



## NEWSLETTER April 2012

### [Highlights since our last newsletter in October](#)

Our activities have included:

- our annual dinner
- Peter Susman's festive "Quirky Quiz for Humorous Humanists"
- our annual public debate "Morality without religion has no firm foundation"



Plus talks by:

- Professor Richard Norman on "Humanism and the Arts",
- Alan Montgomery on "Life in a divided Ireland"
- Gerard Philips, Vice President NSS on "The National Secular Society".

## DETAILS OF OUR PAST EVENTS AND CURRENT ACTIVITIES

### [Legal status for humanist weddings in England - Visit to Parliament](#)

Since 2005, humanist weddings have had legal status in Scotland, and have become the third most popular form of ceremony surpassing the number of Catholic ceremonies performed. However, in England and Wales, humanist weddings must be supplemented by an additional registry office ceremony.

**Sue Willson** and **David Savage** from Farnham Humanists attended a panel discussion in the House of Lords in March, chaired by Lord Warner of Brockley, on legalising humanist weddings in England and Wales. The main speakers were BHA Trustee David Pollock, humanist celebrant Caroline Black, philosopher Dr Julian Baggini and Ministry of Justice representative Philip Dear.

**Sue Willson** says "It was fascinating to go to the Houses of Parliament - the many police, some armed with serious looking guns, the security check, the Puginesque decor, the buzz, the really informal atmosphere inside the magnificent building.

The aim of the meeting was to establish the best way



to achieve legal status for humanist weddings. David Pollock explained that as marriage law was currently being discussed with regard to same-sex couples, this seemed a good opportunity to try again to obtain legal status for humanist ceremonies. Caroline Black gave many examples from her own experience of couples wishing to have a single legal wedding ceremony which totally reflects their humanist beliefs and lifestyle. However Philip Dear said that the government had no plans to include humanist ceremonies in the current investigations.

The possibility of introducing a Private Member's bill was discussed, and also the complete overhaul of marriage law in England and Wales, which is very complex for historical reasons. Both options were not considered likely to be successful, at least in the near future. It was pointed out that the law in Scotland was much simpler and therefore legalising humanist weddings there had not been difficult.

It was good to be present at such a meeting, and to see a little of how The System works.”

### [Humanism module in Surrey RE Syllabus for the first time](#)

**Jennie Johnson** writes “For the past 7 years I have been fortunate to be able to represent Humanism and the non-religious viewpoint on the Surrey SACRE (Standing Advisory Council on Religious Education). RE is not part of the National Curriculum and there is no national syllabus. Each of the 152 Local Education Authorities in England tasks its own SACRE to provide an RE syllabus for its community schools and a small minority of its faith schools. Most faith schools, and now academies and free schools, can choose to use their own RE syllabus which, of course, can mean in reality only really teaching one religion. Although there is national guidance which indicates that pupils should learn about non-religious perspectives as well as religious, it is non-statutory and thus by far the majority of the current 152 RE syllabuses barely mention any non-religious view points.

The Surrey SACRE has just completed the final draft of its new RE syllabus. My submission of a Humanist module titled “How do non-religious people answer the Big Questions” as one of the options for 11 to 14 year olds has been accepted and the RE professional adviser was kind enough to comment very positively about it. The old RE syllabus has only one mention of a non-religious view and only one reference to Humanism whereas the draft new syllabus mentions non-religious views 49 times and Humanism 6 times as well as the new Humanism module option.”

### [Rally following attacks on free expression](#)

Farnham Humanists **Simon Johnson** and **Mike Adams** attended The One Law for All rally for Free Expression, held in February opposite the House of Lords.

Mike reports” Around 300 of us heard speeches from Richard Dawkins, Andrew Copson (BHA), Keith Porteous Wood (NSS), AC Grayling (philosopher), Nick Cohen (writer) and Maryam Namazie (One Law for All). The event passed off peacefully, without any counter- demonstration. Similar rallies and other linked events took place on the same day in several other countries.



