u3a Thorley Newsletter

Registered Charity No: 1182852

November 2026

No. 81



From our Chair

Hello Everyone

Welcome to this rather full November Newsletter. A big thank-you to all who have contributed and given your time to make our u3a a varied and stimulating organisation.

We have two of our three grandchildren staying this week so it's full on! A friend of ours works in the newly built Fire Station and Flight Control Tower at North Weald Airfield and gave us a guided tour. We saw several small planes taking off and couple of helicopters coming and going.

North Weald Airfield has very strong ties with the Norwegian Airforce. In 1942 airmen from 331 and 332 Squadrons were based at RAF North Weald, where they formed the North Weald Wing and carried out many offensive operations over occupied Europe. These Squadrons were equipped with Supermarine Spitfires and were manned entirely by Norwegian personnel, many of whom had escaped occupied Norway to continue the fight against Germany.

Our visit was made even more enjoyable by having lunch at the Rosey Lea's tearoom next to the runway. Whilst outside it, watching small planes coming and going, my attention was drawn to what looked like the top of a large, raised manhole cover.

I was then informed that was in fact a Pickett-Hamilton fort. A rare, retractable World War II concrete pillbox designed to defend British airfields from enemy airborne and paratrooper attacks. Built as two telescoping concrete cylinders installed flush with the grass or landing area, the inner turret rose about 2ft 6in above the ground during an attack and was equipped with machine guns. About 375 were installed across UK airfields but very few survived and today fewer than 50 known examples remain across the UK.

Best wishes to you all *Nigel*

FUTURE EVENTS

Monthly Meeting – Monday November 2nd

Our November 2nd meeting will be at the United Reformed Church (URC) in Water Lane, Bishop's Stortford CM23 2JZ.



OUR SPEAKER THIS MONTH will be **Danielle Barnett 'Sing a Song of Christmas'**

You've sung them whilst clutching cups of hot cocoa, cosying around a fire. They are played constantly in shopping malls, churches and parties – but do you know why some of the best known Christmas songs were created? Join Danielle for a fun and enlightening sing-a-long talk!

DOORS OPEN AT 1.30pm, with the Chair's welcome at 2.00pm, followed by the speaker at 2.10pm.

TEA & COFFEE service stops at 1.50pm. Please make sure you get your cuppa in good time!

HEARING AID LOOP For best results, sit in the centre of the hall.

December: Christmas Lunch but No Meeting

We don't have a monthly meeting in December because our Christmas Lunch will be on Tuesday December 1st at Great Hadham Golf & Country Club.

Only a few places are left for the lunch – it's nearly sold out. See John Bailey at our November meeting if you want to book a place, or email him at thorleyu3axmaslunch@gmail.com

John advises that you check your friends have booked, otherwise you may not be sitting with them.

JANUARY & AGM



MONDAY JANUARY 4th, 2027
ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING

Followed by
Bradley Chapman
'The English Canal Network and the River Stort'
A presentation suggested from within the membership. Bradley will give us a talk on the canal network and, close to home, the River Stort.
Bradley is a member of Canalability, a charity dedicated to helping those with disabilities to enjoy boating in specially adapted canal boats.

Stansted Saturday Seminar on Dickens

Stansted u3a is kindly offering our members places at its Saturday Seminar on November 14th at St Theresa of Lisieux Church Hall from 9.30am-1.30pm.

Dr Christine Corton, chair of the Cambridge branch of the Dickens Fellowship, will be presenting 'Charles Dickens: a Life in his Novels'.

Places cost £7.00 and can be booked by emailing stanstedseminars@gmail.com

Physical tickets are not provided but attendees are marked off on a list, so if booking more than one place please provide all the names you're booking for.

First seminar for 2027 will be on February 27th on Viennese Art. Details to follow.



BOOK NOW!

U3A Singers' Christmas Concert

Our annual Christmas Concert is the very best way to start celebrating the festive season!

