

Friends Meeting House, Bath

York Street, Bath, Somerset, BA1 1NG

National Grid Reference: ST 75157 64707



Statement of Significance

The building was erected in 1818 as a Freemasons' Hall and purchased by Friends in 1866. The building was designed by William Wilkins, an architect of national importance. There have been a number of minor changes to the fabric and few early fittings survive, but the main room is still a handsome space which retains something of its original character and the whole is of high heritage significance.

Evidential value

Roman remains have been unearthed from beneath the building. The original plans of the Wilkins building survive and make it possible to chart the history of alterations to the structure. The site and building are of high evidential value.

Historical value

The building is important to several 'histories', including that of the Freemasons, of Nonconformity in Bath and of the Society of Friends. It has high historical value.

Aesthetic value

William Wilkins was an architect of considerable ability and the main elements of his elegant and practical design have survived more or less intact. The building makes an important contribution to the character of the area and is of high aesthetic value.

Communal value

The building has been used by local groups, including Freemasons and Baptists, since its opening in 1819 and by the Quakers continuously since 1866. More recently the building has also been much used by other local groups. The building has high communal value.

Part 1: Core data

- 1.1 Area Meeting: *West Wiltshire & East Somerset*
- 1.2 Property Registration Number: *0007180*
- 1.3 Owner: *Area Meeting*
- 1.4 Local Planning Authority: *Bath & North East Somerset Council*
- 1.5 Historic England locality: *South West*
- 1.6 Civil parish: *Bath NPA*
- 1.7 Listed status: *II*
- 1.8 NHLE: *1395817*
- 1.9 Conservation Area: *Bath (and City of Bath World Heritage Site)*
- 1.10 Scheduled Ancient Monument: *No*
- 1.11 Heritage at Risk: *No*
- 1.12 Date(s): *1817-19, major internal alterations 1982*
- 1.13 Architect(s): *William Wilkins, 1982 alterations by Derek Stollar*
- 1.14 Date of visit: *2 August 2016*
- 1.15 Name of report author: *Neil Burton*
- 1.16 Name of contact(s) made on site: *Judith Eversley*
- 1.17 Associated buildings and sites: *Site of detached burial ground in Clarendon Road, Bath*
- 1.18 Attached burial ground: *No*
- 1.19 Information sources:
Butler, D.M., *The Quaker Meeting Houses of Britain*, 1999, vol.2, pp. 528-530
Liscombe, R.W., *William Wilkins 1778-1839*, 1980, pp. 117-8

Stell, C. *An Inventory of Nonconformist Chapels and Meeting-houses in South-west England*, 1991, p. 164

McLaughlin & Ross, Historic Building Report, 2011

Bath and NE Somerset HER, monument number MBN 4626

Local Meeting survey from Judith Eversley, April 2016

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

2.1 Historical background

There was a meeting in Bath by 1673 and in 1697 a meeting house was bought or built in Marchant's Court off the High Street. Quakers worshipped here until 1799 when a new chapel building in Lower Borough Walls was acquired and refurbished. The seventeenth-century meeting house was demolished in 1808. Friends sold its successor in 1866 and purchased the present building in York Street. This had originally been a Freemasons' Hall, erected in 1818 to designs by the architect William Wilkins. There is some evidence that Wilkins was himself a Freemason. The building always had a large room filling most of the upper floor and a number of smaller rooms in the lower, basement, storey. The Freemasons only used the building for a short time and the building then served a variety of uses. From 1841 until acquisition by Friends in 1866 it was used as a Baptist chapel.

In 1978 Friends decided to sell the building because it was considered too big and costly to run. Consent was obtained for various enabling alterations but, after a number of disappointing offers and difficulty in finding suitable alternative premises, Friends decided that the building should be retained and refurbished. This work was done in the early 1982. In 2005 Friends again considered selling the property for use as a restaurant and further consents for alteration were obtained, but the sale fell through in 2008, largely because of the financial crash. Since then Friends have continued to refurbish the building.

