CONWAY HALL

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TIMELINE OF THE BUILDING OF CONWAY HALL

1787 – Elhanan Winchester establishes a non-conformist congregation in London.

1793 – Parliament Court Chapel established.

1824 – South Place Chapel built as a Unitarian chapel. (Our archives contain minutes and financial accounts relating to the building of the Chapel.)

1864 – Moncure Daniel Conway (1832-1907) is appointed minister. Over time, Conway gradually moves the congregation away from the belief in God towards a more humanity-centred philosophy of life.

1884 – Conway resigns in order to spend more time writing.

1888 – Under the ministry of Stanton Coit (1857-1944), the Society abandons belief in God altogether in favour of the Ethical Culture Movement and the name is changed to South Place Ethical Society.

1892-1897 – Conway's second period as minister, ending with his return to the USA because of his wife's terminal illness. She died on Christmas Day 1897.

1900 – Plans to rebuild the Chapel first proposed by F. Herbert Mansford, as the existing building was no longer adequate for the many and varied activities run by the Society. Moreover, "the structure was never strongly built and cannot last very much longer." The General Committee rejects this proposal in favour of repairing and repainting the interior.

1901 – Wallis Mansford (Herbert's brother) advocates selling the Chapel and erecting a new building which would have a "Swimming Bath convertible into a Gymnasium in winter

months", a bookshop, separate lending and reference libraries, a labour and emigration bureau, and a roof garden.

1903/04 – The Annual Report states that "Unfortunately no progress has been made with the re-building scheme, it being apparently impossible for the present to overcome the difficulties referred to in the last Report." In other words, the Society still had insufficient funds to progress beyond a wish list. This situation would last for some years.

1911 – At a meeting in January, F.H. Mansford puts forward a proposal to sell the Chapel and move to another part of London. He advises the Committee to consider a site at the Angel. A special Building Committee is established to look into the matter; it recommends that a decision be made sooner rather than later, because of the deteriorating state of the Chapel.

1913 – Plans to sell the Chapel and move further west to the centre of London are approved, but World War I intervenes and the plans are put on hold.

1920 – Plans for the sale are revived but the original resolution is rescinded as post-war economic conditions make the original plans impossibly expensive. The idea of a building to be used by South Place jointly with other kindred societies, principally the Rationalist Press Association, first mooted. However, the project is abandoned as the RPA is unable to commit any funds to it.

1921 – The Chapel is sold to the School of Oriental Studies for £36,000. The Society would be allowed to remain as tenants until such time as the premises were required by the school for their own purposes.

1922 – A special sub-committee is established to find a suitable new location. A site in Red Lion Square is purchased in October, and F.H. Mansford is appointed to submit plans for the new building. (We have in our archives the deeds for the site, dating back to 1685/86.)

1923 – An article in the April *Monthly Record* details the accommodation needed in the new building and proposes the name Conway Hall, not for the building itself, but only for what is now called the Main Hall.

1924 – The commencement of building work is delayed due to lack of money, and an Appeal Fund is set up. From October, a room is rented from the Ashburton Club, at 28 Red Lion Square, for the use of members.

1925 – The Society acquires the freehold of 51 Theobalds Road, in order to provide a second exit from the Red Lion Square building, as required by London County Council. F.H. Mansford is formally appointed architect. "In view of his long association with the Society, and the many plans he has prepared for a new South Place during the last twenty-five years, the Committee express their satisfaction that Mr Mansford's appointment was made with practical unanimity." Mansford's plans are on view to members at the Chapel, using the name Conway Hall for the building itself. There is also a model – "to the scale of half an inch to the foot and can be illuminated by electricity. It also shows the small hall and tea rooms, which we hope will eventually be built above the main hall." (Unfortunately, we do not appear to have this model any longer.)

1926 – Problems raising money again. The Society has £31,000 in hand but estimates that another £25,000 is needed. The Appeal Fund Committee prepares a descriptive brochure which they hope would have a wider appeal than just to South Place members. Tenders for the building work are issued in the autumn but the lowest tender is £10,000 more than the Society has.

1927 – Modified plans are approved by the General Committee. At the end of March the Society vacates the Chapel. Temporary office space is rented at 35 Bloomsbury Square, and the National Sunday League's hall, also in Red Lion Square, is hired for meetings and social functions. Services would be held at the lecture theatre of the School of Oriental Studies. The Appeal Fund brochure is issued in September. Contributors' names are published in each issue of *The Monthly Record* from November 1927, and in the annual report.

1928 – The contract with the builders, John Greenwood Ltd, is signed in February, the contracted price being £28,485. Building works begin.

1929 – The lease of the Bloomsbury Square offices expires, and the Society moves its administration to the rooms on Theobalds Road, but begins using Conway Hall as the postal address. In May, members visit the new building. The first meeting is held on 1 September, and Conway Hall is officially opened on 23 September, with speeches by C. Delisle Burns, John A. Hobson, Gilbert Murray, and Graham Wallas. Others in attendance include F.J. Gould, J.B.S. Haldane, C.E.M. Joad, Harry Snell, and Gustave Spiller. Reports of the speeches are published in the Society's magazine. Later in the first week, the Conway Memorial Lecture, entitled *The Religious Advance Toward Rationalism*, is given by Laurence Housman. The annual reunion soirée and the first dance of the season are also held as part of the official opening of the hall. Activities during the first few months, in addition to the

discourses and lectures, include concerts, dances, country dance classes, rambles, play-readings, social evenings, at homes, and discussion circles.