

Humanists — “They’re very good at thatched cottages”

This was from a local radio vox pop last week, when shoppers were asked what they knew about Humanists. One man mentioned the Golden Rule (Don’t do to others what you wouldn’t like done to you), a woman said, “They’re people who don’t like animals,” a man asked “Is it that they don’t like humans?”, and another man said “They believe in reality.” Our secretary, Denis Johnston, liked this last definition, but some of the others made him laugh. We have no idea how we’ve come to be associated with thatched cottages.



Still from “How do we know what is true?”

Denis was interviewed on 30th March by BBC Radio Suffolk’s Rob Dunger about four short animations, produced by the BHA and narrated by Stephen Fry, that introduce Humanism. Since most of the vox pop answers were wrong, it seems they’re needed. They pose the questions, “What makes something right or wrong?”, “What should we think about death?”, “How do we know what is true?”, and “How can I be happy?”. You can see all of them on the BHA website at www.humanism.org.uk.

AGM—Tuesday 8th April

Next Tuesday will be our AGM, when we have the usual election of a committee for the coming year and reports on our activities last year (see page 3). We hope to see you there. We’ll be making plans for the future and will welcome your ideas. For the time and place, see the diary on the last page.

After the business part of the meeting is over, there should be time to view one or two TED talks by Michael Shermer. The first is “Why do people believe weird things?”, and the second is “The Pattern behind self-deception.” TED is a non-profit organisation devoted to spreading ideas, usually in the form of short talks. It began in 1984 as a conference where Technology, Entertainment and Design converged, and today covers almost all topics – from science to business to global issues – in more than 100 languages. Meanwhile, independently run TEDx events help share ideas in communities around the world. Michael Shermer debunks myths, superstitions and urban legends, and explains why we believe them. He also publishes Sceptic Magazine. For more, see www.ted.com.

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and on our website, www.suffolkhands.org.uk.**

Does Population Matter?

Café Scientifique at Arlington's Brasserie

John Mellis

More than 40 people crammed into the bar area of Arlington's Brasserie in Ipswich on 27th January to hear John Collier, a trustee of the charity 'Population Matters', discuss this question. The density of bodies in the audience was appropriate. The world's human population went through the 7 billion mark in October 2012 and only a very few humans seemed to take serious notice. In 1800 the world's population had only just passed 1 billion. In 1950 the figure was 2.5 billion. This near-tripling in the last 65 years is arguably the most dramatic thing to have happened to our planet in human history. But talking about it is almost a taboo. Why? Overpopulation makes almost all of our problems become harder to solve. In the words of one of the charity's patrons, David Attenborough, "All environmental problems become harder – and ultimately impossible – to solve with ever more people."

John Collier gave an engaging talk which was full – but not over-full – of population facts and figures. World population is growing at 78 million per year, or 1.5 million per week. On this trend the global population will pass 10 billion sometime in the second half of this century. UK population is predicted to reach 70 million in 2033. Of course, the population increases are not uniform across the

globe. The average 'replacement level' to maintain population at a steady state is 2.1 children per woman. In Japan the current level is 1.6 to 1.7 children per woman, and population declines are predicted. In China the single child policy has dramatically curbed the rate of population growth. The greatest population growth rates are now happening in the Indian sub-continent and West Africa. Globally, an average of 40% - 50% of births are still unplanned, and vast numbers of women still have no access to birth control methods.

