



In this issue

The Chairman's January Message

Preview of January and February's Talks

Early Days of Computing by Glyn James / Group News / Mayors Quiz Night

Local Walk by Paul Ollett / December Butterfly & Birdwatching Report

Your 2025/26 Committee

Musings From the Chairman

As a new year begins, we look forward to the opportunities that it will bring: new activity and social groups to join, new people to meet and friendships to make, new skills to learn, new adventures to experience and a never-ending zest for life. In a nutshell: more u3a. Not just a club, but a community and a way of life that we are all lucky to be a part of.

As we begin 2026, our u3a is in good shape. Our finances are sound, we have an outstanding committee, an increasing number of activity groups and a growing membership. Incredibly, we already have a full list of volunteers to form the new committee following May's AGM.

Project-wise, we are currently working to restructure our IT systems to make them future-proof, easier to manage and secure. This is a major reorganisation that will keep our data protected and our systems running even when the unexpected happens. Later, we will be designing and creating a new website to make finding the information you need easier and to keep everyone informed with regular updates. The man driving all this is our IT Operations Manager – Donald Syme. If you meet him at the bar, buy him a drink.

Looking beyond Thrapston u3a, we have a revived Network of the 13 Northampton u3as and in March, a meeting of the East Midlands Region u3as - the first I can remember. As Iain Cassidy – CEO of the Third Age Trust – in his recent visit reminded us, we are one of 1,015 u3as in the UK, with a combined membership of over 420,000 and aiming for 500,000 by 2028. I think it's safe to say the national u3a is in good shape and getting better all the time.

Making all this happen at Thrapston is a small army of unsung heroes: Committee members, the Social Group who organise and run the Summer and Christmas events and much more, the Welcome group who greet you at the door of the Plaza, the Refreshment group who serve you drinks and biscuits, and the most important people in u3a, the Group Leaders, who organise and run our 30+ activity groups - some for more than a decade. All I ask from you in 2026 is to remember to say thank you and to offer your services when needed.



Happy New Year, everyone.....Frank



Monthly Meeting

16th January & 20th February 26

Doors open at 10:00 am



Pianist and Entertainer

16th January Speaker: Lincoln Noel

Lincoln has been a principal concert performer for over 15 years for 'The Council For Music in Hospitals,' working nation-wide in Hospices, Residential Homes and Hospital wards with many of the country's leading Singers and Instrumentalists. Lincoln Noel has played for the King and Queen at the Albert Hall, Uur January meeting will be a musical festival and highly entertaining! You won't want to miss this one!



History of Carry on Films

20th February Speaker: Steve Dimmer

We welcome back Steve Dimmer and this month he will tell us all about the history of the Carry On films – Ooh Matron!





Early days in Computing

By Glyn James

In 1968, back from a year in Sweden and looking for a new career, I answered an advert for a trainee systems analyst at the Stock Exchange. Those were early days for computing (the term IT hadn't been invented then); even ten years later I was working for a computer "bureau" which processed payrolls and invoices for small firms just as laundrettes took in other people's washing. But throughout the eighties it all began to change; companies began to install their own "mini computers" while home computers also started to be available – first the Amstrad or Commodore then big towers that went under a desk before desk-top versions, both with a big separate monitor and then finally somewhere around the turn of the century laptop computers were becoming available.

The Stock Exchange computer in 1968 took up a very large air conditioned room but had only a tiny fraction of the processing power of a modern laptop or smart phone. You certainly couldn't speak to it and it had only a basic keyboard used by the operator to get it started or to bring the other equipment to life. Any data supplied to it had to be input on punched cards which were slimmer and a bit longer than playing cards; about the size of the machines that were used to plate your credit card in those far off days. They were then fed into a card-reading machine. Any data that was stored was held either on giant magnetic tapes which stood in cabinets against the wall or on horizontal disks the size of four or five extra large dinner plates stacked above each other.

I remember smiling at a James Bond film where the tapes whirred backwards and forwards and the computer spewed out information; it was nonsense. Tapes could only be read from the beginning to the end, just like the home tape recorders we had in those days. Anything printed was on continuous sheets of wide paper with lines like sheet music and sprocket holes at the edge of the paper.

In the first instance my training involved learning to program, which I enjoyed probably as much as any other part of my career. We wrote programs on sheets of paper with special columns and then handed what we had written to the "punch girls" (it was always young women) to produce the punched cards. It was absolutely critical to feed the cards into the card reader in order. If they were dropped (usually referred to as the operator shuffle) the computer would make no sense of them. First of all a new program would be "compiled"; a process in which software already on the computer would establish whether what was presented was in an acceptable format; only then could you run it to see if it did what it was supposed to. Needless to say it took a few goes at each stage before there was any chance of a program working as intended.

