

the northern line

the magazine of north london U3A issue 85 April 2024

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- **The editors may shorten or otherwise amend articles to fit spacing and style requirements.**

Editorial

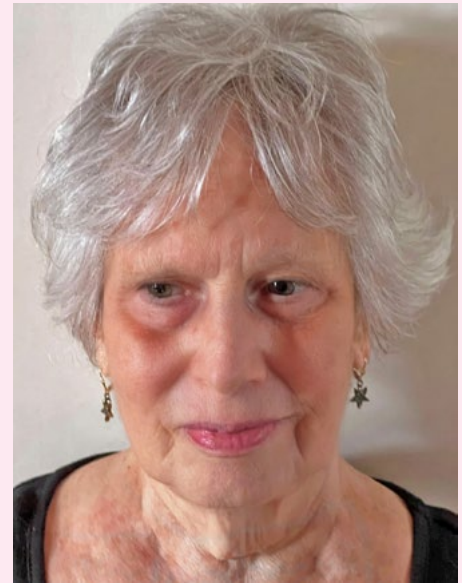
U3A is not Age UK. That organisation is a charity that campaigns for the rights and welfare of elderly persons. It achieves good things, but not everybody in U3A is 'elderly', and we don't campaign. Nor is U3A Saga, which is a commercial establishment that sells holidays, insurance and more to 'over-50s'. U3As are open to everybody, over or under 50, who is not in full-time work, and it doesn't try to sell anything to anyone.

So what is it? The U3A was founded in 1982 as the University of the Third Age, which its creators saw as a time of life when people are free to undertake learning for its own sake rather than for exams and qualifications, because job and family-raising responsibilities are largely over. (Unless you're a grandparent, that is, whose

offspring can't afford the cost of childcare, but that's another story.)

There are over 1,000 U3As throughout the UK, with nearly 400,000 members. All are autonomous units which operate independently while bound to the principles of the Third Age Trust. All are based on mutual learning in peer-to-peer interest groups: 'learners' teach and 'teachers' learn. As Keith Richards said in a recent letter to the Guardian, this 'makes it even more radical than the Open University'.

In this issue, Keith Richards celebrates the 30th birthday of NLU3A, of which he was a co-founder, with a personal reflection. We look at the groups that have continued operating on Zoom even though the restrictions of the pandemic have ended. And Annabel



Ripin tells her life story, which includes careers as a croupier and an equestrian

Happy reading!
LENI GREEN
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Cover photograph by Barry Davies of autumn in Hyde Park. People used to enjoy horse riding there, as described by Annabel Ripin in her article on page 8.

As I see it

Regrets... I have a few... **Patricia Isaacs** reflects

IF. Such a short word but one full of tremendous potential. Have you ever considered how different your life might have been IF you had done something different, IF this hadn't happened, IF that had come about, IF you had gone to a different school, IF you had chosen a different best friend in your teenage years?

The possibilities are endless. It can be an interesting thought process to think about the life you might have lived, the way in which you would have dealt with the good things and the less good, the different decisions you could – and perhaps should – have made.

When, like me, you are a very long way past middle age (whatever number that

is nowadays), there are inevitable regrets alongside the happy memories, the good things achieved; there are doubts, perhaps, about the road best taken or the path best avoided. It might be insightful to write a brief memoir for your own eyes, even if no one else will ever see it. Looking carefully at aspects of your life and wishing you had done things differently can, in fact, help you to see that it was a pretty good life for the most part, and then you won't waste your precious third age on regrets.

Even so, there are times when I wish I had done things in another way, or had listened to advice, or had taken that road less travelled.



Would my life have been harder, better, more satisfying?

If only !

PATRICIA ISAACS IS A PAST CHAIR OF NLU3A

The zoomies

There are no more lockdowns, and restrictions on meeting in person are long gone. So we're all back to face-to-face meetings. 'Not so!' say the groups that have chosen to carry on meeting on Zoom. On the next pages some of their coordinators tell us why.

Zoom is the only good thing to come out of the pandemic: it allows me, in my 90s, to participate!

