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THE THIRD AGE TRUST



THE UNIVERSITY OF THE THIRD AGE

# Local History

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# HOW TO START A LOCAL HISTORY GROUP

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## LOCAL HISTORY

### PRELIMINARIES

Because you are reading this I assume you are interested in forming a Local History group of the U3A. Are you thinking of becoming the leader of the group?

### Vocation

Here are some questions to ask yourself:

- Do I know that there are six, ten or more persons who would like to have a Local History group?
- Where would we meet?
- In my home?
- In another member's home?
- In a room belonging to the local council, school, library, museum?
- In a church or chapel room?
- How much would the hire charge be?
- How often would I like the group to meet: weekly, fortnightly, monthly?
- Do I have a good knowledge of the history of my locality?
- Have I read books, pamphlets, seen videos, etc about the place?
- Have I some teaching experience?
- Could I run a class for 30 to 50 minutes non-stop?
- Do I have mannerisms which might upset some members?
- Able to watch all members and notice signs of lack of interest, eyes closed, no longer taking notes, or do you see who wants to ask a question, make a comment.
- Could you coax a member to say something subject wise?
- Could you gently, but firmly, bring members who will go on talking about another matter, back to the point?
- Could you see that only one person speaks at a time?

If you feel comfortable in your answers then go ahead.

### **Next Steps**

Put a letter or short article in your local paper(s) and in your U3A Newsletter if you have one, inviting prospective members to let you know of their interest in joining a Local History group.

Ask them to give name, address and telephone number.  
Name a closing date

From the results decide whether to call a meeting in your home or in a public meeting room.

If the latter, book the room for one hour or one and a half hours depending on the expected number of the people showing interest.

If you know some local people who are interested in the idea of this new group, talk to them regarding accommodation, charges, willingness to help, e.g. as treasurer, or organiser of visits, help with refreshments, able to give one or more talks on local history subjects.

Put an announcement of a meeting to be held to inaugurate a new group in local paper(s), library, museum, noticeboards, shop windows, etc. As you think necessary.

### **MEETINGS**

These should be from one and a half hours to two hours each week. It is important to include an interval. For these reasons:

The members can chat and get to know one another; discover common interests, help one another.

Members can 'stretch their legs', walk about, speak to other members across the room, exchange news or photocopies, webpages.

The leader can enjoy a break from concentrating on his subject; chat to new members.

If practical, tea or coffee might be provided.

After the interval the leader should call on members for their contributions, presentations and ask each person how long the piece will take to read. Then he can decide on the order of speaking.

### **Equipment**

The following items are likely to be required from time to time:

- White board, felt pens, duster
- Scrap paper
- Membership forms
- Register of members
- Name tags (using the 'preferred' name of member)
- Laptop computer
- Slide projector
- Screen
- Overhead projector
- Map(s) of locality

### **Opening meeting.**

It is recommended that the members should sit in a square formation round a number of tables. Many will want to make notes. Everyone should be able to see everyone else and also see the whiteboard and members' name-tags in order to get to know one another.

### **Welcome**

Name the group, give dates when meeting and times.

### **Check**

That members have joined the U3A. If not, give out membership application forms. Collect later during the interval.

### **Register**

Whether already supplied or not, it is useful to have additional information about the members.

1. Give each member a slip of paper (say 5in x 3in)
2. Ask to fill in (and write on whiteboard)
  - Name
  - Name preferred we all use in the group, 'pet-name'
  - Name tags will come next week
  
  - Address
  - Telephone number; e-mail address if have one
  - U3A membership number
  - Note of any subject knowledge in local history which the member has
  - Note of any aspect of local history which the member wants to study
3. Collect slips – and write up later in ABC order of surnames

### **Introduction**

- Give your own name. Write it up if difficult to spell or pronounce
- Add brief notes about yourself as a leader, experience, career.
- Call on each member to do the same: career, hobbies, local work

- How long have they lived in this place
- How long in U3A or in other groups

**The U3A Method** – this is very important. Aim to show why the U3A is better than most other local societies. Stress, slowly, the four 'S's.

- Self-help
- Sharing
- Sociability
- Stimulation

Make it clear that you want members (from time to time) to take part:

1. By a comment
2. Asking a question
3. Reading a piece from a book, magazine, newspaper that is relevant to our studies
4. Bring an object (map, photo, programme, or object) and talk about it.
5. Find information on something that has come up in class
6. Write a piece (short or longer) on a relevant topic of your own choice
7. Write a piece on a topic set by the leader
8. Present a piece (as in 7 or 8) to the group

In this way members will slowly get to know one another, begin to feel that they belong, are welcome, have a right to speak and feel more relaxed – going on from small hesitant, even nervous beginnings to become fluent. If members are not happy with this method, feel that they have not the time or inclination to search for information and write it up and speak, then I fear that they will not enjoy the Local History group and might like to try another subject.

