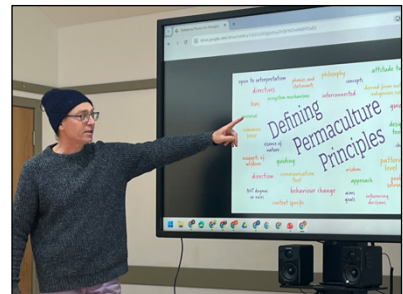


Monthly Bulletin — March 2026

RECAP OF RECENT NEH EVENTS

Permaculture updated

In the late 1950s Bill Mollison, an Australian scientist, was watching marsupials browsing in the Tasmanian rain forests. He was ‘inspired and awed by the life-giving abundance and rich interconnectedness of this eco-system.’ At that moment, Mollison jotted down the following words in his diary: ‘I believe that we could build systems that would function as well as this one does.’



Working with others – particularly David Holmgren – Mollison began to develop his idea into an approach to land management and settlement design based on their observations of flourishing natural ecosystems. They created a set of design principles using ‘whole-system’ thinking and applied them to fields such as regenerative agriculture, town planning, rewilding, and community resilience.

Mollison and Holmgren called their approach ‘permaculture’ (from ‘permanent agriculture’) and saw it as the opposite of modern industrialisation. Drawing on philosophy, ethics, and compassion for living things, permaculture is underpinned by a set of principles which guide our engagement with living systems.

For an approach so reliant on principles and ethics, it is perhaps surprising that the only attempt to describe them was made in 2002, when Holmgren published *Permaculture: Principles and Pathways Beyond Sustainability*.

Wilf Richards is a permaculture designer who has been co-managing a cooperative smallholding business near Durham City with friends since 2001. A co-founder of the worker’s coop Abundant Earth, the Land of Roots CIC and Green Durham CIC, he was a learned, fascinating and engaging guide to permaculture for the February meeting of the Durham Salon.

In this month’s Bulletin:

- The Rosalind Franklin Lecture: Is free will an illusion?
- Zero net migration would shrink UK economy by 3.6%
- *Church of England abandons proposals for same-sex blessing ceremonies*

Collaborating with 40 other practitioners and drawing on the experience of the many people he has worked with over the last four decades, Richards publishes *The Power of Permaculture Principles* this month. He provided his attentive Salon audience with an absorbing preview.

The book's starting point is the 12 principles described by Holmgren. The authors retrieve and integrate many of Mollison's original principles and introduces new ones from permaculture designers worldwide. The result is a highly readable compendium which, step by step, suggests a better way for humans to live for the benefit of all living things.

The Power of Permaculture Principles is published by Permanent Publications, priced £19.95. Click [here](#) for more information and to order

Food and good conversation strengthen fragile communities

Moira Turner

In a fractured world, building social cohesion and connecting communities is vital work.

The Dialogue Society, a London-based registered charity, does this through creating opportunities for dialogue, sharing ideas, and growing new networks.

I was pleased to join the Community Dialogue Iftar and Diversity Dinner at Newcastle



Cathedral, organised by the Society's North East branch, under the banner of 'Building Community Trust'.

The objective was to bring together people from varying backgrounds and foster inter-social and intercultural understanding among individuals of all faiths and none, as well as diverse communities from Tyne and Wear and its surrounding regions.

It was a celebration of Ramadan and also an opportunity to note other festive occasions which take place in March and April.

The nave of the cathedral looked lovely, decorated with lights and there were 20 beautifully laid tables for over 170 guests.

A number of dignitaries attended including the Lord Lieutenant of Tyne and Wear, the High Sheriff, and the Dean of Newcastle Cathedral. The Lord Lieutenant, Lucy Winskill OBE spoke on the fragility of social cohesion generally throughout the country and the others echoed this theme in their speeches.

Tugay Yalcin, Regional Director of the Dialogue Society for the North of England, mentioned that although he realised there were those who were not willing to take part in coming together, he said he was always happy to host such events.

It was good to meet with so many people sharing a community gathering and I was impressed by the number of young people taking part. The speakers and entertainers were all interesting and there were videos, live music, poetry, dance, and artwork displays. As someone who can't even draw, I was particularly impressed at the work of a sand artist. The addition of large TV

screens at each side of the interior meant that everybody could clearly see the proceedings from the stage at the front.

The food was varied and good with something to suit every taste and, all told, it was a joyous occasion.

