

PRESENTATION of  
**u3a in the Time of Corona**

By Jennifer Simpson,  
at time of publication, National Co-ordinator for SLPs  
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Subject Adviser for Living History

at RSLP Day, Preston, 3<sup>rd</sup> August 2022

This was a hybrid meeting and unknown to those of us in the room,  
nothing was getting through to those online.

So we've compiled the set of slides  
with the script that we used to present them.  
Do share this presentation with your u3a  
or any of your groups who may find it of interest.

If anyone would like to see the original presentation  
it could be done again on zoom  
(and is short enough to fit into the free version).  
Please contact Jo for this.

Our emails –

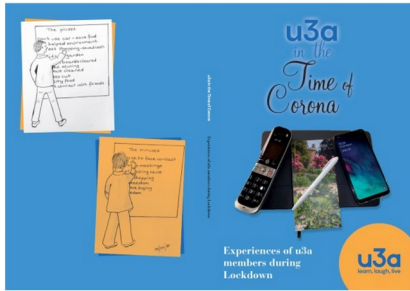
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It might be suitable for an AGM as it's quite short  
but could be developed into a discussion  
depending on the time available –  
AGMs being unpredictable.

# U3a in the Time of Corona

A4 paperback, 120 pages



**JS** Very early on we had thought that the best record of this project would be to produce a book. Also early in the project, it had been decided that all the entries would be offered to the Mass Observation Archive, and they had accepted. This idea had originally come from Sam Mauger who was familiar with the war time diaries from World War 2. By the end of the summer of 2020, we thought Covid might be over and advised the Diarists we would not take any more entries.

During that Spring and Summer 2020 selected entries had (with the Diarists permission) been included in the U3A online Blog “Sources” and there had been an article in Third Age Matters magazine. Shared Learning Projects have traditionally had a more tangible outcome and we wanted as many people as possible to see all aspects of the diary entries, not just the positive bits, but the record of hopes and fears and gloomy times as well.

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### **In the Beginning**

*How it all started, in Wuhan and elsewhere*

### **Don't Panic!**

*Panic buying, food, loo rolls, home deliveries*

### **Vulnerable? Me?**

*Health of individual and household, physical and mental*

### **Family and Friends**

*Concerns about adult children, especially key workers, and elderly parents*

### **Missing the Children**

*Grandchildren, missing them, giving help with home schooling*

### **Filling Those Empty Hours**

*Occupations— art, cooking, music, exercise, books, gardening etc*

### **Learn, Laugh, Live**

*U3A – how it used to be, how we're keeping it going, technology*

### **In Tune with Nature?**

*Natural world - for mental and physical health, environmental aspects*

### **Not on the Bright Side**

*Downside - loss of friends and family, knock on effects*

### **Such a Thing as Society?**

*How communities supported each other, including Clap for Carers*

### **What the Future Holds . . . ?**

*What do people think the 'new normal' is likely to be?*

**JL** We had to base the book on what was sent in and that provided the structure – people were responding to various problems as the weeks went on, so we just followed where they led, from the initial panic buying and problems getting a food delivery, through anxiety about family members of all ages, then how to fill the time, how to keep the U3A going (and learn zoom) and find out, cautiously, how much we were allowed to interact with other people. It was important to show all sides of the contributions – there were some very funny ones, especially to do with loo rolls, hair cutting and even dentists, but many others were losing people to covid, without the support from family and friends that normally accompanies a death, so it was important that their voices were heard as well.

**JS** In the beginning there was panic buying and none of us were used to seeing empty shelves in the supermarket. Some of us joined the queue during the early morning slots allocated to us older folks and NHS staff. Some tried to arrange delivery slots and often failed. People with limited mobility and without the support of family and friends were most vulnerable and often didn't like to ask for help, but there were examples of neighbours who stepped in and kept them going with supplies and networks of helpers soon started up. In general people got used to


The government's assurances that online shopping was the way for us elderly to go has proved woefully over optimistic. I haven't managed to get a delivery slot since this fiasco started.

We called at Morrisons on the way home. Evidence of panic buying and shortages now. No flour, baking powder, yeast or bicarb of soda. Some empty shelves where tinned food and pasta and rice used to be.

Flour is like gold dust at the moment.

The highlight of my week is our Sainsbury's delivery when I spend about an hour washing all items with warm soapy water to ensure no trace of the virus remains. Don't know if I do it properly but it makes me feel safer

My friend ordered bread, broccoli, strawberries and milk with her online shopping. Imagine her surprise when instead of these, she was given four bags of monkey nuts, a coconut and two bottles of sun tan lotion.




We managed to get a slot at Tesco for next Thursday, I'd have liked Waitrose but grateful for anything.

making do.

