Humanists UK Convention 2025

Octagon Centre
Clarkson Street
Sheffield
S10 2TQ



FOR A TOLERANT WORLD WHERE RATIONAL THINKING AND KINDNESS PREVAIL

#Humanists2025
13–15 June 2025
Sheffield

Read on your phone

WELCOME

Hello to all – new faces and familiar ones – gathered in Sheffield for this year's Humanists UK Convention! I'm thrilled to welcome you here. This occasion is a personal annual highlight for me, and I look forward to meeting hundreds of members and supporters in person around the venue. Please say hello!

Hosting our Convention in different cities in England, Wales, and Northern Ireland each year means we're able to explore and celebrate the unique humanist heritage in each – and Yorkshire has an inspiring history of humanist thinkers and reformers. We can draw inspiration from figures such as Yorkshire-born Jane Ellen Harrison, a pioneering classical scholar, feminist, and freethinker who championed critical inquiry and a compassionate, ethics-based approach to life. We also recognise the efforts of individuals like Greevz Fisher of Leeds, who actively campaigned for secularism and progressive social reforms in the 19th and early 20th centuries.

There is a rich heritage of secularist lectures and ethical societies that were forerunners of Humanists UK. In fact, the 25th annual congress of the Union of Ethical Societies (now Humanists UK), and the first to take place outside of London, was held in Sheffield in 1920. Some of the talks this weekend will draw on this same exciting local and national history.

As well as soaking up all that Sheffield has to offer, there will be plenty of interesting talks from world-class speakers this weekend, with entertainment, camaraderie, and good company in spades. For me – and I hope you'll agree – one of the best parts of these Conventions is the community we find together and the new connections and friendships developed over the weekend.

It's important too, that we acknowledge the progress humanists are making towards a fairer society – in Yorkshire and right across the UK. Take the recent appointment of the first Humanist Chaplain at Leeds Teaching Hospitals: a milestone achievement demonstrating the increasing recognition of the need for non-religious pastoral support in public institutions.

Our work to raise the profile of humanist issues continues with vigour. We see ongoing cross-party discussions and growing momentum for key campaigns, such as bringing about legally recognised humanist marriages in England and Wales. We are working with (and, when needed, against) local authorities across the country, to make sure Religious Education is inclusive of humanism. And, of course, in the coming weeks we hope to see the UK Parliament make the compassionate choice, and legalise assisted dying in England and Wales.



We continue to advocate for a secular state, challenging issues like faith-based discrimination in schools and working to make sure we achieve freedom of choice and belief for all. And I was delighted earlier this year to welcome *New Humanist* magazine into the Humanists UK fold, expanding its reach, and securing its future. Please be sure to pick up a copy for yourself!

We're a movement championing ideas for the one life we have and supporting lasting change for a better society. Whether it's your first Convention or the latest of many, I'm delighted to have you here.

Here's to a wonderful weekend ahead, filled with learning, laughter, and the pursuit of our shared humanist values.

Andrew Copson
Chief Executive,
Humanists UK

YOUR TICKET

REGISTRATION

Register and collect your name badge at the registration desk in Octagon Foyer.

Registration for Humanists UK Convention 2025 is open from **18:00** on Friday, **08:30** on Saturday, and **09:30** on Sunday.



Top row (L–R): Celebrant, School Speaker, Pastoral Carer, Volunteer, First-time attendee

Bottom row (L–R): Young Humanists, LGBT Humanists, Defence Humanists, Humanist Climate Action, Attending solo

QUIET ROOM

If you need to step away from everything for a moment of peace and quiet, the Octagon Council Chamber is available from 18:00–23:00 on Friday, 09:00–20:00 on Saturday, and 09:30–18:00 on Sunday. The Octagon Bar lounge is available from 20:00–23:00 on Saturday.

This room is unstaffed, and is **not** for meeting others or chatting.

Please ask a member of staff to direct you.



Convention ticket

Convention ticket-holders are welcome to join us at any talk or panel discussion throughout the weekend.



plus lunch

Join us for teas, coffees, and lunch on Saturday and Sunday.

Refreshments are served at 10:55 and 15:15, with lunch at 12:10.



plus dinner

Join us for drinks from 19:30 on Saturday evening, and for the Gala Dinner at 20:00.

There is no designated dress code for the dinner; come dressed however you feel most comfortable.



plus lunch and dinner

Join us for teas, coffees, and lunches on both days, and for drinks and the Gala Dinner on Saturday evening.

FRIDAY

18:00	**Registration opens**	**Octagon Foyer**
19:00	**Welcome drinks** (card-only bar)	**Octagon Bar**
20:00	**Friday Night Comedy** Hannah Platt, Sean McLoughlin, Olga Koch	**Octagon**
22:00	**Drinks continue in the bar**	**Octagon Bar**

SATURDAY

08:30	**Registration opens**	**Octagon Foyer**
09:00	**Welcome**	**Octagon**
09:05	**What is humanism for?** Richard Norman, *Kathy Riddick*	**Octagon**
10:05	**Human-centred technology in a world of crisis** Sara Wahedi, *Gary McLelland*	**Octagon**
	Invisible rainbows Alfredo Carpineti, *Ann O'Connell*	**Uni Central**
10:55	Tea and coffee (Lunch ticket-holders only)	**Octagon Bar**
11:20	**The Status Game** Will Storr, *Karen Wright*	**Octagon**
	The new algorithmic age: ethics, society, and our AI future Claudia Aradau, Kate Devlin, Sara Wahedi, *Andrew West*	**Uni Central**
12:10	Lunch (Lunch ticket-holders only)	**Octagon Bar**
13:25	**Humanists in Parliament** Lizzi Collinge MP, *Andrew Copson*	**Octagon**
14:25	**Is free speech under threat?** Charlotte Lydia Riley, *Andrew Copson*	**Octagon**
	Faith to Faithless: building community for the ex-religious George Askwith, Ffion Autumn, Terri O'Sullivan, *Clare Elcombe Webber*	**Uni Central**
15:15	Tea and coffee (Lunch ticket-holders only)	**Octagon Bar**

SATURDAY

15:45	**Making the greatest happiness principle a reality** Lord Richard Layard, *Niki Seth-Smith*	**Octagon**
	How Westminster works... and why it doesn't Ian Dunt, *Andrew Copson*	**Uni Central**
16:45	**Evolution, history, and the future of religion** Harvey Whitehouse, *Ann O'Connell*	**Octagon**
17:35	Close	
19:30	**Drinks reception** (Gala Dinner ticket-holders only)	**Octagon Bar**
20:00	**Gala Dinner** (Gala Dinner ticket-holders only)	**INOX Dine**

