



September 2025 Newsletter

Chairman's Report

1. New Members joining in August 2025

I am so pleased to welcome 3 new members who have joined the Harpenden u3a in August, and hope they enjoy the facilities offered by the u3a.

- Gavin Mutch
- John Shrigley
- Carol Anne Cook

The number of members in the Harpenden u3a is now 307.

2. September Talks

Our talks resume again after the August break, and outlined below are details of these. As usual the talks are held at the Abbeyfield Hall, above the Southdown Co-op, and the talk will commence at 2:15. Parking facilities are available at the Co-op.

On September 4th there will be a presentation of paintings by the u3a Art Appreciation Group. This is one of our regular events and have been much enjoyed by members.

On September 18th, there is to be a talk by Paul Barwick, called "Eddie Chapman – The Life and Crimes of Double Agent Zigzag".

Paul, back in January 2024, did a talk on "The White Mouse – Nancy Wake".

The Exploring London Group also had booked Paul for a "The Eyes of the Spies" walk, which was enjoyed by all.

We look forward to welcoming him back again.

Roger Thompson (Contact via [THIS LINK](#))

3. Summer Party

On Thursday afternoon 21st August, the u3a held its Annual Summer Party at the usual premises of the Plough and Harrow, which we have used on a number of occasions before.

The weather was cool early on so many attendees were comfortable sitting inside, especially as this was where the cakes that members had brought for the event were! It was a very happy and enjoyable occasion, with good conversations taking place. Photographs were taken of the event, and some of these are shown below:



4. Eric Midwinter



Included below, are four tributes from members of the Harpenden u3a, in memory of Eric Midwinter, our Honorary President, who sadly died recently at his home at the age of 93, and where he had been bedbound for some months.

Roger Thompson – Harpenden u3a Chairman

As many members of our u3a know, he was one of the three people who founded the National u3a over 44 years ago. The u3a has now become a National Organisation with members and u3as across the United Kingdom. I also received correspondence from the National Chairman of the u3a acknowledging Eric's vital contribution to the development of the u3a.

Eric very much maintained his affection and local contacts with the Harpenden u3a, becoming Chairman on a number of occasions, and maintaining links locally with both individual members and groups. His contributions were always outstanding in those groups he was in contact with regularly. He was a delightful person always having time for others, none more so than in relation to the u3a History Group, about which I now wish to make reference.

Eric won a scholarship to read history at St Catharine's College, Cambridge, and his love of history stayed on with him during the rest of his life. None more so than in his leadership of the u3a History Group for many years.

I communicated with him during his last illness, when he was housebound, and always his first comment was always 'How is my beloved History Group'. He also enjoyed very much for example hearing how talks had gone! He was also a strong advocate of the History Group Christmas Quiz, to which he gave some of his very good books as delightful prizes. I was also surprised fairly recently to receive from him, one of his difficult quiz presentations, which he loved doing, to be included in the next Quiz in the History Groups Christmas Quiz in December!

Eric was also the Honorary President of the Harpenden u3a, and this award has acknowledged the contribution he has made over the years to our organisation. The Harpenden u3a also wishes to send commiserations to Eric's family for their very sad loss.

A Message about Eric Midwinter from Viv Chandler – Past Chairman

Eric Midwinter and Harpenden u3a

When I joined Harpenden u3a about 14 years ago, I had no idea who Eric Midwinter was. Mind you, I didn't really know what the u3a was either, apart from its rather grandiose name of 'University of the Third Age'. Thankfully, in the rebranding of 2020, it changed its name to the much more concise and modern 'u3a'. Eric was someone who occasionally popped up at the Thursday afternoon meetings to give an erudite talk or to host his notoriously tricky annual quiz.

Although I did not know it at the time, Harpenden u3a was going through a difficult stage and was not thriving. In fact, there was a real possibility that it would not survive as it was not attracting new members. Membership had never risen above 150.

The problem was that although Harpenden had been one of the very first u3as, founded in 1982 by Eric and his close friend Reg Davis—someone who had been very kind to me when I first moved to the area—it was starting to run out of steam.

