

## FEATURE

# New York and Mumbai, eat your heart out!

It's Suffolk where the movers and shakers now flock to discuss The Big Questions

**I**T'S a bright, breezy morning as I arrive at Snape Maltings for my chance to discover what the chattering classes are chattering about.

For the past two years, Aldeburgh and Snape have played host to an annual private get-together of influential thinkers entitled Names Not Numbers.

The brainchild of Julia Hobsbawm, the world's first professor of networking, Names Not Numbers assembles 200 luminaries from the worlds of business, the arts, the media and academia for a three-day "mini-festival of ideas".

Named Media Woman of the Year in 2012, Julia is the daughter of the late Marxist historian Eric Hobsbawm and founder of the networking and communications business Editorial Intelligence. Names Not Numbers is the company's flagship event, and it is fast becoming a magnet for movers and shakers.

Previous Names Not Numbers events have been staged in New York,

For three remarkable days, a host of big names – from Ruby Wax to Margaret Atwood – descended on Suffolk to take part in a festival of ideas called Names Not Numbers. **PAT PARKER** mingled with the great and the good.

Mumbai and Portmeirion, but now Suffolk has become its permanent home. Julia, who teaches business networking at University Campus Suffolk and regularly holidays on the Suffolk coast, explains why.

"We relocated to Suffolk because we felt that the spirit of Benjamin Britten suffuses the area with the kind of creative spirit we want. Aldeburgh and Snape Maltings in particular give exactly the right atmosphere."

I have been invited to sit in on the third and last day of the event. You can hardly move for famous faces. I spot right-wing journalist Melanie Phillips and left-wing journalist Yasmin Alibhai-Brown. The theme of this year's ideas fest has been "What Matters", and the format varies from talks with Ruby Wax

and Suffolk artist Maggi Hambling to panel discussions on everything from Faith to Capitalism to the Decline of the West and the Rise of China. Speakers have included Joan Bakewell, food critic AA Gill and Baroness Julia Neuberger.

The entire 100-hour programme has been designed as a menu, with meatier sessions interspersed with lighter "amuse-bouches" – five-minute talks on everything from insects to cheer-leading.

The highlight of today's menu will be the iconic Canadian writer Margaret Atwood, author of *The Handmaid's Tale*, about a dystopian world where women have no power, money or freedom, and are valued only for their ability to breed.

But, before that, there is a choice between a discussion on digital



■ Dame Joan Bakewell, who was part of the event at Aldeburgh and Snape.

Photo: MATT CROSSICK/PA

communication, or an "open-mic" session hosted by comedian and writer Viv Groskop. I plump for Viv who urges speakers to offer either a rant or a rave. Memorable contributions include president of the Media Society Geraldine Sharpe-Newton, an American who criticises the small-mindedness and insularity of her native country, where only 17% of the population have passports and the press's coverage of Britain is apparently restricted to the royals and the Chelsea Flower Show.

She says Britain is far more diverse but we do have an annoying habit of wanting to join America in any war it cares to wage. "America wouldn't do that for us," she asserts.

This has been a tantalising appetiser to the undisputed dish of the day – Margaret Atwood in conversation with Baroness Helena Kennedy. The 74-year-old Canadian is small and softly-spoken, but the impact of her sardonic wit and keen intelligence is enormous, and her audience sits in rapt attention.

She disarmingly rejects flattery. When Baroness Kennedy calls prolific, she says: "not prolific – just quite old". Neither is she a subversive: "just a very ordinary person who's always right".

Atwood has long resisted being labelled a sci-fi writer. "When people talk of science fiction, they mostly mean rocket ships, skin-tight clothing and other planets. I confine myself to this planet," she says. She prefers the term "speculative fiction".

The daughter of an entomologist, she spent much of her childhood in remote woodlands. "I'm an incessant reader, but remember, up in the woods there's nothing else to do when it rains – no electricity, no TV, no cinema. I didn't go to school regularly until I was 12."

Her father taught her much about wildlife and nature, and her environmental activism owes much to these formative experiences.

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Her latest Maddaddam trilogy envisages a post-apocalyptic future in which humans have been virtually wiped out by a deadly virus. We are given a brief outline of the history of utopian and dystopian literature. Tales of mass devastation, she says, are as old as the Ark, but in the 19th Century Darwin's theory of evolution, and social and medical progress, led people to dream of utopias and believe that "life was going to get



■ Names Not Numbers founder Julia Hobsbawm with Canadian writer Margaret Atwood and Baroness Helena Kennedy.

