

Bee in Your Bonnet? Got something to rant about?



Humanists can be very opinionated. Are you? Have you got a bee in your bonnet? Would you like to tell us about it at our next meeting, on Wednesday 8th September? Even if you haven't, come anyway. Be prepared to agree or disagree. Bring a friend. There'll be the usual raffle, and refreshments, and publications for sale.

The rules are:

1. No old rants – no ranting about anything we've already heard you rant about.
2. No rants lasting longer than 5 minutes.
3. No rant that's totally unreasonable – we are Humanists, after all!

It goes without saying that, however heated the discussion, you'll be ruled out of order if your rant gets rude.

Newsletter format

At a recent meeting, members were asked if they preferred the old A4 newsletter or the more recent smaller version, and the consensus was that they liked it big, which is why we've reverted to A4.

One e-mail correspondent thought our logo was 'wobbly, but maybe it's meant to be?' Yes, it *is* meant to be wobbly. It was designed to be different from the BHA's logo and other versions, and the 'wobbly' design is meant to be 'organic'.

A significant proportion of our members don't attend meetings for a variety of valid reasons, so the newsletter is important to them. We welcome contributions but reserve the right to edit them.



If you'd like a **large print** newsletter, or one on tape, let us know, and if you receive a printed copy but would be happy to get yours in PDF format by email, say so. It saves costs and paper.

Living as a Humanist

We watched a European Humanist Federation video about 2,500 years of Humanism in July. It was difficult for some to follow the subtitles on the small screen, so if you'd like to borrow the video to watch again, please ask – and would whoever's got it now return it please?

From some of the questions that were asked, it seems that some are struggling to understand what it means to be a Humanist. One of our members asked, does it just mean thinking for yourself? It means more than that, though freethinking is important to Humanists. Another asked, is it a religion? Very definitely not – it's the antithesis of religion.

All Suffolk Humanists members should have had a free copy of 'A Short Course in Humanism', published by the British Humanist Association. If you haven't, let me know. It's a good introduction to the subject, as are Barbara Smoker's little book, 'Humanism', and 'What is Humanism?' by the BHA's Humanist

Philosophers' Group, both on sale at meetings.

Jim Herrick's 'Humanism, an introduction', is available from the Rationalist Press Association - £6 plus P&P from <http://shop.rationalist.org.uk/> or RPA, 1 Gower Street, London, WC1E 6HD. Tel. 020 7436 1151. Recommended.

You might refer friends and family to our website, which includes the following:

Unlike religionists, Humanists have no faith. Having 'faith' means having a strong belief in something without proof. Humanists are essentially sceptics. Where religious people might offer supernatural answers to some of the fundamental questions about life, the universe, and everything, Humanists prefer to leave a question mark.

Humanists are atheist (meaning 'without god'), or agnostic (a term coined by the 19th century biologist, Thomas Henry Huxley, to mean 'without knowledge', since Huxley said one cannot prove or disprove the existence of God). Humanists think you can be good without God.

Humanists also reject the notion of an afterlife; they think that this life is the only one we have, and we must therefore make the most of it.

Humanists don't have the equivalent of the Bible or the Qu'ran, or a book of rules to guide them through life, though they may refer to

great works of history, philosophy and literature. You don't actually need to have read the history of Humanist ideas to be a Humanist, but most, being inquisitive, thoughtful people, will investigate the ideas that interest them.

A Humanist friend from London says that she gets cross when people assume that if you're a Humanist, you must subscribe to a particular political philosophy, such as being a pacifist, for example. My view is that being a Humanist means adopting an ethical stance on contentious issues like the invasion of Iraq. This means examining the evidence for and against any action, and considering what the consequences might be. There's no book of rules. Yes, you must think for yourself, then you must be prepared to be wrong, to change your mind, or even to admit you don't know the answer. Religious people who follow their leader's guidance don't have to worry about any of this.

At our meeting in November, we'll be considering what it means to be a Humanist, with examples of real or imaginary situations you might face, or that others have faced. For example, how would you respond, as a Humanist, if you'd raised your children to be freethinking, open-minded, responsible individuals, and your son fell in love with a Muslim whose family expected him to convert to Islam and marry her?

I've had the following for some time. I think it came from America.

The Affirmations of Humanism:

A Statement of Principles and Values

- We are committed to the application of reason and science to the understanding of the universe and to the solving of human problems.
- We deplore efforts to denigrate human intelligence, to seek to explain the world in supernatural terms, and to look outside nature for salvation.
- We believe that scientific discovery and technology can contribute to the betterment of human life.
- We believe in an open and pluralistic society and that democracy is the best guarantee of protecting human rights from authoritarian elites and repressive majorities.
- We are committed to the principle of the separation of church and state.
- We cultivate the arts of negotiation and compromise as a means of resolving differences and achieving mutual understanding.

