

Friends Meeting House, Cheltenham

Warwick Place, Cheltenham, Gloucestershire, GL52 2NP

National Grid Reference: SO 95144 22661



Statement of Significance

A functional design of the 1980s, consisting of three linked and staggered blocks, under pyramidal roofs. The site lies close to the ring road, within Cheltenham's Central Conservation Area. It is the fourth meeting house in the town. Overall, the meeting house is of medium significance.

Evidential value

The building is of relatively recent date and as such is of low evidential value.

Historical value

Cheltenham has seen continuous Quaker witness since 1660, and this is the fourth meeting house in the town. One of the earlier meeting houses survives, that of 1836, now a health club. Quakers were prominent in the eighteenth-century development of Cheltenham as a spa town and one notable figure, Elizabeth Skillicorne, is buried in a late seventeenth-century detached burial ground, which is now a builders' yard but retains its historic boundary wall. While the present meeting house is not of great age, it is of high historical value if only as part of the longstanding and continuing Quaker witness in the town.

Aesthetic value

The building consists of four linked square blocks, a striking design and something of a low-lying landmark near the inner ring road, within the

Central Conservation Area. However, the materials and finishes do not match the quality of the design. Inside, the meeting room is a pleasant space with high timber and boarded ceiling, and looks onto a small sheltered garden with a large weeping silver birch tree. The site is of medium aesthetic value.

Communal value

The meeting house is well used by community groups, and as such has high communal value.

Part 1: Core data

- 1.1 Area Meeting: *Gloucestershire*
- 1.2 Property Registration Number: *0006530*
- 1.3 Owner: *Area Meeting*
- 1.4 Local Planning Authority: *Cheltenham Borough Council*
- 1.5 Historic England locality: *South West*
- 1.6 Civil parish: *Cheltenham*
- 1.7 Listed status: *Not listed*
- 1.8 NHLE: *N/a*
- 1.9 Conservation Area: *Central Cheltenham (Old Town Character Area)*
- 1.10 Scheduled Ancient Monument: *No*
- 1.11 Heritage at Risk: *No*
- 1.12 Date(s): *1984*
- 1.13 Architect(s): *C. Frank Timothy Associates*
- 1.14 Date of visit: *2 June 2016*
- 1.15 Name of report author: *Andrew Derrick*
- 1.16 Name of contact(s) made on site: *Alison Crane and Colin Gerard*
- 1.17 Associated buildings and sites: *None*
- 1.18 Attached burial ground: *No*
- 1.19 Information sources:

Butler, D.M., *The Quaker Meeting Houses of Britain*, 1999, vol. 1, pp. 208-11

Stell, C., *An Inventory of Nonconformist Chapels and Meeting-Houses in Central England*, 1986, pp. 76-7

Verey, D. and Brooks, A., *The Buildings of England: Gloucestershire 2*, 2002, p. 240