Book club

Jan Mole

Bury the Chains by Adam Hochschild.

Almost a full house today apart from Susan who was called away on community business.



Most of us had read the book completely and could certainly agree on the excellent quality of writing and research. The detail in the book built up a picture with huge impact. It was agreed that we really knew very little about the abolition of slavery before reading it. We were astounded by the length of time, the magnitude of opposition and the sheer perseverance required by a determined group to achieve an end to the slave trade.

We found the complicity of church and state very distressing and this led to a discussion about how information was disseminated then and the resonances with today's 'fake news'; plus the pros and cons of reparation by various groups today.

Beliefs about the superiority of certain races and the dehumanising process which allows for abhorrent treatment of peoples were also discussed.

Our next meeting will be held at 12-30pm Monday 30th March at the 'Duke of Wellington' Durham when we will discuss *Tomb of Sand* by Geetanjali Shree.

NEH NEWS Forthcoming meetings

The NEH Annual General meeting will be held this month, and all members are invited. Apart from the normal business, attendees will be invited to contribute and discuss topics drawn from a hat. The relevant papers will be distributed shortly.

What: NEH Annual General meeting

When: March 28, 2.30pm

Where: Merryoaks Community Hall, Park House Rd, Durham DH1 3QF

Secular Salon: From Amman to Durham: Journeys, Identity and Fiction With Fadia Faqir

The next North East Secular Salon is pleased to welcome the internationally acclaimed novelist Fadia Faqir for an afternoon exploring journeys, identity and the role of fiction in bridging cultures.

Born in Amman in 1956 and educated in Jordan and England, Faqir studied English Literature at the University of Jordan before moving to Britain to complete an MA in Creative Writing at Lancaster University. She later received the first PhD in Creative and Critical Writing from the University of East Anglia.

Her novels include *Nisanit* (1988), *Pillars of Salt* (1996), and the widely translated *My Name is Salma* (published in the USA as *The Cry of the Dove*). Her work explores migration, cultural in-betweenness, women's lives and the tensions between homeland, religion and identity. Blending Arabic storytelling traditions with contemporary narrative techniques, her fiction offers powerful feminist and political insight.

Faqir has also edited *In the House of Silence: Autobiographical Essays by Arab Women Writers* and has taught and written extensively in Durham, where she is currently Writing Fellow at St Aidan's College.

Join us for what promises to be a stimulating and thought-provoking conversation with a writer whose work connects Amman and Durham through story.

The event is free and open to all. Refreshments will be provided, and donations are welcomed to help cover costs.

When: Sunday 15th March, 2.00pm

Where: Merryoaks Community Hall, Park House Rd, Durham DH1 3QF

Sunday Breakfast

When: March 29th, 10.30

Where: The Five Swans. The pub is at 14 St Mary's Place, Newcastle upon Tyne NE1 7PG, very convenient for car parks, the Metro and the Bus Station.

Please join us for a chat about nothing and everything.

HUMANISTS UK NEWS

For millennia, humanity has wrestled with the concept of destiny. To the ancients, it was the whim of the gods; to Enlightenment thinkers, it was a superstition to be swept away by the autonomous self. But as we venture further into the 21st century, a new kind of determinism is emerging – not written in the stars, but said to be inscribed in our DNA and our neural wiring.



In this riveting lecture on the science of fate, Dr Hannah Critchlow will invite us to reconsider the 'free will' we cherish, investigating whether, to any degree, it could be an illusion generated by the brain's need for a coherent narrative – and the possible risks of such 'forbidden knowledge'.

Hannah will take us on a journey through the developing, hungry, and caring brain, examining how our lives are shaped by forces set in motion long before our conscious minds take the stage. She will explore how the microscopic methylation of our DNA in the womb and the structural sensitivity of our amygdalae influence and drive of our political affiliations, our

mental health, and even our romantic choices. Yet, this is not a counsel of despair. Hannah will demonstrate that by accepting the reality of our biological constraints, we may finally acquire the tools to alter them.

This Rosalind Franklin Lecture promises to be a tour de force combining neuroscience and compassion, suggesting that while the Fates may spin the thread, we can still choose the tapestry we weave.

When: Thursday 5 March, 19.30 – 21.00

Where: Conway Hall, London and Online

Book [here](#)

The 2025 Freedom of Thought report - a global report on the rights, legal status and discrimination against humanists, atheists and the non-religious – has been launched by Humanists International.



