

The Blue Idol Meeting House

Oldhouse Lane, Coolham, West Sussex, RH13 8QP

National Grid Reference: TQ 10739 23125



Statement of Significance

The Blue Idol Meeting House is a farmhouse of c.1580 which was acquired by a group of Quakers including William Penn in the early 1690s. It was extended in 1934-5 by Hubert Lidbetter. The site includes a small attached burial ground and a medieval hovel barn. The meeting house is of exceptional significance.

Evidential value

As a sixteenth-century building which retains original fabric and historic fittings, the meeting house has exceptional evidential value.

Historical value

The meeting house has strong associations with the origins of Quakerism and in particular with William Penn, Quaker leader and founder of Pennsylvania. It has exceptional historical value.

Aesthetic value

The older part of the building is a timber-framed building whose pattern and patina of age lends the meeting house high aesthetic value. The 1930s extension in a vernacular idiom has perhaps slightly less aesthetic value.

Communal value

The building has exceptional communal value as one of the best-known Quaker meeting house and as a focus for Quakerism and the local community. It has exceptional communal value.

Part 1: Core data

1.1 Area Meeting: *West Weald*

1.2 Property Registration Number: *0028380*

1.3 Owner: *Area Meeting*

1.4 Local Planning Authority: *Horsham District Council*

1.5 Historic England locality: *South East*

1.6 Civil parish: *Thakeham*

1.7 Listed status: *II**

1.8 NHLE: *1181144*

1.9 Conservation Area: *No*

1.10 Scheduled Ancient Monument: *No*

1.11 Heritage at Risk: *No (removed from register in October 2015)*

1.12 Date(s): *c.1580*

1.13 Architect(s): *Not established*

1.14 Date of visit: *10 September 2015*

1.15 Name of report author: *Johanna Roethe*

1.16 Name of contact(s) made on site: *Christine Knott*

1.17 Associated buildings and sites: *attached house, barn, William Penn primary school in Coolham*

1.18 Attached burial ground: *Yes*

1.19 Information sources:

Butler, D.M., *The Quaker Meeting Houses of Britain*, 1999, vol. 2, pp. 611-3

Hudson, T.P. (ed.), *A History of the County of Sussex: Volume 6 Part 2, Bramber Rape (North-Western Part) including Horsham (Victoria County History)*, 1986, p. 48

Lidbetter, H., *The Friends Meeting House*, 1979, pp. 6-7, 14, 27, plate 39, 40, fig. 27 (plan)
Nairn, I. and N. Pevsner, *Sussex (Buildings of England)*, 1965, p. 107
Stell, C., *An Inventory of Nonconformist Chapels and Meeting-houses in Eastern England*,
2002, pp. 355-6
West Sussex County Council HER, monument report, MWS476
Local Meeting survey by Kersti Wagstaff, July 2015

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

2.1 Historical background

Friends initially used the house of John Snashold, and later the houses of William Penn and John Shaw of Shipley. (William Penn, Quaker leader and founder of Pennsylvania, lived at nearby Warminghurst from 1677 to 1696 (except for a trip to America in 1682-4) and was involved in the early stages of trying to establish a meeting here and finding a permanent building.) In the early 1690s (Stell and Hudson: 1691, Butler: 1692), the Quakers bought a farmhouse from John Shaw for £20, together with 1 ¼ acres of land. The farmhouse, dating to c.1580, was initially known as 'Little Slatter'. (The date of c.1580 appears to be generally accepted now. The *Victoria County History* dates it to between 1672 and 1679.) A meeting room was created by removing part of an upper floor with the remaining part used as a gallery. A new stair was inserted, as well as a tall central window and a corner stand. These alterations, completed by 1693, cost £53 which was paid by John Shaw and paid off by the meeting in 1701. A nearby detached medieval barn is said to have been used by the women's business meeting. In 1791 the meeting was discontinued; it was restarted in 1874. By 1869, the building and meeting were known as 'Blue Idol' – with 'idol' possibly being a corruption of 'idle'. After 1869, a central heating system with underfloor heating in the meeting room was installed. By 1882, this appears to have been replaced by a free-standing stove in the meeting room. The northern part of the building was used as a caretaker's dwelling which was extended in 1893.

By the early twentieth century, the building was in poor condition and three Young Friends work-camps were held in 1919, 1920 and 1923 to undertake the necessary work. From 1923, the house was used as a guest house. In 1934-5 the house was further extended (photo centre left on page 1 and figures 2 and 3) and the historic building restored (architect: Hubert Lidbetter). Improvements were made in 1969 and the house again enlarged. About 10 years ago, the use as guest house ceased; the attached house is now let. A major restoration (2013-15) was completed in June 2015, which included timber and roof repairs. The architect was Simon Dyson of HMDW Architects.



