

Suffolk Humanists

Promoting Humanism and Secularism

Welcome to our Spring Issue

This issue's banner picture shows a scanning and transmission electron microscope (STEM) image of the SARS-CoV-2 coronavirus (in yellow) emerging from cultured cells (blue and pink). This image was released by the US National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, Rocky Mountain Laboratories and featured as the 'image of the day' on the highly recommended website of The Scientist.

<https://www.the-scientist.com/>

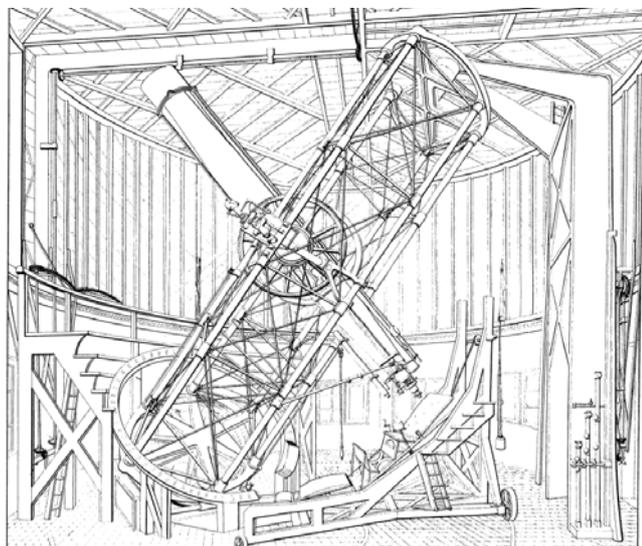
Given growing concerns over the spread of the virus and the importance of social distancing we have decided to suspend all events and meetings until further notice. We will keep you informed of developments through our monthly bulletins and will let you know when we are able to meet again.

In this issue we feature an article by Denis on Religious Education in Northern Ireland. It is, as you would expect, highly informative, but Denis's personal perspective makes it doubly interesting.

Ed.

After the Orwell Observatory Visit

In the last issue of this newsletter (Winter, 2019) we reported on a highly successful tour of the Orwell Park Observatory coordinated by our member Mike Whybray. A visit to the Orwell Astronomical Society, Ipswich website (<http://oasi.org.uk>) revealed the important role that the local engineering firm Ransomes had played in building mounts for the country's largest telescopes - including (probably) the mount for the Orwell Observatory's Tomline refractor telescope. As befits a Suffolk company, Ransomes started as a manufacturer of agricultural equipment but in the early 19th century diversified producing a wide range of products based on its superior casting technology. Amongst these were mounts for the increasingly large and heavy telescopes being commissioned by English observatories - including the mount for the Great Equatorial Refractor installed at Greenwich in 1859. For an excellent overview of 'the Ransomes' connection' see <http://www.oasi.org.uk/OPO/Ransomes/Ransomes.php>



Darwin Day Dinner

By George Bethell

Darwin Day falls on the great man's birthday, February 12th. Traditionally we have celebrated it at our February meeting by getting together for a meal. This year, members met at The Swan at Westerfield where the vegans, vegetarians and (shame on you) carnivores in our party all found something to suit on the menu. Conversation flowed easily and predictably towards a discussion about end of life 'arrangements'. Talk of direct cremations and suitable locations for the scattering of ashes were highly entertaining and grew increasingly loud until we realised that our chosen topic may not be appreciated by the younger and perhaps less philosophical diners surrounding us!

At our February Committee meeting it was suggested that we should think of putting on something special to mark Darwin Day in 2021 - perhaps an open lecture given by a notable speaker at the University of Suffolk. If you have any suggestions as to topics and/or suitable speakers, please let Denis or any other Committee member know.

George

Committee Meeting Thoughts

In February, in addition to the Darwin Day suggestion mentioned above, the Committee discussed a number of possible activities for the coming year. First, it was agreed that we should accelerate planning for a 'Street Stall' event in Ipswich to raise awareness of Humanism in general and our group in particular. Peter Wells is leading preparations for the event which is tentatively scheduled for 16th May, 2020. Please pencil it in your diary. Second, it was agreed that we should offer to host next December's UN Day at which religious and other groups (including us) are invited by the Ipswich and District UN Association to speak about a specific article chosen from the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Third, we are preparing a mail shot for schools in the county to advertise the fact that we have a number of members trained and ready to visit schools to share their experiences as to what it means to be a Humanist. Finally, it was suggested that our September meeting should take the form of a visit to Darwin's former home, Down House in Kent. However, it is a long way (70 miles) and so we are exploring the possibility of hiring a minibus. Watch this space.

