

Suffolk Humanist News

February 2008

Every society that's ever existed has felt it necessary to have creation myths. Why should I believe one? People write to me and say: "You show us birds and orchids and wonderful, beautiful things - why don't you feel you should give credit to He who created those things?" My reply is: what about a parasitic worm that's boring through the eye of a four-year-old child on the bank of an African river? It confuses me that I should believe in a god who cares individually for each and every one of us and could allow that to happen.

*Sir David
Attenborough,
The Observer,
20 January 2008*

February meeting—Cambodian story

On February 13th, Suffolk Humanist Nathan Nelson will report on his latest stint as a volunteer at the Sangkheum Centre for Children, Siem Reap, Cambodia, with photos, video and music. We'll be in Room 1 at Castle Hill Community Centre, Highfield Road, Ipswich. Guests are welcome.



Students at the Sangkheum Centre for Children, Siem Reap, Cambodia


Nathan writes: "I've been living and working in Cambodia for five months now. Cambodia is a country that constantly surprises, amuses and frustrates, where the few rich ride Lexus and Mercedes, while most of the population still live on a dollar a day or less. Despite widespread poverty, massive problems with HIV/AIDS and other diseases, a useless education system and miasmatic corruption, the Khmer people are kind, curious, cheeky and good-humoured, and the country is lush and beautiful. I have been working with young adults at an orphanage and education centre outside Siem Reap (Cambodia's main tourist town and the home to the temples of Angkor) on training and developing them for life outside the orphanage, work and further education.

Webby wonder

We've had a website for several years – we're on our third version—at minimum cost with maximum style. It's had about 32,000 visits; the most popular page is an article on "Funeral Etiquette", read over 10,000 times. Over 60 registered users can contribute to our forum or add comments. It attracts readers from all over the country as well as overseas. One wrote, "... can I commend you on a super website." Another wrote, "... so pleased I've found you."

We provide an events calendar, a forum, articles and news stories, links to other sites of interest, quotations, Thoughts for the Day scripts, news feeds, and detailed articles about ceremonies, Humanism, education and so on. An explanation of why Creationism and Intelligent Design are wrong—'We're all Monkeys'—has been read over 1,300 times in two years.

You can buy books from Amazon, there's an Amnesty banner, a button to enable people to donate online, and a banner that links to the Good Energy site (see back page). You can download newsletters, leaflets and copies of all the articles. You can ask for information about funerals or book a wedding.

The website's designed for ease of use and works in a range of web browsers. We provide advice and information for groups who want to set up their own website—see the "Help" page. If you're not a frequent visitor, why not subscribe to our feed? Look for the little symbol like this  on the site, and if you have the right software (see the "Help" section) you'll be notified whenever anything new is added.

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Suffolk Humanist News

The Oxford Debate—Griffin & Irving



Nick Griffin

The furore over the Nick Griffin and David Irving Oxford Union debate (26 November 2007) evolved into concern about whether the debate should have been permitted to take place at all.

The press reports that I've found haven't attempted to report the debate itself, though I have established that the two speakers were split up into two separate debating rooms for "safety's" sake.

Defence Secretary Des Browne backed out of the debate when he heard who was to speak and Trevor Phillips, head of the Equalities and Human Rights Commission condemned the event. Yair Zivan, The Union of Jewish Students (UJS) campaigns organizer, said it was an "offense (sic) ... to Jewish students."

I fully understand why people are nervous of Griffin and Irving debating but free speech in this country is rightly curtailed in order to prevent incitement to racial hatred. I do not propose to discuss whether Griffin and Irving are racist; suffice it to say that they unquestionably espouse views that have led others to commit racist acts.

I am wondering whether it could be argued that people need to be aware of the views of such people in order to be on guard to prevent an escalation of fascism. It is clear that the issues that they raise are, sadly, current and yet many young people are woefully unaware of recent history. Whilst the Holocaust was now more than sixty years ago, others have taken place since, both in Africa, much closer to home in what was Yugoslavia as recently as ten years ago, and yet I find that young people know nothing of it. I base my views not on prejudice but from teaching in a university. If there were no threat of similar things happening again then it could be argued that the ignorance is not a problem. However, we know that fascism is becoming a problem in Russia and is on the increase in Germany. Now the situation in Kosovo is perilous with major powers disagreeing fundamentally over what should happen to the country. And, the situation in Israel continues to be one that is totally untenable.

