

Suffolk Humanists

Promoting Humanism and Secularism

Welcome to our Spring issue

2019 could be a springboard for our group. Members at our January meeting were keen to launch a membership drive even though we know it will be difficult to attract new blood. So, once we have finalised our partnership with Humanists UK, we will publicise our events more widely. If you have any suggestions as to how we can raise our profile please contact Denis or any other Committee member. Ed.

[The banner for this issue shows plant fossils from Alaska.]

Darwin Day Dinner

This year our February meeting fell on Darwin's birthday (the 12th) and so we were able to hold our annual 'Darwin Day Dinner' on the day! Eleven of us met, appropriately, in the Darwin Room at Arlingtons in Ipswich. There was some sadness that the portrait of the great man that had hung there for many years was 'lost' when Arlingtons recently changed hands, but once the food and drinks arrived the conversations flowed unabated until chucking out time.

Our thanks to Denis for making the arrangements.

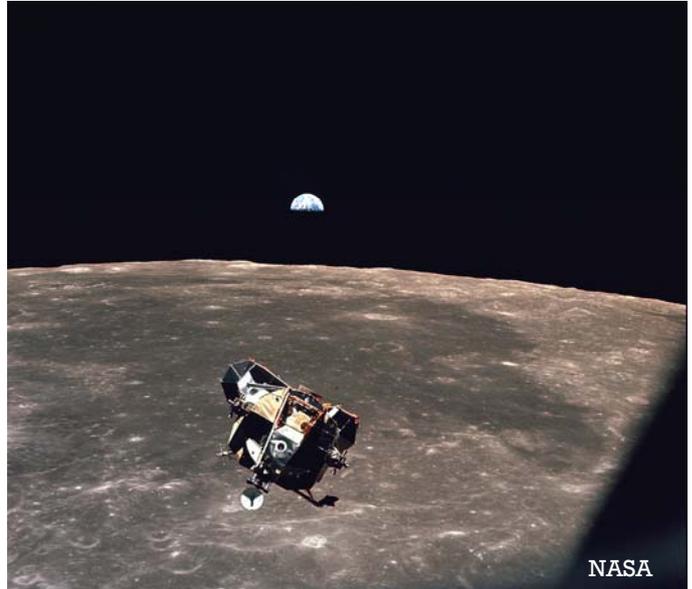
PS Whilst discussing the absent portrait someone asked whether we have images of Darwin without his trademark white beard. Apparently we have many. (Check out: http://www.wikiwand.com/en/Portraits_of_Charles_Darwin) The early drawing below shows Charles (aged six) with his sister Catherine.

George



Charles and Catherine Darwin. Chalk drawing (1816) by Ellen Sharples (1769-1849).

A Flat Earth? Where do you stand?



It may have escaped your attention, but in May of last year the UK's first Flat Earth Convention was held in Birmingham. Participants spent three days discussing the latest flat Earth models and the 'science' that underpins them. In short, flat earthers believe that our planet is not a sphere orbiting the Sun, but a Frisbee-shaped disc around which celestial bodies move - or appear to move. When asked by 'globe earthers' to explain evidence gathered by geoscientists and astronomers, flat earthers come up with ingenious, complex arguments. For example, when asked about gravity they suggest that what we experience is a result of the 'fact' that the flat Earth is accelerating upwards! And when confronted with photographic evidence from satellites and manned space missions, they simply deny its authenticity. Michael Collins' famous photograph of the Earth (above) is, they say, a fake. Why? Because flat earthers believe that the moon landings were faked and were part of a great conspiracy. In this, the flat earthers reflect a more general tendency in society - a deep distrust of established authorities and a strong belief in minority conspiracy theories. Harry T Dyer writing for The Independent sums it up thus:

"In the 21st century, we are witnessing another important shift in both power and knowledge due to factors that include the increased availability of public platforms afforded by social media. Knowledge is no longer centrally controlled and - as has been pointed out in the wake of Brexit - the age of the expert may be passing. Now, everybody has the power to create and share content. When Michael Gove, a leading proponent of Brexit, proclaimed: "I think the people of this country have had enough of experts", it would seem that he, in many ways, meant it."