This year's Key Countries edition features ten country entries – Bangladesh, El Salvador, Georgia, Kenya, Lebanon, Malaysia, Malta, Myanmar, Sudan, and the USA – as well as a Foreword by Mubarak Bala about his persecution and road to freedom.

The theme of the Key Countries edition 2025 is the right to freedom of religion or belief in a world of rising authoritarianism. The report captures positive developments while highlighting instances of democratic backsliding, religious nationalism, and restrictions on civic space.

To read the report, click [here](#)

Freedom of Thought podcast

Humanists International has officially launched *Freedom of Thought*, a new global news and interview podcast examining the state of freedom of belief, expression, and human rights worldwide.



Freedom of Thought is hosted by Leon Langdon, Senior Advocacy Officer and Gary McLelland, Chief Executive. The podcast brings together researchers, human rights defenders, activists, and policy experts to explore the realities facing humanists, atheists, and non-religious people across the globe.

To listen, click [here](#)

OTHER NEWS

Assisted dying

Assisted dying on Welsh NHS a step closer as Senedd votes in favour

Welsh politicians have paved the way for assisted dying services on the NHS after a key vote took place in the Senedd.

Following an emotional debate, Wales' parliament gave its consent to Westminster legislation that would allow terminally ill people to obtain a medically assisted death.

The landmark bill, which is currently in the House of Lords, would legalise the practice across England and Wales if passed.

The vote in Cardiff Bay was needed because the backbench law gives powers to the Welsh government to set rules for assisted dying services if it wishes to.

To read more, click [here](#).

Meanwhile, a law to allow terminally ill adults the right to choose to end their own lives has been approved in Jersey.

The votes in Jersey and Cardiff mean there are now five parliaments across the British Isles that have weighed in on the divisive issue of assisted dying. To read more, click [here](#)

Assisted dying would commodify death, says James Gordon Reid Haveloch-Jones

For two millennia, Christians have proclaimed that life — fragile, dependent, and unfinished — is not a problem to be solved, but a mystery to be accompanied. Yet the assisted-dying Bill invites us to imagine death not as the final horizon of a life held in communion, but as a purchasable solution to suffering, administered with clinical tidiness and cultural indifference.

Once death becomes a service, it inevitably becomes a convenience. Once it becomes a convenience, it will not be long before it becomes an expectation — especially for people who already feel like a burden.

To read more, click [here](#)

Migration

Zero net migration would shrink UK economy by 3.6%, says thinktank

The UK economy would be 3.6% smaller by 2040 if net migration fell to zero, forcing the government to raise taxes to combat a much bigger budget deficit, a thinktank has predicted.

The National Institute of Economic and Social Research (NIESR) said falling birthrates in the UK and a sharp decrease in net migration last year had led it to consider what would happen if this trend continued to the end of the decade.

In this scenario the UK population would stop growing at about 70 million in 2030. The latest official figures showed the UK population was 69.3 million in 2024.

Dr Benjamin Caswell, a senior economist at NIESR, said: 'Net zero migration leaves the economy 3.6% smaller by 2040 and this reflects slower employment growth and a smaller workforce.'

The thinktank said that initially real wages and disposable income would rise as firms would be forced to use more machinery and become more productive, with GDP per capita rising by 2% by 2040.

However, these gains would come at the cost of weaker growth in the economy overall as a smaller and ageing population would lead to fewer tax revenues, opening up the gap between public spending and receipts and causing the government to borrow more.

‘Imagine it as like freezing the population where it is, and then just having a continually ageing population,’ Caswell said. ‘In the short to medium term, it’s not too detrimental, but over 20 years this gap [in spending and receipts] becomes continually larger and larger.’

To read more, click [here](#)

Same sex marriage

Church of England abandons proposals for same-sex blessing ceremonies

The Church of England's national assembly has formally abandoned proposals to deliver blessing ceremonies for same-sex couples in churches.

General Synod did vote to continue to look into the issue in the future, but bishops had already decided there were theological and legal barriers to having such ceremonies now.

There was emotional testimony from some gay Christians during the Synod debate and warnings that many liberals and LGBT people were abandoning the Church.



Church leaders apologised for the hurt caused to ‘both sides’, with conservatives having also complained about a lack of clarity from bishops about traditional teaching about marriage and sexuality.

‘This is not where I want us to be, nor where I hoped we would be three years ago. And I want to acknowledge that wherever you stand on the debate, I know that many of you are feeling angry and disappointed,’ said the Archbishop of York Stephen Cottrell at Synod on Thursday.