Eric had used Harpenden as a test case all those years ago to discover what worked and what didn't. He realised that having a variety of individual interest groups and social camaraderie was the best way to meet his (and the other two founders') vision for the growing number of people in their 'third age'.

Most u3as, when they were founded, followed that principle, but Harpenden had opted for a slightly different approach of weekly meetings with full membership involvement. It stuck to its guns, believing that this method worked for them. By the beginning of the second decade of the 21st century, there was only a handful of interest groups, and membership was static and ageing with no new blood. In fact, two new u3as had started in the surrounding villages and Harpenden people were joining them as they found them more stimulating. Eric was worried.

Eric returned to the committee and also took on the role of Chairman for a while about 10 years ago in an effort to turn things around. He managed to secure some funding for publicity, including promotional material, and organised an Open Afternoon. We also attended the annual Harpenden Seniors' Fairs. I helped Eric on the stand one year, and since we weren't very busy, he shared with me the problems and his hopes for Harpenden u3a.

He proposed to the members that Harpenden u3a should meet only monthly, primarily to save money but also to encourage members to establish interest groups which they would run themselves. He aimed for Harpenden to return to the fundamental u3a principle of 'self-help'. As you can imagine, the idea of reducing from weekly to monthly general meetings was not at all popular, so Eric compromised by making the meetings twice monthly – which is still our practice today.

It was at this time that I joined the committee. After one committee meeting, I said to Eric that I felt I had been rather outspoken about something or other but Eric reassured me by saying that that was what the committee needed. From that day forth he encouraged me and when I became Chairman at the beginning of the pandemic, he supported me all the way and was always there should I need a word of advice – or even comfort! There was always a funny story to lighten the mood; and if he could, he would bring in a mention of his beloved cricket, Man U or old-time comedians.

In the past five years, Harpenden u3a has brought itself into the 21st century, returned to the u3a fold and is now truly thriving with a membership that has grown to over 300 with more than 30 interest groups.

It has been a real pleasure to see Eric so delighted at how far Harpenden u3a has come in the past few years. It has been a real tribute to him and to his enthusiasm and support.

A Message about Eric Midwinter from Alan Bunting

Eric Midwinter, who has sadly passed away aged 93, was not only a greatly-loved and valued member of Harpenden u3a but a co-founder in 1980 of what was declared to be the University of the Third Age, a movement which soon came to be known simply as the u3a.

Born at Sale, within the environs of Greater Manchester, the son of a fireman, he became a working class grammar school boy, destined to make his mark in the world of academia. Eric and his wife Margaret were long-time Harpenden residents and members of the Harpenden Society whose quarterly newsletter he edited until 2015. He described himself as an author, educationalist, gerontologist and social historian, with specialisms in Victorian social history, sport and light entertainment. Both football and cricket were among his abiding interests, the latter receiving arguably disproportionate attention in his lengthy obituary in *The Times*, which made reference to his 1981 biography of WG Grace. He once wrote that "if the Church of England is the Conservative Party at prayer, cricket is the Church of England at play".

Under the 'light entertainment' heading Eric was an acknowledged authority on the history of the Music Hall, notably across the North of England, from Victorian times onwards. Among the 50 or so books he wrote were profiles of famous comedians, among whom he counted Ken Dodd as a particular friend, visiting him at his home in Knotty Ash, on the outskirts of Liverpool.

It is hard to identify a talent he lacked. One however was that of never being a driver. 'I've never sat behind a steering wheel' he proclaimed unapologetically to someone who picked him up from his home in Bloomfield Road to attend a u3a meeting at the other end of Harpenden.

Eric's career landmarks include those of: Doctor of Philosophy and Lifetime Scholar of St Catharine's College, Cambridge; Director of the Liverpool Educational Priority Area Project; Head of the National Consumer Council's Public Affairs Unit; Director of the Centre for Policy on Ageing; Chairman of the Open University's Health and Social Welfare Board.

