



Humanistically Speaking

January 2021



A Humanist hotline to a secular worldview

Better Days Ahead

Humanists celebrate science, progress, and the possibilities of human development and fulfilment.

At the beginning of a new year, *Humanistically Speaking* looks forward to the liberating possibilities of effective vaccines against SARS-Cov-2 and we celebrate the wonderful ingenuity of the human species in protecting ourselves from microscopic predators.

Also this year, the UK will host the 26th UN Climate Change Conference of the Parties (COP26) in Glasgow on 1 – 12 November. The COP26 summit will bring parties together to accelerate action towards the goals of the Paris Agreement and the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change. *Humanistically Speaking* will maintain its focus on climate matters as we approach this event of vital importance for the future of humanity and our planetary ecosystem.

As the 46th President is installed in the White House, what will be the legacy of Donald Trump and will Joe Biden and Kamala Harris address the concerns of the 74 million Americans who voted for him?

We're excited about 2021 and we look forward to bringing you a cornucopia of humanist news and views from across the southern region and further afield. Stay tuned and stay in touch!



Features this month:

- Interviewing the CEO
- Being a Veggie
- Life after Death with Maggie
- Cats & the Meaning of Life
- Another Book Giveaway
- The Boris Bunch
- and much more

Get your own *Humanistically Speaking* hot-lined direct from the editors

Humanistically.Speaking@gmail.com

In this Issue

Come in, sit down, put your feet up...

David Brittain
Executive Editor,
Humanistically
Speaking

Tap my face >



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CONTENT DISCLAIMER

Our editorial team consists entirely of humanist volunteers. Articles are written by them, or by our readers and contributors, and published at the discretion of the editorial team. We strive to publish content in line with humanist aims and values but views expressed by writers are their own and not necessarily shared by the South Central England Humanists Network or Humanists UK.

Welcome to our last bi-monthly issue of *Humanistically Speaking*!

From now on, we will be a monthly magazine, so future issues will be shorter, but more frequent, and hopefully more in touch with current events. Nevertheless we have an amazing, sumptuous issue – a joyous feast for your eyes – that includes another free lottery draw for *HS* subscribers – this time for Stephen Bibby's latest book, *The Bullingham Bequest* (find out how to subscribe at page five).

Inside this issue, Young Humanists Ambassador Ronnie Barr reflects on a difficult year for young people and Amelie Forbes explains how and why she became a vegetarian.

We've also included an article about a meeting with the late, lamented Barbara Windsor written by Bedfordshire Humanist Cathy Moorhouse who, as a BBC executive, lunched with Barbara and was impressed by her humanity and sense of humour. Plus contributions on our letters page from Dorset Humanist Chris Smith (about the quality of *HS*), and from Brighton Humanists' Roz Mercer, in which she shares her thoughts about Marcus Rashford's dad.

There's a controversial piece from Aaron about Boris Johnson's performance regarding Covid which is certainly thought-provoking, so do tell us what you think. There is also a page for adverts: now we haven't approached any potential advertisers yet, but we will. In the meantime, if *you* have anything you want to sell *yourself*, do get in touch with us! Then there's 'Maggie's Musings' which are as ever considered and incisive, and David Warden's book review, which is more than just about cats!

Finally, we have a full and frank interview with Humanists UK's CEO Andrew Copson who has a New Year's message for all of our wonderful readers. So what more can I say? Except that the whole team here wishes you the happiest Winterval possible in these difficult times. So read on, MacDuff, and we'll meet again in 2021.

David Brittain

BREAKING NEWS



125th birthday approaching



Are you a member of Humanists UK?

An exciting milestone is approaching and in case you are one of those persons hovering on the sidelines we thought we would give you a nudge in the right direction, and it doesn't have to cost anything. Click image below:



**Celebrating
125 years
1896 -2021**

As you are probably aware, if you're a regular to our magazine, humanist groups are the 'ground forces' in our local areas informing people that Humanism exists whereas Humanists UK has the strategic view, influencing government and national institutions. Together, these two approaches join up and support one another.

Information broadcasting is an expensive business and thus Humanists UK have a paid staff and raise money through memberships and donations, but you can also donate, be a supporter, a volunteer or just help in other ways.

Why not get on board to celebrate this massive milestone in Humanist history, and help be a part of the next chapter moving forwards.

<https://humanism.org.uk/support-us/>

Click image to read



Did you
like our '8
Values'
booklet?

It is our AIM to get this into print during this year, and into those places where internet may not be available or viable. Prisons and hospitals are our key focus. Would groups be interested in buying copies? The more we can order the lower we can get the price. [EMAIL](#) us with your desired quantity - no commitment at this stage - and we will report back.

We were immensely proud to release our FREEBIE extra in December's issue of *Humanistically Speaking: From Atheism to Humanism: A Compact Guide to 8 Humanist Values*. Inspired by many, written by David Warden with an afterword by Executive Editor David Brittain, and designed by Aaron Darkwood, this 22-page booklet will help to answer those perennial questions such as "I'm an atheist, why bother with Humanism?". Let us know what you think, and then share it with everyone.

BREAKING NEWS



Photogenic, socially-distanced humanists...



Three key members of the *Humanistically Speaking* editorial crew (Aaron, David and Ronnie) were requested to stand as models during a drizzly day in December as students from Arts University Bournemouth wanted to capture our essence! They had already photographed members of faith communities and now it was our turn. Kept at Covid-distant spacing, we were positioned in a damp woodland setting and immortalised...



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Your Instagram Page

Your Website



Arriving late to the party...?

See how far we have come from our 2020 original back issues of below.

Jan

Apr

Jun

Aug

Oct

Dec

Like What We Do? Help Fund Us!

Humanistically Speaking is created by unpaid volunteers, yet we do incur some costs and we'd like to expand our operations. Could you make a voluntary donation by Standing Order from just £1.00 a month? Or a one-off donation? We'll leave our bank details here and let you surprise us. Please use HS DONATION as the reference.

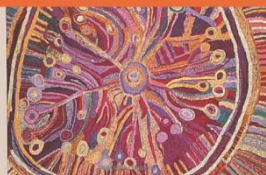
Account name: **Basingstoke Humanists**
Sort 30 98 97 – Acc 33031168

- Running Costs
- Technology upgrades
- Leaflet printing
- Travel expenses



The Bullingham Bequest

Stephen Bibby



BOOK GIVEAWAY!