Keith Richards

Carpe diem (Latin)

Sandra Golding

Zoom is convenient: you can do other things before and after the session. We don't have to carry books on London Transport, and you can log in from anywhere if you're not at home. We meet weekly on Zoom, but to suit everybody we also get together fortnightly for two hours in a local café or pub.

Zoom takes up an hour a week. We work hard

– we are using the Cambridge Latin Course series. We translate from Latin into English and discuss the grammar.

Meeting in person for two hours may be more fun, but the whole afternoon is gone. And having a cuppa, a chat and a few jokes doesn't leave much time for conjugating verbs!

Friday Film Group

Marta Brown

We watch films individually and try to agree on one or two, one in the cinema and one on a streaming platform. Any member can volunteer something they've seen and thought worthwhile. We get some good suggestions that way. And TV gets a look in, too.

There is no appetite to change from Zoom as it works well for this group and members have now arranged other activities around it. Also, there are transport inconveniences in going to other members' houses.

History Without Borders

Christine Barnard

Zoom has many advantages. It's more social: we chat before and after sessions; everyone can be seen and heard; less mobile members can attend. It's practical: maps, photos, etc are easily shared on screen; transcripts can be emailed and sessions recorded for review. Technical know-how isn't required, but help is readily available.

We don't miss the meeting room, where nobody stayed to chat, handouts had to be printed and maps or books with illustrations brought in. We still meet up regularly for tea or lunch.



Dance

Margaret Sutton

We have met weekly throughout the year on Zoom since the lockdowns. A member who has discovered a talent as a disc jockey uses the internet to source lively dance music from the 50s and 60s. We dance around our living rooms for 45 minutes and leave time at the end for a chat. It's a friendly, sociable group; it gives us an opportunity to do some exercise – and it's fun. Members include people who are unable to get to meetings for various reasons: caring responsibilities, health, mobility issues. We don't have a teacher, and we have chosen not to learn steps. We just move to the music and improvise, and we all feel better at the end of the session.

History: A Sideways Look

Michael Johns

Throughout lockdown, our group worked successfully with papers circulated by email and a discussion held a week later on Zoom. During that period, some of our members had lost mobility and others had joined who would not find it easy to travel to our base. So we decided to stay on Zoom rather than lose those members. No-one argued for returning to face-to-face, though we did decide to have regular social lunches for those who can make it. Nor has it deterred new members: people have been able to join discussions from the north of England and even Buenos Aires.

Modern and Contemporary Literature

Ann Bracken

Members participate in our meetings by reading aloud the prose and poems we have chosen and discussing them – activities which are suited to Zoom. We are a small group (having lost members since 2020), so the medium works well.

We meet every two weeks regardless of term times, which is an advantage. There is obviously

a different ambience from meeting in person, but unfortunately, this is physically impossible for some members even though preferred. Rain, cold, feeling under par ... no problem! We can meet on Zoom. A great bonus four years after Covid lockdown 'shut us down'.

We now use the NLU3A Zoom link and know how fortunate we are to have access to that facility.

Italian and Creative Writing

Anna Lowenstein

Before the pandemic our Italian group used to meet in a pub, but this was not the ideal environment for a language group as it was quite noisy. When the pandemic started, we discovered Zoom. Since we usually read magazine articles, I was able to share them onscreen instead of photocopying them.

After the pandemic, most of us preferred to continue on Zoom. Apart from the fact that it was quieter and more convenient at home, several people appreciated the fact that they did not have to spend time travelling to the meetings.

I noticed, however, that the people who lived

alone were keener to go back to face-to-face meetings, while those who had a partner preferred to meet over Zoom.

I also coordinate the Creative Writing group. We've had exactly the same experience as the Italian group. Before the pandemic, we used to meet in a pub, which was rather a noisy environment, especially for reading our pieces out loud. Since the pandemic we've continued to hold our meetings online. However, every few months we go out for lunch in a local restaurant – this is a purely social event, which satisfies people's desire to meet in person from time to time.

Who do you think you are?

Peter Cox

This is a family history group, and Zoom is ideal if there are more than two participants because it's easier to see a shared screen of pages from online searching aids such as Ancestry. We'd never go back to face-to-face. Of course it saves money too. I do have face-to-face one-to-one sessions when starting someone off though.

