

U3A Harwich Peninsula

September 2026



A big thank you to everyone who has sent in articles, photographs, information, etc.

Please forward articles etc for the October newsletter by around 10th October to Rita Rossini at Kramermarzulu@aol.com. Articles and recipes would be very welcome, especially seasonal recipes and ideas for easily cook meals. It would be very helpful to have group updates and plans for the Autumn from Group Leaders in relation to their group activities.

Meetings

Speakers 2026 - Don't forget the meetings from January will be at the United Services Club, at the usual times.

Oct 13th Cherry Mullins – A Welsh Labour of Love

Nov 10th Graham and Mary Brace -Wildlife of Brazil

Dec 8th "Lost Direction" Entertainment with songs from 50s,60s and 70s with a



Christmas flavour. Lost Direction is Mersea Islands own "Boy Band". Eight retired characters from different backgrounds, who sing to raise money for Mersea Lifeboat. Their repertoire is varied but tends towards humour.

IMPORTANT MESSAGE FROM THE CHAIRMAN

Several of us on the Committee will be “retiring” in May. It is very important for the survival of our U3A that members step forward to help run it. Each job on the Committee is quite small but needs to be done. By planning in advance, I hope that we can fill the vacancies and give volunteers time to understand the particular tasks involved. Our Committee works as a team and problems are shared. Please consider joining the Committee now; you will be made very welcome.

The members of the sub-committee who arrange speakers for the monthly meeting will also be stepping down – having been doing it for nearly 14 years. We have found that 2 or 3 people makes a good team, meeting about 4 times a year. Please volunteer to take on this role.

I know that people are not very keen to volunteer but it is actually quite rewarding to take part. Please contact me (07986 319827) or any other committee member if you would like more information.

Pauline Gronow

AI Group

Last call for joining the next AI Familiarization session. Oct 7 10am

Weds Oct 7th. We have a request for a morning session, 10-12.
Members are happy to oblige.

This is a chance for local members to shake hands with an AI portal with guidance from our more experienced members.

It's OK to bring your smartphone, tablet or laptop to work on. We have some exercises we've found helpful. Our sessions are quite informal and we can spend time on questions as they arise.

This is part of an initiative by National U3A AI to offer every U3A member the opportunity to have a supervised go at AI. AI is already present in doctor's surgeries and answering phone calls. It is often in the news creating new materials for batteries or in trouble for going rogue all by itself: most recently hacking other computer systems to complete a task.

Lots to learn and discuss. Contact Geoff on the Harwich U3A website if you want one of the last 3 places.

Astronomy Group

At the September meeting we learnt more about Dr Becky Smethurst of Oxford Uni. Dr Becky is a favourite source of simplified news from Deep Space research. We saw her engaging and speaking at a major conference.

In a second YouTube we learnt about the new Roman telescope, the follow on from Hubble. Dr Becky invited us to join this project:-

Look for extreme galaxies with Rubin: Blobs and Blurs or dust off your lens to clean up the cosmos through Artifact InSPECTor!

Jump in and start classifying, or read on to learn more about the science behind each project.

Artifact InSPECTor - <https://www.zooniverse.org/projects/artifact-pipeline/artifact-inspector>

Discipline: Space

Task: One-step. Check machine predictions of large artifact maps.

This new project asks volunteers to verify detections of image artifacts in data from space telescopes. The project displays data from the ESA's Euclid Space Telescope, and will expand to include similar detections from NASA's new Nancy Grace Roman Space Telescope. The data from these telescopes will be used to map distances to distant galaxies.

Just like how dust on your camera lens could cause aberrations in your photos, detectors on telescopes can produce artifacts in the data that need to be removed, or "masked out," before scientific analysis. These telescopes send down terabytes of data to Earth each day, far too much for astronomers to mask out artifacts individually. Your contributions to Artifact InSPECTor will provide improved artifact masks to refine machine learning models that hide artifacts automatically, providing clean data with which to make a 3D map of the universe.