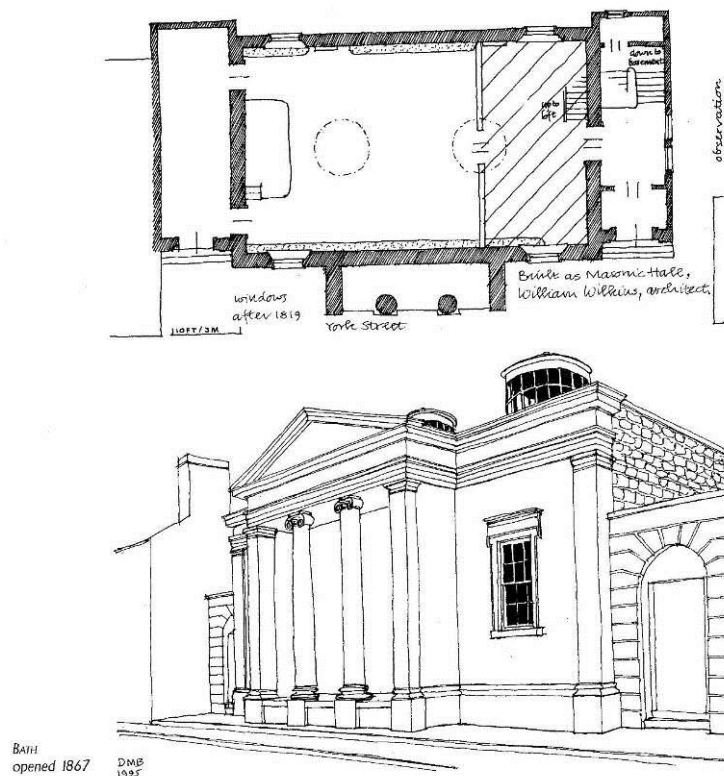


Figure 1: Ground plan of the upper floor c1979 before removal of the gallery, with a perspective view of the main front to York Street. North is at the top of the plan. (Butler, vol. 2, p. 530)

2.2 The building and its principal fittings and fixtures

See recent (2010) list description below.

The building is in a Greek Revival style derived from the Erechtheum in Athens. It has one principal storey over a basement. The façade is faced with limestone ashlar and has a central projecting pedimented portico with solid side walls and two unfluted Ionic columns *in antis*. Under the portico is a blind doorway with a pylon architrave. The portico is flanked by pilastered bays of the same height pierced by tapered window openings. These openings were apparently blind originally but were later opened and given small-paned timber sashes. The whole of the main building is raised above street level on a stylobate. The entrances are in two lower side wings, set back from the main façade, which have rusticated front walls and arched door-openings. The low-pitched and tiled main roof is not visible from the street, but two tall timber lanterns rise above the roofline. The side and rear walls are of coursed rubble and are tightly enclosed by adjacent buildings. To the south west is the ornamental rear façade of Ralph Allen's House, on whose garden the hall was built.

On the upper (ground) floor the whole of the main building is occupied by what is now the main meeting room, with rectangular lobbies at either end. The main meeting room is a handsome rectangular space with plain plastered walls, timber skirtings and chair rails, a decorative plaster cornice and a plain cove to the flat ceiling. There are two fireplaces in the rear (north) wall with plain moulded marble surrounds. The room is lit by large sash windows at the ends of the long north and south walls and by two large lantern lights in the ceiling. Across the west end are modern bookcases for the meeting's library. The west lobby contains the original main staircase which has plain stick balusters and a moulded handrail. The east lobby originally contained a committee room and a smaller secondary stair, but the stair was removed in 1982 and the spaces reconfigured to provide a kitchen and toilets.

On the lower (basement) floor is one large room and a number of other spaces which originally included a substantial kitchen. The large room has a Gothick plaster cornice which is apparently not original and a cast-iron Gothick grate with a stone surround. The other spaces have been adapted for other uses, including a warden's flat at the east end, not currently in use.

2.3 Loose furnishings

There are four old open-backed timber benches in the main meeting room. Their provenance is unknown.

2.4 Attached burial ground (if any)

None

2.5 The meeting house in its wider setting

The meeting house fronts directly onto York Street, a narrow road formed in 1808 on land south of Bath Abbey. Directly facing the meeting house is a terrace of two-storey houses with a central pediment – 115-119 York Street – which was built in 1819, also to the design of William Wilkins (McLaughlin & Ross, Historic Building Report, 2011).

There is a former detached burial ground site at Widcombe Hill (now Clarendon Road; NGR ST 75748 63989).

2.6 Listed status

The building is currently listed Grade II. In 2007 it was considered for upgrading to II* but was considered to be too altered to justify such a change. It seems unlikely that the listing grade would be reconsidered.

