

Suffolk Humanists

Promoting Humanism and Secularism

Welcome to our Autumn issue

As part of the process of becoming a partner member of Humanists UK, the words 'and Secularists' have been dropped from our official name—we are simply Suffolk Humanists. However, as made clear in Peter Well's contribution below, promoting secularism remains an important issue for many of our members. If you feel strongly about this or any other issue, please consider submitting a piece for publication in a future newsletter.

Ed.

[This issue's banner shows fossilised pollen grains extracted from rocks laid down 50 million years ago.]

A Secular Appeal: a 'think piece' by Peter Wells

I believe in the right of individuals to believe what they wish and to practice their beliefs freely constrained only by the laws of the land. I do not, however, accept that some individuals or groups have the right to impose their beliefs on others - especially religious beliefs where the justification for positions taken and observance expected is based solely on theology.

Consequently, I'm offended by the fact that our Head of our State is also, by right, the Head of the Established Church of England. I do not want to see unelected Bishops in the House of Lords, which is part of our Legislature after all, and I do not take kindly to various Church schools using public money to influence the thinking of young children, often without their parents' explicit consent. Most parents send their children to school to be broadly educated which, of course, should include a knowledge of world religions and belief systems. But they do not generally wish them to be indoctrinated, subtly or otherwise. A lot of parents have little choice as to the school their child attends. They may wish to take their child to Church, Synagogue, or Mosque themselves, but they do not want to have a particular theology forced on them by circumstances they cannot control within a publicly funded institution.

In our society the majority are not practicing Christians so why do we have prayers before Parliament opens? Why do many Local Authorities have the same practice? The only reasonable and just way to conduct public office in our country is in a secular manner, with respect for all and special privilege for none. This should apply to the Offices of State, the Legislative bodies that govern and administer the law, and to all other bodies receiving public money, including schools.

Personally I would like to see our country become more inclusive, fairer, and more just. I'm not really too bothered about it being "Greater" - whatever that means.

Peter

Peter's views opposite will undoubtedly chime with humanists within our group and beyond. I simply add the following notes.

When Christopher Hitchens was asked why he wanted to take away religious beliefs and practices from those that found meaning in them he said, *"I'm perfectly happy for people to have these toys, and to play with them at home, and hug them to themselves and so on, and share them with other people who come around and play with their toys. So that's absolutely fine. They are not to make me play with these toys. Ok? I will not play with the toys. Don't bring the toys to my house. Don't say my children must play with these toys. ... I'm not going to have any of that. Enough with clerical and religious bullying and intimidation!"*

Since the reign of Henry VIII, all English sovereigns have held the title 'Defender of the Faith'. Few Anglicans realise that the 'faith' in the title originally referred to Roman Catholicism. It was bestowed by Pope Leo X in 1521 for Henry's defence of the Catholic Church against the protestant movement in general and Martin Luther in particular.

Both Humanists UK and the National Secular Society run extensive campaigns against religious schooling. However, the tide is far from turning. According to the NSS, *"Despite a consistent and dramatic decline in church attendance, and a growing majority of non-religious citizens, successive governments have paved the way for ever greater religious involvement in education... Data from the House of Commons library shows that the proportion of state faith schools increased in England between 2000 and 2017 - from 35% to 37% at primary level and 16% to 19% at secondary level. This seriously limits choice for parents who do not want a religious education for their children, or do not share the faith of the local school. Indeed our research has shown that 18,000 families were assigned faith schools against their wishes in England in 2017 alone."*

In January of this year, Conservative MP Crispin Blunt put down an Early Day Motion calling for the practice of saying prayers at the beginning of parliamentary business in the House of Commons and House of Lords to be abolished. He argued that the practice, first established in 1558, is "not compatible with a society which respects the principle of freedom of and from religion". Such motions are formal proposals calling for a parliamentary debate on an issue but, as in this case, they rarely achieve that end.

Ed.

"When a religion is good, I conceive it will support itself; and when it does not support itself, and God does not take care to support it so that its professors are obliged to call for help of the civil power, 'tis a sign, I apprehend, of its being a bad one."

Benjamin Franklin (1706-1790)

Uganda Humanist Schools Trust: An Update

In May, Steve Hurd, Chair of the trustees of the Uganda Humanist Schools Trust (UHST) came to speak with us about UHST's support for schools in rural Uganda. Since then, Steve and other Trustees have made another of their regular trips to see how things are going. Full reports for the schools are available on the UHST website but here are a few highlights.

