

# Conversation Club

Issue 23 – December 2025



Conversation  
CLUB



# CONTENTS

## Page 3

Welcome from the Joint Chairs:  
– Christine Barltrop & Brian Helsdon

## Page 4

Annual General Meeting  
29th November 2024  
– Elizabeth Birks

## Page 6

### Walks Programme 2025

Lonngshaw Estate  
Chatsworth Park  
Edale

– Ahmad El Malla

Whitby Seaside Trip

– Ahmad El Malla

Tea at Christine Barltrop's

## Page 10

A Journey of Words and Warmth  
– Nataliia Ivanenko

## Page 11

Remembering Kathleen Wallace  
– Brian Helsdon

Remembering Hasan Ali  
– Denis Green

## Page 12

In Conversation with Masoumeh Sahatlyan  
– Denis Green

## Page 13

Why Do We Need Conversation Club?  
– Richard Chessum

## Page 14

Learn Like a Child  
– Alison Ross

## Page 15

Editor's Closing Comments  
– Jim Dimond

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

email: [enquiries@conversationclub.org.uk](mailto:enquiries@conversationclub.org.uk)

visit: [www.conversationclub.org.uk](http://www.conversationclub.org.uk)

### Our Trustees:

Brian Helsdon – Joint Chair ESOL, language support

Christine Barltrop – Joint Chair

Victor Mujakachi – Finance

Richard Chessum – Advisor

Jim Dimond – Newsletter and Social Media

Ahmad El Malla – Walks

Lee Moran – Wednesday and Friday Groups

Helen Roberts – Membership and Student Liaison

Masoumeh Sahatlyan – Women's Coordinator

Farhan Mordi – Arts Table

**Newsletter Editor** – Jim Dimond

**Produced and printed by**

**Pickards Design & Print inc. Print by Tonik**



[info@pickards-tonik.co.uk](mailto:info@pickards-tonik.co.uk)

[www.pickards-tonik.co.uk](http://www.pickards-tonik.co.uk)



# Welcome

A very happy welcome to the 2025 Sheffield Conversation Club Newsletter, with thanks to everyone who has contributed. Special thanks go to Jim Dimond and Ahmad El Malla who have edited the articles and put together the pictures.

In one sense this has been a normal year. We have continued the arts table and English class. We have also added a new English class aimed specifically at Ukranian refugees at beginner level. We are grateful to Nataliia for organising this.

We have continued our active programme of summer walks and annual seaside trips. This year we went to Whitby. Thanks go to Ahmad and Lee respectively for organising these.

Sadly, however, this issue also pays tribute to two longstanding members: Hasan and Kathleen, who passed away at the beginning of the year. They are sorely missed.



**Christine Barltrop and Brian Helsdon** Joint Chairs

*Whitby harbour*





# ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING 29th NOVEMBER 2024

## Welcome and Performance by the One World Choir



Brian welcomed everyone to the AGM and invited the One World Choir to take the stage. The Choir sang some magnificent songs in a variety of languages with lots of movement and energy. Anyone taking photos was reminded that some members of the choir are not happy for photos of their faces to be published. The above picture was, therefore, taken carefully from an appropriate angle to omit these people!

## Report from the Joint Chairs – Brian Helsdon and Christine Barltrop

Brian and Christine spoke for a few moments to give a summary of the activities of the club in the last 12 months and to thank some of the many people and organisations who have done so much to support the club. Special thanks were extended to David and Edie

O'Mara, who not only look after the Central United Reformed Church (CURC) building, but also look after us while we are there. In a few months they plan to leave Sheffield to live in the Orkney Islands, to the north of mainland Scotland.

## Financial Report – Victor Mujakachi

Victor reminded people that paper copies of Conversation Club's financial statement were available by the entrance door, and pointed out that as yet the financial audit had not been completed, so the information therein was currently "in draft" form.

