

Conversation Club

Issue 21–December 2023



Conversation
CLUB



CONTENTS

Page 3

Welcome from the co-chairs:
– Christine Barltrop & Brian Helsdon
A Community of Nations

Page 4

Annual General Meeting and 20th
Anniversary Celebration December 2022

Page 6

Walks Programme 2023 and Seaside Trips
Abbeydale Industrial Hamlet
and Ecclesall Woods
Longshaw Estate
Eyam
A Tale of Two Seaside Trips
Scarborough
Flamborough/Bridlington

Page 12

Reaching out to Partners Through Events
Migration Matters Festival
Yorkshire Integration Festival

Page 13

Student Societies and Volunteers' Fairs

Page 14

Arts Table
Interview with Farhan Mordi

Page 15

Reflections on 21 Years of Conversation
Club and Forward Look

**For more information or if you are
interested in becoming a member or
a volunteer**

email: brian.helsdon@conversationclub.org.uk

visit: www.conversationclub.org.uk

Our Trustees:

Brian Helsdon – Co-Chair ESOL, language support

Christine Barltrop – Co-Chair, Communication

Victor Mujakachi – Finance

Richard Chessum – External Liaison

Jim Dimond – Newsletter

Ahmed El Malla – Walks

Lee Moran – Wednesday and Friday Groups

Helen Roberts – Membership and Student Liaison

Newsletter Editor

Jim Dimond

**Produced and printed by
Pickards Design & Print**



info@pickards.org.uk

www.pickards.org.uk

Welcome



A very warm welcome to the 2023 Sheffield Conversation Club Newsletter. You may think it's a long time since our last Newsletter – and you would be right. We last had a printed Newsletter at the end of 2019 with a digital only edition in early 2021. We all know what happened in between. During the pandemic we could only meet online or, during the summer, in local parks. Since October 2021 when we reopened our face to face Friday Club we have gradually been

recovering. We have welcomed new members especially from Ukraine and Hong Kong. This year we have been virtually back to normal with a seaside trip, walks programme and on Fridays an arts table, two English classes and a Living in the UK class. We hope you enjoy the Newsletter which relives some of the highlights since the last edition.

Christine Barltrop and
Brian Helsdon (co-chairs)



A COMMUNITY OF NATIONS

Conversation Club has been described as “a tree with many branches”. Another description might be “a community of nations”. One of our strengths is our willingness to reach out and welcome in friendship people from all over the world, whatever their background, personal circumstances and origins. This picture shows that, taken on Friday 27th October 2023, and includes people either from, or with strong connections to, the following countries of the world:

Afghanistan	Ghana	Nigeria
Brazil	Hong Kong	Palestine
Czech Rep.	Kurdistan	Saudi Arabia
Cyprus	Iran	Sudan
England	Iraq	Syria
Eritrea	Mongolia	Ukraine
Germany		

(With thanks to Lee Moran for the original idea)

ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING and 20th ANNIVERSARY CELEBRATION 2nd DECEMBER 2022

Introduction

Our 2022 AGM also marked the 20th anniversary of Conversation Club so we wanted this to be a celebratory event to coincide with this significant milestone.

Our co-chair Brian Helsdon opened the meeting and welcomed everyone including those who had left Sheffield and come especially for the anniversary.

He introduced Side by Side who performed two short and enjoyable plays, the themes of which clearly resonated with our audience of around 70 people.

We then moved onto the formal business of the meeting and elected Ahmed El Molla to the board of trustees and re-elected Qais Aryan and Jim Dimond.

Co-chair's Report

Brian then went on to give the Chair's report and outlined how 2022 had been a year of recovery for the charity following the pandemic, but there were reasons to be positive. In particular he mentioned the good partnership with City of Sanctuary and thanked Anna Aitken for her help in developing such good relations.

Equally positive was his mention of the successful trip to Scarborough enjoyed by 50 people. Attendance at the Friday sessions was, however, still patchy and Brian noted that we needed to do more to promote the walks programme and do more in this regard in the coming year. Brian thanked our volunteers for their support over the past year and for giving up their time freely and regularly so that the club



could continue its work. He then handed over to Victor Mujakachi, our treasurer, who gave his financial report.

Treasurer's Report

Victor set out his report covering the financial year from 1st May 2021 to 30th April 2022 and explained that the relative inactivity in financial terms was due to COVID and having to ask funders to carry grants forward into the next financial year to allow the money to be spent.

