

# A HISTORY OF HUMANIST CEREMONIES

People have always looked for ways to mark significant events in their lives, like births, marriages, and deaths. Although many ceremonies have often been associated with religious ideas (such as baptism, or a church marriage), non-religious people have always sought out ceremonies which represent their own values: creating personal and meaningful events to mark the most important moments in their lives.

Today, Humanist Ceremonies take place across the world, and Humanists UK have been organising them for over 100 years.

## AN EARLY EXAMPLE OF A NON-RELIGIOUS CEREMONY

In the early 1800s, two centuries ago, followers of a man called Robert Owen conducted ceremonies tailored to their own non-religious beliefs. Known as Owenites, they wanted society to radically change - to be organised around communal living, cooperative working, and a 'rational religion', based not on any god but on the role of human beings in making a better world.



Edward Truelove

One such ceremony took place in London in 1849, where an early humanist called George Jacob Holyoake carried out a special naming ceremony for the young son of his friend, publisher Edward Truelove. The child was given the name 'Mazzini', to honour an Italian reformer admired by the Owenites. Holyoake asked the community gathered for the ceremony to help bring the child up with values of kindness, self-reliance, independent thought, and

bravery. He said the best way to do this was to live by those values in their own lives, to set an example for others.

This ceremony represented the beliefs of the Owenites who, like humanists today, were guided by reason, compassion, and a sense of responsibility for others. Just like humanist naming ceremonies today, the event celebrated the joy of a new life, and encouraged the adults present to think about how they could work together to create the best possible world for the child to grow up in.

**Humanists UK** began life as the **Union of Ethical Societies**, which was founded in 1896. These societies brought people together to live good lives, without reference to supernatural ideas. They believed it was possible to be good without believing in a god - like humanists today.

Members and leaders of these societies took part in 'ethical' ceremonies to mark key moments in their lives, from at least the 1880s.

## AN 'ETHICAL WEDDING'

William Sanders and Beatrice Martin were married in Battersea Town Hall, London, in 1899. It was referred to in the newspapers as an 'ethical wedding', because it was carried out in line with the beliefs of the Ethical movement (the humanist movement today). Stanton Coit led the service, and spoke about the meaning of marriage, the duties of husband and wife to each other, and their duties to the community they lived in.



William Sanders was a Labour Party politician, and Beatrice Sanders was an active suffragist (meaning she worked for women's right to vote).



## HUMANIST FUNERALS

Humanists believe that we only have one life, so when we die, we do not go to a heaven - or have an 'afterlife'. Because they don't believe in a god, humanists see human beings as being responsible for making life as meaningful and happy as possible. Human beings are responsible for the good (and bad) things they do.

Just like namings and marriages, humanists have been carrying out meaningful funeral services for well over 100 years - and probably much longer. Typically, these ceremonies have focused on the life and character of the person who has died, and remind those who loved them that it is their memories of that person which mean something of them survives their death - not any afterlife or reincarnation.

During the 1980s and 1990s, a network of humanist celebrants continued to grow and develop, partly because of increasing demand for non-religious ceremonies. A key figure in this was the humanist teacher, writer, and celebrant Jane Wynne Willson. She wrote three groundbreaking books on non-religious ceremonies, helping people to plan events such as weddings, funerals, and baby namings. These were: *Sharing the Future*, *Funerals Without God*, and *New Arrivals*.



**Jane Wynne Willson.**  
Bishopsgate Institute Archives

Not all humanists today have humanist ceremonies, but they are becoming increasingly popular. For example, thousands of humanist funerals are attended by over one million people in the UK each year. In Scotland (where humanist marriage is legally recognised) in 2019 there were more humanist weddings than Christian weddings. Humanist marriage is also now legal in Northern Ireland, but Humanists UK are still campaigning for the legal recognition of humanist marriage in England and Wales.

From the earliest days of the organised humanist movement, leaders and members of the ethical societies carried out funeral services in line with their non-supernatural beliefs. One letter, written to Stanton Coit in 1889, thanked him for the 'tender feeling and beautiful sentiment' expressed by Coit in a funeral for George Hickson, the letter-writer's father. Coit's wife, the suffragist Adela Coit, had a humanist 'ethical' service on her death in 1932. It featured poetry from Shakespeare, and prominent humanist Harry Snell said:

*Let us... not grieve for what we shall no longer see: let us be glad for the life that was; for its service and example... And now let us do what she would most have wished - return to our own work in the world, that those who still live in it may have life more abundantly.*



**Adela Coit (1863-1932),**  
whose non-religious  
funeral was led by  
**Charles Kennedy Scott**  
(1876-1965).

