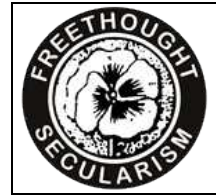


LEICESTER SECULAR SOCIETY

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Telephone: 0116 262 2250



The Oldest Secular Society in the World
Formed in 1851

FEBRUARY NEWS 2008

The Secular Hall Modernisation Project

The special meeting of members on January 6th, called to hear the Rationalist Trust's views on the refurbishment of the Hall, was attended by 36 people, about 25% of the members. Rupert Halfhide, of the Trust, began by announcing that he had appointed two additional Trustees.* Then, after a heated debate, a motion was proposed from the floor that it was time for the Trust to work closely with the Society's Development Group to try to ensure the bid for a Project Planning Grant is put in to the HLF before the March 31st deadline. The motion was carried unanimously and a Joint Working Party (JWP) of the Trustees and the Society's Development Group was established immediately. This has now met twice to progress the bid urgently. While the timetable is very tight the JWP is still hoping to meet it. The Society's Board is calling an Extraordinary General Meeting at 7.30pm on Tuesday 4th March 2008 to consider changes to the Memorandum & Articles of the company to meet HLF requirements. The Trustees of the Rationalist Trust are consulting their solicitors on remodelling their Trust Deed to permit them to meet the HLF's requirements also.

*A further Trustee, Lyn Hurst, has since been appointed so that The Leicester Rationalist Trust now consists of Rupert Halfhide, Nick Manley, Andrew Legg, Tony Barron and Lyn Hurst. Members of the Society Development Group are currently Michael Gerard, David Gorrod, Allan Hayes and Harry Perry.

Roof repairs

You may have seen the scaffolding up around the Hall in the last couple of weeks. Unfortunately this is not the start of the refurbishment project but just some urgent roof repairs to make the building water-tight. The total cost is around £27,000 with the Society contributing £10,000 and an LCC conservation grant the rest.

The LSS could learn a thing or two from Oadby's new Jesus Restaurant

A new restaurant recently opened in our area and my wife and I decided to try it out. As we were shown to our table, we were quite surprised when the waitress told us about the upcoming events at the local church. When our meal arrived, we had to wait while she said grace. The food was excellent, which we ate in surroundings decorated with images depicting the Christ. When our bill finally arrived, we weren't too surprised to find a pamphlet explaining the teaching of Jesus in place of the after-eight mints.

Now the food was fantastic; but let's face it – I would have thought that all that god-bothering is going to put a lot of people off. It's likely that the restaurant might gain a small number of enthusiastic customers, but I'd be surprised if many people come more than once.

If the goal of the restaurant is to sell meals, then to sell the largest number it needs to appeal to the widest range of diners. Yet this new business cannot fail. It cannot fail for a very good reason – I made the whole story up. But if it ever did exist, I'm sure you'd agree that it probably wouldn't last long.

And the case is the same with the Leicester Secular Society. If our goal is to promote secularism, then to achieve our goal we must encourage everyone who shares that goal to join us.

While the group continues to strongly align itself with socialist interests, the society continues to make the same mistake as my fictitious restaurant. To thrive, our society must appeal to secularists regardless of their political or economic beliefs. By abandoning our association with socialism, we would vastly widen our appeal.

We need to ask the question "what are our goals?" If they are to promote socialism, we need to rename the society. If they are to promote secularism then we need to remain focused on that goal at the expense of all others.

Simon Perry

It would be interesting to have responses to Simon's views in the next newsletter. Is the Society really seen as a socialist body? Where should we stand on political issues? - Any offers?

President's Column

I look forward to a significant and successful year for the Society. Opposition to faith schools is building up: Catholic bishops have been called to account by a Commons Select Committee; the British Humanist Association is appointing a full time officer to coordinate opposition; members of the Society are speaking at meetings and writing to the press; and we will be doing more.

