

Friends Meeting House, Bunhill Fields

Quaker Court, Banner Street, London, EC1Y 8QQ

National Grid Reference: TQ 32505 82276



Statement of Significance

The meeting house is a modest structure and is only a fragment of a much larger complex of late Victorian buildings, now lost. It stands on the edge of, what was between 1661 and its closure in 1855, the principal Quaker burial grounds in London. For that reason, the site as a whole must be considered to be of high heritage significance.

Evidential value

The present meeting house is the former caretaker's cottage or manager's house of the lost Memorial Hall and Coffee Tavern of the 1880s and is of medium evidential value. The burial ground is of high evidential value

Historical value

The meeting house is of medium historical value as the fragment of a much larger complex, but the burial ground is of exceptional historical value as one of the principal London Quaker burial grounds and as the last resting place of George Fox.

Aesthetic value

Although only a fragment of the original building, the meeting house is of medium aesthetic value as an example of the institutional Queen Anne style popular in the late nineteenth century.

Communal value

The meeting house has been in use for its present purpose since the 1950s and is well used by community groups. It has high communal value.

Part 1: Core data

- 1.1 Area Meeting: *North London*
- 1.2 Property Registration Number: *0032700*
- 1.3 Owner: *Six Weeks Meeting*
- 1.4 Local Planning Authority: *London Borough of Islington*
- 1.5 Historic England locality: *London*
- 1.6 Civil parish: *Islington NPA*
- 1.7 Listed status: *Not listed*
- 1.8 NHLE: *N/A*
- 1.9 Conservation Area: *St Luke's*
- 1.10 Scheduled Ancient Monument: *No*
- 1.11 Heritage at Risk: *No*
- 1.12 Date(s): *1881*
- 1.13 Architect (s): *William Ward Lee*
- 1.14 Date of visit: *1 September 2015*
- 1.15 Name of report author: *Neil Burton*
- 1.16 Name of contact(s) made on site: *Andrew Roberts*
- 1.17 Associated buildings and sites: *None*
- 1.18 Attached burial ground: *Yes*
- 1.19 Bibliographic references:

Butler, D.M., *The Quaker Meeting Houses of Britain*, 1999, vol.1, p.380
Edwards, G.W., *The Quaker Burial Ground, Bunhill Fields, London c.1950*
<http://studymore.org.uk/quasho.htm#BunhillMission>
British Friends 1882, p.83
Greater London Historic Environment Record, SMR nos. MLO25718 & MLO104437
Local Meeting survey by Michael Albero and Andrew Roberts, October 2015

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

2.1. Historical background

A small plot of land purchased in 1661 for a burial ground was the earliest freehold property of Friends in London. Over a thousand victims of the Great Plague were buried here in 1665 and George Fox was buried here in 1691. The burial ground expanded steadily as further plots were purchased, some with tenements which were let to Friends until the ground was needed for burials. The Burial Acts of the 1850s forced the closure of all central London burial grounds, but by the time that the Bunhill burial ground was closed in 1855 there were nearly 12,000 recorded burials.

The ground lay unused between 1855 and 1874, when a gospel tent mission was established by the Bedford Institute Association, which was superseded in 1875 by an iron room seating 400. In 1880 the Metropolitan Board of Works (precursor of the London County Council) took part of the burial ground for road widening and the compensation money paid for the building of a Memorial Hall on the Roscoe Street frontage, which included a coffee tavern and lodging rooms. The architect was William Ward Lee who had been in partnership with his fellow Quaker, William Beck. A large Adult School was erected immediately east of the hall in 1888 and a meeting for worship was settled in the hall in 1889.

The memorial hall was destroyed by bombs in 1944. A small surviving fragment, known as the cottage, which had been the manager's house, was restored to serve as a small meeting house. A redevelopment of the site was proposed in the mid-1970s but was not carried out. The present building may incorporate parts of an earlier structure, but the visible fabric all appears to date from the later nineteenth century.



Fig.1 A perspective view of the Memorial Hall erected in 1881, with the existing cottage on the extreme left (<http://studymore.org.uk/quasho.htm#BunhillMission>)



Fig.2 The coffee tavern, with the Adult School of 1888, on the right, the meeting room between them and the caretaker's cottage on the far left. (<http://studymore.org.uk/quasho.htm#BunhillMission>)

2.2. The building and its principal fittings and fixtures

The small building now used as a meeting house is in the Queen Anne manner which was current in the 1880s. It is two storeys high over a semi-basement and is rectangular on plan with a canted bay at the eastern end. The walls are of yellow brick, with bands and ornaments of red brick and a pitched roof covered in Welsh slate. The main entrance is on the north side and has a tall doorway with a rectangular fanlight in a red brick surround with a heavy projecting canopy on shaped brick brackets. To the right of the door are two small windows. To the left is a square tablet in an elaborate cut-brick surround. The tablet carries the inscription: 'Society of Friends: Bunhill Fields Memorial Buildings: 1881'. The eastern bay has rectangular sash windows on all three sides at lower level, with a single central sash in the upper storey. The rear (south) elevation is largely blind, with a door at lower level onto a modern verandah and a semi-dormer window to the upper floor.