Isaac Newton High School has become a beacon for high education and welfare standards in its District where it is the 5th best performing school out of 35. Recent site additions, including a new teaching block with three additional classrooms, a well-equipped science lab and a second boys' hostel make the school well-equipped for teaching 600 students, with two classes in each O-level year. The school has a thriving Humanist Student Association which works to improve life in the local villages and promotes First Aid skills with help from the Red Cross.

Mustard Seed Secondary School is rapidly becoming the school of choice in its District where, in 2018, the national examination results placed the school 6th out of over 30 schools. Two-thirds of students board while the rest walk to school from the vicinity. UHST supporters fund 60 boarding places. They are allocated to bright children from the most-needy homes. The school has an active sports programme for boys and girls and there is an active scouting group. Most notably, Simon Bogere, the school's Humanist Counsellor, has just qualified as a Humanist Celebrant and has officiated at his first Humanist wedding.

Kasese Humanist School is the umbrella for three primaries and a secondary school. They are run by Robert Bwambale who has an active and inspiring Humanist presence on Facebook. After two attempts in rented buildings Robert bought land next to the Rukoki River and established a permanent primary school which educates 69 boys and 70 girls. Two years ago he founded a small secondary school which educates 51 students. He has also constructed a small orphanage (Bizoha) to the south of Kasese, which provides a home for 12 orphan children; a cause dear to Robert's heart as he himself was orphaned as a young child.

Next to the orphanage, a successful primary school with 245 children is ably led by their Headteacher, Phiona Ngabirwe, who has just completed her Diploma in Education, with help from UHST supporters. Robert has built his schools on a shoestring. He educates really needy children, charging very low fees and subsidising the schools from the proceeds of a number of small businesses. The schools have a strong Humanist ethos and, for the past 5 years, their two best students have been awarded UHST scholarships to attend Isaac Newton Humanist School where they are among the best performing students as well as being exemplary for their Humanist life stances.

For further information visit:
www.ugandahumanistschoolstrust.org

"Should schools teach Atheism? No! There's no need to teach Atheism. It is the natural result of education without indoctrination."

Ricky Gervais

July: An Evening of 'Great Thinkers'

At our July meeting we tried a new, experimental format based around 'Great Thinkers'. The original plan was for each member to come along with information about their own nominee so that others could try to identify the chosen thinker through a series of questions and answers. In the event, this was supplemented by cards from 'The Thinker Game' produced by The School of Life. The combination led to a wide range of thinkers being discussed including Margaret Mead (American cultural anthropologist, author and public speaker 1901-1978), Theodor Adorno (German philosopher and sociologist 1903-1969) and Rachel Carson (American marine biologist and conservationist 1907-1964) alongside regular favourites Mary Wollstonecraft, Jean-Jacques Rousseau and, of course, Charles Darwin. According to Denis, the evening worked best when members were presenting the choices that they had researched. So this is certainly a format worth using again but perhaps we need to work a little more on the details.

Note: The School of Life is by its own account, 'a resource for helping us understand ourselves, for improving our relationships, our careers and our social lives - as well as for helping us find calm and get more out of our leisure hours'. One of the resources is the online 'book' - *The Book of Life*. This is an ever growing collection of mini-articles on relationships, work, self-knowledge, sociability, calm, and leisure which you can dip into at any point. The School of Life was founded by the author and 'philosopher of everyday life' Alain de Botton so if you like his work you'll like *The Book of Life* available via <http://theschooloflife.com>.

August: AGM

This year we held the AGM in our new venue at the Thomas Wolsey in Ipswich. The turnout was excellent and for once we didn't have to worry about being quorate. Official business was disposed of quickly and all last year's officers were re-elected unopposed. A request for other members to join the Committee met with a very positive response and so now we have an enlarged and invigorated group: Denis Johnston (Chair), George Bethell (Vice-Chair), Liz Thompson (Secretary), John Mellis (Treasurer) with members Charlotte Meadows, Edna Salmon, Barbara Wells, Peter Wells, and Mike Whybray.

Under 'Any Other Business' the issue of raising our profile was discussed with a concrete suggestion that we should set up a 'stall' in Ipswich on, say, a Saturday to engage with the public and hand out materials about Humanism in general and our group in particular. There was a lot of support for the proposal but it was recognised that we will need to ensure a good presence on the day to maximise impact and that we will need to check on the practicalities of organising such an 'event'. Several members agreed to set the ball rolling so... watch this space!

