



NEWSLETTER October 2011

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



Our activities since April have included taking part in an ethical Jury run by Michael Imison, a walk via Waverley Abbey followed by a pub lunch, talks by political philosopher Alan Howarth on 'Conscientious Objection' and by Winchester Skeptic James Thomas on the 'Skeptics in the Pub' movement, a Summer garden party and member talks ranging from Belinda Schwer telling us about 'Citizens Rights to Social Care Services in an Era of Cuts' to Sid Clough on 'Being' and Greta Thomas on 'What good are the Arts'

DETAILS OF OUR PAST EVENTS AND CURRENT ACTIVITIES

[Darwin connection with local pub walk](#)

Early June about 18 of us joined in our annual walk. This year Sue Shaw led us from the Shepherd and Flock pub, along the Greensand Way, to Waverley Abbey (see picture above) returning by a different route to the pub for lunch. En route we passed Moor Park 'Dr Lane's delightful hydropathic establishment' where Darwin stayed several times between 1857 and 1859. He was not well at this time and though his health did not improve much he 'enjoyed solitary walks around the gardens'. Moor House has recently been converted into luxury flats.

[Keen interest for Farnham U3A \(University of the 3rd Age\) course on Humanism](#)

Over 30 people have registered for Farnham Humanists' six session course on Humanism starting February 2012. Jim Herrick (author of "Humanism , An Introduction") supported by other group members is running the course which will cover topics such as , 'What is humanism', 'What do Humanists do?', 'Humanism past and present', 'Humanism and gods/religion', 'Moral behaviour - ethical problems', 'Science - the evidence', 'The arts being inspired' and 'The meaning of life? A fulfilled life'.

[Ethical Jury helps out with member's moral dilemma](#)

Michael Imison explained to a crowded June meeting room his format for running an ethical jury. Each person in turn was offered a chance to propose a moral dilemma and then, following limited explorations, the group voted on the issue they most wanted to deliberate. The one chosen was a current dilemma for a member as to whether or not she should ask her lodger to leave. He was someone who was providing work in return for accommodation but not doing it as promised. The member had also lent him money, and had become aware of personal problems between the man

and his partner. Evicting the man could cause more problems for the woman, to whom the member felt a sense of loyalty; but forgetting about the money and getting rid of the man's presence would be good for the member and her family. The member was keen to have other people's opinions as to what she should do. Michael as facilitator offered each jury member the chance to ask further questions and to give their advice. At the end he summarised the group's collective verdict and reasoning as to why the lodger should be asked to leave immediately. The member followed the advice the next day and has since expressed sincere thanks to the 'jury' in helping her resolve what was becoming an increasingly stressful and potentially damaging situation.

Good time had by all at July Garden Party

Alan Montgomery writes "With only two replies by the week before (thank you Belinda and Mark) the FH committee decision to go ahead was vindicated when some 17 members and family enjoyed the 2011 garden party *chez* Linda and Alan Montgomery in Fleet. Maybe this was because we did not, in the end, have to compete with an Andy Murray Wimbledon final? Everyone brought food, drink or nibbles - so generously that we were well supplied for a week. Seasonal strawberries and cream were served, both provided by Sue.



Entertainment included much animated discussion, croquet, badminton, a garden quiz and a fiendish garden photo hunt. Quentin's children, assisted by teacher Helen Montgomery, rampaged around trying to locate features and mark them on map of the garden. Later, perhaps emboldened by wine, several committee members joined in with mixed results.



With fine weather, a good time was had by all. Thanks are due to everyone who contributed, and to everyone who attended. Especial thanks are due to the indefatigable Sue who arrived early to set out chairs, food drinks etc, and stayed late to help clear up."

Citizen's rights to social care services

Belinda Schwer spoke in July about people's so-called rights to social care services if they can't organise them for themselves or afford them. It is especially easy to lose sight of the legal rights that do exist in an era of everyone supposedly putting their best foot forward and putting up with cuts. Belinda also spoke about the law on what one is allowed to do for people when they lose the mental capacity to make decisions for themselves and either say no to offers of help, without understanding the implications, or lose capacity to communicate at all. The powerpoint she presented was made available to members many of whom have a need to know this information in relation to elderly parents, siblings, etc.

