



AGM and The Way Ahead

This year's AGM was held at our March 20 meeting, a month later than has been the practice in past years. This change gave us the opportunity to send out the reports for 2007 from our Officers so that members would be able to read them before the meeting and allow much more time to discuss the way ahead for the NEH.

Committee composition

The formal business of the AGM included the election of Committee Officers and Members. In addition to those willing to stand for re-election, we were fortunate to have one of our younger members, Leigh Venus, elected to the Committee. Leigh brings expertise on up-to-date internet technology and practices. He has already started a *Facebook* group and has entered a description of NEH activities in *Wikipedia*. He is now turning his attention to a major improvement of our website.

Vision and Strategy Committee

A presentation by Chris Haine, a member of the specially convened group to recommend plans for the future, focused on the need for more members to participate in the various NEH outreach activities, both for our members and for the general public. This would be achieved by each Officer's having a team of helpers to spread an already heavy workload. The questionnaire sent to all members asked for those willing to help with specific tasks to let us know how they are prepared to help.

An important innovation was the idea of eventually having our own **Humanist Centre** which would include the commissioning of a dedicated building for our activities. This was enthusiastically supported by AGM participants and Chris Haine has formed a project team for this purpose. This is obviously a long term project and we are mindful that it must not detract from our existing wide-ranging work as active Humanists in the North East. Now does seem a good time to start exploring the options available to us. Chris has already held meetings with a social enterprise advisory service and they have offered to help us prepare a feasibility study and business plan. Separate meetings with Newcastle City Council to identify vacant premises are scheduled. Funding will clearly be a big part of the project so Chris is particularly interested in working with NEH members who have some experience in this field.

If you would like to know more about our plans for a Humanist Centre, or think you may have specific skills that could be of help to the project team, please contact Chris on 0191 430 0193 or e-mail Chris.Haine@PhoneCoop.coop

A more modest beginning might be to arrange coffee mornings at a convenient and comfortable location and we have one suggestion that is being followed up.

Extension of closing time at the Lit & Phil

Our Thursday evening meetings have had to finish at 8.45pm so that we could be out of the building by 9.00pm. We have been able to negotiate the building closure to the later time of 9.30pm. This will enable meetings to finish at 9.00pm and there will be more time to talk to members and visitors before clearing up.

A full report on the AGM and subsequent discussions is being sent to all members.

Don't Miss the Durham Conference!

We still have some places available for our Regional Conference on Saturday May 17 in Durham Castle with the theme ***Humanism as a Force for Change!*** This is to remind members that the application form sent with our January Newsletter provided a description of the two main speakers – Richard Norman and Michael Imison.

Richard's book 'On Humanism' has been acclaimed as the definitive work on the subject. He is an excellent speaker and his talk is entitled '***Shared Values – how shared are they?***' This will give you the opportunity to hear his approach and to discuss your own ideas about Humanism.

Michael brings with him a wide experience of Humanist activities. He has been Chair of the very active Suffolk Humanists and is now a BHA Trustee. Michael is very much involved with the conduct and promotion of Humanist ceremonies for the BHA and for the locally run Suffolk Celebrants organisation. His talk is entitled

'Humanism – the healthy alternative to religion'.

The afternoon will be mainly devoted to discussions in small groups aimed at developing ideas related to the theme of the conference. The final session will bring participants and speakers together with a view to putting forward ideas for how Humanism can help our members and promoting Humanism to a much wider audience.

The venue in Durham Castle is one we are familiar with and it provides a very attractive setting for our conference. We already have bookings from Humanists in Cumbria, Manchester and Scotland, making this a truly Regional event. If you haven't yet signed up, either send in your application form or contact John Hodge.

(see his email address and telephone number on the back page).

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BHA Local Development Project in Cumbria and the North East

Human rights and equality legislation have led to government, both local and national, involving and consulting a number of diverse groups in the development of policies. These range from education to housing and social services, especially as such services are increasingly being contracted out to non-profit sector organisations such as charities, rather than being directly provided by local authority departments.

In the current climate, a number of these groups are faith-based and members of the **British Humanist Association**, like other non-religious citizens – now a majority in Britain – were becoming increasingly concerned that their views were not being sought in parallel with those of the faith groups. Equality laws confer the right to an equal voice and by broadening the definition to *'faith and belief'*, the BHA was successful in its campaign for inclusion in the consultations. Their **Local Development Project**, funded by the Department for Communities and Local Government, has ensured that during the last year over 200 BHA volunteers have become involved in local consultation groups to ensure that the non-religious perspective is presented.