SUNDAY

09:30	**Registration opens**	**Octagon Foyer**
10:05	**Blasphemers! Four freethinkers who fought for our rights** Paul 'Polyp' Fitzgerald and Madeleine Goodall	**Octagon**
10:55	Tea and coffee (Lunch ticket-holders only)	**Octagon Bar**
11:20	**Authoritarian century: omens of a post-liberal future** Azeem Ibrahim, *Andrew Copson*	**Octagon**
	From heresy to witchcraft Deborah Hyde, *Neil McKain*	**Uni Central**
12:10	Lunch (Lunch ticket-holders only)	**Octagon Bar**
13:25	**Blue machine: how the ocean shapes our world** Helen Czerski, *Andrew Russell*	**Octagon**
	A piece of chalk Luke Donnellan, *Madeleine Goodall*	**Uni Central**
14:25	**Money, Lies, and God: Inside the movement to destroy American democracy** Katherine Stewart, *Andrew Copson*	**Octagon**
15:15	Close, tea and coffee (Lunch ticket-holders only) AGM registration opens (Members only)	**Octagon Bar** **Octagon Foyer**
15:45	**Humanists UK Annual General Meeting** (Members only)	**Octagon**
17:15	**Drinks with board members** (Members only)	**Octagon Bar**

All appearances and timings are subject to speakers' work and other scheduling commitments.

SESSIONS

FRIDAY

Friday Night Comedy — Octagon

Hannah Platt, Sean McLoughlin, Olga Koch

Friday 19:00–Late

A fun, easy, social start to the weekend! The bar opens at 19:00, and comedy kicks off at 20:00. And why not stay for a few drinks with attendees old and new from 22:00?

SATURDAY

Welcome — Octagon

Andrew Copson

Saturday 09:00–09:05

What is humanism for? — Octagon

Richard Norman, *Kathy Riddick*

Saturday 09:05–09:55

Most of us think we know what humanism is – but why do we need it? If people are leaving organised religions, why do they need another package deal, a new '-ism'? Why not just leave them to arrive at their own individual sets of beliefs and values?

This is the question which Richard will share with us, and it is the subject of his new book, *What Is Humanism For?*. In attempting to formulate some answers, he will look at what humanism has to offer in the face of the mounting crises – ethical, political, and environmental – which confront us all.

Human-centred technology in a world of crisis — Octagon

Sara Wahedi, *Gary McLelland*

Saturday 10:05–10:55

As artificial intelligence and digital systems increasingly shape how societies govern, communicate, and deliver aid, the question of who these systems serve - and who they exclude - has never been more urgent. Drawing on her experience leading civic technology in Afghanistan and adapting it in the wake of the Taliban's return, Sara Wahedi reflects on what it means to design technology in contexts where freedom, safety, and access to information are constantly under threat.

This session will explore how digital infrastructure can protect rather than endanger, and how innovation must respond to the needs of those living under censorship, surveillance, and systemic collapse. It considers how human-centred design must evolve when the users are not just consumers, but survivors. From her work in conflict-affected regions to global advisory roles on technology and human rights, Wahedi offers a powerful argument for placing dignity and accountability at the core of technological development.

SESSIONS

Invisible rainbows
Uni Central

Alfredo Carpineti, *Ann O'Connell*

Saturday 10:05–10:55

The light we can see is only a small part of the whole electromagnetic spectrum. From radio waves to gamma rays, there is so much of the universe that is invisible to us. Join us to explore these phenomenal objects and events.

The status game
Octagon

Will Storr, *Karen Wright*

Saturday 11:20–12:10

In his books, Will Storr argues that humans live their lives as status games, but experience them as heroic stories. Telling the story of Marada Dynda, who became sucked into the anti-vaxx movement, Storr will show in this talk how dogged pursuit of status leads to widespread irrationality.

The new algorithmic age: ethics, society, and our AI future
Uni Central

Claudia Aradau, Kate Devlin, Sara Wahedi, *Andrew West*

Saturday 11:20–12:10

How can AI development promote, and not undermine, democratic principles? What safeguards are needed for individual autonomy in an algorithm-driven world? How can technology's empowering potential benefit humanity, especially vulnerable groups, while mitigating risks? And what is democracy's future when inscrutable algorithms influence societal decision-making?

Join Claudia Aradau, Kate Devlin, and Sara Wahedi to explore all these questions and more, in a crucial conversation on the complexities of our rapidly developing digital world, and what we must do now to bring about an understandable, accountable, and transparent AI serving humanity and upholding – not subverting – democratic and humanist values.

Humanists in Parliament
Octagon

Lizzi Collinge MP, *Andrew Copson*

Saturday 13:25–14:15

Join Lizzi Collinge MP, Chair of the All-Party Parliamentary Humanist Group (APPHG), in conversation with Andrew Copson to hear about what it is like being a humanist parliamentarian in Westminster. Learn what the APPHG is doing to raise the humanist voice in Parliament, and how you can get involved to create positive, lasting change.

Plus, take part in a Humanists UK campaign activity to invite the Justice Secretary to legally recognise humanist marriages in England and Wales.

SESSIONS

SATURDAY

Is free speech under threat? — Octagon

Charlotte Lydia Riley, *Andrew Copson*

Saturday 14:25–15:15

Who gets to exercise free speech, and what happens when powerful voices think they have been silenced? Free speech has been reinvigorated as a political issue in recent years – from controversies around protest, to concerns around hate speech, the question of who is allowed to speak and what they are allowed to say has been the topic of much debate. There are doubtless real threats to people's speech rights around the globe today. And yet, our contemporary 'culture wars' have positioned this issue in a very narrow space, one in which 'cancel culture' poses a far greater risk than authoritarianism, and in which it is the progressive left, not the reactionary right, who should be most feared when it comes to our ability to speak freely. Why is this, and what are the consequences of this framing?

Faith to Faithless: building community for the ex-religious — Uni Central

George Askwith, Ffion Autumn, Terri O'Sullivan, *Clare Elcombe Webber*

Saturday 14:25–15:15

How do you start from scratch with finding a community which shares your values, understands your journey, and accepts you for who you are?

Leaving a high-control religious community that once provided all of your friends, family, and support can be very isolating. In addition to carrying trauma from the control and abuse experiences within the community, leavers may face shunning, public shaming, and, in some cases, threats and ongoing abuse or harassment.

