



# North East Humanist

No. 67 - Newsletter for Tyneside, Teesside and Cumbria Humanist Groups - Summer 2007

## 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Year The Opportunity for Humanism

On September 17<sup>th</sup> 1957 at 5 Kirkstone Gardens, Newcastle upon Tyne, 10 people unanimously carried the motion to constitute the Tyneside Humanist Group. Regular fortnightly lectures commenced in October 1957 and Humanist funeral ceremonies were held from January, 1958 at the request of the London based Ethical Union to which the Tyneside Group was affiliated. A Sunderland Group was started in April 1959 and the first AGM was held at the British Legion, Great North Road in May the same year. There were 21 paid up members and among those present was our current

President, Neil Jenkins, now aged 92. It was reported that the Newcastle City Librarian had agreed for the magazine 'Humanist' to be placed in the library's reading room on payment of an annual subscription of one guinea. There was an outing in June 1959 to the Theatre Royal to see Ibsen's 'Ghosts' with seats at 4s 6d.

In 1997, following the formation of a Teesside Group, we changed our name to North East Humanists.

From this early beginning, we have grown to having over 200 members with a wide range of activities which include Humanist presentations to schools, campaigns and a varied selection of social events for our members.

Despite all our own efforts, and those of the national and international organisations to which we are affiliated, the public's awareness of Humanism remains at a comparatively low level. However, there are signs that this situation could be significantly improved.

The recent appointment of Polly Toynbee as President of the BHA will certainly help. She is a distinguished political and social commentator who is not afraid of giving her views on Humanism as a life-stance. Accepting the appointment, Polly said,

*'I am honoured to be appointed President of the BHA at a time when not for many years has there been such a need to promote a Humanist view of the world. Religious fanaticism is the clear and present danger all round the world. We need to oppose religious zealotry by promoting the positive and liberating case for believing life on earth is precious because the here and now is all there is and our destiny is in our own hands. Mankind itself has all the innate moral strength it needs, without inventing divine reward and wrath. Humanism is tolerant of all beliefs, so*

*long as they oppress no-one else, including weak members of their own communities, and so long as they seek no special privileges from the state. The Humanist view of life is progressive and optimistic, in awe of human potential, living without fear of judgement and death, finding enough purpose and meaning in life, love and leaving a good legacy.'*

At our NEH committee meeting on July 10, we looked at actions other groups are initiating to promote Humanism before deciding what steps we could usefully take. The BHA has engaged Pepper Harrow to spearhead the launching of their Local Development Project aimed at influencing policy and practice at the local level. We have already contacted Pepper to see how this can fit in with our own work in this area. June Maxwell of the Scottish Humanists is initiating an 'Academy' of Humanist writings. 'Its aims and objectives will be to encourage the promotion and practices of

Humanism in Scotland and beyond...'. Richard Hogg (South Hampshire Humanists) with the support of the BHA, is contacting all local groups with the aim of raising the public's awareness of Humanism through mass leaflet drops. However, we had already made plans to do this in Newcastle.

### Our 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary

We are using this opportunity to promote Humanism in the North East. A task force has been set up to define what we would like to see for Humanism in, for example, 10 years' time, and how we would get there.

Some specific actions for the next 12 months include:

A joint **public lecture on October 4** with Newcastle University with **Professor A C Grayling** as the speaker. We shall set up a table and display in the foyer of the Curtis Auditorium to attract the interest of the expected audience of around 250 people.

**A stand at Grey's Monument in Newcastle on Saturday August 11** to promote our activities to the general public.

**A 1000 leaflet drop in Newcastle** to gauge the response to this type of contact with a view to scaling this up at a later date.

Continuation of our annual **'Greenfest' and Durham Miners Gala displays**.

**A one-day regional conference** with workshops at **Durham Castle on Saturday May 17, 2008** to explore further practical ways of getting the Humanist message across to a much wider audience.

**These activities all require organisation and help on the ground to make them successful.**

Members are invited to contact John Hodge to add their



Polly Toynbee Guardian photograph

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# Human Models for Human Diseases

**On May 17, we were introduced to the work of the Humane Research Trust by Ken Cholerton, Chair of the Trust, who showed a video in which scientists funded by the Trust talked about their research and why they considered it essential to pursue human studies rather than experiments involving animals. Ken's talk was followed by a lively session of questions, observations and debate.**

The objective of The Humane Research Trust is to fully develop human based technologies and skills in order to better understand and address the diagnosis and treatment of human diseases. The Trust is committed to making a major contribution to human health, whilst at the same time saving animals from the suffering associated with laboratory experiments.

