Drumbeat

Durham & District u3a Issue 32, December 2026

Welcome to December's Drumbeat.

Are you starting to consider possibly entertaining the idea of beginning to think about Christmas yet (like me, perhaps)? Or are you in the camp that's had it all sorted for weeks?

This issue makes a nod or two towards the festive season, but as it's still only November at the time of writing, it doesn't feel right to go full Jingle Bells. Still, with Christmas quizzes and lunches only a couple of weeks away now, it'll soon be time to don the Santa jumpers. Let's hope the Singing for Fun group is practising its carols.

There's a lot to go at in this issue, with everything from fun facts to Egyptology, including several creative contributions. Plus an account of Margaret Wilson's highly entertaining reminiscences. I hope you enjoy it.

Finally, let's welcome our latest new members: **Ravinda Cheema, Heather Clay, Julie Hudson, Tony Lake, David McCauley, Frances O'Riley and Andriess Warring.**

Laura Woods, editor



Oops! Stir-up Sunday's been and gone!

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NOTICES

Online membership forms now available! Tell your friends – it's never been easier to join. See here

If you're thinking of joining a new group, be sure to contact the group leader in advance. Details here

The Music and Satire of Gilbert and Sullivan

Monthly meeting, 26 November

This month's talk is by author and speaker Bernard Lockett, who'll be telling us about the work of those giants of musical theatre, Gilbert and Sullivan.

Their songs and stories, humour and political satire remain hugely popular to this day. Bernard will be illustrating his talk with video clips from famous productions.

Venue: Bowburn Community Centre, 1.15pm for 2.00pm start

(And did you know that one of our members started her career with the D'Oyly Carte Opera Company, famous for its year-round Gilbert and Sullivan productions? ….Read on to find out more.)

Spicing it up

Ever tried Parsi food? It's a fusion of mostly Persian and Indian cuisines that's been around for hundreds of years, ever since Persian Zoroastrians fled persecution and settled in Gujarat in the eighth century.

Our October speaker, Xerxes Satna, entertained us with a blend of personal experience and culinary history – plus a dash of Zoroastrianism – in his account of how he and his wife came to set up Mazzeh Spice, their North East-based business selling pre-packaged spice mixes for Parsi dishes.

The audience warmed to his engaging style and his evident passion for his products – so much so that at the end of his talk, Xerxes' spice mixes couldn't fly off the shelf fast enough.



Happy Wanderers



Emerging into the sunshine from Nesbitt Dene

The day dawned crisp and sunny for the Walking Group's November outing. Led by Richard, we took a circular route from Hart village's St Mary Magdalene church, first tracking the coast up to Nesbitt Dene, then turning along past Nesbitt Hall (complete with its own sword in the stone) before heading back down to Hart.

A lovely walk along lanes and through fields and woods, topped off by lunch at the Raby Arms.



Jane with the Nesbitt Excalibur!

The Lyric Muse

This was the title of Clive Wright's choice of music at October's meeting of the Music Appreciation Group.

Clive's selection of songs, and poems set to music, ranged from Abba to Vivaldi, Bizet to Procol Harum, and included traditional Irish and Scottish airs. It also featured Clive's translation of Latin, Irish and German poems and lyrics, as well as the first poem of his own to be set to music, reproduced here.

ECCE HOMO
" Behold the Man "

Look, as soon as legs and arms
out of the womb at last uncurl
they bind them tight in winding cloths
to straiten them as they unfurl.

Look at his first stuttering steps
to reach his father's arms outstretch
and feels he's falling, falling 'til
the joiner's hands take hold and catch.

Look at the cross, the arms he still
holds up even though lost for breath
his legs still stand unbent, unbrok-
-en even on the point of death.

Look in the grave- he takes the clothes
they wound around his limbs and head,
folding them neatly in his hands
he gets up now and leaves his bed.
Clive Wright

Insights from Ancient Egyptian Graffiti: Echoes from the Past

You may be surprised to hear that graffiti, far from simply being the scourge of modern cities, has a very long history. In Egypt it dates back well over 4,000 years.