Because a lot of programming involved moving data one character at a time, continuous loops were built into the program but the computer needed a count or some special character to know when to stop. If the count was calculated wrongly or the special character wasn't there when it should have been, the computer would merrily keep moving characters for ever until it had overwritten so much memory that it ground to a halt. It would then print out a message "illegal X" which meant that all the data was so corrupted that it didn't know what to do next – and it could offer you no hint as to why or where it all went wrong. A lot of head scratching and rewriting would follow.



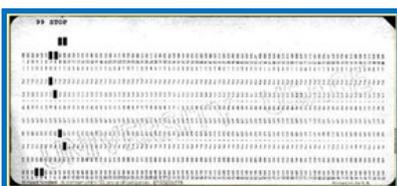
Early days in Computing Contd

The computer was kept busy most of the day on other Stock Exchange business and there was very little spare capacity for development work. We programmers had to submit our requests for machine time and often wait for an hour or two for a response. Sometimes we needed to watch the program running which was permitted only on sufferance and after we had put on soft overshoes before we were permitted to pass through the sacred portals to the air conditioned room where the computer was housed.

As the pressure grew to complete the project on time the only way to progress fast enough was to work at night when the computer was not otherwise in use and the operators - and the Operations Manager - had gone home. We would then operate the computer ourselves, run our programs, try to find out what was wrong and immediately have another go. Left to our own devices not only were the overshoes neglected but we would stroll in with coffee in one hand to be put down on the operating console and as likely as not with a cigarette in the other.

Eventually however by early 1970 everyone was working on an all-important project to process sales of stocks and shares which accumulated notionally over a twelve day period and were then finalised over the next two days before another trading period began. The project was not a success. It wasn't that some things didn't work as intended; problems were expected and could be resolved just like any other programming error. The disaster was that the processing simply took too long and could not be completed in the time available between the end of trading on Tuesday and the start of the next trading period on Thursday. At the same time as the system was being trialled, the Americans had launched a rocket which suffered a major malfunction mid flight but which they were able to rectify to bring the crew safely home. One of the senior operators took some delight in comparing their success with our efforts and concluded "you lot couldn't program an orange to hit the ceiling".

I had by then finished my training and become a systems analyst but as I had been given the job of supervising the trial it was still a bit discouraging. After a period of confusion, consultants were called in and gave their advice that the way forward was to sack the man at the top. (They were the same consultants who had recommended him in the first place.) A new structure came about and there was an attempt to be a bit more professional with our procedures and documentation. After not very long my new boss offered me promotion to senior analyst but for once one of my major decisions was probably the right one. I decided instead to leave. I was painfully aware that I had virtually no experience as an analyst, never mind a senior one and was looking to be guided rather than to guide. Equally importantly I suspected there would be a very long period of navel gazing before any significant attempt would be made to begin work on a new project. I learned later that my prediction had proved to be correct.





Happy New Year everyone

As we welcome in the New Year, have you any tales to tell about your festive period that you would like to share with our members. Here's a few ideas..

- Did you discover any new traditions?",
- Did you try a new recipe
- Did you go somewhere special
- Do you have one holiday tradition you have kept for years or perhaps a new one started this season
- Did you simply relax and recharge
- How would you sum up your 2025 holiday season
- What was the funniest or maybe the worst mishaps this year

Please send your stories and photos to Tina, editorthrapstonu3a@gmail.com

Group Information

Are you interested in a *Short Mosaics Course*, making an Easter/Spring Wreath.

This could run for 6 to 8 weeks from February until completion, there will be some cost involved for the purchase of materials. Please sign up with Polly at the January meeting if you are interested.

This picture is an example of a Christmas wreath.



Those of you who signed up for the Book Group should have received an email from Theresa who has offered to be group leader. Let me know if you have not been contacted.

There has not been enough interest in the Choir group to date but it could be revisited at a later date.

Polly Johnson groupsthrapstonu3a@gmail.com

Christmas Social Thanks

Special thanks to all those on the Social Team who gave their time to make our Christmas Social such an enjoyable time:

Polly Johnson
Ann Thorpe
Tina Jones
Pauline Dennison
Sheila Brownsea
Theresa Wood
Angela Gyves
Jenny Cholerton



And not forgetting, The Pantomime Players, especially Alastair Henderson-Begg who wrote it.