Welfare services are likely to join faith schools as an issue. The Bishop of Carlisle suggested in a speech in the House of Lords that the church should be paid to deliver welfare services as it is for schooling; that it should be trusted, not controlled; and should be permitted to advocate its doctrines along with providing welfare. He revealed the Government has been in discussions with the church on these matters for over two years. We will be bringing this issue to wider public attention.

Education is an area in which we can present a positive image and open up discussion. I have been appointed to the Leicester Agreed Syllabus Conference, responsible for preparing the "religious education" syllabus binding on Leicester community schools for the next five years. This is a significant breakthrough following the recommendation in the 2004 "Non-Statutory National Framework" that there should be "opportunities for all pupils to study secular philosophies such as humanism" and the news that the notorious guidance that kept us out of such bodies is to be revised.

Our past chairperson, Eleanor Davidson, is increasingly active in the provision of non-religious ceremonies for births, deaths and marriages. She is also busy as a secular chaplain for the Leicester Hospitals' Trust and Leicester College.

The Society's programme continues to show our wide range of interests and it is my hope that we will be doing more to engage with others and to bring issues to public attention.

And we must not forget our social side - we had a good Burns Night, and in prospect we have another walk round Watermead Park, a visit to Leek to see more of the work of the Hall's architect Lerner Sugden, and, perhaps an East Midlands get together at Twycross Zoo, with talks about evolution and Darwin.

Allan Hayes

Secular Thought for the Day from Cee Martin

'Remember, there are no "shoulds" or "musts" in the universe. Remember that your own intelligence is an adequate guide in every situation.' (Harvey Jackins)

Burns Night Review

Last Sunday's Burns night was a success. I enjoyed myself and I think everybody who came enjoyed the night. The dancing went on a bit longer than intended partly because I danced a little longer than I should and consequently was later than arranged in delivering the food from Rob Eustace's. I, like Rob, think that you need a plan to begin with but to stick religiously to it is very often impossible. The food, when delivered, was hot, went well and there was enough to feed nearly sixty people.

The haggis was piped in in style by John Hoffman in full regalia. The singing that followed went on a little too long and I thought we might have enjoyed a little more of John's pipes. I believe we even made a profit despite buying some giant pans. All in all a fun night and good experience for the organisers.

Dave Ray

UNHOLY SPIRIT

Look! Lichgate's empty shadow
- A brighter band of grass -
'Midst headstone grey and shadow black,
As full moon makes its pass.

Brief journey from that lichgate
- To lay beneath that sod -
Got lost in centuries of time.
He ne'er did meet his God.

For all his life from boy to man,
It was his Sunday place
To sit and hear and stand and sing,
And learn about God's grace.

But when the graveyard beckoned,
When he was very old,
He did not want to leave his seat
- Nor do what he was told.

He could not help the dying bit
- It was the thing to do -
But as for going up or down,
Nor Heaven nor Hell he knew.

"If I have been here all these years
As thundered sermons roared,
Then why not stay and hear some more?
In Heaven I may get bored".

His coffin went into the ground
- The headstone all did buy -
But none did see how quick was he,
How quick and very spry.

For he soon - with soul intact -
Escaped that wooden box,
And went back in the church to sit,
Through doors - keys turned in locks.

Now still in deathly silence
- No Earthly voice nor choir -
He sits immobile, so intense,
No words to life inspire.

Words had boomed forth those years ago,
The organ swamped that space.
To Heaven he did not want to go,
And Hell? - Why! Such disgrace.

Not Heaven, not Hell, then here on Earth
Is where he would remain.

Of companions there would be a dearth -
Who came, he made insane.

Doug Kennett ©

SUBS

Please send in your subscription soonest
so I can get to sleep at night:

Waged - £10

Low Waged - £5

Unwaged - £2

Family - £15

+ a donation if you can afford it!

