

## ***Friends Meeting House, Aylesbury***

*9 Rickfords Hill, Aylesbury, Buckinghamshire, HP20 2RT*

*National Grid Reference: SP 81797 13693*



### ***Statement of Significance***

***An early eighteenth-century meeting house, tucked away behind frontage buildings in the historic core of Aylesbury. The Meeting House is of high heritage significance.***

### ***Evidential value***

***The meeting house was sympathetically restored in 1933 and 2010, and retains much evidence of its original and historic construction, detailing and fitting out, all 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 long interruption) since the early eighteenth century, behind buildings of possibly earlier date, with an attached burial ground, the building and site are of high historical value.***

### **Aesthetic value**

***The tile roof, eighteenth-century brickwork and joinery and the atmospheric interior fitted out with dado panelling and fixed seating, are all of typical meeting house character, and of high aesthetic value. This value is enhanced by the setting, hidden away behind historic frontages in the town centre.***

### **Communal value**

***The buildings and site are of high communal value for their history of Quaker witness and other local uses, and for the facilities they continue to offer.***

### **Part 1: Core data**

- 1.1 Area Meeting: *Chilterns*
- 1.2 Property Registration Number: *0031670*
- 1.3 Owner: *Chilterns Area Quaker Meeting*
- 1.4 Local Planning Authority: *Aylesbury Vale District Council*
- 1.5 Historic England locality: *South East*
- 1.6 Civil parish: *Aylesbury*
- 1.7 Listed status: *Not listed*
- 1.8 NHLE: *N/a*
- 1.9 Conservation Area: *Aylesbury, Walton and Wendover Road*
- 1.10 Scheduled Ancient Monument: *No*
- 1.11 Heritage at Risk: *No*
- 1.12 Date(s): *1727*
- 1.13 Architect(s): *Not established*
- 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: *Geoff Higgins*
- 1.17 Associated buildings and sites: *Frontage properties (9-11 Rickfords Hill)*
- 1.18 Attached burial ground: *Yes*
- 1.19 Information Sources:

Butler, D. M., *The Quaker Meeting Houses of Britain*, 1999, Vol. 1, p. 23

Davis, E. Jack, *Aylesbury Quakers and their Meeting House 1689-1933*, 1933 (updated by Michael Davis, 2004)

Newell, K., *Local Historic Building Survey: Society of Friends Meeting House, Rickfords Hill, Aylesbury, Buckinghamshire*, June 1998  
Stell, C., *An Inventory of Nonconformist Chapels and Meeting-Houses in Central England*, 1986, p. 5  
Local Meeting Survey, by Tim Newell, July 2015

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

### 2.1. Historical background

Confusingly, early records state that in 1704 tenements on what is now Rickfords Hill were acquired for Quaker use, and in 1703 a 'newly-erected' meeting house was registered (it lay in the yard behind the tenements). Whatever the precise date, this building was superseded in 1726, when further land measuring 48 ft x 40 ft behind the tenements was acquired and the present meeting house built, opening in 1727. It was reached via a passageway at the side of one of the frontage properties. The remainder of the site was used as a burial ground and the frontage properties let.

In 1810 a porch was added 'after the manner of Friends Meeting House at Chesham' (quoted in Davis, p. 11) and double shutters erected in the meeting room, presumably to form a women's meeting room. The porch is shown on a plan held by Quarterly Meeting (illustrated in Newell). However, the southern side addition/entrance is not shown on this plan. The Meeting was discontinued in 1836 and from 1845 the building was let as a school. It later became as a Baptist chapel (and is shown as such, with the southern side addition/entrance added by then, on the first edition Ordnance Survey map of 1878), and then by the YMCA. The Meeting was revived in the twentieth century, when the meeting house was restored (and the porch taken down) by Walter Rose of Haddenham, assisted by 'Sammy North, at that time in training for an Architect' (Davis, p. 35). The refurbished meeting house reopened in 1933. The pre-1700 cottages facing onto Rickfords Hill were reacquired and renovated by Friends in 1960 and 1987-8, and the meeting house was refurbished in 2010 (architect Malcolm Barnett), using funds from the legacy of Claire Winn, who attended the Meeting in the 1980s.

