetings. I hope that the talks encourage them to keep coming.

The inclusion of a poetry section in the newsletter has received a positive response. Joan has suggested a poem for March and Dave saw a theme emerging: a topic related to the month. Please send your suggestions or tell me at the meeting.

Also, a thank you to all this month's contributors with a special thanks to Mo who has given me some material for a quiz.

I've also included items at the end of the newsletter for events on the Wirral or in Liverpool that might interest members.

Again, either email me or tell me at the meeting of anything you think might be relevant.

Hopefully see you on April 3rd.

Joy (Newsletter editor)

Chair's message

Hello Everyone! I hope you are all enjoying the Spring sunshine. I actually had to find my sunhat before I could sit in the garden.

On Saturday I met up with several friends from u3a for a coffee morning in aid of Animal Welfare. The next one is 29th April at St Stephen's, Prenton.

I hope you have a Happy Easter and the weather is kind.

Best wishes to you all.

Janet

Important Announcement

The AGM

April 17 is the AGM.

Derek circulated relevant information in an email 23rd March.

The AGM usually lasts about 15 minutes. The scheduled talk will follow.

Meetings

April 3

Barrow to Baghdad and back again

Philip Caine

April 17

Radio Caroline North

Brian Cullen

Outings/Visits

28th April

Bury Market

Coach trip

£19 or £17 if booked on-line.

10th May

Poulton Hall, Raby.

£12 per person

24th May

River Dee Boat trip

£15.75

Special Event

5th May

Afternoon Coronation Tea

Popsy's, Hoylake

(Fully booked – although there's a reserve list)

Meetings Venue

Williamson Art Gallery, Slatey Road, Birkenhead.

Tea and coffee are served at 10.00am. The speaker starts at 10:45.

Entrance fee is now £2.

Meetings

Witches and superstitions

Our speaker, Jean Finney, was delighted to be doing this talk in March since she's usually asked to do it October or November. She started with some very depressing statistics. Between 1543 and 1736 (see below for the significance of these dates), it's estimated that, across Europe, 20000 people were executed for witchcraft. This figure is based on written records and it's believed that the actual figure is closer to 100,000.

In the Middle Ages, every community probably had a woman who would provide a range of services such as producing herbal medicines and assisting in childbirth. These women were known by a variety of names such as 'good wife' and 'cunning woman' (which meant knowledgeable). This woman was most likely a widow and her role of service provider was a means to earn some money. However, the Church was not happy with these services, considering that they were at odds with the Church's teaching, such as the power of prayer to heal. The concept of a 'witch' begins to emerge as someone who practices 'magic', which has been learned by associating with the devil – which for women meant a sexual association leaving her with blemishes which could be used as evidence of the association. Knowledge about herbs (some of which can also be poisons) began to be associated with 'magic' and before too long a convenient scapegoat (the witch) was identified to explain bad events. While in 21st century, we tend to associate the word 'witch' with a woman, in Medieval Times there was a much broader definition – an adult man or woman, children and occasionally animals could be labelled as a 'witch'.



Although Jean didn't use any slides, she did use other means to engage the audience. For example, she asked us to 'shout out' visual characteristics we associate with a witch, eg black clothes, pointed hat, cat, broomstick. After our input, Jean produced a picture which matched exactly our characteristics!

Now to the dates mentioned in the opening paragraph. Jean described differences in reactions to witches and witchcraft by English monarchs who reigned during those dates. She started with Henry VIII who was king in 1543. He had been able to use the Church's opposition to witchcraft to rid himself of his second wife, Anne Boleyn. To help turn public opinion against her, he was careful not to say directly that she was a witch but that she had bewitched him and he was unable to resist. It was known that Anne had six fingers which was equated with deformity – a characteristic of a witch. However, Anne was not tried as a witch since this was ecclesiastical law and if found guilty, she would have been burned at the stake. Henry was probably also considering the implications for his daughter, Elizabeth, if her mother had been declared a witch. When Elizabeth became queen, she had the charge of witchcraft to be tried under civil rather than ecclesiastical law – so the evidence had to convince a jury and judge.

Less sympathetic, was James I who was fanatically anti-witch – to the extent that he had inserted into the English language version of the bible published during his reign a sentence: thou shalt not suffer a witch to live! James wrote a book on 'demonology'. He had 70 people hung for causing a storm that nearly killed him and his wife on a return journey from Denmark.

Even when we were a republic, persecution of witches continued. Matthew Hopkins assumed the title of Witch Finder General – a position he set about implementing with considerable vigour – even offering 1 Guinea for every successful prosecution and execution.