- We are concerned with securing justice and fairness in society and with eliminating discrimination and intolerance.
- We believe in supporting the disadvantaged and the handicapped so that they will be able to help themselves.
- We attempt to transcend divisive parochial loyalties based on race, religion, gender, nationality, creed, class, sexual orientation, or ethnicity, and strive to work together for the common good of humanity.
- We want to protect and enhance the earth, to preserve it for future generations, and to avoid inflicting needless suffering on other species.
- We believe in enjoying life here and now and in developing our creative talents to their fullest.
- We believe in the cultivation of moral excellence.
- We respect the right to privacy. Mature adults should be allowed to fulfil their aspirations, to express their sexual preferences, to exercise reproductive freedom, to have access to comprehensive and informed healthcare, and to die with dignity.
- We believe in the common moral decencies: altruism, integrity, honesty, truthfulness, and responsibility. Humanist ethics is amenable to critical, rational guidance. There are normative standards that we discover together. Moral principles are tested by their consequences.
- We are deeply concerned with the moral education of our children. We want to nourish reason and compassion.
- We are engaged by the arts no less than by the sciences.
- We are citizens of the universe and are excited by discoveries still to be made in the cosmos.
- We are sceptical of untested claims to knowledge, and we are open to novel ideas and seek new departures in our thinking.
- We affirm Humanism as a realistic alternative to theologies of despair and ideologies of violence and as a source of rich personal significance and genuine satisfaction in the service to others.
- We believe in optimism rather than pessimism, hope rather than despair, learning in the place of dogma, truth instead of ignorance, joy rather than guilt or sin, tolerance in the place of fear, love instead of hatred, compassion over selfishness, beauty instead of ugliness, and reason rather than blind faith or irrationality.
- We believe in the fullest realisation of the best and noblest that we are capable of as human beings.

Committee phone meeting



The committee 'met' by telephone conference call on 26th August. Because we're widely scattered we have some committee meetings by phone through Community Network, a charity that provides phone conferencing for other charities and voluntary organisations at low cost. We pay about £10 for an hour's conference and each committee member pays for his or her own phone call at the cheap rate.

It's cheaper and more environmentally friendly than driving all over the county. We've had no difficulty in getting through

all our business in the time available, by sticking to an agenda and avoiding waffle, but we have to supply our own tea and biscuits.



Suffolk Humanist Ceremonies Celebrants



David Mitchell



Michael Imison



Sophie Lovejoy



Margaret Nelson

There are still four of us in the Suffolk team. We mainly do funerals but there have been a small number of weddings and baby-namings this year. New members may not have heard of us, so here's what we look like. We operate as independent celebrants, not part of the BHA Ceremonies Network (though David and I used to work with the BHA).

David's reputation, after 2½ years, has ensured increasing demand for his services. Sophie's just started a new part-time job at Essex University but will continue to do some funerals. She and Michael are gaining valuable experience. I'm no longer willing to cover the Clacton, Walton and Frinton areas, and will only do a limited number of funerals close to home for families who've used my services before, or for friends. After over 800 funerals, I'd like more time for other activities.

At our committee meeting, Peter Davidson expressed concern that the Suffolk team works independently of the BHA. We'd like it known that we aren't the only ones; an increasing number of experienced officiants have been quitting the BHA scheme. Some will meet to compare notes in Peterborough later this month and I plan to be there, out of curiosity, though I don't intend to join any alternative national scheme. However, I do maintain contact with BHA and non-BHA people from around the country, providing support, advice and information when asked.

For a Humanist funeral, wedding, baby-naming or gay affirmation ceremony, phone 01473 658828. We have a leaflet about planning your own funeral. Please phone if you'd like one. MN



Humanists on BBC Radio Suffolk

95.5, 95.9, 103.9 & 104.6 fm

David and Margaret continue to broadcast their Thoughts for the Day on Radio Suffolk at about 7.25 to 7.30 am. Their next will be as follows: 9th September (MN), 11th September (DM), 30th September (DM), 7th October (MN), 22nd October (DM), and 29th October (MN).

David will be reviewing the Sunday papers on Nick Risby's programme soon. On 25th August Lesley Dolphin tried out a new idea on her mid-morning programme – COWS, or Crabby Old Women, Radio Suffolk's answer to Grumpy Old Men (as seen on TV). Margaret enjoyed being a cow and had a good gripe about waste and the people who complain about only having their bins emptied once a fortnight. Nothing to do with Humanism, but fun.

Standby =  + 

Did you know it takes the output of 2 power stations a year just to supply appliances left on standby? Save the planet. Switch off!

Friends of Suffolk Humanists

Those who get their newsletter by post will find a picture by **Kathy Mitchell** in their envelope. Some of you will know Kathy, my niece, through social events. She is a disabled artist who paints by mouth and is a member of the Mouth & Foot Painting Artists. She exhibited at the Robert Cross Hall in Ipswich Corn Exchange a few months ago. For more information, send the postcard to the MFPA Gallery or go to <http://www.mfpa.co.uk>.



