



## Neil Jenkins – an outstanding contributor to Humanism

Our President, Neil Jenkins, died peacefully on 14<sup>th</sup> October just nine days before his 93<sup>rd</sup> birthday. His funeral ceremony on 29<sup>th</sup> October was led by Chris Haine and covered a truly remarkable life. Chris's account of Neil's personal and family life was amplified by a colleague, Mike Edgar, who described Neil's many academic achievements which culminated in his being appointed Professor of Oral Physiology at Newcastle University. Barrie Berkley gave an appreciation of Neil's outstanding contribution to Humanism.

The Tyneside Group of the North East Humanists recently celebrated its 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary. What is particularly remarkable is that Neil Jenkins was an inspiration for our activities for this entire period. He was present at the first meeting on 17<sup>th</sup> September 1957 and attended the anniversary lecture and reception when Professor Anthony Grayling spoke on 'Reason and the Good' at a joint event with Newcastle University on 4<sup>th</sup> October 2007. The North East Humanists have been very fortunate to have had such an outstanding man as President for 40 of our 50 years.

Born on Merseyside to a devout Scottish Presbyterian mother and an English Baptist father, Neil had a thorough grounding in the Bible and Christian beliefs, but by his late teens doubt had set in, leading him to become a Humanist. His shift to non-belief was paralleled by the growth of Neil's interest in all aspects of science, beginning with what was to become a lifelong interest in astronomy, precipitated by the gift of a telescope when he was twelve.

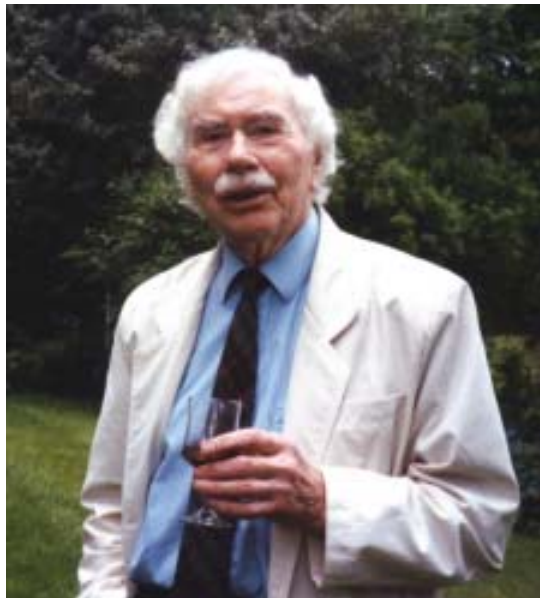
Neil's contributions to Humanism in the North East have been many and varied. He gave numerous Thursday evening lectures to our members, usually in January, speaking on a wide range of ethical and topical subjects.

Undoubtedly, one of Neil's major achievements was his joint authorship with Alfred Hobson of the very well-received book 'Modern Humanism', now in an updated fourth edition. It takes its place as an acknowledged source of information about living as a Humanist and is promoted by the British Humanist Association and the Humanist Society of Scotland.

A very different side of Neil's personality was his joy in being a host to his Humanist colleagues. In August 2005, under a clear blue sunny sky, Neil and his son Oliver

welcomed over 50 Humanist members and friends to their remarkable home, with its extensive terraced garden leading right down into Jesmond Dene. We greatly enjoyed having the opportunity to circulate and mix with each other in such attractive surroundings.

Although Neil's health was clearly failing at the time of the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebrations, nevertheless this was a joyous occasion for Neil as well as for all of us who were there. At the reception after A C Grayling's talk, Neil and Anthony were able to have a chat and to exchange books they had written. Neil stayed on for the dinner that followed the reception in



the company of 60 of his fellow Humanists. This proved to be the last opportunity that most of us had to be with Neil as he died 10 days later. Neil was obviously delighted to be able to participate in these celebrations and all of us in the North East Humanists will remember his truly great contributions to our association and his warm and friendly disposition.

