

A HISTORY OF DEWSBURY AND DISTRICT THIRD AGE

On The 40th Anniversary (1985 To 2025)

By Sandra Bligh

1. Introduction

The U3A movement, known as the University of the Third Age, is an international movement whose aims are education and stimulation of mainly retired members of the community – in their “third age” of life.

It started in France in 1973, where groups were connected to local universities. In France in 1990, it was widened to the University of All Ages.

It was started in Britain in 1981 but as a self-help organization. Originally for over 50s, the national U3A is now for all who are retired or approaching retirement with free time and who wish to undertake learning for its own sake. The classes are held during the daytime, which is vital as many older people do not wish to go out alone during the winter evenings. Our trustees and class tutors (leaders) are volunteers.

Dewsbury U3A was formed in 1985. My mum, Elsie Heywood, was a founder member, trustee, chairperson and tutor of photography and Yorkshire dialect classes. Much of the early information about our charity I have learnt from her.

My dad died in 1982 and mum, in her mid-60s, was looking for a new social life alone, if possible to include her love of photography. This situation is similar to many of our members now.

She heard of Wakefield U3A which was founded in 1983. She joined their Yorkshire Dialect class .

Later, she joined a group of retired people in Dewsbury who were wanting to start a third age group. They were liaising with Huddersfield U3A, who formed in 1984.

I have a cutting from the Dewsbury Reporter about the new group. Its headline is “Life Begins at Fifty”. I presume this cutting was from the month before opening, which was October 1985. It raises quite a few points, some no longer applicable and some still relevant. There had been 130 people showing interest before the official enrolling days. It states “the people being attracted are the retired and unemployed but we are getting quite a lot of people,

especially women, who have never worked". At that time there were many women who had been homemakers, staying at home to look after their children or working part time. Interestingly, they state that there has been a good response from retired teachers. I know some of our volunteers now are retired teachers but we do cover a wide range of former careers amongst our volunteers. In fact, unless it is relevant to the course they wish to lead, we do not ask. In the article, Sylvia Evers, the publicity officer, who had to retire early due to ill health, says that she "knows the trauma which can occur when a busy person is suddenly thrown on the scrap heap. People with experience of life still have a great deal to offer. Usually, they still want to keep on learning. Keeping their minds active is much better than sitting at home taking tranquilisers". Another quote is: "no qualifications are necessary to join any course. If they are over 50 they will have the only qualification necessary - the fact that they have lived and have experience of life".

Another flyer saved by my mum is the list of classes in Autumn 1986. Many still exist today, though perhaps only Photography and Local History have continued without a break. There were 24 classes and included furniture restoration, silkscreen printing, tatting, magic and mysticism, sequence dancing, improve your handwriting, dressmaking, German, Italian, hand loom weaving, machine knitting and crafts, pottery and, surprisingly so early, computers. Many craft activities but no table tennis, indoor bowls or walking. In fact, looking at the prospectuses I have, the variety of courses offered over the years is amazing.

2. From the Minute Books

We became a charity in 1987. Dewsbury U3A kept in close contact with Huddersfield U3A, also Halifax. Until 1989, we were working under the English U3A banner, though each local group was independently managed. Fees of £1 per person had to be sent to the national body, which at that time was in the process of being established. Dewsbury, Huddersfield, Halifax and Cambridge voted to disaffiliate from the U3A. (Vote at the annual general meeting for disaffiliation 91, abstentions 5, against 0)

In 1996, the group changed its name to the present one. There were rumours that the national U3A would sue us for continuing to use their title.

Apparently, the Saga holiday group were paying for the University of the Third Age name and logo to be turned into a trademark. Huddersfield informally changed their name but when no legal action appeared they changed it back.

Dewsbury decided to change the name and notified the Charity commission of this.

By 1992, there were 770 members and these numbers have fluctuated throughout the decades. One year, it was reported that there were 579 ladies and 161 gentlemen. Membership fees were £3 p.a. and class fees £3 per 10-week term. For the first 15 years or so, the majority of enrolling was done in one day in the Exchange Hall of Dewsbury Town Hall. All tutors were expected to attend to enrol their own class. Trustees took the money for membership and handed out membership cards and then people moved on to enrol at a class. It appears that fewer tutors were attending so there were not enough people to enrol, therefore the system we use now, with a few tweaks, was adopted.

At first Kirklees Council offered us free use of rooms in their buildings but, after 5 years, they decided that we would be charged room hire, though at a lower rate as we were a charity. We were given a grant of £2,000 for two years and this was on the understanding that we should publicise Kirklees sponsorship in our leaflets and invite someone from the council to our events. The grants reduced and eventually stopped. At one time, we had free use of a room in the Fire Station on Huddersfield Road and recently we have had free use of a room in Mirfield and Dewsbury libraries.

In the 1990s, a number of classes held their own exhibitions in libraries etc. In the late 1990s, annual exhibitions and craft fairs were held in the Exchange Hall. Craft items were sold and we received 10% of money received. However, there is a record of having to pay £25 to the council for a sellers' licence. An exhibition in 1990 resulted in over 200 new members.

