

## Farnham Humanists' Chair's Annual Report February 2015

We have enjoyed a hugely busy 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary year.

**Two special birthday celebratory events were :**

### **February 26<sup>th</sup> Professor Jim Al-Khalili's talk in Guildford**

All 200 tickets were sold for the President of the British Humanist Association, and eminent physicist, Professor Jim Al-Khalili's talk at the Trinity Centre in Guildford titled "Written in the stars: how to live happily in a deterministic universe". Jim covered such questions as: Do we have free will? Is our future pre-ordained? And he talked about what modern physics contributes to the debate. For more see <http://farnham.humanist.org.uk/professor-jim-al-khalilis-guildford-talk-to-farnham-humanists/>

### **And on June 22<sup>nd</sup> our 10<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Celebratory Garden Party**

We celebrated with a Champagne Tea Garden Party and live jazz in Farnham Museum's Gallery and beautiful gardens in glorious summer weather. The event was open to everyone and we were delighted that all tickets were snapped up. Eighty supporters and guests joined in the merry throng, including the mayors of Waverley and of Farnham, the chairman of Surrey County Council and representatives of some local churches and other Farnham organisations. For photos and more <http://farnham.humanist.org.uk/10th-anniversary-celebratory-garden-party/>

**We initiated a new Humanist group: Guildford and Woking Humanists!**

Our big aim in our 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary year was to set in motion a new sister group Guildford and Woking Humanists. We advertised our proposal to start a new group in various ways: using a stall in Guildford High St, Professor Jim Al-Khalili's February talk and two Guildford based workshops in March and April titled "Exploring Life – A Non-religious View". The new Guildford group had its first meeting in October and we are delighted that it is gaining momentum. See its facebook page at <https://www.facebook.com/groups/GuildfordBHA/>.

We are also pleased that the brand new 'University of Surrey Atheist, Humanist and Secularist Society' is flourishing. In addition we now have links with Guildford Skeptics in the Pub and Guildford Café Scientifique.

**March and April Guildford based workshops "Exploring Life – A Non-religious View".**

The aim of the workshops was to stimulate not proselytise. From a lively start with David Savage presenting various non-religious perspectives and asking which, if any, "could you most empathise with?" and whether any "made you feel uncomfortable?" the discussions moved onto "how do you think you have got your moral values?" followed by people being split into groups to consider the case study "Is IVF (in vitro fertilisation) morally justified?". Sue Willson, Mike Adams and Jennie Johnson also talked about Humanist ceremonies, UK secular organisations and what it can feel like to be non-religious. For more see <http://farnham.humanist.org.uk/exploring-life-a-non-religious-view/>

**Our monthly Sunday meetings included diverse subjects such as tax havens, an ethical jury and Sharia Law**

We were fortunate to host some excellent speakers

- Oct: Chris Street led a discussion on 'There is nothing science cannot illuminate and elucidate'
- Sept: Kauser Akhtar's talk about Women and Sharia Law

- July: Dr Sara Melly's talk about 'Religion in Healthcare: What's the Harm?'
- May: Amy Walden's talk about Humanist pastoral care in prisons
- April: Celebrant Ailsa Davies facilitated a stimulating ethical jury
- March: John Christensen's talk about Injustice and Tax Havens
- February: Talk on "Humanism in Education" by Sara Passmore, Head of Education and Promotion at the British Humanist Association

More details on all these events can be found on our website under previous events

<http://farnham.humanist.org.uk/events/previous-events/> and in our April 2014 and October 2014 newsletters <http://farnham.humanist.org.uk/newsletters/>

### **We held a debate about the pros and cons of faith schools on November 4th**

For our 10th Birthday public debate we decided to repeat the motion we had used for our first debate in 2005, namely "Faith schools should not be a part of state education". The event, which was open to all, **raised £261 through voluntary contributions for Plan UK's charity: Because I'm a Girl**. The speakers were local head teachers Canon Stephen Green, Mrs Elizabeth Lutzeier, Dr Robert Sykes CBE and it was chaired by Mr David Munro Chairman of Surrey County Council. For more about the debate see

<http://farnham.humanist.org.uk/faith-schools-should-not-be-a-part-of-state-education/>

### **Social events**

Our 1<sup>st</sup> Wednesday of the month pub chats have been enriched both by people new to the group and by old friends dropping in.

John and Ruth de Prey led our Summer pub walk which "*was fun and the conversations were fluent (to say the least!). Also I'm sure we all gained some absolution from walking on a bit of St Swithen's Way.....*".