Before he died, Neil agreed to be interviewed for a film documenting his choice of a Humanist funeral. With the agreement of his family, television cameras recorded the funeral ceremony and comments by participants at the reception that followed. The finished film is due to be broadcast early in the New Year as part of BBC North East and Cumbria's 'Inside Out' programme. We will let our members and friends know the date as soon as we can.

Neil expressed the wish that, if there were a collection after his ceremony, the proceeds should be put towards NEH's support of the Isaac Newton School in Uganda. The amount received was £953.

### *In this Issue.....*

- \* Religion in schools
- \* Friendship and food for the Newcastle homeless
- \* Promoting Humanism in Europe
- \* Forthcoming meetings and events

# 50th Anniversary Celebrations

## REASON AND THE GOOD

**Anthony Grayling, Professor of Philosophy at Birkbeck College in London, prolific author and powerful advocate for Humanism, spoke without notes for 50 minutes on the importance of Reason to the good life, when he gave the lecture at Newcastle University on October 4<sup>th</sup> which marked the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the founding of the North East Humanists. He then spent some time answering questions from the audience. The lecture was jointly sponsored by the University and NEH.**

Anthony's focus was on the pressing need to find a more reasoned way out of the very bad tempered quarrels that are causing such distress in the world today and the crucial importance, at this very difficult time, of hearing a clearly articulated and serious alternative from the non-religious. There are many more secular people than is often assumed, because they tend to be very individualistic and not to be united and in a position to lobby for their causes, as the churches are. We need to take every opportunity to let people know that there are thoughtful and sensitive non-religious people giving serious consideration to the way in which we should behave.

It is not helpful to think in terms of theists versus atheists. We need to spend our time thinking rationally and more deeply about individual well-lived lives and we should be concentrating on this quest for the good life. Anthony referred frequently to what we could learn from writings on the good life by the classical philosophers. Socrates saw doubt as the beginning of wisdom. Amongst the non-religious, Humanists would see themselves as particularly concerned with thinking about ethical behaviour, but they have to stand up and be counted, in order to have any effect. Life is very short and it is urgent that we think rationally about our values and how to realise them. Good relations with our friends and loved ones and with other people, taking responsibility for our lives, seeking the good and not harming others – these are the principles at the heart of a Humanistic outlook.

As a species, it seems we retain a memory of all those odd beliefs our ancestors once had as their way of dealing with life and our own fear of uncertainty means that we still tend to be drawn to a neat, closed narrative. Religion has an important role in many lives, but it would seem to Anthony that the attachment is largely emotional.

Secularism itself originated in the struggle between the mediaeval church and the state, at a time when it was actually the church which wanted its independence. A secular state does not have to be anti-church – in fact the example of the USSR showed that such a policy only nurtures a hidden desire for religion. A secular state can give different religions a chance to exist, which is often denied when one religion is dominant. However, religion should not have a disproportionate influence as it has in the UK, where the 3% of the population who are church-goers are represented by 26 bishops in the House of Lords. France presents a contrast with the honourable principle of *laïcité* which aims to treat all French citizens as equal, with their religion being a private affair.

Recent events in the UK have shown that the multi-cultural approach adopted here has not worked and more assimilation is needed. Faith based schooling, although well meant, is creating difficulties for the future and is misguided. Small children simply accept each other and if they stayed together for the whole of their education that would surely be better than accentuating any differences between them by separating them according to their parents' religion.

All religions blaspheme each other, because they each believe that their religion is the true one. We have to get secular ideas established in society. A secular state can meet our needs as human beings. There is a danger at the moment of creating ghettos. This is a time of change and reassessment and we need a secular solution.

