



North East Humanists

Monthly Bulletin — December 2022

RECAP OF RECENT NEH EVENTS

Remembrance Day — Friday November 11th

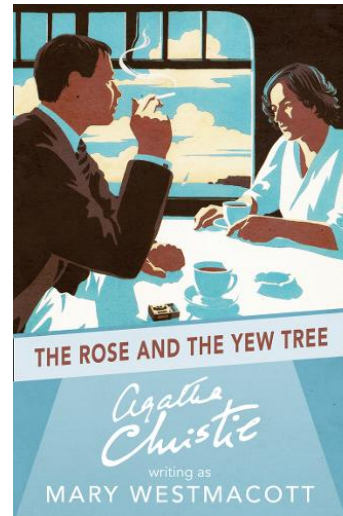
It's a tradition now for North East Humanists to participate in Remembrance Day events around the region, and this year was no exception. Irene Wilkinson reported, "on Sunday November 13th, I had the honour to represent NE Humanists at the Remembrance Day Service at Durham Cathedral. I laid a wreath on behalf of our group, along with many others from local community organisations."

In addition, here's a photo of the wreath that Moira Turner laid on our behalf at the Tynemouth War Memorial. Thank you very much to all NEH members who represented humanists at such events.



NEH Virtual Book Club on Tuesday November 15th by Jan Mole

At our recent meeting at the Duke of Wellington in Durham, we enjoyed a social chat and overwhelmingly positive reviews of our latest book. Written in 1947 by Mary Westmacott (Agatha Christie), *The Rose and the Yew Tree* was Glen's choice having heard about it on Radio 4. The story was narrated by Hugh Norreys, a disabled war veteran who is an observer and confidant of the other characters. The setting is a large village where the residents are in the process of selecting a Conservative candidate for the first post-WW2 election.



Like Glen, we were gripped from the first page and were able to identify strong parallels with the current political situation. Norreys was not a particularly reliable narrator, stating initially that the story was “not about him” when it clearly was, in terms of his relationships with the other characters. These were generally clearly defined; however, the writer left sufficient unsaid, so as to allow for personal interpretation. The book was a strong indictment of the class system and the style of writing and descriptions of the attitudes and culture of the time made for a thoroughly interesting and often humorous read.

Our next choice is [*Talking to Strangers*](#) by Malcolm Gladwell. This is a work of non-fiction described as “What we should know about people we don’t know.” Without going into minute detail, it examines a selection of disparate situations in short chapters and really defies a succinct description. Look out for our next meeting when we will discuss it and let you know our opinions. Better still, get hold of the book, read it, and come along to our next meeting yourself!

We meet at [The Duke of Wellington](#) in Durham and our next meeting will be on Tuesday the 10th of January at 7pm. You will be very welcome. A meal is not obligatory — you can just join us later — but anyone wishing to attend should let me know on 0780 466 7390 or janet.mole@ntlworld.com.

From Nursing to the Archaeology of Disease with Charlotte Roberts

On the 17th of November, we were treated to an informative talk about a fascinating subject by a local professor. Charlotte Roberts spent many years at Durham University as an archaeologist and she was kind enough to give us a taste of the many investigations she has undertaken in this role. You can tell this is a topic that



intrigues many people as the attendance at MEA house was the most we’ve had since we moved there, and we had twelve screens on Zoom – again the most we’ve had since the pandemic.

The talk started just a bit late as Charlotte got tangled up in some Newcastle traffic and it took us a bit of time to find her! But you would not have guessed from her presentation that she had had to rush so much. She began smoothly with a bit about her upbringing in West Yorkshire and an early career in nursing. This may have seemed a bit off topic but it quickly became apparent how this informed much of her later career in archaeology. The road to success is often a winding one!

Professor Roberts' nursing stint was good grounding for her specialty of understanding what bones can tell us in archaeological digs. We may think of diseases as things that come and go, but they often leave their marks on teeth and bones that can be studied for centuries. From skeletal remains, we can learn about sex, age, height, health and well-being, diseases, injuries, and even migration patterns due to different isotopes in the water and land in different parts of the world. Such information provides a great window into the lives and struggles of past societies. And the history of disease provides us with a deep time perspective on today, which can help us plan for the future. To emphasise this point, Charlotte ended her talk with a picture of the logo for the Paleopathology Association whose Latin motto can be translated as "Let the dead teach the living."



