

FERNDOWN U3A – THE EARLY DAYS

John Gooch is one of our longest serving members and remains active, running his Opera group from his home in Colehill. In this short article he reflects on some of his experiences during his involvement, running the Opera Group, participating in the play reading group, and attending talks and lectures. He has served as our Chairman and as our Treasurer.



When I retired I looked forward to spending my time travelling with the campervan, playing tennis and bridge and enjoying life. So, when my late wife Barbara and I moved to East Dorset, with an airport and a car ferry convenient for the continent, I joined a local tennis club and we both joined Poole U3A for bridge and natural history.

In the local paper one day I showed Barbara an item about a proposed course on Ancient Egypt being run by Ferndown U3A, which had just been formed. Barbara went along and when she returned announced that she had signed up to act as Secretary, and she'd volunteered me as Treasurer!

Ferndown U3A was formed after sterling efforts by its founder, Angela Dennett, who stood outside Tesco enrolling members and without help from The Third Age Trust, which is the normal route. In those days all our activities were at Ferndown Youth Centre, known as The Reef, which we generally had to ourselves apart from the occasional staff presence. This meant that members could bring sandwiches, make themselves coffee and mix with members from other classes. That first year (two terms) we had about thirty members and, like most start-ups, ran at a loss. For the following year we adopted a more conservative policy on the basis that although we could probably forecast outgoings we could not assume membership numbers would increase (but they did). Furthermore, we took subscriptions in advance and were solvent once again, but in truth none of us were seriously worried.

I remember that at the first AGM Angela provided us all with butternut squash soup. That would be a tall order now.

I joined the French Conversation class and also the History Class and joined the walks which we later organised. Barbara also co-ran the Gardening group. There was no limit to the number of classes one could attend, ranging from Art to Winemaking.

The Dorset U3As met annually to discuss matters of mutual interest and help the burgeoning U3As with advice on recruitment, etc. I felt that part of the ethos of U3A

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movement should be to encourage special interest groups (e.g. Archaeology) to invite others to join when the numbers amongst their own membership didn't justify the cost of the meetings. I believe there was some overlap between the U3As in Bournemouth and Christchurch in this area. We did have invitations from Poole to join theatre visiting groups but there was insufficient interest to take this up. We were challenged to a table tennis match and to take part in a duplicate bridge competition (again by Poole) but we felt our members were not interested in being competitive and would perhaps be overwhelmed. I have been, much later, to Poole U3A for a course on computers (free) and have recently been on a Dorset History course at Blandford U3A.

When I was Chairman there was an occasion when Christchurch U3A was looking for a venue for a day course on Art History. I volunteered Colehill Memorial Hall and offered to provide the catering (for a fee), Gerry Lewis (our current President) having a catering certificate. A week before the event I checked on the number of tickets sold and was told maybe 100. 'Let's keep it at no more than 110', I said. On the day we served 147 covers. Our team of 6 was exhausted and thereafter we confined our efforts to strawberry teas in our garden.

We did have one very successful half day seminar led by Tom McConnell, one of our history lecturers, on 'Nationalism' - about 60 attendees and only teas and coffees.

We invited the mayor of Ferndown to visit The Reef and he was surprised to learn of our existence. I asked to be listed in the Ferndown Handbook (but it hasn't happened).

From the earliest days there has always been some form of entertainment around Christmas such as a pantomime, usually written and performed by members, and I took part in one. We have also had performances on handbells and, more recently, musical events and a talent show (which I didn't win).

Bridge has always been popular and some members wanted to play all year round. The demand for extra accommodation, largely to provide for the bridge players, combined with a change of policy at Riffs, led us to start renting rooms at the Barrington Theatre and before long the Barrington became the hub for our activities – until Covid, when their letting policy changed.

We had several members living in Verwood who wanted to run their own programmes and for a time we offered reciprocal membership. Eventually the Verwood activities and the numbers involved meant they developed separately.

When I was Chairman I had the idea of forming a 'Culture Club' that would make visits to theatre, pantomime and so on. I am pleased to see that this idea has recently been resurrected in the form of Performing Arts Visits. A party of us went to the Mayflower Theatre in Southampton to see Welsh National Opera perform 'I Pagliacci' and 'Cavalleria Rusticana' and also to Christchurch to see the ballet 'The Nutcracker'.

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A fellow member, Martin Tuck, had been Musical Director at Basingstoke Amateur Operatic Society and ran a short course for us on music by decades in the nineteenth century. This encouraged me to believe I could do something similar and with the help of DVDs supplied from Sources, the U3A resource library (now disbanded, unfortunately) I started the Opera Group that had 15 members at its heyday.

Ferndown U3A currently has a membership of around 600 and runs so many classes that we have to restrict the number one can apply for in order to give everyone a fair share. We run regular talks, foreign holidays and activities. The committee has doubled in size since the early days as, inevitably, has the subscription, but it still represents incredible value for money apart from its valuable contribution to the social life of its members.

I have enjoyed enormously my time with Ferndown U3A over a period of so many years. I would encourage any member considering running a course or standing for the committee to step up immediately. I'm a great believer in the words: 'The more you put in, the more you get out!'

N.B. I now have 130 DVDs of operas and operettas, mostly thanks to Martin Tuck. Would anyone like to see any or maybe start up a group?

John would welcome feedback and discussion about his article and there are some topics he raises – firstly, cooperation and liaison with other local U3As and secondly, the possibility of organising in depth day or half day courses on a particular subject – that might usefully be restored in the future. Let's hear your views. Any contributions may be published on our website. Please send them, preferably as an attachment to an email, to ianburr353@btinternet.com.