Ipswich Corn Exchange was the venue for a Quaker memorial meeting on 9th August for **Nan Fyfe**, also known to some of you through social events. Nan came to our music and fish 'n chips evening last winter. She once said that when she died she'd like a Humanist funeral, because Quaker meetings are often silent and she'd rather like people to talk about her. She needn't have worried. There were a lot of people at the Corn Exchange and many spoke about Nan with affection. She'd worked for Barnardo's and been active with CRUSE bereavement care. She believed in God, Marie and I don't, but there was mutual respect, and friendship, and we shared common values. Nan was a plain-speaking Scot who was scornful about the notion that you can be a Quaker without believing in God, as some have claimed. She said, 'We're the *Religious Society of Friends*'. MN

Charitable & other donations

We donated the proceeds of our July raffle to the Oxfam emergency appeal for the Sudan. We were able to give about £36, more than we usually raise with a raffle.

I mentioned that we might do this in the last newsletter, and asked again at the meeting if anyone objected. No one did. However, Peter Davidson, our Vice-Chair, told the committee that he felt 'pressured' to conform, that Suffolk Humanist funds ought to be used in Suffolk, and that it ought to be up to individual members to donate to whatever charities they liked, rather than through the group.

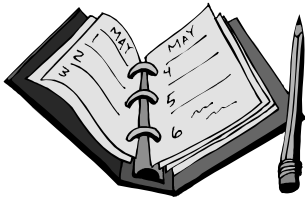
We've given the proceeds of our raffle to guest speakers in the past, as a donation to the group or charity he or she represented. Peter was happy about this, but asked that we might have a procedure for donating group funds in the future.

The reason I asked (twice) if anyone objected to this donation was to save time in an emergency. It would have taken longer to ballot everyone through the newsletter. The committee hasn't determined what any procedure might be.

In view of Peter's objections, I won't ask the group to donate the proceeds of its raffle to an appeal again. However, I don't believe there is anything wrong with any member making a formal proposal that we should donate funds to a worthy cause, and taking a vote on it.

Peter requested information about the progress of the newly formed 'Humanism South Africa' organisation. We donated £50 in response to an appeal from the coordinator, Stephen Langtry, some time ago. Peter was the only member to object. When you consider that there's been no history of freethinking in South Africa, and that even the BHA only has a small membership (about 4000), it clearly won't be easy. Stephen responded to a recent email asking what progress he'd made as follows: 'Growth has been slow, but we get a steady flow of enquiries and there are now a number of members – still less than 50 – over the country. There are no new groups though. We plan to have a national conference early in the New Year. Thank you for the support that you gave last time.'

If anyone has any comment to make, please get in touch. MN



Dates for
your diary

Wednesday 8th September
Bee in Your Bonnet (see p1).

7.30 pm at Castle Hill Community Centre, Highfield Road, Ipswich.
Raffle prizes and guests welcome.

Tuesday 26th October
Music & Poetry buffet supper as guests of members Joan and Ted Matthews in Kesgrave. Bring your favourite poetry and music (books and CDs).

"Too many people in the modern world view poetry as a luxury, not a necessity like petrol. But to me it's the oil of life."

John Betjeman (1906-1984)

7.30 pm start. Please phone 01473 658828 by Friday 22nd October at the latest to say if you'd like to come.
Directions will be supplied.

Wednesday 10th November
What it means to be a Humanist (see p2).

7.30 pm at Castle Hill Community Centre, Highfield Road, Ipswich.
Raffle prizes and guests welcome.

Please phone 01473 658828 for directions and if you can offer or need a lift, though we can't guarantee to supply one.

If you can't get to our meetings, we can come to you. You're welcome to organise a social event at home, attendance by invitation – we don't give out contacts details to the public. No need to lay on a buffet – we can ask everyone to bring food to share.

Silly Seasons

Thought for the Day BBC Radio Suffolk, 30th August

It's August bank holiday – the end of the summer holidays and the beginning of autumn. Keats wrote, 'Season of mists and mellow fruitfulness', not 'Season of soggy cereal crops'. You used to know where you were with the seasons. Not any more. Everything's topsy-turvy, seasonally. We've had warm winters and soggy summers, early springs and late autumns. The birds and beasts don't know if they're coming or going. There are lots more bugs about, because there haven't been the hard frosts to kill them off, while seabirds off the Scottish coast have failed to breed because the small prey they feed on have all swum north in the milder seas. We may not face the same sort of flooding as those unfortunate people in Cornwall did the other week, but the seas are rising, and our Suffolk coastline is retreating.

Anyone who says it's nothing to do with global warming could be right, but if they're not, and we could do something to put things right, we should. You can't gloat while you're afloat. The Government isn't doing enough to change things, which is understandable. The electorate is unwilling to change so it's a vote-loser, being environmentally friendly.

Will your grandchildren and great-grandchildren (if you have any) thank you for your complacency, or will they be too busy struggling in a world that's too dry in some places, too wet in others, while insurance premiums have gone sky-high?

We usually save up new resolutions for New Year, but, as all good hippies used to recite in the sixties, this is the first day in the rest of your life. Our small planet needs you. It needs all of us to be more ingenious, more considerate, to conserve energy, and to think in terms of sustainability. Don't blame the weather – blame our lifestyle, then let's change it. This is a non-party-political broadcast, asking you to consider the future, whether the weather be fine, or not.

Margaret Nelson

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