

The Creation of Countesthorpe U3A

by John Armstrong

I recall an advert that appeared in the Herald in late summer 1999, seeking people interested in forming a U3A in Countesthorpe. The idea of the U3A as a learning organisation, aimed at daytime activities for the more senior folk in the village, appealed to me greatly. At the start it seemed to me to be a blank canvas; would this “university” provide courses, would it be for an intellectual elite, or would it have general appeal? I wondered how Countesthorpe could possibly be large enough support a “university”.

I went along to an initial meeting which was organised by John Slipper of Countesthorpe College. There I met the two other founders, Dorothy Elgar and Ruth Westley. We agreed to get something started and see where it went. John Slipper was wonderfully supportive in enabling the whole start up process.

We held an open meeting on 9th November to do some initial planning, and formed a steering group of nine people. Ruth agreed to chair our committee meetings, and I the public meetings. A fortnight later we met to plan the launch of Countesthorpe U3A.

We jointly learned from the experience of committee members of Market Harborough U3A, who kindly came over and told us about their own early days. They had grown to over 300 members, and were thinking of splitting the U3A into two groups so that they could all fit into a hall for their monthly meeting - who would have thought that Countesthorpe, one third the size of Market Harborough, would have the same challenge to consider just a few years later! Leicester U3A were kind enough to welcome me to one of their monthly meetings, which was my first chance to see the operation of a marketplace during monthly meetings first hand, and to meet some group leaders and group members.

We started to spread the word, with Dorothy Elgar in charge of publicity. I prepared a press release which went to local papers. Dorothy and myself were interviewed on the air by Monica Winfield. My first poster was distributed around the village and surrounding areas.

I recall doing the design work for posters and publicity, and for the first membership cards. Using software from my employment, now obsolete of course, it was all designed and printed in my study for the first few years.

We set up the launch meeting on 9th December 1999, which saw numbers grow to about thirty. I contacted Waitrose to arrange the attraction of wine and cheese, which may be what made the launch such a success! The first group leaders were found and the form of the monthly meetings was set in place.

From the start one of my jobs was to run the public meetings, probably because it was felt that a man was needed, and I was the only one available! It was a great pleasure and quite a buzz to stand up before the quite crowded village hall assembly, and talk about our aims and to launch the marketplace. A strong voice was needed - there were no microphones then! Seeing it grow each month from the front of the hall was a thrill too!

Countesthorpe College offered us accommodation for groups, at a knock-down price, provided we used rooms outside school times. They were very helpful in many ways. In particular I recall the technical support given to the Flight Simulation group that I set up, where up to six of us used the computer network to ‘fly’ together.

A U3A is usually the sum of a monthly meeting and several activity groups. We learned that some U3As had no activity groups at all, whilst others were bristling with them. I felt that both sides of the U3A were equally vital; some people would be drawn by a speaker, others would be drawn by activities. Through activity groups, the members themselves could create an environment where their skills and interests could be of use and developed further. This, to me, is the essence of the U3A in Countesthorpe.

The result was, and is, wonderful!