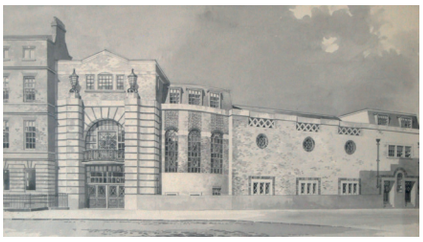
Humanist Heritage

BLOOMSBURY TOUR

Bloomsbury has been home to dozens of individuals and organisations who have influenced the modern humanist movement, and profoundly changed the world around them. Beginning at historic Conway Hall, this walk introduces a range of freethinkers, activists, creatives, and community leaders who thought for themselves and acted for everyone.



1 CONWAY HALL

Conway Hall was opened in 1929 and named for Virginia-born Moncure Conway (1832–1907), an abolitionist and freethinker. Conway was 'minister' of the hall's predecessor: South Place Chapel in Finsbury. In 1888, under another American, Stanton Coit (1857-1944), this became South Place Ethical Society. Ethical societies emphasised 'deed without creed'; living well without reference to any notions of reward or punishment in the hereafter – the precursors of today's humanist groups.

2 CHURCH OF HUMANITY

20 Rugby Street (formerly 19 Chapel Street) was the site of the positivist Church of Humanity, established by philosopher Richard Congreve (1818-1899) in 1870. Rooted in the ideas of French philosopher Auguste Comte, positivism sought to celebrate the achievements of humankind through secular ritual, and the chapel's interior was decorated with portraits and busts of those they admired. The freethinking Harriet Martineau (1802-1876) played a significant role in popularising Comte's ideas, with her 1853 translation of his *Cours de philosophie positive*.

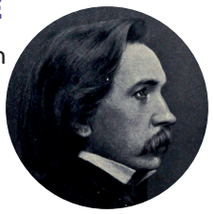
3 BRUNSWICK SQUARE

Brunswick Square has an all-star cast of former residents, including Leonard and Virginia Woolf, John Maynard Keynes, and E. M. Forster - all of whom were humanists. Like Woolf's Mrs Dalloway (from the novel of 1925), hers was an 'atheist's religion of doing good for the sake of goodness.' Virginia lived with her brother Adrian, Leonard, and John Maynard Keynes at no. 38 in 1911–12. Fellow writer E. M. Forster was active in the humanist movement, as well as in the cause of civil liberties. A humanist, wrote Forster, had 'four leading characteristics — curiosity, a free mind, belief in good taste, and belief in the human race.' He lived at 26 Brunswick Square between 1930-1939.

4 ROBERT OWEN

Welsh-born Robert Owen (1771–1858) was a utopian socialist, philanthropist, and reformer, whose time living here covered some of the busiest years of the Owenite movement. Owen was sceptical of organised religion, and motivated by the belief that human character was shaped by circumstance, not inbuilt from birth. As a mill owner, he had introduced pioneering changes to education, community, and labour, and later applied these lessons and ideals to experimental communities in Britain and abroad. Of his hopes for grand social reform, he wrote 'my plans were all laid to gradually supersede these religions… by the practical religion of love and charity for our race, irrespective of colour, country, class, sect, sex, party, or difference in natural organisation or constitution; and thus to attain happiness, the great object of humanity.'

