



RE Centres Southern Regional Group

<http://users.xalt.co.uk/recentresgroup/>

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Chair: Shirley Nicholls
Suffolk Christian Resource Centre
Diocesan House, Cutler Street, Ipswich IP1 1UQ
Tel: 01473 298507
shirley@stedmundsbury.anglican.org

Newsletter Editor: Ian Knight
Winchester Diocesan Resource Centre
Church House, 9 The Close, Winchester SO23 9LS
Tel: 01962 624760
ian.knight@chsewinchester.clara.net

Letter from the Chair.....

Sadly we all need to step back and have a break sometime – now it’s my turn! I feel that after four years since I took over from Dawn as Chairman of our group (in July 2000—something else to celebrate in that year!) it is time to give someone else a turn.



I have enjoyed my time as Chairman immensely and found it to be a very rewarding part of my membership of the group. It is very useful for pushing up the credibility stakes, especially when other diocesan officers are made aware of the group’s existence; they realise there is life outside St Eds & Ips.

The best moments for me, apart from the fellowship, are when new members join us, attend our meetings and find the time spent together invaluable. The support and affirmation from other group members is something I feel we all need in this day and age. The worst moments have been struggling to find a way through flooded/blocked Suffolk countryside roads in order to get to a meeting on time – and even catch the train I am booked on. It is also sad when a centre is closed and so you don’t see some people again.

My best wishes to the person who feels they are at the point in their work where they can carry our group on to the next stage and take over as Chairman.

See you in November.

Shirley Nicholls

Remember that we need to elect a new Chairman at our November meeting. Do please think who would be good for this job, do some phoning round, come to the meeting and give the new person your support.

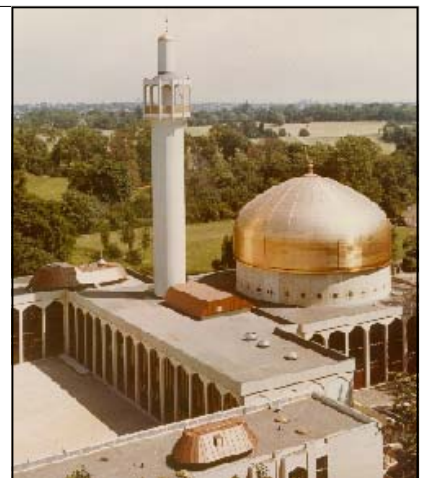


And a huge thank you from all the group to Shirley for all her work on our behalf over the last four years.

NOVEMBER MEETING

Regents Park Mosque
London

Tuesday 2
November
11 am—3.30 pm



The day includes a guided tour of the mosque, a chance to observe prayers and to buy resources in the shop. It might be possible to buy lunch in the canteen or we may need to bring a packed lunch. We shall also have a short business meeting to elect a new chairman and plan our meeting next summer.

Find out more about the mosque at www.iccuk.org.

It is situated in Hanover Gate between Park Road and Regents Park. There are directions and a map at www.iccuk.org/icc/location.htm Baker Street Underground Station is just off the bottom right hand corner of the map.

Please would you let Ian know if you will be coming by Thursday 28 October (contact details above).



21st Annual Conference—East Anglia Experience



Members of the Group in the Abbey Grounds, Walsingham

Our East Anglian experience could almost be summed up as an “Interfaith Mystery Tour” or perhaps “Diversity is the Name of the Game”.

Starting in the heart of modern day Ipswich, we met at the office of Suffolk Inter Faith Resource (SIFRE) and some of us went off to visit Shirley’s *Revelations* Bookshop and Resource Centre before enjoying a delicious lunch. Our Pagan tutor Terry Smith gave us a good overview of Anglo-Saxon history and with his help we were able to build up a picture of life around the year 600 CE.

We set off to journey back in time to Sutton Hoo. A rather awesome place, it has yielded some magnificent treasures. With Terry’s and Robin’s help we began to understand life at the time of Raedwald, King of East Anglia. Gazing at the treasures unearthed in the burial mound and now on display in the museum one couldn’t help but marvel at the craftsmanship of those exquisite pieces set out before us.