Professor Eric Midwinter, OBE – A personal reflection by Chris Marsden, August 2025

Roger Thompson has asked me to produce an article on Eric for the next newsletter'. What a request! Where to start? How in a relatively few words can one capture the essence of such an amazing man who achieved so much in just one lifetime. A few days before he died, over the phone, he was asking me about what next for our Hot Issues seminar group, in which he played such an active and authoritative part since its inception in 2019. He knew he wouldn't be participating any more but he wanted to be informed and discuss things. He described his condition as having a 50 year-old brain in a 100 year-old body. It was the first time he had ever been seriously ill. He knew and accepted totally that he was dying but was worried that his latest book on the church and cricket might not get completed in time.

Eric was a polymath; the complete antithesis of the adage 'Jack of all trades and master of none'. Eric was master of everything he turned his mind to; as professor of education, as social historian (writing more than 80 books), as cricket writer and statistician, as chairman of the London Regional Passenger committee (where he was responsible for the invention of 'The Travel Card'), as Director of the Centre for Policy on Aging and, of course, as joint founder of the u3a, to name some highlights. In 1992 Eric was awarded the OBE for public service and scholarship. Others have and will write more on Eric's national achievements. I want to focus on my personal relationship with Eric and reflect on his considerable contribution to the lives of many of us living in Harpenden.

I first met him over thirty years ago. He, Margaret, Matthew, Daniel and Kate lived just 5 doors down the road from us. Eric, often with Margaret, walked his dog up the road twice a day, stopping to chat to anyone they passed on the way. Sometimes these walks would take a very long time. They had a very patient dog! Eric and I soon discovered common interests and a joint meeting of minds and we became friends. Socially he was a lively member of any gathering. We and other neighbours remember many happy News Year Eve parties which always ended with Eric performing the 'Miners Dream of Home', first in full by himself, then in silence with us miming the actions and then the whole thing again singing all together.

For the Millennium new year, Eric wrote a pantomime in which we all played parts while also being members of the chorus and audience. Eric, of course, was totally in his element as natural showman and impresario, assisted ably by Margaret. It was such a success that he wrote two more which we all performed with much hilarity in subsequent years. Treasured memories.

When I became chairman of the Harpenden Society in 2011, Eric agreed to become editor of our quarterly newsletter. With his flair for communication and erudite writing the newsletter quickly became essential reading for those who wanted to know about issues facing the town plus interesting comment. For the next 6 years, Eric and I would meet regularly in what he called 'The Oval Office' (our small conservatory), fueled by coffee and chocolate digestives, to discuss issues facing Harpenden and how we might influence things. Our discussions were wide ranging, extending to politics, education, cricket and whatever Eric was writing about at the time – always interesting and very well informed.

We also discussed the u3a. As many reading this will know, Eric was passionate about remaining active in retirement years. Eric, along with Michael Young and Peter Laslett were instrumental in shaping the u3a in the UK promoting the idea of learning for the love of it within a cooperative learning framework. With a small central coordinating body, u3a depends on local groups forming their own networks and range of activities led by individuals of wide-ranging interests and expertise.

From the early 1980s Eric did a lot to help grow the u3a network nationally. In those days, the Harpenden u3a was relatively small with its main activity being the popular fortnightly afternoon talks in the Trust Hall. Eric was disappointed that our local branch hadn't developed much further. So, having become more involved with Harpenden affairs through his work with the Harpenden Society, he was ready to turn his attention more closely to our local u3a.

With his encouragement and the hard work of many others, a whole range of self-help groups have now evolved, ranging from current affairs, history, play reading, book groups, art appreciation, gardening to guided walks, theatre visits and many others. Eric took particular interest in the history group, which has become very popular. He pioneered the idea of active history whereby he would present a key event or situation and then ask participants in groups to role play different scenarios of what might happen next.

The key to u3a development is to find enthusiastic volunteer group leaders with u3a members joining groups freely as they wanted. One of Eric's mantras was that there should be no waiting lists to join groups for folk in their 'third age'. None of us knows how long we've got. Another mantra was that everyone has stories to tell about their lives which will be of particular interest to their families and descendants. He encouraged many people, including me, to write our memoirs both as a contribution to social history and also as a therapeutic activity in itself. In my case, I eventually wrote over 100,000 words (the length of a typical novel), which Eric read and commented on with great encouragement.

