



# NEWS & VIEWS



[www.birminghamhumanists.org.uk](http://www.birminghamhumanists.org.uk)

New series

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*Humanists are a large and growing population of ethically concerned but non-religious people. We are always pleased to welcome as new members those who believe we can live good lives without religious or superstitious beliefs and who try to make sense of life using reason, experience and shared human values. Our group is affiliated to the British Humanist Association, the Gay and Lesbian Humanist Association and the National Secular Society.*

## Past events

### Annual General Meeting

**The AGM was held on 5 June 2013, with twelve members attending. We are most grateful to Jane Wynne Willson for allowing us to use her house for the AGM again this year.**

Here are a few items of note, extracted from the minutes of the meeting:

It was felt that the first Blackham lecture, given by Stephen Law, had been a successful event, with good attendance. Members were asked for ideas for future speakers – a speaker from the international Humanist movement was suggested. It was agreed that next year the lecture should be held earlier, to be closer to Harold Blackham's birthday (31 March) and further away from students' exams.

It was reported that one of our members, Francis O'Regan, is involved in trying to set up a Humanist Assembly in Birmingham, along the lines of the one in London.

Since Birmingham Humanists became a partner organisation of the BHA, our contacts with them have included:

- meetings with Richy Thompson and Pavan Dhaliwal in October 2012 when the BHA was exploring the possibility of using Birmingham as a test case for getting Humanist representation on SACREs – for various reasons, it has not been possible to take this forward
- information from the BHA about members living in our area, as a result of which we have gained several new members
- some sharing of information among local groups about issues such as publicity and speakers for meetings.

Birmingham Humanists have been delighted this year to begin sponsoring a second student at Isaac Newton School in Uganda, in the name of Jane Wynne Willson, as an 80<sup>th</sup> birthday present. The student is called Maimuna Natomgo, and she's 14 years old. It was pointed out that we are still welcoming contributions to the sponsorship, and that these should be given to John Edwards.

There was some discussion about whether we need to increase membership fees. It was agreed that, if we haven't been successful in increasing revenue by getting new members or collecting more money at meetings, we should put forward a motion next year to increase the one year membership fee by £1 to £13.

There was discussion about the low number of members attending the AGM. It was suggested that this might be because we had to change the meeting to a Wednesday this year, rather than holding it on a Friday. It was agreed to go back to a Friday next year.

## What Humanism means to me

**This meeting, held on 21 June, was a chance for members old and new, and for anyone interested in Humanism, to share their views about what Humanism means.**

Adrian Bailey, who chaired the meeting, started the ball rolling by outlining his own background, and how he came to Humanism. After a childhood in which the Christian religion was accepted as being true, he said, he realised in his teens that not everyone believed in god. He spoke about his own beliefs and his interpretation of Humanism.



The meeting was then thrown open for general discussion. Points that were made included:

- Parents do indoctrinate their children.
- There's a general assumption that people believe in god, but in practice the life of most people is non-theist.
- The general amount of religious belief in the nation has changed in the last 50 years, but the political position on religion hasn't changed – there are still bishops in the House of Lords, and churches still have a favourable tax position.
- Christianity still shapes the debate within society.
- We need to move from the irrational towards the rational.
- Humanism encourages open-mindedness, and thoughtful approaches towards issues such as death, homosexuality and GM crops..
- Churches have a social function in the community.
- People see morality as being bound up with religion – there's an assumption that you are amoral if you say you don't believe in god.
- Is it true that religion is in decline? Christianity may be in decline, but religion has a whole still has a strong hold on many people.
- There are things we don't understand – we can marvel at the universe without being religious.
- Religious people think atheists have no purpose in life. The opposite is true – religious people are waiting for a better life after death, but Humanists make their own purpose in life.
- The interests of human beings don't trump everything else. Human beings are agents of change on the planet – they are damaging things, making things more difficult for those who follow us.

One member of the audience pointed out that much of the discussion had been shaped by viewing Humanism in opposition to religion – he would rather that Humanism was seen as something positive in its own right.

