

CHELMSFORD: University of the Third Age feeding thirst for knowledge



Marian and Cyril still have a thirst for learning - thanks to the U3A

By nicola taylor newsdesk@essexchronicle.co.uk

[CYRIL](#) Bagshaw may be 82 but he says his social life rivals that of a much younger man thanks to the [University of the Third Age](#).

He is just one of hundreds of over-55s who are studying subjects as diverse as meteorology, botany and philosophy, as well as enjoying walking, wine-tasting and eating out through U3A.

With the highest membership since it was set up 18 years ago, and 45 interest groups for members to join, the Chelmsford branch of U3A is more popular than ever with almost 500 students signed up.

"I see U3A as a chance for people who are retired to pursue topics in which they have always had an interest but not had the time or opportunity to explore in any depth," the founder member said.

"I think often people retire then start looking round to develop their interests which they had previously kept in the background.

"We find that various groups run out of steam or cover all the ground they need to and so end.

"But there is a lot of renewal – new members join and start up other groups based on their interests. There is a lot of enthusiasm in the U3A."

Cyril runs the poetry appreciation group and participates in the play-reading, philosophy and chess clubs.

Cyril, a retired probation officer, and wife Marian, 80, from Springfield, are founder members of the branch, after attending the inaugural meeting in 1993.

Marian is a keen participant of the French group, whose members pay a professional teacher to lead sessions in French conversation.

Fellow founding members Bill and Pat Brown of Great Baddow remember seeing an advert in the Essex Chronicle inviting people to come along and discuss starting the Chelmsford branch.

Pat said: "The meeting had to be moved to a bigger venue as there was such a response – around 70 people turned up.

"By the end of the afternoon, we had set up the walking group. Our first event had four walkers and this has grown and grown so we now meet twice a month and have three spin-off walking groups.

"I lead the church visiting group and we are keen participants of the weekend group where members take it in turns to organise trips to places which they would not usually go to on their own.

"The friends you make and the social activities maintain your interest as well as the educational bits. There is so much going on – it's a wonderful organisation to be part of."

Bill, a retired solicitor, leads the philosophy group and uses online resources to allow members to gain expert tuition at no cost.

He said: "We have joined U3A Online, which allows you to download notes and films of lectures in a whole range of subjects.

"We have been able to access lectures by a top philosophy professor who really brings the subject alive.

"We like to think our horizons are not limited: we may be getting old but we are not quite finished."

Despite its name, members need not have any qualification, nor do they work towards exams.

"The aim of U3A is learning from each other," explains [Burt Adams](#), 70, chairman of the Chelmsford branch.

"Having the word university in our name can put people off as some think you need a degree to join but this is not the case at all.

"It is for people who have an interest they want to develop. Any member is free to set up an activity group, and become what we call a convener – a person who leads a group but is not necessarily the teacher.

"Members come and go but we have just had 440 renew for 2011/2012. We usually add a few each month. I anticipate we could be up to 500 by the end of the year."

Burt, a retired television commercial producer, joined U3A with wife Mary, a retired secretary, around eight years ago, as their friends were members.

The couple estimate they take part in seven to eight U3A events each month, including philosophy, theatre visits, walking and ten-pin bowling, which has greatly increased their social life.

[Mary](#) said: "We've made a lot of new friends through U3A. It is a great way to meet people who share your similar interests."

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