



THE UNIVERSITY OF THE THIRD AGE

THE FIRST 10 YEARS IN KNOLE U3A



At the start

Magda Sweetland, Chairman 2009-2014

The launch of Knole U3A took place at the Community Centre in Sevenoaks on Monday, 6th July 2009. It was well attended, and the new members were able to pay their subscription on the day and also join the new Study Groups. One advantage of being a second generation U3A was that the newcomers already knew a fair bit about the running of the organisation and there was a good spirit of volunteering from the beginning.

However, the origins of this U3A predated that first public meeting. In January 2009, the Sevenoaks U3A committee decided to recruit on a 'one out: one in' basis and to offer membership in future only to those with a postcode of TN13, 14 and 15, cap its membership at 885 and suggested the set up of a new U3A. This is a requirement of the Charity Commission, so that the organisation maintains an open-door policy. Those on the Sevenoaks waiting list were given the choice of waiting for a vacancy to appear, or of joining the new U3A.

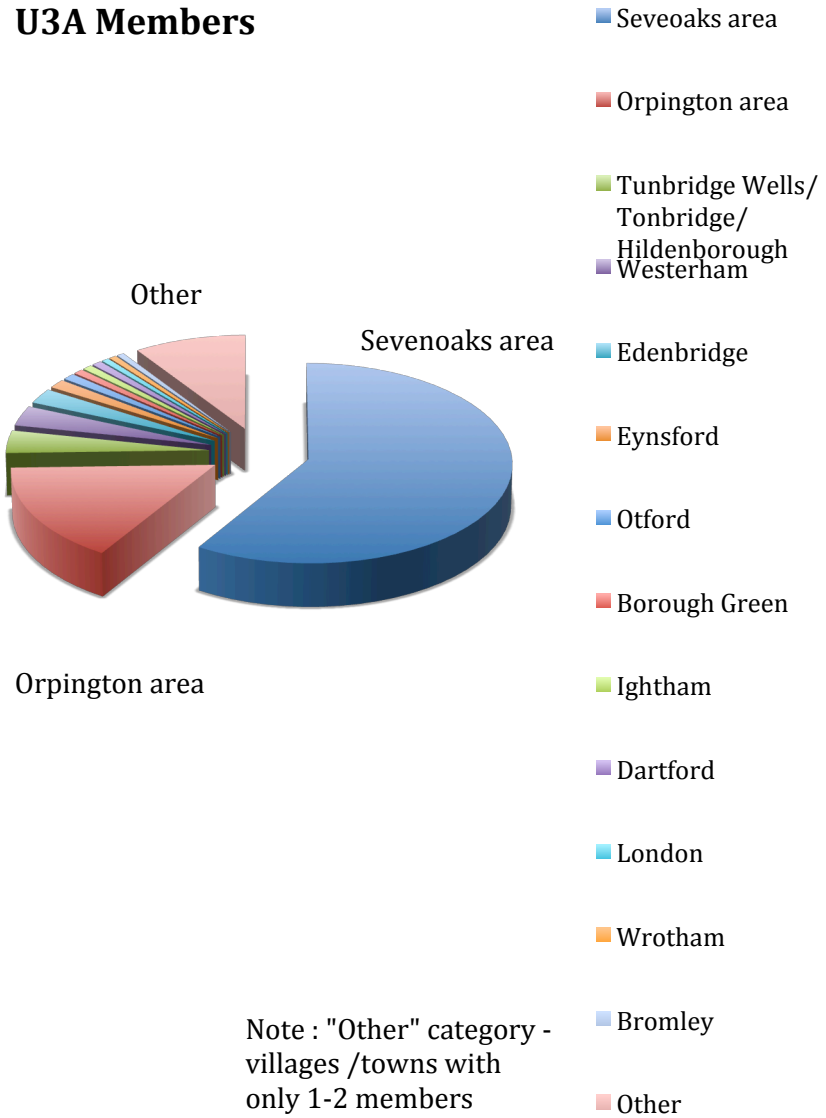
The majority of these new members came from the Sevenoaks postcodes, but one of the characteristics of Knole from the beginning was that members came from far afield, Orpington, West Kent, the Darenth Valley and even further away. Some were already a member of another U3A but were attracted by a specific subject that Knole offered, or by being in at the beginning and the promise of getting to know a new group of people.