**JL** Once the need to get food supplies had settled down, most people's concerns were for family members. Many had partners, or occasionally parents, in care homes, which was a source of huge anxiety at that time, and our children were trying to juggle working from home with teaching their children, unless they

were key workers which meant extra worries for us as parents who could do nothing to help them. And then there were all the family events that just didn't happen, or only within a single household – grandchildren's birthdays missed, weddings postponed and funerals limited to five people who couldn't even hug. Though some families managed to have huge gatherings on zoom, from all round the world – and didn't even have to do the washing up at the end of it.



only one family member allowed to visit indoors.

I spoke to my brother on the phone. We wondered when we'll be allowed to meet again. That seems to be everyone's first priority now. Restaurants and holidays can wait. Just let us see our family and friends again.

It makes me weepy to see our 2 1/2 year old grandson on Zoom but not able to be with him. He does not relate to us as real people on screen and will have to re-build a relationship if there is an 'Afterwards.'

My daughter's in her flat, alone, ill, unable to get her own supplies. She'll have to rely on friends to leave things on her doorstep. Now it is real. It is in my life. It is mind-wrenchingly frightful.

As the virus is probably here for the foreseeable future it's inevitable that juggling family issues with anxieties will continue.

My son is due to get married and then emigrate to New Zealand. They are selling their house, his buyer has pulled out, the wedding is off because no guests can attend and he'll probably lose his job in July. All down to the Corona virus. I was in tears again.


**JS** The Diarists wrote about keeping busy and having time to do all the jobs around the house they hadn't

Everyone reported the same kinds of reactions – shock, disbelief, anxiety

There's a blank wall of nothingness in front of me

We could not hug or kiss for fear of killing each other

For 16 years we've helped look after our grandchildren and supported our family. At a time of global emergency we are unable to help and have been told not to. This was the most distressing moment so far.



Absolute boredom  
Really struggling what's the point.

Someone on one of my Zoom meetings was over the moon because she was going to the dentist. A day out! Someone never had anyone treat them with anything but dread and horror before.

It's 3rd June, I'm still shielding, I haven't left the house since mid February, it's a very lonely and depressing time in my life

I find it difficult to express the huge changes in mood that I'm experiencing on being isolated.

got around to, but all that began to be less attractive as time went on and all most people wanted was human contact and interaction again. Dealing with the deaths of family and friends due to Covid was the most difficult thing and of course there was the ever-present worry that you might catch it yourself. Couples either appreciated one another more or became more infuriated with partner's behaviour as the months passed.



**JL** If anyone had been asked beforehand what they would find most difficult about daily life in lockdown, I doubt if many would have put lack of hairdressers at the top of their list. But it was clear that for many it was the last straw at a very difficult time. Some turned to dog-clippers, wielded by their partner. There were stories of secret sessions in back gardens, with the neighbours asking if they could join in. People began comparing their hair to Boris and one even accused Nicola Sturgeon of secret visits to her hairdresser because she always looked so smart. And there was outrage when Germany allowed hair salons to reopen when ours were still closed.

There were loads of people about, I recognised lots of covid hairdos. Loosely chopped locks and axe cuts; roots showing, straggly ponytails and unkempt collar length tresses.

Germany has released more restrictions, hairdressers and barbers can reopen, oh please can we follow soon? My long wavy hair is driving me mad.

I trimmed my husband's sideboards with dog clippers he is so desperate to visit the barbers.

The hairdressing situation is getting more desperate by the day. My hair is on my collar, so annoying. I've taken to wearing hair slides to keep my very long fringe out of my eyes. It's noticeable that even the newsreaders' hair on TV is looking shaggy.

My hair is getting tattier, I'm not washing it so much, so it doesn't dry out much and the colour doesn't disappear; I've taken to making little plaits, placing them across my head and fastening with clips, it doesn't really matter if I'm indoors most of the time.

I am beside myself, hairdressers are not going to be allowed to resume their business until July 4<sup>th</sup> at the earliest, my hair will be down my back by then.

I'd love to tell you in confidence but...

I need a hug and I'm shielding and even if I wasn't I couldn't have one. This is when I wish that I had a cat.

2m

There is no gossip. No groups of people to discuss life with.

A thought came into my mind, loud and clear – I want my life back! Unreasonable, I know – and not something I can insist on, but it was heartfelt all the same.

I find difficult to accept that I belong to the vulnerable group that must be protected and cannot help. Not being allowed to go out is very different from not being able to go out.

We went to the Library to get books renewed. But will it be open? And should we be out? It was open. We could borrow up to 48 books with no overdue charges because we don't know when the lockdown will end. But the shelves were almost empty!

