

BRISTOL TOUR

From chartists and Owenites to secularists and humanists, Bristol has a rich history of radical action and free thinking. This walk follows in the footsteps of some of those who challenged religious dogma and political inequality to fight for a society built on reason, democracy, and 'deed not creed'.

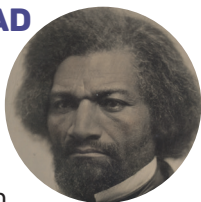


1 CASTLE PARK

Across the park, at 34 Castle Street, once stood the premises of J. Cossens: purveyor of radical literature. On this walk, we'll be introduced to some of the freethinkers and agitators who might have been drawn to such a shop; individuals who fought for change in Bristol and the wider world during the 19th century and beyond. These have included the chartists – a working-class movement agitating for democratic reform; Owenites – who advocated for the reorganisation of society along communitarian lines; and secularists – whose philosophy referred to a this-worldly focus on doing good for the sake of humankind, identical to humanism today.

2 BROADMEAD

Broadmead was the site of the Owenite Hall of Science, built in 1840 as a centre for education, discussion, and social activity. Trustees of the Hall of Science on Broadmead included pawnbroker Robert Tovey, carpenter Samuel Bromhead, and engravers John Field and Charles Brown.



The Hall of Science later became the Broadmead Rooms, continuing to welcome speakers of all stripes. One of these, in 1846, was formerly enslaved abolitionist and freethinker Frederick Douglass.

3 9 BRIDWELL STREET

Near this site was a house once occupied by Emma Martin, commemorated by a plaque unveiled in 2023. The remarkable Emma Martin was born in Bristol in 1812, and was in her early years a zealous Baptist. She later became an outspoken atheist, and one of Owenism's most famous women lecturers, drawing crowds of thousands. In her later years, she worked as a midwife, and advocated firmly for the rights of women to knowledge of their own bodies.



4 NARROW LEWINS MEAD

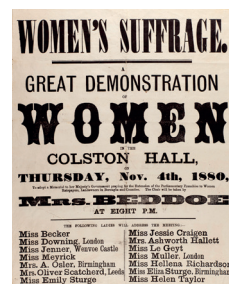
Formerly a unitarian meeting house, it was here, in 1818, that a teenage Harriet Martineau came under the tutelage of minister Dr Lant Carpenter. Born into a unitarian family in Norwich in 1802, Martineau progressively abandoned the religious faith of her childhood, embracing instead a rich humanist philosophy focused on free inquiry, social conscience, and the pursuit of happiness. Today, she is remembered as the first woman sociologist, a prolific writer, and a vocal opponent of slavery.



5 BRISTOL BEACON

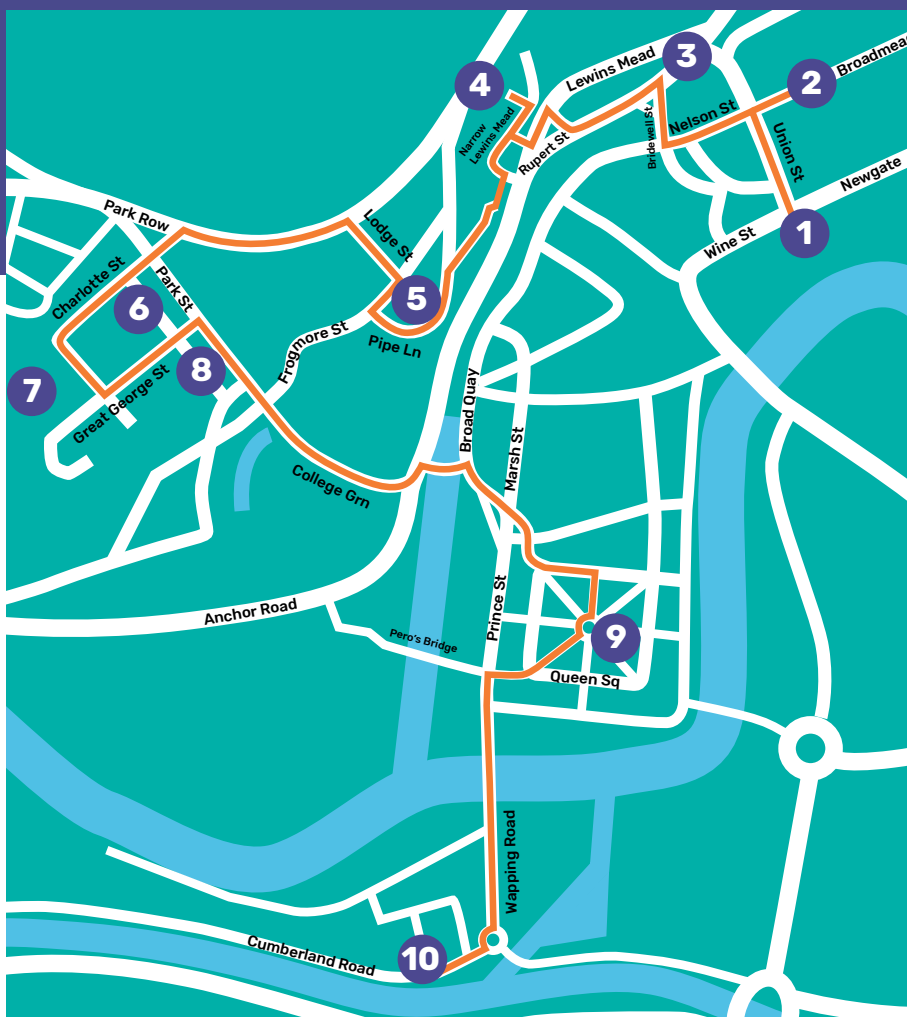
On 4 November 1880, when still known as Colston Hall, this was the site of a significant suffrage demonstration, whose

