

Council Prayers

Margaret Nelson

In August I reported that I'd discovered that Babergh District Council begins its full meetings with prayers. I wrote to the Chief Executive, asking that the council might consider making prayers optional so that members should opt in, rather than have to opt out if they're not religious. This reply came by email from Chief Executive Pat Rockhall:

'Dear Margaret,

Following your earlier e-mail, your comments were discussed at a meeting of our Political Group Leaders on 28 August. After careful consideration of all views, it was agreed that prayers before Council were a much valued part of the proceedings for current Members and, therefore, that no changes should be made to our current arrangements. However, Members were conscious of the need to keep this matter under careful review and to be prepared to consider changes in the future if the need arose.

Thank you for raising this issue with me.

With kind regards

Pat Rockall'

SUFFOLK HUMANISTS

Woodstock, Ipswich Way, Pettaugh, Stowmarket, IP14 6DJ

Tel. 01473 890593.

Fax. 01473 890117.

mail@suffolkhumanists.org.uk

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

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



Ten Minute Topics, 7.30 - 10 pm, Wednesday 12th November, at Castle Hill Community Centre, Highfield Road, Ipswich. Friends and raffle prizes welcome. Phone 01473 658828 for directions, lifts or offers of lifts.

The Xmas decorations were up in Ipswich town centre at the beginning of November and there'll be a lighting-up 'do' next weekend. If you think that this is far too early (or would rather not see them at all) write to:

Ipswich Borough Council, The Civic Centre, Civic Drive, Ipswich, Suffolk IP1 2EE

Is this the sort of thing that's grabbed your attention over the last few weeks? Bring press cuttings or any issue you'd like to get out of your system, and let's hear about it at our 'Ten Minute Topics' session.

Although we don't suggest everyone starts putting it into practice:

Aoccdrnig to rscheearch at an Elingsh uinervtisy, it deosn't mettar in waht oredr the ltteers in a wrod are, the olny iprmoetnt tihng is taht hte frist and lsat ltteer is ni the rghit pclae. The rset can be a toatl mses and you can sitll raed it wouthit a porbelm. Tihis is bcuseae we do not raed ervey lteter by itslef but the wrod as a wlohe.

POP PHILOSOPHY

David Mitchell

I read with particular sadness of the untimely death just a few days ago of Bobby Hatfield, one half of the Righteous Brothers, because 39 years ago he and his singing partner Bill Medley helped me learn one of the most valuable lessons of my life. Their newly released record, 'You've Lost that Lovin' Feeling', burst into our living room on a Saturday evening in 1964 on the BBC television show 'Juke Box Jury'. I was stunned. I'd never heard anything like it and just knew it would be a huge hit.

Imagine my total disbelief when it was savaged by the jury. The insufferable David Jacobs sounded the 'miss' hooter with great glee, informing the audience that a much better version by Cilla Black would be released in the following few weeks.

The lesson I learned, as my prediction was gloriously vindicated, was to think for myself, have the courage of my convictions and not listen to so-called experts when they talk through their nether regions. It has stood me in good stead from callow youth in 1964 to senior citizen in 2003.

And, after all this time, it's still the greatest pop single ever made. Unless you know better, of course!

Council Prayers

A response to an appeal for a change in policy at Babergh District Council - no change!



*The Righteous Brothers -
Bill Medley (left) and
Bobby Hatfield (right)*

(Continued on page 12)

do - how they organise themselves, what activities they offer, etc. Rather than make a donation to the BHA in its current difficulties, we agreed to offer to publish a book for BHA groups, collating all this information so that groups might learn from one another. It will not be expensive, and we'll expect the BHA to distribute it. Our offer will be made at the GRAM, and we'll see if they accept it.

Our Ceremonies Team continues to be busy, as funeral directors and families speak highly of David Mitchell and Margaret Nelson's work. Michael Imison has successfully done two funerals and has worked with Marie Haworth on naming ceremonies. Sophie Lovejoy has begun her training. Linda Morgan has left our team.

For Humanist ceremonies and funerals in Suffolk & N E Essex, tel. 01473 658828.