During this time, there was a thriving social committee who arranged events and also day trips and it was very successful but, as their committee members left, it was hard to replace them. It left a small group planning a few events and lunches and, later, annual 3-4 days holidays. These were popular and the lunches only stopped 2 years ago due to the lack of an organiser. It would be good to be able to provide these activities again but we do not have the full quota of trustees which would be needed to take on other event planning.

Where we now plan exhibitions and concerts, the committee in the 1990s was more imaginative: Pot Pourri, Dance Extravaganza and an afternoon soiree

were some of the events. They all had a tombola or raffle. Two words stood out to me as I read through the old minutes. They kept cropping up again and again: “flowers” and “wine”. Every time someone was in hospital, flowers were sent. One gentleman received a plant in a pot when he returned home! The drink provided at these various social entertainments was also a glass of wine free with your £1 entry. I can understand the lack of flowers as they are not appreciated in hospital now but not sure why we have replaced the wine with tea and coffee.

In 1996, there was a report of members of Butlin’s Red Coats attending a meeting of the Sequence Dancing class. They gave a talk and showed slides. This event was open to all members. Butlin’s donated £40 towards the refreshments.

One quote in the minutes from the social committee: “It has been noted that the musical “Blood Brothers”, which is our October outing, contains strong language. This should be brought to people’s attention when booking, as we have no wish to offend members’ sensitivities”.

During the 1990s, annual meetings were held between the local disaffiliated groups of Huddersfield, Brighouse, Halifax and Cleckheaton. These had stopped by the time I took on the Chairperson role in 2011. Once disaffiliated, the groups had to find their own insurance and until 2013 the 4 groups shared a policy. We then found that it did not offer quite what we wanted. We now have our own insurance policy.

Into this century and one official who worked very hard was the Publicity Officer. The “Dewsbury Reporter” and other local newspapers still featured local group activities, accepted articles and used to send a photographer. This has been another good source of information. It took a few years to establish a choir, searching for a conductor and pianist. Huddersfield University, Leeds College of Music and Bretton College were all contacted for help. Radio Leeds were also contacted to try and find us a tutor for the Yorkshire Dialect class.

It was reassuring to read that, since they first started, summer classes have been a financial concern, as they are now. They have taken up much committee meeting time over the decades. At one time, summer class members had to be self-supporting, which did increase fees for a few.

In 2002, the annual dinner started and that continued for over 10 years. One year monthly quizzes were run, successful at first but then numbers dwindled and they were stopped after a year. In the 2000s we got the use of Oakwell Hall free for our annual exhibition (paid for heating) and also individual classes held their own exhibitions, including Patchwork in 2005 and Photography in 2008. Now we have to pay.

A website was set up about 20 years ago and this has been developed as technology has changed. We also make much more use of emails and use our phone “packages” whenever possible if we have to make phone calls. This has made a big deduction in our telephone calls and postage bills. About fifteen years ago, digital projectors were bought for the Photography and Local History classes, though they are available to be used occasionally by other groups or at exhibitions. We have had information stalls at various fairs and festivals. It is amazing how many people have still not heard of us.

In 2013, I first found the statement in Minutes saying that older people were leaving the classes and not enough younger people were joining to replace them. It was suggested this is due to the increased retirement age for women and many grandparents having childminding responsibilities for their grandchildren.

We have had to produce more policies as the world in which we live in changes. These included safeguarding, equality and diversity and data protection added to those which already existed. A policy group of trustees was set up to create these policies and to regularly check and update all our policies, when needed.

In 2020, we had our biggest challenge in COVID. The serious concerns started just after our Spring Term ended but we did go ahead with our exhibition at Oakwell Hall and a first aid course run by the British Red Cross. The following week came lockdown and all summer classes were cancelled. As we are a registered charity, committee meetings of the trustees had to go ahead. We were grateful for the guidance of the Charity Commission and the National Council of Voluntary Organisations, of which we are a member. We became “experts” at zoom and even held that year’s Annual General Meeting by zoom.

There were no face-to-face classes in 2020-21 though the photography class held fortnightly competitions by zoom. We even got used to having a zoom coffee break! One art class and the book club met less frequently by zoom.

When we came to discuss returning in 2021, we knew that we could not afford to run half-size classes as, obviously, room hire would not be half price. We had a phased return from August -October 2021. Members were asked to obtain a negative lateral flow test before attending a class and this resulted in few transmissions of infections through classes. Due to an increase in cases over Christmas, some classes delayed starting in 2022. By October 2022 we were running normally, though a few classes did not return for a number of reasons and membership was down by about 200. Numbers have slowly increased and we have been happy to welcome many new members but, sadly, each year some existing members are unable to return. Our membership is now just under 500. We are confident we can continue.

In 2023, we started working with Huddersfield Town AFC Foundation, who were looking to set up classes for adults in Kirklees to improve their health. We arranged a meeting and we now have a successful class running in Thornhill Lees entitled "Exercise for the over 50s". At first, they provided a qualified leader and paid the room hire. They still provide the leader but we pay for the room hire. The class is full at the time of writing with a short waiting list.

It is impossible to mention the hundreds of people who have volunteered over the decades, though two have just retired recently after 30 years. Many more have been volunteers for over 20 years and we enjoy welcoming new tutors.

I have enjoyed reading through the old minutes; some things have changed but the enthusiasm continues.

Sandra Bligh

Chairperson