Figure 1: Undated photo showing the meeting house before the extension of 1934-5 (Lidbetter (1979), plate 39, reproduced with kind permission of Mark Sessions)

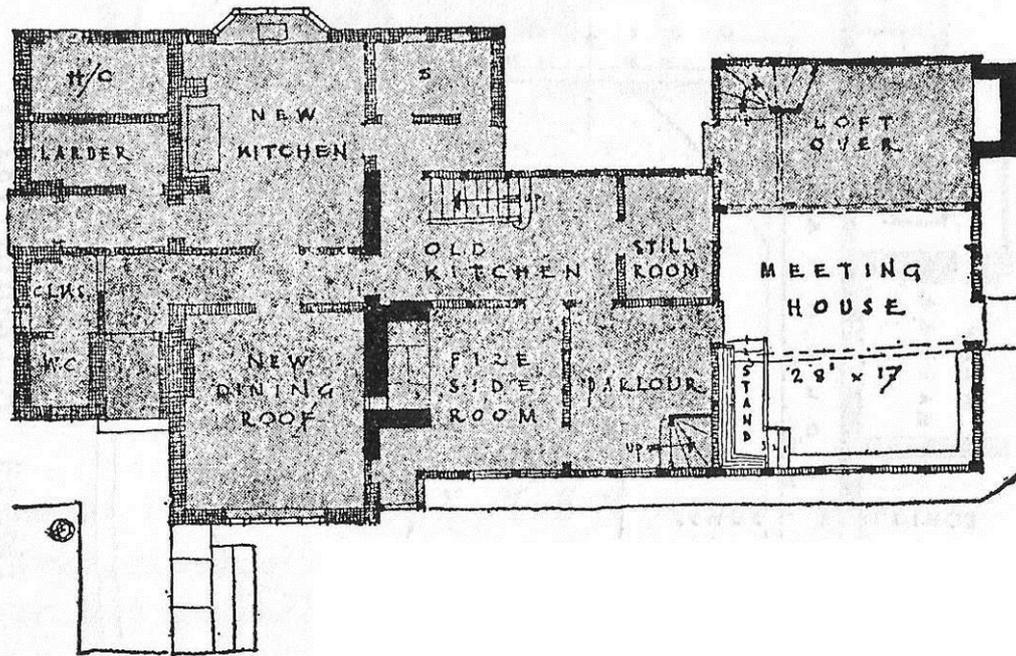


Figure 2: Plan of the meeting house by Hubert Lidbetter (north is to the left; not to scale) (Lidbetter (1979), fig. 27, reproduced with kind permission of Mark Sessions)

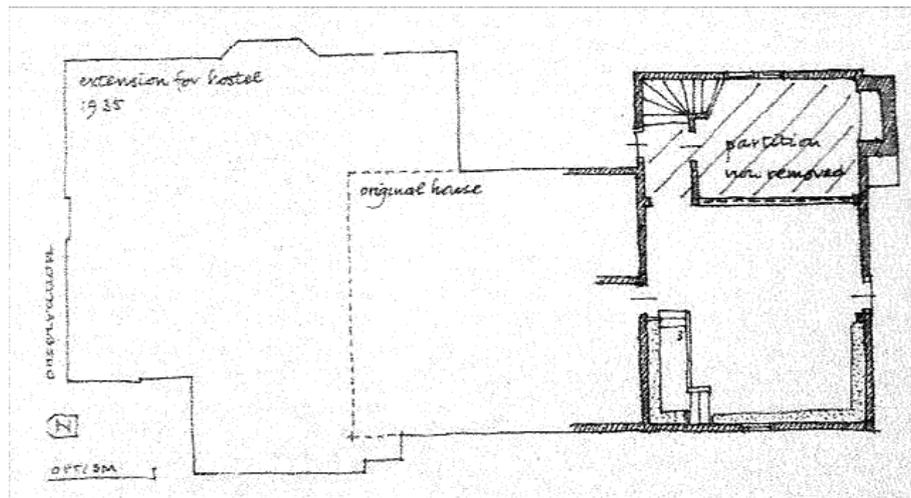


Figure 3: Site plan (north is to the left; not to scale)
 (Butler (1999), vol. 2, p. 612, reproduced with kind permission of David Butler)

2.2 The building and its principal fittings and fixtures

The meeting house is at the south end of the building. It is part of an L-plan former farmhouse whose north arm (now at the centre of the building) was extended in 1893. To the north is a large extension of 1934-5 by Hubert Lidbetter (photo centre left on page 1 and figure 2). This and the ground floor of the older house now form a self-contained residence, while the first floor over the older house (and the meeting room) is the warden's flat.