A London Walks Group make a friend

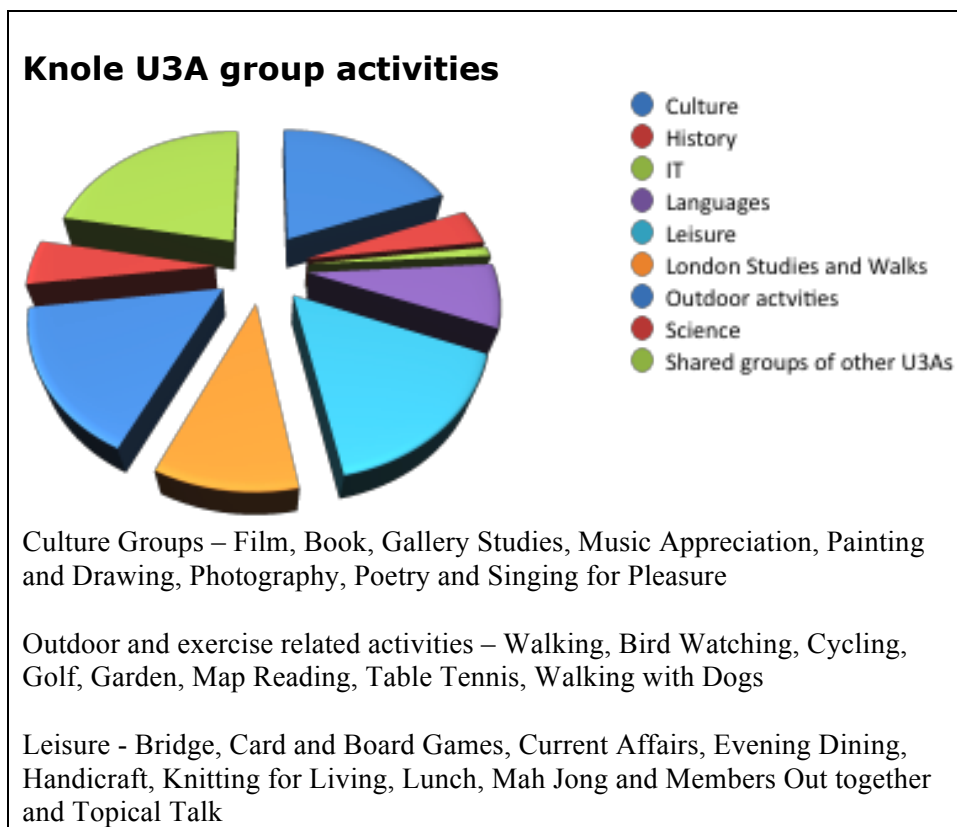
By the time of our birthday celebrations we had over 500 members (~ 70% women and 30% men). Most of us come from the towns and villages within a ten-mile radius of Sevenoaks High Street - Edenbridge to the west, Borough Green to the east, Tunbridge Wells to the south, and the Orpington area to the north. A few members come from much further away from west London, Dartford, Leatherhead, Gravesend and Folkestone. For some of our shared Groups we have fellow U3A friends also coming from some distance away such is the popularity of our activities! See page 3 for a chart of the membership distribution for Knole.

Geographic spread of Knole U3A Members



Study Groups

All U3As share the same basic format, with a Monthly Meeting, plus occasional Social Events, but the main focus is the Study Groups on subjects that are chosen by the members, and run by them. Knole is lucky to have a high ratio of subjects relative to the membership, nearly 1 in 6 whereas the national average is 1 in every 10 members. They also cover a very wide circle of interests - see the pie chart below.



