



9th August, AGM & BBQ

Our treasurer John Mellis is hosting our summer barbecue this year in Stutton. It will be preceded by our AGM, postponed from the spring. Guests are welcome at the barbecue but the AGM is for members only, so if you're not a member you can socialise with other non-members while the rest of us talk AGM-talk—we'll try to keep it brief. Please let John know that you're coming, so we know how many to cater for. Bring a plate of food and drinks to share. The usual barbecue fare will be provided.



The address is: Old Pond House, Catts Close, Stutton, IP9 2SP. Email mellisj@btinternet.com or phone 01473 327061 ASAP. Catts Close isn't far from The King's Head on the B1080, Manningtree Road, through the village. If you're facing the pub, Cattsfield is a few yards to the left, and Catts Close is on the left off Cattsfield.

If you need or can offer a lift, get in touch and we'll try to help.

SIFRE reformed

Denis Johnston

Many of you will be aware of the work of Suffolk Interfaith Resource (SIFRE) an organisation that we've been affiliated to since 1991, when both groups began. Atheists and humanists are often uncomfortable with terms such as "interfaith" but the purpose of SIFRE, which is "... to advance public knowledge and understanding of the teachings, beliefs, traditions and practices of the different

religions and philosophies (including their distinctive features and common ground) of communities in Britain and in particular in Suffolk and East Anglia", is clearly inclusive and we have always been made more than welcome. SIFRE has done much to encourage dialogue and understanding between all involved.

In recent times however changes outside SIFRE's control have meant that we have had to think carefully about its future.

The first change was concerned with financing. For many years it had received local authority and other grants that were sufficient to maintain an office, host events and employ a member of staff. However, in 2013 SIFRE, along with many other voluntary bodies across the country, suffered the loss of its core funding.

The second change affected accommodation. Until recently SIFRE was provided with free accommodation by Suffolk College and then University Campus Suffolk. This provided a venue for meetings and allowed it to host a substantial library. In 2013 we also heard that the building holding the Interfaith Centre was scheduled to be demolished in the near future. Fortunately, this was delayed and SIFRE was able to continue (albeit without staff) until spring 2015, when we were eventually informed that the building was to be vacated. Losing the rooms was major blow not least because it meant we had no fixed place for meetings (although UCS has provided rooms on occasions) and of course the library had to be relocated. The

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SIFRE . . .

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books are now boxed up and in storage. It is not yet known exactly what will happen to them.

Over the past year the board (of which I'm a member) has deliberated and consulted with the membership to chart a way forward and the present situation is that:

* The board has proposed and membership has agreed that without premises or staff SIFRE need no longer be a charitable company with all the legal obligations and considerable overheads associated with that status.

* Instead three new small charities will be created. These are expected to be set up in Ipswich, Bury St Edmunds and Waveney, and will be formed with their own local committees.

Although this is clearly the end of an era it also heralds the beginning of a new one. With the exception of the library we hope to continue all of the current activities including holding seminars and conferences, and to build upon the new.

Over the twenty-five years two of the key drivers within SIFRE have been Cynthia and David Capey. They set up SIFRE at a time when most people would have retired and they have worked tirelessly over the years with boundless enthusiasm and undaunted optimism. Even in the changing circumstances of SIFRE they have been instrumental in establishing the new charities and we owe them all the thanks and support we can give.

Margaret Nelson

To confirm what Denis has written, the latest news is that interfaith groups will be centred on Bury St Edmunds, Ipswich and Lowestoft. Each of them, classified as a small charity by the Charity Commission, will have its own constitution and, unless its income exceeds £5,000 pa, won't need to be a registered charity. Over 75% of SIFRE's Company Members have agreed to the Board's proposal and the closure will be the subject of an Extraordinary General Meeting of Board Members to be held immediately before SIFRE's AGM on 13th September. In the short term, the SIFRE web site will

be kept running and local group activities will be announced on it.

