

Darwin Day Celebratory Lunch

with An Extraordinary Life Story

**1.15pm Saturday 8th February at Moordown Community Centre,
Coronation Avenue.**



Join us for our legendary Darwin Day celebration which this year includes an interview with one of our members who has had an extraordinary life. Our in-house volunteer chefs Cathy Silman and Dean Robertson will create culinary delights for you including shepherd's pie, vegetarian lasagne, and vegan curry followed by desserts created by Karen Preston and other volunteers. We will serve a selection of wines and soft drinks.

All of this for an inflation-busting price of £5 for Dorset Humanists subscribing members and £10 for non-members/guests. Don't forget you can join Dorset Humanists for just £15pa to claim your discount. Please let David Warden know if you can volunteer to help with this event (such as laying tables and clearing up afterwards).

You must pre-register and ideally pre-pay for this event so that we know who to cater for. If you tell us you are coming you will be charged if you don't turn up on the day. You can book and pre-pay in person at our events or contact David on 07910 886629.

Members' Lunch & AGM 2025

Eat, drink, and have your say

Saturday 8th March ❖ 1.15pm Informal buffet lunch ❖ AGM at 2.00pm Moordown Community Centre, Coronation Ave, BH9 1TW. Please RSVP via Meetup or email so that we know how many to cater for and ensure a quorum. Gluten-free and veg options.



AGM free food for members and guests! Photos by Aaron.



Quest is under way...

Quest is an exciting series of friendly discussions about humanist answers to some of life's biggest questions. Free entry – all welcome.



- 1. **HUMANISM IN CONTEXT** Wednesday 22nd January 7.00pm Westcliff Hotel
Understanding what humanism is in contrast to other worldviews and philosophies
- 2. **FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS** Wednesday 29th January 7.00pm Westcliff Hotel
"What's the difference between atheism and humanism?" and other frequently asked questions
- 3. **HUMANISM IN THE UK AND AROUND THE WORLD** Wednesday 5th February 7.00pm Westcliff Hotel
What does the humanist movement actually do in this country and on other continents?
- 4. **IMPROVE YOUR THINKING SKILLS** Wednesday 12th February 7.00pm Westcliff Hotel
How to be more rational and avoid common pitfalls of bad thinking
- 5. **IMPROVE YOUR HAPPINESS SKILLS** Wednesday 19th February 7.00pm Westcliff Hotel
How to experience more bliss in your life
- 6. **WHAT'S WRONG WITH US?** Wednesday 26th February 7.00pm Westcliff Hotel
Understanding the weird psychology of human beings and how to be your own therapist
- 7. **PROSPECTS FOR HUMAN SURVIVAL** Wednesday 5th March 7.00pm Westcliff Hotel
The top six threats to human survival and how to stop worrying about them
- 8. **WHAT IS A HUMANIST GROUP?** Wednesday 12th March 7.00pm Westcliff Hotel
What's a humanist group for and how can it become a magnet for all non-religious people?

Email David on chairman@dorset.humanist.org.uk or text [07910 886629](tel:07910886629) to register your interest. This programme may be adjusted to meet the needs of participants – let David know what you would like to see included. Attend as many as you like but for the full benefit attend all eight! Details correct at the time of printing. Please check the latest bulletin and especially Meetup.com for any changes to this programme. Venue address: Westcliff Hotel, 7 Durley Chine Rd, BH2 5JS.

Dates for your diary

Wednesday 5 th February 7.00pm	Westcliff Hotel, Durley Chine Rd	Quest session 3 : Humanism in the UK and around the world (see more details and more dates above)
Thursday 6 th February	Moon in the Square	Friendly pub social. Just turn up and look for us on the ground floor on the right.
Saturday 8 th February	Moordown	Darwin Day – please let us know if you are joining us for lunch at 1.15pm chairman@dorset.humanist.org.uk
Friday 21 st February	Westcliff Hotel, Durley Chine Rd	Humanists in the Hotel Bar – informal social event. Just turn up.
Saturday 8 th March	Moordown	Informal members' lunch and annual general meeting. Everyone welcome. Lunch from 1.15pm. AGM 2.00-4.00
Plus other social events and walks which will be announced on Meetup. Please check all events nearer the time in case of any changes.		



Photo by Aaron

Mike Flood is concerned about the direction of travel and lack of debate in the humanist movement...