NEW BOOKS



'The Fundamentals of Extremism: the Christian Right in America' edited by Kimberly Blaker. Prof. Richard Dawkins wrote, 'I have just read this brilliant book from start to finish, almost without a break, and I am stunned and horrified by what I have learned. The fundamentalist Christian Right is America's Taliban.' The paperback is available from £8.46.

'Mother Teresa: The Final Verdict' by Aroup Chatterjee. Aroup emailed: 'It took me 8 years of hard slog and it busts the 20th century's biggest myth. I am Calcuttan born and bred.' On 19th October Pope John Paul beatified the nun, which required a miracle. He gave communion to an Indian woman who claimed a tumour had shrunk when she'd prayed to Mother Teresa, but the gynaecologist who treated her said that the tumour was, in fact, a tubercular abdominal cyst which had been cured by drugs. Read Aroup's book online at <http://www.meteorbooks.com/>, or buy it for £9.99 plus P & P - ask for details.

and the term ‘free-load’ was uncalled for.

I will be allowed to respond in the next issue of Rite Lines, apparently, but it remains to be seen whether they’ll print all of my reply. Hanne told me that they’d like me to make it clear that only two of us have given up our accreditation. This is interesting, because the BHA has so far failed to report that we aren’t the only people to have quit. In the report to the AGM, it was mentioned that two people have had their accreditation withdrawn after complaints had been made about them, but *not* that people had left voluntarily. I’ve been in touch with some, who are experienced, respected celebrants, not money-grubbing, unprincipled opportunists.

As for ‘free-loading’; since 1991, when I started officiating in pre-accreditation days, we’ve built up a reputation for good work among local funeral directors and families, introduced new people to meet increasing demand, and promoted Humanism in a variety of ways. Our group has provided moral and practical support. The number of referrals that has come through the BHA has been negligible. We’ve referred work to BHA people outside our area and responded to funeral directors from other areas who’ve been desperate to find a celebrant when they’d tried everyone from their own patch. We’ve paid our own expenses, and are training our own people free of charge. How can this be described as ‘free-loading’?

BHA Groups Annual Meeting

At our committee meeting on 5th November, we co-opted Michael Imison onto the committee. Michael has been following the discussions on an internet e-group for BHA groups with interest, and will attend the Groups’ Annual Meeting (GRAM) in London later this month on our behalf.

The e-group became rather indisciplined, but it provided dribs and drabs of information about what other groups

BHA Conference & AGM, 2003

Michael Imison

Ninety-odd members attended the conference, from 3rd to 5th October, almost filling the small Great Barr Hotel. After participants had recovered from their journey they were welcomed in the air-conditioned chill of the conference room by BHA Chair Chris Butterworth, followed by Hanne Stinson, the Executive director, who outlined the conference theme of Human Rights. The rest of the evening was spent socialising.

Next day the conference started in earnest with Norwegian human-rights lawyer Dr. Sigrun Skogly examining the possible connections between security, poverty and Human Rights. She dated the conception of Human Rights from the end of the 18th century and recited the increasing number of international treaties that sought to define them. These documents did not, however, ensure that rights were protected. Studies showed that poor people in all countries suffered lack of dignity and security and were the most likely to suffer violence, which provides a breeding ground for terrorism. She was followed by Professor Richard Norman, a member of the BHA philosophers’ group. His examination of the concept of Human Rights took in the classic ‘life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness’ (*US Declaration of Independence 1776*) ‘liberty, property, security and resistance to oppression’ (*French Declaration of the Rights of Man 1789*) through Bentham and Locke to the 13 rights enumerated in the 1950 EU declaration and the 33 listed in the 1948 United Nations Declaration of Human Rights. He divided rights into negative rights, such as protection from violence, freedom from exploitation, and positive rights, such as entitlements to food and shelter. He felt rights can never be absolutely defined but can be rationally discussed. Infringement of rights justified international interference in the internal affairs of a country,

but not military action, which itself infringed human rights. Both talks were followed by wide-ranging debate with contributions from such distinguished BHA members as Sir Herman Bondi. There was a refreshing lack of entrenched positions.