Professor Roberts left us with several options for learning more about this subject. One of her websites — www.skeletonscience.weebly.com — offers options for outreach as well as resource packs for teachers. She recommended her book [*Human Remains in Archaeology: A Handbook*](#) for much more information. And she later sent us links for specific items of interest such as the Bamburgh Castle skeletons (<https://bamburghbones.org>) and a MOOC course on Scottish Soldiers (<https://futurelearn.com/courses/battle-of-dunbar-1650>). To whet your whistle further, here is a picture of some of the samples Professor Roberts brought to her talk, which we got to examine during the break.



We would like to send a big thank you to Charlotte for taking the time to come to Newcastle and share her life's story and work with us. We really enjoyed it! She asked that the speaker fee we offered go to a charity that she supports, so we thought we should share that with you as well. If you would like to make an

additional contribution to [Ovacome](#), the UK charity focused on providing support to anyone affected by ovarian cancer, you may do so at their website.

UPCOMING NEH ACTIVITIES

Winter Holiday Lunch Social — December 18th

This year's winter social will be held at the home of Susan and Glen Walker from 12:00 noon until 3:00 pm on Sunday, December 18th. As before at such events, please bring a food contribution with you for sharing. It's great to socialise at such informal events and we look forward to seeing you!

Here are the details on how to get to Susan and Glen's home:

Address: 86 Hastings Avenue, Durham, DH1 3QQ

Telephone:

Parking: Parking is available on the street. There are also frequently spare spaces at St Cuthbert's Hospice, which is at the end of Hastings Avenue.

Susan also happens to be organising a book sale for the local community centre near her house, so there will be an opportunity to contribute to this. You are welcome to donate your own books, but Susan would love for you to please buy some too! We may also have a quiz from our quizzing expert Irene, which she will have to operate one-handed due to a recent fracture. Not that that will make the questions any easier! All in all, it promises to be a full and fun-filled afternoon. Feel free to come along for as much or as little of it as you can.

OTHER NEH NEWS

Obituary for Terry Avery (5.5.1937—22.10.2022) by Les Milne

In a full chapel at Newcastle's West Road Crematorium, family and friends of the late Terry Avery gathered on 7 November to remember and celebrate the life of longstanding North East Humanists member Terry Avery.

A colourful character in every sense of the word, Terry enjoyed life to the full, his dapper dress with those characteristic red socks will be long remembered by those who knew him best. Terry was a royalist and admired the late Queen. And just like the Queen, he spent a lot of time planning his own funeral and over the years the plans have constantly evolved and changed. His sister Moira and brother Gavin provided his most recent version of the plan so that the celebration was very much Terry's event.

The music he chose was a reminder of his love for Spain and especially Barcelona, the place he regarded as his second home where many of his friends there knew him as El Capitan. The words spoken included the beautiful poem "*When I'm Gone*" read by his niece Rebecca. His sister Moira added her thoughts and, as instructed by Terry, his good friend Stephen read the eulogy, recalling Terry's working life in Social Services at Newcastle and Gateshead where he gained satisfaction from the knowledge that his efforts had helped improve the lives of others.

A cultured man, Terry enjoyed music both at the theatre or at the Sage Gateshead where he sang with the Silver Singers. A formidable Scrabble player, he set the club record for the highest score in a game. We also heard that he had been a member of the temperance society until his 20s, which is not quite the image most would have of him from the dinner parties he held. His niece Rachael also shared her memories of her uncle and his smoking habits and telephone style.

As a member of NEH, Terry was a regular and supportive attendee at the Jesmond House Group where he brought common sense and humour to the discussions (and the coffee and wine breaks!). NEH owe it to him that we are now regularly invited to join the Lord Mayor's Party at the annual Remembrance Day Ceremony at Eldon Square in Newcastle. In 2014 he approached the City Council to request our involvement and took on the responsibility of laying our wreath at the War Memorial, which he carried out with great dignity for several years.

He was very particular in only allotting a certain amount of time to what he did. Once that time slot was used, he'd declare, "*You are dismissed.*" Terry himself is now dismissed, but he will be remembered fondly by all who had the pleasure of his company and our condolences are with Moira and Gavin.

2021 Census Data Shows Big Changes Nationally and Locally

As noted in a recent [Humanists UK Press Release](#), it's now official: England and Wales are among the least religious countries in the world! The data published by the Office of National Statistics shows the number of people identifying with 'No religion' jumped by over 8 million, from 25% to 37% between 2011 and 2021. Christians are now a minority in the Census results for the first time, and are outnumbered by the non-religious in Wales. This is in spite of the Census question on religion being widely recognised as a biased and leading one. In reality, England and Wales are even less religious (in terms of identity, belief, and practice) than the Census results suggest.

