

Charles Bradlaugh

Charles Bradlaugh (/ˈbrædlɔː/; 26 September 1833 – 30 January 1891) was an English political activist and an atheist and British republican. He founded the National Secular Society in 1866.^[1]

In 1880, Bradlaugh was elected as the Liberal MP for Northampton. His attempt to affirm as an atheist, rather than take a parliamentary Oath of Allegiance which assumed a new MP was a Christian (and a Monarchist), ultimately led to his temporary imprisonment, fines for voting in the Commons illegally, and a number of by-elections at which Bradlaugh regained his seat on each occasion. He was finally allowed to take an oath in 1886. Eventually, a parliamentary bill which he proposed became law in 1888 which allowed members of both Houses of Parliament to affirm, if they so wished, when being sworn in. The new law also resolved the issue for witnesses in civil and criminal court cases.



BRADLAUGH AT TWENTY.

1 Early life

Born in Hoxton (an area in the East End of London), Bradlaugh was the son of a solicitor's clerk. He left school at the age of eleven and then worked as an office errand-boy and later as a clerk to a coal merchant. After a brief spell as a Sunday school teacher, he became disturbed by discrepancies between the Thirty-nine Articles of the Anglican Church and the Bible. When he expressed his concerns, the local vicar, John Graham Packer, accused him of atheism and suspended him from teaching.^[2] He was thrown out of the family home and was taken in by Eliza Sharples Carlile, the widow of Richard Carlile, who had been imprisoned for printing Thomas Paine's *The Age of Reason*. Soon Bradlaugh was introduced to George Holyoake, who organised Bradlaugh's first public lecture as an atheist.

At the age of 17, he published his first pamphlet, *A Few Words on the Christian Creed*. However, refusing financial support from fellow freethinkers, he enlisted as a soldier with the Seventh Dragoon Guards hoping to serve in India and make his fortune. Instead he was stationed in Dublin. In 1853, he was left a legacy by a great-aunt and used it to purchase his discharge from the army.

2 Activism and journalism

Bradlaugh returned to London in 1853 and took a post as a solicitor's clerk. By this time he was a convinced free-thinker and in his free time he became a pamphleteer and writer about "secularist" ideas, adopting the pseudonym "Iconoclast" to protect his employer's reputation.^[3] He gradually attained prominence in a number of liberal or radical political groups or societies, including the Reform League, Land Law Reformers, and Secularists.

He was President of the London Secular Society from 1858. In 1860 he became editor of the secularist newspaper, the *National Reformer*, and in 1866 co-founded the National Secular Society, in which Annie Besant became his close associate. In 1868, the *Reformer* was prosecuted by the British Government for blasphemy and sedition. Bradlaugh was eventually acquitted on all charges, but fierce controversy continued both in the courts and in the press.

A decade later (1876), Bradlaugh and Besant decided to republish the American **Charles Knowlton's** pamphlet advocating birth control, *The Fruits of Philosophy, or the Private Companion of Young Married People*, whose previous British publisher had already been successfully prosecuted for **obscenity**. The two activists were both tried in 1877, and **Charles Darwin** refused to give evidence in their defence, pleading ill-health, but at the time writing to Bradlaugh that his testimony would have been of little use to them because he opposed birth control. They were sentenced to heavy fines and six months' imprisonment, but their conviction was overturned by the Court of Appeal on a legal technicality. The **Malthusian League** was founded as a result of the trial to promote birth control. He was a member of a Masonic lodge in **Bolton**, although he was later to resign due to the nomination of the **Prince of Wales** as Grand Master.^[4]

On 6 March 1881 he spoke at the opening of **Leicester Secular Society's** new **Secular Hall** in Humberstone Gate, Leicester. The other speakers were **George Jacob Holyoake**, **Annie Besant** and **Harriet Law**.^[5]

3 Politics

Bradlaugh was an advocate of **trade unionism**, **republicanism**, and **universal suffrage**. "...for so long as the working classes are denied justice, and are not admitted to the suffrage in so ample a manner as to outnumber the upper class electors, it is to the working men that Mr. Hare's bill is peculiarly beneficial; and I trust that even if universal suffrage were obtained tomorrow the people would know that a permanent and progressive democracy can only subsist usefully by permitting its opponents to be heard in the national deliberative assembly." The Real Representation of the People^[6]. He opposed Marx's **socialism**^[7] in his work *Some Objections to Socialism*^[8]. His **anti-socialism** was divisive, and many secularists who became socialists left the secularist movement because of its identification with Bradlaugh's **liberal individualism**. He was a supporter of **Irish Home Rule**, and backed France during the **Franco-Prussian War**. He took a strong interest in **India**.

