



Through the language glass

Michael Elliott, who worked abroad for many years, disabuses us of the notion that older people can't learn languages

Two recent incidents have shown me how worthwhile it is to learn a new language or keep up an old one.

The first was in the Polish grocery shop in East Finchley. I had been chatting about sausages with the man behind the counter when a group of customers at the door gave me a round of

applause: 'Thank you for trying to speak our language,' one said. I was most encouraged.

My connection with Polish goes back to the early 90s. I had just retired; the Berlin Wall had come down and Poland was turning towards the West; they wanted help in learning English. A group of English teachers in

Hereford was organising people to go and do what they could. I went to a small town in Silesia for six months to teach in the local high school and at the same time I started to learn Polish. I wanted to fit in.

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Photo: Barry Davies

Mein Gott, hilf mir diese tödliche Liebe zu überleben (*O God, help me survive this deadly love affair*).

Artwork on a remnant of the Berlin Wall

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• **The editors may shorten or otherwise amend articles to fit spacing and style requirements.**

Editorial

It is a truth universally acknowledged that you can't teach an old dog (read 'person') new tricks. Or is it? Since I joined NLU3A 10 years ago, I've learned to play a bit of bridge, managed complex yoga postures and improved my violin-playing a hundred times over, having given up learning the instrument at age 12. I've learned some music theory, have taught myself to do cryptic crosswords and have become skilled with software for editing photos – and this newsletter.

Our U3A is filled with older people who have not given up on learning, from a member who took up the cello at 70 to previously inexperienced

writers who have had their work published and former technophobes who now happily write or draw on tablets and computers. We haven't quite graduated to the sky-diving of other U3As, but there's still time for that. For the ethos of U3A is lifelong learning, and there's always something enjoyable to be learnt.

This issue features language learning, as Michael Elliott tells how he became involved with languages and how he now helps others to do so. Krishna Dutta continues our blue plaque in north London series with a story about Tagore, the Bengali poet who once lived in Hampstead. And we learn what a business



secretary (Michael Johns in our case) actually does – and why we need one.

Happy reading! ☺

Leni Green
EDITOR

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My working life in the Diplomatic Service had meant tackling a new language every few years. Sometimes there was plenty of preparation – I had six months full time at the University of London's School of Oriental

and African Studies (SOAS), for example, before going to Tehran. Sometimes you coped on your own – but some knowledge of the local language was essential.

Sometimes you went back to the same country, and that helped

the language stick. I spent six years altogether in Tehran, hence my pleasure at the second incident a few weeks ago when the waitress at a Persian restaurant in Temple Fortune remarked that I spoke like her

The major problem is that in later life your memory lets you down – you have to work harder to retain a language.

grandfather. It's not always so easy – not to use it is to lose it. My Brazilian Portuguese disappeared completely after eight years of closely related Spanish in Mexico and Peru.

My own experience is that the major problem is that in later life your memory lets you down – you have to work harder to retain a language.

The tremendous

advantage nowadays is that so much more material is available on TV and the internet. Some enterprising pupils in my classes don't bother with dictionaries any more: instead, out come the smartphones.

Photo © Joan Swann



Old tiles in Alcazar, Segovia

U3A language classes are very well suited for senior citizens. In my own classes I try to offer a relaxed, happy atmosphere (nothing helps more than a laugh) in which people can do their own thing. Several are young enough to be my children; several are in their 90s. There are no hard and fast rules, but people usually prepare a topic in the

The multilingual Swiss aren't superheroes. They're just in a position where they frequently have to cope with an extra language or two

language concerned, which they read out or use as a speaking note, or simply ad lib. This usually leads to a wide range of discussion - the topic itself, points of grammar, pronunciation, alternative ways of saying the same thing. Above all, people lose their shyness about speaking out. The main consideration is to look for

a class where you feel at home and to remember that the multilingual Swiss aren't superheroes. They're just in a position where they frequently have to cope with an extra language or two. 🔄

