



## NEWSLETTER October 2012

### Highlights since our last newsletter in April

Our activities have included:

- An ethical jury
- Public meeting Jeremy Hunt MP "The Big Society"
- Garden Party
- Walk and pub lunch

Plus talks by:

- Professor Derek Diamond "Spirit Level",
- Dr Matthew Engelke "An anthropologists view of humanism"
- Anne Marie Waters "Sharia law in the UK"
- Richard Thomas "William Cobbett"

### DETAILS OF OUR PAST EVENTS AND CURRENT ACTIVITIES

#### U3A course on Humanism repeated by popular demand

**Sue Willson** writes

"For a second year running, **more than 30 people signed up for Farnham Humanists' U3A course** on Humanism.

Seventeen attended the first session, which **David Savage** opened by giving a brief but comprehensive account of what Humanism is. He used slides to illustrate some of the elements of our beliefs.



This was followed by a **presentation by Sylvia Harper** about her upbringing in a small religious sect, and some of the difficulties this caused her. She explained how supportive and congenial she had found Humanism, and how pleased she was to have found a group of like-minded people. Several of the course members asked questions and seemed very interested and touched by Sylvia's openness in sharing her experiences and views."

After the all-important coffee break, Sue herself spoke about **humanist ceremonies**.

She talked about what people are looking for and what they might find in a humanist funeral or wedding, and spoke a little about her years as a celebrant. She was most encouraged by the number of questions and comments she received.

Future sessions during the course include discussions about Humanism past and present; Humanism and religion, science and the arts; altruism and morality including people's ethical dilemmas; Humanism in society and internationally; famous humanists and finding meaning in life.

#### Waverley Faith Forum – family support volunteers needed

**Alec Leggatt** reports "Waverley Borough Council have initiated a **Family Support Team** which aims at a holistic approach for families in trouble. We have offered to provide someone to give a non-religious listening ear to families in the Farnham area. This has been gratefully received by the council. **We would like to hear from members who would like to be involved in this**; no professional skills are called for or offered.

## The 'Big Society' comes to Farnham

**Farnham Humanists** hosted a meeting in May with **Rt Hon Jeremy Hunt MP** Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport about the Big Society. Churches Together, other religious and secular organisations were invited together with members of the public. **Some 200 people heard Mr Hunt explain that it is a vision of social renewal** with more people taking more responsibility for themselves, for their families, and for their community. The Big Society will only work if we can harness the dynamism of existing organizations. It is not about government opting out of social responsibility or trying to save money. Nor is it party political. Government actions to encourage the Big Society included reducing bureaucracy around volunteering and Gift Aid; encouraging arts organisations to set up US style endowments and the setting up of a Big Society bank to provide £200m of venture capital for social enterprises.



**Farnham Humanists' Belinda Schwehr then chaired** a lively discussion based on **challenging questions raised from the audience**. Was it the Big Society that was abandoning minimum nutritional standards for school meals; charging VAT on repairs to war memorials; preventing sincere orthodox Christians adopting as they had the "wrong cultural background" for the child in question; closing libraries and museums and increasing unemployment? The government had come to power promising a bonfire of the quangos, slashing red tape but it wasn't happening. Local Authorities were playing off competing charities against one another, simply to drive down the price paid for services. Frimley Hospital has 700 volunteers; would they continue to volunteer if the hospital was run for profit?

Mr Hunt used these questions to stress his support for ever more decentralization and devolution of power. He felt London had been transformed since it acquired a Mayor. He defended private enterprise including much-criticised pharmaceutical companies, who provided vital medicines and had supported his own charity. The questions were still coming when Mr Hunt had to leave. Belinda thanked Mr Hunt and Andrew Carter, Head Teacher of South Farnham School.

This is an excerpt of Belinda's full write up which can be found on the website:

<http://www.farnham-humanists.org.uk/private/Events/debates/The%20Big%20Society%20comes%20to%20Farnham.pdf>

## Farnham Humanists outdoors: walk and our summer garden party

Walk leader **Alec Leggatt** records:

"The walk postponed from June by bad weather did a little better on July 29th with just a few sharp showers. Six stalwarts strode for 3.5 miles over lovely Hampshire hills around Crondall with open views to North and South. The rather damp party joined a further six less (much less) energetic members at the Hampshire Arms for lunch.

A straw poll of the walkers thought the two hour trudge was about right but the fact that six more came for lunch only might indicate

that a shorter walk would be more popular, opinions please."