Tickets are now on sale and will be available at our November meeting or you can email carmen.konopka@btinternet.com

It's a bargain at £10 per person, which includes a glass of wine and mince pie in the interval. This year's programme features popular songs from West Side Story and the Everly Brothers, plus of course all your Christmas favourites.

The U3A Singers are made up of nearly 30 members of Thorley u3a with both male and female sections. We practise every Thursday afternoon at the Havers Lane Community Centre, so if you enjoy singing, come and join us!



NEWS & ANNOUNCEMENTS

URGENT

YOUR u3a NEEDs YOU!

URGENT

Could You Be Our Next Chair or Vice Chair?

Both our Chair, Nigel Varnam, and Vice Chair, Linda Ketteridge, will come to the end of their three-year roles in January and we urgently need to find new members to take on their jobs.

Please give this serious consideration because Thorley u3a cannot exist without these essential officers on the committee. **If nobody volunteers our u3a would have to close.**

Nigel and Linda (*pictured below*) both say they have really enjoyed their time heading our u3a and have found their jobs enormously rewarding.

If you think it's something you could take on, please speak to any member of the committee. And you will be very welcome to come to a committee meeting (on the morning of the third Thursday of the month) to see what goes on.

Nomination forms are available from our Business Secretary, John Acklaw, and must be submitted by December 8th, with elections at our AGM on January 4th.


Nigel Varnam


Linda Ketteridge

Could You Follow in their Footsteps?

Subs are Now Overdue!

Please pay your subs for the year from September 1st immediately to avoid being removed from our membership list.

Bank transfer is our preferred method of payment. Payment to sort code 08-92-99, account number 67274808, with a reference of your surname and membership number.

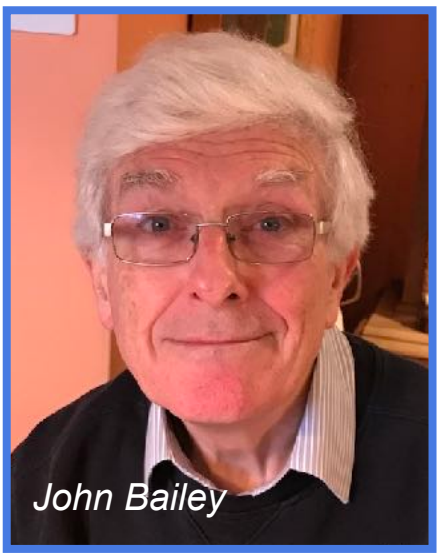
Cheque payments should be made payable to 'Thorley u3a' and please put your membership number on the back. You can pay by cheque or cash at our November meeting, but there may be a queue!

Renewals by post should be sent to our Membership Secretary, at the address below. Enclose an SAE if you wish your membership card to be posted to you.

Barbara Jacobs
180 Stansted Road
Bishop's Sortford
Herts CM23 2AR

ASSISTANT TREASURER

Assistant Treasurer Tony Clark has stepped down from the role and we would like to take this opportunity to thank Tony for all his enthusiasm and work this year. He has been a valued member of our Committee.


John Bailey

The job has now been taken on by John Bailey (*pictured*). Many of you will know John well because he has previously served as a Committee Member in the roles of both Assistant Treasurer and Membership Secretary.

The job of Assistant Treasurer includes handling the annual subs from all members and organising attendance, menu choices and payments for the Christmas Lunch.

Our constitution allows members to serve a maximum of nine years on the Committee, so John is undertaking the job this time as a non-committee member.

ANNIVERSARY MEETING

Cake and Ghosts at September Meeting



Our current and past chairs cut the birthday cake at our September meeting. From left to right in order of their terms of office are: Founder Chair Gillian Micallef, Richard Masters, Linda Ketteridge, Carmen Konopka and current Chair Nigel Varnam. Liz Happer, who was chair between Richard and Linda, was unable to attend.

A bumper attendance was enticed by the prospect of our 15th anniversary cake and stories of local ghosts.

