Chairman’s report for AGM 2015

I feel that I can present my report with a smile on my face, not just because this, my second report, is my last as Chairman but because I believe that U3A in Thrapston is definitely thriving. A successful organisation is one thing but more importantly I truly believe that U3A is a very valuable organisation, providing a unique opportunity for a particular generation to find physical and intellectual stimulus as well as opportunities to socialise in many different ways.

Over the year our general meetings have been enlivened and enlightened by an extraordinary range of different speakers and entertainers. We have been to the Arctic in the company of a resident artist, explored the mysteries of the paranormal, learned about the birds and the bees (two separate talks – we assume you had the other talk quite a few years ago) and explored Thrapston’s history - to mention just a few.

It’s always a pleasure to listen to an interesting speaker and I think we can reflect on what a wonderful job Richard Swindall has done as our Speaker Seeker. Richard is one of the founder members and served on the Steering Committee but sadly he feels that the time has come for him to stand down and I would like to put on record our gratitude for all he has achieved. It will be a hard act to follow.

One of the things that we particularly wanted to ensure was that coming to general meetings should be a friendly and sociable event. To that end, Michele Collison, running the welcome team has done a wonderful job carrying on where Tricia left off. It isn’t just a question of ticking people off on the attendance list, there are now more and more guests and more and more new members at each meeting. Michele tries to ensure, as well as everything else, that people who arrive alone are introduced to someone else to sit with and chat to. Of course Michele has not done it all single handedly; other committee members like Ann, Rachel and the other Michelle, our Secretary, are always there to help as well as all the other willing volunteers who man the desk or make tea and coffee. And let’s not forget Roger Dyson who is here faithfully to put out chairs and set up the PA system for every meeting. We owe them all our thanks.

I mentioned new members and our membership has increased on average throughout the year by about five or six at every meeting so that at the end of April it stood at over 230. I hope that itself is an indication that we are at least doing something right but credit must also go to Ann Carter who has worked hard all year at publicity. We have an entry in almost every local publication, as well as posters every month, reminding people that we are here and detailing our next meeting. We have also, with the aid of a grant from central U3A, been able to create leaflets to distribute. Unfortunately they were not ready for the Charter Fair but in the event that was the least of our problems. Ours was one of the few uncovered stalls and those who braved the elements will recall that it was not a day for the faint hearted. I number myself among the latter because when a desperate mission to buy a gazebo at short notice failed – we managed to get one but half the bits were missing – we packed up and went home. I think I could have lived with getting wet, but what
literature we had, couldn’t. The good news is that we shall approach this year equipped with our own gazebo which Richard has donated to us.

Because not all the membership is as old fashioned as I am, Rachel, who looks after Social Media has also set up a Facebook … thing .. and is planning to have a .. whatever… on it which will answer the question, what could I do with U3A today, and will accurately reflect what is on each day. Our other major shop front, as it were, is of course the internet and our site attracts a lot of interest. Because of his many other commitments, Neil Busby felt unable to continue on the committee but he has continued and will continue to look after our website and we are very grateful for that. There are quite a few people who have expressed an interest in U3A after looking us up on the web and indeed a number of people have got in touch with me using that route. (I have confessed that I don’t do Facebook, but I do actually use the web).

Membership renewal being in May for so many people, means no doubt a small drop in numbers again for a short while because inevitably there will be those whose circumstances have changed. It will take some years of our new system of rolling renewals before May loses its importance. The ongoing task of reminding members and then processing their renewals has, I think, been managed very efficiently. We tend not to give these details much thought but I would like to take this opportunity to thank Maddie, our Membership Secretary and Tricia, our Treasurer for all the effort they put into it. Thanks also to the little team who have worked hard today processing some 40 renewals. Tricia also having taken on the job of Treasurer at the last AGM, when no other volunteers were forthcoming, has kept the books in order despite all the odds. Wads of cash and cheques arrive at all sorts of times from group leaders and outing organisers, followed by invoices for coaches, or hire of halls. Since organisers don’t always know how many people will join a trip and people don’t always pay when they should, it can be a while before the income and the bills can be neatly paired up. And then there are the monthly meetings where I gather we once took £67.20 at a pound a head from members and £17 for visitors who pay £2 each. I’m still not sure what half a visitor looks like.

In between general meetings the committee meets once a month to make sure everything is proceeding smoothly and to plan ahead. Michelle Owen has had the unenviable task of minuting our diverse discussions, a job she has been doing now for two years. I am sorry to say that she too has decided the time has come to step down and I would like to take this opportunity to thank her for all her efforts. We have managed to keep her in office until the last moment and beyond, taking the minutes of today’s AGM.

It would be a mistake not to mention the efforts of our newsletter editor, Parry Jones. It would be a mistake for two reasons. Firstly, a huge amount of effort goes into collating information and presenting it in an attractive and interesting way within a very tight timetable. And whatever deadline is set, there is always someone who needs to add something at the very last moment. Parry not only edits, emails and prints it but he even delivers some of the printed copies too (and the rest, Rachel tirelessly delivers each month). I did say there were two reasons not to miss Parry out. The other one is obvious.
Parry is not averse to including his own view of speakers in his editorial and it wouldn’t do for me to upset him.

Above all, the heart of what we do in U3A lies in the activity groups. Last year I was pleased and rather proud to be able to announce that we had over thirty groups; now we have over forty. You will be aware of the range of activities on offer, from the cerebral, like Latin to the unashamedly entertaining, like visits to the dogs. There is scope to exercise whether walking, cycling, ten pin bowling or Tai Chi, creative activities from writing to lacemaking, culture, history, music to listen to or discuss or to create and there are lunch groups and other ways simply to socialise. And that’s only part of the story. Some of these groups, like Tai Chi in particular are prominent in recruiting new members. I hope those new members are happy to be part of the rest of U3A as well but there is no doubting their original reason for joining. It goes without saying that none of these groups would exist without the enthusiasm and hard work of the people who run them, sharing their particular expertise or just their enthusiasm, since whilst certain skills are sometimes called for, plenty of groups involve simply sharing ideas or learning together. But even such shared enterprises don’t get off the ground until someone steps up ready to organise them. I think we are generally quite good in U3A at not taking our group leaders for granted; I hope so anyway. Whatever the case it does no harm to remind ourselves now and then how much we owe to them.

And finally of course, the whole enterprise of starting new groups, looking for leaders on the one hand and participants on the other, reporting on progress, providing encouragement and resolving problems, as well as recently brokering agreements with other U3As falls to Glyn Hill who as well as having been Vice Chairman for the last two years, has also undertaken the daunting role of Group Co-ordinator. Glyn, like Richard, was a member of the Steering Committee and indeed became its Chairman. She too is standing down this year and whilst that will be an enormous loss to us, I can understand why after giving so unstintingly of her time she feels that she would now like to take a break. I am personally indebted to her for her support to me as Chairman over the last two years (though thinking about it I have a feeling that it was Glyn who talked me into it in the first place). Without the vision and persistence of people like Glyn and Richard, there might indeed have been no U3A in Thrapston at all. The committee will be the poorer without them.

That concludes my second and last report to you. It has been a privilege to act as Chairman and I could not have asked for a more enthusiastic and willing committee to serve with. Thank you also to all the members who have been so supportive.

Glyn James