

This Month's Talk

Monday 19th January 10:30am
Shrewsbury Town Football Club

Sharon MaGrath
My Atlantic Journey

A Shropshire midwife who rowed from The
Canary Islands to Antigua



The remarkable story of her Atlantic rowing challenge; the planning, the training, and the personal determination it took to cross one of the world's most unforgiving oceans by sheer human power. From navigating storms to the quiet moments of reflection. It's a tale of courage, endurance, and the strength of the human spirit.



HIGHLIGHTS

Future Events (Page 2)

Group Reports (Pages 6–8)

- **Anthropology** • **Economics** •
- **History of Science & Invention** •
- **British Sign Language** •
- **Reading Group 1** •
- **Motown, Funk and Soul** •

**You can renew your
membership now**

New Groups (Page 9)

- **Model Miniatures** •
- **Podcast** •
- **Radio, Computing & Electronics** •

Chairman's Report (Page 3)

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National u3a Talks (Page 11)

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U3a Trip to Tatton Park
15th April 2026
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Events Coming Up

Monday 16th February 10:30am

The Walker Theatre

Alison Utting

AGGIE' – The life and adventures of Dame Agnes Hunt
The story of an amazing Shropshire nurse and medical pioneer

Monday 16th March 10:30am

The Walker Theatre

Andrew Fusek-Peters

The well-known Shropshire photographer will be sharing stories from his two most recent books: *Garden Safari* and *Butterfly Safari* and some of his other iconic work

Palmer's Café Friday 30th January

Our popular drop-in afternoons are held at Palmer's Café on Claremont Street, usually on the last Friday of the month. Join us anytime from 2.00pm until 4.00pm in the room upstairs where a lift can transport you in comfort.

This is a good chance to meet other members to chat about everything u3a and there will be Committee members there, and they just love to answer all your questions. All current and potential members are welcome so why not give it a try?

Future Dates are Fridays 27th February and 27th March



A Shrewsbury u3a Spring trip to Tatton Park on the 15th April 2026



Located in the heart of Cheshire, Tatton Park is one of the most complete historic estates in Britain and features an elegant 18th century neo-classical mansion with Georgian architecture and lavish interiors. There is a farm and a beautifully landscaped garden, voted best National Trust Garden in 2020, they feature Italian, Japanese, and kitchen gardens. It has a medieval old hall, and all is set within 1000 acres of stunning parkland. The mansion, home to the Egerton family, houses one of the National Trust's finest libraries and an outstanding collection of Gillows of Lancaster furniture.

Tatton Park is managed by Cheshire East Council. National Trust members have free access to the Mansion and gardens only on presentation of a valid physical NT card; or you will be charged. Entry to the Farm or Old Hall will incur an extra charge.

Optional. HEAD GARDENER'S TOUR of the Japanese garden. £5.

Eating and Drinking. The Stables restaurant and Tea room provide food and refreshments.

The coach leaves at 9.30 am from the Abbey coach/car park. We leave Tatton Park at 4.30 pm.

Cost £15 for National Trust members. Non-NT members £31. **You can pay me by cash or cheque payable to Shrewsbury u3a. Entrance to Gardens and Mansion, Tipping, and executive coach travel included in the price. To book, contact me Seeven on 01743 368462 or email trips@shrewsburyu3a.org.uk**

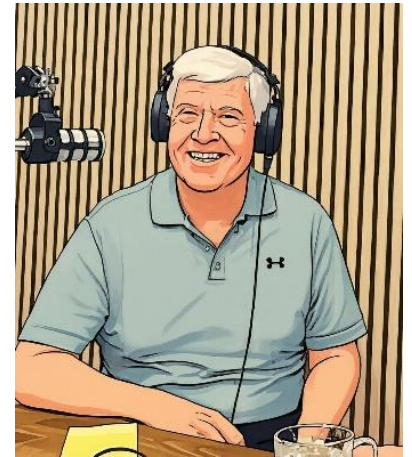


LETTER FROM YOUR CHAIRMAN

Happy New Year to all our members. I hope that you all had an enjoyable festive season. My wife and I are still recovering from having our extended family to stay.

