
EARLY DAYS OF PENRITH AND NORTH LAKES U3A

Following requests from those without access to the u3a website, each Early Days article will be published, with pictures, in the newsletter. For technical reasons and timings I have held over the item on Howard Simpson featured in the last issue. It can be seen on the website at <https://penrithandnorthlakesu3a.org.uk/early-days>.

John Upson - u3a member since 1996

John's Story:

John was taken by surprise when he entered the sports hall at Penrith Leisure Centre last year. He thought he had arrived for his usual game of Thursday afternoon table tennis but, instead, was presented with a glass tumbler etched with table tennis bats, not only to celebrate his 90th birthday, but to thank him for his contributions to Penrith & North Lakes u3a since it began in 1996. He also had the pleasure of us singing a slightly out-of-tune 'Happy Birthday' song to his musical ears!



John in his home



John, with daughter Rachel and his son Chris, together with Glyn on guitar, playing Irish Jigs to a delighted group of bridge players

The surprise was returned at one of the Bridge Club meetings, when John, accompanied by his daughter Rachel and son Chris, also on violin, with Glyn on guitar made an appearance to play 3 Irish jigs to an enthusiastic and delighted audience.

He went on to tell me that his first recollection of investigating how to run a group was of going down to Ullswater College to speak to someone from London u3a, who could advise and assist on how to set everything up.

As John had taught the violin for many years, and with his natural interest and knowledge of music, it seemed fitting for him to take on the role of Convenor for the Music Appreciation group, which he still runs today but, he explained that it was his late wife Mary who initially began it. It also happened to be the very first group to kickstart the new Penrith & North Lakes u3a, with 10 people attending John & Mary's home for it's debut, on Monday 3rd September, 1996 at 10am.

At the beginning, the group used to meet every week from Autumn to Spring, with a break over the summer months. The main aim of this group was, and still is, to provide interesting and informative material in the form of cd's, live performances at home and away, and a programme which is both challenging and interesting to enable people to engage in (as John puts it) 'semi-earnest' discussions of music. Trips to places such as Edinburgh and Glasgow and The Sage at Gateshead, as well as closer to home concerts in Penrith and Carlisle, and sometimes at John's home, are still organised for members to attend and enjoy live events.



John, seated at the back with a member of the Music Appreciation group holding a photograph of Mary, John's wife.

John retired in 1993, and whilst his wife was the Convenor for the Music Appreciation group, other people had expressed an interest in Bridge which both he, together with his late wife Mary, decided to set up, as they had knowledge of the game having previously played. In 1997 John and Mary formed the Bridge group which was, again, held at their home.

The Bridge group has evolved over time due to its popularity. It began with a mixed set, involving some people who could play and others, who had never played. With the standard and numbers of players rising over time, it is now in contact with other Bridge groups around the country. Because of this, the club is now only able to accept members who can already play. If people who have never played wish to join now, Mr Jon Begg teaches Bridge classes outside the u3a, and this enables any u3a member to subsequently join.

This group shares a positive attitude and forward-thinking approach as they decided to help members during COVID by providing an on-line Bridge club which was set-up for a Monday evening and, as it proved to be so successful, it has continued to be available on both Monday evenings and Friday afternoons, reaching out to people with less mobility, but who still enjoy playing. The on-line system used is called Real Bridge, which allows people to both play and chat. An excellent lifeline to many people.

Since the successful outcome of this on-line version, for u3a members, other groups are now looking to do the same, for example, Mike Head also ran a Play Reading group - but more about Mike and his group at a later date.....

John is still a very active u3a member, belonging to the Table Tennis group, Bridge Group and Convenor for the Music Appreciation Group. When I was visiting John I asked if he could play something for me on his violin. He very graciously obliged and treated me to a piece of music from The Gadfly by Shostakovich, it was very special.

Thank you John, for sharing your 'Early Days' story.

Sandy Wright - Publicity