I've been a humanist for most of my adult life, although I didn't recognise this until I was 60 – that was after I came across a stall at the Edinburgh Festival run by Humanist Society Scotland and subsequently contacted Humanists UK and set up Milton Keynes Humanists. Discovering humanism has been transformational. I've learned so much and met some wonderful people / made some good friends. But in recent years I've grown increasingly concerned about the direction of travel of our movement – or rather the humanist organisations that represent us – and I'd like to share some of my concerns with you this afternoon. I am speaking in a personal capacity.

I think it's time for humanist organisations to rethink their priorities and their approach in the light of technological advance and world events. Indeed, this is in line with what Humanists UK's President Adam Rutherford said in his new year message: "Our work in promoting rational, ethical approaches to life's most challenging questions has never been more vital," he wrote. "As we stand on the cusp of 2025... The challenges are significant –

Is humanism fit for purpose in the 21st century?

*Dr Mike Flood, Chair of Milton Keynes Humanists, and David Warden, Chair of Dorset Humanists, gave complementary talks addressing this question at our January event at Moordown Community Centre. Since delivering his talk, Mike **has** heard from Humanists UK's Chief Executive, Andrew Copson, and he's expecting feedback soon on the issues raised here.*

political polarisation, technological disruption, climate change – but so is our capacity for innovation, empathy, and collective action. Humanism has always been about facing reality with clear eyes and an open mind..." I'll return to this at the end – but I'm struggling with the "clear eyes and an open mind" bit... If only! And may I say I'm not particularly comfortable criticising people or organisations when they are not here to defend themselves. The problem – and it's one I've been wrestling with for some years – is that Humanists UK tends to simply ignore critical comment... I think this is disrespectful – and counter-productive! Humanists UK is fond of the dictum 'Think for Yourself. Act for Everyone' but in practice it shows no interest in what members think – or indeed, in encouraging debate within the movement – which is weird for an organisation that promotes curiosity and freedom of expression. And it pains me to say this. And this is what Humanists UK said about Freedom of Expression in a 2019 policy paper: "Freedom of expression has occupied an important part in humanist thinking for centuries and humanist organisations have always been active in campaigns for it." Maybe, but what about engaging in honest debate about your policies and priorities with your membership? ►

Perhaps I could make a comment about the state of our movement. I think we're in serious trouble: many of our groups are struggling... perhaps not Dorset, but others, including my own in Milton Keynes, most certainly are. Humanists UK says it has 120,000 members & supporters. But my guess is that it has somewhere between 20 and 30,000 members, based on its 2023 annual report of subscription income. I think alarm bells should be ringing. I was shocked to discover that the American Humanist Association has some 34,000 members and supporters – less than one third of what Humanists UK claims, and for a country five times our size!

But my main concern — and what I'm here to debate — is that Humanists UK is campaigning on a very narrow range of topics primarily concerned with the rights of the non-religious rather than the rights of everyone. Indeed, it seems more interested in celebrating humanist heritage than thinking ahead and providing leadership on how we should address some of the really big moral issues that our society — the world — is facing. I'm talking about the tsunami of lies and half truths that infects social media and political dialogue — which encourages polarisation and is undermining democracies around the world; the adoption of artificial intelligence (which is transforming so many aspects of our lives and raising profound questions about what it means to be human); and the growing climate crisis. I first lobbied for Humanists UK's Board to set up an independent panel of experts to advise on disinformation and AI back in August 2018, but they rejected the idea. Although this did indirectly lead to my being invited to represent Humanists International at a Dialogue Session of the European Parliament. Humanists UK *is* fighting for human rights, but it is primarily the rights of the non-religious rather than everyone. I believe fighting for the rights everyone would better reflect what we humanists claim in our founding manifestos and declarations. I also think such a switch would make our movement more attractive to the growing

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number of people who say they are not religious.

Are we really saying that humanists don't have anything useful to contribute to the debate about these issues, and not least the threat they pose to human rights, and to democracy and the very existence of sentient life on Earth? And if not, what does that say about humanism and its relevance in the modern world? Indeed, if you follow this 'logic', someone with mischievous intent might want to argue that there's actually no need for humanist organisations at all as a variety of other organisations are campaigning on the very same issues [as Humanists UK] — and maybe this is why we're seeing a fall-off in public interest and support for humanism. There are many other groups focused on secularism, human rights and equality, reproductive rights, assisted dying and so on. And let's not forget organisations concerned with Cosmopolitanism — the idea that all human beings are members of a single community, where people of various ethnic, cultural and/or religious backgrounds live together in peace and interact productively — one might say humanistically [e.g. Global Citizenship Foundation; World Federalist Movement; Democracy Without Borders].