As previously announced at the December talk, we are responding to an observation that we should reserve seating, and wheelchair space, in the front row at Theatre Severn for those who can't get up or down the Walker Theatre steps. So, from February, this should be in place.

I am now in my third and final year as Chairman of our u3a. I am planning to continue on the course that I set out at the beginning of my tenure; **Doing Things Better and Doing Better Things**. I believe that we have made some significant progress so far but there is more work to be done. I will do my best but will not be able to achieve much without your support and, in some cases, active help. So:



Membership Renewals. Renewals started on 1 December. Those who have not yet renewed, have until the end of Jan to pay their £15 fee. Please, please, please try to help us do renewals better and help our long-suffering Membership Secretary and Treasurer. Please go onto our website, click on "Membership," and then follow the very straightforward instructions for registering (if you have not done that already as previously requested) and then pay by credit or debit card. It is very easy but if you struggle, ask someone you know in u3a to help. We are a learning organization, so saying that you can't do something is not a valid excuse.

Central Events. We now have a small band of people who have agreed to run some central events. We need three or more others to join the crew. Please give this serious consideration. Although it will involve some effort, the camaraderie of working in a team should be enjoyable and rewarding.

Podcasts. We also have a Group who are going to look into doing podcasts focusing on some of our group activities.

A Group Coordinators' Conference. The conference will aim to help Coordinators manage their groups, not least by utilizing our new (and simpler) IT, system.

National u3a Festival. Those of you who read your Third Age Matters magazine should be aware that there will be a national u3a festival in York on 1-3 July 2026. I did not attend the inaugural 2024 event, but I have it on good authority that it was a most sociable experience. Consequently, I am looking at my wife and I attending and encourage anyone else who is interested to consider going as well.



Shrewsbury u3a Policies

To operate effectively, and legally, we all need to take a responsible and commonsense approach to our participation in u3a activities. The general principle in Shrewsbury u3a is that all members are responsible for their own wellbeing, health and safety. They are trusted to use common sense and judgement in their participation in our activities in accordance with our Code of Conduct. All our policies are contained in our Members' Handbook, which is available on our website. Paper copies are available on request.



All About Christmas

Anne Cousins

The December talk had a festive theme, as Dorothy Nicolle told us all about Christmas traditions and, along the way, she shattered some long-held beliefs.

First of all, the date. She told us that 25 December was completely the wrong date for Christ's birth. The most accurate indication of the real date of Christ's birth was the star which the three kings followed. Experts have identified this star as a supernova which shone for 70 days in March, in the year 5 BC.



The three kings came with gifts which were very symbolic to Christians, gold, frankincense and myrrh. Christ was King of the Jews, and the gold represented wealth and frankincense represented deity. Myrrh was used in embalming and was a reference to the reincarnation of Christ. For early Christians, the birth of Christ was much less significant than his death and reincarnation.



In the fourth century, Pope Julius decided to introduce celebrations for the birth of Christ. The year began in March in those days, and the Pope calculated that Christ had been conceived in March and therefore his birth must have been in December, which led to the date of 25 December being used for Christmas. This date was close to the winter solstice, the longest night of the year, and an important date in the pagan calendar. At this time Christian missionaries were trying to convert the pagan population to Christianity, and it was useful to incorporate pagan traditions into Christianity.

Holly, ivy, and mistletoe are all pagan traditions and nothing to do with Christmas. The Druids worshipped mistletoe, for example, because it was an important medicinal plant and also seen by them as a plant of peace. Mistletoe has always been a fertility symbol, hence the tradition of kissing under the mistletoe. Holly was thought by Christians to represent the crown of thorns worn by Jesus and for the pagans it represented immortality. Holly has traditionally represented men, while ivy has been seen as feminine, and the two have been twined together in Christmas decorations. Ivy was believed to celebrate triumphs and to ward off drunkenness.