More madcap mayhem from *Humanistically Speaking!*
All of our lovely direct subscribers have the chance to win a signed copy of Stephen Bibby's latest novel *"The Bullingham Bequest"*



Basingstoke author
Stephen Bibby

"A gripping, exciting story with an engaging hero, suitably unpleasant villains, great plotting and a very satisfying conclusion. Highly imaginative with great scene setting. A new thriller writer is born." Amazon review of Stephen Bibby's first novel 'Collingwood's Club'.

Humanistically Speaking has six copies of Stephen's latest novel 'The Bullingham Bequest' to give away. Six winning names will be drawn from a hat on 7th January. Stephen will sign each book with the winner's name before dispatch – but to get your chance to win, you need to be a subscriber.

Not a subscriber? No problem. Just email us [here](#), and type just one word 'Subscribe' in the subject box, and you will be placed on our list. After that, not only will you be included in our prize draws, but you will receive your future copies of *Humanistically Speaking* direct to your email address.

Basingstoke Humanists member **Stephen Bibby** retired from the civil service in 2009. He enjoyed a busy decade as a magistrate, including a spell as chairman of his bench. During this time he was also writing children's books and novels.

Collingwood's Club, the first of a trilogy, sees Ben Turner working in the world of international finance. Initially befriended by Crispin Collingwood, he is sent on a mission to South America. In the second volume, *A Ransom for Rhodes*, Ben is blackmailed into a trip to Southern Africa as he tries to locate and free a kidnap victim. The plot of the third, *The Bullingham Bequest*, is entirely fresh but has links with previous events and characters. In this volume, the action moves rapidly between rural England, Southern Africa and a hair-raising encounter in the Australian outback. All three novels are written at a cracking pace and set in locations visited by Stephen either when working overseas or on the foreign trips he has been able to undertake in recent years. They are available as paperbacks or e-books on the Amazon website.

Do you agree with our values, why not check them out here:

[Humanist Values Booklet](#)



After a challenging few years for Oxford Humanists, media Manager **Michele Walker** explains her plans to help humanists stay connected...

Oxford Humanists has been running as a Humanists UK partner group for nearly 20 years. I joined 6 years ago, and I was secretary and media manager of the group from 2014-2018, so I was saddened to see the group wind down in recent years - exacerbated by the COVID19 crisis this year putting an end to the monthly talks which were our socialising core. As I was already helping to run the allied social media as well as managing a local discussion forum and maintaining the Oxford Humanists webpage, I discussed with the committee the possibility of 'de-branding' and continuing to run our online services as a non-aligned humanist hub. Humanists UK kindly agreed to continue hosting the page, and we secured nine years' subscription to the domain name so that we can continue the website without any change of URL (and re-link and rebrand it if another group of Oxford Humanists is established within that time).

So, the mailing list *humanistsoxon@googlegroups.com* is available to join for anyone who espouses humanist ideals and values. It will provide a medium for its members to interact via email - to hold discussions, update each other with local events and campaigns of interest, share resources, and maybe arrange social interaction once restrictions ease.

The webpage now stands as a hub, storing links to online resources, services and organisations, aggregating news and social media feeds on topics of interest, and providing an events calendar to promote talks, lectures, and other activities for local humanists. Hopefully, this way, we can stay connected to our fellow humanists in the area and maybe resume, on a more informal *ad hoc* basis, some live events when the virus threat recedes.

I would love to hear from anyone who can help run, manage or moderate any of these online services, and will happily listen to advice and suggestions for their use or development. Email me directly at oxhums@gmail.com with any comments or questions. Just trying to keep resources available, communications open and interactions available for us all.

David Brittain writes: Oxford has been such a powerhouse of Humanism over the past 100 years, inspiring so many luminaries, including the current CEO of Humanists UK, Andrew Copson. So we're happy to hear that Michele plans to keep lines of communication alive until a successor group can be established in the future. The South Central England Humanists Network may be able to help.

Do you agree with our values? Why not check them out here:

[Humanist Values Booklet](#)



Being a Veggie and Helping Out Mother Earth



By Amelie Forbes

I love being a veggie. That said, it doesn't come without its disapproval from others. Turning up to family gatherings and being asked the inevitable, "are you still a vegetarian?" – that's not so much fun. I also get a fair amount of concern about how much protein I get, and people worrying that I don't get enough calories in. There's also the common misconception that vegetarian food is bland or that every single meal must contain cheese. There are also some people who think that us veggies will just shout at them for eating meat. With all that, I still love being a veggie.

So, why am I vegetarian? It all started when a kid in my class gave a presentation on how animals are treated by fast food chains, years ago now – in the almost inconceivable pre-Covid past. I was so shocked and upset at how awfully these animals are being treated that, talking to my mum about it through floods of tears, I vowed to never consume meat or fish from fast food places again. From then, I gradually evolved into being a full-time veggie (and no, there was never a time when I called myself a 'flexitarian' – I think that expression is ridiculous because it's just a way of saying a meat-eater who eats less meat than others, so still a meat-eater!). A main driving factor for me staying veggie is the fact that I just wouldn't feel comfortable eating meat or fish. I find the concept of consuming another living being really quite disturbing, and I also love the new tastes and textures that I've discovered since exploring the

How land is used in the UK

Farmland
56.7%

Natural
34.9%

Green urban
2.5%

Built on
5.9%



Source: Corine Land Cover inventory

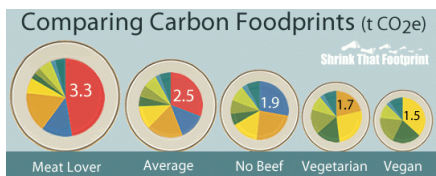
BBC

world of vegetarianism. There's also no need for an animal to go through suffering when I could just as easily enjoy a meal that doesn't cause that suffering. On top of this, of course, there's the element of being kinder to the planet.

I did the WWF carbon footprint calculator and my carbon footprint was 11.6 tonnes – that's bigger than both the world average and the UK average, as well as being 1.1 tonnes over the 2020 target. I was then curious to see how much of a difference regularly eating meat would make, so I changed one of my answers from saying I have a vegetarian diet to saying I eat meat in every meal. My result was then knocked up to 12 tonnes, so not the biggest change, but 0.4 tonnes is no mean feat (for reference, 0.4 tonnes is 0.4 million grams). In the UK, 67% of the food supply land is grasslands for livestock, 21.8% is cropland for growing animal feed and 15.5% is used for growing

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human-consumed crops. That's a lot of land for animal products, yet animal products only make up 32% of the calories consumed by the UK. This suggests a potential lack of efficiency – if the majority of the food supply land was used for plant-based food sources, would those stats maybe be a little

more promising?

