

suffolk Humanist & secularist NEWS

Newsletter of Suffolk Humanists & Secularists

May 2008



"...and sporteth twice they the camels, before the third hour. And so the Millionites went forth, to Ramgilliad, in Kadesh-belgamesh, by Shorethberagalion, to the house of Gashbillbethuelbasda, he who brought the butterdish to Balshaza, and the tent-peg to the house of Rashamon. And there, slew they the goats, yeah, and put they the bits in little pots."

Monty Python

Our website continues to attract between 400 and 500 visitors a week, but the numbers shot up at the beginning of March after we'd posted an article by Laurence Boyce of Cambridge ("It's official: religion has been debunked"), which has been read over 34,600 times! www.suffolkhumanists.org.uk/node/640

If you're not on the Internet and would like a copy, send an SAE.

Name change

Our group is affiliated to the National Secular Society and the British Humanist Association. At our AGM in April it was agreed that we'd change our name, following the suggestion from Terry Sanderson, President of the National Secular Society, "... that local humanist groups might like to change their titles to Secular and Humanist Groups or Humanist and Secular Groups. Based on the enquiries we have received, this would broaden your appeal and therefore increase your membership, while also making the secular presence more accessible in local communities." The NSS is "delighted" by our decision.

The BHA and the International Humanist & Ethical Union (IHEU) don't recommend using the term "secular humanist", as the word "humanist" doesn't require qualification, which is why we've chosen to call ourselves Suffolk Humanists & Secularists. We'll have a new URL (website address) and email address soon, but the old ones will still work.

10 minute topics in Colchester

At our meeting in Colchester on Wednesday 14th May you'll have an opportunity to get something off your chest and free the bee in your bonnet.

The idea is that everyone writes down a topic, all the suggestions go in a hat (or similar container) and we draw them out at random to be discussed for 10 minutes. If there's something that gets everyone fired up, we can go on for longer if we all agree.

This has been postponed from our AGM in Ipswich last month, when we were locked out of our meeting room by mistake and wasted time looking for somewhere else to go.

We'll be in the Parnell Room at the Quaker Meeting House, Church Street, Colchester - near The Mercury Theatre and the water tower. Nearest car park - the multi-storey on Balkerne Hill, then just walk over the footbridge.



Birds in Ipswich

Our speaker on 11th June in Ipswich will be Mark Grantham from the British Trust for Ornithology. The BTO aims to promote and encourage the wider understanding, appreciation and conservation of birds by:

- conducting high-quality, impartial research in field ornithology.
- providing scientific evidence and advice on priority issues in bird conservation.
- basing this work on a partnership between amateurs and professionals, conducting fieldwork that is both enjoyable and scientifically rigorous.

Thanks to a Heritage Lottery Fund grant, Suffolk became the first county in the UK to have its own garden bird Ambassador. On Saturday 26 January, Carl Powell said, "I'm delighted to take up this position, by raising the profile of the BTO/CJ Garden BirdWatch Survey in Suffolk I will also be helping to highlight the importance of Suffolk's gardens for birds. More people than ever are feeding the birds in their gardens and by taking part in this survey they are adding to the knowledge already gained. In the long run this can only benefit the birds. The more we know now the better position we will be in to protect them in the future."



Suffolk Humanist & Secularist News

“People of Faith” invited to join Local Strategic Partnerships

An invitation to “people of faith” to join the Suffolk Local Strategic Partnerships boards (through Suffolk Inter-Faith Resource) has recently been seen by Suffolk Humanists.

Do you know what Local Strategic Partnerships (LSPs) are? Nor did I. I’ll try and explain, although it’s pretty dry stuff!

The Government Offices For The English Regions website defines LSPs as:

“Single non-statutory bodies that bring together local public, private, community and voluntary organisations, generally at the level of District, County and Unitary councils. They work with the local community to identify and tackle key issues such as crime, unemployment, education, health and housing in a more co-ordinated manner than has happened before.”

According to the Financial Times, LSPs are meant to offer a forum for local agencies and others, such as businesses, to co-ordinate local policy. The New Statesman said in 2001 that local partnerships, introduced by the Labour Government, were a new sort of quango, at a local level. Quangos are now supposed to be called non-departmental public bodies (NDPBs), by the way.

Suffolk has a Strategic Partnership with forty board members. The board chair is the Countess of Euston, and other members are local politicians, police and primary care trust personnel, educationalists, business people, etc. There are six local area LSPs, each with a board: Babergh East, Mid Suffolk, One Ipswich, Suffolk Coastal, Waveney and Western Suffolk.

The invitation was for one person of faith to join a board and for that person to represent all the faiths in each area.

(There are six local area LSPs, but the invitation calls for faith representatives to join the seven LSPs, which implies that the main board needs one too. But the invitation was issued by a main board member who is already called the Faith Communities Representative ...)

So what, after all this detail? What have local strategic partnerships to do with humanists and secularists?