The call for action followed an increased number of attacks on free expression in the UK, including

- (i) threats of violence, police being called, and the cancellation of a meeting at Queen Mary College where One Law for All spokesperson Anne Marie Waters was to deliver a speech on Sharia

(ii) 17 year old Rhys Morgan being forced to remove a Jesus and Mo cartoon or face expulsion from his sixth form college

(iii) the LSE Student Union's call for its atheist society to remove its affiliation due to the posting of a Jesus and Mo cartoon.

The next planned public rally in London (for a Secular Europe) will be on Saturday 15 September."

You can hear **Anne Marie Waters** talk about **"Sharia in the UK"** at our **Farnham Humanists Hop Blossom Meeting on Sunday September 16<sup>th</sup>**.

### [Wedding fair](#)

**Sue Willson** writes "The stall we had at The Maltings wedding fair last Sunday seemed to go well. About 175 "brides" came through, and we talked to quite a lot of them, giving out the BHA "Sharing the Future" leaflet and a local one we produced for the 4 of us round here. We all enjoyed it and thought it was a rare opportunity to hand out leaflets and chat to people about what we offer."



### [Farnham Humanists "Big Pick" contribution](#)

Farnham in Bloom invited local groups to help clean and tidy up the town with a Big Pick Week. As part of our group's engagement with the local community we took part by cleaning up litter from around the forecourt of Farnham Station.

### [Mike Adams checks up on Council Prayers and declines Humanist 'homily' opportunity](#)

**Mike Adams** comments "As soon as the judgement was issued, I rang the Mayor of Guildford to advise him, as the council was just about to hold a meeting. The mayor was not best pleased as he said he wanted the 'tradition' to continue. I attended the council meeting (a ceremonial held in the Guildhall with lots of people in fancy dress). Once the mayor and everyone else was seated and the mace placed on the table, the mayor just opened with '**Before we start the meeting**, I will ask my chaplain to say prayers'. There was no opportunity given for anyone to leave (although I walked out). I contacted the Surrey Advertiser as a 'local member of the National Secular Society'. They ran an article and quoted me.

Coincidentally the Mayor of Surrey Borough Heath council contacted me to ask for a Humanist 'homily' in their 'prayer' slot, which I declined in view of the outcome of the Judicial Review. (The Mayor also told me that as the council executive meeting makes the decisions, the full council meeting is just a 'formality', which does rather raise the question as to why they feel they need to have a 'homily' at all. To give an appearance of democracy perhaps? )

The Judicial Review has at least brought the issue to public attention – most people had no idea that about half of all councils still hold prayers."

### [More local reaction to the Prayers Controversy:](#)

#### [Farnham Town Council votes for Prayers for first time](#)

**David Savage** reports "Farnham Town Council never had prayers, either before or

during Council meetings. However, as a result of the NSS case and the Communities Secretary Eric Pickles' letter to Councils, Farnham Town Council have now voted to have prayers before Council meetings

thereby making prayers a matter of Council procedure and policy. They are even thinking of bringing in local Christian clergy to say prayers. They seem to have no thought for making provision for the non-religious or other religions prior to Council meetings”.

### [Waverley Faith Forum recommends Quiet Reflection to Council instead of Prayers](#)

**Roy Weedon** writes “Like many people I have been to a number of funerals that have always been religious and I sometimes used to squirm in my seat knowing that the deceased was not religious and neither were the family.

Often they were never given an option by the Funeral Director or they felt that they must opt for a religious service because it is “the thing to do” never realising that there is an alternative and that a Humanist Funeral is based on the celebration of the person’s life rather than mourning the death.

I have been non-religious since I was a young teenager, when I realised that religion made no sense to me, and when in the last few years I discovered that the British Humanist Association offered training to be a Funeral Celebrant I just knew that is what I wanted to do. It gives me so much pleasure to help a family celebrate the life of a loved one

The course training consisted of two full weekends and one other day. It was a very intense course where we had to write scripts for a fictitious family, choose music and

**Alec Leggatt** says “At a meeting on 19th January 2010 of Waverley Faith Forum, a body sponsored by Waverley Borough Council, the matter of prayers at Council meetings was discussed. Rev. Jonathan Still proposed that a moment of quiet reflection should be substituted for prayers at Council meetings. This was unanimously agreed to be the recommendation to the Council.”

