

Sources 3



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Odd pieces of history

Surfing through the internet for some observations on the subject of history, you can stumble upon this one. "The present is specious; the future is unknown. The past is all we have." For such profundity the attribution is 'anonymous'! There are others, such as Henry Ford's "History is bunk" and Jane Austen's "I often think it odd that history should be so dull, for a great deal of it must be invention." Whether you hold the view or not that the inaccuracy of reportage and tradition devalues historical records, there is a fascination in discovering the past, delving into such records we have in libraries and museums. History stimulates imagination, correlates with present experience and satisfies curiosity.

An article in the Oxford Magazine by Dr. John Maddicott, a fellow in modern history at Exeter College, put the cat amongst the pigeons and hit the newspaper headlines last October. "What Oxford historians know when they graduate is largely a matter of

bits and pieces. It cannot be assumed that they have a working knowledge of how their own country was evolved." He considered that it had become "a sort of self-service restaurant, where the menu is exclusively a la carte and the tables are all almost separate." An Edinburgh historian responded that the whole point of studying the past is to gain a sense of perspective. Sheffield University announced that their curriculum was switching back from the modular pick-and-mix approach to the traditional core of knowledge. All first-years will have to study European history from the fall of Rome to the present day to ensure they have a basic grounding in ancient, mediaeval and modern history.

How, then, do U3A history groups approach their study? Some, no doubt, have qualified historians ready to impart the knowledge and inspiration they acquired from academic circles. Others will follow the self-help principle whereby each member of the group researches one section of a common theme and shares the knowledge gained. The chosen theme may be an historical period, an historical place or the history of an activity, railways or theatre or fashion.

Whatever the method or the subject, U3As can provide the path along which members can step into the past, examine the records, feel the passing of the ages, and assess the changing values of the generations. So here is another quotation flashed onto the computer screen. "Thucydides says history is philosophy learned by examples."

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History Groups

Warwick U3A

Two historical mysteries intrigued Warwick U3A. The first was why the architect of Stonehenge designed 30ft high arches with 20ton lintels and how did the builder build them? In six months we learned a lot about the Neoliths, the Megaliths, the Bronze Age and Iron Age peoples, mythology, astronomy, earth magnetism and dowsing, Druids and pseudo-druids, ley lines and levitation, the

movement of ice sheets over Britain, to say nothing of the history of Stonehenge. We had a marvellous day at Woodhenge and Stonehenge but two things we did not do. We did not find out why the architect designed the Trilithons nor how the builder built them!

The second mystery turned into a geological treasure hunt. Ten teams, consisting of two geologists and twenty-eight members, each chose a different rock and spent the first month at Warwick Museum looking at life when their rock was laid down. Some tickled trilobites, some dashed after dinosaurs, some laughed at lamellibranchs, and the curator enjoyed himself.

Summer days were spent in the field with maps, looking and listening to everything in the area - quarries, houses, churches, pubs, the soil, flowers and trees, farming - everything dependent on the rock beneath. In September the teams reported their findings, revealing the wealth and variety of information discovered.

Orpington U3A

Lacking a professional tutor, nine history enthusiasts got together to form a DIY group. Each in turn researches their favourite subject and presents it to the monthly meeting. Interests range from mediaeval buildings to the Ottoman Empire, from Alexander the Great to Joan of Arc. Various aspects of the 19th and early 20th centuries are planned.

Researchers have to check and co-ordinate their findings from books and produce visual aids where possible. Listeners find their historical perspective enlarged and stimulated to further this new knowledge.

Lewes U3A

A small but active Oral History group was set up in 1991 since when it has recorded 178 tapes of interviews about the changing life in Lewes during the twentieth century as part of its project "Lewes in Living Memory". All the tapes are routinely copied and summarised, and much of the material has also been transcribed verbatim. From these transcripts two books have been published, "Lewes Remembers the Second World War 1939-1945" and "Lewes

Remembers Racing and Race Days". A third book, on shopping in the town, is in active preparation. The master tapes are deposited in the East Sussex Record Office in Lewes.

