

The Leicester Secular Society: Unbelief, Freethought and Freedom in a
nineteenth century city.

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ABSTRACT.

The Leicester Secular Society is the only example of a durable presence in provincial Secularism. It thus provides material for a study of the rôle of Secularism in the survival of radicalism from Owenism to later Socialism. This thesis charts the history of the Society from 1852 until 1920 and of key areas of concern thrown up by Secularists' own experience. These include leisure, education and welfare together with the ideology that inspired them.

Secularism is shown to be the conscious attempt of Owenite survivors to create an organisational form and ideology that survived the lean years of the mid-century. Only in Leicester was this ideology nurtured by radicals who provided a permanent hall and continuing support, allowing the Society to flourish whilst others floundered. A consequence of this was the maintenance of a free platform to promote freedom of opinion. This provided 'quality' entertainment and education for a self-improving membership, and stable foundation for survival. By refusing to identify with the positions advocated by its lecturers, the Society avoided entanglements that became obvious anachronisms.

Responses to change are viewed in the light of the Society's leisure and educational provision which walked a tightrope between what should be provided and what was actually demanded. New ventures acknowledged the dwindling of the Society's artisan membership. Of these the most important was the ministry of F. J. Gould who, though giving a Positivist/Ethicist edge to Secularism, came to compromise choice within the Society.

The deepest impression upon the Society was made by William Morris, whose ideas were Owenism recast - a point at which thought began rather than finished and which provided, like Owenism, a basic response to the perceived ills of the world. Secularists constructed their own world view and the response of those who joined them forms the final part of the thesis.

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS.

A. A. C. A. N.	Association of All Classes of All Nations.
A. P. U.	Anti-Persecution Union.
B. S. U.	British Secular Union.
G. N. C. T. U.	Grand National Consolidated Trades Union.
I. L. P.	Independent Labour Party.
L. A. P. D. L.	Liberty and Property Defence League.
L. S. S.	Leicester Secular Society.
L. S. S. M. B.	Leicester Secular Society Minute Books.
N. S. S.	National Secular Society.
S. D. F.	Social Democratic Federation.
U. D. C.	Union of Democratric Control.

Introduction.

The Leicester Secular Society occupies a unique place in the radical and religious history of Victorian Britain. Founded in 1852, it provides an important exposition of that dimly explored no-man's land of scholarship - mid-Victorian radicalism. The extensive records of the Society, which is still in existence today, cover the period from the death of Chartism and the fading of the Owenite communitarian dream, right up to the perceived decline of Liberalism. This period stretches in a related frame of reference to the dawn of that apparently 'secular' society to which we are heirs today. The Society is without doubt the best supported of its type in Britain, and it stands as a unique testimony to the many men and women whose unbelief is far too often glossed over in the desire to put the ideology of Secularism into a purely national context. The paucity of evidence for local Secularist activity has been without doubt the cause of this bias, and this study of the Leicester Secular Society transfers attention from the more obvious manifestations of the national movement to considering aspects of 'movement culture' that were vitally important at the local level.

The papers of the Leicester Secular Society exist, with relatively few gaps, as a coherent whole so that members, ideas and activities provide us with a well-rounded picture of Secularist life in a provincial Victorian town. The main source is the minute books which are relatively complete save for an unfortunate twenty two year gap between 1855 and 1877. The content of these books gives us an insight into the day-to-day workings and procedures of the Society. These are supplemented by volumes of membership nominations, visitors books, newspaper cuttings and cash books. The records of the Secular Hall company are represented by a shareholders allotment book, a registry of members and a journal detailing the final destination of the numerous shares.

Another important primary source for this study is autobiography, in which Leicester is particularly fortunate. Of direct relevance to a study of the Society are the autobiographies of F. J. Gould, Malcolm Quin and Tom Barclay. However the most important of all is the so-called 'Random Recollections' of Sydney Gimson, the longtime President of the Society. Written in two parts, it conveys the impression of an aged gentleman reflecting upon a long and distinguished career in the service of the ideas he cherished. Gimson remembers particularly his brushes with the famous and, with an air of almost disarming familiarity, often gives us a unique insight into the foibles of the intelligentsia of his generation. The autobiography of Tom Barclay, however, is a rather different proposition. Entitled The Autobiography of a Bottle Washer, it charts his life from his childhood in Leicester through his sojourn in London, to his eventual involvement in the Secular Society. Barclay's autobiography differs from the others mentioned because he is a member of the Society rather than a leader or administrator. Barclay emerges as a classic autodidact in the George Jacob Holyoake mould and his book provides us with a ready-made case study of the making of a Leicester Secularist. As such it is a valuable corrective to the tendency to regard Freethought and Secularism as predominantly lower middle class concerns.

The short history of the Society written by F. J. Gould and published in 1900 is in the interesting category between original and secondary source material. It catalogues, selectively, the previous four decades of the Society's history and, though it is useful for filling the gaps for which other records do not exist, it is at times speculative.

The prolific nature of these records means that the historian is in the relatively fortunate position of being able to 'work outwards' from his precise area of focus to consider other areas of the Society's thought and action. From a consideration of the Society's history the focus moves to the

examination of specific activities which the Society undertook and from there to an analysis of the motivation behind such activities. Within the ideas and initiatives of the Society, we not only glimpse local Secularism in action, but also confront many of the obsessions, ambiguities and contradictions that were part and parcel of mid-Victorian life. The desire to be part of a radical national movement for change had to be tempered by local concerns which argued for at least some sort of good relations with vital local pressure groups. The quest for consensus amongst the 'right minded' of the country about a progressive attitude towards social organisation had to be reconciled with the desire to be forever in the vanguard of that progress. An attitude which showed a craving for respectability and status validation accepted also the existence of unrespectable tendencies which Secularism in particular made a virtue of. In the Leicester Secular Society, local concerns mingled with national, respectability blended with unrespectability, and consensus in its widest sense fused with narrow dissent; these were characteristics far from unique to mid-Victorian Secularism.

Leisure is considered not simply in isolation as an activity undertaken by the Secular Society, but rather as an item of widespread social concern that occupied the thoughts of groups as disparate as the local Adult School Union, the Mechanics Institute and the Leicester Quaker Cocoa House Movement. In this context leisure is perceived as a market commodity from which the Secular Society ostensibly had more to gain and lose than most.' A closer look at some of the churches and their respective spiritual, leisure and welfare provisions helps to establish just where in the 'market-place' we can find both the Secular Society and the various branches of Nonconformity and the Established Church.

The 'market-place' model is particularly useful since it analyses areas of distinct and sharp competition, degrees of 'market research', 'obsolescence' of both product and/or marketing practice, as well as long and short term

responses to changes in the nature of the 'market' itself. These changes are described by some historians and sociologists as the process of secularisation. This in itself is seen as profoundly affecting attitudes to both religious provision and leisure activity, introducing a whole new equation between commitment and possible reception.

However, the contributions made to many other areas of Victorian historical scholarship by the records of the Leicester Secular Society are not without significance. To the outsider the suggestion that the Leicester Secularists were ideal, and, indeed, quintessential Victorians may seem a maverick one, but such a suggestion has foundation. The ability of the Society and its members to create a lively and distinctly viable 'chapel culture' (such as that explored by Clyde Binfield in his study of Queen's Road Baptist Chapel²) may perhaps indicate indigenous tendencies, not simply in Victorian religious forms of organisation, but also within provincial social hierarchies to organise for their survival, validation and protection.

It seems that such a culture may have been important in sustaining and motivating Victorian society and the social and political theories that existed both as mainstream and as undercurrent within it. This blend of the mainstream and the undercurrent that the chapels so often accomplished gave rise to that refuge of the convinced and the philanthropic - the Victorian pressure group. The capacity for righteous indignation that spawned a multitude of small, but highly motivated, pressure groups enshrined the legitimate nature of political and philosophical dissent. As Patricia Hollis has observed:

Radicals denied that they were a mob encroaching on the proper rôle of parliament. Following the lead of the Philosophical Radicals, they spoke for the people, for the common interest as against the exclusive class interest of the ruling aristocracy.

The people were not Canning's aggregate bundle of atomised individuals, fickle and rootless; they were bound, not by property, granted, but by the morality of a 'national mind', in Matthew Davenport Hill's phrase: 'stable, reflective, self-disciplined, and self-educating'. behind the radicals' claim lay their rationalist assumption that all men of good will, undeflected by sordid self-interest, would come to common conclusions on the common good. 'Discussion' said the radical M.P. Roebuck, 'will soon establish what is true and expose what is erroneous.'³

Thus we can see this line of thought gave, not simply a blueprint for consensus and legitimate dissent, but also a licence for independence of thought that could travel in quite unexpected directions. Whilst many pressure groups such as advocates of Free Trade, anti-slavery, franchise extension and municipal improvement fit comfortably into the historian's conception of progressive liberalism, other tendencies such as Phrenology, Spiritualism and Urquhartism do not. As such they blend many elements of progressivism with rather older radical ideologies.⁴

A liberal outlook encouraged compromise, discussion and consideration, but only action in the most extreme of circumstances. Thus, in the history of the mid-Victorian pressure group, Secularism holds a particularly interesting position. Inheriting an older, plebian, radical tradition, Secularism successfully accomodated itself to latter century liberalism largely under the guidance of its initiator George Jacob Holyoake. However the movement still contained within it the desire and capacity for further radical change.

An historical approach to Secularism and secularisation hopes to answer many questions posed not simply by historians, but also by sociologists: could Britain have produced a substantially active Secularist population? Why

did Secularism not win for itself a place as a dominant practising denomination? And the important corollary question to this: might not Secularism appear to be an episode in the history of secularising society rather than its logical conclusion?

The purpose of and perceived rôle performed by Secularism contains within itself many apparent contradictions. Indeed, the very notion of organised, institutionalised 'unbelief', appears to us today more than slightly incongruous in an age that exhibits greater tendencies towards ambivalent deism and 'de-christianisation' than rationalist 'unbelief'. However, we can see that not only religion, but all organised belief systems have an explicit, psychologically supportive rôle. They give the participant a sense of collective community in a social structure greater than the family unit. Such a community can act as a protection against both the vagaries of circumstance and the opprobrium of society.⁵

The intention to construct a Secular Society as a place of quasi-religious worship had a twofold purpose: Firstly, it provided psychological support whilst the second purpose was the natural consolidation of this - Secularists sought the opportunity to show society at large the essentially respectable nature of their belief and morality. This was particularly important in an age that still had deep cultural memories of the iniquities of Paine and Carllile.

The degree to which adverse publicity could prove damaging, and the craving for respectability which this engendered, is a theme that reappears throughout this study. So easily could concerns for freedom from harmful constraints such as poverty and deprivation be misconstrued as an attack upon the edifice of decent Christian society.

Thus Leicester Secular Society came together to offer both a platform on which to campaign and a refuge for the spiritually needy. However, once constituted, it found itself subject to the inevitable tensions between sect

and pressure group. As a belief, Secularism argued stridently that morality need not be founded upon Christian principles, and that Christianity itself had been responsible for much political, social and psychological distress. Yet the local Society had also to recognise the good intentions of some of its Christian counterparts and to consider carefully its place in the wider moral community.

For the Secular Society there seems little doubt that it was faced with the problem that sooner or later confronts all pressure groups: how should it respond to the satisfaction (albeit only partial) of its demands? For Secularism as national agitation it became clear that its greatest enemy was the perceived gradual 'secularisation' of society. Once battles over the right to affirm in a court of law, the right to a secular (or at least silent) funeral, and the practice of leisure on the Sabbath were won, there seemed less and less to fight for. This perception was heightened by the gradual, if grudging, acceptance of Secularists and their culture within the wider society. This tension between the 'chapel' and the 'agitational' impulses almost invariably flows as an undercurrent through Secularism. Such a tension raised taxing questions on recruitment, attitudes to orthodox religious belief and the position of Secularists themselves in the changing climate. This perhaps demonstrates that contemporaries saw 'secularisation' as a process with themselves as merely the personnel involved, for better or worse, in that process. However, this admission was not an abdication of responsibility. Secularists had started the ball rolling and they had a duty to see it to its goal, though fear of losing control played its part in the growing anxiety about the nature of that goal. A fundamental part of this Leicester story is to explain why the local Secular Society was able to stay in the game while the national Secularist organisation failed to do so. This survival was very much the concern of individuals. The work of the Gimson family and F.J. Gould was a vital factor in the Society's ability to adapt to

changing circumstances. Without the intervention of the concerned and committed the Society would doubtless have collapsed. In the Edwardian period Gould in particular instigated a revival in fortunes based on a blend of Positivism in religion and Socialism in politics. This suggests that Secularism could have played a more dynamic rôle in late-century radicalism had its survival been more widespread and its leadership more progressive.

If we were to examine the purely national context of Secularism, we could be forgiven for thinking it a disparate and sporadic movement depending on a series of cause célèbres, such as the Bradlaugh case or the Knowlton pamphlet trial, for the impetus to organise and agitate. This has led to the comparative neglect of the local organisation and cultural aspects of Secularism and has profoundly affected the historiography. An examination of the movement in purely national terms cannot do justice to the richness and, more importantly, the diversity of the Secularist experience, nor can it answer the more interesting questions about how Secularism survived during periods of apparent lull in activity.

Only through the local study of organisation and culture are the responses to perceived and, sometimes, unperceived changes fully appreciated. Though there was a core of stable membership within the Leicester Secular Society, recruitment was nevertheless a vitally important consideration. Secularism inevitably relied on conversion and this study of the Leicester Secular Society over a period of seventy years provides an opportunity to consider the changing background and experience of converts. As the century wore on the Secular Society found that it was losing its traditional artisanal membership, largely due to changes in the industrial structure of the city. These were gradually replaced with women and white-collar workers who seem to have been drawn to the Positivist message that the Society increasingly voiced in the 1890s. The ability to gain members on a new basis eventually brought conflict with those recruited on the old terms. The

Edwardian period was thus a battleground for old and new style Secularism. The eventual winner was not Secularism itself but its offspring - the free platform - which survived these struggles to proclaim freedom of thought and action.

The shift towards a more secular culture may, to some historians, have left Secularism without purpose, but the pioneering work of Secularists in the field of museum extension and deliberate Sabbath breaking was a significant step in the movement towards a genuine and acceptable *leisure ethic*. Peter Bailey has highlighted the equation made by the Victorian middle classes between leisure and dangerous, unregulated free time.⁶ The work of a local Secular Society to both provide and habitualise leisure as a central part of life suggests a crucial - though perhaps unwitting - rôle in the acceptance of the legitimate, yet voluntary use of leisure time. Despite this positive attitude to leisure, Leicester Secularism also found itself struggling against the apathy of a rapidly growing, affluent, urbanising population, with a myriad other diversions at its disposal. Thus much of the leisure component of this thesis takes as its underlying theme a three-cornered fight for the attention of the masses with Secularism struggling against both apathy and rival forms of leisure.

The Secular Society at Leicester, which enjoyed such vital support, both financial and participatory, indeed indicates how Secularism could have flourished elsewhere if only it had been nurtured with the same loving care. The minute books of the Society cover a wide chronological span during which far-reaching changes within society were up for debate, publicly or otherwise. Thus this thesis is also a study of politics, religion and leisure in crisis in an East Midlands town. A unique insight into the relative importance of these three factors, and the interrelationships between them, is provided by the *raison d'être* of the Society. Its principles allowed for the free discussion of all matters whether religious, political, or scientific.

Josiah Gimson, the earliest patron of the Society, suggested at the opening of the Secular Hall on 6 March 1881, that men should rather be Freethinkers first and Secularists after, boasting that no other religious society permitted the discussion of views deviant from the norm. During his speech he poured scorn upon this lack of free discussion in a city that prided itself on being the metropolis of Nonconformity. He particularly attacked those whose 'part is to listen only to professional advocates of foregone conclusions'.⁷ This fundamental tenet of free discussion meant that matters political as well as religious were considered in the society, which thereby provides a window through which we can view many of the ideas and concerns that were present on the late Victorian radical and intellectual scene. With the fame of the Society spreading widely, it is no surprise to find figures such as William Morris, Annie Besant, Charles Bradlaugh, Peter Kropotkin, George Lansbury, J.M. Robertson, and Stewart Headlam and the other Fabian essayists all coming to speak. The Society not only provided a focus for its members' activities, but also a platform upon which important issues of the day were thrashed out. The platform, which managed to engage the intelligentsia of three generations, was a continuation of the old Owenite search for a new moral world. Unlike forms of Owenite communitarianism, however, this was a self-help activity based on improvement of the 'here-and-now', the primary tenet of George Jacob Holyoake's ideology of Secularism. This original message was updated in 1884 with William Morris's appeal to artisans and employers alike to resist the erosion of the quality of life. These were absorbed by the Society so that they became, like Owenism, the first premise on which all subsequent thinking was founded. The impact of Morris is thus considered as a demonstration of the Society's intellectual processes at work. Such an ideology was capable of expressing itself in numerous ways and this diversity was exemplified by the life and thought of a number of individual members as well as the enduring vision of

the Society itself.

Throughout this study the historian is confronted at every turn by men and women wishing to reconstruct a fallen society, or to construct it anew. Whether one examines the concerns of churchmen, politicians (local and national) or the Secularists themselves, one is struck by an almost uniform discomfort with the direction in which society might be heading. This at times, bordered on a paranoid fear of the unknown. Caught between the dissolution of mass religious belief and the growth of a divergent secularising society, contemporaries certainly thought that they were viewing the grave of a latter-day 'World we have lost'. This tension between the desire to reconstruct some form of *community* or *gemeinschaft*, against the backdrop of increasing individual freedom of thought and belief was the mainspring behind many contemporary notions of society in crisis. This thesis is partly an attempt to explain and examine such notions through the thoughts and actions of a small, but concerned and influential, minority. The determination of a number of concerned people of all shades of opinion to remedy what they saw as the numerous ills of society has provided both the inspiration and the starting point of this work:

'What men demanded was a religion of daily life that stood on a business footing... Secularism was the Home Rule of this World.'¹⁰

Footnotes to Introduction.

- 1: Stephen Yeo, Religion and Voluntary Organisations in Crisis, (1976) passim.
- 2: Clyde Binfield, Pastors and people, (1984).
- 3: Patricia Hollis ed. Pressure from Without, (1974) page 5.
- 4: For an engaging and cohesive analysis of a number of these radical and progressive concerns, see Hollis Pressure from Without, though this work tends to concentrate on movements with a predominantly *national* profile. More work needs to be done on local pressure group organisation, particularly in the latter half of the century and beyond. Some attempts have been made, notably the work of Stephen Koss and Clyde Binfield who both successfully approach the study of local movements of passive resistance to the 1902 Education Act, albeit from different methodological perspectives. The recent work by Logie Barrow Independent Spirits (1986) emphasises the links between older ideologies and elements of mid-century radicalism/progressivism through a study of spiritualism and its appeal to individuals of a radical disposition.
- 5: For an examination of the importance of belief systems as a form of psychological support, see Keith Thomas, Religion and the Decline of Magic (1971).
- 6: Peter Bailey, Leisure and Class in Victorian Society, (1978) chapters 3, 4 & 5.
- 7: Leicester Secular Society minute books (hereafter L.S.S.M.B.), March 6th 1881.
- 8: Ibid. G.J.Holyoake, March 6th 1881.

CHAPTER ONE

THE NATIONAL CONTEXT¹

Any history of Secularism that portrays unbelief as a progressive march against absolute religious truth is in danger of misunderstanding the nature of both organised religion and Secularism itself. Though it is possible to see, for example, Biblical criticism developing in a logical manner, the concentration on the reasoned intellectual rejection of religious belief can obscure the nature of personal factors in that rejection. Likewise it is impossible to argue that, because biblical truths appeared to have been discredited, the nature and quality of religious belief suffered accordingly. Indeed an important theme running through this study is the continued attempts by religious and secular thinkers alike to change the nature and scope of the debate, with varying degrees of success.

Most of the ideas, thoughts and personalities that are described below contributed as much to the welfare and health of the version of the universe they opposed as they did to its destruction. Religious and Secularist organisations were mutually dependent as each leant the other meaning, order and purpose.

Despite the fact that much of the following chapter appears to be a progressive, developmental history, it is nevertheless an attempt to outline factors that created a climate and battleground in which people were more able to make choices about their own spiritual, or secular, destiny.

A study of the origins of English Secularism must take into account the effects of two separate strands of thought that contributed 'significantly' to its growth. The first can be described as the progress and gradual acceptance within intellectual circles of natural philosophy, the latter as

the growth of plebeian dissension - what seventeenth century historians have termed the "mechanic tradition". It is important to remember that though such developments may have made orthodox religion untenable to the radical or intellectual few, their precise effect upon the beliefs of the many are rather more difficult to grasp.

Though the first stirrings of philosophical doubt within the intelligentsia is the most tangible evidence of the growth of English Atheism, the mental attitude spawned by the equally important "mechanick tradition", and all that it implied, was fundamental to the attitude and experiences of working class and artisans from the late seventeenth century onwards. It was a world view characterised by independence of thought and action quite often deliberately at variance with orthodox hierarchies and customs. Christopher Hill has traced back many links between seventeenth century sects and their earlier fifteenth century manifestations.² Amongst those cited Hill mentions two sects that exhibit a form of early Proto Humanism; the Family of the Mount and the Family of Love. The former believed that heaven and hell were present here on earth, the latter expressed their doctrine simply as "heaven is when we laugh, hell when we are in pain or sorrow"³. Though it is tenuous to suggest that Familists were the ideological ancestors of plebeian Secularism, it is important to note their open defiance of authority both as a means of creating a community of belief and as a means of self-definition. Such a community was itself a manifestation of their own world view. This, largely plebeian, world view argued that skill or ability at a particular trade or calling was unnecessary and that to be moved to perform such actions amounted to all the justification required by a believer. Though such attitudes found expression largely in the field of religion⁴, there was also a measured distrust of other professions such as medicine and the law. Indeed the very idea of

professionalisation was often seen as a conspiracy against the uninitiated and ignorant. Hill again notes both the religious and the social impetus behind the "Mechanic" interpretation of the Bible; "For seventeenth-century English radicals the religion of the heart was the answer to the pretensions of the academic divinity of ruling-class universities."⁶

Later seventeenth century sects such as the Fifth Monarchists and more importantly the Ranters made defiance of temporal and secular authority a virtue which often led to the accusation that certain trades contained individuals that were dangerous, radical and unregenerate. Evidence concerning the regional concentration of Ranterism indicates that it was most prevalent in hosiery districts amongst itinerant weavers and cloth workers. It seems possible, as a result of this, to suggest that Ranterism was not simply a defiance of authority by an independently minded occupational group but was a perpetuation and sanctification of an accepted itinerant lifestyle.

Hill again points to the essentially artisan nature of religious dissension and mentions that Familists were known to be "weavers, basket makers, musicians, bottlemakers (and joiners who lived by travelling from place to place).⁶ Moreover Hill also suggests that even in the seventeenth century there was a tradition of lower class materialism, largely nurtured by the prevailing tide of antinomianism which carried with it such sects as the Ranters and Gerard Winstanley's Diggers.⁷ More often than not later Christian apologists and critics of Secularism alike were wont to refer in pejorative tones to the lower class origins of Freethought. Much of this helps to explain why the caricature of the infidel cobbler or shoe maker became a common yet, not mistaken, image of atheism.

It is, however, considerably easier to trace the intellectual origins of Secularism and Freethought. The English Reformation was responsible for

destroying much of the superstition that was a vital part of English Catholicism. The gradual withering away of popular belief in the doctrine of purgatory and the ability to lay the dead and their after life to rest without affecting the spiritual life of the individual unduly made the contemplation of a more secular life an easier prospect. One historian has portrayed the Reformation as a, largely fulfilled, crusade in favour of the secular life:

"The Reformation made all secular life into a vocation of God. It was like a baptism of the secular world. It refused any longer to regard the specially religious calling of priest or monk as higher in moral scale than the calling of cobbler or of prince. Christian energy was turned away from the still and the contemplative towards action. The man who would leave the world turned into the man who would change it. religion centred upon ritual veered towards religion centred upon ethic."⁶

Though the capacity for Protestant mysticism remained, the work of monastery and chantry dissolution, together with the denial of Papal jurisdiction, radically altered the intellectual and psychological landscape of English religion. Moreover it should also be pointed out that the Reformation could not have been carried out by Henry VIII and his ministers without harnessing a widespread tradition of anti-clericalism that was at least a century old.

Once popular anti-clericalism had been given some form of official sanction it became somewhat easier for inquiring and dissenting theologians to pursue their studies. Nevertheless, populist expressions of anti-clericalism were frowned upon as dangerous to other forms of authority. It is no coincidence that the Restoration settlement of 1662 re-established the

Anglican church as almost an extension of government. Those who pursued the path of philosophical enquiry were invariably of a "cloistered" background, capable of proving both their own personal respectability and their honest intentions to the apparent satisfaction of those in authority. Atheists were only one of many deviant groups who were victims of the many seventeenth century religious panics. Atheists were at one time believed to be in league with Rome and on another occasion with the Turks.⁹

Nevertheless investigation into the alternative interpretations of the universe were quite capable of producing material that both confirmed the fears of theologians and popular visions of atheism and freethought. John Toland, the respectable eighteenth century deist, was still able to sanctify a life of dance, song and wine in mock religious language perhaps indicating a regard for the opportunities of this life familiar to followers of Coppe and other Ranters.¹⁰ Nevertheless, concern for the pleasures of this life were somewhat harshly associated with both ammorality and defiance of appointed law. This position was typified by the theologian Francis Gastrell, the Boyle lecturer for 1697, who argued that atheism was merely a cloak for libertinism. Men were rational enough to justify their hedonism by adopting irreligious views but Gastrell argued that they were insufficiently in control of their desires to see the arguments from true natural religion. Those who denied a divine system of grace and punishment denied the existence of the soul.¹¹

On the philosophical front the work of the century's foremost thinker Thomas Hobbes was of paramount importance. Hobbes argued that Society was based on fear and was the continuing story of the triumph of might over right. In the quest for an explanation of morality Hobbes was the first to suggest that environmental factors were as important in man's development as reason or divine design. Man was ostensibly a slave of nature rather than

being lord of it.¹² This important shift of emphasis was to become a central brick in the construction of atheist thought until the twentieth century.

The prolonged period of scientific and philosophical inquiry called by historians 'The Enlightenment' was as much an atmosphere as a concerted movement or mode of thought. New perceptions and epistemological techniques seemed to demonstrate that the previously perceived nature of God and the universe was but one, potentially flawed, explanation. As science began to explain natural phenomena with increasing confidence the efficacy of Christian hope, prayer and revelation appeared to be under attack.

Many took, and would continue to take, as their starting point the work of Descartes who postulated the distinction between mind (or spirit) and matter. As Edward Royle puts it; "this theme of dualism - the antithesis of spirit and matter - runs right through the thought of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries."¹³

The classical enlightenment Deist argued for the acceptance of an ordered nature discovered by a process of experience and experiment. Some were prepared to suggest the possibility of a Supreme Mind at its inception. However the trappings and inconsistencies of an orthodox, biblical God were unacceptable. Whilst the Deist position rested on doubt fed by reason it was able to call on an increasingly sophisticated stream of biblical criticism. By the eighteenth century the authenticity and reliability of the Pentateuch had already been called into question by a number of scholars - notably Hobbes and Spinoza - but the pace quickened as the century wore on. The regius professor of medicine at Paris, Jean Astruc, in 1753, successfully deciphered the separate Elohim and Yahwist accounts of the Creation. Astruc demonstrated the dual authorship of the Pentateuch and emphasised the two differing views of both the God of Israel and the nation of Israel itself. It was becoming clear that the immutable word of God was not without its

textual ambiguities.¹⁴

Though biblical criticism was certainly important in altering perceptions of the creation of the universe it was the work of geologists and natural scientists which was emphatically more far reaching. From a static creation, the completed product of a series of catastrophes, the earth became merely the host to a range of incomplete shifts in the nature of its composition. The Mosaic account of the creation chronology became inadequate as the rock of the earth's crust was shown to be of widely differing age. The matter appeared to be further complicated by the revelation that animal life had existed whilst some rock was being laid down. The new ideas were given credence by the work of Lamarck and Cuvier who managed to fit the sequence of animal creation into the time scale given to them by geologists.

Lamarck went further and introduced, in a recognisable modern form, the concept of evolution. He suggested that animals had developed from inert matter by a series of physical and chemical changes which had resulted in living tissue. This had gradually increased in its complexity until man was the ultimate result. However Lamarck argued that these changes required for survival and development were instigated by the will of the living tissue itself. Thus it was possible to explain, albeit inadequately, the continuous evolution of certain bodies and the hopeless decay of others. The function of any creator was being pushed further and further into the background as the discoveries of natural evolution and geology rejected the truth as it was according to biblical sources.

Nevertheless Deism, which for many was the logical consequence of this thinking, was a philosophical position reached by the individual mind and at no time was it anything resembling a concerted movement. When there appeared to be evidence of heterodox beliefs amongst the lower orders these were distinguished from the more respectable Deist position by the use of the

term 'Infidelity'.¹⁵ Thus one of the roots of Secularism lies with isolated individuals often in provincial locations and not always of noble or respectable birth. Men such as Thomas Chubb of Salisbury (1679 - 1747), Jacob Ilive of Bristol (1705 - 1768) and the publisher of the first freethought periodical the Free Inquirer Peter Annet (1693 - 1769) were indicative of the form freethought was to take until the nineteenth century.¹⁶ They were artisans, although Annet was a schoolmaster, who brought their conclusions to a wider audience through the medium of debating Societies and clubs. As such their views were a minority which must have constituted a committed, yet sometimes eccentric phenomenon to contemporaries. Whilst the existence of God and the order of creation remained a matter for philosophical debate 'Infidelity' was a matter of conscience for the individual who took on his own head the consequences of building a heterodox universe.

By the end of the eighteenth century the fundamental basis of the state was being questioned throughout Europe and with it the rôle of religion as an instrument of it. It was primarily the work of the republican journalist Thomas Paine who successfully married 'Infidelity' to radicalism. Though Paine himself was a religious man, inclined to the deist position and displaying a liking for a 'natural religion' that in some ways predates humanism, he criticised the teachings and actions of the Churches and their ministers and was able to turn the arguments used by theologians against freethinkers back at them. Whilst they questioned the morality of freethinkers and accused them of libertinism, Paine questioned whether the bible was a sufficiently moral book from which to extract a system of laws and principles. His great achievement was to move the mainstream debate away from the nature of God and creation and instead to suggest that the Christian state should be judged by its works. Whilst not being credited with any reputation as a

profound thinker, Paine was the first great publicist of revolution in the name of reason rather than in defence of customary rights.

In England his spirited reply to Conservative criticism of the French revolution won him many friends amongst radicals in France, England, Ireland and America. Paine himself insisted that the revolutions in both France and America threw "a beam of light over the world which reaches into man"¹⁷ and it was precisely this potentially dangerous threat to order that prompted Burke into print. Burke's avowed purpose was to defend the English Constitution, re-established in 1688, on the grounds of both its antiquity and rôle as supreme promoter of the common good. It was seen as apparently less autocratic than the French monarchy, being the product of controlled organic evolution rather than the inert crystalised tyranny which had inevitably led to revolution. Paine stated that authority, be it in the realm of government, religion or property was spurious if it rested on tyranny, ignorance or illegitimacy. What was required for the proper exercise of government on right principles was the free assent of the governed:

Government in a well-constituted republic, requires no belief from man beyond what his reason can give. He sees the rationale of the whole system, its origin and its operation; and as it is best supported when best understood, the human faculties act with boldness, and acquire, under this form of government, a gigantic manliness.¹⁸

His 'Rights of Man' identified the agents of religious power, namely the priesthood, with the illegitimate tyranny of the State and as such it became a standard text for infidels and radicals alike. However the full exposition of Paine's humanistic religion had to wait until 1794 when he published "The

Age of Reason" as a belated attempt to persuade the French away from the atheism that seemed to be a consequence of the Terror.¹⁹ The first part of the work was an exposition of the evils of the notion of established churches with hierarchies, legends and mythologies that at times seemed to rank alongside the constitutional travesties advocated by the likes of Burke. Paine linked the existence of a creator to reason and made the individual the sovereign unit of that belief. No longer was the mere profession of belief and adherence to the church enough or even necessarily tenable. Religion should be henceforth a conscious choice re-enforced by beneficial action, Paine summed up his feelings thus:

I do not believe in the creed professed by the Jewish church, by the Roman church, by the Greek church, nor by any church that I know of. My own mind is my own church.

All national institutions of churches, whether Jewish, Christian, or Turkish, appear to me no other than human inventions set up to terrify and enslave mankind, and monopolize power and profit.²⁰

Nevertheless on the same page Paine advocated an almost agnostic position denying specific knowledge of a creator, one that would have been familiar to many nineteenth century Secularists;

I do not mean by this declaration to condemn those who believe otherwise; they have the same right to their belief as I have to mine. But it is necessary to the happiness of man, that he be mentally faithful to himself. Infidelity does not consist in

believing, or in disbelieving; it consists in professing to believe what he does not believe."²¹

This freedom to believe what was dictated by conscience was the first victim of the church and its oppressive partner the state. The resulting evils meant that honest religion was itself the victim of what were inextricably vested interests:

The adulterous connection of church and state, wherever it had taken place,... had so effectually prohibited, by pains and penalties, every discussion upon established creeds, and upon first principles of religion, that until the system of government should be changed, those subjects could not be brought fairly and openly before the world; but that whenever this should be done, a revolution in the system of religion would follow: Human inventions and priest-craft would be detected; and man would return to the pure, unmixed, and unadulterated belief of one god, and no more.²²

Paine introduced to English freethought elements of European anti-clericalism which had more reason to fear a close church/state relationship than the Anglican church engendered at home. His identification of the church with the state and his argument that they were inextricably linked provided a point at which political, social and religious radicals could merge. His message was sufficiently anti-establishment that it appealed to working men yet was not so revolutionary that it was distrusted by artisans and tradesmen who, after all, comprised together Paine's constituency as the productive classes. Paine himself appears often to be a spokesman for a

'shopocracy' in embryo which distrusted the workings of traditional landed government which was avowedly opposed to their economic and social aspirations. As such the writings of Paine not only galvanised working men but also this 'shopocracy' whose battle for recognition, independence and prosperity comprises yet another strand in the story of Infidelity and Secularism.

Paine's message was coherent and appealing and it is no wonder that it was, to be a cornerstone of radical thought for the next fifty years and the radical primer for two generations. As Edward Royle has pointed out;

His writings present the conclusions of the Enlightenment, bound up with the nascent infidelity of Chubb, Ilive and Annet, and sealed with the revolutionary fervour of France. Until the English artisan became reconciled to the political and ecclesiastical establishment... the tradition of Paine remained a dominant theme among the leaders of the British working class movement. His teachings were repeated with little or no change for two generations and more."²³

Paine's attempts to spread the message of reform and revolution to the semi-literate masses were highly successful. Through the medium of the many radical clubs and corresponding societies his works were disseminated through cheap editions and by word of mouth. The London Corresponding Society printed and sold over 200,000 copies of the "Rights of Man" and the society in Sheffield was alleged to have staged public readings of the work.²⁴ Paine and his fellow publicists were in some real sense the creators and sustainers of a culture of artisan study and criticism that managed to survive the attempts of the authorities to suppress and prosecute.

Though the impact of Paine's radicalism waned as the revolution in France took an authoritarian course it was revived by the onset of economic depression from 1812 onwards, a year that was characterised by machine breaking in the east midlands and other areas.²⁵ Throughout the following twenty years the cause of radicalism was to be championed by a radical press that had its genesis in the early teens of the century.

One of its earliest practitioners who was to have a profound effect on the spread of infidelity was a west country metal worker named Richard Carlile who, after moving to London, became embroiled in radical journalism. He first served his apprenticeship selling radical papers such as Cobbett's Political Register, William Hone's Reformists Register and most enthusiastically Wooler's Black Dwarf.²⁶ Soon Carlile abandoned his trade to take on radical journalism full time. He concluded a business agreement with William Sherwin to become publisher of the Weekly Political Register which continued in circulation until summer 1819 when he renamed it the Republican.²⁷ Carlile's work on the Register was considerable and it is through his work as a journalist that the ideas and legacy of Paine survive. Carlile argued that the national, mutual prosperity of all classes was essential to any civilised society. His critique drew on a pot pourri of radicalism which included the work of Cobbett on bureaucracy and taxation, Hunt on the suffrage question and on Paine for everything else.²⁸ As Joel Wiener has noted "Paine's political analyses were refashioned in almost every page of the Weekly Political Register".²⁹

Carlile further established his radical credentials by going to prison for republishing the Age of Reason. He was arrested in the aftermath of Peterloo and remained in Dorchester gaol until November 1825³⁰. Despite imprisonment, which had the advantage of maintaining public attention, Carlile was able to continue publishing the Republican. In it he reiterated

the message of Paine and added his own brand of anti-clericalism with distinct political overtones. In the edition of February 22nd 1822 he linked the tyranny of Christianity to the tyranny of the state:

No effectual reform will ever take place in this country whilst an established Priesthood draws an immense revenue from the industry of the country, and exercises in return a despotic power over the minds as well as the bodies of the people... the priests are as much a political body as a standing army, the former are kept up to keep your mind in awe, the latter your body."³¹

The imprisonment of Carlile and the resulting publicity meant that there was no shortage of volunteers to staff his Fleet street shop and to distribute his vast journalistic output. It was during the years of Carlile's imprisonment that the foundations of an underground radical unstamped press were laid, complete with an endemic sympathy providing no shortage of personnel.³² This support was not simply metropolitan in scope but took in areas of the north and Scotland as a network of Zetetic societies grew up to give moral and financial support to Carlile and his campaign.

Despite the following Carlile had, his particular niche in contemporary radicalism - namely a crusade against the libel laws - was only one small battle in the wider war for radical change. From his prison cell Carlile's rôle was as critic of society rather than as active revolutionary and at times his concentration on clericism as a particularly noxious evil has led one historian to judge him as merely "slashing away at his priestly phantoms in prison" so that his writings appear to be "almost independent of time, place, and politics".³³ Nevertheless Infidelity was as much a tributary of

radicalism as currency reform or land hunger; both surrogate legacies of the Paineite tradition, and its writers and their literature were no less convincing. This need for people to be convinced was a central part of Carlile's thinking. This could only be achieved by the promotion of the means by which the important truths of the world could be discussed. Carlile's belief that "public free discussion is the only system of purification in society"³⁴ and his self-professed, individualistic, approach to knowledge and its acquisition are echoed twenty years later in the ideas of G.J. Holyoake and the Leicester Secular Society.

Carlile was responsible for translating the anti-clerical deism of Paine into a more militant materialistic atheism. Thus reshaped he handed it on to other radicals in the form of the now altered and truncated Paineite tradition. So strong was this tradition that the later apostasy of Carlile himself, initially to deism and later to allegorical Christianity, came to be of little or no consequence.

This tradition of infidel publicity and publishing was taken up by the publisher of the 'Poor Man's Guardian' and active member of the National Union of Working Classes, Henry Hetherington. The vital work was aided by James Watson a former shopman of Carlile's. Hetherington and his journalism represents the cross over point between the rather more iconoclastic tendencies of crude infidelity which devoted a majority of its time to criticism of an iniquitous system, and what became the earnest search for a new system of social organisation. This change of emphasis was eventually to give birth to the ideology that Holyoake was later to call Secularism, but it found its first home in the ideas and proposals of Robert Owen.

The pervasiveness of these two attitudes and their ability to co-exist is demonstrated in the writings of Hetherington, particularly in his Cheap Salvation³⁵. This contained within it an uncompromising attack upon the evils

of established religion and, perhaps for the first time, introduced a more subtle critique of priestly pretensions:

What is now the greatest obstacle to the mental, moral, social, and political improvement of the people? - PRIESTCRAFT or PRIESTIANITY. The priests of all religions, and of all sects, thrive by deluding the people. They live by teaching false doctrines, and by proscribing all false doctrines but their own, and those who believe in them. This practice promotes division and separation among the people, instead of uniting them in the bonds of "brotherly affection". This is not the religion of Jesus. It is not *Christianity*; it is *Priestianity*, which has caused more *disputations and ill-will than, perhaps, any subject that ever arrested the attention of a human being. I say Priestianity*, because genuine *Christianity*, the religion taught by Jesus, is, as I have clearly shown, a plain, practical religion, unpolluted with mysteries, unencumbered with priests, and eminently calculated to generate in the minds of its sincere votaries, a love of truth, of justice, and of liberty.³⁶

Hetherington's defiant iconoclasm was also tempered by the belief in an altogether superior and richer system of organisation that not simply threatened Priestcraft and Kingcraft but also the iniquities of a competitive society based on capital:

These are my views and principles in quitting an existence that has been chequered with the plagues and pleasures of a competitive, scrambling, selfish system; a system by which the

moral and social aspirations of the noblest human being are nullified by incessant toil and physical deprivations; by which, indeed, all men are trained to be either slaves, hypocrites or criminals. Hence my ardent attachment to the principles of that great and good man---ROBERT OWEN. I quit this world with a firm conviction that his system is the only true road to human emancipation.³⁷

Such was the apparent quality and appeal of Owen and his vision that it was able to transform men who were otherwise sober materialists into passionate millenialists. His ideas of human organisation and spiritual happiness were based on environmentalism, though they were never consistent enough to cite precisely the part played by this particular factor in human development. He argued that mankind and womankind were corrupted by the practices and structures of an 'old Immoral world' controlled and conducted by an army of priests and irresponsible capitalists. This world, rather than being readily identifiable, appeared to Owen to be merely the antithesis of his new system which, though crystal clear to Owen, was not immediately obvious to his followers. This in part explains the willingness of those followers and sympathisers to utilise elements of Owen's system to combat the particular evil they suffered most from. Hence some were led into co-operation, some to communitarianism of life and labour, some to trade unionism and some to Infidelity and Secularism. This failure to fully comprehend either the grand scale of Owen's system or the caprices of his intellect explains the willingness of radicals to use only those parts of Owenism that were deemed suitable. It also in great part explains the disappointment and sadness of Owen when he beheld what appeared to be misuse of his system.

Owen apparently came to reject all religions after he had read Seneca at the age of fourteen.³⁸ He became convinced in the true spirit of the Enlightenment that perfectibility of life lay within the power of man to change his own environment, or have it changed on his behalf. Thus he embarked on an ambitious project of industrial communitarianism at his own cotton plant in New Lanark that met with considerable success, though this was in no small way due to the fact that Owen had complete control over the settlement and made every attempt to run it with this firmly in mind. Owen's conviction of his own rightness strikes the twentieth century historian as resembling that of a dogmatic millenarian prophet who alone possessed the truth that would save mankind. Indeed this is precisely how Owen saw himself and his consistent and repetitive reiteration of his message was tiresome to opponents:

When these truths are made evident, every individual will necessarily endeavour to promote the happiness of every other individual within his sphere of action; because he must clearly, and without any doubt, comprehend such conduct to be the essence of self-interest, or the true cause of self-happiness.

Here then is a firm foundation on which to erect vital religion, pure and undefiled, and the only one which without any counteracting evil, can give peace and happiness to man."³⁹

It is extravagant claims such as these that illustrate how important a part of the appeal of Owenism was its messianic quality.⁴⁰

From the late teens Owen's plans were gradually enunciated to a hostile world that nevertheless contained some sympathisers. These supporters were convinced by Owen's critique of Political Economy which was by its own

definition a denial of the efficacy of the capitalist market system. The core of Owen's thought was set out in his four "Essays on the Formation of Human Character" (1813 - 1814) which argued explicitly for forms of communitarianism to promote the happiness of the individual against the "Old Immoral World".

The organisation of Owenism was essentially an economic and moral attack upon capitalist Society and the new forms of Social organisation reflected this at branch level. Eileen Yeo has indicated that the notion of an all embracing co-operative 'Institution' was a fundamental part of the mission. This was represented initially by the Institute for the Association of the Industrious Classes in Gray's Inn Road. The desire was to form a Social Community which was initially defensive. The community would in the first instance protect its members from the iniquities of capitalist competition before preparing them for communitarian life. In the midst of industrial towns the Community was encouraged to taste the benefits of the co-operative brotherhood in recreational activity.⁴¹ Like aspects of Owenism in its other phases this philosophy was to leave its mark on the Secularist movement.

However, the communitarian aspects of Owenism were always of more appeal to impoverished working men who saw in them the chance to transcend the trap of destitution that was considered by conventional Political Economy to be an unavoidable, and indeed necessary, consequence of the market system. Many of the more prosperous artisans and many of Owen's lower middle class supporters gradually came to see communitarianism as an expensive debilitating irrelevance. To them Owen's advocacy of direct labour exchanges and his emphasis on co-operation as an attack upon the evils of under consumption and sweating was of far greater importance. Moreover communities were founded on a distinctly agricultural basis as a means of combatting

unemployment. Owen himself expressed a certain fondness for spade husbandry and saw this as a way of regulating production and its inherent problems.⁴² It was precisely these twin problems that artisans had to confront, though they sought the remedies in other areas of Owen's thought.

It is most clearly at this point that we see the distinct tensions between Owen and the Infidel wing of his movement. Owen himself was no root and branch radical schooled in the Paineite tradition. He consistently saw his system as transcendent and always appealed to the great and powerful when he sought support. The attack upon religion was never an end in itself; it was always merely one more illustration of the workings of the 'Old Immoral World', albeit an important, strident and highly visible one. Owen's own doctrine of circumstance would not allow him to attack religion as an evil in itself since it argued that man was innocent and only mistaken in his belief in an immoral system. Most important of all man was not himself responsible for that belief. All would be well when Owenism itself became the acknowledged substitute for national religion. Much of this attitude suggests Owen was as much a charismatic sectarian leader as a radical reformer. The comparison is given further credence when the methods he adopted for the spread of his system are examined. Owen created a dedicated group of social missionaries, a lecturing 'circuit' and a sophisticated network of 'Halls of Science' which acknowledges the forms of organisation that were likely to be successful. After all the claim of Owenism to be the great rational religion of humanity explains the methods by which it was disseminated. In true Enlightenment spirit 'sermons' became 'lectures' and 'chapels', 'Halls of Science'. Though Owen himself sought the patronage of the proud and powerful, his message was essentially a millenarian one and it was only through religious idioms that it could compete with the 'Old Immoral World'. One tactic that Owenites developed and handed on to succeeding

generations of radicals was that of public disputation with opponents. Though the successes for Owenism were limited the tactic was later improved upon by Secularists and was an effective mechanism for generating interest and support as well as helping to fill the coffers.

It was Owen's attitude to religion, or, more precisely, his attitude to the attacks made by religion on his followers that led to quarrels in the movement. The parliamentary campaign against them, led by the Bishop of Exeter, and the prosecutions over the collection of money on a Sunday instigated at Manchester forced sections of the movement to think again. The crux of the prosecution was that the Owenites were in contravention of Sabbatarian legislation unless they were registered under the Toleration Act. To register implied acceptance of their status as a religious sect which many were not prepared to do.⁴³ The effectiveness of this attack from the religious establishment coupled with the growing disquiet of Owen's more well connected followers led to a rethink of strategy. Owen gradually tried to impress upon his followers that the attack upon religion was itself of limited importance and ultimately had to take second place to the importance of raising money to demonstrate the ultimate truth of the Owenite communitarian ideal. Many who had graduated from the Paineite tradition and had endured their own personal struggles for the cause of an unstamped press (Owen's own newspapers were at no time unstamped and illegal) found his attitude to be dictatorial and, for a radical, unpleasantly compliant. Though to Owen the shift in emphasis seemed both self-explanatory and profoundly necessary:

You will no longer find it advantageous or necessary to contend with the religious prejudices of the old world... you will best

overcome the errors that have been forced into the human mind, by mildly and calmly placing self-evident truths before them.⁴⁴

Nevertheless many artisans still considered the experimental element in Owen's communitarianism to be in some way valuable though the tension between the two schools of thought remained.

The Owenite experiments were short-lived and floundered on the rocks of financial and organisational ineptitude as well as the eventual disillusionment of the colonists. Attempts to equalise the value of labour which itself was of variable efficiency, created resentment among the productive who found themselves subsidising the weak, lazy and unproductive. The ideal of communal labour and ownership of capital all too easily disappeared amid a mountain of complaints and recriminations. Thefts and other intrusions of the "Old Immoral World" such as chronic undercapitalisation threatened these bold attempts at re-organisation, usually when they were at their most vulnerable. The most important early experiments after the demise of the initial attempt at Spa fields which folded in 1823 were at Orbiston and Ralahine though only that at Queenwood had Owen's support.⁴⁵ Both Orbiston and Ralahine lasted less than three years but Queenwood survived from 1839 until 1845. When the Queenwood community was eventually wound up there was a curious atmosphere of contempt for the continued attempts at outmoded Owenite paternalism which it had symbolised and which blended surprisingly easily with enduring millennial aspirations.

Garnett notes that at the Owenite congress convened in July 1845 the distrust of working men was embodied in a statement that accused the government of Queenwood of being simple agricultural exploitation in disguise. Working men required:

No mere Agricultural plan with a huge CLUB HOUSE of rich people to devour the produce, and just have enough of workers (as Russian serfs) to do the drudgery... There is no use Owen telling us we have 'no experience' in the matter, and further insult us by writing us down as so many asses who can't understand--what he says, are the plainest truths in nature.⁴⁶

But the dream of a "New Moral World" was not so easily dissipated and devotees of his system, even veterans of the communitarian failures, kept hold of their millennial faith:

There was much less recrimination than might have been expected: the collapse of the new moral world was not made a source of bitterness, but rather of continuing aspiration. The promised land had eluded the colonists through their lack of organisation, but it would come to future generations.⁴⁷

Though Owenism itself as a cohesive movement was racked with divisions and hamstrung by the naivety of its chief ideologue it was viewed by its sympathisers as a system capable of uniting those radical in both politics and religion. Moreover this union was on a profoundly positive platform since it dispensed with the more gratuitous iconoclasm of Paine and provided an alternative. What appeared to some to be compliance with the old immoral world was to others a recognition that the old ideology of frontal attack should be challenged. This tension between tendencies towards, on the one hand elimination, and on the other substitution is a current that runs through the history of Infidelity. Such tensions caused particular problems at local level where reputations had to be reconciled with the needs of a

campaigning national movement.

Owen gave to his missionaries the basic elements of an ideology and an ideal that years of travelling and lecturing had fashioned into a more practical doctrine. With the effective postponement of Owen's millennial movement his missionaries found themselves increasing without a credible platform, but still with a job to do. Though the dream had faded, the 'Old Immoral World' was still there.

One of the most able missionaries who took up the mantle of Owenism was George Jacob Holyoake, an artisan who had been led into socialism through his extensive reading and the many contacts he had made in the radical world. Holyoake was himself an able teacher and organiser though testaments as to his lecturing ability are less than distinguished.⁴⁸

Holyoake had been schooled on the ideas of Owen and his writings betray the range of knowledge necessary for a radical to imbibe. It was demonstrably possible for Holyoake to allow the twin radical programmes of Owen and Paine to live side-by-side:

Just as Thomas Paine was the founder of political ideas among the people of England, Robert Owen was also the founder of social ideas among them. He who first conceives a new idea has merit and distinction; but he is the founder of it who puts it into the minds of men by proving its practicability. Mr Owen did this at New Lanark, and convinced numerous persons that the improvement of Society was possible by wise material means. There were social ideas in England before the days of Paine; but Owen gave social ideas form and force.⁴⁹

Holyoake was to find himself the heir apparent of both traditions and for the following sixty years his life's work was to be to try and hold them together in some sort of alliance. His sympathy came to lie conspicuously with the substitutionalist tendency though he acknowledged the necessity for campaigns against clerical control of everyday affairs. Holyoake's character was generally more conciliatory than some of the more strident infidels, as befitted an ex-Owenite and Co-operator. Though anxious to dispute the truth of Christianity on any platform available to him Holyoake's ideas and personality was better suited to the notion of bridge-building than many of his colleagues. However the willingness to listen and applaud the approaches of opponents could be seen as going too far. Sydney Gimson, who continued the family and Leicester Secular Society association with Holyoake after the death of Josiah, his father, in 1884 described him as "somewhat inclined to rejoice too soon at friendly approaches of the great ones of the Earth and to see a breadth of mind where I could see only condescension or calculation".⁵⁰

Holyoake like many radicals forsook his own trade and turned to journalism. After several private appointments and considerable experience working on behalf of the organisation of the Owenite missionary circuit, which included presidency of the Birmingham branch,⁵¹ Holyoake was stirred from sympathy to action. When Charles Southwell was arrested in 1841 on a charge of blasphemous libel for the fourth issue of his inflammatory newspaper The Oracle of Reason Holyoake and other radicals decided to act. For his trouble Southwell received a sentence of twelve months and Holyoake walked ninety miles to visit him in gaol.⁵² The issue mobilised those Owenites who were increasingly distrustful of the Owenite Central Board which was by now influenced by the Home Colonisation Society, Owen's middle-class capitalist supporters. This had led to a more conciliatory approach to

religion necessitated by the need to provide capital for working experiments of the 'New Moral World'.

With the absence of Southwell in prison and the 'Oracle' without an editor Holyoake was persuaded to take the post and immediately he became the focus for the Infidel wing of Owenism. Holyoake was by nature a cautious man and his style of leadership was reasoned and intellectual. This characteristic was strengthened when Holyoake found himself in gaol serving six months for blasphemy. Those who expected the campaign against the establishment and its religious trappings to continue on his release were to be disappointed. Though by now Holyoake had lost the last vestiges of such Deism as he may have possessed, his own thinking was moving beyond what he construed to be a thoroughly negative and unproductive position.

It was for all radicals left behind by Owenism, important to separate the wheat from the chaff. The development of both Spiritualism and Secularism into coherent systems after the comparative discredit of their ideological parent is a demonstration of how successfully radicals were able to regroup.⁵³ It was characteristic of Holyoake's caution that he attempted to persuade other Owenite socialists to divorce the discussion of theology from that of socialism. To Holyoake the tactic of courting prosecution was inconsistent, counterproductive folly. The spirited defence of his own personal views was precisely what it seemed and Holyoake only demanded the respect for his position that he was willing to extend to others. However he overestimated the credence his own beliefs had when divorced from Owenism, and underestimated the malice of those Christian apologists he shared a platform with.

Holyoake's imprisonment had not been entirely unproductive since he was able to keep the nexus of his supporters together. Though others tried to maintain regular publication of the Oracle, the imprisonment was clearly a

handicap to them. During this time it was the arrest of Holyoake that prompted the formation of the Anti-Persecution Union (A.P.U.). It was a primarily defensive measure that was very much in the spirit of its mentor. It was designed to deflect direct opposition to Infidelity by appealing for the legitimate consideration of all views.

The ploy of defensiveness, of which Holyoake heartily approved, was not adopted simply out of cowardice. It was hoped to show the unreasonableness of the authorities by suggesting the undoubted reasonableness of the Infidels and their unsectarian stance. This concern for liberty of expression was, at the time, expedient. However it was also fundamental to the cosmology of an enquiring Infidel and, after it had merged with Millite libertarianism and individualism was to provide the theoretical basis for Secularism for the next fifty years.

Predictably it was Holyoake who was the first beneficiary of the A.P.U. though the work of the Union was geared to more than support of its martyrs. The Union's claims for freedom of speech, hastened on it by trouble in Scotland and Yorkshire were eventually recognised in Parliament by a bill introduced by the former Chartist advocate Thomas Slingsby Duncombe which established that magistrates could not initiate prosecutions.⁵⁴

The release of Holyoake from gaol restored him to the leadership of the moderate wing of the Infidels. Henceforth he was to remain in this rôle unchallenged for almost a generation and his new periodical the Movement confirmed his position of power within the Infidel movement and also publicised a new agenda for Owenism. It was a programme for the survival of an apparently irrelevant ideal within a hostile land. In many ways the work of Holyoake as the unrecognised intellectual pragmatist suffering from the indulgences of others reminds the casual observer of the later Gramsci.

Holyoake's A.P.U. and his newspaper had sporadic success. The paper

suffered from poor circulation and the Union was handicapped by its metropolitan power base. Nevertheless provincial outlets were established, Dr. Royle mentions that one of the more distant outposts of its support was Edinburgh where Matilda Roalfe was its chief advocate⁵⁵. It also found a small but not influential following in industrial towns such as Leicester where Emma Martin, whom Holyoake had earlier championed, lectured in 1844.⁵⁶

The watchword of Holyoake's primacy in the Infidel movement was caution. To him the public explanation of his beliefs was much less important than his explicit right to hold them. His imprisonment had not been a pleasant experience and he had never sought martyrdom, unlike Southwell and his more strident colleagues. For this Holyoake's position was construed as ambivalent. Within the Freethought roll of honour he had without doubt suffered, yet so often his reasoned, cautious approach made him unpopular amongst those of a more rash, iconoclastic nature. This was to be chief of the accusations levelled against him by Charles Bradlaugh and those connected with his National Secular Society in later years.

Holyoake's career in journalism continued with the publication of a new periodical which, it had been suggested to him by James Watson, would improve the quality of freethought investigation. The paper was born as the Reasoner and Herald of Progress, financed by a £50 prize which Holyoake had won in the Manchester Unity Oddfellows essay competition. The Reasoner, as it later became, was not successful and failed to break even or to establish a sufficiently large circulation. This decline of interest in Holyoake and his ideas went hand-in-hand with the apathy felt by many socialist branches after the ignominious end of the Queenwood Community and the resulting financial squabbings.

It was, however, the personal appearance of lecturers and the feeling of genuine contact with the personalities of a movement that was essential to

the maintenance of freethought in the provinces. As such the work of Holyoake, Southwell and others to establish, staff and fund a network of freethought lecturers was instrumental in insuring that the regional branches of Owenism did not die but were rebuilt and sustained by a successor movement. From the perspective of 1848 though, it must have seemed to Holyoake and his compatriots as if they were swimming against the tide. Local branches were short of funds - a situation exacerbated by trade depressions - and they were distinctly lacking in enthusiasm for the old brand of Owenism. It was clear that times were changing and it was the triumph of Holyoake that he was prepared to harness the trends to create his own popular ideology.

Holyoake was able, as the 1840's wore on to gradually sweep up the elements of what would have otherwise have been an atomised movement. His own personal concerns which included rational religion, co-operation, and at least a tacit acknowledgment of the potential benefits of communitarianism, as we have seen, echoed much of mainstream Owenite thought. Despite this he was already in the middle forties lowering the sights of the millenium in a search for readily achievable goals. His book 'Rationalism, a Treatise for the Times' (written in 1845) was a clear attempt to put Owenism on a secure footing and to give it a framework that appealed directly to the individual⁵⁷. This stress on the rights of the individual was a cornerstone of Holyoake's own artisan education and appears unaltered in all areas of his thought. Just as he foreswore the class based opposition to the Corn Laws orchestrated by other Chartist leaders, Holyoake turned Infidelity from a strident protest into a fundamental question of personal choice. This was the essence of Holyoake's thinking when he re-established Infidelity under the banner of Secularism. The word 'Secularism' was originally coined in 1851 after considerable reflection so that the Reasoner was, by December of that

year organising a meeting to launch the movement.

The premise behind Secularism was an extension of what Holyoake had attempted to do with the A.P.U. and it emerged as an infinitely more subtle position than Infidelity had been. In its stress upon the defence of individual belief Secularism placed the onus on orthodox religious proponents. Moreover this position was also a reflection of Holyoake's own revised position. His creation of Secularism and his definition of it was no longer a pure brand of atheism. Instead it became a hybrid form of agnosticism which argued not exclusively about the existence of a deity but rather questioned the relevance of that deity and any future life such a belief entailed. Ironically it was Holyoake's work in this area that placed him tactically, if not ideologically, on the side of Robert Owen and the communitarians he had earlier criticised.⁵⁰ Simple attacks on religion now appeared to be both anachronistic and counterproductive. It was far better to work towards an alternative, though the difference was for Holyoake that this was to be achieved through the conscience and reason of the individual, coupled with the insistence on the distinction between religion and morality. Moreover, Holyoake was able to identify his movement more readily with a softer more conciliatory, yet individualistic mid-century Liberalism. In its expression this was epitomised by the writings of J.S. Mill and the politics of Richard Cobden, John Bright and Joseph Sturge.

Secularism was more cautious in its approach to religion than Infidelity had been. It argued with a utilitarian thoroughness that Christianity should be judged on the basis of the actual benefits it bestowed upon morality. Christianity was now no longer to be confounded but to be judged according to the moral test of a modern age; that of utility. Thus the quarrel was not with religion per se, but rather with the claims it made for itself. Holyoake with his ideology of Secularism was now interested in what could be

extracted from religion and religious tendencies that would benefit mankind. In his investigation of religion he turned against atheist disbelief in the unknowable and claimed that this was as mistaken as the assertion that the unknowable had been revealed. In some sense he was saying that too much effort had been expended by infidels on the exploration of metaphysics and the nature of the almighty and that this was playing into the hands of the numerous Christian apologists. Whilst portraying the shortcomings of biblical morality was still necessary from time to time, and was to remain an essential tool, it was no longer enough whilst Infidelity offered no alternative.

For Holyoake the old approach seemed anachronistic and limiting. He declared that he no longer wished to be called an 'atheist' since it seemed to signal that he was "one who is without God and also without morality, and who wishes to be without both". Along with this he jettisoned the term infidel since Christians understood it to mean unfaithful or treacherous to the truth.⁵⁹ In this way Holyoake appeared an heir to the philosophy of Owen since he rejected the criticisms of an unjust world that were simply negations and substituted the enduring desire for a fundamentally better, more plausible organisation of Society. Holyoake's own justification for this outlook was to be summed up, and would continue to be summed up, in the phrase "nothing is destroyed until it is replaced".⁶⁰ To Holyoake the orthodox atheist position had neglected the social function of religion and the fact that it did in fact fulfil a need. To destroy it was not to satisfy that need. Holyoake's Secularism, though accepting the possibility of a creator not acknowledging his relevance was not at all mystical. Despite this there was an underlying recognition that mankind possessed religious sensibilities and had a right if not a psychological need to indulge them. By the middle of the century this position was becoming more credible due to

the interaction of a number of factors. Whilst radical agitations had failed, it was evident that forms of continued long term support were necessary to the survival of Freethought and Freethinkers. This support had been lacking since the relative demise of the Owenite Halls of Science and it was apparent that there were no places for the religiously radical other than church or chapel in what was, after all, the threatening environment of the Victorian city. The ability of the city to create social pressures meant that the Freethinker was denied the company of others and the comfort otherwise provided by a church service. Holyoake's own regard for the favourable attributes of church services are well attested.⁶¹ He certainly had this element in mind when he toyed with the idea of Secularism as a religion, with the emphasis on human endeavour and fortitude in its own right. The position Holyoake favoured also appeared more credible as the ideas of the Secularists were given some form of acceptance in the work of the more liberal mid-century Christians. Among these were writers such as Leigh Hunt, W. R. Gregg and James Martineau whose movement away from dogmatic fundamentalism was warmly welcomed by Holyoake who had been doing the same for Freethought.

To atheists Holyoake's new ideas were as unwelcome as the ideas of the liberal theologians appeared to Christian and biblical fundamentalists. Though Southwell recognised the greater sophistication of the Secularist position he still maintained that it amounted to an acknowledgment of the validity of theism. Robert Cooper based his arguments on a different tack. He denied the efficacy of liberal Christianity's reliance on a religion of the soul and of the heart. However, to Holyoake, this was again restoring the old atheism devoid of the needs of the human spirit. This dichotomy of interpretation of religious tendencies and their purpose is the central argument that runs through Secularism until the end of the century.

The thoughts and innovations of Holyoake would have been of little importance if they had gone no further, but their appeal and acceptability meant that a new movement was rescued from the wreckage of the old. The meeting places and personnel of Owenite Halls of Science were often to be found continuing into the Secular movement. We have already seen that the origin of Secularism was to an extent contemporaneous with the break up of Owenism and the credentials of Holyoake as leader of a new movement were impeccable. It was sufficiently like its Owenite and radical parents to appeal to those who had grown up in those movements and also to persuade growing numbers of artisans and self-improving labourers who made eclecticism a habit. The localities were still quite capable of pursuing many of the old quasi-Owenite modes of social investigation which included dabbling in Phrenology, Mesmerism and Spiritualism.⁶²

Holyoake's achievement was to make possible the transformation of Freethought from a soulless agitation to a semi-stable sect. As such the successful recruitment of members might be seen as yet another variant on the famous "Chiliasm of Despair" thesis suggested by Edward Thompson.⁶³ Secularism can be seen as a down to earth reaction to the passing of Owen's millennial moment as the disillusioned participants set about rebuilding their lives under the umbrella offered by a realistic and protective sect. This sectarian belief was both considerably less demanding and also far more aware of the needs of a sector of society that was starting to evade poverty and could see glimmers of prosperity.

This mirrors the attempts made by the Society of Friends to break with some of the more radical and politically dangerous elements involved in their own past.⁶⁴ This tendency to create and define a sect is also reminiscent of the choice made by the Muggletonians whose continued proselytising (a strategy deemed anachronistic both by its leader and by later historians)

would conceivably have spelt their own rapid extinction.⁶⁵

However the important element required to make the new belief more than a simple passing fad was organisation. Though the personnel were ready to come in to the movement they had first to be galvanised into action. The first positive response was from the north west where eventually the first national conference was held in Manchester in 1852 with delegates from Cheshire, Lancashire and the West Riding.⁶⁶ The conference was characterised by the expression of the ideal that local initiative and action should be as unfettered as possible. This was a necessary recognition of the importance of local conditions that had been ignored in much Owenite organisation and was even more important a consideration in Secularism. The whole meeting was dominated by Holyoake and as Edward Royle notes;

'In one day Holyoake had outlined an organisation for Secularism, imposed his own doctrine upon it and a levy for the support of his work, and he had nominated himself and his friends as directors. That he was able to come to Lancashire and do this is an indication of his great influence among the former socialists.'⁶⁷

When Holyoake returned to London to busy himself with publishing much of the impetus behind national organisation went with him. He was perhaps content to let the provinces call their own tune but was also strenuously opposed at any attempts to convene nationally where he was not the prime mover. Thus the main strengths of perceivable Secularism were in the north west and based around Holyoake and the London Secular Society. For the provinces it was very much a question of sink or swim and their own strength relied on the encouragement of visiting lecturers of national prominence. It also seems that Secularism put down roots in the same areas of industrial England and Scotland that had nourished Owenism. As has already been noted Manchester was a mainstay of the movement and this had

as much to do with the nature of the conurbation as with anything else. The number of smaller industrial towns within the radius of Manchester was able to support a network of mutually dependent societies.

Outside the metropolis it seems that Secularism was able to take strong local initiatives that succeeded particularly in areas where light industry was the norm. There is a marked predominance of Secular societies and activity in the textile towns of the north west, in the West Riding of Yorkshire and in the weaving, clothing and footwear towns of the east midlands. The movement in Yorkshire was even strong enough to support its own periodical, the Yorkshire Tribune.⁶⁸

However, the first ten years of Secularism are a story of transitory moments of excitement alongside long periods of inactivity. There were never enough lecturers to go round and the fact that local societies often relied on the income generated from public disputation did not help matters. Holyoake himself was a leading proponent. On many occasions he debated with the seasoned anti-socialist, the Rev. Brewin Grant and such occasions must have been set pieces of argument and entertainment. They could sometimes last as long as two evenings a week for three weeks, such as the one held at Glasgow in 1854.⁶⁹ The Glasgow discussions serve as a good example of how Secularists employed this tactic to gain publicity and funds. The Glasgow Eclectic Association at the instigation of John Wright the secretary wrote to a Dr. Anderson to persuade him to debate with Holyoake who was on a lecture tour in the area. Anderson declined but he suggested that Brewin Grant take his place. From this juncture a correspondence occurred between the opposing parties which at times bordered on the inflammatory. Brewin Grant at one stage suggested that Holyoake would refuse to debate with him on the grounds that he himself was:

Too well acquainted with his writings and his jesuitical character. He prefers objections from those who are ignorant of both, and he can repeat his old lectures, &c., which he gave in our discussion. He is ignorant of historical questions, and leaves them to R. Cooper, whilst he talks of morals and justifies murder by organisation.⁷⁰

Though many moderate and liberal Christians later objected to the stridency of Brewin Grant's style, all attacks on the Secularists amounted to very good copy. The controversy, almost without exception, was guaranteed to fill the hall and it became almost an endemic characteristic of Secularism that the success of an organised discussion relied on the stridency of the attacks made by the apologists of Christianity or the stridency of their own lecturer. This division between the two styles of approach within the movement was emphasised in later years by the differing philosophies and styles of Holyoake and Bradlaugh.

By the late 1850's it was increasingly obvious that the Secularist movement - whilst still a movement - was surviving rather than prospering. Holyoake, though not abandoning the movement completely, was to a great extent preoccupied with his involvement in other agitations as well as suffering from cumulative fatigue. He gave up his platform and abandoned the Reasoner, so that by the end of 1861 his leadership of the Secularist movement seemed to have been abdicated.

Holyoake's disinterest made the efforts of the heir apparent to his leadership, Charles Bradlaugh, all the more appealing. Bradlaugh, a former soldier and legal clerk who had learnt his Infidelity whilst living in the house of Eliza Sharples, the common-law wife of Richard Carlile, had gradually built up a reputation within the movement as a lecturer of some

talent. In 1860 he became co-editor with Joseph Barker of the Sheffield Secularist paper the National Reformer which lasted about a year. Joseph Barker had already had a distinguished career as a leader of his own sect before he had become a Unitarian. After service as a West Riding Chartist he had become a Freethinker in 1853 whilst in America. He had returned to England in 1860 where his reputation as an elder statesman was an asset to Bradlaugh.⁷¹ Barker eventually broke with Bradlaugh over his warm reception of George Drysdale's book 'The Elements of Social Science; or, Physical, Sexual, and Natural Religion'. Barker was appalled by the profanity of the book, and, though it appeared to be a blueprint for sexual licence, it was merely a bad example of the genre of birth control literature that was part of the Secularist mission to demystify areas of church control. Though the advocacy of what came to be known as Neo-Malthusianism was entirely consistent with Secularist thoughts on the nature and abuse of power structures it was all too often used against them in accusations of libertinism.

Holyoake came forward to support Bradlaugh and reached an agreement with him to become major contributor to the National Reformer after the departure of Joseph Barker.⁷² The arrangement lasted only a short time before Holyoake fell out with Bradlaugh somewhat acrimoniously. Holyoake and the directors of the company wanted to reduce the paper to a foolscap periodical, much to Bradlaugh's chagrin. To force the issue Bradlaugh resigned in protest and appealed to the shareholders (he himself was the largest shareholder). Though an enquiry later vindicated Holyoake, Bradlaugh was the de facto victor. This was as much a contest over who would direct the national Secularist movement as it was about the primacy of individual views. From this point Bradlaugh and Holyoake were never wholly reconciled

and, though most secular societies were happy to welcome them both as speakers, it was nevertheless a fact that such societies felt compelled to hold sympathies with one or other party. The clash of personalities was so marked and the views so divergent that the split was still evident at the turn of the century nine years after Bradlaugh's death.

After another lean period Secularism began to revive in the mid-eighteen sixties and Bradlaugh felt sufficiently confident in 1866 to request statistical information on the regional spread of the movement.⁷³ Bradlaugh discovered he was by now de facto head of the Secular movement and began to plan for the future with this in mind. Though there was little in the way of response to this request it was the preparatory step to the formation of a new organisation for Secularism. Just as Holyoake had created an organisation in his own image so Bradlaugh now sought to put his mark on the movement. Holyoake had established a form of organisation that reflected his fondness for the principle of Owenite branches, yet in its more independent federalist approach it stripped them of their capacity to make devastating and far reaching decisions capable of affecting the whole movement. Bradlaugh however, sought a centralised, mainly metropolitan, form of organisation that was to be a springboard for his ambitions to turn Secularism and Bradlaugh into household names.

It would be wrong to overemphasise the element of egotism in Bradlaugh's character though doubtless it was present. Bradlaugh worked hard in the cause of Secularism and suffered greatly and this was easily forgotten when he appeared to glorify in the attention he received. His approach seemed to contemporaries, particularly some Secularists who had experienced the struggles and prosecutions of the 1840's and had lived to enjoy more liberal days, distasteful, unnecessary and even liable to reawaken Christian persecution. Secularism like any radical movement on the right side of the

law felt it could live with notoriety but not with effective persecution that robbed it of its leaders for any length of time.

Bradlaugh's plan was to form a national Secular society with membership based on the individual rather than affiliation through local societies. The intention was to create a highly centralised organisation that required a greater degree of commitment from members and was only to be expected from an avowed individualist like Bradlaugh. The structure of this form of organisation was also intended to limit the potential for regional and branch autonomy which had flourished under Holyoake's primacy. The founding conference finally met in December 1867 and it confirmed the position of Charles Bradlaugh as president. Charles Watts, who was appointed secretary, had arrived in London as Holyoake was propounding his new doctrine of Secularism. He had risen to prominence in the movement through his involvement on the lecturing circuit and his work on the National Reformer from 1864 onwards.⁷⁴ Unlike Holyoake, Southwell or Cooper, neither man had been a follower of Owen.

Charles Bradlaugh brought to Secularism a distinct change of style and ideology. Unlike Holyoake he was an unrepentent atheist who bolstered his beliefs in social and political terms with a strident individualism which outshone Holyoake. Not only did this make his political position rather different to Holyoake but it also negated Holyoake's contention that man required to have his religious impulses satisfied. Unlike Holyoake, Bradlaugh was a militant eliminationist who could see only the evil done by religion and its handmaiden the state. This conviction that the two were intertwined also took Bradlaugh and many of the Secularists that he convinced into the Republican movement. In many ways Bradlaugh's ideology was a throwback to Paine. He argued that the monarchy and aristocracy were wasteful luxuries that a society that was seeking to be industrially competitive could ill

afford to maintain. However times had changed since the age of Paine. Bradlaugh's message was now layered with elements of Utilitarian and laissez-faire philosophy and he spoke the increasingly coherent and intelligible message of self-help and respect for democratic institutions. He exhorted the nation to change but asked that it "strive to make that revolution gradual, peaceful, and enduring, rather than sudden, bloody, and uncertain."⁷⁵ Unlike Paine he fundamentally respected British institutions and this is no clearer than in his condemnation of the new Socialism on the grounds that it was of disquietingly Germanic origin.⁷⁶ The supremacy of Bradlaugh and his oft quoted anti-socialism was to inhibit any rapprochement between Socialists and Secularists for many years to come.

