

Newsletter April 2015

Social Events

Annual Dinner

In January we enjoyed an evening of lively, friendly conversation over superb food and drinks provided by Andersons Restaurant in Farnham. It was particularly welcome to meet new members and guests, and to hear about the early days of Farnham Humanists from founding members and of the political climate at the time. Farnham does attract interesting people, so it is wonderful to find occasions such as our Annual Dinner when there is opportunity and time to meet the personalities behind faces we might see in Elphicks or Waitrose. *[John de Prey]*

December Festive Evening

This event, once again splendidly hosted by Jennie and Simon Johnson, was well attended and thoroughly enjoyed. In the light of some of the surprising answers offered to Anglo Saxon riddles in the word-game quiz, it was wisely decided not to include this one:

I saw in the corner something swelling,
rearing, rising and raising its cover.
A lovely lady, a lord's daughter,
buried her hands in that boneless body.
Then covered with a cloth the puffed up creature.

(Come to our pub chat evenings from 8pm on the first Wednesday of every month at the Hop Blossom to learn the answer to that riddle and other gems of profound wisdom!) *[John de Prey]*

Recent Sunday Meetings

October 2014

There is nothing that the scientific method cannot illuminate and elucidate – Chris Street

Physicist Leonard Susskin is the co-founder of the String Theory which is considered to be the leading candidate for the “Theory of Everything”. He questions whether physicists can ever understand reality. This is because it might be beyond the limited human capacity to visualize it. Chris Street, chair of Humanists4Science and president of Atheism UK, illustrated how many prominent scientists disagree. For instance



Peter Atkins, former professor of Chemistry and vocal atheist, has stated “My faith respects the powerful ability of the collective human intelligence ... to comprehend ...without limit”.

Chris Street quoted Jim Al-Khalili, Professor of Theoretical Physics, as having an unshakeable conviction that our universe is understandable, that mysteries are only mysteries because we have yet to figure out the almost always logical answers. However, Professor Al-Khalili has also said that we may not get the full picture, but science allows us to get ever closer.

Steven Hawkins, the renowned theoretical physicist and cosmologist, suggests that in order to describe the universe we might need to employ different theories in different circumstances. This idea is not the physicist’s traditional expectation for a theory of nature, nor does it correspond to our everyday idea of reality. But it might be the way of the universe.

The philosopher Steven Law has questioned whether or not science can answer moral questions. He quotes David Hume who stated that science reveals what is the case; it cannot tell us what we ought or ought not do.

The debate was hotly taken up by the floor during the Humanist meeting. Will science one day tell us that morality, emotion, consciousness and the widespread belief in the afterlife are simply evolved human survival characteristics? Might Peter Atkins not be in effect making a “leap of faith” in his belief in the ability of science? The usefulness of philosophy was questioned. Our debate was skilfully inspired and facilitated by Chris Street.
[John de Prey]

February 2015

The Importance of secularism in the UK today - Sadikur Rahman

Sadikur Rahman, an active member of the Lawyers’ Secular Society (LSS), explained that secularism means the absence of all religious interference from the governance of the state, and freedom of religions within the state without privilege to any one. These things are not found in theocracies such as Shi’a Iran, Sunni Saudi Arabia, and the rule of the Taliban and Isis.

Recently, in the UK, the Law Society drafted a guideline for lawyers creating wills based on Sharia Law. This included the words: "The male heirs in most cases receive double the amount inherited by a female heir of the same class. Non-Muslims may not inherit at all, and only Muslim marriages are recognised. Similarly, a divorced spouse is no longer a Sharia heir". This draft guideline was challenged by the LSS and subsequently dropped by the Law Society because it was agreed that non-Muslim lawyers should not be advising Muslims on Sharia Law, and should not be endorsing discriminatory behaviour towards women and non-Muslims, even though it is, of course, legal for Britons to write their wills based on Sharia Law if they so wish.



Sadikur Rahman described how in the UK, some young Muslims are reacting to the apparent liberalism of their parents and are becoming indoctrinated by Wahhabism. This is an extremist pseudo-Sunni movement emanating from Saudi Arabia. Until recently in Birmingham the takeover of some schools by hardline fundamentalists was apparently ignored because the schools were perceived not to advocate violent extremism. However, those schools did ignore “British values” by segregating boys and girls, limiting girls’ education to domestic activities, presenting an unbalanced view of religions and excluding music and sex education. Soft extremism like this, Sadikur Rahman argued, does need to be challenged by us all. He said the Qur’an provides little basis for extreme behaviour. There is a great need for a new, open debate, without fear, within the Islamic communities about the significance and interpretation of Islamic texts. *[John de Prey]*

March 2015

Why Equality is Better for Everyone and Why the 1% Need to Take Notice - Eleanor Hill & Derek Chandler



In 2009 Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett published the influential book “The Spirit Level” showing the correlation between extreme inequality and the

increases in so many social ills. Since then inequality has grown still more until now the richest 1% in the UK own nearly half of the wealth.

