EPSOM U3A Inc.

epsom1u3a@gmail.com
Website https://u3aepsom.nz/.

MEETING PLACE

Royal Oak Bowls, 146 Selwyn St, Onehunga

10am on the 2ND Thursday of most months

NEWSLETTER

March 2026

Next meeting
10-12noon
Thursday 12 March 2026

Our March meeting is on the twelfth. That day is World Kidney Day (www.worldkidneyday.org) and our speaker is Joanne Hand from The Kidney Society of New Zealand. This organisation seeks to promote awareness of kidney disease (often symptomless until it becomes serious) and offers practical assistance to those who need it – community dialysis houses, home-based visits, etc. In the general population of NZ, one in ten suffers from chronic kidney disease (CKD) but in the over-65s, that figure rises to almost half. Kidney disease is a threat to the elderly. Which raises a much larger issue.

How do we – how *should* we look after our health? When I read back the second-to-last sentence in the paragraph above – *kidney disease is a threat to the elderly* – I have to give a snort of derision and ask what isn't? But I also have to take it seriously.

What do I need to do to stay reasonably healthy – as much as I can? We're all at the age when lots of things start to go wrong; I'm sure we're all very painfully aware of that! One straightforward answer to that question – for me at least – is regular GP visits. I do this once a year, at my wife's firm insistence, for a "warrant of fitness". I resisted for many years but, in the end of course, the outcome was never in doubt. I see the doctor regularly. And I'm glad I do – she was right and I was wrong.

My father died of prostate cancer and both my brothers have suffered from the same thing. In hindsight, it's a no-brainer for me to have frequent check-ups. But a personal example doesn't change the fact that many men (especially) are very reluctant to visit a doctor. I can understand the reasons why – I don't particularly *like* doing it myself. But I do. I have to. And I don't want to be preachy about it, but so do we all. Hopefully, Joanne Hand can hammer the message home.

I look forward to seeing you all on the twelfth of March.

Ian

EPSOM U3A EXECUTIVE

President
Ian Jost – 027 488 7037
president.u3aepsom@gmail.com
Immediate Past President:
Duncan MacDonald – 021 316 661
General Duties
Kaye Buchanan- 620 7572
Secretary
Jenny Whatman – 027 353 2487
secretary.u3aepsom@gmail.com.
Minutes Secretary
Jeanette Saunders – 624 5025
Membership Secretary
Thomas Tam - 520 1084
membership.u3aepsom@gmail.com
Treasurer & **Technical Officer**
Thomas Tam - 520 1084
treasurer.u3aepsom@gmail.com
Almoner
Charmaine Strang – 027 4177 556
Interest Group Co-ordinators
Joslyn Squire – 021 168 0680
Bill Hagan – – 021 611 247
Guest Speaker Organiser:
Ian Jost – 027 488 7037
Legal Advisor
Mike Matson – 022 630 7968
Newsletter
Jeanette Grant – 638 8566
Greeters:
Don Buchanan - 620 7572
Ngaire Mune – 624 0226

INTEREST GROUP CONVENERS

Applied Sciences
Peter Parsons - 021 521446
Attending Performing Arts
Shirin Caldwell – 630 1662
Architecture
Brian Murray – 021 026 68396
Art Appreciation
Kaye Buchanan – 620 7572
Art History
Emily Flynn – 021 0902 5094
Big History
Emily Flynn – 021 0902 5094
Book Chat
Helen Holdem - 021 260 3510
Chess Group
John Locke - 021-187 8061
Comparative Religions
Duncan MacDonald - 021-316 661
John Locke- 021-187 8061
Current Affairs
Shirley McConville – 622 3542
Fabric & Fibre Crafts
Charmaine Strang – 027-4177 556
Famous & Infamous Group
Shirley McConville – 622 3542
Foodies
Graham Gunn – 027 445 0929.
Garden Appreciation
Betty Townley - 626 6673
Introduction to Family History
Bryn Smith – 027 280 5235
Latin
Phylllis Downes – 630 5867
Lunch Bunch
Shirley McConville – 622 3542.
Music Appreciation
Carleen Edwards – 624 6298
History & Social Change
Helen Holdem – 021 260 3510
NZ History
Kaye Buchanan - 620 7572
Philosophy
Jocelyn Hewin - 634-1552
Scrabble
Joslyn Squire – 021 168 0680
Te Reo Maori
Jenny Whatman – 027 353 2487
Travel
Diana Hart- 021 284 4402
Walkers & Talkers Group
Don Buchanan ph:620 7572.

