

Next
meetings:
11th January
& 16th
February

Suffolk Humanist NEWS



The Newsletter of the Suffolk Humanist Group

January 2006

"It is not known with what weapons World War III will be fought, but World War IV will be fought with sticks and stones."

"Setting an example is not the main means of influencing another, it is the only means."

Albert Einstein

"No man lives without jostling and being jostled; in all ways he has to elbow himself through the world, giving and receiving offence."

Thomas Carlyle

A movable commemoration

SH member Derek Mason tends an allotment. He and his fellow allotmenters stood in silence on the 11th hour of the 11th day of the 11th month 2005, the anniversary of the signing of the Armistice on 11th November 1918. Since the end of the Second World War, it's been known as Remembrance Day.

Last November, Derek was distracted by the noise from the school playground. He went home and wrote to the head teacher as follows:

"... at 11.00 am on 11 November the men on the allotments stood in silence for two minutes. This coincided with your school's playtime. Normally, I like the sound of children playing, albeit loudly, but on this occasion I found it intrusive and disturbing. When I enquired at your reception, I was told that the occasion was marked earlier in the day so that the vicar could attend, because he had a funeral at 11 am.

"Unlike Sunday at the Cenotaph, this is not a religious event. Specifically this is not a Christian event, because people of many religions, or not religion at all, died for our freedom. I was also told that it was felt that it would be of more significance to the children, but the children may now think that an event observed at a precise time throughout the United Kingdom can be moved to suit the schedule of the vicar. The teaching of consideration and respect seem to be lacking."

(Continued on page 2)



Supermarket censorship

Sainsbury's and Woolworths have removed DVDs of Jerry Springer: The Opera from their shelves in response to complaints from extremist Christians, mainly a small group called Christian Voice, led by self-appointed guardian of the nation's morals, Stephen Green. Mr. Green wrote of the stage version, "This tour can only bring the judgment of Almighty God on the United Kingdom."

Whether or not you enjoyed JS: The Opera (*some disliked the profanities, but I thought it was great—MN*), are you willing to allow those who claim that they've been 'offended' to determine what you can or can't buy? Please write and complain to Sainsbury's at St. James House, 1-5 Wilder Street, Bristol BS2 8QY, and Woolworths at Woolworth House, 242-246 Marylebone Road, London NW1 6JL. Let us know if you get a response.

www.suffolkhumanists.org.uk



Gypsy children in Tamil Nadu

January 11th meeting—Around the World in 60 minutes

Nathan Nelson, son of Suffolk Humanist Margaret, has recently returned from a round the world trip he described as 'a gap year, ten years late'. Staring in Tamil Nadu, India, last January, where he worked as a volunteer at an aid camp decorating a primary school for dalit (untouchable) children, he visited Thailand, Vietnam, Hong Kong, China, Cambodia, Australia, New Zealand, Tahiti,

Easter Island, Chile, Argentina, Peru and Bolivia, returning via America on 21st December.

The trip's been recorded in his blog at <http://www.mybigtrip.info/blog/>, but to hear the traveller's tales and see the pictures, come to our next meeting on January 11th, starting at 7.30pm, at Castle Hill Community Centre.

"The food we eat is the most political decision we make every day. Each time you buy food, you buy the agricultural production system at the other end. These choices make a difference to nature and to communities."

Jules Pretty

February 16th in Colchester—Prof. Jules Pretty

At our meeting on 16th February in Colchester we'll be privileged to welcome as our guest speaker Prof. Jules Pretty, FRSA, FIBiol, Professor of Environment & Society at the University of Essex. Prof. Pretty has said he'll talk about "Sustainable Development: Hope or Hoax—this will cover an overview of the state of the planet, address our relations with nature, and indicate where there might be cause for optimism in the face of worrying trends."

Prof. Pretty's research interests include: sustainable and ecological agriculture; green exercise; soil health and carbon sequestration; social capital; biodiversity

and ecoliteracy; agricultural policies and the real costs.

To find out more about the professor's interests, appointments and achievements, see the University of Essex website at <http://www.essex.ac.uk/bs/staff/pretty/index.shtm>.



Jules Pretty

Member Sophie Lovejoy, who works at the university and has arranged this for us, has said Prof. Pretty is "quite a catch" as speakers go. Please come, and bring a friend.

What are you?
 Humanist?
 Atheist?
 Agnostic?
 Freethinker?
 Rationalist?
 Secularist?
 Heathen?
 Unbeliever?
 Sceptic?
 Or all of them?

A moveable commemoration

(Continued from page 1)

The reply included the following:

"... may I point out that I fully support the remembering of those affected by wars and fighting, and we should make every effort to remind children of the sacrifice people have made.