It is in Israel perhaps that the twin issues of racism and the Holocaust come together clearest: some Israeli's believe passionately that they should be given the whole of the state of Israel precisely because of the Holocaust. I do not support this view any more than I believe in it being their God given right (also much purported). Race and religion are particularly closely linked, especially with Arabs and Jews. Because of the history of the Jews it is understandable that the Union of Jewish students should say that they felt that they would be in danger as result of the debate but perhaps there is more to be gained than lost from views being out in the open and intelligently debated.

Here in England, there is an exponential rise in the number of immigrants, particularly from Poland. Worryingly, many people, and some with influence, see this as a problem.

I am reminded of the saying which is something like; keep your friends close but your enemies closer.

Michael Lumb

If you're one of the few who don't know who Nick Griffin and David Irving are, the Independent reported: "One of the guests, the BNP leader Nick Griffin, heads an organisation that wants to see millions of people deported from the UK because they do not regard them as truly British. He was due to share a platform with the historian David Irving, who has courted notoriety for decades by claiming that Hitler did not give the order to commit genocide, that there were no gas chambers and that six million Jews were not killed by the Nazis."

Comedian Marcus Brigstocke said that he had no problem with people like Griffin and Irving enjoying freedom of speech, but he didn't think we ought to provide them with a platform to exercise that right. I agree with Marcus. What do you think?

MN

Photo of Nick Griffin © mrmurray.
Photo of David Irving © The Irving website.

"Goebbels was in favour of free speech for views he liked. So was Stalin. If you're in favour of free speech, then you're in favour of freedom of speech precisely for views you despise."

Noam Chomsky,
from
Manufacturing
Consent, 1992

February 2008



When I was a small boy, my father used to take me to stay with an aunt, uncle and cousin in the village of Scole on the Norfolk/Suffolk border. The bus journey from Melton to Scole via Ipswich seemed to take me to the end of the earth and a different age. The adults would sometimes talk about the Strike School at nearby Burston, but it didn't mean much to me then.

It's only in recent years that I've discovered the story of that school and the remarkable couple who inspired a whole village to rebel against the injustice against working people endemic in the most rural parts of East Anglia less than a hundred years ago.

At the beginning of the 20th Century, when the urban and metropolitan working class were busily educating themselves and gaining a voice in the affairs of the land, most farming communities were still effectively feudal, as they'd been for centuries.

When Tom and Kitty Higdon arrived at Burston School on 1st February 1911, no one suspected that day marked the beginning of a process that would propel Burston into the national headlines. The powers-that-be in the village – the parson, the doctor and the biggest local landowners – regarded it as their role to ensure the status quo. Working class children should be taught to read and write and to perform simple arithmetic but most of all they should be taught to respect their betters and not to get ideas above their station. The social order was predestined and inviolate.

These ideas were not shared by the Higdons and soon the first of many battles between them and the school board were fought over conditions in the school and, in particular, the tradition of taking children out of school in the summer months to help in the fields.

Matters came to a head and the Higdons were sacked. Their notice expired on 1st April 1914 but, just as they were about to leave the school house, they heard music and singing, and virtually all the children from the school marched past with banners proclaiming that they'd gone on strike.

The Higdons stayed in the village and started taking lessons in the open on the village green. The authorities used every weapon in their armoury to cow the Higdons, the children and the parents of the children, to no avail.

The Strike School found a temporary home in an old carpenter's shop on the green but it had become a cause célèbre in left-wing circles and, as a result of a national appeal, the then huge sum of £1,250 was raised from sympathetic organizations and individuals, amongst them the Russian writer Leo Tolstoy.

On 13th May 1917, before a crowd of a thousand, Violet Potter, the leader of the striking children in 1914, spoke; "With joy and thankfulness I declare this school open to be forever a School of Freedom".