As part of a nationwide project 95 tapes of life histories of members of Lewes U3A have also been made for deposit in the National Sound Archive at the British Library in London.

During the course of this work the members of the group have learned a lot more not only about their town in this century but also about the technicalities of recording, the fun in researching, and the intricacies of editing and preparing material for publication. They have the satisfaction of adding to valuable and permanent source material for future historians.

Doncaster U3A

A Local History group has studied the impact of the Romans on the area where kilns have been found for the production of pottery for home and export consumption. Also, they have examined population growth and discovered that when Doncaster had 10,000 citizens it needed only two constables to keep the peace.

The group has been on short residential courses at Northern College on the history of housing, Wentworth Castle and art appreciation. The history of canals will be the subject of the next three day visit.

Nottingham U3A

History through language is one way to gain a fascinating insight into the transformation of people and their language. The second millenium begins with English firmly established as the international language. At the start of the first millenium its ancestor was spoken only by a few poor tribes on the outer fringes of civilisation.

Starting with the origins of language, the group take a bird's eye glimpse at the language families of the world, then follow the spread of the Indo-European languages alongside agriculture. They consider the fate of Celtic languages and the slight linguistic impact of 400 years of Roman occupation, and look at some Old

English and Middle English texts and assess the advantages to the language - but not to the people - of the Norman conquest. There follows discussion of modern English, its suitability as an international language, its crazy spelling and what can be done about it, with arguments about grammar.

This approach to history through language has provided opportunities to research word origins and loan words, and to learn of methods of teaching reading. Members whose first language is not English have contributed interesting comparisons. Sessions on place names, personal names, writing and the alphabet can add to the interest in the subject. A History of the English Language, by A. Baugh & C. Cable (Routledge) is an invaluable source book.

Lincoln U3A

Two groups have been studying a wide range of history but both have concentrated on the mediaeval period for the last three years. Members choose the subject for their own research and share the findings with the group. They have learned of St. Hugh of Avalon, Richard III, Stephen and Matilda, Perkin Warbeck and Lambert Simnel, the Magna Carta and the Wars of the Roses.

The city of Lincoln has provided a good hunting ground for visits to supplement the meetings. Lincoln Cathedral and Castle, the old Bishop's Palace, the Jews House and Lincoln St. Mary's Guildhall included. Visits of mediaeval kings to Lincoln and meetings of Parliament in Lincoln Chapter House have been topics for group research.

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History is one and indivisible

Whenever I mention that I run U3A history courses I get the responses of "What period are you doing?" or "What sort of history - political, social or economic?" To which I reply with the above quotation, or rather misquotation from Mr. Litvinov. There is no such thing as 'sorts' of history; all strands are inextricably

intertwined. Nor is there any point in 'doing' any particular period unless you have 'done' what went before.

I present my new students with two analogies. One is a very large mural in an art gallery. Before going up to it with magnifying glass in hand, to study the detail, you need to stand at the far end of the room, look at the whole, and get a clear idea of what it is all about.

The other is a big jigsaw. You might start by assembling the pieces that obviously fit together, but that way you can only build up islands. What you need then are the seemingly insignificant joining pieces which often change your whole concept of what the finished picture is about. U3A members have all built up some islands already but usually these remain in isolation and each member has a different set of islands. What I aim to do is to fit in the joining pieces and enable them to see the whole picture. That means, of course, starting with the big bang and continuing to the day before yesterday, taking in the relevant parts of the history of countries other than our own.

When they have got the picture and can place things in context, then it is time to study the detail and unravel the threads, economic, social or maritime etc., whichever particularly interests them - and only then. Our formal education systems do not allow for this holistic approach. Specialisation begins in the classroom and, as a result, there are graduates in history who know very little history, just a great deal about very little and that without the overall context. In the U3A we are blessedly free from the constraints of time, curriculum and "Are you sure there will be a question on this in the exam?" If someone raises an interesting point we can spend time discussing it, even if it is not strictly relevant to the issue we are dealing with at the time. We can run forward to see the long term consequences of an event. For me, history is just one word for 'how things got to be the way they are now'.

