

Sermon Delivered by Howard Hague  
at Essex Church, 19<sup>th</sup> August 2001 (*slightly amended March 2003*)

# Towards a Unitarian Heritage Trail for London

Some years ago there was an initiative in the movement nationally to compile heritage trails in various parts of the country. To my knowledge there are trails for Glasgow, Cambridge, Norwich, Essex and Suffolk, and no doubt others as well. Work on compiling a heritage trail for London has been a complex and time-consuming business, not least because of the size of our capital city and the number of locations and sites that could be included. If you are fairly new to the movement, you may be surprised to know that even today there are 11 Unitarian congregations in the Greater London area, indeed 13 if you include the fellowships at Watford and Enfield & Barnet. In North London there are churches at Golders Green, Hampstead and Islington, to the east at Newington Green, Stratford and Bethnal Green, to the west here at Kensington, and south of the river at Richmond, Brixton, Lewisham and Croydon.

In the past there were many more congregations, most created during the expansion of the movement in the later 19th century, and where their buildings no longer exist, for example in Walthamstow, Kilburn, Acton, Highgate, Limehouse and Peckham. However, perhaps a surprising number of buildings once occupied by Unitarians have survived, albeit now used for different purposes. The former churches in Bishopsgate and Finchley are now synagogues, the one at Leytonstone a Sikh temple, and Putney a Catholic church. The old Dingley Place Mission, just round the corner from the Moorfields Eye Hospital, off City Road, is now used by Islington Council for their youth justice team. Perhaps the most prestigious building in this category, the old Gravel Pit Meeting in Hackney where Richard Price and Joseph Priestley were ministers, is now a factory. It was built in 1716, and the graveyard down the road is still in existence, though boarded up now for reasons of safety. South of the river, behind the National Theatre on Stamford Street (SE1), can still be found the impressive classical facade of the former Blackfriars church, which only closed in 1962. The six large Doric columns and pediment now front only a school playground, but they are still worth seeing if you are in the area. On Stepney Green, just off the Mile End Road, are the meagre remains of the Stepney College Chapel, once the home of the Central Postal Mission. When I was there a few weeks ago, the mock Tudor facade and remaining brickwork were providing shelter for some goats from the neighbouring city farm.

If you were embarking on a heritage trail in central London, you would probably want to start off in Essex Street, near The Strand. It was here that the Unitarian story in Britain really took off. Within four years of the first service in April 1774 a substantial chapel had been built, and Theophilus Lindsey remained minister until 1793, when failing health caused him to step down. The congregation remained on the site until the 1880s when, because of a declining population in the area, they decided to move out to Kensington. Essex Street then became home to the British and Foreign Unitarian Association, and to the Sunday School Association, and remains the home of our General Assembly (Unitarian Headquarters) to this day. However what you will see today is sadly not the same building where Lindsey preached. Essex Hall was hit by a flying bomb in July 1944, and was almost totally destroyed. The present building opened in 1958, but a plaque to Lindsey will be found inside the entrance hall. On the ground floor the Martineau Hall - named after the leading theologian of our movement in the 19th century, James Martineau - provides a meeting place for our London District Association and for other events, and on the first floor many committees and smaller groups use the Lindsey Room.

The next port of call on our trail might well be Bunhill Fields Cemetery, off City Road and opposite Wesley's Chapel. Bunhill Fields is an oasis of calm in a very busy area, and I especially like it in the spring when the daffodils are out. It is a former Dissenters' burial ground, long disused but now administered by the Corporation of London as an area of open space. Here are buried William Blake, John Bunyan and Daniel Defoe, but they are not the object of our visit. Instead we are looking for the graves of Theophilus Lindsey, Richard Price and Daniel Williams. The Lindsey tomb is in a fairly prominent position in the north-western corner of the cemetery, and there is a seat nearby for a rest. Part of the inscription reads, "Having resigned his preferment in the Church for the sake of truth and a good conscience, he became the founder of the chapel in Essex Street". Lindsey was formerly vicar of Catterick in Yorkshire. The grave is in good condition, and I wonder if it was renovated for the bicentenary celebrations in 1974 of the opening of Essex Street Chapel. Certainly there was a pilgrimage to Bunhill Fields on that occasion, reported in *The Inquirer*.