### Moseley Festival

With good weather on 13 July, this year's festival was much busier than the last one and plenty of people came to talk to us on our stall. Our updated 'Wheel of Fortune' with a new set of famous Humanists was a conversation point, and quite a few people seemed interested to find out more about Humanism. It was fortunate that our next meeting, only a few days after the festival, was on a topic (Humanist ceremonies) that those new to Humanism were likely to find particularly interesting. As a result, several of those we spoke to attended the meeting on 16 July.

It seems to the committee that taking a stall at an event such as this is a very worthwhile way of promoting Humanism to a wider audience. However, we struggled this year to get enough helpers to staff the stall all day, without putting an undue burden on a few people. Next year we'll be asking for volunteers again – and maybe approaching some of our members directly if we don't get a good response!

## Humanist ceremonies

**On 21 July Victoria Denning, a member of the Birmingham Humanists group who has been a full-time celebrant for the last five years, spoke about her experiences of conducting weddings, funerals and naming ceremonies.**

Victoria began by outlining her own background: she was born in Birmingham, into a non-religious family. She told us that, when her husband died 27 years ago, her parents helped her organise a Humanist funeral (quite unusual in those days), which was conducted by Jane Wynne Willson. This was a traumatic time for Victoria, and the funeral helped her through, she said. Many years later, she decided to train as a celebrant – initially she just did weddings and naming ceremonies, as these were usually at weekends and could fit in with her career as a teacher. Then, five years ago, she became a full-time celebrant and began officiating at funerals as well.

Victoria gave details about BHA celebrants: there are 305 BHA accredited celebrants. In 2012 they conducted 376 weddings, 315 naming ceremonies and over 6,000 funerals. Not all celebrants do all types of ceremonies, she said. She outlined what the BHA training entails:

- induction days
- two days of general skills work (speaking, listening, interviewing)
- intensive days for the different types of ceremonies.

Trainees are then allocated a mentor who lives nearby, and taken with them on family visits. They have to write scripts for the different types of ceremonies, and then conduct three ceremonies, watched by an experienced celebrant, who assesses them. If the assessment is favourable, they then become accredited. This isn't the end of the process, though – there's a forum, conferences and local meetings to keep celebrants in touch, as well as continuing professional development. Each year celebrants are asked to observe colleagues taking ceremonies, and to be observed taking one of each type of ceremony.

### Weddings

People wanting Humanist weddings are usually non-religious, Victoria said, but sometimes they are couples with different religions. There's usually plenty of notice – couples often contact her 12 to 18 months beforehand. People mostly want a fairly traditional wedding, but with no religion. Victoria encourages couples to write their own vows – she shows them past scripts that other couples have written. Occasionally this can cause problems – as with the groom who was still trying to write his vows on the morning of the ceremony and decided at the last minute that he couldn't manage it, leaving Victoria to make them up on his behalf!



### Naming ceremonies

Again, there's a mixture of non-religious people and parents from mixed religious backgrounds who want to hold a Humanist naming ceremony for their child. The parents usually write vows to make to their child. They often ask friends or relatives to be 'guide parents' or 'spare parents' (the equivalent of godparents). Grandparents and friends are encouraged to say a few words or to read a poem at the ceremony.

### Funerals

Requests to conduct funerals usually come through funeral directors, Victoria told us. The ceremony is likely to take place about five days after that initial contact. A Humanist funeral is a celebration of the life of the person who has died – family and friends are encouraged to read poems and to write tributes (though they don't always feel able to read out the tributes themselves). If there are going to be a lot of people there, Victoria asks the funeral director to book a double slot at the crematorium, so that the ceremony doesn't have to be rushed.

### Working with families

You need to be very open-minded, to inspire confidence and to be good at questioning and listening. Most people are very disorganised, so you need to let them know what they need to do when. Victoria stressed the importance of remembering that every ceremony is an important event in the lives of the people involved.