Within a few months of our U3A starting, we had initiated 30 groups embracing a range of leisure cultural and academically focussed activities. We now have a diverse range of 75 groups up and running, with several more at

the planning stage. Many U3As twice the size of Knole, have fewer groups for their members to participate in, and often with a far narrow range of activities. We are very fortunate to have a high proportion of our members prepared to lead these groups and many members prepared to assist the group contacts in the running of the groups. We are also fortunate to have a great mix of academic, leisure and cultural activities represented, which provide many opportunities for our members to develop new skills, interests and broaden their social contacts in retirement (and some of us in semi retirement!). We also have developed very good contacts with a few local U3As, providing access to a further 22 groups, and we are exploring the scope for sharing more activities with them (notably Sevenoaks, Westerham and Edenbridge U3As) in the future.



The Computer Group at work

The dynamism we now see in Knole was the result of the enthusiasm of the early members, and particularly of the steering committee that met for the first time in March 2009 and started the work of the Study Groups, and the administration of the U3A under the aegis of National Office.

Here are the impressions of some of the members of that first committee:

Lionel Parks, Treasurer 2009-2014

In 2009, my interest in continuing my Arabic studies, after several happy years working in the Middle East, led me to a search on the Internet and amazingly to discover that Sevenoaks U3A had an Arabic group.

My initial enthusiasm was quickly dampened however, when I was informed Sevenoaks had capped its membership, and so I was not able to join the group.

Then out of the blue, I had a phone call from Magda Sweetland, the then progressive and proactive President of Sevenoaks U3A, to ask if I would work with a few other frustrated applicants to start a new U3A in the Sevenoaks area. Naturally I said yes!

And so it was, in late spring 2009, a small group of enthusiastic and willing people came together for the first time in Magda's sitting room and, under her guidance, started planning a new U3A group. After much discussion of a name, I suggested that, with Knole House on our doorstep, what could be more appropriate, and so it was adopted.

They say that the U3A is about personal development . . . well I have to say, after Magda asked me, 'with your business experience, how would you like to be the Treasurer' and I said, 'Well OK,' it was a steep and wonderful learning experience that I wouldn't have missed for anything. Working closely on the steering committee with the other new recruits, who were equally feeling their way, was a very supportive and inspiring experience, and a lot of fun.



The Rusty Riders visit the seaside

Now, as a U3A member, I was able to join the Arabic group, made up of a small select few who, like me had spent time in the Middle East and were captivated by the language and its people.

Over the years since those halcyon days ten years ago, my enthusiasm for Knole has not diminished, indeed has grown . . . and I have

made lots of wonderful friends along the way. Since fully retiring, I have set up a couple of half day walks and also love the camaraderie of our Monthly Rusty Riders . . . yes that sums it up well! A big contrast from cycling up and down the mountain passes of my youth, but eminently enjoyable and much less demanding!

I am also especially active in the Industrial Heritage Group, putting my research background to good use in preparing talks on 'Water Mills along the Darent' and 'Rope making Past and Present.'

From those humble beginnings, who could have imagined we would grow to now be around 500 strong . . . and it is strong, because Knole U3A is an amazing organisation. It has been a privilege to help create it and it has truly become an important and valued part of my life . . . thank you.

Janet Willcox, Social Events Organiser 2009-2014

When I retired, I felt I needed to take the plunge, and wanted new challenges and to meet new people. Being a U3A member has been such an interesting and educational time for me. In spite of having lived in London all my childhood, I confess I was ignorant of the history around me. Joining the London Studies Group has taught me so much. For instance Leighton House, which used to be my library; I didn't appreciate the beauty of it, or know the significance of its name, relating to Lord Leighton, the Victorian artist. I am also in one of the Gallery Groups, as well as Mah Jong - a well-rounded programme!

