

A HISTORY OF

MELTON MOWBRAY u3a

From a small idea in France to a thriving local community — 1972–2026

“Learning should not have to stop when formal education ends.”

The idea at the heart of the u3a movement

The big story

The u3a story began in Toulouse, France, in 1972. When Cambridge academic Peter Laslett developed the idea for Britain in 1981, he shaped it around a simple principle: learning should be by members, for members. Local people could share their knowledge, explore subjects that interested them and learn together without relying on universities.

The first formal British meeting took place in Cambridge in March 1982. Within a year, u3a groups were appearing around the country, and the movement soon became a national network. The British model also travelled overseas, inspiring organisations in countries including Australia, New Zealand, South Africa and Cyprus.

The journey at a glance

A visual timeline from the origins of the movement to Melton Mowbray’s 30th anniversary.

1972	Toulouse, France The u3a idea begins, with continued learning at its heart.
1981	Britain Peter Laslett sets out to establish a British movement based on member-led learning.
Mar 1982	Cambridge The first formal British meeting leads to the creation of the first British u3a.
Sep 1983	UK The movement launches its first national magazine, initially called “The Last Post”.

1995	Melton Mowbray Margaret Butler begins exploring the possibility of establishing a local u3a.
20 Mar 1996	Gloucester House More than 50 people attend the first public meeting; a steering committee is formed.
18 Apr 1996	Melton Mowbray The first full meeting is held, featuring a talk on travels in New Zealand.
16 May 1996	Melton Mowbray The committee is formally established; the first newsletter appears and membership reaches about 70.
9 Jul 1996	Melton Mowbray The original constitution is signed; it is formally adopted at the AGM in March 1997.
2000	Community history Members begin an oral-history project, preserving memories of local working life.
2005	Wider movement Gordon Young becomes Chairman of the East Midlands Association of u3as.
Mar 2006	10th anniversary A decade is celebrated with a meeting, exhibition, concert and commemorative tree.
2011	Third Age Trust Gordon Young is elected to the Third Age Trust Roll of Honour.

2012	Community & culture Members serenade the Olympic Torch procession and continue performances and charity activity.
2016	20th anniversary Two decades of friendship, learning and achievement are celebrated.
2020–22	COVID years AGMs adapt to social distancing, proxy voting and Zoom as members keep the organisation going.
2023–26	Modernising Electronic membership cards, a PR & Marketing Subgroup and digital support strengthen the organisation.
2026	30th anniversary AI awareness, Digital Friends, website improvements and a major anniversary celebration mark the year.
21 Aug 2026	30th celebration Around 120 members gather for an afternoon tea and showcase, joined by civic and u3a guests.

From Toulouse to Melton Mowbray

The national movement created the foundations, but local people brought the idea to life in Melton Mowbray. In 1995, Margaret Butler decided that the town should have its own u3a. She contacted the national development body and, in October, received advice, promotional materials and a £30 start-up grant from National Development Co-ordinator Roy Wilson. At the time, there were around 300 u3as across the UK and approximately 47,000 members.

Margaret also sought local support from Alan Nutt of Age Concern Melton and Kathy McKinlay of the CVS. The turning point came on 20 March 1996, when more than 50 people gathered at Gloucester House. Margaret chaired the meeting and representatives from Loughborough u3a explained the possibilities. The response was positive: a steering committee was formed, officers were appointed and Melton u3a was born.

A movement built by its members

50+ people at the first public meeting	~70 members by May 1996	100+ groups today	~900 members today
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The early years: learning, creating and exploring

The first full meeting followed on 18 April 1996, when Vic and Joan Dixon entertained members with a talk about their travels in New Zealand. Very quickly, members began establishing activities including Watercolour Painting, Calligraphy, Music, Scrabble, Rambling and Local History/Ambling, while Bridge for Beginners and Gardens & Gardening were also being developed. The message was clear: this was to be a u3a shaped by the interests and enthusiasm of its members.

By 16 May 1996 the committee was formally established, with Margaret Butler as Chairman, Mary Wilson as Secretary, Len Pearce as Membership Secretary and Gordon Young as a committee member. Alan Nutt and Kathy McKinlay became advisers. The first newsletter appeared that month, annual subscriptions were £10 and the membership list already contained around 70 names.

Preserving local memories

Around the turn of the millennium, Melton Mowbray u3a was already reported to have more than 250 members. Plans were made to train members in oral history, and approximately 12 members interviewed people connected with Holwell Works, the Melton Woodyard and local agricultural enterprises. Their work created an archive of memories from the 1930s and 1940s, with a copy eventually presented to Melton Mowbray Museum.

Ten years, twenty years — and beyond

The 10th anniversary in March 2006 was marked with a special meeting, a three-day exhibition at St Mary's Church and a concert by the U3A Singers. A Sorbus hupehensis tree was planted behind the Baptist Church by then-Chairman Winifred Maine, creating a living memorial to the milestone.

The organisation's contribution also reached into the wider movement. Gordon Young, an original member and first-committee member, became Chairman of the East Midlands Association of u3as in 2005 and was elected to the Third Age Trust Roll of Honour in 2011 — at the end of 2014, only 47 people were on that Roll.

Members have learned, performed, travelled and supported their community over the years. Activities have included group holidays in the UK and overseas, theatre trips, singing and guitar performances, charity fundraising and participation in local events. In 2012, members even serenaded the Olympic Torch procession as it passed through the area.

Adapting through difficult times

The COVID-19 pandemic brought unprecedented challenges. The March 2020 AGM took place under strict social-distancing measures, with a small number attending and the committee elected by proxy. In March 2021 the AGM moved entirely online via Zoom, attracting 56 connections representing around 80 participants. The 2022 AGM was again affected by COVID, but members adapted and the organisation continued.

The digital chapter: 2023–2026

As Melton Mowbray u3a moved towards its 30th anniversary, it continued to modernise. Electronic membership cards were introduced, and a PR and Marketing Subgroup was established to support recruitment and raise awareness of the organisation's activities.

In 2026, technology became an even stronger part of the story. Members began exploring the opportunities and challenges of Artificial Intelligence, while the Digital Friends support team was created to help people feel more confident with everyday technology. The website was also improved to make it more engaging, informative, accessible and easier to use for both prospective and existing members.

Thirty years — and still learning

On Friday 21 August 2026, around 120 members gathered to celebrate the 30th anniversary year. The organisation welcomed Iain Cassidy, CEO of the Third Age Trust, alongside The Mayor and Lady Mayoress of Melton Mowbray, Jim and Kate Adcock. Members enjoyed a traditional afternoon tea, entertainment from Mr Music Man, Thomas Corden, accompanied by Russ Hamer, and a performance from The Generation Gap.

The celebration also welcomed four former Chairs — Winifred Maine, Alan Barton, Graham Cherryman and Kathy Slack — and included a special memory display honouring Chairs who had contributed to the organisation's development.

THE NEXT CHAPTER

The first 30 years have given us much to celebrate. The future promises just as much to look forward to.

Nearly 900 members • More than 100 groups • A continuing spirit of learning, sharing and friendship