I'm not telling you to stop eating meat altogether. It's not my place to dictate what people should eat. I'm also aware that there are plenty of people who would love to go veggie, but can't because of health reasons. If you can though, try consuming less animal products – meatless Mondays or fishless Fridays, maybe even go veggie for a week or hop on the 'Veganuary' bandwagon! Maybe the veggie life isn't for you, maybe it is. You may never know if you don't try.

By Amelie Forbes

An encounter with Barbara Windsor...

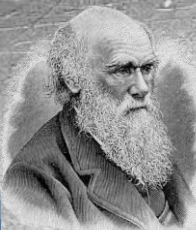


As part of my part-time consultancy with the BBC Adult Literacy Project from 1975 to 1980, I used to attend the now defunct BBC Television Studios based at White City. On recording day, usually a Wednesday, I would sit in the gallery with producer David Hargreaves, director Barbara Derkow and the rest of the recording team to oversee the filming of each of the various sections of 'On The Move'. The rehearsals took place in the mornings and then there was quite a long lunch break (union rules for camera operatives had to be obeyed) for the production team followed by the final filming in the afternoon. The comedian Barry Took presented the 15-minute episodes, with a different 'star' appearing in each one in addition to 'anchor actors' Bob

Hoskins and Donald Gee who played removal men with literacy difficulties. (The title of the programme, 'On the Move', was coined to match their jobs as well as aiming to 'move the adult viewers on' to learn to read and write. I can't remember which episode Barbara Windsor appeared in or what comic role she played but I do remember her joining us along with regular Barry Took for the buffet lunch, including booze, with which we were supplied. She was very warm and friendly, had us all crying with laughter as she related anecdotes about the 'Carry On' films and her various sexual conquests.

What I liked about her was that she did not try to project 'stardom'. She just saw us as a small group of people she hadn't met before and she clearly enjoyed meeting us, learning our first names and entertaining us. She could have elected to stay and be served in her dressing room or leave the premises for lunch, as some 'stars' did. To my mind Barbara Windsor saw herself as a team player and respected all in the team regardless of their jobs or status.

*Cathy Moorhouse
Bedfordshire Humanists*



Charles Darwin.

Dear Darwin

Ask Charles your difficult questions...



The Mount, Shrewsbury.
Darwin's family home.

Hi Charles

We never met but the fact you are able to reply at all shows that you really got the afterlife bit wrong, didn't you!

My friend Aaron the Humanist is confused, as I get to hear from you but he never gets to hear from Jesus. Any thoughts?

So my question is: what part of the universe are you writing from? If its heaven, then I'm delighted that the rumours about a deathbed conversion are true. If it's the other place...well I'm sorry. But you had every chance.

All the best

John MacDiarmid (Former Church Minister)

P.S. Smart move getting buried in Westminster Abbey. How did you manage that?! You spend your whole life undermining the church...and they honour you.

Dear John

Thank you for writing but I must confess I am somewhat pained by the tone of your enquiry. I spent much of my life in agony about my growing religious doubts. My father, Robert Darwin, and my grandfather, Erasmus Darwin, were famous freethinkers. But having read Sumner's evangelical *Evidence of Christianity* (1821), I became convinced of the divinity of Christ and expected to gain a comfortable living as a country parson.

I took a degree in theology, philosophy, maths, and science at Christ's College, Cambridge but by the time I graduated I was also a competent naturalist with a fondness for beetles.

You will be familiar with William Paley's *Natural Theology* (1802) and the famous watchmaker analogy. I'm afraid it was Paley's insistence that the Christian religion is compatible with reason and evidence that was my undoing. The more I discovered about the natural world on my voyage on *The Beagle* the more doubts I had about the credibility of the biblical account of human origins and ultimately the Christian religion as a whole. For the most part I kept my doubts to myself, so as not to upset my dear wife Emma. An avowal of atheism was barely possible in mid-Victorian England but I was comfortable with the more respectable word 'agnostic' as coined by my good friend Thomas Huxley.

No, there was no death-bed reversion but I expected to be buried in the parish churchyard at Downe in Kent. There was however a groundswell of public opinion after my death, comparing my achievements to the great Isaac Newton, that landed me in Westminster Abbey!

My ability to communicate with the splendid editors of *Humanistically Speaking* is a closely-guarded secret as I'm sure you will appreciate.

The Boris Bunch

Our columnist Aaron Darkwood argues in this article that the government's handling of the pandemic was the right one



Images: BBC News

After reading a review by a friend decimating Boris Johnson and his handling of the Covid situation I was compelled to respond with this article. Like my "honourable friend" I'm not a Conservative lackey. I'm not going to defend clearly bad practice for the sake of appearing loyal, but with hindsight and objectivity as a central focus I aim to shape a view that I feel the media attack dogs would do well to take into consideration.

Points to consider:

- This was the first real pandemic a Prime Minister has had to face in recent decades
- Getting it wrong either costs lives or the economy; do you listen to the advice given?
- In recent years we have dealt with Ebola, a truly deadly virus, and had Swine and Bird flu in the headlines. Were they false alarms?

Principles over economy?

Stepping in means authoritarian control that both offends the libertarian camp as an infringement of civil liberties and critically impacts the economy. Our PM, as well as leaders across the world, will have had advisers saying:

- *Do nothing and lives will be lost*
- *Do something and the economy will suffer*
- *Do nothing and hospitals will be overwhelmed.*

Containment

At the early stages of "Do I close borders or not?" leaders will have had those voices

screaming at them. Scientists will have said "close now to prevent spread", medics will have said *"We don't know how deadly this is, don't over-react"*, economists will have said *"Closing the borders will cost an £xx million per day hit on the economy"* as well as some people saying *"Over 300,000 people enter the UK per day through official channels; stopping all of them would be difficult or impossible"*.

Closed borders

You have to take into account what a closed border means. As an island nation we can feed 16 million people a year with our own resources. We need the channel tunnel and ferries open so that trucks can deliver supplies and we need shipping and planes delivering foodstuffs. But it only takes one person sneaking ashore to spread the virus.

Entry

It's claimed that 74 people try to enter the UK illegally every day based on numbers detained. No doubt many more get through, as between 130,000 and 1.3 million illegals are believed to live in the UK. If they are getting in, the virus will get in, so the need to plan for that eventuality has to be taken into account.

What if...

