



Make a note in your diary —

The meeting on 10th March will be our AGM. Among other things, there'll be a report on the GRAM (BHA Groups' Annual Meeting), attended by Michael Imison. Please consider whether you'll be willing to join our committee. Some committee meetings are by telephone conference calls so we don't have to travel—we're scattered over the county.

Talking about Humanism

Over the last couple of months, Margaret has spoken about women's rights at the annual Human Rights celebration at the Unitarian Meeting House, attended by David and Marie, and made two visits to Kesgrave High School, where she contributed to the Matters of Life & Death and Marriage conferences. On 21st January she will attend a Community Leaders' Lunch at Ipswich Police Station—the invitation came through SIFRE.

The Suffolk Humanist Ceremonies Team

There are four of us—Margaret Nelson, David Mitchell, Michael Imison and Sophie Lovejoy—covering most of Suffolk and the Colchester & Tendring areas. Linda Morgan has left us. For help with ceremonies, phone 01473 658828.

SUFFOLK HUMANISTS

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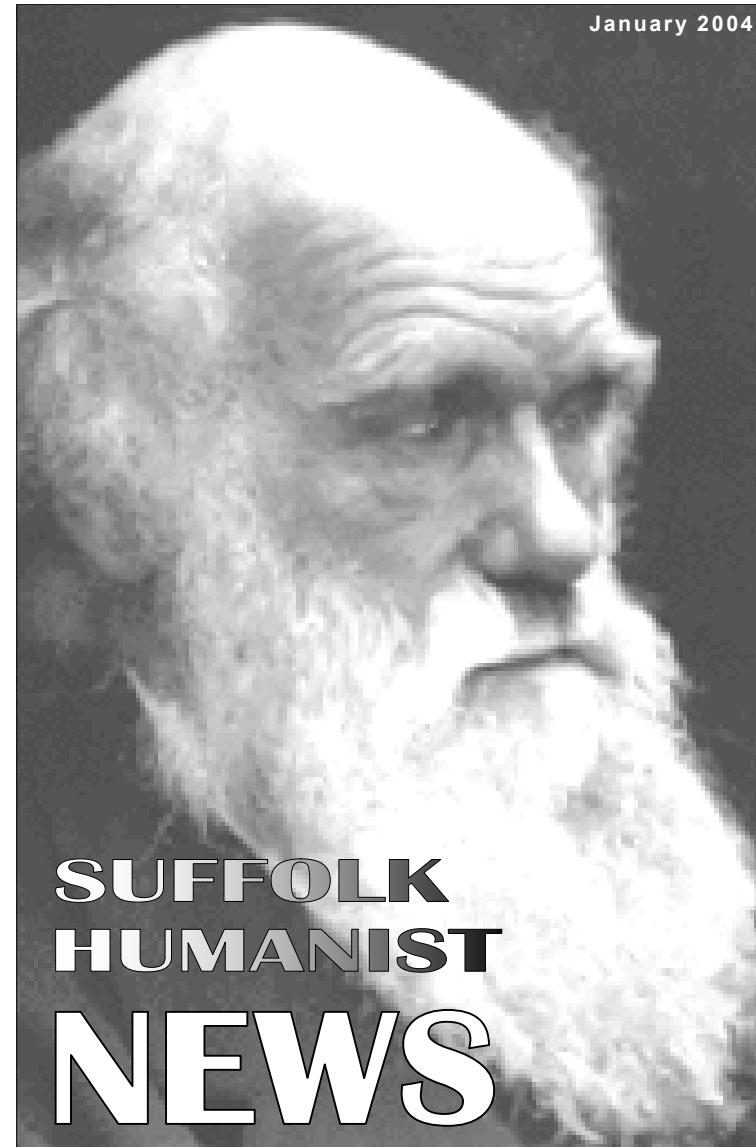
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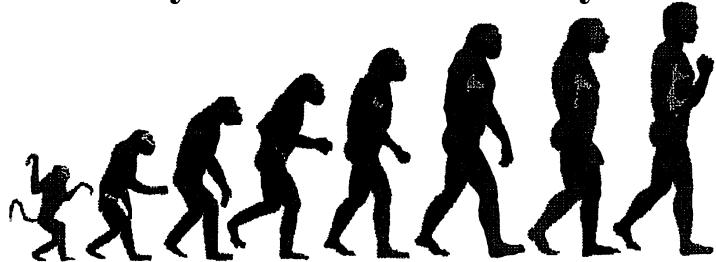
<http://www.suffolkhumanists.org.uk>