Bearing this while starting to build a new life, deciding who they are, what they believe, and how they connect with others can be a struggle. Faith to Faithless offers people the opportunity to feel validated and find others who can relate, building a compassionate and understanding community. Just knowing you are not alone can be a life-saver. Join us to hear from Terri, George, and Ffion, who have all played their part in creating communities for ex-religious people.

Making the greatest happiness principle a reality — Octagon

Lord Richard Layard, *Niki Seth-Smith*

Saturday 15:45–16:35

In this session, Professor Lord Layard will discuss how we can make the greatest happiness the guiding principle for all organisations and for ourselves in our daily life. He will review what governments can do and what the UK Government is doing. He will show how value for money should be based on the greatest happiness, and how that would turn public priorities upside down. Then, he will discuss the purpose of business and of education – with examples of what it would mean if they targeted the greatest happiness. Turning to ourselves, he will describe how Action for Happiness is trying to promote a happier world, before ending with an optimistic forecast for the future.

How Westminster works... and why it doesn't
Uni Central

Ian Dunt, *Andrew Copson*

Saturday 15:45–16:35

Join in to hear Ian Dunt lift the lid on how Westminster really works, in conversation with Humanists UK Chief Executive Andrew Copson. In this session, Ian will put aside the empty calories we normally consume for political coverage and instead take a raw look at how power operates in Britain. How does the Whips Office work to control MPs? What kind of pressure do editors put on their reporters? How did special advisors take over the civil service? And why can we get such a shockingly low quality of ministers? All will be revealed, in agonising detail.

Evolution, history, and the future of religion
Octagon

Harvey Whitehouse, *Ann O'Connell*

Saturday 16:45–17:35

How has human evolutionary inheritance shaped global society? Why are humans everywhere prone to believe in ghosts? How might our tendency to imitate one another be contributing to the climate catastrophe? And does our deep evolutionary past impel us into deadly wars?

In 1987, Harvey Whitehouse went to live with an indigenous community deep in the Papua New Guinea rainforest. His experiences there convinced him that, far from being wildly different, humans are fundamentally alike: their beliefs and behaviours rooted in a set of evolutionary urges that can be found in any society, anywhere.

In this talk, Whitehouse will rove across 12 millennia and five continents to uncover how these evolved urges have both shaped and been reshaped by human history. Along the way, he will show that this ancient inheritance does not just hold the key to explaining the modern world – but perhaps also to changing it.

SUNDAY

Blasphemy! Four freethinkers who fought for our rights
Octagon

Paul 'Polyp' Fitzgerald and Madeleine Goodall

Sunday 10:05–10:55

What can the battles of the past teach us about the challenges we face today? And who were the freethinking forerunners who championed freedoms we continue to defend?

From a potential cast of hundreds, this session alights on the vivid, turbulent lives of four such figures, who risked freedom and reputation for the causes they believed in. Sometimes seen as loose cannons by even their would-be allies, they provoked the rigid authoritarian establishment of their day, and occasionally alarmed even their campaigning peers with provocative ideas and confronting methods.

What can their determination and experiences teach us about the ideological conflicts and strategic challenges we face today? And who might be their modern equivalents, crashing into the hulls and masts of our contemporary newsfeeds?

SESSIONS

SUNDAY

Authoritarian century: omens of a post-liberal future — Octagon

Azeem Ibrahim, *Andrew Copson*

Sunday 11:20–12:10

Liberal democracy has delivered more freedom and security to more people than any other system in history. Yet today, it faces a growing anti-liberal backlash – and much of the blame lies with its own defenders. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, Western leaders claimed ideological victory and embraced a rigid 'total liberalism' – repeating the inflexibility that had doomed communism. The economic, social, and foreign policy failures that followed have eroded public trust, opening the door to disillusionment, populism, Russian interference, and the appeal of the Chinese model.

In this urgent and thought-provoking talk, Azeem Ibrahim explores how we reached this moment of democratic crisis. Drawing on history – from Tsarist conspiracy theories and Italian corruption to the revolutions in America, France, and China – he traces the deeper roots of liberalism's present-day struggles. With clarity and conviction, Ibrahim argues that liberals must reckon with past mistakes and reimagine liberal democracy for the 21st century. Only by renewing its promise can we uphold human dignity and confront the global emergencies that lie ahead – a vision at once sobering and hopeful.

From witchcraft to heresy — Uni Central

Deborah Hyde, *Neil McKain*

Sunday 11:20–12:10

Witchcraft became big news in Europe in the 16th and 17th centuries. Torrents of learned discussion turned to action, and the corpses piled high. But the legal infrastructure for such a mass persecution did not arise fully-formed in the moment. The concepts and institutions were well established and had been used for other purposes all the way back to the ninth century. The early Middle Ages saw European empires re-coalesce after the decline of Rome.

An ambitious Church set itself the task of designing and enforcing the architecture for control of its own self-defined domain across nations. Through schisms, crusades, and heresies, a theoretical and legal framework formed. Add the new technology of the printing press and the political turmoil of the Reformation, and the ideas of a religious empire were set to take a side-step to a new sphere.

In this session, Deborah Hyde will look at history, belief, power, and perverse incentives to understand the making of a very bloody delusion.

Blue machine: how the ocean shapes our world

Octagon

Dr Helen Czerski, *Andrew Russell*

Sunday 13:25–14:15

Earth is home to a huge story that is rarely told - that of our ocean. Not the fish or the dolphins, but the massive ocean engine itself: what it does, why it works, and the many ways it has influenced animals, weather, and human history and culture. In a talk that will recalibrate our view of our blue planet, physicist Helen Czerski dives deep to illuminate the murky depths of the ocean engine, examining the messengers, passengers and voyagers that live in it, travel over it, and survive because of it. From the ancient Polynesians who navigated the Pacific by reading the waves to permanent residents of the deep such as the Greenland shark that can live for hundreds of years, she explains the vast currents, invisible ocean walls, and underwater waterfalls that all have their place in the ocean's complex, interlinked system. What does it really mean to be a citizen of a blue planet? It's time we all found out.

A piece of chalk

Uni Central

Luke Donnellan, *Madeleine Goodall*

Sunday 13:25–14:15

In 1868 renowned biologist Thomas Henry Huxley (also known as 'Darwin's bulldog') gave a celebrated lecture in which he reconstructed the geology of Britain and the evolutionary history of life on Earth from a piece of chalk. In this presentation, Luke will attempt to go one step further and use this deceptively simple piece of rock to illustrate everything about the humanist approach to life. Not only a scientist, Huxley was a keen educator, passionate about sharing his understanding of the natural world, able to take complicated concepts and find ways to bring them to life. That goal lies behind much of the work of the Understanding Humanism programme – finding creative ways to illustrate big ideas. How much can a humble piece of chalk tell us about not only who we are and where we come from, but also how we ought to live?