**This is a very brief summary of some of the points made in Professor Grayling's eloquent lecture which drew an enthusiastic audience of 360. We have a recording of the talk and the ensuing questions on a CD and copies can be sent to you for £1.50 from the editors (see 'Have Your Say' for contact details) or will be available at the NEH meetings for £1.**

## RECEPTION AND DINNER

After A.C. Grayling's talk, NEH hosted a reception in the Curtis Auditorium foyer to which all members of the audience were invited for a drink and nibbles. There was a display of NEH activities and leaflets were available for those interested. Anthony signed copies of his books which were on sale by Blackwells. There was also the opportunity to chat with Anthony. Neil Jenkins and Anthony Grayling enjoyed each other's company and exchanged books they had written. This provided an excellent opportunity to publicise our association.

At the dinner which followed the reception, 60 members and friends spent a very enjoyable evening at a private function in the restaurant of the adjacent Northern Stage Theatre.

*A.C. Grayling with Neil Jenkins*



## NEH Regional Conference - May 2008

As part of our 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary year celebrations we have arranged to hold a one-day conference in the Senate Suite of Durham Castle on Saturday 17 May, 2008. The general theme of the conference is Humanism as a force for change in this complex world. We have already secured Professor Richard Norman, author of one of the best books on Humanism as the keynote speaker. Michael Imison of the Suffolk Humanists, who is a BHA trustee, will share with us practical aspects of Humanism. Workshop sessions will provide ample opportunity for discussion of the theme in small groups

### FRIENDSHIP AND FOOD FOR THE NEWCASTLE HOMELESS

**The People's Kitchen is the NEH charity for this year. In September we invited Maureen Hogg, a volunteer with the Kitchen, to tell us more about their work and she gave us a compelling picture of the origins of the Kitchen and of the clients it does its best to help.**

In 1985 a 76 year old lady called Alison Kay was so shocked by a newspaper report that an elderly homeless man had been found dead in Leazes Park and that he had apparently been dead for three weeks before he was found, that she determined to find out more about the plight of the homeless in Newcastle. She was eventually able to befriend a group of rough sleepers in Dean Street and she began to bring them a flask of hot soup every Monday evening. She was a very persuasive lady. Soon friends joined her and the flask of soup became two big containers, provided by the nearby Chief Fire Officer, with more and more homeless people coming each week for the soup and a friendly chat. These Monday evening "friendship picnics" continue to this day. The People's Kitchen has learned that some of those who sleep outside are never happy in any enclosed space. Like all their clients, the sleepers in Dean Street appreciate the friendly atmosphere, as much as the hot soup. Alison was struck by the isolation of the people she first met. They did not communicate with each other, even when they slept side by side.

Eventually, in 1997, the Kitchen acquired the premises they have today in Bath Lane, where they are able to offer a three course evening meal to all who come on Tuesday, Wednesday and Friday evenings, High Tea on a Thursday and a hot breakfast on Sunday mornings, when there is also a "Breakfast Run" at Old Eldon Square. There is also a session for the glue sniffers in the cemetery near The Big Lamp, although they tend to have no appetite. About 650 clients a week are helped by the Kitchen.

All this is achieved by the hard work of about 80 volunteers and the considerable generosity of local donors – of money and of food.

What Alison Kay learned, and instilled in her helpers, was that those who came for the food craved even more the attention of someone who would listen to them. 95% have a history of abuse. They have no role models and no self esteem and have never experienced a loving home. Most are alcoholics, many are on drugs and many have mental health problems. All are lonely. They have had a very hard life. In recent years, the proportion of young people under 25 using the Kitchen has, unhappily, grown considerably, to about 60% .

More volunteers are always needed, but not "do-gooders". Maureen feels that she gains a great deal personally from her work with the Kitchen, but it is obviously very demanding and entails acceptance and care for people who can be difficult and not necessarily, at first sight, very appealing.

However, there would seem to be no doubt that the People's Kitchen, which not only offers food, but also clothing, bedding etc and help with finding accommodation, together with friendship and a personal interest, makes a very big contribution to the lives of the homeless in Newcastle, although there is only very occasionally a story with a happy ending.

