

CONWAY HALL

HUMANIST LIBRARY AND ARCHIVES

SOUTH PLACE ETHICAL SOCIETY ARCHIVES

The **South Place Ethical Society** (SPES) began as a radical nonconformist congregation, founded in London c.1787 by an American, Elhanan Winchester (1751-1797). It acquired premises in Bishopsgate in 1793, and in 1824 built a new chapel in South Place, Finsbury. Over the course of the nineteenth century, the congregation, guided by a series of charismatic leaders, notably William Johnson Fox MP (1786-1864) and another American, Moncure Daniel Conway (1832-1907), evolved continuously away from religious observance towards freethought and rationalism. In 1888 it followed a third American, Stanton Coit (1857-1944), into the Ethical Culture movement and adopted its present name.

From the latter half of the nineteenth century, the Society's meetings have been a forum where 'they publicly debated most of the issues of the day', from what became an essentially 'humanist' stance – setting the pattern that still shapes the Society's public meetings today. Eminent lecturers who have stood on the 'South Place platform' have included Robert Browning, TH Huxley, GJ Holyoake, Charles Bradlaugh, Annie Besant, Bertrand Russell, Fenner Brockway, CEM Joad, Jonathan Miller and Richard Dawkins and many others. South Place also became a centre of musical activity in the nineteenth century with concerts and soirees, and from 1887 a series of Sunday chamber music concerts which continues to attract established performers.

In 1926 the Society sold South Place Chapel and in 1929 opened Conway Hall, in Red Lion Square, which remains the London base for its own activities and those of its 'kindred' secularist and humanist bodies.

Scope and content

Archives of the South Place Ethical Society under its various titles: Parliament Court Chapel (1793-1824), South Place Chapel (1824-1926, Finsbury Unitarian Congregation

(c.1802-c.1834), South Place Religious Society (1879-1888, etc), and South Place Ethical Society (1880-date). Also records of Conway Hall (opened 1929). Includes:

Minutes

Minutes of general meetings of the congregation / Society, 1807-1966; minutes of the general committee, 1807-1984; minutes of finance and fundraising committees, 1817-1982; minutes of programme, activities, music and publications committees, 1879-1999; minutes of library committees, 1893-1976; minutes of the building committee, 1895-1903; minutes of trustees, 1920-1940; minutes of associated groups meeting elsewhere, 1877-1896

Financial records

Financial records including treasurer's accounts and balance sheets, reports, invoices etc, 1815-1881; papers re minister's salary, 1826; subscribers and accounts for repairs and new chapel, William Johnson Fox memorial, Conway Hall building fund, c.1815-c.1930; mortgage redemption fund accounts and papers, 1882-1900; trustees' accounts, c.1921-1930; correspondence re SPES share certificates, 1925-1931

Membership and personalities

Papers re rules and membership, c.1823-1857; membership records including 'Finsbury Chapel register', 1825-1864; register of seatholders and payments, 1852-1860; marriage registers, 1889-1980; 'address book' (members, contacts etc), c.1971-1980; autograph albums

Correspondence

Correspondence re congregation and society business, c.1817-1969; includes personal and semi-personal correspondence of William Johnson Fox, c.1823-1851, and Moncure D Conway, 1871-1905; correspondence re the controversy over William Johnson Fox and Eliza Flower, 1834-1835; correspondence between James Waterlow (treasurer) and Newenham Travers and others, re Travers' lectureship at South Place, etc, c.1849-1851; South Place Chapel letter book, 1873-1877; correspondence with lecturers, 1936-1944

Deeds

Deeds of properties at 14-20 Lambs Conduit Passage, 1685/6-1968, 25 Red Lion Square, 1876-1951, and 49 and 51 Theobalds Rd, 1882-1925, incorporated into Conway

Hall site; copy Land Registry certificates for Conway Hall, 1933-1984; South Place Chapel and South Place Ethical Society trust deeds, 1825-1933

Legal papers (other than deeds)

Papers re legal issues, other than property and trust deeds, including opinions on charitable status, 1906-1930; court papers in Chancery case re Society's charitable status, c.1980; counsel's opinion re letting Chapel for music and dancing, 1880; papers re Lambert bequest, 1991

Buildings and property

Papers re building of South Place Chapel, including plans, contract papers, accounts, debentures, mortgages and mortgage redemption fund, repairs and alterations etc, 1822-1939; correspondence re South Place Chapel property, 1913-1921; plans of Conway Hall, 1927-1963; papers re Conway Hall war damage, c.1941-1950; inventory and valuation of Conway Hall, 1950; plan and correspondence re 49 and 51 Theobalds Rd, 1923-1926; papers re repairs of 14 and 15 Lambs Conduit Passage, 1932; documents re Theobalds Rd shopfront, 1960, and conversion of 51 Theobalds Rd into flats, 1961

Activities

Papers re the Infants' Friend Society, Mutual Improvement Society, Sunday School, library etc, c.1821-1851; proposal for lectures by William Johnson Fox, 1822; programmes and publicity material for congregation and society events and activities, 1876-1936; report on Chapel music, 1874; correspondence and papers re dispute with Musical Director, 1877; Sunday concert programmes, annual reports and accounts etc, 1887-2005; programmes and handbills for children's activities, 1875-1911; address book and papers re Thomas Paine exhibition, 1895, Paine Commemoration / Holyoake Reception, 1903, and Paine centenary, 1909; correspondence and contracts re Conway Memorial Lectures and Trust, 1893-1949; correspondence and papers re meeting in support of Francisco Ferrer, executed in Spain, 1909; meetings and discussions record book and associated papers, 1966-1987

Administration

Administrative papers and files c.1817-1994; papers re registration of South Place Chapel as a place of worship, c.1870-1890; draft 'Aims of South Place Ethical Society', c.1890; Society rules and draft revisions, 1947-1949

Photographs and prints

Photographic portraits of notable figures in the ethical, secularist and humanist movements including Moncure D Conway, Charles Bradlaugh, Felix Adler, Stanton Coit, etc, c.1873-c.1935; album of portraits of persons connected with the Chapel and Society, and of Conway Hall; lithographic prints of South Place Chapel, 1924, and Conway Hall, 1931

Published reports and journals

Annual Reports, 1871-date; South Place Magazine / Monthly Record / Ethical Record, 1895-date; South Place Chapel centenary souvenir, 1924

Personal papers

Ms autobiography and journal of a visit to Scotland by William Johnson Fox; ms autobiography of William Lovett (Chartist), c.1853-1876; illuminated addresses presented to William Johnson Fox, 1842, and Charles Bradlaugh, 1874 and 1887; mss of lectures by Moncure D Conway, c.1874-1896; letters of William Morris, nd, and George Bernard Shaw, 1926; correspondence, draft articles and personal papers of Harold Blackham, 1919-2003