Money, Lies, and God

Octagon

Inside the movement to destroy American democracy

Katherine Stewart, *Andrew Copson*

Sunday 14:25–15:15

For too long, America's religious right has masqueraded as a social movement preoccupied with cultural issues. Katherine Stewart reveals a disturbing truth: this is a political movement that seeks to gain power and impose its vision on all of society. Religious nationalists aren't just fighting a culture war, they are waging a political war on the norms and institutions of American democracy. The movement is fuelled by a sector of ultra-wealthy donors, actively disinforms and propagandises its followers, and exploits religion for politics and power. Its ambitions are international; it is actively forging alliances with figures and organisations in the UK and beyond.

In this closing session of Humanists UK Convention 2025, Katherine Stewart will pull back the curtain on the movement's inner workings and leading personalities, explain how the movement works, and offer some ideas for mounting an effective resistance.

SPEAKERS



Claudia Aradau is Professor of International Politics in the Department of War Studies at King's College London. Her current research focuses on how digital technologies reconfigure security and surveillance practices, and how algorithms and machine learning recast relations between security, democracy, and critique. Her latest book, *Algorithmic Reason: The New Government of Self and Other* (with Tobias Blanke) won the 2023 Best Book Award by the Science, Technology and Arts in International Relations section of the International Studies Association. She is currently co-editor of *International Theory*. She is Principal Investigator of SECURITY FLOWS ('Enacting border security in the digital age: Political worlds of data forms, flows and frictions'), funded by the European Research Council, which seeks to analyse how datafication – the process of transforming our everyday lives into quantifiable digital data – is also transforming borders today.



George Askwith grew up as a Jehovah's Witness, indoctrinated from childhood and committed to the faith. But as she struggled to reconcile her sexuality with the expectations of the religion, the pressure to be the 'perfect JW' became unsustainable. Exhausted and increasingly aware of her identity as a lesbian, she deconstructed her faith and stepped away from the religion. Meeting Ffion marked a turning point: to avoid excommunication and losing her family, George relocated across the country. Starting over while processing life outside the faith was incredibly challenging. Shortly after the move, she attended apostasy training by Faith to Faithless at Sheffield Hallam University and immediately began volunteering, bringing Ffion along with her.



Ffion Autumn was born in a Middle Eastern country where religion, government, and culture are deeply intertwined. 'Muslim' was printed on her birth certificate and passport. From a young age, she questioned Islam but was met with punishment rather than answers. Forced into marriage and later fighting for divorce, she came to fully understand the limits on her freedom and safety as a lesbian and atheist in an Islamic society. She seized the opportunity to study in the UK and chose to stay for her safety, at great personal cost, losing both her family and a successful career. While pursuing a PhD, she met George and joined Faith to Faithless as a volunteer.

Together, **George and Ffion** launched the first Faith to Faithless social group outside London, building a vibrant and supportive community of apostates in South Yorkshire. Over the past six years, this group has helped people navigate the complex journey of leaving high-control religious communities. As their careers took them across the country, they established similar groups in Dorset, Hampshire, Cambridgeshire, and Leicestershire. George has also contributed to the Faith to Faithless research team, and given talks on apostasy and Faith to Faithless.

SPEAKERS



Alfredo Carpineti is an astrophysicist and communicator, working for IFLScience for nine years. He is the staff writer and space correspondent. He is committed to fighting inequity in STEM and is the chair and founder of Pride in STEM, the largest UK charity dedicated to supporting LGBT People in STEM. He's an avid science communicator producing videos and podcasts under the moniker The Astroholic. He's writing a book, *Invisible Rainbows*, about all the astronomical discoveries conducted with light beyond the range that humans can see.



Lizzi Collinge MP is the Labour MP for Morecambe and Lunesdale and chair of the All-Party Parliamentary Humanist Group, which brings together around 130 MPs and peers.

Lizzi is a strong advocate of humanist causes within the UK Parliament, championing human rights and equality at every opportunity. This includes calling for legal recognition of humanist marriages in England and Wales, the introduction of a safe and compassionate assisted dying law, and for inclusive schools. Lizzi is also a humanist Faith and Belief Champion within the Labour Party, and a patron of Labour Humanists. Prior to her election, Lizzi was a Lancashire County Councillor.



Andrew Copson is Chief Executive of Humanists UK, responsible for day-to-day management of the organisation as a whole, and management of the staff team. He has been Chief Executive of Humanists UK since 2010, prior to which he worked across educational and public affairs roles within the charity. He is an expert on humanism who has written widely on the subject, and is regularly invited to appear on TV and radio news programmes. As well as these roles, Andrew is a trustee of the Religious Education Council and President of Humanists International – the umbrella body bringing the global humanist movement together to pursue human rights at an international level.



Helen Czerski is a physicist, oceanographer, broadcaster, and author. Whilst Helen's primary academic interests are those of the physics of the oceans, she describes herself as a lover of the science of the 'everyday world'. Helen's passion for a broad range of scientific endeavours, as well as her skill in science communication, has made her well known as the presenter of a host of popular BBC TV and radio science programmes and documentaries. She also gave a talk on the impact of oceans on human civilisations to a packed house at the 2017 Humanists UK Convention. Helen is a patron of Humanists UK. Her latest book is *Blue Machine: How the Ocean Shapes Our World*.

SPEAKERS



Kate Devlin is Professor of AI and Society in the Department of Digital Humanities at King's College London. Her research explores how people interact with technology, both historically and in the future. With a background in archaeology and a PhD in computer science, she bridges the arts and sciences to examine AI's societal impact. She leads King's College London's role in the £31 million Responsible AI UK programme, funded by UK Research and Innovation, bringing together researchers to shape AI development for societal benefit. Beyond academia, she serves on the board of the Open Rights Group, advocating for digital rights. She became a patron of Humanists UK in 2022, and she represents Humanists UK as a Commissioner for the AI, Faith & Civil Society Commission.



Luke Donnellan is Director of Understanding Humanism, where he is responsible for promoting the understanding of humanism, especially in formal education settings. He manages Humanists UK's school speakers programme; teacher training and CPD; and the production of educational resources. He is the co-author of *Understanding Humanism*, writer and editor of the online courses *Introducing humanism* and *Humanist lives*, and writer-director of Humanists UK's recent short film with Alice Roberts, *One Life, Live It Well*.