George III was more generous, declaring that we are enlightened and don't believe in demons and witches. He changed the law that witches were not punished by being put to death, but one could still be found guilty of pretending to be a witch and sent to prison.

The last person to be prosecuted under George III's law was in 1742! A medium, Helen Duncan, was accused of having knowledge about the sinking of a Naval vessel which she could only have obtained as a spy. She was sent to prison for a year.

The laws related to witchcraft were finally removed from the statute books in 1952!

Jean finished an entertaining talk by explaining some of the origins of certain practices we do to protect ourselves. We use charms, such as a cross, as an outward symbol that we are protected. We touch wood because the crucifixion was on a wooden cross. We don't walk under ladders because it breaks the link binding the Holy Trinity which brings bad luck. We throw salt over our left shoulder which has its origins in religious paintings from the Middle Ages always depicting the Devil peering over a person's left shoulder! The M56 doesn't have a J13!

Joy

The Terracotta Army and Emperor Qin Shi Huang

On 20 March Judith Foxon treated us to an illuminating talk about the Terracotta Army and the life and times of the First Emperor of Qin. The talk was illustrated by an excellent slide presentation, with photos of the Terracotta Warriors and some of the fascinating and exquisite artefacts found in the Emperor's Mausoleum. Several of the slides had good captions, which was much appreciated.

Fragments of the Terracotta Army were discovered in 1974 by a group of farmers who were digging a well, in the Lintong district, about 20 miles east of the city of Xian. This discovery prompted Chinese archaeologists to investigate the site, revealing the largest pottery figurine group ever found. A museum complex has since been constructed over the area, and the largest pit has been enclosed by a roofed structure. The Mausoleum, including the Terracotta Army, was listed as a World Heritage Site in 1987.

The city of Xian is about 570 miles southwest of Beijing. The Emperor's capital city was Xianyang, about 15 miles northwest of Xian.

The Warring states period

The Warring States period in ancient Chinese history ranged from about 475 BCE to 221 BCE. It was characterized by warfare, as well as bureaucratic and military reforms and consolidation. It concluded with the Qin wars of conquest that resulted in the annexation of all the other states. The Qin state's victory in 221 BCE led to the first unified Chinese empire, under the Qin dynasty.

Lu Buwei (291-235 BCE) was a merchant and politician of the Qin state during the Warring States period. Lu Buwei met and befriended Prince Yiren, who was then a minor prince, held as a hostage in the Zhao state. Through bribes and machinations, Lu Buwei succeeded in helping Prince Yiren become the heir apparent to the Qin throne.

Prince Yiren fell in love with a concubine of Lu Buwei, who consented for her to become Yiren's wife. She became known as Lady Zhao. Their son, Ying Zheng, was born in 259 BCE.

Prince Yiren became King Zhang of Qin in 250 BCE and he appointed Lu Buwei as his chancellor. However, King Zhang died just three years later, probably from mercury poisoning.

Ying Zheng became King of Qin in 247 BCE, at the age of 13. Lu Buwei became his chancellor and regent. Nine years later, in 235 BCE, Zheng assumed full power, after Lu Buwei was banished for his involvement in a scandal involving the Queen Dowager Zhao and her illicit lover, Lao Ai. While in exile, Lu Buwei committed suicide by consuming poison. His entire clan was ordered to commit suicide.

By 221 BCE King Zheng had conquered all the other Warring States and unified all of China, by the age of 38. He became Qin Shi Huang, the first emperor of China. Incidentally, the name of China is derived from Qin.

Reign as Emperor Qin Shi Huang

Qin Shi Huang and his prime minister Li Si organized the empire into administrative units and subunits, and appointments were based on merit instead of hereditary rights. They unified China economically by standardizing the Chinese weights and measures. The currencies of the different states were standardized. To facilitate road transport, wagon axles were made the same length. The emperor also developed an extensive network of roads and canals for trade and communication.

Perhaps most importantly, the Chinese script was unified. Under Li Si, the seal script of the state of Qin became the official standard, and the Qin script itself was simplified, by the removal of variant forms. This produced a universal written language for all of China, despite the diversity of spoken dialects.

Qin Shi Huang ordered the building of new walls to connect the fortifications along the empire's northern frontier. Hundreds of thousands of workers were conscripted for this work, and a large number died. But the walls became the precursor to the Great Wall of China.

Beginning in 213 BCE, Qin Shi Huang ordered most of the existing books to be burned, with the exception of those on astrology, agriculture, medicine, divination, and the history of the State of Qin. People owning certain books were punished severely. According to some sources, Qin Shi Huang had 460 scholars buried alive for possessing the forbidden books. (But recent research suggests this may have been a myth, invented at a later date to discredit the emperor).