MICHAEL ELLIOTT COORDINATES FOUR LANGUAGE GROUPS: FRENCH – EASY CONVERSATION, FRENCH CONVERSATION, GERMAN LANGUAGE, AND SPANISH LANGUAGE

Reflections

Seven members share their experiences of the language groups

Frank Kelsall, leader of **Everyday French Conversation**, says: 'We talk as friends do when they get together and usually achieve our aim, which is to keep going with conversation in French for the 90 minutes we meet. We see what grabs the headlines in a French newspaper, where we often find interesting words: *rocambolesque* (incredible) is a recent favourite. There are no native or fluent French speakers to keep us on the straight and narrow, and we are pretty tolerant of each other's mistakes.' 🔄



Photo © Joan Swann

Ceret in the French Eastern Pyrenees



Photo © Joan Swann

The Spanish Vuelta, a multi-stage cycle race, passing through Serdinya in the French Eastern Pyrenees

Humphrey Swann finds that **French Conversation**, led by Michael Elliott, allows members to keep up with the language through talk. 'Learning comes through small improvements to accent, grammar and vocabulary rather than formal instruction,' says Humphrey, 'and the meetings are designed to enhance comfort and confidence in using the language. My advice to joiners: if you have a solid base, want to improve your vocabulary and correct your shortcomings, this is the group for you. Those who are comfortably fluent and can easily understand and eavesdrop on French conversations will want a more demanding level.' 🔄

Joy Winterbottom leads **Advanced French Conversation**, which, she says, combines native speakers, fairly fluent French speakers and a few who are more hesitant but keen to improve. 'The format is a mix of formal and informal – starting with whatever crops up during the week and then proceeding to an article, extract from a book, set of poems, something that someone has brought along.' 'We are all very disciplined about not speaking English,' she adds. 🔄



Photo © Joan Swann

The square at Prades in French Eastern Pyrenees



Photo © Barry Davies

Heidelberg

Pat Taylor started learning **German** at school, where she enjoyed it very much. On joining the U3A, she realised she could start again and quickly learnt that while you can just about recall what you once knew, it's very difficult to add more. She says: 'It's a very enjoyable group, deftly steered by Michael Elliott, which manages to encompass the different levels of fluency.' 🔄



Photo © Barry Davies

Bauhaus at Dessau

Hilary Segall decided to **Carpe Diem** (*seize the day*) by learning **Latin** when she joined NLU3A in 2018. She says: 'I had to play catch-up, sitting at home desperately trying to make sense of six cases, gender and pronunciation! Understanding Latin has given

me a greater knowledge of English grammar. It's good to stretch the brain, learn something new and in the process, meet nice people! And for anyone who thinks Latin is a dead language – how wrong they are!' 🔄



Picasso in Reina Sofia Gallery, Madrid

Douglas Barnes began learning **Spanish** in 1994, on a university extension course and a WEA discussion group. He says: 'When Michael Elliott's Spanish Language group began, I was glad to have the opportunity to take it up again. Members prepare something in writing, bring copies of a short article for discussion, or just join in when they wish. We do not always manage to exclude English from our sessions, but this is usually because the complexity of our thoughts goes beyond our linguistic skill.' 🌀

As I see it

Is one type of learning more valuable than another?

Patricia Isaacs thinks not

Every U3A is different, and every U3A is interesting and exciting, with North London being up there among the best of them! We have changed a great deal over the years, as of course we should do, rather than remain in one place, and from time to time discussions take place on our present position and the connection to our past. Should we concentrate more on academic education, which is how U3A began and what it was about, or should we be happy to include whatever members want? Are bridge, croquet and embroidery appropriate groups for us? I would offer a firm 'yes' – anything new comes under the umbrella of learning, and if a particular subject stimulates members and encourages them to join groups, then as I see it, it's a

good thing. Join, say, a croquet group and someone might try to persuade you to join a reading group, take up poetry, learn another language. Or just stay in the croquet group: every kind of learning is of value in itself.