Dorothy moved on to talk about Christmas trees. She told us that if we thought they had been introduced by Prince Albert in the 1840s, we were completely wrong! The Christmas tree was an old German tradition which went back much further than the 1840s. The reason we tend to associate the Christmas tree with Prince Albert is because of a picture of the Royal Family painted in the 1840s, showing them by a Christmas tree. This picture popularised the idea of the Christmas tree in Britain, but it was not true that Prince Albert had introduced it.



What about Santa/Father Christmas? Where did this jolly figure of a man in a red coat with a big white beard come from? We were told this was all because of a Coca Cola advertisement in 1931! Before that, the Santa/Father Christmas figure wore a green coat, or a blue one, or indeed any colour, but after the Coca Cola advertisement, he was always in red. There are many tales about the origin of a man going around giving gifts to the poor and one of the most famous is Saint Nicholas, who was bishop in Turkey in the mid-400s. It is said he passed by a poor house, where three young girls were sobbing because there was no money for dowries for any of them. Hearing this, Saint Nicholas returned at night and left three bags of gold in the girls' shoes in the fireplace, and it was said the money had fallen down the chimney. St Nicholas Day is 6 December. In Holland, the Saint Nicholas figure is known as Santa Klaus and in Britain he became Father Christmas, although Santa seems to be the most popular name nowadays. An old Norse tradition was that the god of magic, healing, and good luck, Woden (or Oden) flew through the air on an 8-legged horse on the longest night of the year, visiting all the houses in his kingdom. Over time, this has become reindeer driving Santa's sleigh.

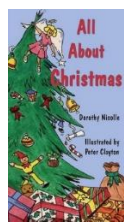
Christmas carols evolved from folk songs sung in the round at the winter solstice in pagan times. The Christian church was always nervous of songs sung in church at Christmas time and carol singing has always traditionally been something done outside church, in the home or in the street, for example. Christmas was banned by the Puritans and anyone caught singing carols could be accused of witchcraft. Carols eventually became popular in Victorian times and the first carol service held in church was in Truro Cathedral in 1878. Most of our most popular carols date from this period.



The Victorians also introduced Christmas cards. In 1843, Sir Henry Cole sent a card to his grandmother, which she kept, and this is believed to be the first Christmas card. In 2001, it was sold at auction for £20,000! The new postal system encouraged people to send Christmas cards. Postmen at this time wore red waistcoats and this led to the depiction of robins on Christmas cards. Tradition has it that the robin got his red breast because a robin was in the stable with the baby Jesus and he flapped his wings over the fire to keep

the baby warm, thus gaining a red breast.

Food is, of course, an important aspect of Christmas. The rich, spicy food associated with Christmas was because fresh food was in short supply in the winter and herbs and spices were used to disguise this. Mince pies were originally meat pies. Plum porridge was also meat originally, but it became Christmas pudding, another thing popularised by Prince Albert. The traditional Christmas meat was always the goose. Turkey became popular as a result of the Charles Dickens story, *A Christmas Carol*. This was a ghost story, of course, and ghost stories always used to be told at Christmas, which was a holy, safe time. Nowadays we think of Hallowe'en as a time for ghost stories, but that used to be considered far too dangerous a time because it was when the ghosts were most active.



Dorothy concluded by mentioning a few notable dates near to Christmas. Advent is, of course, the fourth Sunday before Christmas, not 1 December, therefore advent calendars are inaccurate. Advent calendars were originally a German idea, which spread to the United States. Boxing Day was traditionally a day off for servants and a time for them to receive gifts. The unluckiest day in the year is said to be 28 December, Holy Innocents Day, which remembers all the children killed by King Herod. For those interested in finding out more, Dorothy Nicolle has published a book called *All About Christmas*.