In many ways he became an important mentor for much of my own writing and thinking. No more so than when I came up with the idea of holding Hot Issue Seminars (HIS). The idea for the group was that we should focus on one 'hot' issue at a time with expert input as a starting point for our discussion. We began by using podcasts from the Royal Society of Arts (RSA) and the BBC Moral Maze programme. However during Covid, when we met virtually over Zoom, we changed to asking our members to choose and research topics and circulate a paper beforehand which they would present briefly at the start of a session. Eric told me with some pride that the HIS group has become a good example of what the u3a is mainly about; a self-learning group relying on the interests and expertise of its members.

Our topics have included international conflict, economics, the challenge of capitalism, democracy, populism, artificial Intelligence, meritocracy, education, health and welfare, wealth distribution, land ownership and use, plus many more. The quality of input from our member presenters and the subsequent discussion has been remarkable.

Members with strong opinions have nevertheless listened to what others have to say and learnt to disagree agreeably. Above all we have been blessed with the inputs from Eric. He would usually bide his time and when the moment was right he would weigh in with a well-prepared, insightful analysis, often giving a pertinent, historical perspective.

He will be sorely missed by me and many others. While I am writing this with an acute feeling of loss, it is also with a great sense of gratitude and good fortune for the 30 years of personal friendship, guidance and teaching that I have had with a national treasure.

Group Reports

Bus Pass Group

On Friday 22nd August four members of the Group enjoyed a visit to Berkhamsted Starting the visit with a pleasant walk alongside the Grand Union Canal. We then returned to the town centre finishing at the 13th century St Peter's Parish Church.

German Conversation Group

August's meeting heard members sharing the names of three people, living or not, who they would most like to have had around their dinner table. Of course, names weren't enough: they explained why these people had been chosen, which was most interesting! Our podcast was: "Der Klimawandel in Deutschland". For further details, please contact via [THIS LINK](#).

History Group

The next Group meeting is on Tuesday 9th September, and as usual it will be at the Harpenden Trust Hall. The presentation will be given by Mick Nolan and the topic is 'A short political history of Taiwan.' The meeting will begin at 2.30, although the room will be available from 2.00. On this occasion, owing to too few members at two previous meetings, members attending will be asked to make a contribution of £2 towards the cost of the room hire. The presentations for the remaining months of 2025 are:

- October 14th A presentation by Malcolm Rainbow 'The Indian Mutiny'.
 - November 12th A presentation by Sharon Torres, 'Hannibal the Carthaginian'.
 - December 9th The History Group Christmas Quiz, Presenters Kate and Roger.
- For further details please contact Roger Thompson via [THIS LINK](#)

Italian Conversation Group

At last! We now know the lyrics to that well-known Italian song: 'Quando, quando, quando'. Having translated the words from Italian, we sang along to the original, thanks to YouTube.

On a more serious note, we listened to a piece especially spoken by a native from Venice. This was tricky as his Venetian accent and dialect were all too apparent. The next two meetings (8th September and 20th October) will take place at The Inn on the Green in the centre of Harpenden. Any would-be Italian conversationalists are welcome to come along and join the group.

For further details, please get in touch via [THIS LINK](#)

Needlecraft Group

We are still meeting at our homes twice a month and enjoying our various items of embroidery, counted cross stitch, knitting and wool tapestry. We enjoy our sessions and have a very friendly relationship with each other.

For further details, please get in touch via [THIS LINK](#)



Reading For Pleasure Group 1

Our latest book was "The Seventh Son" by Sebastian Faulks. It is set in the future, and concerns a young American academic, Talissa Adam, who needs funding to continue her research work. Mary and Alaric, who are desperate to have a child, and the Parn Institute in London, who are offering, for a fee, to implant the couple's fertilised egg into the womb of a surrogate mother.

Talissa is enrolled as a surrogate but evil lurks in the Parn institute, sperm is replaced, and the baby born is only half homo sapiens.

Repercussions follow!

The book led to a lively debate, as we were all watching the T.V. series "Humans".