Richard Price was minister to our congregations at Hackney and Newington Green, though outside the Unitarian movement he is probably more remembered today for his pioneering work in actuarial science and life insurance. The last time I saw his grave (which lies very close to the eastern entrance on City Road) it was not in good condition, due to the effects of weather and time. Daniel Williams, whose fine grave was renovated by his trustees a few years ago, was not a Unitarian but a Welsh Presbyterian. However he is of interest to us because after his death the Dr Williams's Trust and Library was set up, and this contains one of the most important collections of nonconformist historical material in the country. Today the Library is housed in historic premises at 14 Gordon Square, just over the wall from University College. It is worth noting that our

General Assembly found accommodation there when Essex Hall was bombed out in the war, and the same building had been the home of Manchester New College during the later part of the nineteenth century.

Before we leave Bunhill Fields perhaps I could mention a further connection with Essex Church. The cemetery there closed for burials in 1853, and the maintenance of the grounds passed to the Corporation of London in 1867. Two years later the area was re-opened for public use by the then Lord Mayor, Alderman James Clarke Lawrence. The Lawrences were a remarkable Unitarian family, noted for their philanthropy and for their generous support of many of our chapels and missions in London. It was the same Sir James Clarke Lawrence who provided land here at Notting Hill Gate for the new congregation meeting in the area. A temporary 'Iron Church' opened in 1874, to be replaced in 1887 by a rather grander church building when members of the old Essex Street congregation joined them. As we know, that Victorian church was itself replaced by the building in which we are gathered today and which opened in 1977. The last surviving member of the Lawrence family, Mrs Theodora Durning-Lawrence, was a member of this congregation until her death in 1971. Raymond Williams noted in his history of Essex Church that she was the last member who was brought to church in a chauffeur-driven Daimler or Rolls Royce!

You can see already how long and complex our heritage trail has become, and so far we have really only been to two main sites. Somehow one thing leads to another. But I must just take you up to Highgate in North London. Although our chapel there closed in 1961 and the building has gone, it remains an area with much to interest the Unitarian wanderer. Halfway up Highgate Hill is Channing School, founded in 1885 'for the daughters of Unitarian ministers and others', and it remains an independent day school for girls. It is named after William Ellery Channing, the American writer and preacher. Not far away is Highgate Cemetery, where James Martineau, Henry Crabb Robinson and James Yates are buried. Martineau, as we have heard, was one of the leading thinkers of the nineteenth century, and Crabb Robinson was a journalist and diarist. James Yates is less well known, but he was a Unitarian minister and one of the founders of the Scottish Unitarian Association in 1813. He was also the last private occupant of Lauderdale House in what is now Waterlow Park, on the opposite side of Highgate Hill from Channing School. The park is named after Sir Sydney Waterlow, printer and philanthropist, who owned the house but never lived there. Waterlow came from a Unitarian family, and his father held a pew at South Place Chapel in Finsbury. In 1899 he presented the park to London County Council for the enjoyment of Londoners. Lauderdale House is now an arts and community centre, with a popular cafe. There is a statue of Sir Sydney Waterlow in the park, and it is said to be the only statue in London which shows its subject with an umbrella.

There is so much more that could be said. I could mention the writer and critic William Hazlitt, son of a Unitarian minister, who is buried in St Anne's churchyard in Soho and for whom there is now a campaign to erect a memorial on that site. I could mention the writer and social activist Mary Ward, who is perhaps still better known as the novelist Mrs Humphry Ward, and whose pioneering social settlement established at 5 Tavistock Place had strong Unitarian connections. Now known as Mary Ward House and currently home to the National Institute for Social Work, it is one of the finest examples of an Art Nouveau building in London. I could mention Sir Henry Tate, the sugar refiner who endowed several public libraries in South London but who is sadly neglected by the art gallery which bears his name. You will find a bust to him outside the Brixton Library on Effra Road (SW2). But I hope I have been able to give you just a small taster of the rich Unitarian heritage which we are fortunate to have here in London.

### **Some Sources of Information:**

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*'Essex Church in Kensington 1887-1987'* by Raymond Williams. Essex Church, 1987.

*'The Story of Essex Hall'* by Mortimer Rowe. The Lindsey Press, 1959.

*'A Wide & Fast-flowing River: Unitarians Together in London and the South East from 1850-2000'* by Alan Ruston. LDPA, 2000.

*'The Official Guide to Bunhill Fields'*. Corporation of London, 1991.

*'Mrs Humphry Ward : Eminent Victorian'* by John Sutherland. Clarendon Press, 1990.

*'London for Heretics'* by William Kent. Watts & Co., 1932.