Dr Hana Navratilova, an Egyptologist specialising in ancient graffiti, recently gave an absorbing lecture to the North East Ancient Egyptian society here in Durham, sharing some of her current research. This involves graffiti from the Old and New Kingdom periods that has been found in the pyramid and temple complex of the pharaoh Sneferu at Meidum. Dating back to 2575 BCE, it covers a period of over a millennium.



Graffiti, said Dr Navratilova, were among the most widespread forms of communication in ancient Egypt. Painted, written, scratched, or carved onto monuments, they could be created by many different people and served a variety of social, religious, and political purposes.

Although often overlooked, these informal inscriptions offer a valuable window into everyday lives in past communities, often challenging more traditional historical narratives. Importantly, they represent the thoughts and words of ordinary members of society, such as the people who actually built the pyramids, worked and lived nearby and in later years visited from Egypt and beyond.

The Meidum complex is exceptional because its graffiti span a thousand years in the life of the monument, from builders' marks associated with its construction to later inscriptions from priests and visitors, who remembered Sneferu as both a revered ruler and a source of political legitimacy. These graffiti transformed Old Kingdom pyramids into enduring sites of memory and public discourse.

Dr Navratilova pointed out that pyramids not only venerated the dead but also formed an important interaction with the living communities around them. Graffiti spanning Old to New Kingdoms vividly reflects this interaction, with people and communities coming into daily contact with these enduring buildings.

Interestingly, the builders' marks found on the complex provide important information on who the pyramid was built for, as the monument itself lacks any texts or official inscriptions. Other inscriptions from the New Kingdom are often written in red ink by scribes and other visitors. They venerate Snefru as an example of kingship and include personal outlines of the writers, comments on other messages and reflections on their pharaoh's achievements and political events. They offer an intriguing parallel narrative to the official texts of the time.

In conclusion, Dr Navratilova pointed out the importance of graffiti as a record of private views on events in their authors' own lifetime. For current-day researchers, they help provide a broader understanding of historical context.

It remains to be seen if more modern-day graffiti will prove to be as insightful to future generations. I suspect they may not.



pAUl nEwBY waZ eRe

Born to Sing!

Some stories of past lives are the stuff of novels.

Take the recollections of Margaret Wilson, who many people will know is a highly talented musician. As a young woman, she had a fascinating career in musical theatre. It's impossible to do justice here to her rollercoaster experiences, or to capture her humour and wit (she's a born raconteuse), but here's a little flavour of her youthful adventures.



Margaret has always had music in her life, thanks to her musical parents. She remembers standing on a chair aged three to sing "Jesus loves me" at the village chapel anniversary (turning her back on the congregation to gain confidence from her parents in the choir behind!).

The family were far from well off (annual holiday was a day trip to the seaside) but

they encouraged her musical interests. After starting piano with a strict ruler-wielding teacher, she was taught to sing, first by the conductor of the Leadgate male voice choir, and then by an ex-Sadler's Wells principal. Her talent had already seen her win third place, the youngest contender, in a Newcastle singing competition. "Everyone was singing "Wings of Song", and I was number 33 out of 36. I was terrified!" she recalls.

But it was Jack Dobbs, her school music teacher, who transformed Margaret's fortunes, introducing her to the classical universe and nurturing her talent in myriad ways. "It opened up a whole new musical world," she says. Under his tutelage, she performed solo, not just at school events, but around the county, more often than not learning her parts in the bus on the way to the venue. She remembers it as a hectic but wonderful time.

Aged 17, at Mr Dobbs's instigation, she auditioned nervously before a panel of elderly grey men for a place at the Royal College of Music – which she won, along with the first RCM bursary in the county for singing. She was off to the bright lights of London!

Funds were still very tight. "It literally was a case of starving in a garret," she says. Life in her Soho theatrical digs was spartan, to say the least: this was 1948, with rationing in full force. Walking everywhere to save money only increased her hunger, and she fondly remembers feasts of cornflakes with hot milk (made from powder sent by her dear dad). College practice rooms were always booked up, so she practised instead in the digs basement, on a honky-tonk piano, and performed in concerts, although she couldn't afford to attend any herself. She did all kinds of odd jobs to earn cash. "It was a strange three years," she recalls.

