



North East Humanists

Monthly Bulletin — November 2021

HELLO FROM NORWAY by ED GIBNEY

Hi all. Even though I'm spending a month in Oslo while my wife is working at the university here, I'm still able to put together our monthly bulletin through the wonders of Zoom and (lots of) emails. As you'll see in the issue below, we have so many great things going on in the North East but I thought I should try to see if there were any interesting Humanist events happening here in Norway. According to the Wikipedia entry on [Irreligion in Norway](#), this is a very secular nation that no longer has a state religion. In a 2016 survey that asked, "Do you believe in God?", 23% said they didn't know, only 37% said yes, and 39% said no! Also, there are several 'irreligious organisations' in Norway and by far the biggest, oldest, and most visible is the [Norwegian Humanist Association](#), which has close to 100,000 members. Those members constitute 1.7% of the national population, making it by far the largest such association in the world in proportion to population.

Why is Humanism so successful here? One of the reasons may be the fact that they offer [Humanist confirmation ceremonies](#) for young people as they become adults. This surely gives Humanism a visible and perhaps lasting bond in the population here. What goes on at these ceremonies? Here is what their website says:

Confirmation (coming of age)

A Humanist confirmation consists of a course in life stance and ethics, finalised with a formal ceremony. All young people (normally at 14-15 years of age) may choose a Humanist confirmation, regardless of their own or their parents' beliefs.

The confirmation course encourages independent thinking and reflection on ethical issues. The main topics of the course are humanism, human rights, and critical thinking. The course is concluded with a formal ceremony for the participants, with family and friends as guests. The ceremony includes cultural elements, such as music and poetry readings, and a speech addressed to the confirmands. Ceremonies ordinarily take place in public facilities such as cultural centres, town halls, community centres, or banquet halls.



What do you think? Could we do something like this in the UK? What would you put in the course? Would parents and children be interested? [Send us your thoughts.](#)

RECAP OF RECENT NEH EVENTS

Update on the NEH Community Fund

Three more community groups have been awarded microgrants during October. Two of them are groups of volunteers that have been set up to enhance the experiences of people living in care homes.

Harton Hinnies work with the Harton Grange Care Home in South Shields. Our grant will be used to make raised beds in their garden to grow flowers and vegetables.

Mandale Marvels work with Mandale House Care Home in Thornaby. Our grant will help them create a nature hide in one of the spare rooms. They hope the new facilities will also encourage the participation of children from a local nursery school.

In addition to these, a grant was made to a volunteer trust set up to broaden the pupil experience in the Duchess's Community High School in Alnwick. They have agreed with the school staff that Year 7 pupils will benefit from specific books being read to them in weekly tutorial sessions. Our grant will buy multiple copies of the first four of these books.

Finally, we have received a great big thank you from the Horden Community Welfare Football Club for their grant that we announced in [the last bulletin](#). They have already used our grant to purchase brand new football training equipment and a first aid kit to replace some of their old and damaged equipment. According to their chair, this will certainly help the lads and the football management team when they are training, and it will improve their fitness levels too.



The eight grants awarded to date average about £450 each with a total spent of £3587. The remaining fund (£1413) is available until the end of January when the scheme will close to allow for internal evaluation.

Outreach to the Public by Mike Turner

Tynemouth Market, Saturday 9th of October 2021

Our colourful stall and flag were set up in the equally colourful and vibrant Tynemouth Station. We joined about 100 other stall holders selling a huge variety of

things. Adjacent to us on one side was a pensioner who was selling 100% marzipan figurines that he had made, most of them on a Halloween theme. On the other side was a cold-brewed coffee seller. We all tried a small sample and thought it tasted just like cold weak coffee! To each their own, I guess.



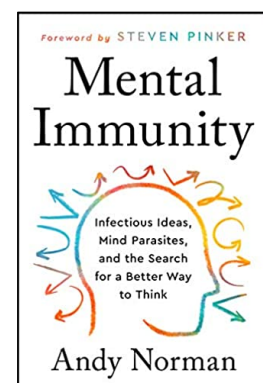
Liz, Moira, Mike, and Kate were our representatives from 9 till 3 and we talked to about 22 people over the course of the session. These included a Methodist who loved Humanist Funerals, a Buddhist who was one of the stallholders, and a pagan. One guy who said he didn't know what he was, told me how wonderful Christopher Hitchens and Richard Dawkins were on YouTube. A few others knew little about Humanism and were happy to take some literature. And, of course, we did have a few fellow Humanists and local friends drop by during the day, which was very nice and much appreciated.