In early 2023 after 10 years of bitter debate, the Church of England finally decided that, unlike some other Anglican churches like the Scottish Episcopal Church, it would not support gay marriage.

To read more, click [here](#)

Dialogue Society 2025 Impact Report: Deepening Connects, Cultivating Trust

The Dialogue Society is a registered charity, established in London in 1999, with the aim of advancing social cohesion by connecting communities, empowering people to engage and contributing to the development of ideas on dialogue and community-building.

As public debate has grown more polarised, bringing people together matters more than ever — strengthening social cohesion by connecting people across differences and turning those connections into lasting community trust.

The Dialogue Society does this by bringing people together through discussion forums, courses, capacity building publications and outreach. It operates nation-wide with regional branches across the UK. It was founded by British Muslims of Turkish background inspired by the teachings and example of Muslim scholar and peace advocate Fethullah Gülen.

The Dialogue Society is not a religious or ethnic organisation. It aims to facilitate dialogue on a whole range of social issues, regardless of any particular faith or religion. It stands for democracy, human rights, the non-instrumentalisation of religion in politics, equality and freedom of speech.

To read the Dialogue Society's 2025 Impact Report, click [here](#)

We thought Gen Z had started going to church in droves. But the truth is more complicated

Prior to last year, it had long been accepted that Christianity was declining in Britain - from the days when most people were Christian, to an increasingly atheist and multi-faith society where derelict church buildings were being sold off and turned into cocktail bars and luxury flats.

But in 2025, a new report from the Bible Society called *The Quiet Revival* started to challenge the idea that Christian faith was waning. Based on an online YouGov survey it commissioned, it suggested the number of Gen Zs attending church in England and Wales had skyrocketed in the past six years, to the surprise and delight of Christian communities.

It spawned press coverage across the country, with churches presenting their own evidence of young people 'turning to Jesus', and Christian groups asking how to make the quiet revival 'louder'.

Last September, the diocese of Guildford held a conference called 'turning up the volume on the quiet revival', where 600 people heard the theory likened to 'a great wave sent by God'.

But now the report has become the centre of a fierce debate among experts who are questioning its findings - and the entire premise of the quiet revival, which was primarily based on one survey.

They say there is growing evidence that some online surveys aren't reliable, especially when presenting data on young people, and when respondents are rewarded for taking part.

To read the full report, click [here](#)

Call for Participants: Language of Older People in the North-East

Scarlett L Hart

Are you interested in the language and accents of North-East of England? If you are aged 65+ and were raised in Tyneside, Wearside, County Durham or Northumberland, you are invited to take part in a PhD project exploring the speech, accents and hearing of older people in the region.

My research aims to combat the current knowledge gap on how ageing-related changes in hearing, cognition, and physiology affect our perception and production of specific

speech sounds. This research could be used in the development of smart hearing aid devices, and for training resources for health & social care professionals to help combat the stigma



older people with and without hearing loss face because of the way their speech is perceived.

Participants will be invited to the Newcastle University Linguistics Laboratory for a half day visit, involving a short audio-recorded interview about your experiences as an older adult in the North East and completing a range of tasks designed to identify diversity in ageing. Tea, coffee, and biscuits will be provided! If you are interested in taking part, you can contact me via email at S.L.Hart2@newcastle.ac.uk for further details.

'Recognized More and More': Frederick Douglass and Newcastle's role in ending slavery in the United States.

Everyone knows that Newcastle had a strong tradition of reform in the nineteenth century, from land reformer Thomas Spence to political reformer Lord Grey, to the campaigning editor Joseph Cowen, and the city has made much of its connection to the abolitionist Frederick Douglass in recent years. But Newcastle's connection to the campaign to end American slavery was in place long before Douglass arrived, and it included a range of actors, both local and visiting. This talk will give a sense of who those people were, what they did, and what difference it made to the end of slavery in the United States.



Bruce E. Baker is Professor of American History and African American Studies at Newcastle University and has written widely on the history of the American South. Since 2020, he has worked closely with Fionnghuala Sweeney, an expert on Frederick Douglass, to research the life and career of Moses Roper, a fugitive slave from North Carolina, who came to Britain and campaigned against American slavery several years before Douglass.

