

***Quaker Meeting House, Birkenhead***

*83 Park Road South, Birkenhead, CH43 4UU*

*National Grid Reference: SJ 30706 88644*



***Statement of Significance***

***The late Victorian meeting house has high heritage value; the 1892 building retains most of its original architectural detail and loose furnishings and is particularly well cared for.***

***Evidential value***

***The meeting house expresses late Victorian design and Quaker use. The burial ground has the potential to reveal information about past Quakers. The meeting house and site have medium evidential value.***

### **Historical value**

***The meeting house has high historical significance in the local context, and reflects the history of local Quakers and their response to the suburban growth of Birkenhead. It was designed by a regionally important architect George Enoch Grayson who was responsible for a number of buildings in the Merseyside area.***

### **Aesthetic value**

***The meeting house has a high aesthetic value, compromised slightly by the re-tiling of the roof. However, the meeting house is an attractive late Victorian building which retains much of its original architectural detail. The interior of the meeting room has been well preserved and is virtually unchanged. The meeting room's significant features include leaded windows, elders' seating, panelling, benches and the original heating system. The ladies WCs are notable for the decorative blue and white Doulton & Co toilet bowls.***

### **Communal value**

***Since 1892 the meeting house has been a place for Quakers to meet and has a high community value. The meeting house provides a valued venue for local community groups.***

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

- 1.1 Area Meeting: *Wirral and Chester*
- 1.2 Property Registration Number: *0012360*
- 1.3 Owner: *Area Meeting*
- 1.4 Local Planning Authority: *Wirral Council*
- 1.5 Historic England locality: *North West*
- 1.6 Civil parish: *Birkenhead*
- 1.7 Listed status: *Not listed*
- 1.8 NHLE: *Not applicable*
- 1.9 Conservation Area: *No*
- 1.10 Scheduled Ancient Monument: *No*
- 1.11 Heritage at Risk: *No*
- 1.12 Date(s): *1892*
- 1.13 Architect (s): *George Enoch Grayson*
- 1.14 Date of visit: *23<sup>rd</sup> April 2015*
- 1.15 Name of report author: *Emma Neil*
- 1.16 Name of contact(s) made on site: *Tom Miller, Mary Green and Harvey Cox*

1.17 Associated buildings and sites: *Warden's house*

1.18 Attached burial ground: *Yes*

1.19 Information sources:

David M. Butler, *The Quaker Meeting Houses of Britain* (London: Friends Historical Society, 1999), vol. 1, pp.43-45.

Clare Hartwell, Matthew Hyde, Edward Hubbard and Nikolaus Pevsner, *The Buildings of England: Cheshire*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2011), pp.397. *Birkenhead Friends Meeting House Centenary 1892 – 1992* booklet.

Mary Green, *Local Meeting Survey*, March 2015

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

### 2.1. Historical background

A Meeting was first established in Birkenhead in 1836 by a group of members from the Liverpool Meeting who lived in the locality. By 1846 the first meeting house had been built in Beckwith Street; however, as a result of unsatisfactory conditions the friends rented premises from 1849 until 1854 when they built a new meeting house in Hemingford Street to the designs of the architect Lewis Hornblower (Fig.1).

By 1884 some Friends were moving to the suburbs of Birkenhead which led to the decision to dispose of the meeting house in Hemingford Street and consider building a new meeting house in a more convenient location. The meeting house was sold to a Charles Thompson for £1400 in 1890. The present meeting house was designed by George Enoch Grayson and opened in December 1892. The cost of the meeting house was £3400 and money was raised by subscriptions and debentures.



Figure 1: Birkenhead Meeting House, Hemingford Street. Drawing by Butler (1999, vol.1, p43).