As before, one of the highlights of the day was the opportunity to discuss world problems and catch up on local issues with our fellow trustees. Tynemouth Market will be the last outdoor outreach event this year. We are considering suitable indoor venues with enough footfall for outreach events over the winter. Please make suggestions for venues or events in your locality if you have any ideas for these.

Public Lecture — The Story of Cognitive Immunology

On Thursday, October 21st, we received an excellent talk from Andy Norman who is a professor of philosophy and is very active in the American Humanist Association. Andy was a last-minute fill in due to a late cancellation, so we had to conduct this talk online only, although Susan hosted a few people in her home in Durham, which did provide a nice opportunity to revive the house group there.

Andy has recently published a fascinating and award-winning book called *Mental Immunity: Infectious Ideas, Mind-Parasites, and the Search for a Better Way to Think*. The book documents some of what he has done as the founder of the Cognitive Immunology Research Collaborative ([CIRCE](#)), which is a global



think-tank leading the effort to inoculate humanity against cognitive contagion. His work has appeared in *Scientific American*, *Psychology Today*, *Skeptic*, *Free Inquiry*, and *The Humanist*. He has appeared on The Joe Rogan Experience, NPR, The BBC's Naked Scientist, and The Young Turks. His research illuminates the evolutionary origins of human reasoning, the norms that make dialogue fruitful, and the workings of the mind's immune system.

You can [watch Andy's full talk on YouTube](#), but here is a brief synopsis.



As a fellow Humanist, Andy said we often think that a lack of 'critical thinking' is at the root of all the bad ideas out there today. Misinformation and disinformation are spreading like wildfire. An outlandish example is the QAnon conspiracy that the world is secretly being run by a cabal of paedophiles that can only be thwarted by Donald Trump. But bad information has serious consequences too. It has clearly impacted the 700,000 US and 140,000 UK Covid deaths, which could have been much fewer according to the performance of comparable countries.

There are many ideas for why this is happening—ignorance, gullibility, lack of critical thinking skills, polarisation, skilled disinformation, social media filter bubbles, and online search algorithms. What is missing from these explanations, however, is an empirical investigation of why some minds work well and *don't* succumb to bad ideas. (As Andy wrote in *Psychology Today*, [Why Aren't We All Conspiracy Theorists?](#)) Could we use this evidence to actually strengthen people's minds? Such study has been called 'cognitive immunology' or 'mental immunity'.

The formal history of this field began in the 1960's with the psychologist William McGuire who studied the propaganda efforts of the Eastern Bloc's military against the West. He noticed that minds act like immune systems. Weakened ideas can *pre-inoculate* a mind against stronger versions of harmful ideas. McGuire identified these 'cognitive antibodies' as part of what he termed as an 'inoculation theory'. As is often the case with scientists trying to separate facts from values, this early work was quite amoral. McGuire simply studied how to guard against *new* ideas. But later

researchers—John Cook, Sander van der Linden, Stephan Lewandowsky, and Josh Compton—have laid the groundwork for how to guard against *bad* ideas. And Andy Norman’s book *Mental Immunity* draws on his career in philosophy studying epistemology and ethics to expand on this greatly.

The way cognitive immunology describes it, bad ideas are a kind of mind parasite. Just like biological parasites, they require a host, they cause harm to that host, and they spread to other hosts. Minds also act like immune systems by spotting and removing these harmful ideas. And clearly, minds can function better or worse at the two tasks of filtering out bad ideas and letting in good ones. Minds cannot simply focus on one of those tasks; they must find the right balance between too much acceptance and too much rejection.