In the afternoon participants had a choice of activities. Despite the rain many went on a guided walk to a local bird reserve. The more sedentary enjoyed either a public speaking workshop with Chris Butterworth or a session with David Pollock on UK Human Rights legislation. After tea Dr Skogly and Professor Norman responded to further debate on Human Rights. This gave an opportunity to go into the subject in more depth and was much appreciated.

The final event of the day was an auction in aid of Dr Shaikh, imprisoned in Pakistan for blasphemy, conducted by BHA member Abe Alpren, and raising about £1,700.

On Sunday Roy Brown and Babu Gogenini of the International Humanist and Ethical Union talked about Political Islam the movement, not supported by all Muslims, that says the government of Muslim countries must be wholly subject to religious law as embodied in the Qur'an and Sharia law. No freedom of belief is allowed and the conduct of every part of life is subject to the law and draconian penalties. The position of women is particularly unhappy as they are subjugated in all areas to men. Only in a small ruling elite can women emerge as leaders. A particular danger is the new constitution of Afghanistan, which is likely to enshrine Islamic law. IHEU is supporting a new campaign to oppose Political Islam, which will be launched on 21st November.

This was followed by another choice of activities – a discussion of the BHA's education work with Marilyn Mason or a Campaigning workshop with Jean Berkley. The conference closed with addresses by Hanne Stinson and Chris Butterworth.

Rite Lines, and 'Facts & Rumours'

Margaret Nelson

In our May newsletter, which is distributed to other groups and individuals besides our own, I wrote about the decision of the Suffolk Humanists Ceremonies Team to become independent of the BHA. Among other things, I wrote 'Last year the BHA hired a new officer to manage ceremonies, which has meant increasing celebrants' fees and the cost of training courses.'

Hanne Stinson of the BHA responded by saying that this was 'factually inaccurate', and that they'd be informing their officiants of 'the true situation.'

In June we wrote to the BHA to say we were withdrawing from its accreditation scheme, and 'would like the BHA to regard us as offering a complementary service that's been developed through our unique position in the community.'

Not long ago I had a phone call from a BHA celebrant who asked if I'd seen the June edition of Rite Lines, the BHA's newsletter for officiants. She read me an article by Chris Butterworth (BHA Chair) about our newsletter, which criticised us for leaving the scheme and ends:

'The Newsletter proposes that the Suffolk Ceremonies Team should have some formal recognition by the BHA. Since they appear prepared to be independent and not part of the accreditation scheme, it is not clear why they are making this proposal. They seem to want national recognition without either paying for it or being prepared in turn to recognise the accreditation standards. Either being part of a national scheme has some benefits and responsibilities for which individuals should be prepared to contribute, or it does not. Suffolk Ceremonies Celebrants appear to want to free-load on the rest of us without providing anything in return.'

I thought that Chris Butterworth had misrepresented us,

Comment: Margaret Nelson

I'm grateful to Michael for his report on the conference and AGM. I've also read the BHA's annual report and glanced the financial statements for last year.

It strikes me that it's unrealistic to expect a large increase in BHA membership in the short-term. We discussed membership at our committee meeting last week, and the majority agreed that most people who supported us, and Humanism in general, are not 'joiners'. Campaigning groups, slimming clubs, and social clubs may attract a steady turnover of new members, many short-term, but otherwise membership organisations of all sorts struggle to retain their membership, whose average age is well over sixty.

Meanwhile, with a static membership of under 4000 and decreasing investment income, the BHA has committed itself to increasing costs, more expensive premises and more staff. I can't help feeling that this strategy has been rather unrealistic. It's a bit like a dwindling number of C of E members being expected to pay the clergy and maintain the churches.

I'm not saying that the BHA shouldn't campaign on religious schools, etc., and all the other worthwhile work it's been doing; I just think that maybe it'll have to go back to doing what it used to do - rely on volunteers, or not do it at all. Meanwhile, there *are* ways to save money, but the technophobes won't like them. For example; instead of paying travel expenses for committee members from all over the country to go to meetings in London, have some meetings online or by phone (as we do).

If you're a BHA member and would like a copy of the annual report and accounts, contact the BHA. If you have any comments about the association's activities and finances, please write something for the next newsletter.