Thanks, John Catt - Treasurer

LSS Board membership

The AGM elected Allan Hayes as President, Michael Gerard as Chair and six other Directors: Mike Burden, John Catt, Wilf Gaunt, Satish Kapur, Dave Ray and Chris Williams. Harry Perry declined to stand at the last minute on account of the two Trustees of the Rationalist Trust failing to offer any hope of progress on the refurbishment project. In view of the recent progress, however, Harry has agreed to be co-opted back on to the Board and to act as Company Secretary once more.

Saving Sayed Pervez Kambaksh

Many thanks to all LSS members who responded to the urgent email to sign the Independent's petition against the execution in Afghanistan of Pervez Kambaksh for downloading a "blasphemous" document on women's rights. The Afghan Senate has now said that its endorsement of the sentence was a "technical mistake". This opens the way for the eventual release of Pervez - if the pressure is kept up. You can still sign the petition at www.independent.co.uk/petition. It now has around 65,000 signatures. Thanks

Is it time to pull out of Afghanistan?

The sentencing of Sayed Pervez Baksh to death by a religious court in Afghanistan is a stark warning that defeating the Taliban will not defeat religious extremism in that country.

While the overthrow of the Taliban government was justified by the need to eliminate a haven for Al Qaida's Islamic terrorism, we are seeing the hopes of creating a secular democracy in that country destroyed by the very people who were supposed to establish it.

The presence of NATO troops there is now doing no more than bolstering one faction in a civil war between elites vying with each other to prove their fundamentalist credentials. Our taxes are paying for Sharia law to be imposed. I say it's time to think about pulling the plug. Why not bring the troops home?

Harry

A man runs through a crowded train. "Get me a priest", he shouts. A few minutes later he runs back down it. "OK, I'll settle for a vicar." He's more desperate as he passes again, shouting "A Rabbi would do, I'm not choosy." At this point another man gets up and says, "My son, perhaps I can help you - I'm a Methodist minister, and I might be able to soothe your soul, which is obviously in torment." "You're no good", he replies, "I need a corkscrew!"

From Chris Williams

THE SECULAR TOURIST (3)

We visited the town of Gavle in Sweden in the summer of 2007 to check out the Joe Hill Museum situated in a tiny attic room above an office of the International Workers of the World (IWW or "the Wobblies"). The museum is in Gavle because Joe Hill was a Swedish emigrant from the town who went to America in 1902 to seek his fortune, like hundreds of thousands of other Swedes of his time.



While a migrant labourer in various occupations Joe gradually got more involved in the workers' movement and after 1910, became well-known as an active organiser and song-writer for the Wobblies.

His time as a union organiser is not well documented but it earned him respect and affection until one day in January 1914 when he had occasion to visit a doctor with a gunshot wound to his arm. He was subsequently arrested, tried and found guilty of the murder of a shopkeeper and his son on the same day, during the course of an armed robbery. A widely supported but unsuccessful campaign for his freedom was followed by his execution on 19 November 1915.

The shopkeeper's other son was an eye-witness and his testimony, added to the evidence of the gunshot wound, which the son said he got during the robbery, was enough to get the conviction. Joe Hill's trial and execution is traditionally seen by the left as at best a miscarriage of justice and at worst a piece of revenge for his union activities by US government authorities. But the failure of Joe Hill to provide any explanation of how he came by the wound, except to refer darkly to an illicit liaison with an unnamed married woman, was likely as much to blame for his conviction as anything else. Calls for a posthumous pardon continue.

Harry

Cost savings

As part of trying to improve the financial efficiency of the Society the Board has recently decided to end the practice of subsidising member subscriptions to "The Freethinker" and the funding of the mailing of the Coventry & Warwickshire newsletter to members. This will now be provided on-line only. To get it please confirm your email address to: john.catt@ntlworld.com

The Simpsons

Bart often plagues his Sunday School teacher with questions about the hereafter: Wouldn't you get used to Hell, like in a hot-tub? Will there be pirates in Hell? Will an amputated leg be reattached in Heaven? Will there be animals in Heaven? What about cavemen? Robots with a human brain? What if a ventriloquist goes to Heaven, will his dummy go too? (Answers: no, yes, yes, no, I don't know, and no...) Finally the teacher breaks down pleading: "I don't know! All these questions! Is a little blind faith too much to ask?!"