Here we have an invitation for faith (religious) people to influence local affairs, in their status as religious people. Not as Catholic social workers or Buddhist police officers, but just as religious people.

And it gets worse, as a single person is expected to represent all the faiths in his/her area. How rational is that?

Can secularists accept this invitation as reasonable? Surely adding more people of faith to these boards goes against our view that government should be separated from direct religious influence.

Given the large numbers of people already involved in LSPs, faiths are already well represented. LSP members, with or without a faith, are going to bring their ethical background to work or to a board meeting.

We don't need and cannot afford even more people to join what appears to be a swollen, quango-like organisation, especially if they're bringing agendas which could be unacceptable to the majority of the local community.



John Palmer



From the Chairman

We've had a varied programme of events over the last year and continued with our foray into Colchester, where we are always made most welcome at the Quaker Meeting House by the warden

Mervyn Carter, one of our members.

My grateful thanks to Margaret for continuing to fly the Humanist flag prominently in the media and in the world of education as well as for her many hours of work behind the scenes to ensure that our meetings are well organised and the website always interesting and topical.

I also extend a big thank you to Derek Mason, who's been a stalwart for as long as I can remember and a voice of reason on the committee, from which he now wishes to resign. And a note of appreciation for Joan Matthews, another long time and stalwart member who came onto the committee last year and whose increasing deafness

caused her great difficulty when trying to participate in meetings. Joan has also offered her resignation. My thanks also to Richard Stock for hitting the ground running in his role as deputy chairman. His help and enthusiasm are greatly appreciated especially in the knowledge that he also has a very full professional workload and family commitments to balance. Last but not least Jan Schmidt, whose dedication to our refreshment at meetings knows no bounds.

I find myself enjoying all the meetings I attend. I'd like to appeal to anyone who feels they have something to offer the group as a committee member, speaker or envelope filler to offer their services. All we can offer in return is the satisfaction of knowing you've done a little bit towards the spreading of the Humanist message. Good luck for the coming year.

David Mitchell

(This is an abbreviated version of David's AGM report.)

May 2008

The 2011 Census—the religion question

The British Humanist Association is lobbying the Office of National Statistics to change the 'religion' question in the 2011 Census. The 2001 question – 'What is your religion?' – led to deeply flawed results. The objective is to ensure that the question or questions about religion in the 2011 Census give an accurate picture of religious affiliation in the UK.

At least 15.5% of the population is non-religious according to the 2001 Census, making this the second largest 'belief' group in the UK, 2½ times bigger than all the non-Christian religions put together. By any sensible reckoning, this figure is far too low. Firstly, the ONS itself admits that the leading nature of the 'religion' question meant that many people, especially those with a loose affiliation to a religion, would have identified themselves as religious when they are not; this is particularly true of those who identified themselves as 'Christian'. Secondly, a large proportion of those who identified themselves as affiliated to a religion have no active involvement.

Apart from the inaccuracy of the data, there are real, practical problems with its use. It says nothing about the actual religious practice, involvement, belief or belonging of the population, but central and local government use it in resource allocation and for targeting equality initiatives. The figure stating that 72% of the population is 'Christian' has been used in a variety of ways, such as justifying the presence of Bishops in the House of Lords, the state-

funding of faith schools, increasing religious broadcasting and excluding Humanists in Parliament and elsewhere.

The ONS has written to the BHA that they've tested the question and their results show that the 2001 Census question on religion should be used again. In light of how the data has been misused, the BHA says this is highly irresponsible. In order to strengthen its case, the BHA needs evidence that demonstrates the difficulties created by the 2001 question.

The BHA would appreciate information about the justification of 'faith-based' practices by public bodies based on Census results. Examples may include funding decisions or changes in service delivery, or justifying the allocation of resources on the basis of Census data on religion.

If you have any pertinent examples, please let us the BHA know so that they can build up evidence showing the misuse of the questionable 2001 data.

All information should be sent to Naomi Phillips, BHA Public Affairs Officer, naomi@humanism.org.uk. Contact Naomi for more information, by email or on 020 7079 3585. We would like to know about it too, so that we may raise the issue locally.



MN

Naomi Phillips

We nearly had our AGM in a car park

Our AGM on 10 April got off to an unpromising start, when we found ourselves locked out of Castle Hill Community Centre. Glad it wasn't raining! The problem was due to an acting key-holder who didn't turn up. I've been assured that a new caretaker will be in charge next time and it shouldn't happen again—but if it does, I've got the manager's mobile number! So our thanks to Marie Howarth, who very kindly invited us to hold the meeting at her place, and apologies to Michael Lumb, who got lost on the way. Our guest for the evening was Vinaya Kulkarni from Suffolk Inter-Faith Resource, who kindly suggested a couple of other potential meeting places in Ipswich, if we have any more problems. Since we started late, we didn't have time for 10-minute topics (see front page).