The AGM was held in Birmingham following the BHA conference, which perhaps created a more positive atmosphere than might otherwise have been the case. About 60 members attended. Before the formal proceedings Carol Mountain was photographed with the Chair handing over some unwanted share certificates to the BHA. It was suggested other members might want to do the same with 'windfall' shares received after de-mutualisation of, say, a building society.

Chris Butterworth then delivered her address. She said the BHA had had a difficult year. Economy had forced a reduction in staff numbers by two. More income was necessary. She hoped members, rather than give single donations, would enter into longer-term commitments, enabling planned expenditure.

The BHA had been very active on the campaign front – particularly in relation to the issues of faith schools, of allowing humanists to perform legal marriages and of discrimination against non-believers in employment law.

The move to Gower Street had resulted in a much better environment for staff. In response to a request for the AGM to be held earlier in the year she said that next year it would be held in July. Further questions elicited that there were three vacancies on the EC and that the current figure for membership of the Association is 3743 and has been static for some time. A proposal to give a free one-year trial membership of BHA to members of local groups was referred to the Treasurer who said that groups could encourage BHA membership by subsidising members themselves.

On the accounts the treasurer stated that the EC were taking action to bring the association's financial affairs into order. Reserves were sufficient to cover the current losses. The drop in value of the association's investments should be reversed as the market started to recover. From the floor it

was pointed out that reserves had reduced continuously over five years. Only legacies were preventing the association going bankrupt. The cost of staff had gone up but though they worked hard membership had not gone up.

The report submitted to last year's AGM had been complacent and redundancies had not been foreseen. The Director responded that although it was clear last year action was necessary it would have been improper to announce redundancies before staff consultation. The accounts were passed without opposition but nine abstentions.

Marilyn Mason reporting as Education officer said her work included working on the Humanist News and fronting many of the BHA's campaigns. The office move had disrupted work but she was catching up. Successes included a good relationship with the Times Educational Supplement, which takes stories from her, the defeat of a faith school in Kingston and a meeting with Charles Clarke about the RE syllabus.

Maria MacLachlan, Community Services Officer, said that 100% of her time was spent on Ceremonies. A high proportion, about 100 a week, of all calls received by the BHA related to ceremonies. In 2002 there were nearly 7,000 ceremonies, mostly funerals. There are 181 accredited celebrants. 2 people had accreditation withdrawn. 33 were trained. Appraisal is being reviewed. A committee of 6 celebrants (all regional co-ordinators) is looking at re-organisation of the regional structure. At the moment the BHA subsidises ceremonies. This must become self-supporting. A levy of £5 per ceremony is being imposed and this will rise to £10 (which will be tax deductible for celebrants.) In response to the suggestion that *Rite Lines*, the celebrants' newsletter, should be more widely distributed she said it had to be restricted to accredited celebrants.

Justine Brian the Membership, Development and IT Offi-

cer, reported that membership had not increased and the new membership database had not been set up as she had other priorities, notably setting up the new web-site. She had also organised the conference. She was setting up a new newsletter, which would come out six times a year in future. She was organising GRAM with Joshua Kutchinsky and Barrie Berkley. The database would come next.

Finally Hanne Stinson delivered her report as Executive Director. She said she was delighted that the staff now have better working conditions even though the move to new offices had been time consuming. Sharing with the Rationalist Press Association and the International Humanist and Ethical Union reduced the cost but made it harder to find suitable premises. She admitted that the rent currently being paid (after a 5 month rental holiday) was higher than would have been payable if the BHA had stayed at Theobald's Road. The organisation had high core costs. Further cuts in staff would result in abandoning a whole area of activity such as education or ceremonies. Rather than see that she herself would resign, but admitted this was a high risk strategy. The BHA was conducting more campaigns than ever. A notable success was ensuring that the new Communications Act compelled broadcasters to treat beliefs (e.g. humanism) equally with religions. To continue more income must be raised. On average humanists pay 50p a week towards supporting their beliefs compared with the £7 a week the average believer pays to his church. Individual members and affiliated groups cost the BHA more than the income they generate. She felt that the BHA was unlikely to get any money from grant-awarding bodies and raising the subscription could lose members. The urgent need was to get more members and she urged all present to go away and recruit.

In her closing remarks Chris Butterworth endorsed this and expressed the EC's thanks to all the hard working staff.