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

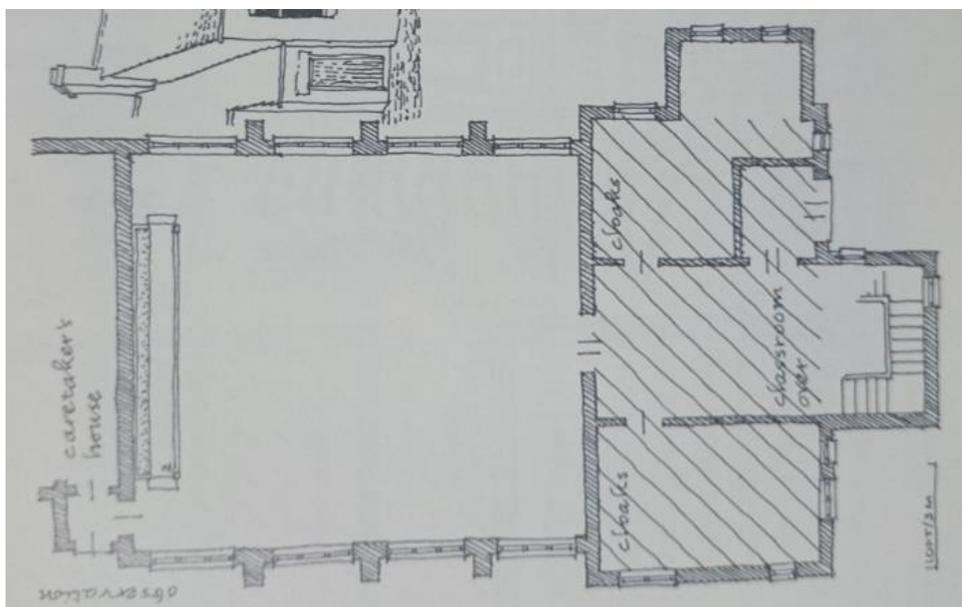


Figure 2: Ground floor plan of the meeting house as reconstructed by Butler (north is to the right; not to scale) (Butler (1999), vol. 1, p.43)

The Meeting House was designed by George Enoch Grayson and opened in December 1892. It is built of red brick with stone dressings to the main entrance (to the north), some roughcast render and modern concrete roof tiles, and brick chimney stack. Roughly T-plan, the building divides into a two storey block to the north containing entrance hall, stairs, small meeting rooms and ancillary spaces, with the single volume meeting room and warden's house to the south. The north front elevation has a central projecting gabled bay with roughcast render to first floor level with remnants of decorative paintwork on the upper section. The entrance is to the right (west) side of this elevation with a double timber door in a stone surround. Windows are mullioned and transomed with leaded glazing. The hipped roof has dormer windows to the west and east. The single-storey four-bay main meeting room has east and west elevations, with brick buttresses, four 3-light timber windows with leaded glazing under segmental brick heads. Adjoining the south elevation is the warden's house built at the same time as the meeting house; a modern 2-storey flat roofed extension is to the south. The west elevation has a rectangular single-storey red brick projection (disabled WC) to the north end, with fire escape stairs and stone steps to basement.

The main meeting room, smaller meeting room and WC's are accessed via a lobby area with white plastered walls, decorative metal vents, a parquet floor and an open well staircase to the northeast which leads to the meeting room and kitchen on the first floor. The interior of the main meeting room has been little altered since it was first built; the rectangular room has a panelled dado in pine, a sloping ceiling with three timber trusses and is lit from east and west by windows with leaded lights and a border of red glass. Fittings include the raised elders' benches on the south wall, pendant lights dating from 1912, original heating system by Isaac D. Smead & Co (patented August 1<sup>st</sup> 1882) (Fig.3). The wooden floor has been

covered with carpet tiles and historic benches are currently arranged in a square around a central table.



Figure 3: Original heating system by Isaac D. Smead & Co

The WC facilities retain decorative ceramic toilet bowls and cisterns by Doulton & Co of London. The female toilet has an unusual blue and white patterned ceramic toilet bowl (Fig.4), and wooden seat.



Figure 4: Blue and white patterned toilet bowl by Doulton & Co London

The meeting room on the first floor has been altered but retains two exposed roof trusses and some historic benches. A modern kitchen has been installed to the north of the room.

### 2.3. Loose furnishings

The main meeting room contains historic pine benches (fig.5) with vertical tongue and groove detailing to match the dado panelling.



Figure 5: Meeting room benches

### 2.4. Attached burial ground

The burial ground is located to the north of the east elevation of the meeting house. There are a small number of flat headstones of nineteenth century date onwards, set within a landscaped garden space.