Guess the Thinker

Born in Vienna in 1902. Moved to New Zealand in 1937 where he wrote '*The Open Society and Its Enemies*'. After WWII, moved to UK where he lectured on logic and the scientific method at LSE and UCL. Gave us the concept of 'falsifiability' that sets scientific hypotheses apart from all other forms of 'knowledge' - including religious infallibility. Died in 1994 at the age of 92. (Answer on the back page.)

'Educated' by Tara Westover: A Review by Liz Thompson

I am rather tired of the number of personal memoirs on the market, usually describing the writer's grim childhood and inevitable triumph over adversity. However, I decided to read this memoir because of the numerous and varied accolades that it has gained - from the American Booksellers Association's 'Book of the Year' (2018), through the Audi award for Best Female Narrator and Audible's Best Memoir of the Year, to Barack Obama's Favourite Books List and Bill Gates's Holiday Reading List. I wasn't disappointed. I thought it was a brilliant if harrowing read because it left me with a clear impression of the difficulties people face to escape abusive indoctrination and the lasting legacy of the experiences in childhood when parents hold huge influence over their children's lives. Westover shows clearly that even when your education and intelligence show that what you have been taught by your parents is wrong, it is still incredibly difficult to move away from family values.

Tara's memoir is about being born to Mormon fundamentalist parents in Idaho, the youngest of seven. Her father, Gene, was allegedly the prophet of their small family, hating anything to do with the government. Thus no Westover was sent to school, no tax returns were made, no child was given a birth certificate, no one ever saw a doctor or went to hospital. Convinced the world was going to end at the stroke of the millennium, her parents were survivalists and Tara, along with her siblings, prepared for the end of the world by stockpiling home-canned peaches. In the summer she stewed herbs for her mother, a midwife and healer, and in the winter she salvaged in her father's scrapyards.

Money is a constant struggle; Gene works largely in scrap metal but it isn't enough to live on and her mother becomes a midwife. Cars driven by exhausted family members crash during long drives and even though injuries are serious no doctors are allowed so injuries persist. There is a large number of freak accidents which befall the male siblings: leg shreddings, burnings and head injuries. Tara is repeatedly beaten and abused by an elder brother who comes into her room while she's sleeping and fastens his hands around her throat, calling her a whore because of her friendship with a local boy.

Eventually, Tara began to educate herself. Encouraged by her brother Tyrell who left home to go to college, she taught herself enough mathematics and grammar to be admitted to Brigham Young University where she studied History, learning for the first time about important world events like the Holocaust and the civil rights movement. Her quest for knowledge transformed her, taking her over oceans and across continents to Harvard and to Cambridge.

'Educated' is not only about being in a fundamentalist home but about abuse, and the way in which both abusers and their enablers distort reality for the victims. For Tara's parents, allegiance to the family is paramount, and allegiance to the family requires you to accept Gene's version of the world and to disagree means you are no longer family. I thoroughly recommend this book.

Liz

Educated is published in paperback by Windmill Books. When I've finished reading my copy I'm happy to pass it on. Just let me know... George