Events Secretary Chrissy Thear organised a beautiful giant cake that easily fed the 160-plus members who turned up for the meeting.

Cake-eating was accompanied by a talk on the Adventures of a Ghost Hunter by Damien o'Dell. He has been interested in the mysteries of the unexplained since his childhood and his grandmother was a gifted psychic.

Here in Bishop's Stortford there have been frequent sightings of the 'Grey Lady'.

Centuries ago in Room 27 of the George Hotel a brutal murder took place. Her ghost is said to visit the George and the nearby Boar's Head Inn before ending up in the graveyard at St Michael's Church.

Close to our meeting venue, back in 1922, the grey phantom drifted past a mother and child in Water Lane heading towards the church. Both witnesses fled in terror.

Coopers (formerly Maslens) had two ghosts and a Grey Lady disappeared into a wall. Later alterations revealed a door had been where she disappeared. Spooky!

And the Cock Inn at Stansted Road was said to be the home of two ghosts.

Damien is a volunteer at Chicksands Priory and he reckons that is the most haunted place in England. The Priory is open for visitors… if you dare to go!

Barry Maxwell



NEWS 3

Thorley U3A feeds 160 members from one cake to mark 15th anniversary

Thorley U3A (University of the Third Age) members celebrated its 15th anniversary with an impressive cake that fed 160 members who turned up for the occasion.

Balloons decorated the Water Lane United Reformed Church in Bishop's Stortford where the group meets the first Monday of every month. The cake was cut by Thorley U3A chair Nigel Varnam and some of his predecessors.

"We had a great time and it was very well attended with 160 members. I had to cut the cake and it did manage to feed everybody," said spokeswoman Carmen Konopka.

The Thorley branch – one of more than 1,000 U3As up and down the country – was formed in 2011 and has nearly 700 members.

Open to anyone no longer in full-time employment, it has 40-plus interest groups ranging from exercise, languages and board games to history, gardening and wine appreciation.

The organisation also runs outings, holidays, theatre trips, quiz nights and a Christmas lunch.

Its monthly meetings feature a guest speaker, with members learning about a range of topics over the last 15 years. The talk at the anniversary gathering on September 7 was by Damien O'Dell and entitled 'Adventures of a Ghost Hunter'.

Carmen said they had had talks from a pilot and a burlesque dancer. "There's such a huge range of subjects, some more serious and some not so, but it's always very interesting.

"The great thing about U3A is that it's organised by members for members and we only charge £10 a year with 40 different groups. We also have a thriving choir.

"It's a place where people can make friends, learn new things and join in with lots of activities rather than sitting at home being lonely. It's a very impressive movement."

New members are always welcome. Find out more at www.thorley.u3asite.uk.

Thorley U3A members, from left, Gillian Micallef, Richard Masters, Linda Ketteridge, Carmen Konopka and Nigel Varnham cutting the 15th-anniversary cake

Picture: Vikki Price

NEWS 17

Raise a cheer – and slice of cake – for U3A anniversary

Members of Thorley U3A (University of the Third Age) will be celebrating its 15th anniversary at their monthly meeting on Monday (September 7).

Open to everyone no longer in full-time employment, it has grown rapidly since its formation in 2011 and now has nearly 700 members.

The Thorley branch, which is one of more than 1,000 U3As up and down the country, has 40-plus groups ranging from exercise, languages and board games to history, gardening and wine appreciation. It also runs outings, holidays, theatre trips, quiz nights and an annual Christmas lunch.

Its monthly meetings always feature a guest speaker, with members learning about a range of topics over the last 15 years.

The speaker on Monday at Water Lane United Reformed Church in Bishop's Stortford will be Damien O'Dell with a talk entitled 'Adventures of a Ghost Hunter'. A special cake will be cut by Thorley U3A chair Nigel Varnam and some of his predecessors to mark the 15th anniversary.

New members are always welcome. Find out more at www.thorley.u3asite.uk.