Local Meeting Survey, by Alison Crane, April 2016

Quinquennial Survey, March 2015

Local meeting website, <http://www.cheltenhamquaker.org.uk/hist.php>

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

2.1 Historical background

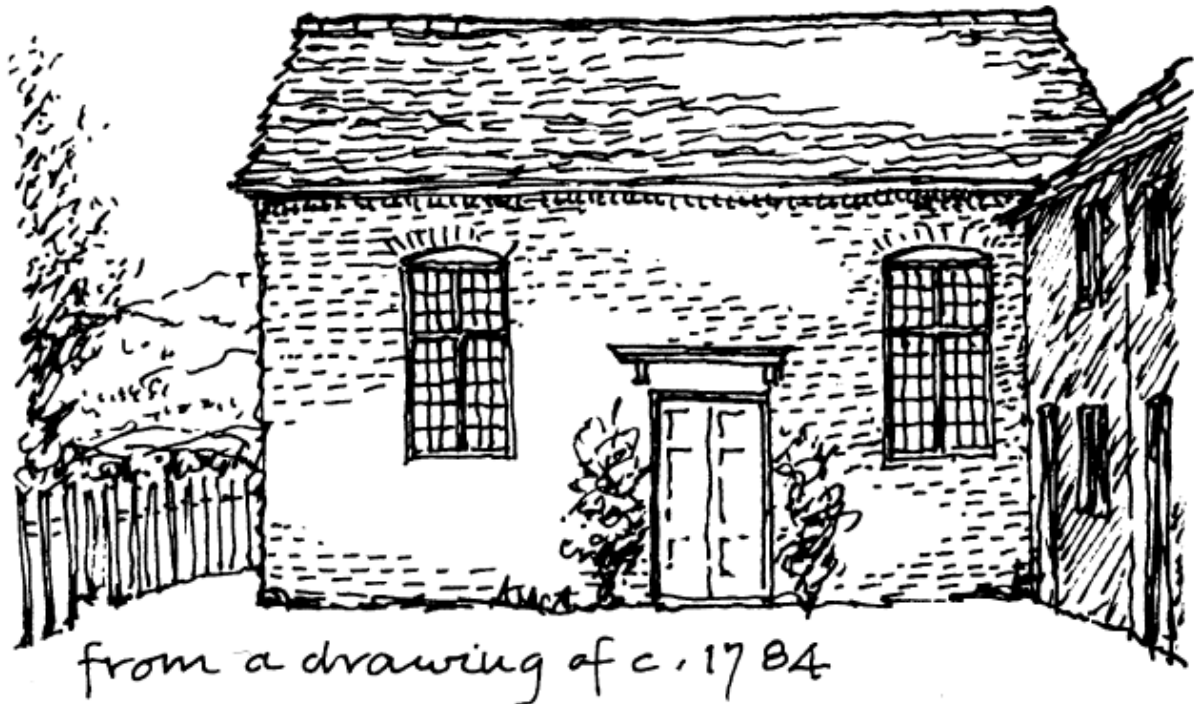


Figure 1: The 1702 meeting house, based on a drawing of c1784, from Butler, Vol.1, p.209

A meeting was settled in Cheltenham by 1660, at the home of Elizabeth Sandford, and in 1685 a burial ground was acquired in Grove Street. Elizabeth Sandford later gave land on Manchester Walk (later Clarence Street) for a small meeting house, built in 1702 and licensed in 1703, with an attached burial ground. As far as can be ascertained, the interior of this building was a single space, accommodating about 150 people. The external form of the building, based on a late eighteenth-century illustration, is shown in Butler's sketch reproduced at figure 1. It was superseded by a larger meeting house in 1836, after which the building was used by the Unitarians, Baptists and Wesleyan Methodists before finally being closed and demolished in the late nineteenth century.

In the later eighteenth century Cheltenham Quakers were involved with the development of the town as a fashionable spa. A chalybeate spring was found at the Bayshill property of William and Margaret Mason, both Quakers, whose daughter Elizabeth had married Captain Henry Skillicorne, a retired naval captain, who established Cheltenham's first Spa and Pump Room here. Elizabeth Skillicorne is interred in the burial ground in Grove Street.

The 1836 meeting house (figure 2) was also in Manchester Walk (NGR SO 94629 22556) on a site given by Elizabeth Skillmore (according to Butler, possibly Elizabeth Skillicorne?). This was in the Regency neoclassical style, in keeping with the fashionable character of the spa town. The published accounts do not name an architect, but one possibility is the eclectic Samuel Dawkes (or Daukes, 1811-1880), who was architect of the meeting house at Gloucester (*qv*) and built widely in Cheltenham. Doors from the entrance lobby led into a large meeting room and a smaller room for women's business, the two spaces separated internally by a shuttered partition. In 1902 this building was sold to the adjoining Church of

England Girls' Training College, which added an additional storey. Known as Manchester House, it survives as a health club and is a Grade II listed building.



from a drawing of c.1840

Figure 2: The 1836 meeting house, from a drawing of c1840, from Butler, Vol.1, p. 209



Figure 3: The third meeting house, built in 1903 (from Butler, vol.1, p. 210)

The third Cheltenham meeting house (figure 3) also accommodated an Adult School, and was built in Portland Street in 1903. This was a three storey neo-Jacobean design in red brick with stone dressings, built from designs by Henry Tutty Fowler. It was described in *The Friend* (1903, 314, cited by Butler) as 'a model meeting house. Not only is it well placed, but it provides, as far as we can judge, all that is required in a meeting house, while all that which is superfluous has been scrupulously avoided'. According to the 1903 account, the meeting room contained chairs instead of the more usual benches.

In 1960 the Portland Street building was threatened by a road scheme, and designs for a replacement meeting house in Montpelier Terrace were prepared by Iorwerth Williams. However, work on what became the Cheltenham northern relief road did not in fact start until 1983, when the 1903 meeting house was demolished. The meeting convened at Shaftesbury Hall, coincidentally on the site of the eighteenth-century Meeting House, for about a year while a new meeting house was being built close by in Warwick Place. This, the fourth in the town, was built from designs by Arnold J. Browning of C. Frank Timothy Associates (not C. Frank Tibbald, as given by Butler). The cost of construction was underwritten by £150,000 obtained through the compulsory purchase of the old Portland Street premises. The new meeting house opened in February 1985.

