



March 2025 Newsletter

Message from the Chairman

Roger Thompson, Chairman of the Harpenden u3a, sends best wishes and grateful thanks to all who have contributed to the March Newsletter. There are a number of articles below which describe some very important information for the attention of members.

1. New Members who have joined in February 2025.

I would like to welcome the following 7 new members who have joined the Harpenden u3a in February 2025. This brings the total number of members to 273, our highest ever number.

The new members are:

- Bill Carnochan
- Gill Carnochan
- Patricia Collins
- Theresa Doolan
- Roger Marshall
- Suman Sharma
- Keith Spark

2. Obituary: David Collins

On behalf of the Harpenden u3a, I am very sad to report the death of David Collins who unfortunately has been ill for over a year and spent most of that time in hospital. He had returned from hospital to Harpenden but sadly passed away soon after his return home. Viv Chandler has written an obituary in relation to David and the message below indicates her account of David's death.

David had not been a member of Harpenden u3a for long but had made a big impact in two of our groups. He became a member of the Creative Writing



Group soon after it formed and he then took on the leadership of the Science and Technology Group at its creation. He was extremely popular in both groups for his charm, knowledge, experience and wit.

Sadly, he had spent most of the past year in hospital but anyone who visited him came away having spent a most enjoyable hour or so in his company.

He still kept up with what was going on in both his groups and continued to send a contribution to the Creative Writing group each month, the last one of which was read out at the group meeting the day following his death. Later in this newsletter you will find one of David's contributions to the Creative Writing group.

David had spent many years in the computer industry both here and abroad but then moved into training, organisation and strategic marketing. In addition to his love of anything to do with physics and astronomy, he was an outstanding amateur musician. In 1990 he was chosen to be part of an International Choir that sang at a UN charity concert with Pavarotti at the famous Verona Arena.

His daughter, Alison, has asked that we convey to members how much it had meant to David to be part of Harpenden u3a and how much he had enjoyed his membership.

The condolences of all u3a members are sent to Alison, Michael and his sisters as a tribute to David.

3. Article written by Diana Brimblecombe: Harpenden's Heroes and Heroines.

I am very grateful for Diana's articles about Harpenden heroes and hope readers will be entertained by them:

SPORTING LEGENDS

There are plenty of opportunities for sport in Harpenden; Several golf clubs, two cricket clubs, two tennis clubs, Harpenden Football club and much more. Hockey, skateboarding, lacrosse and even quoits!

OWEN FARRELL, international Rugby player, fly-half, was educated at St George School, represented England and holds the record for scoring the most points of an England player. Other legendary Rugby players educated at St George's are **GEORGE FORD** and **MARO ITOJE**.

Harpenden also has a world class lacrosse player **LAURA MERRIFIELD**, who has played in four world cups, and is a member of the squad preparing for 2028 Olympic Games in Los Angeles.

And of course, Champion golfer born in Harpenden and member of the Common Golf Club is **KEN BROWN**, who played in 5 Ryder Cup matches.

Then there's **PHOEBE GILL**, 2024 Olympic track athlete and **DAVID CLARKE** who played blind football in the Paralympics and who is now CEO of Paralympics UK.

Finally, the cricket correspondent of The Times, cricket author and Harpenden resident **RICHARD STREETON** who died in 2006.

You didn't know all this? Why not book on the next tour of Harpenden by St Albans City and District tour guides on 19th April? Bet you'll learn much more about Harpenden's history and it's residents!

Book online at www.stalbanstourguides.co.uk

Thanks to Harpenden Local History Society for some info. Do visit their new Museum in the Eric Morecambe centre. harpenden-history.org.uk

4. Need for new Programme Secretary

Jan Warr writes below, that as she has now completed four years in this role, it is the right time to hand over to someone else:

All the speakers are booked for 2025 so we now need to begin 2026.

It is a good idea to work at least six months in advance so as to give yourself plenty of time. A lot of popular speakers get booked up a year ahead.

The new Programme Secretary will not be thrown in at the deep end as I will offer as much assistance as I possibly can.

If you are interested in this very worthwhile post, which also involves membership of the u3a committee, you can contact me directly.

Janet (Warr).

Group Reports

Creative Writing Group

Tribute to David Collins' contribution of his work for the Creative Writing Group...

In September 2023 the Group Leader, Brian Ball, asked for a short piece to be written, using the title of a Kinks song beginning with a 'D'. David had never heard of the Kinks but came up with this story using the little-known Kinks song 'Ducks on the Wall'. We think it shows David's Pythonesque sense of humour;

Ducks on the Wall

Dear Fosdyke,

I hope this letter finds you well. They look after me quite well here, though sometimes I find it difficult to focus on what they are saying.

I have a very pleasant room with a good view over the grounds. Unfortunately, the grounds include a duck pond, and you can imagine how hard I find it to enjoy that particular part of the view.