Coverage of our anniversary in the local Bishop's Stortford Independent paper

October Meeting: Andy Stuart

This fascinating talk was one for history buffs as Andy Stuart told us about Churchill's Intervention in the Russian Civil War.

Andy, whose grandfather had taken part in this campaign in 1919, told the story of how the Allies invaded Russia at the end of the First World War. In October 1917, the Russian Revolution saw the end of the Romanov dynasty and the last Tsar Nicholas.

The Armistice to end the First World War was signed in November 1918, but earlier Lenin signed the Treaty of Brest Litovsk in March 1918 to end Russia's war with Germany. As a result, the Allies (Britain, France and other Commonwealth countries) decided to invade Russia to encourage Lenin to rejoin the war, and also to help the Tsarist forces known as the Whites.

The Allies knew that if Germany did not have to worry about fighting Russia, she would be harder to defeat. Churchill was the loudest voice in favour of taking action as he was anti-Communist.



In all, Britain sent more than 14,000 soldiers to fight in this campaign and lost 526. The total sent was 40,000.

However, the campaign was not a success, and the Allies withdrew from October 1919. The Bolsheviks led by Lenin continued with the Russian Revolution.

Although the campaign did not stop the spread of Communism in Russia, it did stop the spread of Communism in Europe. Churchill commented later that it started the distrust between the West and Russia, which has continued ever since.

This was a fascinating talk on a forgotten campaign that has influenced history in a big way.

Dave Willett

GROUP REPORTS

GROUPS UPDATE

Interest groups are the linchpin of your Thorley u3a. A special thank you goes out to every Group Leader who we know carries out their role with dedication and great enthusiasm, which we are all grateful for.


Alastair Curbbun

The **Line Dancing Workshop** at the end of September, run by Helen Nicholls, was extremely successful, with 18 people attending. Helen is hoping to run another workshop in January, so watch this space.

We also had a very lively **Quiz Night** on October 24th, attended by 80 members. A big thank you to everyone who made it happen, especially Chrissy Thear who organised the evening, Quiz Master Carmen Konopka, Ken Blethyn who kept the scores, and runner David Herbert.

Please keep your ideas coming for new groups and we will be happy to discuss any ideas and to try to find a leader. Recent ideas for new groups include:

Italian Conversation: For those who already speak Italian to meet for a chat every fortnight at South Mill Arts – we already have a volunteer leader.

Creative Writing: A little interest has been shown in this group and we are looking for a leader and for more members to show interest.

Coffee, Cake and Conversation: This would take place at 3.00pm on specific dates and will give members a chance to meet fellow members . If this is successful we could then do other groups on other days or at 11.00am.

Art History Discussion: This group would meet once a month, with members bringing in a piece of art for discussion. This group could also include art gallery trips.

Please email Groups Co-ordinator Alastair Curbbun (*pictured)* at groups@thorleyu3a.com to show your interest for these potential new groups. And – very important! – please say if you are able to be the group leader. **Alastair Curbbun**

Coach Trip to Chelsea





Another successful and fascinating trip took 43 of us to Chelsea. In the morning 20 members walked along the road for a tour of Chelsea Physic Garden, while the rest of the group went next door to see the National Army Museum.

The Chelsea Physic Garden contains thousands of plants and herbs used for medicinal purposes, including one to help with childbirth. The guide was excellent, and the group enjoyed this tour.

The highlight of the day was a two-hour tour in the grounds of the Royal Hospital. Our guides were residents Bill, aged 85, and Ted, 88. They were both knowledgeable, and full of stories and humour. They are volunteers and are entitled to two dress uniforms called ‘scarlets’, which cost £800 apiece.