The qualitative nature of Secularism was also altered under Bradlaugh. He was a rugged man of immense energy and his platform style was blunt, commonsensical and popular. He was very much self taught and his lectures projected the down-to-earth view of knowledge and its utility. His popularity lay in the ability to demystify the pretensions of religion and the intellectual references of his more bookish colleagues. Bradlaugh's atheism had been founded on the virulent personal hatred of religion and its works. However, this cannot have been blunted by the harsh personal life he was to experience with the death of a son, the incapacity of his wife through alcoholism and his own increasingly infirm health. Though adversity does not make a Secularist, in Bradlaugh it created a particularly pugnacious individualist who came to rely exclusively on human fortitude.

These characteristics made Bradlaugh difficult to work with and many otherwise able and enthusiastic lecturers were obliged to ply their trade outside the umbrella offered by the National Secular Society (N.S.S.). Nevertheless the popularity of Bradlaugh seemed boundless as over the next few years he consolidated his hold on the movement by weekend lecture tours

whilst still working during the week as a financial agent. Bradlaugh was able to put the Secularist movement back on its feet after the lean years of the early eighteen-sixties. The circulation of the National Reformer doubled between 1867 and 1872 and Bradlaugh was able to widen the base of the movement by reducing the subscription of N.S.S. from 1s to 3d a quarter as a result of which nearly a thousand new members were enrolled almost immediately.⁷⁷ Bradlaugh was rapidly transforming Secularism from provincial quietist sect to vocal and visible national movement. For this he relied upon a constant diet of hard canvassing and lecturing coupled with the ability to keep the agitation in the public eye by broadening the basis of its concerns.

Though most Secularists were Republicans at heart and recognised the alliance between church and state power it was the inspiration of Bradlaugh that brought them firmly into the mainstream of this movement. From their opposition to the church Secularists came to judge such matters as the misappropriation of land and excesses of coercion in Ireland as evidence of a tyrannical system of government in action. With the excitement generated by the events of 1870 in France and the growing unpopularity of the monarchy, popular republicanism spread rapidly. During 1871 many provincial republican clubs were formed and organisation which included many individual secularists as well as Societies proceeded apace. Bradlaugh constantly urged, if not outright caution, then certainly legality and was alarmed by the revolutionary tendencies of many with whom he shared a republican platform. His own critique of the situation was essentially Paineite but placed the emphasis on the creation of a meritocracy rather than the Socialist revolution some of his compatriots talked of.

Many of the Secularists led by Bradlaugh felt increasingly uneasy in the republican movement and this was transformed into open hostility over the issue of the Paris Commune which had gained support from the extreme

radicals. For Bradlaugh the issue was never class war but land and he denounced the reckless plans made by the Universal Republican League for arming and the use of physical force. Though events in France were instrumental in creating a wave of republican support it was criticism of the royal family that was of more importance. Bradlaugh's own assessment of royalty 'The Impeachment of the House of Brunswick' originally published in the National Reformer became a highly popular and widely read work. Radical individualist M.P.'s such as Charles Dilke, Auberon Herbert and Henry Fawcett were staunch opponents of the provisions made in the civil list and though they were able to get 53 votes for their cause in 1871, when the Prince of Wales was seriously ill with typhoid, however, this fell to 2 the following year.⁷⁸ Gradually the excitement evaporated and with it the raison d'être of a movement that had brought together a heady blend of disparate radicals from movements as diverse as Individualism and members of the first International.

Bradlaugh pursued the cause of republicanism to the comparative neglect of the N.S.S. and he declined to be elected President in 1871. From this point onwards it was increasingly obvious that the cause of Secularism required the energy and devotion of Bradlaugh to survive in the short term. He was able to give it his full attention again in 1874 as he began to reconstruct his own platform and reconstitute the movement. He found himself having to make new publishing arrangements which were necessitated by the untimely death of Austin Holyoake whose place as foremost printer and publisher in the movement was taken by Charles Watts. Watts agreed and stepped sideways from the post of N.S.S. Secretary to take over the premises at Johnson's court and inherited the printing plates of almost two generations of Secularist writing.

Bradlaugh was also able to welcome into the Secularist movement in the

mid-seventies a new generation of talented lecturers who replaced the older generation with connections going back to the days of Chartism and Owenism. G.W. Foote gradually emerged in 1873 as a coming man and together with the former Methodist probationary preacher Joseph Symes and the gifted Annie Besant formed the mainstay of a lecturing team that was eventually to enable the movement to survive the premature death of Bradlaugh.

Foote however quarrelled with Bradlaugh and became yet another victim of his determination to brook no opposition. For a time Foote was resentful of the ambitious and talented Besant and doubtless was displeased to realise that ability on the platform was considered a preferred quality to his own considerable literary gifts. Foote gravitated towards Holyoake and the two collaborated on a new venture, the shortlived Secularist, the partnership split up and Holyoake moved on to produce his own paper the Secular Review. Foote attempted to challenge the dominance of Bradlaugh at the N.S.S. conference in Leeds in 1876 but found himself almost entirely alone in his push for a diffusion of power within the Society. Many of these squabbles and power struggles reverberated throughout the local societies and many felt obliged to support one side or the other, though a policy of waiting to see the outcome certainly served to minimise the effect.

What brought Secularism firmly back into the public gaze and confirmed Annie Besant in her position alongside Bradlaugh in the front of the Secularist movement was the prosecution in 1876 over the publication of the Knowlton Pamphlet. This was to become a cause célèbre for Secularists and to have profound repercussions at a local level. The book was a treatise on contraception that had been largely superseded medically and until 1876 had been published openly and had remained free from prosecution. A bookseller in Bristol was charged and convicted with selling it as an obscene publication and sentenced to two years imprisonment. Worse was to come,

Watts was rapidly arrested on the charge of being the publisher.

The issue of birth control literature was an important one for Secularists. It was an effective way of attacking the close relationship between the church and state which in this area appeared to complement each other's repression. It was a classic case of the tyranny of ignorance, whence society conspired to deprive women of the knowledge which was self-evidently their birthright. However Bradlaugh went further and tied the issue to his own philosophical individualism when he espoused Neo-Malthusian economics. His argument stated in true Malthusian style that poverty was caused by over population and that control over fertility gave the working classes the ability to compete as individuals. Though some were convinced, many, like Holyoake, opposed these developments. Secularists from Holyoake's generation who had memories of Owenism and co-operation were appalled by what appeared to be a return to the same Political Economy that had constructed the 1834 Poor Law. Still more found the doctrine distasteful and much of the literature was deemed to be mitigating against the good impression Secularists had been trying to portray to combat the sporadic accusations of libertinism and loose morals.

The situation in the Knowlton Pamphlet trial appeared to make matters worse. It was discovered that the original Pamphlet, sold wholesale by Watts, had had additional obscene illustrations inserted by the Bristol bookseller, Henry Cook. Watts at length decided to refrain from defending its publication and entered a plea of guilty agreeing to have the remaining stock and plates destroyed. Bradlaugh and Besant were furious at the capitulation of Watts and his wife and made preparations to campaign. Many thought the subsequent championing of the pamphlet by Bradlaugh and Besant unwise since it served to link Secularism dangerously with contraception, licence, and loose morals as well as the mechanistic theories of Neo-Malthusianism. However it is

difficult to evade the conclusion Bradlaugh was to come to himself, that the principle of defending freedom of publication was too important to allow to lapse and the defence of it would ensure no further encroachments by the authorities. Moreover with public consciousness all too willing to listen to the opponents of Secularism he was concerned that the unwillingness of Charles Watts to stand his ground would be construed as cowardice and tar the rest of Secularism with the same brush.

Even for Bradlaugh the position was not quite as clear as it seemed. The virtues of Knowlton's 'Fruits of Philosophy' were certainly questionable and it has been suggested that it was the personal insistence of Annie Besant, "who of all the freethought leaders was probably the most ostracized by respectable society", that forced Bradlaugh into line.⁷⁹ Many local Secularists and some national leaders who opposed Bradlaugh's high handed action defended the Wattses and proclaimed their right to follow their own course of action. Holyoake's Secular Review was favourable to their point of view together with Foote's Secularist and Harriet Law's Secular Chronicle which both offered warm support.⁸⁰

When Bradlaugh and Besant defiantly published their own edition of the pamphlet in 1877 and were duly arrested and prosecuted there was a distinct impression abroad in the movement that he had made Secularism a hostage to fortune. Despite this the initial effect was to publicise the aims of Secularism widely, though not always with the clarity and accuracy its proponents would have liked. Support grew by the day with many flocking to join Secular societies, impressed with the nobility of Bradlaugh's stand on a matter of principle. The matter was rapidly transformed from dislike of Bradlaugh's overbearing authority and inconsiderate treatment of his colleagues to the simple issue of the freedom to publish, a matter guaranteed to unite Secularists.

Bradlaugh and Besant conducted their own defence and were confident of acquittal. The jury found them guilty of depraving public morals in publishing the work, but exonerated them from any corrupt motives in so doing. They were technically guilty and would have been imprisoned had not Bradlaugh succeeded in having the judgement set aside on a technicality.

The outcome was a victory of a kind, but the net effect on the Secular movement was probably an adverse one. Bradlaugh had toyed dangerously with the reputations of all Secularists and had abused his position as president of the N.S.S.. Though he was triumphant in the eyes of the rank and file his high handed action and cursory treatment of Watts did not endear him to his immediate juniors in the society. At the Conference of 1877 there was an attempt to abolish the presidency of the N.S.S. on the grounds that it was too powerful. After an unsuccessful attempt to depose Bradlaugh from the presidency a rump of the leadership including the Wattses, Harriet Law, G.W. Foote and Josiah Gimson (the president of the Leicester Secular Society) left and formed an opposing organisation the British Secular Union (B.S.U.). Though this grouping did not last it took a number of provincial societies with it, notably Leicester, and, through a democratic framework began to move Secularism away from the combative methods of Bradlaugh towards more Sundays Schools and plans for the future.

When Bradlaugh entered Parliament and began what was to become a lengthy campaign over the oath question the story almost repeated itself.²¹ Initially some deemed the attention given to atheism and Secularist views counterproductive, yet gloried in the support that flocked to the Secularist banner, seeming to come from almost every corner of liberal England. Bradlaugh was fighting a battle on his own behalf yet every Secularist recognised that his struggle highlighted the fact that Secularists were not full citizens. However, critics like W. Stewart Ross, the leading journalist of

the B.S.U. balked at the idea of a fellow Secularist swearing on the Bible. After bitter struggle Bradlaugh emerged triumphant in 1886 and gazed upon a movement that had become, under his charge, a force for radicalism throughout the land. In the early 1880's greater involvement in local communities can be traced as the excitement generated by the Bradlaugh case allowed individual societies to become a dynamic presence in their localities. The example of Bradlaugh also stimulated renewed efforts to gain representation on local Councils and School Boards.

The rights of Freethinkers were further infringed whilst the Bradlaugh case was at its height by the arrest of G.W. Foote on a charge of blasphemy. Bradlaugh escaped being drawn into this net by successfully proving that he was not connected with Foote's paper the Freethinker, which had been started in 1881 to protest at the treatment Bradlaugh was receiving from Christians. Foote was found guilty along with W.J. Ramsey and sentenced to a year. A second trial, based on the 1882 Christmas number of the Freethinker, had the favourable result of making a clear legal distinction between indecency and blasphemy and also a statement from the Lord Chief Justice that the motives behind the actions taken by Foote and Ramsey were honourable,⁸² and not analogous to the trade of the pornographer. The prosecution and imprisonment of Foote, now reconciled to the N.S.S., added fuel to the Bradlaugh fire raging in Parliament. It also established Foote as a martyr to the cause and almost ensured his succession to the presidency of the N.S.S. upon the retirement of Bradlaugh.

Secularism was never again to reach the dizzy heights of the success achieved during the Bradlaugh case, and its days as a national agitation were numbered. Though many blamed Foote's presidency after 1890 for this the accusation of squandering Bradlaugh's inheritance is largely unfair. Foote's legacy was in many ways an unfortunate one. He followed a revered leader and

presided over a movement that ceased to have the cohesion it once had. Though there was initial success, by the middle nineties the N.S.S. was caught in a spiral of falling membership coupled with the further debilitating effects of falling income.

Membership of Secular societies was also no longer the prerequisite for a political radical as it once had been. The new creed of Socialism kept many out of Secularism who distrusted the Liberal individualism of its remaining chief proponents, notably Foote himself. Moreover Secularists themselves stayed aloof from Socialism and pointed accusatory fingers at the number of Methodists and clergy in the movement. Secularism had always been allied to radical Liberalism and its fortunes throughout the century ebbed and flowed with this tide. However, Secularism itself was losing ground to the growing Ethical and Positivist movements, largely inspired by the writings of Auguste Comte,⁹³ that were appealing to a new generation whose objection to religion had not been akin to Bradlaugh's old style iconoclasm. The new converts had been converted to a new religion, not simply smitten with a pressing need to reject the old. The growing appeal of these movements was a reaction to the mechanistic nature of atheism and seems related to the ideas generated by the Oxford Movement which gave back to religion its mysticism and ceremony. This created within the Secularist a distinct Church versus Chapel mentality.

The attachment of many Ethicists and Positivists to Socialism, notably F.J. Gould,⁹⁴ indicates a growing belief in a religion of mankind which synthesised the new politics with an appreciation of the religious tendencies in man to leave old style Secularism as a redundant campaigning position. However many Ethicists and Positivists remained members of Secular societies, but brought degrees of intellectual refinement and pretension into the movement that were distrusted and disliked by many of the traditional membership who were often to dismiss them as the outpourings of a new

'professional' class.

Secularism was also bound to suffer when religion suffered. As the nineteenth century progressed towards its twilight the growing number of alternative entertainments, distractions and cheap literature as well as improvements in home life mitigated against the continued growth of Freethought. Besides, Secularism was running short of battles, or at least, battles that could arouse public interest. Christianity was more liberal and many of the rights of Secularists had now been acknowledged by secular and clerical authority alike. The preservation of an unacceptable face of religion, increasingly difficult, seemed a marginal occupation. Such an attitude reached its zenith in the suggestion of Arthur Moss, the Southwark School Board visitor, that the Bible should be compulsory reading in schools in order to create good and thoughtful Secularists.⁸⁵

Though the battles against religious repression were won by Secularists they were singularly unsuccessful in erecting anything in its place. Some historians have emphasised that Secularisation was not the same as creating a Secular society, but was rather creating a situation in which forms of agnosticism were the norm in a so-called "Post Christian Britain."⁸⁶ Perhaps the marginalisation of religious questions had happened as Holyoake hoped it would - but where was the morality of transfigured mankind?

With the leadership of Foote the fortunes of Secularism declined, so that by 1915 when he died, in Edward Royle's words "From being a large national organisation with branches throughout the country and a strong presence in London... it became a small pressure group with no secure indoor lecturing place in London, and only a handful of branches in the provinces."⁸⁷

The Great War was a further bitter blow to an already hard pressed dwindling organisation. The outbreaks of jingoism created by the Great War

seemed to signal the final triumph of emotion over reason as well as the death of the liberal tradition of three generations, and Secularists were thrown back on their resources and went about their task of promulgating a gospel of reason and defence of free speech.

The initiative was returned to the individual branches to survive as best they could. Indeed this was what they had always done and their local struggle in this period of national decline is a neglected aspect of the history of the Secularist movement, as indeed is the history of those individual local Secularists who gave time and energy in the crusade against religious error.

Footnotes to Chapter One.

1: Much of this chapter relies on the four principal accounts of national secularism. The most comprehensive are the two works by Edward Royle, Victorian Infidels (1974) and Radicals, Secularists and Republicans [1980]), These are supplemented by David Tribe, 100 Years of Freethought (1967) and Susan Budd, Varieties of Unbelief (1977).

2: See Christopher Hill, The World Turned Upside Down (1972), page 25.

3: J[ohn] R[ogers], The Displaying of an horrible secte (1578), quoted in Ibid. page 175.

4: Ibid. page 176. This is just one example among many in Hill's book. The most graphic description of an itinerant "Mechanic" preacher's disdain for authority concerns a John Boggis of Great Yarmouth who asked "where is your God, in heaven or in earth, aloft or below, or doth he sit in the clouds, or where doth he sit with his arse?"

5: Ibid. page 95.

6: Ibid. page 45.

7: Ibid. page 166. Hill notes that both Familist and Grindletonian attitudes to perfection were easily assimilated into plebeian materialism; 'The Family of Love and the Grindletonians had taught that prelapsarian perfection could be attained in this life. But before the 1640's such doctrines had been kept underground. Now nothing could be suppressed. Plebeian materialist scepticism and anti-clericalism could express themselves freely, and fused with theological antinomianism. The result was a rejection of clerical control of religious and moral life, and a rejection of the whole concept of sin the great deterrent'.

8: Owen Chadwick, The Secularization of the European mind in the Nineteenth Century. (1975), page 8.

- 9: John Redwood Reason, Ridicule and Religion: the Age of Enlightenment in England 1660-1750 (1976), page 29.
- 10: Ibid. page 29.
- 11: Ibid. page 30.
- 12: Ibid. page 34.
- 13: Edward Royle, Victorian Infidels (1974), page 14.
- 14: Madeleine S. Miller and J. Lane Miller, Black's Bible Dictionary (second edition 1960), pages 699 - 700.
- 15: Royle, Victorian Infidels, page 24.
- 16: Ibid. page 24.
- 17: Thomas Paine, The Rights of Man (Penguin edition 1979), page 140.
- 18: Ibid. page 162.
- 19: Royle, Victorian Infidels, page 27.
- 20: Thomas Paine The Age of Reason - Part One in The Writings of Thomas Paine Volume IV edited by Moncure D. Conway (1894-6), page 22.
- 21: Ibid. page 22.
- 22: Ibid. page 22 - 3.
- 23: Royle, Victorian Infidels, page 26.
- 24: Ibid. page 29.
- 25: E.J. Hobsbawm, 'The Machine Breakers' in Labouring Men (1964), pages 11 - 14.
- 26: Joel Wiener, Radicalism and Freethought in Nineteenth century Britain - The life of Richard Carlile, (1983), page 17.
- 27: Ibid. page 18.
- 28: Ibid. page 20.
- 29: Ibid. page 20.
- 30: Royle, Victorian Infidels, page 33.
- 31: Quoted in Patricia Hollis ed., Class and Conflict in Nineteenth Century

England 1815 - 50 (1973), page 15.

32: See Patricia Hollis, The Pauper Press (1970), particularly Chapters 4 and 5.

33: Ibid. page 100. See also the criticism levelled at Carlille in E. P. Thompson, The Making of the English Working Class (1963), page 839: 'The rationalist lampoons upon the 'priesthood' as the hired apologists of privilege and the emissaries of an ignorance designed to hold the people in thrall, are somehow just wide of the mark.... If George IV *had* been strangled in the entrails of the Bishop of Llandaff it would have been a triumph, but not the triumph which he supposed. He would still have had to deal with the last city alderman and the last local preacher.'

34: Joel Wiener, The War of the Unstamped - The Movement to repeal the British Newspaper Tax, 1830 - 36. (1969), pages 130 - 5.

35: Henry Hetherington, Cheap Salvation: or an antidote to Priestcraft, London (1832?). Quoted in Edward Royle, Radical Politics 1790 - 1900 Religion and Unbelief. (1971), page 109

36: Ibid..

37: Quoted in Hollis ed., Class and conflict, page 18.

38: David Tribe, 100 Years of Freethought (1967), page 13.

39: Robert Owen, A new view of Society (penguin edition 1970), page 155.

40: R.G. Garnett, Co-operation and the Owenite Socialist Communities in Britain, 1825 - 45 (1972). Chapter 1 emphasises this quality of Owen's ideas and considerable output.

41: Eileen Yeo, 'Robert Owen and Radical Culture' in Pollard and Salt ed. Robert Owen Prophet of the Poor (1971), pages 95 - 107.

42: Robert Owen, Report to the County of Lanark (penguin edition 1970) page 211 - 6.

43: Royle, Victorian Infidels, pages 65 - 8.

- 44: The New Moral World, 11 July 1839. Quoted in Ibid. page 67.
- 45: For a detailed exposition of the mechanisms and eventual breakdown of the various Owenite communities see R.G. Garnett Co-operation, W.H. Armytage, 'Manea Fen: an experiment in agrarian communitarianism', Bulletin of the John Rylands Library XXXVIII (1956) pp. 288 - 310., and J.F.C. Harrison, Robert Owen and the Owenites in Britain and America" (1969).
- 46: Garnett, Co-operation, page 205.
- 47: Ibid. page 204.
- 48: Royle, Victorian Infidels, page 74. See also Sydney Ansell Gimson, 'Random Recollections of the Leicester Secular Society' (1932), pages 11 - 12.
- 49: G.J. Holyoake, Sixty Years of an Agitators Life (1906), page 115.
- 50: Gimson 'Random Recollections', page 12.
- 51: Royle Victorian Infidels, page 73.
- 52: Holyoake, Sixty Years, page 142.
- 53: See Logie Barrow, Independent Spirits (1986) for the lineage from Owenism to Spiritualism.
- 54: Royle, Victorian Infidels, page 86.
- 55: Ibid. page 87.
- 56: Ibid. page 89.
- 57: Edward Royle, Radical Politics 1790 - 1900 Religion and Unbelief (1971), page 51.
- 58: See Holyoake, Sixty Years, pages 198 - 203 for his memories of visiting Queenwood. See also Susan Budd, Varieties of Unbelief, page 25 for Holyoake's criticism of the community management in the Oracle of Reason.
- 59: Royle, Victorian Infidels, pages 151 - 2.
- 60: The Reasoner 31 December 1854, quoted in Ibid. page 155.
- 61: Ibid. pages 155 - 8.
- 62: See Barrow, Independent Spirits, passim. for evidence of continuity of

- interest between Secularism and Spiritualism, Phrenology and Mesmerism.
- 63: See E.P. Thompson, The Making of the English Working Class, Chapter 11.
- 64: See Christopher Hill, The World Turned Upside Down, Chapter 10.
- 65: See Reay, Lamont, Hill, The World of the Muggletonians (1983), passim.
- 66: Royle, Victorian Infidels, page 176.
- 67: Ibid. page 177.
- 68: Ibid. page 187.
- 69: See Report of a Public discussion between the Rev. Brewin Grant B.A. and George Jacob Holyoake E.S.Q., Held in the City Hall Glasgow on Monday and Thursday evenings commencing October 2nd and ending October 19th 1854. (1854).
- 70: Ibid. page VI.
- 71: Royle, Victorian Infidels, page 307.
- 72: Ibid. page 278.
- 73: Ibid. page 283.
- 74: Ibid. pages 284 and 316.
- 75: Susan Budd, Varieties of Unbelief, page 65.
- 76: Ibid. page 65.
- 77: Edward Royle, Radicals, Secularists and Republicans (1980) page 7.
- 78: Ibid. page 205.
- 79: Budd, Varieties, page 56.
- 80: Royle, Radicals, Secularists and Republicans, pages 14 - 15.
- 81: For the best appraisal of Charles Bradlaugh and the oath question see W.L. Arnstein, The Bradlaugh Case: a study in Late Victorian Opinion and Politics, (Oxford 1965).
- 82: Royle, Radicals, Secularists and Republicans, page 33.
- 83: See T.R. Wright, The Religion of Humanity: the Impact of Comtean Positivism on Victorian Britain (1986), passim..

84: See F.J. Gould, The Life story of a Humanist (1923), passim..

85: Royle, Radicals, Secularists and Republicans, page 311.

86: See Alan D. Gilbert, The Making of Post - Christian Britain (1980),
Chapters 1, 2 & 3.

87: Royle, Radicals, Secularists and Republicans, page 41.

CHAPTER TWO

ORIGINS OF THE SOCIETY 1840-1880

The precise origins of the Leicester Secular Society are obscure. The radical pamphlets and periodicals of the period from the end of the eighteenth century to the 1840's, which most historians consider to be the formative phase of nineteenth century radicalism, suggest scattered individuals, generally acting without unity of purpose. However, many of these considered Infidelity to be an essential component of their radicalism. They took their lead from the Paine/Carlile tradition as they furthered the cause of Freethought within Leicester.

Leicester was, and had been for many years, fertile ground for many kinds of radicalism. Hampden clubs had been popular and later Chartism flourished amid the turmoil of the many cyclical factors that affected the hosiery and stocking industry, the prime employers of the area. In the 1790's the works of Paine had been publicised through the diligence of Richard Phillips, a bookseller, who was an ardent supporter of the French Revolution. Phillips is an almost solitary representative in Leicester of the enquiring, deistical enlightenment mind.¹ He had interests in a number of areas of scientific investigation such as electricity and astronomy and, founded a society for the study of such phenomena in 1790.² This investigative outlook on life was an almost unavoidable consequence of involvement in the radicalism of the 1790's. Though the more obviously political forms of Radicalism were later to neglect this important area of concern, Owenism, Infidelity and Secularism, which sought far-reaching explanations of the universe maintained the tradition. Phillips was eventually prosecuted for selling Paine's 'Rights of Man' though his defence was ostensibly based on an ignorance which feigned indifference to the actual ideas propagated in the

work. Phillips was followed in his Radicalism by a younger compatriot, George Bown, who had been secretary of Phillip's quasi-political Adelphi Society. Bown had signed a manifesto demanding a greater measure of Parliamentary representation for the people and was arrested in 1795 for pursuing 'seditious practices'. Gould suggests also that through his lectures at the Mechanics Institute and later at the Social Institution Bown was in part responsible for the intellectual and political education of a generation.³

Much of the political and religious radicalism of the city of Leicester can be ascribed to the peculiar conditions engendered by the dependence of its inhabitants upon the hosiery industry. The upheavals of the Chartist era which drew a deep and lasting response in Leicester can in part be ascribed to the problems that were created by the structure and cyclical nature of hosiery.⁴ The relatively slow pace of innovation in both organisation and productive techniques meant that Leicester remained a town in a state of economic stagnation. Though demand increased after 1850 the fortunes of the industry were by no means assured and it remained in this semi-industrialised condition until the end of the century.⁵ The failure of the industry to adopt a system of factory based production was also responsible for the continuation of forms of quasi-industrial, artisan craft Radicalism.⁶

This tradition of artisan Radicalism, nurtured by the peculiar conditions of the Leicester economy, manifested itself in support for forms of protest which sought to circumvent the industrial system such as physical force Chartism, Owenism and co-operative production. In 1833 framework-knitters were gradually drawn into the orbit of Owenite co-operative production by the purchase 2,000 frames in an attempt to stabilise the demand for labour as well as to regulate wages and prices.⁷ This connection with Owenism became more solid when the Leicester Spinners were joined by the framework-knitters and other trades in the strike that occurred later the same year. In an attempt both to finance the strike and to state their

own ideal of productive relations, they turned to co-operative production to produce goods for Robert Owen's Labour Exchange in London. The goods produced included blacking for which an advertisement was placed in the Crisis by a Joseph Dean and William Taylor.⁹ However with the collapse of the Grand National Consolidated Trades Union at the end of 1834 Owenism entered upon a phase of grass roots consolidation centred on small scale co-operation and the founding of Social Institutions.

Leicester's Institution was founded in 1838 as branch number 26 of Owen's Association of All Classes of All Nations. A hall was acquired in Hotel Street which was formally opened by George Fleming the following July.⁹ Several weeks later Owen himself lectured in the town and Gould credits him with explicitly exposing the error of revealed religion and its failure to acknowledge the power of circumstances to affect the character of the individual.¹⁰ The Leicester district of the Social Missionary circuit was placed in the charge of James Rigby of Manchester, one of the first two missionaries to be appointed by Owen,¹¹ whilst the Institution embarked on a programme of lectures, discussions and elocution classes.¹² One of the more frequent visitors to the Institution was George Jacob Holyoake who, fresh from his imprisonment for blasphemy, lectured during one week in February 1843 on 'Prosecution for Blasphemy', 'Moral Charity', 'The formation of opinions' and 'The character of Christians and the duty of Infidels'.¹³ He had began an association with the Infidels, Secularists and Co-operators of Leicester which was to last into the next century.

As was the case with the national movement many of Leicester's Secularists were ex-Owenites and their apprenticeship in Radicalism can be traced to this early Social Institution. The tailor William Henry Holyoak and the engineer Josiah Gimson, who had both been born in 1818, started their careers in this way. Gimson was from a long established Leicestershire family and had trained, along with his brother Benjamin, as an engineer in the firm

of Corts before they acquired premises along the Welford road as millwrights.¹⁴ The family had previously been Baptist but by the 1830's Josiah was moving beyond the Unitarianism that other members of his family espoused. Both Gimson and Holyoak took prominent parts in the Owenite Social Institution now a branch of the 'Rational Society', in 1845. Gimson became president and Holyoak took on the responsibility of bookseller¹⁵. Gimson's attachment to Owenism was considerable and there is even a suggestion that the family experimented with communal forms of living in the Owenite mould.¹⁶ About this time the Institute appears to have closed, and Gimson with a small band of likeminded Infidel Rationalists found themselves without a secure and adequate place in radical circles, a situation common to many after the demise of the final great Owenite communitarian experiment based at Queenwood which collapsed in 1846.

These men were on the whole successful in transferring their allegiance to other movements though they were as much drawn to personalities as they were to ideas. The personality who caught their imagination and attention was G. J. Holyoake who represented both a strand of continuity and a path forward. In many ways they were lucky to be drawn to him precisely at a time when he was in the process of salvaging what was left of Owenism to create a new movement.

Holyoake was already by 1840 a respected radical leader in the Midlands, and by 1842 had become a national figure, though it was not until 1846 that he produced his most long-lived and respected Freethought periodical the Reasoner. Describing its reception in Leicester F. J. Gould states that it was 'eagerly read from week to week.'¹⁷ Holyoake had already in 1842 helped create the Anti-Persecution Union, which was promoted by those Owenites who eventually gravitated towards Secularism. As an organisation it argued for toleration of all religious positions that deviated from orthodox Christianity, including Bhuddism and Islam. By taking up such a position it

was also hoped to expose the Anglican Church and its close, almost conspiratorial relationship with the State, so gaining nonconformist support.

However it was ex-Owenite infidels, prosecuted for propagating their beliefs that were the intended beneficiaries and had most involvement in its organisation and propaganda. Holyoake himself acted as secretary and editor of the Union's newspaper the Movement and Anti-persecution Gazette which had a considerable level of support in Leicester. Sydney Gimson notes in his memoirs that the Leicester branch of the Rational Society is mentioned in number nine of the Movement and a subscription of 1/- from his father Josiah was acknowledged by the Anti-Persecution Union.¹⁹ In February 1844 a local committee of the union was formed which involved James Plant (a box manufacturer), Josiah Gimson, W. Cook, Thomas Coltman, and Messrs. Hall and Chamberlain; all later to become prime movers in the formation and early years of the Leicester Secular Society.²⁰ Holyoake was quickly adopted in Leicester when a meeting of the Leicester Rational Society censured George Fleming for not allowing him a right of reply to remarks made about him in the New Moral World. Fleming alleged in return that the resolution had been passed at the Leicester branch only through pressure exerted by Holyoake's own relatives, presumably a mistaken reference to William Henry Holyoak.²⁰ Holyoak was in fact secretary of the committee and had been, along with Plant, Chamberlain and Gimson (who was President in 1845), a veteran of the discussion group which had originally been held at the Owenite Social Institution. When the Institution closed the rump of the discussion group transferred themselves to the Unitarian Domestic Mission Hall.

This Mission held classes for working men, women, boys and girls as well as offering facilities such as a reading room, sewing club, singing classes and a relief fund.²¹ The men's class gave lectures on subjects such as Physiology, Geology, Homeopathy, the Properties of Gases as well as the Social and Moral Conditions of the Working Classes.²² However the Mission

also held a highly successful discussion group and it was here that the homeless Owenite Socialists took refuge. It is possible that Joseph Dare was courting a group of infidels to demonstrate the effectiveness of Unitarian dialogue whilst the Gimson group were attracted by the Scientific and rationalist approach of Unitarianism. The combination of biblical rationalism and modern science, which had characterised Unitarianism since Joseph Priestley's day, doubtless appealed to the infidels who in turn provided a more radical position for those Unitarians who were moving beyond the bounds of Christianity. These included men such as Thomas Coltman, John Sladen and Michael Wright. Whilst resident in the Domestic Mission many of the subjects raised at the Domestic Mission were to preoccupy the Freethinkers during the next seventy years, amongst them "Capital punishment", "Teetotalism" and "Popular education". They also discussed the problem endemic within the Leicester hosiery trade, "frame rents".²³ as well as "'What are the best means of making Mechanics Institutes available to the public', 'What are the best means of self-improvement and 'Socialism as propounded by Robert Owen.'"²⁴

Gould stresses that at such meetings the right of free speech was always respected, a fundamental tenet of Leicester Freethought for the remainder of the century. Dare paints a vivid picture of the range of skills a member of the discussion class could acquire and possibly shows why the Secular Society eventually had at its disposal a number of willing and able speakers:

The questions are proposed, as nearly as possible, by the whole of the members in rotation. Each person is at liberty to speak in his turn for ten minutes or to pass his turn without speaking. There is no surer way of eliciting the ideas and feelings.²⁵

According to Joseph Dare's report of 1852 socialism and religious belief were the subjects that persistently engaged the attention of the discussion group and this had been the case for several previous years. Dare himself was a not unsympathetic man. He was deeply concerned with the increasingly degenerate nature of the urban society that he found in the course of his investigations, but whilst sympathetic to the plight of the men involved, he had little sympathy with the actual conclusions that they drew from their experiences.²⁶

The discussion group had a reading room which, though taking the Reasoner was nevertheless dominated by safer reading such as the Family Economist, the Sunday School Magazine and the Atheneum.²⁷ Dare was blunt about the purpose of the classes and regarded them as a success in moderating dangerous opinion:

I feel assured the discussions have had considerable influence in softening extreme notions in politics and religion, or rather unbelief.... the youthful mind must be laid hold of before any general good can be accomplished.²⁸

The first mention of the existence of the Leicester Secular Society is a notice in the Reasoner 6 April 1853 stating that the society meets every Sunday evening for lecture and discussion.²⁹ This was almost a year after Holyoake had relaunched his movement, under the new name of Secularism, with a national tour which had included Leicester. Gould is at a loss to explain the sudden announcement of the Society and is probably correct in presenting a continuity of membership, stretching from the Owenite movement through the Anti-Persecution Union to the new Society. It seems perfectly reasonable to assume that, in addition to the main personalities, many ex-Owenites whose names have not survived were also members in 1853, having

remade their contacts with and affiliations to an organisation that offered both succour and practical defence. However the movement of Owenites into Secularism is portrayed by Gould as inevitable and wholly logical. This is to a great extent misleading. As recent work by Logie Barrow has shown the attachment to Owenite ideas and, in many ways the open ended nature of them, could equally take a dabbling ex-Owenite seeker into the Spiritualist movement, still in pursuit of the ideal of perfectible man.³⁰

The presence of large numbers of ex-owenites in Secularism is largely due to the work of the man the Leicester Secular Society was to recognise as its own mentor; George Jacob Holyoake. Though he had been involved in infidel politics for some time it was only in 1852 that his beliefs crystallised into the position that he himself labelled Secularism. This was based on what might today be labelled a form of agnosticism. Holyoake argued that knowledge of a future life was lacking, ambiguous and generally tenuous. Such an ill founded doctrine was as impossible to affirm as it was to deny. So he formulated a denial of the value of belief in a future life as a guide to human conduct and substituted for it a heightened concern for the present instead. Such a creed was both accommodating to a range of opinion and wholly compatible with the Owenite vision. Secularism was the first realistic attempt to create a system since Owen and relied on similar elements for its appeal.

The Owenites were compulsive system and model builders, so it is hardly surprising to see them cropping up in alternative movements that offered an equally universal explanation of prospects and conditions. Thus Logie Barrow has pointed to the movement of large numbers of ex-Owenites into Spiritualism as a result of shortcomings in Owenism. Indeed Barrow suggests that the eventual involvement of Owen himself can be seen both as an admission of failure and as a logical extension of his own thought, acting almost as a tacit sanction of all alternative paths and initiatives.³¹

These alternative paths seemed more plausible and more likely to bring success as time went on. Secularism did not have quite such grandiose ambitions as Owenism had encouraged, preferring to pin hopes on a more pragmatic theory of human progress that entailed the elimination of superstition and ignorance. In contrast to some other former Owenites, those who became Secularists gradually came to preach a doctrine of independence of mind, though they were also to stress the value of 'organising' such independence. As George Jacob Holyoake was to tell them almost thirty years later at the opening of the Secular Hall: "The habit of thought was the greatest form of independence; thinking was their only protection against ignorance,"³²

Though Gould dates the first appearance of the Secular Society to April 1853, minutes exist in a somewhat truncated form for the latter half of 1852. The committee of the society, as first constituted, confirmed the primacy of Gimson and Holyoak making them treasurer and financial secretary respectively. The posts of president and general secretary, however, were taken by James Plant whilst that of corresponding secretary was filled by Thomas Emery. The first entries indicate that initially the main function of the society was to publicise the Reasoner. At this stage it was deemed neither necessary nor convenient to leave the Unitarian discussion group, though doubtless the underlying policy to "smooth over" differences of opinion must have caused some concern.

The circulation of the Reasoner, under the guidance of the Society, rose steadily from 74 copies in November 1852 to 82 the following month,³³ whilst Joseph Dare had earlier put the circulation of the paper at 60 during the previous year.³⁴ The promotion of the Reasoner was aided by advertisements placed in the local press as well as the acquisition of placards intended to promote the paper. This commitment to the promotion of the Reasoner was enshrined in the first rules of the Society which sought "to register in a

book provided for the purpose a list of all persons in Leicester or Leicestershire favourable to freedom of thought and speech."³⁵ In addition to an expressed commitment to the principles of what was now called "Secularism" the rules also pledged the Society to "aid in abolishing all laws limiting the fullest freedom of thought and speech. And to procure that respect and freedom for the principles of Secularists accorded to all other sects and parties."³⁶ It seems that from the outset the Society was conscious of its unique position in the religious life of a city that already had a long history of religious dissent. Within Leicester's tradition of religious defiance they hoped for support for the principle of freedom of opinion but were obviously less hopeful of toleration for the actual views they held.

What could be described as the first lecture to the society was given, not surprisingly by George Jacob Holyoake who delivered two lectures at the Assembly Rooms in Granby Street. The first, given on May 19th 1852 was entitled "Roman Catholicism the type of the churches around us". The following Sunday Holyoake gave a lecture in which he clearly stated the principles that he had defined as Secularism. At both these lectures Holyoake was confronted with remarks made from the floor by a Mr. Cecil. His eloquence must have been deemed a match for Holyoake's since the Society seized the opportunity to organize, quite effectively, a two-night's dispute between the two gentlemen. This was a time honoured tactic that had been sharpened to perfection in the hands of Owenite Socialists. With a small outlay in cost and publicity a healthy crowd could generally be guaranteed to support such occasions which afforded great publicity and the chance of making a small profit. The organisational verve with which the disputations were organised still appears impressive; two police constables were hired and the meetings advertised in the Leicester Journal, Mercury and Chronicle along with provision made for the production of 25 posters and 500 hand bills.

Though the Society made a loss of £3 - 17 - 4d, an average of two hundred and fifty people attended each lecture. A bonus came at the end of the second night when a prominent local Baptist, the Rev. Joseph Foulkes Winks, challenged Holyoake to a further discussion, thereby ensuring a wealth of continuing publicity. The appearance of Winks as an opponent of Secularism without doubt excited great local interest since he was a pillar of respectable Dissent within the city. Winks, a printer by trade, was a veteran of the Leicester Complete Suffrage Union and had agitated on the Board of Poor Law Guardians for an extension of outdoor relief and abolition of the settlement laws. Patterson describes him as a "fiery little gamecock of a man who was always thirsting for a fight in the name of justice and liberty". It was Winks who was later to baptise Thomas Cooper on Whit Sunday 1859.³⁷

This next series of debates were eventually organised in a hall in Wellington Street, and attracted an average of 1200, some paying 6d for a front seat and many more being refused admission due to the hall being crowded. The subject of the dispute was that "Christianity is more favourable to the welfare of man, than any other system, that has ever been propounded."³⁸

Though the course the discussion took is unclear it seems that the Secularists were happy with the conclusion since a report of the discussion was published by Holyoake as "Number 2 Wayside Points." The Society ordered for itself a thousand copies which were to be sold at a price of one penny. In addition to the copies intended for sale others were sent to what were deemed to be interested parties in the city. The list of recipients reveals the names of a number of veterans of other battles for religious freedom. Amongst them is that of William Baines, a congregationalist shopkeeper who had been imprisoned in 1840 for refusing to pay church tithes and was later to become a prime mover in the Leicester committee of the British Anti-State Church Association.³⁹ Copies were also sent to a number of local ministers

including the Baptist James Philipppo Mursell, the Unitarian Charles Berry and the Independent Dr. George Legge. All had in previous years been prominent in middle class radical and Anti-State Church activity. Both Mursell and Berry had formed part of the dissenting radical elite that had ruled Leicester after the demise of unreformed corporation in 1834 - 35. Berry had gained some local notoriety as a result of his skill in assembling, within twenty four hours, a petition of 5,534 against the Corporations opposition to the Catholic Emancipation act.⁴⁰ Despite this by 1848 events had rather left Berry behind. At a Chartist meeting he condemned the charter but spoke vigorously in favour of household suffrage, earning a rebuke from his one time compatriot Mursell who reflected that he was "still where he was sixteen years ago."⁴¹

Mursell himself was known to be sympathetic to the plight of impoverished working men and had been the effective leader of radical Nonconformist Leicester for some years which he championed through his organ the Leicester Mercury. He had been an initiator of the Complete Suffrage Union negotiations in the City and had organised the ill-fated proprietary school in New Walk which had hosted lectures from the talented J.F. Hollings, another recipient of the Secular Society pamphlet. The school itself had been consciously modelled on the University College school founded by James Mill and had initially had an advanced curriculum, omitting religious instruction.⁴² Dr. George Legge was also a vigorous proponent of the voluntary principle in education and attacked the hosiery magnate William Biggs over the compulsory educational provisions of the Factory Bill of 1843.⁴³

It seems that the action of distributing pamphlets to those with influence in the city was a calculated policy. It was designed to play upon the reputations that men like Berry and Mursell had gained through struggles

for religious freedom. It would either stir them into action on behalf of the Secularists or expose their opposition as the sectarian humbug it surely was. In any event the Secularists could not lose since the further action of sending copies to the Tory Leicester Chronicle and the Liberal Leicester Mercury was calculated to elicit further publicity and create further copy.

The pamphlet itself was extremely popular and sold out by the end of January 1853, though it appeared to be underpriced since the committee commenced a subscription to pay off the debt incurred personally by Holyoake.⁴⁴ The members were also obviously wary of overstretching the slender resources of the society since at the meeting on 4 March William Cooke, a member of the committee, reported that little could be done to raise a subscription to advertise the Reasoner in the local papers. This also perhaps indicates that the effective level of support was limited.

In May of the same year Holyoake requested the chance to lecture in Leicester again. The committee favoured the proposal though they were by now experiencing great difficulty in obtaining the use of a hall. This unfortunate state of affairs had led to them turning down a proposed lecture from another luminary of the by now burgeoning Secular movement, Robert Cooper.⁴⁵ This would have been quite a coup for the society since Cooper had published, the previous year, "The Immortality of the Soul" which was a new and influential exposition of the rationalist interpretation of the human mind.⁴⁶

The work done by the society during the year must have absorbed time and energy and took them away from the Unitarian Mission, either by accident or design. Joseph Dare's report for 1853 has no mention of the Infidel/Secularist opinions within the discussion group that had been a source of concern for the three previous years.⁴⁷

The minutes for the rest of 1853 are missing, or more likely, do not

exist since it is obvious that the society was labouring under the difficulties engendered by the lack of a secure home. When the minutes do restart in February 1854 the Society sought to reply to three lectures delivered at the Temperance Hall by the Christian apologist, the Rev. Brewin Grant, and craved the assistance of Holyoake and Cooper to accomplish this. Both Holyoake and Cooper had been old opponents of Brewin Grant's since their Owenite days, though in this case the opportunity to engage in direct disputation was denied them. Holyoake had previously met Brewin Grant in disputation in both London and Newcastle. When on 27 February Brewin Grant lectured on "Christianity the True Secularism". Despite this "the style of lecturer was extremely uncourteous and insulting", since it touched directly upon the character of Holyoake (James Plant offered some objections from the floor).⁴⁸ The Society was, however, eventually able to obtain a venue in which to hold a return lecture by Cooper on "The Infidels Best Book" with the Rev. Dr. Legge in the chair (J.P. Mursell had chaired Brewin Grant's lecture). A further lecture was delivered by Holyoake on 1 March entitled "The Last trial by jury for Atheism"; with Joseph Winks in the chair.

By this time the tactic of arranged disputation and reply was becoming not only a focus of attention for the religious practitioners of the town, but was also providing entertainment for the townsfolk. Holyoake took to his task with relish and a further reply was arranged to lectures delivered by J. Sanders Chew, though a misunderstanding over the booking arrangements led to the lectures being postponed. Holyoake must have considered this lost opportunity unfortunate since he missed the chance to reply to a formidable opponent. Sanders Chew had published the previous year a refutation of Holyoake's ideas using his own speeches. In it Holyoake was accused of a lack of acquaintance with theology and he went on to suggest that the newly defined position 'Secularism' was inconsistent and unintelligible. What had

appeared to Holyoake to be the strength of his position, the failure to deny outright the existence of a creator, was ridiculed by Sanders Chew who saw it as a flagrant misuse of the faculty of reason. His parting shot and accusation was simply that Holyoake could not understand, therefore he did not believe.⁴⁹

After hosting a series of lectures given by the Baptist J.P. Barnett the Secular Society found itself at loggerheads with the administration of the Temperance Hall. Holyoake had hoped to to lecture for the Society for three nights in the first week of April 1854 but on application permission to use the Hall was refused. This prompted a bitter attack in the Leicester Mercury on the religious intolerance exhibited in the town and at the Temperance Hall in particular.⁵⁰ In the article the Society attacked the Quaker directors of the Hall questioning their failure to give adequate reasons for the refusal and arguing that it was an unsound practice to deny the Hall shareholders a source of legitimate revenue. The society argued further that if certain criteria existed limiting the use of the Hall then why had they not been applied in other cases. The article concluded that religious bigotry was the root cause of the problem and found such action as was taken by the directorate both ironic and inconsistent.

Leicester was, after all, a "boasted metropolis of Nonconformity where 'freedom of opinion' is a constant theme of our public speakers and religious liberty paraded on every platform."⁵¹ It is also noted in the article with some irony that the Quakers were responsible for setting up "this censorship over opinion", a sect whose whole history had been "one continual series of persecution and suffering."⁵² From this reaction it is obvious that the Secular Society felt its cherished totem of free speech to be threatened and that the Quaker directorate was acting as the worst possible kind of poacher turned gamekeeper. The insult was compounded by the opportunity that Brewin

Grant had taken to launch a personal attack on Holyoake from a platform that had effectively denied him a right of reply. The author of the article, possibly James Plant, refused to believe in the compliance of various Nonconformist friends such as Mursell, Legge and Winks and ended by expressing the earnest hope that the shareholders would overturn the directorate's decision.

The article, as such, is the first appearance of the authentic, articulate voice of the Secular Society. It demonstrates the Secularists' passionate belief in freedom of speech but also shows the reliance on a sympathetic and conducive atmosphere. Their appeal to Nonconformist friends was not simply an invocation of apparently shared principles but also an attempt to seek integration into the local political and religious arena.

Towards the end of November of the following year the Society made another attempt to secure the Temperance Hall for further lectures by Holyoake, this time endorsed by their Nonconformist contacts Winks, Mursell and Legge. Yet again the Hall was refused and, when an attempt was made to obtain the use of the New Hall, this too was refused. The Society then passed a resolution to write in protest to the Chairman of the Hall committee, the former Mayor of Leicester Thomas Stokes. Once again the Society was faced with the unenviable task of searching for an alternative venue for its activities.

It is at this point that information from the minute books ceases for a period of some twenty-two years; however hints concerning the activities of Secularists during this period can be gleaned from other sources. Gould notes that the Society disappeared from the national map of Secularism since its advertisement in the Reasoner drops out until the first revival of fortunes in 1861.⁵³

This initial failure of the Society is without doubt a consequence of

the lack of a platform from which to publicise its message. In many ways this ignominious defeat spelt the end of the primacy of the Owenite approach to self publicity. It created a local sensitivity to the whole question of public disputation since the reliance on set piece excitement had led to the sad dissolution of the Society.

The appearance in 1852 of effective organisation in Leicester seems to have coincided with the first national Conference of Secular Societies in Manchester though there was no explicit connection. However the outcome of the conference, which sought to encourage local autonomous organisation must certainly have given the Leicester society a mandate for its activities.⁵⁴

The revival in 1861 was shortlived and Gould suggests that the remnants of the society had been held together in the interim by the efforts of Gimson and Holyoak. What was left of the Society appears to have met at Holyoak's house in Belgrave Gate.⁵⁵

In January 1861 the Reasoner carried an article which reported the refounding of the Society at a meeting held at the Russell Tavern Rutland Street. Holyoak took the chair and the Society was formally revived with the Tavern as its agreed Sunday meeting place. The fact that lack of funds had been partially responsible for the demise of the Society in its original incarnation was recognised in a further resolution which set the subscription rate at 1/- a quarter.⁵⁶ According to Gould, one of the first actions of the reconstituted Society was to celebrate Paine's birthday and the Owenite legacy is still discernable in the lecture given by J.J. Harrison on "The Formation of Character".⁵⁷ However, by April of the following year this revival had run out of steam and the work of the Society was no longer reported in the national Secularist press. Whether it died out completely is unknown but, since the Society had to be formerly refounded yet again in 1867, it is likely that it ran out of funds and reverted to the practice of

meeting in the houses of members.

The revival which began in August 1867 at last made the Secular Society a permanent fixture on the religious and political landscape of Leicester, it is from this date that the Society dates its continued existence. Once again the revival coincided with a national upturn in Secularist fortunes since it was from the mid-sixties that Charles Bradlaugh began to rally effectively the regional forces of the movement.⁵⁰

The initial revival Committee had Josiah Gimson as Treasurer and the influence of Holyoak was still evident though with Messrs. Ainger, Ross, Barradaile and Johnson, a number of new names were elected. The secretaryship appeared to have been peripatetic, though whether this was by accident or design is unclear. During the first four years the reports of the society were signed by no less than seven people. Amongst these was Deborah Ross the first woman mentioned in connection with the society.⁵⁹ One of the more notable Secretaries during this early period was John Sketchley, a former Chartist and Secretary of the South Leicestershire Chartist Society. Sketchley had been a physical force Chartist and appears to have flirted with Secularism before moving to Birmingham in 1870 where he became involved in embryonic Socialist organisation.⁶⁰

By this stage the Society and its individual members must have been making some impression within the local religious community since William Henry Holyoak was asked to read papers at two conferences convened in 1867 which were intended to investigate the absence of the masses at religious services.⁶¹

In May 1869 the Society took the first step towards providing itself with a permanent home by the acquisition of an Institute and Club Room at 43, Humberstone Gate. Within these premises newspapers were provided as well as a range of refreshments, with the subscription set at a modest 1d a day.

3d a week or 1s a month.⁶² The Club itself was an offshoot of the Society with the same officers and the property belonging to it vested in the hands of trustees appointed by the Society.⁶³ Though the Club and Institute provided a weekday centre for activities the membership were encouraged to engage in activities which "elevate the taste and contribute to their intellectual improvement, without being dependent for these purposes on the public-house."⁶⁴ Within the Club gambling, intoxication and obscene language were proscribed, and children were admitted at the discretion of the committee. The rules also contained a clause which admitted to the Club as members persons "of any persuasion",⁶⁵ an admirable sentiment in a climate in which Secularism was expanding and seeking to draw in recruits and sympathisers. However, this pluralistic approach was to cause problems in relations between the Club and the Society when it was deemed necessary to redefine the rôle of Secularism within the community of Leicester. At this period the atmosphere inside the Club appears from the sources to have been relaxed and easy going with an emphasis on the creation of a homely space for Secularists rather than the extension of strident propaganda. Though impressions of life in the Club only exist for a slightly later period it seems that it was a development similar to some of the Radical and Secularist Clubs of London investigated by Stan Shipley. Some of these Clubs acted as centres for mutual improvement initiatives ranging from classes to clothing and sick clubs and their development also stems from this date.⁶⁶ The rôle of organising lectures and propaganda was left to the Society though a mutual improvement class held in the club provided able hands for such work. This developing division between the propaganda work of the Society and the social provision of the Club marked a departure from the Owenite form of activity which saw the Social Institution as dual purpose.

Throughout the early 1870's the Society engaged in the work of

consolidation. The Secularists hosted a number of lectures from national figures such as Harriet Law and Bradlaugh though Josiah Gimson, Holyoak, Michael Wright and Thomas Coltman were equally capable of occupying the platform in the absence of these big names.⁶⁷

The 1870's were the decade of educational debate and the Secular Society took advantage of the opportunity to propound its message on a national topic of particular concern to Secularists. At a working men's conference called at the Temperance Hall, Michael Wright spoke in support of the proposals of the National Education League which sought to exclude sectarian theological teaching from schools.⁶⁸ Though Wright almost certainly spoke in favour of secular education Gould is mistaken in suggesting that the League advocated the removal of the Bible from Board Schools.⁶⁹ Despite the failure of the Secularists to gain freedom from religious teaching in schools they at least were given the opportunity to gain representation on local School Boards. F.J. Gould was to use such representation with considerable effect at the turn of the century. Throughout these years the Secularists' reputation grew in stature so that a member of the Town Mission observed that evangelical Christianity was faced with the opposition of both Ritualists and Secularists with pamphlets "very industriously circulated among the young and among those who were uneducated or half educated."⁷⁰

Though the Club premises were adequate for their purpose in 1872 Gimson prepared his compatriots for a visionary leap. He proposed to solve the perpetual problem of finding a venue large enough for major speakers by the erection of a Leicester Secular Hall paid for by the membership. The Society responded with enthusiasm and the first collection towards the project realised £4.⁷¹ Gimson brought his considerable business acumen to bear and suggested an arrangement that would raise the necessary capital through a Secular Hall Company to which the membership could apply for

shares. The Company was formally constituted on May 2nd 1873. The memorandum of the Society pledged it to find accommodation for a hall, class and committee rooms, library and reading room as well as secure premises for the club and institute. The avowed purpose of the establishment was for:

...the delivery of lectures and addresses on scientific, social, political, religious, or theological questions, with the design of stimulating inquiry and promoting instruction in these subjects, and of improving the condition of the working classes.⁷²

With its purpose enshrined in the articles of the company it was hoped that the hall, when built, would be permanently preserved for Secularism and protected from the dangers of external takeover. The articles of the company appointed John Sladen as President with Josiah Gimson as Treasurer and Holyoak as secretary and indicate the continued strength of the manufacturing group of Secularists and their willingness to be in the forefront of the Society's progress.

This control was emphasised when the shares were finally issued at the extremely high price of five pounds each. Such a figure virtually precluded the large scale involvement of the small tradesmen and framework knitters that made up the bulk of the Society. Though according to the share allocation book there were a number of opportunities to pay for shares in instalments, the number of only partially subscribed shares and transferred shares indicates that the overall effect was to limit the participation of the poorer members.

The share issue of 1873 was taken up enthusiastically by the small number of manufacturers clustered around Gimson.⁷³ The shares that Gimson himself acquired amounted to 665 out of the total of 1,000 (66.5%), making

Gimson was the largest shareholder by an enormous margin. The next largest holding belonged to the dye manufacturer, John Sladen who owned 60 (6%) of the share issue. Two groups of 40 shares (4%) were owned by Michael Wright, the elastic web manufacturer and by Thomas Coltman the hosiery machinist. Small quantities of shares were held by Richard Russell, a jeweller of the Haymarket, George Gibbons a bookbinder of Crescent Street and Abraham Fitchett, a bag hosier associated with the Gimson group. Apart from these main shareholders the rest of the issue seems to have been divided amongst the small shopkeepers and tradesmen who were able to afford only a small stake in the company which seldom amounted to more than single figures. A few unskilled workers were able to purchase single shares though often they were unable or unwilling to complete the payment of the share instalments. An example of this is furnished by Joseph Sharpe, a framework knitter living in Willow Bridge Street, whose single share, purchased in May 1873, had to be transferred to Abraham Fitchett in November 1875. Fitchett also acquired at the same time the two shares that had been issued to another framework knitter Benjamin Moore who gave his address as the recently transferred club and institute on Humberstone Gate. Aside from the purchase of shares some money was realised by donations the most notable of which was a donation of £500 from George Jacob Holyoake.⁷⁴

The inception of the company and the actual share issue is dominated by the majority holding acquired by Josiah Gimson. It is an inescapable conclusion that the high cost of the original shares was a matter of deliberate policy which amounted to taking the welfare of the Society into trust. The safe and stable ownership of the shares by the more prosperous members of the Society, centred around Gimson, was of paramount importance for the maintenance of the Society within its chosen venue. Such a policy proved prudent when, from time to time, some of the poorer shareholders

found it necessary to give up their shares. Almost from the start Gimson and his group of compatriots undertook to purchase as many of these shares as possible.⁷⁵

The money raised from the share issue was used to purchase land on Humberstone Gate which amounted to 2,000 square yards, this was bought for £4,500 with the intention that some of it would provide the Company with an income, and land not required for the hall was let.⁷⁶ This leasehold land together with the hall yielded a gradually increasing income to the Company, approximately £100 in 1875 and £420 ten years later (not including arrears).⁷⁷ The purchase of the land was also used as the occasion to move the club into 77 Humberstone Gate a house which stood on the frontage of the site where the hall was to be built. Until the Hall was opened the Society convened meetings in a large room above a stable.

The new venue for classes and lectures was used extensively in the following years. Holyoake appeared regularly, as did Harriet Law who appeared on a platform in Leicester for the first time in 1874. Subjects covered included Biblical criticism, Co-partnerships, "Who are the infidels"? and "Wages, Capital and Labour".⁷⁸

In 1874 when the Secular Society allowed the former Secularist lecturer George Bishop to lecture to them on the "solemn reality of Christianity" they demonstrated not simply their magnanimity but also their growing strength and security. As the Secular Discussion Rooms became a centre for Secularist lectures and activity the old form of open disputation on neutral platforms was gradually being superseded. Though occasional disputation did occur, such as that between Charles Watts and James Flanagan at the Gladstone Hall in 1873 or that Between James Smith and George Bishop at the Corn Exchange in 1876, they appear to have been much more on the initiative of individuals merely sanctioned by the Society.⁷⁹

It had been recognised as early as 1873 by the Secular Society that disputation was not a necessary element of the Secularist position. The rules of 1873 effectively reiterated the Holyoake position on theology and religious orthodoxy. In their preamble they argued that:

Since the principles of Secularism rest on grounds apart from theism, spiritualism, or the bible, it is not logically necessary for Secularists to debate the truth of these subjects. In controversy, secularism concerns itself with the assertion and maintenance of its own affirmative propositions combatting, however, those views of theology and Christianity so far as they interfere with, discourage, or disparage secular action.⁹⁹

The act of turning away from the exclusive use of disputation was a logical extension of the redefinition of Infidelity as Secularism, corresponding to the same action that Robert Owen had taken after 1839. Holyoake sought to generate goodwill and some measure of amiability of relations with orthodox Christianity through the avoidance of fruitless and damaging controversies. Such an ideal was threatened by the continual tiresome rehearsal of jaded and monotonous arguments to audiences which consisted largely of the converted of both sides. Attempts to reach a larger public were becoming increasingly marginalised. If the simple end was publicity then large scale disputation would do, but to a Society with an increasing range of philosophical as well as material commitments this was not enough. The Secularists had now to concern themselves with the upkeep of the premises they possessed and had also to look towards the future. Holyoake's ideology of Secularism had also argued for a greater knowledge and understanding of this world which could not be accomplished with the continual restatement of

old arguments. For the Leicester Secularists this meant the creation of a viable, self contained culture of lecturing and discussion that they could take with them into the new Hall when it was completed.

From 1873 the Society came to rely more and more on the single lecturer format conducted before a smaller audience under its own roof. This had a range of advantages which was to make it a more attractive proposition. The growth of this type of activity was more likely to avoid the risk of incurring the wrath of the local religious community as well as limiting the danger of financial loss, an obvious and a permanent concern of the Society. Such lectures were also simpler to arrange, were less expensive and were easier to obtain local lecturers for if a national figure was unavailable. The reduction in cost also obviously meant that lectures could become a weekly event if a minimum level of attendance could be guaranteed.

In theory the abandonment of disputation took the Secularists out of the public eye. However, in practice even those engaged in it sometimes doubted its effectiveness and popularity. At the two night disputation between James Smith and George Bishop in 1876, the chairman, William Stanyon, a friend and frequent lecturer to the Society, found it necessary both to defend the whole exercise and also to plead for the abandonment of audience participation. A friend had suggested to him that "as far as his experience went such discussions were of precious little use to some people, for they came to a discussion of that kind and took sides." Stanyon's proposed solution was to effectively propose that the proceedings should be turned into a lecture so that "if they took his advice, they would do very little in the way of applause-either for one gentleman or the other."⁸¹

The course of this two nights discussion covered familiar territory. Bishop on the first night propounded the notion of the divine inspiration of the Bible through its lasting coherence and continuity of meaning. He

suggested that the doctrine of the atonement was a thread that ran through the whole of the Bible, even in books and passages that on the face of it appeared to have little in common. Smith in his reply to the first night's lecture argued for the application of reason and denied that any book was infallible purely on the basis of its obvious antiquity.²² Smith then opened the second night's discussion with a demolition of the Design Argument, an explanation of the existence of a creator that Smith conceded his audience was palpably familiar with. The impression that the published report of the two night's discussion gives the reader is that it achieved very little. Secularists were forced to use old arguments against their Christian adversaries rather than push forward the boundaries of knowledge and understanding.

Such aims could be realistically achieved by a retreat from the public domain of theological discussion so that the skills and lives of the Secularist membership could be enriched by the weekly examination of various subjects. Henceforth large set piece occasions were primarily reserved for national figures and the Society concentrated on developing its own programme of lectures.

From 1876 until the new Hall was opened in 1881 the Society transferred its lectures to the lecture room at the Temperance Hall and the public was invited to come along and listen. The minute books of the Society indicate that for this period until the hall was opened lecturing and organising lectures was almost the sole occupation of the Secular Society. Amongst the frequent lecturers with credentials in the national movement were Harriet Law the former Baptist who was by now an old friend of the Society, G.W. Foote and Joseph Symes. Foote at this stage in his life was primarily a writer and critic in the process of making a name for himself. He lectured to the Society on a range of topics pertinent to Secularism and contemporary

politics which included amongst others morality, Nihilism in Russia and the notion of religion without God. Foote also propounded a strand of individualistic suspicion of the new Socialist creed that was endemic in the Secularist movement when he lectured on "Socialism, what it is and how to meet it".⁹³ Symes, like Harriet Law, had been a nonconformist in Symes' case he had trained for the Methodist ministry, and he lectured to the Society on that conversion as well as morality and the division between mind and matter. Symes may also have been the first lecturer to have been invited to stay with Josiah Gimson since it is mentioned pointedly in the minutes. This was to become a traditional and generally invigorating aspect of life in the Gimson household and the Secular Society for two generations. Harriet Law lectured on the history of Christianity, Voltaire, the Life and laws of Moses and the precise nature of morality.⁹⁴ By its frequent popularity as a lecture and discussion topic amongst both local and national lecturers the subject of morality appears to have been one of the pre-occupations of the Society during this period. This was largely because Christians claimed morality rested on supernatural sanctions whilst Secularism replied by asserting that Unbelief was moral and needed no such sanctions.

It is difficult to discover how large the audiences were at these lectures since the level of the collection varies. The collection after Harriet Law's lecture on "Man, who is he, whence is he, and where is he going" in December 1878 amounted to £3-1-7½, but the following month her lecture on "The Teachings of Christ" realised only £2-1-3. Two lectures by Foote delivered in December 1878 and June 1879 realised £2-3-8 and £2-5-8 respectively.⁹⁵ It seems that attendances for national figures did fluctuate though the level to which collections were subsidised is unknown. Collections to benefit specific lecturers or for other forms of relief fund such as Hospital Sunday were frequently topped up by large contributions from the

richer members with Josiah Gimson being a prime mover in this area.

Many others who lectured to the society during this period brought ideas other than politics and Secularism to the attention of the members. Sydney Gimson remembers the Dutchman Dr. Alexander Bickers, an accomplished lexicographer, lecturing to the society in January 1877.⁶⁶ Gimson also recalled how he left the young Sydney a book of prophecies relating to life in the twenty first century ('Dioscorides Anno Domini 2071').⁶⁷ Similar lecturers in this vein, such as the Parsee Ferozeshah were, in later years, to make the Society as much a part-time Atheneum as it was a haven for Secularism and Freethought.

Despite the frequent excitement generated in these early years by the appearance of national figures on the Leicester platform, it was during periods of quiet that the Society used its own resources to impressive effect. Though Harriet Law and G.W. Foote were supplemented as lecturers to the Society by the occasional appearances of local clergymen, such as the Rev. Radcliffe of the newly opened St. Paul's church,⁶⁸ individual Secularists were able to develop their own oratorical skills. Josiah Gimson was a frequent occupant of the platform and was to remain so until his death in September 1883. He lectured on a wide range of subjects, though he particularly liked to lecture on Secular doctrine, biblical criticism, the Sunday question and representative government. Much of his energy was reserved for combatting the pretensions of spiritualism, another apparent heir to the Owenite mantle. Secularists were concerned at the attempts spiritualism made to introduce mysticism into their explanation of the universe. Such a cosmology appealed to many wavering Secularists and was seen by some as not simply dangerous competition but was also merely a staging post on the way back to Christianity and the re-acceptance of religious dogma. Gimson himself made a point of replying to George Sexton,

the arch Secularist apostate, when he lectured on spiritualism and Christianity in April 1878, and he engaged in a long correspondence in the Spiritualist paper The Medium and Daybreak when one of his compatriots from these early days James Holmes converted to Spiritualism.⁸⁹ Holmes himself was a prolific lecturer to the Society in the late eighteen seventies and developed an impressive repertoire. Popular theology, republicanism, morality, Secularist literary criticism and contemporary criticism of unbelief were all subjects he tackled in the years leading up to the building of the new Hall.

Holmes seems to have undertaken these lecturing duties as a means of supplementing his income and when the committee decided to discontinue the practice of paying for local lecturers who had incurred no travelling expenses and were supposedly minor attractions, Holmes suffered accordingly. When Holmes suggested in reply that they should collect specially for him after each of his lectures the committee politely suggested that they would maintain their policy since it would be embarrassing to him and unfair to other local lecturers.⁹⁰ Though this maintained decorum Holmes certainly needed the money more than Gimson or the other more well-heeled lecturers. Eventually over a year later Holmes decided to emigrate to America and the Society bade him farewell with the proceeds of two lectures worth of collections, though these only realised £2-7-5. This did not stop Holmes from lecturing the following August on "America and Americans".⁹¹ One though suspects that Holmes had overstayed his welcome.

Another lecturer who was a real find for the Society was James Smith who had disputed with Bishop at the Corn Exchange in 1876 and was for a long time the manager of the Secular Club and Institute. Smith seems to have been a stock lecturer who filled the platform when no alternative was available, though this was no reflection on his considerable talents. In 1878 he occupied the platform on no less than 10 occasions and this rose to 14

the following year. His lectures covered subjects ranging from the meaning of words to the life and works of the great thinkers including Socrates and Paine. He was also able to talk on the fringe pseudo-scientific subjects such as Mesmerism and Vegetarianism which Secularists had inherited as part of their Owenite psychological and investigative legacy.⁹² Other senior members, including Holyoak and Michael Wright, made valuable contributions to the lecturing programme on a more infrequent basis. Malcolm Quin during this period made his lecturing debut covering a wide range of subjects with the emphasis on the study of theology and ritualism which were to preface his interests for the rest of the century.

Despite their reliance upon lecturing the Secular Society were aware of a wider world. In 1877 the Society celebrated the anniversary of the birthday of Tom Paine and marked it with an agitation in favour of the Sunday opening of the Museum and library. This culminated in a demonstration in February of the same year at which the Secularists Gimson and Wright stood shoulder to shoulder with the more liberal Nonconformist representatives of the town in the shape of William Stanyon, John Page Hoppes, Joseph Wood and A.F. Macdonald.⁹³ Such cordial relations were in stark contrast to the attitude of the national leadership of Secularism and the events of this year meant the Leicester Society had to define its position carefully in a volatile situation.

The national situation for Secularism was enlivened by the stand taken by Charles Bradlaugh and Annie Besant over the publication by Charles Watts of the Knowlton birth control pamphlet.⁹⁴ As a result of the trial Secularism received a great deal of publicity, not all of it desirable. From the start the Leicester Secular Society took a firm stand over the whole affair and censured what they saw as Bradlaugh's high handed action. Charles and Kate Watts, the original republishers of the pamphlet in 1876, were friends of the

Society (Kate Watts' own family had been Nottingham Freethinkers) whilst others such as Holyoake and Harriet Law who had been involved in the early years offered support against Bradlaugh. The Society seems generally to have followed the Holyoake line on the matter which accepted the principle of Bradlaugh's stand but found the pamphlet itself too coarse and liable to damage the growing respectability of the Secularist movement. Moreover, the Leicester Secular Society appears to have been particularly shocked by the disparaging treatment of Charles Watts and the growing authoritarianism of Bradlaugh. The Leicester mood is best summed up in a piece of doggerel verse penned by William Henry Holyoak to mark the infamous occasion. In it he described Bradlaugh's image carpingly as "THE GREAT I AM" and described the treatment of Watts thus:

At which the chief in high command
arose and swore by his high hand
He'd make the minion rue the day
He dared to act against his say.⁹⁵

However not all criticism of Bradlaugh was as harmless, Josiah Gimson took a personal lead in this direction and was one of the leaders who criticised Bradlaugh at the National Secular Society conference at the end of the same year. Though he had apparently been victorious in the outcome of the prosecution Gimson asked Bradlaugh to resign as president since he had become too controversial a leader for the movement to bear. Gimson and his allies manifestly failed in this attempt to unseat Bradlaugh though they at least were consoled when a committee was appointed to investigate new forms of organisation for the National Society. The only real result of this decision was the creation in August of the same year of the British Secular

Union which took Harriet Law's Secular Chronicle as its organ.⁹⁶ The organisation provided a focus for the opposition to Bradlaugh's strident personal style which tied Secularism to forms of iconoclastic activity fit only for the arena of national politics. The realignment of forces also suited local societies like that at Leicester which jealously guarded its autonomy against encroachment from the metropolitan inspired National Society.

The split ran deep and the Leicester Society was never capable as a unit of completely identifying with the National Society, though it made a kind of peace with Bradlaugh himself. The immediate effect was felt at a local level by the society in its dealings with the local branch of the N.S.S.. In 1878 the Secular Society attempted to engage Thomas Slater who had earlier been appointed as one of the National lecturers of the N.S.S.. The local branch refused to allow Slater to lecture for the Secular Society and found that they were in turn refused the opportunity of using the premises of the Leicester Secular Society. Though the Secretary of the branch of the National Society, the butcher George Voss, admitted that the refusal to allow Slater to lecture had been a mistake he was still confronted with what amounted to a rebuke from the Secular Society:

Since the National Secular Society have repudiated altogether any connexion with the 'Leicester Secular Society' we the committee feel that to grant the application would be a sacrifice of self-respect on our part.⁹⁷

He replied in angry terms accusing the society of elevating a petty squabble into a matter of principle. Moreover he claimed to have seen behind the facade of gentility and suggested that the real reason for the refusal of

the premises was the antipathy felt by the Society towards Charles Bradlaugh and the National Secular Society.⁹⁹ The letter written by Voss ends with his assertion that the local branch of the N.S.S. would look to its own devices for survival but, with the local strength of the Leicester Secular Society it was always going to be struggling. The branch re-organised as the Leicester Organised Freethought Society the following year and an official suggested an amalgamation of the two Secularist organisations in Leicester. The minutes record a number of postponed meetings to discuss the matter and it seems that no serious discussion took place and, with the passage of time, the matter was quietly shelved.⁹⁹ The Leicester Secular Society could afford to this and thus they fought and won a quiet but decisive battle within the movement to preserve their own autonomy.

As a unit of organisation the British Secular Union lingered on until 1884 but Josiah Gimson had made his mark on it by being not simply a focus for the opposition to Bradlaugh, but also as de facto leader of the most powerful provincial Secular Society and many looked to him for an alternative lead.