"For the two years I have been the Headteacher of (name omitted) Primary School we have held a special assembly. This year was no different, however we wanted to make it even more of a special assembly and invited the vicar to lead it. He could only make a 9.00 am assembly,

so we decided to hold the silence afterwards. We felt that with 4 year olds in the assembly, to hold the silence afterwards would allow them to understand the reasons for it."

Derek feels that the headteacher's letter doesn't give any real answers. He writes, "This may be because he chose not to do so because he had no argument or that he does not understand. I suspect the latter."

Is a 4 year old's comprehension of the silence on Remembrance day relevant? If anyone would like to comment, please get in touch.

January 2006

In brief...

SACRE

Suffolk County Council's Standing Advisory Council on Religious Education has been working on a new RE syllabus for the county's schools. SACRE member Margaret Nelson reports that it's been agreed that Humanism and atheism should be *explicitly* included in the syllabus, rather than implicitly.

The SACRE has had difficulty finding committed representatives of minority faiths in the county who are prepared to attend regularly. Some seem to lose interest when they realise that RE isn't about encouraging children to *be* religious, but to educate them *about* religion.

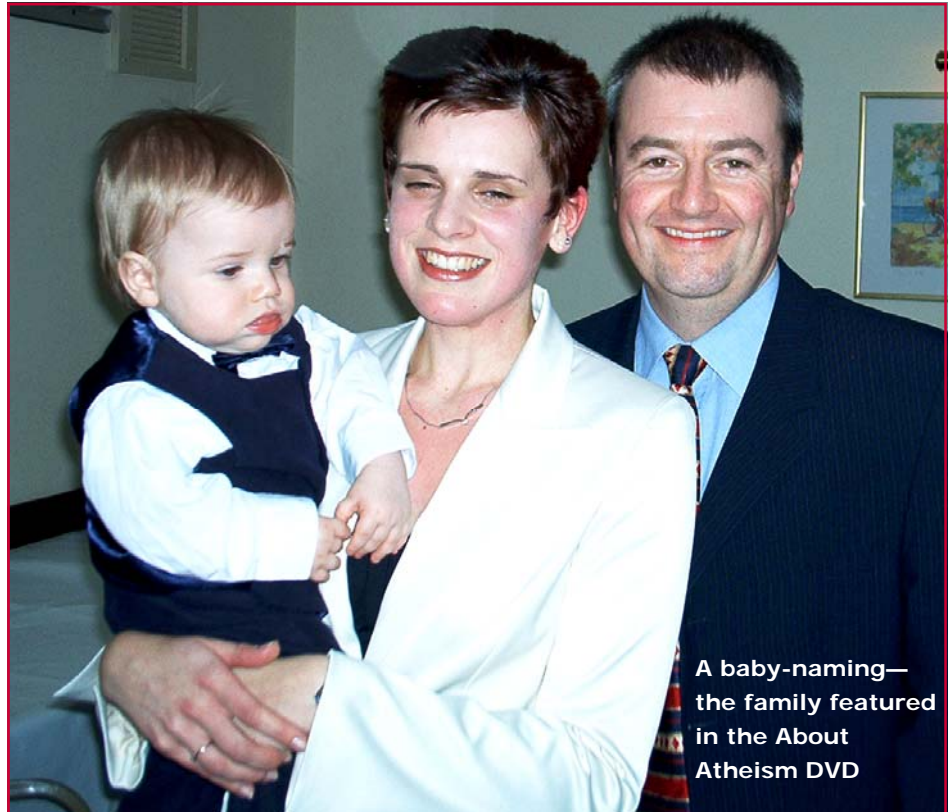
Atheism DVD

Chris Thomas of Team Video Productions has made a DVD called 'Why Atheism?' for secondary schools. It includes films of a Humanist funeral and a baby-naming, conducted by SH Celebrant Margaret Nelson, and a wedding conducted by independent Humanist Celebrant Simon Allen. It also features interviews with school students, talking about their atheism, including some from Kesgrave High School near Ipswich.

Chris is the son of SH member Neville, whose poor health has prevented him from attending meetings for some time.

AGM

It will be our AGM in March. We try to keep the business part of our AGM's brief, but there will be an opportunity to ask questions about what your committee's been doing over the past year. We're short of



A baby-naming—the family featured in the About Atheism DVD

one member so if you'd like to get involved, please let us know. To save travelling we have some committee meetings by telephone conference calls, so even if you have difficulty getting about you might still be able to join us.

BHA enquiry

The British Humanist Association was directed by its last AGM to conduct an enquiry into the many resignations from its ceremonies network. A working party distributed a questionnaire to ex-BHA Celebrants, including Suffolk Humanists David Mitchell and Margaret Nelson. Some have responded that it didn't ask the right questions. We expect a report sometime in the next couple of months.