It's claimed that Humanists UK does not have specialist expertise in the areas of misinformation, AI and climate change. In fact, there's a great deal of specialist talent within our movement. Why on Earth isn't Humanists UK making more use of its Patrons?

In a 2015 essay on 'The Future of Humanism', Peter Derkx, Emeritus Professor of Humanism and Worldviews at the University of Humanistic Studies, Utrecht, noted that “Where humanists give priority to the little fight humanism will more often be defined in negative terms... ►

Where humanists give priority to the great fight for human rights (for everybody...), for peace and for a sustainable economy and a clean and beautiful natural environment, it becomes anachronistic to define humanism as necessarily non- or even anti-religious.” I couldn’t agree more! Humanists UK may want “more non-religious people to live happy, confident, and ethical lives.” I do too, but what I’d like to see is the organisation acknowledging the mess humanity has got itself into – and the damage we’ve done to the planet – and helping prepare local groups (and people more broadly) for the difficult challenges ahead. António Guterres, U.N. Secretary-General, summed up the state of the world in chilling terms in September 2022, in his opening speech to world leaders who had descended on New York for the annual UN General Assembly: “Our world is in big trouble. Divides are growing deeper. Inequalities are growing wider... And challenges are spreading farther... We are gridlocked in colossal global dysfunction. The international community is not ready or willing to tackle the big dramatic challenges of our age. These crises threaten the very future of humanity and the fate of our planet. Our world is in peril – and paralysed.”

The World Economic Forum’s 2024 Global Risk Report assigns high priority to risks over the next decade, including:

- Extreme weather events
- Critical change to Earth systems
- Misinformation and disinformation
- Adverse outcomes of AI technologies

Why aren’t humanist organisations acknowledging the threat and reviewing their campaign priorities and approach accordingly? I’d like to see humanist spokesmen and women playing a more prominent role in the national debate about these issues, and acting for everyone in line with the mantra we like to promote: ‘Think for Yourself. Act for Everyone’. I think words take on a hollow ring when there is little or no follow up, and the campaign focus is clearly elsewhere... on religious education / ending Faith Schools;

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legal objections to humanist marriages in England and Wales; ending blasphemy legislation in Northern Ireland; constitutional reform / Bishops out of the House of Lords... These are important, but let’s get things in perspective! Humanists UK is one of 150 humanist groups in over 50 countries that are members or affiliates of Humanists International. Like the other groups in Europe and North America, it’s primarily focused on ‘campaigning for secularism’ and ‘promoting the humanist life stance’; whilst in the Global South there are some very brave individuals ‘fighting for acceptance’ and stressing people’s basic right to both freedom of and from religion. Some have paid with their lives. But virtually all of this is being done in the context of the ‘Little Fight’ (lobbying for the legitimate but limited interests of non-believers) and not the ‘Great Fight’ – for human rights for everybody, for peace and for a sustainable economy and a clean and beautiful natural environment. And I think this is a serious mistake. Humanists do tackle some Great Fight issues, like assisted dying and the right to abortion, but this is not their main focus. And I don’t know where this drive originates – it’s not written into our various declarations and manifestos. David may have more to say about this.

I do appreciate that there is still much to be done to counter religious privilege and faith schools / religious dogma, but does this REALLY excuse the failure of humanist organisations to address obligations set out in its declarations [such as the Amsterdam Declaration]? ►

‘Great Fight’ sentiments in official humanist declarations

“We seek to promote the flourishing and fellowship of humanity in all its diversity and individuality.”

“Humanists feel a duty of care to all of humanity, including future generations.”

“We recognise that we are part of nature and accept our responsibility for the impact we have on the rest of the natural world.”

“The solutions to the world’s problems lie in human reason and action.”

“We are committed to the unfettered expression and exchange of ideas, and seek to cooperate with people of different beliefs who share our values, all in the cause of building a better world.”

“We are confident that humanity has the potential to solve the problems that confront us, through free inquiry, science, sympathy, and imagination in the furtherance of peace and human flourishing. We call upon all who share these convictions to join us in this inspiring endeavour.”