Ian Dunt is a British political commentator, who writes a column in the *i* newspaper and a weekly political newsletter on Substack called *Striking 13*. He was the host on the *Remainiacs* podcast during the Brexit wars and then on its replacement *Oh God What Now?*. He is now a host on the hit podcast *Origin Story*, which tells the story behind the ideas in modern politics, from AI to Zionism. He is the author of several books, including *Brexit: What the Hell Happens Now?*, *How to be a Liberal* and the *Sunday Times* bestseller *How Westminster Works and Why It Doesn't*. He is the chair of the editorial committee for *New Humanist* magazine.



Clare Elcombe Webber is Director of Humanist Care at Humanists UK, overseeing two key support programmes. She leads strategic work to make chaplaincy services inclusive for non-religious people, and the delivery of this through the Non-Religious Pastoral Support Network. She also oversees Faith to Faithless, which supports individuals leaving high-control religions, and advocates to improve policies affecting them. Clare chairs the Network for Pastoral, Spiritual, and Religious Care in Health and is the humanist/non-religious advisor to HMPPS and the MoD. Previously, Clare had a career in the violence against women and girls (VAWG) sector in leadership, strategic, and commissioning roles. She spent time as a security consultant for the Home Office and Parliament, as a script consultant for Eastenders, developing new psychological advocacy services, and as part of a multi-agency service for stalking victims and perpetrators. Clare holds a BSc in psychology and an MSc in applied positive psychology, with a research focus on vicarious trauma in professionals.

SPEAKERS



Paul 'Polyp' Fitzgerald is a cartoonist, graphic novelist, and prop builder based in Manchester. A humanist freethinker, he also serves as chair of the Peterloo Memorial Campaign. Paul is renowned for his intricate and thought-provoking work, tackling complex political, social, and environmental issues through his cartoons and graphic novels. He has published a significant graphic biography exploring the life and enduring ideas of the radical thinker Thomas Paine. This work uses Paul's detailed illustrative style to vividly bring Paine's 18th-century era and revolutionary arguments to life for a modern audience. Paul's distinctive approach across his broader work often focuses on themes like climate change, economic inequality, corporate power, and social justice, presenting sharp commentary aimed at making challenging subjects accessible and engaging.



Madeleine Goodall is Humanist Heritage Manager at Humanists UK. Since 2019, she has been researching and sharing the rich history and influence of non-religious people in the UK, alongside a team of volunteers and experts, on the Humanist Heritage website and through a range of events and resources. A particular passion has been uncovering the stories of women in the humanist movement, and she has written about these for publications including *New Humanist*, *History Workshop Online*, and *The Humanist* (US). Madeleine gives regular talks on humanist history, and has also developed a series of heritage walks across the UK, often working closely with local humanist groups. This year, she concluded the two year National Lottery Heritage Fund supported project 'Humanist Heritage: Doers, Dreamers, Place Makers', which included an oral history project, public exhibition, and range of events marking the 45th anniversary of LGBT Humanists.



Deborah Hyde is a folklorist and author. She wants to know why people believe in the supernatural, and uses psychology, cultural anthropology, history, and folklore to shed light on this intractable strand of human nature. She has written for periodicals such as the *Guardian* and the *Fortean Times*, and has contributed material to book anthologies. For ten years, Deborah was Editor-in-Chief of the *Skeptic* and is a fellow of The Committee for Skeptical Inquiry. She makes frequent TV appearances, being a regular contributor to *Strange Evidence* and *Mysteries at the Museum*, and has presented sceptical insights in two of BBC iPlayer's most successful recent podcasts, *Uncanny* and *The Battersea Poltergeist*. In a parallel life, Deborah has provided production management and coordinator services in the film industry for the past 30 years. She occasionally strays to the wrong side of the camera, most notably as the 500-year-old Thurlingian Queen in Terry Gilliam's *The Brothers Grimm*, and (according to Deb) puppeteering the 'best leaf' on the 'Devil's Snare' plant in *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*.

SPEAKERS



Azeem Ibrahim OBE is a renowned scholar and author, serving as a Research Professor at the Strategic Studies Institute, US Army War College, and as Senior Director at the Newlines Institute for Strategy and Policy in Washington, DC. He earned his PhD from the University of Cambridge and has completed fellowships at Oxford, Harvard, and Yale universities. Azeem has advised numerous world leaders on policy development and strategy. He has been recognized as a Top 100 Global Thinker by the European Social Think Tank, and named a Young Global Leader by the World Economic Forum. In 2022, he was awarded an OBE for his services to foreign policy.



Olga Koch is a writer and comedian, across radio, television and film. She was nominated for Best Newcomer at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival in 2018, Best Show at Leicester Comedy Festival in 2020, longlisted for Best Stand Up Show at the National Comedy Awards in 2021 and her show 'Fight' won the 2022 Writers Guild Award for Best Radio Comedy. She has also appeared on *Mock the Week* (BBC Two), *QI* (BBC Two), *Frankie Boyle's New World Order* (BBC Two), *Late Night Mash* (Dave), *Richard Osman's House of Games* (BBC Two), *Guessable* (Comedy Central), *Question Team* (Dave) and *Live at the Apollo* (BBC Two). She is currently developing a book about online behaviour and parasocial relationships.



Lord Richard Layard is the founder-Director of the Centre for Economic Performance – a leading inter-disciplinary research centre at the London School of Economics. He was one of the first economists to work on subjective wellbeing, and his central interest for the last 20 years has been on how government policy can best promote the people's wellbeing. He has always believed, as in the 18th-century Enlightenment, that societies should be judged by the happiness of the people. And since the 1970s he has urged fellow economists to return to the idea that public policy should maximise a social welfare function depending on the distribution of happiness. He has had substantial influence on public policy. In 2007 he persuaded the UK government to develop a large programme of psychological therapy (IAPT, now NHS Talking Therapies), which treats 700,000 patients a year. In 2010, he influenced the UK Government to measure wellbeing as a national statistic – using questions later recommended by the OECD to its member countries. Richard is also co-founder of Action for Happiness (a grassroots movement promoting a happier way of living) and the World Wellbeing Movement (a 'top-down' organisation to persuade decisionmakers to make wellbeing their priority).