Frank



2026 MEMBERSHIP RENEWAL

Annual membership for 2026-2027 is due on the 1st February, the cost is £20

Our preferred method of payment is by Bank Transfer, but it can also be made by cheque payable to Thrapston & District U3A or by cash.

For a bank transfer, please quote your Membership No. and full name as the reference.

Account Name: Thrapston & District U3A A/C No: 73437361 Sort Code: 20 45 77

Membership forms can be downloaded from our website www.thrapstonu3a.co.uk

You can also renew your membership at the Plaza meeting on the 16th January.

Membership forms will be available and payment can be taken at the Membership table.

Bob Simpson: Membership Registrar

membershipthrapstonu3a@gmail.com



In response to my article about Christmas facts in the December newsletter I mentioned the first decorated Christmas Tree was in Riga Latvia in 1510.

This is a photo of the tree that Pat Trede kindly sent which was taken in July 2025.



THRAPSTON'S MAYOR'S QUIZ NIGHT

THE PLAZA - 7th February 2026

Saturday evening 7.00 for 7.30

Teams of 4-6

*Our U3A has reserved 12 places
(some of which are already taken)*

£10 PER PERSON (PAYMENT IN ADVANCE)

Includes the following meal options :-

FISH & CHIPS, SAUSAGE & CHIPS OR CHEESE CROQUETTE & CHIPS

TO RESERVE YOUR PLACE EMAIL: paulollett@btinternet.com



FREE To U3A members !! MATURE MANURE.

It is well rotted and can be easily bagged up or put in a trailer.

Contact John Percy on 01832 720130 or email johnpercy1947@gmail.com

December Butterfly & Birdwatching report

Wednesday 3rd December and a trip to Summer Leys nature reserve, and after days of grey skies and rain the sun was shining and not a cloud to be seen and although chilly, conditions were perfect for our outing. Summer Leys nature reserve near Wollaston is a former gravel pit which was carefully landscaped to create one of the most important wetlands in Northants with many species of wildfowl overwintering on the lake along with many other birds, insects and small mammals that have made the reserve their home.

We headed to the Pioneer bird hide which provides a good view of the end section of the lake, on the way along the path Blue Tits were busily flitting amongst the trees and a Wren made a quick appearance before disappearing into the bushes.



Blue Tit



Widgeon, Gadwall, Coot



Little Grebe

At the hide plenty of birds were on the water including Widgeon, Shoveller duck, Tufted duck, Mallards and Little Grebes. On the island a group of Teal looked fast asleep in the sun until they were disturbed by a Little Grebe looking for food. On the far side of the lake a pair of Swans, a Heron and a large white Goose were to be seen, after a while we moved on towards the Paul Britten bird hide lower down the lake, along the path a lovely little Goldcrest was busy looking for insects in a tree above us and further on a friendly Robin landed by the side of the path looking for food and it quickly took the bird seed we put down.



Robin



Goldcrest Cormorants,



Lapwings, Harrier

An amazing sight at the hide with a Marsh Harrier flying around on one of the small islands, great to see. In front of the hide over twenty Cormorants, a large flock of Lapwings and many other wildfowl were resting in the sun although the Marsh Harrier flying around was making them



Marsh Harrier



Teal



Widgeon

By now it was gone twelve and time to head home, It was a lovely morning and thanks to everyone who came and to Colin for the photos. Looking forward to the next outing in January.....Bob

Local Walk .

Those of us who enjoy exploring the local countryside on foot are really spoiled for choice where gentle, largely unchallenging routes literally radiate from Thrapston offering opportunities for river side strolls or cross-country routes to visit neighbouring villages. The choices are seemingly limitless. Selecting a favourite route, I have chosen to start from The Woolpack at Islip but as it is a circular route it can be joined at other points.



The Route: - With the Woolpack Inn behind you turn left and continue through Islip passing the small green with the Islip village sign soon to turn Left up School Lane passing the church. Bear Right at top to pass a cul-de-sac sign. Go through the gap at right of white 5 bar gate, bearing Right, ascending to pass yellow barrier. Ahead passing to Right of double metal gates and cross road with **GREAT CARE.**

Go through gap in opposite hedge and continue through the middle of cultivated field to the opposite side, then pass through narrow gap in hedge. Stay on the same heading across middle of the field to go through a wide gap on opposite hedge.