Photos: HABIE SCHWARZ



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■ Assembled guests taking part in Names Not Numbers at Aldeburgh. Left, Viv Groskop, writer and comedian. Right, Ruby Wax - also pictured below in conversation with Jemima Khan.

Photos: CHRISTINE HAYTER / HABIE SCHWARZ



better in every conceivable way”.

That all came to a halt with the First World War. “People had to stop thinking of themselves as the pinnacle of evolution, or that we were super beings with high moral ability and high moral standards.”

Attempts at creating real-life ‘utopias’ such as Nazi Germany, the USSR or Mao’s China, where leaders promised a better future “but first we have to get rid of ‘those people’,” finally destroyed the utopian dream of a perfect society. From then on, “we started writing the kind of fiction which offered a view of the future which said, ‘Look out!’”

She has two dire warnings about today’s world. First, the capitalist system is producing a dangerously unequal society.

“We are now getting quite close to the pre-French Revolution stage in which too few people have too much, and too many people have too little. You can’t go on accumulating at the top without something falling over. Something’s going to break.”

The second warning is about environmental catastrophe. “Unless we pay a lot more attention to the natural world, we’re going down. If we kill the oceans, there goes our oxygen supply. Our oxygen was made 1.9 billion years ago by marine algae, and if we kill the oceans, there it goes. And if the oceans continue to heat up because of global warming, there goes our oxygen supply anyway.”

After her talk, greeted with reverential applause, I snatch a few words with her. Does Atwood believe

the position of women has improved since she wrote *The Handmaid’s Tale* in the mid-80s? “It has, in certain parts of western society, but in Taliban-controlled areas of Afghanistan, for example, it has not. It’s always relative to how much food there is, how many jobs there are, and how the men in that society are behaving.”

And why does she think so many teenage girls seem to see feminism

“It’s been a nightmare trying to access emails here but there’s a degree to which you feel cleansed to be out of every day life

as outdated and irrelevant? “Give it a few years,” she replies. “Feminism doesn’t start kicking in until they get the law, and the law is either that they can’t get a good job because they’re women, or somebody else gets promoted ahead of them, or they get pregnant and they’re up against it. That’s when the light-bulb goes on, and they realise how things are.”

Over lunch, I sit with libertarian writer Claire Fox and musician and Oxford classicist Dr Armand D’Angour. I ask what they have most enjoyed about Names Not Numbers.

“It’s been great to get away from London and meet such an eclectic bunch of people,” says Claire. “It’s been great waking up and seeing the sea. I’ve never been here before, and I would really like to come back and spend a few days. It’s been a nightmare trying to access emails on our phones, but there’s a degree to which you feel cleansed by being out of the bubble of everyday life.”

After lunch, it’s back to the Britten Studio for a discussion on genetics.

Later, style guru Peter York thanks Julia for bringing together “all sorts of heroes to talk about elevated ideas. I think I speak for everyone when I say nobody wants to go home.” The audience cheers and then their “ideas holiday” by the sea really is over for another year.

I find myself feeling surprisingly tired. Obviously, my brain is struggling to cope with so much intellectual stimulation in one day and I feel I could do with a lie down.

However, I speak to Tim Rowan-Robinson, chairman of The Suffolk Coast DMA – an organisation set up last year to boost tourism. He has been instrumental in bringing this event to Suffolk.

“We have been delighted to welcome Names Not Numbers for the second year to soak up all the Suffolk coast has to share,” he said. “Some of London’s most creative and influential minds have been stimulated by our magical part of the country, many visiting for the first time.”

“They have clearly loved the three days they spent with us. We hope

they will spread the word far and wide and we look forward to welcoming them back next year.”

Broadcaster and journalist Mary Ann Sieghart, whose mother Felicity Ann Sieghart used to run Aldeburgh Cinema, thought the town a great location. “The sun shone, everything was in walking distance, and the cinema and Jubilee Hall were the perfect size for sessions. I left feeling really inspired.”

Viv Groskop agreed: “The major highlight for me was Margaret Atwood. Her modesty and wisdom were astonishing.”

“Names Not Numbers teaches you complicated concepts and effect is a bit like downloading several dozen really good books into your brain. It’s useful and inspiring. But you need a lie-down afterwards!”

Glad it wasn’t just me!