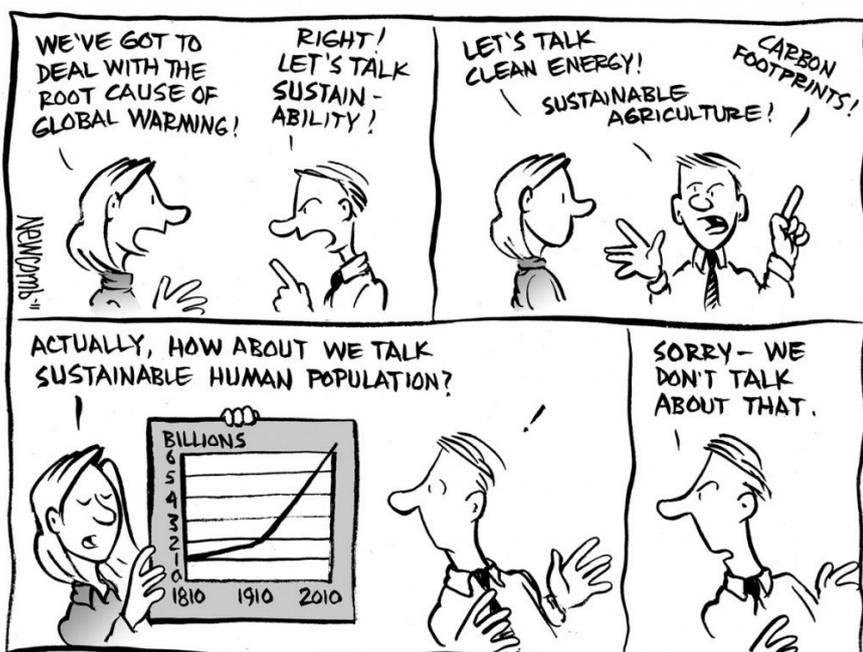
There are no simple answers to the challenges of achieving a sustainable world population, and a lively Q&A session followed the talk. One questioner, seemingly outraged by the speaker's advocacy of widespread family planning and birth control, asked, "What has happened to passion? Will this be forbidden?" and asserted that we have plenty of room left on the planet, claiming that the world's population could all be squeezed into Texas with 120 square metres each! Somewhat missing the point I think. Personally, I fear that reaching a sustainable and steady level of population will require more co-ordinated effort across the world than governments seem able to achieve – and that at some point, despite our advances in science and technology, our over-stretched resources of arable land, energy, ecosystems and effective medicines will result in a decline in human population before a steady state can be gracefully achieved.

What that sustainable level of population might be is hard to predict, but for more information and

discussion of the subject visit the website of Population Matters (previously called the Optimum Population Trust) at www.populationmatters.org.

Since this talk, the UN's Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) has published the most comprehensive study yet into the effects of rising levels of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere, and warns that global warming could undermine economic growth and increase poverty. Ed.

Cartoon by Tim Newcomb at Population Matters



Chairperson's report

Sue Hewlett



Following last year's AGM, held at Pinewood, we looked forward to a year of mixed events, some serious, others much less so. On the lighter side, we continued to enjoy regular pub lunches in Woodbridge, though we did consider trying a new venue occasionally. The problem was where exactly, and, as they've been well attended, perhaps we should stick with the grand old Duke of York. Conversation is lively and stimulating as you would expect from long-standing, knowledgeable members.

Also "light" was the evening barbecue in Stutton. It went well with the bonus of some local people who showed great interest in what we're about – possible new members if we keep wearing them down. Afternoon events at Hadleigh are definitely a worthwhile break from the norm. Several of us enjoyed a session of music in the form of Desert Island Discs. There were a few surprises, some emotional moments, nostalgia and fun – a great mix. We were also treated to an impromptu performance by the immensely talented singer, Jin An from China.

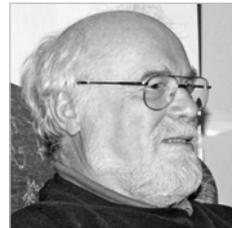
There was unfortunately one disaster when a group of us gathered at Pinewood expecting to view and discuss a video, *Universe from Nothing*, presented by Lawrence Krauss. The computer connection failed and we saw nothing. The good news is that we have now bought a projector and can show things with no problem.

Our most recent event at Pinewood was Denis Johnston's fascinating and enlightening talk about his recent trip to Bhutan. Titled, *Gross National Happiness in the Land of the Thunder Dragon*, it was a great insight to the traditional life in the country and into the challenges the people there face as modern life and practices encroach. The projector worked well and the photos were superb.

Denis and I represented Suffolk Humanists at the local UN Association's Celebration of Human Rights on 10th December at the Friends' Meeting House in Ipswich. Denis is going to say more about the evening and our contribution is on the website.

Our celebrants remain busy. David Mitchell continues to be the busiest, though he's taking a short break soon. Denis has some information about the BHA's review of non-religious ceremonies. We have a new hopeful, Peter Whitehouse. He has attended a celebrants' meeting in Elmsett and observed ceremonies taken by myself and David. He and I also spent an interesting couple of hours at Farthing, Singleton and Hastings Funeral Services on Woodbridge Road. We all hope that Peter's training continues to go well.

As ever, we hope to attract new members because they may bring fresh ideas. The website is our best chance of doing that. We thank Margaret for her constant efforts in that regard and for her resolve to poke, prod and cajole Facebookers and Twitterers to think about and react to current issues and to give them her Humanist perspective.



