

Chester U3A – Chairman’s Report to the AGM 4th November 2008 – Neil Fitton

In this, my last report as your Chairman. I want to do two things. First, to say something about the work of your Committee over the past year, including my own contribution. Second, to leave you with a few thoughts of mine about Chester U3A and its place in my life and in our wider community.

Since the last AGM the Committee has met on seven occasions hosted each time with splendid hospitality by our Minutes Secretary, Connie Charlesworth. We lost the services of Doreen Barnes who has had to care for her elderly mother. Mary Emery, whom we had co-opted this time last year was asked by the Committee to take Doreen’s place. Mary is now eligible for election to the Committee for a further two year period of office.

Perhaps the most significant development undertaken by the Committee has been the extension of our membership. When I became your Chairman two years ago we had a cap on our numbers of 600 and a waiting list. I was uneasy about this situation as I felt that we were likely to face growing demand for our services in light of the Government’s decision to cease funding for local authority so-called ‘recreational’ courses. Our response was two-fold. We pushed our limit up to 650 and then, at the December 2007 monthly meeting I announced that we would introduce a new category of membership. We were to call this Group membership and the idea was that a member could voluntarily agree not to attend the monthly meeting. All other facilities would be open to the Group member, including the right to attend the AGM and to vote. By this means we hoped to reduce the pressure on the hall at St.Columba’s church where numbers had been close to capacity and, at the same time allow more members to join. We set a limit of 50 on Group membership and I can report that the scheme has been a success so far.

One concern was that the AGM would be overloaded if Group members and a full complement of other members all decided to come. We had no way of knowing what the outcome would be and decided to see what happened this year. It looks as if we were right to leave things alone but next year’s committee will, no doubt, consider this matter again.

Pressure remains on our membership totals. We encourage applicants to consider our colleagues in Cestrian U3A and I hope that when they are full someone in Chester will ask the question – why not a third U3A in the city? I know that I and a few others would be glad to help set up a third group if the demand materialises.

Discussion on the matter of Group membership threw up an interesting question concerning the concept of ‘Chairman’s Action’. Coming from a local government background I am used to the idea that, between Committee meetings the Chairman could be asked to give decisions which would then be reported to the next formal meeting. We have established a protocol whereby the Chairman of Chester U3A will consult other Committee members by e-mail before taking action and only in real emergencies would he or she act without that procedure.

A significant development this year was the decision to apply for Gift Aid. Under this scheme charities can apply to HMRC for tax relief on subscriptions. Our Treasurer, David Kent and Membership Secretary Jenny Carley worked hard to introduce the scheme and we had a good response from the membership. A cheque for £2007.08 was received. Members have been asked to suggest ways of utilising this windfall and the new Committee will tackle this issue.

Mention of Jenny reminds me to congratulate her on the outstanding work she has done with regard to our membership arrangements generally. The booklets she has produced are professional and a credit to the organisation.

Among other important matters affecting us we have had the re-organisation of our parent body, the Third Age Trust, into Regions based on Government boundaries. We are now part of the North West Region and within that we are members of the Merseyside, West Cheshire and Flintshire Network, a grouping of some 23 U3As in the sub-region.

I have represented Chester U3A on other external bodies such as Chester Voluntary Action and attended other occasional meetings, for instance organised by the MP for Chester.

Carol Ferris has continued to organise our Christmas lunches at Rossett Hall and they are well supported with around 100 members at both events.

For the first time this year the Committee decided to invite all our co-ordinators to lunch as a token recognition of their efforts on behalf of the membership. Val Quince, our Group Liaison Officer booked two dates at West Cheshire College and we had a good representation on both dates. I think this gesture was appreciated by our co-ordinators without whose work we would not have the U3A we have today.

Brian Holyoak has continued to attract some outstanding speakers to our monthly meetings. You will each have your own favourites but the highlights for me included Christina Spencer on "The History of the Bibby Line", the Hintons on "The Children of Chernobyl" and Alan Hayhurst on "Banking in a Gentler Age". It was also good to have two meetings where our own members from Friday Creative Writing, Storytelling and Play Reading Groups did so well in showing us their talents.

John Hammond has not only maintained but continues to improve our website. It really is an outstanding source for anyone interested in our U3A and also for individual members. If you can get on to the internet do use it as it will keep you up to date and informed about many of our activities. John also suggested the idea of a competition to design our own logo and we expect the results to be announced shortly.

Our other great source of news is of course the monthly Newsletter so ably edited by Alex Davis. Thanks go to Alex for the efficient production of this outstanding resource.

Our social and educational visits programme continues to amaze me with its productivity and variety. What a team we have there and you see them at every Monthly meeting beavering away on your behalf. We co-opt Mary Vives and Barbara Wright on to our Committee but the other key members of the team include Norma Hardy and Beryl Parkinson.

Mary Emery has taken on the task of trying to fill in the gaps in our archives. As something of a historian it is important to me that I hand on a full record of our activities but I was sorry to find that we were not so assiduous in the early days. Mary has been piecing together the evidence from 1993 -1994 and, although we have not completed our search for the minutes of Committees and AGM, by talking to a number of our founder members we do now have a pretty good picture to pass on to our successors.

Last year, in my Annual Report, I made the mistake of trying to mention by name everyone who does a job on our behalf. Inevitably I missed someone and had to correct my omission at the first opportunity. This year I have not attempted the same task. Let me conclude this part of my report therefore by saying a big thank you to all our co-ordinators, often unsung heroes and heroines, who are so vital to our success and to each and every one of our members who does work on our behalf. We are a volunteer and self-help organisation and we should always celebrate that situation.

In handing over shortly to June Hargreaves I am confident we will be in good hands. She has done the job before, of course, and is now taking up the reins again for one year. One of her key tasks will be to find a successor!

As I leave the stage as your Chairman I can look back on two enjoyable and fulfilling years. Chester U3A is a going concern and has grown in numbers by over 16% in those two years. I am pleased at the spread of our message within Chester and District. We have also played a full part in the wider community of the voluntary sector in the area. People know we exist and that we have a distinctive voice. So many of our colleagues in this wider community are part of what I call 'the dependency culture' They exist to fulfil social and health needs and do outstanding work on behalf of their client groups. But they are themselves dependent on others for their funding and, therefore, their very existence. We are different and our independence is to be cherished. It is what gives us that unique voice and it is why I feel it is so important that we are prepared to share it with that wider world. Chester U3A means a great deal to me and I am proud to have been your Chairman.

Neil J Fitton
4/11/08