Inside the building, the main meeting room occupies the east end of the building. The decoration and furnishings are mostly modern, but the meeting room retains its original simple chimneypiece of figured red marble.

2.3 Loose furnishings

The furniture is modern. It includes a book cabinet in the basement presented by the Bunhill Women's Adult School in 1949.

2.4. Attached burial ground (if any)

The former large burial ground is now known as Quaker Gardens. The present space is only the eastern portion of the former burial ground. It is a large rectangular space, enclosed by buildings on all sides, and is now partly laid to asphalt, with some planting and a children's play area. A large London plane tree stands in the centre, with smaller planes at the corners. The central tree was planted after the burial ground closed in 1855. There are only three memorial stones: one, put in place about 1876, is to George Fox who was buried here in 1691; one, dated 1881, records some of the history of the site; the third is a 1952 memorial placed near where Fox is thought to be buried which was designed by Hubert Lidbetter and records the remains of the 'many thousands of Friends' buried here. The burial ground is maintained jointly by The Society of Friends and Islington Council. Major works to renovate the burial ground were completed in 2005/6.

2.5. The meeting house in its wider setting

The setting of the meeting house changed dramatically after the last War, when the area was redeveloped after extensive bomb damage. The east end of Roscoe Street was blocked off and the Banner Street frontage was lined with new flats, with a vehicle entry beneath to the burial ground and meeting house.

2.6. Listed status

The meeting house building is not currently listed or locally listed, nor is the burial ground registered, though Bunhill Fields nearby (which is full of handsome tombstones, many listed in their own right) is grade I in the National Register of Historic Parks and Gardens. The meeting house building is probably not of sufficient architectural or historic interest to merit inclusion in the statutory list but should certainly be included in the Islington local list. The burial ground is of very considerable historic interest, despite the lack of monuments, but probably falls outside the selection criteria for the National Register of Parks and Gardens. It is protected to some extent by conservation area designation.

2.7. Archaeological potential of the site

High: the burial ground and meeting house lie within an Archaeological Priority Area

Part 3: Current use and management

See completed volunteer survey

3.1. Condition

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

3.2. Maintenance

The last quinquennial inspection was carried out in September 2011 by a chartered surveyor on behalf of Six Weeks Meeting. The building was found to be in good condition, with a few areas of concern in respect of the electrical services where work was required. The meeting has enough money to cover the costs of maintenance and repair by communal funds at Six Weeks Meeting and a devolved budget. Six Weeks Meeting undertake quinquennial reviews of the property.

3.3. Sustainability

The meeting does use the Sustainability Toolkit and is reviewing the situation as regards its environmental impact.

- Climate change and energy efficiency is being addressed in quinquennial reviews.
- Waste is recycled
- There is a gardening group which helps to co-ordinate conservation measures with Islington Council

The building does not have an Energy Performance Certificate.

3.4. Amenities

The meeting has all the amenities it needs in the meeting house. There is a small kitchen, and toilets and a shower in the basement. There is no resident warden.

There is good public transport by tube and bus every day of the week. Street parking is controlled. There are 2 car spaces on site. Bicycles can be chained to railings.

3.5. Access

The meeting house is not accessible to wheelchair users. There is no level access into or inside the building, no accessible WC and no hearing loop. There are no facilities for partially-sighted people. There has not been a Disability Access Audit.

3.6 Community Use

Friends use the building for between 2 and 4 hours per week. The building is available for community lettings for a maximum number of 80 hours per week (two small meeting rooms) and is used for approximately 40 hours per week altogether. The top floor of the building is separately leased as a Sufi Centre. The meeting has an informal lettings policy which aims to make the meeting house a shared community space and a tolerant space for people of all faiths and none. Alcohol and tobacco are not permitted. Users value the convenient inner-London location, reasonable prices and friendly community spirit.

3.7. Vulnerability to crime

There has been both general crime and heritage crime. There have been attempted break-ins, security at the rear of the building has been reinforced and some complaints have been made about drug crime in the vicinity. Meeting house users have attempted to establish a working relationship with young people, who sometimes gather on the verandah after dark. In 2007 an attempt was made to remove the lead from the roof.

The locality is generally well cared-for, but has high crime levels (Bunhill Ward was ranked second in notifiable offences in Islington in 2008/10). Despite the affluence for which it is known, Islington is the eighth most deprived local authority area in England. There is high community confidence. Friends have developed a liaison with the Local Neighbourhood Policing Team.

3.8. Plans for change

There are currently no 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 meeting house is very adequate for the present small meeting. There is little scope for change.

ii) For wider community use, in addition to local Meeting us: the meeting house contains only small rooms, which are perfectly sufficient for present needs. There is little scope for change within the present building and very limited scope for expansion.

iii) Being laid down as a Meeting House; thanks to its location, the building could certainly find a new use if the meeting was laid down.

Part 5: Category: 3