

# Local education charity closes, ending 50-year community involvement

Local adult education charity “Learning Never Stops” has closed down. It ends half a century of community involvement in Colchester’s adult education. It began with the setting up of a Members’ Association when Colchester Borough Council’s own Senior Evening Institute moved from Alderman Blaxill School to Grey Friars to form the adult college in the 1960s.

From its inception, the college maintained direct links with the community to ensure the curriculum was relevant to local people’s needs. It quickly developed a programme ranging from beginners’ courses to exams and university entrance for adults.

As well as the independent members’ group (a kind of staff/student body), there were advisory committees and a board of governors. The college was the lynch-pin organisation in setting up the collaborative Colchester Learning Shop (next to Jack’s) which gave impartial advice and guidance on all post-school learning.

Grey Friars was once one of the UK’s leading specialist adult colleges, with over 12,000 students a year on over 1,000 courses. It also operated in the heart of communities in schools, village halls, going anywhere in its travelling classroom (built on a lorry chassis) and even in a maisonette on Greenstead for two years. Its principal Alan Skinner was awarded the MBE for services to education in 2000. All this ended when Essex County Council reorganised its adult education in 2005 into a central service, managed from County Hall, with the posts of principal and senior managers made redundant, governors disbanded and many community links lost.

Grey Friars was closed in 2007 and the Wilson Marriage building became the venue for Colchester.

Grey Friars is now a 5-star luxury hotel and the Learning Shop is the Three Wise Monkeys bar/restaurant.

To keep the “Grey Friars spirit” alive the existing community-related bodies morphed into the registered charity “Learning Never Stops”. It ran public events such as festivals, history projects and open days, published books and websites, and operated an information and advice service.

It started with a community project tracing the history of the Grey Friars site which brought together local residents with eminent historians such as John Ashdown-Hill, Andrew Phillips and Patrick Denney. The book sold in thousands and the website has over 12,000 followers worldwide.

The project won an accolade for community involvement in the 2016 Gazette and Standard education awards.

The charity’s 2017/2018 Festivals of Lifelong Learning brought together many local providers of all kinds of post-school learning and the resultant signposting website has had over 14,000 hits.

This will all cease soon, so, in order that not all is lost, the charity made an appeal to the Colchester Borough Council Cabinet in the hope that at least the information and advice service can be maintained.

It is ironic that the charity's last meeting took place in this year's national Lifelong Learning Week. This year it celebrates not only the liberating effect of learning as an adult, but its value in aiding Covid-recovery in many ways.

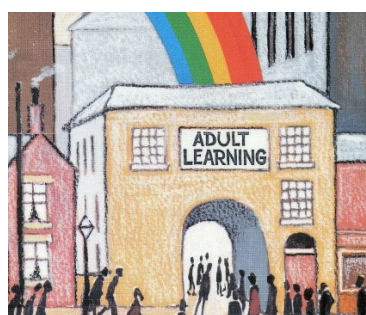
Lifelong learning has many benefits, not only in the world of work, but in improving health and wellbeing. It helps us become better parents and citizens and to cope with longer life expectancy by staying active in old age. To lose this is a massive waste of opportunity.

The charity's web presence will continue until the end of the year on [www.ColchesterLearningTown.org.uk](http://www.ColchesterLearningTown.org.uk) for information on adult learning opportunities; [www.GreyFriarsColchester.org.uk](http://www.GreyFriarsColchester.org.uk) for the history project; and a documentary about the adult college is on [www.Bit.ly/GreyFriars](http://www.Bit.ly/GreyFriars)



(left) Alderman Janet Fulford, College Governor, addresses the Members' Association in 2005

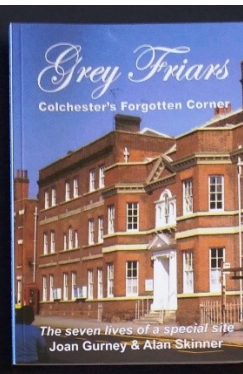
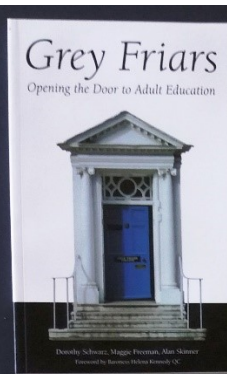
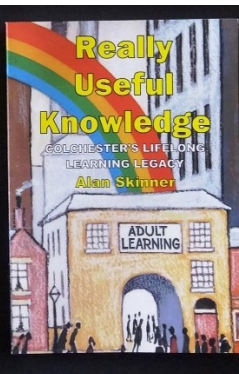
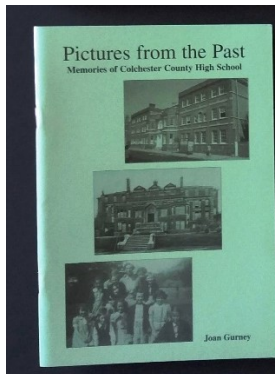
(right) The Members' Association going to protest to Parliament in 1992



The Charity's logo

Trustees with historical documents saved for the Essex Record Office

YouTube documentary



Some of the charity's publications

The 2016 award for community involvement in education



A history project open day at Grey Friars / Lifelong Learning Festival / Guided tours of GF site / now a luxury hotel