### 2.2. The building and its principal fittings and fixtures

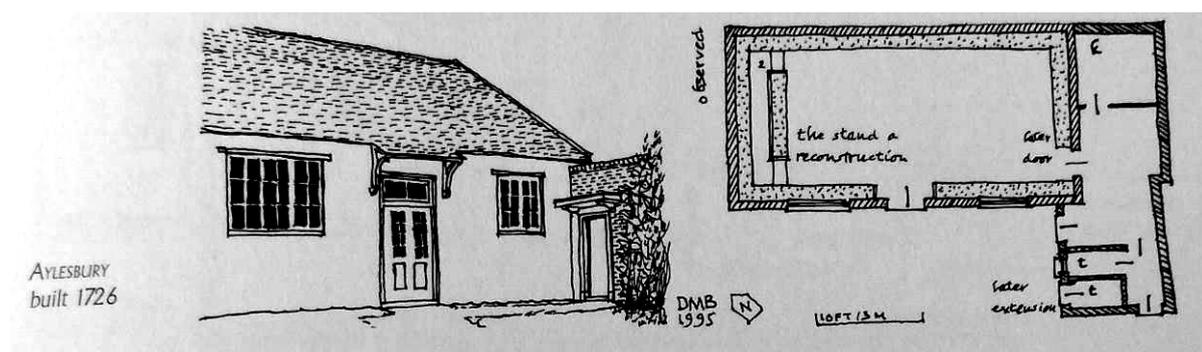


Figure 1: Elevation and plan, from Butler, 1990, p.23

A small structure, rectangular on plan, built in 1727 and with a later, probably early nineteenth-century lower projecting side entrance at right angles (figure 1). The building was restored in 1933 after nearly a century of disuse as a meeting house, and was refurbished and upgraded in 2010.

The building is on a constricted backland site, with windows on one side only. The main (west) frontage is of red brick, unusually laid in header bond, with some black glazed headers, and with a moulded brick cornice. The roof is tiled and hipped. The central entrance has two doors of two panels each, the longer upper panels glazed, with a two-light glazed fanlight above. These features probably date from 1933, when it is likely that an early porch was removed, although the door frame may be original. The roof slope continues down over the hood over the doorway. The small-paned paired casement to the right (south) is within the original window opening, while that to the left has been widened by an additional casement; both have timber lintels. To the right, the entrance in the later lower addition has a bracketed canopy over the door.

The interior consists of a large meeting room and a smaller space at the southern end, possibly originally a separate women's meeting room. Stell suggests that the exposed timber-framed wall that separates these two spaces was originally external and possibly weatherboarded, but Newell argues persuasively that it was always internal, possibly fitted with shutters (recorded as added in 1810, although there is now no physical evidence for these). A brass plaque fixed to the lower rail at this end is inscribed 'remembering Walter Rose who restored this meeting house'. The main space has plastered walls and a perimeter dado with a mixture of square panelling and tongue and groove boarding. Perimeter benches are fixed to this, with some shaped ends, based on the pattern of those at Jordans (Davis p. 35). The raised height of the dado at the northern end suggests the former position of the elders' stand. The ceiling is now at collar level, leaving exposed three roof trusses, with tie beams (the central one with modern reinforcements), struts rising to clasped purlins, and dragon beams at the corners.

### 2.3 Loose furnishings

According to the questionnaire return, the benches were made by Walter Rose of Haddenham, who restored the meeting house in 1933, as copies of those at Jordans. This might include the loose benches. There are also some Windsor chairs.

### 2.4. Attached burial ground

The site incorporates a small burial ground, where the first burial took place in 1727. It closed in 1855. There are records of six interments, but none are marked by headstones.