So we know it will get in and stopping it is near impossible. The PM would have had several aspects to look at:

1. **How fast will it spread?**
2. **How lethal will it be?**

He will have advisers showing method of transmission believed to be coughing and sneezing initially. How long does it live outside

Image: The Bow group

the body wasn't known, so surfaces were in question. Aerosols weren't well understood. Masks were not recommended at first. They will have looked at swine flu and bird flu, neither of which took off to pandemic levels, so are we overreacting? There's an annual 'virus of the year' in China - an alert starts and then fizzles out. Was this another fizzler? We then had Ebola, a lethal disease of massive proportions but wasn't transmissible by air and therefore contained. But was the 'not yet named' Covid-19 going to have a deadly effect?

Confusion

There were few facts at the start. TV news brought some details, but journalists hype stories so often we don't believe them when a real danger poses a threat. China released details quickly, but was it fast enough? China isn't a country to panic, and they initially contained the virus to Wuhan and then to the province. By the time Italy was struck we already had cases ourselves.

Abilities to cope and contain

The UK doesn't have vast labs ready to tackle a national outbreak. We have plenty of PPE for routine needs, but bump this up five-fold in hospitals, then factor in 1.3 million care staff and we ran out fast. There was no chance of the public being encouraged to mask up at this point as supplies were exhausted. Typical PPE isn't N95 rated, so reserve stockpiles were not good enough for surgical staff. We assumed by the initial outbreak it was spread by droplets and only later found out about aerosols. Public mask advice then changed accordingly to prevent aerosol spread, and the two metre rule was relaxed.

Deaths

As deaths climbed, existing medical conditions were the main factor, then age. An average person on the street who is fit and healthy would "likely" survive. Save the economy or save society's vulnerable population?

Clearly, the Prime Minister chose the latter course, but it can't have been an easy choice.

Exit strategy

'Test and trace', 'local lockdowns' and 'tier systems' could only mitigate the spread of the virus. Ultimately, vaccines were going to be the real game changer. They are now coming on stream and 90% effective. Yet those choosing to ignore the complex array of variables as listed above seem not to appreciate the difficult political choices made along the route, choices with catastrophic consequences no matter which direction was taken.

As indicative charts have gone up and down, and deaths have climbed and fallen, would you have stood at the despatch box to announce, "We expect that less than 1% of the population will die, so we are going to let it happen."? No Prime Minister could have done that. The press would have destroyed him and every immune-compromised person, everyone with a grandparent at risk, and every parent or a child with breathing difficulties would have blamed him for their loved-ones' deaths.

Hindsight

We can all look back now and see what could have been done differently. But would you really have "let them die"? Had any national leader taken that stance they would no longer be leader. They would have been shamed into resignation or ousted by their own party. On these grounds I support the government's handling of the crisis. Trump took the other line and is now out of a job. Sweden took their line but have a totally different demographic set up with fewer people in less dense areas. The world took our route predominantly. I think it was the right one, if not the only one.

This article is to ask for a moment of pause, for consideration and compassion. One or two of you don't like Boris, yes I can tell, but place yourself in his shoes, just for a moment.

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Young Humanists



*Young Humanists Ambassador **Ronnie Barr** reflects on an exceptionally difficult year for young people and how support from colleagues, friends, mentors, and Dorset Humanists has made all the difference...*

2020 was going to be my year. I'd moved and was living independently for the first time, I was learning important life and work skills with my new mentors, and I'd been accepted onto an apprenticeship course and was preparing to find a work placement. When I left my college interview I was feeling so much more positive than I had in a long time.

Then five days later the UK lockdown was announced. It was horrifying to watch as many of my friends struggled to make ends meet and the vast majority of people I knew who weren't classed as key workers ended up furloughed. As saddening as this was it didn't come as a shock. Half of eligible under-25s were placed on the furlough scheme at the start of lockdown compared to one in four of our older colleagues. Young people were also the most likely to lose their job; the youth unemployment rate rose to 13 per cent with around 7 per cent of under-25s being made redundant due to the pandemic.

Those of us looking for work didn't have it any easier. The number of jobs for university

graduates fell by 60 per cent with applications falling by only 33 per cent, meaning more competition for considerably fewer job roles. In the run up to the 2020/21 academic year apprenticeship starts were halved compared to 2019, something which I and my future classmates knew all too well. The vast majority of work placements for my own apprenticeship course have stopped as employers are unable to take on new hires, silently 'ghosting' on the listings they'd previously advertised.

2020 has not filled many young people with confidence. The enthusiasm I felt at the start of the year has been slowly chipped away as reality has settled in. Young people have been struggling in the workplace for a long time and the lack of support and encouragement we've received this year certainly hasn't helped things. It's seen as exceptional if a young person feels happy and comfortable when they're working rather than the norm it should be. If you have a good working life then you're one of the lucky few.

Continued next page...



Whether it's because we're automatically seen as 'entitled' or just not good enough to be there, young people are often treated poorly in the workplace. I've seen enthusiastic, capable friends start work with stars in their eyes and a spring in their step only to leave in tears after being relegated to tea duty or experiencing bullying from older colleagues and having it swept under the rug. If they dared to raise the subject they'd be ousted from their jobs.

Unfortunately, I know the feeling all too well. There have been times when I've been treated poorly in previous roles and it's difficult to shake it off. I've been belittled by colleagues after attempting to bring up issues in the workplace that they refused to acknowledge. I've been hired to provide tutoring help and guidance only to be forced into the role of glorified babysitter for as long as possible. I've been rejected from positions or forced out of them when it became clear I've had health problems that they didn't fully understand.

For years I've felt like I've been flailing, questioning my own capabilities and wondering how I would ever survive in the adult world. For a while it looked like the pandemic was going to reinforce those ideas of inadequacy, that nagging thought that I will never be good enough and that I'd never make it on my own.

But I couldn't have been more wrong. Throughout the year my colleagues, my mentors, my friends, have believed in me in a way I've never believed in myself. They've trusted me to overhaul Dorset Humanists' social media and work on our website. They've voted for me to have a place on the committee, to contribute behind the scenes, and to stand my ground when I need to. They've supported me as I've applied for work, taught me skills and given me advice I needed when I felt like hope was lost. They've given me the opportunity to help shape the direction of *Humanistically Speaking* and share my voice, my opinions, my words with you.

I might not get a job next year. I might not start college as quickly as I'd hoped. But when the time comes I'll be ready and I'll know I can do it. I hope other young people know that they can do it too.