## Working with funeral directors

Victoria said she had found that funeral directors tend to be very old fashioned and stuck in their ways. They like a familiar routine, and tend to use people they've used in the past. They don't really like Humanist funerals, as we don't do the same thing every time. It's a good idea for a celebrant to travel in the hearse with the funeral director, as it's a chance to get to know them.

## The future

Victoria told us that:

- people are starting to ask for funerals at weekends, so that those attending don't have to take time off work
- in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, Humanist weddings will soon have legal status (see *the report from the BHA on page 6*) – until now people wanting a Humanist wedding have also had to have a ceremony taken by a registrar
- Humanist celebrants need to keep their costs in line with what vicars and priests charge (though they actually spend a lot more time preparing for ceremonies than most vicars do).

Victoria stressed, though, that she doesn't do it for the money – it's an extremely interesting and rewarding job. She wishes she'd left teaching years before she actually did!

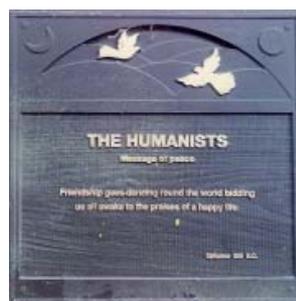
## Peace Walk and picnic

A small group of us – Jane Wynne Willson, Olga Farooqui and John Edwards – met up at the Iron Man statue in Victoria Square at 12.30pm on a pleasant Saturday and, after waiting to see whether there were any late arrivals, set off slowly past The Victoria (the Skeptics in the Pub venue) and up Bath Row to the Peace Garden, where they found Kelvin Watson waiting.

We were all disappointed to find that the corner of the garden with the bombed church ruins was fenced off and very overgrown, as this meant we could not get close to inspect (and clean, if necessary) the Humanist plaque. Kelvin read the Haiku he had composed earlier that morning and the sun came out as we sat down to eat the food we had brought. We spent a very pleasant half hour or so looking at the other plaques and memorials before heading off on our separate ways to get transport home.



*John, Olga, Jane and Kelvin by the old Church of St Thomas at the Peace Garden*



*The Humanist plaque*



*The fenced-off area, with the plaques behind the railings*

We all agreed that a letter should be sent to the City Council to complain about the poor state of part of the garden and ask whether the fourteen plaques that people could no longer see could be moved if the old church of St Thomas was going to be left in a derelict and dangerous state.

*Postscript: a letter has now been drafted on behalf of the committee of Birmingham Humanists and this will shortly be sent to the City Council.*

Kelvin's Haiku:

Sh! The Peace Garden  
It's no place for the DJ  
and his raving friends.

## Jazz in the Garden

**At the invitation of Terry McGrath and Sheila Fawkes, Birmingham Humanists joined with Moseley in Bloom to put on an evening of jazz, food, drink and good company on 27 July.**

This was a repeat of last year's successful event, and again it went well, although the weather was not so kind to us this year. Everything went swingingly for the first hour or so, but then the heavens opened, so we had to retreat under gazebos or indoors, and it wasn't possible for Terry and Sheila's Eureka Jazz group to play their second set. Still, with plentiful food and convivial company, everyone managed to have a good time. Many thanks to Terry and Sheila for hosting this enjoyable event for a second year.



*Terry McGrath with some of his Eureka Jazz colleagues, taken from inside one of the gazebos in which some of us later took refuge from the rain!*



## Brum Hums' Christmas festivities



Come along to our meeting on 6 December to celebrate the festive season in Humanist style with an irreverent look at the 'true' meaning of Christmas, with short talks, a quiz on inconsequential Christmas traditions, perhaps the odd game and the chance to be creative and learn and sing some 'bowdlerised' Christmas carols. Plus, of course, you can sample the delights of mulled wine and mince pies.