I still have flashbacks to that dreadful day at Plitvice Lakes when you and I were undertaking that research project to discover if the claim that ducks' quacks do not echo was true, or just an admittedly trivial conspiracy theory. When I wake in the night, I can see the two of us rigging the microphones around the banks of that inlet, and securing the powerpack and the tape recorder to a stout branch over the lake where we had spotted several individual *Anas Moschata*.

The trees offered us an excellent hide and we settled down in a cleft of a large oak, waiting for a duck to quack so that the microphone array would capture the sound and any echo from the banks of the inlet.

I must break off for a moment, Fosdyke: a nurse is bringing me my evening cocoa. It has a funny taste, but she won't leave until I've drunk every drop...

As I was saying, Fosdyke, I well recall the dismay we both felt as we remembered that the Muscovy doesn't quack! Unless there were also Smews or Mergansers we hadn't spotted, we had little chance of getting any quacking to record!

And then you spotted that devil incarnate, Bitterworth, hiding in the tree next to ours, trying to disconnect our microphone array from its powerpack!

Bitterworth has made a career of destroying our legitimate duck research – I am sure you remember the battle we had when he wrote that disgraceful article in the *International Journal of Duck Research*, casting doubt on the work we had done on the comparative paddling power of the Indian Runner and the Silver Appleyard.

Sometimes, what ensued slips from my memory. I see Bitterworth fiddling with the powerpack (a Westinghouse 550 XL, if memory serves); the sudden flash; his

desperate cries as he falls into the lake, still clutching the power pack and the frantic quacking of an unknown duck, our recording ruined, and our project destroyed. I must finish now, Fosdyke. The full moon has turned the duck pond to silver, and I feel the horrible eyes of those plastic ducks – just three between them – staring into my head from the wall behind my bed. I do hope you can find the time to visit me.

Yours as ever

Reg Harbottle

P.S. If you do manage to visit me, I would regard it a singular honour if you could bring me a large chisel and a 4lb hammer.

German Conversation Group

Our group is about to enter its second year. From humble beginnings we now have seven regular members and currently communications are ongoing with two would-be joiners. What do these undecided people want to know? Apart from when do we meet? (The last Tuesday afternoon of each month) and where do we meet? (My house in Peters Green), the most common question is: what level of German is acceptable? The answer is simply all levels – from rusty 'O' Level/GCSE to fluent, as is our delightful native speaker, Marianne, who is Swiss German.

Our get-togethers begin by chatting about a particular topic (for which advance notice is always given) and then break for tea and biscuits (sehr wichtig!). During the last half hour or so we listen to a German podcast and translate it, one person at a time, as best we can (viel Spaß!).

For further information, please contact **Sharon Torres**.

History Group

I attach below, the future presentations for the History Group in 2025.

- March 11th – Presentation by Malcolm Rainbow, 'The War of Austrian Succession'.
- April 8th – Presentation by Suheil Sharyar, 'How America weaponised the World Economy'.
- May 13th – Presentation by Gerald Cuff. 'A History of the Western Alphabet'.
- June 10th – Presentation by Roger Thompson. 'The Decision as to who was the Greatest Person in British History'?
- July 8th – Presentation by Geoff Cunnington, 'From Peterborough, to Pavilions and Palaces. A day at the British Empire Exhibition, 1924'.

- August 12th – ‘Two Paintings and their History’.
- September 9th – Presentation by Mick Nolan, ‘A History of Taiwan’.
- October 14th – Malcolm Rainbow (topic to be confirmed).
- November 12th – ‘Presentation by Sharon Torres,’ Hannibal the Carthaginian’.
- December 9th – ‘The History Christmas Quiz’.

Roger roger.c.thompson1940@gmail.com

Italian Conversation Group

Italian conversation groups seem to be very popular within other local u3as. Several members and non-members of Harpenden u3a have expressed an interest in starting an Italian conversation group.

Experience tells us that we need four to six members to enable us to start the group. If you are interested in joining an Italian Conversation group, please contact Brian Ball group coordinator.

Grazie

Brian

Reading for pleasure Group 1

Our latest read was "The Figurine" by Victoria Hislop, whose books we have enjoyed in the past. She has a passion for Greece that radiates through her books, and we were all pleased to be transported to a land of Mediterranean sunshine during this gloomy spell of weather.

The story centres around a young Helena, who is of British Greek heritage. Through her discoveries, we are given an insight into the dark days of dictatorship in Grecian recent history – her grandfather was a leading member of the Junta that ruled then.

We also learn about the illicit smuggling of ancient artefacts, largely to the USA, which still goes on today.

Jean Rapier

Reading for pleasure Group 2

The February book, which was read and later discussed at the monthly Book Group meeting, was ‘Human Traces’ by Sebastian Faulks. Two young boys grow into adults whilst trying to understand the human mind. As psychiatrists, their quest takes them from the squalor of the Victorian lunatic asylum to the lecture halls of a Paris hospital and their hospital in Austria. A magnum opus which took five years to write.