The Trust works WITH scientists to develop these new technologies and skills, based upon the belief that the answers to human disease will be found in human rather than animal studies, and that we will be better off if the resources devoted to animal studies were instead invested in human studies. The Trust's scientific and ethical values exactly coincide.

The video addressed some of the scientific problems associated with animal experiments, such as the cumulative effects of genetic and other differences, the use of healthy animals as a proxy for sick people, artificial infection or the affliction of animals with conditions they cannot naturally contract and such factors as the rapid assessment of results, whilst human conditions often build up only slowly, the effects on behaviour of the unnatural laboratory environment and the impossibility of identifying many important side effects as animals cannot speak.

Only after subsequent human studies can the results of an animal study be evaluated and these results can be costly in both human and financial terms. Millions of animals are used annually in the UK alone, and it is not surprising that these yield some useable information. They also produce much misleading information, misdirection of resources and lost potential. Many substances, treatments, ideas etc have "passed" animal tests, only to fail in human use, and many others have been rejected for "failing" animal tests, but could have perhaps been of human value.

If, for whatever reason, animals had not been available, medical research would still have proceeded and would probably have done so more humanely and efficiently, as scientists would have had to be more creative sooner. If vivisection did not already exist it would be very difficult to argue a case for its introduction.

This is not intended to be a judgement against all scientists using animals, most are decent and genuinely believe that what they are doing is ethical and of net benefit to humanity. Legal, political, commercial and career environments can be obstructive. Lawyers want the maximum arguments to use in the face of any product liability claims. The idea is too prevalent in the political community that identification of possible benefit in itself makes something "ethical". Commercial pressures (at present being especially seen in areas involving genetics) can mean less thinking time and a focus upon opportunities rather than responsibilities. Career pressures mean it is easier and less culpable to do things as they have been done in the past.

"The lesser of two evils" - using animals versus not doing everything possible to address human disease - is still an "evil". The Trust is committed to developing a third way - to

simultaneously help people and save animals. Surely, twenty-first century science is capable of achieving this!

There is a range of positive factors at work - the success of human studies, the large and growing number of researchers who are turning to human based studies, younger scientists who will not go down the animal route and older seasoned scientists who have learned from experience that the human route is better.

The new powerful resource of the Genome with its huge data bank about the human body opens up significant new opportunities for human studies, which are also facilitated by new technology, enabling research with ever smaller quantities of tissue.

On the ethical side, zoological research is now showing that animals have full mental lives and self-awareness - something many scientists have not accepted. This new research strengthens the moral case for not using animals.

Some of the work currently funded by The Trust includes: development of human tissue technology, cancer studies, novel human cell models for the evaluation of neurotoxicity, diabetes research, study of bowel disease and human intestinal stem cells, new human biochemical techniques for vaccine design, tetraspanins and the role of certain proteins in disease, and rehabilitation studies.

The portfolio of Trust funded projects has a number of strategic features:

- \* scientific excellence per se.
- \* "seed-corn" funding to enable new ideas to be studied and developed - a kind of support which is very difficult to secure.
- \* leverage and spin-offs, and the promotion of new work in other areas.
- \* the establishment of postgraduate studentships, student project bursaries, etc to train the scientists of the future, and the establishment of senior lectureships.
- \* team building.
- \* encouragement of publications, presentations at conferences and other information flows.
- \* hospital and patient links - science and patients side by side.
- \* contributions to infrastructure for human studies - support of human tissue banks, development of human tissue technology, establishment of key research posts, etc.

The Humane Research Trust is, thanks to its supporters, making a real difference for the benefit of people and animals.

*For further information about The Trust or to join its mailing list contact:-*

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29 Bramhall Lane South, Bramhall, Cheshire.SK7 2DN.

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Website [www.humanersearch.org.uk](http://www.humanersearch.org.uk)

# Speaking as a Humanist

In June, three of our members each spoke for ten minutes on a subject of their choice. Their talks were all very different and led to a lively discussion.