To an unassuming northeastern girl, some college teachers were alien beings. One flamboyant extrovert would tell her, "With your voice and your looks, darling, we could set the Thames on fire!" Naturally, Margaret "didn't believe her for a jiff". *(But see photo…)*



Keen to hone their auditioning skills, she and a friend applied for two singing tours. To their surprise, both were accepted for the first, "Lilac Time". They decided to go ahead with the second audition, for the experience – and Margaret was offered another contract, this time with the Gilbert and Sullivan opera company, D'Oyly Carte, who said they would contact her the following year.

Off she went on the "Lilac Time" tour, enduring foul weather, poor food and grotty digs, eventually being laid low by tonsillitis. Banned from singing for six months, she earned her crust at Durham greengrocers Rushworth and Storey.

Now aged 22 and back in London, working in admin and taking more singing lessons, she was summoned by D'Oyly Carte, whose tour had already begun at Streatham Hill Theatre. She was given just two weeks to learn nine operas, after

which, the theory went, watching one performance and taking part in a full rehearsal for each, she would be ready to go on stage. But the practice was very different. It was a gruelling start. “We were flogged,” says Margaret. So began a truly eventful experience, not, as you might imagine, without its comic moments.

Her first unforgettable stage appearance came about unexpectedly, when she and a friend were pounced on by a formidable woman while chatting to the female cast of “Pirates of Penzance”. “You look bright girls,” she boomed. “I think you could go on this afternoon!” She wasn’t joking. This was an opera they’d never seen, and trying to remember the words and music while simultaneously smiling, curtseying and racing across the stage was truly petrifying. Margaret’s only thought on stumbling off was to get away home.

But worse was to come: the two were told to take part in the evening performance. “Can we lie down and die somewhere?” they groaned. That was bad enough, but a costume mix-up meant that Margaret ended up with an outsize version of crinoline, frilly pants and lisle stockings. Once onstage, she realised to her horror that her frilly pants were falling down. “How can I swing my legs and keep my knees together?” she panicked. Salvation came from a friendly tenor behind her. ”Kick ‘em off,” he whispered, “and I’ll boot them into the wings”. Singing and smiling all the while, she dutifully did, and honour was saved.

“Pirates” was jinxed for Margaret. Another time, a touching scene with a sorrowful Papa, surrounded by his graceful daughters, turned to farce when a pillar slowly toppled to the ground, dislodging her wig in the process. She and another girl grabbed hold and carted it off stage, to tremendous applause from the audience. In the next scene, the hapless pirate king found himself forced to hide behind a non-existent pillar, prompting another uproarious response from the house.



Margaret in her D'Oyly Carte days

Appearing in “Patience” was a welcome respite from chasing about the stage: Margaret was required to sing while perched sedately on a tree trunk. Admittedly, her wig looked like Harpo Marx’s, but you can’t have everything.

Away from the audience’s eyes, there was no end of fun and trickery among the cast. One leading man made a point of trying to make rookies like Margaret laugh on stage. She got her own back one night by

blacking out her two front teeth and giving him a huge grin.

And then there was the rubber heel, the subject of a running joke between two male principals…it turned up everywhere, wrapped in a parcel, sewn into a costume, even baked in a mince pie. The saga ended when it appeared on the execution block at a crucial moment in "Yeomen of the Guard", provoking a totally unscripted expletive from the Headsman.

Such talent, so many adventures, so much fun. After the British tour, America and Canada beckoned …but that's another story. Margaret has many more tales to tell.

Do you have a story to tell, or an anecdote or two? We'd be delighted to hear from you, and would be happy to talk and produce a written version if you'd prefer. Get in touch with Laura or Jim (see our emails at the back of Drumbeat).

Believe it or not: More of Badger's musings

I *was* going to do a short piece about the fascinating history of mail and postage stamps, starting with Henry VIII. Best tell the story now, whilst stamps are still about…

However - and please don't be too disappointed - another part of me said that popular and unusual facts may be more interesting. Feel free to heckle…



Lightning - not that beautiful aeroplane but the scary kind - heats the surrounding air to hotter than the Sun's surface.

