

Suffolk Humanists

Promoting Humanism and Secularism

Welcome to our Winter issue

In this bumper issue we cover a wide range of topics reflecting the eclectic nature of our activities and the interests of members. On the front page you will find not one but two 'think pieces'. Written entirely independently they are both personal reflections on how we relate to decent people who don't share our non-religious world view. They make us think about understanding others at a time when we clearly need to build bridges rather than walls. If you've got thoughts on these pieces or anything else included herein, please consider writing a piece for the first newsletter of 2020. Which reminds me... *Happy New Year!* Ed.
[This issue's banner shows highly magnified ice crystals.]

Thoughts on a personal experience: a 'think piece' by Peter Wells

Recently, I have had lengthy discussions with an old friend from years ago who happens to hold quite firm religious views of the Baptist/Free-Presbyterian variety.

We might think that such a person would hold atheists, humanists and those of a secularist persuasion as unclean and, frankly, beyond redemption. But, in this case at least, not so!

I showed my nameless friend a short text which he read: "Secularism is not atheism. Atheism is a lack of belief in gods. Secularism merely provides a framework for a democratic society. Atheists have an obvious interest in promoting secularism, but secularism itself does not seek to challenge the tenets of any religion or belief, nor does it seek to force atheism on anyone. Secularism is solely a means of ensuring equality throughout society - in politics, the law, and elsewhere - for believers and non-believers alike."

His response? "Yes, I agree with every word." That made me really happy and made me think that we need to work much harder to get through to people. We need to break through the initial rigid barriers and make contact with fellow humans who are not our natural enemies - just people with different world views. Inter-faith communication is a start, but to be most influential we all need to sing from the same secularist hymn sheet.

Peter

Peter is right that secularism needn't be an issue that separates atheists and those of faith. It's ironic that the religious right in the US now see the First Amendment's *de facto* separation of church and state as an attack on their religious freedoms when, in fact, it was included to defend the rights of those holding minority beliefs – specifically the Danbury Baptists of Connecticut. Of course, we in England can have no such separation while our monarch serves simultaneously as Head of State and Supreme Governor of the established church. Disestablishment now! Ed.

Our upbringing can influence for longer than we think: a 'think piece' by Edna Salmon

Out shopping recently I donated to the Salvation Army 'tin' and was given *The War Cry*. My parents were both officers – Brigadiers – in the Sally Army so I was, I suppose, indoctrinated although my recollections, especially of my Mum, are just of love and commitment to helping everyone. All who knocked on our door were welcomed and helped – whoever they were.

I still find it hard to discuss belief and non-belief with 'her sort' of good people. This *War Cry* set me thinking. Inside the front cover it says:

"The Salvation Army first published a newspaper called the War Cry in London in December 1879, and we have continued to appear every week since then. Our name refers to our battle for people's hearts and souls as we promote the positive impact of the Christian faith and the Salvation Army's fight for greater social justice".

Who could disagree with fighting for social justice? Who could argue with my mother's work towards improving the lives of others? I would very much like to know how others manage when talking to those whose take on life is unquestionably admirable, but is based on a premise that we consider false.

I still admire how Mum led her life: it was the life she wanted and chose. I'm also sure she would understand my point of view now. She would be especially pleased that her granddaughter who when asked at the age of 15, "What do you want to be?" answered, "Like you Grandma", is now in a career helping others, in a secular way certainly, but very much with the ethos of her grandmother - my Mum.

Edna

Edna's story personifies a general conundrum – how do we respond to religious people doing good things when we reject the basis of their religion? Perhaps the first step is to consciously separate the individual from the organisation. My guess is that Edna's mum did good things simply because she was a good person. I'll bet that she would have been kind to others if she'd been born in, say, a Muslim country, or at a time before the Booths set up their 'army'. But what about the institution? The Salvation Army's mission is clear: it is an evangelical movement trying to convert non-believers to the Army's own particular brand of Christianity. Now that's a mission I can't support. Ed.

Did you know... ?

The Beatles 1966 song *Strawberry Fields Forever* is a reference to the fields behind the Salvation Army's 'Strawberry Field' orphanage in the Liverpool suburb of Woolton where the young John Lennon played with his childhood friends.

September: Observatory Visit

By Mike Whybray

Earlier in the year I gave a talk to members about 'Cosmic Evolution'. As a follow-up, I used my privilege as a member of Orwell Astronomical Society Ipswich (OASI) to arrange a visit to the Orwell Park Observatory at Nacton on the evening of September 12th.