Leading two walking groups has taught me how to read maps properly. I am afraid that in the beginning it was a little hit and miss! As the members of the half day Walking Group will remember, one day we were a little lost in the woods. I had to sort out where the sun was, turn the map round. Then no problem, we found our way home!

I have been the committee member for Social Events for some years. Our first task is to provide refreshments for the Monthly Meeting, which helps to cement the social side of the U3A, and we have a team which runs the Christmas Party, always a great success with fabulous home made dishes, and games or entertainment to break the ice. The U3A is full of like-minded people who come together to learn, to start with, but also have a very enjoyable time in each other's company. That makes for a great retirement!

John Stambollouian, Groups Co-ordinator and Vice-Chairman 2009

The thing I have most enjoyed about Knole U3A over the past decade has been the friendliness and enthusiasm of its members. Whether it has been discussing travel books, visiting innovative buildings, researching local history, struggling with Spanish or coping with disaster on the golf course, it has all been fun in the company of like-minded people who have enjoyed sharing the experience and supporting one another in a joint endeavour. It has been a great source of satisfaction to have the opportunity and encouragement to develop new interests and skills in retirement and also in watching others gain the confidence and fulfilment from having taken on and met new challenges in a safe and supportive environment.

Whenever I meet people from other U3As they share the same enthusiasm for what they are doing and for the fellowship of the groups to which they belong.

It is difficult to think of many other organisations which are so truly participative and bottom up – there is perhaps a lesson there for wider society.

Lesley Allum-Jolly, Membership Secretary 2009-2014

After retirement I wanted something to do that was challenging, new, varied and involved meeting new people. I had heard about U3A and subsequently put my name down on a waiting list to join Sevenoaks U3A.

I then had a phone call from Magda about starting up a new U3A in the town and subsequently found myself on the steering committee on Knole U3A. It was a steep learning curve but also exciting and stimulating. I have always enjoyed being part of things as they begin and then being able to watch them grow. The new steering committee became great colleagues and despite the hard work we had great fun – and I learnt a lot!



I am also the group contact for Amblers 1. I enjoy meeting people and organising things. Amblers is a very social group and the interesting thing about being the group contact is that you get to know the people in your group very well. We plan the year's walk over a pub lunch – usually in February when the weather is often too wet to walk.

A Knole walking group
approach journey's end

All I do is to organise their suggestions into a planner with all the details on and send everyone a copy. Everyone is responsive about being responsible for a walk just once a year. This involves them doing a reccy of the walk, sending out the email at the appropriate time to the rest of the group, organising the lunch stop and finally leading the walk on the day. They have all grown in confidence and any one of them could easily be the group contact.

As I was the membership secretary for five years, I kept the number of groups I was in fairly small – plus I have other hobbies outside U3A. Initially I joined the singing group and the Amblers. After a time, I exchanged the

singing group – which was great fun and very relaxing – for London Studies. I have also joined Mahjong and Card and Board Games.

First it's very unusual to find a group, which fits the varied interests of both male and female and also a wide age range. As some of you know, there was a time when both my husband and I, and my Father were all in Knole together but all doing very different things. Secondly, it's a great organisation to meet new people, learn new skills and have fun. There is such a wide and varied range of activities that it's impossible not to find something that interests you - and if you do, then there is the opportunity to start a new group as there is sure to be someone out there who shares the same interest as you – and I don't know any other organisation where that happens so easily.

Alan Heyes, Group Coordinator 2015-17, Vice chairman 2018 -

I joined Knole in September 2009 not long after it was first established, attracted by the range of activities offered even at an early stage in its development. After a few years as an academic I was attracted by the excellent mix of leisure, cultural and academically focused groups we were able to participate in. Those some 30 groups are now approaching 80, which works out at around a group per six members – not a bad statistic for a U3A just 10 years old!

After retiring completely in 2013, Magda soon tapped me on the shoulder asking if I would set up the Science Group and with some other willing helpers we were in business by October 2013. Since then we have managed to organise eight talks a year on a broad range of scientific and technical topics together with a good mix of technical visits. The Science Group continues ably looked after by Christine Walls.