The gigantic planet Saturn could actually float in a suitably sized bath (think larger than an Olympic-size pool). Why? Because it's not made of rock like the Earth, but is just a large gaseous object.

Diamond rain! Saturn has such a high atmospheric pressure that it crushes any carbon into diamonds (ladies!).

The human stomach has such a high concentration of acid to aid digestion that it could dissolve a razor blade in around two hours.

(Two points – can you still buy 'proper' razor blades? Some people have indeed ingested razor blades – saved by surgical intervention!)

Apparently, rats make high-pitched laughing sounds when tickled. Is this some kind of researcher's fetish? Or were the rats and scientists just bored?



Sharks existed before trees, appearing around 400 million years ago and predating trees by millions of years.

African elephants help to grow ebony trees, by dispersing ebony seeds through their dung. Areas without elephants have up to 70% fewer saplings.

Some atoms in your body are older than the sun – true! Carbon, oxygen and other elements were forged from the death of ancient stars which scattered these elements across the cosmos.

So the poetic phrase 'you are made of stardust' is not just metaphorical and romantic, but scientifically accurate. *(There, that's stripped the romantic element out of it).*

Frozen chicken was 'invented' by Sir Francis Bacon (wrong name?) in 1626.



I love chicken, me!

He stuffed a plucked chicken with snow to see if cold temperatures could preserve meat. It worked! However, he subsequently died from a chill contracted during the experiment.

Well, that's enough for now - more later if you like!

But just before you go:

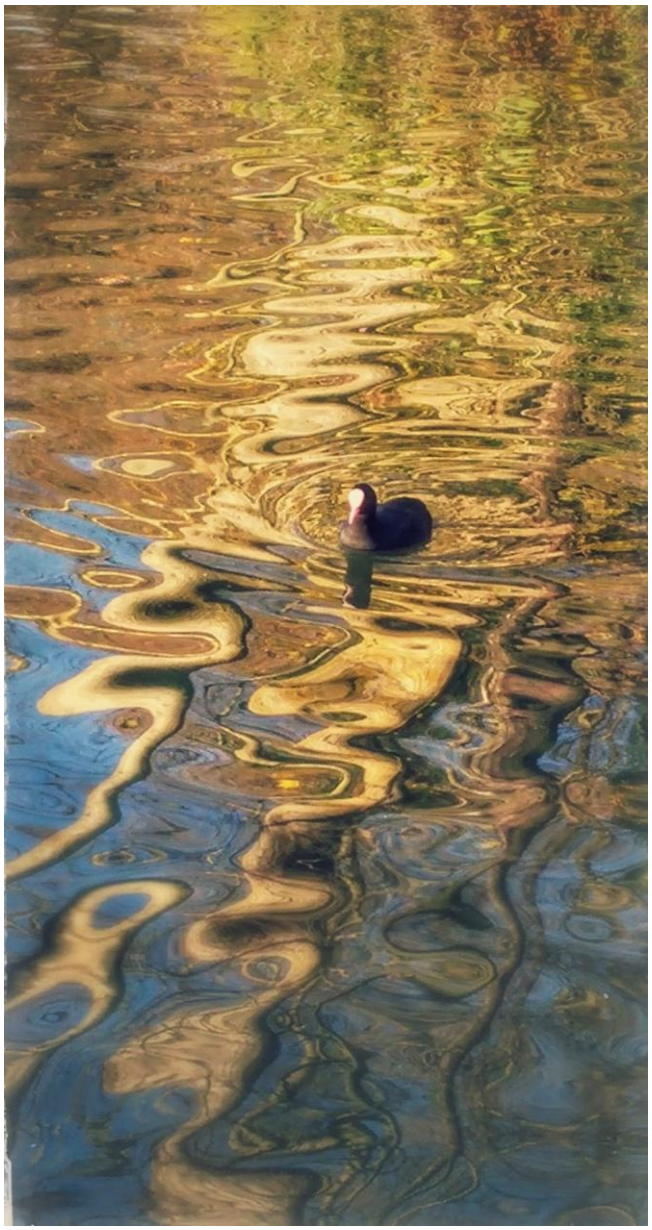
1) What do you call two diamonds going out for a meal together? *Carbon dating*.
2) A quantum physicist walks into a bar and doesn't.

