Humanist Heritage

SHEFFIELD TOUR

Sheffield has been home to a network of freethinkers over hundreds of years, who met, wrote, campaigned, and connected with each other - whether as individual activists or as organised groups. While many of the buildings in which these people met have been lost or profoundly transformed, there are still echoes of this humanist heritage throughout the city today.

1 PARADISE SQUARE

This beautiful Georgian square was a major open-air meeting place for radicals from the end of the 18th century. The Sheffield Society for Constitutional Information, formed in 1791, had their headquarters here. Inspired by the writings of Thomas Paine, they believed that 'the Want of Knowledge and Information in the general Mass of the People has exposed them to numberless Impositions and Abuses', and aimed to spread political knowledge and agitate for reform.

Later, the square became notable for thousands-strong gatherings of chartists: part of a working-class movement for parliamentary reform and universal (male) suffrage which began during the late 1830s. One activist who addressed meetings here was self-described 'infidel' Isaac Ironside, chartist, socialist, freethinker, and founder of the Hall of Science – a building opened in Rockingham Street in 1839 for the purpose of education, socialising, and social reform.

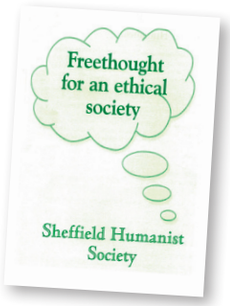
2 CATHEDRAL

The first building here was the Parish Church, built by Norman lord William de Lovetot around 1101. This was demolished and replaced around 1430, with additions over subsequent centuries. Early organised freethinkers were acutely aware of goings on in the churches, including suggestions by ministers that unbelief was responsible for unpleasant happenings in the world.

In 1914, the *Literary Guide* (now *New Humanist*) reported that the Bishop had told an assembly of school teachers gathered here that a turning away from faith was to blame for the outbreak of war. *The Literary Guide* noted that as the 'hideous panorama of war' filled the world's eyes, it was all the more necessary to guard against 'the unscrupulous attempts of Christians to load Rationalism and Materialism with the responsibility for this catastrophe'.

3 TOWN HALL

From the early 1960s to the late 1970s there was an active humanist group in Sheffield – successors of the Sheffield Ethical Society (see stop 5) and precursors to today's Sheffield Humanists. The group later revived and was active again during the 1990s and into the 2000s. Activities undertaken by the group included large scale events with leading humanists like Peter Tatchell and Jim Al-Khalili, letters to the press, and a stand outside the Town Hall in the lead up to the 2011 Census, encouraging non-religious people to tick 'no religion'.

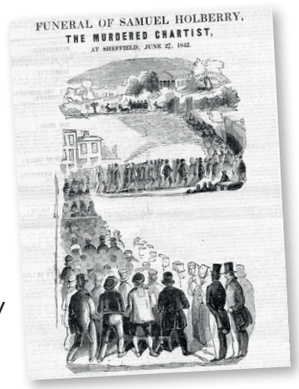


Today, Sheffield Humanists are a Humanists UK local group, meeting regularly for socials and events.

4 PEACE GARDENS

The Peace Gardens are on the site of what was originally the churchyard of the 18th century St Paul's Church. This was demolished in 1938 to make way for a proposed extension to the Town Hall, which was never built. A temporary garden was created there named St Paul's Gardens, but known as the Peace Gardens due to a desire to return to peacetime (during World War II). This name became formal in 1985.

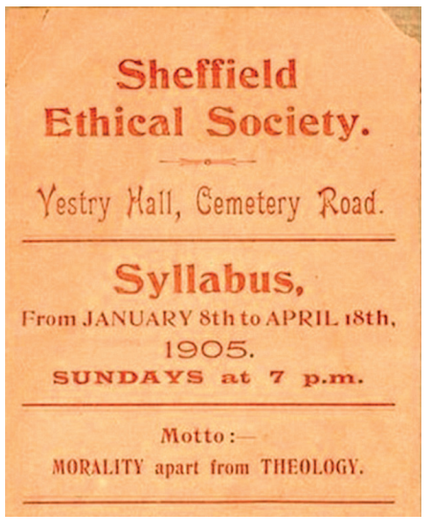
Today, the Peace Gardens are home to the Holberry Cascades, named for chartist Samuel Holberry, who died aged just 27 following imprisonment in brutal conditions. A funeral address was delivered by freethinker George Julian Harney, who called on the assembled 'to labour with heart and soul for the destruction of the horrible system under which Holberry has perished'.



5 PINSTONE CHAMBERS

Now Pinstone Chambers, 58 Pinstone Street was once the Wentworth Cafe. It was here on 8 July 1903 that the founding meeting of the Sheffield Ethical Society took place - a forerunner of later humanist groups in the city. Ethical societies, which flourished in the UK from the 1880s, aimed to bring people together for socialising, education, and discussion, without reference to supernatural ideas. The general aims of the Sheffield Ethical Society included fellowship rooted in 'the needs of man as a social and rational being', and to 'reform social conditions by the application of Ethical principles to all social problems, and to remove social evils such as war, poverty, superstition, privilege and inhumanity'.

The Society's key figures were local councillor R.H. Minshall and cookery columnist for the *Sheffield Independent* Katherine Gillott, and speakers to the group included the poet and gay rights activist Edward Carpenter. The success of Sheffield's ethical society was apparent from the fact that the first annual congress of the Union of Ethical Societies (now Humanists UK) ever to be held outside of London was hosted here in 1920.