Amsterdam Declaration 2022 (extracts)

There hasn’t yet been a ‘Humanist Declaration on AI’ but I’d be surprised if it is long in coming, given what Humanists UK’s Director of Communications and Development, Liam Whitton, wrote in this piece on their website in December 2022: ‘The time has come: humanists must define the values that will underpin our AI future’. We’re still waiting...

Conclusion

In so many areas of concern, humanist organisations seem to be missing in action, preoccupied by the ‘Little Fight’ and humanist heritage rather than fighting for the common good and showing what humanism has to offer. Misinformation and unregulated AI are a threat to everything humanists hold dear: the truth; liberal democracy; and what it means to be human. And climate change threatens our prospects of living well and sustainably on planet Earth.

Further reading

Building a World Community: Humanism in the 21st Century (1989) Edited by Paul Kurtz in co-operation with Levi Fragell and Rob Tielman © International Humanist and Ethical Union (now known as Humanists International). Contains papers delivered at the 10th World Humanist Congress in Buffalo, New York, in August 1988. Published by Prometheus Books, Buffalo, New York.

From the dust jacket: “How can we develop a new global ethics, a humanism that is truly planetary in focus? How can we build a twenty-first century world community that supersedes economic conflict, war, ecological despoliation... These are some of the questions examined during the 10th World Humanist Congress in 1988 which brought together the leaders of humanism from 29 countries including the US, the Netherlands, Norway, France, China, India, Mexico, and the Soviet Union. This compilation of fascinating papers addresses such topics as science, technology, ethics, sex and gender, the ethics of global co-operation, ecology and population, war and peace, moral education and human rights.”



Letters & Emails

It's your column...

From Simon Bowden, Secretary of Dorset Humanists, in defence of the idea of humanist spirituality – and adopting a moral platform

I thought it was a great session this afternoon (“Is humanism fit for purpose in the 21st century?”). There seemed to be two distinct camps on the future of humanism:

1. We are a small niche group who campaign on a secular platform, arguing that people’s life decisions should be based on reason and science, not dogma. God and religion are always bad. We are the elite who are “saved” because we no longer believe in God.
2. Humanism is a human-centred world view, which emphasises the need for us to care for all other people and the living world we depend on. We look to science to answer the factual and technical questions it can deal with. For our personal and moral lives we also need to respect the input of our feelings, empathy, intuition, imagination, metaphor and myth.

We are all partly driven by narratives in our minds, as popular politicians and religions have long found. As humanists we need to build founding values, such as the good, the beautiful and the true, which can help to direct and anchor our lives. We will obviously frequently fail to achieve these goals, because the world is an ever-changing flux of conflicting forces.

We need to build these aspirations, on the basis of our humanity rather than any ancient religious creed. And this does not involve any conflict with science or rationality.

“The modern Western drive towards individualism and self-fulfilment as the overriding goal has severe downsides.”

Humanism, which provides a broad moral platform – and then debates and sometimes endorses specific political choices – could have a much wider appeal (and more influence) than the current model. There is no real reason why a Christian or other religious person should not also be a humanist – because the word “God” is indefinable.

A fundamentalist religious person will insist that their God from their sect comes before everything else. But a growing number of people in religious groups have a much freer interpretation of the myths of their particular faith. They will often regard them as metaphors and moral parables rather than historical truth.

But they benefit from the sense of belonging to a moral community. And they may well enjoy a sense of brushing from time to time against the sacred – values they could never disown, or a sense of the infinite expanse at the edge of human existence. These feelings are powerful and healing – and humanists and scientists are free to enjoy them too!

It also seems to be true that, on average, families in a religious community have fewer divorces and, on average, both parents and children benefit from this. The modern Western drive towards individualism and self-fulfilment as the overriding goal has severe downsides.

So perhaps a developed humanism would incorporate a moral stance on the individual’s duty to their family and their society. And an aspiration to reduce the role of their personal ego and will to power and possession. At this stage we are talking about raising our consciousness or awareness – perhaps using meditation, yoga or other disciplines and rituals – which we may or may not call “spiritual.”

From Aaron Darkwood in response to "Is humanism fit for purpose in the 21st century?"