School Talk – Alan Montgomery writes "In June Farnham Humanists were once again approached by Moira Johnson the Librarian at Treloar College looking for an introductory talk and discussion during National Humanist Week, from 20th June. We could not manage a date during the week but did arrange a talk for July 1st.

"Treloar is a specialist college for young people, aged 16 or over, with physical disabilities from all over the UK and overseas. Based in Holybourne, near Alton, It has the expertise and facilities for young people to learn and develop as adults, in a positive, supportive environment." A student quote ***"Being treated as a young adult and receiving encouragement to speak up for what you believe is what Treloar's is all about"; sounded to me like humanism in action.***



The group comprised only 6 students (a second group could make it) plus 3 helpers, one a former student. All but teacher and one helper were in wheelchairs. Many suffered from spasms and/or had difficulty speaking, but all were alert, and clearly happy. **It is a humbling and inspiring experience to meet such children and their carers and helpers,** and it made me "count my own health blessings".

Warned that a student had hearing difficulty, I arrived with PowerPoint. I began with an overview of Deists, Atheists, and Agnostic, “two *ists* and an *ic*”. The students were interested in pictures of various gods. We briefly reviewed other religions as I’d been told they had been covering them. The able bodied helper a Nepalese Buddhist –corroborated some of this material. I described Humanism and how I became a Humanist, before describing some of what Humanists do. The picture of the red London bus carrying our advertisement proved a big hit to round off the talk.



I think most of the students really enjoyed the session, and several seemed to think they had Humanist tendencies! **I recommend the experience to anyone.**”

Skeptics in the Pub

At our May meeting James Thomas, Winchester Skeptics, told us about the 'Skeptics in the Pub' movement. Founded in London by Dr Scott Campbell in 1999, people interested in philosophy, science, psychology, legal and political skepticism, even the paranormal met regularly at a London pub and talked a lot. They still do but the word has spread and there are now at least 20 groups in England and 100 globally. Inevitably, they hear from, as James says, a few 'crazies'. For more information on local groups <http://winchester.skepticsinthepub.org/> or <http://guildford.skepticsinthepub.org>

Secular Ear offer to support Police

David Savage and Alec Leggatt have established good relations with the officer in charge of Surrey Police chaplaincy and are having a dialogue on the separation of Humanist "Chaplaincy" from the religious sort. We are proposing to call the job "Secular Ear"
Alec has also been invited to play a role in the Police memorial service on November 11th.

FUTURE EVENTS

October

- **Wednesday 5th** 8:00pm Fox Inn, **Informal pub evening**
- **Sunday 16th** 7:30pm Hop Blossom Pub **Prof Richard Norman 'Humanism and the arts'**

November

- **Tuesday 1st** 8:00pm South Farnham School, Public Debate on "Morality without religion has no firm foundation" Speakers for: Lord Richard Harries, Former Bishop of Oxford and Dr Nabil Mustapha, Against: Dr Stephen Law and Mr David Pollock.
- **Wednesday 3rd** 8:00pm Fox Inn, **Informal pub evening**
- **Sunday 13th** 10.45am **Remembrance Day** wreath laying at the Farnham Memorial, South St, Farnham
- **Sunday 20th** 7.30pm Hop Blossom Pub **Members talks: Alan Montgomery 'Life in a divided Ireland'**

December

- **Wednesday 7th** 8:00pm Fox Inn, **Informal pub evening**
- **Sunday 11th** 7:30pm **Festive Social Event** - for more details please contact Dr David Savage on 01252 794021

[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>

[Farnham Humanists October 2001 Newsletter - Post Script](#)

[BHA Annual conference 17-19th June, Manchester – report by Alan Montgomery](#)

Farnham Humanists were well represented with David Savage, Harold and Elizabeth Hillman, and Alan and Linda Montgomery. The theme of the conference was *The Meaning of Life*, a large but elusive topic that was only really addressed by one of the speakers. I made notes on a sporadic basis, so what follows is subjective and incomplete.

The venue is the Hilton Hotel Deansgate, located in the bottom half of the tallest residential building in Europe, a towering thin slab that was a complete revelation to Manchester educated Linda. It was created as part of the reconstruction of the city centre after the bombing of the Arnedale Centre. The view from the bar, only half way up, was stupendous.