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

The meeting house is located in a suburb west of Birkenhead, on the south side of Birkenhead Park. It is set back from the street on the corner of Park Road South and Slatey Road. The stone boundary wall and surrounding garden create an attractive enclosed green space which makes a positive contribution to the surrounding area. The grounds are well planted with trees and shrubs which add to the mature landscaped character of the area. The boundary trees restrict views to the meeting house from Slatey Road. The key view of the meeting house is from Park Road South.

The meeting house is not within a conservation area, however Birkenhead Park conservation area is to the north and the park itself is a grade I listed registered park and garden. Directly north is the University Academy of Birkenhead which dates from 1926. To the south of the

meeting house the area is predominantly residential, the housing generally semi-detached houses set back from the road with front gardens.

## 2.6. Listed status

Not listed. George Enoch Grayson was a Liverpool architect, who in conjunction with Edward Ould designed a number of notable buildings in the Merseyside and Cheshire area. Grayson designed a number of buildings which are Grade II listed. The interior of the meeting room has been little altered and still retains a good set of historic fittings and furnishings which contribute to its character. The building could be a candidate for listing, and early discussion with Historic England is recommended should changes be proposed. The building would merit consideration for inclusion on a potential local list Wirral Borough Council when resources become available.

## 2.7. Archaeological potential of the site

The site is likely to be of low archaeological potential. The Merseyside Historic Environment Record was consulted and no records have been identified for the site. There was no earlier building on this site. The site for the building was specifically acquired to build a new meeting house.

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

*See completed volunteer survey*

### 3.1. Condition

i) Meeting House: Good. As part of the quinquennial survey dated 2010 a number of recommendations have been followed including: clearing the gutters, maintaining the garden and redecoration of the interiors of both the meeting house and the warden's house. One of the windows of the meeting house needs attention, however this is in hand by local members. The original roof has been replaced with concrete tiles.

ii) Attached burial ground (if any): *Optimal/generally satisfactory.*

### 3.2. Maintenance

The meeting house does not have a five year maintenance and repair plan. Members regularly monitor the meeting house and have the necessary funds to undertake repairs and maintenance when needed.

### 3.3. Sustainability

Although the meeting does not use the Sustainability Toolkit, steps have been taken to improve sustainability.

- Climate change and energy efficiency: more efficient boiler with zoned heating has been installed.
- Resource use, recycling and waste management: the meeting house uses the local authority recycling scheme.
- Wildlife, ecology and conservation: the grounds are well planted with trees and shrubs which provide wildlife habitats.
- Transport: Friends car-share where possible.

### 3.4. Amenities

The meeting house has all the amenities it needs. These include a kitchen area on the first floor, WCs (including one fully accessible) and three meeting rooms.

### 3.5. Access

A Disability Access Audit was undertaken in approximately 2005. As part of this survey a ramp was installed to the main entrance, a grab handle to the rear door, an accessible disabled toilet and a hearing loop installed. Access is limited to first floor and there are no facilities for the partially sighted.

The meeting is accessible by public transport. However, on Sundays public transport does not reach the meeting house and involves a one mile walk from the station. There is car parking on site for five cars.

### 3.6 Community Use

The meeting house is in community use for 30 hours each week, groups include Weightwatchers and Buddhists. There is a lettings policy; the rooms are not hired to political parties. Letting free of charge is available to Quaker groups only.

### 3.7. Vulnerability to crime

In recent years the meeting house has been subject to anti-social behaviour in the form of stones being thrown and a waste bin was set a light eighteen months ago. The caretaker is in liaison with local police and neighbours.

### 3.8. Plans for change

Apart from routine maintenance and repairs there are no future plans for change.

## **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 interior of the meeting room has been little altered and the original historic furnishing should be respected in any future scheme. Any further internal alterations should be sympathetic to the original design and take account of the quality and character of the existing space.

*ii) For wider community use, in addition to local Meeting use:* The building is already used for other community uses and has the necessary facilities to accommodate the community groups.

*iii) Being laid down as a Meeting House:* In the event of closure a sympathetic alternative use should be found, which retains the internal spaces and fittings, as far as possible.

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