Sheffield
Ethical Society.

Yestry Hall, Cemetery Road.

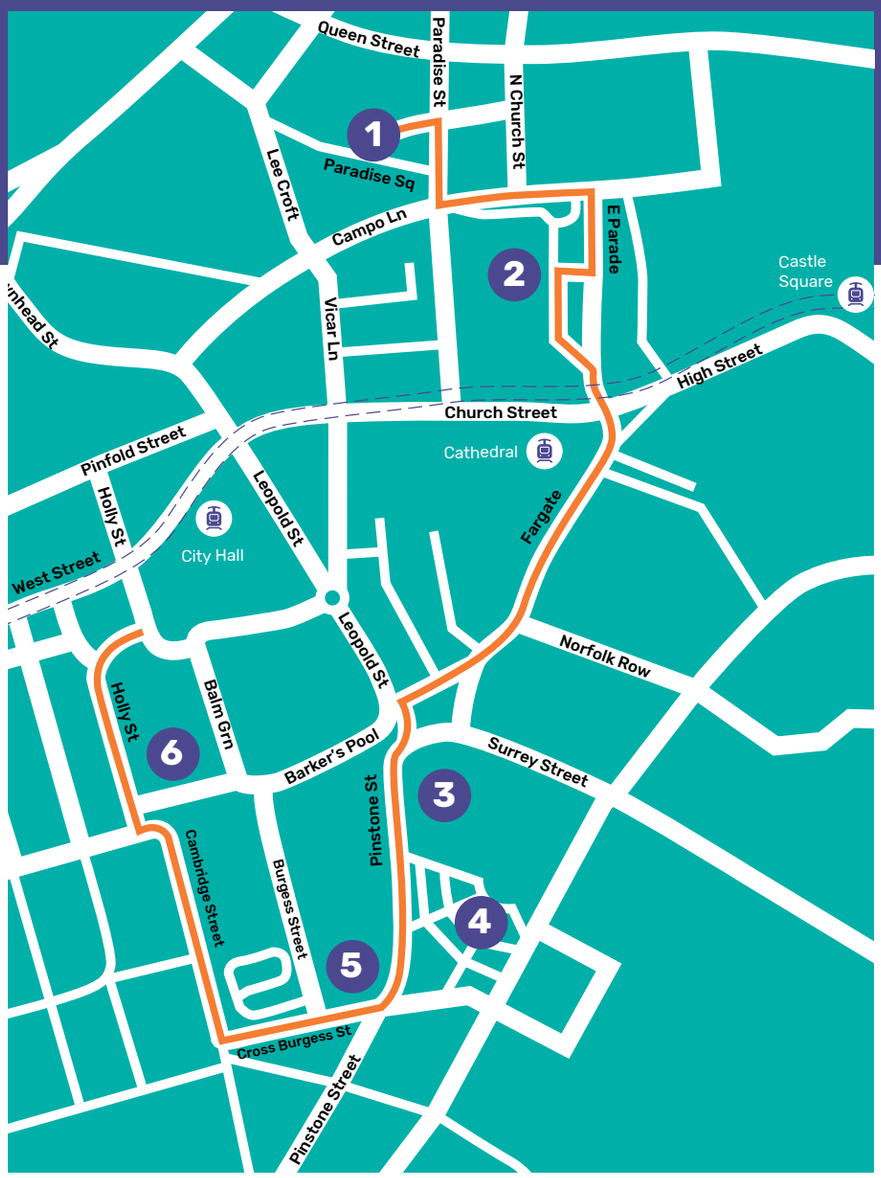
Syllabus,

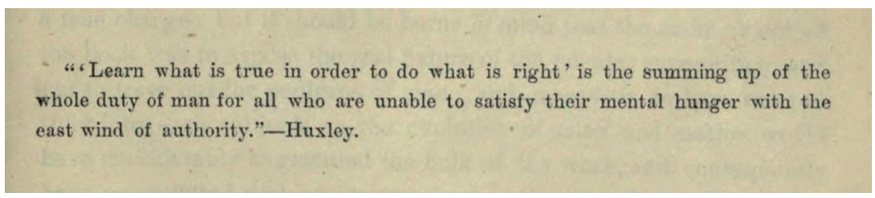
From JANUARY 8th to APRIL 18th, 1905.

SUNDAYS at 7 p.m.

Motto:—

MORALITY apart from THEOLOGY.




"'Learn what is true in order to do what is right' is the summing up of the whole duty of man for all who are unable to satisfy their mental hunger with the east wind of authority."—Huxley.

6 CITY HALL

In May 1950, this was the site of a 'Freethought Demonstration': a public meeting with a range of speakers, intended to educate people about the values and aims of freethought. The meeting was addressed by leading humanists and secularists from across the country, including Nottingham's Thomas Major Mosley – a prominent public square debater. A report of the evening noted that the collected speakers put across 'various aspects of Freethought in clear, crisp and pointed terms to an interested audience'.

Running alongside and behind City Hall is Holly Street, once home to the Sheffield Public Hospital for Diseases of the Skin, established in March 1880 for the benefit of poor people. Its founder, Herbert Junius Hardwicke, was a freethinker. In 1887, he published *Evolution and Creation*, the epigraph for which was the above quote by avowed agnostic Thomas Henry Huxley. This was a follow-up to his earlier *Popular Faith Unveiled*, which had sought 'to expose the real nature of popular superstition'.