If you would like to get involved, go to [www.peopleskitchen.co.uk](http://www.peopleskitchen.co.uk) or ring 0191 222 0699

### John and Grace Hodge attend BHA Groups' Meeting

On Saturday 3 November, 48 members of 30 local humanist groups met with BHA staff at Conway Hall, London, for the Group Representatives Annual Meeting (GRAM). NEH's representatives, Grace and John Hodge, report that, in an upbeat mood, there was a positive sharing of ideas and experience, including some principles for running successful groups, getting student groups off the ground and the use of websites for gaining and disseminating information about humanist organisations. The relationship between the BHA and local groups, accounts of specialist groups, such as for vegetarians, and projects such as the BHA's Local Development Project were also discussed. All present felt that this was a very worthwhile occasion.



John Hodge sharing NEH ideas at GRAM

# RELIGION IN SCHOOLS

**In July we welcomed back Iain Patterson, semi-retired HM Inspector of Schools, Secretary of the Cumbrian Humanists, SACRE member and BHA Trustee, to revisit the subject of religion in schools, which he first broached with the NEH in 1997.**

In considering what he might say on this subject, Iain was struck by the thought that he had been involved with Religious Instruction, Religious Education or Religious Studies for most of his life. His involvement with religion began with his baptism in East Kilbride parish church and he attended that church with his mother almost every Sunday from a very early age. When he was five and began school and Sunday school he was, in both places, fed a diet of hell and brimstone Bible stories from the Old Testament which convinced him that the Bible was intent on frightening the living daylight out of sinners – i.e. Iain. This fear was reinforced when, after his mother had told him that his soul would turn black if he was naughty, he found one day that the dye had leached out of his sock and had turned his sole black. Prayer and a hot bath seemed to solve this problem, leaving Iain feeling vaguely cheated.

Iain's family's involvement with the church finished abruptly in 1941, when Iain was 9. His brother had registered as a conscientious objector and his parents went to church one evening shortly afterwards to hear their son being denounced from the pulpit as unpatriotic and a coward. They walked out and never came back and Iain became an atheist. He had no intellectual arguments to offer at that stage, but knew he could have no truck with a church or a god that adopted that attitude towards his brother. The intellectual arguments came later.

When Iain started work as a teacher, he was given some religious instruction classes to teach and he did so, with the understanding that he was allowed to teach anything in these classes except religious instruction. When Iain, an historian, became an HMI in 1979, he found himself inspecting religious education, as it had become, under the umbrella of humanities, alongside history and geography. He decided that he had a professional obligation to judge the teaching of religious education (which has been gradually metamorphosing in many schools into religious studies) impartially, according to its value and quality as an educational experience in its own right. Iain knows of several heads of RE departments who are either atheists or agnostics. The notion of RE as religious instruction has largely gone. The introduction of humanism to RE syllabuses as a consequence of the recent non-statutory guidance has gained almost universal acceptance. The most impartial account of humanism Iain has witnessed came from a nun in a convent school.

Increasing numbers of humanists are becoming members of SACREs. Iain feels that what is needed now is the abolition of the locally agreed syllabus in favour of RE becoming a National Curriculum Subject with humanism as a major component. We are never likely to expel religious education from the classroom – the attempt has been ineffective in the USA. Iain is in favour of abolishing religion from school assemblies. He believes, however that RE, properly taught, has a role to play in improving race relations.

Like all humanists, Iain would like to see religious belief wither away and there are encouraging signs that it is doing so in this country, but we have to face present reality. RE in schools will take a generation to wither away. We may justifiably think that we are faced with not even the best of a bad job, but, for the moment we have to deal with religious education in such a way that something positive comes out of it.

## Summer Party

The NEH annual summer party took place on August 19 at the home of Jean and Barrie Berkley overlooking the Tyne Valley above Corbridge. The weather was damp that day and so good use was made of the old byre. As usual, everyone enjoyed the chance to socialise and the food contributed by those attending was as delicious as ever. The Bring and Buy Sale and the Raffle raised £93 for the People's Kitchen.



