

Suffolk Humanists and Secularists News

April 2012

ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING – TUESDAY APRIL 10TH

This is the meeting (see details on page 4) at which we look back at the last year and forward to the next. Reports from the officers as printed in this newsletter will be presented but not read out. There won't be a chairman's report because the last AGM failed to elect a chairman and Denis Johnston has effectively been both chairman and secretary, a burden he has shouldered both cheerfully and efficiently but he cannot be expected to do this forever. In fairness someone should be found to assist him.

Another matter to be discussed will be the venue for our monthly meetings. Our move to the Interfaith Centre has not brought the increase in attendance hoped for. There are those who favour returning to the Pinewood Community Centre or even the Castle Hill Community Centre, or do you know of somewhere better still? A room above a pub?

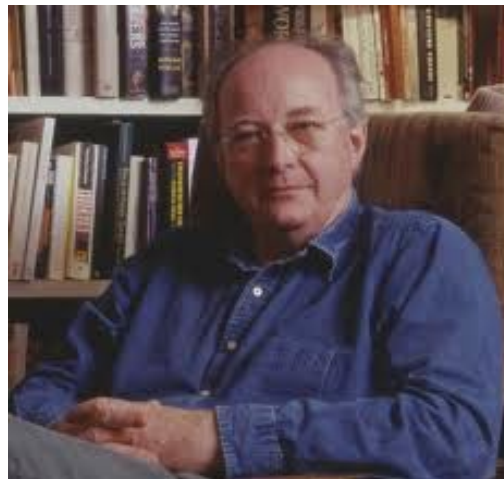
The meeting will not be all business however as we will be showing a filmed interview between Michael Rosen



Michael Rosen

the writer and broadcaster who was Children's Laureate 2007 – 09, and the author Philip Pullman, perhaps best known for the "His Dark Materials" trilogy.

He has said " I think it's perfectly possible to explain how the universe came about without bringing God into it, but I don't know everything, and there may well be a God somewhere hiding away. Actually if he is keeping out of sight , it's because he's ashamed of his followers and all the cruelty and ignorance they're responsible for. If I were him I'd want nothing to do with them." .



Philip Pullman

Phillip has been described as one of Britain's most famous atheists and is a Distinguished Supporter of the BHA.

Michael Imison

MARCH MEETING "Religion for Atheists"

Last month's Suffolk Humanist meeting featured a talk by Michael Imison on Alain de Botton's latest book "Religion for Atheists". Contrary to the impression that may have been given by the comment, quoted in last month's

newsletter, that the book showed “religions are even scarier than you thought” de Botton describes all the means that the Churches use to make their activities attractive to people, which may explain why they still survive while their core beliefs have been so thoroughly exploded. These include creating a sense of community, in which ceremonial meals play an important part, giving opportunities for repentance and providing consolation for sorrows by showing examples of sufferings much greater than most people are called on to bear and showing that no-one is exempt from pain and loss.

A pattern of repeated activities counters the forgetfulness endemic in most people and the Churches powerfully use architecture, sculpture, painting, poetry and music to reinforce their message. De Botton argues that revulsion from what the churches stand for should not prevent non-believers from using these same tools to promote their own rational way of life. He envisages richly decorated temples of Human Achievement where people can rejoice in what mankind has done. He imagines Agape Restaurants where community is created by a schedule of ritual meals to promote mutual understanding and a shared commitment to caring for each other.

De Botton practices what he preaches. In 2008 he set up The School of Life (www.theschooloflife.com) running programmes and services which explore questions of fulfilment and how to lead a better life. On their web site you can see a video of Alain de Botton discussing this book, as he did to a sell-out audience at the National Theatre and is now doing at literary festivals throughout the country.
Michael Imison

THE SCIENCE OF RELIGIOUS BELIEF

A review of articles in a March edition “New Scientist” magazine.

I suspect that only a few members of SHANDS regularly read “New Scientist” but those that do will be aware that it often contains articles concerned with ethical and even religious issues. Indeed, in recent years, it has been rare for an issue not to make reference to the teaching of “Creationism” in schools, something which, to its credit, it has strongly campaigned against.