It was now, in the evening of his years, that Josiah Gimson's fortunes prospered. He had worked his way up from an apprenticeship in ironfoundery to become probably the foremost engineering manufacturer in Leicester. His new works, a monument to the age of Victorian manufacturing expansion had just been opened in Vulcan Road¹⁰⁰ and like many a similar town worthy his mind turned to politics. In 1878 he seized the opportunity to represent his community and stood in West St. Mary's ward as a Liberal Councillor. He was elected by a majority of 1,106 and took up his duties with commensurate enthusiasm. His opinions were cherished and he rapidly found himself Vice-Chairman of the Floods, Highways and Sewerage Committee where his engineering experience and know-how proved invaluable.¹⁰¹

In many ways the life of Gimson represented a quintessentially Victorian success story, the kind that fascinated Bennett, amused Galsworthy and had the potential to infuriate the likes of Morris, Ruskin and Lawrence. He had made a success of industry, politics and religion, though his approach to religion had a decidedly individual slant whilst his social concern suggested he was of a different breed from Morris' Mr. Bottles. Gimson had been an Owenite and, though he had materially benefited from the continuance of the old immoral world, he had never forgotten Robert Owen's premise about the perfectibility of man. The years of worldly success never diminished his belief in this dream; indeed it called on him to become the custodian of it in Leicester and to spread the new message with the same persuasive zeal. Thus the creation and erection of the hall had the mark of Gimson acumen and determination written all over it. Gimson provided the majority of the initial capital required for its construction and, through his contacts, was able to engage the Morris disciple Larner Sugden to be the architect. It stands as a monument to the Gimson ability to make things happen in the days when such paternalism could be visionary as well as controlling.

The progress that Leicester Secularism had made during the previous forty five years had been intermitent, yet startling. Though it had faltered after the demise of Owenism yet when the prospects for Secularism in the locality of Leicester had been bleak, it had consolidated its position in the fertile years of the early seventies and was about to enter a new phase filled with aspirations. This could clearly not have been achieved without the aid of numerous local Gimsons, Holyoaks and Wrights. This rescue of a belief from the collapse of its ideology is similar to the continuance of Southcottianism after the death and failure of Joanna Southcott to realise the ideals of the sect.¹⁰² The growth and nurturing of Secularism from the ashes of Owenism however had a more acute mind at the helm. It was thus

more coherent and yielded greater, more lasting success. With the abandonment of Owenism went much of the baggage that had weighed down local initiative; Centralisation was abandoned in favour of local autonomy and the sights of the millenium as they were lowered came more easily into view.

The new ideology provided by Holyoake gave a greater opportunity for Secularists to be accepted as part of the community and the abandonment of disputation as a method of publicity seeking meant that they were still able to be seen in the community, but were not heard in it quite so often. This movement away from direct confrontation with organised religion meant that they could quietly develop their own internal, individual approach to theology and knowledge and this quietist approach was enshrined in their rules and regulations.¹⁰³ This gradual movement from sectarian agitation to semi-quietist congregationalism mirrors the changes noted by Bryan Wilson in his study of religious evangelical sects.¹⁰⁴ Wilson notes the transfer from a rigid, particular, sectarian form of organisation based around the defence of its members against the opprobrium of the prevailing society, to a denominational one more willing to accept certain levels of conventional morality and behaviour in exchange for a greater degree of acceptance and toleration.¹⁰⁵

The Leicester Secular Society had not softened its approach to the world, but had gradually become a part of it, its place was confirmed and commemorated in the building of their home, statement against the inadequacy of religious society, the Secular Hall. The ideal and inspiration engendered by the new Hall led the Society and its members into a new age of work, thought and achievement.

Footnotes to Chapter Two

- 1: K.J. Funnel, 'The Leicester Secular Society in its Historical Context', University of Leicester dissertation (February 1978), page 19.
- 2: A. Temple Patterson, Radical Leicester (Leicester 1954), page 68.
- 3: Ibid. page 72. For Bown see Ibid. page 70 and F.J. Gould The History of the Leicester Secular Society (Leicester 1900), page 4.
- 4: J.F.C. Harrison, 'Chartism in Leicester' in Asa Briggs ed., Chartist Studies (1959), pages 121 - 9.
- 5: Bill Lancaster, Radicalism. Cooperation and Socialism. Leicester Working Class Politics 1860 - 1906 (Leicester 1987), pages 1 - 9. See also Richard Gurnam, 200 Years: The Hosiery Unions 1776 - 1976 (Leicester 1976), pages 22 - 4 and R.J. Pickering, The Cradle and Home of the Hosiery Trade (Hinckley 1940), chapters 8, 10, 12, 13 and 14.
- 6: Lancaster, Radicalism. Cooperation and Socialism. introduction. This continuity of older forms of Radicalism is a cornerstone of Bill Lancaster's argument concerning the particular nature of Leicester politics and trade unionism.
- 7: Temple Patterson, Radical Leicester, page 285.
- 8: Ibid. page 288. See also the Crisis, Volume III, 24 May 1834.
- 9: Gould, History, page 6.
- 10: Ibid. page 6.
- 11: E. Royle, Victorian Infidels (1974), page 49.
- 12: Gould, History, page 7.
- 13: Handbill for lectures to be held on 20,21 and 23 February 1843 in L.S.S. scrapbook of printed material shelved at 10D 68/6 in Leicestershire Record Office, New walk, Leicester.
- 14: Jack Simmons, Leicester Past and Present Volume II. Modern City 1860 -

1974 (1974), pages 4 - 5.

15: Royle, Victorian Infidels, pages 310 - 2.

16: I am grateful to Bill Lancaster for information relating to this suggestion gleaned from his interpretation of the Gimson 'Recollections'.

17: Gould, History, page 7.

18: Sydney Ansell Gimson, 'Random Recollections of the Leicester Secular Society with Digressions' (1932), page 2.

19: Gould, History, page 9.

20: The Movement and Anti-Persecution Gazette, ed. George Jacob Holyoake, Volume II no.60, 5 February 1845, page 47.

21: Joseph Dare, 3rd Annual report of the Unitarian Domestic Mission (1848), page 13.

22: Ibid. page 13. See also 5th Annual report of the Unitarian Domestic Mission (1850), page 10.

23: Gould, History, page 8.

24: Dare, 5th Annual report (1850); page 12.

25: Ibid. page 12.

26: Joseph Dare, 7th Annual Report of the Leicester Domestic Mission (1852), page 18.

27: Ibid. page 18.

28: Ibid. page 14.

29: Gould, History, page 9.

30: Logie Barrow, Independent Spirits: spiritualism and English Plebeians 1850 - 1910 (1986), pages 19 - 29.

31: Ibid. page 23.

32: L.S.S.M.B., 6 March 1881.

33: L.S.S.M.B., 25 November 1852.

34: Dare, 5th Annual report (1850), page 14.

- 35: L.S.S.M.B., undated minute (probably May 1852).
- 36: Ibid. undated minute.
- 37: Temple Patterson, Radical Leicester, page 188. See also John Wigley, The rise and Fall of the Victorian Sunday (1980), page 95 and Baptist Handbook (1869), page 139.
- 38: L.S.S.M.B., 30 October 1852 for details of arrangements.
- 39: Temple Patterson Radical Leicester, pages 253 - 4. See also Wigley, Rise and Fall, page 95.
- 40: Temple Patterson, Radical Leicester, page 163.
- 41: Ibid. page 358.
- 42: Ibid. pages 254 - 6, 298 - 9, 302, 327. For Mursell's involvement in the C.S.U. see also George R. Searson, A Quarter of a Century's Liberalism in Leicester. What the liberals did, and how they did it between the years 1826 and 1850, page 105. See Temple Patterson, Radical Leicester, pages 242 - 4 for Hollings and the Proprietary school.
- 43: Temple Patterson, Radical Leicester, pages 256 and 258.
- 44: L.S.S.M.B., 13 January 1853.
- 45: L.S.S.M.B., 16 June 1853.
- 46: Susan Budd Varieties of Unbelief (1977), page 22.
- 47: Joseph Dare, 8th Annual Report of the Leicester Domestic Mission (1853), page 18.
- 48: L.S.S.M.B., 26 February 1854.
- 49: J. Sanders Chew, Mr G.J. Holyoake Refuted in his own Words (1852), pages 11, 12 and 15.
- 50: Leicester Mercury 29 April 1854. Cutting appended in minutes (possibly written by James Plant).
- 51: Ibid..
- 52: Ibid..

- 53: Gould, History, page 10.
- 54: See Chapter 1.
- 55: Gould, History, page 10.
- 56: Ibid. page 10.
- 57: Ibid. page 10.
- 58: See Chapter 1.
- 59: Gould, History, page 11. Unfortunately the reports that Gould mentions do not appear to have survived.
- 60: Harrison, 'Chartism in Leicester', in A. Briggs ed., Chartist Studies, page 134. See also E.P. Thompson, William Morris Romantic to Revolutionary (1977 edition), pages 289 - 90.
- 61: Gould, History, page 11.
- 62: Ibid.
- 63: Rules and Principles of the Leicester Secular Society (1873) in Leicester Secular, records classification. 10d 68/6, Leicestershire Record Office New Walk Leicester. (Scrapbook of printed material. Hereafter 'Scrapbook').
- 64: Section on the rules of the Secular Club and Institute in Ibid..
- 65: Ibid..
- 66: Stan Shipley, Club Life and Socialism in Mid Victorian London (1983), pages 21 - 2.
- 67: Gould, History, page 12.
- 68: Ibid, page 12.
- 69: See Royle, Victorian Infidels, page 309.
- 70: Gould, History, page 12.
- 71: Ibid. page 14.
- 72: Ibid. page 14.
- 73: For a detailed analysis of the pattern of shareholding see Appendix 2.
- 74: Gould, History, page 14.

75: See Appendix 2.

76: See Lancaster, Radicalism, Cooperation and Socialism, page 57. Bill Lancaster cites Gould as suggesting that the spare land was used for allotments organised on co-operative lines. Lancaster is mistaken since no such assertion exists in Gould's *History of the Society*. Oral evidence from a Mr. Donald Cotterill indicates that such a system existed though this only dates from the turn of the century.

77: Secular Hall Company Account Book Journal (10D 68/25) entries 30 June 1875 and June 30th 1885.

78: Gould, History, pages 15 - 16.

79: Ibid. pages 15 - 17.

80: Rules and Principles of the Leicester Secular Society (1873), in 'Scrapbook'.

81: see Two nights public discussion between Mr. G. Bishop and Mr. J.H. Smith in the Corn Exchange, Leicester March 22nd and 23rd 1876. (1876), pages 3 - 4.

82: Ibid. pages 11 - 32.

83: For Foote see L.S.S.M.B., 20 March, 11 December 1878, 31 March 1880.

84: For Joseph Symes see L.S.S.M.B., 21 November 1877, 16 January 1878. For Harriet Law see L.S.S.M.B., 23 January, 15 May, 4 December 1878, 1 January 1879.

85: L.S.S.M.B., 11 December 1878, 8 January, 18 December, 18 June 1879.

86: See British Museum General Catalogue of Printed Books, for Bicker's books on pronunciation, spelling reform and Linguistic analysis of the works of Darwin.

87: Gimson, 'Random Recollections', page 2.

88: L.S.S.M.B., 12 February 1879, 4 February 1880.

89: See Barrow, Independent Spirits, pages 106 - 107 for Secularist

opposition to the pretensions of Spiritualism. For Gimson's Correspondence see Medium and Daybreak 4 and 11 February 1881, quoted in Barrow, page 106 and footnote.

90: L.S.S.M.B., 13 March 1878.

91: L.S.S.M.B., 7 August 1880.

92: L.S.S.M.B., 30 October 1878, 21 May, 9 July 1879, 7 January, 11 February 1880.

93: Gould, History, page 18.

94: See Chapter 1.

95: William Henry Holyoak, handwritten poem appended in 'Scrapbook'.

96: See Secular Chronicle 11 August 1877. See also Budd, Varieties, page 58.

Susan Budd wrongly states that Sydney Gimson was instrumental in the formation of the B.S.U., it was of course his father Josiah.

97: L.S.S.M.B., 6 March 1878.

98: Letter from George Voss appended in L.S.S.M.B., March 1878.

99: L.S.S.M.B., 5 March, 9 April 1879.

100: Jack Simmons, Leicester Past and Present Volume II (1974), pages 4 - 5.

101: Leicester Mercury, 7 September 1883, page 3.

102: J.F.C. Harrison, The Second Coming (1979), pages 86 - 109.

103: See Rules and Principles (1873).

104: Bryan Wilson Patterns of Sectarianism (1967).

105: Ibid. page 22 - 27.

CHAPTER THREE

VICTORIAN HEYDAY 1880-1900

The Development of the Society 1880 -1890.

For the Leicester Secular Society the year 1880 was dominated by the construction of the new Hall, and Larnier Sugden, a rising architect and follower of Morris, was engaged to draw up plans for its construction.¹ With the composition of the design Sugden appears to have been given a fairly free hand and the result was what Gould termed "a free treatment of Flemish Renaissance".² Sir Nicholas Pevsner was rather more critical of the building preferring to see it as an untidy collection of motifs rather than a creation in its own right.³ A number of local materials were used, in typical Morrisite style, including Coalville Brick and the result must have been impressive in the Humberstone Gate of the 1880's. Though dwarfed by many subsequent building developments the exterior of the Hall itself looks almost unchanged from the drawing in Gould's autobiography.⁴

The Hall was designed to seat between 500 and 600 people in its main lecture hall which measured 66' by 31'.⁵ In addition to the main lecture hall the building contained a club room, a refreshment room, a skittle alley in the cellars and a library, still used for lectures today. Attached to the building was a lecturer's house which had an adjacent bookshop from which William Henry Holyoak was to ply his trade, though today this is a travel agents and no longer forms part of the Hall fabric.

On the frontage of the Hall were five supporting pillars on which were placed the busts of the five great apostles of religious criticism; Paine, Owen, Socrates, Voltaire and Jesus. These busts, modelled in terra-cotta by

A.L. Vago, can still be seen today and appear to be naturalistic treatments of their theme. Gould suggests that they were originally to be set off with bronze girdles inscribed with quotations from their respective teachings so the intended effect was possibly grander than that glimpsed today by the casual observer.⁶

The five representations were intended to honour the great opponents of religion and stood "in a general way for wholesome criticism, for revolt against priestly pretensions, and for endeavours after a happier social environment. They are types of great moral and intellectual activities."⁷ The placing of the bust of Jesus alongside those of Paine, Owen and Voltaire was a controversial move that was bound to excite interest in the town. It is not clear whose idea the placing of the bust had been but it is tempting to see the hand of Josiah Gimson behind it since he leapt to defend the decision in the local press with an eloquence that suggests a degree of pre-planning. The erection of the Hall was viewed as a perfect opportunity to arouse public interest and to give much needed publicity to the cause and beliefs of Secularists. As the Hall was being built the bust of Jesus was noticed with some disquiet and many took to the pages of the local press to express their anger. The opposition to the bust is best illustrated by a letter signed by someone who styled himself 'INDIGNATION' who asked:

How is it possible to draw any analogy between one who believes and teaches these doctrines and another one who regards them as only fit subjects for jokes and sarcasm.⁸

Though opposition was vocal, the pages of the Midland Free Press suggest that Gimson and the Secularists had easily the better part of the argument. Several letters of support were printed generally applauding the action the

Society had taken. One writer, who styled himself 'INQUIRER', caught the mood of the moment and wrote against pious Christian humbug and in favour of toleration:

Surely these sceptics, after all, if they live peaceably, honestly, and honourably amongst us, who can complain? And who shall say that they are worse than the thousands of nominal christians who require a god only to swear by.⁹

Another who signed himself W.B. stated he was not a member of the Society but was sympathetic to its aims and could see the reasoning behind the decision to erect the bust:

Bigotry and class interest expatriated Paine, murdered Jesus, and persecuted Voltaire. The most cowardly ingratitude was shown towards Owen, and Socrates was rewarded for his patriotism by poison. They all had one end in view i.e. the happiness of their race, and they all suffered from the tyranny of ignorance.¹⁰

Nevertheless the controversy was skilfully turned to the Society's advantage by Josiah Gimson. He sprang to its defence, warming to his task as he stated an orthodox Secularist interpretation of the character of Jesus which accepted him as a moral teacher. Gimson's reply illustrated that the philosophy of Secularism was not atheistical, a fact the Society sought to acknowledge in the decision to erect the bust in the first place:

The persons whose names appear in company with that of Jesus

did not deny the existence of god but believed in it. Socrates, the pagan philosopher accepted the pagan gods; the others like Jesus were theists.... Whenever the christian churches adopt the Father-God of Jesus as theirs, though some of us may not be able to accept his existence as a fact, our inability will be simply intellectual, and will not be strengthened by moral repugnance as at present.¹¹

However, the generally liberal Canon David Vaughan did not take kindly to this representation of Jesus as a Secularist and through the pages of the Leicester Journal suggested that if the Secularists had no intention of offending orthodox Christians then they could always take the bust down.¹² Throughout the month of September the press was punctuated with letters from Gimson stating the Secularist case still further and citing a number of biblical texts in support of it. Despite the fact that the argument went in favour of the Secular Society a rather sour note was struck by a letter written to the Free Press, ironically enough by a Mr. Albert Paine, which appeared in the 18 September edition of the newspaper. The tone of the letter dismissed the squabbles between the Society and its Christian opponents as an irrelevancy and saw material improvement as a more fitting destination for such wasted energy:

Here is the work for earnest Secularists, here is their field for secular effort. Teaching the people how to live virtuous, honest and happy lives helping them out of the quagmire of ignorance drunkenness and vice.

The letter grew increasingly sarcastic and suggested that the Society might

emulate its evangelical opponents by making house-to-house visitations to read the works of Paine and Voltaire. It ended by suggesting that the Society had become as neglectful as orthodox religion of the material dimension of life. It was obvious to the correspondent that the religious denominations of the town only undertook work that was of direct benefit to them:

Will they do it? This is the work which orthodox Christianity rightly makes a secondary consideration, and which Secularism altogether neglects.¹³

However nothing could dampen the enthusiasm of the Society as it looked forward to the new era embodied by its Hall which was gradually taking shape. This enthusiasm crystallised in the admission of three members who were considered to have positions of status within the town. The minutes suggest that Messrs. Barrs, Bunton and Wright were the first new members for some considerable time, there being only two other new additions since 1875. The impression is that the policy of strict observance of the rules regarding admission was at last paying dividends. The Mr. Wright mentioned must have been one of Michael Wright's sons, either Thomas or Michael, both proceeded to carry on the family's earnest and welcome work which instinctively went hand-in-hand with the development of their own Elastic Web business.

J.W. Barrs in particular was a fine catch for the Society. He was a prosperous Tea Merchant prepared to use his money as a source of Secularist patronage, providing help and support to a number of writers including Tom Barclay, the Poet James Thompson (B.V.), Barlas the author of "Phantasmagoria" and Francis Adams the author of "Songs of the Army of the

Night". In 1886 Barrs became proprietor of The Countryman a weekly paper containing items of secularist and radical interest which generally dovetailed with his own idiosyncratic ideas. This was circulated to over fifty Leicestershire villages and it contained reports of strikes and items of republican interest. This venture gave Tom Barclay a route into radical journalism since Barrs gave him full editorial control which only ceased when the paper fizzled out in the early 1890's.¹⁴

As the year turned the Society looked forward eagerly to the opening of the Hall and it decided to turn the occasion into a celebration. Thus the first Sunday in March was chosen as the date and the Society brought together a number of luminaries from both wings of the Secular movement. Both G.J. Holyoake and Bradlaugh accepted the invitation, presumably agreeing to bury their differences for the day. They were joined by Bradlaugh's lieutenant Annie Besant as well as Harriet Law, Theodore Wright and the Norwich Secularist, Robert Aspland Cooper.

There were meetings all day each being prefaced by the recitation by Mrs Theodore Wright (formerly Mrs. Austin Holyoake) of a poem written by James Thompson specifically to commemorate the occasion.¹⁵ The morning meeting was fittingly opened by Josiah Gimson who mapped out a new landscape for Secularism in Leicester. He suggested that the Hall would henceforth provide the support and congregational life to Secularists and their families that had hitherto been lacking and cited the example set by orthodox religious denominations:

The complete separation from the various church organisations is in its first effect a loss. The Congregational life of the churches cannot but be of great value in many ways apart from their several speculative opinions. However erroneous these

opinions are, we are bound to believe in the sincerity of those who profess them - (shouts of 'hear' 'hear') - and this Sincerity animating the congregations gives them a moral tone which is of great advantage to the individuals. The social life of the members is greatly influenced, and that, too, mainly for their good by the Social relationships formed, and also by the various agencies which the churches employ for secular purposes. If this building answers to the hope of its promoters it will be used as a means to similar ends.¹⁶

In many ways this was yet another restatement of Holyoake's principles which suggested a legitimate rôle for religious impulses within Secularist definitions of the universe. It was a tacit rejection of Bradlaugh's iconoclasm and its abject failure at local level to unite Secularists. It pointed towards a quietism which would enable the nation's Secularists to take their rightful place within the local religious community:

We have neglected the emotional part of our nature, and have treated our hearers as so many machines for grinding logic.... If we could secure the rallying around us of nearly all who are with us in opinion, we should certainly occupy a fair place beside the churches of the town.¹⁷

Gimson was followed by Holyoake himself who argued strenuously for the pursuit of knowledge which would lead to self, as well as general improvement:

The habit of thought was the greatest form of independence;

thinking was their only protection against ignorance. But they did not regard Speech as the mere waste pipe of opinions which should flood the platform or the press with the products of ignorance; they rather regarded it as the means by which they could contribute to the great stream of public truth. the more thinkers there were the more truth there was in the world.

Holyoake finished his speech with a statement which emphasised that the new, recast Secularism could ultimately have a much wider appeal:

What men demanded was a religion' of daily life that stood on a business footing.... Secularism was the Home rule of this world'¹⁸

Holyoake's tone stood in contrast to the speech by Annie Besant which followed. She cast her net over a range of topics, criticising foreign policy and an unfair social system. Her speech closed with a plea that the Secular Hall be a forum for the investigation of social truth and what she saw as the monstrous inequalities of wealth that persisted in society.

When the Society reconvened for the afternoon session they were addressed by Theodore Wright who identified Secularism squarely with Liberalism in politics and suggested that:

'U' stood for Utilitarianism, which he took to be the key-note of Secularism; let everything be done to a useful end.'¹⁹

After Wright had spoken he was followed on the platform by Charles Bradlaugh. The President of the N.S.S. was currently engaged in the struggle

to take his seat in parliament having been elected to one of the Northampton seats in the general election of the previous year. He was in fact expected to appear in court the following day for the offence of, in his words, "voting in the house of Commons."²⁰ He was in fact awaiting the outcome of a private prosecution brought against him by Henry Lewis Clarke which was tried during that week of March 1881.²¹

Bradlaugh's struggle to take his seat had become a national cause célèbre and the excitement generated by his principled stand brought much support. Indeed the growing public profile of the Leicester Secular Society may have owed as much to the publicity that Bradlaugh had gained as it did to the construction of the New Hall. Certainly one wonders whether the coverage in the local press would have been quite so thorough without the appearance of a national figure engaged on a national crusade.

Whatever the effect of Bradlaugh's presence there is no doubt that in times of mutual crisis or benefit the two differing wings of the Secular movement could forget their differences, even if only for a day. Thus the Leicester Secular Society welcomed Bradlaugh as righteous champion of their rights in parliament. Bradlaugh in turn toned down some excesses of style and encouraged them with the suggestion that Secularists were at last a potential power in the land. Moreover when he spoke again in the evening he was able to give the Society a glimpse of power that had hitherto been inconceivable. He spoke on the various foreign and domestic problems facing the recently elected Liberal government and defended the actions he, as an elected member had taken over matters such as the Transvaal war and Irish coercion. He presented his quest to take the oath as a crusade for rights and freedoms and spoke almost as though he were addressing his own constituents, which in an ideological sense he was. Bradlaugh offered the problems of the Liberal administration forward as an opportunity for the

extension of Secularist responsibility in government. He thus brought, for a brief moment, the society and its members to the centre of decision making within the land and portrayed himself as their delegate. He wound up with a defence of the Boers and their individual rights against the British government's broken promises and allied it to constitutional struggles at home:

He would appeal to everyone there whether they ought to have crossed the frontier, whether they ought to have torn up the treaty made 25 years ago? (shouts of 'NO')... the Boers had done what John Hampden had done, they had not used force until force had been used against them.²²

The place of Secularism at the very centre of modern society was given further credence by Harriet Law who declared:

Whilst Scepticism was a factor in progress, Secularism was a necessary institution of our civilisation.²³

Bradlaugh's stand as a champion of rights was given further coverage when Annie Besant spoke again arguing for an extension of morality into the realm of politics. "It was wrong for one Englishman to steal from another" she argued "but their morals were not conclusive enough to forbid the practice of stealing from a man with a dark skin."

The day was completed by the appearance on the platform of the Society's mentor George Jacob Holyoake. His speech was an impassioned exhortation to the Society to prepare a way for Secularism in the wider world. He argued that all ideas passed through several stages from ridicule and contempt to

advocacy and approval. The implication was that the fostering of continued and earnest enquiry would hasten the day when Secularism could take its place in society as a legitimate idea among many others. The Leicester Society, and others like it, were to be the active agents of that vision. Toleration rather than the defeat of Christian religion was to be the goal since, as Holyoake stated:

Secularists had no desire to empty churches and chapels, but only to improve the kind of instruction given in them.²⁴

Thus in what must have been an exciting and exhausting day the Leicester Secular Society received inspiration and advice from a range of speakers. Those present had heard a number of messages but they were primarily urged to keep Radicalism in politics, a degree of conciliation in religious affairs and open-mindedness and utility in their approach to knowledge. Though such a varied and tolerant outlook proved to be unattainable amongst the national leadership, the Leicester Society was to prove that such currents and opinions could co-exist where other factors prevailed.

The anniversary of the opening of the Hall became, in later years, a chance for the Society to honour friends and commune with those at the heart of the national movement. These occasions turn up the appearance of old friends as well as a number of rising stars in the movement. The anniversary quickly became an institution in the life of the Society, though in its early days some members quarrelled over the form it should take. When it was proposed to celebrate the Society's first year in the building it was suggested that a number of speakers from the inaugural meeting should be invited back. It emerged in committee that there were distinct differences

of opinion: one group wanted a virtual re-run of the previous years celebrations whilst another sought to confine the event to local speakers. Within this latter proposal there was a distinct objection to the presence of "professionals from London and elsewhere."²⁵

It seems those wanting an event based around the appearance of national figures won the day and the anniversary celebrations of 1882 included invitations to R.A. Cooper, once again, and Daniel Baker from Birmingham. Baker, a prosperous pen manufacturer, had helped to erect a Secular Hall in Birmingham in 1877. In temperament he was similar to Josiah Gimson and his Birmingham grouping, like the Leicester Society, was decidedly less militant than many in the national movement. Baker was quickly established as an annual visitor to the celebrations, though he was unable to attend in 1882.²⁶ Baker along with R.A. Cooper, Harriet Law, Theodore and Mrs. Wright and George Jacob Holyoake made up the old guard of regular visitors. Usually one or more of them occupied the chair whilst members of the Society, generally the President, Secretary and Treasurer, addressed the meeting. Holyoake in particular seems to have relished the occasions since Sydney Gimson says that he once wrote: "As long as I live I shall count myself part of the Anniversary Meeting."²⁷ The members of the Society also looked forward to the presence of their mentor since his manner was considerably more relaxed and intimate at an anniversary supper than when giving a more formal lecture.²⁸

As the years progressed the Society added to the names that graced its platform on the occasion of the anniversary. In 1884 it reflected the current Radical interest in land reform by inviting Joseph Gurney of Northampton, the towns leading Secularist and currently involved in the local Freehold Land Society.²⁹ The following year the Society acknowledged the excitement that Secularism was generating on the national scene, as the Bradlaugh case

reached its climax and memories of the Foote, Ramsey, and Kemp blasphemy trial were still fresh in the popular mind. The scale of the anniversary celebrations were transformed with invitations to a total of fifteen national figures of varying stature. Both Bradlaugh and Holyoake, the respected leaders of both sides of Secularism were invited as were supporting figures such as Annie Besant and W. Stewart Ross. Ross by this stage had taken a greater part in the Secular movement by becoming progressively joint and then sole editor of the Secular Review. He held a deep antipathy to Bradlaugh and Annie Besant, preferring to ally himself with the Holyoake wing.³⁰ As well as Ross himself the Society also invited one of his writers from the Secular Review Philip Dawson.³¹ One of Daniel Baker's associates in the building of the Birmingham hall, George Anderson, was also invited to attend, he was later became a prime mover in the establishment of the Rational Press Association.³²

It is difficult to imagine this volatile mixture of personalities occupying the same platform and there is no way of telling how many of the guests attended since, unfortunately unlike 1881, there is no press report of the anniversary celebrations. Nevertheless it does seem likely that Bradlaugh, Holyoake and Robert Porter of Nottingham and R.A. Cooper certainly attended since they spoke at a meeting of Liberal Radicals at the Floral Hall on March 3rd, two days after the Anniversary celebrations.³³ Failure on the part of others to reply to the invitations of the Society may be indicated by the fact that the secretary was instructed to contact five more national figures nearer the date. Amongst the personalities contacted was Glegg Bullock, a wealthy supporter of Ross who was currently engaged in supporting a Secularist school at Whitminster. He was later to quarrel violently with Bradlaugh, being implicated in the production of a scurrilous biography of him.³⁴ Other figures who were also contacted were the veteran Robert Porter

and the journalist J.H. Levy, 'Dialecticus' of the National Reformer. Levy in particular was popular at Leicester and was to attend frequently in later years.³⁵ Like the Leicester Society he was of a tolerant disposition and espoused an individualism tempered with the attitudes engendered by Mill's On Liberty, itself a beloved text of the Secular Society.³⁶ However, Levy was at bottom entrenched in the attitudes engendered by old fashioned Political Economy. The final guest invited for these 1885 celebrations was F. Feroza, an established and popular speaker on philosophical subjects.³⁷

Quite what the Society sought to achieve at this meeting is unclear, it may have been an attempt to heal differences within the movement or it may simply have reflected the Leicester society's vision of its own importance. Whatever the motive such plans for the anniversary celebrations were never to be as elaborate again. Through the late 1880's the established friends of the Society dominated the celebrations with the addition of Thomas Allsop a veteran Owenite, who appeared on the platform in 1890. The following year he promised the Society a donation of £100 if it could undertake to find an additional £400 in order to continue its propaganda work.³⁸ Anniversary celebrations in the 1890's continued very much in the same vein with the appearance of John M. Robertson on the platform from 1895 onwards. The late 1890's were noteworthy for the frequency with which Mrs Theodore Wright and Kate Watts were invited to give dramatic recitals at these celebrations, perhaps suggesting that the age of powerful national leaders, acceptable to the Leicester Society, was waning. This may have reflected a gradual change in taste or may equally provided evidence of the decline of the quality of national leadership.³⁹

Though the anniversary celebrations came to reflect the image of the Society, other factors contributed to the nature of its character. The acquisition of the Hall created a major area of responsibility for the

Society of which it had had little previous experience. Matters were not helped by the death of two of the Society's stalwarts Michael Wright and Josiah Gimson, which began to signal the quiet passing of the Old Guard. Michael Wright, who died in September 1881, had been a prime mover in the history of Leicester Secularism. It was only in his later years that he was able to establish a solid spiritual and financial legacy to pass on to his sons Thomas and Philip. Josiah Gimson was still comparatively young at his death (he was aged sixty-four), though he had been suffering from a heart condition for several years. Gimson died on September 6th 1883, the same day as Joseph Dare the Unitarian Domestic Missionary. Such men typified the pioneering approach in social and industrial affairs indicative of the age of Victorian enterprise. With the passing of these two men the mid-nineteenth century came to an end in Leicester.⁴⁰

Gimson was admired in the town not simply for his work within the town council but also for being one of the great mid-century success stories. The Leicester Mercury suggested that he was:

known as an upright and conscientious man, who by the force of his considerable natural ability, and strictness of principle, raised himself from an obscure position to one of considerable influence and comparative wealth.⁴¹

The Secular Society also deeply missed his leadership. George Jacob Holyoake presided over a memorial tribute which was staged at the Secular Hall and linked Gimson's personal philanthropy to the practice of Secularism:

He was for bright coffee taverns for the people, for co-operative devices which tend to establish equality without

Revolution.... In these and similar ways material improvement was to him a religion - the only religion which has ever yet brought good to man.⁴²

Though the Society had lost its founder, Gimson had made provision for its welfare in his will. By his death he had a personal fortune of over £20,000 and left the family firm to be run by his sons Josiah Mentor, Arthur, and Sydney as well as stipulating that his nephew Josiah be taken into the firm.⁴³ Gimson also discharged Thomas Coltman from their long standing partnership in the manufacturing of hosiery machinery.⁴⁴ However the most important provision of Josiah's will, as far as the Secular Society was concerned, was the clause which provided them with an income of £100 for the following ten years. This at least gave the Society some form of guaranteed income with which to bolster up its perpetually shaky finances. When the fund expired the Society was fortunate to secure the further legacy from Thomas Allsop.

The Gimson legacy was not, however, entirely material. Josiah's third son Sydney became one of a small number of younger sons who began to take over after the deaths of the pioneering members.⁴⁵ Sydney had gradually been edging away from the family's first generation Unitarianism and had been teaching at both the Society and the Unitarian great Meeting. Though he only formally became a member after the death of his father, Sydney quickly began to take a leading part in the affairs of the Society.⁴⁶ He was joined in this by Thomas Wright, the youngest son of his father's friend and colleague. Wright became President in 1884 whilst Sydney Gimson took on the office of Secretary. Thus the welfare of the Secular Society came to be a concern primarily of the younger sons of the ruling industrial dynasties whilst the

elder siblings wielded more responsibility in the running of the family businesses.

Organisation and Administration

The Secular Society this younger generation inherited rapidly acquitted itself to new responsibilities. The construction of the Hall had given the Society a public face in Leicester which brought with it a whole range of day-to-day matters that needed constant attention and the help of willing hands. Before the acquisition of the Hall the evidence of the minutes suggests that the bulk of the work was undertaken by a general committee of senior members. After the opening of the Hall it became obvious that the work of the Society, both important and mundane, needed greater organisation. Very quickly it was clear the workload should be split amongst a number of sub-committees taking power from the general committee. Thus as early as June 1881 it was suggested that finance, the provision of musical entertainment and the organisation of lectures should be the preserve of separate sub-committees.⁴⁷

These duties were initially shared amongst those who comprised the general committee and, during Josiah Gimson's presidency, the conduct of these duties was undertaken informally. Apart from a finance committee many sub-committees appear to have been created on a 'one off' basis in response to individual needs and problems. As time went on and responsibilities multiplied, other sub-committees were established and gradually more individuals drawn into responsibility.

Though the Society always needed 'one off' sub-committees for an anniversary supper, a soir e, or a flower show, organisation and administration came to depend increasingly on the work and effort of a

number of standing sub-committees.⁴⁸ As their rôle was confirmed and recognised membership of these sub-committees was seen by the society as vital to its well being. It is only from 1883 that the composition of these sub-committees starts to appear in the minutes but they emphasised that they were initially branches of the General Committee.⁴⁹ The composition of the General Committee itself was volatile in the early years as new members were voted on to it, possibly to gain experience and share the workload. An example of this occurred in October 1883 when the General Committee for the ensuing half-year consisting of eight members was replaced by eight others in the ensuing elections of January 1884.⁵⁰ The Society later made a virtue of this by requiring a proportion of the Committee to retire at each half yearly meeting.⁵¹ However in later years the membership grew used to electing the same members, such as Sydney Gimson and Thomas Wright, into the posts of President and Vice President and the habit remained when selecting general Committee members.

Membership of a sub-committee became a recognised method of gaining administrative experience before attempting to get an elected post on the General Committee and there is certainly evidence to suggest some members did this.⁵² Despite these changes in personnel the impression is that the Society had some difficulties in recruiting its committee and sub-committee members and, as a result, a small élité were obliged to assume power in the absence of substantial member participation. Initially the General Committee consisted of seven members though this was raised to fifteen by a change of rules passed in September 1885. Seven of these were to be elected in the July of each year, theoretically making the general committee more accountable. The composition indicates that those actively involved in the organisational life of the society made up an extremely small proportion of the total membership. New blood moved slowly into committee work and

experienced workers were generally persuaded to carry on through a combination of deference and expediency.

Sub-committees were the Society's all purpose medium of organisation. They could be used to cover matters as diverse as the upkeep of the Hall, relations with the Club, the provision of musical entertainment, and the canvassing of external speakers. These were standing committees which dealt with repetitive day to day matters. Others were constituted to meet immediate needs and approach individual problems. One such sub-committee was convened in March 1882 to inquire into delicate matters of internal discipline concerning a rather riotous choir soirée. The sub-committee concluded that the soirée had been inadequately supervised and censured those responsible. Another sub-committee concerned with discipline was constituted in 1898 to enquire into an extra marital affair between two members which resulted in the expulsion of one and the resignation of the other.⁵³ Other matters covered by 'one off' committees include one in May 1888 to enquire into a worrying downturn in the membership, and another in October 1898 to investigate the reduced circumstances of a particular member with a view to making him a small grant of money. Other sub-committees were rapidly convened to manage the Society's response to an external political event such as the one to collect signatures against the Blasphemy laws of which Foote, Ramsey and Kemp had just fallen foul, or the one to aid Bradlaugh's fight against the oath.⁵⁴

On several occasions sub-committees were called upon to act in the absence of the General Committee, and such action was usually later ratified. There were also instances though of sub-committees abusing their powers and finding themselves censured for such activity.⁵⁵

Compared with later years the early sub-committee structure was comparatively modest. One reason for this change is that growth reflected

the gradually institutionalisation of certain activities. Josiah Gimson's oration at the opening of the Hall had pointed towards a landscape of change, but a number of members saw different paths that the Society might take across it.

Activities

In the first few years after the Hall was opened, the Society had to decide to what use its premises should be put. Several individual members had their own ideas: John Barrs thought the Hall should be a picture gallery open to the public during the week and also on Sunday evenings; a Mr. Holland sought to extend the educational repertoire of the Society by holding both a shorthand and a French class.⁵⁶ Both of these suggestions were rejected by the General Committee since they threatened seriously to compromise what were perceived to be the normal activities of the Society. Barrs' suggestion meant that the Hall would no longer be the preserve of Secularists, and Holland's suggestion interfered with the provision of a ladies' conversation room. The latter resigned his membership some weeks later. It is also worth noting that the first attempt by an outsider to tender for the use of the hall in order to hold a dancing class was rejected at this time.⁵⁷ With the wave of euphoric optimism that accompanied the opening of the Hall the society could afford to ignore these requests which either inconvenienced members or threatened autonomy. In the case of provision for a dancing class, the Society later decided to go it alone though its attempts met with little success.

Several other activities, however, were considered to be legitimate parts of the Society's mission. As early as March 1881 George Bunton suggested that the Society should provide a Sunday school for its members and the

matter was instituted and enacted later the same year.⁵⁸ The Hall also performed the function of a centre for the collection of signatures to petitions of a generally radical nature. These were sometimes left for members and sometimes were actively canvassed in a room set aside for the purpose. In 1883 signatures were sought for a petition against the Affirmation Bill and for another in favour of women's suffrage. An issue of more local interest, that excited a petition in 1898, was the opening of the Pasteur institute. Leicester was a centre of opposition to the campaign against compulsory vaccination which was led by the Liberal nonconformist wing of municipal authority assisted by several members of the Society. Likewise, in the same year, another petition calling for women's suffrage was passed around and coincided with a lecture from the Women's Suffrage Association.⁵⁹

The society was also capable of organising petitions explicitly for its own benefit, and in this way persuaded the local magistrate to grant the Society a seven day licence for music and singing. The Society was able to secure the signature of the chairman of the watch committee which it seems was sufficient to secure the licence since the subsequent public meeting in the town could be called off.⁶⁰

As the Society established itself in the Hall, it began to answer the call of Josiah Gimson to create a viable congregational life within its confines. As an adjunct to the work of spreading the Secularist message, individuals and their families were able to take advantage of a range of educational and leisure opportunities. Classes in singing were of educational value but also helped to provide accomplished members for the choir. Teas and entertainments appear to have been more of social occasions than fund raising events since the financial returns from them could prove erratic.

With the provision of lectures, the congregational life so praised by

Josiah Gimson began to take shape as Sundays were gradually set aside for the enrichment of members. Many of the developments of the eighties were attempts to gratify what was perceived as mankind's own innate religious impulse. Such a perception had been largely irrelevant to the position adopted by the earlier atheist infidels but it was tolerated, if not encouraged, by the new ideology of Secularism.

As early as April 1881 the provision of music became an important factor in the life of the Society. For Sunday, 17 April 1881 the general Committee agreed that a 'Musical Service' should be held in the afternoon preceding the evening lecture. This was advertised by the production of fifty posters and four hundred programmes. Thereafter the concept of a subscription concert with privileged seating for well-heeled non-members who were prepared to pay became a recognised method of raising additional funds. However such a method could not be overused. The same concerts were discontinued the following March because they were by then making a loss, as a result of which the band leader, a Mr. Kilby, had no option but to resign.⁶¹

Though the introduction of music in the form of concerts was capable of bringing in revenue as well as providing respectable entertainment, the Society also began to incorporate it into its own services. The minutes of the first year after the opening of the Hall indicate that the Society already had a choir and sang hymns on a regular basis, probably from their own recently compiled hymn book.⁶² Initially these were accompanied by a harmonium hired for the purpose, though the society later obtained an American organ and a grand piano, the latter a generous gift from Sydney Gimson. Many of these attempts to introduce music as a form of worship were pioneered by members who were drawn to the ethical Positivism of Auguste Comte. This group sought to introduce a greater element of ceremony into the

Society's proceedings based on a mystical celebration of human achievement. This was geared to providing a religious antidote to the grimness of mechanistic explanations of life and found comfort in ritualistic expression.

Though the arrival of Gould in the late nineties accelerated the trend there were other minds at work in the 1880's. George Findley a second hand bookseller, and ex-chartist, was the de facto leader of the group that included his son (also named George) and Malcolm Quin.⁶³ Findley was not slow in persuading the Society that it should develop a repertoire of hymns. This culminated in the production of a hymn book in 1882 in which Findley was heavily involved.⁶⁴ One hundred copies of the hymn book were printed with half that number bound as presentation copies in scarlet cloth. This was later advertised in the National Reformer and the Secular Review.⁶⁵ The exercise was repeated in 1900 when Sydney Gimson and J.M. Robertson pooled their resources to compile another hymn book that was self consciously designed to be the standard work for the Secularist movement.

One development contemporaneous with the production of the first hymn book was the growth of a choir. In July 1881 the Society empowered a Mr. Matthews to reorganise the choir from what appear to have been informal ramshackle origins. The intention was that the choir should be responsible for introducing Sunday 'services' with a hymn or voluntary. Attempts to restrict the composition of the choir strictly to members of the Society was difficult to enforce and was often the cause of disagreements. In 1882 several members of the General Committee wanted to refuse the choir the use of the Hall for a soirée of their own and it was only allowed on the conditions that a committee member be present. However Thomas Coltman, the delegated committee member, left early and the soirée degenerated into a rowdy free-for-all resulting in damage to the fabric of the Hall. It was obvious to the General Committee that the choir could not be trusted and it

was agreed that henceforth it should consist solely of members and their families.⁶⁶ Though the choir proved to be a lasting institution, its history was an extremely eventful one. In the seventeen years before Gould became the Society's organiser the choir had no less than five choir masters. Though not an excessively large number, one of these was dismissed for his part in the rowdy soiree and another ostracised and finally dispensed with for assaulting his wife.⁶⁷ On occasions there were complaints about the standard of performance given by both the band and the choir. It was even suggested in 1892 that the choir should either be improved or disbanded. Shortly after this date it did in fact collapse for a few months but was once again active by the end of 1893.⁶⁸

These complaints, however, simply suggest inevitable troughs in the history of both the choir and the band, two long running institutions that must have given many years of otherwise satisfactory service and pleasure. It also seems possible that the choir became not as popular a Sunday activity as it had once been, as it experienced intense competition, not least from the other activities available in the Hall.

Another manifestation of growing religious impulses within the Society was the introduction of the readings with which Sunday services were begun.. These were started in 1882 with the lecturer being given the option of reading it himself or allowing the chairman the privilege.⁶⁹ Such passages came from acknowledged Freethought classics and were generally devoted to short expressions of Rationalist principle or to the exposure of religious error and the development of Bible criticism. These Secularist 'bon mots' became, under the guiding hand of F.J. Gould, almost a literary form in their own right. Indeed Gould devoted a large portion of his own 'parish magazine', the Leicester Reasoner, to precisely this kind of comforting homily.⁷⁰

The Lecture Programme 1880 - 1890

Though many of the quasi-religious trappings certainly contributed to congregational life within the Society, the emphasis was still placed on lecturing as the most effective means of altering the oppressive nature of religion. This was deemed the most fitting and productive outlet for the Society's energies and its message.

In keeping with this the lecturers who came to the Hall during the early 1880's were mostly figures from the acknowledged Secular lecture circuit. Apart from old friends and guiding spirits such as G.J. Holyoake and Harriet Law, many were National Secular Society approved lecturers. Robert Forder was a frequent visitor during these years as was William Whitehouse Collins (grandson of the famous Birmingham Chartist) and Charles Watts. Other less frequent visitors were Joseph Symes and Hypatia Bradlaugh. Generally the subjects of their lectures were well trodden Freethought ground; Forder for example lectured on 'Mohemedanism and Biblical criticism' whilst Collins contented himself with exposing the fallacies of Paley's design argument.⁷¹ Nevertheless the more contemporary concerns of Darwin and his theories of evolution were covered by Edward Aveling who persuaded the Society to advertise him as "Doctor of Science, Fellow of University College London". However this pomposity did not prevent the Society from finding him a thoroughly capable lecturer, nor did it prevent Aveling from collecting as his fee the takings minus expenses, an unusual arrangement for Leicester.⁷² Nevertheless on the whole the Society was pleased with Aveling's performance and they attempted to hire him for another occasion despite growing doubts in the national movement about his character.

Quite what this group of lecturers from the National Secular Society made of this doggedly independent provincial society can only be vaguely

glimpsed. The Society, though welcoming them as lecturers with their individual viewpoints, was often opposed to the tactics of their parent organisation and, occasionally, opposed to their sentiments as Secularists.

In many ways the Leicester Secular Society could afford to cold-shoulder the N.S.S. since its own branch in the city had grown extremely weak. George Voss the former secretary of the Leicester Branch had, despite previous antagonism, joined the Society and by 1882 was involved in negotiations for the British Secular Union to use the Hall. He also began to work on a number of sub-committees, eventually becoming secretary of the Society in 1884. Though the Leicester branch continued it was always playing second fiddle to the Society and numerous attempts to combine talents were rebuffed.⁷³ The Leicester Society's own attitude to the N.S.S. was amply demonstrated by the replies it penned to a questionnaire which emanated from J.B. Coppock of the Nottingham Branch, who was later to lecture to the Society. Coppock was convinced that a local basis for Secularist activity would be more effective than the branch structure that surrendered both autonomy and good name to the whims of the movement in London. Once again older tensions between locality and national movement were alive and well. At least for the Nottingham Branch of the N.S.S., the example of Leicester offered more than passing hope. The Society replied that it was successful precisely because it was local and that such a form of organisation was of more benefit whilst there was "so much division in the party". In addition to this the Society declared that it had never felt the need to affiliate to the N.S.S. and gave helpful information about the level of subscription necessary to maintain a local society.⁷⁴

However this description did not go as far as to indicate the precise nature of the Leicester Society's own work. For the Society the lecture was the thing and the gradual development of their programme meant they

entertained lecturers with an increasingly wide portfolio. As well as asking Secularists from other localities to lecture, such as J. Edgar Myers of Huddersfield, the Society maintained a high profile by inviting political men of the moment. These included those who had links with the republican movement of the early 1880's such as George Standring, Georg Most and Frederick Verinder,⁷⁵ as well as attempting to procure the services of Joseph Arch. The Society also examined the new ideologies of Socialism by inviting William Morris and H. M. Hyndman.⁷⁶ A more exotic slant was given by the appearance of Russian emigrés on the platform such as Stepniak Mikailoff and Peter Kropotkin, the former a Nihilist and the latter an Anarchist. Kropotkin in particular was still to be a favourite of the Society in the nineties. Gimson remembered an interesting and amusing conversation in which Kropotkin advised Mrs. Gimson on the most beneficial methods of bringing up children!⁷⁷

The growing diversity of personalities and subjects that were covered was a direct consequence of the Society's avowal of a completely open platform. Such a policy gave the members of the Society access to the cream of ideas that had potential to shape the world around them. This was quickly seen to be an essential part of Leicester Secularism and was reflected in an alteration of the rules in 1885. The *raison d'être* of the Society was no longer to provide a home merely for "those approving of the principles of Secularism". It became instead the "advancement of Secular principles by means of lectures and discussion".⁷⁸

As movements and ideologies came to the fore the Leicester Secular Society sought to engage their adherents for its platform. Many ideas came propounded by a series of lecturers; It was decided, for example, that a series of lectures from the burgeoning Fabian Society would acquaint its members with the ideology of Socialism. Dutifully the society obliged with a

series conducted by Annie Besant, Graham Wallas, Bernard Shaw, William Clarke and Hubert Bland. Gimson remembers that the speeches were good and made many converts from the Society.⁷⁹ Another series, delivered in 1883, involved the Guild of St. Matthew led by the Reverend Stewart Headlam. The Guild was generally sympathetic to the Secularist demand for freedom of opinion though its members primarily sought a reform of Christianity to bring it in line with many Secularist demands. Most of the lecturers were clergymen like Canon H.C. Shuttleworth, Rev. Brooke Lambert (vicar of Greenwich), and the Rev. C. E. Escreet. However Frederick Verinder, as well as having an interest in land reform which he shared with Headlam, was a lay representative of the Guild.⁸⁰ Gimson himself had fond memories of the Guild of St. Matthew and was sent by his family to place a sovereign in the collection plate at each of their lectures.⁸¹

However the Guild members were not the only clergymen to lecture to the Society. Rev. J.F. Winks appears again as a lecturer in 1883 as well as the local Unitarian Minister John Page Hoppes who was well known to the Gimson family.⁸²

This apparent fraternisation with clergy, both local and national, was not seen as a healthy sign by those involved in national Secularism. Robert Forder, after a visit to the Society in 1886 concluded that the Leicester Society had virtually 'signed a peace treaty with the Christians'.⁸³ The appearance of both Stewart Headlam and Page Hoppes were criticised without a hearing by some sections of the national movement, the mere sight of a dog collar was more important than any ideas conveyed by its wearer. Such an attitude was by this stage very out of touch with the Leicester way. Nevertheless, the Society also fulfilled its obligations to the national movement since, at the height of the parliamentary oath agitation in 1885, it organised a mass meeting in the town for Charles Bradlaugh at the Floral

Hall at which upwards of 2,500 townspeople were present. Sydney Gimson considered the occasion to be one of the most memorable he had been involved in.⁹⁴

The lecture programme of the middle and late eighties offered variations on the themes the Society had already explored. Lecturers new to the Freethought circuit gained valuable experience from their frequent visits to Leicester. F.J. Gould, Arthur Moss of the Camberwell Secular Society, J.H. Levy and Edward Clodd all made their first of many appearances on a Leicester platform during these years.⁹⁵ Some like Arthur Hunt of Nottingham, made a debut appearance at Leicester in the same year that he was added to the list of N.S.S. lecturers. Hunt was another representative of a crop of lecturers emanating from Nottingham that had already included J. B. Coppock, Robert Porter and Kate Watts and was to include Harry Snell.⁹⁶

The long association with John Mackinnon Robertson began in these years. Robertson first lectured in April 1887 and was, in many ways well suited to the Society; he was a good speaker with interests in orthodox areas of Freethought such as Biblical criticism, theology and ethics as well as being a literary critic of considerable ability. He was also for many years, on the fringes of political power, finally achieving it in Asquith's 'Cabinet of all the talents'. He was considered to be very much an attraction in his own right, particularly to the ladies and always drew an enthusiastic audience. Moreover apart from his credentials as a lecturer he also demonstrated a lighter side when he entertained Gimson's own growing family with his impression of a grizzly bear!⁹⁷

Bradlaugh's future successor, G. W. Foote, also appeared at Leicester in 1884 when he lectured on the subject 'Is freethought a felony'. Like Robertson's his was to be a long acquaintanceship with the Society. Foote had been in contact with the Gimson family as early as 1875 when he appears to

have persuaded Josiah Gimson to finance The Secularist. He also found enemies amongst the Gimson women, by now converts to the broad church Anglicanism of David Vaughan. His strident anti-Christianity was already marking him out as a possible successor to Bradlaugh.⁸⁸ Though older than Sydney Gimson, Foote and Robertson represent the second generation of Freethought lecturers who inherited the mantle of national leadership, much as Gimson had locally in the context of Leicester.

The Lecture Programme 1890 - 1899

A plethora of lecturers bringing new ideas began to appear in the eighteen nineties, in some cases alongside appearances by the Society's established friends.⁸⁹ In many cases the Society was addressing important questions of the day and must have been responding to the concerns and interests of its members. The growing ideology of Ethicism was brought to Leicester by both Stanton Coit and Moncure D. Conway, lecturing respectively on 'The Workings of conscience in Shakespeare's plays' and 'How Jesus sank into the tomb of Lazarus'.⁹⁰ Conway's visits were relished by the Society but the obsession with ceremony demonstrated by Stanton Coit worried the sensibilities of many orthodox Secularists at Leicester.⁹¹

In order to provide some balance to the season of Fabian lectures held at the hall in 1888 - 9, the Society offered a series of lectures by Individualists. Thus Wordsworth Donisthorpe and his colleague Frederick Millar of the Liberty and Property Defence League were speakers at the Hall in what had become the burning question of the day. Individualism, like Socialism, made many converts in the Society though its emphasis on freedom and independence of the individual against the spurious assumptions of a greater power was more akin to earlier forms of Secularism. The most notable

adherent of Individualism was Gimson himself who admired the character of Donisthorpe and Millar though he found their lecturing style abrasive and cynical.⁹² Gimson preferred the more polished approach of Auberon Herbert whom he described as the nearest Individualism could provide to a Bernard Shaw.⁹³

The real George Bernard Shaw was also a welcome visitor to the Hall in the nineties and beyond, lecturing on 'Progress in Freethought' and 'Religion in the Twentieth Century'.⁹⁴ Like Robertson, he was very much of the Leicester style; witty, erudite and with a taste for literary allusion. Shaw's personality was infectious and impressed many, most notably Tom Barclay whose respect for Shaw was boundless.⁹⁵

The open platform of the Society was tested in the nineties when it bore witness to the apostasy of Annie Besant. In 1889 she lectured to the Society on 'The Organisation of industry under Socialism' but appeared two years later to lecture on Theosophy to which she had recently become a convert. However on the latter occasion she was followed by G. W. Foote who denounced its pretensions. Gimson remembered that Annie Besant was no longer the amiable friend and ideological sparring partner she had been and was now a rather aloof 'priestess'.⁹⁶

The lecture lists of the eighteen nineties suggest that apart from helping to wean a new generation of Secularist lecturers such as Moss, Gould, Levy and Robertson, the Society was deeply involved in the burning questions of the day. In the early nineties it was the Socialism versus Individualism argument that preoccupied the Society, though members made up their own minds fuelling discussion for many years to come.⁹⁷ In the late nineties the Society hosted lectures on Education, Evolution and the development of Secular Morality, though this probably suggests the interests

of lecturers such as Joseph McCabe, Lawrence Small & Chapman Cohen as much as those of the Society itself.

Finance

Throughout the period the health of the Society fluctuated from year to year. Finances were always precarious, though judicious cheeseparing and the fortunate acquisition of a series of generous benefactors prevented the Society from becoming wholly insolvent. It was also the stewardship of Sydney Gimson who became president after Thomas Wright that gradually brought the Society round. Gimson mentions that the years after his father's death were certainly characterised by financial problems based on the simple fact that outgoings were greater than income. In 1883 the Society had successfully negotiated a temporary reduction of its rent from the Hall Company of £30. The pressing need to raise income pushed the Society into letting the Hall as a serious financial consideration. Thus charges were revised in July 1883 to increase revenue, making the Hall available for concerts at a cost of 21/- or for soirées at 30/-, with an extra premium for holiday bookings. Though dancing classes for members were restarted the emphasis placed on the scale of charges to be made and the provision of refreshments suggests that the financial benefits were now of more than passing interest.⁹⁰

The importance of generating income eventually led to the appointment of Thomas Slater, an established friend and former Bury Co-operator, as manager of the Hall, Club and Bookshop premises in 1885. The appointment seems to have been more a recognition of Slater's reputation as a Co-operator, lecturer and friend of Holyoake than his managerial skills. The engagement was not successful and he was replaced by his son in the following year.⁹¹

By 1885 the total of rent earned by the Society amounted to £259 18/11d which was almost double the income they had earned in their previous premises ten years earlier. Much of this increased income was generated from lettings to members as well as non-members, though the receipts from stabling ceased to be a major source of income.¹⁰⁰

Nevertheless insolvency loomed in 1885 and members were pressed as a matter of urgency to subscribe to the lecturing fund. When the money was not forthcoming Sydney Gimson threatened a vote of censure on the finance sub-committee for their inattention to its collection at a time of pressing need.¹⁰¹ The Society fell behind with the rent and discovered that due to the mismanagement of Thomas Slater, arrears in the Book store and Club department, in addition to the arrears of hall rent, amounted to £214 7/6d.¹⁰² Remedial action was required and the General Committee decided to discontinue its tenancy of the Bookstore after reprimanding the store sub-committee. The tenancy then became the responsibility of William Henry Holyoak who appears to have run it thereafter under his own initiative. The Society also stopped taking a number of newspapers and deemed it necessary to make the rates for hiring the Hall more competitive. However, little could be done about the loss making Secular Club which was rapidly coming to be seen as a barrier to financial stability as well as to the ideals of the Society.¹⁰³ These same ideals nearly met an ignominious end when the committee toyed with a suggestion that they should have entertainments provided 'instead of the usual lectures'.¹⁰⁴

Despite this setback, more stringent attention to financial matters began to improve the Society's position. With the approval of the General Committee, the treasurership was handed over to the bank by Sydney Gimson for safe keeping.¹⁰⁵ A tightening up within the club however did not improve the position of this area of provision. After a shortlived increase in

activity, prices within the club were increased and a more vigilant attitude meant abuses of the occasional visiting rule were prevented. These reforms eventually discouraged a wider use of Club facilities and depressed the takings.¹⁰⁶ Though these measures had financial ends in view they were also part of the society's long term war of attrition against the Club and its attractions.

Despite the obvious effects financial constraints may have had on the life of the Society, it was in the years 1886 and 1887 that recruitment was at its highest. After the comparatively lean years in the early eighteen eighties when an average of 31 people became members, 1885 saw 104 join the Society. The following year 160 people became members, the highest annual recruitment the Society ever witnessed. This was also the year in which the annual anniversary celebration became a roll call of the Secular movement. Such an increase is particularly interesting since it contrasts with the peak in national recruitment which occurred in 1883.

Thereafter the late eighteen eighties saw the recruitment level stabilise around the 100 mark, still an impressive number for what was after all a provincial Secular Society.¹⁰⁷ Certainly many who joined in 1885 and 1886 were brought into the movement by the Bradlaugh case. In many ways this sort of recruitment went against the wishes of the Society who wanted earnest Secularists who could be depended upon rather than those roused by transitory national excitement. However the maintenance of a high level of recruitment in the late eighties, a period when the national movement was in decline, can only be attributed to local factors such as successful family and workplace recruitment.

The Development of the Society 1890 - 99

By 1889 Gimson, in his capacity as President, reported on the general health of the Society and demonstrated the range of services and benefits membership offered. Summer outings, a reading room, weekly socials and a popular series of lectures on questions of the day were all pushed by his annual report suggesting that the Society saw these as possible inducements to membership. Mention of the club was characteristically low key: whilst admitting it made a loss, Gimson claimed with some pride that it was because the members spent so little on alcohol.¹⁰⁸ The following year the attractions had increased: a skittle alley, whist matches and a newly formed bicycle club enhanced the opportunities for enjoyment provided by the Society.¹⁰⁹ Gimson was also able to report a financial upturn, though the Society was still effectively £120 in debt.

The year 1891 saw the position improve considerably with larger audiences at lectures, increased use of the club and skittle alley and the recent provision of a young persons debating class.¹¹⁰ This prosperity was also reflected in the finances of the Society as £40 of the rent arrears were paid off and it was hoped to pay the remainder off the following year.¹¹¹ There were ambitious plans to extend the work of the Society in the villages surrounding Leicester. However a downturn in trade then put this prosperity in jeopardy. Several members were found to be in reduced circumstances and the Society made collections to aid them. This was the impetus behind the setting up of a Society Benevolent Fund.¹¹² The report covering the two years 1892 and 1893 was considerably more pessimistic and shows the Society marking time, an impression confirmed by the minutes. The choir was disbanded and reformed and Gimson complained of the lack of audiences during the Summer, attributing this to the many outdoor attractions that drew people away.¹¹³ The club had also suffered as a result of the trade depression and receipts fell heavily in these years. Recruitment

was also affected with only 66 being nominated in 1892 as opposed to 123 in 1891.

Nevertheless Gimson intimated that reconstruction work was to start on the crest of an upturn in trade. He issued a circular in January 1894 stating that the Society had 'practically been at a standstill for many years'. The impression that the Society was neglecting its wider duties was confirmed in Gimson's mind by the recent decision to open the bar on Sundays and the consequential closing of the reading room to the public. He warned the Society that:

We need a special vigilance to guard ourselves from lazily letting the pleasures of club and social life absorb all the energy that should be given to upholding the principles that we believe would make the world a far brighter and better place to live in.¹¹⁴

Though it was resolved to restart the Sunday School, leisure was not entirely neglected since the Society also proposed to establish a gymnasium and swimming club, presumably with an eye to regenerating the society with younger members.¹¹⁵ Provision for an older generation of Secularists was also becoming of paramount importance. A sick club had already been established in 1890 and, in addition to this, the Society compiled a list of those willing to visit ailing members, as well as instituting an enquiry into the causes of their distress.¹¹⁶

Despite these apparent innovations the impression given by the Society in the middle nineties is one of contented inactivity. Lectures continued alongside the numerous clubs and activities that were offered. Indeed such quiet consolidation of leisure initiatives and their effects could hardly be

expected to exhibit evidence of dynamic activity. However there was always a suspicion that the Society's good fortune in acquiring a series of legacies was being squandered. Some argued that the money was wasted in maintaining a Hall primarily for pastoral and for recreational purposes. Such thoughts continually occupied Gimson and he duly came up with a radical solution. The decision to appoint a full-time organiser was an ingenious way of killing two birds with one stone. If the Society were to choose wisely, a talented and renowned lecturer from the national circuit would attract interest in the town as well as providing material help in the provision of welfare, educational and other pastoral services.

The Society's first choice for the post was an old friend and frequent lecturer, Harry Snell. He was appointed in September 1897 for a trial period during which he would visit the Society for most weekends during the winter of 1897 to comfort sick members and provide a number of meetings for young people. Gimson thought the project would cost £50 and was confident of raising the money.¹¹⁷ Eventually the society decided to offer him the post in March 1898 with an attendant salary of £150 per year. His contract required him to devote his whole time to teaching within the Society as well as providing pastoral care to sick and needy members. He was to lecture for the Society when required, to develop relations with sympathisers outside the Society and to publicise the work of Secularism.¹¹⁸ However the delight of the Society at having found what Sydney Gimson later called a 'Secular Pastor' was short lived when Harry Snell declined the engagement, probably because of the level of commitment to the society which it involved.¹¹⁹ After advertising the post in the Freethinker, The Ethical World, The Agnostic Journal and Watts' Literary Guide it was resolved to offer the post to Joseph McCabe.¹²⁰

McCabe had also been long respected by the Society and had impeccable

Secularist and intellectual credentials. Indeed McCabe's previous experience as a Catholic priest was deemed, rather ironically, to fit him well for the post!¹²¹ Gimson saw his appointment as a logical and welcome step in the society's development:

Every little Bethel can show sufficient self-sacrifice to support a minister, and shall we be behind them when we have the honour and progress of the cause of Freethought and Secularism at heart? The work we are trying to do will, if successful, serve as an example and encouragement to other Rationalist organisations.¹²²

McCabe's talents as a scientific lecturer, particularly in the field of evolution, were harnessed and he was persuaded to offer evening classes on these subjects in addition to French, Logic and Political Economy.¹²³ These classes provided 'an elementary acquaintance with sciences that are not otherwise available...in the classes at the Secular Hall.'¹²⁴ For the rest of the year the arrangement worked well but in December McCabe's other lecturing commitments began to encroach upon his work for the Society, to the extent that he left them without a lecturer on one occasion. He was thereafter curtly requested to inform the Society of his future lecturing plans.¹²⁵

McCabe, like Snell before him, was unable to give the total commitment the Society required and duly resigned on 11 January 1899.¹²⁶ As soon as McCabe's intention to resign was apparent the Society was offered the services of Frederick James Gould, one of the new generation of Positivists, and it resolved to accept him.¹²⁷

Gould approached his task from a profoundly different viewpoint than the

previous occupants of the post. Rather than using the Society as a base for forays into the national world of Freethought and Secularism Gould saw the Society, and his position in it, as a genuine force for good in the local community. Gould had an ability to make local issues out of national issues, fired by his own ethical standpoint. Thus Education, politics and poverty were to become once again important issues on which Secularists could strive to be heard. The sheer energy and diligence that Gould brought to his task was to re-awaken memories of the great campaigning days for a local Society whose national parent was in irretrievable decline.

Footnotes to Chapter Three

- 1: Many of these plans are appended at the end of the Society Photograph Album.
- 2: F.J. Gould The History of the Leicester Secular Society (Leicester 1900), page 20.
- 3: Sir Nicholas Pevsner The Buildings of England: Leicestershire and Rutland (1960, Second edition 1984), page 238.
- 4: F.J. Gould The Life Story of a Humanist (1923), plate facing page 85.
- 5: Gould, History, page 21.
- 6: Ibid. page 20
- 7: Ibid. page 21.
- 8: Midland Free Press, 28 September 1880, page 8.
- 9: Ibid. 11 September 1880, page 6.
- 10: Ibid. page 6..
- 11: Ibid. 4 September 1880, page 5.
- 12: Leicester Journal, 18 March 1881.
- 13: Midland Free Press, 18 September 1880, page 6.
- 14: Tom Barclay, Memoirs and Medleys. The Autobiography of a Bottle Washer (1934) pages 77 - 9. See also Bill Lancaster, Radicalism. Cooperation and Socialism. Leicester Working Class Politics 1860 - 1906. (Leicester 1987), pages 90 - 1. L.S.S.M.B., 9 February 1881.
- 15: Sydney Ansell Gimson 'Random Recollections of the Leicester Secular Society with Digressions' (1932), page 6.
- 16: Press cutting from 'Leicester Evening Mercury' (probably March 1881) appended in Minutes.
- 17: Ibid..
- 18: Ibid..

- 19: Ibid..
- 20: Ibid..
- 21: Edward Royle Radicals, Secularists and Republicans (1980), pages 25 - 6.
- 22: Press cutting from Leicester Mercury appended in Minutes.
- 23: Ibid..
- 24: Ibid..
- 25: L.S.S.M.B., 7 February 7th.
- 26: In the years under discussion Baker attended the anniversary celebrations in 1884, 1885, 1886, 1889, 1890, 1891 & 1897. For Baker see Royle, Radicals, Secularists and Republicans, page 58.
- 27: Sydney Ansell Gimson, 'Random Recollections of the Leicester Secular Society with Digressions' (1932), page 62.
- 28: Gimson, 'Random Recollections', page 63.
- 29: Royle, Radicals, Secularists and Republicans, page 55.
- 30: For Ross see Ibid. pages 101 - 2.
- 31: Ibid. page 222. Philip Dawson was the nom de plume of Joseph Ellis.
- 32: See Ibid. pages 166 & 182 - 3 and David Tribe, 100 years of Freethought (1967), page 159.
- 33: Leicester Mercury 3 March 1885, page 2.
- 34: Royle, Radicals, Secularists and Republicans, page 325.
- 35: Gimson, 'Random Recollections', page 12 & 25.
- 36: Royle, Radicals, Secularists and Republicans, page 222.
- 37: Gimson, 'Random Recollections', page 13.
- 38: Ibid. page 64.
- 39: See L.S.S.M.B., 5 February 1896, 9 February 1898.
- 40: Leicester Mercury 7 September 1883, page 3.
- 41: Ibid..
- 42: G.J.Holyoake, Secular Prospects in Death, an address at the funeral of

Josiah Gimson (1883), copy appended in L.S.S. minutes.

43: See will of Josiah Gimson in Leicestershire Record Office, New Walk, Leicester at R (1883) Page 687. Gimson's personal estate was valued at £20,663 11/6½d (gross) and £19,307 4/9½d (net). In his will Josiah Gimson acknowledged that his nephew and two eldest sons were his established partners and made provision for his younger son Sydney to replace him as a partner in the firm, complete with necessary share capital. The acceptance of his nephew as a partner was recognition that the firm had been established by two brothers. See also Dinah Freer, 'The Dynasty Builders of Victorian Leicester' in Transactions of the Leicestershire Archaeological and Historical Society Volume LIIII 1977 - 78, pp 42 - 54, page 49 - 50. Dinah Freer suggests that there was a deliberate policy in the subsequent generation to allow only the eldest of each branch of the family to enter the firm out of a possible fourteen members.

44: See Chapter 6.

45: Gimson, 'Random Recollections', page 9. In addition to Michael Wright and Josiah Gimson the memoirs record that Thomas Coltman and John Sladen also died around this date. For Sladen see also L.S.S.M.B., 17 July 1883.

46: Gimson 'Random Recollections', pages 7 - 10.

47: See L.S.S.M.B., 3 June 1881.

48: See L.S.S.M.B., 19 November 1883.

49: See L.S.S.M.B., 12 July 1887, 9 August 1881, 18 October 1883.

50: See L.S.S.M.B., 15 October 1883, 29 January 1884.

51: See L.S.S.M.B., 13 August 1889.

52: See for example sub-committees listed at L.S.S.M.B., 2 February 1888. Messrs. Hardy, Hill, Stoughton and Carter appear as sub-committee workers only to be elected to the general committee at the July Half yearly meeting - L.S.S.M.B., 30 July 1888.

- 53: See L.S.S.M.B., 23 March 1882, 1 December 1898.
- 54: See L.S.S.M.B., 1 May 1888, October 19th 1892, March 18th 1883, 2 February 1885.
- 55: See L.S.S.M.B., 4 March 1895, 13 August 1889.
- 56: See L.S.S.M.B., 8 August, 1 November 1881.
- 57: See L.S.S.M.B., 30 March 1881.
- 58: The Secular Society Sunday school is discussed in chapter 8.
- 59: See L.S.S.M.B., 18 March, 2 July 1883, 6 January, 31 March 1897. For examples of the vast local literature on the matter of anti-vaccination see J. T. Biggs, Smallpox at Leicester (Leicester 1887), H. Dudgeon, Official Defence of Vaccination by E. C. Seaton examined and refuted by H. D. Dudgeon (Leicester 1876) and Leicester Corporation: Sanitary Committee Report of an inquiry by the Fever Hospital Committee into the Causes of an outbreak of Smallpox in Leicester (1892). Much of the literature brings together medical, political, philosophical and statistical opinion to argue that compulsory vaccination is both unsafe and an infringement upon personal rights and liberties.
- 60: See L.S.S.M.B., 25 September 1888.
- 61: See L.S.S.M.B., 13 April, 13 September 1881, 21 March 1882.
- 62: See L.S.S.M.B., 9 August, 23 August, 6 September 6 1881. See Gould History, page 34.
- 63: See Sydney Ansell Gimson, 'Random Recollections' (1932), pages 19 - 20, and Malcolm Quin, Memoirs of a Positivist (1924), pages 23 - 24.
- 64: See L.S.S.M.B., 12 July 1881, 27 September 1881. George Findley was responsible for obtaining permission for the use of hymns from their respective authors. See also Gould, History, page 34.
- 65: See L.S.S.M.B., 27 June, 4 July, 31 October 1882.
- 66: See L.S.S.M.B., 23 March 1882.

- 67: See L.S.S.M.B., 4 March 1884.
- 68: See L.S.S.M.B., 6 October 1881, 2 March 1892. See also Secular Society Annual Report for 1892 - 3, in 'Scrapbook'.
- 69: See L.S.S.M.B., 1 August 1882.
- 70: For Gould and the Leicester Reasoner see below Chapter 4.
- 71: For Robert Forder see L.S.S.M.B., 20 April 1881, 19 September 1882, 12 March 1883. For William Whitehouse Collins see L.S.S.M.B., 6 September 1881, 30 April 1883, 24 August 1885. For Charles Watts see L.S.S.M.B., 4 May, 6 December 1881, 31 May 1882. For Joseph Symes see L.S.S.M.B., 30 August 1881, 24 August 1885. For Hypatia Bradlaugh L.S.S.M.B., 13 June 1882.
- 72: See L.S.S.M.B., 30 August, 6 September,, 18 September 1881.
- 73: See L.S.S.M.B., 28 November 1882, 6 February 1883, 4 February 1884. For an attempt to join forces see L.S.S.M.B., 22 September 1884.
- 74: See L.S.S.M.B., 28 May 1883.
- 75: See L.S.S.M.B., 21 February 1882 for George Standring, 19 September 1882 for Georg Most, 26 November 1883 for Frederick Verinder. Verinder also canvassed the Society about the possibility of their affiliation to his English Land Restoration League, though the Society itself declined, it was nevertheless prepared to accept further lecturers attached to this Society (L.S.S.M.B., 13 April 1885).
- 76: For Arch see L.S.S.M.B., 14 February 1882, for Morris and Hyndman see L.S.S.M.B., 19 November, 10 December 1883.
- 77: For Stepniak see L.S.S.M.B., 10 December 1883, for Kropotkin see L.S.S.M.B., 19 September 1882 and Gimson, 'Random Recollections', pages 40 - 43.
- 78: Principles and Rules of the Leicester Secular Society 1885, appended in Scrapbook 1.
- 79: Gimson, 'Random Recollections', page 25.
- 80: Ibid. page 10.