He gave a brief account of the financial situation and commented on the different volume of activity between 2023 (when Covid restrictions were still in place) and 2024 when it's been possible to carry out activities more freely. The current situation means that there is enough money to continue to pay the rent for the use of the facilities in the Central United Reformed Church but efforts are being made to secure new grants and donations to keep the club going in the months and years to come.





### **Reflections on Conversation club by members and volunteers**

Members were invited to come forward and say a few words about their experiences in the club and Annie Anthony Mays told us about her artwork and about the activities she and Farhan Mordi carry out to encourage members to experiment with their own artistic abilities.

### **Music by Farhan**

Farhan explained that the Eastern musical scale is microtonal and modal, whereas Western music is diatonic. The Western scale uses minor and major modes, while Eastern music has many more modes, including quarter tones, allowing for greater melodic nuance and expression. He performed just two tunes which was just enough to give us a feel for the possibilities of his music. Thank you so much to Farhan!



### **Close of AGM Followed by food and general conversation**

People were invited to enjoy some hot and cold food based on a variety of world cuisine. Massive thanks to everyone who contributed!

**Elizabeth Birks**



# Walks Programme 2025

**The Conversation Club walks and trips programme started in early May this year with a trip to the Longshaw Estate on the outskirts of Sheffield when a group of us walked to Padley Gorge and had a picnic.**



*A visit to see Graham and Judy Cole*



*At Longshaw*





In May a few of us visited Graham Cole and his wife Judy when Graham was recovering from hip replacement surgery which kept him housebound for several weeks. Graham and Judy are long term contributors at Conversation Club with Graham running one of the talk tables while Judy helps out in the kitchen.

In June we went to Chatsworth in Derbyshire where we had a seven mile walk around the surrounding hills and valleys to the village of Edensor heading back towards Chatsworth.

In July we took the train to Edale where we were met by our host Sarah Elridge, who before retirement worked at the City of Sanctuary in Sheffield, and some of her friends and neighbours. We had a walk through the village and fields visiting the church on the way to Sarah's house where they cooked a meal for us with cold and hot refreshments.

**Ahmed El Malla**



At Edale



# Whitby Seaside Trip

In early August we took the coach on our annual seaside trip to Whitby where we explored the town and the ancient abbey on the hill overlooking the harbour. The trip was very enjoyable and well attended, especially as we haven't been to Whitby for several years.







### **Tea at Christine Barltrop's**

Towards the end of August we took the train to Honley in West Yorkshire. We were met and hosted by Christine. We also visited Queen Victoria Jubilee Tower overlooking the town of Huddersfield and the surrounding hills and valleys.

As you can see everyone enjoyed their tea. Thanks to Ahmad for organizing the trip and Chris for her hospitality.





## A JOURNEY OF WORDS AND WARMTH: From Ukraine to the United Kingdom

My name is Nataliia Ivanenko, and I have the honour of serving as a volunteer at the Conversation Club – a place that has come to mean far more to me than its simple name suggests. It is, in truth, a small sanctuary of humanity, a meeting of hearts and minds from all corners of the world.

I arrived in the United Kingdom in June 2022, together with my beloved mother, Nadiya. Our journey here was not one of ease or leisure - it was a passage through fear, loss, and profound uncertainty. We came from Sumy, a modest town resting quietly on the northern border of Ukraine, not far from the relentless echo of conflict.

Before the world turned upside down, our lives were peaceful and rooted in simple joys. My mother devoted her years to nurturing little souls as a kindergarten teacher, while I shared my passion for logic and discovery as a teacher of mathematics and computer science. Life was measured by seasons in the garden, by lessons in the classroom, by ordinary happiness.

Then, in an instant, peace became a memory. We were among the first to witness the horror of invasion – an endless column of military vehicles thundering through our land. There is a particular kind of silence that follows such moments: the silence of disbelief, when one realises that the familiar world has slipped beyond reach.