And so on we went along winding country lanes to the peace and tranquillity of All Hallows’ Convent, Ditchingham. It is set in beautiful grounds - what a pity there was so little time to enjoy them.

After supper, with the business meeting over, we found time to look at resources brought from other centres, exchanged suppliers’ addresses, noted a few eye-catching titles and joined Cynthia to play *Diversity*, a stimulating and thought-provoking board game produced by SIFRE.

Next morning, no sooner had we finished breakfast than we were on the road again – this time to cross the boundary into Norfolk. Clutching more of Shirley’s detailed directions we found ourselves leading a convoy and missed the obvious (?) turning to Fakenham heading instead towards Swaffham. I hope we weren’t too misleading in arriving at Walsingham via a dual carriageway.

Walsingham: such a joy, such beauty and so much to take in; the Pilgrims’ mile, the Roman Catholic Slipper Chapel, the Abbey Grounds with our guide Janet Marshall, the Anglican shrine, Orthodox church, Methodist Chapel, a trail of buildings...

We stayed on at the shrine for the sprinkling service and then spent a further two hours walking around Walsingham itself. The Eikon Shop was a real treasure trove and I had a job to hold onto my purse strings. I bought a collection of bits to equip a second box of Christian artefacts – the variety of crosses was a real bonus.

We had hoped to stay overnight in Norfolk but the weather was deteriorating rapidly so we finally drove home, mercifully missing the eye of the storm which had brought down branches of trees in Oxfordshire. We hope you all had safe journeys home.

Thank you, Shirley, for all your hard work - it was a fascinating experience and well worth the journey. Thank you also to Cynthia and her colleagues from Suffolk College.

Dudley and Gillian Hunt, Banbury RE Centre

News from Wintershall



The Acts of the Apostles

Thursday 21—Saturday 23 October 7.30 pm
Adults £15, children and students £7.50



The Wintershall Nativity Play

Thursday 16—Monday 20 December 4.45 and 7.30 pm
Sunday 4.45 pm only Adults £12, children £6

Life of Christ Video and DVD

A new recording of the 2004 production is now available.
2 video set £28 or 2 DVD set £28. P&P £2.

Details from Wintershall Estate Office, Bramley, Guildford,
GU5 0LR Tel 01483 892167 Monday-Friday 9 am—5 pm
www.wintershall-estate.com

Walking with Pagans



Bridge Wood in June is a beautiful sight, and made a suitable venue for people from a variety of faiths to come and learn more about how Pagans see the world. We wandered down the footpaths, stopping

every so often to discuss some particular feature of relevance. Oak trees tend to conjure up thoughts of druids for a great many people who may otherwise know little or nothing about this sect of Celtic priests. The monastery founded by the Abbess Brigit in Ireland was called Kildare, meaning “church of the oak”. There were still a great many druids around in Brigit’s time, and many of their traditions were absorbed into the new religion. The tree itself averages a 900 year life span, though we have very few oaks of great age left in this country ~ largely due to the ambitions of King Henry VIII and his successors who cut most of the old trees down to build up a naval force. In folklore oaks are often thought of as masculine and referred to as King of the Woods, a title in part derived from Roman practice where a sacred oak grove dedicated to the goddess Diana had a priest referred to as *Rex Nemorensis*, King of the Sacred Wood. Oak groves formed such a central feature of European Paganism that incoming missionaries were inclined either to seize them as a platform, such as Augustine did, or desecrate them by hacking down the trees, as Boniface did in Germany. Standing under a massive oak, its branches forming a total canopy through which green light filters, knowing the vast range of creatures that live in its branches, roots, bark, and feast upon its acorns, it is easy to see why oaks are so holy.