Co-ordinate outdoor socialising

YOU SHOULD VISIT ME!

AND YOU SHOULD VISIT ME!

**JS** People with grandchildren greatly missed being able to hug them and missing out on seeing them grow up. Seeing them on Zoom did not provide the physical contact. The loss of ordinary socialising was acutely felt.

**JL** How we filled the time – some were very organised, others quite dismayed by all the empty hours. Some saw it as a great chance to learn a language or a musical instrument (though that didn't always go down too well with the rest of the family). Baking became very popular until a shortage of both flour and yeast made that a challenge. Others took to walking in the wonderful spring weather, alone of course or with someone from the same household. Like many dog owners I had a 'get out of jail free card' – you can't keep a border collie indoors for three months! And there were two distinct views on housework – 'a chance to get everything spick and span' or 'can't have any visitors for months – why bother?' I must admit to being in the second group.

Before lockdown begins in earnest, the family decided I needed something to fill the time. Can they be serious? After a lifetime as a working mother and helping with grandchildren, I'm desperate to waste time on reading, gardening, long scented baths, painting – it's a long list.

Oh dear, still can't buy oven cleaner, what a pity, have to put off cleaning the oven.

All the time in the world to re-arrange my spice-rack in alphabetical order

If I thought I would have spare time whilst we are in 'lockdown' I was wrong

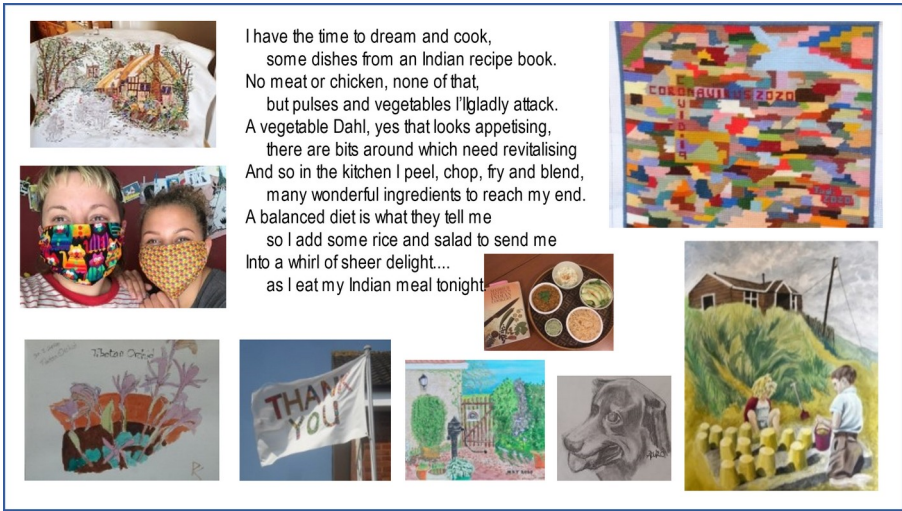
Still no baking flour to be had, shelves completely empty. All the new stay-at-home folks have taken to baking out of boredom.

The government now says vulnerable people like my husband can go out into their gardens. Did they really think that people with gardens wouldn't use them? He's been gardening nearly every day. It's kept him sane.

Found some dried milk powder with an expiry date of 2008 that I might use for custard or rice pudding.

Rain overnight softened up my failed loaf so the crows moved it into a puddle and made bread soup by treading it into the water, eventually they were able to eat bits of it.

It's amazing what you can do with a few black bananas



I have the time to dream and cook,  
 some dishes from an Indian recipe book.  
 No meat or chicken, none of that,  
 but pulses and vegetables I'll gladly attack.  
 A vegetable Dahl, yes that looks appetising,  
 there are bits around which need revitalising  
 And so in the kitchen I peel, chop, fry and blend,  
 many wonderful ingredients to reach my end.  
 A balanced diet is what they tell me  
 so I add some rice and salad to send me  
 Into a whirl of sheer delight...  
 as I eat my Indian meal tonight

**JS** People were motivated to try to be creative and paintings, drawings and fabric items were all produced. Some people put their skills to good use by making face masks and items for local hospitals. Diarists provided us with photos, poems and the wonderful cartoons used in the book.

**JL** The U3A was a lifeline to some but yet another source of deprivation for others. Many U3As rose to the challenge, holding committee meetings on zoom, sending out emails and newsletters to their members and doing everything they could to keep the show on the road. But there were some which were more inclined to close down for the duration, to the great distress of their members. Of course, the new technology of zoom – new to most of us, anyway – was probably the saviour of the U3A. We were rapidly divided into those who could set up a zoom meeting, or at least know how to join one, and those who wanted nothing to do with it and preferred to wait until life returned to normal. Of course, at this stage, we were all thinking in weeks and months – if we'd known then it would go on for nearly two years some may have decided differently.