Locally, we here at NEH received a request for comment about this from Kayleigh Fraser who is a journalist for [Spark Sunderland](#). To begin, Ms. Fraser noted that data from the census showed that:

Population of the North East as:
Not religious: 40% (National average is 37.2%)
Christian: 50.58% (National Average is 46.2%)
Muslim: 2.92% (National Average 6.5%)
Not answered: (5%)

Following on from that, our current Chair, Les Milne, responded to a few questions from Kayleigh after receiving some thoughts on them from the Management Committee. Les also noted that these responses are his own views, so whilst he is the Chair of North East Humanists, these are not necessarily the views of the organisation, although he is confident that most Humanists in the organisation would support them.

Q1. *What do you make of these new statistics as someone who is not religious?*

A1. The statistics are most likely an understatement of the extent that the population is not religious and that the proportion of those with no religion is higher and the number of Christians is lower. This is not surprising as “What is your religion?” is a leading question that assumes you have a religion. It also draws no distinction between those who firmly have no religious beliefs at all and those who were brought up in a particular religion, but no longer actively practice it or believe in its main tenets (e.g. those sometimes referred to as cultural Christians).

In contrast to such a poor question with no option for greater explanation there is considerably more detail and analysis in The National Centre for Social Research British Social Attitudes Surveys, which are widely viewed as the most accurate source of social data. Their [36th Report in 2019](#), included a section on religion which showed a higher proportion of the public to have no religion.

Q2. *Why do you think the region and country is moving away from religion? Comparative data for the nation has shown that in 2011, 14.1 million people in the UK responded that they had no religion, which equated to just under 25% of the population. 2001's figures were even lower, with only 14.8% of the UK saying they are not religious. Why do you think more people are now living with no religion?*

A2. The move away from religion has been a progressive one since church attendance has steadily dropped over the last 150 years. It is generational and is probably due to a better understanding of science, such as Cosmology with the Big Bang theory on the age and expansion of the universe, along with evolution and DNA. There are also concerns at the divisions caused by religious extremism and the persecution of religious and non-religious groups by virtually all religions, both historically and currently, with many countries imposing restrictions or even the death penalty on those who do not follow the state religion. Religious teachings being used to justify racism, homophobic, and certain political views have also disenchanted many.

Q3. *As a Humanist society, do you think moving away from religion is a good thing, or do you believe society should still practice religion and it should be preserved?*

A3. In moving away from religion, people are exerting their freedom of choice and being honest about their beliefs. Such choice has not always been available, with severe punishments for apostasy and blasphemy still in existence, so therefore I consider it a good thing. That does not mean it is necessarily bad to have a religion. Indeed, locally our Humanist group seeks to engage with religious groups and interfaith events. It is only right that people should be free to follow their belief, but that does not give them the right to impose it on others, or for religious groups to be granted special privileges – e.g. The Church of England being able to appoint 26 bishops to the House of Lords.

Q4. *What work do you do as a Humanist charity to promote living with no religion, and what messages do you promote?*

A4. As Humanists, we strive to promote understanding between people whatever their religion/worldview. Our values lead us to help others through kindness, empathy and compassion by thinking for ourselves using reasoning, rationality, and evidence. We want everyone to develop curiosity, open-mindedness, and honesty.

We want to bring people together in respect, accepting the equal rights of others, and the diversity within society. We want everyone to be able to enjoy this one life that we have with cheerfulness, positivity, and true friendship.

The practical ways we do this is to widen understanding of religion and worldviews by active involvement in local authority SACREs (Standing Advisory Council on Religious Education) and providing trained speakers for schools and other organisations, as well as providing resources for teachers. We also provide pastoral care in hospitals, prisons, and other institutions. We have for many years supported a wide range of charities through our Charity of the Year fundraising and more recently by awarding micro-grants to local community groups. Individual members have specific interests and demonstrate their commitment to Humanism by their work with other organisations on many issues that are important to them, such as peace, environmental, animal and other concerns.

The main public contact with humanism is through our celebrants who help families at times of bereavement by celebrating the life of their loved ones. We also conduct weddings, but because of the government failing to make humanist weddings legal in England and Wales, couples also have to undergo a register office ceremony, unlike in Scotland where humanist weddings are legal and now outnumber religious ones. Naming ceremonies are also popular although some parents feel compelled to have their children christened, purely to enable them to go to their local school if it is a religious one – yet another privilege carefully guarded by churches.

The message we promote is often summed up in six words: Think for Yourself, Act for Everyone.

