



Stone and District u3a Newsletter

July/August 2026 Issue

Our Website address (see top of every page).
Members can update their personal details online.
. ...and don't forget our Facebook pages!

Committee News

The next Stone & District AGM 2026 will take place on Friday 4th Sept, at the Walton Community Centre. Enrolment will start at 1.00pm followed by the AGM at 2pm.

Please spare the time to support this event and thereby ensuring the meeting is quorate as officially required.

Tea, coffee and biscuits will be available.



U3a Membership Renewal

The membership renewal period is now active and current members are now able to renew their membership subscription over the coming weeks ready for the new Stone (Staffs) & District membership year which starts on 1st September.

If anyone knows of someone who is thinking of joining our u3a then please let them know that they do not have to wait until September.

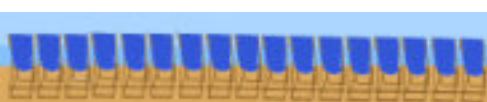
In all cases please access the membership form on our website stone.u3asite.uk where the full details of how to join or renew are listed.



Publicity Officer Wanted!

We are still looking for a member to become our Publicity Officer and join the committee. The role details are on our website, (under News/Events) and whilst they may look overwhelming, the 'job' can be developed as that person feels comfortable. It is essential however that a laptop or tablet is used to write articles, and include images. Contact any member of the committee via our website

Chris Norcross, Chair





Andrew Van Buren - The History of the Circus

Wow, another great speaker meeting from Stone and District u3a!



This time we heard from Andrew Van Buren about the history of circus. Now, most people have heard that P.T. Barnham had the first circus, but those that attended this meeting know the truth. It was actually Philip Astley who invented the concept 100 years earlier.

Andrew, who is himself a performer, was brought up in a performing family who originated from Newcastle Under Lyme. It was his father who first got the performing bug growing up as a child just before WW11. He was fascinated by the circus after visiting one with his father and he decided that was what he wanted to do. His mother thought differently and he was directed to a “proper” job. Fred Van Buren chose cabinet making and French polishing as an apprenticeship. His mother was happy with his choice, but Fred knew it could lead to making magic cabinets for performing. Having learned circus skills as a child during his many visits to Bob Ganyd’s Circus training ground, he joined the circus as a magician and illusionist.

Andrew had an amazing childhood and was taken on stage as part of his parents act as a baby. He continued to be a part of the act until he was 11ys old, when he decided to start his own act. He wanted to do something different to his father and chose unicycling and juggling, moving on the plate spinning later. Andrew has worked all over the world, on cruise ships and on TV.

Philip Astley was also from Newcastle Under Lyme and was born in 1742. He was the son of a cabinet maker. Although he began an apprenticeship in cabinet making, he didn’t complete it and shocked his parents by returning home early with a pregnant wife. Philip joined the Royal Dragoons and gained exceptional skills in riding horses. Andrew enthralled the audience with stories of Philip Astley military career, including an incident where two of his dragoons were fighting. He split them up and told them to settle the matter as gentlemen, with a duel. The duel started as expected, but when the first soldier fired his weapon, Philip Astley “caught” the fired bullet with his sword. Is this where the magic act of catching the bullet came from?

After leaving the army Philip Astley and his wife started a riding school near to Westminster Bridge in London. He taught riding as his main income and put on equestrian shows in between. He used a 42ft circular arena to teach as it was the best size to make use of the centrifugal force, making it safer than riding in a straight line as other riding schools of the time did. It was also an ideal size for the plot of land he had. He called this his amphitheatre. 42ft is now the standard size for a circus arena.

Over time he added fences around the arena so that only those who had paid would be able to watch his shows, and then he added a tented roof so that he could perform even in poor weather. Is this starting to sound familiar?

He realised that his audiences wanted to see more than horses in the show, so he introduced other acts. He wore his red military jacket when introducing the acts. The precursor of the Ring Master in his red jacket.

Once when King George 3rd was riding across Westminster Bridge, his horse bolted. Philip, seeing the danger to both the King and others, stepped out into the horse’s path and caught the horse. This led to a friendship between the two men.





Philip expanded his amphitheatres in other places in the UK and also in Europe. He met and became friends with the King of France and his family. This later caused him to leave France once the revolution began, as he was at risk of being guillotined as a Royal sympathiser. On his return to France, he discovered that his amphitheatre had survived and had become a barracks used by Napoleon's soldiers. He promptly sent him a bill for rent.



During this time a rival show owner, Charles Hughes, set up his shows and as Astley had already used the phrase amphitheatre, he called his shows Circus. 100 years later PT Barnum used the concept to start his shows, and the legacy of Philip Astley seemed forgotten.