Knowing Mike Flood from his *Humanistically Speaking* submissions, I had some idea of where he would be going in today's address, with his laser-focussed fascination with climate change, fake news, and AI fears. This report certainly seems to echo his views, but do they resonate with the public, or even us humanists? As I briefly touched on in the Q&A, I feel most of the general public are more concerned with immediate threats to their wellbeing, such as housing, cost of living, governments, or crime... over such regards as climate etc. Most of us will be dead before the climate hurts us as individuals and I think UK citizens are aware of this. We will feel the effects of mass migration, people who are moving away from food scarcity, drought and inhospitable landscapes, and that food scarcity may even affect our growing seasons in the UK. But on a day to day immediacy, only wealthy middle class white people, such as the average humanist, have time to stress about obstacles down the line, or even on a global scale. These topics 'may' entertain existing humanists, and may bring in those dedicated sceptics out there or green party members... but I feel that the average Joe, who is very hard to bring through our doors, would be more drawn in by current pressures.

Should Humanists UK divert their limited budget into more campaign areas? Their list is already quite extensive and typically targets areas that rival a faith viewpoint. Although Mike raised good and valid arguments as to why his areas are important to humanity, I'm not sure there is a humanist angle to push on. Certainly worthy to hold talks on each area, and we have done so in Dorset, but does it warrant further action?

David painted a future vision of why we need physical structures in towns and cities, a recognised base for humanists, humanist schools in the UK and a known leader,

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who's 'just' the leader of humanism in the UK. Not just a random person chosen that year, who still works in another realm, or charges a fortune to visit your group, but a dedicated face that is known by people in the street. I exemplified Nigel Farage as a loud, vocal, charismatic and recognised figure that we need championing the Humanist cause. Not him per se, but a figure like him, as loud as him, elevated such as him.

With British white religions dying out, with humanism shrinking, could the Islamic faith be the last 'man' standing in the 2050 year David had touched on? The future of humanism starts today. If we want there to be a future, we need to up our game, widen our vision, and start building some structures!



Statue of Liberty: should we not recognise this as an Enlightenment humanist structure?



View from the Chair

David Warden

Chairman of Dorset Humanists

Mike Flood asked whether humanism has “lost its mojo”. Considering the breadth and depth of ambition expressed in *Humanist Manifesto II* (1973), and in the collection of papers delivered at the 10th World Humanist Congress in 1988 (*Building a World Community: Humanism in the 21st Century*) maybe it has.

Enlightenment humanism has always been imbued with a sense of optimism that humans can, through the application of reason, science, and goodwill, solve its problems and build a better world. Leading Dutch humanist Jaap van Praag (1911-1981) called this the ‘Great Fight’ (the interests of all humanity) as opposed to the ‘Little Fight’ (the interests of the non-religious). We should, of course, fight on both fronts. But there’s often a depressing resistance in organised humanism to step up to the ‘Great Fight’ beyond issuing grand declarations of intent, with the excuse that many other organisations are tackling global problems. Given the modest size and resources of organised humanism, maybe such declarations amount to delusions of grandeur. Or maybe humanists have lost their sense of optimism. It’s commonplace to hear the view expressed that “the planet would be better off without us” – a counsel of anti-humanist despair.

I often cheer myself up with the thought that organisations which are working to solve global problems on the basis of science, reason, and humanity (rather than prayer and supplication to the Almighty) are humanist in all but name. We sometimes obsess about the small size of organised humanism while failing to notice that in many respects we live in a humanist world – albeit a highly imperfect one often undermined by irrational and malevolent forces. It would be a lot better if humanism was recognised as a rational and ethical stance consciously adopted by millions of people and embodied in effective institutions.

AI may pose existential threats but it may also help us solve some of our most complex problems. Misinformation may pollute our knowledge environment, but I would rather train citizens to have the skills to navigate this environment, as opposed to authorising states and tech companies to be the arbiters of truth. On climate change, I believe that humanists should be promoting scientific literacy, not so much “the science” which implies dogma. As many of you will know, I have misgivings about ‘cosmopolitanism’ – the idea that all human beings are members of a single community, where people of various ethnic, cultural and/or religious backgrounds live together in peace and interact productively, as promoted by the Global Citizenship Foundation and other organisations. Humans are a social species and nations are about the biggest entity compatible with democracy, social trust, and sensitivity to the needs of ordinary people. International co-operation is dependent upon the existence of nations. Dissolving them merely presents a new set of global problems. In summary, as humanists we should be open to challenge rather than purveyors of settled beliefs. I’m grateful to Mike for being a critic and a disruptor.