Amidst the turmoil and uncertainty, when hope seemed to flicker like a candle in the wind, we turned to the

vastness of the internet in search of guidance – and there, a light appeared in the gracious form of Ms Kylie McAteer. Her kindness and generosity shone with rare sincerity, becoming a true refuge for our weary hearts. A lifelong educator devoted to nurturing young minds and an active volunteer with an enduring spirit of service, she embodied the very essence of compassion in action. Through her warmth and humanity, she did far more than extend an invitation to a new land—she opened her heart and, with it, offered us something infinitely deeper: a sense of belonging, a sanctuary of comfort, and a renewed understanding of what the word ‘home’ truly means.

Arriving in Britain was a challenge of both spirit and language. We entered a world rich in voices – each accent, each expression, a new melody to learn. The British people, in their quiet dignity and kindness, extended hands of friendship that we, in turn, longed to reciprocate. Every Ukrainian who found shelter here carried the same desire: to give back, to contribute, to belong.

Our knowledge of English varied greatly – some could manage conversation, others only a few hesitant words. Yet we were united by determination. We exchanged news of every volunteer organisation that offered language support, eager to grow, to understand, to speak.

It was in September 2022 that I met Lee Moran, and through him, the heart of the Conversation Club – a place brimming with warmth, laughter, and gentle patience. There I met Brian, Christine, Jane, Helen, and so many others whose friendship continues to brighten our days.

For months, I immersed myself completely in learning. Sixteen,

sometimes eighteen hours a day, I studied, spoke, listened, and repeated – driven by the hope that every word learnt was a bridge to a new beginning.

By last year, I felt ready to give something back. I began to organise small gatherings for Ukrainians in our community, modest at first, but filled with enthusiasm. And then, in April 2025, our efforts blossomed into a full English class for Ukrainians at the Conversation Club - a dream realised through shared perseverance.

These classes are more than lessons. They are acts of kindness, moments of connection, and proof of humanity's quiet strength. Within these welcoming walls, we have found not only the courage to learn but also the joy of belonging. Here, we do not merely study English; we build friendships, we exchange experiences, and we discover ourselves anew through language.

Every Ukrainian member of our club carries deep gratitude—for the volunteers who give their time so freely, for the organisers who create this gentle space, and for the countless small acts of care that make each gathering feel like coming home.

If we might wish for anything more, it would be modest indeed: a small, cosy room dedicated to our classes, and perhaps a few more excursions - to museums, galleries, or the winding streets of Sheffield where we could continue our conversations beneath the open sky.

To all who have opened their hearts to us, we offer our sincerest thanks. You have taught us that kindness has no borders, that language is more than words, and that even in the hardest time, one can find a home in the warmth of human connection.

**Nataliia Ivanenko**



## REMEMBERING KATHLEEN WALLACE

We sadly had to say good bye to Kathleen who died in January of this year. She will be missed by everyone at Conversation Club.

Kathleen was born in Sheffield and lived virtually all her life in the same house. She retired in 2012 after 21 years at Sheffield Hallam University working with international and ethnic minority students, helping them get work placements, writing CVs and preparing for interviews. When she retired, she wanted to 'keep learning' and 'keep meeting new people'. That brought her to Conversation Club.

Here she will be missed for her energy and enthusiasm, for her kindness and for her strong opinions. Many a time, if there was something she thought wrong – usually by the Government or other public body – she would proclaim in her usual strong voice 'it's outrageous'.

Kathleen worked tirelessly for Conversation Cub. She will be remembered by individuals with whom she spent many hours helping them with their English, preparing them for exams. She helped with our informal English classes and ran her own Living in the UK class.

It would be wrong just to mention her work with Conversation Club. Her experience at the club gave her the confidence to volunteer with ASSIST, helping new



*Kathleen and Konstantin in Tbilisi, Georgia.*

arrivals in Sheffield, and with SAVTE (Sheffield Association for the Voluntary Teaching of English), teaching English, one to one, and in small conversation groups. More widely, she was an active member of the local Quakers.

Kathleen will be so missed by so many organisations and individuals throughout Sheffield and beyond, a sad passing.