The following people were elected: David Mitchell from Pettaugh (Chair), Richard Stock from Ipswich (Vice-Chair), Louise Armstrong from Harwich (Treasurer), Margaret Nelson from Elmsett (Secretary). Andrew Morrison from Ipswich and John Palmer from Holbrook will be committee members. I hope to provide a brief introduction to all of them in the next few newsletters.

Richard, Andrew and John have all expressed an interest in

representing our group at the BHA's affiliated groups annual meeting (GRAM) in November. Only two people can go, so it depends on which day it is and who's available.

We had over 70 members in April. Welcome to the new members. Most have renewed their membership (some by standing order) but there are still a few who haven't. If you're one of them, please pay now—there was a form with your last newsletter. The minimum sub is still only £5.

We're in a healthy financial position, but you'll have to wait until the next newsletter for the accounts as I somehow failed to get an electronic copy. Meanwhile, if there's anything you'd like to know, please ask. *MN*

Humanist Life Stories

We've been contacted by two Humanists from California who are collecting life stories that illustrate how Humanists face life's challenges without divine guidance, for publication in a book. The stories should be based on personal experience or an event you experienced with others. If you've got something to contribute, get in touch.

SUFFOLK HUMANISTS & SECULARISTS

5 Hadleigh Road
Elmsett, Ipswich
Suffolk, IP7 6ND

01473 658828

mail@suffolkhumanists.org.uk

The Suffolk & N E Essex Humanist group was founded in 1991 to promote Humanism and Secularism, and to provide fellowship, education and support for non-believers in Suffolk and North East Essex. We changed our name to Suffolk Humanists when the Essex group was formed, then again in April 2008, to reflect the importance of secularism when religious organisations are being increasingly assertive.

We meet in Ipswich and Colchester.

We're affiliated to The British Humanist Association and The National Secular Society.

Sympathetic non-members are welcome, but 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, the arts and the media.

The Suffolk Humanist Ceremonies Team has an unblemished record for high standards. We provide non-religious ceremonies for all occasions. For more information, see the contact details above.

HUMANISM: an ethical approach to life without religion; Humanists think we can be good without God.

SECULARISM: the belief that religion should have no place in civil affairs; that the church and state should be kept separate.

IN BRIEF...

Sangkheum Center for Children in Cambodia—If you were at our February meeting, when Nathan Nelson spoke about the centre, you may like to know that you can support them through www.justgiving.com/sangkheumcenter. Otherwise, you may like to come to a fund-raising breakfast in August—see the diary.

Barter—Humanist with a large garden and an arthritic spine (me!) offers slap-up

meal for a couple of hours help. Can also offer secretarial services, photography and design work, personalised cards and notelets. Is there anything you'd like to barter with fellow Humanists?

Is anyone interested in the development of a **Single Equality Scheme for Suffolk Primary Care Trust**? Whether a patient, relative or carer, you could contribute between now and 27 June. Contact us if you're interested. For more information, see <http://tinyurl.com/6z3qb8>. MN

DATES FOR YOUR DIARY

Please note: the days and rooms will vary over the coming year, due to availability, so please make a note in your diary now. We welcome suggestions for speakers and/or topics for meetings and anyone is welcome to organise a social event.

Meetings start at 7.30pm and end at 10pm.

Wednesday 14 May, Parnell Room, Quaker Meeting House, Church Street, Colchester—**10 Minute Topics** (see p1).

Wednesday 11 June, Room 1, Castle Hill Community Centre, Ipswich—**Mark Grantham from the British Trust for Ornithology** on bird conservation.



No meetings in July or August, though there may be a pub lunch. Is anyone interested in **an outing to Dunwich in July?**

We'd have fish 'n chips by the sea, followed by a stroll along the coast, then tea at the Coastguards' Cottages.

Sunday 31 August, French breakfast in Elmsett, 10 'til noon. Croissant, pain au chocolat, pain aux raisins, fruit, tea and coffee for £4.00. Raffle. Funds will go to the Sangkheum Centre for Children,

Cambodia. RSVP 01473 658828 by 25 August please!

Sunday 7 September, Burston Strike School Rally, Burston, near Diss (see our February newsletter). The Norfolk Humanist Group has had a stall at this event for several years, and we're considering going this year. It's an opportunity to promote Humanism & Secularism, perhaps with special reference to what's going on in education today. If anyone's interested in helping, please get in touch ASAP.

Thursday 18 September, Hexagonal Room at the Quaker Meeting House, Colchester—details later.

Wednesday 8 October, The Hall at Castle Hill Community Centre, Ipswich—details later.

Friday 21 November, The Parnell Room at the Quaker Meeting House, Colchester—details later.

Wednesday 10 December, The Hall at Castle Hill Community Centre, Ipswich—**our guest speaker will be Jim Herrick of the Rationalist Association, author of "Humanism: an introduction"**.

We have raffles in Ipswich, but not in Colchester. Prizes and guests welcome.

For directions or to request or offer a lift, phone 01473 658828 or email us.