In his talk, **Alan Ball**, who is a Studio Potter, looked at a Humanistic life-style through the eyes of a practising craftsman. He began by circulating a flint tool, which could be 4000 years old and was recently dug up in Alan's garden. This tool, which is still very sharp and is to be donated to Sunderland Museum, had set Alan thinking about how craftsmen through all the ages of man have used their intelligence and skill with their hands to invent and make useful things for the survival and advancement of mankind. He spoke of his own pleasure in working with clay and the joy of creativity.

Alan believes that from the first stone toolmakers and man's discovery of how to make pottery, which was remarkable in itself and is important in dating archaeological sites, right up to the scientists in our day who are engaged in outstanding developments such as computer science and the understanding of DNA, such people would generally have no time for superstitions, gods and demons. They would surely always be searching for the truth, with pure logic.

After Alan's talk, a number of members spoke about the pleasure that they themselves found in practising various crafts.

**Diane Jones** spoke about a recent House of Lords debate about the privileging of religion in the public sphere. She had been alerted to the debate on hearing Lord Lyndon Harrison say on the Radio 4 Today programme that he would later be excluded from his place of work '*as it is high-jacked to become a church, and prayers are read*'. She said that reading the debate in Hansard and exploring current legislation, government policy and initiatives had given her a greater insight into the pervasiveness of acceptance that religion equals 'a good thing', and consequently of the enormity of the task we face as Humanists in attempting to have our voice heard.

The debate in the House of Lords was on a 'motion for papers' which provides an opportunity for peers to raise issues of interest or concern to them, but is not part of any legislative process. Twenty-one peers – mostly Christian and Humanist – contributed in the debate which was 2½ hours long and ranged over some familiar topics including faith schools, chaplains, broadcasting, and the Charities and Human Rights Acts

Diane mentioned some of the particularly interesting - and particularly ludicrous - contributions made, and then talked about the recent Commission on Integration and Cohesion report which says that '*Recent research suggests that secularists may be particularly prejudiced against faith representatives in public life and this needs to be faced through open dialogue*' - but which appears to allocate to faith communities the task of 'establishing effective patterns of engagement' with non-religious belief groups.... She said that she had developed a great admiration for the persistence and patience of those at the BHA who engage with government and make submissions on our behalf.

The debate is worth reading and can be found at [www.tinyurl.com/2w5bsc](http://www.tinyurl.com/2w5bsc) (Hansard Column 331 - 11.37am)

**Philip Nathan** addressed the question of to what extent the New Testament could be considered a good book. He addressed this question since many Christians refer to this book as the main source of their morality rather than the Old Testament.

Looking in particular at one of the books (Matthew) of this New Testament, he pointed out contradictions between what he considered to be the positive messages of "Turn the other cheek" and messages of forgiveness, contrasted with the threats of eternal pain and torture for those who didn't believe in any God or who didn't follow the rules. He pointed out the many threats of eternal flames and burning for non-believers which would take place at the end of time, which he suggested were clearly connected to the burning and torture of what were termed heretics at various times in Christian history. He also noted elements of the text where the key participants were insulting and threatening to those they disagreed with.

Overall, he concluded that, while there were what we might consider to be positive moral messages, the book could not be considered good in terms of overall morality, as it aimed to encourage religious belief on the premise of rewards and threats of violence and eternal punishment and thereby encouraged its followers to engage in violent behaviour to those who did not accept the Christian message. Of course, the book was also fundamentally flawed in its assertion that there was a God and that this God was all-powerful and needed to be obeyed, which he considered to clearly be an unsound basis for any moral system.

## GreenFest

At the beginning of June, NEH members were present yet again at Newcastle's annual Green Festival giving out leaflets from our stall and talking to visitors. The sun shone throughout the weekend, and as always, there was a very positive response to what we had to say.

Alan Ball did his usual sterling work in arranging, setting up and taking down our notice-board, as well as manning the stall. Joan Congleton, Chris and Barbara Haine, John and Grace Hodge, Joan and Les Milne, Robin Smith and Leigh Venus, also helped out, chatting to visitors and informing them about Humanism and Humanist ceremonies with the help of our ample supply of leaflets.

Overall the weekend was a great success with a significant number of people from the GreenFest coming to the subsequent Thursday meeting. Congratulations and thanks to all who helped out.