At the same time, I fully understand the proposition that we should remain faithful to the philosophy of our founders to provide a place where older people could continue to learn, to think, to embrace knowledge after full-time work had ended. We can, surely, have both, learning different things in different ways; and the social aspect is an essential factor. We learn better with people we like, and without the fabric of a marvellous organisation like U3A, many older people would find retirement a time of life without a



focus.

It cannot be said too often that any U3A is entirely dependent upon volunteers and enthusiastic members for continuing success. I'm going to get onto my favourite soapbox and remind you that you have something to offer, whether it's to start a new group, join the management committee, help with regular events, write for this magazine. The more you give, the more you get back: a cliché, but it hits that proverbial nail on the head.

Remember that U3A gives us that focus with the slogan: 'Learn, Laugh and Live!' 🌀

This apt letter, by Judith Abbs, was published in the Guardian in October

As I was about to reach my 81st birthday in October, I realised that the answer to the clue 'elderly' in the Guardian's quick crossword (7 October) would apply to me. But I was unprepared to find that the solution was 'over the hill'. You would not allow contributors to use offensive language to describe anyone's race or disability, so why should it be acceptable to be dismissive and insulting about 'elderly' people? 🌀

A passage to Hampstead

On a recent visit to Hampstead, **Krishna Dutta** discovered a blue plaque at Number 3 Villas on the Heath commemorating the Bengali poet Rabindranath Tagore. She investigated to find out why

In 1913 Rabindranath Tagore, one of the most influential figures in Bengali literature and culture, became the first non-European to win the Nobel Prize for Literature. His writings included dramas, short stories and essays, but it was his poetry that made him famous.

Tagore had met the artist William Rothenstein in Kolkata in 1910, and with encouragement, two years later he sailed to London to explore the literary prospects of his poems. For three months in 1912 he lived in the Vale of Health house, which Rothenstein had found for him. From this base and through this renowned admirer of his work, Tagore was able to make contact with British intellectuals including writers WB Yeats (who was instrumental in getting his work published) and Ezra Pound; artist Paul Nash; and composers

Vaughan Williams and Fox Strangways. They created a buzz around Tagore that eventually led to the publication of his collection of esoteric poems, *Gitanjali* ('Song Offerings'), despite the fact that he left it on the tube one day. Luckily, the lost property office had it, and this slim book of poems went on to win the Nobel prize and was considered a distinctive voice in English poetry of the time.

As Tagore's fame grew, he visited the USA and lectured at Harvard, gaining some renown there following the Nobel award. But the bubble of his literary fame burst when in April 1919 he strongly protested against the killing and wounding of almost 3,000 unarmed innocent people at a religious gathering in Punjab – the Amritsar massacre.

He was knighted in 1915, but in his individualistic way

he attempted to renounce the honour. He wasn't successful in doing so, though, and he remained 'Sir' for the rest of his life. He died in Kolkata in 1941, aged 80. 🌀



© British Heritage

• Do you know of a blue plaque or other memorial commemorating someone in north London? We would love to read about them, so please send a brief summary of why they've been honoured to Leni at editor@nlu3a.org.uk

Those we have lost

We pay tribute to the following members, who died in 2019, with apologies if we missed anyone.

Harvey Baker
Jill Barnett
Estelle Benjamin
June Day
Adele Epstein

Margaret Kirschen
Angelo Nardi
Jo Pestel
Ruth Poisson
Val Richards

Martin Taylor
Muriel Temkin
Eva Wiesner
Sylvia Woolf

Into the woods

If you think you have to leave London to find natural beauty, think again. **Leni Green** continues our series on places to visit with your Freedom Pass



Photo © Leni Green

How lucky can I be! Across the road, practically on my doorstep, is one of the most picturesque natural spaces in north London – and I

don't even need a Freedom Pass to get there.