Early birds were treated to a walk round Manchester taking in its Roman Fort, Bridgewater Concert Hall, Cheetham's Library and other buildings and sites of interest, led by a Manchester Humanist.

The programme began with a social on Friday evening, a comedy session with comedian **Robin Ince** followed by a multi part pub-style quiz led by **C J de Mooi**. Linda and I rather dreaded the latter, but it seemed to work well, and did allow us to get to know other delegates.

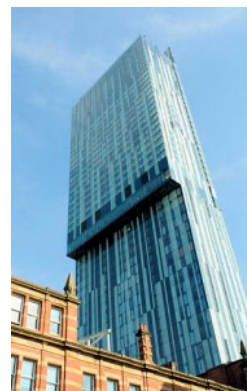
Andrew Copson introduced the main programme. We learned that Anthony Grayling had decided to step down as the BHA President, and would not attend the conference. His decision followed controversy over his part in founding a private university college in London, charging up to £30,000 fees a year. While this had little to do with us, Anthony felt the controversy would not be good for BHA, and there was a threat of hordes of protesters picketing the conference. (Might have been rather interesting, but not necessarily good for BHA).

For me the highlight was **Peter Atkins** "**On being: the limitless power of science**". Peter's talk was spell-binding, a stream of wonderful thoughts brilliantly expressed, and exquisitely illustrated. I wrote down a stream of *bons mots*. "Science is.... *"making observations and comparing notes; ...a grand alliance of Experiment and Mathematics;... publicly shared public discourse"*. The role of science is to "*drive out ignorance while retaining wonder*". Its driving force is ... "*an alliance of curiosity and optimism; sparkling imagination plus extreme caution.*" Scientists are "*hewers of simplicity out of complexity.*" In science, "*truth comes from experiment aided by analysis, discussion and mathematics. ... Science is not about comfort; it is about truth.*"



Peter believed that no area of investigation is intractable to science in the long term, although some can only be investigated when the concepts, tools and techniques have become established. In an argument I failed to grasp, he advanced the fascinating notion that the big bang with the subsequent expansion of the universe was a zero energy event, the kinetic and mass energy of the universe being matched by the *negative potential energy* created by the expansion. (Note to myself: must look into this.) This answers claims by "big-bang creationists" that the big bang must have required a prior creative force (i.e. a god). Peter concluded that the powers of science were indeed unlimited.

Peter's slides were compelling. Two months later I had a chance meeting with the editor of his chemistry text book; I learned that he creates these beautiful illustrations himself. This was truly a master-class in communication.



Julian Baggini bravely tackled “**What does religion have that we don’t?**” His list of things we rationalists lose included: “*loss of mystery and the sense that man is not the measure of all things*”; “*essential humility and corresponding gratitude*” (Julian noted in passing that the sense of gratitude is being replaced by the entitlement culture - too true!); rituals – these can induce *a sense of transcendence*; our secular versions of transcendence seem weaker somehow; religion leads naturally to “*higher aspirations*”, and they (usually) foster a sense of “*belonging to a community*”. For established religions this sense of community is manifest in the great architecture and art that the religions have inspired (or maybe commissioned?).



In A C Grayling’s absence Andrew Copson took his place to have the conversation with **Polly Toynbee** on the Meaning of Life. This is one session where I failed to make notes.

Stephen Law (Believing Bullshit) and Chris French (On Seeing Things That Are Not There) both spoke about, and sought to explain, the fact that people believe whacky things and quickly infer meaning where none exists.

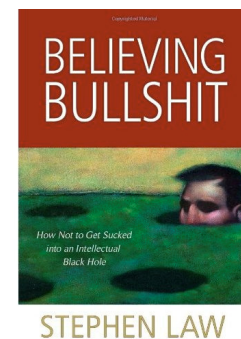


Stephen Law’s talk was based on his book “Believing Bullshit: How not to be sucked into an Intellectual Black Hole”. He asked why so many people believe in gods, afterlife (Muslim suicide bombers confidently expect to be greeted by (allocated?) 72 virgins), creation, that aliens built the pyramids, paranormal powers, etc. It seems that some organizations construct “*intellectual black holes – belief systems that suck people in and hold them*”. They create mechanisms for sustaining belief in stuff that is clearly wrong. The point of the book is to list some of these mechanisms and “immunize”

people against them.