Joan Congleton at the GreenFest display



# Humanist Meetings in Turin, 15 – 18 June 2007

Jean and Barrie Berkley travelled to this historic city to attend four days of Humanist meetings arranged by the European Humanist Federation (EHF), the Italian Humanists and the International Humanist and Ethical Union (IHEU). NEH is affiliated to both the EHF and the IHEU.

The EHF is based in Brussels and it is strongly supported by the Belgian Humanists. It promotes and defends Humanism and secular values in Europe, with representation to numerous bodies such as the Council of Europe, the European Parliament, UNESCO etc, etc. An important activity of the EHF at the moment is to ensure that the mini-treaty between EC member nations does not give undue prominence to religious organisations. The President is David Pollock, a BHA Trustee, and we shall have the opportunity of hearing about the work of the EHF when he speaks to us in October.

The IHEU has a Belgian President, Sonja Eggerickx, who is a schools inspector, and NEH member Jack Jeffery was re-elected as a Vice-President during the General Assembly meeting. There is a huge contrast between the large and relatively wealthy groups in the West and the struggling Humanists in the poorest countries. However, the Humanists in many of these developing countries are young, educated and devoting their lives to Humanism.

Barrie gave a short illustrated talk about the remarkable progress being made by the Ugandan Humanist Association, which was very well received, and the IHEU is now considering how this success could be utilised in other African countries.

Another very powerful presentation was on Child Marriage. The IHEU has launched a joint campaign with the World Population Foundation against this horrific practice and submitted a paper to the UN Human Rights Council on this issue. Overall, IHEU is involved in many very worthwhile causes, but is in need of more support, financial and campaigning.

Towards the end of the IHEU General Assembly, the 2007 award for Distinguished Service to Humanism was presented to Keith Porteous Wood, Executive Director of the National Secular Society.

Awarding him the prize, IHEU president Sonja Eggerickx, said: "This year it goes to a man who has worked tirelessly for secularism and humanism over many years, both in his own country and on the international stage". Keith replied: "I'm thrilled and honoured to have been given this award. There is still much to do to slow the encroachment of religion into European political institutions, with the recent renewed manipulative posturing of the Vatican we have to be ever-vigilant."

The Italian Humanists proved to be very hospitable hosts and led a walking tour to see their beautiful and interesting city. They are very devoted to their cause and are starting up new groups in several different parts of the country. They have particular difficulties, of course, because of the presence of the Vatican in their

country and they are working hard to keep religion out of schools and other institutions.

As usual with these gatherings, it was a pleasure to meet with fellow Humanists from many different countries – some our friends for many years and some new friends – all interesting and keen to tell us what they were doing in their own areas.

## Isaac Newton High School Update

Again, this year, NEH members have responded very generously to our further appeal to provide tuition for orphans and other disadvantaged children who cannot afford to pay fees for secondary school education at a Humanist-run school in a rural area 80 miles from the capital of Uganda.

We have recently sent a cheque for £2,400 to the school which will provide one year bursaries for 20 children. The school manager, Peter Kisirinya, has sent this response: "*Please deliver our sincere appreciation to all members of the North East Humanists UK. I would also like to reassure NEH members that all funds given to us are used solely for the intended purpose.*"

The school has now been open for three years and has 104 pupils in 4 classes. At the beginning of this year IHEU made a grant of £6,500 to enable a science laboratory to be constructed. This will enable a full range of subjects to be taught for the secondary curriculum.

The photo below, sent to us last month, shows the Laboratory under construction.



## Sponsored Walk

We were very pleased to accept the offer by our member Elizabeth Foster and her friend Margaret Mound to undertake a sponsored walk of 73 miles from Fort William to Inverness. £434 was collected from this initiative and this will be put towards our next donation to the school.

## Well done Elizabeth and Margaret!

*Our fund to support the Isaac Newton High School remains open and cheques made out to 'North East Humanists' with Isaac Newton School written on the reverse side will be still welcomed by John Hodge.*

## Forthcoming Meetings

### Tyneside Humanist Group

Meetings are held on the third Thursday of each month at The Literary and Philosophical Society, ('Lit & Phil') 23 Westgate Road, Newcastle.

Tea/coffee is available at 6.45 pm for a 7.15 pm start.