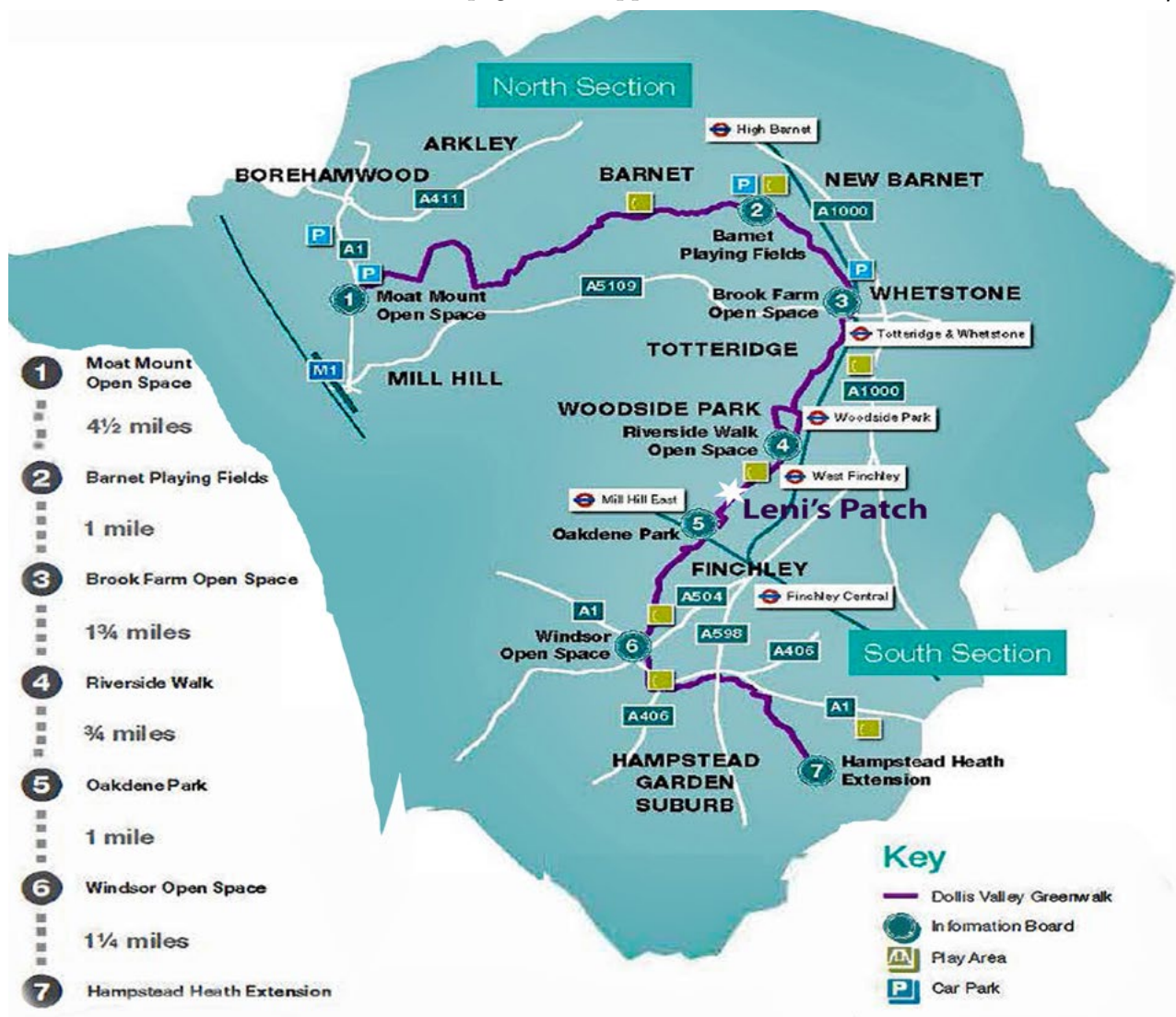
A short walk down my road takes me into the Dollis Valley Greenwalk, a 10-mile brookside path that goes from Hampstead Heath to Barnet via Mill Hill and Totteridge. My patch is in Finchley (roughly between numbers 4 and 5 on the map), and it delights me every time I go there.