Death and succession

As he became older, Qin Shi Huang desperately sought the fabled elixir of life, which supposedly confers immortality. In his obsessive quest, he fell prey to many fraudulent elixirs.

(Note: In ancient China, numerous Chinese emperors, nobles, and officials died from taking elixirs of immortality, hoping to prolong their lifespans. These elixirs often contained mercury (and arsenic) so, far from prolonging life, they shortened it.)

During the Emperor's fifth tour of Eastern China, he became seriously ill, and died in 210 BCE, at the age of 49. His death took place in a palace some distance from his capital, Xianyang. The cause of Qin Shi Huang's death remains unknown but, like his father, he may have been poisoned by an elixir containing mercury.

Prime Minister Li Si feared news of the Emperor's death could trigger an uprising during the two months' travel for the imperial entourage to return to the capital Xianyang. Li Si decided to hide the emperor's death: he ordered carts of rotten fish to be carried before and behind the wagon of

the Emperor, to cover the smell of his body decomposing in the summer heat.

After the entourage reached Xianyang, the death of the Emperor was announced. Although the Emperor's eldest son Fusu was first in line to succeed him as emperor, Li Si and Zhao Gao conspired to remove Fusu. The younger son, Hu Hai, began his brief reign as the Second Emperor. He ruled from just 210 to 207 BCE. He was a weak ruler, and his reign was completely dominated by his prime minister, Zhao Gao, who eventually forced him to commit suicide. By the time of Hu Hai's death, the Qin Empire's power had lessened so much that his successor, Ziying, ruled as a mere king, not an emperor.

The Mausoleum of the First Qin Emperor

Preliminary work on the Emperor's Mausoleum began in 246 BCE, soon after Qin Shi Huang (then aged 13) ascended the throne, but full-scale construction took place from when he had unified China in 221 BCE. The mausoleum was constructed over 38 years, from 246 to 208 BCE. The project eventually involved 700,000 conscripted workers. The loss to the economy and to farming led to famine.

After the burial of the First Emperor (in 210 BCE), the Second Emperor apparently said: "It would be inappropriate for the concubines of the late emperor who have no sons to be out free" so many died. To preserve the secrets of tomb, after the funeral ceremonies had been completed and the treasures hidden away, the inner passageway was blocked, and the outer gate lowered, immediately trapping all the workers and craftsmen inside. None could escape. Trees and vegetations were then planted on the tomb mound, so that eventually it resembled a hill.

Some objects in the Mausoleum

8200 warriors were assembled in battle formation, equipped with real, carefully made weapons. All their faces are different. There are standing archers with longbows and kneeling ones with crossbows. The army includes officers of different ranks. Also present are life-size horses and cavalry officers, with soft shoes to avoid damaging their mounts.

In 2014 a study was conducted by researchers at University College London. They analyzed photographs of the left ears of 30 warriors to determine if they were different from each other. They discovered that no two ears were alike, inferring that all the soldiers were different.

Two exquisite half-size bronze chariots, each pulled by four horses, were buried in a pit 20 metres west of the tomb mound. They were intended for the Emperor's after-life journeys. The chariots were assembled from thousands of components.

In 2020 a golden camel statuette was found in a tomb 100 metres from the mausoleum. (The camel is Bactrian camel. These camels are found in Mongolia and on the steppes of central Asia. They were used on the Silk Road, which operated from 130 BCE.)

Other objects included beautiful bronze birds, supplied with feeders and grain. There is a suit of armour made from pieces of stone. This was intended as a burial item rather than for practical use. Tests have shown that it would have taken a worker about a year to make this suit of armour, consisting of 600 stone pieces.

The workers building the mausoleum included skilled craftsmen, prisoners, debtors and slaves. Some of the workers were buried in graves marked with epitaphs. Others were simply buried in

large pits.

Emperor Qin Shi Huang wanted to enjoy the same things after death as he had owned during his lifetime, so his mausoleum was furnished with an army, weapons, birds, horses and other animals. His actual tomb has not been excavated, to avoid damaging the contents. But historians have suggested that the ceiling is painted to represent the sky and the floor is covered by a model of the map of China. The rivers contain liquid mercury, which was made to flow by some kind of mechanical device. Researchers have measured very high levels of volatile mercury in the vicinity of the tomb.

In conclusion, the sight of the massed warriors is truly impressive, and the bronze statues are exquisite, but the cruelty of the regime somewhat detracts from beauty of the warriors and accompanying statues.