### [“Becoming a new Humanist Celebrant” by Roy Weedon](#)

poems that were fitting and respectful. We then had to lead at a mock funeral at the City of London Crematorium in front of our peers!

Since doing the training I have led at several Humanist Funerals at the Guildford and Chichester Crematoriums. This involves visiting the family at their home and getting details of the deceased so that the tribute I write and read is fitting, and I would say actually enjoyed by the family and friends.

Personally I get a great deal of satisfaction from helping family and friends celebrate the life of a loved one knowing that the life that has finished will hold a special place in their memories. The most rewarding aspect though is when people who have attended the funeral walk up to me afterwards and say “*that is the first Humanist Funeral I have been to and is so much nicer than religious ones and more fitting*”.

To find out more about Humanist Funerals look at Roy’s page on The British Humanist Website <http://humanist.org.uk/royweedon>

### [Our Annual Public Debate: ‘Morality without religion has no firm foundation’](#)

For Belinda Schwer’s full write up:

[http://www.farnham-humanists.org.uk/\\_private/Events/debates/Morality%20debate/Morality%20debate%20report.pdf](http://www.farnham-humanists.org.uk/_private/Events/debates/Morality%20debate/Morality%20debate%20report.pdf)



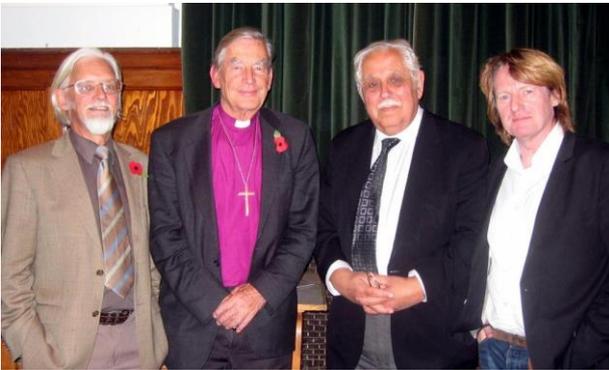
Our 7th annual public debate, chaired by Norma Corkish, attracted over 150

people and raised £312 for Water



Aid and the Citizens' Advice Bureau. The motion 'Morality without religion has no firm foundation' was roundly rejected by a ratio of 2 to 1.

Lord Richard Harries, ex-Bishop of Oxford and Gresham Professor of Divinity, opened the debate with an acknowledgement that one does not need to be religious to be moral, but developed the theme that the firmness of moral foundation derives from a grounding in God. He challenged the audience to explain why it is that humans strive for fairness as a norm in society and asserted that the most mature morality is not just a human construct but 'carries something of musical eternity' only explained by religious faith.



David Pollock, President of the European Humanist Federation, asserted that humankind shows an inborn instinct for moral

discernment. The universal tenet of 'Do As You Would Be Done By' has no connection with religion at all and humankind has used its skills to develop that tenet into broader principles. Religion, on the other hand, often calling on Natural Law for its underpinning, offers torment or reward for the observance of dietary rules and sexual taboos - to the point where it is the justification for discrimination against homosexuals and vilification of women for allowing their skin or hair to enflame men.

Dr Nabil Mustapha, co-founder and Chairman of Elmbridge Multifaith Forum, asserted that only religion can progress morality and develop an effective civilisation e.g. the development of the principle 'An Eye for An Eye' into 'Turn the Other Cheek'. He argued that current evils in society are proof that we need the love of a God, to give a steer to society's moral compass.

Dr Stephen Law, Provost of the Centre for Inquiry, asserted that mainstream religions have a tradition of censoring curiosity and over-reliance on guilt, with recourse even to violence to bring Free Thinkers back into line. Atheists can be megalomaniacs too, but Mao, Stalin and Pol Pot were killers of free thinking, and not Humanists at all. Religion is not a safe bet for immunising people against moral catastrophe whereas Humanism offered a good way forward

### ***FUTURE EVENTS***

#### **May**

- **Wednesday 2nd May 8:00pm** Fox Inn, **Informal pub evening**
- **Friday 11th May 7.30pm** South Farnham School, **Jeremy Hunt MP 'The Big Society'**