(No August meeting)

September 20

#### What it Means to be Homeless in Newcastle

Maureen Hogg, *The People's Kitchen*

October 4 (see separate notice)

#### Reason and the Good

Professor A C Grayling

#### 50th Anniversary Lecture at Newcastle University

October 18

#### Promoting Humanism in Europe

David Pollock, *President, European Humanist Federation*

November 15

#### Media Censorship, Culture and Globalisation

Robert Beveridge, *Napier University, Edinburgh*

### Teesside Humanist Group

For information on meetings and social events please contact: CHARLIE McEWAN Tel. 01642 817541

### Cumbria Humanist Group

Meetings commence at 7.30 pm on the third Wednesday of the month in Carlisle or Penrith.

August 15

#### More Doubters in Literature (27 Spencer Street, Carlisle)

John Rimmer, *Carlisle U3A member*

September 19

#### Members' Soapbox (27 Spencer Street, Carlisle)

October 17

#### I've Always Worn Purple

Jo Hampson, *Life-change consultant* (Penrith Library)

November **Annual Dinner** (to be arranged)

### Future Events – Dates for your diary!

(Details of these events are being sent separately to members)

#### Sunday 19 August

Summer Party at the home of Jean and Barrie Berkley

#### Sunday 9 September

Family Day Out at Bill Quay Community Farm

#### Tuesday 23 October

Wine-tasting at Bowburn, Durham

#### Friday 23 November

Supper and Quiz at the Bridge Hotel

### Ceremonies

For information about Humanist Wedding, Baby Naming, Affirmation and Funeral Ceremonies, please contact our Secretary John Hodge on 0191 281 2808 or email [johnhodge@blueyonder.co.uk](mailto:johnhodge@blueyonder.co.uk)

**DISCLAIMER:** The views expressed in articles and letters are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent those of the North East Humanists.

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## In Brief.....

### Chillingham Outing

Sunday June 17 saw a group of 22 members and friends embarking on a coach at Newcastle Central bound for deepest Northumberland. In a day long trip organised by Chris and Barbara Haine the weather held good, the roads remained clear and a great day out was had by all. The day took in a special guided walk in the grounds of Chillingham up to the unique and world famous White Cattle of Chillingham. The warden, Mr Widows, gave a most interesting explanation of his work and we were all able to get some marvellous photographs of the cattle. After a picnic lunch the group moved on to Chillingham Castle where a second guide was waiting to share the history and supernatural mysteries of the castle that has been lovingly restored by its current owner. By the time everyone was ready to enjoy a pot of tea and a walk around the gardens the sun was shining and the children in the group were able to enjoy some time running around and buying mementoes in the shop. Before the end of the day we broke our journey at Rock Midstead Organic Farm where members were able to buy some produce and enjoy a second pot of tea in the farm gardens - surrounded by pot bellied pigs and families of ducks with their ducklings running around as if they too had been booked as part of the entertainment.

Everyone enjoyed the day and it is hoped to organise a similar event next year providing there is sufficient interest early enough. If you have any suggestions for a theme to the day please contact Chris Haine.

### Durham Miners' Gala - Saturday 14<sup>th</sup> July

This is the third year in which North East Humanists have had a stand at Durham Miners Gala. Each year the attendance at the Gala has increased and there were as many bands and banners on this occasion as there used to be in the 1960s. The Gala focuses on Trades Unions but it's very much a day for celebration of community and of working people. It's fitting that as Humanists we're a part of it.

There was interest in our books and pamphlets and many people agree with what we stand for. We are also identified as Humanists who are the providers of meaningful ceremonies.

We recruited two new members and sold a copy of 'Modern Humanism'. The stand was manned by Grace Hodge, Alice and John Severs and Roger McAdam. Jemma Hooper from BHA Head Office joined us to circulate amongst the crowd handing out BHA leaflets and answering questions about Humanism.

**Teesside Group** On Saturday April 14, twelve members and friends of the Teesside group met at the Treebridge Hotel for lunch. This was a very enjoyable occasion with informal discussions and good food. One of the guests has since become a member of NEH.

## Have your say.....

We welcome letters for publication of around 150-200 words; also longer articles by arrangement with the editors:

Jean and Barrie Berkley,

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Tel 01434 632936 email: [barriebkly@aol.com](mailto:barriebkly@aol.com)

Our next deadline for receipt of material is **October 15th**

Visit our website for more information

<http://northeast.humanists.net>