4 Parliament

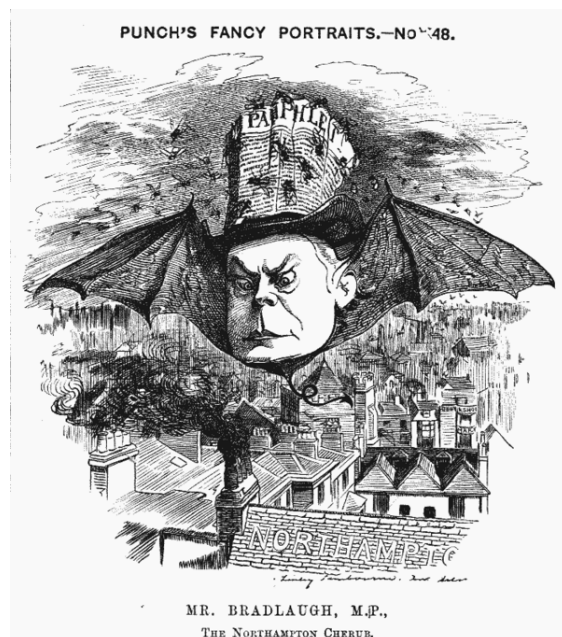
In 1880 Bradlaugh was elected Member of Parliament for **Northampton**. To take his seat and become an active Parliamentarian, he needed to signify his allegiance to the Crown and on 3 May Bradlaugh came to the Table of the House of Commons, bearing a letter to the **Speaker** "begging respectfully to claim to be allowed to affirm" instead of taking the religious **Oath of Allegiance**, citing the Evidence Amendment Acts of 1869 and 1870. Speaker **Brand** declared that he had "grave doubts" and asked the House for its judgment. **Lord Frederick Cavendish**, for



Bradlaugh's arrest in Parliament

the Government, moved that a Select Committee be set up to decide whether persons entitled to make a solemn affirmation in court were also allowed to affirm instead of taking the Parliamentary oath.^{[9][10]}

4.1 First Select Committee



Caricature from Punch, 1881 – "Mr. Bradlaugh, M.P., The Northampton Cherub"

This Select Committee held only one brief meeting on 12 May 1880. The **Attorney General**, Sir Henry James, moved that anyone entitled to affirm to give evidence in court was also entitled to affirm instead of taking the Oath in Parliament. Sir **John Holker**, Conservative MP for **Preston**, moved an amendment to reverse this finding, and the committee split down the middle with eight members (seven Conservatives and **Charles Henry Hopwood**, Liberal MP for **Stockport**) supporting the amendment and