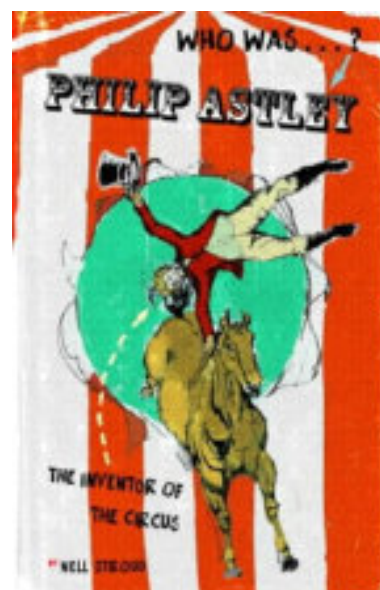
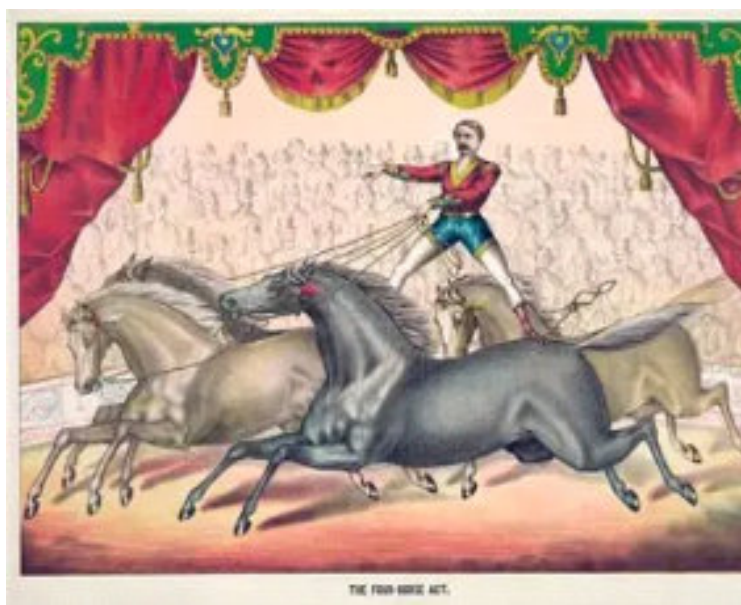
Finally, Andrew told us about the work that he and his father have done to rebuild this legacy and use the link to Newcastle Under Lyme to improve the town. From suggesting Philip Astley and his work as a theme for the town carnival in 1981 to commissioning and building a statue of the man himself, to creating a celebration of the 250th anniversary of the start of the circus with many installations across the town in 2018.

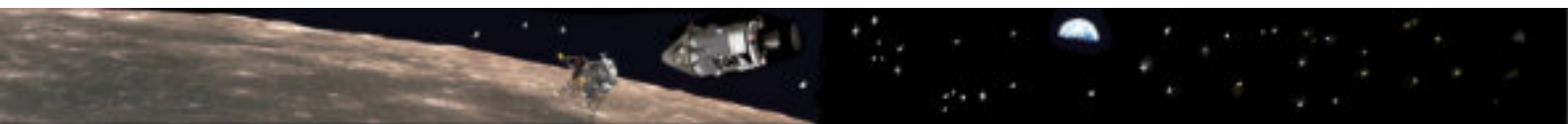
Philip Astley is now commemorated as part of the International Monte Carlo Circus Festival. Andrew and the committee he has set up, are still doing a lot of work in Newcastle Under Lyme in an attempt to make "Astley is our Shakespear" a reality.

Andrew is very knowledgeable about circus and circus history and gave us an interesting and amusing talk. He stayed and answered audience questions after his talk, even though he was rushing off to set a show for later that evening.

2025 Andrew was presented with the Newcastle-under-Lyme Borough Heroes Lifetime Achievement Award in recognition of his amazing career in showbusiness and his work placemaking Newcastle-under-Lyme, Stoke on Trent and Staffordshire through the Philip Astley Projects CIC.

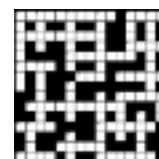
Stone and District u3a's speaker meetings are open to the public and no booking is required. Please keep a look out on our public Facebook page - Stone and District u3a - Public page for information about our next speaker meeting.





Group News

Cryptic Crosswords for Beginners



Have you ever tried to do a cryptic crossword and thought "What is this all about!"

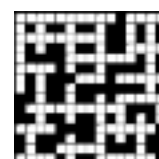
Well help is at hand. There are 12 rules and numerous abbreviations that the setters all agree to follow. We will be going over all of them.

Once you know them, solving the crossword is much simpler.

So if you are a beginner or want to learn the rules and renew an interest, please come along and join us. Solving Cryptic Crosswords is an absorbing and enjoyable hobby.

We restart on Tuesday 6th October and meet on 1st and 3rd Tuesdays of the month, 2-4pm in the classroom at Walton Community Centre.

If you are interested please let me know by email gwynythh396@gmail.com



We look forward to seeing you.

Holiday Italian for Beginners

Starting up again this September, for complete beginners. The course will run on Thursday mornings 10 - 11:30, commencing 10th September, until Easter 2027.

Ordering drinks, asking directions, having a meal, going to the shops, talking a little about yourself and understanding what others may be saying.