When: Saturday 14th March at 3pm

Where: 1867 café bar (Tyne Theatre & Opera House)

PAYF tickets available for pre-booking [here](#)



Annie Besant (1 October 1847 – 20 September 1933) was London-born socialist, theosophist, freemason, women's rights and Home Rule activist, educationist, and campaigner for Indian nationalism. A close friend of Charles Bradlaugh, she was an ardent supporter of both Irish and Indian self-rule. She became the first female president of the Indian National Congress in 1917.

This Freethinker webinar will provide a brief overview of her activism while she was a member of the National Secular Society (NSS). Examples will be taken from her conferences, essays, and actions related to Freethought and to reforms put forward by the NSS, as well as to her positions on some of the issues Victorian feminists tackled in those years, positions which were not unanimously shared by secularists—or indeed other feminists. Her determination, her courage, and her capacity to act in coherence with her convictions and in spite of ‘mainstream’ beliefs and cultural expectations can make her a relevant example for modern progressives.



About the speaker: Lucie Lemieux is a retired health professional with experience in women’s health and international health, currently pursuing a Master’s degree in history with a Concentration in Feminist Studies at the Université du Québec à Montréal, Canada. Her subject is Annie Besant’s contribution to freethought while she was one of the vice-presidents of the National Secular Society, from 1875 to 1890.

You must register to secure your place at the webinar. To do so, click [here](#)

I died for 40 minutes - here's what it taught me about life

Dying doesn't normally give a person new life - yet that is exactly what happened to Patrick Charnley.

He was a high-flying lawyer, who viewed downtime as ‘wasted time’, restlessly pushing himself to success.

But working long hours during the pandemic in 2021, the ultra-fit father-of-two suffered a cardiac arrest aged 39.

What began as an unremarkable evening eating sausage and chips on the sofa ended with him collapsing unconscious. Triggered by a hereditary condition, his heart stopped. Patrick was clinically dead for 40 minutes. His wife performed CPR, while his daughter and son, then nine and seven, ran to get help.



Paramedics' defibrillation attempts failed. With his life slipping away, they tried adrenaline shots as a ‘kind of final roll of the dice’, says Patrick.

They ‘shocked and shocked and shocked [me]’, he adds. His wife began to suspect he was lost. Then suddenly his heart began beating again.

Patrick awoke from his week-long coma a changed man, with a brain injury that affects his sight, memory and stamina.

Unable to work and live as he did before, he feels it's allowed him to be more present in life and relationships.

It's a perspective shift, he tells Emma Barnett's that he ‘wouldn't change’ - even if given the chance to return to his old life. To listen, click [here](#)



CONTACT US FOR MORE

North East Humanists

All of the latest information about North East Humanists is available on our [website](#). You can also follow us on social media via [Facebook](#) or [X \(formerly Twitter\)](#). Interacting with us there is a great way to help spread the news about Humanism.

Please consider a membership with us if you do not already have one. Our fees are very low, but they really do support so much local grassroots work, as we hope you see in these bulletins. This month, we are excited to welcome **Sue Robson** as a new member. Thanks for joining!

The monthly bulletin is free for members and supporters of North East Humanists. If membership is more of a commitment than you can make, you can be a supporter if you just [sign up to our email list](#). For NEH members without email, the bulletin is printed by Mike and Moira Turner and sent by post. Contact them on 07740 427132 to arrange this if you need it.

Durham Secular Salon

This local group is run by Susan Walker. Contact her at susan.walker@northeast-humanists.org.uk if you would like more information.

Teesside Humanist Group

If you would like to join this group, please [contact us](#) for more details. You can also follow them on Twitter [@TeesHumanists](#) or like the [Teesside Humanists](#) group on Facebook run by Terry Waites and Ben Collier.

Humanist Funerals:

The death of a close relative or friend can be traumatic, the feelings of shock and loss deep. The funeral is an opportunity to reflect on your feelings with love and respect. Also, to celebrate the life of the person you have lost, to express gratitude and appreciation, to say goodbye with care and dignity.

While acknowledging the sadness, a Humanist funeral ceremony celebrates life, for we believe that life itself is the greatest cause of all to celebrate. Our ceremonies are non-religious and based on the life-affirming values of love and concern for others.

We also offer support for *Baby Namings, Weddings and Vow Renewals*

We can provide celebrants through the Tyne Wear Celebrants Group, those accredited by Humanists UK, and other individuals serving the North East region.

For more information, please contact Ian Hunter (Secretary, North East Humanists) on 07969165024, ian.hunter@northeast-humanists.org.uk

