

GENERAL MEETING 2025

January 2025: MILITARY WORKING DOGS

The speaker was Pam Farquhar who spoke to us about military working dogs, past and present.

Pam explained that her background was as a nurse, both with the NHS and the Army, but what brought her to this interest was when her daughter became an 'explosion dog handler' who used 30 ft. of rope whilst her dog searched for IED's, so naturally Pam gained a great respect for such dogs. She's not the only one, General David Petraeus is quoted: "by all means of performance" military working dogs outperform" any asset we have in our industry". The capability they bring to the fight cannot be replicated by man or machine.



She then went through a range of pictures of various dogs, including Rin Tin Tin and mentioning that there is a statue of a military dog in the White House. Judy, a pointer, that was awarded the Dickin Medal and became the first dog to be taken as a 'prisoner of war' when their boat HMS Nas was captured. Another RAF 'search dog' that saved thousands of lives, then Trio, a Dickin medal winner for the work on 'Daisy Chain explosives', Australian Cattle dogs were used for sending messages, they had 2 handlers and the dogs were kept hungry so that they would go to the second handler to get fed and delivered the message. Medical dogs, trained to find fallen soldiers and having to wear gas masks.

Inevitably, there are some countries (Russia) who trained dogs to feed under tanks, fitted with a device, so that they could blow up the German tanks, with the dog underneath them! Americans saw the value of dogs in the Vietnam war, where the temperature/humidity conditions meant that the men couldn't cope and dogs smell ability with 50 million olfactory receptors, 1000-fold higher than humans. Unfortunately, at the end of the war they left 4000 dogs in Vietnam.

There is the Royal Army Veterinary Corps centre in Melton Mowbray who have Open days where you can find out about how they train the dogs for different specialisms. She posed the question about what we thought it would cost to train such dogs and our answers were way out of the actual cost of £60k (10 years ago). Her daughter Alex did a number of tours in

Afghanistan with her Malinois 'high assurance dog' HiHa, and she showed us the bootees they had to wear to protect their sensitive paws from the rough terrain, as well as the muzzle required for the helicopter lifts they needed to get to the forward bases, plus the goggles (called DOGGLES) to keep out the dust. Naturally the dogs and handlers are a specific target for the enemy, recognising the invaluable contribution they make in identifying IED's and other strategic information, so it's a very dangerous occupation.

However, one amusing tale from Alex's Army experience was when she was asked for an audience with the Queen following the Manchester Bombing involvement, she didn't take HiHa and the dog she took actually passed wind in front of the Queen!

Pam has taken on 5 retired dogs over time, as they tend to retire about 8 years old and it's her way of giving back, via the RBL to military dogs who saved her daughter's life.

February 2025: HOUSE OF COMMONS LIBRARY

Felicity Whittle worked for over 29 years in the House of Commons Library in various roles and she gave us an insight into the workings of Parliament. The proceedings and legislature must be impartial and some is confidential e.g. constituency matters, but the rest is available on the website and in Hansard.

Felicity had a wealth of fascinating, often amusing detail about the day to day running of such an organisation, including Seb Coe 's office being situated the furthest distance from the Division lobbies as he could run quickly! The House of Commons rooms and furnishings are all green while those of the House of Lords are red and everything is colour coded in this way.



There were some wonderful nostalgic images on the screen of memorable MPs including Tony Benn, Charles Kennedy and Frank Field. We were shown books written by well known characters earlier in their lives such as "The Art of the Deal" written in 1987 by one and only Donald J. Trump and "A Parliamentary Affair" by Edwina Currie. There was information too about Portcullis House which provides a less formal meeting place for MPs and visitors. This was an informative, insightful and hugely enjoyable talk.

Marianne White

March 2025: MARY'S MEALS

Jane Wright was a trained primary teacher who changed careers to work for Mary's Meals, a charity providing meals to schoolchildren in the poorest areas of the world.

She is based in the East Midlands and East Anglia and she introduced us to the charity and its fundraising. Jane wanted to increase awareness in the charity.

Magnus Macfarlane Barrow lived in Dalmally, Scotland and in 1992 he set off to Bosnia where he began providing meals for children. His idea that feeding and education must go together gathered momentum and he ran his new charity from a shed in Dalmally and he is still there.



The charity now reaches 16 countries and 2.6 million children. The charity was a simple solution to world hunger and Jane described it as being "low cost but high impact". Everywhere the

charity reaches uses local food, small holdings, local volunteers and community involvement. The children are provided with a nourishing breakfast before lessons, often porridge or similar, which is cooked by the local mothers and helpers. Attendance and academic success as well as happiness and job opportunities all improved when children were no longer hungry.

Jane's talk was interrupted a couple of times by gremlins interfering with her microphone but she was completely unfazed by it and delivered a wonderful insight to a truly inspirational charity.

April 2025: ANTARCTICA

John Tidmarsh is membership secretary of West Bridgford U3A but he came to speak to us about his trip to Antarctica. Apart from his stunning photography and descriptions of the journey and life on and off the ship he was extremely amusing with a very dry sense of humour.

We heard about the long journey he and his wife made to join a bird watching group on a small cruise ship. I think we all fell in love with the penguins with their varied plumage and the Albatrosses were awe inspiring with their ability to run to the cliff edge and take off using wind currents to gain altitude and speed so they could "sail".