Secretary's report

Denis Johnston

Meetings

As we had a continuing low turnout at meetings in the Interfaith Centre at UCS we tried other locations – Hadleigh Library and Pinewood Hall. Since the change attendance has been higher. Our thanks to John Palmer for looking after the refreshments and also acting as an ex-officio person keeping the BHA and NSS up to date with our activities.

In August we had a brilliant summer party at Stutton. Many thanks to Sue for hosting.

The informal lunchtime pub meetings at the Duke of York in Woodbridge have continued to be held every other month. These seem to be particularly popular with much better attendances than meetings – sometimes 14 or 15 people.

Newsletter

Margaret Nelson – also ex officio – has continued diligently to provide the newsletter at three monthly intervals. Almost half our members now receive this electronically.

Affiliations

We're affiliated to the British Humanist Association, the National Secular Society (their newsletters are available at meetings), and Suffolk Interfaith Resource (see opposite). We're a member of SAVO (Suffolk Association of Voluntary Organisations), which was renamed Community Action Suffolk during the year. We're listed on InfoLink, Suffolk County Council's online directory of local organisations.

Executive committee

We've managed with only four committee members through the year; Chair, vice-Chair, Secretary and Treasurer. There were vacancies for two more members.

Press & media

Opportunities have arisen infrequently, probably fewer than in previous years. Again thanks to Margaret for being the main point of contact for media events.

Future campaigns

The faith schools issue remains high on the agenda. This is something that every member who has any connection with education, including as a parent or grandparent, can influence.

East of England Humanist groups meeting

This group, organised in Cambridge, seems to have folded.

BHA group representatives' annual meeting

I attended this BHA event and provided a report.

Suffolk SACRE

I represent Humanism on the statutory Standing Advisory Council for Religious Education, as a full voting member, which meets quarterly. Members also attend regional conference for RE teachers. The SACRE is still feeling its way in the world of free schools and academies, however much of the work has revolved around encouraging Suffolk RE teachers to adopt an inquiry based approach to RE. This approach, which although familiar to science teachers seems to be only recently adapted to the teaching of RE, encourages students to explore and understand various faiths and worldviews, including Humanism.

Suffolk Interfaith Resource

SIFRE, based at University Campus Suffolk, has a

library and other resources to encourage inter-faith dialogue. It also provides a series of evening talks and seminars on broadly religious issues. I was elected to be a director of the organisation this year and it has been interesting to understand how other groups are influential in local government and in education. Although originally partly funded by Suffolk County council, all such funding ceased during the year and SIFRE lost its only full time employee. Currently the office is run on a voluntary basis by volunteers (I do two hours a week). SIFRE provides an opportunity to speak in schools and to teachers. Through SIFRE I was also invited to give a "Sermon on Humanism" at Bury St. Edmunds Unitarian Church.

I was also able to attend a number of the local Interfaith groups, including Bealings Interfaith Group. What is encouraging is that many of the people I encounter there, although nominally religious, often describe themselves as agnostic and even atheist in some cases; not so much religious as philosophical.

UN Human Rights Day Celebration

We contributed to the 2013 event in December at the Friends' Meeting House in Ipswich. About 30 people attended, including the Mayor of Ipswich.

The website

The website continues to tick over happily but is currently being transferred to a more "industrial strength" system. Yet again our thanks are due also to Nathan Nelson for his administration work and for Margaret's relentless blogging.

From the Times Educational Supplement, 31st March

Faith schools will no longer be allowed to redact questions about evolution and reproduction from science exam papers, and any attempt to do so will be treated as "malpractice", the exams regulator has said.

Ofqual has written to exam boards saying that any agreements between exam boards and schools which allow censorship of questions "must not be made" because the practice left exam papers incomplete and "unfit for purpose".

On the wrong sort of memories

From a blog about death, 8th March 2013

Margaret Nelson

Important people who died in foreign parts used to be taken home for burial stuffed into a barrel of something alcoholic. In 1805, Admiral Nelson's body was brought home in a barrel of brandy. In hot climates, bodies are either buried as soon as possible, before they start to stink (the origin of the contemporary funeral practices for Jews and Muslims), or they might be embalmed, if the body is to be viewed. Embalming is less common in the UK than the US, where open coffins are favoured. These are short term solutions to the problem of putrefaction, when scented handkerchiefs don't do the trick. The long term preservation of a body is another matter.

Channel 4's newsman Jon Snow has written a cautionary post in his blog about the plan to preserve the body of President Hugo Chavez of Venezuela, referring to the embalming of Kenya's President Kenyatta and the USSR's Lenin, who's been gradually crumbling over the years:

"Lenin has suffered considerably down the years. An ear fell off some time ago and had to be re-attached. Nasty black splotches appear on his skin from time to time and have to be removed with hydrogen peroxide."