He listed eight, and suggested strategies for refuting them. For more detail buy Stephen’s book!

1. Playing the mystery card
2. “But it fits!”
3. Moving the semantic goalposts
4. Going nuclear
5. “I just know!”
6. Pseudo-profundity
7. Piling up the anecdotes
8. Pressing your buttons



Chris French’s talk was perhaps the most “fun”. He suggests that our brains evolved for survival, not for systematic thought; they allow us to make quick decisions based on heuristics and intuition which are right enough most of the time, as opposed to slower more reflective decisions that are right slightly more often. But we are prone to errors: we are poor at evaluating probabilities or recognizing randomness, and we often see meaning when there is none.

On ten tosses of a coin which result is more likely, HHHHHHHHHH, or HTTHHHHTHT? How many people must be in a room before the chances that two share a birthday is more than 50%. He gave many cases of meaning being perceived when none was there, including: seeing image of virgin Mary in a piece of toast, believing assassination of J F Kennedy/Ghandi is predicted in the Bible by following a sequence of every nth letter, etc. Chris concluded by playing number of pop tunes backwards to show the unholy messages encoded there. Using the audience he demonstrated that almost all could hear the desired target phrase, but only after we had been told what it was! Chris

left us with a quotation from Carl Sagan: *Sceptical scrutiny is the means, in both science and religion, by which deep thoughts can be winnowed from deep nonsense.* [Carl Sagan]

It was real pleasure to see **Phillip Pullman**. Phillip suggested that the meaning of a thing depends on its connections to other things. The purpose of life is for everyone to “*increase [their unique] consciousness*”. (I’m not sure what he means.) Answering questions from the audience Philip said: “every story has a moral whether the writer intended it or not”. He believed that children readers do not identify with 1st person characters in stories; they do hope that the character would think well of them (the reader).



Phillip said he didn’t read fantasy because the stories were rarely worth the effort of learning the fantasy world - except *Voyage to Arcturus*. The *Lord of the Rings* was flawed because it had no sexuality and almost no moral ambiguity - only Gollum is interesting. He always started his stories with a sense of the last chapter, and wrote the story to lead up to that. As an author, he was not in the message business.

Phillip had read the bible extensively in preparation for his recent book. Mark’s crucifixion story is stark; Luke’s is a nice story. “Jesus almost certainly existed and was a genius with words. Christ is a construction, largely by Paul.

Are we the author of our own lives? No, but we do have the power to retell our story. We must live life so we have a true and interesting story to tell. Humanist funeral celebrants do this.

Saturday ended with the Gala (what does gala mean?) Conference Dinner, with surprisingly good food, after which Andrew presented Phillip Pullman with an award for Services to Humanism.

On Sunday morning **Natalie Haynes** gave a brilliant “stand-up” performance showing how the Greeks and Romans were just like us. We learned *inter alia* the context of *Quis custodiet ipsos custodes?* Juvenal worried about how to keep his wife pure. “*I hear always the admonishment of my friends: “Bolt her in, constrain her!” But who will guard the guardians? The wife plans ahead and begins with them!*”; and that Aristophanes wrote a salacious play involving a sex strike by women trying to stop their men from fighting – made more ambiguous by the women being played by boys.



Finally **Richard Norman**, former Professor of Moral Philosophy at the University of Kent talked on Meaning: made or discovered? He surveyed the views of philosophers from Aristotle who believed everything had a purpose, Sartre, “we freely choose our purpose”, to Camus who believed that we live in an absurd universe, but as human beings we are aware of the absurdity and can choose our own meaning. We are on our own and accepting this makes life purposeful. As Richard is our guest speaker at Farnham Humanists on 16th October at the Hop Blossom, I will leave him to tell you more himself.

What did we make of it? First this was a great success. There were some 160 attendees from all over the UK. It was enjoyable, two days of intelligent talk, with intelligent people. It was good to meet the BHA staff, and to meet other humanists. We both really enjoyed the weekend. If you can afford the time and money involved, resolve to attend next year in Cardiff.