■ **Young Humanists is the 18-35 section of Humanists UK. We want a world where tolerance, empathy and reason prevail, and where policy is created on the basis of evidence and equality. We work to ensure that more and more young people are aware of and active in Humanism at the local level, and provide a national voice on issues that are relevant to them. Find out more from the link below.**



Interviewing the 'Chair'

Our regular spotlight on Humanist group leaders interviewed by David Brittain

An exclusive in-depth interview with **Andrew Copson** – Chief Executive Officer of Humanists UK and President of Humanists International



Andrew seemed to be in cheerful mood when we chatted online from his new home in the Leicester countryside. "It's a converted guest house," he told me. "It's not as big as you might imagine, but it's plenty big enough for my partner and me plus my mum without us getting under each other's feet." Leicestershire is near Andrew's home turf (he was born in Nuneaton) so it shouldn't surprise anyone that he had chosen to move out of the 'heat' of central London to find a familiar retreat. He was also a little reflective when we chatted, I think, on having just passed his 40th birthday. But the boyish charm was still there, and his easy sense of humour and extraordinary presence of mind was evident from the very start of the interview.

"I was brought up in an entirely non-religious family, and my mum was an occasional member of the then British Humanist Association, so I was aware of Humanism from a very early age," he said, before adding, "My first real introduction to Christianity was at school. I remember thinking how strange some of its ideas were

and I easily rejected it. So I had an entirely non-religious upbringing. Humanism made sense to me, and I have been happily humanist ever since."

Andrew is from a working class background, but he was a bright student, and after passing his 'A' levels he got into Balliol College, Oxford where he studied Classics, graduating in 2004 with a first class BA in ancient and modern history. By then, he had already joined the British Humanist Association (now known as Humanists UK) and in 2005 he became an employee. Andrew had been involved with several organisations by then, but Humanism became his main interest. "I had no particular ambition to become CEO at the time," he reflected, "but opportunities came and I just took them along the way."

"But it's one thing to be a member of Humanists UK," I said, "...but quite another to become so active as to become an employee of the British Humanist Association. How did that come about?" Andrew paused for a moment to reflect.

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◀ A youthful Andrew Copson and our Executive Editor in deep discussion at an early Humanist convention



"It was when the Blair Government announced its big expansion of faith schools. It seemed to me to be such a counter-intuitive thing to be doing at a time of secularisation and growing diversity. Why mix up religion and education even more than they already are? Every child should learn about different religions and non-religious worldviews, but to select children on religious grounds and to teach one particular religion as true in a state school seemed so wrong to me, and it was more than anything else what motivated me to become more involved in humanist work."

And that commitment from Andrew would prove to be Humanism's lucky day, because in 2009 Andrew was appointed, at just 28 years of age, to become the youngest CEO in Humanists UK's history.

"But aren't faith schools more academically successful?" I asked. "It's not as straightforward as that," Andrew responded. "The reason faith schools are more academically successful is simple: Faith schools are more academically selective." Simple and succinct. Of course, I knew that, so, fair point, I thought. On to my next question. "Under your leadership, Humanists UK support has expanded enormously – up to 80,000 members and supporters I think –

so are politicians taking us more seriously now because of our increased size?" Andrew shook his head. "I don't think it's just a numbers game in that sense. It's not just our claim to members and supporters and the fact that we are a growing movement. It's also about our social impact, like the number of people at our ceremonies, our school speakers, our pastoral carers, and those who lobby their MPs. All these things inform politicians that we are a large and growing demographic, and that they should be attentive to the concerns of people in it." He then updated my quoted figure. "It's nearing 100,000 now, by the way." (I think I detected a slight tone of satisfaction in his tone there – after all, 100,000 is pretty impressive).

"Humanists UK is a charity," I said, "...and you must have similar issues to other charities. Do you ever get together to discuss shared problems, or do you treat each other as competitors?" "Oh, we don't compete," Andrew replied "...and there are obviously many similar problems, so we do maintain contact, although we don't have as much time as we'd like to do that. We're all under the same regulator, of course, the *Charity Commission* and we are a member of the *National Council of Voluntary Organisations* [the umbrella body for the voluntary and

community sector in England]. We also belong to *Equally Ours*, a coalition of charities that work in the equality and human rights sectors, and the *Association of Chief Executives*, which I find personally useful. We network all the time, and hold meetings online and in person but we never have the time to attend them all. Nevertheless, they are all there when you need them which is very reassuring.”

“OK,” I said “...so we know that there are plenty of folk out there who call themselves Humanists but they may not join Humanists UK. What could you say to them to persuade them to join?” Andrew replied, “I would say that if you value the work we do, then please make a commitment to keep it happening. But you know, people don’t *have* to join to support us. They can donate, they can volunteer, and they can lobby their MP about the issues we care about. Of course we need to create membership to keep running, but I think the most promising areas of rapid growth are with supporters.”

“So with all this extra support,” I continued, “...what do you think is the most successful initiative that Humanists UK has launched in recent years?” Andrew paused for just a few seconds before answering; “I think the training of the public authorities in identifying the causes and recognising the safeguarding issues of apostates is really important. It is something the police and other authorities have taken very seriously, and that has undoubtedly been a success. Also, the introduction of Pastoral Care, I think, has been very important, as has been campaigning for legalized humanist marriage in Northern Ireland and...” he added with a touch of exasperation, “... surely sometime in England and Wales.”



Andrew is looking forward to legalized humanist weddings in England and Wales...

“You are also President of Humanists International so where on the planet do you think Humanism is under greatest threat?”

“We are under greatest threat in the Islamic states, of course, where humanists are actively persecuted and their beliefs criminalized, and that gives us cause for concern. But it’s worth bearing in mind that the reason humanists are being persecuted is because their numbers are increasing in those countries. At one time it would have been impossible to persecute humanists in Malaysia because there were no humanists in Malaysia, but clearly there are now, and they are organizing and appearing on social media. So in a way, although there is some terrible suffering going on, it could be interpreted as a good sign overall, because it’s the rise of Humanism in those countries that has led to attempts to suppress it.”

“What are Humanists UK’s plans for 2021?”

“Our strategic review takes place every five years, and our review following the latest period (2015-2020) has been delayed by the pandemic. But for next year we plan to further promote and develop those projects that already exist. For example, ceremonies, pastoral care, school speakers and the like, but it’s difficult to plan regarding campaigns

until we know what the Government's objectives are, and that's been delayed because of Brexit and Covid-19, so it's difficult to say at the moment. But I think, 'carry on as we have been' is the message for the time being."

