

Our AGM next week is at Arlington's Brasserie, Museum Street, Ipswich, at 7.30pm on Tuesday 12th May. As well as the usual organisational stuff and the election of a committee, we'd like to hear your ideas about our activities during the coming year. Hope to see you there.

The next pub lunch will be at the Rushbrooke Arms at Sicklesmere on the A134 near Bury St Edmunds on Saturday May 30th at noon. If you'd like to join us, please get in touch by Monday 25th, as we have to book—sue.hewlett@sky.com or phone Sue on 01473 328541. As always, if you need or can offer a lift, we'll try to help.

Ron Alston

Founder member Ron Alston died on 25th February, aged 90. His funeral was conducted by Suffolk Humanist Celebrant David Mitchell on 23rd March. Ron's wife Madge wrote the eulogy, which included a reference to his



involvement in the NHS, as he'd played a part in its inception. Ron served in the RAF during the war and when he was demobbed he joined the Civil Service, in the Department of Health. He and his team were responsible for the legislation of the 1948 NHS Act, Madge wrote, and he talked about how proud they were when Aneurin "Nye" Bevan, the Minister for Health, thanked them for getting the act through Parliament. In later years, Ron took advantage of the NHS when he needed heart surgery.

Some of our long-term members will remember summer garden parties at Madge and Ron's in Claydon, when we enjoyed a game of croquet on the lawn. As it sloped towards the house, the knack was to make allowances for this. Ron, having designed the layout, was always amused by other people's efforts.

So thank you Ron for your contribution to the group's success, for the fun and games, and for your part in the establishment of the NHS.

Review of the Year

Sue Hewlett, Chairperson's report, 2015

The last year has seen changes to the regular pattern of our activities. It seemed prudent to seriously consider the changing clientele and the need to attract new members if we are to develop and thrive in future. One result of this thinking was to try different venues for pub lunches. The Duke of York in Woodbridge remains popular, so we enjoyed lunch there and then decided to try its sister establishment, The Beagle at Sproughton. Unfortunately, a few people who were intent on joining us in Sproughton were unable to for different reasons, but nine of us enjoyed a good lunch and lively conversation. For our May 30th outing, we plan to book the Rushbrooke Arms near Bury St Edmunds on the A134.

Sunday afternoon meetings in Hadleigh tend to be less well attended but are always enjoyable. It was good to welcome Judy and Barry Prime to Denis's quiz along with Pat and Brian from Sudbury, following their introduction to the group at the summer barbecue in Stutton, which again proved to be a very popular event.

November saw one of our liveliest meetings when we discussed British values. Members expressed wide ranging views, especially about what should be taught or otherwise transmitted to children in schools. There was also the superb extra element provided by Ian Heywood, who wrote and performed a song on the subject.

In December, some of us attended the annual UN

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Association Celebration of Human Rights, this year at the Ipswich Seventh-day Adventist Church. The theme was Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights; the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion. Denis prepared a clear and comprehensive explanation of the Humanist perspective on the theme, including a clear, concise statement of exactly what secularism means.

Due to a hiccup with the February booking of a Darwin Day speaker, Denis stepped up, as he often does, and asked, "Is there a limit to Free Speech?", with recent events in Paris in mind. Some lively discussion ensued.

At our March meeting, Denis yet again took the lead and gave an entertaining and interesting talk on artificial intelligence from its beginnings with chess-playing automata (some of them clever frauds), through real chess-playing machines and the creation of early computers. Various definitions of AI were discussed and the validity of the Turing Test in determining the 'intelligence' of machines and 'neural networks' was vigorously debated.

In April we were treated to a visit from **Richy Thompson**, the BHA's Campaigns Manager, charged with the task of investigating practices in faith schools and challenging them at every turn. His presentation was detailed and comprehensive. His progress in the campaign against faith schools can be followed on the BHA website. There was a good turnout for this event at Arlington's Brasserie in Museum Street, which is where we now usually meet. We hope that it's position close to Ipswich town centre and with safe car parking close by make it more likely that we can attract new members to attend our events. There is some evidence to support this thought, though it's still early days. There is also the added advantage that there is no charge for this venue, which we hope will help us boost our funds to be able to afford speakers more frequently.

Following the AGM, we plan an evening of astronomy. We will be approaching two possible experts soon.



Secretary's Report

Denis Johnston

We've started to meet more frequently again and generally managed once a month. The refurbishment of Pinewood Hall meant that we tried another venue, Arlington's Brasserie, usually in the appropriately named Darwin room. Turnout at these meetings remains rather low but are at no cost. See Sue's report for more about this. It's quite striking that the different meeting venues, times and events seem to attract a different set of people, probably reflecting the fact that we're widely dispersed geographically.

Many thanks to Sue for hosting the summer barbecue and to John Palmer for looking after the refreshments and also for keeping the BHA and NSS up to date with our activities.

The problem of gaining new members, especially younger ones, remains an issue. At one point posting events on www.meetup.com seemed an attractive proposition but were put off by the rather high cost and long term commitment.

Margaret Nelson continues to provide the newsletter. An increasing number of you have opted to receive this electronically.

We're affiliated to the British Humanist Association and the National Secular society. We're also members of Suffolk Interfaith Resource (SIFRE), Community Action Suffolk (CAS), and we're listed on Suffolk County Council's InfoLink website.

We started the year with a full complement of committee members and officers, however Peter Wells resigned during the year and Ed Sedgewick was unable to attend having started work in London.