Charlotte Lydia Riley is a historian of 20th-century Britain at the University of Southampton, specialising in questions about empire, politics, culture, and identity. She is editor of *The Free Speech Wars* and author of *Imperial Island: A History of Empire in Modern Britain*. Her writing has appeared in a wide range of publications including the *Guardian*, *New Statesman*, *Financial Times*, *Washington Post*, and *History Today*.

SPEAKERS



Neil McKain is a Head of Religious Studies with over ten years' teaching experience. He graduated in Theology and RS from the University of Leeds and holds an MA in Philosophy and Religion from the University of London. His work nationally in RE has been extensive. Neil is part of an advisory group to the Rt Hon Charles Clarke and Professor Linda Woodhead in their work on a new legal settlement for RE. Neil has served on the executive of the National Association for Teachers of RE (NATRE) for the last six years and is a member of the RE working group at OFSTED. He is a published author of student textbooks as well as articles on RE more generally. Neil also serves as a primary school governor with responsibility for curriculum and standards. Neil is a committed humanist and a firm advocate for RE which is objective, fair, and balanced.



Gary McLelland has been Chief Executive of Humanists International, since February 2017. Before this, he worked for the Humanist Society Scotland from 2013 as Head of Communications and Public Affairs. He has also previously served as a Board member of the European Humanist Federation based in Brussels, as well as a board member of the Scottish Joint Committee on Religious and Moral Education. Before working in humanist campaigning, Gary worked for a global citizenship project at the Mercy Corps European headquarters in Edinburgh, and also in policy and service delivery in education and social work. He has a BSc (hons) in psychology, a diploma in childhood and youth studies and master's in human rights law, in which he researched the approach of the European Court of Human Rights and the United Nations' approach to so-called 'blasphemy laws'.



Sean McLoughlin is an acclaimed stand-up comedian and writer based in London. Hugely in-demand in the UK and internationally, he has made appearances on *Live at the Apollo*, *Mock The Week*, *The Stand-Up Sketch Show*, *Stand-Up Central* and Kevin Hart's *LOLNetwork* among others. Sean has played solo shows on four continents, and has opened for Bill Burr at the Royal Albert Hall, Ricky Gervais at the Hollywood Bowl, and performed a gala show at the Sydney Opera House. He's also released two specials and three hugely successful US comedy albums. He has made multiple TV and radio appearances and his material on the world of technology has even seen Sean invited to perform at multiple high-profile tech conferences, including the keynote speech at E-Day in Amsterdam.



Richard Norman is Emeritus Professor of Moral Philosophy at the University of Kent, and author of many books including *On Humanism*, co-author (with Andrew Copson and Luke Donnellan) of *Understanding Humanism*, and co-editor of *Religion and Atheism: Beyond the Divide*. His forthcoming book, *What is Humanism For?*, will be published in June 2025, and *Religion and Atheism in Dialogue*, co-edited with Anthony Carroll, will be out in July. Richard is on the committee of Humanist Climate Action, and is a patron of Humanists UK.

SPEAKERS



Ann O'Connell is a member of the board of Humanists UK. A committed humanist, she shares the Humanists UK vision of personal fulfilment found in our connections with others, and finding meaning in science, reason, compassion, and creativity. Ann is a trustee and treasurer of the Leicestershire and Rutland branch of Emmaus UK, a national charity which works to end homelessness. She is also a Director of Leicester Health Insight (LHI) a not for profit company which aims to facilitate improvements in health and social care for the population of Leicester city.



Terri O'Sullivan is the Apostate Services Development Officer for Faith to Faithless, a service of Humanists UK. She runs the peer support programme, coordinates social events for the ex-religious all over the UK, and trains service professionals on the issues apostates face through Apostasy Awareness courses. In 2007, she founded XJW Friends, a support and social group for former Jehovah's Witnesses now with nearly 2,000 members. She holds a BSc and MSc in social psychology from the University of Kent and Tilburg University in the Netherlands, where she conducted research on the psychological effects of long-term ostracism from a religious community.



Hannah Platt is the 'voice of a generation' (*The Skinny*) with 'humour sharp enough to draw blood' (*Guardian*); she is 'an undeniable rising star' (*Fest Magazine*) of the UK comedy scene. Her debut Fringe show was nominated for four awards including NextUp's Biggest Award in Comedy, and earned her five- and four-star reviews from the likes of the *Scotsman*, *DIVA* magazine, and *Chortle*. She has appeared on *Comedy Central Live*, BBC Three and Radio 4, and supported Fern Brady, Ashley Gavin, and Lou Sanders amongst others on their UK tours.



Kathy Riddick leads Humanists UK's work in Wales as Coordinator of Wales Humanists, the section bringing together all of Humanists UK's members and supporters in Wales. She is also Campaigns Manager in the Public Affairs and Policy team working across all Humanists UK campaigns. She came to Humanists UK after a successful career in business consulting and communications. As well as representing Wales Humanists to senior stakeholders in the Welsh Government, Kathy makes sure that the voice of humanists in Wales is fully represented in public policy discussions, Senedd debates, and in the media, and works to expand the availability of humanist ceremonies, pastoral support, and resources for teachers in Wales.

SPEAKERS



Andrew Russell is a board member of Humanists UK, as well as a board member of Wikimedia UK. He is also the Head of Policy & Public Affairs for Into Film, the charity that supports young people into screen careers, inspires young filmmakers, and works with schools to use TV and film for teaching and learning. Passionate about rational, respectful dialogue and debate, his work and volunteering efforts promote critical thinking, media and information literacy, and equal access to knowledge. A philosopher by academic background, he also served seven years on the board of The Philosophy Foundation, a charity that encourages the teaching and practice of philosophy across the UK.



Niki Seth-Smith is the editor of *New Humanist*, the award-winning quarterly print and digital magazine exploring culture, ideas, science, and politics from a rationalist and humanist perspective. This historic publication, founded in 1885 and published for many years by the Rationalist Association, is now published by Humanists UK following a merger in early 2025. Niki, who assumed the editorship in Spring of 2023, is also a journalist and fiction writer. Her non–fiction work, often focusing on politics, culture, and gender, has appeared in outlets such as *Vice*, Al Jazeera, and *openDemocracy*. She has also co-edited two essay collections, *Democratic Wealth: Building a Citizens' Economy* (openDemocracy/Politics in Spires) and *Rethinking the BBC: Public Media in the 21st Century* (Commonwealth Publishing). As a fiction writer, she is interested in storytelling's potential and is currently working on a novel set in Athens, where she lived for many years.