Opposite: From the appendix to a paper prepared by the Astronomer Royal, Sir George Biddell Airy giving detailed specifications and drawings of the 'Great Equatorial at Greenwich' (1869). The paper is available online from the Smithsonian Astrophysical Observatory and NASA Astrophysics Data System <https://ui.adsabs.harvard.edu/>. Don't you just love the internet?

Reflections on Religious Education in Northern Ireland

By Denis Johnston

Recently I was at a Humanists UK meeting where a primary school teacher from Northern Ireland (NI) gave a short talk on teaching humanism to young children. I was brought up in Belfast and so it led me to wonder just how much Religious Education (RE) there has changed over the years.

At primary school in the 1950's we had daily assemblies which consisted of a hymn, a prayer and another hymn followed by a few announcements. The first lesson of the day was Religious Instruction (RI) the essence of which was reciting and remembering verses of the Bible. Annually, and always on a Thursday morning, we had an 'inspection' - a minister would appear and ask us questions based on the verses we had learnt.

The first few years at secondary school were similar with the same morning assembly pattern but RI was called "Divinity". The content was still mainly Christian but with a bit of Judaism added. However in 4th/5th forms (equivalent to KS4 today) it was very, very different. This was the time of the 'swinging' 60's and great social change was taking place. Whether it was school policy or not I do not know but RE lessons were transformed. As there was no examination in RE there was no pressure in these classes and they were like mini debating societies spanning topics covering philosophy, politics and 'comparative religion', other 'isms' and much more. Atheism certainly featured and I suspect Humanism may have got a mention. Looking back I am sure that many of my current beliefs were formed there.

In the 1950s the aim of religious education in both English and Northern Irish schools was to produce practising Christians. However in England today the focus is on teaching *about* religion(s) and other worldviews without proselytising. There are still exceptions as schools 'with a religious character' (which includes Roman Catholic schools) are still permitted to teach a *confessional* (e.g. Christian only) syllabus determined by the school governors but, in practice, most of these schools also teach about other religions.

So has NI changed with the times? Currently, the top-line legislation seems similar to that for the rest of the UK. It stipulates daily Christian collective worship that is not particular to any religious denomination. Similarly RE is a compulsory subject but parents have the right to withdraw their children from this and/or any collective worship.

However there the similarity ends. In NI the focus has been on getting a single syllabus that all the major denominations including the Roman Catholic Church would accept. Given the long standing religious divisions and the fact that over 90% of N Irish schools are either totally Protestant or totally Roman Catholic this agreement has been hailed as a major breakthrough. That this "Single Core Syllabus" further required that protestants learn about Catholicism and vice versa was considered ground breaking!

So does this new syllabus represent a new beacon of enlightenment in a traditionally religious society? Unfortunately it does not seem so. For this new syllabus was exclusively based upon advice from the four main churches – Roman Catholic, Presbyterian, Church of Ireland and Methodists. No other religions or beliefs were represented.

The result is that the syllabus is almost entirely focussed on traditional Christianity and every section is peppered with "scripture references....as a guide to teachers". Only in Key Stage 3 is there a brief opportunity for study of other religions. This section rather condescendingly begins "Pupils should be given an introduction to two world religions other than Christianity in order to develop knowledge of and sensitivity towards, the religious beliefs, practices and lifestyles of people from other religions in Northern Ireland." Apparently the inclusion of other religions was hotly debated by the authors as it was reported at the time that "the choice of religions to be studied is a matter for the school and the Churches suggest that the study of other religions other than Christianity should only require a modest amount of teaching time in each year of Key Stage 3." They added that even this might confuse students.

In Key stage 4 the Christian-centric approach returns with a vengeance and it reads like a theological primer. You can view it here (but sit down first) <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/de/religious-education-core-syllabus-english-version.pdf>

One other peculiarity is that of RE inspection. As the responsibility for developing the syllabus had been delegated to clerics, responsibility for the inspection of RE was also assigned to the clergy. Consequently the NI schools inspectorate must not inspect religious instruction unless specifically called upon to do so by a school's Board of Governors. Strangely, at the same time – apparently in deference to the professionalism of teachers - few schools now engage the clergy either with the result that nobody really knows what is going on.