FEBRUARY SPEAKER'S REPORT	Judy Nicholl, our guest speaker, is Chief Executive of Counties Power Ltd. Which supplies over 49,000 homes in South Auckland and North Waikato with electricity. Previous experience included being a non-sworn officer for the police, teaching, working with trade unions, and holding senior management positions with Fonterra, AFFCO and Unitec. Judy was also responsible for the operation of Auckland Airport where new systems and digital technologies were introduced, to cater for the huge increase in passenger numbers and new airlines using the facilities. Globally recognized systems were introduced to handle baggage and security. This has led to plans for expansion of the International and Domestic terminals, while staff training to change mindsets was an important aspect of the new developments. With such broad-based experience, Judy found it easy to transition to the electricity sector which has many challenges as we develop solar and wind power (both on land and offshore), and realise the impact that AI and electric vehicles will have on systems and delivery to the customers who seek greater choice, control over their usage and cheaper prices for electricity. Collection of more data via smart meters is driving change, as providers can more accurately estimate consumer usage, high load periods and isolate faults more quickly, leading to quicker repair times after storms and other weather events. The intention is to develop a self-healing network. There are also moves to link communities with electric vehicle power sources, to be used as back-up energy in the event of power outages. There is a pilot project currently underway, involving 80 families. Another project involves using the residual energy of second-hand used car batteries linked to provide back-up systems. Remote working is now possible, so talented people can be employed from all around the country. Co-ordination of the systems of different providers and sources would increase reliability and bring down prices. As Auckland is the second biggest growth area in NZ energy companies have to plan for this future growth while still considering environmental issues. Judy emphasized that working in partnerships and putting customer needs first is required, rather than competition between companies. Profits need to go back into the community rather than offshore. Governments could also assist with building a resilient power system by providing incentives for installing solar energy on homes and by encouraging the purchase of more electric vehicles. At a time when power prices are increasing rapidly and causing stress for many NZ families, one hopes that people like Judy will have influence over the directions that Government policy and NZ power providers take, when planning for the needs of residents and the economy.
SUBSCRIPTIONS INFORMATION	The 2026 Epsom U3A subscription is $50 per person This should be paid into our ASB bank account no later than March 31. Payee: U3A EPSOM INCORPORATED 12 – 3067 – 0204618 – 00 Please enter subs in the "code" section and your name in the "reference" section in order for us to have a record of your payment. We now have 209 members. Seven new members since the start of this year. 82 members have paid their subs so far.
MAIN SPEAKER	Our speaker for March is Joanne Hand for the NZ Kidney Society (www.kidneysociety.org.nz) who will speak on the importance of kidneys and why we need them. For those of us with long memories, apparently Joanne spoke to us in May 2024 about modern slavery.
DID YOU KNOW?	Auckland Council Libraries can deliver books to people in the local community who are unable to visit due to mobility, access or other special circumstances. Volunteers collect and deliver library items to customers. This can be on a short or long term basis. If you, or one of your whanau, need this service, please ask at the local branch or email(insert your local library's name here)@auckland council.govt.nz NB there may be a "waiting list" for inclusion at some branches due to the popularity of the service but don't let that put you off making an enquiry.