According to Andy, we can learn to enhance these cognitive immune functions. But the concept of ‘critical thinking’ isn’t enough. As an example, Andy told a joke about Fred the flat-Earther who dies and goes to heaven. (We’re all Humanists and don’t believe in any of this, but Andy said it’s just a joke so we can continue.) After his initial processing, Fred gets to stand in front of God and ask him one question. Fred asks whether the Earth is round or flat, to which God replies that it is indeed round. Fred’s response? “This conspiracy goes even higher than I thought!”

The point of this joke is that Fred the flat-Earther isn’t devoid of critical thinking skills. He’s actually thinking *too* critically. One of Andy’s friends, Lee McIntyre, has recently published a book titled *How to Talk to a Science Denier* in which he writes about going undercover to a flat-Earth convention. It turns out that the attendees there think *we’re* the ones who are gullible. They ask questions that we don’t even think of. In many ways, they’re *more* critical than us. So simply saying “be more critical” can be bad advice. It can trigger a kind of autoimmune disorder which attacks perfectly good ideas. This is why mental immune health has become a much better concept to Andy after he taught critical thinking skills for 20+ years.

Tens of millions of people are like Fred, warped by a poor mental immune system. They have been surrounded by bad cultural immune systems leaving them susceptible to bad ideas. How did this happen? One reason is that cultural sayings like “everyone is entitled to own opinion” or “values are subjective” lead to poor mental immune functioning. These cultural ideas act as ‘disruptors’ to individual cognitive immune systems, but they are extremely prevalent.

One question that pops up for this subject is whether this is all just a metaphor. For Andy, the answer is a clear no. To him, this is real, and we are at the beginning of a scientific revolution that sees this. Andy has spent his career studying scientific revolutions and knows that they have signs, which we are beginning to see for cognitive immunology. The first microscopes allowed people to see microbes and that led to many scientific revolutions, including the understanding of body immune systems, which saved millions and millions of lives. Cognitive immunology can do the same again and improve the lives of millions of people for generations to come.

As part of Andy’s work with CIRCE, experts are coming together to develop this new science, learn how to map so-called *infodemics*, and then study how to disrupt them. CIRCE is trying to develop principles for *cognitive hygiene* that can help us all in the fight against bad ideas. Some early findings include the following:



- It's easier to prevent poor thinking than to fix it. An ounce of 'pre-bunking' is worth pounds of cult deprogramming.
- Belonging to a 'community of inquiry' can help a lot. Typical communities include Humanists, scientists, or philosophers. Join in!
- Religions can often lead to closed minds since they encourage identifying with ideas that are set in stone and this triggers over-reactions of 'identity protection' whenever those ideas are questioned.
- It's better to hitch your identity to the act of inquiry, rather than to any specific beliefs since those can always change with new information.

Andy finished his talk by asking us a question. As Humanists who are committed to thinking well and improving the well-being of others, what can we do to bring about the cognitive immunology revolution? How can we try to reduce the blight of bad ideas on all future generations?

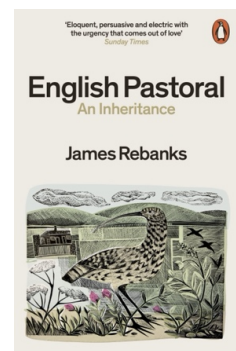
(Editor's note—sharing Andy's talk or book is a good start!)

After a brief pause, our group asked Andy many questions. How do you distinguish between a good idea and a bad one? What role does emotion play in this? Can you tell us a little more about the history of this science? Does this end up being anti-religious? Would philosophy training for children help? How does this square with the history of science where new ideas are sometimes laughed at before they eventually become accepted? How do we talk to conspiracy believers? Are bad ideas filling a vacuum of good ideas? And has Andy made many converts with his book? For answers to all of these and more, be sure to [watch his talk on YouTube](#).

Virtual Book Club by Jan Mole

There were fewer of us able to attend our Zoom book club meeting on 26th October, but last month's read of James Rebanks' [English Pastoral](#) stimulated a lively discussion. There was unanimous approval for this biographical account of three generations of a farming family and their experiences in the Eden valley and Lakeland fells. This is a story of changing farming methods since the Second World War and the impact this has had on the environment, food production, and the farmers and their families.

James Rebanks engages pragmatically with the 'old ways' reminding us that there are no areas of the UK which have not been affected by humans for millennia. His farming education first came from his grandfather but continues today as he works to restore the productivity of the land his family has owned for generations.