#### **June**

- **Sunday 3rd June 10:15am** **Walk and pub lunch - location to be decided**
- **Wednesday 6th June 8:00pm** Fox Inn, **Informal pub evening**
- **Sunday 17th June 7:30pm** Hop Blossom Pub, **'William Cobbett', Richard Thomas of the Cobbett Society**

#### **July**

- **Wednesday 4th July 8:00pm** Fox Inn, **Informal pub evening**
- **Sunday 8th July** **Garden Party - details to be decided** (Ring Dr David Savage on 01252 794021 for more information)
- **Sunday 15th July 7:30pm** Hop Blossom Pub, **"An anthropologists view of humanism" Matthew Engelke**

## August

- **Wednesday 1<sup>st</sup> August 8:00pm Fox Inn, Informal pub evening**

## September

- **Wednesday 5th September 8:00pm Fox Inn, Informal pub evening**
- **Sunday 16<sup>th</sup> September 7:30pm Hop Blossom Pub, "Sharia Law in the UK" Anne Marie Waters, One Law for All**

[For a full future events programme - please see separate document & our website  
http://www.farnham-humanists.org.uk/private/Events/current%20programme.pdf](http://www.farnham-humanists.org.uk/private/Events/current%20programme.pdf)

## OUR COMMITTEE

At our AGM we voted in our committee for the year. To help remember names and faces - this is who we are and roughly the activities we are especially involved in:

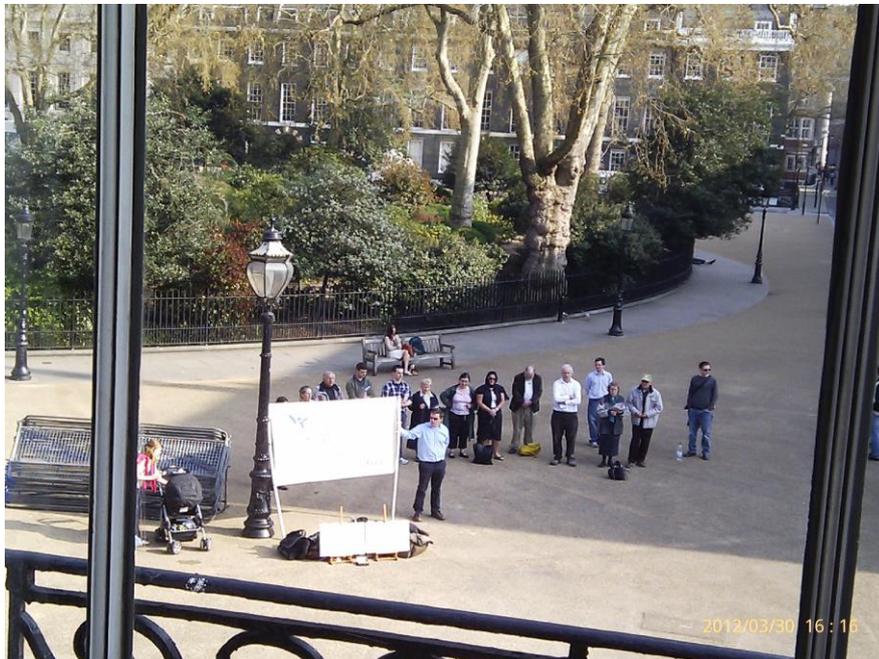
 Chair Jennie Johnson Website, SACRE	 Vice Chair Belinda Schwer	 Secretary Sue Shaw	 Treasurer Mike Adams	 Member David Savage BHA Trustee
 Member Jim Herrick Humanism author	 Member Alec Leggatt Celebrant, Chaplain	 Member Roy Weedon Celebrant	 Alan Montgomery Schools	 Member Sue Willson Celebrant