**Brian Helsdon**

## REMEMBERING HASAN ALI



A memory..... It was an Annual General Meeting. After the talk and the formal reports there is some fun at these events. On this occasion it was music and a dancing performance to which we were all invited to join.

I noticed that Hasan was sitting at the back of the room with papers and books. I went over to him to encourage him to join in. But no: he wanted me to sit with him to work on some points of grammar. And that's what we did. I assured him that actually, he knew that grammar because he was using it correctly when he spoke. But no: he wanted to master the terminology and the rules. There were many other occasions, usually after Brian's class, when we sat on for similar things. Often, he wanted to check his understanding of what we had been doing in the lesson, and again, he usually had understood, but was not confident that he had done so. Sometimes it might be something from another class that he wanted to check or maybe an official letter

(Council, hospital etc) that was using quite complex English. His English was better than he thought it was, though he did struggle with some pronunciation, and explaining that is a weak spot for me. I struggled to help him differentiate between "ship" and "sheep", "right" and "riot"; when he said them they sounded the same.

He was very open about his mental health issues and was optimistic about dealing with them. Yes, there were periods when we didn't see him because he was not well. There were times when he might come to class late and apologetic (he had usually been to mosque) but whenever he did, there was that smile. I will never forget Hasan or his smile.

**Denis Green**



# IN CONVERSATION WITH MASOUMEH SAHATLYAN

Masoumeh has been coming to Conversation Club for many years; three years ago she became a trustee. She talks to Denis about growing up in Iran, life in Sheffield and Conversation Club.

**Denis** Iran is a very a very big country. Where did you grow up?

**Masoumeh** I am from the ancient city of Shiraz: a top tourist destination. It is known as the city of literature and flowers. Two famous poets: Hafez and Saadi are from Shiraz and are buried there. It is famous for its beautiful Kilims (hand-made woollen carpets with complex patterns). Iranians consider it the city of gardens because of all of its gardens and fruit trees.

**Denis** Can you tell me something about growing up there?

**Masoumeh** I was the youngest of five children. My dad died when I was just one year old so my mum raised us by herself. I was very close to her and I still am.

I remember being excited when I started school at the age of six but there was a problem because I am left handed and the teacher insisted that I write with my right hand. I tried to hold myself over my desk so that she could not see which hand I was using, but she caught me. She punished me by putting the end of a burning cigarette onto my left hand. I was so upset and scared that I refused to go to school for six months. My friend



encouraged me to return and I had a new teacher who allowed me to write with my left hand.

At high school I discovered that I



loved literature, especially the poetry of the 14th Century poet, Hafez. It is difficult to get books written in Farsi here. I bought some when I went to Iran for a holiday. Of course, I also brought back some traditional sweets and saffron.

I married and have two daughters, both born in Iran. I worked as a hairdresser and had my own salon. We lived in the hills on the outskirts, where the air is wonderfully clean. We had a very large garden and I grew lots of fruit. In Sheffield I still like to grow fruit: black and yellow grapes and strawberries. And lots of flowers: lilies, tulips, roses.

**Denis** So, when did you come to Sheffield? How was it for you?

**Masoumeh** I came in 2016. The previous year my husband came here with my daughter Forough, aged 20, to seek asylum. Getting here was difficult for me and my younger daughter Faranak, aged 13. Before we could travel to the UK, we had to get our papers from the British Embassy in Turkey as there wasn't an Embassy in Iran. When we were in Turkey our passports and money were stolen. That's a long story ... but The Embassy provided me with a temporary

passport so that I was able to get back to Iran with my papers to come to the UK.

Sheffield was a huge challenge to me. When I arrived I could speak just two words of English: yes and no. My daughters picked up English quickly, but it was a struggle for me. At the end of my first English lesson I was crying because couldn't understand what was being said. Helen gave me a big hug and said, "Don't give up". I didn't. I gradually started to improve after things were repeated many times. I kept coming back because people were so friendly. At Conversation Club I have learned more than how to speak English; learning about British culture is very important. But I have also learned about culture and traditions in many other countries. When I first came to Sheffield I knew only the area around my home and the city centre. I know a lot more now. On Conversation Club trips I have got to know the local countryside and villages such as Hathersage, Castleton and Eyam. I enjoy outings such as Scarborough and visiting Christine's house. I like to walk in the Rivelin Valley, especially in the autumn, going through the fallen leaves.