### **Presentations**

Touch on the benefits to members: accomplishment, satisfaction, work put on file, writing their own local history. You will point out a few details on how to make the presentation more interesting to the group:

1. Write or type larger than usual; leave spaces
2. Speak slower than usual. Members will have to take in new ideas and then make notes. Slight nervousness makes you hurry!
3. Speak louder than usual – to reach everyone
4. Hold paper or book up off the table. Look over it to catch the eye of members while you are speaking. This helps you to hold their attention and also to make you go slower.
5. Pause several times if you are reading a long piece

### **Volunteers**

Ask who would like to help with the organisation of the meetings:

1. To collect fees and mark the register
2. To arrange visits (say, one per term)
3. To prepare and serve refreshments – if having any

4. To act as the link with the local parent body of the U3A
5. To arrange for the loan of equipment: projector, screen

If there is not enough material to fill the time, the leader must have something else to offer. Perhaps spring a surprise by talking about an entirely different subject. Calling for comments this could lead to a new interest and a topic to be worked on later.

### **LOCAL HISTORY AS A SUBJECT FOR STUDY**

In February 1999, number 3 issue of *Sources* (free to U3A members) there was an analysis of the 27 different kinds of History that were being studied by 439 U3A groups across the country. By far the most popular was Local History (153 groups) followed a long way lower down by : Social History (36), General History (33), European History (30), British History (29), Family History (20), Ancient History (19), Medieval History (14), Archaeological History (13) and Garden History (10).

All the other types of history were in single figures but still very interesting subjects.

Each issue of *Sources* looks at a broad subject field in order to show what the groups are doing. The nearest that an issue got to one devoted to Local History was in Number 26, November 2005 when the subject was History.

I had a short piece in it entitled *The Appeal of Local History*. In a later issue it was very gratifying to me to read that someone thought my piece was 'inspirational'! So here are a few extracts from it:

*The reasons for the word 'appeal' are well-known: personal interest in one's locality; knowledge of immediate past: memories passed down from parents and grandparents.*

*We play the onion-peeling game. From what can be seen today we work backwards decade by decade building up a chart.....*

*The snag is that the further back we go, the harder it is to find the evidence. Yet members get really excited and take considerable time and effort to go to libraries, museums and archives. Or they comb the Internet bringing back astonishing finds. They learn how to sift the wheat from the chaff and are surprised at the errors that turn up.*

*Members present what they have found – either ad lib or by reading a piece. We discuss it. Ask for the sources – and some will go off to look for more.....*

*Slowly members acquire the knowledge and management skills that can be useful elsewhere. They get enormous pleasure in contributing to the group's work.*

*Possible reasons for choosing to study the single subject is that it is easier to grasp and keep hold of it. If anyone has grand parenting duties and has to leave early or is absent, it will not be too difficult to use someone's notes next time and then hear what happened.....*

*It is any wonder that a member, years ago, said "I can hardly wait for next week!!"*

## **Subject Matter**

Besides asking members what they are interested in (and put on the Introductory slip I handed out), I will also gather ideas on what local information, experience, help, I may hope to get from members. This will be useful when I assign topics for research. It will also help me to decide on subjects for future courses.

In my experience the topics of most interest are:

1. The locality in general
2. The buildings, their uses, occupiers and changes
3. The streets, including every building, old and new
4. History of the whole area, other local villagers, etc
5. History by period, e.g. Roman, Tudor, Victorian
6. People: important families: nobility, gentry, pioneers, industrialists, writers, painters, etc.
7. Recent and current people and their activities on behalf of the community.

## **Reading, Searching For Information and Research**

After listening to the speakers, and taking notes, we come to the hardest part of a Local History group's activities. A member asks: "What shall I read?" Hoping that there is a piece in print which will answer the question set.

I suggest that you have three or four main texts which you recommend to the whole group. After that, single items will be 'discovered' by you and the members for particular subjects.

Searching for information can be the most interesting part of any course. It resembles the work of a detective or an archaeologist who finds a clue or an item which leads to something else. The hunt is on! Who did it? What happened next? We end up with those familiar words: what, where, who, when and how?

## **Where to Look For Information**

- In your own books, pamphlets, leaflets, diaries, letters etc.
- In the memories and possessions of your parents and grandparents
- Examples: schooldays, teenage, major events, such as travel abroad, love affairs, first job 'Memory Lane' in general
- Or try relatives and people you know



Then turn to:

- Public libraries: city, county, branch and mobile
- University and college libraries
- Business or firms' libraries (past and present industries)
- Society and private libraries
- Museums and art galleries
- Archives collections
- Realia and artefacts (sculpture, inscription, signs, tapestries, heraldry, gravestones, monuments)

Provided that the member has a real question to be answered there should be no difficulty in getting access to the materials in the above collections. The staff are there to help the enquirers!

Talking now about the most used library, **the public library**, we need to find out if members already use their local library and do they understand how the books are arranged, that is, the classification scheme used? Do they know how to use the catalogue of the holdings? If an item wanted is not in that library, do they know how to request or reserve it and obtain it from another library (in Britain or in the wider world?) Here a variety of skills must be developed, all of which will help to save the time of the searcher and make the task more interesting.