Members of **Cumbria Humanist Group** met in Morton Community Centre, Carlisle on 19 March to hear Bob Churchill of the BHA talk about the background and progress of the project. Bob bravely stepped into the breach, travelling up from London at the last minute as Pepper Harow, who leads the project and was due to speak, was taken ill. Some members expressed doubts about Humanists being included with faith groups, feeling that we should be campaigning to exclude religions from such influence – beating them rather than joining them – but we acknowledge that the spectrum of Humanist belief is a broad one, ranging from sharing a philosophical fellowship, promoting a positive caring outlook for the non-religious, to active political opposition to the power of religion in our society.

The **North East Humanists** directly cover seven local authorities with links to three others. Ideally, the BHA would like there to be one Local Development Project representative in each authority. However, at present, John Severs is the only volunteer from our area. John reports that he went to a training day in Leeds last November and learned that there are a number of key areas that we were interested in, particularly those concerned with Equality and Diversity. John has had excellent meetings with Kay Winter, Durham County's Equality Officer and with Ian Hunter-Smart, Community Officer responsible for religion and faith groups. Both were very sympathetic and want to get us involved. Ian has promised that John Severs will be consulted when faith groups are asked for their advice and, if their representatives are appointed to any working party in the future, John would be also be nominated.

The experience of John Severs shows that there are opportunities for other volunteers from Cumbria and the North East to liaise with Local Authorities, serve on appropriate committees and advise councils of our views. If you would like to participate in this interesting and worthwhile work, please contact Chris Allen (Cumbria) or John Hodge (North East) for further information (*see back page for their email addresses and phone numbers*).

The NEH Bookshop

At every monthly meeting at the Lit and Phil, we have a table with free magazines and pamphlets and another table where we sell recommended books on Humanism and issues of interest to secularists. We may not have regular sermons to stimulate our thoughts and encourage us to live a worthwhile life without religion, but we are fortunate indeed in the number of excellent contemporary secular writers who write in a very approachable way and have much to say that is interesting and inspiring.

We have the paperback edition of Richard Dawkins' highly praised best-seller **"The God Delusion"** on special offer - £6 instead of £8.99. – described by Michael Frayn as "A wonderful book – joyous, elegant, fair, engaging and often very funny – informed throughout by an exhilarating breadth of reference and clarity of thought."

The new book by Christopher Hitchens **"God is Not Great"** – is much admired by A.C.Grayling who says "The anti-religion case has never been put so well...as in this razor sharp book... outstanding" and by a string of distinguished reviewers. We have also managed to get this book at a reduced price of £6.00 instead of £8.99.

Other books we have on sale include A.C.Grayling's own book **"What is Good? – The Search for the Best Way to Live"**, Julian Baggini's **"Atheism. A Very Short Introduction"**, Sam Harris's **"The End of Faith - Religion, Terror and the Future of Reason"** (very topical and well reviewed), **"Parenting Without God"** (Jane Wynne Willson), **Ceremonies Books (funerals, weddings and baby namings** - also by Jane Wynne Willson), and **"The Thinker's Guide to Life"** (short, pithy, thought provoking quotations).

Since we are now able to stay in the Lit and Phil until 9.30pm, there will be plenty of time to come and browse at the Bookshop after the main meeting finishes.

Interesting Events in Newcastle

On March 25, a dozen or more of our members were in the audience at the Centre for Life to hear Professor Lewis Wolpert, who is a distinguished developmental biologist and a Vice President of the BHA, speak on "What Makes Us Human". The lecture explored how human causal beliefs gave evolutionary advantage in relation to complex toolmaking and use and also gave rise to religion and mystical thinking, as people needed explanations of events which affected their everyday lives.

These themes are developed in great detail in Professor Wolpert's informative and very readable book "Six Impossible Things Before Breakfast" (faber & faber £8.99). See www.life.org.uk for future events.

On March 15, Jean and Barrie Berkley attended a well run one-day workshop on "Developing World Challenges" at Newcastle University organised by The Great Debate.

On Saturday October 10 The Great Debate is offering a day workshop at the University entitled "Agents for Change? Darwinian Thought and Theories of Human Nature Revisited", with a distinguished panel of speakers. These workshops are free and certainly on March 15 included lunch.

See www.thegreatdebate.org.uk which also lists the Cafés Scientifiques, Politiques and Philosophiques events, as well as the University Insights lectures.

The Far Right in Britain

In January, we heard a speaker from the Tyne and Wear Anti-Fascist Association (TWAFa) and the following article is provided by them.