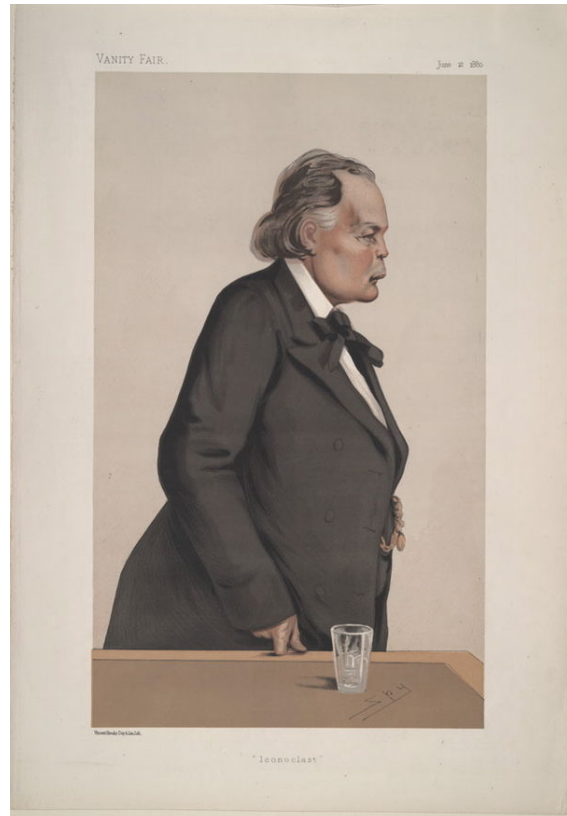
eight (all Liberals) opposing it; on the casting vote of the chairman **Spencer Horatio Walpole** the amendment was carried.^[11] Bradlaugh was not surprised that the Committee had gone against him, and notified the Speaker that he would attend to take the Oath on 21 May.

4.2 Attempts to take the Oath

To explain his actions, Bradlaugh wrote an open letter to *The Times* which was published on the morning of 21 May. He said it would have been hypocritical to voluntarily take the oath “including words of idle and meaningless character” without protest when another form of words was available, but now that the Select Committee had ruled he must, he would do so and “regard myself as bound not by the letter of its words, but by the spirit which the affirmation would have conveyed had I been permitted to use it.” Bradlaugh’s letter was regarded as a direct provocation by his opponents, and when he came to the table, Sir **Henry Drummond Wolff** rose to object to the administration of the Oath to Bradlaugh. Speaker Brand allowed him to object, and Wolff argued that the Evidence Amendment Acts referred to by Bradlaugh only allowed an affirmation to one who regarded the oath as meaningless, so the House should not allow Bradlaugh to take it. Prime Minister **William Gladstone**, alerted to the fact that a protest was possible, moved to set up a second Select Committee to examine whether it was possible to interfere with a Member wishing to take the oath. Gladstone’s amendment was carried by 289 to 214.^[12]

4.3 Second Select Committee

The Select Committee began deliberating on 1 June 1880, when it considered a paper put in by Sir **Thomas Erskine May**, the Clerk of the House. Sir Thomas found several precedents for Members disabled to sit for refusing to take the Oath, together with Quaker MP **Joseph Pease** who was permitted to affirm, and Jewish MPs Baron **Lionel de Rothschild** and **David Salomons** who were eventually allowed to take the Oath while omitting the words “on the true faith of a Christian.”^[13] On the following day, Erskine May and Bradlaugh himself were questioned by the Committee, with Bradlaugh arguing that, should the Committee decide he had no right to affirm, he would take the oath and regard it as binding on his conscience.^[14] When the Committee decided its report, it agreed by one vote an amendment declaring that the House could “and, in the opinion of your Committee, ought to” prevent Bradlaugh taking the Oath.^[15] It also added (by 12 votes to 9) that it would be possible for an action in the High Court of Justice to test whether an affirmation was genuinely legal, and therefore recommended that if Bradlaugh sought to affirm, he should be allowed to do so in order that such an action be brought to clarify the law.^[16] The second Select Committee had effectively reversed the outcome of the first.^[17]



Bradlaugh by Spy in Vanity Fair, 1887

When it was known that this was the likely outcome of the Select Committee, Bradlaugh’s fellow Northampton MP **Henry Labouchère** initiated a debate on a motion to allow Bradlaugh to affirm. Sir **Hardinge Giffard** moved an amendment that Bradlaugh be not permitted to take either the Oath or make an affirmation. After two days of debate,^[18] Giffard’s amendment was carried by 275 to 230, a defeat which surprised Gladstone. The majority comprised 210 Conservatives, 34 Liberals and 31 Irish Home Rulers; supporting Bradlaugh were 218 Liberals, 10 Home Rulers and 2 Conservatives.^[19] On the next day, Bradlaugh came to the Table claiming to take the Oath; in consequence of the previous night’s vote the Speaker ordered him to withdraw. Bradlaugh was permitted to address the House from behind the Bar (which was technically outside the Chamber), and treated the occasion as his **maiden speech**. He based his argument on law, contending that he was not legally disqualified, and asking “as one man against six hundred” for the same justice he would receive in the Courts. Although well received, the speech was too late to reverse the decision, and Henry Labouchère was forced to withdraw a motion to rescind it.^[20]