CO-CHAIR'S REFLECTIONS ON OUR 20TH ANNIVERSARY

Christine Barltrop (co-chair) reflected on the origins of Conversation Club founded by Myra Davis and Richard Chessum (Chris joined 6 months later) when it was hosted in a small room and a kitchen in Carver Street. The club's ethos was, and still is, for people to meet socially and leave their troubles on the doorstep. The scope of the club soon expanded to involve trips further afield to give people experience of the sights and sounds of places outside of Sheffield.

Going forward the addition of more student involvement through STAR

(Student Action for Refugees) further enriched the club; and help from the Northern Refugee Centre in grant applications and registering as a charity helped to put the club on a firmer footing.

She then went on to talk about lockdown and the impact of the pandemic on the club. Members and volunteers could only meet online via Zoom, with only a few summer meetings, socially distanced of course, in Weston Park and the Botanical Gardens. These were the only opportunities to meet in person with our members.

Despite all this the club continues. Volunteers worked hard to reconnect with students and reach out to new members. Christine closed by inviting members to put forward suggestions for new activities they'd like to engage in in the coming year. She presented Ralph Hancock with a present from us all in recognition for his sterling work as chair of Conversation Club over many years.

We then handed over the meeting to two former refugees: Lora from Ukraine and Habib from Afghanistan who recounted their journeys to the UK.



Guest Speakers

Lora came to the UK following Russia's invasion in February 2022 and was helped by City of Sanctuary. She thanked the people of Sheffield for opening their hearts and their homes by welcoming so many Ukrainian refugees.

Habib first left Afghanistan when he was six years old because of civil war and told a fascinating story of moving back and forth into neighbouring counties before finally leaving his homeland at the age of 19. After traveling through several countries and been refused asylum, he ended up in Russia, only to be flown to Cuba, 20 thousand miles from home.

He was accepted in Cuba and studied there for four years before ending up by chance in the UK following successful negotiations with the British Embassy. Habib resumed his studies in Sheffield and completed his degree in Hispanic Studies. He now works successfully as a multilingual interpreter, helping others to navigate their way through officialdom and overcoming their language barriers. A truly remarkable and inspirational story!

Brian closed the meeting and invited everyone to stay for food as in the picture above. It was an excellent way to close our special 20th anniversary AGM!

Jim Dimond

Walks Programme 2023

Abbeydale Industrial Hamlet and Ecclesall Woods

Walks are very much a part of Conversation Club. So as soon as we could we started up again, beginning with a series of short local walks near the centre of Sheffield, in autumn 2022. This included a walk to Norfolk Park.

During the summer of 2023 we planned a series of walks. The first was a visit to the Abbeydale Industrial Hamlet followed by a walk through Ecclesall Woods. It was a gloriously sunny late spring day. We had a guided tour of the Industrial Hamlet, saw the water wheel in action, then enjoyed a walk through the woods. But rather than me talk about this here are some of the pictures.





Next up was a walk and talk at the Longshaw estate. This was July 2023. Remember that, it was very wet! I suppose we were lucky because the rain did hold off for most of the time. When it was raining the most, we were inside having a packed lunch or interactive session with the organisers, including local rangers.

Brian Helsdon





Eyam

Overall we enjoyed a lovely trip to Eyam festival but it didn't get off to the best of starts! We got dropped off the bus in Calver, the driver telling us the roads were closed but that it was only a twenty minute walk to Eyam. An hour later, uphill all the way, Lemlem and I, who together

had been bringing up the rear, finally arrived! Lemlem still with a smile on her face!

Luckily it was a lovely sunny day. First we had a well-earned rest and some food and drink.

We then sat and watched the great festival parade through the

streets. There were many beautifully decorated floats, bands playing and people dressed up in fancy costumes. We also treated ourselves to ice creams etc.

So despite not the best of starts, we all ended up having an enjoyable day.

Helen Roberts





What a wonderful festival at Eyam! The sun shone brightly all day! People were dressed in really amazing costumes; not national costumes. Crazy outfits making them look like horses or cows or double people, like a mass theatre or circus. Well done to everyone who walked miles and miles from wherever the bus dropped them all the way along the road and up the steep hill to Eyam!

I remember another Conversation Club outing to Eyam to see this celebration years ago, when we had to wait

hours before a bus came to pick us up from the village but it meant we had the chance to watch folk dancing round the maypole. The well dressings were great! One had the wording: "Do not conform to the pattern of this world! Be transformed by the renewing of your mind". The well dressing is a way of celebrating the source of water. Thank goodness we all have access to water here in England right now!