Many thanks to Judith for an excellent talk and presentation.

Jo

{Editor's note: Thank you to Jo for doing some extra research and adding the findings to the meeting report. I found the following website promoting tourism in China which has some good photos of the warriors and some more information:

<https://www.chinadiscovery.com/shaanxi/xian/terracotta-warriors/terracotta-warriors-facts.html>

The World Museum in Liverpool had an exhibition of the Terracotta Warriors in 2018. There is material related to the exhibition available on their website:

<https://www.liverpoolmuseums.org.uk/whatson/world-museum/exhibition/chinas-first-emperor-and-terracotta-warriors#section--the-exhibition>

The Catalogue for the Exhibition is still on sale at a reduced price of £10.}

Groups

Scrabble Group

This is a new group which plans to meet at 2pm on 3rd Monday of the month. Contact details for the organiser can be found on the bulletin board by the tea/coffee counter.

Walking Group

An Oxton Walk

A description of Oxton in 1819 reads "mean and small, composed of wretched straggling huts, amongst roads only not impassable.....but a scene of solitude, broken in only by the voice of the cowherd, or the cry of the plover. Bleak and barren moors stretch round it in every direction, and exhibit an unmixed scene of poverty and desolation."

The first part of this walk took us to some of the older parts of Oxton, parts which probably haven't change in 150 years. Starting at the Shrewsbury Arms which has been a pub since the early 1800s, we walked down Fairview Road passing a row of nice mid-Victorian houses on the way, with some larger Villas part hidden up long drives and behind stone walls. We then turned right into South Bank which still has to discover the benefits of tarmac, or any modern road construction. This can be quite muddy after heavy rain, but fortunately not too bad this day. The outlook for a row of small cottages at the top of South Bank hasn't changed much since the middle of the 19th century.

A left turn leads into Arno Road, so named because it led up to the Arno, now an area of parkland and walks, but once a woodland of Birch and Oak, cut through in part by the old quarry. The sandstone which Oxtan is built on produced the sandstone of which large parts are built. A few steps further on brought us to The Queens Pub, whose landlord, a Mr. Hughes, gave his name to the road which runs at the back of the pub. To the side of The Queens is Newburns Lane named after local builder who put up the row of small houses nicknamed the 'The Dolly Tub' cottages, as apparently lines of washing could be forever seen outside. It may be that the tenants provided a clothes washing service to the surrounding community.



Continuing the walk, we came to a large house, now split into two separate houses. The entrance to the righthand house has a Blue plaque remembering Brigadier Sir Philip John Denton Toosey who lived there before the war. Philip Toosey was held as a prisoner war on the Japanese 'Death Railway' in Burma, showing great courage and striving at all times to assist the well-being of the men under his command. His story was told (after a fashion) in the film 'The Bridge over the River Kwai'. Continuing down the hill to Wellington Road where another Blue plaque informed us that two pioneering ladies lived there. The Willings sisters, Laura and Jeannie, were editors of the Birkenhead News and The Wallasey News respectively as well as being influential in the Suffrage movement.



We continued our walk to reach the lowest point at the Williamson Art Gallery, having descended gently from the highest point in Oxtan at the Arno. The Williamson Gallery was opened in 1928 funded by money raised by John Williamson a director of the Cunard shipping line and his son Patrick. The gallery contains the UK's largest

selection of Della Robbia pottery. The museum is a bit like an iceberg with considerably more items stored down below in the basement, unseen by the public. The displays are rotated from time to time to bring a fresh look to the gallery. We are very lucky that we can hold our Monday talks in such lovely surroundings. From the art gallery we walked back up Christchurch Road into the centre of the village and a few yards brought us back to The Shrewsbury Arms, just in time for lunch.

Dave

April 27

On a fine spring Monday morning, members of the walking group met at Ness Gardens for a walk alongside the River Dee and back through Little Neston. After a brief chat where several members regretted bringing scarfs rather than sunglasses, we set off towards Burton before turning right over the railway line down to a cycle/footpath running parallel to the Dee. After about half an hour we stopped at Net's Café where we were able to sit out in the sun enjoying a cup of coffee. After coffee the group split. Some returned to Ness Gardens to enjoy the café, garden and/or the plant centre, while others continued onward along the cycle path towards the river mouth. We met a young man hard at work picking up detritus (mainly plastic) from the riverbank. He told us he lives in a cottage along the shore and does this task when a lot of material has been washed downstream. We thanked him for undertaking this Herculean task while regretting it was necessary.