Interested in learning online with people from U3As in other areas? IGO (Interest groups online) is a national U3A learning community that gives you the opportunity to join U3A groups online without having to leave your home. Find out more from [U3A.org.uk/igo](https://www.u3a.org.uk/igo)

Photography

Martin Goldman

Zoom works well for us because we can share screens and thus show images to the group. We are also able to subject material to editing software, and we can demonstrate and teach in a way that is much more difficult in a live situation.

We had lost a number of members to the Covid pandemic, and we were informed that we had insufficient members to be permitted a rented venue. On Zoom we don't have to worry about numbers, but if we do expand, Zoom can accommodate.

Once a month we gather somewhere in London for a live shoot. We may revert to a hall meeting if the situation changes, but for the moment we enjoy not having to fiddle with projectors and screens and setting up chairs and tables.

Reading Shakespeare

Peter Fraser

When I joined the group in 2021, Zoom was already in full swing. There was limited enthusiasm for restoring physical meetings, and we have settled on Zoom permanently.

No-one has to travel, and it's easier for people to join and leave if they have other commitments. There is no necessity for a member to offer a physical venue, or for the organisation to pay for one. And it is easier for me to keep the materials at hand, which allows me to manage the sessions.

However: it is always better to meet people in person rather than rely on screens. Although we are a reading rather than an acting group, physical readings offer more non-verbal information. And also, we are full...

I would be delighted with physical meetings, but I think the group thrives better on Zoom.

Time rediscovered

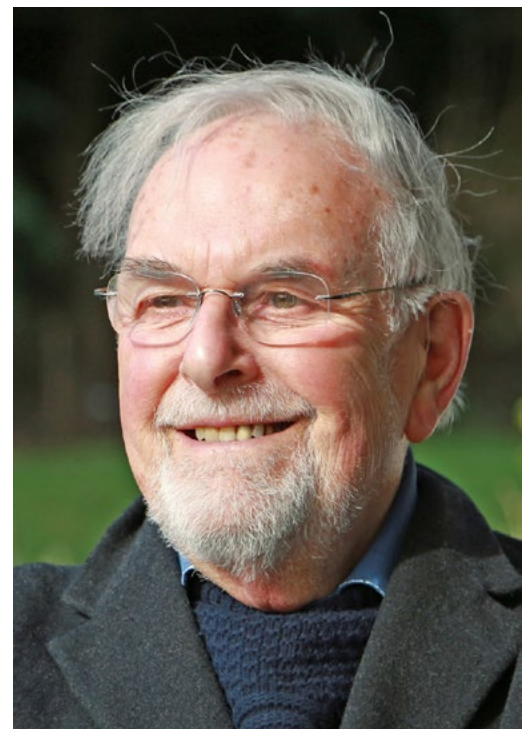
Keith Richards reflects on the 30 years of NLU3A

The year 1994 was an ominous one. The dread word 'retirement' was making itself heard. I was enjoying my work, absorbed in a new programme at the University of Westminster. Mature students could construct their individual degree programme from the hundreds of modules available in four faculties. Crucially they could gain substantial credit from presenting a folio of their experiential learning (APEL – the Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning).

I often reflect that NLU3A began with two deaths – one actual, one metaphorical. A very close colleague in the department died and I wrote to her brother,

Peter Laslett of Trinity College, Cambridge. Our correspondence developed on the subject of lifelong learning and he invited me to lunch at Trinity.

Peter was one of the three founders of the U3As in this country and, as I left, he threw his book, *A Fresh Map of Life*, into my car. My view of 'retirement' as a bereavement began to fade when I started reading. That week I wrote to the office of the Third Age Trust, then situated in someone's bedroom in south London, asking if anyone in the Finchley/Highgate area had enquired about the U3A. They sent me 20 contacts



and I wrote to them all. Six answered. We met in my office in Westminster and dreamed up a 'North London U3A'.

I think I am the only one of those pioneers still alive. How we worked! There was no money available but I attended the conference and AGM of the Third Age Trust at Swansea University that year. Knowing no one, all was bewilderment but I made valuable contacts and was given advice and even a named member of the national executive. One of 'the six' was a member of the management team at Lauderdale House and he got us a booking for an inaugural meeting and the possibility of hiring some rooms at a peppercorn rent.