Against a background of dynamic population movement across the globe, the British National Party is considered to have grown in size and importance in recent years. It is the largest and most successful far-right party yet seen in British electoral history. The emergence of the BNP, with its roots traceable to the racist and anti-Semitic policies and ideology of 1930s fascism, poses a threat to community cohesion and democracy. The Tyne and Wear Anti-Fascist Association, celebrating its 25th birthday this year, is proud to be in the forefront of the fight against fascism in the region.

During the eighties and for most of the nineties, the BNP focused on crude racist propaganda and ran a confrontational campaign calling for "Rights for Whites". The party provided the foot soldiers for the violent and terroristic Combat 18 group which assaulted opponents. The membership of the BNP has yielded some very violent criminals including the London nail-bomber, David Copeland. The Number 2 in the party, Tony Lecomber, was jailed following the attempted bombing of a left wing party's premises in 1985. In this region, the party has fielded convicted soccer hooligans as candidates.

The political direction of the BNP took a sharp turn following the election of its current leader, Nick Griffin in 1999. Prior to Griffin's ascendancy, the party muddled along under the stewardship of its ineffective founder, the openly Nazi John Tyndall. Griffin is more astute and attuned to concerns about immigration and asylum. Indeed, the asylum issue provided the party with ammunition to use against the Labour Government. Since 9/11, Griffin has steered the party along the line of Islamophobia. Traditionally the BNP has been anti-Semitic (Griffin has a conviction for inciting racial hatred following anti-Semitic comments in a Nazi magazine he edited; he has publicly denied the Holocaust).

The BNP has changed its image since its formation in 1992. Gone are the boot-wearing skinheads, replaced by suited "politicians" who have assiduously studied the tactics of the Lib Dems at street level and have targeted local elections. The BNP currently has fewer than 50 local councillors (out of more than 20,000). With 13 councillors on Barking and Dagenham Council, it represents the official opposition. In the North East of England, the BNP has not had a single councillor despite fielding 96 candidates in May 2007. Nationally, success has been patchy and transient. A number of BNP councillors have had to resign for a variety of reasons; their impact has been negligible.

This *Populist Nationalism* has struck a chord with some of the electorate who have grown cynical of the mainstream parties' appeal for votes only at election times. Involvement in the political process has declined over recent years; there is a sense that the mainstream parties have taken votes for granted, leading to a sense of disaffection. The BNP has sensed a political vacuum and, in some places, filled it.

At present, the BNP has its eyes on the 2009 Euro elections. Griffin will be a candidate in the North West region and will only need to secure 8% of the vote to win a seat. However, all is not rosy for the BNP. Last Christmas, the party was on the verge of imploding as a core group of its most able administrators were expelled for daring to question the lack of financial transparency and democracy in the party. Griffin is currently suing them for, ironically, bringing the party into disrepute!

TWAFa believes that the BNP and other far-right groups represent a threat to the values of tolerance and inclusiveness in our society – values that had to be fought for in the first place. The BNP can and must be defeated. We are calling upon the North East Humanist Group to help us in that struggle by joining and supporting the Association in any way possible. You can email us at twafa@twafa.org.uk

NEH Charities in 2008

Members will know that for some years, NEH has formally and informally supported the East Area Asylum Seekers Support Group (EAASSG) at 'Common Ground' in Walker. This year, the committee has decided that for the northern part of the region, the proceeds of the planned Supper and Quiz in November, and any incidental sums raised that are not earmarked for NEH funds, the Isaac Newton School, or The People's Kitchen, will go to EAASSG.

A recent report in the Lords has highlighted the plight of asylum seekers who are caught in limbo between awaiting a decision on their status or deportation following the rejection of their application for asylum in this country. Such persons are not entitled to any financial, housing, education, health care, or other benefits, and are not permitted to seek work. As set out in the EAASSG newsletter accompanying this mailing, the group is regularly in desperate need of cash and staple food supplies for these destitute people.

Grace and John Hodge are always happy to accept gifts in kind or cash at the monthly Lit and Phil meetings. John will be happy to provide directions for members who wish to take supplies direct to Common Ground.

On Teesside, it is hoped that members may be able to contribute to their local charity, The Mary Thompson Fund, details of which are included with their newsletters. More information for Teesside members will be provided later.

The Isaac Newton School in Uganda will continue to be supported and members will receive a separate note on this.

Face to Face

The monthly meeting at the Lit. and Phil on 21 February departed from the usual format of an address followed by discussion. Following the business part of the meeting, John Hodge invited members to form small groups of 3-5 persons and to spend 40 minutes discussing these questions:

- What effect would one expect being a Humanist to have on the way our members conduct their lives?
- Should Humanism have a code of conduct for its members?
- Given the Humanist value of the tolerance of difference, what should be the Humanist response to the assertion by the Archbishop of Canterbury that it is inevitable that some elements of Shari`a law will be incorporated into British law?
- Should Humanist groups accept for membership applicants who have a belief in a god or gods?

