

63 Fleet Street and 28 Stonecutter Street

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From 1882 to 1890 these were the premises of the Freethought Publishing Company owned by Charles Bradlaugh MP (1834-1891) and the pioneering feminist, Annie Besant (1847-1933). The Company was originally established at nearby 28 Stonecutter Street in 1877 but its rapid expansion necessitated the relocation to these larger premises.

The Company was founded with the initial, express purpose of republishing a cheap, pioneering, birth control pamphlet, *Fruits of Philosophy*, written by an American doctor, Charles Knowlton. This had been withdrawn from circulation by its publisher as a result of the prosecution of a Bristol bookseller. Bradlaugh and Besant determined to test the law. In their eyes this was an important issue of free speech as well as an attempt to provide ordinary working people with the knowledge needed to limit family size as an antidote to poverty.

The republication of this new edition was an immediate success with the pamphlet becoming a bestseller. Close to 1,000 copies were sold on the first day with copies being delivered to the local police station. In the first year no less than 125,000 were sold.

Bradlaugh and Besant were in turn prosecuted, defended themselves and won their case on appeal. It was almost unheard of for a woman to defend herself in court and Besant's eloquence stunned all who witnessed it. Sales of the pamphlet burgeoned and it was soon

replaced by others, such as Annie Besant's own *Law of Population* which provided more up-to-date, clearer advice and, eventually, with advertisements for contraceptive devices.

Charles Bradlaugh was elected as an MP for Northampton in 1880 and went on to fight a six-year battle to take his seat in the House of Commons. He was prohibited from taking the religious oath on grounds of his freethought and unbelief. He eventually took his seat in 1886 having been re-elected no less than four times. In the years left to him he succeeded in persuading Parliament to pass an Oaths Act, 1888 which allowed MPs to affirm rather than take a religious oath. Many MPs take advantage of this today. During the course of his struggle he became the only individual ever to be imprisoned in the prison room of the Palace of Westminster when he refused to leave the chamber of the House of Commons and was arrested.



*Charles Bradlaugh in 1877
at the time of the
Knowlton pamphlet trial*



*Annie Besant in 1877
at the time of the
Knowlton pamphlet trial*

Annie Besant achieved further fame as one of the leaders of the Match Girls' Strike of 1888 and as a Fabian socialist.

During this period the Freethought Publishing Company rapidly expanded its range of publications to include not only birth control literature but radical political works including women's rights, republicanism, electoral reform and land law reform. 63 Fleet Street was undoubtedly the site of London's leading radical book shop and the main source of information about birth control techniques.

Charles Bradlaugh died in 1891. Annie Besant converted to theosophy and emigrated to India where she campaigned for Indian Home Rule and for the rights of Indians. She died in 1933.



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Additional notes

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Further Reading:

www.secularism.org.uk/the-young-charles-bradlaugh.html

www.secularism.org.uk/the-fruits-of-philosophy-trial.html

www.secularism.org.uk/bradlaughs-struggle-to-enter-par.html