Get involved and give the project a try -
visit: <https://www.zooniverse.org/projects/artifact-pipeline/artifact-inspector>

The AI group all engaged with Zooniverse to identify galaxy types in a similar project. They did so to help understand how AIs are trained. They all succeeded in this exercise unlike several other AI engagements recently.

Wondering what to do these forthcoming dark winter evening. Volunteer as a deep space explorer. Click the link above. From Christmas the new Nancy Grace Roman Space Telescope will begin sending lots more new images from near, our galaxy looking for rocky planets amongst other things, and deeper space than ever before explored. **Geoff Catchpole**

Book Group

With the long hot summer behind us, we are now planning great book titles for the coming months.

We would welcome two/three new members and Richard Flatt would love another male book lover to consider joining our great group.

We meet on the second Wednesday of each month at 2pm.

Ann Duggan



Walking the Meon Valley Trail

I discovered this 11 mile trail running from West Meon to Wickham whilst in Hampshire walking a section of the South Downs Way. The OS map app showed a former railway line running between Alton and Fareham through the stunning Meon Valley and this trail now forms part of it. Originally built to join small villages to these larger towns, Winchester and London; it carried people, livestock and freight but the route was never financially viable. It closed to passengers in 1955 (before the Beeching Report) and finally to freight in 1968. Finished in 1903 it was one of the last standard gauge railways to be built but it lasted less than seventy years.

There is some of the infrastructure still remaining such as brick bridges some of which still carry roads over the old trackbed. There are also a number of iron bridges which are still in relatively good condition. Although mainly following the Meon river the line did towards its northern end required the digging of several long tunnels. This modern trail, as a former railway line, is flat, well surfaced and open to walkers, cyclists, buggies and mobility scooters which is great for people with limited mobility to access this part of the South Downs National Park. As I had already planned to stay in the village of Exton in the Meon Valley I booked an extra night at the B and B to enable me to walk this beautiful trail and also to meet up with a friend in a nearby town.



The day I walked it was hot and sunny but almost the entire line is now guarded by tall trees which, despite the lack of rain, were in full leaf. It was a lovely cool walk but there wasn't much chance to see the beautiful valley and undulating hillsides through the green tunnel of trees. The route very occasionally touched the beautiful river Meon, which is a rare crystal clear chalk stream; there being only 200

worldwide with nearly all being found in England. Unfortunately I didn't get to see one of the reintroduced water voles on the river.

This quiet, rural line had an important claim to fame, as in June 1944 Churchill, de Gaulle and Eisenhower met in a railway carriage at Droxford Station sidings to discuss the D Day landings, whilst 100,000 Allied troops were amassing in the natural amphitheatre at Cheesefoot Head, a few miles away.

Named after the Jutish tribe the 'Meonwara', the Meon Valley was also settled by Bronze Age people and the Romans. All these ancient groups must have flourished in this beautiful landscape. I certainly enjoyed being there and plan to return as there are some other Hampshire long distance walks that go through this pretty valley.

Liz Smith

Sketching Group

We are almost at the end of our sketching season which has presented us with a variety of weather challenges - chilly, wet and hot conditions . We are not easily put off!

There are some beautiful places in our area. Great Oakley churchyard is a very quiet and peaceful space, Lawford Church offers a range of amazing and varied views . From the edge of the graveyard you can see the Essex way dropping down into the valley of the Stour with the rooftops of Manningtree showing above the trees and the Suffolk countryside in the distance. The June trip to Castle House in Dedham was very hot but the huge lime trees in the grounds offered shade and coolness.

In July we sketched down by the river at Wrabness on a perfect summer day. Our outing to the Redoubt we were met with rain on the dot at 10.00 am. How lucky that we could go down and visit the interesting displays on offer, thanks to the sterling

work of the Harwich Society who maintain the site so well. Needless to say, we had plenty of options for sketching there.



We have also visited Cliff Park and Ramsey village. Our most recent visit was to Brookelynn Farm in Beaumont, a favourite venue offering landscape views over the fields but also a wealth of sketching opportunities - machinery, barns and equipment and animals, who sadly wouldn't keep still enough in their excitement to see us.