The older two-storey building is timber-framed with a brick base and plaster infilling, and a Horsham slab roof. The weather-boarded south wall has the main entrance to the meeting house with a window above the door, a dormer, and an external brick stack. The west elevation has square-panel framing with different patterns for the meeting room and the adjoining part to the north. There is a tall window to the meeting room, beyond which are two first-floor windows and three ground-floor windows, with a door under a tiled canopy near the angle with the 1930s wing. Also near the junction with the later wing is a brick chimneystack. The connection with William Penn is commemorated by a plaque erected by West Sussex County Council on the west elevation. There is a small window in a gablet above the southwest corner. The southeast gable is weatherboarded with a single window each on three levels. To the north, this wing also has square-panel framing and another door. The east elevation of the north arm of the former farmhouse has a window and a door under a low roof (photo top right on page 1).

The attached 1930s extension is faced in brick laid in stretcher bond on the ground floor, with weatherboarding to the first floor. The roofs are tiled with two brick stacks. There are two gables to the east, two hipped roofs to the north, and another gable to the west. There is a canted single-storey bay window to the east.

The three-bay meeting room retains part of the original upper floor (now the gallery) at the east (photo bottom right on page 1). The gallery has a panelled timber front. Below the gallery is another entrance door, a door to the timber stair in the northeast corner and a brick fireplace at the southeast. At the northwest corner of the room is the elders' and ministers' stand comprising a fixed bench on a dais behind a balustrade with stick balusters (photo bottom left on page 1). There is another fixed bench along the west and southwest walls.

There are four ground-floor rooms in the north arm of the former farmhouse (see figure 2). A large ground-floor room at the northwest (called 'Fireside Room' in figure 2) has a large brick fireplace with a timber bressumer which has a tongue-stopped chamfer. A 1930s stair

in the northeast room (the 'Old Kitchen' on figure 2) leads to the upper floors of the extension. The attic above is the warden's flat which can be accessed from the gallery stair in the meeting room and a stair in the southwest room. The older part of the building has several historic doors (internal and external), some with wooden latches.

The extension of 1934-5 has a dining room, a kitchen and ancillary rooms on the ground floor (figure 2). The upper floor has the former guest rooms with brick fireplaces and wash-hand basins.

2.3 Loose furnishings

The chairs in the meeting room are modern. There are older timber chairs (of late nineteenth or early twentieth century date) on the gallery. The meeting room also has a sixteenth-century coffin table with turned legs, and a grandfather clock with painted dial by 'D. Baker, Billinghamurst' [sic]. Two open-backed benches were moved from the meeting room to the barn.

2.4 Attached burial ground (if any)

The attached burial ground is a small area to the southwest of the meeting house. It is not demarcated from the large surrounding garden. There are seven headstones and four footstones. One headstone dates from the eighteenth century, two from the twentieth, and the rest from the late nineteenth century. According to Butler, this burial ground was last used in 1757. William Penn's daughter Letitia (died 1746), wife of William Aubrey, is reputedly buried in an unmarked grave here. (There are also claims that she was, like her parents and husband, buried at Jordans but her name is not included in *Jordans Burial Ground, A list of burials from 1671 to 1845 compiled in 1895 by Joseph Green* (Chilterns Area Quaker Meeting, 2010).)

2.5 The meeting house in its wider setting

The meeting house is set back from Oldhouse Lane within generous grounds. These are laid out as a garden with an orchard, modern sculpture by a former warden and a Penn-related trail of information panels. To the east of the meeting house is a free-standing prefabricated block containing a kitchen and toilets.

A small detached timber-framed hovel barn (photo centre right on page 1) stands to the northwest of the meeting house. This is said to pre-date the meeting house. The two-bay interior retains the wattle-and-daub infill in the upper panels of the internal partition. Reputedly it was once used for the women's business meeting and later as a store. By 2001, it was in poor condition and was then thoroughly restored. It is now used for the children's meeting. A modern extension to one side is in poor condition.

The wider setting of the meeting house is rural, of fields and farms. The meeting house, the barn and the attached burial ground are to the east of Oldhouse Lane. The meeting also owns a field on the other side of the Lane.

There is a detached burial ground (NGR: TQ 10514 23400) about 350m northwest of the meeting house, to the west of Briar Farm and Little Farm. This is still in use.

2.6 Listed status

The meeting house is correctly listed at grade II* for historical reasons. The list entry needs to be amended to correct one typo, to clarify the sequence of extensions and to remove references to the former guest house and accommodation for visiting Friends.

