

suffolk Humanist & secularist NEWS

September 2012

MEETING CHANGES

If you let us know your thoughts about when and where we should meet in future, thank you.

Attendances at our monthly meetings have been low lately. Only six people came to hear our guest speaker John Minns from the Woodland Trust in June, which was a shame as he was very interesting. This was, however, typical of recent months.

We (the committee) wondered if this was because our new venue was unpopular; more people used to come to our previous venue, Pinewood Hall. Some have commented that they couldn't find the centre easily, or that they didn't like having to drive into town.

The majority of our members never attend meetings, being happy simply to receive newsletters and follow us on our website, Facebook and Twitter. Most are content to let the small core group of activists do what they can.

From limited research, we get the impression that we're not unique; other small organisations find it difficult to attract members to meetings. One exception is U3A, the University of the Third Age, which offers "lifelong learning" on a co-operative basis to retired people, but their meetings are held during the day.

Some of us dislike driving at night, or can't drive at night, so some daytime meetings would be a good idea. We're investigating venues, perhaps returning to Pinewood Hall, for occasional gatherings on weekend afternoons.

We're going to have fewer meetings, some in the evenings and some in daytime. We may also have more informal social get-togethers, including pub lunches. The last one, on 25th August, attracted about twelve members and guests. The problem with pub lunches though is that they can be very noisy, so it's hard to have a good discussion, even if you're not hard of hearing.

There'll be a meeting at the university again this month (see back page), but there are no finalised plans about what will happen after that; we'll let you know.

If anyone has any suggestions, please get in touch.

You may have seen a recent TV programme about female genital mutilation, which pointed out that although it's illegal in the UK, not one case has been prosecuted and hundreds of girls are at risk. Please sign the e-petition calling for action to HM Government at <http://epetitions.direct.gov.uk/petitions/35313>. Thank you. MN

SOPHIE THE BRAZILIAN



Our member and celebrant Sophie Lovejoy, who lives in Brightlingsea, took part in the Olympics opening ceremony as one of the gold-clad carnival-goers with a big drum suspended over her head, to celebrate the next games in Rio. Although I was looking out for her, I'd never have recognised her in this get-up! This is what she looks like when she's not in fancy dress >>>>



Sophie says she'll be in the Paralympics closing ceremony too—no idea what she'll look like this time! MN

A HUMANIST BOX

Suffolk Inter-Faith Resource (we're affiliated) is collecting a selection of boxes for RE teachers to use as resources, containing artefacts provided by each of the members faiths—and us. Ours will be a bit different from the others, with a collection of objects to stimulate discussion; a fossil, a teapot, a telescope, etc. We'll explain at our next meeting.



Denis's books

*At the July meeting, members shared their thoughts about the books they'd been reading lately. **Denis Johnston** describes his choice.*

I considered three books. The first was "The pleasure of finding things out" by Richard Feynman. My youngest son recommended this and it has

been lying around the house for ages. Although Richard Feynman is one of the most famous physicists of all time this book is not scientific but is mainly about his attitude(s) to life.

Feynman was a maverick. He worked on top secret assignments – and was one of the key figures in developing the atomic bomb. He was also one of the very few people who saw an atomic bomb go off and survived with his sight intact. But he was a complete 'loose cannon in the organisations he worked for. He delighted in breaking into cabinets containing files and playing 'cat and mouse' with his management. His passion was for understanding.

The book is a celebration of the joy he discovered in finding out how things worked, from the simplest clockwork toy to the complexities of particle physics, and reflects his awe and wonder at the beauty and simplicity of the underlying mathematics.

There is little deep philosophy in the book but there is clarity and simplicity on his views on life and (non)-religion.

I was especially interested in his views of the bomb.. More than anyone he knew what he was doing and what the implication was. Accordingly I had expected that he might have at least a chapter on his thoughts. But what is there is quite limited.

His moral take was very simple. It was them or us. If the USA had not developed the bomb when they did the Axis powers would have built theirs and won the war with it. For him at the time it was not a matter of morality – it was simply a race as to who got there first. He even goes so far as to say how much he expressed his delight with the dropping of the first bomb at the time – and how there was feeling of relief..

My second book was "Thinks" by David Lodge. The book is based on the relationship between a cognitive scientist, Ralph Messenger, and a humanist creative-writing instructor and novelist Helen Reed. The essence of the book is a debate over the nature of human consciousness and contains views from the various 'traditions'. I suppose that I was bit disappointed – mainly because the fundamental debate was just a rerun of the strong/weak AI debates that were current in the '80s. The rest of the plot was OK but it wasn't quite what I had had hoped for in adding to what I was already familiar with.

