

Quaker Meeting House, Amersham

Whielden Street, Amersham, Buckinghamshire, HP7 0JB

National Grid Reference: SU 95609 97044



Statement of Significance

An early seventeenth-century timber-framed house, acquired as a Meeting House later in the same century and altered and extended in the eighteenth, twentieth and twenty-first centuries. The meeting house and attached former burial ground are of high heritage significance.

Evidential value

The original timber framed house has been altered and enlarged at various stages, and each phase reflects developments in the use of the building. Its construction, detailing and fitting out are of high evidential (and

archaeological) value. The attached burial ground is also of high value, despite the lack of marked burials.

Historical value

As a meeting house in use (with one interruption) since the late seventeenth century, occupying a building in part of even earlier date, with an attached burial ground in use from perhaps as early as 1660, the building and site are of high historical value.

Aesthetic value

The tile roof, eighteenth-century brickwork and joinery (including external shutters), and the atmospheric interior fitted out with dado panelling and fixed seating, are all of high aesthetic value. This is enhanced by the setting of the old boundary walls and large meadow/former burial ground, with mature and specimen trees. The building sits well in the local townscape, next door to the former workhouse, a flint-faced neo-Elizabethan design of 1838.

Communal value

The building and site are of high communal value for their longstanding Quaker witness, for their contribution to the local townscape, and for the facilities they offer.

Part 1: Core data

1.1 Area Meeting: *Chilterns*

1.2 Property Registration Number: *0001080*

1.3 Owner: *Chilterns Area Quaker Meeting*

1.4 Local Planning Authority: *Chiltern District Council*

1.5 Historic England locality: *South East*

1.6 Civil parish: *Amersham*

1.7 Listed status: *II**

1.8 NHLE: *1274183*

1.9 Conservation Area: *No*

1.10 Scheduled Ancient Monument: *No*

1.11 Heritage at Risk: *No*

1.12 Date(s): *1624; Meeting House from 1689; c1780; 1957; 2014*

1.13 Architect(s): *Not known for earlier work; Hubert Lidbetter (1957); Malcolm Barnett (2014)*

1.14 Date of visit: *5 November 2015*

1.15 Name of report author: *Andrew Derrick*

1.16 Name of contact(s) made on site: *Penny Ware, Ann Flood, Alex Wingfield*

1.17 Associated buildings and sites: *None*

1.18 Attached burial ground: Yes

1.19 Information Sources:

Bunney, G., *Life and Work of Amersham Meeting from 1917 until 1939, a Personal Account*, 2008

Butler, D. M., *The Quaker Meeting Houses of Britain*, 1999, Vol. 1, pp. 21-2

Lidbetter, H., *The Friends Meeting House*, 1979

Stell, C., *An Inventory of Nonconformist Chapels and Meeting-Houses in Central England*, 1986, p. 3

Anon (possibly Mary Dyson), *A History of Amersham Meeting*, n.d.

Local Meeting Survey by Penny Ware, 2015

Part 2: The Meeting House & Burial Ground: history, contents, use, setting and designation

2.1. Historical background

Quaker occupancy of the current site is believed to date from about 1660, when part of an orchard 'at the town's end' was given by Edward Perot or Parret for use as a burial ground. Perot's funeral in 1665 was notorious for its forcible interruption by the authorities and the arrest of many mourners; the coffin was left lying in the road and later interred in unconsecrated ground. However, it was not until 1689 that the timber-framed farmhouse on the Whielden Street frontage, said to have been built by Joseph Winch in 1624 (Butler) or 1635 (Lidbetter), was registered as a Meeting House. At this time one of the rooms was enlarged by one bay to serve as the main meeting room and a little later, according to Stell, a wing (presumably the double gabled weatherboard range) was added. The building was refurbished in about 1780 (Butler; Lidbetter says 1785), when it was refaced in brick and the furnishings in the meeting room renewed; a brick extension was also added, providing a room for the women's meeting, connected to the main meeting room in the normal way by internal shutters.

In 1850 the meeting house was closed, and went through various uses including occupation by the Wesleyan Methodists, before reopening for Quaker worship in 1917. Quarterly Meeting approved its status as a Preparative Meeting in 1927. In 1957 a classroom, kitchen and WCs were added at the back, along with other improvements to the meeting house and cottage (architect Hubert Lidbetter). This resulted in the plan form as drawn by Butler and shown at figure 1. Since then an extension has been built giving off the 1950s additions, providing an accessible entrance and WCs, improved kitchen etc. (2014, architect Malcolm Barnett).

2.2. The building and its principal fittings and fixtures

The building has a long and complex history. It appears to have originated as a timber-framed building, built in c.1600 (list entry) or perhaps 1624 (Butler) or 1635 (Lidbetter). It was acquired and enlarged to serve as a Quaker meeting house in 1689, and extended (and refronted in red brick) in c.1780, with further additions and alterations in 1957 and 2014. According to the list entry (below), the cottage was refronted in the early nineteenth century.