I then asked Andrew, out of curiosity, who were his most outstanding humanist heroes and heroines, and Andrew was quick to point out (for obvious reasons) that he would confine himself to deceased humanists, not living ones! Nevertheless, his selection rather surprised me: "James Baldwin, EM Forster ... oh, and George Eliot. They would be my humanist heroes. I like humanist novelists. We talk about lots of philosophers and scientists all the time, you know, but so many artists and authors have been humanists. The novel in particular is such an incredibly humanist art form because it relies on empathy, it cultivates your imagination, and fiction is an aid to moral development for children and adults. And social activists are often overlooked. For example, we have been researching Humanism for our 125th anniversary next year, and it has thrown up so many incredible people including Miss Zona Valance, a suffragette who was the first person to do my job, and Margaret McMillan an early member of the Labour Party who, after being horrified at the extreme poverty of working class schoolchildren in East London, pressured the Government into introducing free school meals.

"What if you were left stranded on a desert island, as in the BBC's Desert Island Discs radio programme? Music aside, you would normally be given the complete works of Shakespeare and the Bible. What else would you take? *The little book of humanism* perhaps?". "Oh, no!" he said. "I'd want something bigger. The complete works of EM Forster would be my choice, I think."



***Andrew's
humanist
heroes and
heroines include
novelists
George Eliot,
James Baldwin,
and E M Forster.***

"And my last question, Andrew: Do you have a New Year's message for our readers?" Andrew reflected for a moment. "It's been an incredibly difficult year, and there's no point pretending that it hasn't, but the good news is that we're better equipped now than at any time in the history of our species to deal with the situations that face us, not only with the international enterprise of science working remarkably quickly on vaccines, but we also have systems of social support, many of them introduced by humanists, like Bevan and Beveridge, that have sustained people through it: the sophisticated, compassionate equipment of a modern society and a welfare economy. So in terms of science and organised compassion we've come through it better than any society in history would have done. That's a cause for optimism, and we can look forward to better days ahead."

I thought his message was a memorable finale to a fascinating interview, and I closed the meeting thanking Andrew for his time, for this remarkably full and frank interview.



Thought for the Day

Reasons to be Cheerful for 2021

Well ... I don't know about you, but I've just about had it up to here with 2020!

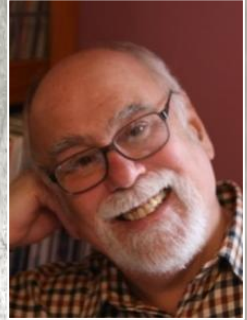
What with the usual global warming, worldwide poverty, vicious wars, violent mobs and civil oppression, we've also had to put up with Donald Trump, Coronavirus, and Brexit. So as far as I'm concerned, good riddance to 2020!

And I have a special reason for not liking this time of year, because whilst everyone puts up bunting and pretty lights to mark the birth of a man they never met, on my birthday – the 5th January – everyone begins taking the decorations down. No wonder I had a difficult childhood!

But it's not *all* bad, is it! Even after the worst year so far in this 21st Century, it's a good exercise to pause for a while and reflect on what we do have in this one and only life of ours.

I'm reminded of a story about George Washington who, when the War of Independence was going badly, noticed a black boy singing at the top of his voice whilst he worked in a field. When Washington asked him what he had to be so cheerful about, the lad said, "I sing because everything I see this morning is new and fresh. I don't know what is going to happen today, and it fills me with excitement and anticipation. You see, I ain't never seen this day before."

It seems trite, but that boy's comment hides a deeper truth. If you don't believe me, take a walk in the woods ... Yes ... I mean, right now! (Well, maybe after you've read this!). The air is likely to be a bit chilly at this time of year, so dress up well before you venture out. And when you do, don't walk fast, walk slowly, and pause from time to time to take it in. Look at the earthy grass, the bushes, and the berries on some of them – study them and see



*By Executive editor
David Brittain*

Do you have a *Thought for the Day* worth sharing?

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what you can see. Stop and watch the trees, and whilst you are reflecting at their amazing complexity, and wondering perhaps how long that tree has been there, you might catch sight of a bird, or a squirrel scampering up the trunk as if it were a main highway (which of course it is ... to the squirrel!). Further on, you might see some fungus in the woods, and the promising sprouts of new flowers-to-be. If you do this, you will have just experienced what I call the good life.

And there's more still, because I recall walking in Hyde Park the day after my 60th birthday and a somewhat cheeky squirrel spied me, and ran down a tree, across a pathway and up my leg until it settled just above my knee and looked up to me hoping for a treat. Apart from the inevitable jokes I had to suffer later about where a squirrel might be on the lookout for nuts, it occurred to me that it's not just us being aware of nature, but nature being aware of us – and that reminded me that I was as much a part of nature as the squirrel. A nice thought.

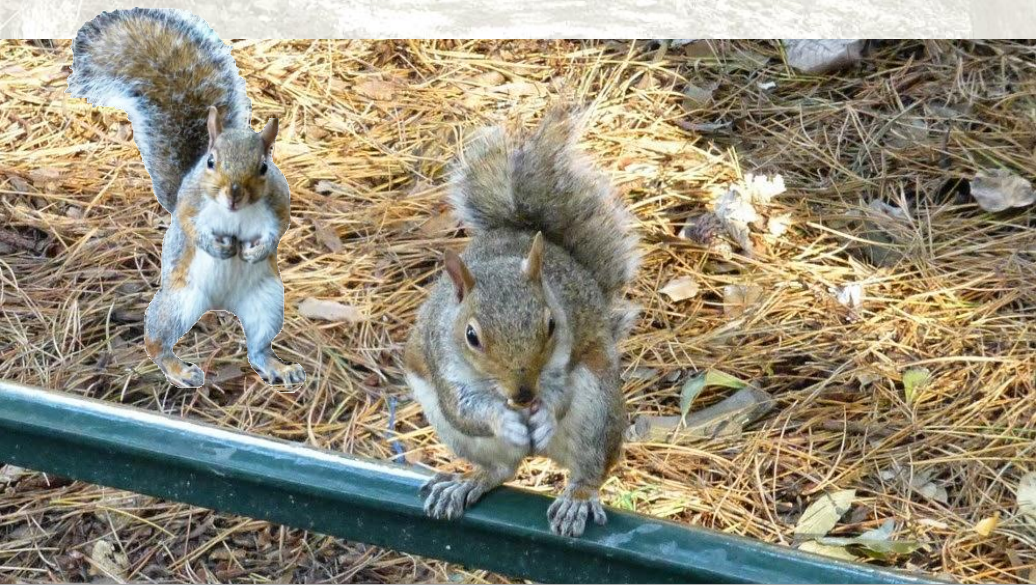
But the good life is not only about walks in the woods. Nor is it just about health and wealth, although these things are of course vital. But it is also about kindness, love and having a sense of humour. And the more ethereal things, like good music, fine art, a walk in the park, a trip to the seaside, a good movie, a good book, and a nice meal. Even simply learning something new can be astonishingly enriching. Such things as these are not really just nice, they are wonderful!