Aim for left corner of conifer wood at other end of field and pass through gap into narrow field aiming across a small field for way marked foot bridge in opposite hedgerow. Turn Right on track for 3 metres then left across foot-bridge, ahead path rises with the hedge on left side. Continue to apex, pass Left of the pond, now descending the field to corner with hedge on Left.



Go through gap and turn Left descending with track (which narrows) for 750 metres to emerge at road. Turn Left then bear slight Right to cross over and go down the road towards **Woodford** passing under the A14 trunk road, over the bridge, ascending on right hand side of the road to enter the village. Keep straight ahead.

Follow the road along the main street as it gently descends through the village passing the Fish & Chip shop to bear Left at the village green (*Note: For those who fancy a nice cup of tea continue on the road towards the Addingtons with the village green on the left and in 100metres or so just up a turning to the right you will find the charming 'The Buttery Café. Retrace your steps to pick up the route afterwards).*



Ahead passing *The Dukes public house, village green on your right, continuing downhill to turn Left at Whittlesea Terrace which becomes The Leys and ahead to the end. Go through a wooden hand gate and turn Right going downhill passing Left of the Waymarker post, keep right of the telegraph poles..*

At the bottom of the slope pass through a kissing gate and continue between wire mesh fences to bear slight Left at end and ahead with trees and ditch on Right soon to meet the river side. After 500 metres pass the river lock and in a further 100metres at crossing track turn Left for 1kms towards A14 Trunk Road. Pass beside gate post and turn right with A14 on left and in 200metres bear left to go under viaduct. Bear Left then ahead still with busy road on left, soon ascending slightly for 400 metres. Pass the end of the bushes and at corner with telegraph pole turn R and ahead passing electrical -substation to the end.

Pass beside metal gate and turn Right descending on the footpath to cross the road with care to return to the Woolpack Inn where you may reward yourself with some refreshments!

I hope that you enjoy the route which is a delight at any time of the year.

Walk and photographs provided Paul Ollett



Telephone numbers given in the newsletter are usually preceded by the Thrapston STD code—01832. Any Raunds numbers (indicated by R) need the STD code 01933

Thrapston and District U3A Committee 2025/2026

| | |
|--|--|
| Chair: Frank Boydell | chairmanthrapstonu3a@gmail.com |
| Vice Chair: Helen Dawson | vicechair2thrapstonu3a@gmail.com |
| Treasurer: Ann Thorpe | treasurerthrapstonu3a@gmail.com |
| Secretary: Viv Tunstall | secretarythrapstonu3a@gmail.com |
| Groups Co-Ordinator: Pauline Johnson | groupsthrapstonu3a@gmail.com |
| Membership Registrar: Bob Simpson | membershipthrapstonu3a@gmail.com |
| Speaker Seeker & Facebook: Helen Dawson | speakersthrapstonu3a@gmail.com |
| Newsletter Editor: Tina Jones | editorthrapstonu3a@gmail.com |
| Publicity & Access: Glyn Hill | publicity1thrapstonu3a@gmail.com |
| Plaza Welcome Manager: Wendy Davies | plazawelcomethrapstonu3a@gmail.com |
| New Members Representative: Angela Gyves | repthrapstonu3a@gmail.com |
| IT Operations Manager: Donald Symes | itopsthrapstonu3a@gmail.com |
| Equipment Manager: Tony Lomer-Cross | equipmentthrapstonu3a@gmail.com |
| General Committee Duties: Eric Franklin | thrapstonu3acom1@gmail.com |

A note from the Editor

This newsletter is published on behalf of the committee of the Thrapston and District U3A. The opinions expressed are not necessarily those of the Editor, or of the committee of the Thrapston and District U3A, or of the U3A Trust.

Please note that items for inclusion in the next newsletter should reach the Editor by the last day of the month.

Editor and publisher : Tina Jones - email: editorthrapstonu3a@gmail.com

Website : www.thrapstonu3a.co.uk where details of the committee and their roles can be found along with details of all the groups.

You can also join us on **Facebook — Thrapston and District U3A**

| JANUARY 2026 | | | | | | |
|--------------|-----|-----|-----|------|-----|-----|
| SUN | MON | TUE | WED | THUR | FRI | SAT |
| | | | | 1 | 2 | 3 |
| 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 |
| 11 | 12 | 13 | 14 | 15 | 16 | 17 |
| 18 | 19 | 20 | 21 | 22 | 23 | 24 |
| 25 | 26 | 27 | 28 | 29 | 30 | 31 |
| *** | | | | | | |

Thrapston & District U3A is a registered charity number 1179593