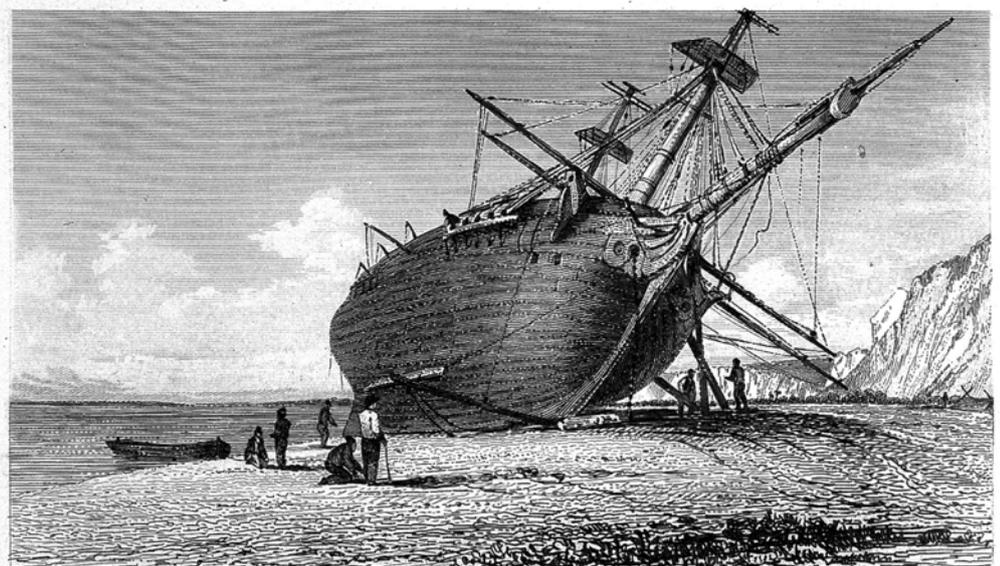
The Hunt for HMS *Beagle*

In August, *The Times* reported that marine archaeologists are homing in on the last resting place of HMS *Beagle*, the brig-sloop that famously carried Charles Darwin to the Galapagos archipelago where he gathered compelling evidence supporting what would become the theory of evolution by natural selection.

After serving as a coastguard vessel, the *Beagle* was finally decommissioned in 1870 when it was sold for salvage.

Stripped of its superstructure, the hull was allowed to sink into the Essex mud near Paglesham.

An archaeological survey of the area found lots of contemporary Victorian pottery and a radar survey revealed the shape of an old dock and, perhaps, the wreck itself. Now efforts to locate the exact location of the ship have intensified with drones equipped with infrared cameras being used to scan the mud banks where Fitzroy's most famous ship now lies.



Opposite: *Beagle Laid Ashore, River Santa Cruz*

Credit: Wellcome Library, London.
Wellcome Images
images@wellcome.ac.uk <http://wellcomeimages.org>]

Quick Quiz

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

1: All these Bishops currently sit in the House of Lords but which one is an *ex officio* member with a permanent seat?

- A Bishop of Coventry
- B Bishop of St Albans
- C Bishop of Winchester

2: Talking of Bishops, which diocese connects these two?



- A Gloucester B St David's C Llandaff

3: According to the Mormons, in which American State was the Garden of Eden located?

- A Utah B Missouri C California

4: What was the Christian name of Fitzroy, Captain of HMS Beagle?

- A Robert B Richard C Randolph

5: Which of these authors had the middle name 'Wollstonecraft'?

- A Jane Austen
- B Mary Shelly
- C Charlotte Bronte

6: According to Gustav Holst, which of these does the planet Jupiter bring?

- A Jollity B Peace C Old Age

(Answers at foot of next column.)

Call for Contributions

We welcome contributions from all our readers. Would you like to submit a 'think piece' on an issue that concerns you? Could you review a book that may be of interest to other members? Have you stumbled across something in the press or on the internet that could form the basis of a short article? If you would like to contribute a piece for the winter edition, please contact the editor on the new e-mail address: suffolk.humanists.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/>

Forthcoming Events

Thursday, 12th September 2019: Visit to Orwell Park Observatory

Arranged by Mike Whybray through his role with the Orwell Astronomical Society Ipswich, members have the opportunity to join a guided tour of the observatory and - weather permitting - observe the night sky through the observatory's 258mm Tomline Refractor.

Entrance will be at 8:30 pm prompt - latecomers will not be admitted. Full details are given in the monthly Bulletin distributed in August and available on our website - please check.

Members wishing to join the visit MUST register in advance. Contact Mike on whybray@btinternet.com or Denis as soon as possible and no later than September 11th.

Please note that this replaces our Tuesday meeting for September.

Saturday, 28th Sept.: Suffolk Humanists Pub Lunch

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

Tuesday, 8th October 2019: Lines of Sight - on the trail of W G Sebald at the Norwich Museum

To be confirmed. Watch out for details of this visit in Denis' monthly bulletins.

Saturday, 26th Oct.: Suffolk Humanists Pub Lunch

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

Tuesday, 12th November 2019: War Paint - themes in the art of war

George Bethell will give an illustrated talk on the roles of war art.

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

Recommended on YouTube

- Alain de Botton gives a TED talk on 'A kinder, gentler philosophy of success'. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MtSE4rglxbY>
- Bill Gates talks to Tara Westover about *Education* https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a7Y6Udf_Nzo
- Women's History Minute: 'Rachel Carson'. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6xAL5J5xRh0>
- Theodor Adorno (a School of Life video) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4YGnPgTWhsw>

Great Thinker Answer Sir Karl Popper

Quick Quiz Answers

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