Kitty Higdon's approach to teaching was child-centred; she identified talent and enthused her pupils to academic heights unknown in that era. The pupils learned to express themselves, their feelings, and their opinions. She instilled the sense of fairness and justice; she taught them to be open-minded; she gave them political awareness.

The Strike School operated very successfully until the death of Tom Higdon on the eve of the Second World War. Kitty, by then in her seventies, was unable to carry on and the school closed, with the remaining pupils transferring to the village school, which had stayed open.

(Continued on page 4)

BHA Groups 2007 Annual Meeting (GRAM)

I attended the GRAM on 3rd November 2007 to represent Suffolk and to encourage more groups to follow our example and experiment with an ethical jury*. In contrast to 2006, when lack of support meant that GRAM was cancelled, 49 people crammed into one of the side rooms at Conway Hall, London, for the annual get-together of BHA-affiliated group representatives. Danny Colman from Birmingham was in the chair. Groups Officer Jemma Hooper presented an upbeat report, saying that groups are now promoted on the BHA membership application form and several new ones have been set up.

I had some good practice to share and a second agenda of talking about ethical juries. The North London group reported their jury meeting was one of their most interesting and Farnham Humanists, reporting the success of big public debates with well known speakers, also expressed interest in an ethical jury. The largest group, North East Humanists, with 232 members, said their size resulted from wide publicity including library posters and leaflets, stalls at events, letters to the local press, leaflet drops, their ceremonies team and a presence on Facebook; supporting other charities is a key activity of the group. A speaker from the new SW London group reported that they'd contacted potential members using local newspaper advertising and the internet. Another new group was from Nottingham University. They felt their main attraction was their opposition the increasingly assertive religious groups. The Armed Forces Humanists, with 1.5m current or ex-members of the Forces to draw on, saw many possibilities for expansion.

Having dealt with group activity, the meeting heard from John Catt and Josh Kutchinsky about using the internet.

Andrew Copson (BHA Education & Public Affairs Officer) spoke about the Local Development Project, which mostly seeks to involve local groups in what Suffolk already does – ensuring Humanist representation on local consultative bodies. Finally, Richard Hogg talked about his leafleting campaign, in which Suffolk is playing a part. Previous GRAMS that I've attended have been somewhat of a grumble-fest, pointing out the shortcomings of the BHA. On this occasion, the tone was almost uniformly positive, with the one curious criticism being that the BHA, in providing exclusively vegetarian food for the occasion, was discriminating against meat-eaters!

Michael Imison

*The ethical jury that Michael refers to is an idea he tried out at a Suffolk Humanists meeting in Colchester on 17th May 2007. A "jury" of Humanists considers an ethical dilemma presented to it, and suggests a course of action.

The BHA will launch its new educational resources website this month. Now that Humanism and Secular world views have been included in the new Suffolk RE syllabus, this resource for teachers is urgently needed, especially for primary schools.

The BHA is also lobbying the government to end the ban on full membership of SACREs for Humanists (ignored in Suffolk), and to enforce an emphasis on the inclusion of non-religious beliefs and values.

It will also argue for a national RE syllabus, and a change of name to "beliefs and values education".

Burston Strike School

(Continued from page 3)

It had been the longest strike in history and, in its small way, had contributed to the improvements in our lives over the last hundred years, which I feel we sometimes take too much for granted. The rights we enjoy today, and which some people would no doubt be happy to see us lose, were fought long and hard for by the likes of the Higdon and the villagers of Burston.

Their battle is commemorated annually on the first Sunday of September with a mass rally and march, retracing the route of the first march by the striking children in 1914. Last September was the ninetieth anniversary of the building of the Strike School and on a lovely sunny day, my granddaughter and I joined thousands of people on the village green at Burston to celebrate the event. I can thoroughly recommend it.

Burston is just west of the A140 Ipswich to Norwich Road and signposted from the Dickleburgh by-pass. The Strike School is adjacent to the village green and is well worth a visit. The outside is covered in plaques naming the main contributors to the building fund. There's more at www.burstonstrikeschool.org.

David Mitchell

David spoke about the Strike School at our meeting on 14th November 2007. Members of the Norwich Humanist Group have attended the rally and joined the march for several years.