However the 17th March edition –caught my attention even more than usual because its cover heading was “THE GOD ISSUE” with strap-lines “*The new science of religion tells us where secularists are going wrong*” and “*As we learn more about religion's biological roots, it is becoming clear that secularists are often tilting at windmills and need to rethink.*”

Inside are eight pieces, some of which challenged my assumptions about ‘religious’ human behaviour.

The editorial sums it up....

WE ARE ALL BORN BELIEVERS.....“Give me the child until he is seven, and I will show you the man.” This Jesuit maxim epitomises how many of us perceive religion: as something that must be imprinted on young minds.

The new science of religion begs to differ. Children are born primed to see god at work all around them and don't need to be indoctrinated to believe in him.

If that has raised your eyebrows (or hackles) then much of what follows will do little to lower them. Here are the headings of some of the articles, followed by a few lines that give some of the flavour.

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RELIGION IS THE KEY TO CIVILISATION..... Like it or not, religious belief is ingrained into human nature . And a good thing too: without it we would still be living in the Stone Age ...

This article goes on to explain why religious belief systems were the agents that enabled humans to change from hunter-gatherers to large sedentary societies.

IN ATHEISTS WE DISTRUST..... In a recent opinion poll, Americans identified atheists as the group they would most disapprove of their children marrying and the one least likely to share their own vision of American society. Self-declared atheists are now the only sizeable minority group considered unelectable as president.

This article examines why it is that believers reject atheists “who are not a visible, powerful or even a coherent social group” so vehemently. The answer appears to be the same force that helped religions expand: atheists are outside the social group and so they cannot be trusted to co-operate.

SCIENCE WON'T LOOSEN RELIGION'S GRIP... The fears and trepidation of so many believers - and the jubilant anticipation of so many critics of religion - that science will eventually displace religion are wrong-headed on many counts.

This examines just how strongly the human cognitive processes lead us to become religious and how religious ideas and actions spontaneously and inevitably arise in human populations. In particular it discusses why people don't “just grow out of it”.

GOD IS A TESTABLE HYPOTHESIS The gods worshipped by billions either exist or they do not. And those gods, if they exist, must have observable consequences. Thus, the question of their existence is a legitimate scientific issue.....

This is a short romp through the various scientific studies that have looked for evidence for supernatural phenomena and (of course) have come away empty.

The articles are in no way apologia for religion – but they do press the point that atheists must make more effort to understand better what they are dealing with. As the editorial concludes.....“ Religion is deeply etched in human nature and cannot be dismissed as a product of ignorance, indoctrination or stupidity. Until secularists recognise that, they are fighting a losing battle”.

Well worth a visit to the library to have a read!

Denis Johnston

2012 SUFFOLK HUMANISTS AND SECULARISTS AGM

Location: SIFRE Centre , WestBuilding, University Campus Suffolk, Waterfront Building, Neptune Quay, Ipswich IP4 1QJ. <http://www.sifre.org.uk/> for more details

Time: **7:30 Tuesday 10th April 2012.**

Agenda

1. Apologies.
2. Minutes of last AGM.
3. Matters arising.
4. Reports:
5. Nomination and election of committee:
6. Motions:
7. AOB.

The meeting will be followed by a screening of the Pullman interview (DVD).

Reports received for the meeting are in the following pages.

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SECRETARY'S REPORT

Membership: Membership has increased slightly over the year, however the turnout at meetings is low, rarely exceeding 14 or 15 and sometimes as low as 6. The number of members opting to receive Newsletters by email has increased to 25 (from 15 last year). This is something we want to encourage as not only does it reduce the workload on the secretary, but because the recently announced 39% price rise in second class postage will clearly increase our costs.

Newsletter: Margaret Nelson has continued diligently to regularly provide the Newsletter, although now 4 times a year rather than monthly. If a member is willing to take over this job possibly "apprenticed" to Margaret for a while we would be very pleased to hear from them!