[<https://www.independent.co.uk/voices/flat-earth-convention-birmingham-fake-news-science-facts-a8336946.html>]

Report on a Multicultural Day for primary school pupils

By John Palmer

In November, two members of our group, Peter Wells and John Palmer, were invited by The East of England Faiths Agency to talk to children from Bentley CEVC Primary School and Copdock Primary School at Copdock Village Hall. There were more than 120 children in the hall, ranging from those in year 1 to 10-11 year-olds in year 6. (The noise generated by 120 kids in one hall has to be experienced to be believed!)

As well as we Humanists, people from Jewish, Buddhist, Hindu and Muslim groups were invited to speak and to display artefacts relevant to their belief systems. The Hindu display was by far the prettiest stall, with garlands and statues of deities. The Jewish representative, besides displaying a lighted menorah, provided a large loaf of bread, which the kids greatly enjoyed. The Buddhist gong was a pleasant background sound. Our display was more practical, with our usual mix of archaeological and scientific items, as well as 'slides' to explain our worldview and what we stand for.

With such a large age range to cater for, each half-hour presentation had to be different in content. Year 5 and year 6 children can listen to and understand discussions about atheism and agnosticism, and about the golden rule. They particularly enjoyed looking at pictures of famous non-believers. As always happens in these events, somebody pipes up with "I'm an atheist" or "My family is humanist".

It always seems to come as a surprise to children when the ages of the universe, the Earth and our species are explained. I used a timeline of early hominids through to *homo sapiens*, and a small display of fossils, to explain how old are the roots of morality, that they are not just the 4-6000 years believed by some. Questions are always forthcoming, from teachers as well as youngsters. Although our Bertrand Russell teapot was on display, we had no time to explain the reason for it. I left the kids with the task of Googling for an explanation.

Children in years 1 and 2 are, I think, too young really to understand, or be interested in, a lot of talk about beliefs and ethics. Indeed, I worried before the event that we – any of the groups – should be engaging with little 'uns who are barely more than infants. But, the fact is that they are exposed to religion in their daily school lives... They listened quite well to our talk about being happy and good and treating each other nicely, and then really enjoyed colouring-in their copy of the Happy Human image. Peter told them a story – a humanist variation of Red Riding Hood! - And a demonstration of 'magic' left them mystified, with a message from us that they should try and work out how it was done.

The day was, I believe, a great success. The children were interested and a delight to be with, well behaved and keen. As a humanist, I hope of course that our worldview is the one that the children will grow to appreciate.

John

Opposite: This is one of a series of 'Thoughts For The Commute' produced by the BHA in 2014 as a response to the BBC's TFTD. You can see/download all TFTC posters from the Humanists UK website.

Thoughts on Thought for Today

By George Bethell

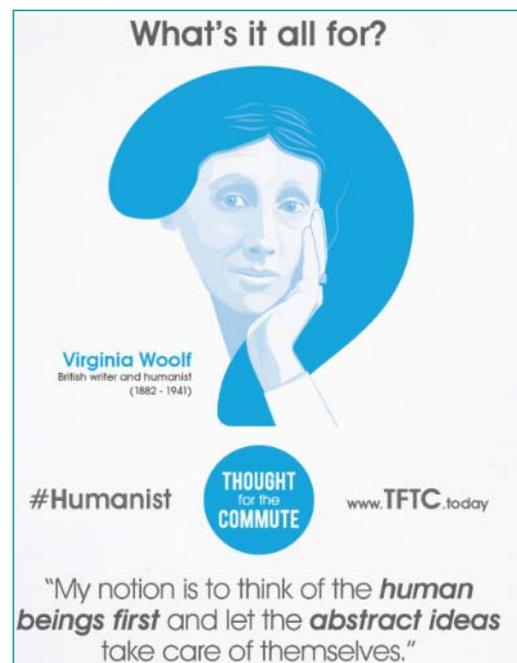
For many years, the British Humanists Association (now Humanists UK) has run a small but important campaign to change the rules concerning those eligible to contribute to Thought for Today (TFTD), the daily slot on the BBC's flagship Today Programme reserved for speakers representing recognised religions. The campaign to include humanists and other speakers with non-religious world views has long been supported by people from within the Beeb. In 2012, Evan Davis said that the absence of non-religious voices on TFTD constituted "a form of discrimination". In 2017, the newly appointed editor of the Today programme, Sarah Sands, said about TFTD, "... surely we should also include humanists? I admire religion and believe it is robust enough to have challengers". Most recently, John Humphries criticised TFTD's current format and called for it to become "a secular moment for reflection". Fellow presenter Justin Webb weighed in with his description of typical 'Thoughts': "They're all roughly the same. If everyone was nicer to everyone else, it would be fine. But from my cursory glance around the world, I think a lot of religious people don't want to be nice to each other."