February 2008

Christmas with kids

Christmas is invariably a challenge with small children, particularly if you aren't Christian. For the past few years, my halcyon days of totally ignoring Christmas have been entirely forgotten. I got away with not celebrating when Tess was one, but as she turned two, I couldn't hold out any longer. Once Toby came along, I had no choice but to rethink how I'd manage over the festive season.

I work very hard in the run up to Christmas to keep the kids focused on the people they love, and who love them. Part of this is making almost all our gifts and cards, and I try to make something for each of the children too. I occasionally let the kids buy something very small, but usually my response when they ask is "Do you have any money? No? Well we'll have to make something then." Gifts have ranged from sponge-painted underpants (my particular favourite) to hand-painted flower pots with bags of compost and chilli pepper seeds inside them. We've given pine cone bird feeders, decorated oven gloves and lots of truffles, biscuits and cakes. Occasionally, I have to remind the kids to think about what the recipient might like, rather than their own likes. (Toby recently made a Spiderman card for Nana's birthday).

I do various things to keep consumerism down in my household, and to try and limit the number of toys the children have. Don't get me wrong...they have unlimited craft materials and access to creative toys like puppets and Lego. It's the nasty plastic rubbish I try to keep under control. My avoidance tactics are pretty stern; the children are allowed some TV, but it's almost always one of the BBC channels. On the rare occasions we watch commercial TV together they know I mute the adverts. Tess has even started muting them for me. Nevertheless, she knows exactly which brand of dolly she would like from Santa,

after a brief exposure to TV ads at Daddy's house! One thing we never do is go shopping as a leisure activity; partly because I can't see the point, but also because children can't help but ask for almost every toy they see, even if they know the answer will be "No". There's no point in showing them all the things I won't let them buy for themselves or other people.

We spend the festive season having fun. We eat every meal together round the table (often food we've all helped prepare). We sing carols and Christmas songs loudly and at every opportunity, sometimes with Tess playing them on the piano. We drive around in the dark with a flask of hot chocolate, looking for the most outrageous Christmas lights. Most of all we spend time together (and remarkably little money). It's during that time together that I talk about why Christmas is celebrated, and what it means to some people, while making it clear that it's not what I believe. We talk about which traditions pre-date Christianity, and why our friends are having a celebration on the shortest day. I stop short of explaining Santa wears red because of an highly effective Coca-Cola advertising campaign...that one, I'm keeping for when they're older.

Sophie Lovejoy



Shall we change our name?

From Terry Sanderson, President of the NSS:

The National Secular Society greatly values its relationship with its affiliated groups and societies; we are keen to work closely with local humanist groups towards our common aims, especially at this time when issues such as the blasphemy law and faith schools are showing signs of real progress.

We have had a lot of phone calls and emails over the last year or so from people wanting to join local secular groups. Some of them are happy to join humanist groups but others are looking for something more inclusively secular. The more multi-religious and multi-cultural our society becomes, the more pressing becomes the need to emphasise the secular aspect. This will foster a more cohesive society and resist the growing encroachment of

religious demands compromising equality and freedom of expression.

We are proposing that local humanist groups might like to change their titles to Secular and Humanist Groups or Humanist and Secular Groups. Based on the enquiries we have received, this would broaden your appeal and therefore increase your membership, while also making the secular presence more accessible in local communities.

We hope you will consider our proposal and would also like to hear your thoughts on it.

This proposal will be discussed at our AGM in April. If we change our name, what shall we call ourselves? Suggestions on a postcard please, or any other form of communication.

MN

What I've been doing, and why I need help

This is what I've been doing since the last newsletter, besides answering the phone and emails, etc.

11 September—accompanied the BHA's Local Development Officer Pepper Harow to a Suffolk Inter-Faith Resource (SIFRE) open evening at University Campus, Suffolk. Pepper wanted to know about SIFRE, which is unlike most other inter-faith forums.

26 September—Michael Imison and I took a stall at UCS's Freshers' Fair, where we tried to interest the students in setting up a Student Secular Society. Although a few registered an interest, nothing else has happened, yet. UCS is a brand new college with a high proportion of mature students doing nursing and similar degrees. They rush home to their families after lectures, with no time for extra-curricular activities.