INTERESTED IN AN ONLINE STUDY?	The Emotion, Lifespan, and Memory (ELM) Group in the School of Psychology at Victoria University are currently running an online study that is looking at the relationship between memory and wellbeing for adults aged 65 and older. You can find out more about the study on their website. The study is funded by the Royal Society Te Apārangi Marsden Fund and we have been granted ethics approval from the VUW Human Ethics Committee. **https://elm-group.org**
INTEREST GROUPS	The Architecture Group meets on the second Tuesday of the Month. In February members of the Architecture Group had a most enjoyable trip to the University of Auckland to reacquaint ourselves with buildings old and new and to reminisce about our student days. We met for coffee at the Pulman Hotel opposite Old Government House. Three of our members had been married there in the seventies; another member had had one of the first weddings at the MacLaurin Chapel which we also visited. An engineer who happened to be working in the chapel told us about the standalone scaffolding which covered the Clock Tower - this was to be removed in time for the 100th anniversary of the tower in March. Group members had each been assigned a building to research and discuss - as well as the clock tower and the chapel, these included the Pembroke Building, the old Synagogue, and Old Government House. We also visited the Northern Club, the Grand Hotel, the elegant apartments built for "city girls", the High Court and St Andrew's Church. We finished at the Education Building looking down on the Pasifika fale. jenny.whatman@gmail.com **ALSO** Please remember that it is courtesy to let a convenor know whether you are attending or not, as it affects trips, bookings for lunch and dinner groups and catering for refreshments.
2026 MEETING DATES Thursdays, 10am	12 March 9 April 14 May 11 June 9 July 13 August 10 September 8 October 12 November AGM **NB Always wear your name badge** and be seated ready at 10am

JEANETTE'S JOTTINGS

GALLOPING GERTIE

The Tacoma Narrows Bridge was a suspension bridge across the Narrows of Puget Sound, connecting the Olympic Peninsula with the mainland of Washington state, U.S. The original bridge, known colloquially as "Galloping Gertie," was a landmark failure in engineering history.

Only four months after the opening of the first Tacoma Narrows Bridge, on the morning of November 7, 1940, it suffered collapse in a wind of about 42 miles (67 km) per hour. The 2,800-foot (840-metre) main span, which had already exhibited a marked flexibility, went into a series of torsional oscillations whose amplitude steadily increased until the convolutions tore several suspenders loose, and the span broke up. An investigation disclosed that the section formed by the roadway and stiffening plate girders (rather than web trusses) did not absorb the turbulence of wind gusts. At the same time, the narrow two-lane roadway gave the span a high degree of flexibility. This combination made the bridge highly vulnerable to aerodynamic forces, insufficiently understood at the time. The failure, which took no lives because the bridge was closed to traffic in time, spurred aerodynamic research and led to important advances. The plate girder was abandoned in suspension bridge design.

The failed 1940 Tacoma Narrows Bridge was replaced in 1950 by a new span stiffened with a web truss. To address growing congestion, a parallel bridge south of the original opened in 2007; the 1950 bridge now has four lanes of westbound traffic and the 2007 bridge four lanes of eastbound traffic.

THE BLACK DEATH'S SPREAD

Hidden inside the narrow growth rings of Pyrenees trees lies the strongest evidence yet for what set the Black Death in motion. For the first time, researchers have combined high-resolution climate reconstructions with medieval records to draw a direct connection between a sudden climatic shock and the arrival of the plague in Europe, where it killed tens of millions between 1347 and 1353.

The new study, from the University of Cambridge and the Leibniz Institute for the History and Culture of Eastern Europe (GWZO) in Leipzig, has argued that the Black Death's devastating impact began not with a pathogen alone but a "perfect storm" of environmental and human stressors. Specifically, a volcanic eruption – or cluster of eruptions – around 1345 triggered several years of abnormally cold, wet summers across southern Europe. These conditions are recorded in the distinctive "blue rings" found in trunk sequences from trees in the Spanish Pyrenees, which indicate severely reduced growth during 1345, 1346 and 1347. A single poor summer can be explained away, but three consecutive ones bear the hallmarks of a major volcanic event. And contemporary accounts describing persistent cloudiness and dark lunar eclipses further support this argument…

The researchers believe that ships arriving with grain also carried fleas infected with the bacterium Yersinia pestis. While it's still not known where this bacterium originated, ancient DNA points to a natural reservoir in wild gerbils in central Asia. But once these fleas disembarked in Mediterranean ports, they jumped from rodents to humans and ignited the first, deadliest wave of the pandemic. From there, the Black Death quickly tore across Europe.