For Alice, the book evoked memories of rural Dorset, to where she and her mother were evacuated from London at the start of the war. Kate had heard James Rebanks speak at book festivals and told us about his work with UNESCO and the Masai tribesmen in Kenya whose trust and respect he only achieved when they learned that he, like them, was a farmer.

The conversation also included the necessity and cost of feeding the world's populations, the difficulty of making a living from farming, the demand and expectation of cheap food, and the role of food corporations.

The next book we have chosen for discussion will be [Clock Dance](#) by Anne Tyler. This is a bittersweet novel of family and self-discovery from the bestselling, award-winning author of *A Spool of Blue Thread*.

The NEH Zoom book club meets on the 4th Tuesday of each month at 7:30 PM so the next discussion will be November 23rd. If you are interested in joining, please contact Jan Mole at 0132 535 6029, 0780 466 7390, or janet.mole@ntlworld.com.

UPCOMING NEH ACTIVITIES

Sunday Social Breakfasts — November 7th

For the first time since the pandemic, we feel safe enough to restart the social breakfasts that proved successful in 2019/2020. Our venue has simplified their menu but still offer good value for money and plenty of space for a friendly chat.

The first of these social breakfasts will be on Sunday November 7th at the Five Swans, 14 St Mary's Pl, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE1 7PG. This is very close to the Haymarket Metro Station and to car parks at the Civic Centre and on College Street. (Both charge £3 for all-day parking.) Meet at 10 AM for ordering at about 10:15. No pre-booking is required; just turn up.

If the weather is dry and you have time, there are also parks nearby where chatting may continue whilst strolling.

Remembrance Sunday – November 14th


Once again, North East Humanists will be representing humanists at several [Remembrance Sunday](#) events around the region. Susan Walker will be at Durham Cathedral as a parish councilor and Irene Wilkinson will also be there representing NEH. The Lord Mayor of Newcastle will lead a Remembrance Day Ceremony at the Eldon Square War Memorial at 11:00 AM and Liz Armstrong has been invited to represent NEH at the ceremony and lay a wreath at the memorial. Gary Hope will lay a wreath in Darlington, Moira Turner will lay one in Tynemouth, Chris Butterworth is representing NEH at the Morpeth Remembrance Event, and Stuart Dearlove is representing us in Hexham where he will lay a wreath. Additional participants are always welcome. [Contact us](#) if you are interested in representing NEH in your area.




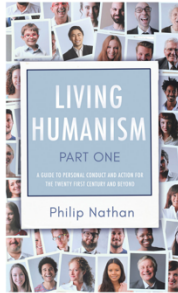


Decolonisation and Empire with Philip Nathan — November 18th

This will be a members' discussion meeting, led by Philip Nathan, where we will examine a range of issues tied to decolonisation and empire. Issues discussed will include: the removal or maintaining of statues associated with empire and slavery (such as the Colston statue in Bristol); the National Trust and its slavery and empire linked properties; history education in schools in relation to empire and race;

returning artefacts such as the Elgin marbles and Benin bronzes to countries of origins; paying reparations to countries that were British imperial possessions; and paying reparations to those damaged by the slave trade. Our discussions will be supported with videos and documentary evidence. Philip Nathan is a trustee of North East Humanists and the author of [Living Humanism](#).



Decolonisation and Empire



A Group Discussion Led by Philip Nathan
7 to 9 PM, Thursday, November 18th

Who: Philip Nathan

When: Thursday November 18th at 7:00 PM

What: A 2-hour group discussion using videos and slides to spur debate.

In-Person: Tyneside Irish Centre, NE1 4SG. Doors opens at 6:30. £1 for NEH members. £2 for non-members. This includes tea, coffee, and light refreshments.

Online: Zoom opens at 6:45. Register using the Eventbrite link:

<https://www.eventbrite.co.uk/e/decolonisation-and-empire-tickets-202871854177>

If you prefer not to use Eventbrite, you can send an email to Susan Walker at northeasthumanist@gmail.com and she will send you a Zoom link directly.