9 October—Standing Advisory Council on Religious Education (SACRE) meeting in Ipswich—someone raised the subject of guidance on Creationism & ID for RE teachers, to be discussed next time.

14 October—reviewed the Sunday papers on BBC Radio Suffolk.

16 October—led a Forum of Faiths on "Living in a Secular Society" at SIFRE. I'd suggested the topic after people at a previous forum on "community cohesion" made comments that betrayed a lack of understanding of secularism. Sadly, they didn't turn up to be enlightened.

15 November—contributed to the annual Year 10 Marriage Conference at Kesgrave High School. A depressing minority of girls still seem to think no further than a very expensive wedding with a white dress and lots of presents.

22 November—SIFRE lunchtime session on Humanism for County Council staff at Shire Hall, Bury St Edmunds. The attendees were all women. A previous session in Ipswich was attended by roughly equal

numbers of men and women.

23 November—led an assembly on Humanism at Holbrook Primary School, then the first lesson with Year 6 children. Due to a dearth of appropriate material for the age range, I'd written a story, which the staff said I'd pitched "just right". The kids asked lots of thoughtful questions. They were great!

1 December—contributed to an inter-faith event for World AIDS Day in Ipswich. Hardly anyone came to hear how complacent they are about the risks of unsafe sex.

4 December—SIFRE tea party for senior citizens, with birthday cake.

16 December—BBC Radio Suffolk interview about a Humanist view of Christmas (either ignore it or enjoy it, as you please—it's not just for Christians—midwinter festival is 1000s of years old—bah-humbug to commercialisation).

9 January—BBC Radio Suffolk interview about Dr Evan Harris's proposed amendment to the blasphemy law.

From 10 January, for 10 weeks—spoke about Humanism at the beginning of a "World Religions Roundabout" course for Stoke-by-Nayland Workers' Educational Association (WEA). I'm facilitating, with speakers from SIFRE. Thought I might learn something about religion. So far (after a Buddhist, a Jew and a Christian), I'm even more perplexed by religious people's beliefs.

24 January—SACRE meeting, where we discussed RE teachers' guidance on Creationism & ID. Mentioned that we thought it a good idea for RE teachers to have some basic science training. From some of the comments made by religious SACRE members, it was evident that they were scientifically ignorant too. The word "transubstantiation" was mentioned several times (no idea what that has to do with evolution), and the old

argument about the Cambrian gap in the fossil records. I'm reasonably sure that we'll eventually provide something that doesn't conflict with the science teachers' guidance.

2 February—Thought for the Day on the 90th anniversary of Votes for Women, BBC Radio Suffolk.

10 February—BBC Radio Suffolk interview about the NSS/BHA campaign to persuade the Scout Association to stop discriminating against non-religious kids and scout leaders.

12 February—Darwin Day Thought for the Day on BBC Radio Suffolk.

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As interest in Humanism and Secularism increases, requests for speakers and information have been increasing from schools, the media and other organisations. This is good, but I need help.

One reason for a lack of volunteers may be that members don't feel they know enough to talk about Humanism and Secularism with confidence. Another may be that you're not sure what to expect. If you'd like to learn more, whether or not you eventually become a Humanist speaker, would you be interested in a course on Humanism and Secularism, our activities in Suffolk, and the organisations we work with? If yes, get in touch—please!

Suffolk SACRE (at my suggestion) is devising some school visitors' guidelines, which will apply equally to religions and non-religious contributors to RE. The guidance will include: 'A key question for a visitor, when reflecting on the impact of his or her approach, is to ask, "If a representative of a faith or secular organisation other than mine visited my child's school and behaved as I have done, would I, as a parent, be happy with their contribution to my child's education?"'

Margaret Nelson

February 2008

Suffolk Humanists are on Facebook, the social networking site, like lots of other Humanist, atheist and secular organisations. If you're on the web, why not join us there? The group could do with some livening up. Just search for "Suffolk Humanists" at www.facebook.com

A 2-sided A4 introduction to Humanism was provided for WEA students (see p6) recently. If anyone would like copies, please send a SAE. We also have A5 publicity leaflets—some will be distributed by volunteers door-to-door. Ask if you'd like some.