NEXT MONTH'S NEWSLETTER February 2026

I am looking for reports that promote your Group and tell us what you have been doing. If you are the coordinator of one of these groups, I would love to hear from you. No prescribed length but around 300 words is good, and a few photos are welcome too – by **20th January** please to editor@shrewsburyu3a.org.uk

- **Architecture** ● **Badminton** ●
- **Classical Music Appreciation** ● **Creative Writing 2** ●
- **Folk Music 2** ● **French Conversation 3** ● **History 2** ●
- **Lunch on Sunday** ●
- **The One Club** ● **Table Tennis 4** ●

Reading Group 1

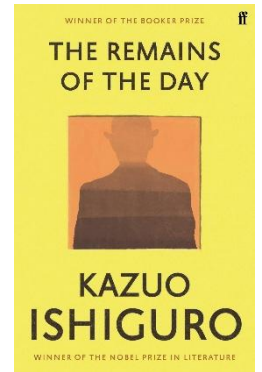
Roger Sharp

We meet in each other's homes, and we get our books from the County library service, and these two factors limit the size of our group to ten.

We are a congenial group and usually spend an hour engaged in a lively critique of the literary merits or otherwise of this month's book.

We have enjoyed a varied selection including a fictional "what if" version of Hilary Clinton's life, a novel based on a woman co-conspirator of Kim Philby, and the classic "Remains of the Day."

We always get together before Christmas to enjoy a convivial lunch, looking forward to the next year of discussing what we have read.



British Sign Language Group

Sue Short

The British Sign Language Group had its inaugural meeting on December 10 in the Hobbs Room at the Central Library in Shrewsbury. As a result, the group will have its first learning session on January 14th at 1.00pm.

It was a positive start and there is a lot of enthusiasm about learning the basics and foundations of the language, using online resources. We went away 'looking forward' to our 'homework', I'm sure, of looking at the BSL alphabet and exploring how to spell our names using finger spelling.



We aim to learn together with a friendly, supportive social group atmosphere and ethos through shared learning experiences. We are going to follow a structured course but, at the same time, we intend to make our learning fun and enjoyable that will help us all communicate better with a wider community. Interesting times ahead of us.

If you find yourself in London in the new year before 10th May you might consider visiting the National Gallery where, in the Sunley Room, there is a special exhibition of paintings by Joseph Wright of Derby.



Wright was born in 1734, a contemporary of Josiah Wedgwood, Matthew Boulton and the luminaries of the Lunar Society with whom he engaged closely.

Wright's principal interest and painting skill was in the dramatic rendering of light and shade. Here shown in his picture "Philosopher Giving a Lecture on an Orrery" – an orrery being a mechanical model of the solar system that shows the relative positions and motions of the planets and moons orbiting the Sun (in this case, a lamp), using gears to demonstrate their cyclical movements.

But the picture can also be taken as an allegory – the lives of young and old being illuminated by the light of scientific knowledge.

If you would like your life to be so illuminated, the History of Science & Invention Group meets on the first Friday morning in the month at the Radbrook Community Centre. Contact Michael Willmott on mwillmott@talktalk.net for further information. We haven't had a talk about orreries yet, but the range of topics can embrace knowledge of anything in the solar system, and indeed beyond!

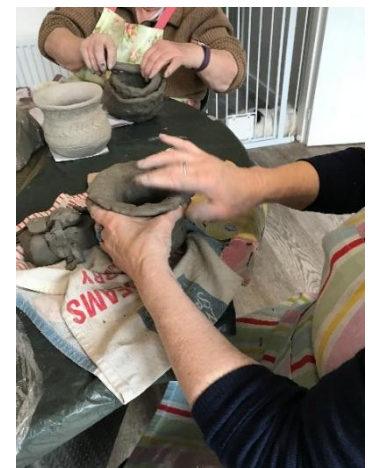


Anthropology

Our Anthropology group has been meeting for two years. We started by finding out about Homo species that were prevalent before Homo Sapiens arrived on the scene and then watched an Alice Roberts series 'The Incredible Human Journey'. As we gained knowledge and confidence, everyone introduced a topic they were interested in. These have included tool development, burial practices, the Aztecs and Incas, and myths and legends.

We have an art teacher member who has led practical sessions on carving Venus women from soap bars, recreating early cave drawings and sculpting Beaker people pottery burial vessels. We also visited the Shrewsbury museum for a talk on the Bronze age where we were able to handle ancient artefacts. Our next away day is to see Ella Al-Shamahi talk about her BBC series HUMAN.

