



# Dorset Humanists

*Bulletin – February 2012*

## **Forthcoming events...**

### ■ **Saturday, 11th February 2012**

Bournemouth International Centre

12.00pm Lunch 2.00pm Talk

## **Darwin Day with our special guest Robin Ince**

Darwin Day is celebrated around the world to recognise the great contribution of the naturalist Charles Darwin to our understanding of life.

This year we will be celebrating Darwin Day in style at Bournemouth International Centre with lunch in the Bayview Suite followed by a talk from award-winning comedian, Robin Ince. Robin's passion for science combined with his incisive observational comedy make him the perfect choice for this year's Darwin Day celebration. Robin has been a regular attraction at the Edinburgh Fringe, has toured with Brian Cox, Ben Goldacre and Simon Singh in the science spectacular, 'Uncaged Monkeys', and has written for Ricky Gervais. He is currently on tour with his show 'Happiness Through Science' – a comic exploration of the human condition.

Contact Jane for any last minute availability: 01202 428506



**Robin Ince, comedian and writer**

### ■ **Thursday 23rd February 7.30pm**

## **The Extraordinary Life of Robert Fitzroy: Darwin's Commander**

David Croman will present the life of Robert FitzRoy, who achieved lasting fame as the captain of *HMS Beagle* during Charles Darwin's famous voyage. FitzRoy is often caricatured as the villain in the Darwin story, owing to his opposition to 'Darwin's dangerous idea', but in this we do a grave injustice to a talented and colourful character who was one of the last great explorers, a scientific pioneer and a humanitarian.

Venue: Moordown Community Centre,  
Coronation Avenue, BH9 1TW.

■ **Thursday 23rd February 7.30pm**

West Dorset Humanists, Dorchester

## Humanist Hat Debate

A chance to discuss a whole lot of questions about Humanism with other freethinkers.

Wessex Royale Hotel, 32 High St.  
West Dorchester DT1 1UP

✉ westdorsethumanists@hotmail.com

☎ 07921 311518

■ **Saturday, 10th March 2.00pm**

## Annual General Meeting

Our AGM is unmissable! This year we'll be discussing a possible name change for Dorset Humanists (see Jane Bannister's article in this Bulletin) as well as considering whether to form a closer partnership with the British Humanist Association. Together with reports from your hard-working committee, and committee elections, this year promises to be one of the most interesting in terms of important debates, discussions and decisions.

If you would like to nominate someone to join the committee, or make a formal proposal, please pick up a nomination form at one of our meetings or phone David on 01202 768212. Nominations and formal proposals must be received by the end of February. Everyone is welcome to attend but you must be a member in order to vote. Membership costs just £12pa. Ask for a membership form.

## Proposed name change for Dorset Humanists

*Jane Bannister*

At the AGM in March, I shall propose that Dorset Humanists changes its title to 'Dorset Humanists and Atheists'. This does, of course, implicitly include 'agnostics'.

My reasons are that people still do not know what Humanism is. I have spent 15 years with a local Humanist group, during which time the British Humanist Association and our own group have put considerable effort into publicising Humanism. We know that possibly 50% of the UK population is not religious and that the majority of people know what 'atheist' stands for. It makes sense to have a word in our title that the public is familiar with rather than one which needs explaining every time.

Three years ago, the Atheist Bus Campaign increased BHA membership by 3,000. Humanist comedian Ariane Sherine thought up the idea, the BHA with Richard Dawkins (BHA Vice president) supported and launched it and initial funding was by BHA members - and, yet, it was known as 'the Atheist Bus'! Look what it achieved.

In December, Richard Dawkins guest edited 'The New Statesman' magazine, with the majority of the articles being contributed by prestigious members of the BHA. I could not find the word Humanist mentioned once throughout the entire 100 pages.

Dorset Humanist members who have covered our stand at the Bournemouth University Freshers' Fair say they struggled to explain, briefly, what Humanism stands for. They got the impression students sometimes regarded it as a strange cult. 65% of university groups have Atheist in the title as opposed to 45% with Humanist.

Increased membership is the key that will enable us to have some influence on the issues that concern us. Our members are atheists and agnostics, as well as Humanist. Let's broaden our title and see if it reaches those who have been unaware of an organisation that caters for them.