Our last outing of the season will be Harwich where some are tempted by the variety of boats on the Quay, or the multiple choices of buildings tucked away. We'll be there (weather permitting) on the last Thursday of September armed with seats, sketchbooks, pens and paints. The last quarter of an hour we convene to share our morning's

work. It's been another very enjoyable season.

Jill Riches

My Primary School Years in Northern Ireland

Following July's article on the history of education in Harwich I thought I would share my primary school years in Northern Ireland.

I started primary school when I was four and a half. My mum only took me for the first week, after which I walked the mile to school and back on my own every day. Our next-door neighbour rode a motorbike to work and if he happened to see me he would give me a lift. It was a very different time with little thought given to health and safety.

The year I started was the last in which pupils stayed at our primary school until they were 14 before leaving to work. One of my older cousins who was leaving gave me his treasured collection of marbles.

My first three years were spent in the same classroom with Miss Balin. She taught us reading, writing and arithmetic. If we misbehaved or failed to concentrate she could be quite strict and sometimes made us cry. Afterwards she would comfort us by sitting us on her lap which meant some children deliberately misbehaved just to receive the cuddle.

One memorable incident was being stung by a wasp. I screamed so much that a teacher and two older pupils had to drag me to the chemist for treatment.



When I was six our class was taken to confession every month. As I felt I had no sins to confess I usually invented a couple. One day however a few friends and I sneaked into the priest's orchard and picked some apples. We were caught by our priest and he marched us straight back to church to confess to stealing them. I remember being secretly pleased that for once I had a genuine sin to confess. In my third year I also made my First Holy Communion.

The next 3 years were spent with Miss Bradley as my teacher and she introduced us to joined-up writing and more advanced maths. She was a strict teacher who would pinch my arms leaving bruises and rap my knuckles with a metal ruler if I made mistakes with my times tables. When I complained my mum simply said that Miss Bradley's father had taught her and had been just as much of a bully.

During Year 4 a couple of our classes were confirmed by a visiting priest from Belfast who later became a cardinal. My confirmation dress and veil were bought from the tallyman with my mum paying for them in weekly instalments.

For my last two years I was taught by the headmaster Mr Rowan. In my final year he prepared us for the 11-plus examination. We studied grammar, essay writing, algebra, geometry and geography. I particularly enjoyed our geography trips to local coastal features left behind by the Ice Age. It was also during this year that I discovered my love of mathematics which has stayed with me throughout my life.

Mr Rowan believed in using the cane.

He told me I would never pass the 11-plus. Happily for me he was wrong.

Looking back I also remember taking some of my younger brothers and sisters to school each day, I made friendships that have lasted a lifetime and I enjoyed sport.

Despite the strict discipline my primary school years left me with many happy memories that I still treasure today.

Moirá Arthy

The Art Bench

Large family groups in various states of undress sat in untidy circles on the parched yellow grass. Some were shielded by windbreaks and others, unperturbed by the unforgiving sun, lay outstretched on beach towels. The kiosk was doing a roaring trade. Everyone needed a cold drink or thirst-quenching cup of tea in the drought, and the stallholder wiped his glistening forehead with his oversized grey hankie.

Willow had been in Dovercourt for five months now, and the excitement of living in a new place was beginning to wear thin. Jack was probably due to be released in a month or two, and she prayed he wouldn't find her here. She missed her friends and the tremendous support they had given her, but how lovely it was in this peaceful seaside town! One day, before the recent hot spell had started, Willow had discovered Cliff Park and found the perfect bench to sit on. People had obviously been sprucing up the area: the iconic Victoria statue had been cleaned and repainted and was now floodlit at night, the railings along Marine Parade were now a pleasing shade of light blue, and tubs of colourful flowers had magically appeared at strategic points. Even some of the benches had been given a new look, including this one she had chosen to sit on today. The sound of the incoming tide was relaxing and comforting: shoo-oosh, silent, shoo-oosh, silent. A man's abandoned denim jacket was draped over the other end of the bench and she wondered what the story was behind it. Willow noticed that underneath it was a plastic Lidl bag with some binoculars and an artist's sketchbook inside.