About 15 minutes later we turned inland towards Little Neston passing through a housing estate which gave the opportunity to admire West Cheshire's rubbish collection in operation and then back to Ness where we met up with the other group for a chat and lunch in the café. We left Ness Gardens believing spring had arrived only to be brought back to earth the next day which proved very wet and miserable. Certainly, we picked the right day!

Giles

Visits

Memories of Water

Little Theatre Birkenhead

On Friday 17th March, a group of five U3A members went to see this play, the 4th of the Carlton Players season at the Little Theatre.

Although I enjoyed it as it was live theatre, I have to say that I was in the minority.

The six actors did their level best to bring some dark humour into this black comedy but I can't understand for the life of me, why it won the Lawrence Olivier Award for Best Comedy in 2000.

The action of this play, such as it was, took place in Vi's bedroom and it was hard to maintain interest in the dialogue between the 3 daughters discussing their memories of their childhood with relation to the Deceased.

All in all not as enjoyable as their last production.

Chris

Poetry Corner

Wordsworth's poem popularly known as 'Daffodils' was suggested by Joan – a particularly appropriate choice for March. Like many of us I'm sure, at school Joan had had to learn it off by heart. She can still recall many lines of the poem!

I Wandered Lonely As A Cloud (Daffodils)

William Wordsworth

I wandered lonely as a cloud
That floats on high o'er vales and hills,
When all at once I saw a crowd,
A host, of golden daffodils;
Beside the lake, beneath the trees,
Fluttering and dancing in the breeze.

Continuous as the stars that shine
And twinkle on the milky way,
They stretched in never-ending line
Along the margin of a bay:



Ten thousand saw I at a glance,
Tossing their heads in sprightly dance.

The waves beside them danced; but they
Out-did the sparkling waves in glee:
A poet could not but be gay,
In such a jocund company:
I gazed- and gazed- but little thought
What wealth the show to me had brought:

For oft, when on my couch I lie
In vacant or in pensive mood,
They flash upon that inward eye
Which is the bliss of solitude;
And then my heart with pleasure fills,
And dances with the daffodils.

Editor: I am very happy to receive suggestions for a poem of the month. I do need to check that they are out of copyright. You can either email with a suggestion or tell me at a meeting.

Around Wirral and the environs

Oxton Secret Gardens

Sunday 14th May

10:00am to 5:00pm.

Chance to visit 18 gardens. There are also refreshments and entertainment (also for children).

Charge £10 on the day, or £8 in advance from:

<http://www.theoxtonociety.co.uk>

The Big Sing

Wednesday 10th May 2023, 10.15 a.m. – 3.30 p.m.

The Quaker Meeting House, School Lane, Liverpool (short walk from Central Station).

Charge £15 which includes refreshments but not lunch.

Organised by u3a Northwest Region

Led by Fredrik Holm, music specialist from Lancaster and Morecambe u3a and

members of the Northwest Regional Team.

Register by May 3rd.

For more details, please see the email circulated by Derek on 23 March.

Wirral Repair Cafe Update

In last month's newsletter I mentioned that the Wirral Environmental Network (WEN) is proposing to set up a Repair Café to mend a

Coffee Corner Moment

February challenge

Answers

Commonality

The common word can be placed in front or after the listed words.

1. joy; over; time = kill
2. by; miss; sighted = near
3. bear; deep; flint = skin
4. bargain; guilty; heartfelt = plea

Maths

14; double it; +12; ÷10; x4;
+17; ÷3; x6; -29; double it = **74**

28; 75% of it; +100; ÷11; x8;
+1/2 of it; -32; ÷5; x7; -67 = **73**

6; cube it; -57; ÷3; x4; +50% of
it; -6; ÷6; +75% of it; x9 = **819**

March Quiz

These are easy! No asking Dr Google!

1. How long did the Hundred Years War last?
2. The Canary Islands are named after which animal?
3. What colour is a purple finch?
4. Which animal is the main source of material for the camel's hair brush?
5. Which country celebrates Columbus Day, even though the man never set foot there?

range of items including clothing, electronics and furniture. According to the WEN newsletter they had an excellent response for volunteers to help at the Café. WEN is now looking for a venue and sorting out any formalities. I will keep you posted.

Additional Important News

Photo ID to vote

From 4 May 2023, voters in England will need to show photo ID to vote at polling stations in some elections including the forthcoming local elections. Don't panic! You may well already have the right documents with a photo you can use (e.g., passport, driving licence and bus pass). If you are not sure, then you can check on the Electoral Commission's website:

<https://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/i-am-a/voter/voter-id/accepted-forms-photo-id>