- 81: Ibid..
- 82: L.S.S.M.B., 4 June 1883, 28 April 1884.
- 83: National Reformer, 7 February 1886, quoted in Royle, Radicals Secularists and Republicans, page 139.
- 84: Gimson, 'Random Recollections', page 16.
- 85: For Gould see L.S.S.M.B., 28 May 1883, 4 February 1884, see also lecture list for 1893. For Moss see L.S.S.M.B., 14 November 1882, 1 December 1884. For J.H. Levy see L.S.S.M.B., 4 October 1887. For Edward Clodd see L.S.S.M.B., 11 February 1884.
- 86: L.S.S.M.B., 2 April 1883 & Gimson, 'Random Recollections', page 11.
- 87: See Ibid. pages 91 - 98. Gimson's memoirs make clear that Robertson quickly became a firm friend of the family and this attachment became an integral part of his visits to Leicester. In this friendship with the Gimson's emphatically meant friendship with the Society. For Robertson's appearances at Leicester during the eighties see L.S.S.M.B., 19 April, 4 October 1887.
- 88: See Gimson, 'Random Recollections', pages 67 - 69.
- 89: During the period 1889 - 1898 Robertson appeared at least 15 times, Foote 5 times, Moss 3 times, Touzeau Parris 7 times. See lecture lists 1889 - 1898 appended in scrapbook.
- 90: See Ibid. 1894 & 1895.
- 91: Gimson, 'Random Recollections', pages 49 - 50.
- 92: Ibid. pages 29 - 30.
- 93: Ibid. pages 29 & 84 - 90.
- 94: lecture lists 1891 & 1895.
- 95: Barclay, Memoirs and Medleys passim.
- 96: Lecture lists 1889 & 1891 and Gimson, 'Random Recollections', page 28.
- 97: Barclay Memoirs and Medleys, passim. See also Gimson, 'Random Recollections', pages 34 - 5 for Gimson's description of country walks in

the Newtown Linford area during which the reordering of society was the most popular topic.

98: L.S.S.M.B., 31 July, 17 July, 24 July 1883.

99: See Gimson, 'Random Recollections', pages 35 - 36.

100: See the Leicester Secular Society Cash Book at New Walk Record Office 10D 68/23. page 2.

101: L.S.S.M.B., 20 October, 8 December 1885.

102: L.S.S.M.B., 29 December 1885.

103: L.S.S.M.B., 15 December 15th, 23 December 1885, 5 January 1886, 1 December 1886. Relations between the club and the Society will be discussed in Chapter 7.

104: L.S.S.M.B., 5 January 1886.

105: L.S.S.M.B., 18 January 1887.

106: L.S.S.M.B., 7 September 1886, 19 July 1887, 17 April, 11 September 1888.

107: See Appendix four.

108: See Annual Report for 1889, appended in Scrapbook.

109: See Annual Report for 1890, appended in Scrapbook.

110: See Annual Report for 1891, appended in Scrapbook, page 4 - 9.

111: Ibid. page 11.

112: See L.S.S.M.B., 29 May, 27 July, 19 October, 2 November 1892.

113: See Annual Report for 1892 - 3, appended in Scrapbook, page 4.

114: Sydney Gimson's address to the Society January 1894, appended in Scrapbook.

115: See L.S.S.M.B., 31 January 1894.

116: L.S.S.M.B., 18 November 1896, 20 January 1897.

117: L.S.S.M.B., 8 September 1897 & circular on appointment of Harry Snell, September 1897, appended in Scrapbook.

118: L.S.S.M.B., 30 March 1898.

119: L.S.S.M.B., 13 April 1898.

120: L.S.S.M.B., 23 May 1898.

121: Circular on appointment of Joseph McCabe, September 1898, appended in Scrapbook.

122: Ibid..

123: Ibid., see also L.S.S.M.B., 28 June 1898.

124: Circular on Autumn evening Classes 1898 appended in Scrapbook.

125: L.S.S.M.B., 14 December 1898.

126: L.S.S.M.B., 11 January 1899.

127: L.S.S.M.B., 1 February 1899.

CHAPTER FOUR

E. J. GOULD - SECULARIST, SOCIALIST AND PASTOR.

Gould's appointment to the post of Organiser to the Society was very much the hurried response to the unwelcome departure of Joseph McCabe though it also seems that Gould canvassed for the post. At the same meeting as McCabe resigned a letter from Gould appeared before the committee enquiring about the post of organiser so it seems possible that Gould was, at least in part, nominated by McCabe as his successor.¹

Despite the fact that F. J. Gould was not the obvious first choice the Leicester Secular Society still had reason to feel pleased with the appointment. Though he was not a national figure like Harry Snell or the studious Joseph McCabe he had lectured to the Society before and he appeared to be one of the coming men. He was an experienced teacher and had campaigned against the prevalent scheme of Bible teaching in the schools of east London.² Gould had been one of the personalities involved in the Moral Instruction League which sought to improve the nature of all ethical instruction in schools. The organisation's acceptance of the Bible as a potentially valid source for Moral Instruction was however opposed by many in the national Secular movement, most notably Annie Besant. This however was no bar to the acceptance of Gould by the Leicester Secular Society which could justly claim that he was further fulfilling their philosophy of improving religious instruction rather than replacing it.

Gould was also a leading devotee of the ideas of Comte and, though he described himself as a Positivist, he spent more time developing practical ethical applications for the philosophy than many of the other prime movers. Whilst Frederick Harrison devised rituals and Malcolm Quin established an

experimental Church of Humanity in Newcastle, Gould was busy devising a plausible system of Moral Instruction that he was able to persuade many was actually unsectarian. His intention was not that Positivism should be 'set up' as a new religious alternative but that through the medium of education its ideas should permeate the wider society. Such a philosophy was further motivated by the Socialist conclusions which Gould drew from his interest in Comte which affected his own attitude both to Positivism and other Positivists. Though Comte's gospel appeared to have some sort of socialist order as its goal, Gould was impatient with its by now anachronistic millennialism and found the social pretensions of other Positivists 'too bourgeois'.³ He put this feeling more succinctly towards the end of his life when he declared : 'I have more respect for one poor proletarian mother, struggling with poverty, than for a congregation of Positivist philosophers in a comfortable library'.⁴ This individual blend of convictions meant that F. J. Gould was able to see the active vocation of a true Positivist in a whole range of areas. Municipal Socialism, Moral Instruction and the confrontation of clerical pretensions were all ways of promoting the wider Gospel of Humanity. In particular Gould's shrewd assessment that the education question was to be the most important political and religious issue of the Edwardian period was ultimately responsible for his rise to prominence.

For the Leicester Secular Society the acquisition of Gould as their organiser was calculated to gain a number of benefits. His reputation in the realm of education and ethical curriculum development seemed to bode well for the future of the Sunday school which had relied primarily on the Society's Positivists for many years. Indeed Gould appeared to offer a whole scheme of 'good works' based on the twin motivations of Socialism and the Religion of Humanity. Moreover, in the area of religious confrontation, his

ideas appeared to be closer to those of the Leicester Secular Society than many, who, like G. W. Foote, still clung to the old iconoclasm. Gould's ethical Positivism saw the matter of replacing religious impulses with other forms of suitable collectivism as a matter of the utmost urgency:

there must be a governing theory, however crude or confused or weak. That is the meaning of churches, chapels, and Secular halls. If you take away a man's governing theory, the old habit will remain; sooner or later he will go back to it, or he will seek another. Argue him out of Christian theology, he will still search more or less anxiously for another basis, and he will experience discomfort and mental laxity so far as he fails to attain it.⁵

The arrival of Gould must have seemed like the logical step forwards. His presence it was hoped would rekindle the prospects of the Society by catering for their own personal welfare and by developing Secularist propaganda within the town. The Secularism of Holyoake, driven onward by Positivist zeal, was to at last be given the chance to go on the attack.

Though the Leicester Secular Society knew something of Gould as a lecturer and respected figure, they could not have known what it would be like to have him permanently in their midst. As a personality Gould seems to have been something of an enigma. At times sober and austere, whilst at others lightheartedly playful (particularly when taunting nonconformists and passive resisters). F. J. Gould seems to have exhibited the residual piety of his evangelical background tinged with the mischievous joy at having cast it aside. Though staunchly committed to his ideals he was sufficiently pragmatic to maintain amiable relations with most who came his way. Anyone who

disliked his occasional overbearing authoritarianism could not doubt the depth of his conviction nor fail to admire his massive workrate. At heart he was still an evangelical and his acceptance of Positivist ideas gave him a gospel to preach which he did at every possible opportunity. Sydney Gimson remembers him as dressing in the manner of a parson, an impression Gould was obviously at pains to create.⁶ He was equally at home on the platform or the page and combined these attributes with an instinctive skill for publicity and cultivating controversies where he artfully remained in charge of the argument. Despite an ability to be in the right place at the right time Gould was not simply an opportunist and his achievements emerge as products of hard consistent work as much as of sleight of hand. In addition to discharging his responsibilities within the Secular Society he was able to write extensively for the press and fulfil lecturing and other commitments outside the Society. His own autobiography describes his activities during these years with the customary false modesty that almost became his trademark:

I lectured on literature, biography, and history; taught classes in logic, psychology, sociology, etc.; supervised a Young People's Ethical Guild, carried on a "Garland" group for juniors, initiated a women's Sewing-circle, presided at discussions, increased and catalogued the library, composed a *History* of the Society (1900), wrote articles and reports in the local press, edited the monthly *Leicester Reasoner* (1901 - 3), recorded minutes, collected rents for the Secular Hall Company, instructed the Sunday-school, conducted operettas, painted scenery, stage-managed the small actors, organised three bazaars, got up programmes for "socials" and dances, visited the sick, bent over

the dying, and pronounced many a funeral address. And still I felt the agenda was inadequate, and longed for more scopes to conquer.⁷

Certainly the arrival of F. J. Gould rapidly increased the level of activity within the Society. Within a year Gould had been appointed as Secretary to the Society and had been instrumental in getting a number of new activities under way as well as breathing new life into a number of old ones. The growth of amateur dramatics was encouraged and the Society duly recognised them as a legitimate and positive form of leisure.⁸ Likewise 1899 was the year that the Society's annual outing became an institution and extension meetings in Leicestershire villages were also undertaken.⁹ Gould also had a hand in the decision to continue with the choir during the quieter summer period and also managed to obtain a place for himself and a fellow Positivist composer and musician, Emily Troup, on the committee concerned with the production of the Society's new hymn book.¹⁰ Financial matters however were not neglected: the club was asked to be of more material benefit to the Society and Gould himself proposed that money should be raised by a bazaar in 1900.¹¹ Gould placed his mark more firmly on the society by his reactivation of the Sunday school, and his ethicist influence is certainly detectable in the new statement of principles drawn up by the Society in November of that year:

That reason should be the supreme guide of personal and social conduct. That morality is the noblest expression of man's nature, and will reach a higher level when theology has passed away. ¹²

Despite these gentle innovations Gould appeared determined to become part of the Society and he demonstrated this by undertaking to write a history of the Society to be published in 1900.¹³ The *History* itself is a valuable document since it is almost the only real collection of oral evidence we have for the pre-1880 Society. It must have taken a great deal of effort on the part of Gould himself, particularly when considered alongside the breadth of his other duties. However the product of these labours remains typical of Gould's character. Amid what seems to be the fairly faithful evidence gained from eyewitnesses, particularly William Henry Holyoak, is an amount of plausible fiction, informed guesses and exaggerations. Despite this, in writing the work Gould can reasonably be excused any ulterior motives other than seeking to please the Society with a more rounded and sympathetic account than was actually possible with the limitations of the sources available.

By the end of Gould's first year with the Society the foundations of a new period of development had been laid. Sydney Gimson felt that the situation was sufficiently promising for him to hand the presidency over to other hands. He had long thought that new blood would be in the interests of the Society and would stimulate growth. With the new organiser settled in the moment had arrived and Gimson duly stepped down - though the Society was reluctant to see him go. Eventually he was replaced by William Wilber after he had persuaded the Society by promising that he would seek re-election at a future date.¹⁴

However during 1900 the atmosphere in the Society changed. Though the post of organiser had been considered to be a supportive one, Gould gradually expanded his rôle into the realm of policy making. After his arrival he had found that the Leicester Secular Society was not organised on the lines he had encountered in the East London Ethical Society, and

possessed a character all its own which was not at all to his liking. Its tradition of genial club life and relaxed attitude to alcohol was disliked by Gould and he began a systematic campaign against both the club and members whom he considered to be unsuitable or indolent. Applications for membership were more closely scrutinised and several were rejected since Gould was not himself convinced that the prospective members adhered totally to the Secular creed.¹⁵ Others found their personal affairs reflecting on their good character in the Society. A Mr. Wilkinson found himself the victim of rumours about his honesty when he re-applied to join the society after a period of arrears. His brother did his utmost to dispel these rumours but his application was rejected at an open meeting.¹⁶ Some members unwittingly found themselves victims of Gould's own crusade against the club. More stringent control had already been instigated in the form of a more carefully maintained visitors book and a clampdown on extensions and breaches of licensing hours, but Gould pressed on.¹⁷ Reported incidences of drunkenness increased, though this seems likely to have been caused by the almost gleeful vigilance of Gould and his supporters. A Mr. Bull was upbraided for his objectionable behaviour in the club whilst drunk, and on another occasion three other members were reprimanded for similar behaviour - all of which served to blacken the name of the club still further.¹⁸

The club however was not the only area of the Society that caught the attention of Gould. A concert held on behalf of the Reservists fund was objected to as unsatisfactory and several items on the programme, presumably popular songs, were considered by Gould to be objectionable.¹⁹ Similarly after the successful Bazaar of 1900 Gould objected to the Committee's decision to dispose of articles by raffle. Such an attitude contrasted sharply with that of the other members of the committee who sought to

acknowledge the help given in a good cause by allowing the workers unrestricted access to the Hall during the week of the Bazaar along with a dance on their behalf.²⁰

There seems no doubt that the new atmosphere of austere piety sat uneasily on a Secular Society that had preached liberty and individual freedom of choice. Nonetheless Gould had been appointed to look after the welfare of the Society and he did not shrink from the task. He judged that mindless, unsupervised social activities were a fundamental drain on meagre human and financial resources. They also generally failed to live up to his own exacting standards of decorum and taste and he sought the solution in attempts to rationalise and streamline commitment within the Society. The net effect was the reversal of trends that had been operating unchecked within the Society for many years. The eighteen eighties and nineties had seen the Society effectively denominationalising itself from its sectarian origins. That is, it had expanded its constituency to admit and welcome a wider range of members whilst making a more solid compact with the world outside. Such a tendency has been described by Bryan Wilson as typical of 'conversionist' sects, of which Secularism is an obvious example.²¹ Wilson generally describes the development of denomination from sect as a logical, even inevitable development. Gould strove to turn the clock back to obtain commitment by subscription to a more obviously collectivist ideal. Wilson's analysis of sectarian characteristics indicates the result of such developments and suggest what Gould was trying to achieve:

Sects have a totalitarian rather than a segmental hold over their members: they dictate the member's ideological orientation to secular society; or they rigorously specify the necessary standards of moral rectitude; or they compel the member's

involvement in group activity.... Not only does the sect discipline or expel the member who entertains heretical opinions, or commits a moral misdemeanour, but it regards such defection as betrayal of the cause...²²

Gould and Secularist Representation in Community

With Gould's attention firmly fixed on the internal structure of the Society the next development must have come as a surprise to many in the Leicester Secular Society. In October 1900 Gould declared his intention to stand as a candidate in the forthcoming School Board election. The General committee had no alternative but to sanction this, despite the fact that it clashed with the candidacy of John Potter, one of the Society's Vice Presidents.²³

Eventually Gould was returned second in the poll which suggests that he was able to capture a number of nonconformist votes with his platform of unsectarian education which offered a way out of the deadlock of religious involvement in education. Moreover, Gould obviously found that a reputation for teetotalism and sober conviction did his electoral prospects no harm at all! The conclusion is difficult to ignore that Gould's sectarian approach to the ideals of the Leicester Secular Society were at least in part motivated by the desire to present a favourable image. It was hoped that the respectable and respectful Society would reflect well on the organiser responsible for the change. However it is possible to judge Gould too harshly on this issue; he was doubtless committed to transforming the Society in any case and it is impossible to distinguish what amount of publicity he was

gaining for Secularism and what amount he was gaining for himself. Indeed what Gould was able to achieve for the cause of Secularism and Secular education in the following eighteen months could be described as quite remarkable.²⁴ He was also in a sense doing no more than following his own conviction that education was the burning issue of the day and that in fact not to take a seat, possessing the qualifications that he did, would amount to a dereliction of duty. Gould considered that he was in the ideal position to guide opinions in the direction of moral instruction. Moreover he had an important part to play in thwarting the anticipated nonconformist opposition to the Balfour Education Act which threatened their entrenched position. Gould was in favour of the Act which, though imperfect and conciliatory towards the Church of England, at least set in motion in his eyes a system of national education. This would be presided over locally by the municipal and county councils, which Gould found much more palatable than the sectarian School Boards.²⁵ Gould's solution to the current squabble in the field of education was typically his own:

What is to be done ? There is only one solution. The so-called religious instruction must be taken out of the time-table of every school supported by rates or taxes, and it must be no part of a teacher's duty to give such instruction. The Government and Town Council must pay for Secular Education only,... The moral training of the children should be regarded as the main purpose of the secular education, and this purpose can be realised by means of plain, sensible, systematic lessons in the secular duties and responsibilities of domestic, social and political life.²⁶

Despite F. J. Gould's depth of convictions, contemporaries found that a meddlesome and interfering manner remained a prominent feature of his personality and coloured his attempts to alter terms of business that were the prerogative of the School Board. This criticism was captured by the Leicester Guardian which produced a musical comedy to mark the passing of the Board and put a song into Gould's mouth which summed up his record of achievement, though it also concentrated on what is saw as his bombastic egotism :

When I came on the Board I could see at a glance
Its affairs were absurdly at sea;
A fact perhaps due to the Board's sad mischance
Of existing so long without me.
Let me mention an instance to show what I mean:
The morals of scholars were fed
On a book called the Bible, which intellects keen
(Like my own) have proved long to be dead.²⁷

At the end of the musical comedy the School Board barricades the door against the approaching Town Clerk, though Gould asks ironically to be entered in the minutes as offering 'only passive resistance.'²⁸ Despite the lighthearted tilt the comedy was right about the redundancy of the School Board. Though Gould was in favour of the change it nonetheless meant that his job was apparently done until a new field of activity could be found.

Gould and the Secular Society

Alongside his activities in the town F. J. Gould did not rest in his

attempts to improve the Leicester Secular Society as his influence was further extended. He began to restrict the access of unsupervised children to the Hall. First of all complaints about the children were heard from those who used the reading room, and children were also subsequently prevented from inhabiting the gallery on lecture nights.²⁹ Gould pressed onwards with his attempts to gain more committed Secularists and complained that there were still loop holes in the admission policy which allowed those 'neither for nor against our principles' to join the Society.³⁰ Once more the Secular Club and its clientele became the target of Gould's disdain. He had now become determined to enact the prohibition of alcohol. After further pronouncements on the unsuitability of the bar person employed and the quality of songs sung in the club room Gould moved in for the kill!³¹ In October of 1901 he confronted the Leicester Secular Society with the choice between himself as organiser and the dubious attractions of the club department in its present form. In December he tendered his resignation with the intention that he be re-elected at the next Annual General Meeting. Gould further stated that he would only regard a large majority as a mandate for his policies. The eventual vote was an overwhelming success for Gould's tactic of brinkmanship with a vote in his favour of 103 to 28.³² Reasons for the Society's desire to retain Gould as organiser are not hard to find. He had rejuvenated the Society and raised hope and expectation in all areas of activity as well as stimulating a growth in membership which he oversaw and assisted in enrolling.³³ Moreover Gould at this stage only sought greater control of the club and many could have been forgiven for thinking that he stopped short of outright alcohol prohibition. However this vote also seems to reflect changes in both the membership and its expectations. Gould's policy of mass enrolment of those committed to the ideology of the Society must have brought many of a Positivist leaning into the Society who would

naturally follow the ideas and designs of their own mentor. Older members may, however, have seen the club as an anachronism which offered facilities which could be obtained from other institutions such as the burgeoning Working Men's Club movement.³⁴

The resounding success of Gould's re-election meant that further action against alcohol in the club was only a matter of time. After a short interval, in which more cases of drunkenness and abuse of the bar facilities during lectures were reported, the inevitable happened. Gould issued a long circular which attacked the longstanding abuses of the club which he claimed inhibited the cultivation of a good reputation in the town and prevented the Society from being invited to take part in the major political events and agitations of the day. Gould also alleged that alcohol and the atmosphere it brought with it discouraged membership from women and youths at the expense of 'loafers'.³⁵ By this stage Gould could count on the support of a majority of the membership, though the result of a questionnaire sent to members suggested that the policy of prohibition would not be universally popular.³⁶ Thus on 30 July 1902 the purchase of alcohol for consumption on the premises of the Secular Hall was discontinued, though once again resistance was strong and the resolution was passed by a mere eleven votes out of a total of ninety three.³⁷

Though F. J. Gould had won he now sought to consolidate this victory with further reforms and maintenance of discipline. More complaints about children and the bad behaviour of adults followed and Gould upbraided a number of members for taking little interest in the financial affairs of the Secular Society. Gould's answer to what was a lingering problem of shades of commitment was to introduce a two-tiered membership policy. Henceforth the Society introduced a form of associate membership which was open to those who only expressed 'friendliness towards the Society's object, without

complete assent to its Secular principles'. These associate members could use the premises and attend socials but had no voting rights and could not introduce visitors. Subscriptions were 3/- a year for women and 3/- per half year for men compared with 6/- and 9/- respectively for full membership.³⁸ The same set of rules contained a redefinition of the Society's aim which suggests that Gould's major aim of transforming the Leicester Secular Society into an ethical one was at least partly approaching fulfilment:

The object of the Leicester Secular Society shall be the advancement of Rationalist and Ethical principles by means of lectures, discussions, classes for adults and children, library, publication and distribution of literature, social meetings etc..³⁹

Despite having brought the society into line Gould still persisted in a policy which would gain a wider audience for his views, and he decided to offer himself as a candidate in the local elections of November 1903 in Newton ward. Standing as a Socialist, Gould found himself opposed by a Liberal linoleum dealer called Spurway, and advocated what was rapidly becoming his usual platform of Moral Education tinged with municipal Socialism. He could not refrain, however, from his equally customary attacks on the sensibilities of his rival as he held up to ridicule the foibles of passive resisters and extreme temperance advocates, amid quotes from Plato and Walt Whitman. Gould's Socialist platform and his wide ranging attacks however were not taken seriously by the Liberals who won comfortably by 686 votes to Gould's 276.⁴⁰ By July 1904 Gould had resolved to stand again and notified the Society of this intention. This time he stood for Castle ward against a Conservative publican and was duly elected on a teetotal platform

by Baptists and Wesleyans who could presumably only just distinguish between the lesser of two evils.⁴¹

Even Gould at this stage realised his position as organiser of the Leicester Secular Society was becoming ambivalent. He had accepted responsibility for the welfare of the Society only to be seen by some to be rejecting it in favour of a more glamorous arena of activity. Gould decided to explain himself to the Society in his monthly report for November 1904 and had it entered in the minutes. He argued that his original brief, to organise and conduct classes, was a mistaken one since there was little enough demand for them anyway. A higher profile in the town was the most productive method of gaining a wider audience for Secularism and Secularist views. Gould however, full of enthusiasm for his new initiative, quietly forgot that Sydney Gimson and the Society had been quietly been doing precisely this for some years:

I believe that, by constantly appearing among the business and public men of Leicester I can quietly and effectively remind them of our existence our claims and our views. They feel that we are a force that is permanent, and a force that has to be reckoned with, especially of course in regard to education, but also in regard to general municipal affairs. Add to this I am now personally acquainted with four of the editors of local papers, Mercury, Free Press, Evening news and Pioneer and it all means that I have some influence on the springs of action in public affairs in the town.⁴²

This latest development was a great deal for the Society to take, particularly since Gould rather arrogantly advocated a policy the Gimsions had

practiced for years. Already the maintenance of Gould as Organiser had cost a great deal in financial security and goodwill. The Secular Society found itself £60 in debt at the start of 1901 and the situation continued with bar takings taking a steep downturn during the course of the year. September 1902 saw the finance sub-committee introduce the by now familiar measures associated with financial belt tightening, this time motivated by the recent prohibition in the club. A range of newspapers worth £15 per year was discontinued and appeals for donations were inserted in the national Freethought press. Old staples such as dancing classes and volunteer concerts were dusted off and suggested as possible methods of raising money.⁴³ In the event the only serious victim of these financial troubles was the manager, Mr. France, who survived a wage reduction only to have his engagement terminated and his place taken by a part-time caretaker.⁴⁴ With the financial constraints in operation the Society still found itself £25 in debt and liabilities still rising sufficiently to have to pay Gould's stipend out of the General Fund.⁴⁵ In the depths of this looming crisis Gould's single mindedness and failure to grasp the gravity of the situation was demonstrated by his suggestion that more resources be spent on music. This was abruptly scotched by Sydney Gimson who instead persuaded Gould to be responsible for the provision of the choir and their accompanist.⁴⁶ By mid 1904 the deficit had been reduced to £5 though on closer examination the individual funds were in credit with the spectacular exception of the fund set up to pay for the organiser which was in debt to the tune of £50. 1s. 9d.

This was not the only price the Society paid for letting F. J. Gould have his way. The consistent attacks upon the character of members, the prohibition of alcohol, the limitation on children in the Hall and the general atmosphere of increased piety and austerity released tensions within many of

the members. What had previously been petty squabbles developed into tests of respectability, devotion and worthiness. Remarks made by members in what had previously been the comparative safety of the club room were reported in committee. A disagreement which turned upon the opinion of one woman concerning the character of a number of women involved in the running of various committees became a major issue. A Mrs. Lowe was alleged to have made statements which placed doubts upon the good character of a large number of other female members of the Society. Mrs. Lowe found her reported allegations the subject of an investigation involving a committee established expressly for the purpose and presided over by the increasingly draconian figure of Gould. Considering the atmosphere that Gould had created it is easy to see how the exhaustive investigation ran to over ten pages of an exercise book.⁴⁷ Though the precise details and truth of what Mrs. Lowe did, or did not say, are obviously shrouded in their own mystery the allegation itself is revealing. Mrs. Lowe is supposed to have said 'Ladies indeed, these women, ought not to be on the committee, look at their morals'.⁴⁸ Such an outburst graphically displays a certain tension which manifested itself in both accusation and defence. Though Mrs. Lowe was discovered to be the guilty party, her apology was, in true sectarian fashion, written by the presiding Committee, requiring only her own passive assent. Mrs. Lowe refused to do this and resigned with the committee passing on her a six months suspension from the Hall. Her husband was outraged and protested vigorously in committee for a reversal of this action. Eventually the resolution suspending her was rescinded but her renomination was not allowed to proceed. The committee seems to have quietly hoped that the problem would go away but Mr. Lowe by now felt that he had no option but to resign the choirmastership. His letter of resignation complained of 'the narrow and undemocratic policy now in force'. What would previously have been dismissed

as moderately innocent gossip had in the new atmosphere become very much a matter of honour on both sides.⁴⁹

Another similar incident occurred at the same time involving a Mrs. Letts who struck a Mr. Essex for refusing to name a witness who corroborated an accusation he had made against her. On investigation Mr. Essex possessed a written testimony from the witness confirming his accusation. Quite what this accusation was is puzzling; the witnesses, Miss A. and J. Burdett reported that Mrs Letts had followed Mr. McCabe and Miss Lee from the Hall. This may have been Joseph McCabe though he did not lecture in the spring season of 1902. Quite what Mrs. Letts intention was when she followed the couple is unclear, whether the couple were in the process of an illicit assignation or whether Mrs. Letts was engaged in a piece of fairly harmless snooping is impossible to decipher from the minutes. What is obvious is that Mrs. Letts made a gross miscalculation in carelessly remarking on her action in the club room. Though she denied having done this the witnesses confirmed Mr. Essex's story and the committee dismissed the incident reprimanding both protagonists for their rash actions.⁵⁰ Though Mrs. Letts' snooping may have been motivated by the same zeal and quest for propriety as her accusers she unwittingly found herself the victim of it! Once her mistake had been exploited the whole panoply of threat, accusation, counter accusation, signed statement and disciplinary action was unleashed. Gould's reformation of the Society and its attitudes, though raising the profile of the Society nevertheless had a profoundly human cost.

The Lecture Programme 1899 - 1908.

One aspect of the Society's work that remained unaltered was its lecture provision. As usual the Society could always rely on a group of old friends

who lectured regularly during these years. John Robertson lectured every year for the Society with topics that covered the whole range of his experiences and interests. In November 1898 for example he lectured on the origins of Freethought amongst the Greek and Roman civilisations whilst 1901 and 1902 saw him take in other areas of Secularist interest such as Darwinism and the atonement.⁵¹ His important position in the political sphere was also characterised by lectures on Liberalism versus Socialism, Herbert Spencer and the prospects for war and peace.⁵² Robertson retained his popularity which was crowned in 1904 by his being chosen, ahead of Charles Watts and Joseph McCabe, to represent the Leicester Secular Society at the International Freethought Congress in Rome.⁵³

Other figures from the mainstream of the Secular movement paid frequent visits to the Hall. Harry Snell appeared in October 1900 to lecture on Mazzini and again the following year on Bishop Colenso as theologian. He also demonstrated that he was as flexible as Robertson, lecturing on Savonarola, and on militarism in schools as well as providing Shakespearean recitals.⁵⁴ Both Chapman Cohen and J. H. Levy came to lecture on a number of subjects that still reflected many of the older emphases within the secular movement. The state of religion was represented by Cohen's lectures on the 'Present Position of Religion and Science' and 'Is Christianity worth preserving?'. J. H. Levy spoke in a similar vein on 'Religious Persecution' and criticised W. H. Mallock's work on religion as a credible doctrine.⁵⁵ The traditional individualist element in nineteenth century Secularism was also represented by Cohen and Levy in lectures on 'The Law of diminishing returns', 'The Political ethics of Herbert Spencer', 'The Problem of the Criminal' and 'The Significance of Evolution.'⁵⁶

Bradlaugh's daughter Hypatia also visited the Hall and spoke on familiar subjects such as religious intolerance, sabbatarianism, sin and immortality

as well as the structure of parliamentary democracy, and famines in India.⁵⁷ She was certainly an able lecturer and ranks alongside the best of the generation of lecturers who carried Secularism into the twentieth century. Though a more regular visitor to the Society than her father had been, through no fault of her own she was unable to make the same impact nationally.

The Leicester Secular Society also welcomed Bradlaugh's successor G. W. Foote to lecture during these years. Foote appeared several times from 1898 when he lectured on 'The Tsar's appeal to Europe' to 1904 when he lectured on 'Holy Russia and heathen Japan'. Between these appearances Foote was entered on the lecture lists without any specific subject which, as President of the N.S.S. was presumably his privilege.⁵⁸ The Leicester Secular Society however did not take kindly to this practice and it was felt that Foote was abusing his position. In 1900, at a time when he was being criticised nationally for the quality of his leadership, he was requested to inform the Society of his lecture subject in good time so that it could be included in the programme advertising the forthcoming season. Though G.W. Foote's failure to do this was inconvenient it became downright embarrassing when he was found to be repeating material from a previous lecture. After he had lectured in October 1900 a motion demanding the return of half his fee was tabled and, though it was withdrawn, the committee agreed to inform Foote of this objection and to get an undertaking from him that the matter would not occur again.⁵⁹

Despite this unfortunate instance G.W. Foote was a consistent visitor who found favour amongst many in the Society, though his own paper, The Freethinker, continued periodically to snipe at the Society. A veteran member, James Cartwright, remembers Foote as the best lecturer he ever saw on the Leicester Secular Society's platform. The style and tone of some of

these lectures represent a crossover point between the older Secularism of the seventies and eighties and a, possibly grudging, acknowledgment of the new Ethical and Positivist influences that were entering Secularist thought. When he lectured to the society on 'Theism' he took a traditional view of the barbarous and immoral origin of religion:

Even Western religion came originally from the East, and all the Eastern religions were derived from the primitive raw material of savage superstition.... But modern theism was a refinement on the early crude religion, and was but the last prismatic film of the soap-bubble just on the point of breaking and disappearing forever into the infinite.⁶⁰

Though G.W. Foote's lecture contained much from the traditional iconoclastic approach he nevertheless ended his lecture with the contention that Morality was a human product that could be shaped by intuitive action and that when 'the Dream of God' faded away it would be replaced by the noble concept of 'Humanity'.⁶¹

As much as the Leicester Secular Society was always ready to have a lecturer from the national movement, it was equally ready to promote the cause of provincial Secularism against the still distrusted N.S.S.. Thus it had no hesitation in acquiring the services of Percy Ward who had assisted in the formation of the British Secular League, an organisation of northern branches who considered the N.S.S. to be too tied to the capital.⁶² His first lecture was an account of his conversion from Methodism to Secularism and this was followed, after a considerable gap, by a subsequent lecture on Voltaire. Though Ward only lectured twice during these years his fellow lecturers in the team attached to the British Secular League - William

Heaford and Ernest Pack - both made appearances on the platform. Alongside these a newcomer to secularist platforms, John T. Lloyd, made his first appearance at the Society in 1904 and quickly became established as a firm favourite of both the Leicester Secular Society and of Sydney Gimson himself, though he was rapidly added to the N.S.S.lecturing team.⁶³ Representatives of the Ethical and Positivist wings of the Secular movement also lectured to the Society. Gustav Spiller, Gould's erstwhile colleague from the East London Ethical Society, became a regular occupant of the Society's platform. Spiller first came in 1902 and re-appeared on the lecture list every year until Gould left with the exception of 1905 and 1907 and he covered typically Ethicist subjects such as the desirability of virtue and the rise of ethics at the expense of theology.⁶⁴ Stanton Coit also lectured in 1903 on 'The Ethical and Secular Reform of the Church of England' and gained a thoroughly favourable impression of the Society, possibly as a result of the many reforms enacted by Gould. Coit was interested in the possibility of the Leicester Secular Society affiliating to his Union of Ethical Societies and courted Sydney Gimson with the suggestion that he would consider it an honour if the Leicester Society would be the first. Though Gould was enthusiastic, Sydney Gimson considered Coit's tastes to be too ritualistic and his Secularism to be not militant enough. The suggestion was never considered in committee and Sydney Gimson was of the opinion that Coit lost interest in the Leicester Secular Society when it showed little interest in him.⁶⁵

One visitor from the Society's own past graphically demonstrated how far certain areas of Secular thinking had travelled by 1900. After an invitation sent to his Church of Humanity in Newcastle Malcolm Quin returned to give two lectures to the Society loosely based on 'The Religion of Humanity'. In the first one he analysed the essential components of religious belief and

concluded that its fundamental purpose was 'to effect human unity.'⁶⁶ His evening lecture was an exposition of Positivism as an evangelical religion which sounds both, enthusiastic and proselytising. It suggests why Gimson and the Society, though committed to Gould, still drew back from wholesale involvement;

The essential part of worship was reverence, or the cultivation of love. In Positivism, this cultivated reverence was directed towards the supreme Being Humanity. This Supreme Being was the nobler life of all human beings in the past. To this Being we owed all that we possessed of value, whether material, intellectual or moral. And to this Being we should address our prayer.... The worship of humanity would not only enrich, deepen, and expand all that is noble in us; it would develop the intelligence, and conduct human life to the realisation of ideals of which every religious faith has dreamed, but none yet attained.⁶⁷

Gould was also instrumental in obtaining the services of other figures from national Positivism. Francis Sidney Marvin, a member of the Positivist Society and a friend of Gould, lectured in 1903 on 'The religion of Humanity as illustrated in various great writers of the nineteenth century'. Other lecturers from this stable were the president of the Positivist Society, Shapland Hugh Swinny and the chemist Cecil Desch.⁶⁸ Gould later collaborated with these three men in a series of summer schools during the First World War.⁶⁹

Despite the frequent appearance of the new the Society could never forget the old and it was reminded of its heritage by the passing of two of

the great heroes of the Victorian heyday. On 24 January 1906 the Leicester Secular Society formally recorded the passing of its mentor George Jacob Holyoake and resolved to send a deputation to the funeral where they were asked to sing the Positivist anthem 'O may I join the choir invisible' which had been composed by the Society's leading musician, Emily Troup.⁷⁰ Two months later the Society also learned of the death of Charles Watts and sent William Wilber to the funeral.⁷¹

From the world outside Freethought the Leicester Secular Society still attracted an impressive variety of lecturers. Socialism was represented by James Ramsay Macdonald who acknowledged the prejudices of his audience by lecturing on 'Individualism'. Macdonald argued that all individualists ultimately relied on elements of collective society and that 'Individual liberty and communal activity go hand in hand'.⁷² Macdonald though, did not have the matter all his own way and his socialist ideas continued to meet resistance. He was questioned by Bill Lee on why ideas needed to be pioneered by individuals, often against the will of the collective society. Macdonald was not the only socialist to meet older individualist attitudes when lecturing to the Leicester Secular Society. George Lansbury's lecture on citizenship had a similar concession to the rôle of individualism in the choice to improve conditions:

He dwelt on the necessity for personal effort in improving social conditions; for devoting more thought to politics than to football; for lightening the household drudgery of women of the working-classes; for creating a public opinion which would value the work of Mrs. Fry in prisons, or father Damien among the lepers, and other such service for humanity, as more importance than the accumulation of profits.⁷³

Though Lansbury's conclusion was socialist he received a question from the floor which took the discussion back to the days of Secularist Malthusianism. When it was suggested that the limitation of families would be a more effective means of combatting poverty, Lansbury replied that it was the introduction of labour saving machinery that was the real cause of destitution.⁷⁴

During these years the Leicester Secular Society continued in its quest for the controversial in its lecture programme. Whilst the Boer War was raging the Society, prompted by J. M. Robertson's reporting of the horrors of concentration camps, arranged for the appearance of one of the main opponents of the war, Emily Hobhouse, to speak on the platform. The local constabulary tried to persuade the Society to abandon the lecture since trouble was expected. The Society decided to carry on since the police had not forbidden the meeting and undertook to protect the Hall and the Society as far as was in their power. In the event the meeting passed without incident, much to the obvious relief of all involved.⁷⁵

Besides the obviously political the Society also had lectures that were of more general interest. Touzeau Parris continued to lecture for the Society on subjects such as Theosophy and Occultism, the origin of superstition and the derivation of freewill.⁷⁶ However the Society was sad to learn in May 1904 that he was incapacitated and would almost certainly never lecture again.⁷⁷ J. Brandon Medland gave a number of interesting lectures on subjects as diverse as photography and travels on the continent to France and Germany where he observed the Oberammergau Passion Play.⁷⁸ In 1902 Ebenezer Howard spoke on his vision of 'The Garden City' and captivated the audience with his blend of Owen and Morris for the Twentieth century. Howard even elucidated his plans with the use of charts and pointer, since Owen the standard equipment of the would be social reformer.⁷⁹ Sydney Gimson himself

became a member of Howard's Garden City Society and was one of the initial shareholders in his first building venture, Letchworth.⁸⁰ From the literary world the Society hosted a lecture from G. K. Chesterton, who sought to answer Blatchford's 'God and My Neighbour' - though this was considered a disaster by Sydney Gimson. Chesterton appeared to have not prepared his lecture at all and even asked Sydney Gimson what the subject was. The unfortunate result was that the lecture was as 'as dull as dishwater'.⁸¹

The real bonus for the Leicester Secular Society at this time was the flowering of F. J. Gould as a lecturer. During his stay with the Leicester Secular Society Gould never missed a season and gave a vast number of lectures, generally based on his favourite subject, biography. His interests covered the range of traditional freethinkers such as William Godwin, Voltaire, Thomas Paine and James Thompson as well as literary and philosophical figures such as T. H. Huxley, Kipling and Walt Whitman. F. J. Gould, like his subject, could be both entertaining and erudite so that he was able to use his material as a sort of moral education for adults. His lecture on William Godwin, for example contained a skilful blend of analysis and anecdote that must have educated and entertained his audiences. After relating anecdotal material concerning Godwin's attitude to marriage which meant that he lived apart from Mary Wollstonecraft, Gould proceeded to describe his virtues and ideas:

When he praised sincerity, he praised a virtue which was the lifeblood of Freethought. A man may have twenty talents, but if he is not open and sincere in his life and speech, he has not taken the first step towards true manhood. A sincere man would turn hell itself into heaven.⁸²

One major coup that Gould was responsible for was the publicity of the works of a then comparatively obscure poet called William Blake. In the 1900 season Gould lectured on the life of Blake and gave the first public exhibition of his drawings. Some of the drawings elicited lurid, and frightening descriptions from the local press and Gould must have been well pleased with his work. Blake could easily appeal to Gould; his poetry was full of the moral lessons that the individual could learn from the natural environment and contained a strong vein of pantheism and disdain for spurious forms of authority. Indeed Blake's concern for squandered human potential in many ways echoes Gould's own concern for the destitute and disadvantaged in society as he saw it.²³ Gould's record as a lecturer is impressive and this aspect of his character must have been a part of his appeal as organiser and mainspring behind the activities of these years.

Gould's last years with the Secular Society

Throughout 1906 and 1907 Gould continued to exercise something approximating to absolute executive power within the Leicester Secular Society. In June 1906 for example he succeeded in passing a rule that admitted himself and other members of the committee to scrutinise the programme of benefit concerts without notice. Moreover he also prevented the dramatic group from smoking in the Hall during rehearsals.²⁴ Gradually a small but significant groundswell of opinion began to resent the path that the Leicester Secular Society was being dragged along. Opposition to Gould may simply have manifested itself in the disappointing response to the increasingly parlous condition of the organiser fund.

Gould never forsook his ambitions in the wider sphere of municipal politics and continued to sit for Castle ward until he lost his seat in 1907

as the result of a Liberal fightback. The Liberals seem to have made significant political capital out of the recent visit of Belfort Bax who had covered the somewhat thorny subjects of Church, State, family, marriage and social reform. His lecture argued against the legality of the marriage bond and demanded toleration for a variety of sexual unions. It even went so far as to suggest that the institution of marriage, product as it was of evolution, would be the subject of further evolution.⁸⁵ Gould was a sitting target for the inevitable slur campaign that duly followed. His own views were linked with those of Belfort Bax and he found himself beaten at the polls by 968 votes to 718. Though certain reports in the local press suggested the result was unjust and the campaign for Gould would continue, the impact of the defeat could not be avoided.⁸⁶

The disappointing result of the municipal election had the effect of crystallising the opposition to Gould. Though he had held the Leicester Secular Society as a hostage to his own municipal fortunes, he had at least a record of achievement and publicity on his side. When this scheme for the establishment of Secularism within society had met with defeat at the polls, the backlash was only a matter of time.

Gould himself always painted his decision to leave the Leicester Secular Society as a logical progression that stemmed from his own growing disillusionment. His story suggests that he was unable to make the Leicester Secular Society a truly Ethical society and he moved to establish a church of humanity of his own, taking with him a band of dedicated followers:

Nine years had I loyally served the Leicester Secular Society, joyed with its people's joys, and grieved with their griefs. Now I had come to tell my good friend Gimson that I must pass out and tread an untrodden way.⁸⁷

However as early as October 1907 a letter from a respected member, Edward Pinder, was sent to Gould and, by chance, survives in the Minutes. After criticising the recent history of the club department, Pinder criticised Gould's record in no uncertain terms:

(I) am strongly of (the) opinion that your connection with the society has not resulted in the advantages it was reasonable to expect and that this position arises largely from the fact of your inability to make the best use of the forces awaiting your disposition.⁸⁸

F. J. Gould hastily scrawled a reply on the reverse of the letter in his own highly idiosyncratic shorthand. Though he stated the letter was 'not private', one wonders how many members were privy to his pleas for honesty and forthright criticism written in a simple, and perhaps frightened style :

...it has been to me a cause of regret (not to use a stronger word) that members have not always uttered their mind on society affairs with the openness one would look for in a [the next word is indecipherable but is probably 'Rationalist' or 'Secularist'] association. It would have been foolish of me to go about asking people to criticise me but I have hoped and hoped in vain hitherto that in committee or in general meeting or in private chat, the members who thought I was going the wrong way would frankly tell me so. I am downright glad that you and perhaps others are going to let in the daylight on any dissatisfaction.⁸⁹

The matter was set to come up for discussion at the half yearly meeting in January 1908 and no doubt the interval gave F. J. Gould considerable time for reflection on the nature of his position. By the time the date of the meeting arrived Gould was able to still the growing tide of opposition that had gathered against him. His supporters Alfred Dunn and Harry Scott in advance of the meeting had put out a circular which surveyed the success Gould had made of his initial brief, which had been to pull the Leicester Secular Society out of the doldrums. It further suggested that Gould and the Secular Society had reached an impasse in which the desires of neither were being gratified. The redundancy of educational methods was mentioned as was the lecture programme which, according to the correspondents, was lacking in cohesion and purpose; 'being mainly negativist or intellectual, that (in the Positivist meaning) a sense of corporate life and religious association is absent'.⁹⁰ Gould as a result felt that his work within the Leicester Secular Society was at an end and that the time to look for pastures new had arrived. Though Dunn and Scott had sought a way out of the problem they considered the immovability of the Society to be a major stumbling block:

We have anxiously endeavoured to devise some proposal by which the present methods of the Secular Society could be developed in the direction we would like, but we have failed to hit upon any workable scheme. A dual method would fail and even if any plan had good promise in itself, we fear the traditions of the Hall would suffice to prevent the success of a Positivist experiment.⁹¹

Dunn and Scott however had kept their bombshell until last. They were convinced that the only option available was for Gould to move to a freshly

organised association and they themselves were prepared to guarantee the whole of Gould's stipend in order to accomplish this goal.⁹² After discussion in committee it was agreed that Gould should resign, terminating his formal connection with the Society on 30 April 1908. Though F. J. Gould convinced himself in his autobiography that he had made a necessary break the historian has to conclude that his departure was not at all unwelcome.

In departing from the Leicester Secular Society Gould made a typically prosaic statement which expressed the ideals he sought in his move onwards and upwards:

I want to express my conceptions of life, science, duty, and education in a religious form, as understood by Positivists (a form which is altogether free from theology). By "religion" I mean the service of Humanity..... I want to be more at liberty to assist the Labour Movement. Half a century ago Comte declared that the great social needs of the proletariat were a sound free education to the age of twenty one, and regular employment; and I want to help towards the accomplishment of these two aims..... The Labour Movement, the Woman Movement, and the Moral Education Movement are the most hopeful signs of the age.....⁹³

The move left the field free for F. J. Gould to establish his own Church of Humanity which found its home at 14 Highcross Street. The building was a converted shop and contained a platform and lights which illuminated the portraits of, amongst others, St. Paul, Charlemagne, Dante, Homer, Aristotle and Gutenberg. Gould was also given a chance to continue his exploration of moral education in the Church's own Sunday school.⁹⁴ Positivism had a brief

Indian Summer on these premises and the initial interest seems to have coincided with the re-election of F. J. Gould to the council for the Wyggeston ward. The appearance of a number of speakers at the new Church emphasises how far Gould and the Positivist's theology had developed in a matter of months. Harry Weaver, a former member of the Leicester Secular Society now based in London, visited the Church and gave an address. In it he gave an exposition of the Positivist ideal which was light years away from the more iconoclastic Secularism of the Leicester Secular Society:

Humanity was the Prometheus that plucked fire from Olympus to give to men. Humanity was the totality of convergent good feelings, good and true thoughts, helpful and right directed actions, ever growing in value, intensity and unity. Through her we appreciate the order and beauty of the world. To fully realise her power we needed an organised Church and worship. Within such a church the sons of men should find friendship, inspiration and spiritual food; they should find an ordered knowledge of the world; and a practical support amid the tastes and difficulties of everyday life. Faith in the spiritual power of Humanity would be the greatest aid to the true social reformer.⁹⁵

However within a matter of two years the experiment had dissolved and F. J. Gould had left Leicester for the capital. Though Gould's energy, pressure and phenomenal literary output had carved a larger place for the Leicester Secular Society he ultimately made the misjudgement that he had created that place rather than enhanced it. In his own mind Gould perhaps had a right to expect that in gaining a wider hearing for Secularist views

he was building his own national reputation. Gould had a permanent eye on the field of national achievement and continually exhorted others to follow the precedent he had set in Leicester. He did not appreciate that the Leicester Secular Society had provided the material, moral and psychological conditions without which his own schemes and ideas would never have had the necessary authority. The Freethinker, organ of the National Secular Society and not exactly a friend of the Leicester Secular Society, certainly appreciated this. In November 1902 it wrote with a mixture of annoyance, sarcasm and envy of Gould's misapprehension concerning the feasibility of implementing his own ideas:

Mr. Gould has never been much engaged in iconoclastic work. We do not say this to his discredit, for his work has always been very useful and necessary. We merely state a fact which has some bearing on this particular point. Mr. Gould's own line of propaganda does not bring him into special conflict with orthodox susceptibilities. Moreover, the one town in England of which he has quite a definite knowledge is Leicester; and it is a great mistake to assume that the state of things in Leicester is characteristic of England generally. Secularism has enjoyed special advantages in Leicester. The movement has been more or less organised there for fifty years. For a good many years it has been privileged to carry on its activities in a handsome and commodious home. All this has naturally told upon the public opinion and sentiment of the town. Secularism has won a certain respect there. But let it by some accident become homeless and distressed, and see how much respect it would command then.⁹⁶

Footnotes to Chapter Four

- 1: L.S.S.M.B., 11 January 1899.
- 2: See Chapter 8.
- 3: Letter from F. J. Gould to Constant Hillemand, 25 December 1885. Quoted in T. R. Wright, The Religion of Humanity: The impact of Comtean Positivism on Victorian Britain. (London 1986) page 247.
- 4: Letter from Gould to Henry Edger, 21 June 1931. Quoted in Ibid..
- 5: The Freethinker, 18 June 1905, page 389. In book of newspaper cuttings 10D68/10.
- 6: Sydney Ansell Gimson, 'Random Recollections of the Leicester Secular Society, with digressions' Part II, page 2.
- 7: F. J. Gould, Life Story of a Humanist. (1923) page 88.
- 8: L.S.S.M.B., 17 May 1899.
- 9: L.S.S.M.B., 6 July, 31 May 1899.
- 10: L.S.S.M.B., 17 May, 22 February 1899.
- 11: L.S.S.M.B., 2 August, 1 November 1899.
- 12: L.S.S.M.B., 1 November 1899.
- 13: L.S.S.M.B., 6 September 1899.
- 14: L.S.S.M.B., 26 July 1899, 10 January 1900.
- 15: L.S.S.M.B., 15 November 1899.
- 16: L.S.S.M.B., 11 April, 9 May, 25 April 1900.
- 17: L.S.S.M.B., 21 January 1900, 24 January 1900, 25 April 1900.
- 18: L.S.S.M.B., 25 April 1900, 20 June 1900.
- 19: L.S.S.M.B., 25 April 1900.
- 20: L.S.S.M.B., 27 September 1900.
- 21: Bryan Wilson Patterns of Sectarianism (London 1967) page 44.
- 22: Ibid. page 24.

- 23: See Chapter 8 for a full account of Gould's School Board election.
- 24: See Ibid..
- 25: 'The Government's Education Bill: opinions for and against. The Pioneer. 10 May 1902, in volume of newspaper cuttings 10D68/9.
- 26: Ibid..
- 27: 'The Coming Change: an Educational comedy for the new year'. Leicester Guardian. December 1902. in volume of newspaper cuttings 10D68/9.
- 28: Ibid..
- 29: L.S.S.M.B., 5 December 1900, 13 March 1901 & 26 February 1902.
- 30: L.S.S.M.B., 13 March 1901.
- 31: L.S.S.M.B., 28 August, 11 September 1901.
- 32: L.S.S.M.B., 11 December 1901, 22 January 1902.
- 33: The nomination book dating from 1902 to the present shows Gould prominent as a proposer and Seconder of a large number of prospective new members.
- 34: See Brian Hareling 1881 - 1981 One hundred years of Working Men's Clubs in Leicester. (Leicester 1981?) pages 3 - 20.
- 35: Circular 'The Club' appended in minutes 18 June 1902, see also L.S.S.M.B., 21 May 1902.
- 36: L.S.S.M.B., 18 June 1902. Those in favour were a bare majority - 64 as opposed to 37 against and 25 uncertain.
- 37: L.S.S.M.B., 30 July 1902.
- 38: L.S.S.M.B., 29 October 1902.
- 39: Ibid..
- 40: 'Mr. F. J. Gould's candidature' from Leicester Mercury and Midland Free Press November 1903 in volume of newspaper cuttings 10D68/9.
- 41: Gould, Life Story of a Humanist. pages 100 - 101.
- 42: L.S.S.M.B., 6 November 1904.

- 43: L.S.S.M.B., 16 January 1901, 8 May 1901 & 9 September 1901.
- 44: L.S.S.M.B., 9 September 1902, 14 January 1903, 28 January 1903.
- 45: L.S.S.M.B., 6 May 1903.
- 46: L.S.S.M.B., 22 November 1903.
- 47: See exercise book appended in 'scrapbook'.
- 48: L.S.S.M.B., 30 April 1902.
- 49: L.S.S.M.B., 7 May 1902, 30 July 1902, 19 August 1902 & 19 November 1902.
- 50: L.S.S.M.B., 16 July 1902 & 28 July 1902.
- 51: See lecture lists 1898, 1901 & 1902 in 'Scrapbook'.
- 52: See lecture lists 1901, 1904, 1905 & 1907 in 'Scrapbook'.
- 53: L.S.S.M.B., 4 September 1904.
- 54: See lecture lists 1898, 1903, 1905 & 1907 in 'Scrapbook'.
- 55: See lecture lists 1902, 1903, 1904 & 1905 in 'Scrapbook'.
- 56: See lecture lists 1898, 1900 & 1901 in 'Scrapbook'.
- 57: See lecture lists 1898, 1900, 1901, 1902, 1903, 1904, 1905, 1906 & 1908 in 'Scrapbook'.
- 58: See lecture lists 1900, 1901, 1902, 1903, 1905 & 1906 in 'Scrapbook', for Foote's persistent refusal to notify the Society of his subject.
- 59: L.S.S.M.B., 7 November 1900 & 21 November 1900.
- 60: 'G. W. Foote on Theism' from Midland Free Press? probably October 1899 in volume of newspaper cuttings 10D68/8.
- 61: Ibid..
- 62: See Edward Royle Radicals, Secularists and Republicans. (Manchester 1980) page 62.
- 63: See lecture lists 1898, 1904 1905, 1906, 1907 & 1908 in 'Scrapbook'.
- 64: See lecture lists 1902 & 1904 in 'Scrapbook'.
- 65: Sydney Ansell Gimson The Random Recollections of the Leicester Secular Society. Part II pages 12 - 13.

- 66: 'The Religion of Humanity' from Midland Free Press, March 1901, in volume of newspaper cuttings 10D68/8.
- 67: Ibid..
- 68: See Lecture lists 1903 , 1904 & 1907.
- 69: Wright, The Religion of Humanity, page 244.
- 70: L.S.S.M.B., 24 January 1906.
- 71: L.S.S.M.B., 21 March 1906.
- 72: 'Mr. J. R. Macdonald at the Secular Hall' from the Midland Free Press, February 1906 in volume of newspaper cuttings 10D68/10.
- 73: 'Mr. Lansbury on Citizenship' from Midland Free Press, March 1906 in volume of newspaper cuttings 10D68/11.
- 74: Ibid..
- 75: Gimson, Random Recollections Part II, page 10.
- 76: See Lecture lists 1898 , 1901 & 1902.
- 77: L.S.S.M.B., 18 May 1904. Parris died in 1907, aged 68. Like Ernest Gimson, he was also a devotee of William Morris.
- 78: See Lecture lists 1898 & 1901.
- 79: See Lecture list 1902 and also 'A City yet to come' from the Leicester Pioneer 1 February 1902 & Leicester Mercury 27 January 1902 in volume of newspaper cuttings 10D68/8.
- 80: Gimson, Random Recollections, Part II, page 12.
- 81: Ibid. page 16.
- 82: 'William Godwin' from the Midland Free Press, 13 January 1900 in volume of newspaper cuttings 10D68/8.
- 83: 'William Blake' from the Midland Free Press, 13 October 1900 in volume of newspaper cuttings 10D68/8.
- 84: L.S.S.M.B., 24 June 1906 & 28 November 1906.
- 85: 'Socialism, the throne, the hearth and the altar' from the Midland Free

Press, November 1907 in volume of newspaper cuttings 10D68/11.

86: 'Castle Ward - The reasons Why it was lost to Labour' from the Midland Free Press, 6 November 1907 in volume of newspaper cuttings 10D68/11.

87: Gould Life Story of a Humanist, page 108.

88: Letter from Edward Pinder to F. J. Gould dated 19 October 1907, appended in minute book.

89: Ibid..

90: Circular dated 22 January 1908 appended in minute book.

91: Ibid..

92: Ibid..

93: Gould, The Life Story of a Humanist, page 109.

94: Ibid. page 110.

95: 'The Church of Humanity' possibly from the Midland Free Press, 9 December 1908 in volume of newspaper cuttings 10D68/12.

96: The Freethinker, 30 November 1902 in volume of newspaper cuttings 10D68/9.

CHAPTER FIVE

'AMID MANY MODERN GAINS THERE ARE SOME LOSSES.' A CHANGING WORLD 1908 - 1920.

The departure of Gould solved some of the problems that had been created by his stay with the Leicester Secular Society, though it also left something of a vacuum. Gould's presence had brought the Society a much higher local profile, gaining respect from many quarters, though it often must have seemed that he could not distinguish between publicity for himself and for Secularism.

Henceforth the Society tacitly agreed that no single individual should again have such power to shape the destiny and character of the Society. Despite this the value of Gould's work was appreciated and the Society remained on very friendly terms with him as he continued to lecture frequently for them. Gould himself donated books for the library and officiated at funerals. The Society responded by electing him a member in January 1917.'

Nevertheless Gould had moved on and it was time for the Society to learn how to live without him. Such a task was not easy. The causes that Gould had made his own had placed the Society in the vanguard of radical change. His energy and local achievements had effectively shielded them from the decline in the national movement that had continued unabated since the turn of the century. However this is only part of the story; in a sense Gould and his causes departed together and the period of his dominance in the Leicester Secular Society shows how issues were made vital by those who fought for them. Moreover even Gould himself found that opportunities for successful campaigning on the grand scale were fast waning. After his own

attempt to set up a Positivist church in Leicester had failed, within two years he had decided to move back to London. Where he had previously scored was in the all embracing nature of his programme which must have drawn Secularists with other political concerns back into the Society. Gould had offered a refreshing change from national Secularism which appeared locked into nineteenth century conceptions of individualism.

Perhaps as a result of this the post Gould era was, on the face of it a bleak one for the Society. Since deciding against having another organiser, the Secular Society was faced with the prospect of collectively rebuilding its congregational life from the grassroots. This was a reaction to the puritanism of the Gould years and it is possible to detect the guiding hand of a Gimson behind the attempts to strike the right balance between work, finance and play. Though an atmosphere of decline pervades these years - Sydney Gimson himself in his memoirs admits as much - the story is nevertheless one of survival and not atrophy.

Though no full-time successor to Gould was appointed,(the Society preferred to appoint a part-time secretary)² it did follow his advice about re-organisation. Gould suggested a scheme by which responsibility for the work of the Society should once again be rigidly divided amongst a number of sub-committees. These were to be responsible for the provision of Sunday school teaching, socials, dramatic productions and classes with the new secretary sitting ex officio on each.³

F. J. Gould also left another legacy to the Society. The Young Men's Ethical Guild continued for a while and provided a number of personnel during the years immediately prior to and after the war. The Guild also appears to have mutated by 1913 into the Young People's Secular Association, perhaps indicating a shift back from Gould's Ethical emphasis.

During 1908 the Society once again found itself in financially dire

straights. It was unable to increase the manager's salary, despite the its inadequacy and the organiser fund was itself £5 in debt.⁴ It is probable that the despondency created by the perennial nature of these problems worked against the enthusiasm of members. Thus the following year the Society had to press hard to persuade any of its members to take office. At the initial half yearly meeting there were no nominations for president or vice president and insufficient to constitute a general committee, though these offices were filled at the second attempt.⁵

This unpromising state of affairs spurred the Society into action and in 1909 they canvassed for suggestions on how to improve their attractions with a view to also increasing their income. At the July half-yearly meeting demands for more concerts, whist drives, discussions, reading classes and outings suggest that many wanted a return to the more relaxed regime that had existed before Gould's arrival.⁶ It was also in some way an acceptance that the Society would die unless it attracted new members and represented a final abandonment of Gould's 'better, fewer, but better' principle. The Society limped on in 1909, still in financial trouble. Sydney Gimson had to advance interest on money the Society had lodged with him for safe keeping as well as having to draw money from the bazaar fund to meet the rising debt. Matters reached a head when, for the first time in many years, the Society was unable to hold its annual Christmas dinner for the elderly.⁷

Since 1910 was the last year in which the Wright legacy of £50 per year was payable, Gimson urged that something be done urgently to rectify matters. In December of that year he suggested that the answer to their problems lay in increased subscriptions, increased prices and increased cost of membership. This would be augmented by money raised from bazaars, whist drives, dramatic productions and an increase in the sale of literature. Gimson himself promised an increased subscription of £10 per year and urged

others to join him. This resulted in a circular letter which solicited special subscriptions and useful items for the intended bazaar in 1911. Attenders at lectures were also urged to become members and the attractions of the club and library were heavily pushed.⁹ The appearance of the club as an attraction is noteworthy. It acted not simply as an enticement but was, in the absence of Gould's impressive enrolment policy, a realistic way of paying for the upkeep of the Secular Hall. As far as recruitment was concerned the policy began to bear fruit; in one week in February 1911 a total of 21 members were nominated.⁹

By July of the same year Sydney Gimson could congratulate the Society on having improved its position generally, though he urged renewed effort to place their financial affairs on a firm footing.¹⁰ Money raised from the continued letting of the Hall for dancing classes was augmented by a lucrative letting of the skittle alley for three nights a week. Though the money was welcomed there was opposition from some members who found the amenity out of bounds to them. Once again expediency had meant the Society's interests were placed above those of the individual member. In this case a compromise was easily reached when a single track was reserved for the use of Society members. A further letting in 1914 came up against the same problem and once again compromise was reached, allowing Society members access.¹¹

The bazaar which took place in 1912 raised enough money for the Society to invest £250 with Sydney Gimson at 4% interest.¹² Despite the hard work that had gone in to generating money from the bazaar a number of members began to see a deterioration in the Society's affairs. At a meeting to discuss this 'slackness' the Sunday school was heavily criticised. After a heated discussion it was reprieved but what followed emphasised the tension between financial considerations and the other duties of the Society. To

counteract the supposed 'slackness' several members proposed that the Society should appoint another organiser. Though this was quickly quashed by other members who deemed the previous attempt unsuccessful and thought it would create a further financial burden. Juxtaposed to this rejection was a revealing suggestion that the facilities of the club could be of more use to the Society, almost as if one precluded the other.¹³

Much of this must have been in response to the needs of younger members who were starting to appear at the society's gatherings. Sydney Gimson himself noted the fact and Harry Snell, who had recently visited the Society, commented that such participation was, at that time, 'unique'.¹⁴ This influx of eager younger members was quite noteworthy since the age composition of the Secular movement nationally had noticeably shifted upwards as many younger people were attracted to the alternatives of Socialism and Ethicism.

The appearance of younger members meant a move towards providing for them and the minutes soon record the appearance of the Young Persons Secular Association which organised activities based around the Society and the Secular Hall. The Association no longer maintained F. J. Gould's conception of an 'Ethical ladder' which provided training for the next generation of Ethicists, Secularists and Rationalists. It was rather an organisation based around leisure activities and appears to have taken as its model the 'youth club' rather than the 'bible study class'. Dances and whist drives replaced Gould's classes and expositions of moral themes. One wonders what F. J. Gould made of the Association's fancy dress dance of 1913 since the opportunity to dress up and assume another identity had always been practised by Gould with a thoroughly ethical end in view.¹⁵ The influx of younger members boded well for the Society's future and there is evidence that they were given small slices of responsibility such as the organisation

of socials, as befitted the next generation of Secularists.¹⁶

This upturn in fortunes was reflected in the period on the eve of the First World War when the Society had virtually balanced the books. Sydney Gimson was especially pleased and was able to pay £20 towards the Leicester Rationalist Trust fund which aimed at preventing the Secular Hall from falling into other hands.¹⁷

The Lecture Programme 1908 - 1914.

The lecturing and campaigning side of the Society in the pre-war period was noticeably low key. The great age of national figures and national campaigns had passed and those that were left were either ageing or involved in other activities. There was no Bradlaugh to give national impetus nor a Holyoake to be the inspiration of the Society. John Robertson still came and lectured to the society during these years though not as often as he was asked and his message was by now as much Liberal as it was Secularist. As the years passed he was a less frequent lecturer than he had previously been as the pressures of his cabinet work intruded. On one occasion the Society invited him for the anniversary celebrations and suggested his wife should complement his appearance with a violin recital.¹⁸

Another stalwart who maintained strong links with the Society was Joseph McCabe who continued to provide many stock Secularist lectures to the new generation rather than break any radically new ground. Thus McCabe's series for the 1909 season provided four lectures on the evolution of mind through the animal kingdom, concluding with the origin of the human mind. The following year he produced a more obviously Ethicist series on the evolution of morality, tracing it from its origins amongst the higher savages to its assumption as a cornerstone of civilisation.¹⁹ McCabe also came to the

Society in every successive year until the 1913 season.

G. W. Foote though only 60 years of age in 1910 was already a reminder of the past. Though President of the National Secular Society, Foote had never attained the stature of Bradlaugh and was doomed to relive for audiences the great days of Secular campaigning that, like national leaders, were becoming a thing of the past. Foote lectured in both 1908 and 1909. His appearance in 1910 emphasised just how much the national movement was living in the past: his lecture, intended to summarise the recent history of Secularism in Britain, was entitled 'Charles Bradlaugh 20 years after.'²⁰ Even Sydney Gimson caught the mood as he lectured to the Society on its glorious past, as if providing an epitaph for the years of campaigns and achievements.²¹

The increasing atomisation of the Secular movement was emphasised in 1909 by the fact that Gimson had to use the annual Rationalist Press Association dinner as a means of canvassing for lecturers. This project was successful, extracting promises from Earl Russell, George Greenwood of the Moral Education League and Edward Clodd. Earl Russell indeed gave a number of lectures on social questions in the autumn of 1912.²² Old friends like Bernard Shaw, J. H. Levy and George Standring continued their acquaintanceship with the Society as did Chapman Cohen and Harry Snell.²³

As was the Society's custom, a number of lecturers came from other spheres of life. Indeed it must be said that without them the lecture programme would have broken down completely. The journalist Spencer Leigh Hughes - 'Sub Rosa' of the Morning Leader - had been a contact of Sydney Gimson's and came several times to the Society. His lectures were witty and amusing, echoing his column which portrayed him as a Liberal man of letters.²⁴ Another journalist who came to the Society was S.K. Ratcliffe, a former writer for The Statesman, a Calcutta newspaper. His first lecture was

entitled 'Today and Tomorrow in India' and he lectured twice more in the years leading up to the War and beyond.²⁵

The Society renewed its Russian emigré connection with an invitation to Alexis Aladin, the former leader of the Russian Labour Party in the Duma. Gimson claims he first lectured in 1910 but lecture lists indicate he first appeared on the Society's platform in September 1909. Aladin was a popular lecturer and was considered to be more of a western style radical politician and less philosophical than his compatriots Kropotkin, Stepniak and Volkhovsky. Aladin, now resident in London, appeared again in January 1910 (as reported by Gimson) and was suggested yet again for the following season. Aladin had a fascination with the comparative strengths of the two navies currently facing each other across the North Sea and enthralled Gimson with discussions of naval strategy. He eventually returned to Russia after the revolution to fight for the Mensheviks, a cause which Sydney Gimson could not embrace.²⁶

During these years the Society came to rely more and more on local lecturers who were often persuaded to speak on subjects that had previously been more at home in the Literary and Philosophical Society. Thomas Edwards lectured to the Society on 'The Geology of Charnwood Forest' and Mr. Lowe and Mr. Astley Clarke both gave interesting expositions of the contents of the town's museum.²⁷ Another popular local lecturer in these years was Henry Major, the former chief inspector on the Leicester School Board. Major was yet another lecturer to have originated from Nottingham, being appointed Inspector of Schools and Superintendent of visitors in April 1877. He had been an opponent of rote learning as practised in the Board Schools and, though not a Secularist, was nonetheless a popular lecturer. In this sense his rôle of sympathetic local Christian was a mirror of the Society's cordial relations with William Stanyon in the 1880's who had lectured to them on

numerous Hospital Sundays.²⁸ Major was a useful and versatile lecturer as equally at home discussing Natural History as he was Charles Dickens. Indeed such a valuable lecturer on the doorstep of the Society must have greatly contributed to his popularity amongst both committee and members.²⁹

As far as the work of spreading the Secular message was concerned the Leicester Secular Society preferred to concentrate on giving a Secularist viewpoint to local issues. Although the late Edwardian period witnessed an upsurge in blasphemy prosecutions the Society avoided any large scale involvement. In February 1908 the Society passed a resolution condemning the action of the government in prosecuting Harry Boulter for a series of lectures that were deemed to be blasphemous. The Society's resolution placed distinct emphasis on the transgression of the rights of free speech and demanded that Parliament 'use their influence towards the repeal of laws which both degrade religion and insult the spirit of liberty.'³⁰ Though an appeal for funds on behalf of the N.S.S. defence fund was issued this was as far as local support went. Though it is obvious that little else could be done the Society emphasised its pre-occupation with local matters at the following meeting when much time was expended in the jovial discussion of Gould's latest appearance in the police court as an alleged passive resister. Gould described his appearance in the court as a 'jesting bomb' intended to attack the bible teaching in schools advocated by his pious Dissenting and Catholic co-defendants.³¹

The Society's attitude to J. W. Gott, however, was rather different. Gott had been causing the authorities considerable concern as early as 1902 with the irreverance of his newspaper the Truth Seeker. In 1912 the Leicester Secular Society received a quantity of literature from him though how widely read it was is impossible to determine. By 1914 the Society decided to obtain 5/- worth of pamphlets from Gott's British Secular League.³² When

Gott was finally prosecuted for blasphemy in 1917 the Society was reticent about how it should help. Since Gott's defence was to be conducted by Chapman Cohen it may be that the Society followed the line indicated by Sydney Gimson who harboured a distrust of both men. Gimson's partiality was responsible for Cohen's small number of appearances on the Leicester platform and the relevant minute suggests that the society refused to act because Cohen was involved.³³ His dislike of Gott was based on rather more solid evidence. Gimson regarded him as a hothead in the Bradlaugh mould without any of his redeeming features. His memoirs describe, in almost comic terms, what his compatriots deemed as a ridiculous attempt to sell Secularist pamphlets in St. Peter's Square!

Whilst the national scene was put to one side, the Leicester Secular Society managed to involve itself in other social and national questions that were becoming important locally. Thus the Society decided to affiliate to the burgeoning Workers Educational Association as well as to send delegates to the Leicester Peace Society. They were also involved in the British National Peace Congress that was called in 1910.³⁴

The Secular Society and the Great War

The coming of the First World War potentially threatened the unity and purpose of the Leicester Secular Society. Like the Liberal party the Society remained a coalition of 'New Liberals', Individualists, proto-Socialists and traditionalist Liberals. Though the War divided the Society it never split it. Sydney Gimson describes a number of opinions that were activated within the Secular Society. These ranged from enthusiastic support for the War to conscientious objection. However at no point does there seem to have been active support for the German cause as there had been for the Boers.³⁵ This

apparent crisis of liberalism gave the Society new hope and a new purpose. In the midst of the terrible conflict the Society pledged itself to the defence of free speech and the expression of all opinion. Despite the fact that one member left the Society because of unpatriotic talk, the majority took a more pragmatic view. As Gimson put it:

Most of our members took the view that, being involved in the terrible conflict it was essential to do all in our power to bring it to a successful conclusion for England, though I think all of us recognised that no good was likely to come out of the war.³⁶

The Society quickly gave support to its own members who went to enlist by waiving their subscriptions whilst they were on active service and it surprisingly agreed to display army recruitment bills.³⁷ It was in many ways unfortunate for the Society that the War occurred at a time of improving fortunes. Sydney Gimson commented at the Annual Meeting in 1915 on the influx of members (110 new members and 60 associates during the previous year) and described it as a 'good years's work for Rationalist thought.'³⁸ Despite this, 1915 concluded with two events of significance; In October the Society learned of the death of G. W. Foote at Westcliff-on-Sea, though this was not entirely unexpected. His death effectively ended the nineteenth century for the Secular movement and the Society sent Samuel Leeson to represent them at his funeral.³⁹ The hope represented by the Young People's Secular Association vanished when it was disbanded in November 1915. No reason for its demise was given but numerous difficulties connected with meeting regularly in wartime coupled with the loss of some members by enlistment must have been contributory factors. Despite this the involvement

of younger members on an individual basis did not evaporate altogether. ⁴⁰

Nevertheless the bleak wartime situation was one the Leicester Secular Society seemed to thrive upon. At a time when the liberal world seemed far from in the ascendant Sydney Gimson was able to claim that:

...the Society is now on a sounder basis than at any time during the years that I have known it and one can have a surer hope of its permanence because so much of the active work is now carried on by the younger members.

Moreover the Society had now been handed a new responsibility based on the defence of free speech coupled with a concern for all humanity, a cause that many of its members had enlisted to defend:

In time of war there is always a danger of reaction and, with due regard to 'the safety of the realm' but no yielding to irrational panic, we must keep a watchful guard over our great heritage of free speech. Also I hope that when the war is over we shall be among those who work for such arrangements both here and abroad as shall prevent us from getting into the grip of militarism and shall bring nearer to us a real world peace.

