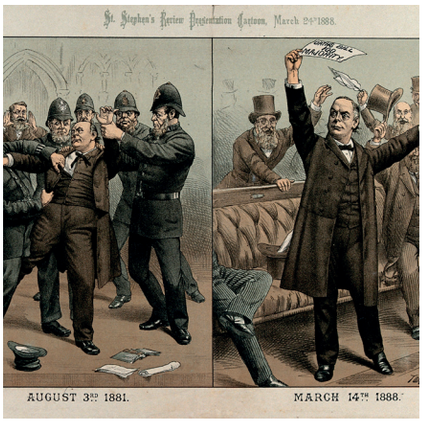
Humanist Heritage

NORWICH TOUR

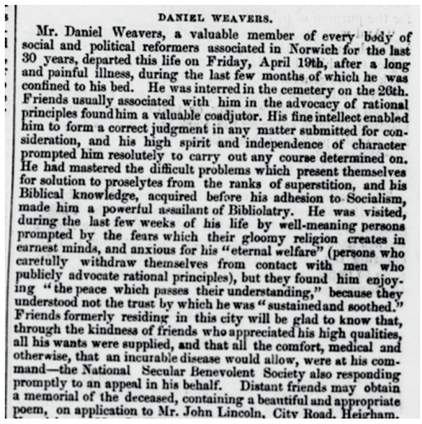
Norwich has a rich radical tradition, and across centuries has been home to many freethinkers, activists, and humanists who have championed reason, rights, and human happiness.



1 ST. ANDREW'S HALL

Charles Bradlaugh (the 'first atheist MP') spoke here at St. Andrew's Hall in 1876. Bradlaugh was a proponent of secularism, a term coined in 1851 to mean a philosophy focused on doing good in this world, without concern for an afterlife. Though it has come to mean the separation of Church and state, this original definition was closer to that of humanism today. In 1875, Norwich secularists had been denied the use of the Hall, instead holding an open air meeting on St. Andrew's Plain to assert the right of free speech.

In 1880, Norwich banded together in support of Bradlaugh when he was refused his seat in Parliament due to being unable – as a professed atheist – to swear the oath. Norwich's Jacob Henry Tillett MP (a nonconformist) supported Bradlaugh in his efforts to be allowed to affirm rather than swear an oath. After nearly six years, and four re-elections, he was eventually able to do so.



DANIEL WEAVERS.

Mr. Daniel Weavers, a valuable member of every body of social and political reformers associated in Norwich for the last 30 years, departed this life on Friday, April 19th, after a long and painful illness, during the last few months of which he was confined to his bed. He was interred in the cemetery on the 26th. Friends usually associated with him in the advocacy of rational principles found him a valuable coadjutor. His fine intellect enabled him to form a correct judgment in any matter submitted for consideration, and his high spirit and independence of character prompted him resolutely to carry out any course determined on. He had mastered the difficult problems which present themselves for solution to proselytes from the ranks of superstition, and his Biblical knowledge, acquired before his adhesion to Socialism, made him a powerful assailant of Bibliolatry. He was visited, during the last few weeks of his life by well-meaning persons prompted by the fears which their gloomy religion creates in earnest minds, and anxious for his "eternal welfare" (persons who carefully withdraw themselves from contact with men who publicly advocate rational principles), but they found him enjoying "the peace which passes their understanding," because they understood not the trust by which he was "sustained and soothed." Friends formerly residing in this city will be glad to know that, through the kindness of friends who appreciated his high qualities, all his wants were supplied, and that all the comfort, medical and otherwise, that an incurable disease would allow, were at his command—the National Secular Benevolent Society also responding promptly to an appeal in his behalf. Distant friends may obtain a memorial of the deceased, containing a beautiful and appropriate poem, on application to Mr. John Lincoln, City Road, Heigham.

2 ST. GEORGES

St. Georges Street, historically known as Gildengate and later Middle Street, underwent a significant transformation in 1898 when it was merged with Bridge Street to create the continuous thoroughfare seen today. During the 19th century, it was the home of Lot Hill (1815–1894), a radical bookseller and secularist. In 1867, following the death of Daniel Weavers, a hand-loom weaver and fellow secularist from nearby Rose Yard, St. Augustine's, Hill organised a collection to support Weavers' family.

3 THE OCTAGON CHAPEL

The Octagon Chapel was completed in 1756 and today is home to an inclusive community of unitarians, who welcome people of all faiths and none. Rooted in dissent from the Anglican Church, unitarianism emphasises individual conscience and progressive thought.