Reading For Pleasure Group 2

From Steve Gledhill:

Three years ago I applied to join the Harpenden u3a Reading for Pleasure group. I was told it was over-subscribed but they were looking for someone to start a new group. I was happy to do that and with the help of the Newsletter I received the names of people who wished to join the new group. We quickly had twelve members and we met in The Engineer monthly. It has been a very happy and friendly group. I am grateful for the help and encouragement from the group members, just what u3a should be. Three years as a group leader is about right so I asked Nicky Wilcox to take over from me, I wish her every success. I will continue as a member of the group.

From Nicky Wilcox...

I'm very happy to take over as group leader from Steve. I'd like to thank him on behalf of the whole group for everything he's done to set up a successful group which runs so smoothly.

Our next book for discussion in September is *The Gift of Rain* by Tan Twan Eng. This is a novel set in Penang shortly before and during the Second World War.

Reading For Pleasure Group 3

We meet monthly (usually the second Tuesday of the month in the morning) in members' houses. The last book choice was 'Malice Aforethought' by Francis Iles. This is credited as being the first of the book genre where the murderer is revealed in the very beginning. (Think Columbo – the American crime drama with Peter Falk!) So not so much a 'whodunnit' as a 'howtocatchthem'. It is full of dark humour and, although written in 1931, did not feel outdated.

Anyone interested in joining the book group should get in touch via [THIS LINK](#) for further details.

Science and Technology Group

The August meeting was rather special, the speaker was our MP, Victoria Collins. She is the Liberal Democrat Spokesperson for Science, Innovation & Technology so was a great fit for our Science and Technology group.



She outlined the responsibilities in her role and then covered some of the many areas that she has been involved with including:

- Artificial intelligence (AI) and regulation
- Online Safety Act
- Screen-free childhood
- Fraud and copyright infringement
- Ethical Innovation



The next group meeting will be on 10th September with our speaker, Keith Hoffmeister, presenting extensive photographs showing the construction of HS2 across the Chilterns and the Colne Valley Regional Park. HS2 is the new London to Birmingham rail link currently being constructed.

Peter Lord from Wokingham u3a will speak on 15th October on The Fediverse which is a collection of social networking services that can communicate with each other. A more friendly title is "Alternatives to mainstream social media". This is a change from previously announced topic.

On 19th November group member Peter Wilson will give a talk titled 'Ham Radio Explained – It's not CB'. Peter has been an Amateur radio (ham radio) enthusiast for many years.

For further details, please get in touch via [THIS LINK](#)

Singing for Pleasure Group

The Singing for Pleasure group is very popular and we now have about 35 members. As the title says, we sing purely for our own pleasure and certainly not for performance, although we have been persuaded to do a Christmas carol or two at the Christmas party. We enjoy singing music from the shows, particular favourites being 'Les Misérables' and 'Phantom of the Opera' and last term we concentrated on 'Joseph and the Amazing Technicolour Dreamcoat'. The hour flies by under the lively direction of Joanna Nolan.

We meet from 2pm to 3pm in the Abbeyfield Hall, above the Co-op in Southdown. The dates up until the end of the year are:

- 11th and 25th September
- 9th October
- 13th and 27th November
- 11th December



Do come along and try us out – I'm sure you'll enjoy yourself. All voices – especially men! – are welcome and although we usually sing in two parts, there is no need to have sung before or be able to read music.

For further information, and especially for the code to access the Abbeyfield Hall, don't hesitate to get in touch via [THIS LINK](#)

Walking Group

It's always nice to do something new on a walk, and the members who lead them are inventive in arranging that.

Our first outing this month was on familiar territory – Harpenden Common and Heartwood Forest – but following an ingenious and enjoyable route.



The second was a loop from Redbourn via Redbournbury Mill, Punch Bowl Lane and the maze of cornfields south of Redbourn church.

Parts of this walk were new to nearly everyone, including the highlight: the stepping stones over the River Ver south of the Mill.

For further details, please get in touch via [THIS LINK](#)



Weekday Strollers

Over the last few months, the Weekday strollers have strolled around Harpenden Common, Rothamsted, Heartwood Forest, the Oval, Stockwood Discovery Centre and watched filming at the Manor that features in Granchester

We naturally always finish our strolls with a visit to a convenient café for some pleasant refreshments.

If you want to stroll with us please get in touch via [THIS LINK](#).