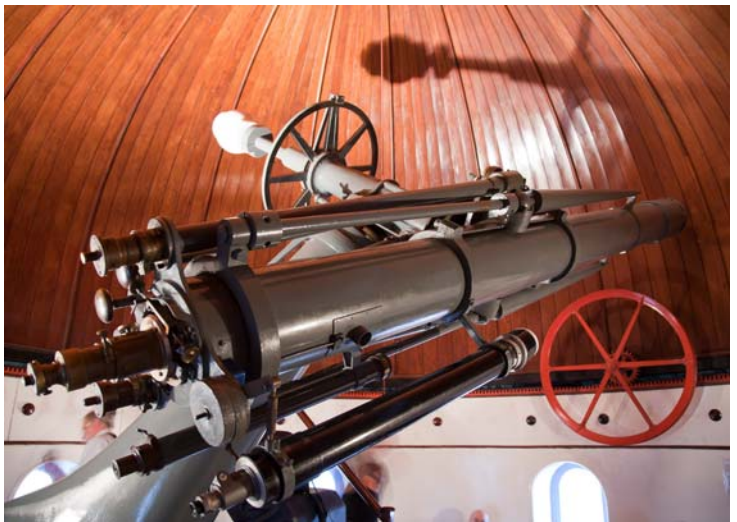
Come the night the sky was actually clear (astronomers get used to being clouded out!) and six Suffolk Humanists assembled with our two OASI hosts in the car park. First stop was about 60 steps up to the Belvedere Room, which is a ring-shaped room below the telescope room which has several balconies with tall windows to admire the views over the river Orwell. Here everyone squeezed into an alcove to hear the history of Orwell Park and the observatory from Paul Whiting who, along with other members, has researched how Colonel Tomline came to have it built. In short, he was a very rich Victorian gentleman indulging in the then popular enthusiasm for amateur science. It is believed, however, that he did very little observing himself, delegating this task to a hired astronomer named John Isaac Plummer, and the real purpose of the observatory was to impress his friends and, as a side effect, to provide work for local people.

After Paul's talk we proceeded upstairs to see the telescope - now named The Tomline Refractor. This is a refracting telescope (i.e. it uses a lens rather than a mirror to collect light) with a 258mm diameter objective lens and a prime focal length of about 3.9 metres. It is mounted on a massive 'equatorial' mount which is angled at 52 degrees (the latitude of Nacton) so that the main axis of rotation of the telescope is exactly aligned with the Earth's spin axis (North-South). This makes it much easier to track stars as they move across the sky due to the Earth's rotation. The telescope sits inside a dome which is lined with mahogany (to impress Tomline's friends!) with a slot which slides open to allow a somewhat narrow view of the sky. The whole dome can be rotated using a large wheel engaging with sprocket teeth on the lip of the tower to allow the telescope to view in any direction. This is an example of great Victorian engineering which still works. The weight-driven clockwork telescope drive is still in place but has been replaced in use by a modern electronic stepper motor.

I had chosen a date when Jupiter, Saturn and the Moon would all be viewable in the sky, as well as faint objects such as the Andromeda galaxy. Sadly by the time Paul had finished his talk the clouds were starting to roll in, so we missed Jupiter, saw the rings around Saturn, and only saw the moon through partial cloud. Another time I will insist on viewing first if the sky is clear so my apologies to our visitors in not doing so this time!

In its day the telescope was among the top 25 in the world and although it has long since been superseded by telescopes with mirrors wider than the whole dome of Orwell Park Observatory, it is still working continuing its function of allowing us to learn much about our universe simply by focussing the light from distant stars and galaxies.

Mike Whybray



Above: The 258mm Tomline Refractor Telescope dating from 1874. Photo courtesy of the OASI.

October: Book Night

In a previously untried experiment, the October meeting took the form of a 'Book Night' where members brought along a book (or, in the case of George, two books!) that they thought would be of interest to others. The result was a collection of books covering an extraordinarily broad range of topics only one of which was explicitly linked to Humanism (thank you John Palmer!). History, science, and 'social politics' featured heavily with Barbara Wells bucking the trend with '*The Flavour Thesaurus*', a rather improbable book exploring 99 flavours and their combinations. Reviews of all the books presented are included in the November monthly bulletin which is available on our website. It was an interesting evening and a format worth repeating in the future.

The Flavour Thesaurus is by Niki Segnit and is published by Bloomsbury Publishing (2010)

Radio Suffolk: 'Tuesday Takeover'

On Tuesday 29th October, we took part in a Radio Suffolk programme on the topic of 'All Faiths and None'. Denis Johnston and Peter Wells represented us in discussions about spirituality, the sanctity of life, and the Golden Rule. In the event it was a somewhat atheist dominated affair with no representation of the Anglican or Roman Catholic churches or the Muslim and Jewish faiths. For further details see the November bulletin.