Although he is often asked, he assured us there are no polar bears at the South Pole. There were amusing details about eating meals sitting on chairs which rolled around with the ship's movements, disembarking for sightseeing and the difficulties in recognising fellow passengers in their red protective jackets and hats.

Getting the ship to dock safely was not quick or easy but always done safely by the expert crew. If there was any ice to navigate the ship's Captain or First Mate would always be on the bridge. This was a wonderful glimpse of a remote part of the world brilliantly delivered and such fun to listen to.

May 2025: ROAD SAFETY

Autumn Rose is road safety Co-ordinator from Via East Midlands Ltd and with her 2 colleagues delivered a slick, punchy presentation, well prepared and tailored to an audience of older drivers. I don't think I was the only person in the hall who soon began desperately trying to remember the Highway code and where I had put it so I could mug up when I got home!

The slides were simple and direct inviting audience participation by registering their answers on a hand held device, which delivered the results almost immediately.

The talk covered the national Speed Limit, the definition of a dual carriageway, the meaning of red on a road sign and lots more topics.

We learnt that the distance between 2 cars should be no less than 2 seconds, the time it takes to say "only a fool breaks the 2 second rule".

Renewal of licences after 70, eye sight, seat belts, hazard perception and journey planning were discussed and even free driving lessons were available for confidence boosting.

The team were very encouraging and issued easy ways to manage situations as we age. keeping ourselves and others safe on the roads.

July 2025: LIVING WITH VISUAL IMPAIRMENT

Our speaker was Amanda Harris, an award-winning writer and speaker about her experience of living with visual impairment.

Amanda has suffered since early childhood from a number of conditions which affect the Optic nerve. She described her school and home life, teenage years, university, work life and holidays.

She is married to a partially sighted man and they have an 18-year-old son who is normally sighted.

There were interesting facts about types of white stick, blind archery and a guide dog who misbehaved. She now runs her own business.

Amanda's determination and refusal to be beaten has stood her in good stead. Her advice to anyone facing a challenge is:

"Do what you want and don't give up"

Good advice Amanda!



September 2025: MEADOW MAKERS

Another brilliant speaker at our September meeting, Edward Cook runs a family business growing and selling wild flowers and he shared his knowledge and commitment for improving the decline in biodiversity due to climate change.

It was impossible not to be caught up in his enthusiasm for healing the planet in our own little corner of the world and not worrying about what other people or nations are doing.

There was some audience participation in estimating the extent of habitat loss, biodiversity levels and reduction in numbers of birds, insects and wildflower meadows due to rising temperatures and farming practises. He had lots of ideas how we can make small changes to our gardens which help to bring wildlife and attract pollinators.



Edward brought a table full of wildflower plug plants which had all been grown ecologically, without plastic, in root runs, and using the minimum of compost. After his talk there was a veritable scrum of keen u3a members eager to get their hands on the plants. I think it was a sell-out. His mail order address is: meadowmakers.co.uk

An uplifting and exciting talk, I hope we will see Edward again.

Marianne White

October 2025: HISTORY OF MUSIC IN AMERICA

Roger Browne made a welcome return visit, having last visited in 2024, and gave an entertaining and informative talk about the history of music in America.

Roger, who is President of the Stockport Operatic Society and began singing and playing music at the age of 4, talked about Irving Berlin and his family's escape from Russia in the late 1890s and how he, as a Jewish man, ended up writing White Christmas and God Bless America.

George and Ira Gershwin's family were migrants from Ukraine and Roger described their upbringing and the encouragement



George received from an early age once his innate musicality was clear. He worked as a song plugger in Tin Pan Alley and went on to write Swanee, Rhapsody in Blue and the opera Porgy and Bess, many of which Roger played excerpts from and sang along to.

Ira's lyrics complemented his brother's music so well, and it was a tragedy that George died so young at 38 from a brain tumour.

Roger also talked about Scott Joplin and Thomas A Dorsey who gave us some of the first ragtime and gospel music.

Roger's talk was excellent, and I agree with a member of the audience who told me "he was so entertaining he went over time and there was no time to ask questions".

Sally Lord

Sue Warren

November 2025: THE MULTI-TASKING FEMALE HONEY BEE

Alec Thomson is an experienced bee keeper and Chair of the Nottingham Bee Keepers Association.

He shared his vast knowledge and passion with us, concentrating on the female honey bee, the hardest working bee in the hive. He listed her jobs under headings such as water collector, cleaner, pest controller, interior decorator and shared beautiful close-up photos of her busy at work.

All this was magnificent and impressive, not just the talk but the bees themselves. We learnt about swarms, the Queen Bee, looking after bees, their peculiar waggle dance, pollination, producing honey and so much more.

These incredible little creatures have inhabited our planet for 5 million years and we are totally dependent on them for our food and well-being. Now it is vital that we do what we can to support them and help mitigate the effects of climate change and loss of habitats. As gardeners we can help bees by planting a variety of bee-friendly flowers throughout the year, allow some areas to grow wild, provide water sources, and avoid using pesticides.

Alec sold jars of his Trent Valley Honey at a reduced price, and also runs training courses.

An exciting, fascinating talk and I'm sure there is more we could learn on a future occasion.

Marianne White