This is an opportunity to pick up some basic Italian vocabulary and enjoy having plenty of practice at speaking and listening in a relaxed and supportive atmosphere.

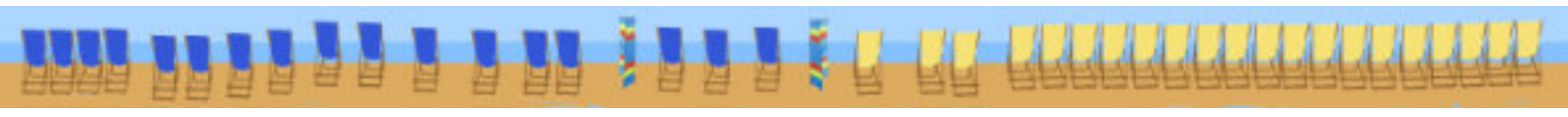
Some optional homework is set to reinforce the rules of the language.

If you wish to join the group, or to gain further information, please contact David via the u3a website.

Photography

In 1913 a six day motorcycling event was held to show how tough and reliable motorcycles had become. Originally it was off road and was renamed ISDE where the "E" stood for "Enduro". The first event was held in Carlisle. Since then it has been held annually in many different countries across the globe. Britain hosted the ISDT event four times (1925 - 1928)

This year, to mark its 100th anniversary the Vintage Motorcycle Club (VMCC) organized a series of four commemorative events, and as the 1926 event was held in Buxton, the North Staffs section of the VMCC hosted a one day event to start and finish at Buxton's Pavilion Gardens. One of the organizers asked if the famous (I just made that up) u3a Photography Group from Stone would like to come along and take pictures of the entries as they motored around either of the two fifty mile courses in the Peak District.





Challenge accepted. Trying to take photographs of vintage motorcycles blasting along seriously narrow country lanes was not as easy as it sounds. Many of these ancient machines had a fair turn of speed. Luckily the u3a photographers had a plan and lay in ambush at the Wetton Mill tea rooms. Like wild life around an African watering hole the riders started streaming in to talk dwell angles and compression ratios over a nice cup of tea and Battenburg. Here our u3a photographers were able to captured them in their native habitat.

The motorcycles were from all over Britain and Europe; BSA's, Triumph, Velocette in fact the oldest bike there was a 1918 Triumph Model H. The second oldest bike, a 1920 Sopwith ABC was ridden by the oldest rider, Keith Sams at 92. Both still going strong. The motorbike with the best name was a 1938 Scott Flying Squirrel.

The Motorcyclists had a great day, the photography group had a great day and the Flying Squirrel was still flying as it disappeared down those very narrow country lanes round Thors Cave.



Wetton Mill. Stopping for tea



A 1926 Rudge 500 4 valve



Geoff Green sitting on his 1927 Scott Flying Squirrel





u3a Special Group Offer: International Gilbert and Sullivan Festival

A u3a group booking has been made at Buxton Opera House for the performance of The Mikado on Wednesday, 5 August 2026 at 2.30 pm.

For booking details and Form, see website.



Interesting Facts

Four hundred and Fifty million years ago during the Devonian period nature developed a new substance used in plant stems. We call it lignin. Up till then land plants could not grow so tall. When lignin came along plant height soared. Trees appeared. The problem was, nature had created this new substance but hadn't come up with a way of breaking it down. It took it fifty million years to come up with fungi and bacteria that attacked lignin. The Devonian period turned into the Carboniferous where there were lots of swampy areas, when these early trees fell down they just sat there, slowly being covered and sinking into the earth. Over millennia these un-rotted trees were crushed and baked to form coal.

A bit of a long winded way to clear up a landscape of fallen trees. But our planet does not produce coal anymore. Coal formation is as extinct as the trilobites. Think on that next time you see a piece of coal.

Summer Sun

Those of you who were looking forward to warm sunny weather have got your wish. They say a heatwave (in the UK) is when the temperature does not fall below 20 Deg C (68F) at night for at least three days. Well we've had that as well. Now, we can complain about it being too hot. Well we are British. Here is the summer sunny issue of the Newsletter. Whatever the weather, enjoy.

Header pictures. (Incase you hadn't worked it out, July 29th 1969, the first Moon landing)

Additional Information about Joining u3a

If you are not already a member of Stone & District u3a and are interested in any of our groups, or would like to volunteer to run a group yourself, please take a look at our website

If you are interested in any of our groups, or would like to volunteer to run a group yourself, please take a look at our website Stone (Staffs) and District - Keep active (in mind and body), enjoy socialising, for those who are retired or not in full time employment

Membership costs just £55 per year and this allows you to attend as many groups as you like. That equates to less than £1 per week*.

*Some groups may request a contribution towards refreshments.

FACEBOOK - An active community awaits you!

See our Facebook page on our website, under News & Events

Suggestion Box

Anything to say/add/amend/ or..? Send your suggestions to me at

newsletter@stoneu3a.net. I look forward to hearing from you. [Ed]

Next Newsletter deadline 1st September 2026