Gimson finished his circular with a forthright justification of the Society's work and its continued, enduring criticism:

That which Christianity has miserably failed to bring about has its truest hope of realisation in a spread of Freethought and Rationalism.⁴¹

Gimson's circular coincided with what amounted to a test of the Society's intentions and principles. The local branch of the Union of Democratic Control, an organisation implacably opposed to the war, had previously been refused the local Corn exchange and Shoe Trade Hall as venues for a meeting. The Society, anxious to see freedom of speech maintained, decided that the Hall should be let to the Union on payment of a guarantee against damage of £25. As feelings in the town ran high trouble was anticipated though Gimson was prepared to offer them the Hall without the necessary guarantee. The meeting duly passed off without incident and the Union wrote a letter of appreciation to the Secular Society.⁴²

The Secular Society also took it upon itself to monitor some of the Social consequences of the War. In 1916 it passed a resolution condemning the government's treatment of servicemen discharged as unfit for duty without the provision of pensions. Another resolution demanded 'equality of sacrifice' and attacked the exemption of clergymen from combatant service. If such a distinction was to remain then the resolution was also of course demanding similar treatment for conscientious objectors.⁴³ By now the passing of resolutions was becoming a habit and was indicative of the Society's stance in defence of liberal civilisation. The Secretary moved another resolution at the half yearly meeting in 1916 which called upon the allies to state their terms for a settled peace and to accept the mediation of President Wilson in the matter.⁴⁴

Despite the Society's clamour for a quick and peaceful solution they cold-shouldered a resolution from F. Maddison of the local Branch of the League of Nations. No reason for this was given but it seems likely that affiliation would have split the Society which, as Gimson suggests, held violently differing opinions. The war was still to be won before the work of

reconstruction could begin. Even the Secularists could have been forgiven their feeling of bitterness. Many lost sons in the war. The first, Wallace Marston, fell as early as December 1914. Sydney Gimson's own son Humphrey was severely wounded whilst serving with the 4th Leicestershire regiment though happily he recovered.⁴⁵ F. J. Gould's son Julian was killed in 1917 and Gould's thoughts on his son's sacrifice, as a father and Positivist/Ethicist, must have been common to many:

When I reached home that May evening I found my son Julian sitting thoughtful in the room where, in view of garden and trees, he often designed and painted. He had that day volunteered for the Army. I will here affirm, as honestly as I have affirmed anything all my life, that I believe millions of our young citizens joined the Army with a spirit as free from Imperialism or Militarism as his. One of his last wishes, expressed in a letter pencilled amid the filth and misery of the field of war, was that he might see the glories of Lincoln Cathedral once again. The immense movement of young men to the Colours was the factor that finally decided my judgment. One could suppose it was all a folly, in which case the human race was morally and intellectually corrupt; or one could believe that beneath the appearance of passion and calamity, the collective human heart was instinctively seeking an end to which personal health and life were subordinated.⁴⁶

Gould's written memories of the War, composed in 1923, may not be wholly reliable since popular memory within the Leicester Secular Society suggests that he never wholly recovered from his son's death and remained embittered

for the rest of his life.⁴⁷ Despite this it is nonetheless obvious that the moral aspects of the War itself presented Secularists with many problems. Though the Leicester Secular Society effectively sidestepped the issue by not giving any 'party line', individuals still had moral dilemmas to solve for themselves. Secularism had fought for the rights of citizenship for a disadvantaged group and it was recognised that such rights also entailed responsibilities which could not be overlooked. Also the emphasis placed in Gould's moral teachings on duty, comradeship and responsibility must also have placed strains on those Leicester Secularists who were brought up on them. Nonetheless other Secularists chose to eschew the war and were, according to Sydney Gimson, imprisoned for their beliefs.

However at a deeper level there is evidence that more profound damage had been done. As Europe geared up to the conduct of the World's first 'Total War' Secularist and Positivist/Ethicist belief in man's power to redeem himself and his fellow man was severely damaged in the mud of Mons, Verdun and the Somme. For Gould's and Gimson's generation of Secularists and Positivists, the World could never be the same again.

Another area in which the Leicester Secular Society provided concrete help was in the realm of housing war refugees. Sydney Gimson had already been heavily involved in a scheme in the town to provide temporary housing for Belgian refugees. Gimson had in fact been made Chairman, at the instigation of the mayor Russell Frear, as a means of circumventing any religious animosity between those on the committee and the refugees themselves. In all, the town provided 100 houses with room for between 600 and 700 refugees and subscribed in excess of £30,000 for their comfort and support.⁴⁸ The Society itself made a special effort in this area and succeeded in housing one family, the Reinbjens, until February 1919.⁴⁹

Against the backdrop of the War the Society continued to pass

resolutions intended to help in the maintenance of the country's liberal heritage and the reconstruction of the post war world. On 2 December 1917 the Secular Society passed resolutions objecting to the disfranchisement of conscientious objectors as being 'contrary to the whole spirit of democratic government'. At the same meeting a similar resolution condemned the censorship of books and pamphlets concerning the war. The Society duly claimed, in line with its approach to all knowledge, that discussion was essential to 'ensure wise decisions' and that to pretend otherwise was to effectively weaken the country in time of war. The situation was bad enough without the unnecessary compromise of fundamental freedoms.⁵⁰

The Post-War World

The end of the war brought with it the 'Coupon election' and the Secular Society was once again called upon to act in defence of fundamental freedoms. Macdonald's candidature in the election for East Leicester aroused deep feelings of resentment since he had been opposed to the war and had articulated this view through the Union of Democratic Control and the I.L.P.⁵¹ It rapidly became clear that committee rooms would be almost impossible to find since other local interests were effectively operating a boycott. Much as they had done in the Bradlaugh case, the Leicester Secular Society decided that this was 'an act infringing the rights and liberties of electors and candidates.' After consulting the manageress and the members the premises were let to the I.L.P. on favourable terms.⁵²

Despite the problems mentioned, the Society as a unit came through the war relatively unscathed. Finances were still healthy and the Society had only lost 25 members during the whole of 1918,⁵³ though the Gimson family itself was to incur a personal loss in August 1919 with the premature

death of Ernest Gimson at the age of fifty five. In gratitude to the members who had fought, and for their own deliverance, the Society instituted a 'Thanksgiving Fund' which was later renamed the 'Special Effort Fund'. The use to which it was put remains unclear.⁵⁴

In late 1918 the Society's lecture programme, which had been severely curtailed during the War, was revived. War time travelling and other restrictions had meant that the Society had relied heavily on local lecturers, particularly for anniversary celebrations which during the war years were almost exclusively conducted by the President and Officers. Despite these problems the Society still managed to fit in lectures by Ramsay Macdonald and Graham Wallas. A noteworthy addition to their famous list of lecturers was Bertrand Russell, brother of and heir to Earl Russell.⁵⁵ The lecture list for the years immediately after the War included invitations to a number of old friends such as Hypatia Bradlaugh Bonner, S. K. Ratcliffe, Harry Snell, Annie Besant (by now representing the Taxation of Land Values League), Bernard Shaw, Gustav Spiller and Joseph McCabe. A small concession to new blood came in the form of invitations to G. D. H. Cole, who was unable to oblige, and the socialist advocate of internationalism H. N. Brailsford.⁵⁶

However one cloud remained on the horizon: the potential loss of the hall. In January 1919 Sydney Gimson warned the Society of the danger of Secular Hall Company shares falling into the wrong hands and urged members to buy up shares. However this threat never really materialised and on the final dissolution of the Company the Hall was saved. The Leicester Rationalist Trust which had been started in the early 1900's was able to raise £2,500 from subscriptions and Society donations to facilitate the purchase of the Hall in 1923.⁵⁷ The trusteeship remained in the hands of the Society's chief officers (initially led by Sydney Gimson) a practice which has

continued to the present day.

Though the Society now had a safe and secure home it looked towards a modern world with trepidation. Though it had survived the trials and buffetings of nearly seventy years the future looked as uncertain as ever. The Leicester Secular Society had moved in a world in which belief and attachment to ideas had been the stock in trade of society. With the disappearance of a culture in which the self acquisition of knowledge was valued, coupled with the growth of nominal agnosticism, the Society found itself not so much in a hostile climate as in a cold one. Sydney Gimson emphatically spoke for the Society when he compared its heyday to the contradictions and inadequacies of the modern world:

Can it be that the old Victorians were really more interesting people? I incline to the belief that that is the explanation. There seems to have been more variety, more individuality then. Now, educationally and in many other ways, we have gone in for 'mass production, which means a lessening of difference. Amid many Modern gains there are some losses.'⁵⁸

Just what awakened Sydney Gimson's interest will shortly become apparent.

Footnotes to Chapter Five

- 1: L.S.S.M.B., 26 July 1910, 24 October 1911, 23 August 1910, 7 July 1914, 14 December 1911.
- 2: L.S.S.M.B., 26 February 1908.
- 3: L.S.S.M.B., 22 April 1908.
- 4: L.S.S.M.B., 3 June 1908, 22 July 1908.
- 5: L.S.S.M.B., 27 January 1909, 9 February 1909.
- 6: L.S.S.M.B., 20 July 1909.
- 7: L.S.S.M.B., 30 November 1909, 3 May 1910.
- 8: L.S.S.M.B., 1 December 1910, 22 December 1911.
- 9: L.S.S.M.B., 7 February 1911.
- 10: L.S.S.M.B., 18 July 1911.
- 11: L.S.S.M.B., 19 September 1911, 21 July 1914.
- 12: L.S.S.M.B., 19 November 1912.
- 13: L.S.S.M.B., 12 November 1912.
- 14: L.S.S.M.B., 21 January 1913.
- 15: See L.S.S.M.B., 13 March 1913; see also F. J. Gould Life Story of a Humanist. (1923) passim, the Leicester Pioneer 1904 - 1908, the Leicester Reasoner 1902 - 1904 and see below Chapter 6 for numerous references to Gould's almost incurable habit of assuming false identities and positions in order to make an unmistakable moral and ethical point.
- 16: L.S.S.M.B., 10 February 1914.
- 17: L.S.S.M.B., 20 January 1914.
- 18: See lecture list 1908 in Scrapbook II (10D68/7. Leicester Record Office.). For Robertson's lecture on 'Public and Personal Morality. see also L.S.S.M.B., 20 April 1909, 8 February 1910 (for the invitation to Robertson and his wife) and 24 October 1911.

- 19: See lecture list 1908 and 1909 in Scrapbook II (10D68/7. Leicester Record Office.).
- 20: Ibid.. See also L.S.S.M.B., 4 October 1910.
- 21: L.S.S.M.B., 23 September 1908.
- 22: L.S.S.M.B., 20 April, 18 May 1909, 30 January 1912. See also reports from The Pioneer appended in Scrapbook II loc. cit..
- 23: For Bernard Shaw see L.S.S.M.B., 10 April 1910; for Standring and Levy, 7 September 1909; for Snell, 5 April 1910 and for Cohen 24 October 1911.
- 24: L.S.S.M.B., 18 October 1910 and Sydney Gimson, 'Random Recollections of the Leicester Secular Society Part Two'. (1932).
- 25: See lecture list 1909 loc. cit.; see also report in The Pioneer appended in Scrapbook II. See also L.S.S.M.B., 18 October 1910, 20 October 1918.
- 26: See lecture list 1909, L.S.S.M.B., 27 July 1909, 12 July 1910. See also Gimson, 'Random Recollections' page 27.
- 27: See lecture list 1909, L.S.S.M.B., 26 July 1910, 18 October 1910, 24 October 1911.
- 28: For Henry Major, see G. T. Rimmington Education, politics and society in Leicester 1833 - 1903. (Hantsport, Nova Scotia 1978), pages 115 - 116. See also Gimson, 'Random Recollections' Part I, page 51.
- 29: For Major's appearances at Leicester see Lecture lists 1908 and 1909 and L.S.S.M.B., 30 March 1909, 5 April 1910, 21 February , 24 October 1911, 18 June 1912.
- 30: L.S.S.M.B., 9 February 1908; for the Boulter Case see Edward Royle Radicals, Secularists and Republicans (1980) page 279.
- 31: L.S.S.M.B., 12 February 1908, see also F. J. Gould Life Story of a Humanist.(1923) pages 110 - 11.
- 32: L.S.S.M.B., 13 February 1912, 25 February 1914.
- 33: See Gimson, 'Random Recollections' Part I. page 54.

- 34: L.S.S.M.B., 20 May 1908, 25 November 1908, 31 May 1910.
- 35: Gimson, 'Random Recollections' Part II, pages 29 - 30.
- 36: Ibid. page 30.
- 37: L.S.S.M.B., 6 October, 17 November 1914.
- 38: L.S.S.M.B., 19 January 1915.
- 39: L.S.S.M.B., 19 October 1915.
- 40: L.S.S.M.B., 16 November 1915.
- 41: L.S.S.M.B., 18 January 1916.
- 42: L.S.S.M.B., 30 November, 5 December 1915, 18 January, 15 February 1916.
- 43: L.S.S.M.B., 18 July 1916.
- 44: L.S.S.M.B., 16 January 1917.
- 45: L.S.S.M.B., 1 December 1914, 19 October 1915.
- 46: Gould, Life Story of a Humanist, pages 160 - 1.
- 47: I owe thanks to Rupert Halfhide, the current President of the Society, for this piece of information.
- 48: Gimson, 'Random Recollections' Part II, pages 31 - 2.
- 49: L.S.S.M.B., 19 January 1915, 16 February 1919.
- 50: L.S.S.M.B., 2 December 1917.
- 51: See Martin Pugh, The Making of Modern British Politics 1867 - 1939 (1982), page 165.
- 52: L.S.S.M.B., 24 November 1918. See also Gimson, 'Random Recollections' Part II, page 20.
- 53: L.S.S.M.B., 19 January 1919.
- 54: L.S.S.M.B., 12 January, 27 July 1919.
- 55: L.S.S.M.B., 17 February 1918, 15 August 1916.
- 56: L.S.S.M.B., 29 September, 20 October 1918, 4 March, 16 March, 27 April, 28 September, 19 October 1919.

57: L.S.S.M.B., 23 January 1923.

58: Gimson, 'Random Recollections' Part II, page 42.

CHAPTER SIX

Who were the Secularists? An analysis of the membership.

Secularism was, according to one historian "a movement with a double origin, a result of two forces, one intellectual, the other social.... The social force which carried this intellectual movement farther and farther from its centre was the strong dissatisfaction of politically and economically underprivileged groups."¹ As this view suggests, Secularism is often seen as a product of nineteenth century industrial, urban society. Those groups who found themselves discriminated against by social and economic change were almost certain to surface in a radical movement, be it Chartism or Secularism. The argument considers that the participation of the economically disadvantaged, those groups attacked by - or sometimes created by - the growth of industrial urban society, points squarely to the class credentials of the movement. The participation of certain trades in Chartism has been well explored² but evidence for an occupational analysis of Secularist membership is more problematical and less forthcoming.

As we have seen Secularism was the heir to Owenism and as such had a less obvious economic appeal to particular classes. Like Owenism it sought to draw in all who earnestly craved the destruction of the clerical monopoly on life and offered a social salvation, sparing in its economic relevance. Secularism was also an intellectual position and required a commensurate level of commitment and personal involvement from the individual, as an individual. Thus conclusions from analysing the social composition of Secularism must be cautionary since the historian is dealing with a movement's critique of society that, though conceding the rôle of economic factors, sought change in other areas.

Previous attempts to examine the composition of Secularism have met with limited success. Susan Budd has attempted to find figures for the national movement by the use of biographical and obituary evidence over the period 1865 - 1965.³ In her study of 263 secularists she found that 40% were semi or Unskilled workers , 20% Artisans , 20% White collar workers, 15% owners of small business premises, 2% were professionals and 3% agricultural workers.

Though obviously only an attempt to discover the kind of people attracted to Secularism, the nature of Dr. Budd's sources and her sample are both fraught with difficulties. Obituaries by their nature are by no means an impartial source. They tend to record the great and powerful and neglect the insignificant members that formed the rank and file. The details they relate are also highly stylised in their presentation and often record impressions that are not always as close to the truth as the historian would like. Obituaries also present problems of continuity in the composition of the sample since they record generally the deaths of aged members and this is unrepresentative.

The use of autobiographical material is also problematic; those who found it necessary to write autobiographies are by definition out of the ordinary as the writer becomes, on the page, an individual rather than a member of a class specific group. Moreover as a source autobiographies themselves are also stylised pieces of literature which generally catalogue a process of upward social and intellectual mobility. Autobiographies give us a unique insight into the world of the Secularist, but precisely because of their sheer particularity they are of limited use in obtaining a clear picture of the whole movement.

Dr. Edward Royle has also attempted two occupational analyses of the Secularist movement; the first covers the years 1837 - 1866,⁴ the second the

years 1865 - 1915.⁶ The first analysis is constructed from a random sampling of names from the Freethought press and produced figures which, allowing for differences in time scale and methods of sampling used, makes an interesting comparison with Dr. Budd's figures. Dr. Royle's figures, due to the differing timescale, take into account a different social structure and as a result the professional classes are categorised alongside the manufacturing classes. Thus he has produced figures that suggest manufacturers (i.e. employers of labour) comprised 4% of his sample, the rising professional classes 3%, the lower middle classes (Shopkeepers, Booksellers, Coffee House and Innkeepers) 29%, the artisanal upper working classes 26% and the working classes (under a tentative estimate) comprised 38%.

The second analysis undertaken by Dr. Royle, covers the same period as Dr. Budd's though it aims to produce figures more directly relevant to nineteenth century Secularism, hence the cut off point of 1915. Like Dr. Budd's study it utilises obituary material derived from the careers of 150 Freethinkers and produces the following figures. Of the total sample 3% of the membership were derived from the Professional classes, 32% were owners of businesses, 15% were White collared workers, 22% artisan craftsmen and 25% were semi and unskilled workers.

However any analysis based on these figures can only be tentative since the sample, as we have already suggested is, unrepresentative because the availability of a truly homogenous source has hitherto been lacking. What has so far been missing is an occupational analysis based on a source cataloguing a locality over a more specific period. Such a source would answer important questions about the local nature of Secularism and approach areas not covered in the other attempts at occupational categorisation. One of the most important aspects missing from previous studies is the participation of women in the movement; an aspect easily missed if one

merely follows the obituaries of the famous.

My own analysis of the membership of the Leicester Secular Society, based on the particularly fruitful run of nomination books, is just such a source. It provides the only in depth profile of its kind based on extensive evidence of all those who lent their name to Secularism during these important years. For the sake of convenience I have taken the twenty years which can roughly be said to approximate to the zenith of Secularism as a national movement (1880 -1900)^e, though for an in depth study I have divided the analysis into two ten year samples (Appendix 3). This period of twenty years also coincides with the systematisation of nominations within the Secular Society as a whole.

If the figures calculated from the Leicester Secular Society nomination books are categorised in the manner prescribed by Dr. Royle and Dr. Budd then the figures fit these trends which have been already identified, though the Leicester figures have more in common with Dr. Royle's. The figures for owners of businesses as a general category are almost identical with those found by Dr. Royle (33% & 32% respectively). The category covering artisan workers has the three analyses roughly in agreement, though it must be admitted that the Leicester figures are lower than the other two giving a figure of 15% compared with 22% for Dr. Royle and 20% for Dr. Budd's chronologically extended study.

When considered alongside the figures arrived at by Dr. Royle the Leicester figures show a considerably larger number of semi/unskilled workers. In the Leicester figures the percentage is nearly double that of Dr. Royle's (39% compared to 25%) and this reflects the nature of his source material, which he freely admits, would tend to miss many of the rank and file labourers and semi-skilled workers who did not rise to local or national prominence.

As I have suggested the methods that have so far been used have distinct limitations in producing a true picture of those in the nineteenth century who chose to be Secularists. The Leicester Secular Society nomination books have enabled me to produce a more detailed picture of one particular society and possibly for the whole national movement.

My own analysis indicates changing patterns of membership over the whole twenty year period. Over the whole period it is possible to trace roughly fifty per cent of the total membership listed in the nomination books⁷ an average success rate for this sort of analysis.

Women in the Society

Before we look at the occupational profile of membership it is illuminating to look at the gender makeup of the Secular society. Of the number of member nominations in the period 1881 - 1891 (371) a total of 93 were women, amounting to 12% of the membership. Of this 12% approximately 58% of them were single women. The second half of the analysis (1891 - 1901) produces a rather different set of figures: whilst the proportion of single women remains virtually the same (59%) the total number of women enrolling doubled to 186, 24% of the membership.

Precise reasons for this increase are inconclusive though there are definite hints. It seems possible that more women enrolled in the Society because it was gradually becoming more respectable as it attempted to distance itself from the more masculine image of the Secular club. The appeal of the society may have had a further boost from increasingly perceptible changes in ideology and Secularist behaviour. The eighties and nineties was the decade when the Society was increasingly exposed to the growing ideas of Ethicism and Positivism which had a more spiritual and

collectivist emphasis. This was an approach that was more successful in recruiting women than the older, individualist Secularism with its emphasis on militancy and struggle had been.⁹ Simple demographics provide another source of explanations; the decade ending in 1901 shows a distinctly steep increase in the female population of all ages, though the increase in the age range 20 - 44 is most marked.⁹ The year 1901 is particularly pertinent since at that date women outnumbered men by over a million for the first time.¹⁰ Such an increase was almost certain to be reflected in the figures, particularly in Leicester where trades such as shoemaking and hosiery had an increasingly high level of female employment. With such a large female population it is also quite possible that the population ratio may have encouraged new initiatives in courtship behaviour and opportunities as more agencies and environments where the two sexes could meet one another at a safe distance were being explored. The Secular society with its growing respectability in the city of Leicester was just such an agency. Secular society dances were popular, as were the frequent dancing classes held at the hall, though not organised implicitly by the Society itself. Quite how many Secularists were recruited from the dancing is unclear but it is, however, not unrealistic to suggest that a high proportion of at least two generations of Leicester natives learned how to dance at the Secular Hall.¹¹ There are also snippets of oral evidence which suggest that Secularists encouraged some of their workmates to attend the dances given at the Hall, though the inevitable invitation to participate in other activities was seldom taken up.¹²

Any conclusions about the class structure of the women involved in Secularism are tentative. Though there was a marked increase in the number of women without a specified occupation in the period 1891 - 1901 (21% of all nominations compared with a figure for the previous decade of 10% of all

nominations), there are problems with what precisely these figures constitute. In most cases it is unclear to which occupational and class grouping these women belonged since the absence of an occupation does not conclusively suggest a particular class origin. Many of these women, especially single women, are untraceable through trade directories as persons in possession of private income or carrying on a business or trade. The problem of identifying the wives of shopkeepers has been minimised by the inclusion of all married women whose husbands are shopkeepers under this category on the presumption that they were liable to be also involved in the business. Despite this it is probably likely that these unidentifiable women were part of the reservoir of casual labour that the comparatively unmechanised trades of hosiery and bootmaking relied upon, at least until the mid-eighteen nineties.¹³ However it is true to say that the figures relating to unemployed women tell us very little and the figures of women with occupations are only slightly more enlightening.

In the figures for the decade 1881 - 1891 women in employment make up only 3½% of all the nominations traced of which under half (a total of four) are married women. Of the married women one is listed as an architect's secretary, one is a shopkeeper whilst the other two have connections in the clothing industry, being respectively a dressmaker and a hosiery hand. The figures for the employed single women tell much the same story with two dressmakers listed along with a milliner, though unskilled trades are represented by the appearance of two shop assistants, one boot repairer and one boot manufacturers operative.

When we look at figures for the following ten years the number of women with occupations has risen to 6½% of all traced nominations. Though the sample is not really large enough to draw any deep conclusions from it is noticeable that the number of married women in employment is catching up

with the number of single women (they now are equal to two thirds of the number of single women). More trades are represented in the totals as well; in addition to those connected with the clothing trade and haberdashery, self employment appears in the form of beer retailing and floristry. In the figures for single women we come across a wider spread of occupations. Augmenting the unskilled workers in the clothing and shoe trades already mentioned are a higher number of shop assistants (5), White collar and professional workers are represented by the appearance of a post office assistant and a music teacher.

Though the total sample is small and the changes in it are apparently limited it is possible to draw some tentative conclusions about it. The number of women enlisting in the ranks of the Secular society effectively doubled during the twenty year period of the study. Although there is no irrefutable explanation for this, it most certainly has much to do with the increasing respectability of the society which became a place where members felt more able to take their wives. Many of the new initiatives such as the extension of musical entertainment, dancing soireés, picture exhibitions and flower shows were certainly an attempt to widen the appeal of the society¹⁴, though the scrupulous vetting of potential members and the limitations on the rights of visitors 'sampling' the Society remained intact.¹⁵ The potential for a new membership was recognised but it had still to be managed and regulated on terms convenient and pleasing to the society. Much of the demand was seen as homegrown, consisting of the wives and families of members and a glance through the nomination book does much to confirm this.¹⁶ Many of the provisions had this in mind and served to discourage outsiders who had to serve an 'apprenticeship' of respectability which almost mirrors initiation ritual.¹⁷

It is noticeable that there is no increase in the ratio of single women

enrolling (this remains constant at 3:2 in favour of married women), rather an increase in the total number of women within the Society. Though many of these women were self-evidently the wives of members there remains a large number who were not. It thus seems plausible to suggest that the society proved more popular to all women, irrespective of marital or class status, at a time when incomes and expectations for women were rising for them in towns such as Leicester. Though there is no overwhelming evidence for the large scale involvement of economically independent women in the Society there are definite hints that some were attracted to the society as indeed they would have been to other agencies of both leisure and worship. However the historian is certainly nearer to the truth to suggest that this probably says more about changes in society at large than it does about deliberate policy within the Leicester Secular Society.

When looking at the rôle of women in the Leicester Secular society and in Secularism the historian is struck by their sheer absence. Dr. Budd has already suggested that nationally women were conspicuously under-represented, something that was seen as a profound threat to the future of the ideology.¹⁹ Women in the Secular movement had no clearly defined rôle. Even the realisation that they were responsible for the next generations of Secularists seems to have been understated. At least until the eighteen - nineties there was no concerted attempt to recruit them into the Secular movement and in many ways the figures reflect this. However some women can be identified from the minute books and other sources as having been active within the organisation of the society. Though women were continually under-represented on committees and sub-committees some did take an active part in the Society. For example Mrs Slater was appointed to the post of manageress with duties chiefly involving the club, and Sarah Perkins spent many years as a teacher within the Secularist Sunday School.²⁰ However the

fact remains that women were an under-represented minority in an organisation that sought to be their ally and liberator.

Men and the Society

Men of private income did not constitute any real part of the Leicester Secular Society. In the figures for the period 1881 - 1891 I was able to trace only one man. In the figures for the following decade this rises to four, constituting only 1.08% of the total nominations. It is difficult to say anything about this small grouping. Each of them was listed in the trade directory as a private resident, which suggests that they were either of independent means or retired from the business or occupation which supplied them with a comfortable private income. None of them can be identified as being a major figure, or as having taken a leading rôle in the affairs of the Society.

The business sector of classification I have divided into three categories. The first is what I have termed manufacturing proprietorial which covers all those in charge of the production and distribution of goods and services on a scale large enough to involve some degree of investment and employment. The second category I have identified is proprietorial (multi premises) which is designed to display all those in charge of small businesses which occupy more than one premises or where the proprietor can be identified as living at a house away from these premises. Likewise the third category of proprietorial (single premises) is similar to the above, but relates only to those trading and living in a single set of premises.

In the figures for 1881 - 1891 the manufacturing proprietorial grouping numbers 20, constituting 5.39% of the total nominations. Five of these men, listed as Engineering manufacturers, are members of the Gimson family.

Sydney and Ernest Gimson were nominated to the Society in May 1882, Josiah Mentor and Arthur were later nominated in the October of the same year. Percy Gimson the youngest brother does not appear in the nomination books until June 1890. Many other men who were to take a leading part in the construction and consolidation of the Society and its work also appear in this category. John Sladen, Michael Wright and Thomas Coltman three of the four original trustees of the Society (the fourth was Josiah Gimson)²⁰ are all represented in the group. Sladen was the proprietor of an Indigo dye works in Cobden Street, whilst Michael Wright ran an Elastic Web manufacturing business in Quorn, an outlying village near Leicester.

Thomas Coltman was a hosiery machinist and needle maker with an address listed in the initial shareholders book in 1873 as 24 Newarke street.²¹ By the time he appears in the nomination books in July 1885 he had moved to premises on the Humberstone road, suggesting his business had prospered considerably. Coltman eventually went into partnership with Josiah Gimson to manufacture hosiery machinery but was discharged from this obligation under the terms of Josiah's will.²² Coltman also presided over the memorial service held for Gimson at the Secular Hall.²³

Though Coltman's initial shareholding was smaller being only twenty shares, (Sladen took sixty and Wright took forty),²⁴ he nevertheless played a leading part in the affairs of the Society, serving on several committees specialising in the organisation of soirées, musical entertainments and other events.²⁵ Though by this stage a manufacturer, Coltman's story appears to be one of growing prosperity and respectability from humble origins, a feeling reflected in a motion he proposed to place books from the Society library in the club room, aiming to improve the educational opportunities of the less genteel club members. The committee to whom the motion was passed approved of the 'spirit' of Coltman's suggestion but did nothing to act upon it.²⁶

Wright and Sladen were also stalwart committee men serving on the General committee as well as on those for the choir, entertainment, finance and other matters. Both of them were veterans of the Unitarian Discussion class held by Joseph Dare in the early 1850's and Wright in particular had lectured to audiences in the 1870's.²⁷ Wright however died in September 1881 at the comparatively young age, of 63. He was sadly missed by the Society and was remembered, by Gould, as a man to whom "Courage was as natural as his integrity. He always stood up for what he believed. The smallness of the party he joined never troubled him. Opposition, or even personal peril (which he unhesitatingly encountered) only made him more resolute."²⁸

Many other manufacturers in this 1881 - 1891 group were also involved in the life of the Society, though rather less obviously. George Woodford for example, a Matting manufacturer of Wellington Street, was one of the original shareholders, applying for four shares in 1873. In March 1883 he appears as a signatory to a petition convening a meeting to plan strategy over the imprisonment of G. W. Foote, W. Ramsey and H. Kemp for publishing the inflammatory Christmas 1882 number of the Freethinker. On 7 April 1884 he was engaged to provide a band for the meeting the following Sunday and was permitted to retain five sixths of the collection money. He again turns up in the minutes of the meeting on 1 November 1887 at which he was thanked for presenting several maps to the Society. In 1898 his son (also George) continued the family tradition after his father death in 1890 and became the first name elected to the General Committee in January 1898. The family involvement with Secularism did not stop there, in December 1888 another son Herbert was nominated and accepted as a member, in November 1894 his wife was nominated and in October 1898 his sister Helby Woodford followed suit. Though the Woodfords do not appear to have taken a leading part in any of

the main Committees or sub-committees, until the late eighteen nineties the family represents a strand of commitment and membership that did not actively seek office yet offered rank and file support through thick and thin, in this case for over twenty five years. This sort of unspectacular membership experience was probably more typical of the mass of members, of most occupational groups whose lives in the Society are otherwise hard to glimpse.

The figures for the following decade (1891 - 1901) show a fall in the number and percentage of this patrician manufacturing proprietorial group, from twenty to ten (2.7%). The largest trade represented was, as in the previous decade, Boot and Shoe manufacturing, something not unexpected in Leicester where the trade had been growing in size for the previous thirty years.²⁹ However there were single representatives of other trades necessary to an industrial city with increasingly sophisticated demands. These included in the 1881 - 91 sample trades such as Beer Engine maker and Bedding and Matting manufacturer respectively. The second sample includes a Disinfectant manufacturer, an ironfounder and range manufacturer and an artificial limb manufacturer.

The proprietorial (multi-premises) group makes up a slightly larger percentage of the total membership. The figures for 1881 - 1891 indicate that approximately 8% of the traced nominations belonged to this group, though the proportion for a decade later fell to 4%. Many of the trades mentioned in this grouping were of the wholesale warehouse and mercantile type, such as a Shoe Mercer listed in the 1881 - 1891 figures or the two wholesale tailors listed in the figures for 1891 -1901. Others dealt in bulky goods that obviously required extensive premises such as a cattle dealer (1881 - 91), a wholesale corn merchant (1881 - 91), or two timber merchants (1891 - 1901). Others still owned retail outlets with a number of branches,

such as George Ireland (1881 - 1891), a greengrocer who had premises listed in the nomination book as 50, Upper Kent Street and another set of premises or a house at 66 Charnwood street. Another example is a Mr. Edwin Clarke, a drysalter and chemist, who was nominated for membership in August 1885 and listed his address in the nomination book as 9 Newtown Street Leicester. The relevant trade directories for the period indicate that he was a partner in Clarke, Nettleship and Bailey a firm of chemists who also had premises at 133 Humberstone Road and at 15 Belvoir Street, Leicester.

Proprietors in this group seem with a small number of exceptions to have acquired the nomenclature relating to their trade and to have left behind the description shopkeeper which appears more readily in the single proprietor class. Perhaps these proprietors readily deserve the term applied to them by Michael Winstanley, 'Shopocrat'³⁰, which implies a desire and potential capacity for social mobility coupled with a substantial element of reserve capital. These attempts to transcend the term 'shopkeeper' were particularly manifest in the trades related to the grocery and provision market. However it must be remembered that some who possessed only one set of premises were also eager to discard the term 'shopkeeper' in favour of a new terminology.

Very few of those listed in this category were connected with Leicester's staple industries of hosiery and boot and shoemaking. The figures for 1881 - 1891 reveal only three men who were connected with the shoe trade - one shoe mercer and two bootmakers. The figures for the second decade show only two bootmakers and grindery dealers whose reliance on the trade must have been by no means total. The clothing and hosiery industry is likewise conspicuously absent from the grouping, providing only four wholesale tailors whose connection with the native clothing trade may have been tenuous. In many ways this reflects the inherently mixed nature of

these industries which persisted with small scale forms of industrial organisation such as 'putting out', small workshop premises, and large scale use of casual labour alongside factory based production.³¹ Much of this labour alternated between the two trades leaving little encouragement for the process of mechanisation³². Such a system was exacerbated by the reservoir of labour in the towns and villages of Leicester's hinterland. ³³

The activities of this group of large scale proprietors within the Secular society is quite hard to trace since they seem, as a grouping, to have taken a smaller part in it than either the manufacturers or their smaller scale counterparts. This may be accounted for by the fact that this category as a total number of nominations was in decline over the period as a whole, the total for the second ten years being half that for the first. It seems reasonable to suggest that this decline may have taken those most likely to be younger and active in Secularism into other movements and interests as they possibly found outlets more in keeping with their social and intellectual aspirations. Those who did join the Secular Society may quite simply have found that with other social, intellectual and political interests alongside the running of a larger scale enterprise, time was at a premium.

A rare example of an active large scale proprietor is furnished by a member who was elected in April 1883, one William Lee. Lee was a Bootmaker & Leather and Grindery Dealer who listed his address as 33 Churchgate Leicester, one of the main shopping thoroughfares even in the late nineteenth century, but he also had premises at 6 Duns Lane Leicester. His nomination to the Society was proposed and seconded by two well respected committee men; William Henry Holyoak the ex-Owenite and veteran of the Dare discussion group and a Mr. Kearsley who appears in the minutes as a member of the Library and Entertainments committees for that year. A year later at the

General half yearly meeting Lee was elected to the General Committee of the Society along with such luminaries as Holyoak and Sydney and Ernest Gimson. In the elections of the following half year, though not on the general Committee, Lee took seats on the choir sub-committee and the newly constituted political sub-committee which had been formed largely in response to the excitement generated by the Bradlaugh case. In April of the same year he was one of the members nominated to constitute a sub-committee to manage the affairs of the Secular Club working alongside Holyoak and Abraham Fitchett. At the July half yearly meeting he was once again elected to the general Committee as well as the choir and club sub-committees and proceeded to assist the choir with the repair of its harmonium. He continued his musical interest by becoming secretary to the musical committee in February 1886 and provided several years service in this area as well as assisting the general committee and other sub-committees with the organisation of entertainments. He was still available to the Society in the nineties and lectured on 'The morality of interest'.²⁴

The single premises proprietorial group is larger than the multi-premises grouping in both sets of figures and is roughly double the size on each occasion. However like the grouping of larger scale proprietors this group was also roughly halved during the course of the two ten year samples. In the 1881 - 1891 sample the single premises proprietor constituted 14%, but this had fallen to 8% in the second 1891 - 1901 sample. Though the percentages mentioned include the doubling in the number of women in the second decade, the numerical differences in the two samples equally demonstrate a marked decline. The total number of nominations traced were approximately the same (371 and 370 respectively); of these 53 were single premises proprietors in the first sample but only 30 in the second.

Most of the trades represented in this grouping were the traditional

suppliers of the needs of an industrial city; tailors, pastrycooks, photographers, hatters, herbalists, fried fish dealers, bakers, hard confectioners, picture framers, hairdressers, grocers and beer retailers are all represented, with those catering for everyday needs and those supplying the wants of the shoe and hosiery trades in the majority. Active members such as Abraham Fitchett, a bag hosier and Samuel and Annie Savage, Mr. Savage being a general dealer,³⁶ fall into this latter category. Fitchett was one of the original shareholders in the Secular Hall Company and was still active on sub-committees well into the 1890's. Others who exemplify involvement in the running of the society include Alfred James Essex, a greengrocer nominated in November 1890, who served on the General and Club Committees in addition to work done on numerous single purpose soirée and supper committees.³⁶

Others such as Alfred Manship, landlord of the 'Barkby Arms', or William Hartopp, the landlord of the 'Marquis of Wellington' are indicative of a small but significant number of proprietors who made their living in the licenced trade in an age when the provision of drinking establishments in the city was considerably larger than it is today.

In many ways it can be said that these proprietors large and small are over-represented as a percentage of the total population. However they effectively constitute what had become a new power in the land after the reforms of 1832 and 1835. Michael Winstanley has emphasised how shopkeepers were almost accidentally moulded into a class by a range of social, political and market forces which persuaded them to answer their 'call' to responsibility.³⁷ They took seats on vestries, Improvement and Police Commissions and became Poor Law Guardians as a means of regulating and overseeing local governmental control. Such an outlook came remarkably easy to Secularists who argued for the excesses of the state to be reined back

yet sought room for self-improvement through honest industry and a minimum of state intervention. It seems likely that the ideology of Secularism would dovetail comfortably with the status of a large or small scale proprietor.

There was a modest but significant increase in the rate of recruitment of professionals to the Society. In the figures for 1881 -1891 they numbered 7, constituting 1.8% of the total of traced nominations. By the second decade this has risen to 17, (4.6% of the total). The differences between these figures are, perhaps explainable by the presence of ten actors in the figures for the second decade. Some of these actors were almost certainly committed Secularists since acting was a profession held in precarious social esteem and was popular amongst Secularists from Southwell and Kate Watts onwards.²⁸ However, it also seems likely that some of them were granted membership on a temporary basis in order to use the facilities of the club and Society so that this apparent increase in the size of the professional grouping may be exaggerated. At the very least this group was numerically holding its own whilst those we have already mentioned were in decline. Members of this occupational grouping do not appear to have taken a significant part in the activities of the Society. Some, like Harrison Anderson a surgeon appeared in the nomination book but, judging from the evidence of the minute books did not then take any further part in the organisation of the Society, perhaps preferring to remain a paper member. Others such as George Sedgewick, the General Secretary of the National Union of Boot and Shoe Operatives, and Thomas Smith, his immediate predecessor and Secretary of the Leicester Liberal Association since 1878, joined within a month of each other at the start of 1883. Both took no discernable part in the Society and may have seen membership as a means of establishing social and political contacts with employers and workmen alike in an informal atmosphere. Both Sedgewick and Smith were of the reformist Lib/Lab wing of

trade unionism and took active rôles in local politics, sitting on the Liberal benches of Leicester Council.³⁹ With the small but influential cluster of important employers in the Society, membership may have been seen by Sedgewick and Smith as playing an integral part in the preservation of identity of interest between employer and employed in Leicester. The Secretary of the local branch of the National Union of Operative Riveters and Finishers, one G. Barratt, also joined the Society in 1890 though his participation was also minimal.

In contrast, the occupational grouping of white-collar workers provided a number of committed and hard working committee men. As a percentage of the total traced nominations they make up approximately 7% of the 1881 - 1891 total, but this falls to 2½% of the total in the second decade. The occupations listed in this category include the ubiquitous clerk who made up the majority of nominations as well as various managers, cashiers, foremen, overlookers and travelling salesmen. Many of these men worked hard for the society and served on its organisational and ad hoc committees. Certainly it seems that there was much in the character and disposition of these white collar workers that was conducive to long hours spent in potentially trivial, but necessary committee work. Examples include Joseph Thacker, a commercial traveller who was elected to the Society in 1886 and began work in the committee and sub-committee structure in 1888 concentrating most of his energy on the club and entertainment division; and Edward Pinder, a manager at a leather merchant's establishment who was active in the Society from 1890 onwards. Pinder in particular was welcome committee fodder, serving on a sub-committee to draw up the Society's deeds, the entertainment sub-committee and the General Committee amongst many other activities.⁴⁰

The three remaining categories roughly constitute what could be described as the manual working class and have been divided to emphasise the

social and economic differences between artisan tradesmen, semi/unskilled workers and labourers.

The skilled manual group includes trades involving degrees of skill that would traditionally have required some form of apprenticeship. Thus tailors, basket makers, bricklayers, cabinet makers, bootmakers, joiners and carriage builders all find their way into the group. The demise of this group as a mainstay of Leicester Secularism was quite spectacular. They fell from a total number of 47 traced nominations (12½%) in 1881 - 1891, to 21 nominations (5.½%) in 1891-1901. Bearing in mind that the number of nominations is roughly the same for both periods this represents a considerable decline in adherence to what is generally seen as a creed that appealed to the artisan.

Part of this decline is offset by a slight increase in the numbers of semi/unskilled workers being nominated to the Society, from 14 (3½%) in 1881 - 1891 to 21 (5½%) in 1891 - 1901, including all those whose semi-skilled and unskilled trades are mentioned in the relevant trade directories such as warehouseman, shop assistant, framework knitter and unskilled factory operative.

The final occupational grouping which underwent a similar degree of decline is that labelled 'other' which includes all men traced to an address but with no listed occupation. It is a fair assumption that these men were in fact labourers and it is also equally likely that many who could not be traced to an address were also labourers, a group whose high level of mobility effectively excluded them from entry in the directories. This group fell from a total of 81 (22%) in 1881 - 1891 to 56 (15%) in 1891 - 1901.

As far as participation in the activities of the society went the skilled and semi-skilled were the more likely to take an active rôle likely to leave a trace for the historian, whereas attendance at lectures, use of the reading

and smoking rooms, participation in society outings and use of the club facilities have not left a trace for the historian. The comparative absence of artisans, and more particularly, labourers from the actual committee work should not obscure this other, important layer of 'participation'.

Nevertheless some skilled workers and labourers were able to take a wider part in the affairs of the Society. We have already seen how the activities of the ex-Owenite tailor, William Henry Holyoak, brought him to a position of prominence in the Society as shareholder, bookseller, treasurer and inspiration to many younger members.⁴¹ Holyoak was so respected that a deputation, drawn from the General Committee, was organised to apologise to him when he took exception to rule changes that had gone through without his knowledge.⁴² However, there were other, often unsung, Committee men such as Richard Hill, a bootmaker of 12 Painter Street, who joined the Society in December 1883, and was elected to the General Committee in July 1886 and later undertook duties relating to the club.⁴³ Another example is a Mr. Payne, one of the occupants of what were almost certainly lodgings, who sat on the same library committee as Richard Hill for two terms before moving on to join the musical committee.⁴⁴

If we seek an overview of the figures then an average of both sets suggests that the society was a mainly working class organisation with important elements of proprietorial and manufacturing support and a leavening of white collar and professional members.

As far as the trends identified in the two sample are concerned the historian must sound a warning. The samples are in a sense incomplete, covering a period up to 1900 in which the figure for that year's nominations is 93 - a dramatic rise over the previous year which produced only 44. This effectively reversed a previously underlying downward trend in nominations. A cursory glance in the nomination book for the 1902 period onwards indicates

that this growth was sustained and built upon, particularly by F. J. Gould who had a policy of encouraging a high level of membership both to ensure the success of the Society and to pay his wages.

Nevertheless there are some trends of significance which can be discussed. The rise in the number of women is most striking, demonstrating both a changing appeal and possibly reflecting other social, economic and demographic changes. The rise in the number of professionals is also of interest, as is the relative stability of the unskilled and labouring groups. The conclusion the historian is persuaded of is that manufacturers and small and large shopkeepers were no longer joining the Society in large numbers and that they were being replaced in the movement by women. These women were generally without an occupation, though there was a small but perceptible increase in the number of women working as shop assistants and other working class trades.

Despite this analysis it is difficult to sketch a typical Leicester Secularist. Those who have left impressionistic evidence are, to say the least, not typical of the rank and file. Malcolm Quin, the Newcastle Positivist convert from Broad Church Anglicanism, remembered the Society from 1873 and described the audience as being composed of "what we should now call the Proletariat... but there was also a few members of the shopkeeping and manufacturing classes at the meetings."⁴⁵ F.J. Gould the organiser in the Edwardian period suggested that the membership contained "nobody who possessed a University degree, and nobody who possessed a carriage, except Philip Wright." This judgement seems a little strange when we consider the obvious wealth and status of some Society members, but it possibly indicates another dimension to the Secularist dichotomy between respectability and unrespectability. Though Gould never saw a carriage it does not mean that nobody had one! Secularists were highly capable of 'dressing down' on

occasions in order to create certain impressions amongst themselves and the outside world, and of 'dressing up' to create other, more orthodox ones related to conventional social mores. Gould himself was not above such activities. He dressed quite deliberately in the manner of a parson confirming his sober character, but records one revealing incident about 'dressing down' in his autobiography'.

I visited a sort of prize fight in order to deliver a true and unofficial account of the bruising and blood letting; and, so as not to seem too respectable, I slouched into the entertainment hall shabbily clad and smoking the only cigar I ever held between my lips. On another occasion, prompted by a like public motive, I attended the Leicester Races, and gravely asked a policeman where I might bet. He pointed to the official ring, and I have always maintained that the law of England, blue-uniformed and spike helmeted, was consciously encouraging me to put money on a horse. This was my first and last vision of the imperial sport.⁴⁶

Sydney Gimson who was President for most of the period under discussion was by no means an average member of the society and his 'Random Recollections' contain little material relating to the rank and file membership. Certainly much of his material confirms the impression of a number of entrepreneurial success stories such as Michael Wright rising to have his own elastic web business.⁴⁷ There is also confirmation of deep strain of working class autodidactism that drew strength from the Society. Gimson describes how William Henry Holyoak spent a life surrounded by books and used to buy up unwanted lots of them at auction sales using the spare

leaves for writing poems and other jottings. Holyoak also let his enthusiasm for Fitzgerald run away with him and issued his own edition of 'Omar Khayyam'. Barclay was to do the same with some writings of John Ruskin. Though Barclay obtained permission from Ruskin, Holyoak was not so fortunate and faced legal action from Macmillan, the owner of the copyright. This was averted only by the timely intervention of George Jacob Holyoake.⁴⁸

Thomas Slater, the former Bury co-operator and manager of the secular hall was also extremely well read and an avid book collector in the autodidactic tradition. Slater himself was of indisputably working class origins, and after discharging his duties as manager of the Hall he obtained work at a spinning factory in Frog Island, Leicester.⁴⁹ According to Gimson's 'Recollections' Slater used to smuggle books home past the keen gaze of his wife who grumbled that they constituted money 'wasted'. On one occasion Slater found himself cornered in the kitchen with a parcel of books and his wife approaching. He hid them in the oven with the intention of collecting them later. After forgetting them for some considerable time it was discovered that they were done to a crisp!⁵⁰

This strand of autodidacticism found its greatest apostle in Tom Barclay a Socialist who spent time working in Corah's hosiery factory and in his autobiography styled himself as a 'Bottle Washer'. He developed his journalistic and literary skills to a high degree of perfection in local journals such as the Countryman and the Pioneer as well as lecturing to a range of audiences. Barclay read widely and developed an adoration of George Bernard Shaw which he fed into his activities as a member and teacher with the Socialist League.⁵¹ He sought to espouse the moral, craft orientated Socialism of Morris and would certainly have found sympathetic, individualist ears within the Secular Society. Evidence for Barclay's attitude is furnished by the remarks he makes in his autobiography about forcibly widening his

knowledge. At one point he suggests that getting a certificate in geology restrained him from "having to bother with that horrible science any longer" and he summed up the autodidact's attitude to life and knowledge as; "If you make too much of money you become a heavy footed ignoramus, whose God is his belly." ⁵²

This is probably the closest we will get to finding the typical Leicester Secularist. The weight of evidence suggests that the working class experience we have catalogued was far from unique and must have been common to many members. Rosamund Billington's sociological study of latter day Secularists found a sizeable residue of this feeling. She was led to suggest that working class membership of the Society acted as a form of status validation for those involved. She also found a predilection for self education and a disdain for more formalised educational initiatives that were deemed to be both state controlled and too effectively colonised by the middle classes.⁵³

In some shape or form all Secularists were slaves to knowledge. The pursuit of it produced an impressively wide range of varying opinions and ideas from the extreme Individualism espoused by Sydney Gimson to the Socialism propounded by Tom Barclay, from the old Holyoake style Secularism that held support in the society well into this century to the Ethical Positivism espoused by Gould, Quin and Findley and a band of younger devotees.

Though those nominated to the Society can obviously be classified because they belong to different occupational groups what shines through is their sheer individuality in both thought and activity and the feeling that apparent 'status' on the outside was not so relevant to the Secularist once he or she had walked through the door, past those four noble busts. It is what those members came to the Hall in search of that must now concern us.

Footnotes to Chapter Six

- 1: John Eros, "The rise of Organised Freethought in Mid-Victorian England". *Sociological Review* 1954, page 99.
- 2: See particularly I.J. Prothero, Artisans and Politics in Early Nineteenth Century London (1979), D. Thompson, The Chartists (1984), mainly part two, and D. Jones, Chartism and the Chartists (1975), pages 30 - 3, and 81.
- 3: Susan Budd, Varieties of Unbelief (1977), pages 95 - 6, figures quoted in E. Royle, Radicals, Secularists and Republicans (1980), page 126.
- 4: E. Royle, Victorian Infidels (1974), pages 304 - 5.
- 5: E. Royle, Radicals, Secularists and Republicans, page 128.
- 6: For a full tabular explanation see Appendix 3.
- 7: The figures are 49% (1881 - 1891) & 47.6% (1891 - 1902), see Appendix 3.
- 8: On this point see E. Royle, Radicals, Secularists and Republicans, page 130 and Susan Budd, Varieties of Unbelief, page 50. Dr. Budd suggests that women make up anything between nothing and a quarter of all attendances at Secularist meetings.
- 9: Martha Vicinus, Independent Women: work and Community for Single women 1850 - 1920, pages 293 - 4. Dr. Vicinus's graphs show an increase in women aged 20 - 40 of over a million in the period 1891 - 1901 compared with three quarters of a million ten years earlier. The age group 45+ shows a smaller increase of just 450,000 compared with 350,000 in the previous decade.
- 10: Ibid. page 293.
- 11: Many conversations with members of the public passing the Secular Hall whilst I was in the process of Photographing it revealed a wealth of popular memory about dancing within the Hall. Many attended dances on a regular basis whilst others recalled that their parents had done so. What was

particularly noticeable was that, for many, their knowledge of the activities of the Society did not extend beyond this and in some cases they expressed a positive desire not to explore further. In some cases this was due to their own religious background or in response to rumours circulated about the Society.

12: I owe knowledge of this aspect of recruitment to a number of conversations with current and past members of the Society and other members of the public. Chief of these was a Mr. Len Birch, age 79, who recalled a Secularist workmate, a Mr. Charlie Liquorish, invited him and his girlfriend of the time to a dance at the Hall. Mr. Birch then recalled how Mr. Liquorish proceeded to 'steal' his girlfriend away from him!

13: Bill Lancaster, Radicalism, Co-Operation and Socialism: Leicester working Class Politics 1860 - 1906 (1987), pages 14 - 6.

14: See for example L.S.S.M.B., 10 August, 18 September 1883 (for social gatherings and dancing soirées), 2 February 1885 (for a floral soirée held after Charles Bradlaugh's lecture on "My Constitutional Struggle"). For the extension of musical entertainment see L.S.S.M.B., 1 June 1886.

15: Many attempts were made to limit the rights and frequency of visitors to the Society and its social gatherings. For example L.S.S.M.B., 4 February 1890 when a motion to widen the club to visitors paying one penny was thrown out. See also L.S.S.M.B., 13 May, 20 May 1890 which limited visitors to attendance at the Hall to once every twenty eight days. L.S.S.M.B., 24 February 1891 also closed the socials to the public and re-enforced the rules governing the introduction of visitors.

16: Amongst others listed in the nomination books who are the wives of men within the Secular Society are Mrs. Sharman (January 1882), Mrs. Slater (November 1885), Mrs. Aldcroft (June 1888), Mrs. Weston (February 1889), Mrs. Buntton (October 1889), Mrs Hill (January 1891), Mrs. A. Payne (October 1891),

Mrs. Maplington (November 1894), Mrs. S.G. Woolley (December 1894), Mrs. Thompson (May 1895), Mrs. Carter (December 1896), Mrs. S. Thacker (March 1897), Mrs. C. Reade (November 1897), Mrs J. Lowe (September 1898), Mrs Elliot (November 1898) and Mrs Potter (October 1899).

17: Some were refused admission to the Society on the grounds that they were of dubious status; A Mr. Clarke was suspended from membership pending a court case (L.S.S.M.B., 3 March 1890), and a motion carried by the Club Committee of the Society (L.S.S.M.B., 14 February 1886) made it necessary for all nominations to be posted in the club room for seven days to allow for objections to be made to the General Committee concerning individual applications for membership.

18: Budd, Varieties of Unbelief pages 50 - 1.

19: For Mrs Sladen's appointment see L.S.S.M.B., 1 February 1893. For Sarah Perkins see F.J. Gould, Life Story of a Humanist (1923), page 87.

20: See L.S.S.M.B., 11 May 1880, see also F.J. Gould The History of the Leicester Secular Society Leicester (1900), page 14.

21: Leicester Secular Hall Company. Register of Members (shelved in Leicester Record Office, New Walk, Leicester. under schedule 10D68 Record No. 20. For Thomas Coltman allocation see Shares numbering 591-610.

22: See Josiah Gimson's will shelved in Leicester Record Office, New Walk, Leicester. Under schedule RP687.

23: Gould, Life Story of a Humanist, page 27.

24: For Wright and Sladen see loc.cit. register of Members share allocations 501-540 (for Wright) and 541-580, 779-798 (for Sladen). By 1893 John Sladen had acquired a further fourteen shares.

25: For example see L.S.S.M.B., 7 May 1883 for Coltman organising the music for a soirée and L.S.S.M.B., 6 February 1883 for his election to the entertainments committee.

- 26: L.S.S.M.B., 23 May 1882.
- 27: Gould, Life Story of a Humanist, pages 8 & 12.
- 28: Ibid. page 26.
- 29: Lancaster, Radicalism, Co-Operation and Socialism, pages 34 - 5.
- 30: Michael J. Winstanley The shopkeepers World 1830 - 1914, (Manchester 1983) pages 11 - 12.
- 31: Lancaster, Radicalism, Co-Operation and Socialism, pages 30 - 8, for the Footwear industry. For Hosiery see Richard Gurnham A History of the Trade Union Movement in the Hosiery and Knitwear Industry 1776 - 1976, (1976) pages 45 - 9.
- 32: Lancaster, Radicalism, Co-Operation and Socialism, page 38.
- 33: Ibid. page 39.
- 34: L.S.S.M.B., 30 April 1883, 29 July 1884, 2 February 1885, 19 January, 2 February 1886, 7 February 1888, 9 April 1889, 18 July 1894. Bill Lancaster notes that a Secularist colleague from Corah's hosiery works named Bill Lee gave Tom Barclay lodgings. It is possible that this is the same man in which case he prospered considerably from the late 1870's, but the evidence suggests otherwise, Lancaster, Radicalism, Co-Operation and Socialism, page 59.
- 35: See for example L.S.S.M.B., 26 July , 8 November 1893, 7 February, 25 July 1894.
- 36: See L.S.S.M.B., 24 January, 7 February 1888, 27 January 1892, for Samuel Savage's election to a range of committees. See also share allocation book, share numbers: 652 - 653 & 746 - 750.
- 37: Winstanley, Shopkeeper's World, pages 19 - 28.
- 38: See Royle, 'Radicals, Secularists and Republicans', page 139.
- 39: See Lancaster, Radicalism, Co-Operation and Socialism, pages 43, 46, 82, 94 & 120.

40: For Joseph Thacker see L.S.S.M.B., 14 August 1888, 29 January, 9 April, 13 August, 10 September 1889, 16 February 1890, 27 July 1892 (appointed financial scrutineer to the Society), 28 January, 31 July (elected to Benevolent Fund sub-committee) and 11 December 1895. For Edward Pinder see L.S.S.M.B., 30 April, 12 August 1891, 10 August 1892, 26 July 1893, 31 January (as proposer of a motion affecting the co-option of new committee members and the voting rights of members), 6 June 1894 (for providing assistance with the club during Thomas Slater's last illness), 30 January (election to sub-committee to revise the rules of the Library), 14 August (duties as steward to a meeting held in the Hall), 2 October 1895 (arranging a supper), and 29 January 1896 (for election to the post of Vice President).

41: For Holyoak's shareholding see Leicester Secular Hall Company, Register of Members share allocation 581 - 590, 751 - 758. see L.S.S.M.B., February 6th 1883 for Holyoak's election to Treasurer.

42: L.S.S.M.B., 7 April 1885. The deputation were "to express to him the great regret of the committee that any action or want of action on their part in reference to informing him of the proposed change in the management of the Society should have shown a want of respect and kindly consideration towards him and the committee unanimously expressed in the strongest terms their great respect for Mr. Holyoak and their earnest wish to behave towards him in the kindly way that his longservices to the Society deserve and call for."

43: For Hill's activities see L.S.S.M.B., 29 July 1886, 1 February (activity on club committee), 12 July (for activity in organising a flower show), 19 July, 13 December 1887 (for motion to open the bar on Christmas day), 7 February (for election to General, Finance and Library Committees and for suggesting the subletting of the skittle alley), 23 July 1888.

44: For Payne see L.S.S.M.B., 7 February 1888 and 12 February 1889. See also resolution of 14 December 1888 in which Payne proposed a Boxing day tea and

social. See also Sydney Gimson, Random Recollections of the Leicester Secular Society (1932), page 55.

45: Malcolm Quin, Memoirs of a Positivist (1924), page 48.

46: Gould, Life story of a Humanist, pages 91 - 2. Gould also used this form of subversion in his journalism. In the Pioneer he wrote a skit on working class attempts to gain welfare:

""What is it you want ?'

'Madam, may I ask for a few coppers to pay for a nights lodging in Britannia Street? I have walked from Coventry.'

'What is your name?'

'Gould - F.J. Gould ma'am.'

'Well, I don't like the looks of you. What is your occupation when you *do* work?'

'Scribbling and talking, ma'am.'

'Yes, I thought you seemed like a loafer!'

'For the love of---'

'Take this ticket. If you are genuine your case will be investigated . You must go to 10 Highcross Street.... Oh drat these beggars! There's the milk boiling over!.... Now that the irate lady has slammed the door, I am free to confess the imposture I have played. I thought I should like to know how it feels to be referred for investigation to the Secretary of the Leicester C.O.S..". Gould, pages 103 - 4.

47: See Gimson, Random Recollections Part I, pages 7 - 8.

48: Ibid. pages 56 - 7.

49: Ibid. page 36.

50: Ibid. page 36.

51: See Lancaster, Radicalism, Co-Operation and Socialism, pages 86 - 91.

52: See Tom Barclay, Memoirs and Medleys, The Autobiography of a Bottle

Washer (1934), pages 41 - 55.

53: Rosamund Billington 'The Leicester Secular Society, 1852 - 1920: a study in Radicalism and respectability. Dissertation, University of Leicester (1968). Particularly pages 70 - 95.

CHAPTER SEVEN

THE SECULAR SOCIETY AND LEISURE PROVISION IN LEICESTER.¹

When George Jacob Holyoake defined the new ideology of Secularism he was as much giving birth to a new movement as rescuing the scattered remnants of the old. The first task had been to rally the remnants of Owenism and to prepare the way for organisational survival; the revival which then followed was the work of many other hands. Holyoake was himself keen to see the development of local autonomous organisations, which meant that he gave little direction to former Owenites in the provinces. His redefinition of Secularism as an ideology that was above controversy encouraged Secularists to think positively about the purposes of organisation. As they looked critically at the world around them, they saw the need to provide for their own survival, in both finance and personnel, as well as to further the cause of Secularism within the wider community.

For the Leicester Secular Society the acquisition of a purpose built Hall brought both opportunity and responsibility. The Hall gave the Society a chance to respond to the needs not simply of members but of their families as well as new facilities became available. The very health of Secularism depended on its ability to draw in all members of the family, and the speakers at the opening of the Hall went out of their way to stress this. The Leicester Secular Society's future success was seen in familial commitment and mutual support. Leisure time activities offered precisely this chance to consolidate relationships, foster commitment as well as gain useful additional income. Sociologists have only recently come to realise the importance of informal and semi-formal leisure structures for individuals and their relationship to Society, and the degree to which leisure can exist as

'mutual aid'.² In mid-Victorian England, a society undergoing changes in its industrial, occupational and social structure, this need was widely felt. Leisure was itself a product of the industrial age, with the growing diversity of industrial production and the regularising of income, contemporary organisations had not only to live with it but also to attempt to mould their own message to this new form.

The Leicester Secular Society was in fact no different to many other organisations that sought to mould their environment. Leisure was desirable whilst it could be had on its own terms. It sanctioned and provided activities which offered the prospect of integrating familial participation and of generating much needed income to enable the society to remain financially stable. However, the acceptance and promotion of leisure activities had other ideological implications for the Secular Society. It was one of many areas in which Secularists could assert their independence of clerical control and attack the attempts of both Anglican and Nonconformist clergymen to limit leisure opportunities. This did in fact create an ideology of Secular leisure which not simply called for greater access to parks and libraries but encouraged gentle attempts to transgress established propriety. The Secular Hall's precursor, the Secular Club, had sold intoxicants and moreover had sold them on the Sabbath. Reading between the lines, the image that remains of the club is one of exclusive masculinity, emphasised by the fact that the proximity of drinking to occupational activity was a marked tendency during the period. Moreover this traditional 'thumbing' of the Secular nose at both the temperance advocates and the Sabbatarians owed much to traditional images of freethinkers and to the protest culture of other forms of radicalism, still very much within living memory. It was also a re-creation in miniature of the Secularist ideal world in which individual freedom and choice counted for all. If the historian of Broad Church

Anglicanism finds 'muscular Christianity' on the cricket field, the historian of Freethought must surely find 'muscular Secularism' there! In part the construction of the Hall and the absorption, of the club was seen as a way of allowing other members of the family into Secular activity. It was also as much a transfer of old forms of leisure to new as it was of old emphases to new. Though the club itself was never effectively marginalised until the time of Gould, it was thereafter no longer the only face of Secularism in Leicester.

Secularism was also by definition a philosophical conclusion that inevitably resulted from conversion. Judged from the makeup of the national leadership, Secularists were almost exclusively ex-Christians or Jews and many aspects of individual Secularism were strengthened by a sound knowledge of the Bible. Moreover the intrusions of religious power in the Secular sphere were a useful ally in recruiting Secularists from wider radicalism. As clerical power and indeed church attendance diminished later in the nineteenth century, interest in matters religious could be seen to be in decline. These were all symptoms of secularisation, a change that altered the agenda considerably for both religious organisations and Secularists. Though on the face of it the decline in religious practices presented more of a problem for religious organisations which sought to fill empty churches, Secularists themselves had to rethink their position. With the decline in religious observance and the decline in the repressive nature of religion, the Leicester Secular Society had to consider where its future adherents would come from. Though it had a right to consider that its 'congregation' was rather more self-defining, with appeal to independent self-educators, it could not afford to ignore the changing conditions. Though generational replacement would solve part of the equation it would by no means be the whole solution.

In this context the Leicester Secular Society found itself competing as much with secular leisure and amusements as with religion. Not only did the Secularists have to 'sugar' their own ideological pill for both new and old adherents, but they found that some of their new converts came directly from this new world of leisure. The Society for example, never had any problem in providing itself with music and musicians of an at least competent standard. It was also more than willing to open membership of the club premises to visiting members of the theatrical profession, possibly seeing them as an interest group who, like ex-christians of old, were potentially at odds with respectable concepts of society.³ However the most important fact - and one recognised with increasing trepidation - was that those who were not outright christians now had the opportunity to be 'unconscious atheists', saving their energies for secular pursuits other than Secularism.

Once this thorny problem had been confronted, with the realisation that the Leicester Secular Society existed in a competitive world of leisure, the supply and provision of leisure time activities were the inevitable consequences. The Secularists were at one time trailblazers in this, but then they either marked time or fell behind what was rapidly becoming a developed market of increasing sophistication. Once inside this market the Secularists fate was ultimately linked to the fate of other suppliers and many of the developments in leisure provision within the Leicester Secular Society are best understood in the context of this market. Though the Leicester case provides an example of the sometimes strident involvement of Secularists in the provision of leisure, welfare and religion in a given locality, it also provides a useful study in miniature of the problems that beset all initiatives by the well-intentioned providers of amenities deemed essential to an industrialising city.

Historians of nineteenth century leisure have concentrated on the

attempts to use leisure to shape character and class relations within a given social context. They have as a result been inclined to neglect the pressure and influence the market forces of supply and demand have exerted on the agencies that provided, not simply leisure, but also welfare and spiritual comfort.⁴ For many churches and other voluntary organisations the necessity to fund and promote leisure, welfare and comfort amid the evils of the industrial city was an essential determinant of policy, attitude and provision. The sophistication of leisure as a commodity supplied to consumers is also indicative of stages of industrial and capitalist development.⁵ In this context the 'rebellion' of certain providers of leisure and welfare is intriguing. Though some agencies became engrossed in supplying the wants of a growing number of 'punters', the resistance of others, such as the Leicester Secular Society, to market conditions and their ultimate survival, offers a further chance to study the dynamics of leisure organisation and adaptation.

When one looks at other, similar, organisations such as the Leicester Adult School movement, the Cocoa House movement, the Mechanics Institute, and the Anglican church, it rapidly becomes apparent that there was a distinct duplication of purpose and of facilities.⁶ The historian is thus brought to the conclusion that this was an area where competition was rife, though the operation of market forces ultimately held the key to success or failure. Indeed it becomes increasingly obvious that this was a

... common context for organisations, in which the centre of gravity of the relationship between supply from above and demand from below might change, altering the context for demand in many subject areas besides religion.⁷

When the provision of leisure and other 'services' is seen as analogous to the modern provision of commodities, it becomes possible to show that the competition, or as Stephen Yeo puts it 'Supermarket' model², goes a long way to explaining the history of religious, welfare and leisure provision in the latter part of the nineteenth century.

Though Yeo's example is Reading it seems that much of what he has to offer applies equally to Leicester. The analysis is complicated by the fact that the historian is not simply dealing with the various religious denominations, but also with a burgeoning number of voluntary secular organisations. These non-religious elements often had purposes which overlapped with those the religious denominations, and indeed in many cases their history demonstrates that they were actively designed to do so.

What this points to is a vast, untapped reservoir of - depending on the viewpoint of the contemporary - devotion, recreation, need, disposable income, or dangerously unsupervised leisure time. Certainly it seems that new organisations were called into existence by an expansion of potentially dangerous social problems caused by what contemporaries frequently saw as a dangerous two-headed monster - a rapidly increasing and industrialised population enjoying freedom, engendered by a diversifying economy which provided increasingly regular real incomes.

Leisure was one of the battle grounds on which anxieties about the nature of industrialised society was fought, as the providers sought to impose images of how communal relations should exist, and receivers articulated how those relationships stood in reality. What made the necessity for such statements all the more urgent was the physical nature of urban society. It was a paradox of the age that as physical living space diminished the opportunity for individuals and whole classes to carve out a cultural identity appeared to multiply. Certainly this was how contemporaries

perceived it and the creation of the genre of social investigation is testimony to this fact. In many cases the sheer pace of urban growth provided the impetus for concern.

Leicester was no exception since, like other staple industry towns, it grew quite rapidly during the nineteenth century. From a population of 17,000 in 1801 the number had doubled by 1831, and it continued to grow at over 10,000 a decade to reach a level of 60,584 by 1851.⁹ Immigration was as important as natural increase, a fact largely explained by the predominance of the hosiery industry and its customary reluctance to end outwork.

However by 1853 the dominance of hosiery was being threatened by the growth of the boot and shoe and engineering industries. The former had developed on a small scale as a result of the Napoleonic wars, but only started to expand from about 1830.¹⁰ In 1851 it employed 4% of the population, a figure to rise to over 25% by the 1890's. The trade had the advantage of an innovative and enterprising engineering industry in the locality which was not slow in transcending the technological barriers to large scale, factory based production. However outwork in both the hosiery and boot and shoe industries was by no means eliminated - it continued in decline until the 1890's - but certainly the low cost advantage of non-factory based production was dealt a fatal blow.

Once the advantage of widespread child labour enjoyed by the outwork system was finally destroyed by the extension of the Factory Acts to cover workshops the success of the factory was, if not assured, then certainly an increasing probability. Leicester, like other industrial cities, had strong advocates of the factory system who strove for its success. John Biggs, a former mayor of the city, was greatly in favour of it in his evidence to the Select Committee on Stoppage of Wages (hosiery) in 1854.¹¹ Not simply did he outline the economic advantages that would accrue to a shrewd industrialist,

but he argued that it would be a kindness to many of the destitute knitters to place them on the Poor Law which at the time offered better payments than their current wages.¹²

Such a change was to alter the condition of Leicester irrevocably. It changed it from an economically stagnant settlement at the mercy of trade fluctuations within its one staple industry to a city that could contemplate the prospect of a growing and general prosperity. With the onset of this prosperity came an increase in general wage levels and there is ample evidence that things were improving as the city moved into the second half of the nineteenth century. The decline of outwork within the hosiery industry had the consequence of raising living standards and regularising wage levels. The arrival of the shoe trade eased the employment market as demand for labour began to increase relative to supply. It has been suggested by Bill Lancaster that this improvement in conditions can be amply demonstrated by the increase in formal trade union organisation, which saw the formation of the Hose, Shirt, and Draw Union as well as the Sock and Top Union, during the period.¹³ Though such advances in conditions and wages were by no means uniform, - the domestic seaming sector continued to be exploited, - the evidence suggests that wage levels slowly climbed hand in hand with the progress of trade unionism.¹⁴

This move towards a degree of universal prosperity was not unnoticed by contemporaries. Joseph Dare, for example, Leicester Unitarian Domestic Missionary, noticed with increasing regularity that prosperity encouraged a 'cheerful tone of manners'.¹⁵ This picture is further enhanced when we look at the pattern of Poor law relief for the latter part of the century. Indoor relief increased marginally and outdoor relief fell, this in a period when the population of Leicester increased by nearly 40%. The rise in indoor relief is clearly an indication that the machinery involved in its

dispensation was not unduly under pressure and reflects national trends after the Local Government Board assumed responsibility for its administration. Dare himself, quite aware of the effect of prosperity on the attitudes of the working classes, declared:

In times of difficulty and distress political feeling grows warm, and a cry is raised for new legislative measures; but when labour is plentiful, the working classes generally are content in employment, that they may secure the day's necessities and some occasional recreation.¹⁶

Certainly, much of the national evidence suggests a similar upward trend in living standards as a result of increasing money and real wages.¹⁷ Dare concluded in his enquiry into factory production that operatives were generally better clothed, fed, educated and were of a better moral character than those who did not work in factories.

However, there were inevitably prices to be paid by the industrialising city; the usual story of bad housing and sanitation does not really need to be repeated, but the legacy of class fear and concern for the safety of social organisation does. Both local and national commentators feared about the condition of the urban industrial working class that they had called into existence.¹⁸ One local Anglican incumbent, in 1872, rather pithily summed up the character of this class and the obsessions of its critics by identifying the three dangers as being 'Dissent, Democracy and Drunkenness'.¹⁹ The new class were considered dangerous, unruly and spiritually destitute and as such posed a threat to the very survival of the social order. One unforeseen consequence of factory production was the regularising of work patterns and hours which left operatives with clearly defined but unregulated free time.