### **Materials (i.e. books, etc)**

It is likely that some members of a group have not done any serious study of a subject since they left school; they may not have gone to college or university. Therefore it is important to spend some time on this part of the introduction, to demonstrate with a few books, to arrange a visit to the library and show the difference between the lending and the reference sections. In the course of doing this you will show the importance of all indexes wherever they may be found.

This will demonstrate the many forms in which information is stored.

### **Types of material** (physical form, shape and contents)

1. Books
2. Booklets, pamphlets, pieces of information (letters, cards)
3. Newspapers, magazines, periodicals
4. News cuttings (loose or organised)
5. Maps
6. Illustrations (photographs, prints, drawings)
7. Microforms (reels of microfilm; microfiches (sheets of film) (census returns; parish registers)
8. Audio-visual media, tape recordings (oral history)
9. Computers
10. Objects, artefacts

## Types of Reference Books

These books show different ways in which information or knowledge has been 'packaged'

1. Catalogues, bibliographies (books about books)
2. Encyclopaedias
3. Dictionaries
4. Yearbooks, annuals
5. Directories
6. Publications from societies, organisations (transactions, papers read)
7. Atlases
8. Computers (in which some of the above may be found) Quote websites, e.g. [www.nantwichweb.com/history](http://www.nantwichweb.com/history)

In brief: the study and explanation of knowledge management (KM) as it is now known, could become a U3A course in its own right. Your use of the above suggestions will be governed by what the group wants to do and what you have at arms' length. Members will not welcome the idea of spending time and money to go to a distant source of information, but if they get a start, make a discovery, present it to the group, then they will be encouraged and likely to do more. This leads to 'presentations .....

## Alternative Events

After fourteen years using the methods described here, I believe that I have found the right mix.

An important element is variety. There should not be a meeting when the leader of member occupies nearly all the time. This can happen when the speaker is over-enthusiastic about his subject, has too much to tell – with more of it waiting in the wings! - and forgets to keep an eye on the time. He (or she) will also have forgotten to keep in 'touch' with the members by constant eye contact, change of pace, change of subject, or adding a bit of humour, or has missed a member's effort to catch attention in order to ask a question.

So, for the U3A, the more people who speak the better.

For variety in the whole course of three terms there can be days when members study

- Old newspapers brought in by members or borrowed;
- When they have a spell of trying to decipher ancient handwriting in wills or indentures
- Try to build up a picture of a family in a large house and all its furniture, etc ..., from an inventory
- There is the slide show or the video as long as relevant to local history

As already hinted I do not favour having outside non-U3A speakers coming in to give set lectures. Brilliant though the material usually is, I feel this type of meeting runs contrary to the principles of the U3A.

The group is not studying local history in order to pass an examination, nor to obtain a qualification in order to improve their employment prospects. The group meets for general interest, fun and enthusiasm – and hoping to gather some new ideas in pleasant surroundings with pleasant people. ‘Experts should be used very sparingly.

Among the list of U3A objectives you can read:

No.2. to Find and Help.....people use their skills to *teach and learn* (my italics) and....  
No.5. to encourage people of all cultures to participate and both give and receive the benefits of mutual experience.

In my corner of the woods I would say I have enough topics, say 300, to last me for five years, before I need to repeat myself – by which time I will have a different set of members!!!

## Visits

Another way to give variety is to go on visits to local places. It will be useful to collect – in the group – a list of places, etc, which they would like to visit. Here is my list. Some places have been visited more than once. Clearly it all depends on what you have in your locality. The emphasis should always be on ‘is it local?’

Old buildings:

- Churches and chapels (architecture, tombs, tablets, parish registers; bells and bell-ringing; views from tower; clock, sundial; notable graves)
- Timber-framed buildings; stately homes: construction; attic spaces; portraits
- Inns and Public Houses; cellars, legends, ghosts
- Excavated sites – findings

Modern premises:

- Factories – engineering, bakery, clothing
- GPO central sorting office
- Colleges – archives and/or library
- Record Office
- Theatre
- Municipal Chambers
  
- RSPCA or similar
- Libraries – local history material
- Museum – artefacts: printed material
  
- Guided Walks – long or short – to study a whole street or a few buildings, e.g. timber-framed ones.
- Exchange visits to another U3A Local History group

**Social Events** – for a real change of atmosphere:

- Annual luncheon or dinner
- Parties – theatre visits
- Quiz and entertainment
- Celebrations – birthdays, marriages.....

**Publications** – a news sheet

- A pamphlet on a local place or person (by two or three members)
- A history of the place – to update what exists (by the whole group)

**Exhibitions** – in local library or museum – of members' work at enrolment day

**CONTINGENCIES**

Do not forget to draw up a list of suggestions for members to use if you are absent at short notice!

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