The Suffolk Humanist Group is affiliated to the British Humanist Association and the Suffolk Inter-Faith Resource (SIFRE)



Darwin Day, 12th February—Social evening in Woodbridge

February 12th is Darwin Day...



... Charles Darwin's birthday. The BHA supports the international campaign for a public holiday on Darwin Day, aiming to achieve the holiday by 12th February 2009, the bi-centenary of Darwin's birth.

All over the world, secular people will be celebrating the life of this great man on February 12th. For more information, see <http://www.darwinday.org/>.

Unfortunately, the Suffolk Humanists' committee did not get its act together in time to organise any campaigning this year, but we promise to sort ourselves out in time for next year. However, it will be the subject of Margaret's BBC Radio Suffolk 'Thought for the Day' on February 10th.

Meanwhile, we'll be celebrating Darwin Day as if it was a public holiday, by having a social get-together at John and Diana Ball's, 7 Moorfield Road, Woodbridge, organised by Michael Imison. There'll be a Darwinian Quiz—with a "Heroes of Atheism" Darwin mug as a prize—and we'll share an Indian take-away. It's proposed that we exercise the little grey cells with a one-off book group (see booklist). If you'd like to read a book before the 12th and share your opinion on it, please let Michael know ASAP, but by 23rd January please. Phone him on 01502 723624 or 07050 041199.

Michael suggests you might like to read "The Life of

time on radio, TV and the press. The end of the twentieth century spawned a whole raft of greatest this or that of the century, and, unsurprisingly, almost all the most popular or best whatever-it-was came from the last thirty years, because anything earlier was in the dark ages to most of the people expressing an opinion. And it is just an opinion. You cannot say that Mozart was greater than Beethoven, or Shakespeare was greater than Goethe, because it's all so subjective. I'm a Sibelius tone poem man but that's between me, Sibelius, and the particular orchestra playing the work. I like it but I can't say it's better than anything else. I've never been a Britten fan, but that doesn't make him a bad composer. It's just my opinion.

This theme of having to have an opinion on everything even when you don't know anything about the subject seems endemic. The East Anglian Daily Times recently asked its readers for ideas on how to keep council tax rises down, and it was quite obvious that most of the respondents had no idea what they were talking about. One admitted as much in an interview – after he'd put the world to rights of course.

That's going to be my New Year resolution: keep quiet unless I know exactly what I'm talking about. I wonder how long I can keep that up. A Happy New Year to everyone.



Apologies for the short notice about our guest speaker from Amnesty at the January meeting. Those likely to attend were notified by snail mail and email. A report will be in the next newsletter.

I was promised a reply from the bishop, but none was forthcoming, though he's sort of apologised to Hanne. However, I've since been reliably informed that Stalin did actually describe himself as a "Humanist", which adds to the confusion. O well.

MN

Speaking of apologies, BHA Chairperson Chris Butterworth wrote in the BHA Celebrants' newsletter, Rite Lines, that she "wishes to apologise for any offence caused by her article—none was intended." This was in response to my article setting the record straight about the Suffolk Ceremonies team, who do not "free-load" off those in the BHA network.

A New Humanist Voice on BBC Radio Suffolk

Suffolk Humanists' secretary David Mitchell will contribute some "Thoughts for the Day" on Radio Suffolk at about 7.25 am on 27th January, 18th February and 12th March. Margaret's next "Thoughts" will be on 20th January and 10th February.



LISTS

David Mitchell

I blame the Guinness Book of Records. Started nearly fifty years ago to settle pub arguments (I well remember as a boy poring over its pages with my friend whose parents ran the Coach and Horses at Melton), it has spawned a movement obsessed with listing and grading everything from poetry, literature and music to sport; the Nation's favourite tune, poem or novel, or the ten greatest goals in Cup Finals. Find any human activity and someone will be taking a vote on it.