Waiting for the raffle

## Visit to Bill Quay Family Farm in Gateshead (from Joseph Severs aged 8)

Feeding the animals was great. We threw food over for the pigs and took lots of hay to the ponies which I loved doing with the large wheelbarrow. We went to the goose pen to put them to bed. One of the noisy ones did not want to go but the lady got it inside the shed. She got another one and we stroked it. We put the running ducks to bed and we made barriers to stop them from escaping. {Did you know that if you leave the ducks out they could get killed by a predator?}. After the brilliant bbq we told jokes and they were all very funny.



NEH family members at Bill Quay

We dressed up as animals and it was really fun. Daniel Severs (5) liked the spider made from scrap on the treasure hunt, the ginger piglets, doing a 'picture' on the ground (using stones, feathers, straw, leaves, twigs, etc.) and found the goose's teeth fascinating.

**Grandad's comment:** Superb. Thanks to helpers and chief organiser, Barbara Haine, the soul of good humour; great programme, marvellous food and drink, all kids winning a prize.

# PROMOTING HUMANISM IN EUROPE

---

**In October David Pollock, the President of the European Humanist Federation (EHF), found time in his very busy life to come up to Newcastle to tell us more about the challenges faced by the Federation.**

---

David described how the differences in historical & cultural backgrounds in European countries meant that words, concepts and assumptions also differed, making it difficult for European humanists to understand each other. For example, 'Humanism' in English represents a positive non-religious life-stance but in France *l'humanisme* and in Italy *umanismo* derive from humanitarianism crossed with Renaissance learning and are claimed by the churches. Moreover, some of our colleagues see the idea of a non-religious 'life-stance' as a betrayal of their rejection of religion.

There is also a division between the Catholic south and the Protestant north, with an anti-clerical emphasis in the south, challenging the domination of the Catholic church. In the UK, the Netherlands, Norway & Belgium, the concept of a life-stance has taken root and the emphasis is on developing a non-religious belief - Humanism - as an alternative to religion. However, there is a significant division even in the north between states with 'pillar' constitutions - principally the Netherlands, Norway, Belgium & Finland - where the state devolves many functions that usually belong to the state to the main belief groups - typically RC / protestant / humanist. There is no separation of church & state, but there is neutrality of the state as to religion or belief. The humanist organisations receive huge Government funding enabling the Dutch Humanists, for example, to run community development, have chaplains in the Armed services, prisons and hospitals, fund a university which trains humanist workers and also dispense about 80m Euros in overseas aid. Humanists are incorporated into these "pillar" states, where the churches remain the major players, and they do seem less inclined to engage critically with religion. Meanwhile Governments also pay very much greater sums to the churches - e.g. meeting all the costs of the priesthood and/or of church buildings.

David criticised such arrangements as far from ideal, making religion or belief a fundamental in society, limiting choice of identity and providing a life-support system for religion long after its true support would have waned, as it has in the UK. He outlined also the government grants and taxes offered to churches in most of Europe: the UK was the exception rather than the norm. Along with financial support went influence and this was apparent also in the EU's arrangements for special channels of consultation with the churches and other religions. The EHF was also able to take advantage of these and, although it objected on principle to the churches not being treated like any other NGO, it had decided to use the opportunity offered to provide a counterbalance. The EHF had therefore had two meetings with EU President Barroso: one this summer ran 15 minutes beyond its allotted time.

The EHF had a very small budget but was assisted by the two Belgian humanist organisations which provided its 1.5 staff and office space. Somehow, it was necessary to raise more money from member organisations, but their circumstances were so varied it was difficult to devise a fair arrangement for fees.

It had, nevertheless, produced a number of booklets and a video, held many conferences over the years and made submissions in response to EU and other consultations, notably on church privileges in the EU. It had a website, which David hoped would be completely renewed within a few months, and it was providing more information to members and supporters through its two Yahoo e-forums, developing a database of church/state relations in European countries and devoting more resources to lobbying and campaigning. This was done in several ways, including through the European Parliament working group on separation of religion and politics, to whose meetings the EHF regularly contributed. David had addressed one of its meetings about church and state relations.