4.4 Imprisonment

The initial difficulty is in defining the word “God.” It is equally impossible to intelligently affirm or deny any

proposition unless there is at least an understanding, on the part of the affirmer or denier, of the meaning of every word used in the proposition. To me the word “God” standing alone is a word without meaning. . . . So long as the word “God” is undefined I do not deny “God.”

--Charles Bradlaugh^[21]

At that point Bradlaugh was summoned back to the table to be told the outcome of the debate; having relayed it, the Speaker then ordered him to withdraw. Bradlaugh “respectfully refused” to obey an order of the House which was “against the law.” The Conservative leader Sir **Stafford Northcote** successfully moved a motion that Bradlaugh be required to withdraw (agreed on a division by 326 to 38, Liberal MPs being unwilling to challenge a motion which sustained the House’s legal authority) but Bradlaugh “positively refused to obey.” The **Serjeant-at-Arms** was sent for and led Bradlaugh out to the Bar of the House, but Bradlaugh then immediately returned to the table claiming to take the Oath. At this Sir Stafford Northcote moved that Bradlaugh be taken into custody. The House agreed, on a division by 274 votes to 7 and Bradlaugh was taken to the small prison cell located under **Big Ben** in the Clock Tower.^[22]

Lord Randolph Churchill roused the **Conservatives** by leading resistance to Bradlaugh.

Because Members had to take the oath before being allowed to take their seats, he effectively forfeited his seat in Parliament. His seat fell vacant and a by-election was declared. Bradlaugh was re-elected by Northampton four times in succession as the dispute continued. Supporting Bradlaugh were **William Ewart Gladstone**, **T. P. O'Connor** and **George Bernard Shaw** as well as hundreds of thousands of people who signed a public petition. Opposing his right to sit were the **Conservative Party**, the **Archbishop of Canterbury**, and other leading figures in the **Church of England** and **Roman Catholic Church**.

On at least one occasion, Bradlaugh was escorted from the House by police officers. In 1883 he took his seat and voted three times before being fined £1,500 for voting illegally. A bill allowing him to affirm was defeated in Parliament.

In 1886 Bradlaugh was finally allowed to take the oath, and did so at the risk of prosecution under the Parliamentary Oaths Act. Two years later, in 1888, he secured passage of a **new Oaths Act**, which enshrined into law the right of affirmation for members of both Houses, as well as extending and clarifying the law as it related to witnesses in civil and criminal trials (the Evidence Amendment Acts of 1869 and 1870 had proved unsatisfactory, though they had given relief to many who would otherwise have been disadvantaged). Bradlaugh spoke in Parliament about the **London matchgirls strike of 1888**.

5 Personal life

The Biography of Charles Bradlaugh by Adolphe Headingle (1880) states (p. 64) “In 1854, Bradlaugh married the daughter of Mr. Hooper, a working plasterer who had attended the meetings at Bonner’s Fields, where he was among the foremost to applaud his future son-in-law, the boy orator, whose eloquence delighted so many Chartists and Freethinkers.” (“**BONNER’S FIELDS**. An open space on the banks of the Regent’s Canal, near one of the entrances to Victoria Park, and so called from the House of Bishop Bonner at Bethnal Green, lately taken down. These fields were one of the places of assemblage of the Chartist Rioters of 1848. -- Peter Cunningham, *Hand-Book of London*, 1850. Quoted from the online *The Dictionary of Victorian London*.)

His daughter **Hypatia Bradlaugh Bonner** (31 March 1858 – 25 August 1935) was a peace activist, author, atheist and freethinker. He named her after **Hypatia**, the Ancient Greek philosopher, mathematician, astronomer and teacher, who was murdered by a Christian mob.