Our team is about to distribute its annual newsletter to funeral directors and crematoria.

SH Chair and Celebrant

Michael Imison has volunteered to organise the BHA's ceremonies conference this year.

E-group

Suffolk Humanists and sympathisers everywhere can now keep in touch through our new e-group (see address on page 2), by chatting or exchanging messages online. Established on 31st December, the group already has 14 members. To join, follow the link and read the instructions.

Ceremonies

The Suffolk Humanist Ceremonies Team—Margaret Nelson, David Mitchell, Michael Imison and Sophie Lovejoy—is being kept busy, mostly with funerals. We get a lot from the Clacton, Frinton and Walton area, which attracts retired people. If you're interested in training to become a member of our team, please get in touch.

WELCOME

We welcome John Baker, Bill Maynard, Kerry Peck, Nick Taylor and Abbie Thoms to our group. Our membership is currently 58, and there's an increasing number of friends and supporters who follow our progress online. If you haven't joined yet, how about it? Our subscription is a very reasonable £5 a year—you can donate more if you'd like to! Existing members are encouraged to recruit friends and family—there's strength in numbers!

For your amusement



A passenger in a taxi tapped the driver on the shoulder to ask him something. The driver screamed, lost control, nearly hit a bus, drove up a curb, and stopped inches from a shop window. For a few moments, everything was silent, then the driver said, "Please don't do that again—you scared the living daylights out of me." The passenger, who was shaking, apologised, and said she hadn't realised that a tap on the shoulder could be so frightening. "I'm sorry," the driver replied, "it's not your fault. Today is my first day as a cabbie. I've been driving a hearse for the last twenty-five years."

Submitted by Marie Haworth

Funerals for "the worst of us"

Suffolk Humanist Celebrant Michael Imison recently conducted a funeral for a member of broadcaster Libby Purves's family. Libby is a Catholic, and she subsequently wrote about the ceremony in *The Tablet*, the Catholic newspaper. These are some extracts:

"I was, I must admit, faintly apprehensive ... I could not quite see how a humanist address, bleakly denying afterlife and grumpily denying Creation, could possibly help the bereaved as much as the ancient words routinely do.

"I was wrong. As it happened, the address was splendid, humane and moving ... Walking out into the sunshine I found old assumptions shaken: a good humanist can, I thought, do a rite of passage and celebrate a good life better than quite a few clergy I have heard, bumbling on coldly and impersonally at far less kindly funerals ...

"But after a while it occurred to me to wonder what it would have been like if we had been seeing off someone far less amiable, and not at all virtuous ...

"What then for the humanist funeral address? There are not, of course, many such people—most of us have redeeming features somewhere—but there are a few about whom it would be difficult to work up much of an encomium without stretching truth to the point of ludicrous embarrassment. So perhaps that's when you really need a Christian funeral, with its assertion of the ultimate irreducible value of every immortal soul, the possibility of redemption, the mystery of forgiveness and the human spirit whose depths can be seen and judged only by God.

"Perhaps it is the worst of us who most need religion to give dignity to our passing. The humanist perspective is fine and admirable, as long as your life is visibly decent. It is when we become atrocious, temporarily or permanently, that the Christian message becomes indispensable. You have to be quite exceptionally nice if you're going to try and do without it. I do not think I had ever quite realized this before."

It's good that Libby appreciated Michael's work, but we thought it a bit strange to argue that nasty people need religious funerals. I emailed Libby to suggest she might read some comments in my blog (<http://deadinteresting.blogspot.com/>), where I wrote about "funerals for bad people":

"The families were given permission, in coded form, to feel relieved and to get on with the rest of their lives. What else did I say? A brief history, perhaps. References to some of their earlier escapades. An acknowledgement of the difficulties he or she had caused

(Continued on page 5)

January 2006

(Continued from page 4)

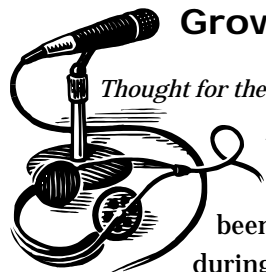
other people, and the efforts that had been made to help him or her. Stories that reflect the way that those affected had given support to one another. A suggestion, maybe, that this person was deficient in some way; lacking an instinct for self-preservation; lacking an appreciation of the effect of his or her behaviour. Then, at the end, a suggestion that no one need worry about him or her any more. Not so much goodbye and good riddance, as simply goodbye.

“Now what would a priest have said about any of them? Pious sentiment about forgiveness would not have gone down well, and might only have added to the feeling of confused guilt that people need to leave behind. Goodbye, and get on with it.”