Affiliations: We are affiliated to the BHA and National Secular society. Both provide Newsletters (paper only in the case of the NSS) and I distribute the BHA electronic ones to all SHANDS members. Paper versions are not distributed but recent copies of both are available at meetings.

BHA membership costs the group £70 per year and NSS is £29.

We are also affiliated to SAVO (Suffolk Association of Voluntary Organisations) primarily because this gives others visibility of our organisation. This costs £5.

Meetings: Monthly meetings have continued to be held every second Tuesday of the month. In November we moved from Pinewood Hall to the SIFRE building in Ipswich. The costs of Pinewood were quite high and when we were offered the use of the SIFRE accommodation we thought that not only would it save money but this might be more accessible to members and particularly those using public transport. However, in the event, it appears that it has had the opposite effect and that some who were happy to drive to Pinewood were unwilling to navigate through central Ipswich.

Most meetings have taken the form of talks, reflective sessions e.g. 10 minute topics, or DVDs.

To cover the refreshment costs each attendee is asked to make a small donation.

Our thanks to John Palmer for looking after the refreshments.

Social events: The informal lunchtime **pub meetings** at the Duke of York) in Woodbridge have continued to be held every other month and usually attract 8 to 10 members

Executive Committee: Executive Committee consists of the Officers - Chair, vice-Chair, Secretary and Treasurer - and two members (total six). However nobody was able to take on the chair at the AGM and positions remained unfilled. EC meetings and members meeting were chaired on a rolling basis.

One of the first decisions of the EC was to reinstate face to face EC meetings (rather than telephone or Skype). Initially these were held at the Oyster Reach pub but as this became rather crowded we moved to the Brewery Tap. This was particularly convenient because "Sceptics in the Pub" (now called "Science in the Pub") also met there on the same Tuesday evening of the month, immediately after the EC meeting.

During the year three EC members resigned. Colleen Nunn had indicated at the AGM that she would be standing down in August when her baby was due and both Andrew Sheldon and John Palmer resigned at the time of the BHA Partnership/Affiliation issue (see below).

Campaigns: We staged a display in Ipswich Library for Humanist Week. We still have a large number(250) of car stickers which have not been distributed.

20th Anniversary Celebrations: We had planned to hold a celebratory dinner at Alder Carr and had provisionally booked it for 26th November. However after contacting all the members we found that we would not have enough takers to reach the minimum number

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required by the caterers. With hindsight this was rather fortuitous as the date clashed not just with BHA and NSS AGMs but with the local “Interfaith week” dinner.

BHA Partnership/Affiliation: After the series of consultation stages during 2010 and 2011 the BHA provided a final recommendation in September 2011. The original view of the committee was that most members would opt for full partnership. However after representation from some of the members this was put to a poll and all members were subsequently balloted. The result was an overwhelming vote (40 to 9 from a total of 70 members) rejecting the Partnership option and so the group has remained as an Affiliate. Unfortunately the tension generated by this issue resulted in the resignation of two committee members.

Press and Media: Letters were written to the local press about the census and (of course) the strange “Warsi” pronouncements about “militant secularism”. However none (as far as I have been able to determine) were ever published.

Future campaigns: The issue of “Faith Schools” remains high on the agenda. This is something that every member who has any connection with education- even as a parent of or grandparent of a schoolchild – can influence.

East of England meeting of Humanist Groups. EC members attended two meetings.

GRAM: We did not attend this year.

Suffolk SACRE (Standing Advisory Committee on Religious Education): We are represented on this by the secretary. SACRE meets four times a year and there have been several syllabus review meetings as well. I also attended the conference for all RE teachers in the region. To some extent the future role of SACRE is unclear as free schools and academies no longer fall under local Education Authority. Consequently most SACRES are evolving to become advisory rather than statutory bodies. I also attended the BHA meeting for SACRE representatives. Here the

main issues concerned the difficulties experienced by many Humanist Groups on being refused participation by the local SACRES. This is not a problem in Suffolk

The website. The website continues to tick over happily. There were some issues with hackers which have been resolved. Margaret has continued to use the website to ‘blog furiously’ and our thanks are due also to Nathan Nelson for his administration work.
Denis Johnston (Secretary)

TREASURER AND MEMBERSHIP SECRETARY’S REPORT

The group has welcomed 5 new members in the past year and group membership currently stands at 74.