Publicity was sparse and tended to be word of mouth. I remember attending a concert at the Wigmore Hall and being reprimanded by a man in the next seat for reading my score (Bach cello suites) during the performance. We met at the next concert and when I told him about our plans for a new U3A, he said: 'I think my wife would be interested in that.' She ended up writing our first constitution!

On a drizzly June day we met at Lauderdale House and began arranging a few chairs. I stood at the door and said 'No-one will come' but gradually they did. I remember nervously explaining the peer group learning principles; anyone could be the 'teacher' as we all brought to the table so much 'experiential learning'. Slowly six possible groups emerged, mostly in the homes of the coordinators (the word 'teacher' disappeared very quickly).

We formed a committee of six and recruited a secretary and treasurer. Groups seemed to just 'happen' and by the time I had retired we were ready for another



Lauderdale House saw the beginnings of our U3A

meeting. This was large and impressive. Members who were to become future luminaries of NLU3A emerged, one becoming a groups organiser and doubling the number of groups and venues.

U3A in London (known to many as Belsize Park U3A) then began to notice us and I was brusquely summoned to their

*My view of 'retirement'
as a bereavement
began to fade*

committee to explain myself and North London U3A. Where was it and did I know that U3A in London 'served' the whole of the capital and was the third U3A to be founded in the UK? They were formidable people but they later became close friends. I am still a member of both U3As.

Now we are 30 years old, have survived a pandemic, and members as tottery as I am can contribute through Zoom. I occasionally survey the whole movement with sadness as some U3As actually call themselves 'clubs' and resemble gatherings of social support for 'old people'

rather than educational groups. Recently the trust itself coupled its proposal for the annual capitation fee with the state pension. But there was never a chronological age requirement; the third age was a time in life when education was sought for its own sake. The founders were also involved in the establishment of the Open University. I consider our movement the more radical because of the peer group learning.

One of my first North London groups read the whole of Proust's *In Search of Lost Time* with crucial contributions from doctors, French speakers, psychoanalysts – an education. I have embarked on this again in U3A in London, this time slowly and analytically. We have just started Book 4. I will not be around to write a NLU3A 60th year article but may survive to 'find time again' in Proust's seventh and final volume.

KEITH RICHARDS IS A FORMER
CHAIR OF THE THIRD AGE TRUST
AND A FOUNDING MEMBER AND
PAST CHAIR OF NLU3A

Casting light on the committee

Ever wondered what the NLU3A committee does? Well, these were the main questions at our first meeting of 2024

How are membership numbers going?

Quite well – subscription renewals are up on last year.

How are our funds doing?

A small deficit over the last 12 months, but it's manageable within our reserves.

How can we change our website to make it easier to update, while keeping it looking good and easy for members to access information?

A major project that's still a work in progress.

Should we change the software we use to circulate our newsletter (MailChimp) to a free version?

We'll have a trial run soon.

What events should we run during the next few months?

Welcome meetings for new members, tea for group coordinators, summer tea for all members to mark our 30th anniversary, and hopefully a full summer programme of walks, talks and more.

What external events should we get involved in to help with publicity?

East Finchley Festival and others still being researched.

How are we getting on with booking speakers for forthcoming monthly meetings?

The programme to the end of 2024 is nearly complete.

If you'd like to find out more, you are welcome to see the minutes relating to any topics you are interested in. We are also always happy to welcome observers at our meetings – where tea, coffee and fancy biscuits are always available!

Want to come along? Email me at chair@nlu3a.org.uk

And of course, we continue to need more people behind the scenes to help with activities like these and others, so if you'd like to get involved, we'd love to hear from you.

MICHAEL JOHNS
CHAIR

From gambling to gambolling

Annabel Ripin recounts her journey through various careers



I grew up in the English countryside with horses, dogs and cats – an idyllic childhood. But when I was 12, my mother ran off with a bouncer and my dad, who was American, sent me and my younger brother to live in the US with his sister.