**Belinda Schwehr** kindly hosted our **annual garden party**. She recounts "On July 8th, about 20 members of the group gathered for tea, with everyone bringing something lovely to share. The weather was fine, and the conversation stimulating. Not even the tennis final distracted the group from the main business of mingling, munching and not falling in the River Wey. I believe I am still harbouring some picnic plates belonging to others, if anyone would like to reclaim them!

## Talk on Sharia Law in the UK today and Baroness Cox's Equality Bill

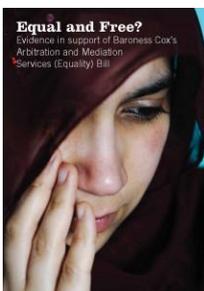
**Anne Marie Waters**, leading spokesperson for **One Law For All**, <http://www.onelawforall.org.uk/> spoke passionately to Farnham Humanists in September about the effects of Sharia law in the UK today. **Jennie Johnson relates** "Many of us were left feeling shocked about the extent to which so many British women are controlled and intimidated by Sharia law. They and their children are significantly discriminated against in terms of divorce, child custody, domestic violence, inheritance and polygamy."



Under Sharia Law a **woman's testimony is worth half that of a man's**; a woman's marriage contract is between her male guardian and her husband. A man can have four wives and divorce his wife by simple repudiation, whereas a woman must give reasons, some of which are extremely difficult to prove. Child custody reverts to the father at a preset age, even if the father is abusive; **women who remarry lose custody of their children**; and sons are entitled to inherit twice the share of daughters. In the UK the cost of a Sharia divorce is typically £400 for women, £200 for men.

Proponents argue that those who choose to make use of Sharia courts and tribunals do so voluntarily and that according to the Arbitration Act parties are free to agree upon how their disputes are resolved. In reality many women have little or no knowledge of their rights under British law and if they do know their rights **they can feel pressured into going to these courts and abiding by their decisions**. Otherwise they risk being made to feel guilty and being treated as apostates and outcasts.

**Jennie adds** "Anne Marie strongly advocated us to support **Christian Humanitarian Baroness Cox's Arbitration and Mediation Services (Equality) private members bill**."



Following the meeting Anne Marie emailed Farnham Humanists a copy of the bill's booklet "**Equal and Free?**". This highlights the main effects of the bill. It would remove any doubt that the sex discrimination law does apply to the Sharia tribunals which operate under the Arbitration Act. A new criminal offence would be created to prevent Sharia councils from falsely claiming that they have a legal status. Public authorities would have a new duty to inform women of the legal disadvantages of only having a religious marriage. The Bill would also require civil courts to satisfy themselves that Sharia agreements have been entered into freely and to investigate any allegations of duress made by independent third parties.

### Postscript to the talk:

There was a **second reading of Baroness Cox's bill** in the House of Lords on Friday 19<sup>th</sup> October.

The National Secular Society reports "The only opposition to the Bill came from the bench of bishops and the first female Muslim in the House of Lords, Baroness Udin. The Bishop of Manchester urged "extreme caution" in proposing legislation, arguing that the functioning of religious courts in the UK required "greater discussion and research". Baroness Udin echoed the bishop's comments saying the Bill would be viewed as "another assault on Muslims".



**Despite overwhelming support in the Chamber**, Conservative peer Lord Gardiner of Kimble, representing the Government, told the House that the Government remained unconvinced that there is a need for a change in the law." See <http://www.secularism.org.uk/news/2012/10/peers-call-for-action-over-religious-courts> which also contains a link to Hansard.

## Farnham Humanists consider another ethical dilemma

**Belinda Schwehr** kindly facilitated a **second ethical jury** for us in March. Each member of the group was asked if they would like to offer up a moral dilemma for consideration.

**Belinda writes** "The group explored, by consensus, the dilemma of what one should do, when asked by medical staff for one's opinion about someone else's wishes regarding medication, **when that person may be terminally ill, but is not able to decide for themselves.**

**Jim Herrick** had been in that position when his late partner's doctor and blood relatives had wanted his input as to what was best, and as to what the person himself would have wanted. He explained how he and his partner had never discussed the precise point at which existing with pain or discomfort and reduced functioning would become intolerable for the sick man.

The jury was facilitated on similar lines as the first. Questions were put by other members of the group exploring the relationship between the hypothetical outcomes that might be brought about by the medication or other treatment, and the particular values of the person in question, and of their carer, and their apparent quality of life. Jim had been glad to have been asked for his input and the relations between him and his partner's relatives had always been warm, but the discussion brought home how it might not always be that way.