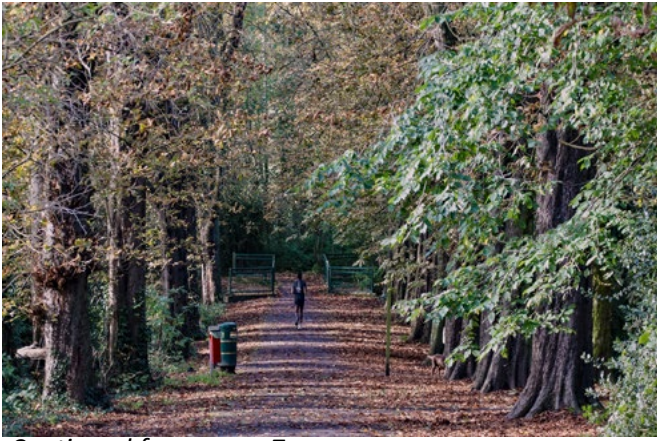
As I write, it is autumn and the tree-lined avenue leading to the walk is filled with fallen leaves that crinkle underfoot (see photo, next page) – or slippery underfoot

if it's been wet. I turn right and go past the brook on the left and a field on the right, where the dog I walk loves to chase tennis balls and, more to the point, squirrels. The walkway is filled with both of these animals. I've also seen muntjac deer and foxes and have been soothed by the ever-present sound of birdsong. Off to one side there's a wooden structure that looks a bit like a deer; I often wonder if it's natural or if someone has created it.

The winding path takes me past a pond which is green and

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Photos © Leni Green



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marshy – it gets little sunlight – and is home to Mandarin ducks and mallards, who nest there. I only go there when it's dry as the path tends to narrow and though my dog can easily slip into the brook, I'd rather not.

Continuing on, I encounter a floral wooded area, a golf course (civilisation is nearby, alas) a

shaded walk with bushes on the right and the brook to the left. There's a waterfall in the brook, but in dry summers, the brook tends to dry up and the waterfall all but disappears.

I turn left and come to two patches of well-maintained allotments; perhaps those who tend them know they're always on show. Across the road is a

large green field and a children's playground; cross another road and you can get to Totteridge. There's no signage so it's easy to get lost, but it's like being in the countryside, which is ideal for a nature-lover like me.

The Greenwalk is enchanting whatever the season. It's close to Finchley Central and Mill Hill East tube stations, and as several buses run nearby, your Freedom Pass will get you there. You can travel the whole 10 miles, or you can enter and leave as you please. Most of the paths are paved, but some aren't, and waterproof boots are advisable when it's been wet.

Find more from barnet.gov.uk/parks-sport-and-leisure/walks-and-trails/dollis-valley-greenwalk ↻

- Do you have a favourite place in London, accessible with a Freedom Pass? Send a brief description to editor@nlu3a.org.uk telling us why it's special. Don't forget to include a photo!



Photo © Leni Green

Mean time

by Val Richards

Tear apart the tiger's stripes
The leopard's spots
The peacock's plumes.
Drain the rainbow of its hues.

Weep, weep,
Eight tears for eight decades.
Do not turn your face away,
Allow the rain to fall.
Be born into these arms,
By them be borne and be.

Val, who died on 1 December, wrote this for a former NLU3A creative writing group that now meets in a pub in East Finchley.

Meet...

Michael Johns, who has been a member of NLU3A since September 2014 and is now on the committee

Who are you?

I'm Michael Johns, recently elected to the NLU3A committee as business secretary.

What exactly does a business secretary do?

I am tempted to say 'not a lot' as it is one of the least onerous jobs on the committee. I mainly act as the liaison between North London U3A and national office. I also edit the monthly email newsletters to members. And I share with other committee members a corporate responsibility for contributing to debates about strategy and policy.

What qualifies you for this role?

My main role was as a senior civil servant in the Inland Revenue (now part of HMRC), where I advised ministers on tax policy. Later I became chief executive of the Valuation Office Agency, which values property for rates and council tax. This gave me great experience of developing and implementing strategy and policy and of the mechanics of making committees and complex administrative systems run

smoothly. In addition, I have been involved in several, mainly educational, charities and I have had a variety of volunteer roles, so I am familiar with the way voluntary organisations work and with the challenges of delivering a professional product through the commitment of people who voluntarily give up their time.