"But you can't do it all. It isn't possible." Well, you can and it is. For ten years or so I have lead courses of 9 terms over 3 years, overlapping when one reaches the present day with one starting "In the beginning." The reward comes when someone says, "I never knew that before" and "I knew that and that but never realised how they were connected." With the levels of enthusiasm and enjoyment

expressed it makes all the work worthwhile.

And if anyone still thinks it can't be done - well, I can tell them how to do it.

Jack Yeatman, New Forest/Waterside U3A

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In the next issue

Literature, poetry and creative writing will be given priority in SOURCES No.4. It will be mailed in May 1999.

U3As are invited to contribute short articles on how they provide for this interest of their members. What ideas are there to stimulate other U3As to take up literature studies and what are the best resources? Has your U3A published any creative writing?

Contributions should reach SOURCES at the National Office, 26 Harrison Street, London WC1H 8JG by 20th March 1999.

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Who does what history?

An analysis of the course programmes of U3As demonstrates that the study of history has wide appeal covering many interesting aspects.

Ancient 19

Architectural 13

Book Illustration 1

British 29

Egyptological 5
European 30
Family/Geneology 20
Fashion 3
Garden 10
General 33
Greek 8
Industrial 8
Jewish 1
Language 2
Local 153
Maritime 2
Medieval 14
Military 4
Modern 8
North American 2
Oral 5
Railway 6
Religious 5
Roman 9
Social 36
Theatre 7
Transport 6

A total of 27 subjects and 439 U3A groups!

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Resource Centre News

History Groups

In the National Office we are able to search a database which tells us which U3As have groups interested in history, and it is from this that we can establish which aspects of the subject are being studied and by how many groups. When members contact the Resource Centre, asking for items on loan or information on what materials are available, there is an opportunity to find out what is actually happening in individual study groups and to respond to their specific needs.

We have had, for example, a request from a group looking at Georgian England, especially the social aspects, who will later visit a Georgian city and may then want slides on Georgian architecture. We have slides on both these aspects of study and can obtain similar sets on other periods of British history. Art slides might be used by history groups looking at a particular period. The set by William Hogarth is a good example and might well be of interest to social historians.

Another example is a request from a group studying industrial history who wanted to look at the history of the construction of bridges. It was possible to obtain slides with notes which covered this subject in detail and which proved to be very useful to the course.

We have a number of sets of slides on architecture and art in classical sites, especially Italy and Greece, which could be used for historical study or by travel groups planning visits.

Collecting resource material

In addition to slides and videos we are collecting material produced by groups which others might like to use. The members of Warwick U3A have produced a set of four packages of notes relating to local history, geology, natural history and weather studies (our second internally produced set on this subject). If your group has produced course notes which other groups could borrow, please send a copy to the Resource Centre and it will be added to our catalogue.

Lists of items in the Resource Centre were sent to all U3As with the November Chairman's letter but new material is being added all the time and the lists quickly become out of date. We have been collecting material for the use of science study groups but none of this material was included as it had not been catalogued at the time. We intend in future to produce subject lists which will go only to U3As studying those subjects but if you have requests on any subject at all, please contact me at the National office address or on 0171 278 8848 (Tuesdays and Thursdays only).

One of the problems of collecting non-book material is that it is

often difficult to judge the quality of items available for purchase. One method of dealing with this is to obtain feedback from group leaders, or members, on the material sent to them. Several groups have co-operated by reviewing material.

One group, for example, took considerable time and trouble to view and report back on Tai Chi videos which I had obtained for them. They sent me a set of reports by different members commenting on the content, presentation and level of knowledge required by potential users.

Another group spent some time reviewing architectural material with regard to its usefulness for groups who want to obtain an overall historical view of the subject without experts on any particular period to guide them.

Sometimes I ask for help in choosing material for a specialist subject. At other times members offer some feedback from their own experience of using the material I sent them. However the offer comes about I am tremendously grateful for this kind of response. It means that I can be more confident of the quality of material we are collecting and can either recommend it with enthusiasm to other groups, or explain its limitations to potential users in advance so that they can decide if it is really right for their needs.