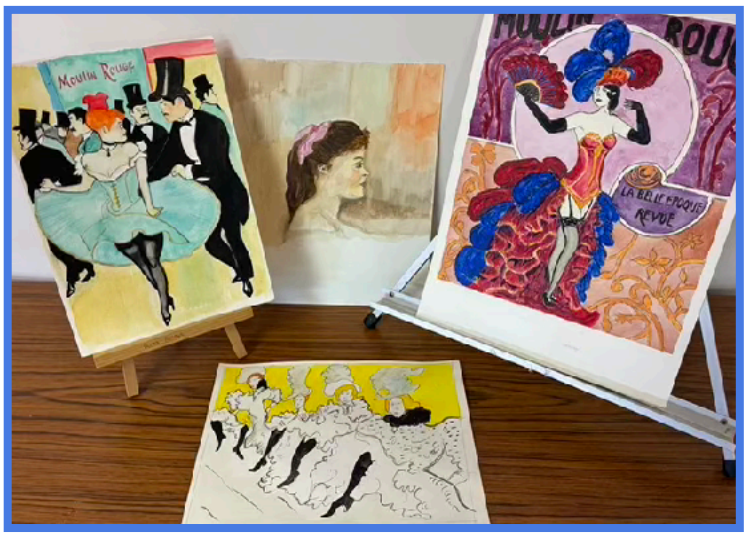
We learned that there are 281 residents, including 19 women. The criteria to join includes the condition that they: ‘Must not be encumbered by spouse.’ So all are widows or widowers. They also give up their army pension, but not their state pension. With three excellent meals every day, and a cheap bar as well, it is a very pleasant place to spend their last years.

The cost of running the hospital is £28 million each year, half from the residents’ army pensions and the other £14 million from tours and events, including the Chelsea Flower Show and show jumping and car shows in the grounds.

Despite the regular frustration of travelling into London and back home again by coach, it was a memorable day.

Dave Willett

Artists at Work!





September and October were very productive months for the Art Group.

They have a system where everyone puts an artist's name on a piece of paper, then the names go into a bag and joint leader Pauline Bullions pulls out one each month.

In their group's monthly newsletter, Pauline writes a paragraph about the chosen artist, then members do research themselves and paint a picture of their choice – though not necessarily inspired by the artist of the month.

Pauline also reminds members of the meetings and other art related items, such as programmes, exhibitions, what's on at South Mill, etc.

Featured artists in September were Picasso and Gaudi, with Toulouse Lautrec in October.

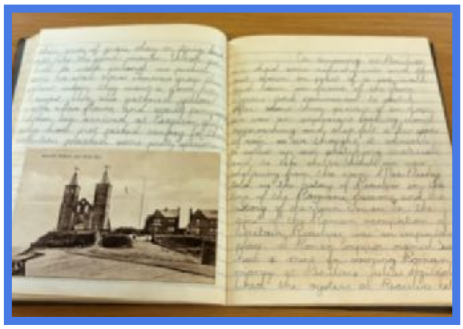
Rita Foster & Pauline Bullions





Family Heirlooms and Memorabilia

The Family History Group's September meeting on Heirlooms and Memorabilia had members searching their cupboards and attics.



Val's mother obviously went to a progressive school as she has a copy of a notebook reporting a trip to Canterbury in 1924 –all in beautiful handwriting and illustrated with postcards and drawings.



Sue's grandma kept diaries which revealed day-to-day happenings in her family. The weather was a constant feature, along with health, cleaning rotas and shopping. Often visits to the cinema were commented on with such phrases as 'fair' or 'poor'.



Christening gifts such as the spoon and pusher and edelweiss jewellery led members to recall similar items in their own homes. A Jewish shawl and kippah were worn by Janice' s father until a few days before his death. He wore them in the care home each Sabbath as he watched the service via a live stream. Members found the jar of foreign coins collected by Jim's ancestor extremely interesting, including currencies long abandoned.

