

CONWAY HALL

HUMANIST LIBRARY AND ARCHIVES

NATIONAL SECULAR SOCIETY ARCHIVES

The **National Secular Society** (NSS) was co-founded by Charles Bradlaugh MP (1833-1891), Annie Besant (1847-1933) and Charles Watts (1835-1906) in 1866, providing the focus for a number of secularist groups around the UK. The Society's principles asserted that 'this is the only life we have, and that we should work for its improvement'. In 1877 Bradlaugh and Besant were prosecuted for publishing Charles Knowlton's *The Fruits of Philosophy*, a pamphlet on human sexuality and contraception. In 1880 Bradlaugh was elected MP for Northampton and his long struggle to enter Parliament without taking the oath was a key milestone in the development of British secularism. He was succeeded as President of the NSS by GW Foote (1850-1915), who in 1881 had begun publication of *The Freethinker*. In 1915 Foote was succeeded in turn by Chapman Cohen (1868-1954), a prolific lecturer and writer on religion and philosophy for a popular audience.

Subsequent leaders of the Society further promoted the use of the media to put across secularist views. Under the banner of 'Challenging religious privilege' in public life, the NSS has campaigned and continues to campaign on a broad range of issues, in particular in education (faith schools), the legislature (bishops in the House of Lords, blasphemy laws), the media (religious broadcasting), and in personal life (contraception, abortion, adoption, women's and gay rights, right to die).

SCOPE AND CONTENT

Archives of the National Secular Society and associated bodies, in the keeping of the Humanist Library and Archives at Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, include:

Minutes

Minutes of the executive committee / council of management, 1891-date; minutes of the organisation committee, 1889-1895; [special] sub-committees minutes, 1933-1958; trustees' minutes, 1921-1980

Constitution, organisation, membership and finance

Constitution and standing orders, 1968; applications to form branches, 1917-1949; files re branches, c.1956-1970; membership ledger (alphabetical), c.1930-c.1960; membership ledger (by branch), c.1930-c.1960; membership ledger, c.1940-1954; register of members and subscriptions ledger, 1979-1996; card index of members and affiliated groups, c.1973-1996; cash book, 1916-1954; petty cash book, 1951-1962; cash ledger, 1967-1972; Chapman Estate (India) ledger, 1945-1951

Property and bequests

Papers re NSS properties (including 'Bradlaugh House' 47 Theobalds Rd, 702 Holloway Rd, and Alfretton Post Office, Derbs) and investments, c.1921-2002; papers re bequests to NSS and associated property, including wills, executors' accounts, leases, insurance policies etc (includes many court papers re Bowman Estate, c.1917-1922), c.1907-1948; title deed for GW Foote memorial at City of London Cemetery, 1930

Administrative and campaign files

Files, papers, presscuttings etc re NSS campaigns and issues, including birth control, abortion, adoption, blasphemy laws, religion in education and schools, events and activities etc, c.1955-1979; press releases and press cuttings, c.1969-1975; papers re and recordings of Peter Brearey memorial meeting, 1998; papers re formal complaint against refusal of BBC to include non-religious speakers on 'Thought for the day', 2002-2003; general secretary's administrative and correspondence files, c.1966-1996; correspondence with NSS solicitor, 1979-1990

Photographs

Photographs of National Secular Society's and London Freethinkers' dinners and events, 1897-c.1960; album of photographs of World Union of Freethinkers international congress, Conway Hall, 1938

Publications

The NSS Almanack, 1872; *The Freethinker*, 1881-date; volume of newscuttings, principally from *The Freethinker*, c.1880-1932; Annual Report, 1910-date; Charles Knowlton, *The Fruits of Philosophy*, and Annie Besant, *The Law of Population*, various early editions, nd

The (National) Secular Society Ltd

Minutes, 1898-1981; register of members, subscriptions, directors, 1916-1996; memorandum and articles of association, and associated papers, 1978-1997

GW Foote and Co Ltd

Board minutes, 1941-1995; ledger, 1940-1951; cash ledger, 1941-1949

The Freethinker Endowment Trust

Trust deeds, 1925-1963; trustees' minutes, 1941-1950; ledger, 1941-1952

The Rationalist Press Association Ltd

'Watts' / Re-organisation Committee minutes, 1951-1953

Society for Abolition of the Blasphemy Laws

Annual accounts and ledger, 1922-1959; cash book, 1922-1959