Elizabeth Birks

A Tale of Two Seaside Trips

One of the things we missed during the pandemic was our annual seaside trips. We put this right in August 2022 when we went to one of our trusted favourites, Scarborough.

Fortunately it was a bright and sunny day and we had a full coachload of people looking forward to a fun day. People walked along the beaches, swam in the sea, had donkey rides and boat trips. Here are some of the things people said about the trip.

‘Today I had one of the unforgettable trips to the most amazing beaches in England. Thanks to everybody; the people who organised the trip; the people who spent time with me; the people in the bus for their nice and friendly mood.’

‘Thank you so much for this amazing trip. I was on the beach, ate fish and chips, ice cream, drank coffee and had a really nice day.’



‘We went boating, saw a lot of seagulls and crabs, went to the lighthouse and swam in the sea.’

People enjoyed the day so much that many wanted to go to Scarborough again. However we decided instead to go to Flamborough Head and Bridlington in 2023. You may remember the summer of 2023,

not good. We postponed the trip a week because of the awful weather forecast. We were lucky on the day, mostly fine weather and quite warm. We spent some time at Flamborough, walking the cliff paths, venturing onto the stony beach and enjoying the sea air.





HERE'S WHAT PEOPLE SAID ABOUT THE DAY...

“ Thanks for a beautiful day on the beach. Thanks for fresh sea air, wind, fantastic clouds and even for a little rain. I dreamed to see seals and I saw one today. For the first time in my life I ate fish and chips. Sorry it is terrible food!! ”

“ It was a beautiful trip. We walked around the town, socialised with friends and enjoyed swimming. ”

Thanks to everyone for making these trips so successful. A special thanks to Lee Moran who organised the two trips, taking the returnable deposits, taking numerous phone calls including at one in the morning and without whom the trips would not have happened.

Brian Helsdon

REACHING OUT TO PARTNERS THROUGH EVENTS

Migration Matters Festival

The annual Migration Matters Festival attracted a huge crowd this year, taking place over the course of a week in June with events at 40 different locations in Sheffield. Conversation Club volunteers, members and trustees attended many of them. The majority of the concerts and performances were sold out.

The One World Choir (which began with the support of Conversation Club and includes several members) was proud to open the event at Sidney and Matilda and The Open Social Kitchen from City of Sanctuary provided the catering with delicious food for everyone. It was a joyous occasion.

The final event was a concert at The Leadmill with the highlight a performance by the famous Ghanaian singer/rapper Sauti Sol, attracting a diverse crowd from all over the UK.

I volunteered at the Yorkshire Integration Festival in September and ran some arts and crafts workshops that were very well attended. I also held an art exhibition at my studio where I sold two paintings and celebrated with a drumming practice.

Annie Mays

Yorkshire Integration Festival

This was such an exciting event. I've never seen anything like it here in Sheffield. There were so many people of so many different ethnicities and wearing so many different national costumes! And I'd never met them before! I enjoyed watching people



wanting to be seen taking part in the festivities. It reminded me of Sheffield when the World Snooker Championships are being held at The Crucible. I could see people who don't normally live in Sheffield who were happy to come here and explore confidently. It's this confidence that really appealed to

me. On the various stages set up for the event there were some great musicians, great speakers, great performers, and great entertainers! I caught up with friends I hadn't seen for years. Please can we have another event like this in Sheffield soon?

Elizabeth Birks

STUDENT SOCIETIES AND VOLUNTEER FAIRS

Over the years we have found that attending Student Society information and volunteer fairs have been a useful way of raising awareness of Conversation Club and recruiting new student volunteers. The past year has proved no exception and Helen, Ahmed, Richard and Jim have represented the club at these and signed up young people keen to get involved.

Jim Dimond



ARTS TABLE: INTERVIEW WITH FARHAN MORDI

One of the successes of Conversation Club is the arts table run by Farhan Mordi. The arts table was founded many years ago and has gone from strength to strength since Elizabeth Birks and Annie Mays took it on. I interviewed Farhan on 20th October 2023 about the arts table to find out more.

Farhan came to the UK in 25 years ago from Saudi Arabia and has been a regular at Conversation Club since 2011. He enjoys the walks and outings but above all meeting new people, making friends and socialising. He started helping Annie and Elizabeth with the arts table in 2014 but has taken the lead in his own right since 2019.