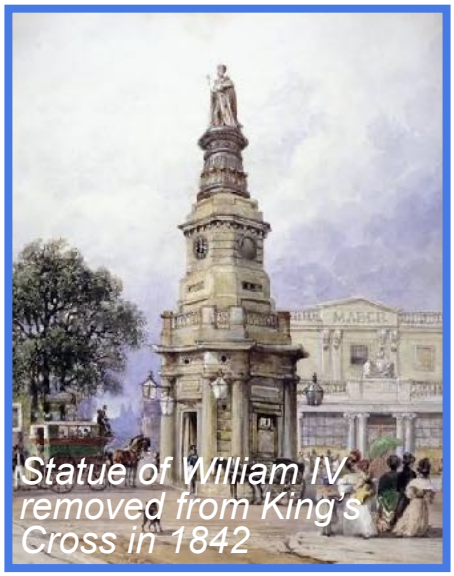


But the most amazing story was of the painting in an attic which had been found by Jim's daughter in her new house. It was by Margery Hann and was a technical piece completed for her Art examinations. By using the resources of Family History websites among others, Jim was able to find the full story of the family and to reunite the picture with the painter's son. A fascinating glimpse of the power of the internet to make an elderly gentleman extremely happy.



Sue Swan

London Walk in September


Statue of William IV removed from King's Cross in 1842

The Walking Group travelled into London and met at King's Cross Station. The walk had been postponed from July because of hot weather – it's not fun walking in 35º heat!

In a pleasant 23º, this walk was a return to the 19th Century, looking at squares and housing developments from almost 200 years ago when the Kings Cross and Barnsbury areas were developed. Almost all of the houses we passed were listed.

On the way we passed the New River Head where it ends. We were familiar with the beginning of the New River as we have often parked near Stanstead Abbots and walked along part of it. Part of the site is now open with a café and a museum of the steam pump engine, and also an exhibition of the cartoonist Quentin Blake.


King's Cross Station today

Both of the old Metropolitan Water Board buildings are now listed, and are private apartments, although with a tempting open door, we went inside to see the Revenue Hall. This is where customers could pay their water bills.

The famous Sadler's Wells Theatre was just round the corner. Walking north we passed through a number of interesting squares and housing, before emerging onto the Caledonian Road. A short walk brought us to the Regent's Canal and then the rejuvenated development of the King's Cross area, which is still going on. There is the almost completed new Google building called Platform 37, Coal Drops Yard, Granary Square, the canal itself… It is now a tourist destination on its own.


Google's new Platform 37 buildin

Dave Willett

Down Memory Lane in Bishop's Stortford

In August the History Group audience was taken on a trip down Memory Lane by speaker Stewart Marshall, a man who has amassed more than 6,000 images of Bishop's Stortford.