It's always worthwhile, I think, to take some time out for yourself – maybe just sit quietly and alone for about half an hour – and reflect, not on how bad the world is, but on how much good there is in your life, and *in spite* of the bad stuff.

And when you've done, embrace the nearest person to you that you love, and remind them how much they mean to you, and how much they enrich your own existence.

And if you do that, then you will know what I'm getting at....

Happy New Year everyone!





Musings by Maggie

Dialogue, Death, and “Beyond”

The question of how much humanists should interact with faith communities is a prickly one. Whilst many humanists and humanist groups are very enthusiastic about doing so, others are understandably wary. Among the positives are the opportunity to educate people of faith about what Humanism really is, as opposed to what they might think it is, and to identify what humanists and people of faith might have in common and issues on which they may be able to work together. For example, Hindus, Sikhs, Baha'is and Jains have been found to be very supportive of secularism and are often not supportive of faith schools. On the negative side, it needs to be borne in mind that there is a danger of Humanism being viewed as another religion. Balance, therefore, would seem to be the watchword when approaching these matters. What dialogue is definitely not (and nor, in my view, should be) is an intention to try to “de-convert” people of faith, any more than we would expect them to try to “convert” humanists.

Back in October, Humanists UK was contacted by *The Inter Faith Network* for the UK about the Inter Faith Week 'buddies' scheme, and since I am a member of the recently formed Humanists UK Dialogue Network, I was among those invited to take part, the idea being that two people of different faiths or beliefs contact each other and have a conversation. I was expecting to get a vicar or an Imam or maybe a nice Hindu. I said I didn't mind which faith or belief group it was. However, I ended up

talking on Zoom to a woman I've bumped into several times before at various events, an “Interfaith Minister”, which, as far as I can understand it, is someone who will take part in any kind of religious event, regardless of what faith or belief community is organising it, and conducts “interfaith” ceremonies such as funerals and weddings where the couple is of different faiths or sometimes no faith. She is also Chair of the local Interfaith group.

I discovered a person who is very ‘into’ death, both ‘end of life’ matters generally and ‘Near Death Experiences’, and has been studying it all her life. Now one of the reasons I am interested in this type of exercise is that I genuinely am very interested not only in what people believe but *why* they believe it, so this fascinated me. I asked her how this interest developed and how she came to be an Interfaith Minister. The answer was very telling. At the age of fourteen she lost her father. I think it was sudden. This started her thinking about death, and she seems to have been thinking about it ever since. Naturally if you lose a parent at that age, just when you are developing your critical skills and trying to work out what you believe, that's going to have a big impact. When you're 14 and your dad's just died, you're probably not going to want to believe that he is just gone forever and you're not going to see him again. She wasn't brought up in a particularly religious household but enjoyed religious services and singing hymns at school. She never felt drawn to any one particular religion but says that whenever she speaks to people who have a

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religious faith, she gets a feeling that they have some kind of special “truth” within them. I tried to draw her out a bit on truth. She seems to believe in some kind of *subjective* truth, in other words what’s true for one person is different to what’s true for another. This strayed into a discussion about knowing when people are not telling the truth, even to themselves, which did seem slightly ironic to me. I said that to me truth is what the facts are and mentioned the old quote, “You can have your own opinion, but you can’t have your own facts” (variously attributed). She was delighted with this and wrote it down, so I’m still not entirely clear on what she thinks about truth.

She offered to send me *Life After Death*, a book by Elisabeth Kübler-Ross - a Swiss-American psychiatrist and “pioneer in near-death studies”. The book has duly arrived, and I have managed to look through it, although I have to say actually reading it at all closely would be so painful I can hardly bring myself to do it. To think that a doctor, a person of science, could believe such stuff fills me with horror. My contact seemed to think that there would be some things in it that I would agree with, but I can’t say I’ve found them yet except, perhaps, for the famous five stages of grief, which is what the good doctor is well known for. She does seem to have done a lot of good work in the hospice movement and advocated for the compassionate treatment of people at the end of life. However, she is convinced that human beings have a soul which is released from the body at death: *“Death is simply a shedding of the physical body like the butterfly shedding its cocoon. It is a transition to a higher state of consciousness where you continue to perceive, to understand, to laugh*



Maggie on the Swiss-American psychiatrist Elisabeth Kübler-Ross: “To think that a doctor, a person of science, could believe such stuff fills me with horror.”

and to be able to grow.” Kübler-Ross (Life Lessons, 2000).

There is an awful lot of stuff about NDEs. She mentions studies that she did which gave results that she considers conclusive of an afterlife, but I can’t see any citations or references where these studies can be accessed. However, I shall do some further research on NDEs because this has sparked my interest in where these ideas come from. Professor Chris French is a sceptic who has done a lot of research into them. There are many different theories on the causes: metaphysical, physical, neurological, endocrinological, etc. The problem is, of course, the same one as the “god of the gaps”. Here is something which is not yet fully understood by science, so until it is, we can keep believing it’s something supernatural.

For my part, I gave her a lot of information on where to find out about Humanism. I sent her links to Humanists UK and *Understanding Humanism* resources. I also sent her the link to the YouTube video of the Humanists UK ceremony to commemorate the victims of Covid 19 which took place in June. I suspect that is something that might appeal to her.



Letters & Emails

Dorset Humanist Chris Smith appreciates *Humanistically Speaking* but suggests some changes to improve readability...

Humanistically Speaking has a very professional appearance; it would invite anyone to pick it up and turn the pages. I would happily buy a copy at a 'real life' meeting, or pay for one to be delivered. The content is diverse and informative, even for someone who has been a paid up Humanist for 25+ years. It would sit on the kitchen table to be picked up at odd moments, to be read or re-read and then passed on to someone else. Only this lunch time I was enjoying an article in an old copy of *The Guardian* from early November. But do you sense a "But..."?

I don't like reading on screen, especially as I can't read a whole column in one go. Far too much ink would be needed to click print. The readability has improved lately; there is more contrast between the text and the background. My officially elderly eyes find dark on dark difficult. The other day it was d*m* near impossible to read the long number on my Nectar card, black on dark purple, even in a good light.

So, what would I like? If not a print version as above? Just the words in an A4 pdf - if humanly possible.

Chris Smith

Member of Dorset Humanists



Roz Mercer claims that successive governments have failed to tackle what is at the very heart of poverty...