***Please let any of us know if you would like to be involved in any of our campaigns***

## [Farnham Humanists April 2012 Newsletter - Post Script](#)

### A Humanist Dilemma from Alan Montgomery

Our offices are in Bedford Square, round the corner from BHA HQ, and next door to the British Pregnancy Advice Service. From time to time, apparently randomly, but maybe it is on saint's days, various protesters gather outside. The norm is for only two or three people to be present. One or two stand by the door to BPAS trying to engage people who enter or leave, and offering them literature. The regular demonstrators are usually people rather past reproductive age, and some are dressed as nuns, presumably are nuns. Sometimes they display a plastic doll foetus – this is (presumably intentionally) rather disgusting. For me this proves that the object is not just to pray for the people and the foetuses (foeti?), and witness for life (or whatever) but actually to dissuade women from considering termination. This is the bit I find so objectionable, preying on usually young distressed people, potentially destroying their lives and/or causing yet another unwanted child to be brought into the world.



For the last few years the “protesters” have made a special event of lent, when they maintain a vigil throughout the 40 days from about 10:00am until dusk. This usually involves a larger crowd, up to 20, though typically between 5 and 10 at any time. On these occasions the younger generation turns up too, including both men and women. I have noticed some young American women among them. They pray, count their rosaries and sometimes sing, though usually quietly. They have a banner that quotes Jeremiah declaiming what god had told him: “Before I formed you in the womb, I knew you”. I presume that is to establish that a foetus is a person, but the “before” is interesting. (Jeremiah is also big on smiting. The lord intends (and does), killing and enslaving thousands, and Jeremiah compares the people’s future anguish with the pain of a woman in labour – an interesting comparison in this context.)

When this happened last year I asked BPAS whether they would like us to organize a counter-demonstration. They said “No. This has been tried and it simply makes matters worse”. As long as they simply stand and pray we and our clients can just wait it out.” We gave them a donation to show BPAS staff that their neighbour was on the side of compassion.

I have engaged with the demonstrators regularly but it is hard to reason with them. They believe that a soul appears magically the moment the sperm hits the egg. So terminating kills a soul. I often say to them, "I think, if Jesus were alive today, he would be on the side of BPAS and the unfortunate women, rather than your side." I base this on "Love thy neighbour as thy self", and hope that Jesus would feel more neighbourly towards a distressed girl or woman than to a bunch of cells." I also say "you are doing the devil's work". Of course I hope to provoke, but for me this phrase means simply deliberately choosing to stir up mischief and misery.

They also believe that BPAS is simply a business that makes money out of doing abortions. Being a modern(ish) liberal humanist I dismissed this out of hand. Yet just to check I did review the BPAS web site. I expected it to be big on counselling, choice, etc. What strikes you is that this is a shop for abortions, with an on-line price list, though they don't quite have January sales, or 2 for 1 offers. Maybe it is best to be very direct, as they have to be sure that people under considerable strain understand that this option is available, but it is very much in your face.

A couple of weeks ago the demonstrators had 5 or 6 young children with them, probably aged 5 to 9 years old. This made me see red, not the best condition for clear sightedness. I made a point of going up and addressing the children said, "Children, you need to know that many people believe your parents are wrong about this, and they are doing an evil thing." I did not want to get into a slanging match in front of the parents, so I left it pretty much at that. However as I left, I did remark to the group in general, "You are doing the devil's work".

A few days later, one of the tall lean young men, spoke to me as I passed to work. He said "aren't you the person that threatened the little children". We did have an exchange in which I made it clear that I thought it very important that the children understood that there was an alternative point of view. Mostly our ensuing conversation was fairly civilized though at one point the man, out of the blue, said I was a coward. Approaching 10 brawny representatives of the church militant was not to my mind an act of cowardice, but he went on to say – "You only confront us because you know we are Christians and won't hurt you. You wouldn't dare if we were Muslims". More seeing red, as he had absolutely no evidence on which to base this. But afterwards I wonder if he was right. Indeed I might be wary of confronting a bunch of militant Muslims demonstrating in the street, or any activists of any sort.

More seriously I left wondering if indeed I had erred in my parting line, "You're doing the devil's work" in front of the children. Of course to me it is just a figure of speech. But to these kids he may be real, and maybe my words might give them nightmares, or worse. Of course the real fault is with those who teach the young superstitious beliefs.

We'll certainly give BPAS another donation, but sometimes I wonder what how a caring Humanist can best act in these situations.