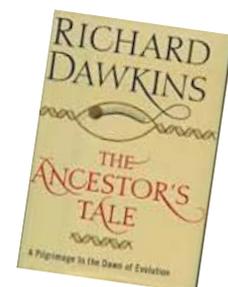
There will be a competition to see who can come up with the best alternative wording to traditional English carols and songs. Members of the committee have already produced what the faithful might see as 'bastardised' versions of 'We Three Kings', 'Oh Come All Ye Faithful', 'Merry Christmas Everybody' and 'Do They Know It's Christmas?', with wording that any secular, sceptical Humanist should be proud to sing with gusto. Can you do better with these or with different carols? Get your thinking caps on and either let a committee member have your new chorus and verses, or bring enough printed copies along on the night for the throng to sing from. We're hoping to have musical accompaniment to these, possibly live, possibly from CDs. An evening not to be missed!

## Some thoughts on immortality from *The ancestor's tale* by Richard Dawkins

Just how fleeting is our importance on Earth can be judged from the fact that on average you can expect one-sixteenth of your genes to end up in each great-great-grandchild (if you have any) – but it could be more or it could be less. After 10 generations this would be on average around 1/1000<sup>th</sup> of your genes and by 20 generations one four-millionth part. As we only have tens of thousands of genes, this means that many of your descendants will have none of your genes at all!

However, it may be some consolation to know that 80% of us will be able to claim the entire human population as their descendants in 1000 or so generations time.

An itinerant selfish gene  
Said 'Bodies a-plenty I've seen.  
You think you're so clever  
But I'll live forever,  
You're just a survival machine.'



## Richard Crane

We were very sad to learn, just before sending out this issue of News & Views, of the death of Richard Crane, a long-standing and loyal member of Birmingham Humanists. We will miss his cheerful presence and valuable contributions at our meetings, and we send his family our deepest sympathy.

Richard's funeral will take place at the Robin Hood Crematorium (Streetsbrook Road, Shirley, Solihull, B90 3NL) on Monday, 16 September at 2.00pm.

## Humanist marriages to gain legal recognition

**On 8 July, following many years of campaigning by the BHA and others, Parliament finally agreed to make regulations that will give legal recognition to humanist marriages. Below is the news report about this from the BHA.**

The government has today brought forward a proposal for regulations that would give legal recognition to humanist marriages in England and Wales. The proposal is being made as an amendment to the Same Sex Marriage Bill currently in the House of Lords and comes in the wake of overwhelming cross-party support for legal recognition expressed by peers from all parties at the previous reading of the Bill.

Many hundreds of couples have humanist weddings in England and Wales each year but unlike in Scotland – where almost 3000 were conducted last year – they are not recognised as legal marriages.

Giving legal recognition to humanist marriages as part of the present Marriage Bill was first proposed as an amendment in the House of Commons by Liberal Democrat and Labour MPs and went on to secure support from MPs of all parties. Government resistance at that stage prevented any progress, although a majority of MPs were in favour.

The issue was brought back in the House of Lords by Labour and Conservative peers and supported by peers from all three parties and from Crossbenchers, with no peer speaking against giving legal recognition. Following that debate, a coalition of Crossbench, Labour, Liberal Democrat and Conservative peers tabled an amendment that would give the government the power to make regulations giving legal recognition.

It is this proposal that has now been picked up by the government. Under the government's proposal, which is now supported by peers from all parties in the Lords, ministers will be given the power to make regulations giving legal recognition to humanist marriages following a review of the current situation, which the law mandates must be conducted and report before the end of 2014.

Andrew Copson, Chief Executive of the BHA, said, 'Legal recognition for humanist marriages has wide support across the country and we welcome any step that brings it closer. It is eight years now since Scotland introduced humanist marriages and just last week the Republic of Ireland followed suit – England and Wales are lagging behind. Millions of people in England and Wales have profound beliefs and values that have nothing to do with religion and which they want to draw on in creating the moments that give their lives meaning, including marriage. Humanist celebrants have decades of experience in creating and leading those ceremonies and the couples that have them deserve for that wedding to be their legal marriage.'

## Contributions to News & Views

We're always glad to include articles, news items or other contributions from our members. Please send them to me, Carolyn Sugden – [carolyn.sugden@blueyonder.co.uk](mailto:carolyn.sugden@blueyonder.co.uk), 37 Devonshire Road, Birmingham B20 2PB.