Katherine Stewart is the *New York Times*-bestselling author of *Money, Lies, and God: Inside the Movement to Destroy American Democracy* (Bloomsbury, 2025). Her previous book, *The Power Worshippers: Inside the Dangerous Rise of Religious Nationalism*, was awarded first place for Excellence in Nonfiction Books by the Religion News Association as well as a Morris D. Forkosch award for Best Book in Humanism, and formed the basis of the documentary feature *God & Country*, produced by Rob Reiner and Michele Reiner. She is the recipient of the Freedom From Religion's 2024 Freethought Heroine of the Year award.



Will Storr is an acclaimed writer and thinker, known for his work on storytelling, psychology, and the human condition. His books, including *Selfie*, *The Science of Storytelling*, and *The Status Game*, have been widely praised by critics and influential figures across journalism, academia, and the arts. Previously, Will was an award-winning longform journalist, specialising in human rights reporting across Latin America, Africa, and remote Aboriginal communities in Australia. His work has appeared in the *Guardian*, *Sunday Times*, *Observer*, *New York Times*, and *New Yorker*. His groundbreaking reporting on sexual violence against men earned the Amnesty International Award and the One World Press Award, and his BBC documentary work was recognised with the Association for International Broadcasting (AIB) Award for Best Investigative Documentary.

SPEAKERS



Sara Wahedi is the CEO of Civaam and the founder of Ehtesab, Afghanistan's first civic-technology startup. Her work focuses on developing responsible AI and digital infrastructure for fragile and conflict-affected settings. Through Ehtesab, she pioneered real-time civic alert systems in Afghanistan, helping to keep civilians informed and safe in the absence of functioning institutions. Since its launch, it has sent over 250,000 alerts. Wahedi advises international organisations, UN agencies, and governments on civic technology, crisis governance, and the protection of 'Access to Information' as a fundamental human right, as outlined in Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. She is a Global Ambassador for Women for Women International and serves on the Board of Directors for Fast Forward 2030 at University College London. She has been recognised for her work by *TIME* magazine as a Next Generation Leader, and by *MIT Technology Review* as a Leading Innovator Under 35; she is one of *Forbes*' 30 Under 30, and one of the BBC's 100 Most Influential Women. She is currently completing a Master of Public Policy at the University of Oxford.



Andrew West is Director of IT at Humanists UK. He joined in May 2011, after two years volunteering as Humanists UK's Photographer-in-Residence. He is responsible for managing and coding the Humanists UK website, its many spin-off websites, the office computers, and the contact database. Outside of the office he is a private pilot and ballroom dancer. He also represented Humanists UK on the Fourth Plinth, back in the day.



Harvey Whitehouse is a distinguished anthropologist renowned for his research into the evolution of human culture and social structures. He holds the position of Chair in Social Anthropology at the University of Oxford and serves as Director of the Centre for the Study of Social Cohesion. Over four decades, Professor Whitehouse has conducted extensive fieldwork in diverse and challenging environments, including millenarian cults in Papua New Guinea, battlefields during the Arab Spring, and among violent football gangs in South America. His pioneering 'modes of religiosity' theory examines how the frequency and emotional intensity of rituals influence the formation and cohesion of religious communities. Professor Whitehouse's work has been featured in prominent publications such as the *Guardian*, *Telegraph*, *Scientific American*, and *New Scientist*. He has also delivered hundreds of talks across six continents, including at the World Economic Forum.

SPEAKERS



Karen Wright is Humanists UK's Public Affairs Manager and has held this role since 2018. She is responsible for managing the organisation's external stakeholders such as parliamentarians, civil servants, and other civil society relationships, as well as the organisation's attendance at party conferences. She acts as Secretariat to the All-Party Parliamentary Humanist Group, which brings together around 130 MPs and peers to raise the humanist voice in Parliament, and holds regular events on matters of interest to humanists. She works across the Public Affairs and Policy team to advocate policy to decision-makers and leads on a number of campaigns, including calling for the legal recognition of humanist marriages in England and Wales, decriminalising abortion, and making the UK Parliament inclusive of all regardless of religion or belief. Outside of Humanists UK, Karen works part time for Lord Alf Dubs, patron of Humanists UK, who sits in the House of Lords.

CONVENTION POLICIES

CONDUCT

Humanists UK aims to make sure that everyone attending our conferences and events can participate in them fully. We are committed to providing a safe and hospitable environment for attendees, volunteers, and staff at our events and prohibit intimidating, threatening, or harassing conduct. This policy applies to speakers, staff, volunteers, exhibitors, and delegates.

Humanists UK will not tolerate any form of bullying, harassment, or victimisation and is committed to ensuring the dignity and respect of all staff, consultants, and volunteers working during our events.

SPEAKERS

All appearances are subject to speakers' work and other scheduling commitments.

PHOTOGRAPHY, VIDEO, AND AUDIO RECORDING

Humanists UK reserves the right to photograph and record video and audio of all public sections of the Convention and to make the footage public as it sees appropriate. Please be aware that by attending Humanists UK Convention 2025, you consent to your voice, name, and/or likeness being used, without compensation, in any and all media, whether now known or hereafter devised, for eternity, and you release Humanists UK, its successors, assigns, and licensees from any liability whatsoever of any nature. If you would like to ensure that you are not captured in any media, please contact events@humanists.uk and we will do our best to accommodate you.

GET INVOLVED

Meet humanists in your area
Join your local humanist group – if there isn't one, we'll help you set one up!
humanists.uk/local-groups

Become a school speaker
Become a humanist school speaker and help raise young people's understanding of humanism.
humanists.uk/school-speaker-training

Join your local RE committee
Join your local RE advisory committee and help us to make religious education in schools more inclusive of humanism.
humanists.uk/SACRE-reps

Uncover Humanist Heritage
Help us to uncover the history – and tell the story – of humanist thought and action in the UK.
heritage.humanists.uk

Humanist pastoral care
Find out more about the Non-Religious Pastoral Support Network, including how to volunteer or build a career as a pastoral carer.
nrpsn.org.uk

MA degree in pastoral care
Explore the post-graduate course in *Pastoral Care: Existential and Humanist Practice*.
nrpsn.org.uk/professional-entry-route

Faith to Faithless
Explore ways of volunteering with Faith to Faithless to directly support people leaving high-control religions.
humanists.uk/faith-to-faithless

Train as a humanist celebrant
Train as a humanist celebrant to deliver meaningful funerals, weddings, or naming ceremonies for people in your community.
humanists.uk/ceremonies/become-a-celebrant