I was almost a teenager and teenage girls exchange horses for boys and parties. America offered such delights as bowling alleys,

diners, ice cream sodas, drive-in movies – and importantly – central heating. Never had a chilblain again!

After college, I became a fashion designer as I'd always sewed my own clothes and earned enough to return to my beloved England.

But I didn't really like fashion, so I answered a newspaper advert which said to turn up at the Golden Nugget Casino on



Annabel on Portia

Shaftsbury Avenue. They were hiring croupiers! I had no idea what that meant, but I trained and passed my test. I worked on American roulette and loved being a dealer. It wasn't like work at all – except for the late hours.

In those days – early 70s – there was no limit on working hours, so if a punter came in at 3am we had to keep the table open until he left. I never looked at people's faces: I knew them by their hands and the rings on their fingers. The clients, all superstitious, would throw their chips on the table and say:

'My regular bets please', and we dealers always knew what their favourite numbers were. One woman would only play at my table as she said I was lucky for her. One night at closing time, the Lebanese police chief walked in with all his bodyguards and we had to reopen the table. It was 5am before I left!

Leading a night life is fascinating. You end up going to late-night clubs which are only a door in a wall and you knock three times to be let in – exciting to a 20-something girl. One night a few of us went to a swanky

casino in Mayfair. Someone knew someone else who let us in to gamble. I lost my meagre few pounds quickly, but I was fascinated by the big players, one of whom threw me £50 to play with. I stayed late, made £150 and went home an ecstatic girl!

Gambling is a mug's game. The house always wins. Advice: if you start to lose, walk away. Or decide how much you want to win and stop there. Alas, I don't have any tricks on how to beat the bank.

It transpired that the manager of the club was stealing money, so it closed, and thus ended my croupier career. What to do? I was lucky again. I answered

another advert and turned up for an interview, looking chic and glamorous in a fur coat. They asked: 'Can you type?' Answer: 'Not really.' 'Can you work a switchboard?' 'No.' 'Can you send a Telex?' 'No.' Finally: 'Can you answer the phone?' 'Yes!' 'Perfect! We need a receptionist and you're hired.' So I worked for seven years for the Library of Imperial History. It was run by an eccentric man who would take his staff to Ascot in a Rolls Royce and give us spending money. Eventually, due to his prolific

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spending, the bailiffs turned up and so ended another career.

Then I joined the Civil Service Riding Club and started riding again. I rode in Hyde Park and loved reconnecting with horses. But disaster befell: a developer wanted to buy the mews where they were stabled. What to do with the horses? Someone had the brilliant idea of asking the Queen if she had any spare stabling in the Royal Mews. Amazingly, she said yes and gave us enough space for our horses. We felt so special riding out of those gates in smart jackets, boots and jodhpurs.

Passers-by took our pictures. We navigated through busy traffic – Hyde Park Corner, which had no traffic lights then, was an ordeal – until we reached the park.

Occasionally, we would hold small horse shows in Kensington

Gambling is a mug's game. The house always wins.

Gardens, with dressage, show-jumping and the odd race. Once a year we would take the horses to Richmond Park, where they went mad at seeing all that space. They loved their day out and wanted to

gallop the whole time – tricky if you had a strong horse!

Eventually the club closed and the horses had to be moved again. By then most people had had enough of riding in London. Some bought their favourite horse and moved to the country. Some quiet horses went to the Disabled Riding Association.

Then life turned tame: I met my partner and our daughter was born. My last working years were with British Telecom. The 20 years there flew by and I thank heavens that I ended up with a sensible job with a good pension.

It's ok to laugh at the Catholic church!

Francis Beckett on the biting satire of Tom Lehrer, which he has incorporated into a new play

In 1959 Tom Lehrer's songs burst into my stifling Jesuit boarding school like a clown in a cathedral. Lehrer's hard satirical edge did not reach Britain until *Beyond the Fringe* burst on the London stage in the early sixties.