If this seems odd - who would like an article on quantum mechanics? *(Oh, just me then…)*

Badger (aka Robert Lebar)

Pool of Light

To brighten up these darker days, a gloriously shimmering picture from **John Liddle**.



The Choice
A short story

Dave sighed. He closed the cupboard door on the cache of empty bottles hidden there. Head bowed, he thought of the times of hope. He had collected his wife after a recovery period in the Centre, only

to be plunged into the depths of despair as alcohol won yet again.

He walked slowly downstairs. He knew what he needed to do. Claire sat on the sofa watching a programme about climate change. Both girls were in their rooms, ostensibly doing homework. Amy, a chirpy thirteen-year-old, stood at the top of the stairs.

"Dad," she began, "Can I just….?" Dave's hand went up. "Please Amy, I need to talk to Mum. Can you give us some time?"

Walking into the kitchen, he picked up an unopened bottle of wine from where he had previously hidden it. Claire's gaze settled on the bottle now standing on a low table.

"Claire, I've seen all the empties you hid away. You will have to make a big decision," and he picked up a photograph. Both girls smiled at the camera.

"You have to choose, Claire." Dave pointed to the bottle and held the photograph towards his wife.

Claire looked at the happy faces. Two girls she loved with their future ahead of them, and then at the shiny green bottle. It winked at her as she stood and walked across the room. Her voice was low as she bent to pick up the bottle. She cradled it to her chest.

" I'm sorry," she whispered, and Dave knew that they had lost her.



Moira Smart
Creative Writing Group

Regional u3a News

You can read a report of the October visit to the Laing's Pre-Raphaelite art and poetry exhibition here. The exhibition is on until 13 February.

Ushaw Day 2027 is on 19 May. Save the date!

National u3a News

Online events include:

Learn about the Lords (2 pm, 26 Nov). Discover more about the work and impact of the House**.**

Capturing your Youth (10 am, 3 Dec). Memoir writing in 12 easy steps.

A Personal Journey through the Music in my Life (2pm, 7 Dec). Dave Tyas shares the songs, memories and musical discoveries that shaped his life.

Christmas Stories, Images, Music and Acts of Hope (10.30 am, 11 Dec). Explore how writers and artists have captured the season over the years.



A Christmas Poem

Ending on a festive note (Christmas *is* coming, after all), here's the poem by Frank Kennedy that won the u3a Northern Region Poetry Competition. Congratulations, Frank. The words will chime with many of us.



Christmas Post Relief Worker, 1975

A Cold Coming, Eliot's Magi had at College carols three days past.
To some three hundred morning doors I'm coming cold, yet cheerily,
A bearer of mass handwritten good will.

A singing Royal Mail ambassador: warm-blooded hopeful youth,
Undaunted by pinching ears and fingers.
My shoulder bag grows light; Its contents may well lighten up these homes.

"Long, long time ago…" Six long verses of that sad-sweet melody
Bring me from 145* to 23 Grange Lane. Plus cul-de-sac.
Lungs enjoying their clear-air exercise.

Behind frozen breath I walk in bliss. Greeted by each passer-by,
Smiled at by those who open doors: the Christmas postman, loved by all!
One dog may bark or sprig of holly stab.

Up close I see lit trees, touch wreaths, hear children call, catch baking smells.
Excused my household chores, my thoughts feast on the warm midnight mince pie
That always heralds Christmas in our home.

**pronounced 'one-four-five'*



Frank Kennedy

Calendar Link

Click here for the calendar to the end of December.

To contact a group leader, please see the website Groups page, or click here

PS: Here's a jolly photo of the Singing for Fun group, courtesy of Mike Forrest.



Your contributions are warmly welcomed! Send in articles, pictures, suggestions to **Laura Woods, editor (lauramw100@gmail.com) or Jim Crinson, deputy editor (website committee page).**

u3a Durham & District