Eleanor Hill and Derek Chandler (pictured on the right) from the Hampshire Equality Group gave a talk to Farnham Humanists (new Chair Ailsa Davies pictured on the left) which looked at the evidence and challenged the status quo.

So how unequal are we and how has it changed? Eleanor used her personal earnings as a systems analyst to illustrate the point. She has recently seen her 1981 job advertised at roughly the same salary after allowing for inflation. In contrast, her company's Chief Executive Officer's (CEO) current salary is roughly 10 times more than the CEO earned in 1981 after allowing for inflation (the 1981 £100,000 CEO salary would be £380,000 today not what it is at £3,500,000!) Putting it another way, in 2015 it would take a cleaner 375 years on the minimum wage to earn what a FTSE CEO earns in a year.

The big question is does inequality matter? "The Spirit Level" shows in a developed country, inequality not wealth is the cause of health, social problems and life expectancy. The book has generated some controversy with right of centre Peter Saunders disputing its statistics and Hugh Noble accusing all of "cherry picking" the data to suit desired conclusions.

So what about Farnham? Whereas the average asking price for a property locally is £650,000, shockingly 8% of Farnham children live below the standard relative poverty line of less than £250 a week net disposable income. Farnham Food bank was expected to help 1400 people last December.

How have we got here? Using Institute of Fiscal studies data, Eleanor argued how inequality soared in the 1980s, partly due to City de-regulation "Big Bang", unemployment and the move to a service economy. Property prices are going through the roof especially in London. In 1970 10% of financial transactions were speculative and not in the real economy, today over 90% are speculative. The overpaid use their additional wealth to drive up the price of non-productive assets like land and housing. Very little gets ploughed back into the economy to create even the tiniest trickle down. The OECD, IMF and Archbishop of Canterbury all argue that a more equal society is a more efficient society.

What can we do about it? Eleanor and Derek's ideas included: tackle tax havens, close tax loopholes, "Name and Shame" companies like Starbucks, tax international financial transactions, tax use resources rather than incomes and profits, and pay the living wage. London's Mayor Boris Johnson says "Paying the London Living Wage is not only morally right, but makes good business sense too".

A more radical option is to adopt a universal income with citizenship as the only basis for entitlement (see The Citizen's Income Trust and the Basics Income Earth Network). Related experiments have been tried in Canada in the 1970s (Mincome) and Namibia in 2008/2009.

Eleanor ended her talk with a plea for more people to become actively involved in the political process citing Denmark where equality is much higher and 89% voted in their last general election. *[Jennie Johnson]*

Annual Debate/Discussion

Should Your Tax Fund Faith Schools?

Should faith schools not be part of state education? The question was hotly discussed by invited specialists and a lively audience in a public debate held by Farnham Humanists at South Farnham School on Tuesday 4th November. The chair was David Munro, Chairman of Surrey County Council.



The major concerns of speakers for the motion, and of the audience, were the admissions policies and practice of faith schools; how can education best mitigate against divisive religious, ethnic and economic segregation and how can the “British values”, recently defined by David Cameron, be promoted.

Arguing for faith schools were Canon Stephen Green, Principal of Christ's College, Guildford, and Mrs Elizabeth Lutzeier, Head of All Hallows Catholic School. Both lead faith schools whose academic achievement record and the

nurturing of values and character of their students is undoubted. They insisted their schools were all-inclusive, and that faith was “proclaimed”, not indoctrinated.

Dr Robert Sykes, Head of Thornden School, Chandlers Ford and Andrew Copson, Chief Executive of the British Humanist Society Andrew, speaking against faith schools, claimed that in practice, in Britain, there is considerable exclusion of children from their local school because of their religious background. Also middle class families can more easily present the criteria acceptable to the admissions attitude of particular faith schools. Those schools are keen to select the brightest and most articulate children. The result is widespread ethnic and economic segregation as well as religious segregation. Of the current 331 independent but state funded “Free Schools” a third are faith schools. Many blatantly don’t promote “British Values”, and Ofsted is not effectively taking appropriate action.

Mrs Lutzeier rounded off her argument by pointing out that the values prominent in the minds of her students are social, not religious. She then said that the land and buildings of All Hallows are owned by the Church, as they are of many faith schools. The state simply could not afford to take them over.