New members are entitled to a copy of the BHA's "Short Course on Humanism" at the discounted price of £4, plus P&P. Copies are available at meetings.

We also have copies of the Humanist Philosophers Group booklet, "What is Humanism?"

How did you hear about God?

At a meeting held on 18 October last year in Colchester, we discussed the topic, "How did you hear about God?" Among new and old members, and a few guests, the talk was lively as everyone was open and frank about their childhood memories of how they'd learned about right and wrong and what part, if any, religion played in this.

Many of us came from church-going families, and some had attended church schools. Some had come under pressure to conform, toe the line, and recalled a fear of being watched by a God who knew everything about us, waiting for the sky to fall when we'd done something bad. But we'd all made the journey, looking at other options of a philosophy of life with or without religion.

Clearly our moral education, for want of a better phrase, begins the moment we come to this earth and does not wait until we have RE lessons. As the Jesuits knew well, "Give me the child until the age of seven and I will give you the man".

I'd gathered a large collection of picture and story books (with the help of

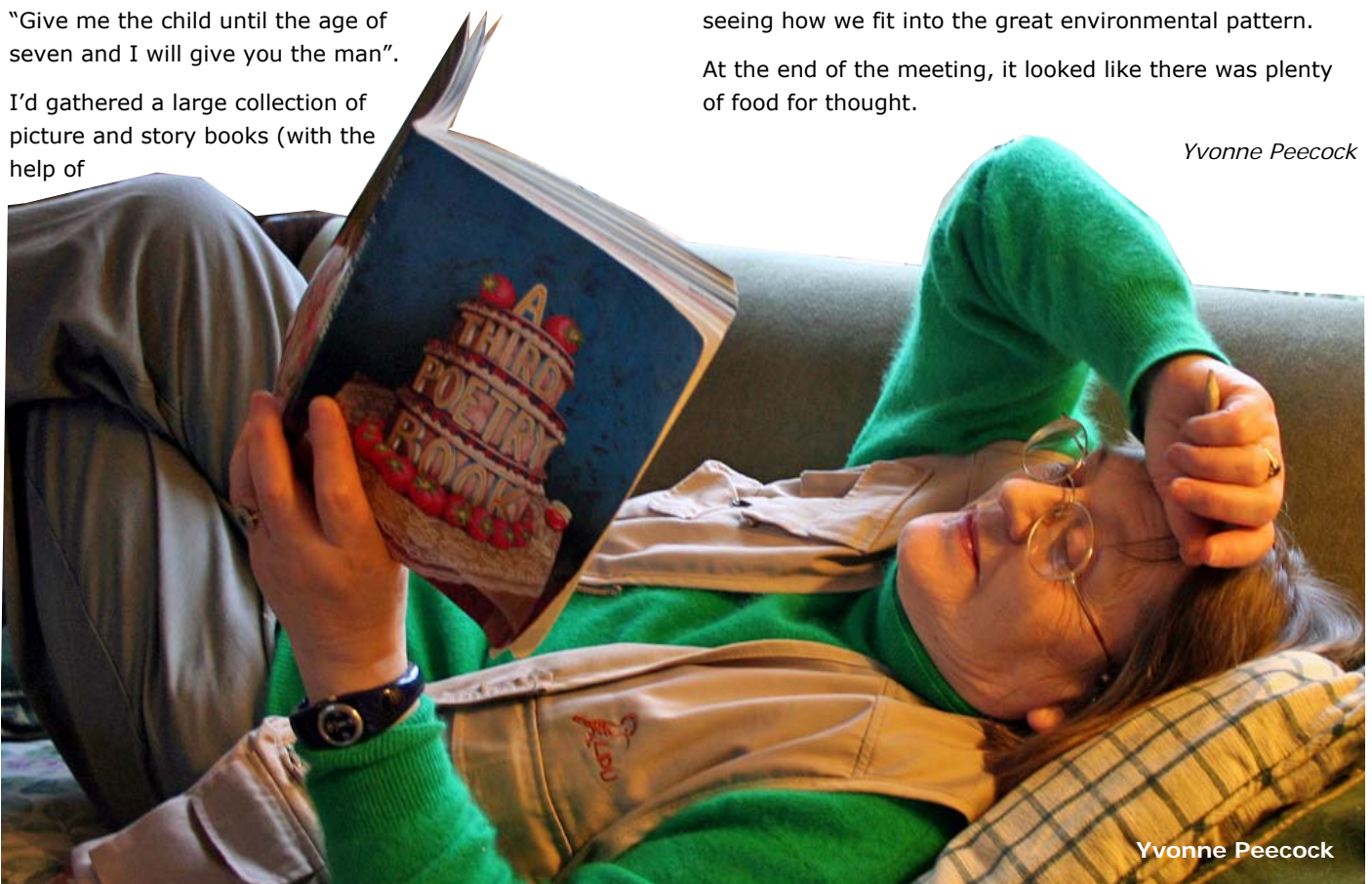
family and friends with children). These dealt with topics relating to the moral welfare of the very young, which could help lay a foundation for rational thinking about the world and empathy with its living creatures.

