

## OUR U3A: A BRIEF HISTORY

We are celebrating 2012 as the Silver Jubilee year of Welwyn Hatfield U3A because 1987 is the date on our Certificate of Affiliation; but in fact the first activities occurred during the preceding year. Val Fieth, a local government officer charged with planning activities for the over fifties, called three meetings of interested parties in March 1986. It was decided to hold weekly Wednesday meetings. These started on 16 April; twenty-six people attended. At first it was managed by Val for the Council. She got the programmes printed and arranged for sheltered accommodations to be used free.

We have a copy of the first term's programme, starting with a talk by a member of Harpenden U3A; Harpenden and Stevenage are the only Hertfordshire U3As to predate us. Just two study groups, French and Creative Writing existed at this early stage.

Happily, there are still connections with this early U3A. Val Fieth, having retired, is now a member, regularly attending Wednesday meetings. Joan Bensley, who was at the first meeting, still keeps in touch from her Hitchin retirement. The French group, meeting at Barndicot, has been tutored from the start by Jacqueline Sanger, who still continues in this capacity, with the group still meeting at the same place.

In June 1986, it was decided to appoint a steering committee, with Joan Bensley as Chairman. The programme for the second term shows a growing, more robust organisation. The range of topics for Wednesday meetings was broader and more like today's. Two more groups, Music Appreciation and Recorders had started. An interesting historical note is that the date of the summer garden party was changed because of the Royal Wedding; Andrew and Sarah Ferguson's.

Unfortunately, no programmes have

survived from then until 1988, so committee minutes and an attendance book are our only historical sources. In November 1986, the first formally constituted committee was elected, with Ann Sargent as Chairman. The subscription then was two pounds per term.

From early in 1987, discussions took place on our affiliating to the Third Age Trust. Our affiliation certificate was issued on February 25th. This is the date we are now celebrating. We were the seventieth U3A to affiliate; today the latest figure is six hundred and thirty!

Membership numbers have grown steadily through the years: the hundred mark was passed in 1988, two hundred in 1993, the year in which we became a registered charity and adopted our first constitution. There were three hundred members in 1996, after which the rate slowed. Four hundred was not reached until 2007. Things speeded up to five hundred in 2009, and early in 2011 we enrolled our six hundredth member. Since Welwyn-Hatfield U3A started, we have been led by thirteen different chairmen as shown in the table: Joan Bensley and Myrtle Pit-Keathly each twice.

From a modest start, we now have more than fifty study groups. A characteristic of their activities has been visits to gardens, to London sights, to theatres and many more. Until recently members have enjoyed regular holidays, mostly ably organised by Margaret Hakansson. Perhaps the most exciting was Stan Stanley's trip to Poland in 2001, when many friends were made with local U3As. Wouldn't it be great if holidays were started again by one of the newer generation of members!

The world has changed in many ways over these twenty-five years; nowhere more than in the extraordinary growth of the digital world. We took our first dip in the water in 2003 when Stuart Barker negotiated a

**WELWYN-HATFIELD U3A: CHAIRMEN**

1986        JOAN BENSLEY  
1986-7     ANN SARGANT  
1987-9     MARGERY WOOD  
1989-91    DEREK GREENER  
1991-3     JOAN BENSLEY  
1993-6     MYRTLE PIT-KEATHLY  
1996-8     ONA GLOVER  
1998-2000 MALCOLM PIT-KEATHLY  
2000-02    MARTIN BRENNAN  
2002-04    PETER LOMER  
2004-06    BRIAN KENT  
2006-8     MYRTLE PIT-KEATHLY  
2008-09    STUART BARKER  
2009-10    JOHN MIDDLETON  
2010-12    SUE KERSHAW

generous grant from the National Lottery and we bought our first digital projector and laptop computer. We now have a second projector, only a fraction of the cost and size of the original, and three laptops!

In 2005, we joined the World Wide Web and launched our own website. For most of our software we are much indebted to John Middleton, who developed our membership list into today's sophisticated database and who designed our complex programs for producing the annual subscription notices. John it was who installed our sound systems at Ludwick and Hatfield, a feat of remarkable physical agility for a Third Ager!

The election of Sue Kershaw as chairman in 2010, supported by a largely new committee, marked the arrival of the next generation of members. This can only be seen as a sign of the healthy state of Welwyn-Hatfield U3A. Long may it continue to flourish!

*Stuart Barker*