Our December festive gathering with buffet and John de Prey's stimulating quiz was hosted by Jennie and Simon Johnson and **raised £97 for Disability Challengers**. Anderson's Restaurant in Farnham warmly welcomed us for our annual dinner in January.

Meanwhile our bookclub coordinated by Tony Newton continues to flourish, meeting every 6 weeks – see

<http://farnham.humanist.org.uk/news/book-club->

### **Ceremonies**

Our member Ailsa Davies has continued to provide Baby Namings, Weddings, Civil Partnerships and Funerals.

### **Community**

Farnham Humanists were invited to talk to a woman-only interfaith event hosted by Ahmadiyya Muslims in May. After a debate amongst ourselves about whether by going we would be condoning women-only groups, we decided there was more to be gained by communicating. Our member Belinda Schwer was listened to with respect; and the meeting served, we hope, as the first small step in a dialogue.

Ruth De Prey has continued in her role for Surrey police as the Humanist Pastoral Care Volunteer, or Humanist "Chaplain" as Surrey Police prefer to call her, working alongside Religious Chaplains. She is now fully vetted and will shortly be attending training day(s).

David Savage has continued to pursue with the BHA the development of humanist pastoral support for non-religious people in hospitals and prisons (in the same sort of way that humanists developed funerals and other

ceremonies for non-religious people years ago). David has also continued to promote equality of religion and belief at the Surrey County Council Equality Group.

### **Education: Schools, Colleges, University**

**In March, at the invitation of Luke Shilling**, Head of RE Oakwood School (a community secondary school in Horley) Mike Adams and Jennie Johnson provided a day of lessons introducing Humanism to mixed ability classes of 12- and 13-year-olds. The following day, as well as speaking to 13 year olds, John de Prey also spoke of his Humanist beliefs and reasons for them to Upper Sixth form students. The student response was impressive, covering the ethics of genetic engineering, stem cells, warfare, and whether or not church viewpoints should be considered in such debates. We must have got something right as we've been invited back to give further lessons and Darwin Day assemblies to each year group.

**In July Farnham Humanists' school volunteers** Mike Adams and Jennie Johnson joined over 100 RE teachers and others at the BHA's inaugural RE Teachers' conference. The aim being to improve confidence in teaching about Humanism.

**Tricia Wallis** has continued to inspire students at Godalming Sixth Form College to nurture their secular humanist group. This has re-launched with new students who are aiming to discuss themes such as 'Faith schools should be banned?' 'The right to blaspheme?' 'The right to offend?' 'Religion should be a private affair?' They plan to hold a debate on whether you need to be religious to be moral.

**The Surrey SACRE (Standing Advisory Council for RE)** is responsible for devising the RE syllabus for non-faith schools across Surrey together with guidance for Collective Worship and visits to and from religion and belief visitors. The Humanist representative Jennie Johnson's input to the latest worship guidance emphasized how expecting students to recite prayers or sing hymns which contain words they do not believe in, or agree with, is disrespectful of their beliefs. Her input was included in the **new "Time to reflect" draft document** highlighting that Hymns could be chosen which do not contain overt references to God or Jesus or if they do, students could be given the choice of whether they join in or sit quietly experiencing the music and reflecting. Likewise joining in prayers should be optional with alternatives of quiet reflection or meditation. The wording of the final document is yet to be seen.

### **World Humanist Congress in Oxford in August**

**Mixing with Humanists from all over the world in Oxford in August.** Eight Farnham Humanist members joined over 1,000 Humanists from 67 countries for the 2014 three-day World Humanist Congress in August. Over 70 eminent speakers from across the world facilitated parallel sessions focusing on freedom of expression and the pursuit of a '21st century Enlightenment'. See <http://farnham.humanist.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/Newsletter-October-2014-Final.pdf>

### **People**

Mike Adams, Sue Willson and James Wallis are leaving the committee due to other commitments and I'd like to thank them for all their hard work and helpful contributions over the years. Mike Adams has moved on to support our new sibling group "Guildford and Woking Humanists. Both Sue and James have said they are keen to continue to support us.

This will be my third and last report as Chair. I'd like to thank the committee for all their support in what has been an exceptionally busy year. I'd especially like to thank our secretary Sue Shaw for her inspiring, thoughtful and tireless work keeping the group going. Our constitution limits the Chair being held to a maximum of 3 years. It is so important that groups evolve and I look forward to what happens next!