If you have a few friends you would like to discuss this with, perhaps you could consider inviting them to your home to watch this event with you on Zoom. Since this is an interactive discussion, we will not be broadcasting it on YouTube.

Anyone is welcome to our online events. Whilst we do not charge for joining these, we are a registered charity that you may donate a few pounds to by using [the button at the bottom of our homepage](#). We suggest £3 for these donations but all amounts are greatly appreciated.

National Inter Faith Week — November 14th to the 21st

Each year, [Inter Faith Week](#) begins on Remembrance Sunday, and runs until the following Sunday. It is hoped that the additional Sunday provides the opportunity for other weekend events to take place as well as those linked to Remembrance Sunday. Remembrance Sunday was chosen as a start day to encourage people to remember together the contributions of all faiths and none, and to consider how best to create a just, peaceful, and harmonious world.

National Interfaith Week runs from Nov 14th – 21st and Newcastle is putting together a resource for KS3 / KS4 young people about different faiths. We were asked to contribute to this, so our education representatives Kate Hinton and Susan Walker have done so. Susan prepared a 5-minute video, as requested, and has just sent it to the coordinator. We expect it to be linked to the Interfaith Network website in [the resources section](#). See their website for more on how to get involved and “get to know others.”



OTHER HUMANIST NEWS

COP26



As you surely will have heard by now, [COP26](#) is taking place in Glasgow between the 31st of October and the 12th of November. This event is a global United Nations summit about climate change, which will be attended by over 190 countries that signed the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change

(UNFCCC) in 1994. This will be the 26th ‘Conference of the Parties’ who signed this framework, which is why it's called COP26. The last major meeting was the 21st in France in 2015 where the Paris Agreement set out several key goals for all nations involved. There is still lots of debate about how the agreed goals should be achieved, though, and this will be the focus of COP26.

In a recent article laying out the evidence for why “[the climate disaster is here](#),” the secretary general of the UN, António Guterres, is quoted as saying, “We are on a catastrophic path. We can either save our world or condemn humanity to a hellish future.” No Humanists want a hellish future for humanity, so many of us are keen to follow the developments at COP26 and are wondering what we might do to help.

Firstly, we can easily get informed. The BBC has unveiled [extensive coverage plans](#) for the COP26 climate change conference. Under the banner of *Our Planet Now*, the BBC will bring together its UK and global services to deliver comprehensive coverage of COP26, as well as a wide range of programming about environmental sustainability and the world’s changing climate. Highlights include:

- The BBC will host a special *Global Climate Debate* on the opening day of the conference where global political figures and a young audience will join in a live debate from around the world.
- The BBC’s 45 local and national radio services across the UK will join forces with BBC World Service to present a global *Climate Voices Festival* giving voice to hopes and concerns about the environment and the summit.
- There will be a COP26 competition on Blue Peter called *Our Planet Now* where the winner’s creative writing will be transformed into an animation by Aardman Studios, with a soundtrack performed by the BBC National Orchestra of Wales, which will be shown to world leaders at the conference.

Among the many other plans that the BBC has listed, North East Humanists' member Professor Tanya Wyatt will be appearing on an episode of the BBC podcast [Green Thinking](#). These podcasts will consist of 26 special episodes, each 26 minutes long, looking at issues relating to COP26. They are being done as a partnership between BBC Radio 3 and UKRI's Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC). The Green Thinking series launched on 3 June 2021 for World Environment Day and will run through to COP26 in November.

Humanists UK are also taking part in the [Global Day of Action for Climate Justice](#) on Saturday the 6th of November. They will be marching with a banner and placards in a procession with other religion or belief groups. You can [join them in London or Glasgow](#).

Finally, if you are looking for something else you can personally do, please consider joining the [Climate Justice Movement](#) for COP26, which offers several options for how you can get involved.

Humanism in Action Conference

Humanists UK will once again be holding an online conference for Humanist groups across the UK. This event brings together partner groups, branches, sections, and networks of Humanists from across the country to a series of workshops and presentations taking place over Zoom. For those familiar with prior events from HUK, this replaces what was previously their in-person Sections Summit and Group Representatives Annual Meeting. It provides an excellent chance to learn more about what people can do at the local level to support the Humanist movement.