The East of England Faiths Agency is ongoing. EEFA was formed several years ago when demand for SIFRE services came from outside Suffolk. Subsequently it took over all the training and teaching work previously organised by SIFRE. EEFA will continue to support RE teaching in schools and offer Diversity Training to the education, statutory and private sectors. Its web site www.eefa.net will remain a source of information about all local faith based events.

I have happy memories of my involvement with SIFRE, which goes back to its inception. I was grateful to Denis for taking over much of the work that I used to do. New members of the group might wonder what SIFRE did. This is just some of it...

There were regular Interfaith Forums, when representatives of the various member groups met to discuss topical issues. One was at the behest of Suffolk County Council's Diversity Officer, when the then Communities Secretary Hazel Blears set out how the Labour Government envisaged working alongside "the many faith based organisations already making a real difference to their communities" in The Framework for Partnership, published in July 2008, promising £7.5m worth of investment. We opposed handing over public services to faith organisations. Later, this idea was recycled by the Cameron government as The Big Society, aiming to hand over lots of services to community organisations. Wonder what happened to that?

SIFRE was involved with the Mayor of Ipswich's Celebration of Community, with providing "thoughts for the day" (including a humanist one) before County Council meetings, with a commemoration of the 9/11 victims in the Corn Exchange on the first anniversary of the tragedy, with training hospital staff about patients' needs (including appropriate and inappropriate behaviour), and much more. I've especially enjoyed visiting schools with a team of SIFRE tutors, where young people have been very interested to know more about humanism. Some contributed to a DVD for schools called "Why Atheism?" by Team Video.

What do non-believers believe?

The rather obscure topic of our April meeting was inspired by a book published in 2006 called "What We Believe but Cannot Prove: Today's Leading Thinkers on Science in the Age of Certainty". At the time of publication discussion around the topic spread way beyond the original scientific themes to embrace just about everything.

Our discussions were similarly broad—indeed it was impossible to really capture them as we ended up raising far more questions than stating or agreeing on beliefs as such. The following gives a flavour of the types of belief statements that triggered discussion. I've left out the obvious ones—like "I believe there are other life forms in the universe." Unsurprisingly we had no certainty about any of them.

"I believe that we all perceive the world in the same way; i.e. my sensation of blue is the same as yours."

"I believe that some people do really believe in the supernatural as strongly as we do not. They just cannot comprehend how it is possible to not believe in god(s)."

"I believe my sense of being is entirely caused by brain processes and that maybe someday these will be understood."

"I believe that reality exists."

"I suspect that people gain a selective advantage from believing in things they can't prove."

"I believe that animals have feelings and other states of consciousness."

"I believe that the scientific method is the best method for establishing truth."

The difficulty with such a discussion of course is that you can end up with "I believe that I cannot prove anything!" And we did. DJ

Our best wishes and condolences to long-term member Joan Matthews, whose husband Ted died on 30th July.

Is marriage outdated?

At our June meeting Elisabeth Thompson gave a summary of marriage through the ages and this triggered most of the subsequent discussion. In the past most marriages were essentially financial/asset agreements regarding inheritance between families and were really only necessary for the wealthy. The idea of a 'love marriage' is very recent. Marriages were often short, lasting fifteen years on average in

Victorian times, with most ending in the death of one partner.

We discussed a lot about what marriage actually was, covering civil partnerships, common law marriage and the merits or otherwise of considering a couple to be married

only after conception or even after birth. There was a lot we didn't know, such as can Mormon Leaders or Rabbis do the legal bit?

Discussion around Humanist Ceremonies was more focused on the types of ceremonies, as the new members hadn't come across them. That said there was general agreement that the civil ceremony plus whatever you want afterward was the ideal but unlikely to be implemented in the UK in the foreseeable future. At the same time, we acknowledged that the prospects for that were remote.

Note: Heterosexual Anglicans get all the legal stuff done in the church (but not gay couples), Jews and Quakers have to give 28 days' notice at a register office, then their "officials" (presumably including rabbis) can register a marriage, and "authorised officials", including ministers and priests of other religions, can register marriages after giving 28 days' notice to a registrar. Humanist weddings are legal in Scotland but not in England. The British Humanist Association has been campaigning to have humanist weddings legalised in England, without success.