How will I be able to keep my U3A group going?

As my U3A has decided to cancel all meetings for the rest of 2020, I decided to make the most of the U3A Trust which has kept me going.

In one evening, two singing practices, a concert and a ukulele practice were cancelled as were all further practices for the foreseeable future.

Today we had a committee meeting on Zoom. It worked reasonably well though we have very little to discuss other than what on earth is going to happen in the future.

Originally, all my groups wrote to say that we would not be meeting and then a few days later they arranged lots of Zoom meetings so I was very happy. U3A have been great.

I lead a French conversation group and up on Zoom [at age 96] Really happy and friendly group.

TAM arrives – 'at last, something to read'

Normally I'd have been hosting a Latin group which I run for our U3A. Today I hosted it on Zoom. Four of the usual six joined in and it went quite well, with few technical problems.

Naturally attending a funeral is out of the question with the current restrictions. Seems so wrong not saying farewell to relatives in person at the Funeral Service

Almost 50,000 people have died in the UK so far and it's very frightening and there seems to be no end to it yet.

I wonder if I'll ever feel comfortable visiting a café or travelling on public transport again in my lifetime.

Death stalks the world. I've been having some dark thoughts myself – What if this virus claims me and all the things I've wanted to do but never got round to doing would die with me

What's happened to everyone? – no replies for days. Very depressing, feeling lonely.

Every other ad on the TV now is for funeral plans or people wanting to offer me a cremation

I'm becoming institutionalised, my horizons are being limited and I am walking through a narrow chasm with no light at the end.

I worry I will lose the ability to talk to people face to face. How will I reconnect?

**JS** There was often the dark side. Have we now forgotten watching those horrible statistics every night and feeling powerless? People wrote about their fears of the world never being the same again or worried that they might not adapt to going out again or returning to their once busy lives.



**JL** Communities were affected by lockdown in two opposite ways. The positive was getting to know the neighbours like never before and the coming together of people for Clapping for Carers, VE Day. And we all realised how much we depend on key workers, not just in the NHS but transport workers, postmen and women, the bin men and all the behind the scenes jobs that we're not even aware of until they stop working. But it was also a pretext for what in the war were known as 'little Hitlers' – those who'd shop their neighbour if they saw a visitor, the trigger-happy police who believed that a walk carrying a cup of coffee was a picnic and the shops that covered up what they deemed to be non-essential items. Life was difficult enough without these characters making it worse.



**JS** The book finally got published in November 2020. Some people bought the book and liked it. We are very glad that it was produced and we think that It is an important record of the times we lived in, especially since we seem to have very quickly got back to normal.

People who've already bought the book have called it–

*'an important item in times to come'*

*'a really interesting and unique document'*

*'a marvellous testament for our times'*

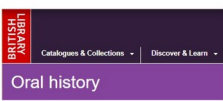
*'an important historical record'*

*'an invaluable record for the future'*

We hope it never happens again but this book is an important reminder of what it was like at the time it was all happening and our lives were turned upside down. We are indebted to the contributors and to the team of people who helped us in its compilation.

We've discovered recently that as well as the whole archive being at Mass Observation, the book is listed in the British Library Covid-19 Projects Database.

*BL Database entry*




**British Library Covid-19 Testimony Projects Database**  
The Oral History team has compiled a database of testimony projects in the UK that collected material during Covid -19. It can be downloaded as a spreadsheet and is an open resource for further research and re-use.  
[Download Covid -19 Testimony Projects Database \(XLS, 74KB\)](#)

**U3A Diary Project,**  
held in MassObservation Archive

Members were asked to record their daily experiences over a period of time. Hundreds of members from across the UK provided daily accounts and a selection of anonymised extracts were made into a book, **'U3A in the Time of Corona'**.

The exercise was repeated as **'Looking back on Lockdown'**, although not published as a print book.



**To order a copy of u3a in the Time of Corona -**

Go to the national U3a website <https://www.u3a.org.uk/> then **'Support for U3As'**, then **'Brand Centre'**.

You'll need to **login** or **register** (if you haven't already done that)

Then **enter the title** into the search box and it will take you to the book.

It costs **£10.82\*** including p&p.

SEE ALSO Pt.2 Looking Back on Lockdown (online only)

<https://www.u3a.org.uk/learning/u3a-research/current-and-recent-projects>

- **Apologies – the Brand Centre made a decision to raise the price by £1.50, without telling us. You can't be more angry about that than we are!**