

Reform in the 1800s

Secularists were on the frontlines of campaigns against the Church rates as can be seen in this illustration of 62 Fleet Street. The premises were once Richard Carlile's Temple of Reason and it was from here he sold Paine's works which he had republished "Every Woman's Book", the first publication in this country to advocate birth control and sexual liberation. Richard and Jane Carlile were pioneering feminists who thought the current Christian sexual morality repressed women. During their lives the Carlile's were both imprisoned for their efforts, along with many shop-workers who sold his publications.

The 1800s saw an increase in religious dissent and a series of reforms which weakened the constitutional power of the established church. The emerging reform movement included non-believers, as well as religious minorities and liberal Christians.

- The *Sacramental Test Act* (1828) removed the requirement for public officials to be members of the Church of England.
- The *Roman Catholic Relief Act* (1829) codified the emancipation of Catholics, allowing (*inter alia*) members of the Catholic Church to take seats in the Westminster Parliament for the first time.
- The *Tithe Commutation Act* (1836) abolished the system of tithes under which the Church had claimed one-tenth of land produce as payment for its services.
- The *Marriage Act* (1836) and the *Births and Deaths Registration Act* (1836) introduced civil marriage and the civil registration of births, marriages and deaths.
- The *Bishopric of Manchester Act* (1847) limited the number of Bishops entitled to sit in the House of Lords to 26 (its current figure).
- The *Matrimonial Causes Act* (1857) took the issue of divorce away from the jurisdiction of the ecclesiastical courts, making divorce more widely available and accessible (especially for women).
- The *Court of Probate Act* (1857) passed control of probate administration (including the collection of death duties) from the ecclesiastical courts to a newly established government department (the Court of Probate).
- The *Ecclesiastical Courts Jurisdiction Act* (1860) further reduced the jurisdiction of church courts to those 'in Holy Orders'.
- The *Compulsory Church Rate Abolition Act* (1868) made the payment of church rates voluntary instead of compulsory.