

The **Oldie**

GUIDE TO GROWING OLD DIS A GRACEFULLY

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Yes you can

Fancy being a ballet dancer or trapeze artist? It's never too late to have a go, says *Henrietta Bredin*

Guess what, you *can* teach an old dog new tricks. What's more, you should. Learning new tricks as an oldie can be thoroughly surprising and enormously enjoyable. Over the past two years of unwilling confinement and social distancing, the opportunities to learn new things have even expanded, thanks to zooming and online streaming, although there is nothing better than the live experience.

Only last week I sat opposite a man in an almost empty tube carriage who was knitting what looked like a highly complicated pattern, involving a number of different coloured balls of wool. I asked him what it was and he told me that it was a jumper for his grandson and that he'd only recently learnt to knit, by following YouTube tutorials, and that it had become something of an obsession.

Sewing is definitely back in fashion, if the BBC's strangely compelling *Great British Sewing Bee* programme is anything to go by. At the Stitch Festival in London's Business Centre in early March there were workshops galore where you could learn how to follow paper patterns, control the overlocker on your sewing machine and master the techniques of brioche knitting, wet felting, mirror embroidery and specialist buttonholing.

In Newcastle, retired GP Dow Smith has not only restarted playing the clarinet after 35 years – he now plays with two amateur orchestras in weekly sessions – but he has also become an enthusiastic aerialist. A few years ago a friend had a spare ticket for a session with Go Ape, a set-up where a group of professionals takes over bits of woodland and rigs up wires and nets in the trees. 'It's extremely safe,' he says, 'with harnesses and helmets and people making sure you

don't do anything foolish. To my surprise I greatly enjoyed it and remembered seeing a leaflet for a circus skills school so I booked in for a trapeze session. All you have to do to start with is stand on a thick mat with a trapeze that is about the height of your head and see if you can get your leg up and over the bar – let's be clear I'm not talking about a flying trapeze, this is static.

'Anyway, I could do that and have been going ever since. Progress is glacial but I wasn't hugely fit when I started so anything is an advance. My horror has always been losing cognitive function and the only thing that has been shown to make a difference is getting more exercise. I walk a fair bit but needed to do something resistive and aerobic and definitely didn't want to go to a gym and bore myself senseless on a treadmill – this is hard work, and very good fun.'

For the less energetic, there are top-notch lectures on every subject imaginable offered by numerous different organisations, both online and in person. At Gresham College in London, for example, recently you could have heard Chris Whitty on infections which use the respiratory route, Anna Whitelock on King James I or Marina Frolova-Walker on Prokofiev – coming up in April there's John Mullan on villains in the novel, Christina Banks-Leite on

preventing the extinction of tropical species. All these lectures are public and free of charge.

The playwright Mark Ravenhill saw the Royal Ballet's film of *The Tales of Beatrix Potter* as a seven-year-old, fell headlong for Jemima Puddleduck and decided immediately (dropping his previous ambition to run a chain of bakeries) that he wanted to be a dancer. Shamed by a self-righteous aunt into thinking that it wasn't something a boy should be doing he gave it up for the next few decades until around four years ago when, wanting to get fit, he thought, 'Right – I'm going to give it a go. Strength, flexibility, musicality, it's all there in ballet. I searched "male ballet classes" online and the City Lit in Holborn popped up.

'It turned out that for an all-male class you had to have some experience but there was a mixed beginners class so I joined up. I was the only man and the women were on the whole older than me.... Some of those women were rather flexible.

'Once I'd decided not to be competitive and just do it for me it was a good psychological lesson – very releasing. And the great joy was that the music was all the big 19th-century romantic stuff' – not normally Ravenhill's favourite period of music but when concentrating at the same time as being enveloped by the 'surging' music, he 'loved it'.

A conductor friend wrote two-and-a-half novels in lockdown; a retired barrister is dabbling in oils, taking piano lessons and honing his Italian conversational skills; three people I know have done bee-keeping courses and I've moved on from solo singing for beginners at Morley College in Lambeth to classes on oratorio and Lieders. There is no age limit on learning.



Enthusiastic aerialists: Dow Smith (left) and friend