

ORIGIN OF THE U3A ORGANISATION AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF CONGLETON U3A

Here is some background information on the origin of the U3A organisation which I have put together for the benefit of new members of Congleton U3A.

The U3A movement actually began in France and the first U3A was developed in the University of Toulouse in 1972. Its aim at that time was to improve the quality of life for older people by bringing them into contact with academic studies run by the university. This movement grew and flourished in France. U3A stands for University of the Third Age and this is where the connection with universities came from.

This movement did not come to England until 1981 and began at Cambridge University. The French model however was modified so rather than using pre-existing university courses, it was decided to develop it into a mutual help organisation providing a wider variety of activities with no pressure.

According to the National U3A which is the umbrella organisation for all U3As, there are currently 319,000 members spread across 903 separate U3As.

The average size of membership is 250 with some having as few as 12 members.

All U3As are charitable bodies run by volunteers and the umbrella charitable body is the Third Age Trust.

All U3As contribute to the National U3A by means of a capitation fee (a proportion of every member's fee) currently I believe it is around £3-50 per head. The National U3A provides a considerable amount of legal help, co-ordinates summer schools, arranges the annual conference and can provide course material in some cases. There are now moves afoot to provide on line courses in certain subjects.

The main aims of the U3A are as follows;

To encourage older people no longer in full time employment to share their personal knowledge/skills with others

To ensure that where possible a U3A exists for their benefit

To maintain that qualifications are not required and are not given by the U3A.

The U3A is now a world wide organisation with groups in Australia New Zealand America and many other countries.

So there is the background; but how did your Congleton U3A start?

Well, it started to come together when Ken Hallam a Congleton resident on his retirement heard about the development of a U3A in Alsager. He joined them and led a calligraphy group. His wife Elizabeth however found that the courses she was interested in all took place on days when she was otherwise occupied. She also noticed that nobody from Congleton had enrolled, and so she had this idea of starting a U3A in Congleton. Elizabeth contacted various people and organisations in the town who donated funding which enabled a steering committee to be formed and the first threads of the organisation to be sewn together. A considerable amount of work

was necessary before the crucial public meeting which was held in the Town Hall on Wednesday the 9th September 1998

One hundred and twenty people attended that meeting, myself included, and we all pledged to support the fledgling Congleton U3A. The headline in the Congleton Chronicle that week was 'New University opens in Congleton'.

Approximately one month later Congleton U3A commenced. Over 100 people enrolled and joined one or more of the nineteen groups offered and Elizabeth Hallam (now our Life President) became the first Chairman of Congleton U3A.

From those small beginnings, Congleton U3A has grown to be one of the largest in the country with over 1200 members currently offering over 100 different activities. These currently span recreational, educational, leisure science and hobby interests and most people would find something to their liking.

Not only that but we also have people organising day trips theatre trips and holidays abroad. If any of you as new members have a skill or interest not represented in our current timetable then, if you are willing to impart this knowledge to others, you too could become a group leader. It is as easy as that to participate.

If you have skills in management, accountancy, committee work we are always looking for people to get involved because it does not run itself. Only with the good will of its members will it continue. So think about what you could bring to your U3A in the future.

In the meantime, I hope you will really enjoy this wonderful organisation whatever you are participating in and I can tell you that you will certainly make new friends.

Lyndon Murgatroyd