Following this part of the meeting, in which it was apparent that each group was engaged in intense discussion, the meeting came together again for 30 minutes for a lively exchange of the views that had emerged earlier. The general feeling, as expressed by a number of members, was that this had been a stimulating and satisfying exercise.

Forthcoming Meetings

Tyneside Humanist Group

Meetings are held on the third Thursday of each month at **The Literary and Philosophical Society**, ('Lit & Phil') 23 Westgate Road, Newcastle. Tea/coffee is available at 6.45 pm for a 7.15 pm start.

May 15 Speaking as a Humanist

Three of our members each speak for 10 minutes on a subject of their choice

June 19 Should Humanists be Activists?

Jack Grassby, NEH member

July 17 Globalising the Free Mind

Report on the International Humanist and Ethical Union Congress, Washington, USA by **Jean and Barrie Berkley**

Teesside Humanist Group

For information on meetings and social events please contact: CHARLIE McEWAN Tel. 01642 817541

Cumbria Humanist Group

Meetings commence at 7.30 pm on the third Wednesday of the month in Carlisle (Morton Community Centre) or Penrith (Eden Local Foyer).

May 21 Anne Pickles, columnist and Associate Editor at Cumbrian Newspapers, will talk about **maintaining editorial balance over controversial issues in a local newspaper**. (Carlisle)

June 18 Dr Jamie Caryl will talk about **"Superbugs - and other aspects of Micro-evolution"**. (Carlisle)

July 16 Members' Discussion Group, including reports from both the North East Humanists

Regional Conference at Durham on May 17 and the **Humanism course** held at Higham Hall at the end of May. (Penrith) NEW VENUE

August 17 (Sunday) Visit to Smardale Gill Wildlife Centre (near Kirkby Stephen, Cumbria). Possibly - or even probably - preceded by a pub lunch. (Details later.)

For further information, please contact
Chris Allen 01228 810592

Website! www.cumbria-humanists.org.uk

Member Survey

Thanks to all members who have completed questionnaires; these are in the process of being analysed. Results will be reported in the next newsletter. It isn't too late to respond - please send questionnaires to John Hodge at 43 Fern Avenue, Jesmond, Newcastle Upon Tyne NE2 2QU

Ceremonies - For information about Humanist Wedding, Baby Naming, Affirmation and Funeral Ceremonies, please contact our Secretary John Hodge on 0191 281 2808 or email johnhodge@blueyonder.co.uk

DISCLAIMER: The views expressed in articles and letters are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent those of the North East Humanists.

Registered Charity No. 1112965

Social Diary

Make a note of these events!

May 6 First Tuesday Dining Club
The Dun Cow, Durham (see details below)

May 29 (Thursday)
* **Middlesbrough Institute of Modern Art**
- "British Surrealism"

June 29 (Sunday)
* **River Cruise & Lunch on the Tees**

July 26 (Saturday)
* **Theatre in the Park** - "A Midsummer Night's Dream"

August 16 (Saturday)
Summer Garden Party (see note below)

August 24 (Sunday)
* **Family Day - Wetlands Wildlife Trust, Washington**

Items marked * will have details provided by mail with this newsletter.

Our popular wine tasting and quiz and buffet events will be held in Northumberland and Newcastle in the autumn.

First Tuesday Dining Club

14 members of NEH passed a most enjoyable evening at The Mill at Blackfell, Birtley marking the inaugural meeting of the First Tuesday Dining Club. Just as intended, the meal was a very relaxed affair offering the opportunity for members and their friends to meet up in an informal setting.

The next First Tuesday event is a "chilli and pasta" night in Durham on May 6 at The Dun Cow in Old Elvet street, opposite the prison. We'll all pay our own way and it promises to be a bargain with plates of food at £2.95 and a pint of ale for even less.

Please let Chris or Barbara Haine know if you plan to attend on 0191 430 0193 - car sharing may also be available.

Summer Garden Party

This year's Summer Garden Party will be held at the home of Derek and Barbara Cattell on Saturday August 16. Derek and Barbara, who live near Bishop Auckland, have been most generous in offering their walled garden for this popular social event. Further details will be included in our July newsletter.

Have your say.....

We welcome letters for publication of around 150-200 words; also longer articles by arrangement with the editors:

Jean and Barrie Berkley,
Holly Hall Barn, Sandhoe, Hexham NE46 4LX
Tel 01434 632936
email: barriebkly@aol.com

The deadline for receipt of material is June 23rd

Visit our website for more information
www.northeast.humanists.net