So far the BBC has ignored polite pleas to make TFTD more inclusive. However, Catherine Bennett in an opinion piece for the Guardian makes a much more serious claim. She asserts that some speakers who deliver anodyne thoughts on TFTD ("I saw a nice film/sky/pair of shoes recently; it put me in mind of Jesus/the Prophet/Guru Nanak.") hold views that are far less wholesome. She hits hard: "You can't tell, from a brief, TFTD introduction, which of its Anglican bishops failed adequately to respond to allegations of sexual abuse, nor which of its regulars oppose same sex marriage, or deny women jobs or prosper by rarely mentioning that they consider homosexuality to be a sin."

Surely the BBC can see that the time for change is nigh...

George

[See: <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2019/mar/02/thought-for-the-day-silence-bbc-preachers-who-keep-women-down-thought-for-the-day>]



Breaking News...

As we go to press on the 5th of March, we hear that New Zealand is set to become the latest in a list of countries which have scrapped their blasphemy laws. The Bill has just been passed by Parliament and now awaits the formality of royal assent. In England and Wales, blasphemy laws were repealed in 2008 but they are still on the statute books in Scotland and Northern Ireland. Clearly these need to be repealed without further delay!

Quick Quiz

These questions are loosely related to things mentioned elsewhere in this newsletter. The answers are at the foot of the next column. Good luck and... don't cheat!

1: This black sarcophagus was originally intended for Cardinal Wolsey. Who lies beneath it now?



A Henry VIII B Thomas Cromwell C Horatio Nelson

2: Complete this Darwin quotation. '*The mystery of the beginning of all things is insoluble by us; and I for one must be content to remain*'

A a great ape B an agnostic C a Christian

3: Who wrote the play 'Who's afraid of Virginia Woolf?'

A Edward Albee B Arthur Miller C Tennessee Williams

4: What was the name of the capsule in which Michael Collins orbited the Moon while Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin were on the surface?

A Columbia B Discovery C Endeavour



5: Which of these is a *Cosmos* flower?

A B C

6: In which modern country would you find the birthplace of Guru Nanak?

A Nepal B Pakistan C Sri Lanka

A new venue...

Last year's move to the Coop Meeting Rooms has not worked out as well as we had hoped. In particular, access is not easy - especially for latecomers! Therefore we are looking for somewhere more suitable. So, for our March meeting we will be trying out The Thomas Wolsey pub on Peter's Street in Ipswich. Buy your drinks and crisps in the bar then join us upstairs!

Forthcoming Events

Tuesday, 12th March: Focus on Education

Denis Johnston will update members on recent changes to curricula related to teaching about religious and non-religious world views. Denis and George will then share their recent experiences of visiting local primary and secondary schools.

7:30 pm upstairs at The Thomas Wolsey, 9-13 Peter's Street, Ipswich, IP1 1 XF

Saturday, 30th March: Suffolk Humanists Pub Lunch

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

Tuesday, 9th April: Update on the Cosmos!

Mike Whybray will talk about current thinking as to the state of the cosmos and its 'evolution'.

7:30 pm upstairs at The Thomas Wolsey, 9-13 Peter's Street, Ipswich, IP1 1 XF (to be confirmed)

Saturday, 27th April: Suffolk Humanists Pub Lunch

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

Tuesday, 14th May: Uganda Humanist Schools Trust

UHST Patron Steve Hurd will talk to us about the Trust's work and the schools it supports. Please make it if you can. Friends and relatives welcome.

7:30 pm upstairs at The Thomas Wolsey, 9-13 Peter's Street, Ipswich, IP1 1 XF (to be confirmed)

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 summer edition, please contact the editor on shands.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://suffolkhands.org.uk/>

Quiz Answers

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