MN

Sukey, you shall be my wife
And I will tell you why:
I have got a little pig,
And you have got a sty;
I have got a dun cow
And you can make good cheese;
Sukey, will you marry me -
Say Yes, if you please.

Old Nursery Rhyme

Chair's Report for the AGM

Although I always feel we are struggling to make an impact as I look back over the past year I find myself rather surprised. We have held regular monthly meetings in Arlington's (previously they had fallen to one only every other month) and although still small the attendance has increased. However it has not yet reached a level where we would feel confident enough to invite regular external speakers. The only external speaker we had this year was Ted Benton who told us of Darwin's contemporary Alfred Russell Wallace. Most other meetings (including a Sunday Special at Margaret's) have been discussions about topical or general interest subjects—a simple formula has proved remarkably successful.

The informal lunchtime pub meetings usually held at the Duke of York in Woodbridge have continued to be held every other month. Early in the year we attempted to have these in other parts of the county, such as Bury St. Edmunds, but found no takers so quickly reverted to Woodbridge.

We managed to get on the radio (both local and national) in November.

Many humanist groups across the country have reported that using the "Meetup" website has been spectacularly successful in attracting new members and we signed up to this in September 2015. So far 48 people have contacted but only a small number (a dozen or so) are in Suffolk and quite a few live outside the UK. It is encouraging that most are young people but disappointing that so far only two have turned up at group meetings.

We remain affiliated to the BHA and National Secular Society. I attended the BHA Group Representatives' annual meeting.

Locally we have been active within Suffolk Interfaith Resource (SIFRE) which has been going through a major transformation in recent times—see page 2. We are also loosely associated with the Ipswich UN association and provided a presentation for UN day in December.

Our main formal links with education are via Suffolk's SACRE (Standing Advisory Committee on RE) and via EEFA (East of England Faiths Agency).

The role of SACREs remain uncertain as schools opt out of LEA control and the increase in faith schools is a concern. EEFA provides a useful way of getting opportunities to visit schools and other educational establishments.

Sadly age and health issues have weighed heavily on the ceremonies team (David, Margaret, Sue and Sophie) to the extent that they decided to formally disband during the year. This may seem to be the end of an era but it has been an era of massive change. Within a few decades the number of non-religious funerals has gone from being almost unheard of to being the first choice of many and the superb work of our celebrants team over the years has contributed greatly to that transformation.

As ever we are indebted to the work of ex-officio members, in particular Margaret Nelson for the newsletter and social media, Nathan Nelson for the website management (and his work in transferring it to a new system), and John Palmer for liaison work.

To finish I'd like to appeal to anyone who feels they have something to offer the group as a committee member, speaker, or whatever, to offer their services. Additionally we need to (and must) find a way to attract younger members who can take an active part and future-proof humanism in Suffolk.

Denis Johnston, 10th July 2016

Secretary's Report for the AGM

Our programme for the year 2016 was constructed in early January and it was decided that it would be mainly discussions until we had more members when we could think about suitable speakers again. Meetings will continue on the second Tuesday of each month, as follows:

January—Protecting the public from terrorism. How does this affect civil liberties?

February—We should not expect our online activities to be private.

March—Meeting with other organisations/Café Scientifique.

April—Extreme views should not be given a public platform.

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May—Things I believe but cannot prove.

June—Is marriage outdated?

August—Summer party.

September—Has Dawkins gone too far?

October—David Hume and Humanism.

November—Peace and Justice.

We decided that these topics could be changed and that each person on the committee would lead a topic in turn to generate discussion.

The December meeting was substituted with the UN Celebration on the 10th, and Arlington's isn't available (due to Xmas bookings).

The dates of the Saturday lunches are on alternate last Saturdays in the month at The Duke of York in Woodbridge.

We have succeeded mainly in holding meetings every month but to be successful we need to ensure that our proposed meetings take place and that there is a committee member available to lead a meeting when someone is ill or on holiday.