The free-standing medieval hovel barn (photo centre right on page 1) might be listable in its own right (without its modern extension). It is currently listed as a curtilage structure to the meeting house.

2.7 Archaeological potential of the site

The site has high archaeological potential as the site of a medieval farmstead and a Quaker burial ground.

Part 3: Current use and management

See completed volunteer survey

3.1 Condition

- i) Meeting House: Good
- ii) Attached burial ground (if any): Optimal/generally satisfactory

3.2 Maintenance

The last quinquennial report was prepared in 2012 by Simon Dyson of HMDW Architects (no copy seen). Since then, a major repair programme has been completed, following which the building was removed (in October 2015) from Historic England's Heritage at Risk register. The 1930s extension needs to be redecorated externally. The local meeting has enough money to maintain and repair the building. It has a five-year maintenance and repair plan.

3.3 Sustainability

The meeting does not use the Sustainability Toolkit. It has implemented measures to reduce its environmental impact. These include:

- Climate change & energy efficiency: roof insulation recently enhanced
- Resource use, recycling & waste management: new condensing boiler, recycling
- Wildlife, ecology and nature conservation: bat conservation, ecological management of garden and burial ground

The meeting does not have an Energy Performance Certificate.

3.4 Amenities

The kitchen and toilets are in a free-standing block beside the meeting house. The attic is usually used as warden's flat. However, a fire-safety inspector recently ruled this unsafe and it is currently not occupied pending improvements.

The meeting is located in a remote rural location which is not accessible by public transport. There is parking on site but no secure parking for bicycles (which, however, are not at a high risk of theft in this remote location).

3.5 Access

The meeting house has limited disabled access. There is level access into the building but there is no accessible toilet, no hearing loop and no facilities for partially-sighted people. No Disability Access Audit has been conducted.

3.6 Community Use

Friends use the meeting house for 2 hours per week. The building is available for community lettings for a maximum number of 38 hours per week. The building is currently not available

for lettings by community groups as there is no resident warden to manage this. The meeting has recently agreed a new lettings policy.

3.7 Vulnerability to crime

There are no signs of general crime or anti-social behaviour at the site. There has been no heritage crime, general crime or other incidents. The locality is generally well-cared for, has low crime levels, low deprivation and high community confidence. There is currently no liaison with the Local Neighbourhood Policing Team. (They have previously been approached but did not respond.)

3.8 Plans for change

There are no plans for alterations at present.

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: As a listed building with historic fabric and fittings, the meeting house has a limited capacity to accommodate alterations.

ii) For wider community use, in addition to local Meeting use: Due to the lack of a resident warden, there is currently no community use of the building. In theory, the building has all the facilities required, although toilets and kitchen are in a detached block.

iii) Being laid down as a Meeting House: In the unlikely event of closure, the meeting room could continue in community use, with the rest of the building (as now) in residential use.

Part 5: Category: 1

Part 6: List description (s)

This building is listed under the Planning (Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas) Act 1990 as amended for its special architectural or historic interest.

Name: THE BLUE IDOL MEETING HOUSE AND GUEST HOUSE

List entry Number: 1181144

Location

THE BLUE IDOL MEETING HOUSE AND GUEST HOUSE

The building may lie within the boundary of more than one authority.

County	District	District Type	Parish
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West Sussex	Horsham	District Authority	Thakeham
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Grade: II*

Date first listed: 15-Mar-1955

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

Legacy System Information

The contents of this record have been generated from a legacy data system.

Legacy System: LBS

UID: 298840

List entry Description

Details

THAKEHAM COOLHAM 1. 5404 The Blue Idol Meeting House and Guest House TQ 12 SW 3/447 15.3.55

II*

2. This was originally an L-shaped timber-framed farmhouse with plaster infilling and a Horsham slab roof. Casement windows. Two storeys. Three windows. In 1691 the south end was converted into a Friends' Meeting House by John Shaw by the removal of the first floor internally. The Meeting House has a gallery with 2 attic bedrooms above for Friends coming from afar. William Penn, who lived at Warminghurst in the adjoining Parish of Ashington, attended this Meeting House between 1676 and 1693. His daughter Letitia is buried in the burial ground attached to the Meeting House. In 1893 the window bay at the north end, of red brick on the ground floor and weather boarded gable above, was added. There are also modern additions behind dating from 1931 for the Guest House. Articles concerning William Penn and this building in the Sussex County Magazine Volumns 2, page 198, 4, page 125 and 7 page 763. Graded II* for historical reasons.

Listing NGR: TQ1073923125