One of our online contacts, Bill, read this, and emailed, “I don't like the idea by Libby Purves that it's the bad people who need religious funerals. No one needs such a funeral. And it raises a point. Good people? Bad people? I have never met either. Everyone is multi-faceted. Everyone is a shade of grey, rather than black or white.”

“Perhaps it is the worst of us who most need religion to give dignity to our passing.”

Libby Purves



Growing old grumpily

Thought for the Day on BBC Radio Suffolk (95.5, 95.9, 103.9 & 104.6 fm), 10/12/05.

With all the fuss they've been making about pensions, you'd think it was news that we've got an ageing population. It isn't. There's been plenty of evidence for a long time that people like me, born during or soon after the war, are living longer, and that younger people are either not having children, or not having many. It doesn't take much imagination or arithmetic to work out that there are fewer people to pay tax and National Insurance contributions to keep us in reasonable comfort in our declining years. Guess we will have to go on working, if we can.

Not that I plan to do much declining if I can help it. I may grow old as disgracefully as I can manage – being disgraceful is exhausting at times – but I won't be responsible for my actions if anyone dares to refer to me as 'elderly', or an 'old dear' as I get even older. I don't object to being called 'old', if that's what I am, but elderly? What the heck is that supposed to mean?

And have you noticed that whenever they've been talking about so-called 'elderly' issues or the pensions 'problem' on TV, they've shown clips of old people in old people's homes or at lunch clubs, all tottering around in a sweetly geriatric fashion. I blame this on the fact that TV is mostly run by young people who have no idea what they're on about. I mean, very few people these days actually want to go into old people's homes if they can possibly avoid it, which is why local authorities are cutting back on places. Residential care homes are mainly for very old people who need care, not just shelter. I'm hoping I won't need anything like that for at least, oh, thirty years? By that time, the young people who make these ageist news items will be worrying about their pensions too.

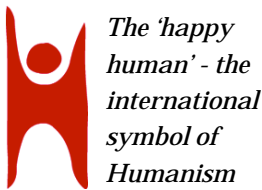
A market researcher, himself over sixty, appeared surprised that I spent so much time on the Internet – not only that, but that I maintain several websites. He probably hadn't realised that there are so many so-called 'silver surfers' out there. Perhaps we ought to do something about shifting the balance on the Internet. I tried googling the words 'old people' last night, looking for senior role models like Sir David Attenborough, and these

(Continued on page 6)

Beyond belief

Evolutionary biologist and distinguished atheist

Richard Dawkins is having a go at religion again. He'll be on Channel 4 television at 8 pm on the 9th & 16th January, affirming that “Religion is the root of all evil”.



The 'happy
human' - the
international
symbol of
Humanism

The Newsletter of the
Suffolk Humanist Group

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Pleonasm \PLEE-uh-naz-uhm\, noun, from Greek pleonasmos, from pleon, "greater, more."

1. The use of more words than are necessary to express an idea; as, "I saw it with my own eyes."
2. A superfluous word or expression.

"Such a phrase from President Nixon's era, much favoured by politicians, is 'at this moment in time,' presumably meaning 'now'."

Eoin McKiernan, "Last Word: Special Relationships," Irish America, 31/8/94

Humanism—for the good life based on human feelings and thought

The Suffolk Humanist group was founded in 1991. We promote Humanism and provide Humanist fellowship for non-believers in Suffolk and North East Essex. We meet at least once every two months in Ipswich and occasionally in Colchester. Sympathetic non-members are welcome, but by joining us you'll help us to raise awareness of Humanism and challenge the increasing influence of religion in public life, the arts and the media.

The Suffolk Humanist Ceremonies Team



David Mitchell, Margaret Nelson, Michael Imison & Sophie Lovejoy

The Suffolk Humanist Ceremonies Team provides non-religious baby-namings, weddings, affirmations, funerals and public ceremonies in Suffolk and N E Essex. Between us, we've done many hundreds of ceremonies and have an unblemished reputation for high standards. Margaret, the founder member of the team, has been conducting ceremonies since 1991. Sophie, the newest, has established herself in the Colchester & Tendring areas. Marie Haworth and Yvonne Peacock, both retired, act as mentors. Please ask for advice and information—see address on the left.

Growing old grumpily

(Continued from page 5)

were the first results I found (for the uninitiated, to 'google' means using the Google search engine on the Internet, a sort of reference guide). Anyway, these were the results – I kid you not:

- Grumpy old people.
- VOP – very old people.
- Bored old people can be dangerous (I might agree with that one).
- Drunken elks attack old people's home in Sweden (it was on the news!).
- What old people do for fun.
- What are old people for? How elders will save the world.

So you see, we've got our work cut out challenging all this ageist nonsense. Growing old's an attitude, and we need more attitude. You young whippersnappers have a lot to learn.

Oh, and my seasonal message is – Christmas isn't compulsory.

MN