Come on, you can spare it

There is a desperate shortage of both blood and donor organs in our NHS. Please help meet the needs of the sick and injured. Register now for blood donation by phoning **08457 711711** or sign up at: <http://www.blood.co.uk/>

And to join the National Organ Donor Register phone: **08456 060400** or go to: <http://www.uktransplant.org.uk/>

Love thy neighbour - tut-tut

Greek Orthodox and Armenian Apostolic priests were sweeping up at Bethlehem's Church of the Nativity following the Christmas rites of the Western churches earlier in December. The floors, walls and rafters of the Church of the Nativity are scrubbed and swept by Orthodox priests between the two festivals to ensure purification before they start their own rites.

The basilica, built over the grotto in the West Bank town that is the reputed birthplace of Jesus of Nazareth, is shared by Roman Catholic, Greek Orthodox and Armenian religious authorities.

Unfortunately some Orthodox faithful encroached on the Armenian section by placing a ladder across their airspace. No sooner had this happened than all Hell broke loose - prompting pitched battles with the brooms. Four people were wounded in the fray!

Trip to Leek

Dave Ray, who was organising the trip to Leek to look at Lerner Sugden's work, regrets that personal commitments now prevent him from organising this as planned in the early part of this year. He believes it will be possible to arrange it for September. Watch this space.

IDEAS ON RACE AND INTELLIGENCE

The next session of the members only IDEAS Group will be at 7.30pm on Thursday 21st February at the Hall. Harry Perry is to make the opening presentation on the highly controversial topic of "Race & Intelligence". Stephen Jay Gould's "The Mismeasure of Man" is background reading.

'Madagascar - an Overview'

Sunday 20th January 2008

Ed Morrison is an ecology student taking a masters degree at Leicester University. He gave an informative view of the History, Geography, Ecology and Peoples of Madagascar, supported with numerous slides. What came across was his enthusiasm for Madagascar and his in depth knowledge. The unique fauna and flora are amazing. Ed hopes to be working there in about twelve months helping to set up an ecology area which will bring economic benefit to the local people. He plans to travel overland to Mozambique and then take a ferry to the Island. We look forward to having an update from him in a year or two.

Mike Burden

Join the Debate - Join the Forum

The march of technology goes on ... members are now able to sign up with the Society's own private discussion vehicle on the internet by going to: <http://groups.google.co.uk/group/leicestersecularsociety>

You will be able to post your own opinions and respond to those of others. There have been plenty of lively exchanges already on the Society and the Hall, the Sea of Faith and the visit of Ken Hamm (apparently a religious nutter) to Parklands Leisure Centre in Oadby.

(Apologies for using the word "nutter", I let

YOUR OPINION PLEASE

Now that we seem to have got into a regularish pattern of production of LSS News it would be really helpful if you were to feed back your thoughts on its style, content and tone. Do you read it? What bits do you like and dislike? Do you think it needs to be weightier with longer discussion pieces? Is it too light-hearted? Are we too hard on religion - or not hard enough? Does it need more illustration? Should it be trying to orchestrate local campaigns? Do you want to have reports of what the Board talks about?

Most important - **would you like to help put it together?**

Please do let me, Harry Perry, have your answers on these and any other aspects of the newsletter. Call on 07795 097635 or email me at harry.perry1@btinternet.com or write to me at the Hall. Thanks, Harry

The Board has revived the policy of making a collection at all events - whatever you can afford. Thanks

www.leicestersecularsociety.org.uk
email: mail@leicestersecularsociety.org.uk