Opposite: Denis Johnston (centre) and Peter Wells (right) with Barbara Richardson-Todd, local self-styled 'post-theist Quaker', in the Radio Suffolk studios.

November: War Art

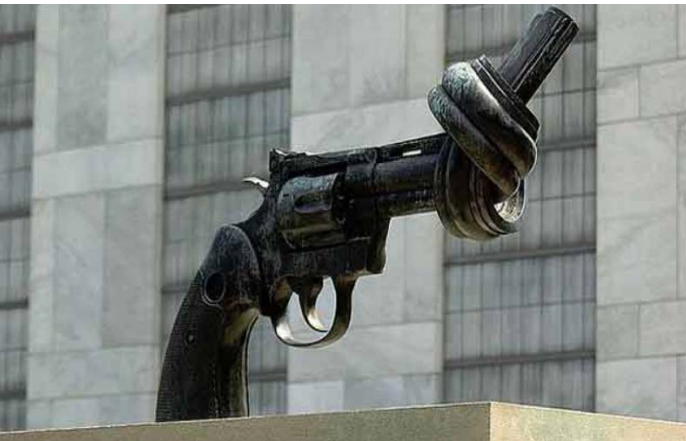
By George Bethell

At our November meeting last year, Liz and Peter Thompson orchestrated an enjoyable and informative evening of 'War Poetry'. This year, George Bethell gave an illustrated talk on 'War Art' focussing on the way in which war has been portrayed in paintings from the British battle for Quebec (1759) up to the bombing of Guernica in 1937. The first part of the talk demonstrated the transition from 'great military man' paintings (e.g. *The Death of General Wolfe*), through the more democratic paintings of Lady Butler (e.g. *Roll Call after an Engagement*), up to the almost nihilistic paintings of the battlefields of WW1 (e.g. *We are Making a New World*). In the second part of the talk, we looked at the work of two hugely important artists who did much to show us the unvarnished horrors of war: Francisco Goya and Otto Dix. The evening finished with perhaps the most iconic of all C20th (anti) war art - Pablo Picasso's *Guernica*. The power of the messages sent by Goya, Dix, Nash, Nevinson *et al* is clear, but given the bloody wars that still rage one wonders - is anyone listening?

George

PS: Having done 'War Poetry' and 'War Art', should next year's November meeting look at 'War in Literature'? Please let us know your thoughts.

Ed.



'Non Violence' by Swedish sculpture Carl Reuterswärd.

Uganda Humanist Schools Trust: Update

Last year, Steve Hurd talked to us about the work of the Uganda Humanist Schools Trust in supporting a number of schools in deprived, rural areas of Uganda. At the same meeting, we presented Steve with a cheque to support the Trust's work. Well, the Trust's annual report for 2018-2019 is now available on its website and makes for interesting and uplifting reading. But, as the schools become more successful the pressure to improve and expand grows. In particular, the Trust has decided to support the establishment of a primary school in Katumba, a small village near the border between Uganda and the Democratic Republic of Congo. It is almost impossible to think of a more challenging environment. If you want to read about the Trust's plans and/or make a personal donation please visit www.ugandahumanistschoolstrust.org.

Everyday Militarism

At a recent meeting, the Committee discussed the increasing representation of humanists at national and local Remembrance Day services. It was generally felt that this was a step in the right direction but, at the same time, we all expressed some discomfort at the implicit, and often explicit, militarism of such ceremonies. The Peace Pledge Union goes further and actively campaigns against what it sees as the increasing dangers of 'everyday militarism' in our society. Here's what the PPU says:

"Militarism is on the rise in the UK, seeping into ever more areas of life. Cadet forces in British state schools have more than doubled since 2012. The government has spent over £45 million on projects promoting a "military ethos" in schools. Armed Forces Day is now marked in communities around the UK. Members of the Army Reserve have an annual "Wear your uniform to work" day. We are encouraged to applaud soldiers as "heroes" and give to charities to support them, even as the welfare state on which wounded individuals should be able to rely is dismantled in front of us.

At the PPU, we call this situation "everyday militarism". It's a situation in which military ideas, values and imagery find their way into more and more areas of everyday life. This is gradually becoming normal to the point where we can easily forget how disturbing militarism is."

You can read more about the Peace Pledge Union and its work at: <http://ppu.org.uk/>.

Quick Quiz

These questions are loosely related to things mentioned elsewhere in this newsletter. Good luck!