Farhan is from the Al Rowaili tribe, a nomadic people from Saudi Arabia that historically migrated back and forth across the Middle East as far as Syria and Palestine, before there were borders. He became interested in music and the arts from a very young age. He studied creative arts and is proficient in painting, sculpture, carving, sewing, rug making and woodworking. When his father wanted him to take more interest in his academic studies he wasn't deterred but secretly made a one stringed instrument (played with a bow of horse hair), and a bamboo flute with six holes so he could continue to practise. Nowadays his instruments of choice are the



“rababa”, a traditional Bedouin instrument, the oud (his favourite), and occasionally violin.

Farhan describes himself as a professional artist. His work has been exhibited and is still on display in Saudi Arabia, and closer to home, of course, in galleries, at Annie’s studio (Bloc Projects Meanwhile Space), and at Sheffield City of Sanctuary. His artwork was displayed at Theatre Deli as part of the Migration Matters Festival. He told me that he may consider selling some of his work in future but in the meantime he is content just giving pieces to friends, simply because it makes him happy.

What impressed me most is that Farhan sees art as a fantastic way of breaking down barriers and helping people to connect. He understands that art has a positive impact on the mind and reduces stress and tension.

Art therapy is nowadays recognised as a useful tool for helping people to express and resolve their emotions and thoughts. Patients work with an art therapist to explore their emotions, understand conflicts or feelings that are causing them distress, and use art to help them find resolution to those issues.

Art is, of course, also about fun and imagination – that’s why the art table has proved to be such a popular and welcome activity for many people at Conversation Club over the years; and why we are so grateful to Farhan for his contribution in continuing to provide our members with this excellent opportunity to explore their creativity.

Jim Dimond

REFLECTIONS ON 21 YEARS OF CONVERSATION CLUB AND FORWARD LOOK

21 years of Conversation Club! Perhaps a time to reflect on how we came to be and what we are for.

Our founder Myra Davis who sadly died eight years ago was quite definite about it when she persuaded me to join her one Friday afternoon to set up the Club.

“We are not going to be a class” she insisted, “that is what I am doing elsewhere. We are creating a space where people can come and make friends and break out of their social isolation”.

There was of course a language element. Many of the people she was teaching in her ESOL classes went home again and spoke their own native language most of the time. Conversation Club was a place to come and practice speaking English with English speaking people. But it was just that – making friends and conversation – not a class!

That first Friday afternoon we did not know whether anyone would actually come. It was an act of faith. But come they did. As the weeks went by, more and more came, both asylum seekers and refugees, and also volunteers who wished to help.

Conversation Club came very much more alive when many young

students arrived from the University which had a well-established STAR group (Student Action for Refugees). Interaction with dynamic young people brought extra life to the Club. Maybe it encouraged those who had been forced to flee from their former lives to believe that, like the young students, they could look with hope to the future.

As the numbers who came grew, so did our activities. We had grants from the Peak Park which enabled us to finance many trips to the countryside, walks were organised, and visits to places of culture and historical interest. An art table was created. An annual seaside trip. Even a class teaching English came into existence, though this was always considered secondary to our main purpose. So what is the future for the Club?

When we were founded, there was no ASSIST. In fact that organisation arose from Conversation Club when Myra, pro-active as ever, insisted we needed another organisation too. So many who came to the Club were suffering severe financial difficulty and some were even homeless, and Myra was determined to help them in more practical ways which meant resources on a scale which the Club itself could never hope to have.

Since Conversation Club and ASSIST were founded, another organisation came into existence – City of Sanctuary, which does some of the same things that the Club does.

Yet there is still a key role for us at Conversation Club. We are still picking ourselves up after not being able to meet during the years of Covid. And once again we need an infusion of new blood, hopefully young people like the ones we had in STAR before. There is no shortage of new people here claiming asylum, many of them now forced to share rooms in hotels. There is still much social isolation and an urgent need to help newcomers to the country enter into the mainstream of its social life.

Conversation Club still has important work to do. We need to find ways of connecting more with new people who come to our country to seek a better life, as well as the kind of inspiring young people who gave the Club such energy and vitality in years gone by. If we do that, then after 21 years, there is still a future for the organisation that Myra Davis took the initiative to create.

Richard Chessum

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS AND THANKS

And finally – some “thank you’s”. Thanks to everyone who has contributed to the newsletter. A special thanks to Jim Dimond for all his hard work in producing the Newsletter and chasing up contributors. Without him you would have nothing to read or look at!

The Newsletter is about Conversation Club so thanks to everyone who has been to the club, organised walks, events, and generally ensured the smooth running of the club.



A big thanks to our current funders, the Brelms Trust and The Lottery Community Fund.

Brian Helsdon



Conversation CLUB