We all know Marcus Rashford (above) the champion of children in poverty. He has proved himself to be a worthy ambassador for his cause. I can't help thinking though that his father who sired five children has been exceptionally feckless in his commitment to them. It has always been thus and yet for some unknown reason the taxpayer rather than the absent parent has to pay. What a better life Marcus's mum might have had if Mr Rashford senior had stepped up to the plate. She is not alone and yet successive governments of all colours have failed consistently to tackle what is at the very heart of poverty. The Child Support Agency was not fit for purpose and it pursued the wrong dads. How can this be fixed so that children can grow up with better financial stability?

Roz Mercer of Brighton Humanists



Bailey – a British Shorthair tabby cat

I'm not a cat lover. In common with many other people I have long believed that cats are cruel and more or less indifferent to humans. But this short book by John Gray has made me think again. It seems that cats have a lot to teach us about how to live and be happy.

Gray has managed to pack a lot of philosophy into this short book, in addition to some charming tales about cats. He's critical of Epicurus and other ancient Greek philosophers who taught that the best way to live is to achieve a state of *ataraxia* or imperturbability. He dismisses this as an ethic for a convalescent hospital. He also questions the relatively modern, quasi-Christian notion that morality consists in living for others. He is much more sympathetic to the ethical systems of Spinoza and Taoism which teach us that the best way to live is to *realise our nature*. Gray sees this way of life exemplified in cats. Cats are untroubled by self-consciousness. They do not try to live up to an image of themselves or the demands of cat society. They are indifferent to 'the meaning of life' and they do not see their lives as a story. Most importantly, they have no idea of an

Cats and the Meaning of Life

Book Review by David Warden

"Feline Philosophy: Cats and the Meaning of Life" (2020) by John Gray, published by Allen Lane

John Gray is an English political philosopher with an interest in the history of ideas. He retired in 2008 as Professor of European Thought at the London School of Economics and Political Science. He contributes regularly to *The Guardian*, *The Times Literary Supplement* and the *New Statesman*.

afterlife in which feline frustrations may be assuaged. No, cats are the ultimate existentialists. They accept life as a gift. Cats live by following their nature in contrast to humans who live by suppressing theirs. The best life for any living thing means *being itself*. Embodying a freedom and happiness that humans have rarely known, cats are strangers in the human world and perhaps this is why they are so often loved.

Gray concludes his book with TEN FELINE HINTS ON HOW TO LIVE WELL. They include 'Never try to persuade human beings to be reasonable', 'Do not look for meaning in your suffering', 'Forget about pursuing happiness and you may find it', and 'Sleep for the joy of sleeping'.

Living like a cat means wanting nothing beyond the life you lead. The meaning of life is a touch, a scent, which comes by chance and is gone before you know it.

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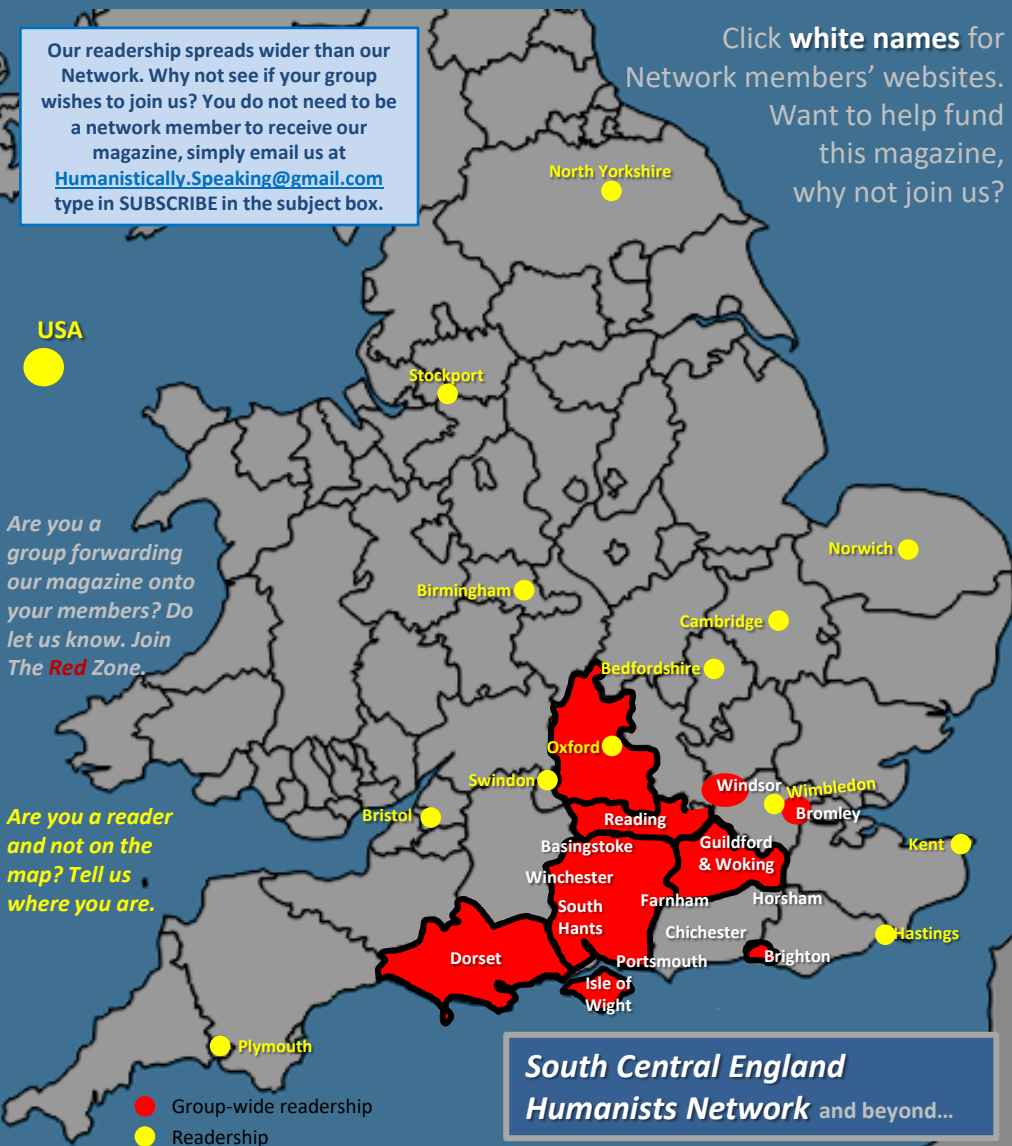
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