

# Chiltern Humanists

Newsletter No. 126    March 2017



*This life is all we have - make it good to be alive*

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## The Consciousness Conundrum

This is the title of the talk given to our group on the 14<sup>th</sup> February by Peter Naish. Peter is a senior lecturer in cognitive psychology at the Open University.

Historically, questions about the hard problem of consciousness have primarily been a topic for philosophers but advances in neuroscience are bringing us closer to a scientific understanding. The human brain is large and uses 20% of our energy. It is made up of billions of neurons. The evolution of the brain is due to the ability of man to find and grow food, essential for the development of body and a complex brain. This enables man to be aware, to be conscious and self reflecting. Animals are not self reflecting.

The pre-frontal lobe cortex (PFC) is the link to the neurons in the basal ganglia, situated at the back of the brain. The PFC synchronises, joins up the thought processes. The PFC is the area of imagination recall and planning.

## Percy Bysshe Shelley - Poet & Atheist A Humanist Out of Time

John Webster, our speaker in March, is a member of the Oxford Humanist Group. John pointed out the humanism related issues arising from Shelley's work. Shelley was the son of Timothy Shelley landowning Whig M.P. He went to Eton and then to University College Oxford in Oxford. In 1811 he meets

Peter then gave us some exercises to test our ability to react and process information. A green spot rotated fast around a clock face at a certain number on the dial the spot changed to red. Almost everyone failed to note the correct number at which the colour changed. Another test was reading letters displayed for only 2 or 3 seconds on the screen. Some people noted 3 or 4 letters, others only 2.

There are many developments in our efforts to unravel the mysteries of consciousness. What is consciousness and how do physical processes in the brain give rise to the subjective life of a conscious mind?

*Mary Peeler*

## New Year Lunch

To kick off 2017, 21 members and friends had enjoyed a tasty lunch at the Russell Arms. Whilst the menu was limited, the friendship was not.

Harriet Westbrook elopes and is married in Edinburgh. He had been expelled from the university because he refused to answer questions on his pamphlet "The Necessity of Atheism" Only 9 copies remain as a Fellow of New College had all copies collected and burnt.

Shelley became interested in science by a teacher at Eton. He developed a rationalist view of life, sceptical of existing theories based on his attraction to geology and other scientific studies.

His response to the massacre at Peterloo was a plea in his poem 'Mask of Anarchy' for democracy and a fairer society. In 'Ode to a West Wind' he conflates the sight of the dead and damaged leaves to the deprived people he saw in the slums of Florence. His optimism that change would come is in the last line, "If winter comes can spring be far behind?"

It was Shelley's view that poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world. They could have a transforming role. His view was that Christianity offered barren hope. He was out of time. As well as his belief in a secular society he advocated for

changes in the status of women.

He associated with other free thinking poets Byron, Keats and Leigh Hunt. Shelley died in July 1822 when his fishing boat was lost at sea. He was 29. All his poems were published after his death by his wife, May Godwin.

After the talk John showed us his very imaginative DVD, with the narrative by Benjamin Zephaniah. There were songs written and composed by John including quotes from Shelley's poems.

*Mary Peeler*

## So this is the 21<sup>st</sup> Century!

**Hoping to attract a new generation of Humanists to our group, as well as signing up to Meetup, we have now started our own Facebook group. Anyone interested in signing up, go to <https://www.facebook.com/groups/ChilternHumanists/> It is a fairly simple process and hopefully it will help us to expand our group.**

## Annual General Meeting

**Our AGM will be held on Tuesday 11<sup>th</sup> April 2017 in Wendover. This is your opportunity to help shape the future of Chiltern Humanists. There are at least two vacancies on the Committee which need to be filled so no individual committee member gets overloaded. If you would be prepared to join, please talk to anyone already involved. The current committee is Antony Chapman, Steve West, Pam Crawford, Richard Jakeman, Peter Norman and David Harding.**

## Humanism and Green Politics

On 10<sup>th</sup> May in Amersham, we will welcome Siân Berry AM. Siân believes it is up to us, and us alone, to look after our wonderful planet and all its people.

She is a green campaigner, politician and author, and a Patron of the British Humanist Association. Since joining the Green Party in 2001 she has been a candidate in numerous council and parliamentary elections, and was the Green

candidate for London Mayor in 2008 and 2016. In 2016, she was elected as a member of the London Assembly.

As a campaigner, Siân has worked on a range of green and social issues, setting up the Alliance Against Urban 4x4s in 2004 and Reheat Britain, which successfully brought in a boiler scrappage scheme. A supporter of the Atheist Bus Campaign, she also focuses on social justice issues, and is a patron of the Fair Pay Network.

Siân has written a number of illustrated books on green issues and home improvement, including *50 ways to make your house and garden greener* and *Mend it!* Her next book will show how to make attractive household items from random articles of junk. She also contributed a chapter on having a greener festive season to *The Atheist's Guide to Christmas*.

It will be interesting to learn how far Siân's Humanist outlook has inspired her political activity, or vice versa.

## News from “Republic”

Graham Smith, Chief Executive of Republic, writes:-

“Donald Trump and Prince Charles have one thing in common: **they don't like people seeing their dirty little secrets**. One of Trump's tax returns has been leaked, but there are lots of other questions being asked about his financial affairs and relationships with foreign governments.

**For Prince Charles, keeping secrets is a whole lot easier** – thanks to the Royal Archives. Millions of official documents from Charles, the Queen and other royals are sent off to the Royal Archives in Windsor Castle, where they are hidden away from prying eyes.

Because there are lots of important questions we need answers to, **I've just launched Republic's new Royal Archives campaign, to get those royal secrets opened up.**”

Graham continues:-

“Normally all official records go to the National Archive, where they can be published after 30 years or released under freedom of information laws. **Not so for our head of state or the meddling heir to the throne.**

- How did **Charles** get hundreds of laws tailored to suit him?
- How does the **Duchy** get away with not paying tax?
- What's the true extent of Charles's lobbying and **influence**?”

These are just **a few of the questions** the public needs answers to.”

**Steve West (Without comment)**

# Forthcoming Events

*Bring a friend to the next meeting  
All meetings are open to anyone interested*

**Tuesday 11 April - Wendover Library 8:00 pm:  
Annual General Meeting**

**Wednesday 10 May – Amersham – 7:30pm:  
Siân Berry AM - Humanism and Green Politics**

Suggestions for future meetings, events and activities are always welcome.

If anyone needs a lift to a meeting, please contact Steve West and we will try to help.

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## **Our usual venues:**

**Wendover Public Library**, High Street, Wendover HP22 6DU. We meet in the room on the left as you approach the Library entrance. There is ample free parking.

**Amersham Community Centre**, Chiltern Avenue, Amersham. HP6 5AH. The Community Centre is close to the station with a large adjoining car park (free after 6.30). We normally use the Small Barn Hall.

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For any queries about Chiltern Humanists or Humanism generally, please call Steve West on 01494 726351 or email: [west@waitrose.com](mailto:west@waitrose.com)

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For the latest news about Humanism locally and nationally keep an eye on our website [www.chilternhumanists.org.uk](http://www.chilternhumanists.org.uk) . Comment on or submit material to the website via the 'Contact Us' page.

**Please send any contributions, comments or letters for Newsletter No. 127 to Steve West at [west@waitrose.com](mailto:west@waitrose.com)**

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*Chiltern Humanists works in partnership with the British Humanist Association and is affiliated to the National Secular Society.*

*Please note that we maintain a computer record of our membership. The record is used strictly for administrative purposes and is not divulged to third parties.*