6 Death

Bradlaugh died on 30 January 1891. His funeral was attended by 3,000 mourners, including a 21-year-old **Mohandas Gandhi**.^{[23][24][25]} He is buried in **Brookwood Cemetery**.^[26]



Photo of the Charles Bradlaugh Statue in Northampton, Abington Square with a large crowd.

In 1898, Bradlaugh’s daughter Hypatia Bradlaugh Bonner wrote a pamphlet in answer to the question that was often addressed to her: whether her father “changed his opinions and became a Christian” before he died. Bonner laid out all the evidence and concluded that her father gave no indication that his opinions had changed in the “smallest” way.^[27]

7 Commemoration

A statue to Bradlaugh is located on a traffic island at Abington Square, **Northampton** and he is remembered annually on the Sunday closest to his birthday, 26 September. The commemoration starts at 3pm and attendees are invited to speak about Charles Bradlaugh. The commemoration, organised by the Charles Bradlaugh Society^[28], started in 2002. 2014 saw the addition of the inaugural Bradlaugh Talk with speakers on issues relevant to Bradlaugh. The first speaker in 2014 was Graham Smith, CEO of 'Republic'. The 2015 speaker was Richard Duncker, MDC, on **Faith-based Assault**. Past speakers at the commemoration have included **Alan Moore**.



Alan Moore speaks at the Bradlaugh Commemoration



Statue back to stone in Abington Square

8 Statue

The statue points west towards the centre of Northampton, the accusing finger periodically missing due to vandalism. In 2014 the statue was cleaned and returned back to the stonework. New signs are to be installed in 2015 on the roundabout reading "Charles Bradlaugh MP". Various local landmarks are named after Bradlaugh, including Bradlaugh Fields^[29] nature reserves, *The Charles Bradlaugh pub*, and Charles Bradlaugh Hall at the **University of Northampton**.

9 See also

- **Luis Emilio Recabarren**, Chilean communist, was prevented from assuming his position because he refused to be sworn on a bible, based on his atheist position

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- *A Plea for Atheism* (included in *Theological Essays*) 1864
- *The Bible: What It Is!* 1870
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11 Citations


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- [2] See Bradlaugh-Bonner (1908, p.8); Headlingly (1888, pp. 5–6); Tribe (1971, p.18)
- [3] Edward Royle, 'Bradlaugh, Charles (1833–1891)', Oxford Dictionary of National Biography, Oxford University Press, Sept 2004; online edn, May 2008 accessed 9 March 2010
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- [7] Theresa Notare, *A Revolution in Christian Morals: Lambeth 1930-Resolution #15. History and Reception* (ProQuest, 2008), 188.
- [8] <https://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/36272>
- [9] Arnstein, p. 34-35.
- [10] *Hansard* 3ser vol 252 cols 20–29.
- [11] Arnstein, p. 38; "Report from the Select Committee on the Parliamentary Oath" HCP 159 (1880).
- [12] Arnstein, p. 40-51; *Hansard* 3ser vol 252 cols 187–221, 333–422.
- [13] "Report from the Select Committee on Parliamentary Oath (Mr. Bradlaugh)", HCP 226 (1880), Appendix No. 1 (pp. 25–33).
- [14] Evidence, Q 85.
- [15] Proceedings of the Select Committee, p. xv–xvi.
- [16] Proceedings of the Select Committee, p. xvii–xviii.
- [17] Arnstein, p. 70.
- [18] *Hansard*, 3ser, vol 253 cols 443–513, 550–628.
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- [20] Arnstein, p. 75-76.
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13 External links

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- Works by Charles Bradlaugh at LibriVox (public domain audiobooks) 
- Hansard 1803–2005: contributions in Parliament by Charles Bradlaugh
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- Browse and search the catalogue of the Charles Bradlaugh Collection and Bradlaugh Papers archive, held at the Bishopsgate Institute, London.
- Charles Bradlaugh Collection, Northamptonshire Central Library, Northampton
- Hackney Plaques and Social History: birthplace of Charles Bradlaugh
- Omnibus: Charles Bradlaugh, BBC World Service radio programme, broadcast 1991
- A bronze bust of Bradlaugh
- Northampton based Charles Bradlaugh Society

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