Membership is still a concern and we could do with a few additional members on the committee from the new intake. The Chair has been actively trying to attract new members through Meet Up with some success.

The venue at Arlington's is currently suitable because the atmosphere is very congenial, food and drinks are readily available and the room is the right size considering the low turnout of members. Parking has not been a problem unless there is a football match. We need to check Ipswich Town fixture list to try and avoid those evenings.

Hopefully we will be able to attract new members in the coming months.

Elisabeth Thompson, 26th July 2016

Social Media Report

I maintain a presence on our website, on Twitter and on Facebook, where we attract attention from other groups as well as atheists and humanists from around the world. We have 728 followers on Twitter. Almost 400 people have "liked" our Facebook page, and over 900 people have read my recent posts, many of which are shared with other people. On our behalf, I follow other groups and organisations on Facebook and 183 others on Twitter, mostly humanist and similar groups nationally and internationally.

Margaret

Suffolk Humanist People...



Simon Bishop

Simon Bishop died recently. The first time that he had anything to do with the group was when our celebrant David Mitchell conducted a humanist funeral for his mum. Simon subsequently joined us but was only able to attend one or two meetings because he spent his

working life in The Hague. He was a brilliant IT specialist, we're told, who had something to do with patents.

Simon liked to play the part of a misanthrope but everyone who knew and loved him could tell you that he was one of the kindest, most generous people. If you remember The Atheist Bus Campaign a few years ago, which challenged some of the offensive religious advertising on London Buses, you should know that Simon was its most generous donor. He also gave our group a very generous donation and many others have benefited from his generosity.

Our webmaster Nathan Nelson is a freelance woodland and countryside manager, but is also the social media consultant for Team Rubicon UK, which unites the skills and experiences of military veterans with first responders to rapidly deploy emergency response teams in the UK and around the world.

They've been to Nepal after the earthquake, Canada after the wildfires, and the North of England after the floods, among other places. Not satisfied with tweeting and stuff, Nathan's trained as a 'Greyshirt' so he can join the response teams too.

You can learn more and donate at www.teamrubiconuk.org.



Nathan Nelson



Suffolk Humanists & Secularists

For the good life, without religion

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Founded in 1991, we're affiliated to The British Humanist Association, The National Secular Society, and Suffolk Inter-Faith Resource. 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.

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

Although our ceremonies team has been disbanded we may still be able to help you. Margaret doesn't drive but can advise you if you're planning a ceremony and occasionally officiates close to home, while Sophie is sometimes available in the Colchester area. Phone 01473 658828.

Why not join in the conversations on our website (URL below), on Facebook (www.facebook.com/suffolkhands) or Twitter (@suffolkhands)?

Dates for your diary

Unless otherwise stated, meetings are in the Darwin Room on the 1st floor in Arlington's Brasserie, Museum Street, Ipswich, IP1 1HE. Car parking in one of the nearby car parks. We start at 7.30pm.

Guests are always welcome. If you need or can offer a lift, we'll try to help.

Tuesday 9th August—AGM & barbecue in Stutton—see page 1.

Tuesday 13th September—Has Dawkins gone too far?

Richard Dawkins, famous as much for his atheism as for his brilliant series of books on evolution, has managed to upset quite a few people by making tactless comments on Twitter and elsewhere about subjects as sensitive as rape and whether to abort babies with Downs' Syndrome. One of his friends has advised him to stay off Twitter.

Saturday 24th September—Lunch

in the Duke of York on the corner of Ipswich Road and Old Barrack Road, Woodbridge. We meet at noon. Please get in touch by the 20th if you plan to come, as we have to book a table. Family and friends welcome.

Tuesday October 11th—David Hume (1711-1776) and Humanism.

A peaceable Scot with a brilliant mind, Hume wrote on miracles, "a wise man [should] proportion his belief to the evidence."

Contributions for the newsletter are welcome. Letters, essays, jokes, riddles, whatever you like, within reason. Send them typed or hand-written (as long as it's legible) by post, or by email (Word attachments are fine) to margaret@suffolkhands.org.uk or by snail mail to:

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