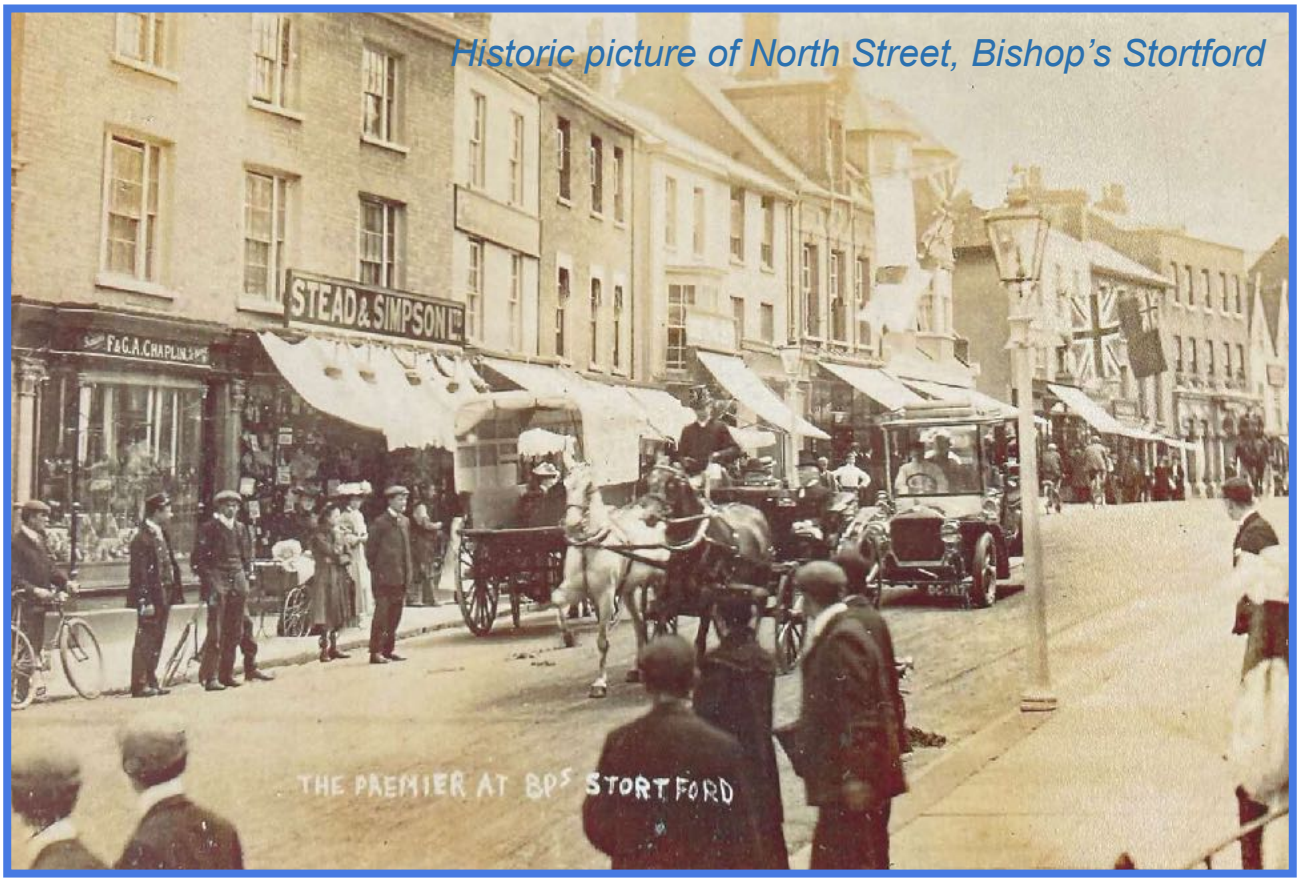
Entitled 'That was the building that was – a pictorial history of Bishop's Stortford', Stewart took the audience on a photographic walk around just part of the town, then and now. There was lively and nostalgic feedback from the audience as they recognised vistas from their own past.

Stewart may well be returning next year, when he will cover more areas of the town.

Earlier, chair Dave Parker announced that Ray Archer has volunteered to take over the running of the Beacon system and to collaborate with Dave on finding speakers for 2027. Dave is much relieved.

The talk scheduled for November 12th is about George Edward Pritchett, local architect and surveyor, presented by Chris Connell.

Dave Parker



Historic picture of North Street, Bishop's Stortford

THORLEY u3a COMMITTEE



Nigel Varnam
Chair



Linda Ketteridge
Vice Chair



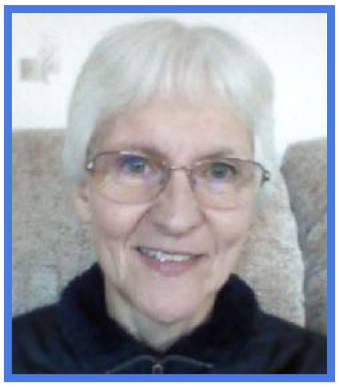
Ryland Perrin
Treasurer



John Acklaw
Business
Secretary



Alastair Curbbun
Groups
Co-ordinator



Barbara Jacobs
Membership
Secretary



Barry Maxwell
Speaker
Co-ordinator



Chrissy Thear
Events
Organiser



Carmen Konopka
Communications

Please send contributions to the Newsletter to Carmen Konopka: comms.thorleyu3a@gmail.com

Committee members can all be contacted via the Contact tab on our website: www.thorley.u3asite.uk