The elevation to the street (photo top left) is dominated by the old tile roof, hipped at the northern (meeting house) end and gabled at the southern (cottage) end. The cottage has a front gable with small-paned casement windows, under a segmental brick arch at ground floor and a timber lintel at first. The entrance is also under a segmental arch, but the bracketed hood mentioned in the list entry is no longer present. There is a seventeenth-century brick stack above the door (and so a baffle entry plan), and the side elevation is tile-hung, presumably over timber framing. The interior of the cottage has not been inspected, but the list entry refers to exposed beams of c.1600.

The Meeting House front elevation (photo top right) has two central flush-panel doors with delicate astragal mouldings, wooden architrave and a flat gauged brick arch. There are two flush frame sash windows on each side, each of six panes over six, with timber cills, flat gauged brick arches and panelled shutters with ornamental iron fasteners. The rear elevation (photo middle left) has four gabled projections, the two central ones weatherboarded and probably late seventeenth-century in date and formerly a stable and chaise house, the northern and southern ones built or rebuilt in 1957. Giving off the northern gabled projection is the addition of 2014, single-storey and of matching brick, its tile roof also hipped to the north.

Inside, the meeting house is divided into two interconnecting spaces in the common late eighteenth-century way, by a screen with counterweighted shutters (photo middle right). The large meeting room has plain dado panelling, fixed perimeter benches and an elders' stand at the southern end with panelled front. This room and the smaller meeting room are each lit by two large sash windows on the east (street) side, with the paired six-panel doors giving off the large room. The smaller meeting room has dado panelling, and a corner fireplace to the northwest. It links through to the extensions of 1957 and 2014.

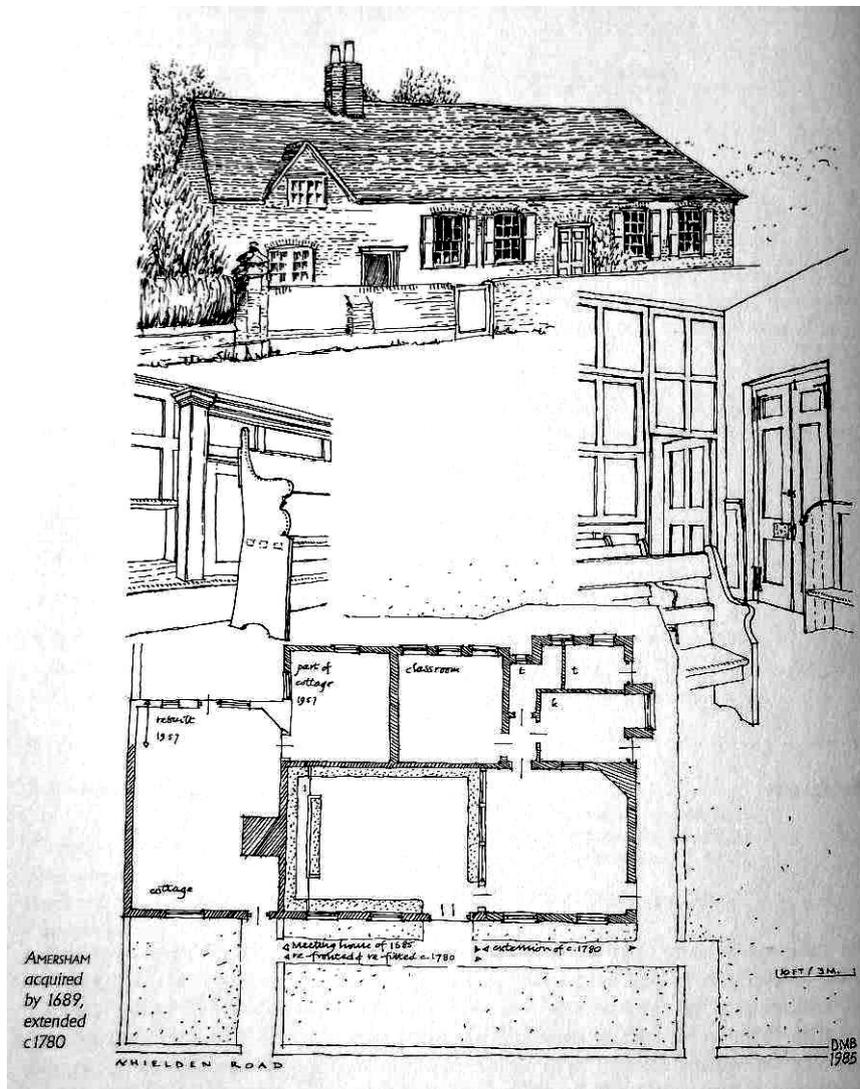


Figure 1: Elevations and plan, from Butler, 1990, p. 22

2.3 Loose furnishings

There are several old open-backed benches with shaped ends in the large meeting room, as well as more recent benches (by John Dalton Banks) and Windsor chairs (said to have come from Old Jordans).

2.4. Attached burial ground

Part of the top end of the large meadow at the back served historically as a burial ground. There are no marked burials. The area is still used for the scattering of ashes.