It's a very cheap and apparently popular way to fill

Pi" by Yann Mantel, winner of the Man Booker Prize in 2002. He writes:

My daughter suggested that this was a book that a group of humanists would enjoy reading and discussing. Now I've read it, I think she's right, though, in fact, we don't agree about what the author's objective was in writing it or indeed about what actually happens. It's that sort of a book.

The first chapter contains this passage:

Then the elderly man said, "I have a story that will make you believe in God".

I stopped waving my hand but I was suspicious. Was this a Jehovah's Witness knocking at my door? "Does your story take place two thousand years ago in a remote corner of the Roman Empire?" I asked.

"No."

Was he some sort of Muslim evangelist? "Does it take place in seventh-century Arabia?"

"No, no. It starts right here in Pondicherry just a few years back, and it ends, I am delighted to tell you, in the very country you come from."

"And it will make me believe in God?"

"Yes"

"That's a tall order."

"No so tall that you can't reach"

My waiter appeared. I hesitated for a moment. I ordered two coffees. We introduced ourselves. His name was Francis Adirubasamy. "Please tell me your story," I said.

The story that emerges is told in the first person by a young boy who finds himself adrift in the Pacific in a small boat with a man-eating tiger for company. It is a tribute to the author's Munchausen-like ability to make the incredible, credible that I soon found myself totally involved. There is continual suspense, but the witty elegant style illustrated above is maintained. It didn't make me believe in God – but I don't think I ever thought it would.

MI

Alternative choice: "The Stone Diaries", by Carol Shields

Carol Shields, the Canadian author who died last July, won the Pulitzer Prize in 1995 with "The Stone Diaries". She was also short listed for the Booker prize and won the Orange Prize in 1998.

Margaret Atwood described "The Stone Diaries" as Shields "glory book". It's the fictionalised autobiography of Daisy Goodwill, born in her mother's Manitoba kitchen in 1905.

My mother's name was Mercy Stone Goodwill. She was only thirty years old when she took sick, a boiling hot day, standing there in her back kitchen, making a Malvern pudding for her husband's supper.

Daisy's father was at work when his wife went into labour, and came home to find that she was dead ("Eclampsia", the doctor said) and that he had a daughter that he didn't know what to do with.

From her inauspicious beginning to her death almost ninety years later in a Florida nursing home, through marriage, motherhood, work, love and loss, Daisy's story reflects the changes of the 20th century.

MN

Babu & the Bishop

On the Today programme on BBC Radio Four last month, Babu Gogineni, Executive Director of the International Humanist & Ethical Union, and Christopher Herbert, Bishop of St Albans, were discussing Article 51 of the draft EU Constitution, which says that religion should be guaranteed regular contact with European Institutions. The IHEU opposes this.

The Bishop upset Humanists everywhere by referring to Stalin as a "Humanist" during the broadcast. He said,

"Of course, and I would be the first to acknowledge that there are times when the churches do harm. But so do humanist dictators. I am not talking about humanism in the strict sense but in the wider sense. I mean we never ever quote Stalin but amongst those people who created mayhem and created acts of appalling wickedness. We have to look at Stalin and say 'You know, when religions are slagged off for what they have done, nobody ever mentions what people who are non-religious do!' Wickedness unfortunately seems to be part of the human condition, whether we are religious or not."

Hanne Stinson of the BHA wrote to the bishop, asking for an apology. Humanists don't like being associated with Stalin, of course. I emailed the bishop's chaplain as follows: "What a pity that the bishop didn't find time in his busy schedule to actually find out what Humanism means before he called Stalin a Humanist, but I doubt that Stalin knew what Humanism means either. I take comfort from the fact that thousands of kids in Suffolk schools know better than the bishop, because Humanism is included in their RE syllabus. I hope that the bishop will offer the apology that he's been asked for by Hanne Stinson of the BHA. Ignorance is no excuse."