

THE National Secular Society is celebrating its 150th anniversary and paying homage to its founder – Charles Bradlaugh – who grew up in Hackney.

He was born on 26 September, 1833 at 5 Bacchus Walk, Hoxton. The son of a solicitors clerk, the family would move around the borough during his childhood, residing in Bacchus Walk, Bird Cage Walk, Elizabeth Street and at 13 Warner Place.

There was little initially to mark him out as a radical free thinker. He attended St. Peter's Church, Hackney Road, where he became a Sunday school teacher under Reverend Graham Packer.

However, his life would change when he expressed doubts about religion. Packer condemned him to his parents and he was thrown out of the family home, aged 15.

Young Charles was taken in by Eliza Sharples Carlile, widow of radical freethinker, Richard Carlile. In the late 1840s, Eliza ran a coffee house for freethinkers in Hackney at 1 Warner Place, off Hackney Road.

It was from here, that Bradlaugh would publish his first pamphlet 'A Few Words on the Christian Creed', aged just 17.

In spite of the break with his family, Bradlaugh maintained fond childhood memories of fishing with his father on the River Lea, a pursuit which he kept up for the rest of his life.

By the time he was elected Liberal MP for Northampton in 1880, he had served in the Army in Ireland, become a key figure in a number of reformist movements and been prosecuted for republishing a US pamphlet providing advice on birth control.

To unite regional secular groups and organisations,

he founded the National Secular Society in 1866, to promote secularism and the separation of church and state.

And it was his battle to enter Parliament after being elected, which would define his public life.

As an atheist and republican, he was faced with the dilemma of whether to take an oath which involved swearing allegiance to God and the Queen. Despite this, he sought to make

an affirmation but the House refused, effectively barring him. Four times in the early 1880s he was re-elected; four times he tried to give the oath but was refused.

On one occasion, he was incarcerated for a night in the prison room in the Clock Tower, the only MP to endure this punishment.

It was not until 1886 that the issue was resolved.

In the House he also spoke on behalf of the plight of the Bryant

and May match girls in the East End and was passionate about Irish Home rule and the cause of Indians in India.

Charles Bradlaugh died on 30 January 1890. His funeral at Brookwood Cemetery was attended by 3,000 mourners including a young Mahatma Gandhi.

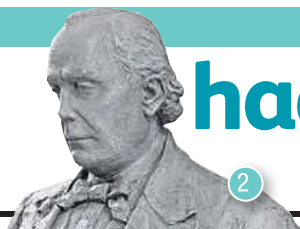
Today, Bacchus Walk no longer exists, but his birthplace is marked by a brown plaque among housing to the east of Regan Way.

Hackney roots of a true radical

Celebrating the life of Charles Bradlaugh: reformist, republican and MP



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1. The young Charles Bradlaugh; 2. Bust of Bradlaugh, by Suzie Zamit, for the 150th anniversary of the National Secular Society; 3. Collection of scrolls; 4. Bradlaugh's angling memories of the Lea; 5. Address from the delegates of Cawnpore to the Fifth Indian National Congress, 1889; 6. Bacchus Walk, Bradlaugh's birthplace; 7. Brown plaque commemorating Bradlaugh in Regan Way, Hackney; 8. Portrait of 'Bradlaugh at the Bar of the House of Commons' by Walter Sickert, at the City of Manchester Art Gallery

MORE INFO

Hackney Archives holds a large collection of material relating to Charles Bradlaugh deposited by the National Secular Society. This includes a series of beautifully illustrated addresses and testimonials from delegates to the fifth Indian National Congress in 1889. For more details, call: 020 8356 8925; e-mail: archives@hackney.gov.uk; or visit: www.hackney.gov.uk/archives