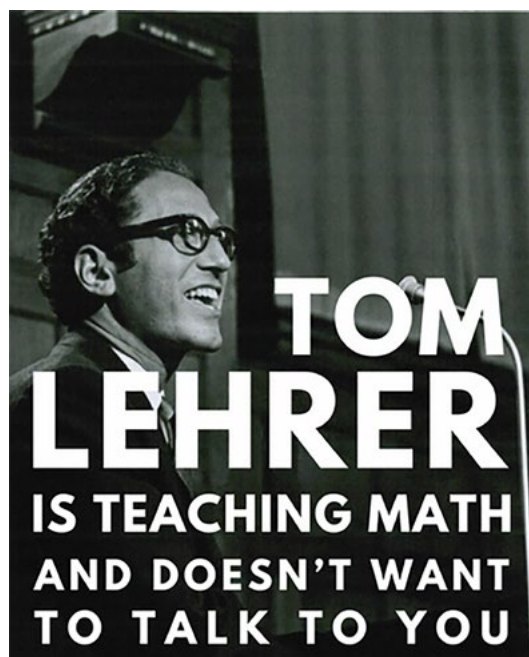
With *The Vatican Rag*, Lehrer taught me the liberating lesson that it was OK to laugh at the Catholic Church. ('Two, four, six, eight, Time to transubstantiate.') Nuclear weapons filled him with fear and anger, expressed in *We Will All Go Together When We Go*: 'There will be no more misery When the world is our rotisserie.'

But the left wasn't allowed the comfortable illusion that it owned him. Every so often he turned round and bit it. 'You have to

admire people who sing [protest] songs. It takes a certain amount of courage to get up in a coffee-house or a college auditorium and come out in favour of the things that everybody else in the audience is against, like peace and justice and brotherhood and so on.'

He sang in a sub-Dylan whine: 'We are the folk song army. Every one of us cares. We all hate poverty, war, and injustice, Unlike the rest of you squares.'

He is a great Gilbert & Sullivan fan, constantly referencing them, and his masterpiece derives from G&S. It's simply the names of all the chemical elements,



sung to the tune of the Major General's song from *The Pirates of Penzance*: 'There's antimony,

arsenic, aluminum, selenium,
And hydrogen and oxygen and
nitrogen and rhenium...'

In 1960, at the height of his fame, he gave it all up, and spent the rest of his working life as an obscure maths lecturer. He stopped doing live performances, and only wrote songs for special occasions.

Later he famously said that when Henry Kissinger got the Nobel Peace Prize it made satire redundant. But that is not why he stopped – Kissinger did not get the prize until 1973, by which time Lehrer had already retreated into as much obscurity as his fans allowed.

So last year I suggested to Upstairs at the Gatehouse in Highgate Village, which has been a home for my last two plays, that I write an exploration into why he gave it up, weaving into the narrative as many of his greatest songs as possible.

I researched his life and work. It turns out that *Bright College Days* comes from the Yale University song *The Whiffenpoof* (that'll be in the show.) And *It Makes A Fellow Proud To Be A Soldier* contains the lines: 'Now, Fred's an intellectual, brings a book to every meal. He likes the deep philosophers, like Norman Vincent Peale.' Peale, I

now find, was Donald Trump's philosophical mentor, the Trump family's pastor, widely known as 'God's salesman'.

Tom Lehrer is Teaching Math and Doesn't Want to Talk to You will be at Upstairs at the Gatehouse in Highgate Village from May 28 to June 9. Tickets from <https://upstairsatthegatehouse.ticketsolve.com/ticketbooth/shows/1173651988/> events/428642359 or telephone 020 8340 3488.

Summer term monthly meetings

These take place at St Margaret's United Reformed Church, Victoria Avenue, N3 1BD, usually on the second Monday of the month. Doors open at 10am, when refreshments are served. Meetings start at 10.45.

13 May: Where do novelists get their ideas from?

Author of five novels Bobbie Darbyshire will explain how the worlds of character, location, plot and subplot arrive in a novelist's mind.



10 June: The Shtetl

Roger Filer (a retired theatre managing director) will give an illustrated presentation on the Shtetl, which for centuries was the traditional way of life of East European Jews.



8 July:

Eleanor Levy will give a talk on **Edward the Confessor**. Further information to follow.

The summer term runs from 15 April to 19 July. Holidays which might affect meeting venues are: Passover, Monday 22 to Wednesday 30 April; bank holidays 6 and 27 May.