Group finances remain sound with current positive bank balance of £980 thanks to membership subscriptions and two significant donations by group benefactors. In addition to the usual items of expenditure to support our Website and newsletter we incurred some exceptional mailing costs in our consultations of members on the question of British Humanist Association partnership or affiliation. In accordance with the outcome of that ballot we continue to subscribe as Affiliates to the BHA and we also continue to support the National Secular Society with a small annual donation.

Given the usually low attendance at monthly meetings we took the decision to reduce costs (and hopefully improve attendance) by relocating the meeting venue from Pinewood Community centre to (currently) the SIFRE room at University Campus Suffolk in Ipswich. From this venue we will try to attract interest and - perhaps - new members from the UCS community.

John Mellis, Treasurer and Membership Secretary.

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SUFFOLK HUMANIST CEREMONIES REPORT

The team continues to meet on Skype regularly to exchange stories about experiences and news from various Funeral Directors and Crematorium staff. Recently, we also met at Marie's for a delicious tea party and a chat. David unfortunately couldn't make it and missed out on the lovely food.

All four of us are happy with what we're doing and continue to enjoy the work enormously.

Among other things, we discussed forthcoming weddings in a variety of locations, the developing attraction for funerals of Oakfield Wood Burial Ground and the increase in popularity of Seven Hills.

Margaret took photos for the newsletter to be sent out to funeral professionals in the area. It looks very attractive and is clear and concise in its descriptions of us and of what we offer.

We hope to organise another 'face to face' get together before too long, possibly including former Suffolk celebrant Yvonne Peacock. Sue is keen to meet Yvonne, having heard from the others what an interesting person she is as well as a respected celebrant, now retired.

Sue Hewlett

Dates for your diary

BHA ANNUAL CONFERENCE

Efforts are being made to include an "Ethical Jury" as a workshop in this year's BHA Annual conference. These sessions which feature a group making a decision on a real life moral dilemma were devised by Michael Imison and pioneered with the Suffolk Group.

The theme of the 2012 BHA conference is the future. With some of the world's leading scientists, journalists, technologists, and thinkers, it will be looking closely at visions of the future that range from the apocalyptic to the utopian, and include everything from history, art, science, and much more.

Following feedback from last year's event the conference will be held at the National

Museum Cardiff, a remarkable building in the heart of Cardiff that is home to Wales's national archaeology, art, geology, and natural history collections. BHA members and students get reduced tickets for the event.

Details

Time and date: 6:00pm Friday 8 June – 12:30pm Sunday 10 June

Venue: National Museum Cardiff, Cathays Park, Cardiff, CF10 3NP

Tickets: General public: £156 BHA members' tickets: £120 Students / AHS members: £100

Contributors: Internet technologist, journalist, author, and broadcaster Ben Hammersley; the world's first cyborg, Kevin Warwick; sci-fi writer and botanist Paul McAuley; academic and journalist Aleks Krotoski; Professor of the History of Political Thought at Royal Holloway, University of London, Gregory Claeys; Former Chief Scientific Adviser to the UK Government Professor Sir David King; barrister, environmental lawyer and author Polly Higgins; musician, comedian, public speaker, futurologist, and author, Mark Stevenson. More still to be announced!

For more information and to book tickets visit <http://bhaconference.org.uk/> or call on 020 7079 3580.

SUFFOLK HUMANISTS PROGRAMME

10th April—AGM. PLEASE DON'T FORGET.

Saturday 28th April, noon—Pub lunch at The Duke of York, Woodbridge. Family and friends welcome, but please phone (01394387462) or email denisjohnston@btinternet.com) by Wednesday 25th so that we can book

8th May—guest speaker Rhea Williams, acting chairperson of the Queen's English Society.

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