The EHF also put considerable effort into the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) annual Warsaw conference on Democracy and human rights in September, which was attended by 70 or so governments and by NGOs who spoke in the plenary session on an equal footing. The meeting gave the EHF a platform on which to highlight religious privilege and discrimination against unbelievers. David had spoken of the dangers of not confronting Islamist allegations that any criticism of Islam amounted to a hate crime. The relativistic values and flabby thinking of many western liberals too concerned with avoiding conflict meant they were failing to stand up to demands in effect for group rights. He had also reacted strongly to demands from the rapporteurs on Islamophobia and from the Holy See, among others, for a ban on defamation of religion. Vera Pegna from Italy, the EHF's main representative with OSCE, and Hanne Stinson, attending from the BHA, had also made trenchant contributions. Our contributions had attracted thanks and support outside the conference room from both OSCE staff and some diplomats.

(This is obviously important and interesting work. David wonders whether there is anyone in NEH who would like to join the board of EHF. He says he could do with some incisive thinking! Please let Jean and Barrie know if you think you might like to speak to David about becoming more involved.)

## 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.

December 20 **Topics from a Hat**

*Members' written suggestions will be drawn out for discussion.*

Please note that the formal part of this meeting will commence at 6.45 promptly and light refreshments will be served at 8.15

January 17 **Fascism at Home and Abroad**

February 21 **Face to Face**

*An evening of discussion in small groups on a topic to be decided*

### 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.

*Please note the change to larger premises in both places.*

December 19 **Superbugs – Life at the Sharp End**

*Dr. Jamie Caryl*

at **Morton Community Centre, Wigton Rd. Carlisle**

January 16 **AGM**

at **Eden Rural Foyer, Old London Road, Penrith**

February 20 (To be announced)

For further information, please contact Norman Walker  
Tel 01228 539 107

## 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.

Registered Charity No. 1112965

## NEH Online

The NEH continues to establish itself as an online presence, with a new group on **Facebook** and a new entry in **Wikipedia**. **Facebook** is the world's largest social networking website, with over 30 million users worldwide. NEH is now one of 217 groups accessible worldwide on Facebook, offering discussion, information, photos, videos, and allowing NEH members and friends to stay in touch across the world.

**Wikipedia** is an online encyclopaedia, larger than the Encyclopaedia Britannica and ranking among the top-ten most visited websites worldwide. An NEH entry has been added to the English Language **Wikipedia**, containing details about the work, history, beliefs and activities of NEH, and links to other articles of interest.

To find NEH on either **Facebook** or **Wikipedia**, simply search for "North East Humanists" within either site. **Facebook** groups are open to **Facebook** members only, but it is quick, easy and free to join, and a few of your fellow NEH members are already on there waiting! If you need any assistance, please email Leigh Venus at [leighandrewvenus@hotmail.com](mailto:leighandrewvenus@hotmail.com).

## Durham Wine Tasting Event

17 of our members met in Bowburn's Community Centre, near Durham, for a Wine Tasting evening at the end of October. This was the second such event that we have organised and it was led once again by local wine enthusiast Alan Holmes.

The theme for the evening was "Undiscovered Spain" and Alan brought a total of 6 contrasting wines. Thanks to the informality of the evening it proved to be both an enjoyable social occasion and an education in itself. It was particularly appreciated for being held outside of Newcastle city centre and we hope to be able to run further events like this in the New Year.

## Future Events – Dates for your diary!

**Friday 23 November** - Supper and Quiz at the Bridge Hotel

**Sunday 6 January** – New Year's Lunchtime Party

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

## 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,  
Holly Hall Barn, Sandhoe, Hexham NE46 4LX  
Tel 01434 632936  
email: [barriekly@aol.com](mailto:barriekly@aol.com)

Our next deadline for receipt of material is **January 2nd**

Visit our website for more information  
[www.northeast.humanists.net](http://www.northeast.humanists.net)