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Design/Age

We will never eradicate old age or mental or physical impairment. Such facts of life are part of the human condition. The important thing is to constantly strive to minimise the impact they have on our lives by designing a physical world which works for everyone, regardless of ability, and where that is not possible, to use our ingenuity to design the special products that offer people as much dignity and enjoyment as possible. It is not compensatory gadgets to make up for failure of good design which interests the U3A Design/Age Network. In our view the answer lies in what is increasingly referred to as 'universal design' or 'design for all'.

Within an existing research project run by the Royal College of Art, Kensington, entitled Design/Age, the University of the Third Age confronts these issues head-on and provides user forums for students and staff and professional design houses. We have adopted the title Design/Age for our own activities because it more accurately describes the subject area we are interested in and distinguishes it from the whole wide subject of design itself.

U3A Design/Age prefers to think not in terms of disabilities but of thresholds. For example, when we reach the point where we no longer feel confident to drive, our world is likely to retract, and herein lies the value of the 'design for all' approach which seeks to expand that world by removing barriers and obstacles. While we have convenience stores we also have inconvenience stores, where the managers, designers and staff seem to go out of their way to make life difficult. In them, an unfortunate customer stares at a product on a shelf right up by the ceiling impossible to reach. Poorly presented and confusing information, packaging hard to open, inconsiderate graphics are some examples. All these things send out unfriendly messages that are bad for business in general and particularly discouraging to older customers because they reinforce negative stereotypes about age and competence. This is not wilful bad design, but there is a striking mismatch between the way we design, package and display goods and the needs and capabilities of older consumers.

In designing for our future selves, how can we ensure that the world of the future will be age-friendly? An important way is by alerting manufacturers and retailers to the potential market that older people represent and helping them address it. For example, the conventional market approach is to lump together everyone over the age of 55 years in one age group. As we get older our differences increase rather than converge and lifestyle becomes more significant than chronological age. A 50 year old and a 70 or 80 year old can easily share the same interests or activities, but have very different capabilities. Again, older people are experienced consumers who like to shop around and have more time for that activity than the working population. What is important to them is that products and services assist them in maintaining their vitality and interest in life.

In this sense older people are moving beyond consumerism. Younger people are more likely to want the latest or most

fashionable products, whereas older people are beginning to realise, to paraphrase Mae West, that it is not the years in your life but the life in your years that really matters. They are looking to fill their time in meaningful and sociable ways.

Understanding the potential older market means recognising that age is more a social construct than a chronological fact; it is not static. Older people represent an enormous opportunity for influencing manufacturers and service providers.

'Universal design' is a subject that should move into the mainstream of social affairs and not be marginalised as it still is in much of Europe. U3A is one of the first senior citizen groups to address this subject effectively and we hope that more U3A groups will recognise the value of exploring these issues.

U3As wishing to take part in this research project should contact Phyllis Babb, National Subject Network Organiser, at the National Office.

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BBC and the Learning Zone

Many of you will know of the contact we have had with Jenny Hunt and the Learning Support Unit of the BBC. Jenny has been promoted and will no longer deal directly with U3A groups. Because the BBC is anxious to promote its educational work among adults, Jenny and I will meet regularly to keep us updated with developments from BBC Education.

If you have enquiries relating to educational broadcasts and the Learning Zone, telephone

0181 746 1111 or fax: 0181 752 4398

If you have more general enquiries relating to the BBC, call 0181 734 800 for TV information or 0171-580-4468 for radio information.

If you would like a copy of the current Learning Zone catalogue, write to

BBC Educational Information,
Room 3318, BBC White City,
201 Wood Lane, London W12 7TS

The BBC have created a website on educational programmes,

<http://www.bbc.co.uk.education/lzone>

As well as recording programmes from the Learning Zone it is possible to buy extension material, usually booklets but sometimes multi-media packs, directly from BBC Educational Information at the above address. I can supply details and prices on request. I am able to buy extension material and lend it to groups who want to use it for short periods. I cannot videotape BBC programmes for loan. We have no licence to do that. Groups wanting to use BBC material must do their own recording.