County Durham Consultation by Susan Walker

If you live in County Durham, please consider clicking on the following link to share your views on some local consultations:

[Consultations - Durham County Council](#)

These consultations help inform the County Council's priorities and decisions. However, they are actively shared to local faith groups and "Faith" is part of the demographics they collect for each respondent. It is important that **all** voices are heard, though. After all, we are a very thoughtful community and I am sure that we have something useful to say.

NEH Work in Schools

Around a third of all state-funded schools in England and Wales are schools "with a religious character." This is the legal term for "faith schools", as they are often referred to. Humanists aim for a secular state guaranteeing human rights, with no privilege or discrimination on grounds of religion or belief, and so we campaign against faith schools, and for an inclusive, secular school system, where children and young people of all different backgrounds and beliefs can learn with and from each other.



The Religious Education Council of England and Wales encourages this approach. It [recommends](#) that humanism is studied in schools as an example of a “non-religious worldview” and believes that *“explaining religious and non-religious worldviews in an academic way allows young people to engage with the complexities of belief, avoid stereotyping, and contribute to an informed debate.”*

North East Humanists maintains a panel of trained and experienced school speakers, led by Kate Hinton. Using their life experience and knowledge, they can add a personal dimension to young people’s study of humanism, bringing the subject to life.

The NEH chair, Les Milne, and one of its members, John Sargent, visited the XP Academy in Gateshead in the last couple of weeks. Teacher Michelle Ross contacted them later, saying, “I just wanted to email you to say a huge thank you for giving up your time to come into school and talk to our students. It was an authentic and rich learning experience to have the opportunity to speak to experts, and something that we actively look to include across our curriculum. I wanted to let you know that we really appreciate your expertise, and our students gave great feedback.”

If you would like to invite a humanist speaker to visit a school, or if you would like to inform someone else who may be interested in this service, you can learn more at [the Education page on our website](#) or by contacting us at education@northeast-humanists.com.

OTHER HUMANIST NEWS

A Special Message from Stephen Fry

Stephen Fry here. As well as being an actor, broadcaster, director, and writer, I’m also a humanist, and a proud patron of Humanists UK. I’ve worked with Humanists UK on a short, animated film, and I’d be so grateful if you could take a couple of minutes to [watch it by clicking here](#).

Humanists UK does a huge amount to help people live full, satisfying lives without religion. From campaigning for an education system free from discrimination, to providing popular humanist weddings, as well as pastoral care in hospitals and prisons, they work for the good of everyone to promote a fairer society.



When you decide to join as a member, you not only support our vital work, but you join a thriving community of like-minded people who think for themselves and act for everyone. So please, do think about [signing up and becoming a member today](#). And please could you also share our film with friends and family on [Twitter](#), [Facebook](#), or [WhatsApp](#)? It’s the best way to spread our message for all to hear!

Latest Issue of Humanistically Speaking



North East Humanists are affiliated with *Humanistically Speaking*, which is a monthly magazine published since 2019 by members of the South Central England Humanist Network. You can subscribe to this free magazine and view all previous issues at [their website](#). Their latest [November](#) issue is about truth and lies. The issue includes features on Professor Jim Al-Khalili, Julian Baggini's consolations for a post-truth world, whether the Tories crash the economy, Norwegian humanists promoting critical thinking, the Rushdie stabbing, and Africa's new slavery.

CONTACT US FOR MORE

North East Humanists

All of the latest information about North East Humanists is available on our [website](#). You can also follow us on social media via [Facebook](#) or [Twitter](#). Interacting with us there is a great way to help spread the news about Humanism.

Please consider a membership with us if you do not already have one. You can [join NEH](#) for as little as £6 per year. Our fees are very low, but they really do support so much local grassroots work, as we hope you see in these bulletins. This month, we are excited to welcome one new member. Thanks for joining!

The monthly bulletin is free for members and supporters of North East Humanists. If membership is more of a commitment than you can make, you can be a supporter if you just [sign up to our email list](#). For NEH members without email, the bulletin is printed by Mike and Moira Turner and sent by post. Contact them at 0191 272 8376 to arrange this if you need it.

Durham Humanist Group

This local house group is run by Susan Walker. Contact her at 0191 384 1432 or susan.humanist@gmail.com if you would like to attend events here.

Teesside Humanist Group

If you would like to join this group, please [contact us](#) for more details. You can also follow them on Twitter [@Teeshumanists](#) or like the [Teesside Humanists](#) group on Facebook run by Terry Waites and Ben Collier.

Humanist Funerals, Baby Naming Ceremonies, and Weddings

Anyone who wants advice on how to organise these should contact Les Milne at 0795 267 1533 or go to www.northeast-humanists.org.uk/ceremonies.html.