This year's conference will take place over 12 November and 13 November, on Friday (15:00–19:00) and Saturday (09:00–12:30). HUK are looking to provide branches, sections, networks, and partner groups with CPD and opportunities to chat with each other. They'll be covering topics such as improving group emails, how to lobby MPs, the future of religion or belief in the UK, and uncovering humanist heritage in towns and communities across the UK.

If you have ever thought about getting more involved with North East Humanists, this conference is a great place to start. It will provide you with lots of information and inspiration. Individual sessions and more information can be found on

the [Humanism in Action webpage](#). Please [contact us](#) if you would like to [register for the conference](#) and become more active in the Humanist community.

A Humanists International Message from Mahmoud Jama Ahmed

My name is Mahmoud Jama Ahmed, and I am a university professor from Somalia.



I am writing to you to tell you how my family and I reached a country of safety thanks to the support of Humanists International. Without their support, I don't know where we would be right now, and that's why I ask you to support Humanists International's work to #ProtectHumanistsAtRisk.

My nightmare began in February 2019, when I started receiving death threats from religious fundamentalists for my criticism of Islam. I was imprisoned in March on 'blasphemy' charges, and then spent 307 days in jail, before being released on presidential pardon. My family and I managed to escape to a neighbouring country, where we lived in hiding for one long year. Then, in April 2021, we managed to resettle to a safe country, where we are slowly rebuilding our lives. All this could not have been possible without the support of Humanists International.

The role of Humanists International is crucial. It is a matter of life or death, hope or despair, for many humanists at risk all around the world. My personal story speaks in favour of this.

[This is why I am asking you to donate whatever you can to Humanists International's #ProtectHumanistsAtRisk campaign.](#)

By donating to Humanists International, you are creating hope for those who devoted their lives to help their own people and their own countries.

Thank you for your support,

Mahmoud Jama Ahmed

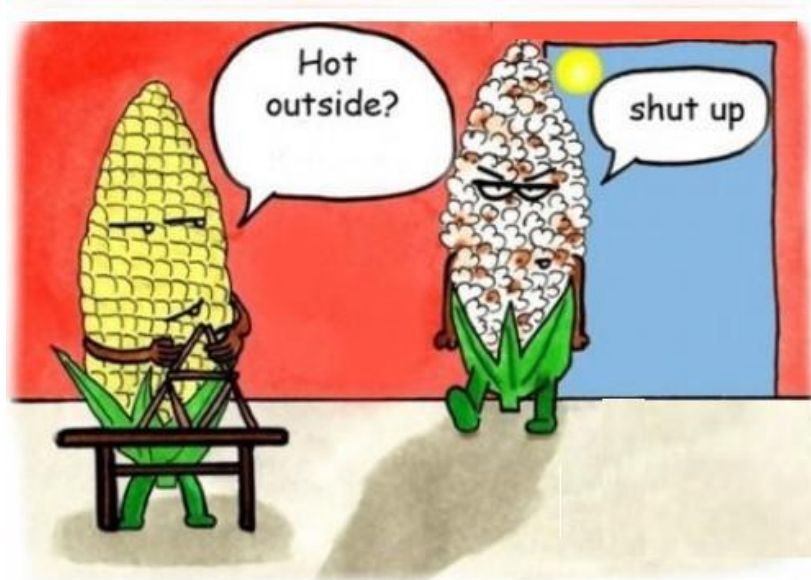
Latest Issue of Humanistically Speaking



North East Humanists are affiliated with *Humanistically Speaking*, which is a monthly magazine that has been 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 [October](#) issue focuses on climate change and includes features with the Greenpeace director Professor Peter Newell, Young Humanist climate action, eco-humanism, an electric car report, a climate toolkit, your letters, the poet's corner, and much more.

ALWAYS LEAVE 'EM LAUGHING

Global warming is no joke to some people.



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 so we can grow and accomplish even more.

Please consider a membership with us if you do not already have one. You can join NEH for as little as £6 per year by visiting [the membership page of our website](#). Our fees are very low, but they really do support so much local grassroots work, as we hope you see in these bulletins.

The monthly bulletin is free for members and supporters of North East Humanists. If that's more of a commitment than you can make, 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 Facebook Group](#) 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.