The group concluded that the theory and practice of writing a Living Will (or an Advance Directive as it is known under the Mental Capacity Act) are very different. **The November 11<sup>th</sup> evening meeting has now been devoted to a further discussion of the practicalities of actually filling out the forms,** as a natural follow-up to the Jury event."

## Humanist "Listener" for Surrey Police – a second volunteer needed

**Alec Leggatt** reports that "Relations with Surrey Police continue cordial and responsive. The new head chaplain Sarah Parrish accepts that Humanism has a positive role in the work of the police (although I am called "Listener" not chaplain.) I have had a few approaches from members of the Police and have responded to them.

I have introduced **Ruth de Prey** to the Police authorities as my potential successor. The initial interview went very well and there is little doubt that she will be accepted. **The Police would like to have another Humanist to cover the East part of the county - any ideas?"**

## Talk on famous Farnham resident with a Humanist link – William Cobbett

**David Savage** summarises

"In June **Richard Thomas** and **Charles Stuart** of **The William Cobbett Society** gave a wonderful talk on one of Farnham's most famous residents. Born in 1763, he worked as a farm labourer at Farnham Castle but he is remembered as a radical. He worked to reform Parliament by removing the Rotten Boroughs and supporting the Reform Bill of 1832.

Cobbett was an admirer of Thomas Paine, an important 'humanist' campaigner in America. Paine was buried in the US but, because of his views about religion, he was not given a decent burial. Cobbett decided to dig up Paine's bones and give them a proper burial in England. Unfortunately he lost the bones on his way back home!"



2013 is the 250<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Cobbett's birth. Please support the Cobbett's Society plans to celebrate this event. See <http://www.williamcobbett.org.uk/index.html>

## An Anthropologist's View of Humanism

### Sue Shaw writes

"In July, **Dr. Matthew Engelke**, an anthropologist of religion at the LSE, gave us 'An Anthropologist's View of Humanism'. He



had recently completed a study of the British Humanist Association. His main aim was to find out what constitutes Humanism and how people who do not believe in an

afterlife are celebrated. As well as taking part

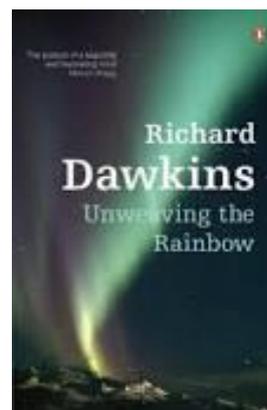
in a celebrant funeral course he attended 16 Humanist and 6 Christian funerals. He also carried out a survey of over 150 of the 270 BHA accredited funeral celebrants, who conduct over 7000 funerals a year. He noted that many of those who have Humanist funerals simply call themselves non-believers. Compared to religious ceremonies, where ritual plays a big part, he found Humanist funerals focus almost exclusively on the individual, their personality and their life. Apparently, 72% of Humanists have read Richard Dawkins, 'The God Delusion'."

## Our Book Club is thriving!

The Book Club has now read nine books, the last two being "**The Master**" by **Colm Toibin** and **Richard Dawkins**' "**Unweaving the Rainbow**".

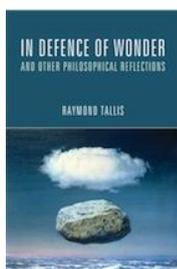
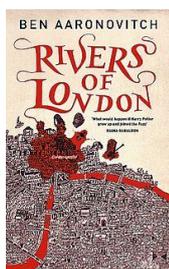
**Belinda Schwehr** reports on the most recent:

"**Dawkins' Unweaving The Rainbow** is an exploration of the two extremes of the debate between scientists and aesthetes, reason and romanticism. He seeks to refute the idea that to investigate and de-construct phenomena in chemistry, physics and biology, robs the world of wonder. He devotes chapters to the patterns of nature, undriven by any deity, using sound waves, botany, prisms, mass extinctions, DNA fingerprinting, the statistics behind coincidence, the evolution of the eye, memes, ballistics and the use of metaphor by humans to illustrate his contentions.



In part he does this by focusing on what he calls good and bad poetic science, incisively criticising 'rubbish' science that is well written about, because of the persuasive damage it does, and shows off his own literary range as he proceeds. The irony is that even in the 1990s Dawkins was already tending to grind a point into the reader's head in 15 different ways per chapter. This perhaps obscures the thrill of discovery, and the wonder at new mysteries revealed - which, given his undoubted talent, he might have been better able than most to convey.