Join LGBT Humanists
Get involved with LGBT Humanists as we continue over 45 years of campaigning for LGBT equality, inclusion, and human rights.
humanists.uk/lgbt-humanists

Join Young Humanists
Aged 18–35? Get involved in all elements of Humanists UK, while meeting other young people and helping to develop the next generation of humanists.
humanists.uk/young-humanists

Dialogue
Our dialogue work supports better conversations between people from different worldviews – why not get involved?
humanists.uk/dialogue

Defence Humanists
The home of the non-religious in Defence, and a hub of support and community for non-religious servicemen and women, Ministry of Defence civilians, their families, and veterans.
humanists.uk/defence-humanists

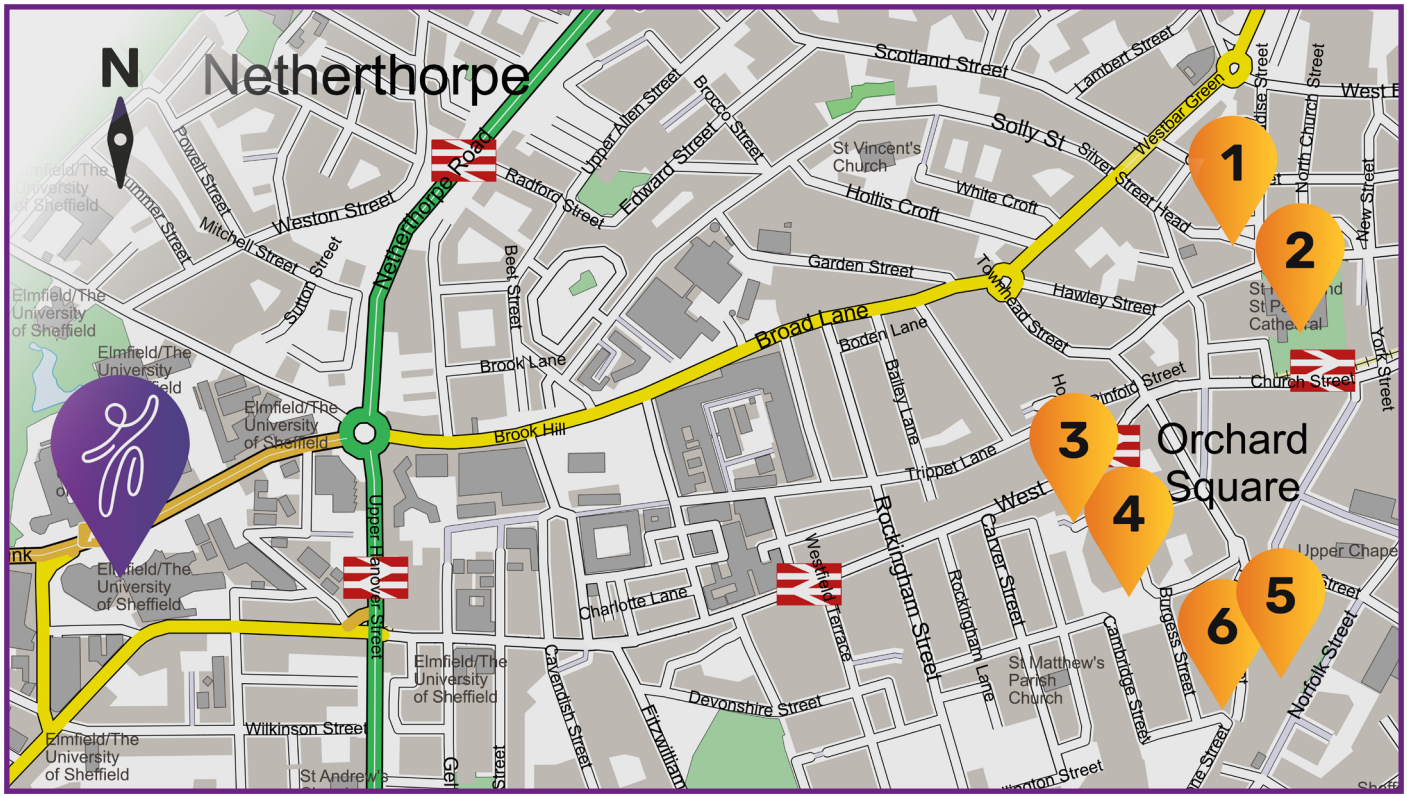
Humanist Climate Action
Committed to redefining lifestyles and campaigning for policies that promote low-carbon, ethical, and sustainable living.
humanists.uk/climate

London Humanist Choir
Come along to enjoy making music in a non-religious environment and help promote the open, understanding, and secular ethos of humanism in a fun way.
london.humanistchoir.org

Volunteer with Humanists UK
Explore the many other ways you can volunteer with Humanists UK

humanists.uk/volunteer2025

GET INVOLVED!



Octagon Centre
Convention venue and meeting point. Notable humanists associated with the University of Sheffield include political theorist Bernard Crick, who taught here 1965–1971, and comedian and former Humanists UK President Linda Smith, who studied English and drama here 1979–1982.

1. Paradise Square
This well-preserved Georgian square was a major open-air meeting place for radicals, including the chartists: part of a working-class movement for parliamentary reform and universal (male) suffrage. One activist who addressed meetings here was self-described 'infidel' Isaac Ironside, a chartist, socialist, and freethinker.

2. Sheffield Cathedral
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. Holly Street
This street was once home to the Sheffield Public Hospital for Diseases of the Skin, founded in 1880 by freethinker Dr Herbert Junius Hardwicke for the benefit of the poor. In 1887, Hardwicke published *Evolution and Creation*, a follow-up to his earlier *Popular Faith Unveiled*, which had sought 'to expose the real nature of popular superstition'. *Evolution and Creation* included various articles by Hardwicke, some of which had previously featured in *The Agnostic Annual* and the *Secular Review*.

4. Sheffield City Hall
In May 1950, this was the site of a 'Freethought Demonstration', addressed by leading humanists and secularists from across the country, including Nottingham's Thomas Major Moseley – 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'.

5. Peace Gardens
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'.

6. Pinstone Chambers, 58 Pinstone Street
Formerly 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. Over the following years, speakers for the group would include poet and gay rights activist Edward Carpenter, and in 1920 the Society would host the first ever annual conference of the Union of Ethical Societies (now Humanists UK) to take place outside of London.

Humanist Heritage

Humanists UK is a registered charity in England and Wales (no. 285987), and limited company (no. 228781).

Humanists UK