Liz McIntyre



The momentum enjoyed in the New Groups area has continued through December, with both the *Drama Games Workshop* and *Love 2 Travel* groups now gearing up for their first 'working' meetings in the New Year.

There is now a new suggestion for the model makers amongst us; this is the *Model Miniatures* group. Meanwhile the *Podcast Group* is first in line, and we hope to be able to conduct a launch meeting early in the New Year, subject to level of interest. Finally, and following a rethink, the former Amateur Radio idea continues in its new and expanded guise as the *Radio, Computing and Electronics* group.

Model Miniatures

Model makers love what they do; whether their passion extends to planes, trains, military dioramas, dolls houses or whatever, modellers thrive on the attention to detail, the scale and the sheer creativity entailed. The aim of this group is to come together whilst working on our own projects to enjoy the camaraderie and to share tips and techniques. Everyone from beginners to seasoned model-makers is welcome.



Podcast Group



This committee-led initiative is aimed at establishing our own regular podcast series to 'inform, educate and entertain' members about Shrewsbury u3a and its activities. Group members could try various roles such as presenters, interviewers, reporters, producers or sound engineers – who knows. For further details **about the idea** please contact our vice-chairperson [Sue Davies](#). To **register** please contact [me Tony Brown](#) in the usual way.

Radio, Computing and Electronics

This group is intended for those that hold a passion for radio, computer technology or general electronics, including experimenters, amateur radio enthusiasts, and computer technologists. Originally conceived as the Amateur Radio Group the originators have broadened the scope



of interest so that technical hobbyists may enjoy the many avenues open to us in both the analogue and digital worlds. The aim is to share our knowledge, create our own projects and develop our skills.

To express interest in any of these groups please contact me at newgroups@shrewsburyu3a.org.uk



Do YOU have an idea for a new group?

Do you entertain a passion for a particular subject, hold an appetite to take up something completely new, or are curious to know whether there could be other like-minded individuals in Shrewsbury u3a? Many may feel they have an idea yet feel uncertain about bringing it to fruition or are apprehensive about what is entailed. Whatever your current thinking please contact me – I would be delighted to have an exploratory chat.

Shrewsbury u3a is Such Fun



Further Afield

You may have noticed that when we are a little short of material for the Newsletter, we sometimes include some details of upcoming events from the National u3a. It is always worth having a look at their website www.u3a.org.uk There are a lot of things going on

The National u3a host regular online talks and these might really suit you if you are not able to get out as much as you would like. They are hosted on Zoom, are free but can get fully booked. You can find them at: www.u3a.org.uk/events/educational-events

Highlights for the coming period include :

Laughter Yoga

Wednesday 14th January 10AM

Laughter Yoga combines hearty laughter exercises with deep yoga-style breathing (pranayama). Hosted by Judith Anne Walker of Edinburgh u3a.



"We don't laugh because we're happy, we're happy because we laugh." – William James

Scientific research confirms that laughter is good for us and we should all be getting more of it – that it is indeed 'the best medicine'. We are told we need to get more joy into our lives, more friends and fun, and more laughter. The trouble is that many of us would like to laugh more but we don't know where to start.

Smart Cities with u3a Let's Talk Tech

Wednesday

21st January 1PM



David Martin of u3a Let's Talk Tech discusses urban areas using digital technologies to collect and analyse data to improve quality of life.

Why snails might hold some answers to age-related memory loss

Tuesday 27th January 11AM



Explore how molluscs can help us to understand how we learn and remember, and how they can be used for studying age-related memory loss.

This event is hosted by the u3a Science Network with speaker Professor Mark Yeoman.