speakers included the freethinker Lydia Becker. Becker was a suffragist, science advocate, and correspondent of Charles Darwin. Another humanist with a link to Bristol suffrage was Jeanette Gaury Wilkinson, a working class trade unionist and feminist. A powerful speaker, London-born Wilkinson was invited to become the Bristol Society for Women's Suffrage's organising secretary and lecturer in 1884.



6 17 CHARLOTTE STREET

Charlotte Street was one of the meeting places of the Bristol Ethical Fellowship, founded in 1934. This was a successor to the Bristol Ethical Society, active from 1898–1900. Ethical societies, which first formed in the UK during the 1880s, focused on living well without reference to supernatural ideas. They grew out of the American Ethical Culture movement, started by Felix Adler in New York in 1876, with the motto 'deed not creed'. Spaces of secular community, they organised lectures and debates, with members often involved in wide-ranging charitable and reformist efforts.



BRISTOL Working Men's Association.

A PUBLIC Meeting

Of the Inhabitants of this City, convened by the
Working Men's Association, will be held

In Queen Square,

On Monday, October 23, 1837,

AT ONE O'CLOCK,

For the purpose of making a Declaration of our
Political principles, and to appeal to our fellow
Citizens on the necessity of Union to carry those
principles into effect.

MR. HENRY VINCENT,

Missionary of the LONDON WORKING MEN'S ASSOCIATION,
WILL ADDRESS THE MEETING.

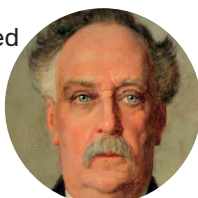
Chair to be taken at Half past One.

9 QUEEN SQUARE

Queen Square was the site of the first public meeting organised by the Bristol Working Men's Association in October 1837, addressed by chartist leader Henry Vincent. The People's Charter (from which the chartists took their name) would be written the following year, outlining demands for the extension of voting rights, including the vote for every man, annual parliaments, and the secret ballot.

7 BRANDON HILL

Brandon Hill provided the outdoor venue for a variety of public meetings and lectures, including those of radical speaker Henry Hunt and the National Union of the Working Classes in 1833. In July 1869, Charles Bradlaugh, founder of the National Secular Society, lectured here. Bristol's Secular Society was established that year. The word 'secularism' was coined by George Jacob Holyoake in 1851. Although secularism today typically refers to the separation of Church and state, Holyoake's definition was almost synonymous with that of modern humanism: a philosophy which placed the needs of human beings, and the achievements of this life, at its heart. One significant Bristol-born secularist was Charles Watts, born into the family of a Bristol book maker in 1836. Brought up a strict Methodist, he heard Holyoake speak and, by the age of 16, had abandoned religion.

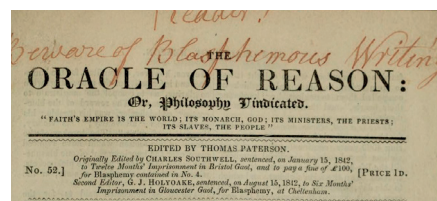


He moved to London to join the national movement and in 1866 became a full-time secularist lecturer and the first secretary of Bradlaugh's National Secular Society.



8 FREEMASONS' HALL

The Institution for the Advancement of Science, Literature and the Arts was opened here in 1823. Housing a lecture theatre, library, and exhibition space, it sought to 'disseminate useful knowledge through lectures and experiments'. Institutions like this often drew freethinkers, helping to promote and expand the scientific understanding which destabilised the religious beliefs of many during the 19th century. That said, papers explicitly discussing religion or politics were often forbidden.



10 THE GATEWAY

This is the site of the Old Gaol, built in 1820 and mostly demolished by 1898. It was here that avowed atheist Charles Southwell was imprisoned for blasphemy in 1842. En route to visit Southwell here, George Jacob Holyoake was himself arrested for blasphemy, following a flippant comment made at a lecture on Owenism in Cheltenham. The flurry of prosecutions in the 1840s which caught Southwell, Holyoake, and others, recalled those of two decades earlier, when efforts to suppress 'blasphemous' or 'seditious' publications and statements had seen the imprisonment of many freethinkers. As then, attempts to legislate opinion and belief were met with fury and opposition, and humanists then – as now – fought resolutely for freedom of the press, and of religion and belief.