There are however some recent signs of progress. Although still much lower than the rest of the UK, 20% of Northern Irish under 24s now say they have no religion and minority religions particularly Islam have grown. At the same time the Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education is extremely active in promoting mixed schools and 70% of the population are reported to be in favour of them.

Last year the first integrated primary school in Belfast was established – and it was the one I went to. I wonder what would happen there if they got an annual visit from the clergy?

Denis

Humanists in Parliament

Following the recent general election, the All-Party Parliamentary Humanist Group (APPHG) has reformed and started the new session by publishing its report '[Time for Reflection: A report of the APPHG on religion or belief in the UK Parliament](#)'. The report gives a fascinating insight into the influence of the Anglican Church within our parliamentary system. It also makes a number of recommendations including: removing the automatic right of Anglican bishops to sit in the House of Lords; halting the customary practice of awarding peerages to individuals by virtue of their religious affiliation; and, replacing the prayers that start business sessions with an inclusive period of reflection. Will changes be made? Experience suggests not but hope springs eternal.

[Humanists UK provides the secretariat for the APPHG.]

March:



At our March meeting, Antonia and Adam from Extinction Rebellion (XR), Ipswich spoke eloquently about the climate emergency, the aims and strategies of XR, and the challenges we all face in trying to bring about huge and rapid changes in both government policy and personal action.

Discussions that followed touched upon the unlikelihood of bringing about the necessary changes quickly enough in a liberal democracy and the unpleasant fact that only authoritarian regimes seem to have the power to force immediate public compliance.

Peter and Barbara Wells highlighted the scale of the sacrifices required by suggesting that we are, in effect, asking people to revert to an earlier, less prosperous age when we routinely awoke to find 'ice on the inside of the windows'. A difficult ask for Generation X and the Millennials brought up to expect constant central heating in the winter and air conditioning in the summer. George

An afterthought: An asteroid strike may account for the mass extinction of dinosaurs but it doesn't explain why they were all standing in the same place, does it?



Above: XR Ipswich members raise awareness at the Noah's Ark replica moored at Orwell Quay.

Recommended on YouTube

The Day the Mesozoic Died: The Asteroid That Killed the Dinosaurs (33 mins)

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tRPu5u_Pizk

Lessons from Easter Island (22 mins)

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kzV6_7PVMaI

125 Years and Counting: the Royal Observatory in Greenwich (3 mins)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BWjMa8Wa3jk>

Quick Quiz Answers

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

Forthcoming Events

Please note that given concerns over the coronavirus we have decided to suspend all meetings and events until further notice. We will contact you when we are able to meet again. Stay safe...

Call for Contributions

We will not be meeting as a group for the foreseeable future but we do plan to keep our communications going and we will publish a summer edition of this newsletter. So if you wish to comment on anything you've read in this edition or if you would like to contribute a piece for the summer edition, please contact the editor on suffolkhumanists.editor@gmail.com. There is probably no better way to spend your time in enforced isolation!

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/>

Quick Quiz

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

- 1: Where is the beer 'Corona Extra' brewed?
A Mexico B Spain C USA
- 2: What was the nationality of the first person to knowingly observe the planet Neptune?
A English B French C German
- 3: What was the name given at Cambridge to students, like Charles Darwin, studying for an ordinary degree?
A hoi polloi B riffraff C vulgus
- 4: According to the last Article of the UDHR, 'Rights are inalienable.' Which Article is it?
A #20 B #30 C #40
- 5: Crispin Blunt MP is Chair of the All-Party Parliamentary Humanist Group. Of which party is he a member?
A Conservative B Labour C Lib Dem
- 6: According to modern criteria, how many mass extinction events of multi-cellular animal life forms have there been? (Don't count the one we're living through now!)
A five B fifteen C fifty
- 7: Last summer, a pink boat featured in the Extinction Rebellion blockade of London streets. What was written on the side?
A 'Act Now' B 'No Planet B' C 'Tell The Truth'

(Answers at the top of this column.)