Other events where tickets were still available as we went to press include:

Tuesday 13th January 3:30PM Understanding Online Content and Misinformation

Wednesday 14th January 2PM How to build confidence in later life

Thursday 15th January 2PM From Roman Britain to the Dark Ages

Friday 23rd January 2PM The Calendar, Time and the Cosmos

Wednesday 28th January 10AM Cryptic Crosswords in Context

Thursday 29th January 2PM The Story of Tootje (Cato) Granaat 1926–2020

Shrewsbury u3a Committee Members

Mike Reece	Chairperson	chairperson@shrewsburyu3a.org.uk	01939 290706
Sue Davies	Vice-Chairperson	vicechairperson@shrewsburyu3a.org.uk	07306 249501
Russell Game	Secretary	secretary@shrewsburyu3a.org.uk	Use email
Ian Hallworth	Treasurer	treasurer@shrewsburyu3a.org.uk	07985 214865
Ian Tanner	Membership Secretary	membership@shrewsburyu3a.org.uk	07773 753563
Frank Velandar	Speaker Organiser	speakerorganiser@shrewsburyu3a.org.uk	07972 019077
Tony Brown	New Groups Facilitator	newgroups@shrewsburyu3a.org.uk	Use email
Patti Cooke	Minutes Secretary	minutes@shrewsburyu3a.org.uk	07963 130764
Mike Etchells	IT Admin	webadmin@shrewsburyu3a.org.uk	07702 455266
Andy Edwards	Groups Administrator	groupsadministrator@shrewsburyu3a.org.uk	Use email
Sue Davies	Marketing Officer	vicechairperson@shrewsburyu3a.org.uk	07306 249501
Mike McGarry	Editor	editor@shrewsburyu3a.org.uk	07840 759702

New Members Secretary, Equipment Officer and Local Networks Officer posts are currently vacant

Study Groups, and Activities

If you would like full details of a group, or would like to join, then log on to our website or you can contact the Editor. Details above.

Outdoor and Sports	Hobbies	Languages	Academic
Badminton	Calligraphy	Ancient Greek	Anthropology
Crown Green Bowling	Classic and Vintage Vehicles	British Sign Language	Architecture
Cycling 2	Clock Repairing for Beginners	Deutscher Stammtisch	Creative Writing
Golf Croquet	Computer Club 01	French Conversation 1	Creative Writing 2
Indoor Bowling	Computer Club 02	French Conversation 3	Economics
Naturewatch	Family History	French Improvers	Exploring English Language
Naturewatch 2	Love2Travel	Parlez Vous Francais	Feminism Discussion Group
Pétanque	Reading 1	German	History 1
Pickleball 2	Reading 2	German Conversation Improvers	History 2
Table Tennis 1	Stitching	Greek Holiday Conversation	History of Science/Invention
Table Tennis 2	Creative Arts	Italian	International Relations & War
Table Tennis 3	Creative Arts	Italiano	Local History 1
Table Tennis 4	Digital Photography	Italian Improvers	Local History 2
Touch Tennis	Drama Games Workshop	Latin	Local History 3
Walkers 1	Early Dance	Russian Language	Local History 4
Walkers 2 (Hill Strollers)	Folk Music	Advanced Spanish Conversation	Military History
Walks – Even Shorter	Folk Music 2	Welsh for Beginners	Philosophy Group
Walks (5th Wed)	Folk Tunes Workshop	Welsh Intermediate	Political Philosophy
Walks Just Walking	Line Dancing	Social and Wellbeing	Practical Philosophy
Walks Medium 1	Play, Write, Record	Breakfast at Shrewsbury	Topical Discussion
Walks Medium 2	Practical Photography	Discovering Shropshire Lunch 1	Cultural
Walks Medium Hilly	Ukulele	Discovering Shropshire Lunch 2	Art Appreciation
Walks Short	Indoor Games	Discovering Shropshire Lunch 3	Cinema
	Backgammon	Exploring Mindfulness	Classical Music Appreciation
	Board Games	Have Pass Will Travel	Jazz Appreciation
	Bridge 1	Living Sustainably	Looking at Art
	Bridge 3	Lunch Club 2	Modern Art History
	Bridge 4	Lunch Club 3	Motown, Soul and Funk Music
	Contract Whist	Lunch on Sunday	Music Appreciation 2
	Cryptic Crosswords	The One Club	Poetry Appreciation
	Mahjong	The One Club Group 2	Poetry Workshop
		Sunday Lunch Group 1	Theatre Trips
		Trips	