Elizabeth Gibson, Resource Centre Manager

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Where can we get.....?

Talking Books

The Talking Bookshop, 11 Wigmore Street, London W1H 9LB (0171 491 4117) has a stock of about 7000 titles. They claim to trace and acquire little known titles and offer discounts to U3As.

Classical Literature

A useful resource for Greek and Latin literature and for Ancient History can be found at The Hellenic Bookservice, 91 Fortress Road, Kentish Town, London NW5 1AG (0171 267 9499 or fax 0171 267 9498)

The Wellcome Trust Information Service

To find out more about biomedical science, science policy, research ethics, public understanding of science visit or contact the Information Service on the ground floor of The Wellcome Building, 183 Euston Road, London NW1 2BE (0171 611 8722).

A brochure details their databases and multimedia products, mainly covering biomedical and biotechnical subjects.

E-mail: infoserve@wellcome.ac.uk

Books and maps for walking groups

Apart from publications at the local library and tourist information office, Stanfords, 12-14 Long Acre, London WC2E 9LP (0171 836 1321) have material covering all counties.

Information sheets and publications on country walking are obtainable from the Ramblers Association, 1/5 Wandsworth Road, London SW8 2XX (0171 339 8500)

British Museum

Study days and courses to be held at the British Museum include "The Arts in Baroque Rome", 16th and 23rd March, tickets £40, and "The History of British Archaeology", Tuesday afternoons at 5.30-7.00 p.m. from 6th April to 11th May, tickets £90. Enquiries to British Museum Education Service, London WC1B 3DG (0171 323 8511)

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Mutual assistance for language groups

A couple of U3As recently experimented with the production of appropriate teaching material on tapes, recorded by native speakers within U3As. This procedure could be a cheap and useful way of supplementing language teaching material for coordinators

who may not have native speakers available in their own groups. There are many native speakers of French, German, Italian, Spanish, Czech etc in U3As around the country. While they may not be willing to be coordinators, and even if they are already leading a local group in their mother tongue, they may be willing to help.

It is suggested that all U3As be invited to provide a list of names and addresses of native speakers in their U3A who might be willing to read texts onto tape on request. It is not a very arduous task and could be a great help to coordinators, particularly in parts of the country where foreign language material may not be easily accessible.

Once such a list is established and, if possible, added to the database at the National Office it could be held in the Resource Centre. Coordinators could then approach appropriate readers directly. It would be up to the coordinators to select the material (suitable to the level of the group) and to send a photocopy of the text to the voluntary reader. The cost involved would be minimal, consisting only of the price of the blank tape and postage. As U3A in London has a particularly large number of native speakers of foreign languages, we would be willing to set the ball rolling by inserting an appropriate note in our U3A in London Newsletter and establishing the first list of volunteer readers. Anyone interested can contact Marion Bieber (0171 722 5399).

* * * * *

"Thank you for the second issue of U3A SOURCES. At our committee meeting it was noted that this single copy was the only one available to the committee.....This Bulletin is vital to the effective running of our groups." Extract from a letter to SOURCES.

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York Study Days

A weekend of study at York University has been arranged for 15-18th July. Applications for places on the following courses can be

made on booking forms available from U3A secretaries or from the National Office. Applications should be made by 31st March.

Birdwatching - day outings to coast and moors, venue depending on weather and latest sightings.

Exploring York - visit to City Archives and tour of Roman York. A list of other sites is available.

Environmental issues - Friday opens with a discussion on the environmental crisis, then a study of urban conservation and a tour of York by the city Conservation Department. Saturday's programme covers agricultural production, crops versus wild life, and the effects of climate.

Literature and poetry - opportunities for reading in common, for discussion on reactions and writing, with special reading of "Wuthering Heights" and poetry by Emily Bronte and Ted Hughes.

Travel - travel law and legal requirements for tour leaders on Saturday, Painting - flowers, portraits and sketching, Philosophy and Information Technology.

SOURCES No.4 will be mailed in May 1999. U3A members who have not yet requested their free service should send their name and address with postcode SOURCES.

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