BBC Complaint

During the weekend of 18-19 August, it was reported that Winnie Johnson, mother of murder victim Keith Bennett, had died without knowing what Moors murderer Ian Brady had done with her son's remains. Mrs Johnson's solicitor was interviewed about this by the BBC's News 24 weekend presenter Maxine Mawhinney. I was among others who complained to the BBC about Ms Mawhinney:

"During an interview with Mrs Winnie Johnson's solicitor, John Ainley, Maxine Mawhinney asked if Brady was religious. Ainley said he wasn't. Mawhinney said that this meant that Brady wouldn't have a conscience, or words to that effect. It's the sort of ignorant comment I expect from some religious people, but a BBC newsreader ought to know better than to suggest that an atheist wouldn't have a conscience. Brady may not have one, but that has nothing to do with his atheism."

The BBC's response included the following: "... it was not Maxine Mawhinney's deliberate intention to comment—explicitly or implicitly—on religion and conscience but we accept that such an impression could have been given and we're sorry if this is how it came across to some in our audience."

They went on, "... this issue will be discussed with both the presenter and the overall editor in charge that weekend."

The third book was Diana Butler's "Christianity after Religion". I was asked to read this after one of Mike King's talks at SIFRE and to give an atheist/humanist view on it. Butler is an American and the book was written in an American context – with Mega-churches, Christian fundamentalism, contemporary views "I'm not religious but I'm spiritual" etc, forming a backdrop. My main feeling was that she was something of a modern day Lutheran – railing against the obviously corrupt and compromised US church establishments – especially the prosperity churches – and also being concerned that the 'new spiritualism' with its associated flim-flam is all total nonsense. I empathised with her but felt that she had not gone far enough – she ended up as an apologist and reformer rather than someone who could just as well have concluded that her 'spiritual/Christian' belief was just as much nonsense as the rest. There was however one observation she made. One that really struck me as being so obvious that I could not see why I hadn't noticed it before. This was where she speculated that faith might just be something based upon intuition and "intuitive feelings". It is not quite as pithy as Mark twain's "Faith is believin' what you know ain't true" but it has a certain resonance. When I thought about it – that was exactly what it was.

All the "great" religious leaders and their closest disciples based their beliefs upon 'revelation'. It is nothing more than what we would today term intuition. Sometimes there is just one concept that makes a book well worth reading and this was it.

Café Scientifique, Ipswich

John Mellis

Café Scientifique is a place where, for the price of a cup of coffee or a glass of wine, anyone can come to explore the latest ideas in science and technology.



Meetings take place in cafes, bars, restaurants and even theatres, but always outside a traditional academic context". That's the welcoming 'tag-line' on the website at www.cafescientifique.org, and locally a regular Café Scientifique meeting has sprung up in the congenial surroundings of Arlingtons Brasserie in Museum Street, Ipswich. Not only congenial, but appropriate, since the Arlington's building was originally Ipswich Museum, England's first purpose-built museum, created in 1847 to "educate the working classes in natural history". Professor John Stevens Henslow, who was Charles Darwin's tutor at Cambridge, gave public lectures at the museum for thirty years.

Recent talks have been by Hugh Whittall (Director of the Nuffield Bioethics Council) on "Novel Neurotechnologies: Intervening in the brain"; Gavin Devereaux, (sports science expert and lecturer at University Campus Suffolk) on "Novel exercise techniques to reduce hypertension and cardiology"; Brendon Noble, (Professor of Regenerative Medicine and Head of the School of Science, Technology and Health at University Campus Suffolk) on "Life and death in the cell" and Fandi Ibrahim on "Gut Microbiota: The Forgotten Organ in our body".

I went to the June meeting which featured an illustrated talk by Dr Lisa Jardine-Wright (Educational Outreach Officer at the Cavendish Laboratory, Cambridge) on "Galaxy formation: painting by numbers". Dr Jardine-Wright has a PhD in Theoretical Cosmology from Cambridge University and for her doctoral work she studied the processes of galaxy formation basically by building computer models of the effects of gravity on stars and inter-stellar dust. The meeting start was a bit delayed since the usual small side-room which can hold about 20 people was quickly filled up, so we de-camped to the main bar, drew the blinds, and about 50 people settled down with their drinks, for the talk and discussion.

Lisa used a combination of slides and props to talk about her work – not just the computer modelling (which confirmed how the effects of gravity can produce spinning spiral-arm galaxies like our own) but also how spectral filters (in our case some coloured plastic film!) and optical telescopes have been used to study the large-scale universe. We now know that the universe is quite big (understatement!) and one slide really brought this home: a Hubble telescope view of a tiny but entirely average fragment of sky – equivalent to a grain of rice held, end-on, at arm's length – showing hundreds of galaxies similar to our own – that is, each containing around 100 billion stars. The talk and slides prompted a good session of questions and discussion and the audience dispersed both well-

informed and well-lubricated.

Meetings are scheduled on the last Monday of the month at Arlingtons, (13 Museum Street, Ipswich, IP1 1HE) usually starting at 7pm. They seem to be suspended in July and August but I thoroughly recommend attending when they re-start. You can monitor the schedule of planned meetings by Googling 'Café Scientifique Ipswich'. Be there or be – well – uninformed!

