Humanist Heritage

BIRMINGHAM TOUR

Birmingham was the birthplace of two key figures who quite literally defined the humanist movement at different stages of its evolution. George Jacob Holyoake (1817–1906) coined the term 'secularism' in 1851, describing an earthly philosophy synonymous with humanism today. Just over a century later, Harold John Blackham (1903–2009), became the first Executive Director of the British Humanist Association (now Humanists UK), earning the title of architect of the modern humanist movement. These two men form part of a wider story of Birmingham freethought, spanning the scientific curiosity of the Lunar Society, the defiant atheism of John Baskerville, and the pioneering work of Harriet Martineau.

1 IKON GALLERY

The Ikon Gallery was once the Oozells Street Board School, opened in 1878 by the Birmingham School Board. Such Boards were brought about following the 1870 Elementary Education Act — a landmark piece of legislation driven by the National Education League's push for free, compulsory, and non-sectarian schooling. This movement attracted prominent secularists like G. J. Holyoake, who argued at the League's founding conference that education should be practical and entirely secular. The school was also a meeting place in the early 1880s for the Birmingham Positivists, who practiced a 'religion of humanity' that replaced supernatural worship with a secular celebration of human achievement.

2 THE GOLDEN BOYS

This gilded bronze statue by William Bloye, unveiled in 1956, depicts three steam engine pioneers: Matthew Boulton, James Watt and William Murdoch. All three men were members of Birmingham's Lunar Society, sometimes referred to as the 'Birmingham Philosophers' or 'Fellow schemers'. Another member was Erasmus Darwin (1731–1802), grandfather of Charles Darwin, who wrote on early concepts of evolution, and supported the idea of women's education.

4 BASKERVILLE HOUSE

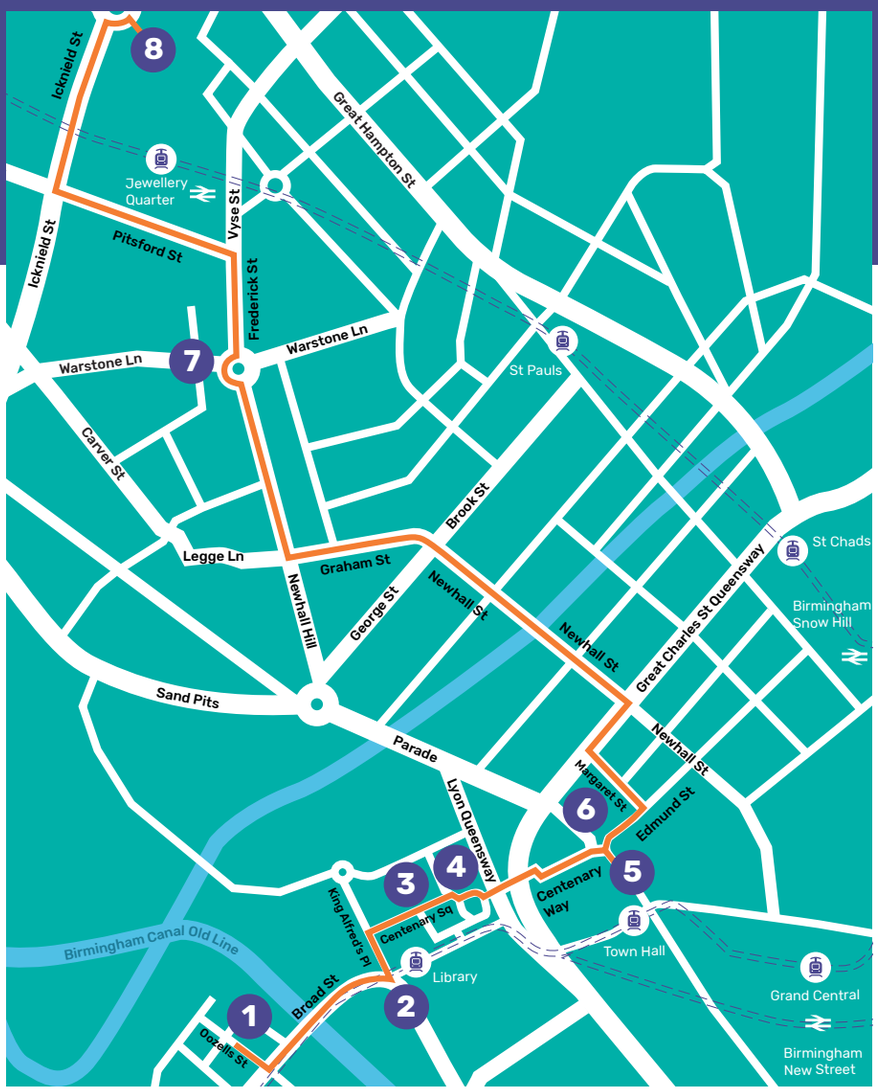
Baskerville House occupies the site of John Baskerville's home. Baskerville wanted to be buried in a conical building on his own premises. His self-penned epitaph read:

