

Enter the Third Age for teachings in French, music... and Scrabble

Why is it that most clubs and organisations aimed at the over-fifties are dominated by women? Is it because they live longer, are more sociable, or are their minds more enquiring?

Think of drama groups, dance classes and adult and community college courses.

In the case of the Kingston and Richmond branches of the University of the Third Age, which is marking the 25th anniversary of the UK foundation this year, the ratio is something like five to one.

Richmond chairman David Jervis, who worked for the British Library until he retired in 1995, presides over a mainly female membership – but is not worried by the trend.

David, of Marble Hill Gardens, Twickenham, leads the philosophy class

which operates under the title Thoughts and opinions, and muses: “Networking is something that women do naturally – so I suppose it follows that more of them will join. They like to meet people”.

The U3A as it is known caters for retired people who want to keep their minds active and for an astonishingly wide range of interests – with course titles ranging from Aspects of listening to music and French poetry to History behind the headlines and German for the bewildered.

In fact, there are more than 50 different groups attached to the Richmond branch organisation which has more than 450 members.

It meets in the CrossWay Hall in Richmond Road, East Twickenham, and, for a modest £11 subscription, also caters

for the physically adventurous, going on nature walks, bird watching and “cycling for softies”.

David Jervis, a father of two who has lived in the borough for more than 40 years, confirms that most of the group leaders are of the fairer sex and it is only subjects like mathematical topics, cycling, astronomy and philosophy that are led by men.

The University of the Third Age has its roots in France where the first groups were formed back in 1971 and were originally affiliated to higher educational establishments.

In the UK, despite its august title, you do not need a university background to become a member, just an intellectual bent – all the teaching is by members who are unpaid and all co-operate in investigating a

chosen subject. Almost all the learning is done entirely for pleasure.

There are more than 600 branches in the country and all are hives of activity. The national membership exceeds 180,000. The Richmond branch was formed in 1991 and one of the original members, Stella Mummery, recalls how it got off the ground after putting up notices in local libraries and a piece in the Richmond and Twickenham Times.

It started out modestly with 29 members and the first groups catered for play reading, architecture, current affairs and science. Within a few months, it was 87 strong and the organisation was firmly established.

Richmond marked the anniversary with a party in August which was attended by the Mayor of Richmond upon

Thames, Councillor Marc Cranfield-Adam, while the Kingston branch is planning boat trip in September.

Its popularity is self-perpetuating. A Sylvia Oates, who runs the Scrabble group in the Kingston branch and is also responsible for publicity points out: “We don’t advertise ourselves very much. Most members find us because they hear about from friends.

“It gives tremendous pleasure and brings like minds together.”

Like Saga and the Oldie, the U3A demonstrates that in what has become youth dominated society, older is getting younger. And the fact that 80 per cent of the mature scholars are women means there’s a message for us men in all this.

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