To better understand the timeline, the research team paired environmental reconstructions with evidence of food-security systems and trade behavior before and after 1345. They found that the cities forced to import grain during those climate-driven shortages were the same places that were hit early and intensely by the Black Death. Meanwhile, major cities that did not rely on imports largely escaped the pandemic's initial deadly wave.

The research was published in the journal *Communications Earth & Environment.*

ARE 'HOBBIT HUMANS' LIVING ON A REMOTE INDONESIAN ISLAND?

Across multiple regions of Flores, villagers describe seeing small, upright-walking beings—hairier than humans but far more humanlike than monkeys. Hunters claim they move swiftly between trees. Farmers say they've heard eerie nighttime calls. These stories circulated quietly for decades, dismissed as folklore.

In 2003, scientists exploring Liang Bua cave uncovered fossils belonging to a tiny humanlike species—Homo floresiensis. These beings stood only about 3.5 feet tall, had long arms, and used stone tools. Nicknamed "hobbits," H. floresiensis had small brains but impressive capabilities. They hunted animals, crafted tools, and survived on the island for thousands of years. Officially, the species is considered extinct. But crucially, the fossils don't reveal exactly when they vanished—only when they were last found. Also, villagers' descriptions of the mysterious small beings closely matched the features of H. floresiensis.

Villagers call them lai ho'a and describe them as small, bipedal figures with sloping foreheads, long arms, and bodies "shaped like a small person, but hairier." The descriptions also note behaviours—such as stealthy movement and food-stealing—that mirror scientific interpretations of hobbit-life. While not evidence, the overlap is hard to ignore. Hunters recount seeing tiny figures sprinting through the brush. Farmers speak of small humanoids crouched near rivers at dawn. One man even described a creature carrying a small animal under its arm. None of these reports are scientifically confirmed, but the consistency across testimonies is unusual enough to intrigue researchers.

BRAIN DECLINE

The peak of a brain's power comes at the age of 22 and lasts five years. The decline is slow and different abilities decline at different rates. Planning and task co-ordination suffer first. Episodic memory, which is involved in recalling events, declines rapidly while the brain's processing speed slows down and working memory is able to store less information.

However, 'crystallised intelligence' which is roughly equivalent to wisdom, heads in the other direction. Changes in fluid and crystallised tend to cancel each other out until we reach our 60s and 70s. Avoiding nicotine and alcohol while staying mentally and physically active, can slow down the decline.

Studies show that people who are more laid back are less likely to develop dementia than stress bunnies. Those who are socially inactive but calm had a 50% lower risk of developing dementia compared with those who were isolated but prone to stress. This is likely to be caused by stress-induced high levels of cortisol which may cause shrinkage in the anterior singulate cortex, an area linked to Alzheimers disease and depression in older people.

HOW WERE THE PYRAMIDS REALLY BUILT?

Traditional theories rely on ramps and a slow, layer-by-layer build, but they struggle to explain how stones weighing up to 60 tons were raised hundreds of feet in just two decades. Now, a new study has proposed that the pyramid was built using an internal system of counterweights and pulley-like mechanisms hidden inside its structure.

In research published in Nature, Dr Simon Andreas Scheuring of Weill Cornell Medicine in New York calculated that builders could lift and place massive blocks at an astonishing pace, sometimes as quickly as one block per minute. He argued that this would only have been possible with sliding counterweights, rather than brute-force hauling, generating the power needed to raise stones to the upper levels of the Pyramid of Khufu.