Stranger—Beneath this Cone in Unconsecrated Ground
A Friend to the Liberties of mankind Directed his Body to be Inhum'd
May the Example Contribute to Emancipate thy mind
From the Idle Fears of Superstition
And the wicked arts of priesthood.

His wishes were honoured, but when redevelopment took place in the area he was disinterred in 1820 and reburied nine years later in Christ Church. When this was demolished, his remains were removed again, and are now in the Church of England Cemetery in Warstone Lane.

3 CENTENARY SQUARE

Centenary Square is home to Industry & Genius: a monument to renowned printer and fervent atheist John Baskerville (1706–1775), by Birmingham-born artist David Patten. Best remembered today for the typeface which bears his name, Baskerville was an unapologetic non-believer, a fact celebrated by later generations of freethinkers. In 1877, just over a century after his death, the Birmingham secularists opened Baskerville Hall (at The Crescent), named in his memory.



5 BIRMINGHAM MUSEUM & ART GALLERY

Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery first opened in 1885, and contains more than 40 galleries of art, applied art, social history, archaeology, and ethnography. Paintings of and by a number of prominent freethinkers can be found in its collections, from James Millar's 1774 portrait of John Baskerville to works by humanist and Pre-Raphaelite painter Ford Madox Brown.

6 BIRMINGHAM & MIDLAND INSTITUTE

On 1 October 1877, physicist John Tyndall delivered a Presidential Address here titled *Science and Man*. In it, he argued that the roots of morality were human – not divine – and for the fundamental importance of honesty and the scientific method: 'When facts present themselves let us dare to face them, but let the man of science equally dare to confess ignorance where it prevail'.

Birmingham-born writer and philosopher Constance Naden took classes here in botany, French, and German from 1879. Naden developed an atheist philosophy called 'hylo-idealism', based on unity in diversity, and contributed to freethought journals like the Agnostic Annual. Bold in her own humanist philosophy, she observed of 19th century Britain that it was 'a nation of practical secularists [who] can tolerate passive religion better than active atheism'.

7 CHAMBERLAIN CLOCK

Joseph Chamberlain was a businessman, social reformer, radical politician, and the father of Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain. He was raised as a unitarian, but lost his faith following the death of his second wife, Florence Kenrick, in 1875. In stark contrast to the feeling of liberation expressed by some freethinkers, like Harriet Martineau (next step), Chamberlain wrote bitterly: 'I refuse to try & buy comfort by forcing myself into insincere conviction—but still I thoroughly abhor the result at which I have arrived'. It was Chamberlain who proposed the vote of thanks to John Tyndall following that 1877 lecture at the Birmingham and Midland Institute.

8 KEY HILL CEMETERY

Key Hill is the city's oldest cemetery, opened in 1836 as the non-denominational Birmingham Central Cemetery. Alongside a host of Birmingham's great and good, two of the 19th century's most remarkable freethinkers are buried at Key Hill: Harriet Martineau and Constance Naden. Both women embraced a humanist philosophy of reason, empathy, and rational inquiry, detached completely from theological ideas.

Harriet Martineau was a pioneering writer, thinker, and activist, considered the first woman sociologist. She is buried in Key Hill alongside a number of her family members.

Scientist, poet, philosopher, and freethinker Constance Naden is buried alongside her mother and maternal grandparents. Their gravestone, replaced in 2019 following a fundraising campaign, bears an inscription from Naden's poem 'The Pantheist's Song of Immortality': 'For earth is not as though thou ne'er hadst been'.