The books dealt in simple language with difficult events, such as anger about a new baby, being bullied, a death in the family, a family member with learning difficulties, or the separation or divorce of parents.

It is beneficial to provide opportunities for children to talk with sensitive and understanding adults about their feelings. Success here relies on having a high ratio of adults to children; "circle times" or talk times on a daily basis are good moments to improve socialisation, bringing out shy speakers and helping others to listen. Perhaps the three main themes for consideration could be named as; caring for one another, looking at our differences, and seeing how we fit into the great environmental pattern.

At the end of the meeting, it looked like there was plenty of food for thought.

Yvonne Peacock



Yvonne Peacock



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The Suffolk Humanist group was founded in 1991 to promote Humanism and Secularism, and to provide fellowship, education and support for non-believers in Suffolk and North East Essex. We meet in Ipswich and Colchester.

We're affiliated to The British Humanist Association and The National Secular Society.

Sympathetic non-members are welcome, but by joining us you'll help us to raise awareness of Humanism and Secularism, and to challenge the increasing influence of religion in public life, the arts and the media.

The Suffolk Humanist Ceremonies Team has an unblemished record for high standards. We provide non-religious ceremonies for all occasions, including baby-namings, weddings, funerals and civic ceremonies. For more information, see the contact details above.

HUMANISM: an ethical approach to life without religion; Humanists think we can be good without God.

SECULARISM: the belief that religion should have no place in civil affairs; that the church and state should be kept separate.



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- Recruit at least one more member!

You'll find a membership form with this newsletter.

 [amazon.co.uk](https://www.amazon.co.uk)

Dates for your diary

Wednesday **13th February**, 7.30-10pm, Room 1 (next to the front door) at Castle Hill Community Centre, Highfield Road, Ipswich—**Cambodian Story** (see front page).

Thursday **20th March**, 7.30-10pm, in the Parnell Room at the Quaker Meeting House, Church Street, Colchester—

Humanist & Secularist campaigns. A briefing on all the current campaigns that you might contribute to with letters or emails. They include the Scouts' promise (the Scout Association discriminates against non-religious young people by the requirement to make a promise to God), an amendment to the law on blasphemy, and the Government policy of handing over welfare and health care to faith-based organisations.

Thursday **10th April** at Ipswich—**AGM**, including reports on the organisations

we're affiliated to; the BHA, the NSS and SIFRE. An agenda will be sent nearer the time. **Please note change of day**, due to the unavailability of a room on the 9th.

The Ipswich meeting dates after April will probably be the usual second Wednesdays in June, October and December, and February next year.

Colchester meetings will be on 14th May, 18th September and 21st November—activities to be announced.

Members are welcome to suggest topics and or speakers for meetings, or to organise social events, such as pub lunches.

There are usually raffles at Ipswich meetings—prizes welcome.

For directions, or to offer or request a lift, please get in touch.



www.suffolkhumanists.org.uk