Moreover factory discipline, the hoped for root of order, could prove counter-productive to those on the receiving end of the resentment it invited. Even the Anglican clergy could not agree on the matter; The vicar of Holy Trinity Church in Leicester advocated the factory system, but the rector of Aylestone (then a suburb) said that factories demoralised the masses making them independent and insolent.²⁰

This two-sided view is very common. Though much of the commentary was obviously uninformed moralising it did reveal a fundamental conviction amongst many in the Anglican Church about the nature of social relationships that ought to exist, and were presumed to have existed in time past. Thus much of the rhetoric coming from the Anglican Church was an admission of failure. Though it must be remembered that, as David Thompson bluntly puts it, 'No-one called a place "spiritually destitute" simply because it lacked a dissenting chapel'.²¹

The negative and positive views of the industrial classes could easily exist side-by-side. Though doubtless relating, in at least some cases, to real circumstances, the descriptions appear often enough for one to believe that they had fused into stereotypes. The most graphic example appears again in the reports by Joseph Dare of the Unitarian Domestic Mission. Dare, a not unsympathetic man, was prone to subdivide the industrial classes into the acceptable and the dangerous. He described with pride those who in 1875:

Attend adult classes for instruction, [namely those classes run by his own Domestic Mission] and attach themselves to places of worship. Wearing apparel is greatly improved; homes are tidier, and adorned with better furniture; scripture pieces and photographs decorate the walls; a book from the free Library lies on the parlour table, or may be, if the taste tends that

way, a few pretty plants unfold their beauty in the window. Many also are members of some co-operative or provident society, others of the dispensary, or depositors in the savings bank.²²

But he had also previously written with fear and trepidation of:

The reckless idle: a moral chaos, scarcely touched by any conforming influences, whence are continually issuing in terrible retribution, crime and infamy, disease and death.²³

Though these two vignettes are distanced by twenty-three years they indicate not simply a perceived level of growing prosperity but also a 'before and after' snapshot that starkly suggests the nature of perceived ills and perceived remedies. This polarisation of images of the working classes (or 'punters') led to all subsequent attitudes towards them being framed within this duality of language, covering on the one hand condescension and on the other, abject terror. Dare was, of course, describing only those with whom he came into contact through his work. Thus he dealt with only the poverty stricken or the prospering upper-working class. It is particularly significant to note that Dare gave gifts of money, clothing or Infirmary tickets only to those he knew personally.²⁴ The most interesting product of this polarisation is the failure to perceive any middle ground. Those who did not conform to the popular stereotypes, and ultimately were to form the majority of the paying customers as the nineteenth century progressed, were quite simply not represented. Nor was their ability to shift, or be shifted, from the rôle of pauper to that of prosperous consumer.

Dare himself, however, saw drink as a major problem. He calculated that

Leicester in 1868 had one drinking establishment for every 180 persons, though he was sympathetic enough to accept that the public house was the only social centre for the working classes. Here was yet more evidence that the well-intentioned had a duty to act. But what was to be done to help this dangerous residuum? The motives behind the attempt to rehabilitate them into society generally involved transforming their errant tendencies into a manageable amalgam of middle class values.

Some establishments had existed since the 1830's though, with the express purpose of managing the industrialised classes. The Leicester Mechanics Institute was founded in 1833. Though its establishment had originally been by working men with a middle class rump in support, lack of funds amongst the working classes had led them to seek the support of the moneyed middle classes. Mechanics Institutes were generally considered to be a successful and vital part of educating the working class. W.E.Hutchinson, a local Quaker chemist, praised them as one of the most efficient means of education then available.²⁵ Nevertheless, all was not well at the Institute. The Rev. George Holt complained in 1835 that he had been victimised because of his concern about the dangerous Republican and 'levelling tendencies' that the Institute exhibited.²⁶ Later attempts to bring the Institute under middle class control were never wholly successful.

The intention had been to provide education for the working classes, but this was rapidly overtaken by the preferences of those who actually consumed what the Institute had to offer. Concerts were gradually initiated as moneyspinners and as a result attendances rose to a peak in 1841. Eventually the concerts as mere amusement came to dominate so that in 1845 the instructive classes, the apparent *raison d'être* of the Institute, were said to exist in name only.²⁷ Whilst the audiences voted with their feet, the resulting financial constraints made pandering to public taste all the more

necessary. Local lecturers were encouraged as an economy measure and the programme of a strict, regulated education for the working classes was severely diluted by the abandonment of book purchase in favour of a policy of book donations.²⁸

From 1845 the main pre-occupation of the Mechanics Institute was simply to keep its head above the financial water, though attempts were made to continue the tradition of education for artisans. In 1852 the Institute joined the London Society of Arts and Manufactures and adopted its examination system, but only one Leicester member sat these examinations and within a few years the Institute was forced to withdraw from the scheme.²⁹

Here we have a classic case of what historians have considered to be the quintessential analyses of leisure; that it exists generally as a manifestation of either class expression or social control.³⁰ Increasingly in the middle-class mind the working classes needed, if not control (which they had learnt by 1850 was too heavy handed), then certainly supervision. But how could such supervision exist without it, either merging into social control or strangling out of existence any working class participation. The consequences of this dilemma were to leave many organisations consisting merely of a middle class committee presiding over an invisible membership.

Joseph Dare's own attempts to alleviate matters were, however not without success. He himself was proud of his discussion class though even here things did not go according to plan. Though members of the 'respectable' working class attended, their attempts to discuss infidelity and socialism were blocked and they left to form what was to become the Leicester Secular Society. From the mid-eighteen fifties opportunities for recreation increased manyfold. In 1852 the expansive beauty spot Bradgate park was opened to the public and witnessed a rapid growth in musical activity.³¹ Musical competitions began on the cricket ground in 1858 and many factories had

their own brass band. In 1863-4 the museum was opened during the winter season for lantern light lectures on its contents.³² The previous year Canon David Vaughan, the popular vicar of St. Martin's, had begun his evening classes in Union Street.³³ Throughout the latter part of the nineteenth century these attractions multiplied. Many of were church or chapel-based initiatives to combat spiritual destitution and unsupervised leisure time. As such they were a response to the fear already described.

On a given Sunday in January 1884 the spiritually destitute could have chosen from a number of alternatives. The Anglican church in Leicester had by this time responded well to the shock of the apparent secularisation evidenced by the religious census of 1851. No less than ten new churches had been built in the city since 1860. Some, like St. Peter's, attracted a mixture of the working classes, tradesmen and manufacturers whilst others, such as St. Saviour's catered for an exclusively working class congregation. The parish of St. Leonards meanwhile, seems to have attracted a congregation drawn from the poorer sectors of society. The Anglican church was at least able to comfort itself about its increased presence in the community since between 1860 and 1884 the church accommodation in the city increased by 10,510 - more than double the previous total.³⁴ Much of this work was supplemented by the erection of mission rooms and other initiatives.

The Nonconformists, however, had not remained idle in Leicester at this time. On our evening in January 1884 Carley Street Evangelistic Mission offered a musical service of song entitled 'Heaven our Home', whilst Sanvey Gate Mission Hall offered a lecture on Alderman Stafford's recent visit to the United States. Those of a Temperance persuasion could attend a Band of Hope tea and entertainment which was held at Victoria Road Church whilst the Anglican Church of St. Margaret's, played to its renewed strengths by offering its congregation a celebration to commemorate the recent

alterations that had been made to the fabric and the bells.³⁵

Those who sought other outlets for their time and energy were also well catered for in January 1884. A range of other entertainment within the town was also available for those with the money or inclination. Throughout January the main theatres of Leicester were all advertising their wares in the expectation of doing a brisk trade. The Royal Opera House, which specialised in staging shows procured from the London stage, hosted three in January 1884. The month opened with a performance of 'Pluck' and this was replaced with a show from the Drury Lane Theatre entitled 'A Sailor and his Lass'. The month's programme was concluded with Charles Reades celebrated drama 'Its never too late to mend', supported by a group of London artistes.³⁶ The audience for such shows must have been somewhat more well-heeled and discerning than that for the town's Palace of Varieties which hosted a number of variety acts of distinctly varying appeal and quality. One evenings entertainment which elicited only an average attendance contained an unfortunate artiste whose dancing was described by the Leicester Mercury as 'being of exceptional order' though her singing was classed as 'only of mediocre quality'. The Palace of Varieties was a pot pourri of entertainment ranging from the run of the mill to the outright bizarre. As well as male and female singers, ventriloquists, dancers and reciters of monologues were comedians of varying talent. Alongside these were speciality acts such as 'Tom Holmes an expert manipulator of the bones and negro artiste', 'Professor Hotines troupe of performing dogs and Monkeys' and the rather enigmatically named Mr W. H. Vane the 'black aesthetic skeleton and banjo king'. The Theatre of Varieties and its competitor, James Paul's Palace of Varieties, provided the fabric of Leicester's Music Hall life: itinerant acts combined with seasoned and popular acts to make a concoction that encouraged regular, but not over, indulgence.³⁷

Those in search of more 'middle brow' entertainment could choose a variety concert from amongst those offered by Leicester's churches and chapels. The St. Lukes Church and School room in Gladstone Street held, for example, a tea and entertainment consisting of recitations, songs and instrumental solos, whilst Denman Street Chapel offered a similar programme concluding with offerings from the Leicester sacred Brass Band 'under the leadership of Mr. Charles Townsend'.³⁹ Such gatherings were by no means the monopoly of religious institutions as programmes of parlour and classical music organised by the Museum, and the Leicester School of Art and Design, amply demonstrate.³⁹

It was also quite possible to combine education with leisure and diversion. The usual course of lectures at Leicester's long established Literary and Philosophical Society continued during this month. Aiming for a generally richer and more 'respectable' audience than the Music Hall or the Temperance and chapel gatherings, the Society commenced its 1884 season with a lecture given by the Reverend J. Moden on 'Emotion and its manifestations amongst man and the animals'. The lecture argued for the customary calmness associated with mid-Victorian middle class life to prevail suggesting 'an unemotional man was less worried by life than an emotional one.' However neglect of this area could result in 'the involuntary creation of nerve forces, which, in its turn, engendered violence, madness, suicide'.⁴⁰ A rather more relaxed, and relaxing, diversion was provided by the Leicester Society of Artists who hosted their annual exhibition and combined it with a lecture offering practical advice on 'sketching from nature'.⁴¹

Apart from these numerous evening activities the eager spectator or participant could follow a range of sports and outdoor activities. These ranged from visits for the more adventurous to see professionals in action at Rutland Skating Rink to more local attractions such as Leicester 2nd XV

in action against Lutterworth or Leicester Victoria Football Club defeating Barrow by two goals to one.⁴² More direct participation was offered by St. George's Harriers who offered weekly competitive paper chases.⁴³

Those who sought to pursue their own recreational opportunities were encouraged to make use of the recently opened premises of the Aylestone and Aylestone Park Conservative club which offered accommodation for smoking, reading and Billiards. Subscriptions were buoyant at a time when the Liberal administration was having to confront attacks on its policy in Ireland and Egypt.⁴⁴ Even leisure and consumption within the home received endorsement from the newspapers as a plethora of cheap 2d sheet editions of popular songs were advertised alongside the latest bicycle models and brass, leather and wooden novelties.⁴⁵ As well as announcing various entertainments newspapers themselves were rapidly joining the race to satisfy the demand for leisure and diversionary excitement. The Leicester Mercury itself announced that it would carry in its own pages a racy period piece under the title 'The Reminiscences of a Gretna Green Parson' which also contained an appendix on 'Irregular Marriages' by the Rev. Caleb Brown. The serial contained a number of chapters with titles that had more than one eye on future circulation figures. Thus, those who bought the paper for succeeding weeks were able to learn about 'The Scotch Lassie', 'The Banker's Daughter', 'Mistaken Identity' and 'A way out of the Difficulty'.⁴⁶

These latter distractions, however, are indicative of a secondary phase of development within the market whereby leisure organisations became self-generating. Rather than having wider social goals in mind such initiatives instead sprang up as expressions of pure demand. Though the Leicester Fosse football club was founded in 1884 by ex-public school boys they had no intention of providing the town with anything more than a successful football team. Though interest was slack for the first few

seasons, by 1887 the team had moved to a larger ground in Belgrave Road and the press began to give regular reports on the condition of football in the city. By the following year the club could count on substantial support when fulfilling away fixtures, though these were mainly confined to the county of Leicester.⁴⁷

Much like the social structure of many a non-conformist chapel, those involved in these leisure organisations were drawn from all classes; the distinguishing feature between them was the relative social standing of those at the top of the pile in a given organisation. Another leisure organisation with a single purpose in mind, though admittedly it appeared later, was the Leicester sketch club. This was a rather middle class, slightly bohemian, organisation devoted to amateur painting. However it is distinctive since its survival and prosperity illustrates an important point about how a limitation of numbers, a limitation of ends and an awareness of the club's appeal was a recipe for a modest degree of success.⁴⁸

Those who had sought in the earlier nineteenth century to re-structure links with the "dangerous classes" had done so with little regard for the means by which those links were to be forged. As the century wore on, however, it was no longer sufficient to start a swimming club, a cycling club, a football club or a sewing circle without considering what other churches, societies and clubs were already doing. Such a course of action had to be thought through carefully, otherwise it could have a far reaching effect on the agency involved. Those who undertook to provide such were treading the dangerous ground between letting the 'punters' have what they wanted (capitulation), and telling them what they should have (resistance).

What rational recreationalists and the religious providers of leisure and recreational opportunities failed to realise was that industrialised society had created an ability within people to compartmentalise their time.⁴⁹ The

stereotypes we have already met were in fact increasingly an anachronism as society grew more diverse and heterogeneous. No longer did time off on the Sabbath mean time spent in church, or in a church-based institution, supposedly gratifying the fantasies of those who regretted the passing of the Anglican church's halcyon days. Rather it was starting to mean, for a growing number of people, a range of choices hitherto unknown to them. Once such choices were available to religious and leisure based organisations themselves, and their adherents, a member of a congregation became, for better or worse, a 'punter'. In becoming 'punters' individuals were able to exercise their rights as consumers and as such make fundamental choices about the sort of society and culture they wished to create and were willing to pay for. Though more research is still needed on this area it seems that this increasingly level of choice and opportunity was the necessary reward reaped by the industrialising worker for consenting to the productive and social revolution that had turned he or she from a 'worker' into a 'hand'.⁵⁰

So how were such churches and organisations to adapt to what was now a market situation. Essentially they had four choices: 1) Extension; 2) Sectarianisation; 3) Diversification; 4) Professionalisation. These divisions were by no means exclusive and occasionally one can see elements of more than one of these classifications within a particular example.

First of all extension. This policy was pioneered by the Anglican church. The Church of England was motivated by a need to be everywhere at once and it sought to alleviate its perceived problem by creating a new face in urban Leicester.⁵¹ Panic set in after the 1851 census so that money was quickly raised. By 1864 £8,915 had been subscribed for the work of church extension alone. By 1876 the church had diversified from the provision of extra churches into raising money for stipends and for the construction of mission rooms. It was pushed into this by the widespread, and largely substantiated

assumption, that a new building created an interested and committed congregation. Recent research on other nineteenth century localities has largely substantiated this claim.⁵² Thus, even the church was quick to recognise the increasing value of novelty!

However extension was not simply the prerogative of the churches; Leicester Fosse football club held a meeting in 1892 with the express intention of raising a fund for the extension of association football in Leicester.⁵³ Even here they were in a sort of competition with the churches. There is a delightful vignette in which the first special religious football service was held in St. George's church. A large contingent from the football club attended only for the incumbent to suggest that their activities were competing with his own as he preached to them the text; Timothy, IV 7 - 8: 'Exercise thyself rather unto godliness for bodily exercise profiteth little'.⁵⁴

Sectarianisation. The second option implied a deliberate decision about the 'punters' one was going to attract. It was an attempt deliberately to define one's market and as such to increase one's regular customers, thereby increasing the quality of that custom. We have already seen how an organisation like the Leicester Sketch Club, in a later era was able to do this from the outset, but many other organisations were not above doing this also. The Leicester Fosse football club defined its market by dropping the practice of playing cricket in the summer.⁵⁵ To follow Stephen Yeo's hypothesis, what we have seen initially is a supermarket model where the prime objective is to increase the number of shoppers whilst paying little or no attention to the quality of that shopping experience. What the process of sectarianisation offered was a sort of corner shop revolution where one was dealing with a proprietor whose integrity, products and goodwill one could trust.

Thirdly, diversification. In most cases this was a route to disaster. We have already seen that the Mechanics Institute got itself into a vicious circle whereby financial constraint led to the dilution of its aims. Many attempts were made to extend weeknight activity within all churches during the period. The Choir, the Sunday School, the Bible study class were the traditional religious recreations. However, during the 1870's ministers saw that purely recreational activities needed to be provided even though by doing so they risked alienating their present congregations. In some cases, this alienation could spread to their clerical colleagues and zealous supporters, many of whom considered the work of church extension or the maintenance of church fabric a more fitting destination for the limited resources at the churches disposal.⁵⁶

The fourth alternative was to succumb to the increasing growth of professionalism. This was achieved by turning what one had to offer into a highly skilled, and privileged form of consumption. This usually involved joining some national hierarchy of one sort or another. Leicester Fosse football club found itself joining a national league and employing professional footballers from outside the environs of Leicester. For example, they played Glasgow Rangers on Easter Wednesday 1894.⁵⁷ The experience of the county cricket club was similar.⁵⁸

Some of these changes were successful some were not, but those organisations that were able to adapt to circumstances without either impoverishing themselves or surrendering their stated purpose survived into the twentieth century. Once there they became exposed to the full force of the consumer society that even relatively modern amusements find difficulty in coming to terms with. The remaining houses that were part of the Cocoa House movement for example could no longer support themselves after the First World War on those individuals who frequently brought their own food

and drink to the establishments, and patronised the company within them.⁵⁹

All the organisations mentioned and the society that called them into existence had a desire to in some sense shape a market that they found themselves to be a part of for better or worse. Whilst they approached this with hardened, pre-conceived notions of the inadequacy of what people lacked, and the value of what they themselves had to offer, they were bound to be disappointed by the lack of response. They found that they could perhaps please some of the people some of the time, but it was not always for as long as they had hoped, nor was it always for the right reasons.

The Leicester Secular Society was itself at the mercy of the world of leisure that it was obliged to move in, and was obliged to fit the pattern. The Society consisted, like many other leisure organisations, of a volatile mixture of those who sought to provide and those who sought to consume. The likes of Sydney Gimson and many of his fellow committee men and women fit the orthodox conception of the rational recreationalist. They were concerned deeply about the dearth of genuine Secular activity which would function as a legitimate substitute for religion and found themselves unwittingly cast as providers. Indeed the whole tone of F.J. Gould's precedence over the Society had the atmosphere of a social and moral crusade, though it must be said his political convictions deny any obviously social motives. However the improvement emphasis of the middle class element within the Society made it potentially a medium for the transmission of bourgeois values - what Robert Storch has defined as 'Conventicles of respectability' which capitalised on aspirations towards upward mobility.⁶⁰

However, coexisting beside the middle class providers was an equal number of Secularists who took no explicit part in the organisational hierarchy yet were no less committed Secularists. For many like the autodidact Tom Barclay, Secularism challenged the fundamental basis of all

hierarchies and sought to avoid the indulgence of social pretension. This in effect created a democratic attitude to knowledge which argued for upward mobility of a less obviously social nature. This independence drew strength from both older style traditions of infidelity and from suspicion about the nature of the growing consumer society. In those who formed the working class membership of the Leicester Secular Society such independence of mind meant that the providers had continual concern about their reliability and dependability. The danger was not simply that today's autodidact could so easily become tomorrow's 'punter', but that without the maintenance of these values there would soon be only 'punters'.

Such concern may have been a primary motivating force amongst those who held major committee positions. As a consequence of the large scale working class avoidance of executive power within the Leicester Secular Society, the result was that in practice those who were concerned enough to run the Society - in effect those who presumed to lead - were allowed to do so.

Thus the Leicester Secular Society shows evidence of some of the wider problems afflicting the world of Victorian leisure. It contained those who sought to reconstruct the communal values that were considered to have been lost in the growth of urban society and saw leisure as a social cement. It also contained members who were fiercely suspicious of activities that were artificially generated and preferred to indulge in a 'culture' of their own. These two distinct strands however were united within the Leicester Secular Society in opposition to the pretensions of religious organisations and often acted happily in tandem when they perceived an external threat. In this sense the Leicester Secular Society appears as a hybrid organisation exhibiting features of rational recreational organisation, radical/working men's club and small sect.

Unlike many other voluntary organisations for which Stephen Yeo's 'deaf

ear⁶¹ is the only measure of resistance, within the Leicester Secular Society the opposition to new initiatives leaves a definite trace. In the new world of leisure the Leicester Secular Society found itself obliged to adopt at different times the four options already discussed and it is possible to see the recourse to these strategies as inevitable in the face of financial and institutional competition for the human and monetary resources available.

Like many of the other Leicester organisations, the Leicester Secular Society initially found the options of extension and diversification appealing. It offered to provide their members with experiences and facilities that had previously been offered elsewhere, bringing their commitment and money into the Society. Moreover it was also seen that it was necessary that those without commitment should be drawn into the Secularist orbit and 'converted'. Thus for the Leicester Secular Society the link between extension and diversification was close since the extension of their own mission - to remove the authoritarian control of religion and to offer, on the face of it, individual freedom of choice in leisure - brought a natural acceptance of diversification.

Stephen Yeo has suggested how easily simple leisure time activities can encroach upon the specific mission of a particular organisation. Citing the desire for a rifle range at a Reading mission he concludes that the provision of such a facility became part of the mission itself with a dilutory effect, revolving around the need to supply in the face of competition.⁶² The Leicester Secular Society suffered in a similar way in its early attempts to introduce dancing classes. Though it was initially seen as a valuable activity for the Society to promote in its own right, there were those that also wanted it to be made available to non-members.⁶³ Despite the decision made by the committee to prohibit this an investigation revealed that non-members had in fact joined the class. Immediately it became obvious

that one of the inherent dangers of such a policy was to encourage lack of commitment; that meant dancing was more important than Secularism. This was emphasised when several present at the class refused to become members of the Society because they could 'get the same enjoyment at other places for 6d per night.'⁶⁴ Unwittingly the Leicester Secular Society had created, within a year of its acquiring its own venue, an activity which encouraged associational links and 'punterism' rather than fostering communal relations, an adjunct to their Secular mission. By the end of October 1881 the society had realised its mistake and had closed the classes. Thereafter the dancing classes that took place in the Hall were usually conducted under the auspices of dancing teachers from the town or on other occasions under the personal direction and responsibility of individual members.⁶⁵ Nevertheless the Society still saw that money could be made as it pandered to the less committed by substituting actual dances for dancing classes. At these the Society provided refreshments and the only commitment required was the entrance fee of 6d or 9d which rose to 1/- on race nights.⁶⁶ Though the activity was not vastly different the Society had turned a potential threat to its mission into a fund raiser which would at least keep it in the public mind and eye.

Stephen Yeo has persuasively suggested that the growth of leisure initiatives within voluntary organisations led inevitably to a dilution of both membership and the commitment of that membership. This was, in Yeo's view, a consequence of policies of extension and diversification that ran away from their hopeful beginnings.⁶⁷ Like other voluntary organisations the Leicester Secular Society responded to needs articulated by its members, but a rather different picture of their development emerges. The Society's annual report for 1890 for example mentioned the existence of a swimming club and increased use of the skittle alley. Likewise the Minutes for 1894 indicated

that Bicycles had become all the rage and a club organised under the Clarion banner had been instituted.⁶⁸ However the growth of such activities offered less danger to the Leicester Secular Society than it did to other voluntary organisations. Dilution is difficult to detect in activities that were aimed specifically at younger members who were, if the society were not careful, merely going to engage in the activity elsewhere. Under the umbrella of the Leicester Secular Society such leisure time activities could be undertaken in a profoundly Secularist manner. One historian has already suggested that the craze for cycling acted for some as a source of social and spatial emancipation.⁶⁹ In this sense it is possible to see some of the Sunday cycle rides undertaken by the Society as a further method of enhancing the personal nature of Secular leisure. Such activity had been accomplished the previous decade by the Secularist's attempts at Sunday cricket.

Cricket within Leicestershire became a going concern from the early 1880's when the county team began to aspire towards first class status, though financial security only came with the new century.⁷⁰ The Secular Society seems to have capitalised on this growing trend by utilising cricket as a method of extending its leisure and secular mission. In 1885 the club attempted to play cricket on three consecutive Sundays on a piece of land recently purchased by the corporation. The Secular Club strode out on Sunday 7 June 1885, in Charles Bradlaugh's colours, with the intention of showing 'that the first day of the week might profitably be devoted to amusement, outdoor as well as indoor.'⁷¹ On the first occasion the match was interrupted by the appearance of the police who took names and addresses and dispersed the Secularists. A fortnight later the Secularists declared that they would test the legality of the question and duly made a second attempt to play. After a series of interruptions by a Sabbatarian mob the proceedings were relieved by the ball being retrieved from the river by a Freethinking dog! By

the following Sunday the matter had grown considerably out of hand when over a thousand turned out to obstruct play. This outbreak of Sabbatarianism resulted in several bruised egos and a bodily assault on Samuel Woolley, though the resulting charge was dismissed by the local magistrates.⁷² A fourth attempt was made to play on 4 July with the same result. By this stage the matter achieved almost national attention when a report appeared in Punch which sought to give the cricket club the benefit of the doubt, insisting that 'persons engaging themselves in pure play are distinctively doing "no manner of work"'.⁷³

For the Leicester Secular Society the incident was something of an impasse; though they had secured a moral victory in the national sphere and the local corporation had refused to prosecute (according to Gould because no law had been broken) the act of playing cricket on the sabbath was still not practical at that time. Though an attempt to play two year later was more successful this was because Secularism had faded from the public gaze, bringing disappointment to both sets of erstwhile protagonists. Nevertheless they had successfully combined older style militant Secularism with a leisure activity for which there was an increasing demand and had a tilt at cricketing forms of muscular Christianity into the bargain.

However such activities only had ideological meaning whilst participation could be limited to Secularists and a policy of monitoring the involvement of non-Secularists was generally adhered to. The swimming club was persuaded that membership should be limited to members of the Leicester Secular Society and their young relatives, and that they should not have to accommodate the non-secularist friends of their members to make it a going concern.⁷⁴ Similarly when the taste for Dramatic art became popular the Secularists saw it both as recreation and as a means of portraying morality and conflict in a readily digestible and immediate form.⁷⁵ When artistic

considerations demanded the use of non-Secularist talent the Society at first objected but eventually allowed one such person on to the premises only for rehearsals.⁷⁶

One other factor which the Secularists saw as guaranteeing their safety from dilution was the sheer transitory nature of many of these pursuits. Cricket was the theme for the eighteen eighties whilst cycling, swimming and a gymnasium occupied time and energy during the nineties. During the Edwardian period, drama became the important expression of both Secularism and leisure aspirations. Cycling, for example, seems to have faded in the Edwardian period only to reappear as a new trend after the First World War.⁷⁷ Similarly other attractions within the Secular Society were prone to fluctuating fortunes, and other leisure time activities seem to have exhibited a natural life span of their own. Sydney Gimson observed this phenomena in the Annual Report for 1892 - 93:

The attractions of the different amusements provided varies from time to time, even Secularists evidently being affected somewhat by fashions. Just now the skittle alley seems to have gone out of fashion, whilst there is enough demand for billiards to keep two tables going.⁷⁸

The skittle alley reappeared as an entertainment fairly rapidly and the Society agreed to an external block booking for its alley by the Municipal Offices Skittle Club on the eve of the First World War, only to discover that this restricted access to members who actually wanted to use it again!⁷⁹

Whilst the attraction of numerous activities was to all intents and purposes transitory, the Leicester Secular Society could afford to let

them proceed. Such an attitude must have been further fostered by the successful and comfortable continuity of a lecture programme that offered the same challenge to orthodox religious and intellectual opinion that it had always done. These activities were not perceived as a threat to the ideological aspirations of the Leicester Secular Society because they were neither obviously unSecularist, nor perceived to be in direct competition. It was only here that trouble started.

What caused more obvious concern was the attraction of the Secular Club. The Club had existed before the Society and owed its ideology to older forms of Secularism. Its purpose, when the hall opened in 1882, was to provide heat, light, and shelter for those of a Secularist persuasion and it maintained this purpose alongside its provision of drink. It was the ambivalence of the Secularists to the drink question that was to provide the battle ground for those who sought to provide and those who were the recipients.

To an orthodox rational recreationalist drink was anathema and stood against all forms of social consensus. It was the cause of poverty, misery and destitution. Yet, this is itself was a value judgement that Secularists themselves treated with caution.

The Club was not initially castigated. Rather, it was seen as a simple and direct competitor. It served drink and propounded secular leisure by serving drink on the Sabbath whilst lectures were taking place in the Hall. The Society found itself losing out to the obvious attractions of the Club and argued that the provision of idle pastimes was not conducive to the promotion of Secularism.⁸⁰ As a result it made an attempt to close the club down on Sunday evenings so that it would not interfere with the course of lectures that had been provided at great expense and trouble.⁸¹ The Society received a reply in no uncertain terms that 'to close the club would

impinge on one of the first principles of Secularism. To show that Sunday has no precedence over any other day'.⁸²

The upshot of this was that the Society had to accept this decision, though this did not stop it attempting to set up a rival. The Society eventually launched an Institute within the Hall which offered to its members a 'cheap tea', a billiard table and newspapers.⁸³ As such it was designed in turn to be in direct competition with the Club, but needless to say it became an unnecessary drain on funds, personnel and time. Even in this sensitive area the instinct of the Society was to compete on quasi equal terms with its rival and this is indicative of the early years of the Leicester Secular Society as an institution. Both extension and diversification were manifestations of an outward looking Society which both sought a reformed world in its own image and believed it could actually have it.

The arrival of F. J. Gould marked a fundamental change to the way the Leicester Secular Society viewed itself and its immediate environment. The F. J. Gould years were emphatically the years of Sectarianisation and Professionalisation.

Gould tried in every way possible both to limit the cosmetic appeal of the Leicester Secular Society and to harden objective commitment to Secularism. Gould's own perception of Secularism as a moral crusade meant that he rejected all that he saw as having the potential to debase. Gould, who emerges as a workaholic, almost appeared to reject the whole notion of the Secularist at play or even at peace. The perception that all must be done to a useful end ceased to be an ideal and in Gould's hands became the yardstick of activity. Much of his work in this area was a conscious attempt at sectarianisation with an explicit attempt to create an organisation that espoused the 'better, fewer, but better principle'.⁸⁴ This meant the

redefinition of commitment and within Yeo's 'supermarket model' the rapid re-establishment of the corner shop around a captive group of consumers.

With the arrival of Gould and his ideas, the atmosphere began to change. The Leicester Secular Society, which had previously acted as a refuge for all who held errant or freethought opinions, began to refuse membership to those who would not subscribe to their definition of Secularism, chapter and verse. After the arrival of Gould and his brand of teetotalism, some members had their own financial and personal affairs held up to the public gaze of the Society as well as having to undergo a much stricter test of adherence to Secular principles by way of initiation.⁶⁵ Several also found that a lapse in personal standards of behaviour, particularly where drink was concerned was now a matter for public scrutiny.

Gould also managed to get alcohol prohibited from the Secular Hall by threatening to resign.⁶⁶ Though the Society and Sydney Gimson in particular had meant to do something about the Club for some time, it took the impetus provided by Gould to finally resolve the matter. What amounted to sanctions were placed on the Club; new nominees were encouraged to join the Society only, whilst a systematic campaign was started to remove alcohol from the premises of the Society. All this was limiting the potential audience for Secularism. But such a course of action was calculated to ensure the survival of the Society as a sect.

For Gould the Society had suffered for too long from the dilution of its avowed aim. The maintenance of anything which mitigated against the 'better fewer but better principle' was counterproductive. Even abuses of the rules about the frequency with which visitors could be introduced were seen in this light.⁶⁷

It was assumed by Gould that the maintenance of alcohol on the premises of the Secular Hall merely served to encourage those who attended simply to

slake their thirst. With drink came other dangers associated with a club life that was not simply anathema to Gould but also alien to him:

We are all aware of the Drink evil in this country, and to associate a Rationalist and Ethical Society with a Club selling alcoholic liquors is a great risk. I think we do right in running the risk so long as we can show how such a Club can be kept perfectly subordinate to the Society's educational aims.²⁹

Gould further objected to the late hours and character of songs sung within the Club and suggested that the Society should preserve its national and local reputation by distancing itself from the Club and all it stood for. He further suggested that a number of fellow social reformers together with women and youths, precisely the members the Society needed, were dissuaded from joining the Society and its environs by the raucous masculinity of the Club.³⁰ Moreover, even if the Leicester Secular Society had no intention of progressing Gould could still argue that the Club was frequented by those who had no interest in the Society; those same unconscious atheists who caused the churches and chapels so much concern.³⁰

F. J. Gould eventually had his way by threatening the Leicester Secular Society with his imminent departure unless the situation was rectified. Though Gould was able to carry the day largely through an oblique form of blackmail he was not without his opponents. Many saw no harm in drink and exhibited the customary Secularist suspicion of anything that smacked of temperance. Tom Barclay, an implacable enemy of Gould, asserted that; 'we can't be too careful in ascertaining whether a desire to drink is the cause of the slum, or whether the slum is the cause of the desire to drink'³¹ Gould's victory was unquestionably the ultimate triumph of the 'better, fewer, but

better' principle which shaped the ultimate destiny of a Society which today survives and still has a prohibition on alcohol.

Beside his instinct to Sectarianise the Society Gould introduced a new element of professionalism into the life of the Leicester Secular Society. To some extent the Society had been cultivating professionalism for years. They had, since 1852 employed outside lecturers who were nationally, sometimes internationally renowned experts in their subject. The Society moved a stage further when it employed Gould who came to it with impressive freethought/ethicist credentials.⁹² As such he fulfilled the rôle of club professional, galvanising the 'amateurs' around him into some sort of credible alternative to orthodox religion and morality. This involved a programme of lectures and the creation of a culture which would 'make' Secularists and as such Gould's whole system suggested that he was preparing those in his charge for a lifetime to be spent in the ultimate expression of their faith.

The fact that Gould was responsible for this change in emphasis is evidenced by the fact that after his departure the expression of leisure, like many other areas within the Leicester Secular Society, reverted to its pre-edwardian level of relaxation. Gould's educationally based Ethical Guild became, for example a Young Persons Ethical Association with a programme based on leisure for its own sake. Similarly dances became a more regular feature of Secular life after Gould.

Throughout the provision of Secularist leisure, assumptions were made about what Secularists wanted and demanded, just as similar assumptions were made about other 'punters' in the wider society. Though initially the Society's own answer was to treat the Club and the Society as two separate entities divided by aims yet somehow united by ideal, the problem of over supply faced with an ultimately static demand could not be ignored. Whilst

the instinct to 'make', to 'convert', to 'persuade' and to 'harness' Secularists into one of several rôles remained, those in charge of such agencies could be guaranteed sleepless nights.

However, even within the Leicester Secular Society, an organisation that perhaps should have known better, their categorisations missed fundamental points about the development of leisure and the development of the urban personality. Many members of the Secular Society were quite capable of listening to erudite lectures, commenting on them, yet retiring to the bar and singing a chorus of the latest music hall song and enjoying a drink. The autobiography of Tom Barclay detailing life in the Leicester Secular Society is full of references to the fun and good fellowship that a bar atmosphere promoted.⁹³ Yet Barclay was no drunkard and no less of a Secularist than F. J. Gould or Sydney Gimson. This ability to move between the rôles and stereotypes that have been perceived by contemporaries and historians has been graphically described by Peter Bailey in his seminal article 'Will the real Bill Banks please stand up!'⁹⁴ Secularism was no less prone to categorise people nor less likely to produce individuals to confound that categorisation. Ultimately for the Leicester Secular Society, the 'thinkers and drinkers' dichotomy did not exist.

Despite the fact that the twentieth century has brought with it a multiplication of those petty distractions the Secularists were so afraid of, and has brought us no nearer to their ideal of a wholly Secular society, there is one area in which their contribution deserves acknowledgment. Despite the fact that the capacity to pass leisure and spare time without the contact of others has multiplied manifold, organisations devoted to particular pastimes still persist. Such organisations still require a committee structure and a reasonably committed membership around which to organise both enthusiasm and what would otherwise be non-existent personal

relationships.⁹⁵ Though the Leicester Secular Society was obviously only successful in one locality it gave strength and cohesion at a vital stage to a concept of 'mutual aid' in leisure and other spheres that has survived from the philosophical musings of Robert Owen to the third quarter of the twentieth century. This 'mutual aid' was considered to be of paramount importance in the promotion of both Secularism and a better quality of life. Within this framework Secularists came to see education and welfare as providing the most efficient means of achieving these ends.

Footnotes to Chapter Seven

1: I am grateful to the Graduate seminar at the University of East Anglia for commenting on a version of this Chapter. I would also like to thank the following people for their advice and help; James Walvin, James McMillan, Lynn Abrams, Simon Cordery, Barry Doyle and Colin Plumb.

2: See particularly Jeff Bishop and Paul Hoggett Organising around Enthusiasms: Mutual aid in Leisure. (London 1986).

3: See Chapter 6 and related Appendix.

4: The Exception to this is Stephen Yeo's excellent study of Reading Religion and Voluntary Organisations in Crisis (1976).

5: Ibid. page 16.

6: For institutional histories of the organisations mentioned see Alfred F. Chollerton ed., Fifty Years of Adult School Work in Leicestershire, 1861-1910 (Leicester 1910). Malcolm Elliott, 'Leicester Coffee-House and Cocoa House Movement' Transactions of the Leicestershire Archaeological and Historical Society XLVII, 1971, pp. 55-61. Craig Grewcock, 'The Leicester Mechanics Institute 1833-1870' in Daniel Williams ed. The Adaptation of Change: Essays upon the History of Nineteenth century Leicester and Leicestershire (Leicester museums publication no. 18, 1980), and (Rev E. Atkins A Brief Account of the work of Church Extension in the Town and County of Leicester 1851-1903 (Leicester 1904).

7: Yeo, Religion and Voluntary Organisations, page 16.

8: Ibid. page 311

9: David Thompson, 'The Churches and society in Leicestershire 1851-1881' (Cambridge Phd. 1969), page 21.

10: A. Temple-Patterson, Radical Leicester (Leicester 1954), page 388.

- 11: Quoted in Thompson, Churches and Society, page 85.
- 12: Ibid. page 85.
- 13: Bill Lancaster Radicalism, Co-Operation and Socialism. (Leicester 1987), pages 12-13.
- 14: Ibid..
- 15: Quoted in Thompson, Churches and Society, page 113.
- 16: Quoted in Ibid. pages 113 - 4.
- 17: See S.B. Saul, The Myth of the Great Depression (1969), page 31. Saul's graph shows an increase in living standards from an index of 100 in 1850 to 170 in 1894.
- 18: See Peter Keating (ed.), Into Unknown England 1866-1913 (1976).
- 19: Thompson, Churches and Society page. 152.
- 20: Ibid. page 145 - 6.
- 21: Ibid. page 131.
- 22: Joseph Dare, 30th Report of the Leicester Domestic Mission. 1875 (Leicester Local Studies Library). Also quoted in Ibid. pages 114 - 5.
- 23: Joseph Dare, 7th Report of the Leicester Domestic Mission. 1852 (Leicester Local Studies Library). Also quoted in Ibid. page 117.
- 24: Ibid..
- 25: Thompson, Churches and Society, page 230.
- 26: Rev. George Holt, A Complete Exposure of the Abuses of the Leicester Mechanics Institute in Two Parts (Leicester 1835) (catalogued in pamphlet volume 31, Leicester Local studies Library) passim.
- 27: Grewcock, Leicester Mechanics Institute, page 24.
- 28: Ibid. page 24.
- 29: Ibid. page 26.
- 30: For an explanation of the historiography and its inadequacies see Gareth Stedman Jones, 'Class expression versus social control? A critique of recent

trends in the social history of 'leisure'. History Workshop IV (Autumn 1977), 162-170.

31: Temple-Patterson, Radical Leicester, pages 378 - 9.

32: Thompson, Churches and Society, page 125.

33: John H. Clarke, Catalogue of the Leicester Jubilee Exhibition (Leicester 1887), page 128.

34: Church of England Yearbook 1887, page 48. Quoted in Thompson, Churches and Society, page 209.

35: Leicester Mercury 7th January 1884 page 2 & 8th January page 2.

36: Ibid. page 1, 4th January page 1 & 22nd January 1884.

37: Leicester Mercury 1st January 1884 page 1 & 3, 14th January page 1, 15th January page 2, 26th January page 1, 28th January page 1.

38: Leicester Mercury 18th January 1884 page 2, 19th January page 4.

39: Leicester Mercury 18th January 1884 page 3 & 15th January page 3.

40: Leicester Mercury 8th January 1884 page 4.

41: Leicester Mercury 30th January 1884 page 4.

42: Leicester Mercury 26th January 1884 page 1, 7th January page 2 & 8th January page 2.

43: Leicester Mercury 7th January 1884 page 2.

44: Leicester Mercury 9th January 1884 page 4.

45: Leicester Mercury 1st January 1884 page 3 & 2nd January page 1.

46: Leicester Mercury 1st January 1884 page 4.

47: T.S. Finney, The Life and Times of Leicester Fosse Football Club (Later Leicester City) (Leicester 1966), page 9.

48: See W.F. Watson, Leicester Sketch Club 1898-1929 (Leicester 1930). For a similar example see Gertrude Ellis, History of the Leicester Ladies Reading Society 1869-1930 (Leicester 1930).

49: See Peter Bailey, 'Will the real Bill Banks please stand up? Towards a

rôle analysis of mid-victorian working-class respectability. Journal of Social History, XII, (1978-9), pages 336 - 53.

50: Yeo, Religion and Voluntary Organisations, page 107.

51: Atkins, Brief account of Church Extension, passim.

52: I am indebted on this point to Edward Royle for insights into his work on Nonconformity in nineteenth century York.

53: Finney, Life of Leicester Fosse Football Club, page 22.

54: Ibid. page 17.

55: Ibid. page 15.

56: See Atkins, Brief account of Church Extension, passim..

57: Finney, life of Leicester Fosse Football Club, page 30.

58: Ibid. page 64.

59: Elliott, Leicester Coffee and Cocoa House Movement, page 60.

60: Robert D. Storch 'The Problem of Working Class Moral reform in the industrial North: 1825 - 50. In A. P. Donajgrodzki ed. Social Control in 19th Century Britain. (London 1977), page 149.

61: Yeo, Religion and Voluntary Organisations, page 271.

62: Ibid. page 65.

63: L.S.S.M.B., 27 September 1881.

64: L.S.S.M.B., 11 October 1881.

65: See for example Thomas Coltman's application for the conduct of a dancing class at L.S.S.M.B., 8 August 1882.

66: L.S.S.M.B., 27 July 1885.

67: Yeo, Religion and Voluntary Organisations, page 182.

68: Leicester Secular Society Annual Report for 1890, pages 8 - 9. See also L.S.S.M.B., 31 January 1894.

69: David Rubinstein 'Cycling in the 1890's' Victorian Studies, Volume XXI, 1977 - 78.

- 70: Leicester County Cricket Club Jubilee Souvenir 1879 - 1928. (1928)
passim..
- 71: F. J. Gould History of the Leicester Secular Society. (Leicester 1900)
page 38.
- 72: Ibid. page 39.
- 73: Quoted in Ibid. page 41. See also the Freethinker 14, 18 June, 12,19 July
1885.
- 74: L.S.S.M.B., 12 July 1899.
- 75: See the Postscript to Sydney Ansell Gimson 'Random Recollections of the
Leicester Secular Society, with digressions' (1932).
- 76: L.S.S.M.B., 1 July 1918.
- 77: L.S.S.M.B., 9 February 1919.
- 78: See Leicester Secular Society Annual Report 1892 - 93., page 7.
- 79: L.S.S.M.B., 10 April 1913, 7 October 1913, 14 July 1914 & 21 July 1914.
- 80: L.S.S.M.B., 12 February 1882.
- 81: See also L.S.S.M.B., 12 February 1882, for an impressive list of republican
and freethought lecturers for 1882.
- 82: L.S.S.M.B., 7 March 1882.
- 83: L.S.S.M.B., 4 April 1882.
- 84: Yeo, Religion and Voluntary Organisations, page 172.
- 85: L.S.S.M.B., 13 March, 25 April 1900, 27 February 1901, 26 April 1902.
- 86: L.S.S.M.B., 11 December 1901.
- 87: L.S.S.M.B., 19 December 1894.
- 88: F. J. Gould typescript Circular on 'The Club' appended in 'Scrapbook'.
- 89: Ibid..
- 90: Ibid..
- 91: See Tom Barclay, Memoirs and Medleys: The Autobiography of a Bottle
Washer (Leicester 1934), page 125.

92: See F. J. Gould, Life Story of a Humanist., page 23.

93: See Barclay, Memoirs and Medleys, passim.

94: See Peter Bailey, 'Will the real Bill Banks please stand up?' passim..

95: See Bishop and Hoggett, Organising around Enthusiasms particularly Chapter 3.

CHAPTER EIGHT

THE SOCIETY AS COMMUNITY - EDUCATION, HEALTH AND WELFARE PROVISION.

A part of the congregational life of Secularism that Josiah Gimson had envisaged at the opening of the Hall was provision for the support and welfare of Secularists. This was to be a central part of the local Secularist organisation at Leicester. Indeed the absence of such a central focus around which Secularists could organise had been instrumental in the failure of local organisations elsewhere. Secularism and Atheism were, even in the early twentieth century, considered to be errant opinions which left their proponents exposed to distrust, ridicule and ostracism.

Others suffered from the disdain of Victorian society in other ways. Dismissal from employment was frequent and Secularists often found themselves prevented from exercising rights that other citizens freely took for granted. Secular funerals were effectively proscribed and there was equally little scope for other rites of passage such as baptism, marriage or for the conduct of elementary education free from Christian influences. Even the attempts of individual secularists to leave legacies for the maintenance of Secular and Freethought activity often foundered on legal difficulties. It was frequently argued that to leave such a legacy was proof of an unbalanced mind, or that such bequests were void since they were for the promotion of blasphemy, a patently illegal purpose. In 1875 for example Bradlaugh had been left £20,000 by H. J. Blackmore, but after long legal wranglings he eventually received only £2,500.¹ The effects of what amounted to exclusion from society could have dire consequences for the individual whether a local secularist or a national figure. Thus the Secularists as a group were more vulnerable and likely to need material help than other

minority groups.

Though the National Secular Society attempted to alleviate material distress amongst Secularists on a national basis the eventual scope of these initiatives was limited. In 1860 the General Secular Benevolent fund was founded which addressed the needs of individuals and it eventually became the Freethinkers Benevolent Fund. This was wound up and its work integrated with the National Secular Society Benevolent Fund which appears to have been successful in the 1880's and beyond.² However seeking help from a National fund must have been a daunting prospect for many whose only contact with fellow Secularists was through the pages of the Freethought press, so that the distress that the national movement was aware of may only have been the tip of the iceberg. Moreover the denial of opportunities for Secularists to share the pleasures privileges and rights afforded to more conventional members of Society must have further mitigated against commitment to unpopular views. In short, without a local support network it was always likely that lack of provision for spiritual and material comfort would limit the numbers that would be prepared to devote substantial time and energy to the cause of Secularism.

In this the situation of nineteenth century Secularists bears comparison with the experience of other minority groups such as homosexuals in our own century, many of whom have only been prepared to admit publicly their homosexuality when able to rely on the help of a 'support network'. For many their experience of 'coming out' and their participation in the material and social side of such support networks has persuaded them to campaign actively against attitudes and legislation that discriminates against their interests. Likewise many Secularists in the nineteenth century must have been persuaded by their sheer isolation into a life of outward conformity or indifference. Only where there was a viable local organisation or support network for

Secularism was there a realistic chance of the latter being a real presence in the community. This is obviously one reason why Secularism appears to have been an exclusively urban phenomenon with little or no evidence of support in rural areas. Edward Royle's map of the distribution of regional Secularism for the years 1866 - 1915 follows the pattern of the main industrial conurbations. Clearly evident as centres of Secularism (apart from London) are the North West, West Yorkshire, Tyneside, the West Midlands around Birmingham, and South Wales.³ Outside of these areas support in the rural South and West, Wales and East Anglia was sparse. This however does not tell us that rural Secularism did not exist, merely that it flourished only where there was an organised focus for it. Evidence for Leicestershire provided by the Leicester Secular Society nomination books suggests that there was a presence in the villages of Leicestershire, represented by individuals who became out-of-town members.⁴ It seems possible from this evidence that isolated pockets of rural Secularism may have existed, but even so it was successfully organised and given a public profile only in the town of Leicester.

The Holyoake wing of Secularism sought to place Secularists back into society rather than persuade them to take up arms against it. Holyoake's redefinition of infidelity as Secularism had sought to make the confrontational aspects of the intellectual position irrelevant. It was an attempt to make Secularists much more 'of society' rather than against society and was in part a change from 'sect' to 'denomination'. This also echoed the post-Owenite approach which argued that Co-operation should take part in the community rather than in individual communities. Once again the comparison with modern homosexual groups is enlightening. The ability of disadvantaged and minority groups to organise and portray a public face to society at large encourages such groups to organise further and so enlarge

their membership. It also demonstrates to the society they live in that such views are considerably more widespread and elicits more sympathy than would otherwise be thought possible from a society that supposedly opposes their views. This 'coming out' itself depends on the relaxation of social attitudes. Holyoake claimed that this had happened, making his Secularism possible though Bradlaugh still argued that he was mistaken.

The natural consequence of Holyoake's new ideology of Secularism was that the social welfare of individual secularists was given a high priority. Like many other differing emphases and attitudes within the Secular movement this was a product of generational differences. The individualists within the Secular movement of the 1880's were almost exclusively younger men who had grown up in a more stable and structured society than many of the older members who had been active in the Owenite attempts to change the whole agenda of society. At a national level this dichotomy can be illustrated by comparing the ideas and attitudes of the two major leaders Charles Bradlaugh and George Jacob Holyoake. The former, born in 1833 was an individualist republican who gave his first lecture on a freethought platform in 1850. The latter by this stage had a career in numerous radical agitations behind him. These included Owenism and co-operation and his work of the eighteen fifties was devoted to rallying the remnants of Owenism and preserving the movement culture of an ideology whose moment was seen to be fading. At a local level in Leicester Secularism this ideological and generational difference can best be illustrated by the contrast between Josiah Gimson and his son Sydney. The elder had been an Owenite Socialist and had come through the turmoil of the early Victorian period to regard himself as a progressive liberal radical who judged ideas and systems by their utility. His son Sydney born in 1860 became a Secularist and maintained his belief with an individualistic perspective.

Those Secularists who had initially attached themselves to Holyoake were more often than not following him into the new movement from their place alongside him in the old. Leicester was no exception since what became the Secular Society had grown out of the Owenite Social Institution. Intended as an example of Owen's new society in miniature it nevertheless proved to be a centre for communal activities that had less grandiose aims. Ned Newitt has catalogued the numerous activities which the Institution promoted, which included lectures, dancing and elocution classes as well as a Sunday school and adult classes in reading and writing.⁵ Music was used extensively as a means of both educating and entertaining audiences and it was deemed desirable that the Institution should cultivate congregational tendencies that would promote goodwill and communal feelings of brotherhood.⁶ Such tendencies were not simply a means of persuading people to take part in activities familiar to them, they were also considered to be a valued ally in the quest for the cultivation and expression of the new moral world:

Congregational singing cannot be too highly recommended, its influence having been found greatly beneficial, as most individuals have, from infancy, been trained under religious tuition, they have been accustomed to the pleasant sensation which music generates.⁷

The use of music and dance as means to interest and amuse as well as educate had long been advocated by Robert Owen and had been implemented at most of his educational experiments.⁸ The Owenite social Institution was instrumental in breaking down the barriers between devotion and recreation so that it managed to appeal to the whole family. It was this appreciation of the value of communal activity that survived in the Secularism

propounded by George Jacob Holyoake.

The Leicester Secular Society in a similar way to its predecessor sought to make constructive use of inclinations and preferences that in the nineteenth century were very much an established fact. It recognised that such tendencies could be as much social as religious. This was obviously in stark contrast to those sections of the national movement which sought to battle both with theology and the whole notion of religious tendencies. Thus the recognition of the validity of religious idioms and 'providing' enlightenment and entertainment to a congregation sheds new light on the phrase which the Society continually reiterated, that it did not seek to remove religious teaching from the pulpits but merely sought to improve its quality.

Thus Josiah Gimson's oration at the opening of the Secular Hall was an exhortation to the Leicester Secular Society to make use of its premises not simply to put forward a public face for Secularism in the town but also to provide a valid and vibrant movement culture for its adherents. This it was hoped would make Secularism a complete alternative which was capable of pleasing its own and of gaining further converts.⁹ As a result of this the Leicester Secular Society tried a number of initiatives in response to demands that they should concern themselves with the education, health and financial security of their members. Commitment to these initiatives was never constant and pressure to raise funds for them often reflected the zeal of individuals rather than any renewing of the agenda by the Society as a whole. The instigation of these initiatives marks the Society as indicative of the 'chapel' type organisation of Freethought which placed emphasis on denominational activity. This contrasts with the 'mission' type organisation which saw proselytising as its primary function.¹⁰

The Secular Sunday School

After the Secular Hall was opened on 6 March 1881 almost immediately members of the Society wanted a Sunday school to be started as one of the first provisions that the Hall could accommodate. Max Bunton, the future secretary and colleague of Tom Barclay came before the General Committee with a suggestion that Sunday mornings in the Hall should be put by for the conduct of a Sunday school for the children of members.¹¹ Though the suggestion was noted, nothing concrete was achieved until November of the same year when the proposal was activated, possibly as a result of Josiah Gimson's visit to Huddersfield from which he gained a favourable impression of what could be achieved, and he was asked to lecture to the Society on the workings of the Huddersfield example. Gimson's enthusiasm may also have been awakened by his recent visit to Failsworth where he had the honour of laying the foundation stone of the new Sunday school building there.¹² On 14 November 1881 at an extraordinary general meeting it was resolved that the Sunday school be created with Mrs Wright & Miss Barnard appointed as teachers with Messrs Wright, Hart, Franks, Max Bunton, Thomas Ireland and Edward Kearsley taking important parts as members of the School Committee.¹³

Despite this appearance of organisation the School seems not to have gained the support it perhaps had a right to expect. In order to succeed such a venture required a number of willing and able teachers who could both attend regularly and provide interesting and varied lessons that would captivate and encourage the children. In the event the reality seems to have generally fallen short of the ideal. Even in the first few months of its existence it had to make do with the less than adequate resources available to it. Very quickly it seems to have been forced into employing outside help since in March 1882 a policy was implemented to put this sad

state of affairs into reverse. The Sunday school executive committee was henceforth empowered to reform the arrangements regarding teaching so that the teachers should thereafter 'consist entirely of members and their families'.¹⁴

However problems seem to have continued since the Sunday school appears to have collapsed for almost ten years. Though F.J. Gould was asked to address the Society's school children in February 1884 the minute books do not make it clear whether this was a gathering of Sunday school scholars or merely the children of members of the Leicester Secular Society.¹⁵ After this point all references to the Sunday school are absent from the minute books. Likewise the annual reports on the work of the Leicester Secular Society compiled by Sydney Gimson similarly contain no reference to its existence. There is no record of its being active in the reports of 1889, 1890 and 1891.¹⁶ The report for 1892 - 3 was considerably more optimistic. The city of Leicester and the Leicester Secular Society were in the midst of recovering from a period of economic difficulty caused by, in Gimson's words, 'bad trade and dislocation due to trade disputes and new machinery.'¹⁷ By early 1894 when the report on the previous two years activities was written the Secular Society had effectively weathered the financial storm and had accustomed itself to a considerably reduced income through bar receipts. It was thus in a comfortable position to plan expansion of activities and provision for the future. The report confirms that the Sunday school had been dormant for some time and intimated that the restarting of this department alongside an expansion of instructive classes for adults was to be one of the Secular Society's priorities for the coming year.¹⁸ By January 1884 it was felt that the Secular Society should act upon the recommendations made in the annual report. At the half-yearly members meeting a discussion took place on a number of initiatives that

would revitalise the Secular Society. Alongside the suggestion of opening a gymnasium and a swimming club was the proposal that the Sunday school should be restarted and help was eagerly canvassed.¹⁹

Though once again evidence for this period of the Sunday school's existence is scanty it seems that it soldiered on, surviving rather than actually flourishing. By August 1896 support for the teachers in the School seems to have dried up since Sydney Gimson made a desperate appeal at the half yearly meeting for further help and assistance.²⁰ However financial help was also required and the Sunday school was assisted by the Secular Society in its attempts to raise funds. In 1897 a Tea and Social took place with the co-operation of the Sunday school teachers with a view to raising funds.²¹

The desire to raise funds may be indicative of a changing emphasis within the Sunday school. From the late 1890's an element of entertainment enters the scene. In response to demand the Society in conjunction with the Sunday school initiated a 'Children's Cantata' which, like many other of its provisions, had one eye on the financial gains and another on the other benefits. The Cantata was ostensibly an entertainment containing a mixture of music, recitation and dramatic dialogue in which most, if not all, talents could find a resting place. The first Cantata, that of 1898, was used as an opportunity to raise money for the Sunday school since a collection was taken expressly for that purpose.²² The exercise proved so successful that the Cantata was repeated on May day of the same year with the collection this time being divided between the Society and the Sunday school.²³

Evidence for the work of the Secular Sunday school before 1899 is both elusive and uninformative. Popular memory within the Society tells us almost nothing about the Sunday school before the start of this century, a situation emphasised by the larger volume of evidence available for the Gould era. The

content and the quality of the curriculum unfortunately elude the historian but small hints do exist. The frequency with which the Sunday school found itself short of resources and active support obviously suggests that organisation was minimal and on a voluntary basis as 'help' was asked for rather than regular 'commitment'. Equally there is no mention of separate classes for children of different age groups. Though this may be a fault of the evidence, the reception of Gould's reforms, which had behind them a definite plan, suggest that primary education within the Leicester Secular Society was only then getting the organisation and personnel it deserved.

The content of the Secular Society Sunday school that was taught during this period is likewise a mystery. Though it is tempting to suggest that several aspects of Owenite education, such as an emphasis on music and creativity survived in the Cantata and other entertainments the connection is perhaps too tenuous. What is certain is that those who were the prime movers behind the operation of the Secular Sunday school were of the Positivist wing of the Society. Sydney Gimson mentions that Messrs. Franks and Cornish were instrumental in maintaining the school,²⁴ the former being mentioned in the list of names appointed to the initial executive committee. Though Positivists were more likely to be attracted to ideas of collective practical help they shared sufficient ground with those who were more in tune with Holyoake's definition of Secularism which sought to put down roots for Secularists in the Community. The Sunday school may have provided, albeit intermittently, an opportunity for Positivists and Holyoake Secularists to share the common ground they had.²⁵

Though Positivists were the leading lights in the Sunday school there is no evidence to suggest that they were able to introduce a coherent Positivist curriculum. Much of what was taught must have been borrowed since it is interesting to note that Sydney Gimson for a time taught in both the

Unitarian Great Meeting Sunday school on Sunday morning and afternoon, though he admitted at the time that he was by no means committed wholeheartedly to the Secular Society or to Secularism.²⁶ Gimson must have used many lessons developed at the Great Meeting at a later time or date at the Secular Hall and possibly vice versa. What is particularly interesting is that he felt no fundamental conflict concerning his involvement in both Sunday schools and presumably had no qualms about the hybrid curriculum that probably resulted.

From this and the other evidence which suggests intermittent existence and limited success it is possible to conclude that the curriculum of the Sunday school was a loose conglomerate of residual Owenite educational ideas, useful moral lessons from Unitarianism and individual perceptions of Comte's religion of humanity. All these strands came into the work of the Sunday school as the enthusiasms of individuals rather than in the shape of an intended programme and this may help to explain the chequered history of the school until 1900.

This situation was to change dramatically with the employment of Frederick James Gould as the organiser to the Leicester Secular Society. Gould had extensive experience of the field of education which he was to put to good use. He had been a teacher with the London School Board since 1879 and was no stranger to controversy. His first post had been in Bethnal Green where he had attempted to lend a humanising influence to an education which he saw as underpinned by the ruthless and mechanical exposition of the bible. When this anger at the destitute condition of the children in his care became a further factor, he found himself:

... the most restless teacher in London. While incessantly angry with the callous inefficiency of the current methods, both

'secular' and 'religious', I was trying to think out plans of educational remoulding and new creation. I toiled, so to speak, in a cellar, and dreamed of the sunlight.²⁷

The Radical London of the 1880's also exposed Gould to a range of ideas which included those of Morris and Hyndman. However one of the speakers he heard was Frederic Harrison whose exposition of Positivism effectively converted Gould to the Comteian 'Religion of Humanity'.²⁸ Gould's conversion to Positivism had considerable effect on his life as a London School Board teacher. He continued to teach the prescribed School Board bible lesson which he was able to fulfil since it demanded:

... there shall be given such explanations and such instruction therefrom, in the principles of morality and religion, as are suited to the capacities of the children.²⁹

Gould saw no conflict of interest since he attended a bible class and debated with members of the Christian Evidence Society, most notably its secretary, the Rev. C. Lloyd Engström. Gould was prepared to see the Bible as a 'human poem' and his fellow class mates referred to him as 'half a Christian', though Gould himself preferred the term 'half a Rationalist'.³⁰

For a time Gould was able to continue his teaching responsibilities alongside writing provocative copy for W. Stewart Ross' Secular Review under the nom de plume of 'Smoke and Sparks'. However in December 1887 Gould was called into the offices of his employer to face questioning by the Chairman of the School Board, the Rev. J.R. Diggle. Gould was called to account for his journalistic activities and was also told to apply for relief from the duty of Bible teaching. This he freely consented to do, though his letter of

application emphasised that he was already in search of a scheme of practicable moral instruction and that he had used the bible as a means to this end:

I have taught with the greatest readiness such practical lessons of morality as are maintained in common by Rationalist writers and by various passages in the Bible- for example, the duties of honesty, temperance, charity, moral courage, etc..³¹

After further consultation between Gould and the School Board which, according to Gould, at one stage resulted in the board redrafting its regulations, he was transferred to another school in Limehouse. This transfer was on condition that Gould maintained a position of neutrality on theological matters in the class room and withdrew from biblical instruction which would be conducted by his headmaster.³² Here the matter would have ended had Gould allowed it to do so. However, he was fast developing a distinct taste for the limelight. His friend John Lobb, the editor of the Christian Age, was more pragmatic about his approach to Bible teaching. When Gould mentioned to him the talking serpent of Eden he exclaimed: 'Well, when I read such things in the Bible, I just say, Hm! we will now turn to the next page!'³³ Lobb also advised Gould to say nothing and bide his time with the advice 'save your money, and then you can be boss!'³⁴

However Gould was not to be thwarted and by 1891 had re-applied to teach Bible classes asserting that he was not aware that his agnosticism was a hindrance in teaching 'the principles of morality and religion.'³⁵ This ploy was typical of Gould's character. He had placed himself at the centre of things on a matter of principle (some would call pedantry) yet he did so convinced that his action was occasioned by the highest of motives. Despite

this, Gould was castigated by Annie Besant and other members of the national movement who could see that this was no place to argue the finer points of distinctions between atheism and agnosticism.³⁶

Gould's moment of glory was shortlived. The result of his discussions with the board was a curt refusal to comply with his wishes so that Gould was obliged to soldier on under the existing conditions of his contract. Finally, in 1896, he at last took the advice of his friend John Lobb and struck out on his own leaving the teaching profession in search of a new outlet for his ideas. His parting shot, contained in his letter of resignation, was a condemnation of the regime that he felt had been detrimental to the welfare of the children in his care:

Permit me, in leaving the Board's service, to make two observations: (1) In my opinion, the moral training of Board-School children does not receive adequate attention. (2) I believe the present method of Religious Instruction is morally, intellectually, and historically unsound.³⁷

From this point Gould sought to develop and implement the curriculum that he had originally developed and tested at the East London Ethical Society in Libra Road, of which he claimed to have been a co-founder with the Hungarian emigré Gustav Spiller.³⁸ One result of Gould's involvement with the East London Ethical Society was the establishment of the Moral Instruction League in 1897 under which he was able to illustrate how far his plans had developed. By 1897 his ideas had crystallised into a 'plan' which formed the basis of a four volume collection of moral lessons. The essence of Gould's approach was the exposition of moral points by the use of illustrative anecdotes which could come from history, biography, fairy

tales or even the Bible. Indeed the conception that the Bible was in any way a useful part of education was so foreign to many Secularists that the National Secular Society initially drew back from the Moral Instruction League, though it maintained a token presence on it.³⁹

Thus it was with a reputation for dedication and a series of new, though largely untried, ideas that Gould came to the Leicester Secular Society in March 1899. Almost immediately he gave notice that he sought to restructure the Sunday school and make it a vital part of the Society's work.

His intention was to construct what he termed an Ethical Ladder which would cater for all age groups and make all classes act as a feeder to the class immediately above it. This would stretch from childhood to adolescence, with the introduction of a young persons ethical organisation which would create a new generation of Ethicists and Positivists.

The minutes reflect almost immediately the renewed impetus behind Secular Sunday school education. Children's teas and outings begin to re-appear in the minutes as does evidence of more concrete planning such as the raising of funds and the purchase of books.⁴⁰ By May 1900 a major part of Gould's ethical ladder had been instituted with the creation of the Young Person's Ethical Guild which was to be a free association of those in their late teens who would meet for less formalised teaching and instruction than was available from the Sunday school. The general objects of the Guild were to 'promote study and recreation and to assist in building up the Leicester Secular Society.'⁴¹ Like the Sunday school this organisation had its social side as the frequent letting of the hall to the Guild for teas and other entertainments testifies.⁴²

Certainly by this stage the Leicester Secular Society was realising its potential as a centre for Secular education. This was recognised by

the Society's landlord, the Secular Hall Company, which from January 1901 resolved to reduce the Society's rent 'in consideration of the increased educational work of the Society and the increased expense entailed.'⁴³ The Leicester Secular Society's annual report for 1900 indeed confirms that educational work was flourishing. Approximately 18 adolescents attended the senior class on Sunday mornings and about 80 the junior class held in the afternoon. This work was presided over by 11 teachers who had access to a library of over a hundred books between them.⁴⁴

The curriculum was heavily influenced, if not prescribed, by Gould himself. The meetings were commenced with the singing of a hymn usually from the hymn book 'Songs of Love and Duty', compiled by Gould's former colleague and fellow Ethicist, Gustav Spiller. In January 1902 the programme of the school consisted of an opening song, an address by Gould, another song, the class lessons and a closing song which was followed by the distribution of library books. This must have been the junior class, since in May 1902 the Leicester Reasoner gave the programme of the senior class as consisting of 'A Reading by one of the scholars; short account of some person, the date of whose birth or death falls on the day of the meeting; pianoforte piece; a half hour lesson'.⁴⁵ Central to the teaching content was Gould's large and growing storehouse of moral tales which he gleaned from every available source which also included the Bible. Such tales could be welded together to illustrate aspects of moral behaviour with infinite variations and degrees of subtlety.

F. J. Gould however did not confine the illustration of these moral tales to the four walls of the Sunday school. His own 'parish magazine', the Leicester Reasoner, was in part set up to gain a wider audience for his moral tales and provides, along with his writings in the Leicester Pioneer, some of the best examples of them. His children's column in the

paper was an exposition of simple virtues and their applicability to everyday life. Their simplicity and charm must have attracted favour amongst many of a Nonconformist and Liberal turn of mind who sought an undenominational and simple mode of elementary instruction. In the August 1902 issue Gould wrote a piece on 'Kindness' which first of all demonstrated various forms of 'natural' behaviour such as the craving to satisfy hunger and thirst amongst humans and animals. From this he moved on to demonstrate the potential for ethical behaviour and sensibilities to intervene:

It is also *natural* for men and boys to fight. Yes, but that is one of the things we want to change; and I think we *shall* change it someday. And let us now see if it is *natural* to show kindness-⁴⁶

The piece then moved on to consider a number of examples of acts of kindness such as a group of deer hunters in America who allowed a doe to rescue her fawn from the river without intervening because 'they respected the mother's love'.⁴⁷ This view differed profoundly from the Owenite version of environmentalism since it placed emphasis on the discretion and Ethical development of sensibilities within the individual. Thus Gould was equally capable of demonstrating bad and mistaken ethical judgement. In an edition of the Leicester Pioneer for 1904 Gould's column 'Chats with Young Folks' contained what amounted to a sermon on the same subject, illustrated with the tale of a geologist travelling through Devon. One evening when he was returning home he found a drunken man in the road and, after discovering where his home was, he assisted him to get home. The drunken man's wife, however, appalled at his condition, turned on the

geologist accusing him of drinking with him and encouraging him to do so. The geologist left abruptly but Gould's suggestion was that he would still have done the same had he expected to be reprimanded. What is interesting in this moral tale is not simply that ethical behaviour should be its own reward but also that evil exists in the form of those without developed Ethical sensibilities who either misjudge the deeds of others or allow themselves to be intoxicated by drink.⁴⁸

Gould's insistence on the power of moral education and Ethicism however led him to take a rather strict view of the raw material he was given. Children whose Ethical sensibilities and responsibilities had not been fully developed could not be entirely trusted. Only in this light can the historian explain Gould's attempt to restrict the behaviour of children on the Society's premises and to penalise those parents who neglected their duty to control their own children.⁴⁹ Once rules had been enacted Gould himself did his best to enforce them, and reported transgressions in tiresome detail. Though restrictions placed on the behaviour of children were obviously necessary to the running of the Society it is noticeable that the mention of rules in the minutes clearly indicates that they were intended to alter a situation that had existed in the Society for some time past. Though Gould presumably sought a more sober atmosphere in which to create his own 'Temple of Humanity', it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that Gould saw a child, any child, as an incomplete moral entity which needed strict guidance and control. A simpler contention that he despised children does not fit a man who spent so much time concerned with their welfare and shed many tears for the underprivileged amongst them. Moreover the suggestion that children were in this sense incomplete is in part given credence by the extensive nature of Gould's own Ethical ladder principle, an educational system which covered the early years to adulthood at which point an ethical apprenticeship

was deemed to have been duly served.

The upper end of this scheme was represented by the Ethical Guild which gradually took root within the Leicester Secular Society and was intended to provide for the intermediate group between the senior class of the Sunday school and those who benefited from the full adult programme of the Secular Society itself. The Guild met, originally on Saturdays but later on Sundays, and was generally organised around a reading or discussion topic. This was tempered by a social side that consisted of teas, socials, summer outings and games after the serious side of meetings had been dispensed with. The programme for the spring session of 1903, for example, shows the Guild dealing with such matters as 'Woman Suffrage', 'Plato's Republic', 'Macbeth (with recitations)', 'Mediaevalism and Modern Thought', 'Warren Hastings' and 'Robert Burns'.⁵⁰ Though the Guild itself disbanded in early 1906 it was reconstituted within a year and remained in existence until its work was effectively superceded by the Young People's Ethical Association.

Gould's own notion of homilies on ethical behaviour was not simply confined to material intended for children, but sought to guide the affairs of those of impressionable age as well as adults. The columns of both the Leicester Reasoner and the Leicester Pioneer abound with instances where the myriad happenings of an Edwardian town were transformed into instructive and often lurid examples of society's evils for the mass consumption of adults. Prize fighting was one of Gould's favourite targets, representing the debasement of man inspired by the iniquitous system of capitalist exploitation and embodying the ultimate negation of the Ethical system. His description of a visit to the Mafeking boxing ring is at times both lurid and humorous, since his report manages ironic tilts at everything from the gullibility of youth to the stupidity of imperial pride. Most importantly it concluded with a distinctly serious moral and ethical punchline:

But woe to us and our future if we can find no healthier use for that strength than in mere animal conflict and in the lust of victory over a fallen neighbour. We must be wanting in wit if we cannot discover in the world enough of ills, diseases, follies, and injustices to try our mettle on without encouraging needless contests of man with man.⁵¹

Similar articles appear in the Leicester Reasoner, often using one of Gould's visits to a local landmark to make a particular point. Readers of the February 1902 edition would have found an article entitled 'St. Mary's Church and Social Problems'. This article recorded that a long obsolete custom at St. Mary's had dictated that Whit Monday was set aside for a procession at which twelve men representing the apostles would present offerings of gloves both to God and to St. Thomas of India. Gould's point was that gloved hands had been 'scarcely fitted to grapple with the serious difficulties which beset modern society.' He went further to denounce the ritualism associated with St. Mary's and indicated the ineffective nature of the church's approach to social ills and gave an exhaustive list of social progressives such as J. A. Hobson, Bernard Shaw, Karl Marx, John Ruskin and William Morris who had all rejected the teachings of the church of England.⁵² The October edition contained an account of one of Gould's outings to examine the geology of the area bordering Charnwood forest. Whilst visiting the church at Markfield where John Wesley had once preached Gould pronounced it unremarkable and paid scrupulous attention to the instructions for the upkeep of the church which had been left for the steeple keeper. This was an opportunity for Gould to suggest that such care and maintenance was required in other areas of life and to put a Positivist

view of utility with a typically scientific metaphor:

To put it in the language of modern science, the Church and all that is therein must be adapted to changed conditions. If a machine is to work properly, it must be re-adjusted from time to time. If a political system is to work properly, it must be re-adjusted by various methods such as the extension of the franchise.... And if a Church or a religion is to work properly it must be brought into agreement with the new thoughts, new needs, and new hopes of the people. Unless that change takes place, the influence of that Church will go for ever, even though it tries to shelter itself in houses of granite.

What is called the Christian religion is, like Markfield Church, 'capable of much improvement.'⁵³

This article was reproduced by Gould and distributed amongst the residents of Groby and Markfield with an invitation to the Secular Hall. In this way as well as through its own circulation the ideas contained in Gould's 'parish magazine' must have reached a wider audience than was inclined to attend the Leicester Secular Society's lectures.

After the Leicester Reasoner folded in February 1903 there is little evidence concerning the life of the Sunday school until the departure of Gould. However this should not be surprising since a smoothly running school, quietly conducting a programme of lessons and classes, could not be expected to generate a vast amount of business for the General committee to deal with. Whilst Gould was still the superintendent of the school all could generally be expected to be well. He was capable of rallying support around his ideas amongst those Positivists already in the Society and those

he had been active in recruiting during his stay in the Society. In addition to this his own 'Ethical ladder' could hope to provide a trickle, if not a flood, of helpers for the Sunday school.

Thus before Gould's departure there appear to have been few problems in the area of staffing, although collections within the Leicester Secular Society were necessary to offset debts incurred in the running of the school.⁵⁴ After Gould's resignation the school fell into an unhealthy condition. Though no one would take on the post of school superintendent the main problem was providing staffing to take the lessons in the school. Though this may reflect a degree of apathy within the Society, occasioned by the departure of Gould. It may also suggest that many of the Positivists who had previously been active in the school left with Gould and were now attending his Hall of Humanity.