Hazel trees, diminutive and slender compared to the vast oak, also provide a great source of food for human and animal alike. There are numerous Christmas traditions of using hazel nuts for divination ~ one of the most widespread involves marking nuts with letters or names, placing them on a shovel in a fire and seeing which cracks first. The cracking of the nuts indicates one’s future husband or wife. Linking hazels to secret knowledge may extend back as far as the Iron Age, when the Celtic tribes saw them as a source of wisdom. Myth tells of a sacred pool in which swam the oldest beast in existence, a magical salmon. Around the pool grew nine hazels, and the salmon gained vast wisdom by feeding on the nuts that fell in the waters. To many modern people it may seem odd to think of a plant as wise. For the ancient polytheists and their 21st century counterparts, the whole universe is alive and thinking ~ every tree, animal, rock, and river has its animating spirit with which a human could (at least in theory) learn to communicate. A 90-year old hazel might well have much to say for itself, let alone a 2000-year old yew tree!

A bridge over a boggy area in Bridge Wood brings to mind the vast platformed settlements built by our supposedly simplistic ancestors in places such as Flag Fen. Some of these communities, which were built over marshes and lakes, were at least as big as football stadia. It was common practice for

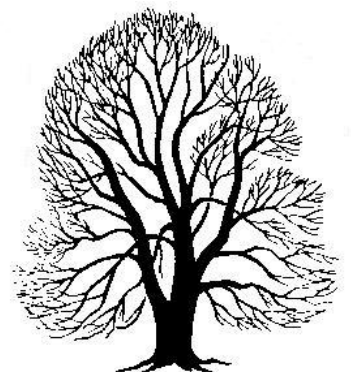
our Ancient British ancestors to leave offerings in water. These were frequently expensive gifts such as jewellery, swords, and shields. Evidence shows that these were gently lowered into the water (not slung the way Excalibur is in so many Arthurian films!) Often they were deliberately broken or bent beforehand. The Egyptians often broke offerings before placing them. If you believe that the human soul departs when the body is irredeemably broken, and that inanimate objects also have souls ~ then to despatch the soul of a sword to the Otherworld, one must break its “body” in this.

A dog crossed our path as we were leaving the bridge, which brought to mind the view of animals in ancient and modern Pagan religions. Whilst some mainstream religions spent the medieval period unsure if women had souls, let alone animals, it was commonly felt by the ancient faiths that all living things had souls. This is not to say that a gerbil has the exactly the same emotions and intellectual potentials as a human (though the reverse may be true in some cases), but that the gerbil has a capacity for pain, happiness and spiritual growth. The Egyptians revered some animals as living incarnations of certain deities, such as a crocodile named Petesouchous who was kept in a sacred lake and was believed to be the living face of Sebek. Whilst there have always been Pagans who have fallen far short of the ideal, it is common to the Pagan religions to treat other creatures with respect and compassion, and to accept that their spirits live on after death as do ours.

Elder trees were popularly thought of as feminine in European cultures, and often referred to as Grandmother Elder. Many traditions warn against felling an elder tree without first seeking its permission, lest the spirit seek revenge. In most Pagan cultures old age brought with it a greater status than it often does these days. Due to the harshness of life back then, few people survived to great old age ~ and those who did clearly knew a thing or two! The elder tree provides a range of herbal concoctions from wine to hair washes to skin creams to haemorrhoid cures. The image of the wise old woman with her herbal cures is one that has remained popular in Pagan religions to this very day.

Towards the end of our walk, in the dusk, we emerged into a large clearing framed by magnificent trees - a cathedral of the natural world, splendid in its simplicity. It was heartening during our walk through Bridge Wood to have seen several other groups of people of various ages enjoying the beauty of the area. It was also good to have had times when we were on our own and able to appreciate the sights, sounds and smells without interruption. Ancient woods and forest groves are a heritage to treasure. We hope Bridge Wood will give pleasure for many years to come.

Robin Herne
Suffolk Inter-Faith Resource



Building Bridges

Our third series of inter-faith meetings took place in the spring term this year. Sadly only once did we manage to have representatives of the six major world faiths together for a meeting but usually we had five of them each time. The subjects for discussion two years ago started off very safely with investigating festivals. This inevitably involved food – always a good way of getting people to talk. This year our talks were entitled *What do we mean by conversion?* (January), *How do we express love (within our faith)?* (February) and *Death: is it the end?* (March). I hope this gives you some idea of the road we have travelled together from our first simple and tentative encounters.