That's impressive! What do you hope to achieve in our U3A?

My main hope is the somewhat unglamorous one of helping to keep the show on the road. NLU3A is a magnificent organisation, delivering knowledge and enjoyment to hundreds of people, and I want to help keep it that way.

What else do you contribute to NLU3A?

I lead one of the popular 'Sideways Look at History' groups, although most of the hard work is done by Ann Bracken, the organiser, and the members of the group who undertake and present the research with minimal guidance from me. I have also, rather tentatively, offered my services as a computer buddy



(my computer skills fairly rapidly come to their limits!) and I have just joined the Reading Poetry Aloud group.

What are your hopes for our future?

I like NLU3A as it is and have no ambitions to change it, except insofar as you always need to develop new ideas and ways of doing things to survive the challenges from inside and outside. If it is as vibrant and positive when I leave the committee as it is now, I shall feel that I've done my job well. ☺

• Is there a NLU3A member you'd like us to meet? Please send their details to editor@nlu3a.org.uk

Scamwatch: they just want your money

If you get an email that seems to be from TV Licensing warning you that your licence is about to expire, don't open it and don't answer it. Similarly, if the email promises you a refund for overpayment of your licence, delete it immediately. These are scams, and as usual, scammers are preying on older people, whom they see as technologically unsavvy. Emails from the

real TV Licensing agency will have a 'do not reply' address; scam emails won't. If you get one of these, report it to Action Fraud (0300 123 2040). Age UK (0800 678 1602) is also interested in knowing about it. And if, in an unsuspecting moment you've given them your bank details, contact your bank straight away. ☺

Royal Academy of Music

Marylebone Road, London NW1 5HT

Friday 17 January

The Royal Academy of Music was founded in 1822 and moved to its present building in Marylebone Road in 1911. Its museum, next door, is housed in the John Nash buildings which flank the York Gate entrance into Regents Park. We shall hear about the history of the academy and see historic instruments such as the Stradivarius violin played by Marie Antoinette and documents such as the score for Gilbert and Sullivan's *Mikado*.

Time

Meet at the museum building at 11.50AM for a 12 noon start.

Cost

£5 per person, payable in advance



Travel

The academy is on the north side of Marylebone Road, halfway between Regents Park and Baker Street stations and five minutes' walk from either. The main academy building has a restaurant for coffee before the visit and lunch afterwards.

• Bookings must be received by 10 January.

Vestry House Museum and Walthamstow Village

Vestry Road, Walthamstow, London E17 9NH

Friday 21 February

The early Georgian workhouse of 1730 continued in use into the 19th century before becoming parish offices. A museum since 1931, its period rooms now contain local history exhibits including the locally built Bremer car of 1892, said to be the first petrol-driven vehicle in the UK; the extensive Walthamstow china service with many painted local scenes; and the Socialist Ten Commandments from the William Morris Hall. There will be a talk and guided tour of the building and its collections, and a chance to look round the rest of the remarkably rural village centre, which has a 15th century timber-framed house and two sets of almshouses founded in 1527 and 1792.

Time

Meet at Walthamstow Central Station at 10.45AM.

Cost

£8 per person, payable in advance.



Travel

Walthamstow Central Station is the terminus of the Victoria Line. There is a short walk to the museum. There are places to eat near the Vestry House or on the High Street near the station.

• Bookings must be received by 14 February.

Trinity Buoy Wharf

Orchard Place, London E14 0JW

Friday 20 March



Those who remember Mark Lewis's talk on lighthouses will enjoy this. In 1803 Trinity House created a wharf between Bow Creek and the East India Dock to build and maintain buoys and equipment. In 1864 a lighthouse was built for training (Michael Faraday had a workshop on the site) and testing lighthouse keepers. It now contains a musical installation, 'Longplayer'. We will have a talk and access to the lighthouse, which has views over the Thames opposite the Millennium Dome. The wharf buildings now house creative industries with relics of navigational history scattered round.