Little is heard of the work of the school after the departure of Gould until 1912. A. C. Brant took over Gould's rôle of teacher in the Ethical Guild in 1908 whilst Ron Eagle, himself a product of the 'Ethical ladder', took over one of the young persons evening classes in 1909.⁵⁵ By 1912 the situation in the Sunday school was clearly unsatisfactory and in many ways indicative of a general slackness within the Society itself. About fifty scholars were attending the Sunday school though attendances were affected by bad weather and the long distances that the scholars had to travel to the Secular Hall.⁵⁶ The memory is still alive in the Secular Society of how several members were involved in the creation of Glenfield garden city and as a result moved from central Leicester to this western suburb. This may have affected attendances at the Sunday school. At a meeting held in November 1912 'a number of different views' were expressed about the problem. Though some suggested that the solution lay in obtaining a replacement for Gould, others did not wish to repeat the experience and

were prepared instead to disband the school. Others described the Sunday school lessons as 'spasmodic and lacking in leadership'; what was required was a group of teachers who would 'stick to the work'. Eventually it was decided to soldier on and 'stick to the old methods'.⁵⁷

From the departure of Gould onwards the numerous photographs in the Society's photo album suggests that the school seems to have concentrated increasingly on the production of its Cantata.⁵⁸ Increasingly games and amusements became important, particularly in the years immediately preceding the War. This in part reflected a growing youthful element within the Society who wanted not only fancy dress dances and whist drives but were also prepared and even willing to provide and assist at children's amusements. This was remarked upon by the Society itself and eventually it led to the Young People's Ethical Association, a looser, more modern form of organisation than the Ethical Guild. Either Gould had misjudged this generation or his Ethical teaching methods had been completely vindicated! This emphasis on the games element perhaps suggests that, like the Leicester Secular Society itself, secular education was becoming increasingly defensive, seeking to hang on to its adherents by providing more in the way of incentives, whilst also coming to terms with a world that was not quite so hostile. Though the Sunday school suffered from the demographic effects of suburbanisation which limited its effectiveness, there were also other factors at work. As religious control of schools and the curriculum became less tenable and local education authority control was extended, the rôle of the Leicester Secular Society Sunday school changed. It was no longer a necessary alternative to the religious indoctrination of Board School education and became instead more of a fellowship and youth club which may have taken more than a leaf from the book of its competitors in the Scout and Boys Brigade movements.⁵⁹

Though the Sunday school found itself with problems, it survived beyond the 1920's and produced a whole generation of Secularists who were brought up not simply as Atheists but as Secularists and Rationalists. Such people were rare in the national movement, as conversion was the usual method of gaining new adherents. Conversations with Jim Cartwright, an aged member who graduated from the school as it was in F. J. Gould's time, give a glimpse of what a wholly Secular and Ethical education was like and how it could have affected the wider Society. Mr. Cartwright throughout his 92 years had never been introduced to the concept of God, nor could he see any truth or value in such a belief. Moreover he rejected the idea that there was any connection between God and morality, asserting that morality was completely independent and within the power of man to understand as well as to act upon that understanding.

The Leicester Secular Society and Adult Education.

Formalised classes within the Leicester Secular Society were surprisingly not seen as a priority. This may have been for several reasons. Most obviously such initiatives may have been forced to take a backseat in the struggle for resources, both financial and personal. However, there may not have been such a great demand within the Society for formalised classes and quite often they appear to have been initiated by individuals only to founder due to lack of support. This may have had more than a little to do with the attitude that members of the Leicester Secular Society adopted to the nature and acquisition of knowledge.

The very experience of creating an independent Secular Society in 1852 had emerged from a dislike of formal interference in what had effectively become their own discussion class in the Unitarian Domestic Mission. For

many the Leicester Secular Society had become a way of preserving both what they perceived to be an artisan lifestyle and an artisan attitude to knowledge. Within the Leicester Secular Society the autodidact reigned supreme so that knowledge and its assimilation was an essentially individual and, often, private matter. It is a paradox that the survival of autodidactic attitudes within the Secular Society meant that a well stocked and well patronised library actively worked against the success of formally planned classes, though to the Society itself such a state of affairs probably made perfect sense!

In contrast to the Leicester Secular Society, the Leicester Mechanics Institute had stood and fallen on a platform of education for the artisan class which had been superseded by other institutions such as David Vaughan's Working Men's College. Before its ultimate demise it had ceased to produce a programme of formal classes and its educational arm was represented, as in the Secular Society, by its extensive library.⁶⁰ Though formal educational initiatives were the preserve of individuals within both institutions, the Secular Society was dealing with a more captive audience and, unlike the Mechanics Institute, did not therefore stand or fall by the success or failure of them.

Despite the efforts made by other individuals to extend the scope of education within the Leicester Secular Society often met with only a lukewarm reception. In 1882 Michael Wright persuaded the Secular Society to stage a lecture by Henry Major to promote 'Technical Education' with a view to establishing classes for instruction in certain subjects within the Hall. Though the Society initially appeared to be enthusiastic, having 5,000 hand bills printed and distributed, nothing ever came of the proposal.⁶¹ Provision for adult education is noticeably missing from the Annual Reports of the late 1880's and early 1890's and when it reappears as an issue it is

once again inspired by the action of an individual. Soon after his appointment as Organiser, Joseph McCabe proposed to start a series of classes of 'general educational value' which emphasised developments in the sciences of Psychology and Astronomy alongside more traditional subjects such as Ethics, shorthand and Political Economy.⁶² These classes were designed to be advertised as much in the town as within the Society itself. If the Leicester Secular Society had not allowed McCabe the opportunity to provide such classes, they would have been letting his extraordinary talents go to waste. However, in order to make the proposed classes work, it was decided that they should offer something different. The circular which advertised the classes emphasised precisely this and self-consciously tried to create demand. It suggested that the classes were serious in intent yet it skilfully avoided any hint of training and formal organisation so that the classes could appear as much like enlightening entertainment as possible:

There are already admirable educational institutions in the town. It is the aim of the Secular Society to impart, not a technical training, but an elementary acquaintance (to be developed in the course of time) with sciences that are not otherwise available.... In the classes at the Secular Hall, therefore, subjects will be taught which deal directly with human life and thought and modern problems.⁶³

Though the decision to offer this syllabus of courses was very much McCabe's own, the Secular Society could be forgiven for wishing to encourage the new work and new order which the appointment of a full time organiser had promised. However there is no way of telling how successful these classes were and what their presence might have meant to the Society.

There are few traces of them in the Minutes of that late autumn and those that exist are ambiguous as to whether the classes were in fact in operation.⁶⁴ With the departure of Joseph McCabe in March 1899 the possibility of extending adult education was nipped in the bud. Gould was less of a scholar than McCabe and emphatically more of a publicist, and as a result he seems to have paid little attention to the question of adult classes for the Society, though they did continue sporadically. Gould's own lectures to the Society on various subjects may have acted somewhat as a substitute.

This suited the temperament of both Gould and the Leicester Secular Society and suggests that for many, if not all members of the Society, the lecture remained the medium of both education and expression. Some lecturers gave a series on connected subjects; John Robertson for example gave a series of lectures on political figures for the autumn 1891 season.⁶⁵ Likewise, others speakers appear to have been procured to fill a chink in the Society's otherwise rounded intellectual armour, though the fact that the Society was anxious to secure advocates of individualism to speak alongside the Fabian Socialists had as much to do with a concept of 'balancing the syllabus' as with notions of ideology or entertainment value. It is particularly interesting to note that when Joseph McCabe did return to Leicester he gave them his educational ideas not in classes but in the form of an annual series of lectures. Each consisted of approximately four lectures and had such course titles as 'The evolution of Man', 'The Development of Civilisation', 'The Evolution of the Heavens and the Earth' and 'The evolution of mind'. Not only did these reflect the interests that McCabe had demonstrated when he had offered classes to the Society but they were also popular amongst the membership.⁶⁶

For the Leicester Secular Society formal methods of education and their

'artificial' structures had little appeal. Attempts by professionals to organise education in the form of classes, and to display 'control' of knowledge as teachers, were generally failures. Informal education in the guise of lectures allowed for a much greater independence and greater selectivity within a culture that saw the acquisition and testing of knowledge on an intensely personal level as supremely important.

The Leicester Secular Society and Secular Education in Leicester.

One legacy of Gould's years in the Leicester Secular Society was the contribution he had made to the intense educational debate that raged in Leicester in the Edwardian period. When he took the office of organiser to the Secular Society, Gould very quickly made it obvious that he intended to carve a place for himself and Secularism in the life of the town. For Gould power meant power to alter the educational structure of the local community and to institute his own programme of moral education. Thus in October 1900 he intimated to the general committee that he wished to be considered as the Leicester Secular Society's own candidate in the forthcoming School Board election.⁶⁷

Gould campaigned on his platform of moral education, though some mistakenly thought he advocated dispensing with the Bible completely.⁶⁸ Gould himself, in a speech reported by the Midland Free Press, argued that the Biblical teaching in schools imparted doctrines that no thinking person could accept and amounted to sectarian education. He summed up his approach to education by suggesting:

If the Bible was used at all it should be merely as a source of illustration by the teacher, who might or might not leave it

out, just as he cared to, but it should be insisted upon that the teacher taught human kindness, neighbourliness, perseverance in all good things, morality, veracity, sincerity, justice. Illustrate those how they liked, but get the principles implanted in the minds of the scholars, and the rest was in the machinery.⁶⁹

In the event Gould was returned second in the poll with 15,669 votes and with seven Liberals and seven Churchmen on the Board he found himself with the casting vote.⁷⁰ Such a situation was better than he could have reasonably hoped for and provided an opportunity for him to raise his own ideas and the Secular ideas he represented to further prominence. At all times Gould never missed an opportunity to embarrass the Liberal Nonconformists, and one of his first actions was to assist in the election of the Rev. W. A. Hawkins to the Industrial Schools Committee from which the Liberals had sought to exclude him.⁷¹

In the year and a half that was left to the School Board Gould made a deep impression. He successfully argued the case against the policy of the School Board to encourage the pupils of the Desford Industrial School to enlist for service in the Boer war. For Gould the suggestion was anathema and he proposed an alternative that contained echoes of Owen as well as Comte as it substituted spears for ploughshares:

All the able-bodied youths and girls of the nation should undergo at public expense, a practical civic training of say, one a year at least; the lads to do tree-planting, draining, fencing, road making, embankment building, and the like; the young women to practise dairywork, orchard - tending, etc. Riding, cycling,

swimming, rowing, and other sports to be open to both sexes; but neither sex to waste time and energy in shooting; nor would they handle any weapons but spades, axes, ploughs, trowels, oars, and other such things.⁷²

Another incident which Gould turned into a cause célèbre was the suspension of a teacher who had refused to distribute coronation medals. The Board School teacher, who objected to government by monarchy, had previously approached Gould for advice. He replied that there was no legal objection to his being excused such duty and that if he informed his headmaster of his intentions all would be well. Though the teacher, a Mr. G. V. Cook, was excused from the coronation festivities, a separate committee approved the distribution of coronation medals without the Board's knowledge. When Cook objected to his being expected to carry out the latter task his headmaster disagreed with his action, claiming he was being insubordinate. The result was that Cook found himself suspended by the Board. Though it is clear there was a clash of personalities Gould turned the matter into a moral crusade.⁷³ Eventually Cook was quietly reinstated though he had lost approximately £4 salary, which was met by a public subscription.⁷⁴

Gould's greatest triumph however was to persuade the School Board to adopt a system of Ethical and Moral Instruction in the Board schools. He tabled a motion which came up for consideration on 7 October 1901, preceded by a circular outlining his intention which was distributed to all Board members. The motion urged that the current state of what Gould termed 'Moral Instruction' should be examined and a scheme prepared which would make such education 'more systematic' and strengthen the moral element in the school curriculum.⁷⁵

The Board were generally well acquainted with Gould's ideas, which were publicised by his frequent writings in the local press as well as the increasing availability of them in pamphlet form: Gould had already published a 'Plan of Moral Instruction' as well as a 'Children's Book of Moral Lessons' which contained 17 lessons on truthfulness.⁷⁶ His most recent offering had argued for his plan of moral lessons drawn from all areas of life and literature, though it warned against the use of abnormal situations and 'half myth' as examples which carried the danger of implying that 'the most moral situations are to be found in abnormal circumstances.'⁷⁷ Moreover, Gould advocated the question and answer method of Moral Instruction to gauge how far knowledge and Ethical behaviour had been assimilated. This was in contrast to the prevalent method of Biblical Instruction which often consisted merely of the reading of a passage and occasionally its exposition by the teacher.⁷⁸

The motion that Gould put before the Board was rather less far reaching and he effectively set out the margins of the debate. When the meeting convened they discovered that Gould had done the necessary preparatory research. In his perambulations around no less than twenty seven board schools Gould discovered that the standard of teaching was inadequate and lacked any coherence or Ethical content. He was able to show that, though it was no fault of the teachers themselves, the effective result was that religious teaching was considered a chore. Some merely read from the Bible whilst others chose inappropriate lessons or reached dubious conclusions from the lessons taught.⁷⁹ He claimed that Biblical education neglected certain areas and in effect amounted to Sectarian education. Gould even expressed himself in favour of the methods adopted by the Church of England schools as opposed to those prevalent in Board schools. Though not in favour of the sections which covered areas such as

duty to God, Gould was impressed by the sections labelled duty to Man.²⁰ After he had described the shortcomings of the present system Gould suggested that the Board should adopt his own which would provide for a more sympathetic version of social history alongside a form of civic instruction. Pupils should have their civic responsibilities cultivated by frequent trips to examples of improvement such as Gas and Water works, Town Halls, Fire Brigades, and the Infirmary as well as local industry.

'... not with a view to giving scientific and industrial teaching, but with the view of impressing the children with the complex nature of the life of which they form a part and of their duty towards that general life as citizens.'²¹

The Board largely agreed with Gould's assessment of the inadequacy of School Board teaching, though not with his conclusions or the programme he advocated as a replacement. A compromise solution was instituted by the Chairman, Alfred Baines, who proposed that as an amendment Biblical teaching in Schools should remain but the Board should commit itself to investigating the possibility of instituting a course of moral lessons alongside the existing commitment.²² This was transformed into a substantive motion and was passed by the Board with one abstention and one dissident who was, interestingly enough Sydney Gimson's sister Sarah, who sat for the Church Party.²³

For Gould it was a victory of sorts. Though he had persuaded the Board to adopt a system of Moral Education he had not yet expunged the evil of Biblical teaching in schools. The Board's own investigation eventually decided in favour of introducing Moral lessons into the curriculum. At a meeting at Medway Street School, Gould's ally, Henry Major, explained the

course of lessons which would encompass five grades of achievement. The first standard was designed to encourage cleanliness, order, punctuality and industry whilst the second taught truthfulness, kindness and perseverance. Standard three sought to build on the previous ethical lessons and encourage self-respect, self-restraint, obedience, gratitude and practical help to others. In standard four the virtues of temperance, presence of mind and self improvement were emphasised. The final standard taught the right spending of time and money, and warned against the evils of gambling. Possibly to placate Gould and his followers the final standard only 'explained' Patriotism and loyalty, and was guarded about lessons on punishments, government and justice.⁸⁴

By and large Gould could be content with what he had achieved. He could never have carried the whole School Board against the concept of Biblical teaching, though his initiative had at least introduced a distinction between the Biblical and moral education. In his autobiography he contented himself with the fact that the initiative he had started in Leicester was copied by authorities in Devon, Bradford and the West Riding of Yorkshire. His ideas were given national credibility in 1906 when the Education Code suggested that moral instruction should be an integral part of the curriculum in elementary schools.⁸⁵

The Secular Society: Health and Welfare.

Though the Secular Society helped organise the welfare of its members, it differed from other organisations such as the Owenite Friendly Societies in that this was not its primary concern. These other organisations came together to provide for their members material well being.⁸⁶ While the Leicester Secular Society was initially organised for the spiritual and

intellectual welfare of its members, with material initiatives being an ad hoc response to immediate needs as they arose. The Society had always provided a service for those requiring a Secularist presence at funerals, but as the need arose it expanded its help in other areas, not to be outdone by other societies and denominations. Thus in 1887 discussions resulted in the creation of a Sick Club intended to aid those not earning due to illness.⁸⁷ The Club had a weekly subscription of 2d and contributors were entitled to 6/- per week for eight weeks and 3/- per week for a further four weeks with no member to receive more than twelve weeks sick pay in any one year. The scheme was designed to look after temporary illnesses and could not take on as a contributor anyone with a chronic ailment. In the event of the death of any member the Club also had a rule requiring a levy of 6d per member to be paid to the next of kin.⁸⁸ A Secular Benevolent fund was also set up in direct response to cases of individual need after the widow of the former manager of the Secular Club was found to be in reduced circumstances. A collection was made to relieve her distress, and the General committee then established a Benevolent Fund to alleviate such acute examples of poverty in future.⁸⁹

Both these initiatives were in response to the ageing of the Society's members. Those who had first followed Holyoake were by the end of the century, like their mentor, in their eighties whilst those of Sydney Gimson's generation were in their forties. However these developments may also suggest that the membership structure as a whole was ageing, which might also, explain the comparative inactivity of the Sunday School. This trend was arrested with the arrival of Gould who enrolled many younger Ethicists and Positivists and stimulated greater and more youthful enthusiasm.

The Secular Society was also able to find other ways to help its members who were in material need. The Society occasionally offered free or

honorary membership to those for whom such fees were a problem and was equally sympathetic to others in arrears who were known to be in difficulty.³⁰ Visits to sick members were also organised, and the possibility was investigated of obtaining the services of a nurse for those who had difficulty in obtaining proper care. Though a candidate for the post was interviewed no further trace of this initiative can be found.³¹ After the arrival of Gould visits to sick members were part of his brief and he seems to have discharged the task satisfactorily.

Though the Sick Club and the Benevolent Fund were effectively self sustaining they occasionally ran into difficulty. A run on the Sick Club could leave it short of funds and the Benevolent Fund, though it raised money by means of soirées and dances³², could also find itself in trouble. Such a problem hit both funds in January 1905, coincident with a downturn in trade. The vice-president, William Wilber, appealed urgently for members to enrol in the Sick Club and give more help to the Benevolent Fund.³³ Despite these problems the two welfare funds survived. In 1911 the Benevolent Fund gave an assessment of its work and estimated that it had successfully given relief to the sum of £69 during its lifetime.³⁴

The Society, however, did not simply collect for itself. It was always anxious to dispel the suggestion that Secularists were uncharitable and throughout the eighties collected for the local Infirmary on 'Hospital Sunday' at which they heard a lecture from an established friend, William Stanyon. They were also ready to collect for many causes and often emphasised the virtues of charity and justice as they did so. During the height of the last German offensive on the Western Front in 1918, the Society collected money for both the welfare of allied soldiers and for German prisoners of war.³⁵

Though the provision for welfare and education did not always run

smoothly or regularly they were both important in the lives of Leicester Secularists. Both were ultimately points at which 'good works' could begin and, in what was still a comparatively hostile world for Secularists, had an effect on morale that far outweighed their practical benefit. It is to the inspiration behind these 'good works' that we now turn.

Footnotes to Chapter Eight

1: See Edward Royle Radicals, Secularists and Republicans, (1980) page 186.

2: Ibid. page 185.

3: Ibid. page 339.

4: Through the Secular Society nomination books out of town members can be traced to the residential suburbs of Evington (6), Glenfield, Glen Parva, Knighton (4), Oadby (5), Wigston (3), South Wigston (8) and Wigston Magna. In addition to these more localised members a number are evident from the market towns of Kettering (2), Loughborough (2), Lutterworth, Market Harborough, Melton Mowbray and Wellingborough (3). Others are present in the industrial villages of Anstey (2), Blaby (3), Coalville, Countesthorpe (2), Earl Shilton (2), Hinckley, Quorn and Syston (4). A presence in the agricultural villages is indicated by nominations for members from Broughton Astley, Oaks in Charnwood, Markfield, Stoney Staughton and Whetstone.

5: See Ned Newitt Secular and Socialist Sunday Schools in Leicester 1838 - 1930, Dip/Ed. Dissertation in the Philosophy and History of Education, University of Leicester (1972) page 5.

6: Ibid. page 6.

7: New Moral World, 30 July 1836, quoted in Ibid. page 6.

8: See 'Owen as an Educator' in ed. John Butt Robert Owen: Prince of Cotton Spinners, (1971) pages 60 - 62.

9: See Josiah Gimson's speech quoted in Chapter 3.

10: See Royle, Radicals Secularists and Republicans, page 120.

11: L.S.S.M.B., 30 March 1881.

12: L.S.S.M.B., 8 November 1881, The Leicester Reasoner, May 1902 page 2.

13: L.S.S.M.B., 14 November 1881.

14: L.S.S.M.B., 7 March 1882.

- 15: L.S.S.M.B., 4 February 1884.
- 16: See Secular Society Annual Report 1889, 1890, 1891. Appended in 'scrapbook'.
- 17: Secular Society Annual Report for 1892 - 3, page 10.
- 18: Ibid. page 7.
- 19: L.S.S.M.B., 31 January 1894.
- 20: L.S.S.M.B., 29 July 1896.
- 21: L.S.S.M.B., 1 December 1897.
- 22: L.S.S.M.B., 30 March 1898.
- 23: L.S.S.M.B., 13 April 1898.
- 24: See Sydney Ansell Gimson 'Random Recollections of the Leicester Secular Society.' Part I (1932) pages 19 - 20.
- 25: See Chapter 9 for suggestions that there were other Philosophical and practical similarities between Holyoake's Secularism and Comte's Positivism.
- 26: See Gimson 'Random Recollections' page 6.
- 27: F. J. Gould The Life Story of a Humanist, (1923) page 47.
- 28: Ibid. page 51.
- 29: Ibid. page 47.
- 30: Ibid. page 53.
- 31: Ibid. page 65.
- 32: Ibid. pages 66 - 67.
- 33: Ibid. page 68.
- 34: Ibid..
- 35: Ibid. page 69.
- 36: Ibid. page 70.
- 37: Ibid. page 71.
- 38: Ibid. page 78.
- 39: See Royle Radicals, Secularists and Republicans, page 314.

- 40: See L.S.S.M.B., 15 November, 13 December 1899, 18 July, 7 November 1900.
- 41: L.S.S.M.B., 23 May 1900. See also Newitt, Secular and Socialist Sunday Schools pages 13 - 14.
- 42: See for example L.S.S.M.B., 5 December 1900, 19 June 1901, 29 January, 9 April, 7 May, 6 August 1902.
- 43: L.S.S.M.B., 16 January 1901.
- 44: Society Annual Report for 1900, shelved in 'scrapbook', page
- 45: Leicester Reasoner, No. 15 May 1902, page 7.
- 46: Leicester Reasoner, August 1901 page 3.
- 47: Ibid..
- 48: Edition of Leicester Pioneer, (possibly July 1904) in book of Newspaper cuttings 10D 68/9.
- 49: See for example L.S.S.M.B., 10 April 1901, for the exclusion of children from socials, 3 July 1901 for their exclusion from the small committee room. 29 January, 12 February 1902 for case of parent's inadequate supervision of their children brought to the attention of the committee by Gould himself. 23 March 1902 for rule insisting that children sit with their parents during lectures. See also 29 October 1902 for a new set of rules which requested children should not be on the premises after 10 pm and that transgressions of this rule would be reported to the committee.
- 50: Leicester Ethical Guild programme of readings January to March 1903, in 'scrapbook'.
- 51: See Leicester Pioneer, 15 March 1902, 'Boxing at the Mafeking. Two fights and a half.'
- 52: See Leicester Reasoner, No.12 May 1902, page 1.
- 53: Leicester Reasoner, No.17 October 1902, page 4.
- 54: See L.S.S.M.B., 20 April 1904.
- 55: L.S.S.M.B., 6 May 1908, 17 February 1909.

- 56: L.S.S.M.B., 20 August 1912.
- 57: L.S.S.M.B., 12 November 1912.
- 58: See photo album listed in Appendix I.
- 59: See Ibid. for numerous organised camps and outings particularly in the Charnwood Forest area so beloved by Sidney Gimson.
- 60: Craig E. Grewcock 'The Leicester Mechanics Institute in David Williams ed. The Adaptation of Change: essays upon the History of 19th century Leicester and Leicestershire. (Leicester 1980) pages 27 - 28.
- 61: L.S.S.M.B., 28 February, 14 March 1882.
- 62: Circular on the appointment of Joseph McCabe September 1898, appended in 'scrapbook'.
- 63: Circular on evening classes autumn 1898, appended in 'scrapbook'.
- 64: L.S.S.M.B., 2 November 1898 for reference reporting on 'information relating to classes.' This acknowledgement of the wealth of other educational opportunities in Leicester meant that the Society concentrated on providing for its existing membership and did not develop university extension classes like those in Manchester or Northampton. See Royle, Radicals Secularists and Republicans, pages 316 - 320.
- 65: See Lecture list for 1891 in 'scrapbook'.
- 66: See Lecture lists for 1905, 1906, 1907 & 1908 in 'scrapbook'.
- 67: L.S.S.M.B., 10 October, 7 November 1900.
- 68: See Press Cutting 'Mr. F. J. Gould's Candidature' From Leicester Mercury. December 3rd 1900 in volume of Newspaper cuttings 10 D 68/8.
- 69: Press cutting 'Mr. Gould and the Bible' from Midland Free Press, in volume of Newspaper cuttings 10 D 68/8.
- 70: Press cutting from Midland Free Press, December 4th 1900 in volume of Newspaper cuttings 10 D 68/8. See also Gould Life Story of a Humanist, page 94.

- 71: Gould op. cit. page 94.
- 72: Press cutting 'The Garden city dream' from the Leicester Pioneer (undated) in volume of Newspaper cuttings 10 D 68/8.
- 73: Press cutting from the Leicester Pioneer 9 July 1902 in volume of Newspaper cuttings 10 D 68/9.
- 74: See subscription circular in 'scrapbook'.
- 75: F. J. Gould Moral Instruction without Theology: report of a debate on a motion by F. J. Gould at the School Board October 1901. (Leicester 1902?) page 7.
- 76: See F. J. Gould A plan for Moral Instruction. published by the Moral Instruction League 1897 and The Children's Book of Moral Lessons (1899).
- 77: F. J. Gould Children's Ethical Classes. published by the Moral Instruction League (1901) page 10.
- 78: Ibid. pages 10 - 11.
- 79: Gould, Moral Instruction without Theology. pages 9 - 13.
- 80: Ibid. page 14.
- 81: Ibid. page 15.
- 82: Ibid. page 16.
- 83: Ibid. page 23.
- 84: Press cutting 'Ethical Instruction in Leicester Schools' from the Midland Free Press (March 1902?) in volume of Newspaper cuttings 10 D 68/9.
- 85: Gould, Life Story of a Humanist. page 95.
- 86: I owe thanks for information on this point to Simon Cordery and Robert Colls.
- 87: L.S.S.M.B., 15 February 1887.
- 88: Secular Society Sick Club Rules April 1890, in 'scrapbook'.
- 89: L.S.S.M.B., 25 May, 27 July 1892.
- 90: L.S.S.M.B., 20 October 1897, 8 February 1899, 23 March 1904.

91: L.S.S.M.B., 18 November 1896, 19 April, 20 September 1899.

92: See for example L.S.S.M.B., 4 October 1899, 7 November 1900.

93: L.S.S.M.B., 11 January 1905.

94: L.S.S.M.B., 31 June 1911.

95: L.S.S.M.B., 21 July 1918.

CHAPTER NINE

APPROACHES TO LIFE, DUTY AND KNOWLEDGE: THE IDEAS AND IDEOLOGIES OF THE LEICESTER SECULAR SOCIETY.

With the comparative stability engendered by over fifty years of earnest financial and practical support, the Leicester Secular Society became the centre of the ideological aspirations of at least two generations of members. The creation of Secularism in the early 1850's was an attempt on the part of George Jacob Holyoake to provide an alternative method of campaigning to that of the mass platform which had so manifestly failed with Chartism. Holyoake preferred the tactic of respectable lobbying, based on the success of the Anti-Corn Law League.¹ Holyoake himself codified his ideas in his extensive writings on the principles of organisation, typified by his The Organisation of Freethinkers, published by James Watson in 1852.²

From the start the Leicester Secular Society came to embody many of the ideas and characteristics of Holyoake's system and, perhaps unwittingly, not a little of his personality. His obsession with organisation and independence found fertile soil in the early membership and preoccupations of the Society. Through George Jacob Holyoake the Leicester Secular Society defined its posture as primarily defensive and its organisation reflected this, purpose built Hall came to replace mission room and lecture gradually replaced speech and disputation. All this was part of a process that effectively sought to remove disdain and ridicule from the armouries of Secularism's opponents. Whilst popular images of the Secularist as a blaspheming, immoral 'Infidel' persisted, Holyoake and his allies argued that progress would always be limited.

Holyoake's system was without doubt attractive to an organisation that

was still finding its way in the disordered world of provincial radicalism in the eighteen fifties. It offered a quieter approach that eschewed the dangers of confrontation and offered the prospect of achievement through credibility and respectability. Moreover this was not portrayed as a retreat since Holyoake's conception of the truth of the Christian religion was subtle. It took an agnostic stance which neither avowed nor denied the truth of Christianity, but placed its exclusive emphasis on this life as the only one of which one could be attained.

Without doubt the major contribution of Holyoake to Leicester Secularism was the assertion that disputing biblical truth was neither necessary nor desirable. Such a position made relations with elements of Christianity within Leicester considerably easier and a place for Secularism within the religious community more likely. It also meant that whilst Christianity could be persuaded to leave Secularism alone any Secularist skirmishing action could be on the Secularists own terms. The most illuminating example of this was the placing of the bust of Jesus outside the Secular Hall, resulting in a press campaign that the Leicester Secular Society was able to manage distinctly to its own advantage.³

The abandonment of the principle of open disputation, and the emphasis on the importance of this life opened new areas of exploration. Holyoake himself had always argued that reason was the ultimate test of truth and validity for any opinion. This approach represented a blend of the utilitarian ideas of John Stuart Mill and a residual search for an explanation and 'science of society' which Owen himself would have recognised. The Leicester Secular Society successfully managed to institutionalise this approach in the form of an open platform that allowed the expression of all opinions, provided discussion of them was permitted afterwards. In his writings, and in his speech at the opening of the Hall,

Holyoake argued explicitly that 'fair and open discussion of opinion is the highest guarantee of public truth'.⁴

The keyword behind this change of emphasis was 'respect'. The end of disputation meant that doubts and opposition to religion became a more personal element of Secularism. No longer did unbelief necessarily involve forms of public iconoclasm, Religious forms and institutions henceforth deserved respect for the material and spiritual wellbeing they generated. Secularists could thereafter merely criticise the quality of such institutions. The Secular Hall and the life that was generated within it was itself testimony to their respect for the ideal of congregational life that many of the other religious organisations proclaimed. At the opening of the Hall itself Josiah Gimson admitted as much and hoped that Secular activity itself was embarking on a new phase of development.⁵

Respect, however, had another dimension. The establishment of an open platform showed the ultimate in respect for the notion of free speech itself. This was a classic piece of Millite Liberalism in which the very desire to establish free speech inevitably involved the concept of respect for the individual. It was effectively a blueprint for the Society.:

This then, is the appropriate region of human liberty. It comprises first, the inward domain of consciousness; demanding liberty of conscience in the most comprehensive sense; liberty of thought and feeling; absolute freedom of opinion and sentiment on all subjects, practical, speculative, moral or theological.⁶

It also acknowledged that the expression of opinions demanded responsibility as well as gave rewards:

The liberty of expressing and publishing opinions may seem to fall under a different principle, since it belongs to that part of the conduct of an individual which concerns other people; but, being almost of as much importance as the liberty of thought itself, and resting in great part on the same reasons, is practically inseparable from it. Secondly the principle requires liberty of tastes and pursuits; of framing the plan of our life to suit our own character; of doing as we like subject to such consequences as may follow: without impediment from our fellow-creatures, so long as what we do does not harm them, even though they should think our conduct foolish, perverse, or wrong. Thirdly, from this liberty of each individual, follows the liberty, within the same limits, of combination among individuals; freedom to unite, for any purpose not involving harm to others: the persons combining being supposed to be of full age, and not forced or deceived.⁷

In this sense Mill's writings were in fact a blueprint for mid-Victorian pressure groups like the Leicester Secular Society. The pursuit of liberty required the machinery to safeguard it. Thus individual freedom meant nothing without both collective protection and a collective arena in which to 'practise' freedom of opinion. For the Leicester Secular Society the adoption of a completely free platform after Mill's model went hand in hand with the retreat from disputation. Once all opinions could be treated with the same respect and be subjected to the same scrutiny, that which was mistaken or incomplete would be exposed as error. No longer would reason battle fruitlessly with mysticism.

With the creation of respect for the opinion of individuals came more room for diversity of opinion within the Society. Liberty of opinion often became the central issue in some areas of the Society's activities. The Society was the only place that both the Independent Labour Party and the Union of Democratic Control could obtain premises for meetings and committee rooms.⁹ The Leicester Secular Society even risked damage to the Hall during the Boer War when, against police advice, it hosted lectures opposing the British war effort. The Society and their speaker, Emily Hobhouse, found that in this instance Liberal principles needed to be defended by upwards of forty constables.⁹ Sydney Gimson himself even risked his personal safety to offer shelter to an opponent of the war, Cronwright Shreiner, who had spoken in Leicester before and whose appearance had then caused some considerable disorder - after the lecture a mob followed him to a nearby café breaking windows and destroying furniture. When Shreiner was to appear again in Leicester, Gimson was asked to accommodate Shreiner at his house. He agreed but made sure that his wife and children were staying elsewhere during the period. In the event Shreiner was ill and unable to come but Gimson was relieved he had not held back from doing his duty to maintain free speech.¹⁰

In many ways this concerted policy of openness mirrored the character of George Jacob Holyoake himself. Holyoake was an idiosyncratic and independent thinker who seldom refused the challenge of exploring new philosophical standpoints. Like the Society, he was willing to listen to virtually all viewpoints but ultimately, like the Leicester Secular Society, was convinced that he must still make up his own mind. Holyoake however could also be sulky and the attitude of the Leicester Secular Society, particularly to the national organisation and local branches of the National Secular Society, indicate that it had a similar tendency.¹¹ One further characteristic that the Leicester Secular Society shared with Holyoake was the capacity to be

impressed, sometimes over impressed, by the overtures of the famous and the opportunities for maintaining the resulting contacts. Holyoake himself possessed an autodidactic artisanal craving for recognition within the realms of the higher culture to which periodic bouts of despair made him aspire. Edward Royle describes him as:

... pedantic and pretentious, a snob who readily criticised his equals and eagerly sought to please his betters. Particularly when under pressure, he was all too ready to seek the company of men of a higher social rank than himself, whom he thought of as being of his own intellectual level and would therefore appreciate him.¹²

Even from the perspective of the Leicester Secular Society, which was devoted to Holyoake, this aspect of his character was plainly visible. Sydney Gimson's own verdict was generally favourable, though he criticised what he saw as the man's great inherent flaw:

Though I well liked and greatly admired Mr. Holyoake and saw his great ability, I could not always agree with him, and I felt that he was somewhat inclined to rejoice too soon at friendly approaches of the Great ones of the Earth and to see breadth of mind where I could see only condescension or calculation.¹³

Nevertheless the Leicester Secular Society itself also displayed a marked taste for its brushes with the famous. The Society took every opportunity to celebrate the career of the Secularists poet laureate James Thompson (B.V.) whose poem, written for the Hall's opening, was frequently repeated. Similarly

a letter from T. H. Huxley, which enclosed a contribution towards the Society's special fund, provided evidence of Huxley's 'full sympathy with the object of the Society'. This was praise indeed from one of the foremost thinkers in contemporary Liberal circles and the Society duly recognised the honour by having the letter framed and mounted in the Hall. The letter itself was deemed to be of such significance that F. J. Gould included a facsimile of it in the 1900 *History of the Society*.¹⁴

In the course of the lecture programme of the Society, opportunities to establish a local connection with important radical thinkers were never missed. In 1901 Arthur Fallows' lecture on William Morris contained not only material on his work and ideas but also a rehearsal of several anecdotes about his stay in Leicester which by that stage must have been, at the very least, familiar pieces of the Society's folklore.¹⁵

This 'commitment by association and patronage' also found its way into the personal lives of members of the Society. Sydney Gimson always valued some of the individual friendships he made in the course of his association with the Society.

When he built Stoneywell, his retreat in Charnwood Forest, he immediately introduced a visitors book for all to sign. A glance through this book turns up a variety of names from the worlds of politics, freethought and philosophy and it emerges very much as a 'collection' of the great and famous.¹⁶

Tom Barclay was similarly enthusiastic about his brushes with the famous. His autobiography contains details about meetings with his heroes William Morris and Edward Carpenter as well as his obsession with the writings and personality of George Bernard Shaw, whom he claimed to have 'discovered' before either Harry Snell or G. K. Chesterton. He saw the works of Shaw as 'a godsend to the intellectual proletaire' since they were both

erudite and concise. Shaw was also praised by Barclay for his utilitarian view of the theatre which echoed the rôle Secularists cast for it. In its new form it was to be:

A factory of thought, a prompter of conscience, an elucidator of social conduct, an armoury against despair, a temple of the ascent of man.¹⁷

Even Barclay's own photographic album appears to be celebration of the famous, consisting largely of portraits of himself and Shaw in various locations. During his lifetime he went so far as to 'rename' his friends after their own favourite author; thus Charley Crisp became Thomas Hardy, Fred Hollis became John Robertson, Jack Jennet became H. G. Wells and George Kelly became Samuel Butler. The exercise was conducted of course so that Barclay himself could be named Bernard Shaw!¹⁸

Though some of this may come across as daydreaming or even the worst kind of sycophancy, such a judgement is deeply unfair. In the absence of a hierarchy and iconography based on the next world the Leicester Secular Society found itself developing one based on the achievements of humanity in this. The valued work and character of individuals came to represent all that was worthy of praise and respect in humanity. This meant an approach to the problems of the world which saw individuals as more important and flexible than ideologies. This was also a method of distancing the local community from problems that manifested themselves on the national stage. The Leicester Secular Society must have developed this attitude partly in response to the antics of the national leadership of Secularism who frequently squandered victories and commitment on petty individual squabbles. The divisiveness of the national movement must have been keenly felt

particularly when their valued friends Holyoake, Watts and F. J. Gould were victims. This emphasis on local initiative and individual feeling was fundamental to the Society's conception of freedom. It is only in this way that the historian can explain incidents such as that when Sydney Gimson, a life-long individualist voted for Ramsay Macdonald on the basis of personal attachment.

A respect for personality and achievement also manifested itself in a form of democratic outlook to which the Secularists gave the rough and ready title of 'one man's as good as anotherism'. This meant a sort of equality of opportunity which offered the would-be adherent the chance of self development and realisation within a protective and conducive environment. Within the Hall the meanest was equal with the greatest through the medium of mutual respect for individual capability and achievement. However, in terms of organising and running the Society, such a principle could prove hard to follow since Sydney Gimson found himself almost permanently president of the Society. This paradox was keenly noted by the Freethinker which suggested with characteristic irony:

Josiah Gimson's *youngest* son was selected by fate, fortune, providence, or whatever it is, to maintain the family's intimate connection with Secularism. Perhaps there is a subtle bit of heredity in this fact.... so much for abstract Democracy and one-man's-as-good-as-another-ism. The truth is that one man *isn't* as good as another, and it is no use pretending he is. People recognise this clearly enough outside politics. When it is a question of real and durable principle, or of obvious self-interest - the two extremes of life-reality - they recognise their leader and stick to him, and find a way of making him

stick to them.¹⁹

The twin beliefs of respect for the individual coupled with a progressive attitude to intellectual and social betterment became fused in an ideology of respectability. This was used both as a yardstick with which to regulate individual behaviour and Society policy, and as a model of status to be aspired to.

Respectability was something of an obsession with the Leicester Secular Society, though with good reason. Secularists throughout the period had a number of dangerous and unhelpful ghosts to lay. The traditional image of the drunken libertine infidel was still alive in the public and clerical mind. Such attitudes were further fed by Bradlaugh's advocacy of neo-malthusianism which was seen as promoting sexual licence. The accusation itself also had more credibility when the episode of the so-called 'Leeds Orgies' was brought to mind. This was an unfortunate incident in which the hall belonging to the Leeds branch of the N.S.S. was let for a dance at which the police discovered the illegal sale of beer, semi-nude dancing and male tranvestitism. The incident tarnished the good name of Secularists who were seen to be guilty by association.²⁰

Like their mentor, G. J. Holyoake, the Society, and particularly its older members, found the ideas of neo-malthusianism both crude and distasteful. Moreover its mechanistic analysis of the causes of poverty and the principles of population growth and limitation argued against that Owenite socialism to which Secularists of Holyoake's generation were accustomed. Avoidance of the issue at a local level was deemed to be politic. Any evidence of sexual impropriety was severely dealt with within the Society. In order to prevent the Leeds situation arising, those who hired the Hall were vetted and on occasions the Society refused to let when they considered the

potential client to be an unacceptable liability.²¹ Several members were requested to resign or were expelled from the Society with little mention of the reason in the Minutes. Individuals were asked to leave and appear to have been victims of rumours about their honesty or their moral standing. However the joint dismissal of a man and a woman in dark circumstances suggests the existence of strong opposition to extra-marital relationships.²² When Oswald Dawson of the Legitimation League, an organisation campaigning on behalf of the rights of illegitimate children, wrote asking to speak his request was refused. Dawson was seeking a platform on which to attack the leadership of the Secularist movement, particularly G. W. Foote, which had been alienated by the progressively extreme and permissive stance taken by the League.²³ He was refused permission by the Society because his presence would bring moral condemnation from the local community and because he wished to use the platform to make an abusive personal attack was further proof of his distance from the ideals, conventions and morals of the Leicester Secular Society.²⁴

The attitudes of the Secularists to the drink question were also governed by respectability, but they were riddled with ambiguity. Though there was a strong lobby against all alcohol, the Society nonetheless had to accept the existence of alcohol within the environs of the Secular Club, at least until the advent of Gould. The club and its alcohol provision belonged to an older form of Secularism which had still to be respected alongside newer developments. Moreover total prohibition was a tactic and an idiom generally associated with the Nonconformist temperance movement which was strong in Leicester. Whilst several members supported greater restriction on the provision of alcohol in the club, they fought shy of prohibition. Characteristically Society placed its emphasis on the rôle of individual conscience and respect for libertarian sensibilities. Whilst abstention was

'suggested' to the older members and encouraged amongst the Sunday School children, no attempt was made at outright compulsion until after Gould's arrival.²⁵ Even Gould himself did not advocate outright prohibition in society at large, but made good use of what he perceived to be the inadequacy of the nonconformist temperance attitude to drink. To Gould and the Secular Society the sight of temperance advocates crowing about conversion was utterly repulsive:

To what new life is the reformed drunkard introduced? He may figure as a prig who points, with vanity, to his record of misdoings and his "subsequent "salvation". such a spectacle is truly disgusting. One cannot conceive of a gentleman... offering his past sins for the inspection of the public at street-corners, or at mission-meetings, or even for the inspection of a circle of private friends.²⁶

Gould saw drink as a consequence of wider evils and not an evil in itself:

For my own part, I do not see any inherent sin in drink-selling. Drunkenness, in a civilised country, is a very complex product and has very complex roots. alcoholic drink meets a social demand, and, for the evils which it brings about, I censure society at large, and not the tradesmen....²⁷

He also had the perfect answer for the nonconformist minister who asked to see Secularism's reformed drunkard by explaining how Secularism's principle of freedom and enlightenment could combat the wayward tendencies of individuals:

With this moral discipline, we associate intellectual energy. We seek to exercise the critical sense, and establish the scientific habit which accustoms a man to look before and after, to gauge the consequences of his acts, to check his personal desires by his humane sympathies and his social obligations. Such being our principle with respect to individual education, we add the force of political methods.²⁸

Gould however went further and stripped away what he saw to be the Nonconformist moral humbug that kept the real issues of the drink debate safely hidden from view:

Our vision passes beyond the bar and the glasses of the saloon. We see beyond into the evils of a selfish capitalism, insanitary and inadequate housing, the perpetual drudgery of women, the starved minds of children (and often enough starved bodies), and a barbaric militarism which takes from the proletariat both bread and blood. By criticism, by political agitation, by attacks on the general conscience, we endeavour to arouse the public soul into shame for these deep causes of physical and moral morbidity.²⁹

Here was an unavoidable tension for any Secularist, but particularly for Gould. His convictions told him that alcohol was anathema and was not conducive to the promotion of Secularism, yet he had of necessity to argue against nonconformist temperance advocates in order to prevent the chapel having all the best tunes. Any serious attempt at alcohol prohibition within

the Leicester Secular Society itself was a potential minefield through which Gould had skilfully to navigate a course. Questions of liberty of the individual and traditions of Secular lifestyle as protest were bound to be aired in the face of opposition to the club provision of alcohol. Thus for a time Gould had to endure the cheerful consumption of beer and spirits a matter of yards away from where he pressed strongly for prohibition. It is interesting that when he finally got his way he had to do it through a convoluted democratic process in which he was the victor by a narrow margin. Moreover the leading argument that Gould used to carry the day was a variation on the theme of lifestyle as protest. Prohibition of alcohol from the premises of the Leicester Secular Society would effectively make them 'better' than they needed to be and 'better' than the wider community.

Respectability, however, had another dimension for Secularists. In order to maintain their credibility as opponents of religion they had often to indulge in particular forms of publicity and action endorsed by the national movement. This was occasionally in conflict with their own conception of the respect they had cultivated in the town. Thus it often seemed as though months and years spent confounding orthodox conceptions of disreputable Secularists could be thrown away by a moments reckless, but somehow necessary, action. This was amply demonstrated by an incident in 1884 when the Secular Society bookstall was selling the Christmas number of the Freethinker for which G. W. Foote was currently undergoing prosecution. The very public face of the Freethinker was its inclusion of cartoons which were generally profane depictions of biblical scenes. These shocked both clerical opinion and some sections of the Freethought movement. Malcolm Quin, who by this stage had moved to Newcastle and was converted to Positivism, ceased writing for Foote as a result of these cartoons. For him the whole tone of Foote's propaganda had lost its respectable literary image, compounded by the

arrival of the cartoons in the Freethinker:

But soon he added cartoons to the arguments; and these cartoons - some of which were comic representations of Christ working miracles - seemed to me so flagrant an offence against ordinary human charity and the reasonable susceptibilities of good men that I wrote my remonstrances to Foote.³⁰

When the strong feelings stirred up by the Freethinker were coupled with the impending prosecution of its editor, Sydney Gimson considered it wise for the Leicester Secular Society to cease offering the paper. The motion that 'This Committee prohibit Mr. Holyoak from selling any more copies of the Christmas number of the Freethinker' was eagerly seconded by Holyoak himself.³¹ This was hardly surprising since the lesson of the Knowlton pamphlet trial had been that booksellers themselves were at least in danger of losing their stock to the authorities. However the meeting was not well attended and an amendment adjourned discussion until the whole of the committee could consider the proposal. After some discussion Sydney Gimson was forced to withdraw his motion and Holyoak had no option but to continue to sell the Freethinker.³²

However this flouting of respectability did not always present the Leicester Secular Society with such a problem. The 1885 decision to play cricket on a Sunday was really an attempt by the Secular Society to goad and discredit other religious elements in the town. When the inevitable verbal and physical attacks on the Secularists came it was these religious sensibilities which were made to seem illiberal and intolerant in the face of a moral victory for the Secular Society and its cricketers.

F. J. Gould himself emphasised this respectability by going to great

lengths to act the opposite. He turned imposture and disguise into a highly ritualised game which he would gleefully report on afterwards. He would seek a likely target such as Prize fighting, passive resistance or the unsympathetic attitude of townspeople to the poor and set it up for his developed form of deceit. When attending a prize fight he even dressed for the part, and must have appeared comical as he self-consciously slouched in a heavy overcoat and attempted to puff on a large cigar 'so as not to seem too respectable'.³³ These things were to Gould the obvious trappings of debasement! On gaining entrance to the scene of iniquity Gould would delight at his success in blending in playing tricks on those he met. One wonders quite what reception Gould actually expected on one occasion when he asked a policeman at the Leicester Races where he could place a bet. When he was shown the direction he claims to have been astonished that the law of the land was encouraging him to gamble.³⁴ On leaving the scene of his discoveries the identity of respectable Secularist and social commentator would be resumed as Gould anxiously turned the event into copy for the Leicester Reasoner or the Pioneer.³⁵ The resultant article would gleefully report his mischief, though towards the close the inevitable homily had the effect of ending the imposture and of re-enforcing Secularist conceptions of their own morality and respectability and the debased and degrading nature of society as it currently existed.

Respectability and its dimensions were attributes of the Leicester Secular Society that could prove highly attractive to the would-be member. A respect for achievement, manners and personality, coupled with the chance for an improvement in social standing, was an ideology that had a particular appeal to working men of a self-educating disposition. In an age and city in which de-skilling was rapidly becoming a fact of life, the offer of a status beyond occupational and economic realities was attractive to the unskilled

and, increasingly threatened, skilled worker. It acted as a form of status validation for threatened groups and subliminally deputised for other religious organisations that provided similar opportunities.

However the broad platform and tolerant disposition endemic in Leicester Secularism meant its appeal reached a good deal wider than this. Susan Budd has attempted to explore the nature of conversion to Secularism in order to discern patterns in the social position and psychological makeup of converts.³⁶ She produces an array of evidence to show the effect of a number of diverse factors affecting the predisposition of individuals to become Secularists. Blocked upward social mobility, the detachment from familial ties, the rejection of individual Christian doctrines, the attitude of religion to politics and the specific effects of individual books are all cited as having been of crucial importance in this process. She also suggests that converts to Secularism, as the nineteenth century wore on, were more likely to come from extreme forms of Nonconformity and Catholicism. Biographical evidence from the Leicester Secular Society confirms the multifaceted nature of conversion experiences. Sydney Gimson was gradually convinced of the truth of the Secularist position held by his father and cited a simple tale by George Macdonald as an influence on his final conversion. Tom Barclay's conversion came after he had walked several miles to a different confessor in search of absolution for sins which he linked to guilt about his own adolescence and sexuality. F. J. Gould after, travelling to London, was converted to Positivism by hearing Frederick Harrison speak. Malcolm Quin was similarly converted.³⁷ However, what is interesting is the diversity of religious background of these four which tends to qualify Dr. Budd's conclusions. Gimson was a second generation product of genteel Unitarianism which itself had sprung from Baptism. Barclay was a classic example of a Catholic from an Irish immigrant family whose weakened familial

ties and intellectual development no longer had room for the faith of his fathers. Gould and Quin were both converts from Anglicanism. Gould had experienced an evangelical upbringing at Chenies rectory in Rickmansworth under Lord Wriothoesley Russell and had sung in the choir at Windsor chapel. Malcolm Quin had been brought up in a more broad church atmosphere which he admitted had sharpened him into a high churchman. Quin could scarcely remember actual details of conversion, which suggests that it was a gradual process. By the end of it he emerged a Positivist, retaining a distinct high church taste for vestments and bells which awoke in him feelings which he was 'not in the least sorry to possess.'³⁰ As a result of these two very different conversions both Gould and Quin took their Positivism in distinct directions. Gould's latent evangelism drove him to proselytise and persuade, whilst Quin paid meticulous attention to formulating an order of service and creating a Church of Humanity.

What this suggests is that the Leicester Secular Society with its open platform and its retreat from dogmatic confrontation offered a potentially safe and secure haven for atheists, Positivists and agnostic seekers from a range of backgrounds. Much of this must have been encouraged by an ideology of respect and respectability which enabled all to progress intellectually and spiritually in a cradle of mutual self help.

The National Secular Society found this relaxed attitude hard to accept. In the Freethinker the Leicester Secular Society was criticised both for the respectable nature of its audiences and the comparative absence of Secularist topics from its platform.³¹ Sydney Gimson replied that the Leicester way had kept a consistent and favourable Secularist presence in the mind of the town's inhabitants and argued that diverse subjects offered a necessary variety:

We like to put God and the Bible in the background sometimes, and show that we are independent enough to do a little Secular work without their help.⁴⁰

For Foote's Erethinker it was easy to look at the Leicester Secular Society's lecture programme as a simple and unthinking eclecticism which could border on fadism. Such impressions are easily conveyed by many of those writers involved in the Society. In the writings of F. J. Gould, Sydney Gimson, Tom Barclay - and even some of the historians who have touched on the work of the Society - the lecture programme appears to be an enormous, unrelenting list. Gould, Gimson and Barclay each mention their own favourite personality, Spiller, Robertson and Shaw respectively, followed by an exhaustive catalogue of the other lecturers they vaguely recalled as having spoken to the Society.⁴¹ The whole notion of providing a consistently varied lecture programme aimed to satisfy the demand for variety, hitherto generally found in the realm of leisure initiatives. The Millite ideology of the Leicester Secular Society had indeed argued explicitly for this freedom and variety.

The net result was an apparently continuous stream of lectures stretching onwards into months and years without a break. Some ideas came and went with their own individual lecturer whilst others were restated and occasionally were brought back to the society in another guise. It is tempting to conclude that such a situation must have created the extreme form of eclectic fadism, noticed by the Erethinker, whereby a member may have been convinced by a rousing Individualist one week, only to find his or herself converted to the revealed truth of Fabian Socialism the next.

However the pressure to view this phenomenon as a simple fadism is stimulated largely by a late twentieth century attitude to education and

knowledge which searches earnestly for comprehension and coherence in the mind of the individual. In situations in which the learning experience is not governed by orthodox ground rules originating from school and university, the search for coherence can be both fruitless and unproductive. In this respect the Leicester Secular Society developed a régime in which the minimum of ground rules left the maximum room for individual development. The maintenance of a free platform was a basic tenet of the Society but it was supplemented by an assertion that free and open discussion should be allowed after each and every lecture. This served as an open-ended, and continually updated university syllabus, which gave its students an opportunity to contribute the fruits of their own knowledge in a highly critical way. Quite often the aim of these contributions was to humble the speaker and his or her ideas. This ambivalent attitude to institutionalised knowledge and education was further evidenced by a distrust of formalised educational structures. Gould's assertion that nobody possessed a university degree is probably correct, though it is also obvious that such an attainment would also have been concealed.⁴² Likewise attempts to gain access to the formal structures of education were also absent. The only educational organisation that appears to have had an enthusiastic response from the Leicester Secular Society was the Worker's Educational Association. This attitude avoided some of the problems which beset the Mechanics Institute when it sought access to formal education. Its flirtation with the examination system of the London Society of Arts and Manufactures was both unsuccessful and ignominiously brief.⁴³

These characteristics - an eclectic platform, a distrust of formal education and a forum in which the questioning of lecturers was institutionalised - points to the existence of what Logie Barrow has described as a 'democratic epistemology'. In his book on spiritualism Barrow

has identified an attitude, amongst those whom he chooses to call 'plebeians', which was instrumental in the creation of an alternative place for knowledge. In Barrow's book the sheer incoherence and irrelevance of spiritualism to twentieth century readers hides its vital relevance to its own adherents.⁴⁴ It was a creation which both avoided and scorned the apparent consistencies of orthodox scientific and philosophical method. Barrow identifies the existence of an elite culture - or, in his terms, epistemology - which members of the spiritualist movement found it necessary to oppose. Its opposition centred upon its desire to show the revealed truth of its own philosophy which it earnestly tried to centre upon the sure footing of empiricism. Its ability to do so is only judged as failure by the condescension of posterity:

Nowadays when an epistemology is democratic it is usually seen as eccentric, and we are encouraged to examine its social context.... but when it is elitist, it is often so taken for granted that any discussion of its sociopolitical roots is in danger of being taken as eccentric too: the complexities of modern knowledge are often seen as so overwhelming as to make such discussion irrelevant, and their institutional form is often talked of as if engendered directly by the knowledge itself.⁴⁵

The essence of Barrow's argument is that 'the lower orders' were able to construct a system which held a challenge to orthodox conceptions of knowledge as its primary function. The order they replaced it with was emphatically self regulating and does not respond well to the efforts of twentieth century historians who tirelessly look for coherence. It was, according to Barrow 'a definition of knowledge as open to anybody'.⁴⁶ The

idea of a democratic approach to knowledge was an intrinsic part of the ideology of the Leicester Secular Society. It was a self evident truth which cut across the whole spectrum of class and background since all were apparently equal in the quest for knowledge.

Barrow's work has also shown that spiritualism itself had strong roots in Owenism and that it was a natural growth from that ideology. It also indicates that in certain areas both spiritualism and Secularism shared common roots and in certain instances were in competition for the same space and personnel. In this light it is possible to see the Leicester Secular Society as providing evidence of another 'democratic epistemology'. The Society was dedicated to the idea that the individual, rather than the institution was the unit of political or religious consciousness. In this sense it was a restatement of what religious radicals had asserted during the seventeenth century and for many years after; that religion was the prerogative and calling of the individual. The mechanic tradition was in fact alive and well and flourishing in Victorian Leicester!

Barrow's own definition of a 'democratic epistemology' needs elaborating. Despite some of his musings on the failure of twentieth century epistemologies his analysis focuses on the purely religious.⁴⁷ But, within the Leicester Secular Society knowledge itself possessed the same power for the liberation of the economically and socially dependent. Moreover the nature of that knowledge, its source and the process of its acquisition did not follow any uniform pattern. Barrow asserts that plebeian 'democratic epistemologies' exist largely in opposition to established elite culture. His analysis leaves no room for the possibility of cross fertilisation between the two.

When we discover that Sydney Gimson was a life long individualist yet was persuaded to vote for Ramsay Macdonald the Socialist we are faced with

an apparent contradiction. Though this could be explained by purely personal factors, the apparent ambiguity in Sydney Gimson's own thought which allowed him to count William Morris and Auberon Herbert as the two primary influences on his life, also needs further explanation.

If we can view the ideology of the Leicester Secular Society as arguing for free and democratic access to knowledge then we can move towards an answer. If individuals are capable of making choices about the acquisition of knowledge then it also follows that they are capable of deciding what forms of knowledge to acquire, how to express it, and even what constitutes knowledge. The total result could be a new philosophy and even cosmology tailored to the needs of the individual consciousness. Carlo Ginzburg discovered a startling example of this phenomenon in sixteenth century Italy. In the archives of the Inquisition he came across a defendant, Domenico Scandella, whose cosmology suggested that the earth was a large cheese having its origins in putrefaction. Though Scandella's conception of the world defies the intrusions of modern enquiry it stands on its own as a product of organised and reasoned thought, a process that the humble miller from Friuli had taken for himself! What emerges is that Scandella's universe was the product of the collision of higher culture and the everyday experience of a peasant. Ginzburg is able to trace the books that his protagonist possessed and to show how gleanings from these were juxtaposed with the testament of years of peasant life.⁴⁸ Moreover the confidence that Scandella drew from his labours made him able to dispute with the inquisitor at his trial and to pronounce upon the tyranny of society as he viewed it.⁴⁹

Though this is an extreme example the motivation remains the same. The possession of knowledge meant that all ideas and experiences could be knowledge and were the building bricks of enlightenment. This explains why the Leicester Secular Society retained a passing interest in some of the

pseudo sciences such as mesmerism, vegetarianism, dream interpretation, spiritualism and phrenology. Though they were at least in part components of the discredited 'democratic epistemology' of Owenism, they remained curiosities for individual exploration in the enduring, but by now half hearted search for a science of society.⁵⁰

Alongside these unorthodox elements from which philosophies could be built were more recognisably elite concepts formulated and reinforced by the dominant culture. These included ideas such as evolution, biblical criticism and the twin ideologies of Socialism and Individualism. Moreover the methods by which concepts were stored and expressed themselves had origins in both the elite and democratic culture. We have already seen how the orthodox liberal Millite platform was modified to meet the needs of an audience schooled in the art of answering the most erudite lecturer. Beyond this form other methods of transmitting basic truths and ideas were developed. The Society itself developed an approach to drama which saw it as a method of displaying moral and social conflict. In this respect the plays of Ibsen and Shaw had much to commend them.⁵¹ Fairy tales were also a method by which morality could be portrayed and was a popular subject for children's cantatas for obvious reasons. Even Gould's plundering of History and Biography in search of Moral examples was moulded into a new cultural and literary form: the Secular sermon.

Ideas themselves had their existence validated and nurtured from a number of quarters. Positivism, for example, could obtain a favourable hearing amongst most sections of the Leicester Secular Society for a number of reasons. It was well received because it was one of the ideas that George Jacob Holyoake had spent time investigating. Indeed Holyoake's own speech at the opening of the Secular Hall, which pleaded for the testing of ideas, was itself reminiscent of Comteian Positivism which argued for the scientific

testing of all philosophy to establish its utility. This utilitarian aspect of the philosophy had also attracted the attention of Mill.⁵² Positivism arrived as one of those very ideas which required testing, and the presence that was left in the Leicester Secular Society is testament to the effectiveness of its permeation.

However Positivism may also have appealed because of its close relationship with the older pseudo-science of phrenology. Once again Holyoake was in evidence since he had been the virtual assistant to the idea's leading proponent George Combe. The three stage structure of the ascent of man from barbarity, through chivalry to the present era was a fundamental part of phrenology. This was later to resurface in Positivism which was, like its Phrenological and Owenite forebears, a philosophy which argued for the ultimate perfectibility of man.⁵³ Indeed phrenology has been seen as giving rise to a tradition of mentalism which made possible both the creation of late-Victorian philosophies such as Positivism and Theosophy but also the musings and investigations of the Leicester Secular Society.⁵⁴ Another example of an ideology and outlook received on a number of levels is provided by the Socialism of William Morris which laid deep roots in the Society.⁵⁵

Whilst ideas realistically remained the currency of collective self-help, the Leicester Secular Society could look forward to many years of examining and processing the ideas of successive generations. However the Society was increasingly faced with the growing popularity of collectivist solutions which possessed their own institutions. No longer did Socialism, for example, appear solely with individual advocates but was also represented by the I.L.P.. Similarly the Society found that it was no longer sufficient to demonstrate its friendliness towards Ethicism: Stanton Coit wanted it to affiliate!

In this light Positivism can be seen as an idea that was accepted by individuals within the Society. Once its presence became actively coercive under Gould tensions came to the surface and ultimately prevented the change from being permanent. The Leicester Secular Society also found itself battling with more insidious collectivities based around leisure and its environs. Barclay was right when he suggested that the new deities were the music hall turns Champagne Charlie and Burgundy Benjamin who inspired the same awe and captivation as revealed religion.⁵⁶ The change was also reflected by Harry Snell who suggested when he spoke to the Leicester Secular Society in 1909 that the battle of the future would not be between Secularism and orthodoxy but between what he called 'rationalism and mysticism'.⁵⁷ This was a recognition of the modern world which called for a new wholly secular approach to a wholly new secular enemy. Rationalism and reason was to be the weapon that would combat the growth of popular enthusiasm for the worthless and the irrational. However optimistic this assertion, it was an admission of the failure of attempts to secularise society. The readiness of others to throw themselves wholesale into new forms of slavery was proof that Society had not been secularised but rather de-christianised.

Logie Barrow's analysis of spiritualism suggests that democratic epistemology contributed to its own defeat in the decade around 1900.⁵⁸ However Barrow's example is spiritualism which he cites as a self consciously democratic and plebeian epistemology. The survival of the Leicester Secular Society is explained by the fact that it had a hybrid form of epistemology. The components of its ideology drew extensively from a range of pseudo sciences and literatures as well as those from the elite culture. It was after all founded on a free platform which was advocated by John Stuart Mill, a central tenet shared with that repository of elite culture the late

Nineteenth century Liberal party. When the Leicester Secular Society advocated free speech it was a cultural constant to which all who heard could relate. Ultimately the free platform was what the Secular Society was able to fall back on when it found that its religious purpose had been outpaced by events. Thus the ability and vitality of the Society, and its own democratic epistemology, meant that it was able to validate itself in the eyes of both plebeian and elite cultures. This blend of the two cultures was one that was able to count on support both from the plebeian side - though inevitably this did not transmit itself into numbers - and respect from the elite side. During the First World War the mantle of libertarian free speech was passed to the Leicester Secular Society with the decline and death of liberal institutions, much in the way that Owenism had been passed to it sixty years previously. By this stage it was a rich inheritance that members of both plebeian and elite cultures had fought for and negotiated amongst themselves. From the First World War the Leicester Secular Society has taken the trouble to be the guardian, though not the sole possessor, of the most vital tool from which a culture - plebeian or elite is built.

Such a tool needed examples to work on and the process of assimilating ideas led the members of the Society in numerous directions. This desire to test ideas is most clearly demonstrated in the reception given to the most wide reaching programme that the Secular Society was confronted with, the ideas of William Morris.

Footnotes to Chapter Nine

- 1: John Eros, 'The rise of organised Freethought in mid victorian England', in Sociological Review, 1954, page 109.
- 2: Ibid. page 108.
- 3: See Chapter 3.
- 4: See Eros, 'Rise of Organised Freethought' page 109. See also L.S.S.M.B., 6 March 1881.
- 5: See chapter 3.
- 6: John Stuart Mill, On Liberty, (everyman edition) 1972, page 75.
- 7: Ibid..
- 8: See Chapter 5.
- 9: See Chapter 4.
- 10: Sydney Ansell Gimson, 'Random Recollections of the Leicester Secular Society, with digressions' Part II pages 10 - 11.
- 11: See Chapter 3 for the Society's hostile treatment of George Voss and the Leicester Branch of the National Secular Society.
- 12: Edward Royle, Victorian Infidels, (1974) page 74.
- 13: Gimson, 'Random Recollections' Part I, page 12.
- 14: F. J. Gould History of the Leicester Secular Society, (1900) page 29.
- 15: See the Leicester Guardian, 14 December 1901, Midland Free Press, 14 December 1901. The Pioneer, preferred to concentrate on reporting the exposition of Morris' ideas. All in volume of newspaper cuttings 10D68/8.
- 16: Visitors book in the possession of Donald Gimson of Stoneywell, Ulverscroft, Leicestershire.
- 17: Tom Barclay Memoirs and Medleys: The autobiography of a Bottle Washer, passim.

18: I owe knowledge of this source to Malcolm Elliot for which I offer thanks. See also Ibid..

19: The Freethinker January 1900 in volume of newspaper cuttings 10D68/8.

20: Edward Royle Radicals, Secularists and Republicans (1980) page 63.

21: See L.S.S.M.B., 21 August 1888 & 11 March 1908.

22: See for example L.S.S.M.B., 3 March 1896 & 5 December 1900 for the dismissal of individuals and 2 February 1898 for the dismissal of Mr. Cartwright and Mrs. Pollard. See also 7 January, 16 January & 30 January 1912 for a similar case concerning a Mr. Richards and a Mrs. Tole.

23: Royle, Radicals, Secularist pages 253 - 254. By 1899 the Legitimation League had moved beyond the mere libertarian assertion of legal rights that attracted individualists like Donisthorpe and Levy and was now in the business of advocating free love.

24: L.S.S.M.B., 20 September 1899.

25: See Leicester Secular Society Sunday School Band of Hope certificate from the 1880's appended in 'Scrapbook'.

26: The Freethinker 7 January 1906, in volume of newspaper cuttings 10D68/10.

27: Ibid..

28: Ibid..

29: Ibid..

30: Malcolm Quin, Memoirs of a Positivist (1924) page 68.

31: L.S.S.M.B., 8 December 1884.

32: Ibid..

33: F. J. Gould The Life Story of a Humanist. (1923) page 91.

34: Ibid..

35: The examples quoted are referred to in more detail in Chapters four, five and eight.

- 36: See Susan Budd Varieties of Unbelief (1977) pages 104 - 124.
- 37: Gimson, 'Random Recollections' Part I, pages 3 - 4; Barclay Autobiography pages 37 & 40; Gould Life Story of a Humanist, page 51 and Malcolm Quin Memoirs pages 36 - 38.
- 38: Quin, Memoirs page 29.
- 39: The Erethinker 6 April 1890 in 'Scrapbook'.
- 40: The Erethinker 27 April 1890 in 'Scrapbook'.
- 41: See Gould Life Story of a Humanist, page 89, Gimson 'Random Recollections' Part I, passim, Barclay Autobiography page 68.
- 42: Gould Life Story of a Humanist, page 85.
- 43: Craig Grewcock 'The Leicester Mechanics Institute 1833 - 1870' in ed. Daniel Williams, The Adaptation of Change: Essays upon the history of nineteenth century Leicester, (Leicester Museums publication No. 18) page 26.
- 44: Logie Barrow Independent Spirits: Spiritualism and English Plebeians 1850-1910, (1986) pages 146 - 8.
- 45: Ibid..
- 46: Ibid..
- 47: Ibid. pages 150 - 154.
- 48: Carlo Ginzburg The Cheese and the Worms (1980) passim.
- 49: Ibid. page 9.
- 50: See L.S.S.M.B., 21 January 1880 for Holmes lecturing on Mesmerism and Vegetarianism; L.S.S.M.B., 30 April 1883 for James Burns lecturing on Spiritualism & 7 January 1884 for Edward Clodd on Dreams.
- 51: See Gimson 'Random Recollections' Part II, appendix.
- 52: See J. S. Mill 'Auguste Comte and Positivism' appendix in On Liberty (Everyman edition).
- 53: T. Parssinen 'Popular Science and society; The Phrenological movement in early Victorian Britain' in Journal of Social History Volume VIII (1974)

page 5.

54: Ibid. page 14.

55: Chapter 10 is an elaboration of this theme.

56: Barclay Autobiography page 22.

57: The Pioneer 7 March 1909 in 'scrapbook'.

58: Barrow Independent Spirits, page 146.

CHAPTER TEN

ART AND SECULARISM.

In 1884 the Leicester Secular Society was, by the standards of many other agencies such as the Anglican Church or the Palace of Varieties, comparatively new to the world ruled by consumption and provision. It had struggled to maintain its existence for over thirty years and survival had only been realistically confirmed by the opening of their own purpose built Secular Hall three years previously. The Society in January 1884 was undergoing traumatic changes of personnel. Their inspiration Josiah Gimson had been dead for less than three months and had been replaced as president by Thomas Wright, the son of one of Gimson's elderly colleagues. However the Gimson money provided secure underpinning for the Society.

These months must have put considerable strain on the young Sydney Gimson who had only recently been confronted with the death of his father and had also to adjust to his place as an, albeit junior, partner alongside his half-brothers Arthur and Josiah Mentor in the family firm. Moreover this period coincided with Sydney's final parting from Christianity as he moved his allegiance from the Unitarian Great Meeting to the Secular Society.¹ The General Committee that took charge of affairs in January 1884 reflected a blend of youth and experience. Alongside Gimson and Thomas Wright were other young men like Tom Barclay and Philip Wright, whilst the more experienced end of the spectrum was represented by John Barrs, William Henry Holyoak, Abraham Fitchett and a former member of the Leicester Branch of the N.S.S., George Voss.²

Since the opening of the Hall the Leicester Secular Society had been self-consciously developing its platform and lecturing programme. Though its

unsectarian approach which embraced liberty of opinion was an important part of its philosophy it was also a 'selling point'. Apart from satisfying the demands of their own members, the success of the committee in establishing their platform with a regional as well as local reputation meant important and money spinning lecturers could be hoped for. However, despite this apparent concession to 'punter power' the Society was more inclined to give people what it thought they should have rather than what they necessarily wanted. Lectures were not of course intended to appeal to everyone, and the Society aimed for an audience of a self-improving, self-educating disposition. The Secular Society must have felt, even at this early stage that its Sunday meetings were above both the limited 'ordinary' entertainment of the Music Hall and the humbug and artificial enthusiasm generated by church and chapel. This is not to say that the Society neglected the social side of things, the development of their own 'congregational life' had proceeded apace with a growing number of socials and an inventory of Society goods which showed evidence that they could, by this stage, cater for a decent sized tea and entertainment.³

During the first weeks of the month Thomas Slater lectured to the Society on 'Life after Death' and another member of the national Secularist lecturing circuit, Edward Clodd, gave the Society his thoughts on 'Dreams, their place in Savage Philosophy'. Though these lectures were the mainstay of the Society and popular with the members, it was the appearance of more famous national figures that stirred the sensibilities. Thus the acceptance of an engagement to lecture by William Morris was a real coup for the Leicester Secular Society.

Morris had been a Socialist from the early eighteen eighties and his first full blooded avowal of this came in a lecture delivered to University College Oxford, in 1883. The lecture, 'Art Under Plutocracy' caused a

sensation and The Times had commented that had Morris's avowal of such doctrines been realised then the Hall would have been refused for the lecture.⁴ January of the following year saw him undertake a prodigious lecture tour which included his visit to Leicester. On 16 January 1884 he delivered his lecture 'Useful Work Versus Useless Toil' to the Hampstead Liberal Club and repeated it on the 21st to a gathering in Manchester.⁵ The Leicester Secular Society had originally asked for both Morris' lectures 'Art Under Plutocracy' and 'Art and Socialism'. However it was eventually agreed that only the latter be presented. There was little doubt that the Society was in for a treat, Morris's ideas were new, exciting and shaking the very foundations of that mid - nineteenth century prosperity that Sydney Gimson's generation had been heirs to. Moreover the acquisition of Morris as a lecturer to the Society maintained their conviction that they were in the forefront of new ideas and were a force to change the opinions that existed in the Leicester of 1884. Nevertheless, at a level which involved pleasing the Society's members and touting for intellectual and financial trade at the same time, there is no doubt that they had also secured the services of one of the hottest properties around. Indeed the Society recognised its good fortune and sought to generate demand by publicising the visit with 1000 window stickers and the same number of hand bills.⁶

Thus it was with considerable nervous excitement that Sydney Gimson and his brother Ernest went on a cold January evening to meet the great William Morris at the railway station. Both Morris and the Gimsos were immediately attracted to each other as personalities; 'He greeted us as friends, and as though we were equals, at once and, immediately we were "at home".⁷ The Gimson's however were not spared the great man's foibles, though for them this became half of the fun; 'in his conversations if they touched on subjects which he felt deeply, came little bursts of temper which subsided as

quickly as they arose and left no bad feeling behind them.'⁶

Morris was remembered by Sydney Gimson as an indifferent lecturer, his style was restricted by the fact that his prepared script was read in a starchy, ineffective style though the quality of the content and construction could not be doubted.⁹ Such was the appeal of Morris and his ideas that his visit had a profound affect on the thinking of several members of the Society and left an indelible imprint on the Leicester Secular Society for years to come.