Note: dates will be in our website calendar – Ed.

Cross-dressing

Derek Mason

No, the title does not mean what you are thinking but refers to wearing a cross.

After a few centuries of complacency, with great wealth and unquestioned power, the Christian leaders seem to think that the church is under attack, with a hint of panic and paranoia. They are exhorting their followers to wear a cross at all times. This can have consequences and two legal cases are rumbling on.

One is a nurse banned from wearing a cross on duty. Crosses are usually suspended by a fine chain, easily snapped. At an operation, a surgeon doesn't want to have to rummage in a patient's innards for the metalwork!

The other is the air stewardess banned from wearing a cross. This is a company which has the motif of three crosses on its planes' tails.

The crosses are usually made of precious metals, of intricate design, sometimes studded with jewels. As symbols they seem somewhat removed from an instrument of torture and death.

Reference is often made to the "true cross". It follows that there must be an "untrue cross". What is it?

Correction: Nadia Eweida, the BA employee who was suspended for breaching the company's uniform code, was a check-in clerk, not an air stewardess. Ed.

The NSS's Terry Sanderson has been busy in the media challenging the myth that crucifixes are generally banned, hoping that the European Court "will put a stop to this nonsense." He wrote,

The impression is widely shared that there is some sort of generalised "ban" on the wearing of crosses and crucifixes at work . . .

Over the last few years, as the repeated challenges to the equality law from Christian activists have escalated and made their unsuccessful way through the legal system, the propagandists at the Christian Legal Centre and the Christian Institute have found willing allies in the right-wing press to spread their distortions and sometimes outright lies about these cases. The Mail and the Telegraph have been happy to tell only one side of the story – and in

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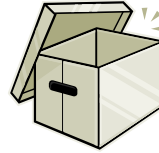
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We currently meet on the second Tuesday of every month from 7.30-10pm in the Inter-Faith Centre, West Building, University Campus Suffolk, IP4 1QJ. The West Building is at the top right corner of the car park. Please get in touch if you need maps and directions. Refreshments are provided.

Our group was founded in 1991 to promote humanism and secularism, and to provide fellowship, education and support for non-believers in Suffolk and North East Essex.

We're affiliated to The British Humanist Association, The National Secular Society, and Suffolk Inter-Faith Resource (SIFRE). The group is a member of SAVO—the Suffolk Association of Voluntary Organisations.

Sympathetic non-members are welcome, but by joining us you'll help us to raise awareness of Humanism and Secularism, and to challenge the increasing influence of religion in public life, the arts and the media.



Next meeting: Tuesday 11th September—usual time and place—**An explanation of the Humanist Box for Schools,**

followed by 10-Minute Topics.

For more on the box, see page 1.

10-Minute Topics is a popular format. You're invited to write a topic you'd like to discuss on a piece of paper, the suggestions are put in a hat (or anything suitable) and drawn at random. Sometimes the discussions can lead to further debate or action, another day.



CEREMONIES

We provide religion-free ceremonies in Suffolk and N E Essex. Our celebrants are David Mitchell, Sophie Lovejoy and Sue Hewlett, with retired celebrant Margaret Nelson as co-ordinator. For more information about funerals, weddings, baby-namings and other ceremonies, phone 01473 658828 or email ceremonies@suffolkhands.org.uk.

NEW CHAIRPERSON

My deteriorating eyesight makes driving at night unsafe, so I won't be able to attend evening meeting except in high summer. I think the chair ought to be able to attend meetings, don't you? So I've quit the chair but will stay on the committee for now. I'm pleased that Sue Hewlett, who was our vice-chair, has taken over as chair. Hope that's OK with everyone.
Margaret

21 YEARS CELEBRATION

Because of the distraction over the BHA's partnership or affiliation choice, plans for our 20th anniversary in December last year were put on one side.

We're going to celebrate our 21st year instead with a tea party in December—date and venue to be announced. There will be cake.

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most instances even that has been extremely partial.

It continues even today, as the Mail tells the same tired version of events – the one that leaves out anything that might disturb their carefully constructed myth of persecution it has created. It once more gives a platform to the increasingly extreme Lord Carey to display his rather sad paranoia about imaginary attacks on the Christian faith in Britain.

But it works. One of the comments under the story says: "So, who is it that is offended by the display of a crucifix? I am not and I dare say the vast majority of British citizens feel the same."

But this was never about the "display of a crucifix"; it was about wearing jewellery in an inappropriate situation in the workplace. Such a simple concept has been turned into an all-out attack on Christianity by somebody – not sure who.

Why not join in the conversations on our website (URL below), on Facebook (www.facebook.com/suffolkhands) or Twitter (@SHandSNews)?

Humanism is an ethical approach to life without religion; humanists think we can be good without God. Secularism is the belief that religion should have no place in civil affairs; that the church and state should be kept separate.

www.agoodlifewithoutreligion.com

www.suffolkhands.org.uk