As chair of the Science Group for a few years I was co-opted onto the Committee and soon became involved in the nitty gritty of helping to run a U3A. Some of this was fun, some frustrating, and some just very hard work!

Over the past ten years my enthusiasm for Knole has increased especially due to the many good friends I have made through participating in my Study Group activities. Some of the subjects such London Studies 1 and the Industrial Heritage Group have provided a good deal of intellectual stimulus that would be hard to find outside a U3A environment.

It would be difficult to imagine my post retirement life without the U3A.

Here are some comments by Group Contacts and others who have helped to organise events:

Pat Jones, Contact London Studies 1

I joined the fledgling Knole U3A in September 2009 and was asked to consider being the contact for a London Studies Group. Me.....from Yorkshire taking members to London. What did I know about London... not a lot!!!!

I decided to give it a try, as I wanted to do something new and out of my comfort zone.

Ten years later I have made many new friends, learnt an enormous amount about London, visited historic houses, seen wonderful feats of engineering and even had Christmas lunch in a prison and I'm still the contact for London Studies 1.

All things I wouldn't have done if I hadn't joined Knole U3A.



London Studies 1 brave the rain to tour the King's Cross development

Pam Button, Singing for Pleasure

The Singing for Pleasure group has been going for a very long time and it brings a great deal of happiness to a lot of U3A members many of whom are widows and they say they find Singing uplifting which makes us very happy.

We sing about 13 songs each session and the content is varied covering folk, jazz, popular and country songs plus show songs, which are particularly popular. We have two guitarists, a keyboard player and clarinet player to accompany the singers. We currently have approximately forty members.



The Singing for Pleasure Group enjoy a party between songs

Janet Austin

I have been part of Knole U3A since it began and have been running the Digital Manipulation Courses for the 1st, 2nd and 3rd year groups. I have also organised several Photographic competitions.

In 2011, I started the Story Telling group which continued for several years and in 2012 I formed Digital Camera 5 as a shared group with 3 other U3A's.

I am also a member of the Singing for Pleasure group which brings such a lot of joy and fun to me and many others.

The U3A experience has been and still is a fantastic journey, meeting many different members, learning new skills and sharing them.

I always sing the praises of Knole U3A.

Mike Willsher

I joined Knole U3A around September 2009. We had moved to Sevenoaks three years previously and I had been retired for about two years. Wendy joined a couple of years later, when she retired.

We still didn't know that many people in Sevenoaks and so joining the U3A seemed a good way of meeting people and generally getting involved.

My main contribution was through the Extramural committee and I organised some of the day outings with Wendy's assistance. Latterly Wendy took over receiving bookings for visits and seminars. A list of the various things that Extramural organised is impressive.

We have also been involved in London Studies, Village Studies, Half Day Walks and Rusty Riders. I am currently group contact for Half Day Walk 3.

We have benefited from U3A by keeping active and by making new friends.

Christine Walls

My job was satisfying and brought me into contact with scientists and doctors so I enjoyed a lot of stimulating company at work. I was nervous about retirement because although it would provide more time to pursue interests and see friends, living alone with no children or grandchildren, it was hard to see how it would match up to a full working life.

I joined Knole U3A a few months before retiring from part-time consultancy as a way to meet people and take part in groups such as walking and London Studies. What I did not expect was the range of interesting people I would meet and how I could use skills developed at work, which enabled me to contribute to Study Groups and to help run them.



The Science Group visit a nuclear power station

Reflections of the second chair of Knole

Amanda Birch – Knole Chair 2014 – 2018

Following Magda Sweetland’s first tour of duty as chair, Amanda Birch kindly agreed to chair Knole for the next four years. Here are her reflections of her time as chair.