As I settled here and got to know Sheffield more, I started doing more. I joined the Side By Side drama group, and One World Choir. I enjoy performing with these; I like to entertain people, and I have made friends from all over the world. Now, I also volunteer with Open Kitchen, City Of Sanctuary and Victoria Hall, where I am an interpreter. These activities are important for me. I like to help people, just as others helped me when I first arrived. All these things keep me busy; I have a very active life. And at home I like to cook, especially cakes.

Three years ago my husband, daughters and I got our UK citizenship and I became a Conversation Club trustee; I am women's coordinator. If any woman member has suggestions for activities or ideas about what we could be doing differently, please speak to me.

**Denis** I know that you've also got some very recent news.

**Masoumeh** Yes. A few weeks ago, my first grandchild was born: Nik. Very exciting. His name means "goodness" in Farsi.

**Denis** Thank you. It is good to hear of your experiences.

**Masoumeh** It's a pleasure!

**Denis Green**

### **From The Gift, by Hafez:**

*Why*

*Just ask the donkey in me*

*To speak to the donkey in you,*

*When I have so many other beautiful animals*

*And brilliant coloured birds inside*

*That are longing to say something wonderful*

*And exciting to your heart?*



## **WHY DO WE NEED CONVERSATION CLUB? A personal view by Richard Chessum**

Some years ago, a British Home Secretary said she wanted to create a 'hostile environment' for asylum seekers. She was referring to those whose cases had been rejected and who, she claimed, had no right to be

here. But we have known so many who had strong cases but had not been believed. We always called it a "culture of disbelief" in the Home Office.

This was bad enough, but now we are seeing a worsening of the political climate for people seeking sanctuary. Throughout Europe and the United States, people seeking to make societies welcoming places for those fleeing persecution and war are facing uphill tasks against political forces thriving on fear and prejudice.

Far-right parties are on the rise almost everywhere. In the United States, Donald Trump came to power again promising "the biggest number of deportations our country has ever seen". Now people are being picked up off the street in large numbers by agents in unmarked cars, and detained and removed.

In many European countries there are parties determined to do the same. In this country too, there is increasing misinformation about migrants, both in the mainstream media and online. We are hearing disturbing stories from people we have known for many years, saying they are sensing hostility to them that they have not experienced before.

So many vulnerable and desperate people wishing to seek sanctuary have been forced to risk their lives in perilous

sea crossings in overcrowded small boats because every other available route has been closed to them. When they arrive they are demonised because of the way they had to come. In former days asylum seekers were housed in the community until their claims had been processed. Now they are placed in hotels and stories abound of the luxurious lifestyle they are falsely claimed to be enjoying.

Conversation Club was formed to provide a welcoming space to end the isolation many asylum seekers experienced, and to begin the process of integration into the community and normal life. Now, it seems, Government policy is to keep them isolated by hiding them away. We always thought that those who won their cases for asylum would eventually be allowed to settle permanently as a human right once they had made a new life here. Yet now there is increasing talk of 'asylum not meaning settlement'. The Party that is leading in the opinion polls are quite explicit about this, saying they want to end all indefinite leave to remain. But these unwelcome developments are not confined to far right parties. Our own Prime

Minister recently expressed fears that we were becoming "a society of strangers" which was widely interpreted as referring to those of a different culture. Many in the general public assumed it even meant a different skin colour.

So we come back to the original question posed. Why do we need Conversation Club? It should be obvious. If we provide lots of welcoming spaces where people can meet and make friends, the irrational assumptions which foster suspicions and lead to hostility can be ended. In today's climate, it is needed more than ever.