Not how he probably expected to be remembered – a mouldering heap – and an example of how not to preserve the dead. If you're really keen to be kept around in some semblance of your living appearance, you could elect to be stuffed or plasticised. As I don't expect to look very attractive when I kick the bucket, I wouldn't want to inflict the sight of my corpse on anyone for longer than necessary and, in any case, some medical students will have a better use for it.

This is from www.deadinteresting.blogspot.com, my blog about death, mortality, bereavement, funerals and related subjects. You may think it weird, but I find it fascinating.



Skulls by Andreas Versalius, 1514-1564

In brief

From here and there

As a signatory to the Arab Charter, **Saudi Arabia** is expected to guarantee freedom of expression to its nationals, yet it has passed a new terrorism law which will treat non-believers and political dissidents as enemies of the state.

Critics say the new legislation – which uses a broad definition of "terrorism" to include any act intended to insult the reputation of the state, harm public order or destabilise the security of society – is a threat to freedom of speech and thought in the kingdom.

There was standing room only at a meeting of the **All Party Parliamentary Humanist Group** in the House of Lords on March 31st for an introductory meeting with the British Humanist Association President Professor Jim Al-Khalili. Humanist MPs and peers were addressed by Professor Al-Khalili who spoke about his work as a physicist and broadcaster, his journey to Humanism and the work of the BHA.

Turkish MP and human rights campaigner Safak Pavey has won this year's award for **Secularist of the Year**. She was presented with the £5,000 Irwin Prize by honorary associate and shadow foreign office minister Kerry McCarthy MP at a lunch-time event hosted by the National Secular Society on 29th March. Safak Pavey is a member of Turkey's main opposition party and sits for the Istanbul constituency. She is known for her international work in human rights, the promotion of the rights of women and minorities in Turkey, as well as humanitarian aid and peace-building.

News Letter, "the pride of Northern Ireland", reports,

"The introduction of **same-sex marriages** in England and Wales is 'concerning' for many Christians, a group which represents evangelicals has said.

"Saturday saw the first gay marriages in England and Wales under the new law, but Northern Ireland retains the old law after the Assembly rejected a motion to extend same-sex marriage to the Province."

SUFFOLK HUMANISTS & SECULARISTS

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denisjohnston@btinternet.com

We meet in the lounge at Pinewood Hall, Ipswich, the seminar room at Hadleigh Library, and at the Duke of York in Woodbridge—see meeting details. Lifts can sometimes be arranged; let us know if you need or can offer one. Guests are welcome. Get in touch or check our website for a map and directions.

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, education, the arts and the media.

Our Humanist ceremonies team

We've provided ceremonies free from religion around Suffolk and NE Essex since 1991. We're mostly busy with funerals but we also do weddings, baby-namings, remembrance and civic events, and special family ceremonies.

We are Margaret Nelson from Elmsett (the team co-ordinator), Sophie Lovejoy from Colchester, David Mitchell from Pettaugh and Sue Hewlett from Stutton. During 2014 we hope to train a new team member.

We're not part of the BHA's national ceremonies network, as our approach differs from theirs. For ceremonies free from religion, phone 01473 658828 or email ceremonies@suffolkhands.org.uk. You can find out more on the Suffolk Humanist website under the "ceremonies" tab.

Dates for you diary

Keep an eye on the website calendar for activities, including events arranged by other organisations, such as Café Scientifique.

AGM & TED talks (see page 1), **Tuesday 8th April**, 7.30pm at Pinewood Hall, the community centre at the top of Hawthorne Drive in Ipswich – IP8 3SL.

We'll be in the lounge. An agenda will be provided at the meeting. Subscriptions are now due, if you're not already paying by standing order. Membership forms will be sent with this newsletter to those who are online, otherwise ask if you need one. Our sub is still only a minimum of £10—good value, we think!

Pub lunch at the Duke of York, Woodbridge, on the corner of Ipswich Road and Barrack Road, **Saturday 26th April** from noon. Please let Denis know if you plan to come by the middle of the week, so he can book.



Suffolk Humanist Ceremonies Celebrants: Margaret, Sophie, David and Sue

Humanism is an ethical approach to life without religion. Humanists think we can be good without a god. Secularism is the belief that religion should have no place in civil affairs; that the church and state should be kept separate.

www.agoodlifewithoutreligion.com
www.suffolkhands.org.uk