5 GEORGE JACOB HOLYOAKE



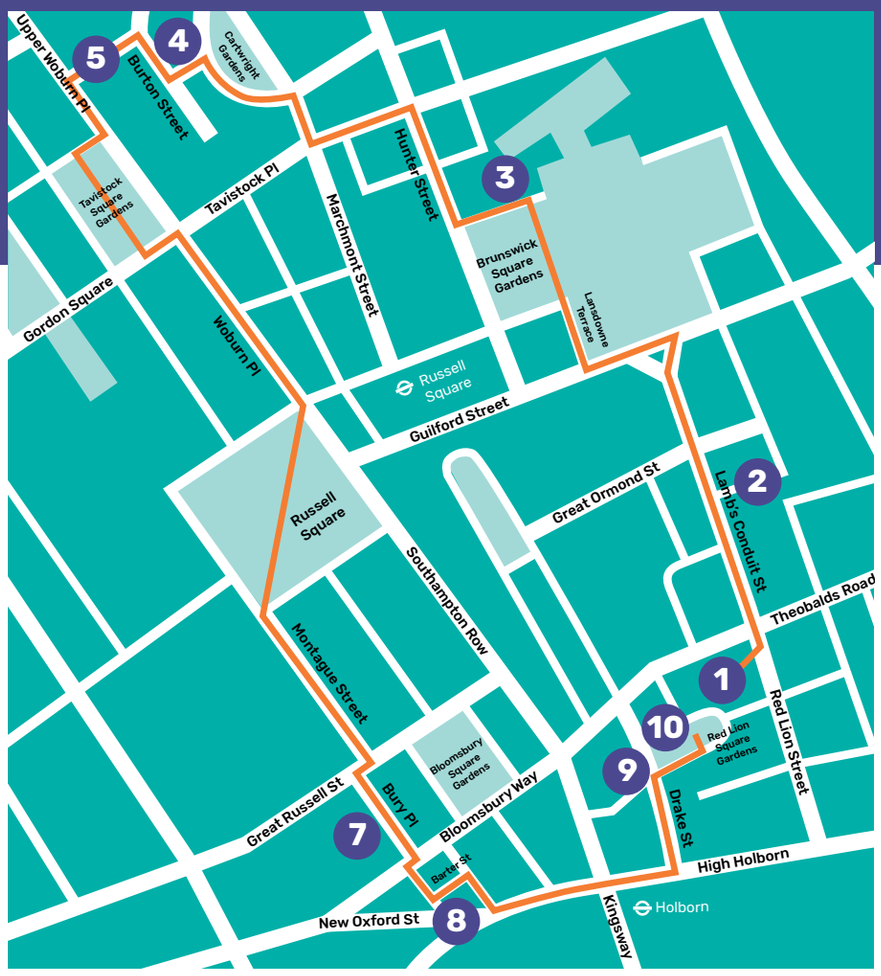
A plaque on Woburn Walk remembers George Jacob Holyoake (1817-1906), a writer, lecturer, and promoter of the cooperative movement, who lived here 1850–1861, and who coined the term 'secularist' in 1851. For Holyoake, secularism described 'that province of human duty which belongs to this life', and work undertaken to improve the lot of humanity. In its focus on living well in this life, without hope of another, Holyoake's original definition of a secularist is almost identical to that of a humanist today.

6 TAVISTOCK SQUARE

The Conscientious Objectors' Commemorative Stone, unveiled in 1994, was the work of a group of humanists and pacifists, and is dedicated 'To all those who have established and who are maintaining the right to refuse to kill'. The campaign was led by Edna Mathieson, whose uncle Joe Brett had been a conscientious objector, and whose enduring philosophy Mathieson described as that of Thomas Paine: 'My country is the world, and my religion is to do good.' The stone was unveiled by humanist, composer, former CO, and then President of the Peace Pledge Union Sir Michael Tippett.

7 BERTRAND RUSSELL

Philosopher, mathematician, and humanist Bertrand Russell (1872-1970) lived here at flat 34 between 1911-16. A public intellectual, Russell was also a lifelong activist, particularly in the cause of peace and international cooperation. Russell described the good life as 'one inspired by love and guided by knowledge', and strove to contribute to the kind of society in which the good life could be lived.



9 FENNER BROCKWAY

A lifelong socialist, anti-racist, and peace campaigner, Fenner Brockway (1888-1988) founded the No Conscription Fellowship in 1914 (at the suggestion of his wife, Lilla) to resist compulsory military service. Alongside Bertrand Russell he was a founding member of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament in 1957 and, aged nearly 90, co-founder of the World Disarmament Campaign in 1979. He was a member of the Advisory Council of Humanists UK.

10 BERTRAND RUSSELL

This bust of Bertrand Russell by Marcelle Quinton was unveiled on 29 October 1980 by Dora Russell, in a ceremony presided over by Lord Fenner Brockway. Dora Russell (1894-1986), herself a prominent humanist and activist, and wife of Bertrand 1921–1935, had proposed the memorial a year earlier, and was joined in the appeal by Brockway, philosopher A. J. Ayer, writers Ritchie Calder and Ted Willis, and sociologist Barbara Wootton – all leading humanist activists.

8 WOMEN'S FREEDOM LEAGUE

One area of activism in which many humanists were involved was the fight for women's suffrage. On the corner of Bury Place and Barter Street was the London headquarters of the Women's Freedom League 1914–1959, founded in 1907 by dissenters from the Pankhurst-led Women's Social and Political Union (the WSPU). Among its founding members were Teresa Billington-Greig (1876-1964), a lifelong agnostic and ethical society member, and Lillie Boileau (1869-1930), a key figure in the 20th century humanist movement.