*Alternative name proposals must be received no later than end of February.*

## Partnership Status – What does it mean for Dorset Humanists?

Dorset Humanists, based in Bournemouth, has been in existence for at least 15 years. We are a local Humanist group affiliated to the British Humanist Association (BHA). The BHA, established in 1963, is the successor to the Union of Ethical Societies which was founded in 1896.

At the Group Representatives Annual Meeting in November 2010 Andrew Copson, Chief Executive of the BHA, launched a two-phase consultation process about “improving the way the British Humanist Association and local humanist groups in England & Wales work together”. The stimulus for this had been twofold. According to Andrew, “some groups were keen to have a closer relationship with the BHA and be able to speak on behalf of the BHA locally” and, at the same time, the BHA’s strategic review had resulted in updated aims which “cannot be pursued without a local element”. The BHA Board therefore wished to “examine the nature of affiliation to the BHA and whether any changes in the relationship could achieve more for both the groups and the BHA”.

In addition, there was a concern about the low proportion of BHA members who are also local group members. Membership of a local group does not confer automatic membership of the BHA which is a separate entity. Total membership of local groups is estimated at 2,500 and the BHA’s at just over 10,000. Approximately one third of local group members are also BHA members. This implies that less than 10% of BHA members are also local group members. Even a modest increase to 20% could make a substantial difference to local groups.



**BHA at 1, Gower Street in London**

The original questionnaire (November 2010) asked whether groups thought that becoming a ‘branch’ of the BHA was a good idea (without specifying exactly what this might mean). Over 50% of groups considered this “probably” or “definitely” a bad idea, with 25% considering it “probably” or “definitely” a good idea. Dorset Humanists was among those who thought it was probably a bad idea. Most of the groups which expressed a negative view interpreted the word “branch” as implying a loss of autonomy and a move to a structure in which local groups would focus on implementation of policies laid down centrally, along the lines of a political party, to “the detriment of the evolution of the local group and the alienation of group members who are not BHA members.”

By May 2011 the idea of becoming a ‘branch’ had been dropped. It was stated that “All local groups [will] remain independent, with their own leadership, membership arrangements, governance and financial accountability.” Instead, there would be two options for local groups:

1. **Partnership** There would be a new, closer, “default” relationship between local groups and the BHA to be known as “Partnership”. It was expected that most groups will feel that this offers significant mutual benefits for them and the BHA, while retaining their autonomy.
2. **Affiliate** For any groups that decide not to become Partners - or for one reason or another cannot be Partners - the Affiliate option would remain (with limited changes and a clearer definition), enabling these groups and the BHA to retain their link.

78% of respondent groups, including Dorset Humanists, thought it “likely” or “very likely” that their group would want to become a Partner and 22% were either neutral or thought it “unlikely”/“very unlikely”.

The BHA has stated that entering into the new Partnership Agreement “does not mean that everyone in the group will be committed to sharing the BHA’s view on all issues. That would be an impossible and undesirable aim for a group of freethinkers who believe in advancing their views through new information and ideas. Nor does it mean that the shared aims, values and policies could not or will not be changed. It simply means that the group and the BHA gain maximum benefit from being members of the wider humanist community, and external bodies - such as Local Authorities, the press, or other players on SACREs or “Inter Faith” forums - receive a reasonably consistent message about humanist aims and values.”

In the new Partnership Agreement there are a number of specific commitments on both sides. The most significant change on the BHA side is enhanced promotion of local groups to BHA members which could increase membership of Dorset Humanists. The most significant change on our side would be to nominate one or

more ‘BHA Local Representatives’ who would be authorised to represent the BHA locally, for example in interactions with local and regional authorities and associated bodies. The presence of a BLR in a group does not inhibit other group members from expressing their views but only BLRs can claim to speak for the BHA.

For further details, please contact David Warden. We shall debate this proposal at the AGM and make a decision.

## Czech census shows big decline in religion

In the 2011 Czech census, 34% of the total recorded population of 10.5m said they had no religious beliefs. A further 45% chose not to answer this optional question.

Roman Catholics were 10% (1.1 million, down from 2.7 million ten years ago) and another 4% named another denomination or religion while 7% simply said they were religious without saying what they were.

The results confirm the status of the Czech Republic as one of the world’s most atheistic countries.

*European Humanist Federation*



### Humanist ceremonies

Dorset Humanist Maggie Pepin is a trained Humanist officiant  
☎ 01202 523338

### Deadline for next Bulletin

Contributions for the next Bulletin should be received by the end of February.