### 2.5. The meeting house in its wider setting

The meeting is, as it always has been, hidden away in a town centre location, behind the buildings on the street frontage. It lies within the historic core of the town, part of a designated conservation area.

### 2.6. Listed status

The meeting house is not listed. This seems anomalous, given the building's clear architectural and historical interest and its early date. It may simply have been overlooked at resurvey, on account of its hidden and landlocked location. It is considered to be a good candidate for listing.

The frontage buildings (photos top left and right) may date from c.1700 or earlier, although they have been greatly altered at the front, back and inside (at least on the ground floor, the only area seen at the time of the visit). They probably should be included in any assessment for listing.

## 2.7. Archaeological potential of the site

The site contains buildings probably dating back to c. 1700 or earlier, as well as an early Quaker burial ground, and it is located within the Aylesbury town historic core archaeological notification area. It is of high archaeological potential.

## **Part 3: Current use and management**

*See completed volunteer survey*

### 3.1. Condition

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

### 3.2. Maintenance

The building is in good condition and is well maintained. It was refurbished and upgraded in 2010. The most recent QIR was in 2013, as a result of which the wall copings, ceilings of the frontage buildings and the drain under the pavement have been attended to. There remains a problem of damp in the meeting house WC.

### 3.3. Sustainability

The Meeting has used the Sustainability Toolkit. Sustainability measures undertaken include:

- Climate change & energy efficiency: Wall insulation, secondary glazing, draft exclusion, roof insulation, modern zonal heating system, new single boiler system replacing two.
- Resource use, recycling & waste management: Maximum recycling, food and garden waste composter etc.
- Building maintenance & refurbishment: Modern zonal heating system to control use of resources, insulation to walls and roof of meeting house.
- Wildlife, ecology and nature conservation: Garden uses no pesticides, birds and bees use the garden.
- Transport: A survey has been carried out to reduce vehicle use. Public transport is used by many, with shared car use also. There is no off-street parking, but secure cycle parking is provided.

### 3.4. Amenities

The Meeting considers that it has the amenities it needs, mostly in the frontage cottages. These include three WCs, two kitchens, two counselling rooms and two large meeting rooms. There is a resident warden/Friend.

### 3.5. Access

There is step-free access into and circulation around the meeting house, and the facilities on the ground floor of the frontage buildings. The rise in the land to the back means that there is a fairly steep ramped approach to the meeting house. There is an accessible WC in the latter, as well as a hearing loop and some provision for partially-sighted people.

### 3.6 Community Use

About twenty Friends use the building for six hours each week. The facilities of the meeting house and frontage buildings are in wider community use for about 96 hours each week out

of a possible 320. The Meeting has a lettings policy proscribing arms, drugs, selling or noise which disturbs others. Users cite the good location, ease of access, peaceful atmosphere, good welcome, reliability and reasonable cost.

### 3.7. Vulnerability to crime

Rare incidents of crime or antisocial behaviour (broken windows) are reported. The area is regarded by the Meeting to be generally one with low levels of crime and social deprivation.

### 3.8. Plans for change

None.

## **Part 4: Impact of Change**

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

*Summary addressing scenarios below:*

*i) As a Meeting House used only by the local Meeting:* The meeting house is a historic space, retaining its historic character and many historic fixtures and fittings. It is regarded as a possible candidate for listing. The scope for major change is therefore limited. The less sensitive ancillary areas have already been adapted, and there is also scope for change in the frontage building.

*ii) For wider community use, in addition to local Meeting use:* The building is already used by the wider community, its small size and the lack of parking perhaps the only constraints (neither easily superable). The frontage buildings offer further spaces and facilities, and are a valuable source of income to the Meeting.

*iii) Being laid down as a Meeting House:* Historically, the building spent nearly a century in uses other than as a meeting house. Although laying down would be regrettable, it would be possible for the building to serve as an annexe to the frontage buildings, but it would be necessary to ensure that its architectural and historical character remained.

## **Part 5: Category: 2**