The motion was carried by 76% voting in favour. £261 was raised through voluntary contributions for Plan: Because I’m a Girl. *[John de Prey]*

Surrey SACRE **(Standing Advisory Council for Religious Education)**

Surrey guidance for religious and belief school visitors and visits to places of worship

Many schools have asked for guidance on how to proceed with visits to places of worship, in particular mosques and synagogues. This follows recent terrorist attacks and parents voicing concerns about indoctrination as well as security arrangements.



Jennie Johnson representing non-religious world views such as Humanism

on the Surrey SACRE has been supporting an update of Surrey's guidance for school visitors as well as school visits, by a sub group of SACRE. The draft new guidance states that the purpose of any visit is educational and forbids proselytising or evangelism. A teacher is required to be present and actively involved throughout. Prior notice must be given to parents, together with educational aims and content, thereby allowing them an informed choice about whether to withdraw their children. A key question to help visitors to schools and hosts in places of worship reflect on their approach is "If a member of another religion or belief visited my child's school and contributed in the same way that I have done, would I, as a parent, be happy with the education given?" *[Jennie Johnson]*

Schools – invitations and offers of support

February - All Saints Primary School, Fleet

Farnham Humanists were invited by The Head of All Saints Primary School Fleet, Alison Wyld, to provide a half hour assembly for 450 7 to 11 year old pupils. After discussions with Richard Lewis, the Deputy Head, Jennie Johnson emailed beforehand what she was planning to say which the school was very happy with.



On the day Jennie was impressed by how responsive the children were. Lots of pupils wanted to answer questions such as "why do you think Humanists might have chosen their symbol?", "what would you do if you found your friends stealing from a sweet shop?", "can it ever be right to steal?"

One pupil in response to "how is it best to answer questions?" talked about using evidence and working things out. Lots of answers such as "kindness" and "with respect" were given to "how do we like to be treated?". The pupils quickly picked up that the same answers apply to "and how should we treat others?" For Jennie the most fun was having a sea of 450 children all responding to her short True/False quizzes with hands on their heads for True and touching their noses for False. She highlighted the universality of the Golden Rule "To treat others as you would like to be treated" for all beliefs, religious and non-religious, which was first written down 3,500 years ago in an ancient Egyptian story. *[Jennie Johnson]*

February - Oakwood School, Horley



Jennie Johnson, David Savage, Mike Adams and John de Prey gave assemblies to commemorate Darwin Day. This was a return visit to the school, and again we were struck by the students' willingness to express informed opinions. The school's push against prejudice is clearly successful. The set themes of the assembly were:

- What is Humanism?
- Why do we celebrate Darwin Day?
- Prejudice and Discrimination – what do Humanists think?

Also the lesson "What is right and what is wrong? How do we decide?" (designed by David Savage) was given to various age groups. Students engaged well with how in the past slavery and the illegality of homosexuality were generally accepted, and were condoned by "sources of authority" by way of literal interpretation of biblical texts. They saw how attitudes and "moral norms" change with time, and are to be challenged. As an example, they agreed that Islamophobia, currently being fuelled by bad journalism, politicians and even television comedians following the Charlie Hebdo attack, needs to be confronted. Interestingly, the students in one session discussed whether or not atheism is irrational.

John de Prey attended a question and answer session with Year 11 RE option group presenting the Humanist view on any of the following: belief in God, marriage and the family, community cohesion, matters of life and death, peace and conflict, the environment, medical ethics, crime and punishment, and source of authority – religious and secular. Medical ethics and the rights of women interested the students most. It was impressive how challenging and engaged their questions were. *[John de Prey]*

Other happenings

Remembrance Day

Farnham Humanists laid a wreath during a ceremony led by the Church at Farnham Memorial. It is still of concern that Humanists are not universally included in such ceremonies in the United Kingdom. *[John de Prey]*

The Chair

In accordance with our constitution, a person may only hold the position of Chair for three year. Consequently, Jenny Johnson stepped down at the AGM. Her work on work the Surrey SACRE (Standing Advisory Council on Religious Education) and her organisation of our talks in Schools are particularly appreciated.

Our new committee – The AGM in February voted in a new committee for 2015/2016.



Chair
Ailsa Davies
Celebrant



Vice Chair
Jennie Johnson
SACRE/Website



Secretary
Sue Shaw



Treasurer
Alan
Montgomery



David Savage
BHA Head of
Pastoral Care



Ruth de Prey
Listener



John Cregan



David Brittain



John de Prey



Tricia Wallis