“My four years as chairman proved to be a steep learning curve, considering I could barely spell “committee”, much less chair one, and it proved to be a productive and enlightening experience. I was blessed with a pro-active committee. Everyone helped bring about worthwhile changes to Knole but, in particular:

Andrew Dunk steered us through the choppy waters around the lifting of the membership cap, the amendment to the Constitution and incorporating Knole U3A as a registered charity. We now benefit from a steady flow of new members bringing their ideas and skills to the table.

Richard Teare spearheaded our membership of Beacon and I believe we are reaping the rewards, not least a smaller workload for our membership secretary and a choice of subscription payment methods for our members.

Carol Oakley and Rose Bates revamped our website and introduced us to the joy of mass e-mail. Our committee can communicate important announcements without having to wait for the next newsletter which is now circulated to most of our members via soft copy, effecting fiscal and environmental savings.

Alan Heyes worked extremely hard to develop a good relationship with local U3As and identify shared study groups and I much enjoyed forming a closer tie with Sevenoaks and arranging annual lunches with our committees at the White Hart. I also benefitted greatly from attending the Annual Conference and Kent Network meetings and sharing ideas on how other U3As operate. So here's to the next ten years!

Other Events

As Mike Willsher mentions above, Knole started an Extramural committee in 2010, the aim of which was to run day trips for members and also Seminars, and later it took on board the running of short five days holidays in the UK. The last were very successful, attracting around 45 members who enjoyed each other's company in coach tours that took in famous buildings, gardens, railways and beauty spots in Northumberland, North Wales and the West Country. Sandy Hull arranged these trips for five years and now they have been taken over by Margaret Thorpe and Christine Walls - and continue to be popular.

The day trips had the same agenda, and some of these were very memorable, either local like the Red House and Chiddingstone Castle, or to places further afield such as Waddesdon Manor and Eltham Palace.

The Seminars were a useful variant on afternoon talks: they were in depth presentations, with an extended question session. They often served as an introduction to a visit, an exhibition or a private property like Jack Kennedy's Japanese Garden in Sevenoaks.

The other advantage was that the Seminar audience was self-selecting, and so this was an ideal place to start off a new Study Group. The list of topics below gave rise to at least half a dozen new study groups, on Money Matters, Gallery Groups, Mediaeval History and Historic Buildings.

<p>18th Century painting: The Conversation Piece The Red House Dover Castle All Change in the Middle East? Financial Management Japanese Gardens The Cheapside Hoard</p>	<p>Pompeii and Herculaneum Looking at Paintings Art Deco and Art Nouveau Low stress Gardening Arts and Crafts at Standen The Huguenots in Kent Restoring Knole</p>
--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------	--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------

New U3As

At one time, the slogan from National Office was 'A U3A every ten miles.' Now it has become 'A U3A every five miles', as this is a reasonable distance for anyone to travel to a meeting or a Study Group. In 2013, two teams from Knole worked on the launch of first Westerham and then Edenbridge U3A. In 2015, Meopham U3A was launched. Each of these continues to grow and thrive, with a combined membership of around 500.

The way ahead

In a decade, Knole has seen considerable changes in the administration of the U3A, with additional record keeping that adds to the work of the committee and the Group Contacts. Social changes have also meant that the retirement age is later, 65+, so the new members are often looking for different activities but have less time at their disposal to enjoy them.

Grandparenting duties, care of ageing relatives, and part-time employment all eat into free time, so there are fewer members available to manage the increasing workload for each U3A.

However, the organisation continues to grow and provide an essential stimulus in to retirement, and an even more vital source of friendship and support. Knole U3A takes both of these aspects seriously and looks forward to continued expansion in the next decade.

To ensure we have a U3A that continues to meet the need of our members and provide a wide range of interesting and rewarding activities to participate in, we need volunteers to step forward and help run it. There are many ways you can do this - being part of the Committee or one of the teams supporting its work, running a group or just helping out at social events. Why not give it a go and help Knole develop and thrive for another 10 years!



London Studies 4 audition for a BBC new reader post!

Our thanks to those who have contributed to this account, and our apologies that space did not permit everyone to add some personal experience of Knole.