- 1: The Salvation Army publishes *The War Cry* but who publishes *The Watchtower*?
A Mormons
B Jehovah's Witnesses
C Seventh Day Adventists
- 2: In which historic county would you find John Lennon's Strawberry Fields?
A Lancashire B Cheshire C Staffordshire
- 3: Yerkes Observatory, Wisconsin has the world's largest refracting telescope. What's the diameter of the main lens?
A 20" B 30" C 40"
- 4: Which of these is covered by the US Constitution's Fourth Amendment?
A The right of the people to bear arms
B The right of the people to speak freely
C The right of the people to be secure in their homes
- 5: According to the Peace Pledge Union, when were the first white poppies worn?
A 1919 B 1933 C 1946
- 6: Benjamin West who painted *The Death of General Wolfe* was the second President of the Royal Academy. Who was the first?
A James Wyatt
B Joshua Reynolds
C Thomas Gainsborough

(Answers at foot of back page.)

Education: Our Role

Our activities in the field of education are probably the most important contribution we make to the wider society. Denis Johnston has for some time been the voice of humanism on the Suffolk Standing Advisory Council for Religious Education (SACRE). In addition, a number of our members have visited schools to explain to young people what humanists believe. We have led school assemblies, conducted lessons, and taken part in multi-faith debates. In November, for example, George Bethell and Peter Wells visited Finborough School where they introduced a humanist world view to more than 300 pupils aged 9 to 18.

Also in November, Denis, Barbara Wells and Peter Wells attended Humanist UK's 'Education Day'. Denis went as a SACRE representative whilst Barbara and Peter learnt about Humanist UK's guidelines for working with schools. In 2020 we want to do more so we will be writing to all Suffolk schools explaining what we can offer. If the response is positive we will report on our activities in this newsletter.

Ed.

Can you Adam and Eve it?

On the 13th November 2019, the House of Representatives in Ohio passed a Bill called the Student Religious Liberties Act which, amongst other things, prevents science teachers from penalising students who produce work based on their religious beliefs rather than scientific evidence. It is not entirely clear what this will mean in practice but some commentators suggest that it will allow students to submit - without fear of contradiction or penalty - that the Earth is 6,000 years old and that modern humans were created at that time and have not evolved. Sometimes it's as if the Enlightenment never happened...

Ed.



Above: In November, a half life-size (*sic*) replica of Noah's Ark arrived in Ipswich and will be moored at Orwell Quay for about three months. Dutchman Aad Peters, the man behind the project, said that he chose Ipswich because of "the town's open-minded character" and his desire to "bring people together during Brexit". Good luck with that Aad. If you are interested, adult tickets are £16.50. 😊

Recommended on YouTube

Guernica: What inspired Picasso's masterpiece? 3 mins.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1VSixma864>

Paul Nash: The Elements (Making the New World) 4 mins.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bTUaHv-QzNY>

Leicester German Expressionist Artists - Otto Dix 3 mins.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ooWTsCRVSMO>

Events

Tuesday, 10th December 2019: Midwinter Traditions

Robert Herne, author and course leader for Religious Studies and Ethics at West Suffolk College will talk to us about Midwinter Traditions.

7:30 pm at Thomas Wolsey, 9-13 St Peter's Street, Ipswich, IP1 1XF. Buy a drink and meet us upstairs.

Thursday 12th December 2019: United Nations Association Annual Celebration of Human Rights

The theme this year is Article 18: Freedom of Religion and Belief.

7:30 pm at the Friends' Meeting House, Fonnereau Road, IP1 3 JH

Saturday, 28th December 2019: No Pub Lunch!

The monthly pub lunch will not take place in December.

Tuesday, 14th January: Monthly Meeting

The topic and speaker for this meeting are to be confirmed. The venue is also to be confirmed as the Committee has agreed to try to find a place which is fully accessible.

Saturday, 25th January 2020: Pub Lunch

Duke of York, Woodbridge at noon. If you plan to attend, please let Denis know in advance.

Tuesday, 11th February 2020: Darwin Day Dinner

We are looking for a suitable venue for our annual 'Darwin Day' dinner. If you have a suggestion, please let Denis or any other Committee member know.

Wednesday, 12th February 2020: Humanists UK Darwin Day Lecture

Chris Packham CBE will be the speaker at this year's Humanist UK Darwin Day Lecture. Doors open at 18:30 for a 19:30 start at Troxy, Commercial Road, London E1 0HX. Tickets are on sale via the Humanists UK website.

Call for Contributions

If you wish to comment on anything you've read in this edition of the newsletter or if you would like to contribute a piece for the spring edition, please contact the editor on suffolkhumanists.editor@gmail.com.

Want to join us?

If you would like to join Suffolk Humanists or if you simply want to know more about us, contact Denis Johnston on 01394 387462 or denisjohnston@btinternet.com

You can also contact us through our website:

<http://suffolkhumanists.org.uk/>

Quick Quiz Answers

1: B
2: A
3: C
4: C
5: B
6: B