**Richard Chessum**



# LEARN LIKE A CHILD

Do you remember studying a language at school? It was hard work: learning about the grammar, trying to remember lists of rules, filling in exercises, writing translations, looking up words in a dictionary? I spent 5 years studying French this way. There was one thing we never practiced in class. We didn't speak or listen to a natural conversation. After 5 years, I passed an exam, but I still couldn't communicate in French! Now look at a 5-year-old child. They understand well and speak fluently – sometimes in two languages! How do they manage this so easily?

**A.** they are immersed (like floating in water) in the language – it's all around them, from the moment they wake up, to the moment they fall asleep, listening to a song or a bedtime story. Family and friends speak to them all the time. They hear other people talking around them. The child may not understand everything at first, but with visual clues and lots of repetition, it gradually makes sense.

**B.** People are delighted when the child speaks. They want to understand, even if it wasn't quite clear. No one is telling the child 'That's wrong.' Communication is the main point. Getting it exactly right will come later.

Perhaps we can copy some of the child's experience, if we want to learn a new language. You can see how Conversation Club follows this method of learning English. When you walk in the door, everyone is talking in English. You can join a table to chat in a small group, with a cup of tea and a biscuit, of course! The art table will welcome you to talk as you create a painting. In Brian's class, he will introduce the topic of the day, so you can learn some new vocabulary as you talk and listen in small groups.

So, every Friday afternoon, you can immerse (surround) yourself in English for a few hours. But what about the rest of your life?



How can you find more ways to listen to and practice speaking English? You could:

- Find another conversation club or group
- Visit your local Warm Spaces to meet friendly people.
- Use your hobbies and interests. You can join a group for sports or crafts or gardening, etc.
- Watch an English, Australian or US film or TV programme with subtitles.
- Go online to websites such as BBC Learning English or The British Council.

Speak to one of the volunteers at Conversation Club to help you explore these options.

**Alison Ross**



## EDITOR'S CLOSING COMMENTS

I think that the past year has been a positive one for Conversation Club. Attendance is good and the website <https://conversationclub.org.uk> is generating lots of interest, phone calls, and a steady stream of email enquiries. Many of these are from potential volunteers and new members. Not all of these enquiries lead to positive outcomes but in many cases I'm able to signpost people to other, more suitable provision so they can get the support they need.

I am very grateful to Mike Parr for his help and patience over the past year in keeping the website and news page up-to-date and for preparing a how-to guide for me to make future changes myself. Mike recently informed us that he was stepping away from volunteering due to family commitments and we'll miss his valuable contribution to the beginners' group.

In the earlier part of the year we had a big influx of new student volunteers bringing fresh energy and dynamism to the club. Another student undertook a research project to investigate the barriers to students volunteering for us. She came up with a list of recommendations both for her university and Conversation Club to implement. We have not yet, however, been able to secure student involvement on our Trustees group.

Last year I wrote about the need for modernising the image and raising the profile of Conversation Club to extend its reach and to raise awareness of who we are and what we do. That has happened up to a point but I'd like us to be much more proactive in exploring opportunities for partnering with other like-minded organisations with shared aims. This is so important at the moment given the current negative portrayal of migration and asylum issues in the mainstream media. We – as a small organisation of volunteers – are stronger when we pool our resources and work together with others like us to counter the (often) misleading narrative and disinformation that is causing so much division and stoking conflict in our communities. I'm keen to set the record straight, if only in a small way.... because we actually have a very good story to tell.

In August I was lucky enough to be able to do that when I was pleasantly surprised to be invited for a live interview on Sile Sibanda's BBC Radio Sheffield Sunday afternoon programme. I was a little nervous but the interview went smoothly and I was happy to answer questions and to chat about the club and about volunteering. It was a really positive experience and a chance to share some positive information about how we help newcomers to integrate; how brilliant it is to see people grow in confidence; improve their English; and help them adapt to life in Sheffield.

**Jim Dimond**





## WORK PRODUCED AT THE ART TABLE