2.7 Archaeological potential of the site

The meeting house stands in the centre of Bath near the Abbey church. Roman deposits were found while excavating a sewer trench in 1982. The site is clearly 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 (if any): N/A

3.2 Maintenance

The 2016 Quinquennial Inspection report by Carter Jonas has just been received. Generally, the building was found to be in good condition. Some problems with damp and dry rot were noted in the basement. The report also noted that the roof and roof-space are difficult to access for maintenance and that the external joinery was also in need of some attention. A specialist report on the external stonework by David Odgers has also just been received. Since the previous QI report in 2011 there has been extensive roof renovation, a new heating system has been installed and the historic décor has been renovated. The meeting has enough money to pay for basic maintenance and repair but not enough for significant upgrading work. The meeting does not have a formal 5-year repair plan, but the management company (Ethical Property company) has a monitoring and service plan for everything needing regular maintenance.

3.3 Sustainability

The meeting uses the sustainability toolkit and has implemented several measures to reduce its environmental impact. These include:

- Climate change & energy efficiency: a new heating system chosen for its energy efficiency (with the potential ability to convert geo-thermal energy from Roman Baths waste water if permitted in future); automatic lighting in public areas; low-energy lamps; better thermostats. Works in prospect include draught-proofing, secondary glazing and upgraded lighting.
- Resource use: recycling bins in kitchen

Neither the meeting house nor the former warden's flat (unoccupied at present) have EPCs and the meeting think it would be irrelevant for a listed historic building.

3.4 Amenities

The meeting does not have all the amenities it needs. There are two large meeting rooms which provide plenty of flexible space but the space used for the children's meeting on Sunday mornings is not ideal, as it is bare and any noise is audible in the meeting room upstairs. The toilets are modern and adequate but not large and may not meet the latest provision advised for buildings open to the public. Washing facilities are limited to hand-basins. There is a small upstairs kitchen. A large catering kitchen downstairs was removed five years ago but may be brought back into use by refurbishment. Some hirers find the AV provision inadequate. There is a self-contained flat on the lower floor which has been occupied by resident Friends in the past but has been empty for some time. The meeting

house is in the centre of Bath and easily accessible by public transport. Parking is very difficult and the use of private cars is discouraged. There are public bike racks at both ends of the street.

3.5 Access

The upper floor of the meeting house is accessible to people with disabilities by means of an external lift from street level (installed in 2012). This floor has level access throughout and there is a WC suitable for disabled people. The lower floor is not accessible. There is a hearing loop (recently upgraded) and some facilities for partially-sighted people (contrast strips on external steps and better lighting over them). A Disability Access Audit was conducted in 2014 and some of the recommended changes have been made. The Premises Committee has this matter under review.

3.6 Community Use

Friends use the meeting house for worship for about 7 hours per week and up to 10 hours per week for other activities. The building is theoretically available for community lettings for a maximum number of 162 hours per week (2 rooms x 6 days x 14 hours less 6 hours for weekday meetings for worship). It is used for an average of 82 hours per week in term time; the principal tenant is Bath and NE Somerset Council which uses the building for 72 hours per week during school terms. The meeting has a lettings policy on the website. No alcohol is permitted. Free use is generally given to those with shared values, if the meeting does not conflict with a paying booking. Users value the building because the accommodation is warm, spacious, centrally-located and cheap. Lettings are handled by a lettings officer from the Ethical Property management company.

3.7 Vulnerability to crime

There are no signs of general crime or anti-social behaviour at the site and no heritage crime. A rough sleeper briefly used the basement vaults. The locality is generally well-cared for and has low crime levels and high community confidence, but the city has some deprivation and homelessness alongside great wealth. There is no established liaison with the Local Neighbourhood Policing Team at present but the meeting would not rule it out.

3.8 Plans for change

The anchor tenant which provides much of the income from lettings is to move elsewhere in 2019-20. The meeting is actively considering how the spaces might be adapted for other hirers or tenants.

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 ample accommodation for the meeting alone and there is also scope for change if required.

ii) For wider community use, in addition to local Meeting use: A number of changes have been made to the building, especially in the 1980s and more recently, to improve its amenities and further changes are in prospect. The building is relatively adaptable and given a sensitive designer it should be possible to make any necessary changes without adversely affecting the significance of the listed building.

iii) Being laid down as a Meeting House: The building is in an excellent central location and would probably find an alternative use if the meeting was laid down, although the experience of an attempted sale in recent years (ultimately

unsuccessful) makes it clear that a suitable alternative user cannot be taken for granted.