2.5. The meeting house in its wider setting

The meeting house lies in Whielden Street, a turnpike road leading south from the Broadway and the medieval parish church at the core of the historic town. It lies some distance from the core, and later intervening development has resulted in the exclusion of the meeting house from the Old Town Conservation Area. Next door to the south is Scott and Moffatt's former workhouse of 1839, in Elizabethan style and listed Grade II (now converted to flats, with additional new build). The meeting house occupies a deep, tapering plot, with a buttressed brick wall (probably eighteenth-century) on the street boundary and an open meadow at the back (photo bottom right), also with a high boundary wall. There is a large car parking area on the northern side of the site. The plot contains a number of mature trees, including a fine specimen ginkgo.

2.6. Listed status

The building is listed Grade II*, reflecting its outstanding architectural and historical significance.

2.7. Archaeological potential of the site

There have been buildings here since the early seventeenth century or earlier, and there are burials in the meadow. The archaeological potential is high.

Part 3: Current use and management

See completed volunteer survey

3.1. Condition

- i) Meeting House: Fair
- ii) Attached burial ground: Optimal/generally satisfactory (no marked burials)

3.2. Maintenance

The building is well maintained and recently has undergone repair and improvement. The reason why its condition is categorised as fair is that at the time of the visit it was reported that since the QIR of November 2014 (not seen) woodworm and timber decay have been discovered in the roof structure. This will require repair, and (probably) re-tiling of the roof.

3.3. Sustainability

The Meeting does not use the Sustainability Toolkit. The questionnaire return states that measures have been taken to reduce environmental impact, but details are not provided. The meeting is accessible by public transport, and a bicycle rack is provided.

3.4. Amenities

With the addition of 2014, the Meeting considers that it has the amenities it needs. As well as the large and small meeting rooms, these include three WCs (one for disabled use), a kitchen and a library. There is ample space for off-street car parking outside.

3.5. Access

The 2014 addition was driven in large part by the need to improve access (an access audit was carried out in 2002). The meeting house now has step-free access and level ground floor circulation, an accessible WC, hearing loop and provision for partially-sighted people.

3.6 Community Use

The meeting house is used for four or five hours a week by Friends (about fifteen to twenty members and attenders per week on average). The facilities are also used by other community groups, but details are not provided in the questionnaire. There is a lettings policy (May 2014); the vision is 'to provide a meeting place for people of all ages, social groups, faiths and no faith, welcoming to all'. Hirers should not use the building in any way antithetical to Quaker values, and priority is given to Quaker users. Alcohol may not be sold or consumed.

3.7. Vulnerability to crime

No incidents of crime or antisocial behaviour are reported. This is an area with low levels of crime and social deprivation.

3.8. Plans for change

None (apart from roof repairs, see above).

Part 4: Impact of Change

4.1. To what extent is the building amenable or vulnerable to change?

i) As a Meeting House used only by the local Meeting: The meeting house has been recently adapted and extended, and presumably meets the needs of the Meeting for the short to medium term. The building is of high architectural and historical significance, one of the few meeting houses to be listed in a high grade, and the scope for significant change in the meeting rooms is limited. There is greater scope for flexibility in the later additions. Any development in the backland would need to take account of the impact on the setting of the Grade II* listed building, and would be controversial, given its historic context as the burial ground for the meeting house.

ii) For wider community use, in addition to local Meeting use: The building has already been adapted to allow for wider community use, and further changes for this purpose are not required.

iii) Being laid down as a Meeting House: This has been a Quaker meeting house and burial ground since the seventeenth century, and laying down would be highly regrettable. It may in that event be possible for the meeting house to be incorporated into the residential use of the adjoining cottage, or made a separate residence, but this would need to avoid subdivision of the two meeting rooms and removal of the fixed historic furnishings. Development on the backland is likely to be controversial, for reasons outlined above.

Part 5: Category: 2

Part 6: List description

Name: FRIEND'S MEETING HOUSE AND WHIELDEN COTTAGE

List entry Number: 1274183

Location: FRIEND'S MEETING HOUSE AND WHIELDEN COTTAGE, WHIELDEN STREET

Grade: II*

Date first listed: 22-Dec-1958

Date of most recent amendment: Not applicable to this List entry.

1. AMERSHAM WHIELDEN STREET 5134 (west side) Friend's Meeting House and Whielden Cottage SU 9597 SE 7/192 22.12.58

II*

Original house at south end c.1600 extended to 1689 to form a Meeting Room for Friends, who has used the building from about 1660. Extended further north late C18, when the Meeting House was refronted in red brick. Cottage refronted early C19. Old tile roof, hipped at north end, C17 brick stack to cottage, gable on left with 2-light casement door with bracketted hood, 2-light casement on left with segmental arch. Meeting House has 2-fold 6 flush panel doors with delicate astragal mouldings, wooden architrave and flat gauged arch. Two sash windows each side, all with wood cills, segmental arches and panelled shutters with ornamental iron fasteners. Rear elevation has four gabled wings, three weatherboarded, the southern one brick. Interior: Cottage has exposed beams of c.1600. Meeting House is divided into two rooms by a screen with counterweighted shutters. Main room has plain dado panelling, wall benches and a stand, open backed benches with shaped ends. Setting: a large open burial ground on the north and west. Important associations with Quaker history. Listing NGR: SU9560997044