We've had occasional exposure in the press and on BBC Radio Suffolk.

The issue of faith schools remains high on the agenda. This is something that every member who has any connection with education—as a parent or grandparent—can influence. Richy Thompson's overview at the April meeting was enlightening.

Unfortunately no-one was able to attend the BHA Group representatives Annual meeting (GRAM) this year.

I represent SHANDS on Suffolk County Council's Standing Advisory Committee for Religious Education (SACRE). It's been an interesting year, especially as the role of SACREs in monitoring school activities is increasingly unclear since many schools are no longer under local authority control. Interestingly, members of Birmingham's SACRE have been active in preventing, indeed attacking, the idea that non-religious worldviews should be taught in schools—this was just before the Trojan Horse issue arose. All in all the position of SACREs in relationship to academies and faith schools remains confused, in that SACREs seem to have responsibilities but no authority.

We're affiliated to Suffolk Interfaith Resource (SIFRE), a charitable company which was set up to provide educational resources of the type that would be of use to RE teachers, social workers, nurses, etc., or indeed any organisation or group that needs information about the diverse range of beliefs in the county. It also organises Forums of Faiths where representatives of religious and other groups share their ideas and beliefs in a bid to improve mutual understanding and tolerance. SIFRE has been very active during the year and we have been extensively involved with it. However the future is now less certain. In 2014 the local authority grant that funded the only staff member was withdrawn. University Campus Suffolk, which has provided rent free premises, is redeveloping the site, starting this July. SIFRE's library, which has just been extensively catalogued, is currently being distributed to whoever can provide a home. In future SIFRE will most likely have a purely virtual existence. Through SIFRE we've been able to speak in schools and to other voluntary and statutory bodies, and I was guest speaker at the 2014 SIFRE AGM.

During the year SIFRE published a book, 'Sharing our Stories', with contributions from local people of faith, a diverse collection of experiences from Suffolk people. Four members of us made contributions, including the late Derek Mason.

The website continues to tick over and has been transferred to the WordPress content management system. Yet again our thanks are due to Nathan Nelson as webmaster and for Margaret's relentless blogging there and on Twitter, Facebook and any other medium she can access.

Suffolk Humanist Ceremonies

David Mitchell

The last year has seen the ceremonies team at a crossroads. A combination of Sue Hewlett's retirement, Margaret Nelson's health problems and lack of transport (so she's only occasionally available, close to home), and our lack of success in finding suitable trainees, has effectively reduced the team to just Sophie Lovejoy in Colchester and me in Pettaugh. Sophie also has a responsible part-time job and two teenagers, which means she's not always available.

I retired from banking many years ago and since the end of 2001 have been a full time celebrant, a job I love and which has given me, as it has others, immense satisfaction. The problem is that with every year that passes I don't get any younger and I get an increasing number of repeat instructions for families and groups of people I've helped before. The workload has quite simply become unsustainable. I recently conducted a wedding but have decided that after another in July I shan't accept any further weddings or namings. They are lovely but simply too time consuming to prepare and deliver. As neither Sophie nor Margaret do weddings, it means that we will no longer be offering this service. The group's website will need amending accordingly.

The number of civil and independent celebrants continues to grow so that less than half of all crematorium funerals in our area are now conducted by ordained priests. Some of the civil celebrants are very good, most of them are not, according to crematorium staff who are in the best position to judge. Sadly, many funeral directors are happy to employ them as all offer "anything the client wants", which often means a hybrid ceremony including a pale imitation of a Humanist ceremony with added prayers and a hymn or two. I call them Low Calorie God or Religion Lite. Like all our celebrants present and past, Sophie, Margaret and I will never accept instructions to conduct such a ceremony.

The group will need to decide on the future of the ceremonies team and its association with the SHANDS name, as in many respects it doesn't really warrant the description of a *team* at present. I'd like to carry on for

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Suffolk Humanists & Secularists

For the good life, without religion

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Founded in 1991, we're affiliated to The British Humanist Association, The National Secular Society, and Suffolk Inter-Faith Resource. 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.

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.

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

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the time being and would be willing, if the group decided to dissolve the team, to become independent and remove any reference to the group from my stationery and business cards. I would, however, continue to operate in the way I always have, i.e. completely religion free ceremonies based solely on Humanist philosophy.

Footnote:

For the benefit of newer members, the Suffolk Humanist group and Suffolk Humanist Ceremonies developed together, from 1991. The ceremonies came first, when I started as a solo officiant, covering most of Suffolk and N E Essex. The group was founded six months later, after I placed an ad in the BHA's national newsletter. David and others have joined the team, some have left, and between us we've officiated at thousands of funerals and hundreds of weddings and baby-namings. For many Suffolk and Essex people, attending one of our ceremonies has been their introduction to Humanism, and while only a minority have joined our organisations, many others have remained supporters and kept in touch, on and off. I've made some very good friends through doing ceremonies. So it would make me very sad if it all fizzled out.

We've had to turn down several would-be celebrants, for a variety of reasons, but I don't regret this because we have a reputation for high standards and haven't been willing to compromise. It's not too late, if you think you might make a good celebrant. See <http://suffolkhands.org.uk/ceremonies/becomeacelebrant/>.

David has spoken of covering a smaller area, so he doesn't need to travel so far, and as long as he's willing to continue, and Sophie and I are able to offer our help, I'd ask the group to leave things as they are and review the situation next year—or sooner, if our circumstances change.

Margaret

www.suffolkhands.org.uk

www.agoodlifewithoutreligion.com