The group veered from giving him the benefit of the doubt, as if the book was a technical monograph, abiding by rigorous principles of self-testing one's hypothesis, to suggesting that 20 pages rather than 300 would have been sufficient for the task. Some found the writing elegant - as we agreed must have been his intention, given the subject; others felt it was flat, other than in the chapters on his own favourite subject, genetics, and even obscure (especially for the non-scientists). All in all, therefore, a good book for dividing opinion and stimulating debate. "



**The next books** planned are "In Defence of Wonder" by Raymond Tallis at Jennie's house on 15<sup>th</sup> November 7:45pm and "Rivers of London" by Ben Aaronovitch, at Tony's house in Godalming, on 8th January.

[http://www.farnham-humanists.org.uk/\\_private/Book%20club.htm](http://www.farnham-humanists.org.uk/_private/Book%20club.htm)

## Events Coming Up

### November

- **Wednesday 7<sup>th</sup> November 8:00pm Fox Inn, Informal pub evening**
- **Sunday 11<sup>th</sup> November 10:45 am Remembrance Day wreath laying at Farnham Memorial**
- **Sunday 11<sup>th</sup> November 7:30pm Hop Blossom Pub, 'How to make a Living Will or Advance Directive Belinda Schwehr**
- **Thursday 15<sup>th</sup> November 7:45 pm Book Club at Jennie's "In Defence of Wonder" by Raymond Tallis**
- **Tuesday 20<sup>th</sup> November 8:00 pm South Farnham School, Public debate on House of Lord's reform**

### December

- **Wednesday 5<sup>th</sup> December 8:00pm Fox Inn, Informal pub evening**
- **Sunday 16<sup>th</sup> December 7:30 pm Festive Evening**

### January

- **Wednesday 2nd January 8:00pm Fox Inn, Informal pub evening**
- **Thursday 15<sup>th</sup> November 7:45 pm Book Club at Tony's "In Defence of Wonder" by Raymond Tallis**
- **Sunday 20<sup>th</sup> January 7:30 pm Annual Dinner**

### February

- **Wednesday 6<sup>th</sup> February 8:00pm Fox Inn, Informal pub evening**
- **Sunday 17<sup>th</sup> February 7:30 pm AGM and Talk by Bob Churchill International Humanism (Uganda and IHEU)**

### March

- **Wednesday 6<sup>th</sup> March 8:00pm Fox Inn, Informal pub evening**
- **Sunday 17<sup>th</sup> March 7:30 pm 'Judaism – A personal view' on Sunday 17 March**

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

### **Becoming an accredited Wedding Celebrant by Roy Weedon**

I have been an Accredited Funeral Celebrant for about a year now and last June I attended the British Humanist Training in July to become an accredited Wedding Celebrant.

The funerals that I lead on are about celebrating the past life of somebody but the weddings are all about celebrating the future lives of a couple

Normally the training is for three weeks unless like me one has already completed the first two weekends training.



In advance of the weekend, there were two fictitious assignments to complete. These were both writing exercises. The first one was asking me to think about the structure of a wedding ceremony, to make some notes about each element and to write the stage directions to myself. The intention was to get me to think carefully about exactly what is involved. The interesting part was that both parties were divorced and one had grown up children

The other assignment asked me to write at least 500 words for a partnership ceremony which we would look at and work on in the training. The two characters were gay women who wanted to show their love and affection for each. One of them came from a Hindu background and although they both wanted a Humanist funeral they wanted to include elements from her Hindu heritage. Searching through the internet I found a lovely Hindu poem and in the tradition of Hindu weddings both ladies exchanged garlands.



On the first day of the course we had to lead on a fictitious partnership ceremony based on the above in front of our peers! We had to set up the room, arrange the furniture, and choose some readings and music. I am pleased to say it went very well although a bit daunting.

On the second day we worked on improving the structure of a wedding and then had to write another script for a wedding that was being held on the beach. We went outside to act this and fortunately the weather was kind to us.

After weekend was over we were given another script to write that:

- Produced a ceremony that reflected the couple and their circumstances
- Gave the ceremony flow and good structure
- Chose appropriate readings
- Took into consideration the issues and possible difficulties of the location
- Selected suitable music

I get great personal satisfaction knowing that I am helping a couple start their journey to a happy and meaningful relationship and that it will hold a special place in their memories.

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