

SWING DIVISION HISTORY by Nick Carter, Balsall Common u3a

I have been a jazz and big band fan since I was a teenager. I took up Trombone when I was 16 and have never had a formal music lesson. Due to my profession (airline pilot) I could not rely on getting any regular lessons, or to join any form of band due to the persistent roster changes and the inherent instability of that life.

After I retired, I sort of fell into playing in the Senior Band at Kingshurst Academy (in Birmingham). Having had a few months to learn to read (very basic) music and after the Christmas concert at St Philips Cathedral in Birmingham I joined the Birmingham Basement Band and learned, on the job, to read music and play in a Big Band. That was from January 2008.

One evening, on my way back home, on a high from an evening playing with the band, and just before going on holiday in 2014, I was reflecting that 'I never thought I'd ever be in a big band'. This led to the further thought that 'I wonder if there are many/any people like me who would be interested in playing in such a band'.

My wife and I had joined the Balsall Common u3a a year or so before this, and I started to think that our u3a would be an ideal base for such a band and further, it would perfectly match the spirit of u3a!

So, after that 2014 holiday, at a gig in Birmingham, I asked a sax playing friend if he was interested in helping to set up a band. He was and we did! I put the word out to the local u3a's and had quite a good response - including a talented trumpet player from Nuneaton. So, we three had a meeting at my home and went on a recruitment drive which was interesting in itself. Finally, in March 2015 we had a band of nine people and began to rehearse in Balsall Common.

The news spread and very soon we had more than a full band!

At each stage we have had support from the Balsall Common u3a and, last year, together with them, we had planned a gig in Balsall Common for the West Midlands u3a's - our major problem was limiting the audience numbers! Sadly, the covid pandemic put paid to that

The 'classic' Big Band has seventeen players: four Trumpets, four Trombones, five Saxophones of various types. And a rhythm section consisting of Bass, Drums, Guitar, and Piano. My Tenor Sax friend who helped us set up, the other Tenor Sax and the Pianist were from the Basement Band.

At this stage I had to sort out a location base; I plotted where each member of the band lived and, with band members coming from Sutton Coldfield, Hall Green, Rugby, Nuneaton, Coventry, Warwick, Leamington, Kenilworth, Malvern, and three of us from Balsall Common, we decided on Balsall Common!

We needed a venue to rehearse at and after much research, we have been, and still are, at the Catholic Church in Balsall Common.

We started doing gigs from 2016 including playing at Core Meetings for Balsall Common u3a, Solihull u3a, the open day at the Sutton Coldfield Water Mill, and at an Open Garden event in Solihull, and at the Balsall Common Festival.

A small band taken from the big band did a special gig in a lull in the pandemic we were asked to do a small gig for a surprise party for a band member who was terminally ill who had been a founder member of the band. The members of the sextet had personal connections to him and we did a twenty-minute set.

We now have some 73 tunes on our pad which includes music from Duke Ellington, Jobin, Glenn Miller, Count Basie and Woody Herman. The trumpet player who helped with starting the band, Paul Morris (from

Nuneaton) is our Musical Director and lead Trumpet player. Another trumpet player helps me with the bureaucracy.

Taking the applause at the March 2019 Balsall Common u3a Core Meeting



Nick Carter, founder of the Swing Division



The members of the Balsall Common u3a were entertained by U3A Swing Division at the March 2018 Core Meeting. The band is made up of members from 11 different U3A's within the West Midlands.



U3A Swing Division at the Festival in the Park 2017

On September 23rd 2017 the U3A Swing Division is now well established and played their fourth gig at the Balsall Common Festival.



At the Bands rehearsal on Tuesday 24th January 2017