The March book will be 'The Great Gatsby' by F. Scott Fitzgerald published a hundred years ago in April 1925. It is a widely read book which is discussed at length. It is interesting to note that it has been made into three movies and a television film. All four are available on DVD. Additionally, it has recently been made into a musical which is transferring from Broadway to the London Coliseum to run from 11th April to 7th September 2025.

Reading for Pleasure Group 3

Meetings of this group take place once a month on Tuesdays from 10am to 12 noon (currently on the second Tuesday of the month). We meet in members' houses, each taking a turn.

Last month we read "Miss Benson's Beetle" by Rachel Joyce. A heartwarming tale of friendship and intrepid travel to New Caledonia to find a specimen of a rare golden beetle!

This book has its dark moments but also genuine humour. It is a historical novel in some senses, but it also speaks of people and their settings in so many ways that are timeless, the secrets that they keep, their resilience, their ability to adapt. There is a strong bond here between women, compelled by their idea of a second chance, their vocation, their unspoken loves.

This month we are reading "The Four Winds" by Kristin Hannah. A tale of hardship, loss and human kindness based on real events – set in the dustbowl and the depression era in the USA. A tale of human resilience against the odds. A deeply moving novel. Anyone interested in joining the group should contact **Jane Leek** for further details.

Science and Technology Group

The founder of our group, David Collins, died recently as reported elsewhere in this Newsletter. We remembered him at the start of the last meeting. He was not able to attend meetings for more than a year prior to his death due to his illness but he followed the growth of membership numbers with interest. He was preparing another presentation to the group but sadly this was not to be. David gave the group inaugural talk in June 2023 on 'Artificial Intelligence'.

February

The February meeting was presented by Peter Wharton, a guest speaker. His talk was 'Infrastructure & Technology Makes or Breaks an Olympics'. He was involved in both the London 2012 & Athens 2004 Olympics.

It highlighted the complexities of organising and holding an Olympics – it takes between 12 and 20 years from having the idea to holding an Olympics. The easiest part is the Olympic Stadium itself and the ceremonies! The hardest is all the upgraded infrastructure and means to get athletes and the public, safely and speedily to, at and from events!

The 2012 Olympics was a feat of British expertise and knowhow. The skills of hundreds of thousands of people made London so acclaimed and successful.



Some of the attendees at the Science and Technology meeting 'Infrastructure & Technology makes or breaks an Olympics' held on 19th February 2025

March

Member Dishan Singh will give a talk on 'Evolution and human walking' on 19th March. He worked for 25 years until retirement as a consultant orthopaedic surgeon at the Royal National Orthopaedic Hospital in Stanmore.

Summary: The transition from quadrupedalism to bipedalism is a hallmark of human evolution. Bipedal gait provides the ability to cover long distances more efficiently. This capability allowed early humans to forage, hunt, and migrate over expansive terrains, thus expanding their habitat and access to diverse resources. Additionally, walking on two legs freed the hands, enabling the use of tools, the carrying of objects, and the development of complex social behaviours. The energy efficiency of bipedal locomotion may have also allocated more resources to brain development, which in turn facilitated advanced cognitive functions, problem-solving abilities, and social interactions.

April

Member Andy Phillips trained as a plant biologist specialising in molecular biology. He worked latterly at Rothamsted Research. His talk to be given on 16th April is titled 'Decoding Life: The Technology of DNA Sequencing'.

All our meetings are open to any Harpenden u3a member. No need to book, just turn up.

Spanish Conversation Group

The Spanish Conversation Group meets on the first and third Tuesdays of every month.

We are a mixed ability group and the aim is simply to practice and help each other to improve. Each session is based on a specific theme such as My Favourite Food or Art as well as discussions on recent events or news. Sometimes we are joined by native speakers which is both wonderfully stimulating and challenging! Our next meeting is on 04 March. New members are welcome. Please contact us via this email: bnathanfrench@gmail.com.

Bridget French

Walking Group

Numbers on our walks vary widely. Early in February, nine of us braved the mud to visit the snowdrops just coming out in Lamer Wood. More recently, a bright sunny morning, following many days of grey skies, tempted a record eighteen members to turn out for another favourite shorter walk, the circular route via Childwickbury and Batchwood Golf Course. It has been a pleasure to welcome several new members on these outings.



Members in Lamer Wood and...



..enjoying blue skies at Childwickbury

Weekday Strollers

As promised, we intend to restart the Weekday Strollers in Spring 2025.

Our first stroll will start on Friday 28th March. Hopefully, the weather will be dry and the temperature a little warmer.

We are still planning our route, but all members of the group will receive an email advising them where the stroll will start and where we can enjoy a coffee or tea and an interesting conversation.

If you are not a member of this group please contact **Brian Ball** for more information