Willow didn't consider herself much of an artist, but she would often do rough drawings of places she came upon: a charming church, or an old bridge over a gushing river, just to remember where she had been. So she couldn't resist taking a peek inside the book. There were just a few sketches of children playing on a climbing frame, a sweet, scruffy dog with a shoe in its mouth, and one of a broad-shouldered man with windswept dark hair observing a ship through a pair of binoculars. Interesting! Was this subject the artist himself? Wouldn't mind meeting him, Willow smiled to herself. She knew how disappointed she'd feel if it had been her who had left her things behind, especially her sketches, but didn't think the book was valuable enough to take to the police station. There was a pencil in the bag, so she turned to a clean page and drew a sketch of her own, a self-portrait: Willow watching the man watching the ship. The man was a blurry figure with his back to the artist, but the Stena Line ferry was clearly identifiable. The same little dog had a red ball in its mouth and was looking up pleadingly at its master. Willow added a note at the bottom beside her signature: 'Loved your pictures and I hope you return to find your things. Regards, Willow.'

Two days later, Willow saw that the Lidl bag was still there. Pleased, but curious that the owner of the forgotten items must have returned to claim the jacket and binoculars but not the sketches, she opened the bag and pulled the sketchbook out. There was a new drawing, this time of a laughing woman resembling Willow's self-portrait, with the dog on her lap, licking her ear. A note was below it: 'Sorry if my picture doesn't do you justice! Hope it doesn't rain for a while, but the bag should protect the sketchbook. Regards, Scott.'

Willow wrote a note this time:

'Hi Scott,

I loved your sketches! They cheered me up on a cloudy day. At least there's been no rain to spoil your book. If that's your dog, tell him I love him too!

Regards,

Willow.'

The following day, she couldn't resist going back to the bench to see if the artist and dog-owner was there, or if he had left any more notes or drawings. She was delighted to find an additional message:

'Dear Willow,

Dickens loves the picture you drew of him and now wants me to buy him a red ball. As you can see, I recovered my jacket, but I preferred to leave the sketchbook behind. Who knows? Perhaps our paths might cross at the bench one day!

Bye,

Scott.'

Who was this amateur artist and why had she never seen anyone resembling the man in the drawing? At least she now knew his name was Scott. Did she dare suggest they met? Would it be risky to meet a total stranger in a park, especially as all these criminals were soon to be let out of prison? No, this was a quiet little town where the only crimes she'd witnessed were traffic offences, fly-tipping and reckless riding of e-scooters. So, emboldened by Scott's interest in her notes and art, she turned to a clean page:

'Hi Scott,

Saw this ball at Morrisons and thought Dickens might like it. If it's fine weather on Monday afternoon, I'll be here at our art bench. It would be nice to meet you both.

Bye,

Willow.'

She popped the ball into the bag. Heavens! She was being daring! What if he was a monster, rapist, or someone like her ex?

It rained on Monday, so, disappointed, she stayed at home. On Tuesday, though, she couldn't resist going to the bench to see if the book was still there.

Perhaps Scott had turned up anyway! No, it had been removed. Willow didn't want to appear too keen, but her heart sank. After all, she didn't know this man and he could be twice - or half! - her age. She was being ridiculous! The sketchbook had gone and the jacket had gone. Why would Scott turn up now? It must have been a council cleaner or the wind that had swept the bag away. There was no note and Scott had never even agreed to meet her.

Suddenly, out of the blue and for no reason at all, she felt in the depths of despair. She had no real friends or family here and felt she could never properly escape from her abusive partner. Unfortunately, he was an intelligent man and could probably find her if he tried. She was truly alone. A few drops of rain began to mix with salty tears on her bare legs. Totally dispirited, she stood up to leave, but a single, high-pitched bark made her look down. A cute dog with floppy ears had just placed a red ball at her feet, and a young man with thick brown hair in a familiar denim jacket was smiling down at her with mischievous eyes.

'I think Dickens here wants to get to know you, but I'm afraid he has a strange way of introducing himself. May I join you? You can tell me why you're upset.'

Jane Myers

Creative writing group

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