The lecture castigated the system of commerce which produced a multitude of unnecessary trifles for public consumption, yet enforced the enslavement of those involved in its production. This enslavement was compounded by the manner in which such petty manufactures had replaced Art, which Morris regarded as a necessary solace to work. Enslavement was effectively spread to the whole population by the devious robbery of reason known as supply and demand:

All these are slaves of what is called luxury, which in the modern sense of the word comprises a mass of sham wealth, the invention of competitive Commerce, and enslaves not only the poor people who are compelled to work at its production, but also the foolish and not overhappy people who buy it to harass themselves with its encumbrance.¹⁰

Moreover for Morris the survival of such trifles were a simple consequence of the capitalist system which needed desire and gratification to be stimulated and gratified at the will of the producer:

... the very capitalists know well that there is no genuine

healthy demand for them, and they are compelled to foist desire for petty excitement, the outward token of which is known by the conventional name of fashion - a strange monster born of the vacancy of the lives of rich people, and the eagerness of competitive Commerce to make the most of the huge crowd of workmen whom it breeds as unregarded instruments for what is called the making of money.¹¹

It was, at least to Morris, very much a self evident truth that 'the death of Art was too high a price to pay for the material prosperity of the middle classes'.¹² The modern world had created tedious unnecessary labour to produce tedious unnecessary objects with the debasement of the labourer as its evil, pathetic result.

The lecture argued positively that dignified labour which enriched the lives of those involved was the solution to what had become an uncivilised society. Throughout the lecture Morris reiterated his guiding principles that would achieve the reordering of Society:

Nothing Should be made by man's labour which is not worth making; or which must be made by labour degrading to the makers.¹³

Such a change could only be accomplished by recognising the full rights of labour and its concomitant, Socialism. Morris paid tribute to the power of working men and conjured up glorious rôle for Trade Unionism and Chartism in the struggle. He even sounded a note of warning to the Society that 'Commerce' was the new God to oppose in the search for social and spiritual betterment. It existed to enslave as much as any religion and it to had its

'priestly trappings' and mythologies. It was:

...a vast wide-spreading grasping organization which will, with the unconscious instinct of a plant, meet every attempt at bettering the condition of the people with an attack on a fresh side; new machines, new markets, wholesale emigration, the revival of grovelling superstitions, preachments of thrift to lack-alls, of temperance to the wretched; such things as these will baffle at every turn all partial revolts against the monster we of the middle classes have created for our own undoing.¹⁴

It was plain to Morris, and, he assumed to his audience that Commerce was a pernicious force which denied the rights of citizenship to the majority of the population. A solution to this parlous state of affairs lay in the vigorous assertion of the rights to have 'honourable and fitting work', 'decency of surroundings' and finally 'leisure'.¹⁵

To his audience what Morris was preaching was radically new yet stirred distant echoes of days past. The emphasis placed on the dignity and indeed supremacy of labour was akin to the gospel of Owenism that the Society had been formed to preserve. Morris saw labour as the prime mover and therefore the desired beneficiary of all economic activity and sought the adjustment of society accordingly. He asserted that undignified work was debasing to the labourer and vindicated the desire to produce only the beautiful and the useful. By placing responsibility for the moral, material and spiritual welfare of society into the hands of labour Morris was recreating the Owenite dream, though he gave it a profoundly contemporary flavour. Labour was once again the source of all wealth, but it was also the source of all

beauty and happiness. Like Owenism Morris' ideas did not attack machinery purely for its own sake but the net result was still a form of anti-industrialism that articulated fears about its consequences rather than its actual use. Morris's plea for the recognition of the economic and moral value of work was also an appeal to the same reservoir of values that Owenism had appealed to. The introduction of an industrial structure meant the consequential de-skilling of an established and skilled labour force. To these people Morris's arguments must have been compelling. With the potential introduction of full-scale industrial production many would see the primacy of handwork vanish. Such production would also destroy pride in work and the involvement of the labourer in the totality of its production. Morris argued relentlessly for pride in work and pride in lifestyle which had a lasting appeal to self and social improvers. His link to pride in the value of work to the labourer and the product of that work to those who enjoyed it effectively recreated the culture of the artisan for a new generation. It was a reassertion of the 'mechanick tradition' both for those who had lost it and for those whose radicalism led them to aspire to it.

Morris' message also reached down to those who had effectively been the victims of the de-skilling he so despised. The low cost of labour in the town effectively gave the producers a free hand and the vast reserve of cheaper labour in the surrounding villages compounded this. Both the hosiery and the boot and shoe industries had continually sought to relocate in such country villages from the 1870's. By 1886, for example, at least thirty hosiery firms had moved to eleven nearby villages.¹⁶ Moreover the consequences of this situation were compounded by the periodic slump, which hit both frame and hand knitting trades in the early 1880's.¹⁷ These factors both destroyed the notion of regular employment and made concepts of skilled and unskilled status almost meaningless. Indeed Morris like Owen and his own

contemporary John Ruskin spoke to the middle classes demanding they reform themselves only to discover that the message was received most enthusiastically by working men:

...my experience as far as it goes is, that whether it be from a certain sacredness in handiwork which does cleave to it even under the worst circumstances, or whether it be that the poor man who is driven by necessity to deal with things which are terribly real, when he thinks at all on such matters, thinks less conventionally than the rich; whatever it may be, my experience so far is that the working man finds it easier to understand the doctrine of the claim of labour to pleasure in the work itself than the rich or well-to-do man does. Apart from any trivial words of my own, I have been surprised to find, for instance, such a hearty feeling toward John Ruskin among working-class audiences: they can see the prophet in him rather than the fantastic rhetorician, as more superfine audiences do.¹⁸

One further consideration completed the picture. Sydney Gimson mentions that Morris's reputation as a craftsman and designer preceded him.¹⁹ His ideas, devoted to the production of pleasant surroundings, and the designs which persuaded nature to intrude into living space had distinct Owenite echoes. The consistent use of utopian images was once again given a millenarian tinge to present the Leicester Secular Society with the first all embracing, coherent programme it had heard since the demise of Queenwood in 1845.

However, the important difference was that Morris's ideas placed

emphasis on the individual's conception of Art, beauty and work. His designs were for the brightening up of personal, individual living space and represented an urban context, like the Secular Society itself, for utopia. Such 'little utopias' were not only amenable to those who had rejected the heavy handed paternalism of Owen but they were actually encouraged by the self-help and self-improving culture of Secularism. Pride in work and the concept of triumph through improvement were part of mid-Victorian intellectual luggage, owing as much to liberalism as to any lingering Owenism. Concepts of individualism had become as useful, and indeed necessary, to the espousal of radicalism as had notions of collectivism. Morris's programme, in the cold light of day, was Owen's utopianism aided and abetted by the very individualistic thoughts and aspirations that Owen had considered to be such an obstacle to social progress. Morris's catchphrase 'How we live, and how we might live' conjured up, for the succeeding generation, rather different images than Owen's 'true and only road that can lead to happiness'.

It must have seemed, for one brief millennial moment, as though the Leicester Secular Society's own intellectual inheritance had at last come home to them. Once again politics and the organisation of society was potentially on the agenda. The ideas of William Morris were responsible for persuading many that politics were once again fluid and that a range of both forgotten, and radically new, initiatives were possible. However once again the thirst for practicality with radicalism asserted itself within the Society. What Morris had said was music to the ears but it lacked obvious practicality, and from Sydney Gimson's account it seems obvious that Morris's lecture met with some criticism:

In the committee room down at the Hall after his first lecture

he fumed about the discussion. 'They all think I'm not practical because I write a bit of poetry. I run a good business all right. Because I can't help stringing a few rhymes together it doesn't mean I'm not practical.'²⁰

Nevertheless it may be that this was the reaction of some members of a Society which itself was devoted to forms of criticism. In a sense nothing met with universal acclaim at the Leicester Secular Society but at the same time Morris himself was also being rather impatient. The mute, unswerving acceptance of his ideas, though initially flattering, was not the material of which social change would be made. Such a reaction would have implied a simple nodding eclecticism rather than something resembling deeper commitment. Morris's judgement on the Society was far too hasty and the passing of years was to make this fact increasingly obvious.

When Morris stepped down from the platform he found that he already had aficionados amongst the Leicester Secular Society. During a dinner held in his honour the conversation turned to the subject of architecture and the recent restoration of St. Albans' Cathedral in particular. A potentially embarrassing scene ensued when Miss Edith Gittins, a member of the Society who Gimson informs us was a devotee of Morris, made detrimental comments regarding the only remaining mediaeval chapel. Miss Gittins wanted it sympathetically restored, thinking herself in tune with her mentor. Morris hurtled across the room and gesticulated his rage; 'Tommy rot madam, tommy rot, tommy rot!' After a brief moment's silence the room erupted in gales of polite laughter, though the unfortunate Miss Gittins must have wondered what had hit her!²¹

Morris completed his first visit to the Leicester Secular Society by staying with Sydney Gimson at his house. By this stage Sydney had begun to

cultivate his own smokeroom as a forum for the discussion of the important matters of the day. On this occasion he and Morris were joined by Ernest and his sister Sarah though she left the assembled company after an hour. Sydney and his brother were left in deep discussion with Morris until the early hours of the morning.²²

The experience left a particularly deep impression on the young Ernest Gimson and the incident was to change the course of his life irrevocably. The middle son of his father's second marriage Ernest Gimson had not been given a part of the family inheritance and was eventually to be glad of the fact. In a more conventional family which had risen to prominence on the great wave of mid-Victorian prosperity, he might have contemplated the Nonconformist ministry, much in the way Joseph Chamberlain had done. For Ernest Gimson, his upbringing and his calling led him to the vocation of architecture. In the great Victorian tradition of improving upon the achievements of the previous generation this was presumably considered a more cultivated and refined skill than engineering.

Ernest Gimson was only 19 years of age in 1884 and had been articled to the Leicester architect Isaac Barradale, a popular local figure who had been responsible for designing Hambleton Hall in 1881 and a series of cottages in the nearby village of Countesthorpe that evoked a rural simplicity.²³ Gimson's discussions with Morris' impressed the latter with his promise and when, two years later, he had decided his future lay in London he consulted Morris about the move. Immediately Morris sent Ernest Gimson three letters of introduction, the first of which bore fruit and he started in the offices of the architect, J.D. Sedding, where he remained for the next two years.²⁴ Sedding had been a friend of Morris for many years and was gaining a reputation as a church architect and restorer in which he actively practiced and espoused traditional building methods. Sedding's

offices in Oxford street were located next door to the showrooms of Morris and Company and the young Ernest must have been impressed by the Arts and Crafts furnishings displayed there.²⁵

At the same time as Ernest began his work at Seddings he was joined by Ernest Barnsley, another young man of similar age, background and ideas. Barnsley had been born in Birmingham a year earlier than Gimson and was one of the younger sons of John Barnsley a prosperous builder. Like Ernest Gimson he was not encouraged into the family firm and made the move to London in search of a career where he was later joined by his brother Sidney who himself was introduced to the architect, Norman Shaw.²⁶ These three developed a close friendship as they gradually began to submerge themselves in the exciting London world of Arts and Crafts design. Gimson and Ernest Barnsley shared lodgings and, after Barnsley had moved back to Birmingham to practise, Gimson joined the Art Workers Guild, a discussion group set up in 1890 by his own employer. Within this group Gimson was able to make friends with others of a similar disposition who were to make their mark in other spheres of design such as the pottery decorator, Alfred Powell, and William Lethaby who was to become Principal of the Central School of Arts and Crafts. Morris frequently lectured to this group and Ernest Gimson joined Morris's own Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings largely at his recommendation.²⁷

By this stage Ernest Gimson was becoming more interested in furniture design, largely influenced by the work of Morris and Company and became determined to emulate it. Thus it was in 1890 that he resolved to follow in Morris' footsteps and the firm of Kenton and Company was born. There were no less than six partners who each contributed a capital of £100. These partners included, in addition to Gimson, Ernest Barnsley, William Lethaby as well as Reginald Blomfield, Mervyn MacCartney and Colonel Mallet. They began

producing furnishings and employed a number of professional craftsmen who personalised and initialled each piece. Though the products of the company were favourably received it suffered from chronic under capitalisation which eventually forced closure in 1892.²⁸

Despite this Ernest refused to be disillusioned. During his time in London he had spent many happy weekends and holiday trips sketching and investigating ancient buildings both sacred and secular all over Britain and some parts of northern Europe. It must have been at this time that the full implications of his design philosophy began to dawn on him. A return to simplicity and utility in design required a commensurate change in lifestyle and environment, and Gimson began to consider quite seriously the possibility that his ideal for living might be 'back to the land'.

In 1893 Ernest Gimson moved with his friends Ernest and Sidney Barnsley, to Ewen near Cirencester and the search was on for a suitable home in which their ideal and their work could flourish. After about a year they discovered a dilapidated mansion called Pinbury Park near Sapperton, which appeared to fit their requirements. Because of its decayed condition they were able to obtain the lease on very favourable terms and the three of them set about the necessary renovations. Ernest Barnsley with his young family occupied the main house whilst his brother Sidney and Ernest Gimson took up residence in two small cottages which were converted from outbuildings.²⁹ In this setting the firm produced simple and honest furniture which was both decorative and fitting for its intended use:

In his best work Ernest Gimson kept clearly in mind the purpose the article was intended to serve; he was not afraid to show construction and in such things as tables he used backing struts in the economical tradition of the engineer. Indeed

sometimes for sheer exuberance, he invented quite unnecessary constructional details, such as dovetail wedges in table tops which, as he always advised scrubbing, have often disappeared.³⁰

Making furniture heavily influenced by Morris and the principles of the Arts and Crafts movement was one thing, but Ernest Gimson took his enthusiasm for such ideas to their logical conclusion. In true Arts and Crafts style he went to great lengths to use local materials and labour in the production of his furniture. He developed the use of locally available woods such as oak, ash and elm and decorated them with inlays of cherry and walnut.³¹ The inspiration for Ernest Gimson's furniture was almost exclusively an attempt to reclaim the past. Articles ranging from farm machinery to examples of English and European furniture that he had come across in museums were all of influence. His own intense pride in workmanship and the ideals contained in it led him to see his own furniture as both the logical and ultimate expression of this. Throughout his career at Pinbury, and later at Daneway House where the firm moved to in 1900, Gimson was adamant about how his furniture should be produced. He insisted that the same craftsman should be involved in the total production of any piece. Thus his workmen were encouraged to follow a piece of furniture from its cutting out from roughly-hewn wood to its final polishing. Moreover Gimson's initial distrust of machinery grew to outright hatred. In this his position is more reminiscent of Ruskin than that of Morris:

...he was proud of the fact that there was nothing made by machinery in his house except the plumbing, which was a concession to his wife! For him a log fire on the open hearth provided more comfort to the eye as well as the body than the

stuffy heat of radiators... He preferred a rush-seated chair to an upholstered one, plain lime-washed walls to wallpapered, plain home-made food to imported luxuries.³²

Increasingly Ernest Gimson's ideas and habits began to resemble the ideal that the pastoral tendency of the eighteen nineties had made its own. Gimson's recreation of 'Merrie England' saw him exchanging the frock coat of the prosperous London architect for the country smock of his neighbours which came to symbolise simplicity and honesty. After Pinbury had been reclaimed by its owner, who himself had taken a fancy to the restoration, Gimson and the Barnsleys moved to another nearby house near Sapperton called Daneway House. Here they expanded the scale of their operation, employing more craftsmen and apprentices. Gimson quietly hoped the resulting increase in the number of items the firm could produce would answer his aspiration that his works would be cheap enough and numerous enough to be available to all. In this his thinking echoed Morris's ideas on the debilitating effects of industrial production on the intellectual and spiritual health of the poor, though it also answered a desire in him to put his furniture back whence its inspiration had been. He hoped that ordinary cottagers could buy his workmanship, be it metal, wood, embroidery or plasterwork. Though, as was the tendency with many producers of Arts and Crafts products, a combination of the craftsman's own exacting high standards and the growing vogue for this re-creation of rustic style made this a forlorn hope.

However, for Gimson his responsibility did not cease here and he began to see a necessary rôle for himself and his wife in the communal life of the village in which they must have been major employers and benefactors. His celebration of the simple agricultural life persuaded him to engage in the

revival of local rustic entertainment, very much in line with the folk song and folk dance revival which was gathering momentum during the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The discovery and recovery of old musical instruments became another abiding passion and links with other revivalists were forged as the visits to the Gimson home of Cecil Sharp and Arnold Dolmetsch testify.³³ Local villagers were encouraged to learn song and dance from scripts thoughtfully provided for the purpose and the Gimson's were delighted when some were able to remember these, whilst others performed without prompting. Gimson was even involved in the design of the village hall at Sapperton, intended for such gatherings and paid for by money raised from Lord Bathurst whose tenant he had been at Pinbury and Daneway House.

Ernest Gimson also made his own contribution to what had become the ideals of the Garden City movement. In 1911 he entered a series of drawings for a competition that the Australian government had organised for the design of their new showpiece capital Canberra. Many of these drawings were executed alongside designs Gimson had been commissioned to prepare for the construction of the Library at Bedales School in Hampshire. His designs for the capital exhibit a regular, airy street pattern tapering around a bay and illustrate the distinct influence of his visits to numerous Mediterranean cities.³⁴

In 1913 Gimson bought land near Sapperton, intending to institute a craft village where skilled craftsmen could gather and work in a setting conducive to the production of high quality artifacts. This scheme never got off the ground due to the untimely interruption of the War, though Gimson certainly continued to plan for the future. He anticipated an upsurge in demand for his products after the War and continued to contemplate the development of the site in his possession which he estimated required £10,000 capital to make it a viable proposition. He did not see this as a

formidable obstacle and seemed more concerned with assembling craftsmen of sufficient skill after the conflict.³⁵ Gimson's dream community never materialised since he died of cancer in 1919 at the age of fifty five and found his last resting place in Sapperton church yard among the people to whom he had given his life. Before his death, however, he was able to repay his great intellectual and spiritual debt to Morris in the design and construction of the village hall at Kelmscott in Oxfordshire.

Though Ernest Gimson had been affected by the ideas of Morris, he turned them into an artistic revolt against industrialism and in favour of beautiful things. In some ways he was lucky that he had been handed an opportunity to give vent to many of the contradictions that his family embodied with its dual inheritance of engineering and Owenite Socialism. Though Ernest did not go into the ministry in the conventional sense he maintained personal contact with the Secular Society and his development of beauty at times took on the flavour of an evangelical crusade, albeit with pantheistic overtones. This ideal and its expression bear comparison with some of the 'Beauty and Duty' Positivism of Gould. Ernest's productive life in his self-imposed rustic hermitage resembled the ideal of the clerical ministry with its concern for responsibility, leadership, local welfare and good works. The difference was Ernest's concern was for the here and now and the actual improvement of the material welfare of the mass of the population. As such this was perhaps the most fulfilling ministry a Secularist could hope for and the historian is left with the abiding impression that both the Gimson family and the Secular Society were proud of his zeal and his achievements.

Though Morris's ideas on work and his ideas on design and ideals for living had their effect on Ernest Gimson he did not follow all of his conclusions on the nature of Society, having little time for his Socialist

analysis. To Gimson it was enough to be able to affect his own forms of material change without recourse to an economic definition of exploitation; he concentrated his attacks explicitly upon the effects of deprivation rather than its causes.

The visit of Morris to the Secular Society did however convince others of the value of Morris's Socialist critique of Society. As a result of Morris's lecture to the Leicester Secular Society a small number of members began to meet and share the ideas that Morris had propounded. This group seems to have taken its lead from Tom Barclay, though other prominent members of the Society (notably Max Bunton, the incumbent secretary) also took a major part. Over a year later the Leicester Branch of the Socialist League was formed and began to hold its meetings in the Secular Hall.³⁶ Throughout its history, Tom Barclay was the mainstay of the organisation and cemented its foundation by lecturing to the Society on the relationship between Capital and Labour.³⁷ His lectures were reported in the S.D.F. newspaper Justice though he was already far more in tune with the ideas of Ruskin and Morris than those of the S.D.F.. For Barclay the supremacy of art as advocated by Morris was an important counterweight to the crude statism of Hyndman and the S.D.F. and this, at least in part, explains his attachment to the former's ideas.

Barclay's own intellectual training, at great personal cost to himself, was proof self-evident of the potential power of the - by now fading - autodidact tradition. From his own experience Morris's attitude that socialists must be made and converted was emphatically the right one.³⁸ The continued efforts of Barclay to persuade his fellow workers of the efficacy of Socialism and his resulting disappointment and anger must be seen in this light.

Tom Barclay considered Morris's journalistic venture Commonweal, a

superior paper to Justice and attempted to sell it, though he complained that his own class were 'ignorant, selfish, apathetic....'³⁹ Barclay's own journalistic ventures, first with The Countryman and afterwards with The Pioneer, were themselves attempts to make things 'happen and a determined effort at consciousness-raising. Though Barclay was not with the Pioneer for long it does resemble Morris' own Commonweal and Barclay must have thought the same style and approach would be of most benefit to his fellow working men. He also edited an edition of selections from the writings of John Ruskin which heartily met with the author's approval. Published by C. Merrick of Cank Street, the pamphlet was as much a distillation of Barclay's own thought as those of Ruskin. Amongst analyses of Political Economy are small phrases which echo the self-help culture that Tom Barclay and his fellow Secularists had sprung from:

Those unwilling to work should be made to toil in degrading circumstances in mines and suchlike.

But amongst such phrases are also those recognising the value of work and the just returns to Labour:

It ought to be quite as natural and straightforward a matter for a labourer to take his pension from his parish because he has deserved well of his parish, as for a man in higher rank to take his pension from his country, because he has deserved well of his country.⁴⁰

Barclay's analysis went as far as Morris's and even beyond when he turned the Capitalist and those whom he termed 'rich' into a moral monster,

the enemy of reason, progress and communal enrichment. This he summed up in an unusually (for Barclay) concise and pithy epigram;

The persons who become rich are, generally speaking, industrious, resolute, proud, covetous, prompt, methodical, sensible, unimaginitive, insensitive and ignorant.⁴¹

In connection with his concern for the moral and material welfare of the working classes it was only a small step for Barclay to combine his Morrisite love of Art with his Moral Socialism and his Secularist opposition to myths and mysticism. It became plain to him that the tyranny of religion and its institutions were being replaced by the institutions of capitalism that were equally pernicious and equally debasing. Moreover, in true Morrisite style, such institutions served to fragment the working class, breaking up what were perceived, even by Barclay as natural communal relationships;

The slave, wage slave or otherwise, does not know he is such. If he learns that he is, and becomes a rebel, what support does he get from his fellow slaves? Some are concentrated on 'the next world', saving their souls: some are absorbed by trivialities football, cricket, and horse racing; you'd think they must be capitalists and millionaires: and some are breaking their hearts and risking their health in desperate efforts to cease being proletaires and to rank themselves amongst the capitalists.⁴²

The inevitable consequence of Barclay's analysis of capitalist power and persuasion led him to despair of the working class, though his objections to

capitalism were based on what he had imbibed from Secularism and from the Socialism of Morris. Capital rather than industrialisation became the enemy so that the concerns of the working class for diversions such as those indicated at the start of this chapter were symptoms of the malaise.

Bill Lancaster in his study of the development of Radicalism and Socialism in Leicester suggests that Barclay's attitude owed more to the iconoclasm of Bradlaugh, which persuaded him to deliberately adopt unpopular beliefs, than it did to the more conciliatory nature of Leicester Secularism.⁴⁹ This judgement seems to understate the importance of the Leicester Secular Society which did more than most to ensure the survival of the working class autodidactic culture into which Tom Barclay was attempting to breathe new life. Moreover, Holyoake's suggestion that knowledge had its own utility had surely no greater champion than Tom Barclay whose whole intellectual development was hinged around this doctrine. The Leicester Secular Society itself encouraged an open mind that on the one hand sought to encourage the discovery of greater truth yet on the other also allowed to flourish older forms of eclecticism, inherited from Owenite days. Barclay's thinking owed its debt to this legacy as well as the moral critique of society offered by Morris. Even his flirtation with forms of Anarchism during the eighteen nineties illustrates "the power of self-help to work on the laws (in Barclay's parlance - the myths) of capitalist society to produce a form of moral revolt. This perhaps indicates how subtle a blend of self-help individualism, eclecticism and simple moral rebellion his character actually contained.

The response of Sydney Gimson to the visit of William Morris was rather more complex. His burgeoning responsibilities in the family engineering firm and following his father's footsteps in the Leicester Secular Society, left him with little room for manoeuvre. He could not share the anti-industrial

hatred of machinery that his brother had developed nor could he surrender a life-long individualism to accept the economic analysis of Morris as his friend Tom Barclay had done. Sydney Gimson took in Morris and his ideas almost subliminally, not putting them into unflinching practice, but keeping them as a form of leisure and escapism from responsibility. In short Sydney Gimson became a 'consumer' of Morris and his ideas.

After 1884 his habits of a lifetime took on a new and important significance. For many years previously he had taken great pleasure in wandering the countryside around Charnwood Forest where he used to sleep rough by the roadside or in a barn belonging to a friend of the family. Here he would sleep contentedly, cooking rough meals on a small fire provided for the purpose.⁴⁴ This gradually became an important form of escapism for Gimson and soon others joined him as rambling became more fashionable.⁴⁵ Sydney's own desire to escape from the city was understandable, Leicester was by no means the worst industrial city but it was not without its social and material deprivations, and he must have been more than envious of the freedom his brother Ernest had enjoyed. Though Secularism preached progress and improvement for the masses, its message about the nature of the city as an institution was ambiguous. This can not have been helped by the adoption of James Thompson, a depressive alcoholic, as the Society's poetical voice whose bleak vision of industrialism was expressed in his poem 'City of Dreadful Night'.

Sydney always dreamed of being able to set up his own version of the rural idyll in the hills above Leicester, surrounded by the countryside he loved and cherished. His chance came when a portion of land which had previously belonged to Ratby Glebe was put on the market by the Ecclesiastical Commissioners. The land was bought by James Billson another Secularist manufacturer who offered plots of the land to Josiah Mentor

Gimson and Sydney Gimson.⁴⁶

Sydney immediately set about creating his own 'little Utopia' where solid rural values could flourish and he could put Morris's ideal for living into, at least part-time, action: what better place could have been chosen than near the inspirational ruins of the mediaeval priory of Ulverscroft!

The three men contacted Ernest Gimson to design and build fitting habitations in which this idyll could be achieved, though it was obvious that Sydney was the most enthusiastic. Ernest Gimson's first building was executed for James Billson, though he saved many of his more ambitious ideas for his next project which was for his brother Sydney. The resulting Stoneywell cottage is impressive. It was, unlike the others he built, sheltered from the road by woodland and made use of natural features in the landscape to give an impression of spartan rustic simplicity. It is built in an 'S' around a small rocky outcrop of Charnwood stone, using quantities of the same material in its construction. Though Ernest later completed two more cottages, one for Josiah Mentor and the other for his sister Margaret, neither were as self-consciously setting out to achieve a particular impression. During its building Ernest used the services of several local workmen who were directed in the execution of the fittings by one of his most trusted fellow craftsmen Detmar Blow. The ideal of cultivated rough and ready 'back to the land' simplicity in design is given credence by a story related by Sydney Gimson. During the construction of the fire place a large outcrop of stone was retained when it was spontaneously suggested that Sydney could use it as a smoking shelf.⁴⁷ At certain points Ernest added his characteristically small but functional motifs and Sydney set about the unhurried business of filling the house with his brother's handmade furniture, much of which is still present and now belongs to his grandson.

From 1899 Sydney began to reside at Stoneywell during the summer

months and cultivated a fittingly alternative 'back to the land' lifestyle to go with it. He identified his family with the local area as many others during the period attempted to do, though in Gimson's case the connection was real enough.⁴⁸ He was able to discover that there was indeed a family connection with the nearby village of Newtown Linford where the earliest recorded member of the family appears in the parish records for 1360.⁴⁹

Much of the land was retained as woodland and served as a screen from the outside world, whilst the garden maintained the gentle impression of nature intruding. The house deliberately avoided home comforts, lacking electricity until 1938 and drains until the 1960's. There was no locally available running water and arrangements were made to collect rainwater to serve the purpose. Whilst he was in Leicester the garden was tended by a local gardener from Newtown Linford who looked after it three days a week. The current owner, Donald Gimson, remembers staying in the summer holidays in a cottage that was almost a shrine to the designs of William Morris which his grandfather insisted upon as decorative furnishings. Even today he estimated that there were approximately ten different Morris fabrics and designs present in the cottage of which several were visible.⁵⁰ As a small boy he was also actively encouraged to learn the ways of the countryside such as bird and tree recognition and the trapping and skinning of rabbits.⁵¹ His memories of his grandfather Sydney indicate that he did not keep this cottage simply for himself. He kept a visitors book which shows how he kept open house almost as soon as the cottage was habitable. Amongst the names in the book are a range of national and local figures, most of whom lectured to the Leicester Secular Society. Bernard Shaw, J.M. Robertson, Annie Besant and James Ramsay Macdonald are there as are Stanton Coit and F. J. Gould. One other name that appears, somewhat intriguingly, is that of the arcadian artist Walter Crane.⁵² From the start the members of the Leicester Secular

Society were also frequent visitors and must have enjoyed their summer outings to Sydney's cottage to help him create his rural idyll. They could expect a warm hospitality which was often also supplemented by country dancing in the grounds. The casual visitor to Stoneywell today will see it very much as it must have been in the time of Sydney Gimson and it is perhaps Sydney's ability to compartmentalise his conception of an ideal that has led to its survival.

This chapter has been an attempt to deal with the consequences of one, though admittedly the most important, idea that was laid before the Leicester Secular Society. We have seen how the ideas of Morris were absorbed by three men in three separate though ultimately related ways. Though the three individuals looked at took William Morris's ideas very seriously indeed theirs was not the whole story. There was perhaps another level of influence amongst those ordinary members who did not leave such informative records for posterity. Morris impressed the whole Society with his assertion that the quality of life was one of the fundamental questions of the day and applauded their own attempts to raise such quality by lecture and discussion. At a more basic level Morris must also have pleased many in the Society with his assertion of the value of useful work. To many who had of necessity to labour in the industrial production of apparently useless commodities, their own leisure activities took on a new significance. It became the 'useful work' that was the antithesis of their daily 'useless toil', or put another way 'How we might live' became for many Leicester Secularists 'How we live for some of the time'.

There remained, however, one flaw that both the thinking of the Leicester Secular Society and the ideas of Morris unwittingly maintained. Morris' own love of artistic accomplishment and craftsmanship had been of singular importance to the Society which itself valued intellectual

achievement. The value placed on this led many in the Leicester Secular Society, of which Tom Barclay and Ernest and Sydney Gimson are examples, to lament the quality of the petty diversions that industrial society had spawned. They were all convinced that an attachment to leisure activities which apparently required little in the way of commitment was corrosive of the nobler aspects of the human spirit and makeup. Such a corrosion had resulted in the collapse of the normal strands of human relationships - strands which Morris helped them recover in his plausible re-creation of a pre-industrial utopia.

Closer to home, the quest for petty excitement in the world at large was seen as a major reason for the failure of the Society to recruit more widely. Those who expressed little or no interest were deemed to be victims of the malaise of industrial Society and its myths. What this analysis failed to recognise was the increasing ability of people to compartmentalise their time, thoughts and feelings just as Sydney Gimson himself managed to live his double life as an industrialist and as a 'back to the land' advocate and admirer of William Morris. Likewise others grew to limit their enthusiasm for such 'petty diversions' as Horse Racing, the Palace of Varieties, the Temperance Mission, 'The Reminiscences of a Gretna Green Parson' or even Gould's hated prize fights to their proper and rightful place in the scheme of things. Participation in these activities at no stage excluded political activity, nor was it necessarily indicative of the breakdown of those communal relations that had existed in some pre-industrial elysium. Indeed it seems more than likely that the development of such activities was the result of campaigns conducted by organisations such as the Leicester Secular Society. These alternative opportunities represented the construction of an urban culture designed no longer to transcend but to mitigate the problems of industrial society. In such situations the ability to choose and organise

'free time' itself became a political activity. Attendance at the Secular Hall or at one of F. J. Gould's hated prize fights were both political choices. Though to some members of the Leicester Secular Society such activities were not as accomplished as their own, taking part in the activities in the Secular Hall itself required the prior acceptance of a number of values. Most of these values by their very nature were designed to create exclusivity and could not be shared by all.

Though the appearance of William Morris on the lecture platform that dark January night in 1884 changed the lives of some of those in attendance, to others it passed by as simply another interesting lecture.

Footnotes to Chapter Ten

- 1: See Sydney Ansell Gimson 'Random Recollections of the Leicester Secular Society' (1932) pages 3 - 4 & 6.
- 2: L.S.S.M.B. 29th January 1884.
- 3: Ibid..
- 4: Quoted in ed. A.L. Morton Political Writings of William Morris (1979 edition) page 57.
- 5: Ibid. page 86.
- 6: L.S.S.M.B. 7th January 1884.
- 7: Gimson 'Random Recollections' page 22.
- 8: Ibid..
- 9: Ibid..
- 10: 'Art and Socialism' in ed. A.L. Morton Political Writings of William Morris (1979 edition hereafter 'Art and Socialism') page 113.
- 11: Ibid. pages 113 - 114.
- 12: Ibid. page 121.
- 13: Ibid. page 123.
- 14: Ibid. page 126.
- 15: Ibid. pages 127 & 128.
- 16: See Bill Lancaster Radicalism, Co-Operation and Socialism. (Leicester University Press 1987) page 17.
- 17: Ibid. page 16.
- 18: Morris 'Art and Socialism' pages 119 - 120.
- 19: Gimson 'Random Recollections' page 22.
- 20: Ibid. page 72.
- 21: Ibid. page 73.
- 22: Ibid. page 23.

- 23: Sir Nicholas Pevsner The Buildings of England: Leicestershire and Rutland. (1960, Second edition 1984) Page 475.
- 24: Gimson 'Random Recollections' page 24.
- 25: Annette Caruthers Ernest Gimson and the Cotswold group of Craftsmen. (Leicester Museums Publication No. 14, 1978) page 5.
- 26: Ibid..
- 27: Ibid..
- 28: Ibid. page 6.
- 29: Ibid. page 7.
- 30: David Burrows Ernest Gimson. (Leicester Museum exhibition Catalogue 1969) preface.
- 31: Jan Marsh Back to the Land: The Pastoral Impulse in Victorian England from 1880 to 1914, page 154.
- 32: Norman Jewson By Chance did I Roze (1952) quoted in Ibid. page 155.
- 33: Marsh, Back to the Land page 156.
- 34: Caruthers Ernest Gimson pages 86 & 87.
- 35: Letter from Ernest Gimson to Sir Sydney Cockerell, 20th September 1918, held at Leicester Record Office, New Walk under listing DE 1763/16. Quoted in Ibid. page 11.
- 36: Lancaster Radicalism, Co-Operation page 60.
- 37: L.S.S.M.B. 19th January 1885.
- 38: Lancaster Radicalism, Co-Operation page 88.
- 39: Ibid. page 87.
- 40: Tom Barclay Rights of Labour According to John Ruskin. (no date) page 5.
- 41: Ibid..
- 42: Tom Barclay Autobiography of a Bottle Washer page 59.
- 43: Lancaster 'Radicalism, Co-Operation' page 61.
- 44: Sydney Ansell Gimson 'Random Memories of the Building of Stoneywell

Cottage' (September 1932) pages 2 - 3. Typescript in the possession of Donald Gimson of Stoneywell, Ulverscroft, Leicestershire.

45: See Marsh Back to the Land pages 28 - 38.

46: Gimson 'Memories of Stoneywell' page 4.

47: Ibid. page 5.

48: See Marsh Back to the Land pages 29 - 31.

49: Gimson 'Memories of Stoneywell' page 1.

50: I owe this information to conversations with Donald Gimson of Stoneywell for which my thanks.

51: Ibid..

52: Visitors book from Stoneywell cottage (started 1898), in the possession of Donald Gimson.

CONCLUSION.

Previous attempts to penetrate the local dimension to Secularist activities have relied on evidence pieced together from the unreliable and unrepresentative pages of the Freethought press. The Secular Society at Leicester was one of only a handful of local Societies to survive over several generations from the days of the Owenite missions, and it is the only one to have left sufficient evidence for an in depth study. In this sense the Leicester Secular Society is unique. Although societies at both Huddersfield and Failsworth, like that at Leicester, were able to maintain a viable presence until well into the twentieth century, they are not well-documented and they followed rather different paths from each other and from Leicester. Nevertheless they share sufficient in common to suggest that the Leicester experience may not have been as unique as its unusual sources and survival might suggest.

The Huddersfield and Failsworth Societies were both active from the late 1860s and survived into the twentieth century despite lacking the magical combination of a secure home and wealthy benefactor. During this period both Societies made an impact on their own localities which compares with the enthusiasm generated in Leicester. Like Leicester, the Huddersfield Society never forgot its Owenite roots and attached itself to the ideas of Holyoake in opposition to Bradlaugh.¹ Though not as prolific as the Leicester Society, the Society at Huddersfield nevertheless was able to go some way towards creating another example of a viable Secularist culture which was reflected by a number of leisure initiatives such as a sewing circle and provision for regular entertainments and celebrations.² This laying down of a Secularist culture was also fortified by the establishment of a Secular Sunday School which was started in 1862. The school was organised to imitate the Owenite

model and its initial success meant that new premises had to be sought in 1865. The Huddersfield Society paid more attention to this area of work than the Leicester Secular Society during the same period. However in 1886 the Sunday School was forced to close after Huddersfield's landlord Sir John Ramsden refused the Secular Society permission to build new premises.³ The Society itself was able to survive this setback and remained in existence until 1915, though it never made quite the same impact again.

The achievements of the Society at Failsworth were even more impressive. The Society grew out of the local Sunday School which claimed to trace its ancestry to a number of 'Jacobins' who took possession of it in the 1790s. Thereafter it was successively home to Chartists, Owenites and Secularists.⁴ When it became a Secular Sunday School it took similar steps to provide a congregational life as those taken by the Societies at Leicester and Huddersfield. The whole array of hymn singing, anniversaries and outings was available to the Failsworth Secularist as a member of an organisation which sought to prolong and extend Secularist culture.⁵ Like Leicester the Society at Failsworth was able to secure its own freehold premises which remained in use as a Secular Sunday School until its closure in 1958.⁶

Like Leicester, the Huddersfield and Failsworth Societies also adopted particular strategies to avoid the impact of quarrels within the national movement. The two northern Societies channelled effort into their Sunday Schools so that at Huddersfield the Society left it to individuals to affiliate to the National Secular Society or the rival British Secular Union. At Failsworth the situation was similar to that at Leicester. The Sunday School was unaffiliated and a separate branch of the National Secular Society was created by a number of individual members.⁷

The Leicester Secular Society is, however, unique not only for its strength during the heyday of Secularist activity in Britain (1880 - 1900)

but also for its survival to the present day. This can be explained by the far-sighted decision of Josiah Gimson to commit the Society to the acquisition of a hall in 1881, which he then used his own money to guarantee. The effectiveness of this is demonstrated by the chequered and intermitent history of the Leicester Secular Society before 1881. The insecurity engendered by the problems associated with rented premises was obviously a factor in Gimson's calculations. The ability of the Society to survive also owed much to the personality and commitment of Josiah Gimson. It was he who lead the small group of disconsolate Owenites from the darkness of the later 1840s into the comparative light of the 1880s. Some of them were able to benefit from the economic prosperity and social equipoise of mid-Victorian Britain, and lived to enjoy both material and political success. The Leicester Secular Society was always to rely for financial support on a small group of prosperous radical manufacturers, though the heaviest burden fell on Josiah Gimson and his heirs. The Society was always short of funds, which could often hamper and frustrate activity, but with the Gimson's help and the assets of the hall, the Society managed to survive these intermittent crises.

Despite its problems the Society was conspicuously successful, even in the difficult years before the opening of the hall. Though organised only sporadically before 1867, the Leicester Secularists maintained a radical presence throughout. The Secular Society was founded and refounded along the organisational lines advocated by G. J. Holyoake, and epitomised, in a local context, the process of radical recovery after the defeats of the later 1840s. Throughout the century the Society continued to pay homage to the ideological triumvirate of Robert Owen, John Stuart Mill and George Jacob Holyoake, though characteristically the last of these also remained an emphatically human presence until 1906. Secularism was Owenism recast for

survival in an 'Old Immoral World' which, in mid century, was either not quite so 'Immoral' or was becoming more subtle in its operation. Within this world the self-improver who had always been attracted to the educational aspects of Owenism was able to find a new home that would offer him both succour and prestige. From its classless, co-operative origins Owenism, recast as Secularism, was able to develop a new culture of collective self-help which effectively grafted economic and social reality on to what had often appeared a millennial dream. Based on the twin tenets of independence and respectability, the life of the Leicester Secular Society provided a route for radical survival in the potentially troubled and lonely waters of urbanising Britain. This independence and reliance upon the locality meant that the Secular Society was effectively shielded from problems that beset national structures and institutions. Its relations with the national movement were always tortuous, motivated by a deep-seated suspicion and the failure of either side to appreciate the other's position. The national movement continually chided the Society for its inactivity and squandering of resources on non-secularist lecturers, whilst the Leicester Society objected to the strident nature of much national propaganda and the cursory treatment of its own ideological idols. In the final analysis both were right but neither could appreciate that by this stage the national and the local were in reality fundamentally different organisations performing different functions.

Because of this division the Leicester Society was effectively shielded from the decline that overtook the national movement. Likewise its rigid maintenance of a free platform preserved the Society from linking its future fortunes to those of other institutions and forms of collectivism. Thus approaches from Stanton Coit's Ethical Church and from the Independent Labour Party were both confidently rebuffed. But, although the Society was

able to preserve itself from the immediate problems posed by the world of leisure, it could not insulate itself from their wider effects. As other institutions succumbed to commercial opportunism, the Society chose to stand firm and demand quality in keeping with its self-improving clientele. It was to this instinct that the ideas of William Morris appealed.

Morris was the only speaker to seriously bring a new ideological tinge to the work of the Society. His message was the nearest to an ideal for living that the Society had heard since Owen and it emerged specifically as a way of thinking rather than a simple ideology. Within its terms those, who chose to adopt it were able to frame their other important experiences of life, work and art. Moreover it was a system for creating little independent utopias in what seemed to be an otherwise barren urban landscape created by Christianity, capitalism and commerce. Such an idea had far reaching appeal to those of all classes, but especially to the self-improving artisan. The Secular Society was committed to the testing of all ideas and as such the message of Morris was pressed into service alongside the differing economic and social preferences of the Society's adherents.

However, from the 1890s the presence of a male artisan elite in the Society perceptibly declined. This reflected the changes that were taking place in the industrial structure of Leicester from workshop and outwork production to the factory system. In this sense a whole way of life as well as artisanal notions of self-improvement had been living on borrowed time in Leicester, one of its last enclaves.

The history of the Society into the twentieth century might have been very different had it not been for F. J. Gould. In his nine years' stay, Gould not only prevented decline but instigated a considerable revival in the fortunes of the Society. The welcome that Gould received arose at least in part from the fact that traditional artisan adherents were being replaced by

younger professional or white collar workers and women, who generally had more sympathy with Gould's Positivism and its aspirations. But, it must also be remembered that Gould did not entirely intimate to the Society his plans when he was appointed, and he met with stiff opposition from the old guard when too much change was threatened. Though Gould's 'capture' of the Leicester Secular Society was largely achieved through a mixture of duplicity and the demographic backdoor of membership recruitment, his control over the Society and events within it was never total. Gould's period of work rested on a mutually agreeable bargain. He gave his own hard work and created a respectable notoriety which enabled the Society to buck the national trend of decline. In return, Gould gained a salaried position within a locally respected institution with its own platform from which he could publicise his views and launch a national career. Whilst the terms of the agreement were on occasions strained, both by Gould's frequent forays into local politics and also by the Society's own intransigence, it nevertheless lasted for nine productive years. The agreement broke down when Gould perceived that opportunities were drying up at the same time as the Society was also becoming convinced that he was not delivering the goods. In the event Gould was as eager to leave as the Society was to discharge him of his duties.

Once again the Leicester Secular Society might have been faced with death by slow starvation, had it not been for a partial revival occasioned by the First World War. In the resulting climate of unease and suspicion the Society was able to rally and reconstitute itself as a pressure group to defend liberalism from numerous foreign and domestic enemies.

In an article written in 1969 F. H. Amphlett Micklewright pleaded for more local studies of Secularism and intimated that Secularism was noticeably strong in areas where light industry, particularly textiles, was dominant. Moreover, he also suggested that Secularism flourished where

Puritanism and religious dissent had also been strong and that such a phenomenon represented 'the extreme left wing of Protestant dissent in its final stage of disintegration.'²⁹. The evidence from Huddersfield, Failsworth and Leicester would tend to support the first two assertions though the survival of the Leicester Secular Society suggests a different conclusion to the third. The ability of the Society to regroup during the Great War around a position that had, by that time, a purely political significance would suggest that during the Edwardian period theories of political and class affiliation replaced religion as the dominant ideological motivation and constraint. Though this provided yet another form of secularisation for local and national societies to be concerned with, the Leicester Society was able to keep abreast of this development and ensure its survival.

In a broader context this study of the Leicester Secular Society has wider implications for an understanding of nineteenth century radicalism. This local Secular Society represented an example of radicalism which spanned the period from the late 1840s when the forces of Chartism and Owenite communitarianism were scattered, to the rise of the I.L.P.. During this time the Society was school to a whole generation of radicals who helped shape the new Socialism of the 1880s and later. The radicalism of the earlier nineteenth century and the socialism of the later nineteenth century have had their historians. This study I hope fills the gap that has so far existed in understanding the way in which Secularists brought old and new ideas together. At Leicester the members of the Secular Society were a broad 'church'. It was this characteristic openness and penchant for collective self-help that persuaded several Leicester Secularists to accept Socialism where the national movement remained suspicious. Moreover the ability to mix with other reformers within a locality provided the mainspring for much radical activity. The historian looking for a radical continuity from the

eighteen fifties will find it more readily in the small enclaves of Holyoake-style Secularism than in the pages of Karl Marx!

The Leicester Secular Society also provides an important test for the tactics utilised in the survival of a radical ideology. Socialist writers have reminded us that conventional notions of individualism and self help have been largely colonised and espoused by the political right since the later nineteenth century. More attention needs to be paid to the significance of these concepts, not as ideologies in themselves, but rather as expressions of organisational necessity and strategy. Improvement and self-improvement were as much valued as weapons in the radical armoury as was the strike, the co-operative organisation or the communitarian spade. All were utilised in the search for a better world. Attempts to have small slices of utopia in everyday life have so far received little consideration. This area is still largely unexplored territory and I hope that this work has at least pointed to themes for further study.

When I started this examination of the Leicester Secular Society I expected to report a story of sad decline and to find an institution facing extinction. I have been surprised to find in Leicester in 1988 a Society that is continuing to attract new members and maintains its fine tradition for interesting and diverse lectures. This is partly explained by a perception that Britain in the 1980s still needs institutions to protect liberal free speech and citizens rights from encroaching state legislation. With the collapse of the consensus politics of the nineteen sixties the defence of liberal values has again become the priority of pressure groups that thrive on oppositional values and local organisation such as Friends of the Earth, C.N.D and Greenpeace. The effectiveness of the ideology espoused by the Leicester Secular Society and its progenitors remains impressive. It is still today, as it always has been, a haven for those who seek to express their

opposition to the prevailing values and mores of society. Even in 1988 the Society received an unconscious endorsement of its ideology and history when at the first Conference of the Social and Liberal Democratic Party it was decided to present the leader, not with a copy of Milton's 'Aeropagitica'(a polite request for freedom of the press) but a more strident volume demanding freedom of speech and tolerance for plurality; John Stuart Mill's essay 'On Liberty'.

Footnotes to Conclusion

- 1: Freethinker, 7 February 1909. Quoted in Edward Royle, Radicals, Secularists and Republicans (1980), page 118.
- 2: National Reformer, 1 December 1878. Quoted in Ibid. pages 139 - 40.
- 3: Ibid. page 322.
- 4: Ben Brierley, Failsworth, My Native Village (Oldham 1895), pages 19 - 20 and 22 - 5.
- 5: J. E. M. Smith, 'Failsworth Secular Sunday School', Freethought News, September, October 1947.
- 6: F. H. Amphlett Micklewright, 'The Local History of Victorian Secularism', Local Historian VIII number 6 (1969) p.p. 221 - 7, page 223.
- 7: Royle, Radicals Secularist and Republicans, pages 323 - 24.
- 8: Amphlett Micklewright, 'History of Victorian Secularism', page 227.

APPENDIX 1

Catalogue of the Leicester Secular Society Photographic Album

Frontispiece: Collection of photographs begun December 31 1902 by F.J.Gould. Book rebound March 1908.

Page 1: Lithograph of proposed Failsworth Sunday School.

Page 2: Photographs of G.J.Holyoake (1903), Mrs. Deborah Ross, Charles Bradlaugh, Mrs. Wright (wife of Michael Wright), Mrs. Strong. Print of Thomas Paine.

Page 3: Photographs of William Morris, Robert Ingersoll, Annie Besant, J.M.Robertson (1901) Houses of Parliament subtitled Bradlaugh's residence (sic), Charles Bradlaugh, William Wilber (1900). Condolence card for the death of Harriet Law (July 19th 1897).

Page 4: Photographs of Thomas Slater, Abraham Fitchett (1892), The Secular Hall, National Secular Society Conference at Leicester Whitsuntide June 1897 (including G.W.Foote, J.M.Wheeler, C.Cohen, J.M.Robertson).

Page 5: Copied Photographs of Ralph Waldo Emerson, Herbert Spencer, Ernst Haeckel, H.M.Hyndman. Photograph of G.J.Holyoake (1904).

Page 6: Large page size Photograph of Charles Bradlaugh.

Page 7: Copy of Photograph of G.J.Holyoake (from Watts' Literary Guide).

Page 8: Photographs of Mr. J.Cartwright (1903), Mrs. Hypatia Bradlaugh Bonner (circa 1900), Mr. B.Drake (honorary member of the Society, died 1906). Newspaper cutting of Mr. W.B.Hornidge (member of the Society and the Boot and Shoe Operatives Union Secretary, recently made a magistrate, November 1905). Invitation card to the funeral of G.J.Holyoake Saturday January 27th 1906.

Page 9: Photographs of H.Dix Hutton (1906), J.Capenhurst (died October 28th 1897, Mr. Ainge (a veteran member 1908), Philip Wright of Quorn (a stereoscope taken by W.H.Holyoak.)

Page 10: Photographs of Mr. Thomas Emery.

Page 11: Group Photographs of Sunday School excursions to Ulverscroft July 1900 & 1902 (taken by Sydney Gimson).

Page 12: Photographs of childrens Operetta "Snow White" (1904). Two Photographs of scenery painted by F.J.Gould.

Page 13: Photographs of Woolley family (Mr. S.Woolley, Mrs. S.Woolley, & Miss Anne Woolley), Miss Gertrude Leedham as a child (May 1905), Hilda Sharman (1906), Julian Harney (1893, a portrait given to F.J.Gould by Harney himself).

Page 14: Photographs of cast of "Snow White" (1904, includes single Photographs of P.Butterworth and Lily Whait). Two more Photographs of dramatic scenery painted by F.J.Gould.

Page 15: Photographs of J.M.Gimson, one taken from "The Wyvern" (March 9th 1901), plus newspaper cutting.

Page 16: Photographs of Mr. Cartwright's bazaar tea (summer 1907), Photographs of cast of "Golden Hair and the Three Bears" cast (1905).

Page 17: More Photographs of "Golden Hair and the Three Bears" which lists as present Daisy Bailey, Gertrude Leedham & Doris Warner.

Page 18: More Photographs of "Golden Hair and the Three Bears" including scenery Photographs. Portrait Photographs of Miss Amy Woolley (1905), Vega Essex (1901, listed by an unknown hand as still a member of the Leicester Secular Society in 1980), Beatrice Sharman (1901 & 1903).

Page 19: Portrait of F.J.Gould with article from "Pitman's Phonetic Journal (July 11th 1903). Portrait grouping from the "Agnostic Journal" which includes Gould with, amongst others, W. Stewart Ross and Douglas Fawcett. (circa 1895?). Photograph of Mr. Murston (1904, an aged and respected member of the society).

Page 20: Group Photograph of the Leicester Ethical Guild (August 1902).

Page 21: Photograph of Mrs. Perkins (1906, an energetic Sunday School worker, died 1906).

Page 22: Photographs of Mr. Cartwright (died 1915) & Mrs. Cartwright (died 1909), Reform bookstall at the Trades Union Congress held at the Temperance Hall (September 1903), one Photograph unidentified.

Page 23: Photographs of the Cricket club, the Clarion Cycling club and the Ramblers(?) club (dates unknown).

Page 24: Photographs of the Young Men's Ethical Guild (1908), Leicester Secular Sunday School, one taken with friends, Ulverscroft (1909).

Page 25: Photographs of the Sunday School at Farryans farm, Ulverscroft (1899). Publicity Photographs of Burleigh Brook Park (visited by the Sunday School June 1905 & 1906).

Page 26: Photographic portraits of Lorrie Perkins, Mr. Perkins, Mr. Warden, Mrs. Max Bunton & daughter, F.J.Gould.

Page 27: Portrait of Mr. John Fallows M.A. (1902). Photograph of the company of "Caste" taken in Derbyshire (1905).

Page 28: Photographs of Walter Warner (1903 & 1905), Mr. & Mrs. S.A.Gimson (January 1905). Group Photograph (1905).

Page 29: Two Photographs of Sunday School outing to Burley (sic) Brook Park (July 1906), Mr. James Cooper as "King Merryheart" in Operetta "The Enchanted Rose" (1908). Newspaper cutting and Photograph of George Lansbury (no date).

Page 30: Two Photographs of camp at Markfield (August 1903), Mr. & Mrs. J. Essex and children (1905), Eric G. Orton, Harry Leedham (as a child in costume).

Page 31: Newspaper cutting and Photograph of Sydney Gimson from "The Wyvern" (January 16th 1904).

Page 32: Photographs of Sydney Gimson's cottage and the choir at his cottage (Saturday June 4th 1904).

Page 33: Photograph of Albert & Harold Capenhurst (as children) (1906), group Photograph of a visit to Swithland Woods (1904).

Page 34: Photograph of W.H.Scott (20/4/06), unidentified Photograph of group of children in dramatic dress.

Page 35: Photographs of H.Anderson & Mrs. Capenhurst, Edgar Eagle as "Bellman" in Operetta "Bold Robin and the babes" (1907). Newspaper Photographs of J.R.Macdonald and E.Clay (formerly member of the Leicester Secular Society, now Honorary Secretary of the Wellington branch of New Zealand Socialist Party).

Page 36: Photographs of Sunday School and friends at High Tor farm Charnwood Forest (Saturday July 6th 1907).

Page 37: Photographs of Mrs. Ensor, and the Ladies sewing circle (1907).

Page 38: Newspaper Photograph of Mr. Thomas Hayes of Failsworth (August 1907), one portrait unidentified.

Page 39: Photographs of Mr. Jas. Cooper (1907), Sir Edward Wood J.P. Mayor of Leicester, group Photograph of Miss L.Eagle, Miss E.Chawner & Miss M.Warner.

Page 40: Photograph of Miss Gardner (1907). Newspaper Photographs of W.Stewart Ross & Mr. H.H.Woolley.

Page 41: Photographs of Mrs. Potter & Mrs. Edith Ensor L.L.C.M. (1908), one unidentified Photograph. Lithographed Picture of Moncure D.Conway.

Page 42: Photograph of Mr. John Potter (former Vice-President of the Leicester Secular Society, member of the Leicester School Board. Also interested in the Desford industrial School and the Co-operative movement). group Photograph of outing taken at Cressbrook Derbyshire (August 1908).

Page 43: Photographs of Thomas M.Watts (Socialist, Secularist, Doctor and Associate member of the society), Mr. & Mrs. Leeson (1908), group photograph taken at Stoneywell cottage.

Page 44: Photographs of F.J.Gould, L.Smith, the Sunday School Senior Class at Sydney Gimson's cottage (June 1909), one unidentified Photograph.

Page 45: Photographs of G.W.Foote, Gordon Tate (1916), Elsie Warner.

Page 46: Photographs of Mr. J.Butterworth (pictured standing beside a giant Redwood in British Columbia), Edward Carpenter, three Photographs of Tom Barclay.

Page 47: Photographs of interior and exterior of the Secular Hall, Humberstone Gate.

Page 48: Portrait Photographs of Mr. & Mrs. S.Hassell (1917, the latter listed as 100 years old in 1980 by unknown hand), Mrs. Boshier (1917). Photograph of Francisco Ferrer (Reproduced from "The Literary Guide").

Page 49: Photographs of Mr. Herbert E.Anderson, E.Harry Hassell, Mrs.S. Hassell. Group Photograph of 50th Anniversary of the opening of the Hall, featuring: E.Hassell, Charles Bradlaugh Bonner, Lord (Harry) Snell, Professor Graham Wallas, Mrs. Bradlaugh Bonner, Mr. Arthur Bonner.

Page 50: Photographs of Mr. G.Butterworth, Mr. Jack Butterworth, Mr. C.Miller (all in World War One uniform). Group Photograph of unidentified camp, one unidentified Photograph, Photographs of interior and exterior of the Hall.

Page 51: Photographs of Sunday School outing (June 6th 1920).

Page 52: Photographs of Sunday School outing (June 6th 1920).

Page 53: Photographs of Sunday School outing (June 12th 1921).

Page 54: Photographs of Sunday School outing (June 12th 1921).

Page 55: Photographs of Sunday School outing to Longcliffe (1922).

Page 56: Two Photographs of society outing to Longcliffe Wood (June 10th 1923). Photograph of gravestone of Tom Barclay. Postcard of bust of Voltaire.

Page 57: Secular Dramatic circle Cast Photographs of "Leonarda".

Page 58: Secular Dramatic circle Cast Photographs of "The Servant in the House" (February 8th 1925) & "The Rivals" (December 11th 1927).

Page 59: Secular Dramatic circle Cast Photographs of "The Mock Doctor" (February 6th 1928).

Page 60: Secular Dramatic circle Cast Photographs of "Young Heaven" (February 6th 1928) & "The Barber of Seville" (April 6th 1930).

Page 61: Secular Dramatic circle Cast Photographs of "Nathan the Wise" (March 24th 1929).

Page 62: Secular Dramatic circle Cast Photographs of "Augustus in Search of a Father" (November 1st 1931).

Page 63: Secular Dramatic circle Cast Photographs of "The Rib of the Man".

Page 64: Secular Dramatic circle Cast Photographs of "George Dandin"
(November 1st 1931).

Page 65: Secular Dramatic circle Cast Photographs of "The Servant in the
House" (March 29th 1931).

Page 66: Secular Dramatic circle Cast Photographs of "The Servant in the
House" (March 29th 1931).

Page 67: unidentified group Photographs (circa 1930?).

Page 68: Newspaper obituaries of Sydney Gimson.

Page 69: Group Photograph taken outside Sydney Gimson's cottage.
Portrait of W. Wilber. Newspaper Photograph of Sydney Gimson's cottage on
fire.

Page 70: Secular Dramatic circle Cast Photographs of "The Dear
Departed".

Page 71: Secular Dramatic circle Cast Photographs of "The Bishop's
Candlesticks" & "Nathan the Wise".

Page 72: Photographs of W. Smith, J. Cliff, H. Hassell.

Page 73: Photographs of Boy's Cycling Club (1939), Boy's Club (1959),
group Photograph of society at Trentham Gardens (1958).

Page 74: Photograph of Youth Club committee (c.1963?), one unidentified Photograph.

Page 75: Photographs of Boy's Club (1960), society visit to National Secular Society (1958).

Page 76: Colour Photographs of society visit to Warwick Castle (1977).

Appended at the end of the album. Original drawings by Lerner Sugden for the ornamental busts outside the Hall. One Photograph of the Hall interior showing portraits hanging above the stage.

APPENDIX 2

Analysis of shareholders in the Secular Hall Company. (1875)

<u>occupation</u>	<u>No. in group</u>	<u>No. of shares owned</u>	<u>percentage</u>
Engineer	1	665	66.5
Elastic web	1	40	4.00
Manufacturer			
Dyer	1	60	6.00
Tailor	1	18	1.80
Machinist	1	40	4.00
Bag Hosier	1	17	1.70
Butcher	2	10	1.00
Framework Knitter	3	5	0.50
Bookseller	2	7	0.70
Elastic Weaver	1	2	0.20
Journalist	1	7	0.70
Matrass Maker	1	5	0.50
Timekeeper	1	1	0.10
Overlooker	1	2	0.20
Stoker	1	5	0.50
Printer	1	1	0.10
Mechanic	1	1	0.10
Framesmith	1	1	0.10
General Dealer	1	7	0.70
Basket Maker	1	2	0.20
Manager	2	8	0.80
Needlemaker	1	1	0.10

<u>occupation</u>	<u>No. in group</u>	<u>No. of shares owned</u>	<u>percentage</u>
Baker	1	6	0.60
Rivetter	1	2	0.20
Clerk	1	2	0.20
Miller	1	6	0.60
Confectioner	1	2	0.20
Hatter	1	8	0.80
Grocer	1	3	0.30
Jeweller	1	20	2.00
Bookbinder	1	20	2.00
Metal Dealer	1	5	0.50
Painter	1	10	1.00
Shoe Dealer	1	3	0.30
Flour Seller	1	4	0.40
Carriage Builder	1	2	0.20

APPENDIX 3

Occupation Analyses 1881 - 1891 & 1891 - 1901.

These two Occupational Analyses are based on the membership nomination book of the Society in which prospective members were obliged to give their names and addresses. Though some appear to have been reluctant to record their precise address (listing it simply as 'Leicester') most were co-operative. These details have been checked in trade directories relevant for the period both before and after the date of entry. However it must be remembered that trade directories are not very reliable in tracing the unskilled worker since there is generally no occupational classification for Labourers (an exception to this is an unusual run of directories covering Norwich for the 1890's). Though consulting the 1881 census may turn up evidence for some of these it risks distorting the whole sample. Many listed at an address appear in only one annual directory being absent from that of the previous and following year, indicating a rapid turnover and mobility of population with many living at a given address only for a matter of months. Indeed it is precisely this mobility that makes a large number of people untraceable through even an unbroken series of directories.

The tables below have been divided chronologically into two in an attempt to provide homogenous ten year samples of membership. One analysis covering twenty years would not be sensitive to various trends occurring during the whole period.

The structure of the analysis is designed not simply to distinguish proprietors from tradesmen and labourers, but also to indicate the relative social and economic prosperity of those proprietors. Thus those proprietors engaged in manufacturing industry are classed separately

from those engaged in the retail trade. Equally those in possession of more than one set of premises, or a house separate to their retail premises, are listed in different categories.

One characteristic of the economic structure of Leicester (but not unique to the city) that needs mentioning is the incidence of people following a number of occupations simultaneously. Examples include those listed as 'Hairdresser, tobacconist and umbrella maker' and 'Shopkeeper, bricklayer and builder'. Unfortunately the analysis cannot bring out this diversity without negating other aspects that it was intended to show and also complicating the practice of categorisation to a needlessly difficult degree. Thus all those entered in the tables appear under the occupation that is listed first for them in the relevant trade directories. However where there is an obvious difference in the nature of two similar trades (i.e. a Beer Retailer and shopkeeper is less reliant on the licensed trade than a publican) this is emphasised. Likewise where an individual from the skilled manual group shows evidence of occupying retail premises this is also indicated.

All those listed at an address in the Trade Directory but without an occupation are listed in the category 'Other', as are all those whose address is listed as a lodging house. Though precise evidence is lacking it must be assumed that many of these individuals were unskilled labourers. The exception to this is where an address given is in an obviously upper middle class area when the occupants are treated as having private income. Those who list their address as a commercial premises in at least two consecutive trade directories, and are not the proprietors are deemed to be employed in those premises.

Women are recorded separately since, though they may in some cases share the same occupation as their male counterparts, one main purpose

of the analysis is to investigate the relative and fluctuating gender composition of the Society. It should be noted that all women listed in the nomination books appear in the analyses, unlike their male counterparts who only appear if they are positively traceable. Thus the level of participation of women in the Society is considered in relation to the total list of members and not simply the occupational analysis of those traceable. Likewise the marital status of women is included to illuminate possible trends in membership and leisure patterns within both the Secular Society and Leicester as a whole.

1: 1881 - 1891.

Total number of nominations: 757¹

Total number traced: 371 (49%)

MEN

I: Holders of private income.

: 1

total: 1 (0.26%)

II: Manufacturing proprietorial.

Shoe manufacturer: 9

Engineering manufacturer: 5²

Blue dyer: 1

Hosiery machinist & needle maker: 1

Hosiery manufacturer: 1

Matting manufacturer: 1

Beer engine maker: 1

Bedding manufacturer: 1

total: 20 (5.39%)

III: Proprietorial (multi-premises)

Tailor & draper: 2

Shopkeeper: 3

Cheese & provision merchant: 1

Marine store dealer: 2

Printer: 2

Hairdresser: 1

Bootmaker: 2

General carter: 1

Greengrocer: 2

Herbalist & druggist: 1

Drysalter: 1

Furniture dealer: 1

Last & model maker: 1

Corn factor: 2

Gun dealer: 1

Coal merchant: 2

Unspecified: 1

Shoe mercer: 1

Cattle dealer: 1

Pawnbroker: 1

total: 29 (7.81%)

IV: Proprietorial (single premises)

Tailor & draper: 4	Beer retailer & shopkeeper: 4
Hard confectioner: 4	Stationer: 2
Bag hosier: 2	Newsagent: 3
Fried fish dealer: 1	Publican: 4
Shopkeeper: 2	Fishing tackle dealer: 1
Herbalist: 1	Bootmaker, leather & grindery dlr.: 2
Grindery dlr.: 1	Hatter: 1
Greengrocer: 5	Pork pie maker & confectioner: 1
Hairdresser : 2	Grocer: 1
Pastrycook: 2	Shopkeeper: 1
Photographer: 2	Jeweller: 1
Sewing machine agent: 1	Agent (unspecified): 1
Ale, stout & cigar mercer: 1	General (textile) agent: 1
Baker & flour dealer: 1	Watchmaker & jeweller: 1
<u>total: 53 (14.28%)</u>	

V: Professional

Accountant: 1	Trade unionist: 2
Political secretary: 1	Musician: 1
Surgeon: 1	Friendly Society superintendant: 1
<u>total: 7 (1.88%)</u>	

VI: White Collar

Travelling draper: 1	Merchant manager: 4
Commercial traveller: 3	Cashier: 1
Clerk: 7	Manufacturers foreman: 4
Railway goods clerk: 2	Railway inspector: 1
Factory overlooker: 1	Clicker's foreman: 1

Postal telegraphist: 1

total: 26 (7%)

VII: Skilled Manual

Carriage builder: 1

Tailor: 6

Joiner: 8

Gardener: 1

Bootmaker: 8

Painter: 4

Brush & basket maker: 1

Butcher: 1

Brazier & tinner: 1

Piano tuner & repairer: 2

Chimney sweep: 1

total: 47 (12.6%)

VIII: Semi & Unskilled

Warehouseman: 3

Letter carrier: 1

Druggist's assistant: 2

Framework knitter: 1

total: 14 (3.7%)

IX: Other

Listed at address: 57

total: 81 (21.8%)

Blacksmith: 1

Cabinet maker: 1

Plasterer: 1

Boot repairer: 2

Staircase maker: 1

Picture framer: 2

Saddler: 1

Foreman clicker: 2

Foreman bricklayer: 1

Needle maker: 1

Shop assistant: 4

Servant: 1

Sewing machinist: 1

Clothiers hand: 1

Listed in lodgings: 24

WOMEN

I: Women (without specified occupation).

Married: 35

Single: 45

total(percentage of all nominations): 80 (10.56%)

II: Married Women (specified occupation).

Hosiery hand: 1

Dressmaker: 1

Architect's secretary: 1

Shopkeeper: 1

total(percentage of all nominations): 4 (0.52%)

(percentage of all traced nominations): 1.07%

III: Single Women (Specified occupation).

Shop assistant: 2

Dressmaker: 2

Unspecified: 1

Servant: 1

Milliner: 1

Boot repairer: 1

Boot manufacturers operative: 1

total(percentage of all nominations): 9 (1.18%)

(percentage of all traced nominations): 2.42%

Number of married women (percentage of all women): 39 (41%)

Number of single women (percentage of all women): 54 (58%)

Total number of women (total percentage of all nominations): 93 (12.2%)

2: 1891 - 1901.

Total number of nominations: 777^a

Total number traced: 370 (47.6%)

MEN

I: Holders of private income.

: 4

total: 4 (1.08%)

II: Manufacturing proprietorial.

Shoe manufacturer: 5

Engineering manufacturer: 1

Disinfectant manufacturer: 1

Artificial limb manufacturer: 1

Clothing manufacturer: 1

Ironfounder & range manufacturer: 1

total: 10 (2.7%)

III: Proprietorial (multi-premises)

Printer: 1

Bootmaker & grindery dlr.: 2

Coal & Provision dealer: 1

Cattle dealer: 1

Pawnbroker: 1

Wagonette proprietor: 1

Builders merchant: 1

Wholesale Tailor: 2

Coal agent: 1

Grocer & corn dealer: 1

Grocer & provision merchant: 1

Timber merchant: 2

total: 15 (4.05%)

IV: Proprietorial (single premises)

Beer retailer & shopkeeper: 3

Newsagent: 1

Publican: 3

Shopkeeper: 4

Greengrocer: 3

Pork pie maker & confectioner: 1

Hairdresser : 3

Grocer: 1

Sewing machine agent: 1

General (textile) agent: 1

Guilder & picture framer: 1

Cheese & egg dealer: 1

Pork butcher: 1

Haberdasher: 1

total: 30 (8.1%)

V: Professional

Actor: 10⁴

Music teacher: 2

Accountant: 2

total: 17 (4.6%)

VI: White Collar

Merchant manager: 1

Clerk: 4

Architect's assistant: 1

Postal clerk: 1

total: 10 (2.7%)

VII: Skilled Manual

Tailor: 3

Gardener: 1

Bootmaker: 4

Bricklayer: 2

Outfitter's assistant: 1

total: 21 (5.68%)

VIII: Semi & Unskilled

Warehouseman: 1

Druggist's assistant: 1

Tripe dresser: 1

Tailor's cutter: 1

Builder: 2

Brewery Agent: 1

Tobbaconist: 1

Dyer & cleaner: 1

Teacher: 2

Engineer: 1

Commercial traveller: 1

Manufacturers foreman: 1

Brewery manager: 1

Joiner: 2

Boot repairer: 2

Painter: 4

Plumber: 1

Box maker: 1

Shop assistant: 10

Sewing machinist: 1

Cigar manufacturers operative: 1

Hosiery hand: 1

Boot & shoe operative: 1 House cleaner: 1

Servant: 2

total: 21 (5.68%)

IX: Other

Listed at address: 34

Listed in lodgings: 22

total: 56 (15.14%)

WOMEN

I: Women (without specified occupation).

Married: 67

Single: 96

total(percentage of all nominations): 163 (20.98%)

II: Married Women (specified occupation).

Hosiery hand: 1

Dressmaker: 1

Florist: 1

Shop assistant: 3

Shoe Operative: 1

Beer retailer: 1

Shopkeeper: 1

total(percentage of all nominations): 9 (1.15%)

(percentage of all traced nominations): 2.43%

III: Single Women (Specified occupation).

Shop assistant: 5

Dressmaker: 1

Drapers assistant: 1

Lace curtain dresser: 1

Unspecified: 1

Servant: 1

Boot manufacturers operative: 1

Haberdashers assistant: 1

Post office assistant: 1

Music teacher: 1

total(percentage of all nominations): 14 (1.8%)

(percentage of all traced nominations): 3.78%

Number of married women (percentage of all women): 76 (40.86%)

Number of single women (percentage of all women): 110 (59.14%)

Total number of women (total percentage of all nominations): 186 (23.9%)

Footnotes

1: Excludes a small number of national figures given honorary membership which would otherwise distort the sample.

2: Five male members of the Gimson family.

3: Excludes 57 out of town visitors enrolled on January 21st 1895 in order to use the club facilities. They gave addresses which include the following; Arbroath, Bristol, Wolverhampton, Kingswood, Kettering, Stratford, Leeds, Dublin, London, Wellingborough, Hinckley, Northampton, Hyham, Glasgow, Norwich, Manchester, Ipswich, Barwell and Anstey.

4: Includes ten members listing their address as the Theatre Royal.

APPENDIX 4

Analysis of Recruitment by year (1880 - 1900).¹

1881	.....	30
1882	.....	42
1883	.....	27
1884	.....	26
1885	.....	104
1886	.....	160
1887	.....	125
1888	.....	100
1889	.....	101
1890	.....	94
1891	.....	123
1892	.....	66
1893	.....	73
1894	.....	97
1895	.....	90
1896	.....	74
1897	.....	63
1898	.....	56
1899	.....	44
1900	.....	93
1901	.....	1 ²

Footnotes

1: These totals include those renewing lapsed membership since they are deemed to be re-affirming commitment to the principles of the Society. This may be in response to a range of both local and national factors.

2: At this point the nomination book ceases.

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