The study also pointed to architectural features inside the pyramid that support this model, identifying the Grand Gallery and Ascending Passage as sloped ramps where counterweights may have been dropped to create a lifting force. The Antechamber, long thought to be a security feature, is reinterpreted as a pulley-like mechanism that could help lift even the heaviest blocks. If true, the study suggested the Great Pyramid was constructed from the inside out, starting at an internal core and using hidden pulley systems to raise stones as the structure grew.

He pointed to scratches, wear marks and polished surfaces along the walls of the Grand Gallery as evidence that large sledges once moved repeatedly along its length, suggesting mechanical stress consistent with sliding loads rather than foot traffic or ritual use. Grooves cut into the granite walls of the Antechamber, stone supports that may have held wooden beams, and unusually rough workmanship point to a functional machine rather than a finished ceremonial room.

In Scheuring's reconstruction, ropes would have run over wooden logs set into the Antechamber, allowing workers to lift stones weighing up to 60 tons. The system could be adjusted to increase lifting power when needed, similar to changing gears. Oversized rope grooves and an uneven, inlaid floor suggest the chamber was once connected to a vertical shaft that was later sealed once construction ended… The theory also offered explanations for puzzling exterior features, including the slight concavity of the pyramid's faces and the complex pattern in which stone layers gradually change height. According to Scheuring, these features may reflect how internal ramps and lifting points shifted as the pyramid rose and stones became lighter at higher levels.

BRONZE BLADE

In the summer of 2023, routine archaeological work in the burial site near Nordlingen in southern Bavaria led to an unexpected discovery. As archeologists carefully removed layers of soil from the grave site, a long metallic object began to appear beneath the surface. At first glance, it seemed like another corroded fragment common to burial digs. But as more earth was brushed away, the unmistakable outline of a sword emerged, its surface reflecting a faint green sheen. The sealed burial condition had preserved the bronze so effectively that the blade retained its form almost perfectly after nearly three millennia underground.

Archaeologists quickly secured the site and shifted from routine excavation to delicate hand tools. The sword lay horizontally with the burial remains of humans. There were no signs of disturbance by later human activity. Unlike many prehistoric weapons found broken or incomplete, this one remained intact from hilt to tip. Its preservation surprised experts, as bronze objects typically degrade over long periods in fluctuating soil conditions. The consistently low oxygen of the burial, however, created an environment that slowed chemical reactions. The metal oxidized evenly rather than crumbling to form the sword's distinctive green patina.

Once fully uncovered, the sword was carefully lifted using supportive padding to prevent stress fractures. Initial visual analysis revealed a finely crafted hilt with an octagonal shape, a design linked to elite weapons of the Middle Bronze Age in Central Europe. Official BLFD analysis states the center of gravity of the sword was toward the front of the blade. This indicated that it was balanced mainly for slashing (cutting). It was a functional weapon. The edges remained sharply defined, with no visible nicks or repair marks. This level of preservation allowed archaeologists to observe manufacturing details rarely seen on objects of this age before in the excavation.

LEAD POISONING

Lead poisoning was recognised centuries ago among plumbers, miners, pot-menders etc whose jobs brought them into direct contact with lead, but why did the rich also get it? It turns out that not only were water pipes in the rich houses made of lead, but it was in food, medicines, cosmetics – and particularly in wine. Most wine was imported from southern Europe where many makers added lead to sweeten it and prevent it going off en route to England. Once there, unscrupulous merchants added more lead to freshen tired tasting wine and mask off flavours.

Ingestion of two milligrams of lead a day can produce symptoms of severe lead poisoning within a year. An analysis of 18th century port made in the 1970s found as much as two milligrams in one litre. Symptoms include irritability, headaches, colic, rheumatic pains and can lead to confusion, paralysis and sometimes loss of speech and memory. It can also cause small strokes, deafness and blindness, even coma and death. It is now thought to have been the cause of Handel's intermittent episodic illnesses.