We have some 30 members of the public turning up to listen, question and discuss these issues. It has proved to be a useful and valuable way of exchanging ideas, getting to know each other better and strengthening relationships between communities. If laughter can be judged as a criterion of success and as an indicator of the courage that it takes to examine one's own ideas and to state when reflecting on the subject of love that "I don't think we do express love", then we rate highly. To hear the room rippling with such laughter is a real joy.



In April and May we had our second series of weekly visits to places of worship and this time members of the faith communities asked if they too could come along. We visited the Buddhist Monastery, Lower Fulbrook, Warwick [see above], Banbury Mosque, the Sikh Gurdwara, Leamington Spa, the Hindu Temple, Middleton Stoney, Oxford Synagogue and St Joseph's Roman Catholic Church, Banbury. Members of our Group will remember visiting the Hindu Temple and Synagogue in 2002. We have a long way to go but I do believe we are on the way to breaking down barriers and building bridges between the faith communities (and it's fun too!).

It's now August and I am beginning to arrange a further series of inter-faith discussions for the autumn. The summer visits were a wonderful journey and we have had tremendous feedback from members of the public who came along out of interest and have developed a real desire to want to know more. This will shape our autumn meetings. No longer do people just want a little, but a deeper and longer debate on issues of real concern. Quite what will be clearer after our initial meeting in September.

At times I feel I am on a mystery tour, not quite sure where I am going, but as with any mystery what is revealed is truly wonderful.

Gillian Hunt, Banbury RE Centre

On The Move

At present, the St Albans Diocesan Resource Centre is located in a redundant church in Welwyn Garden City which was opened in 1960. It was built when that area of the Garden City was expanding rapidly, although there was already an older parish church there. Before long it was discovered that the second church was not necessary and it was decided to close it for normal worship. At that time the diocesan Education Department was looking for a home and that is where they went. Today, the Education Department, the Youth Officer, Children's Work Advisers and the Resource Centre are all housed together in the former church.

In the last few years much more building has taken place within the parish and it is now about the biggest in the Diocese. This has led to some good news, in that the vicar and PCC have decided that they want their church back, leaving us homeless. We have known about this for over three years but finally, in June 2003, Diocesan Synod approved a plan to build new accommodation for us at the rear of, and attached to, the Diocesan Offices in St Albans, near the Abbey. This is a huge commitment from the Diocese, as it will cost around £900,000. The building will be finished in November, but I have asked that the Resource Centre does not move until the New Year. We plan to close for the Christmas holiday in Welwyn, and then re-open in St Albans on January 10th. I do not even want to think about the physical aspects of the move. I have 4912 items in the library and 4076 items in the bookshop, plus all of the artefacts, games, Godly Play boxes etc., let alone all the fixtures and fittings. I suspect it is going to be a nightmare!

Our new centre will be part of the Diocesan Office, and is being built at the moment, causing huge disruption to our colleagues in St Albans, and none whatsoever for us, but they are being very good about this. Everyone is looking forward to all the various officers and departments being together in the same place for the first time in many years. The new Centre will have something like 9m² more space than we have now. Access will be via steps or a wheelchair ramp that leads directly from two disabled parking spaces.

Of course there is a down side - parking in St Albans is a nightmare, and we will have very little off road parking available, certainly very much less than we have now. It will probably lead to an increase in the already flourishing mail order business for the shop. Now that we have installed our new Surpass Library System, we hope to go on-line with the library, so that clients can browse, reserve items on line, and have them sent by post. The ones I really feel sorry for are the locals in Welwyn, particularly the little old ladies who use us as a card shop because they like our religious cards, as they will not be able to get to St Albans. Unfortunately, we can do nothing about this.

Do please come and see us when we have moved. A visit to St Albans is always worthwhile, there is the Abbey, of course, and the remains of Roman Verulamium. There is also one of the best street markets in the country on Wednesdays and Saturdays, which stretches right through the heart of the city. If you let me know you are coming, I will make arrangements to show you around.

Ron Upton, St Albans Diocesan Resource Centre