Part 5: Category: 2

Part 6: List description(s)

Name: FRIENDS MEETING HOUSE

List entry Number: 1395817

Location: FRIENDS MEETING HOUSE, YORK STREET

District: Bath and North East Somerset

District Type: Unitary Authority

Grade: II

Date first listed: 12-Jun-1950

Date of most recent amendment: 15-Oct-2010

Legacy System: LBS

UID: 511225

YORK STREET 656-1/41/1936 (South side) Friends Meeting House 12/06/50

GV II

Friends' Meeting House, formerly a Freemasons' Hall, dating from 1817-19, by William Wilkins (1778-1839), in a Greek Revival style.

MATERIALS: the building has a limestone ashlar front, with coursed limestone rubble to the sides and rear; the roof is not visible apart from two prominent cylindrical lanterns.

PLAN: On plan, the building is roughly rectangular, with a central principal chamber, flanked by secondary rooms to the east and a staircase to the west, and a projecting portico to the north. The basement has detached vaults running to the north, under the road.

EXTERIOR: The building has a single storey and basement. The central block is of three bays, flanked by lower rusticated bays which house six panel, raised and fielded entrance doors. The main block has a projecting, pedimented Ionic portico with two columns in antis, and a blind central doorway with pylon architrave; there is a full entablature above. The first and third bays of the central block have pylon windows with shouldered architrave and cornice, similar to the blind doorway under the portico, housing six-over-six sash windows. The side elevations retain their cast iron rainwater heads with Masonic devices. The west elevation has a pair of three-over-three sash windows under a timber lintel, with a similar window lighting the stair below. The rear elevation has two sash windows to the ground floor and three to the basement, the lower windows set in dressed stone surrounds.

INTERIOR: The interior has a lobby with staircase to the west, leading into the Great Room; this has a foliate frieze with egg-and-dart moulding above, below a coved ceiling, six-panelled doors set in reeded doorcases and fireplaces with marble slips and timber surrounds, the cast iron fireplaces having decoration to match that on the doors. The room was originally top-lit only by the two high, circular lanterns, which have fine plaster details to

their ceilings. To the east, the former committee room has a plain fireplace, and the lobby to the west retains its egg-and-dart moulding. The dog leg stair, in stone with square section stick balusters and ramped mahogany-veneer handrail, leads to the basement, with an original WC to the rear at the bottom of the first flight. A second meeting room occupies the majority of the space; it has a later moulded Gothic plaster frieze at picture rail height and an inserted Gothic window with a four-centred arched top to the rear. Rooms used originally for Masonic functions are ranged to the north, while to the east, a two-bedroomed flat has been created from the space formerly occupied by the second staircase, and the kitchen and wine cellar which served the Masonic Hall. A shallow forecourt leads to the seven stone-lined, round-arched vaults running under the road to the north.

HISTORY: The Friends' Meeting House was built as a Masonic Hall for the local Lodges, and opened on 23 September 1819. It was an expensive undertaking and the Freemasons soon found that they could not afford the building. After a tontine failed to raise sufficient funds for its upkeep, despite the renting out of the Great Room for entertainments, the Freemasons left the building in the 1820s. It was used for a variety of purposes, first as an Assembly Room and exhibition space, and by the 1830s as a Non-conformist chapel, until leased in 1842 by the Reverend J Wallinger, and re-opened as the Bethesda Chapel, an event commemorated by the inclusion of the date '1842' on the pediment above the portico. Since 1866, the building has been the home of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers). In the 1980s, the building was altered to provide a basement flat and to allow community use of some of the spaces.

SOURCES: Walter Ison, *The Georgian Buildings of Bath* (1980) 68-9, 83 Neil Jackson, *Nineteenth Century Bath: Architects and Architecture* (1991) 45-8 R W Liscombe, *William Wilkins 1778-1839* (1980) 117-8 Christopher Stell, *An Inventory of Non-Conformist Chapels and Meeting-Houses in South West England* (RCHME 1991) 164SOM 16

REASON FOR DESIGNATION: The Friends' Meeting House in Bath is designated at Grade II for the following principal reasons: * The building, a former Masonic Hall by William Wilkins (1778-1839) is a fine example of Greek Revival building by a renowned architect in this idiom, whose commissions included the National Gallery in Trafalgar Square * The elegant, correct Greek façade is an important example of this style in Bath, and forms a group with nos. 11-15 York Street, a terrace of Greek Revival houses which run opposite the Friends' Meeting House * The interior, in particular the impressive top-lit Great Room, retains its C19 decorative schemes

Listing NGR: ST7514864712