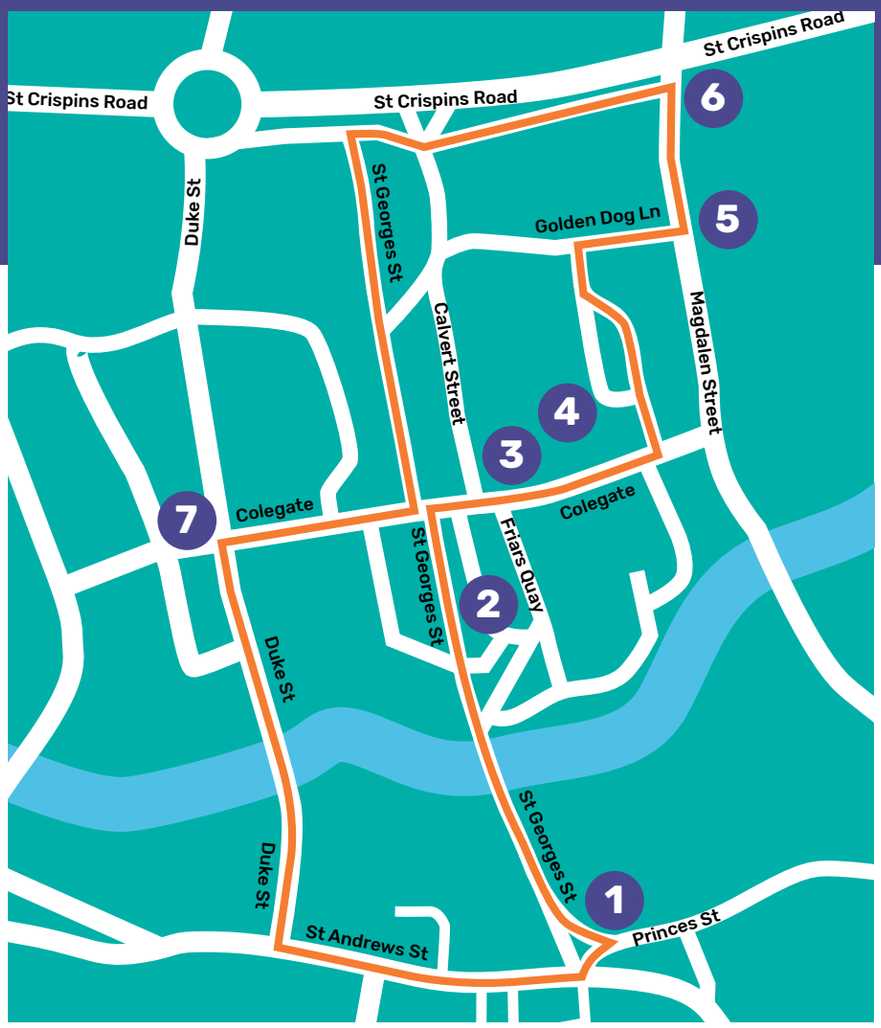
One influential Unitarian was William Johnson Fox (1786–1864), a politician, journalist, and minister. Fox was born in Suffolk but raised in Norwich, where he worked as a weaver and in a bank. Among other causes, Fox advocated for divorce on the grounds of mutual incompatibility, and defended freedom of speech — notably taking a stand for Richard Carlile, imprisoned for selling works, like those of Thomas Paine, deemed blasphemous or seditious. He also encouraged, through his magazine, the early careers of Tennyson, Browning, and Norwich's own Harriet Martineau (see next stop).

4 OLD MEETING HOUSE

In 1767, William Godwin (1756–1836) received tutoring from Samuel Newton here in the Old Meeting House. This was an unpleasant experience, with Godwin recalling Newton as 'the most wretched of pedants,' and his wife as 'an animated statue of ice'. Godwin went on to become one of the most famous English writers of the revolutionary period, a leading radical spokesman, and an atheist. Despite being ideologically opposed to marriage, he married the feminist writer Mary Wollstonecraft in 1797 when she was pregnant with their daughter, the future Mary Shelley – famous as the author of *Frankenstein*.

5 GURNEY COURT

Gurney Court was the birthplace of Harriet Martineau (1802–1876), writer and freethinker. Martineau was born into a Unitarian family but ultimately rejected all religion, which she described in liberating terms: 'What an emancipation it is, — to have escaped from the little enclosure of dogma, and to stand, — far indeed from being wise, — but free to learn!' A fervent abolitionist and pioneering sociologist, Martineau was also responsible for the 1853 translation of Auguste Comte's 'positive philosophies', helping to popularise his secular 'religion' in England. Among those directly influenced by this was fellow writer George Eliot.



6 ST. SAVIOUR'S

Sampson Arnold Mackey (1765–1843) was a British shoemaker, autodidact, and cosmologist, known as 'the self-taught astronomer of Norwich'. On his death, he was buried in the parish of St Saviour's. Born in Norwich, he was apprenticed to a shoemaker aged eleven, but also studied astronomy, geology, and mythology, writing original works and giving lectures. Based

on his ideas about the axial tilt of the Earth, Mackey challenged Christian narratives of the history and age of our planet.

7 DUKE STREET

Duke Street was home from the mid-1880s to the Gordon Hall and Cafe: a centre for the city's socialist movement. Norwich's branch of the Socialist League was established in 1885, and Gordon Hall hosted such speakers as William Morris: artist, designer, humanist, and prominent socialist. A fellow freethinker and key figure among the Norwich socialists was Fred Charles, about whom a friend remarked that 'I, who knew him well, have often thought that Charles, Atheist and Anarchist as he was, had more of the spirit of Christ about him than those who talk so loudly of their Christianity'.

Another Fred, James Frederick 'Fred' Henderson (1867–1957), was a socialist, Fabian, and Lord Mayor of Norwich 1939-40. His most famous work, The Case for Socialism, was the result of a series of sermons he delivered at Norwich Labour Church. Labour Churches sought to imbue Christianity with practical reform and workers' rights – appealing to those 'who believe in a practical religion and despise a faith that does not lead to action'. The Labour Church movement had much in common with the Ethical movement (despite its religious leaning), and a number of Labour Churches were affiliated with the Union of Ethical Societies (now Humanists UK). The Norwich Labour Church and Ethical Society (1910–1912) met at the Victoria Rooms on St Stephen's Street.