Time

Meet at Canning Town Station (outside Costa Coffee) at 10.45AM.

Cost

£5 per person, payable in advance.

Travel

Canning Town station is on the Jubilee Line and Docklands Light Railway. From there we walk (about 15 minutes) through the new development of London City Island, where the English National Ballet will be based, past East India Dock, kept undeveloped as a wildlife reserve. There are two places to eat and drink on Trinity Buoy Wharf, and a bus stop for those who don't want to walk back to the train.

• **Bookings must be received by 13 March.**

To book for any of the away days, use this form or send your name, telephone number(s) and membership number to Pam Lewis, 72 Abercorn Road, London NW7 1JT. Bookings must be accompanied by a cheque payable to NLU3A; if over-subscribed, places will be allocated in order of date of receipt of application.

Away days booking form

Name(s)_____Membership number(s)_____
BLOCK LETTERS please. No more than two names per application form.

Phone number(s)_____

Date	Name of visit

- Please make cheques payable to NLU3A.
- Send booking form and cheque to Pam Lewis, 72 Abercorn Road, London NW7 1JT. Please send a separate booking form and cheque for each visit.
- You will be notified **by phone if you have a place (or not)**. Your cheque will be banked or destroyed accordingly.
- If you are unable to attend the visit, please phone Pam Lewis on 8346 0403 so that your place can be offered to another member, or Frank Kelsall on 07808 063 880 for last-minute cancellations.

Spring term monthly meetings

All take place at 10.45AM at St Paul's Church, 50 Long Lane, Finchley N3 2PU. Refreshments are served from 10.15AM. Please note that, out of courtesy to the speaker and to abide by the fire regulations, you might find yourself locked out of the meeting if you do not arrive by 10.40AM.

13 January

Leonardo and beyond: The Last Supper in art

The Last Supper is a pivotal moment in the drama of the death of Christ, when Jesus predicted his betrayal (in the traitor's presence) and instituted a ritual by which devotees could remember him after his death. This talk, by novelist and art critic Robin Blake, traces representations of the event by artists from Giotto and Duccio to Stanley Spencer and Andy Warhol but focuses on the genesis and influence of Leonardo's great mural.



10 February

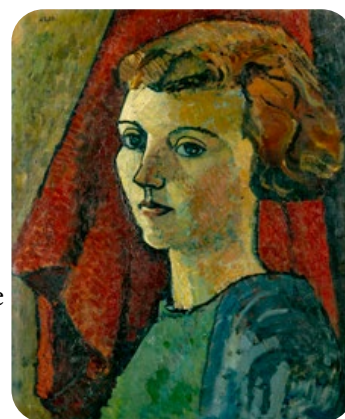
The history of jewellery

Jason Middleton, a professional speaker on the topic of gemstones and an international gemstone buyer, will discuss the role jewellery has played in society from the earliest civilisations to the modern day. He will illustrate this with examples from the Renaissance, the Victorian period, Art Deco, and Art Nouveau to jewellery online today.

9 March

Making sense of a disrupted world or artistic 'non-sense'? Surrealism in 1930s Britain

When the doors of the International Surrealist Exhibition opened in London in June 1936, the British public had its first direct encounter with a European avant-garde literary and artistic circle. What attracted over 1,000 visitors a day to the exhibition? How did some of the works in the show strike a chord with a particular British Surrealist sensibility? In this talk, Chantal Condron explores how the 'non-sense' of the work of artists including Paul Nash, Eileen Agar and John Banting reflected the deeper concerns of an increasingly unsettled Europe.



Term dates



Other important dates

Half term, which affects some groups only, runs from 17 to 21 February. Passover starts on Thursday 9 and finishes on Wednesday 15 April. This might affect your group if you meet in a synagogue.

Term	Start	Finish
Spring	6 January	3 April
Summer	20 April	24 July