2.2 The building and its principal fittings and fixtures

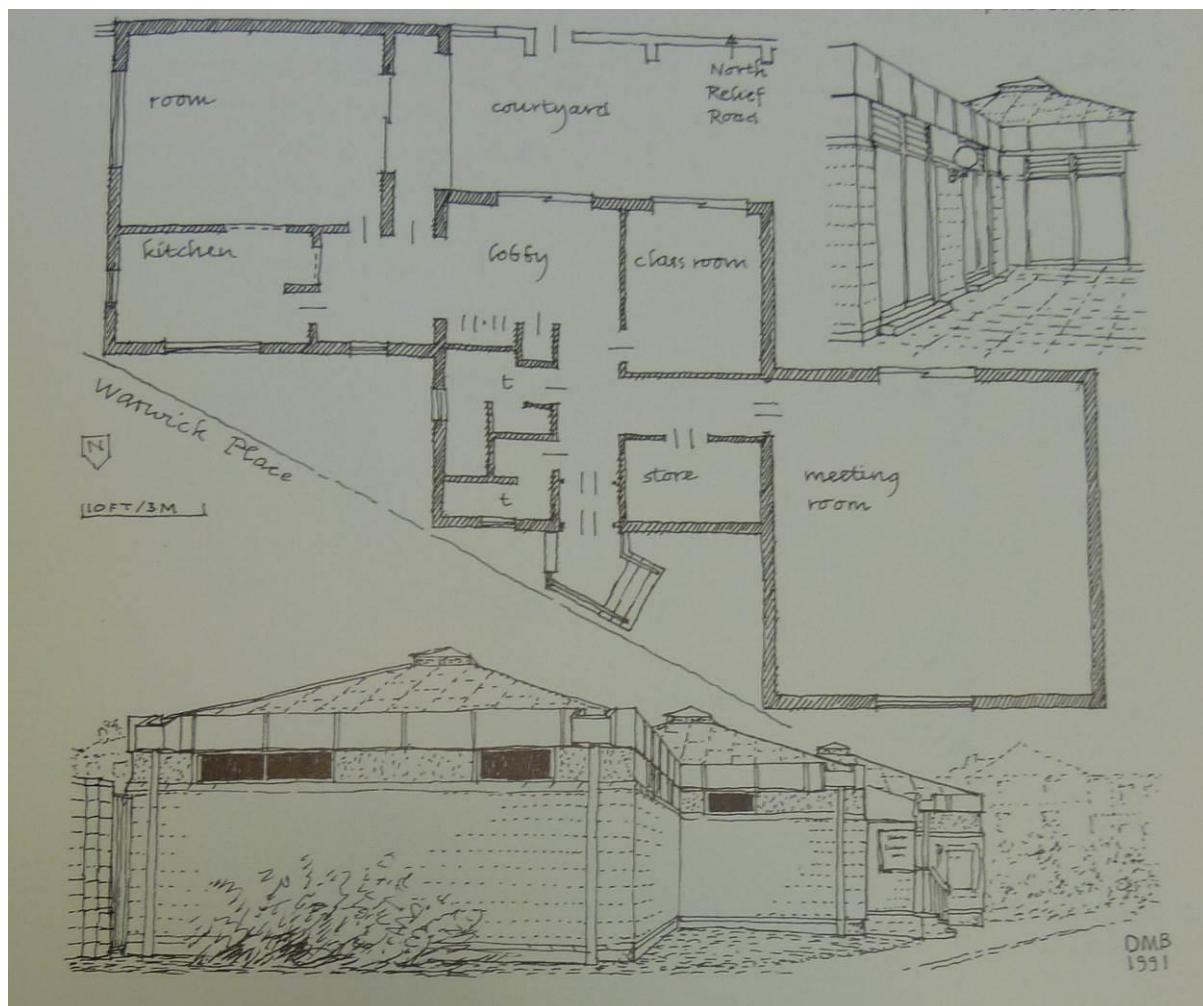


Figure 4: Plan and elevations of present meeting house, from Butler, Vol.1, p.211

The building (figure 4) consists of three staggered and linked single storey square units, faced externally with reconstituted stone, with shallow pyramidal roofs (originally clad in

aluminium, replaced in slate in 1998) rising to louvred caps at the apexes. Photovoltaic panels have been mounted on the south-facing slopes. Natural light is provided by high-level clerestory lights, supplemented in the main meeting room by French doors opening onto a small courtyard garden. The main entrance is on the Warwick Place frontage, where steps lead into an entrance lobby in the middle square, with WCs, store, class room and door to external courtyard garden giving off the lobby. The eastern square contains a kitchen and library space room, while the main meeting room occupies the whole of the western square. The internal walls are faced with concrete blocks, with suspended ceilings apart from in the meeting room, where a timber and boarded ceiling follows the pyramidal form of the roof. The meeting room floor is carpeted.

2.3 Loose furnishings

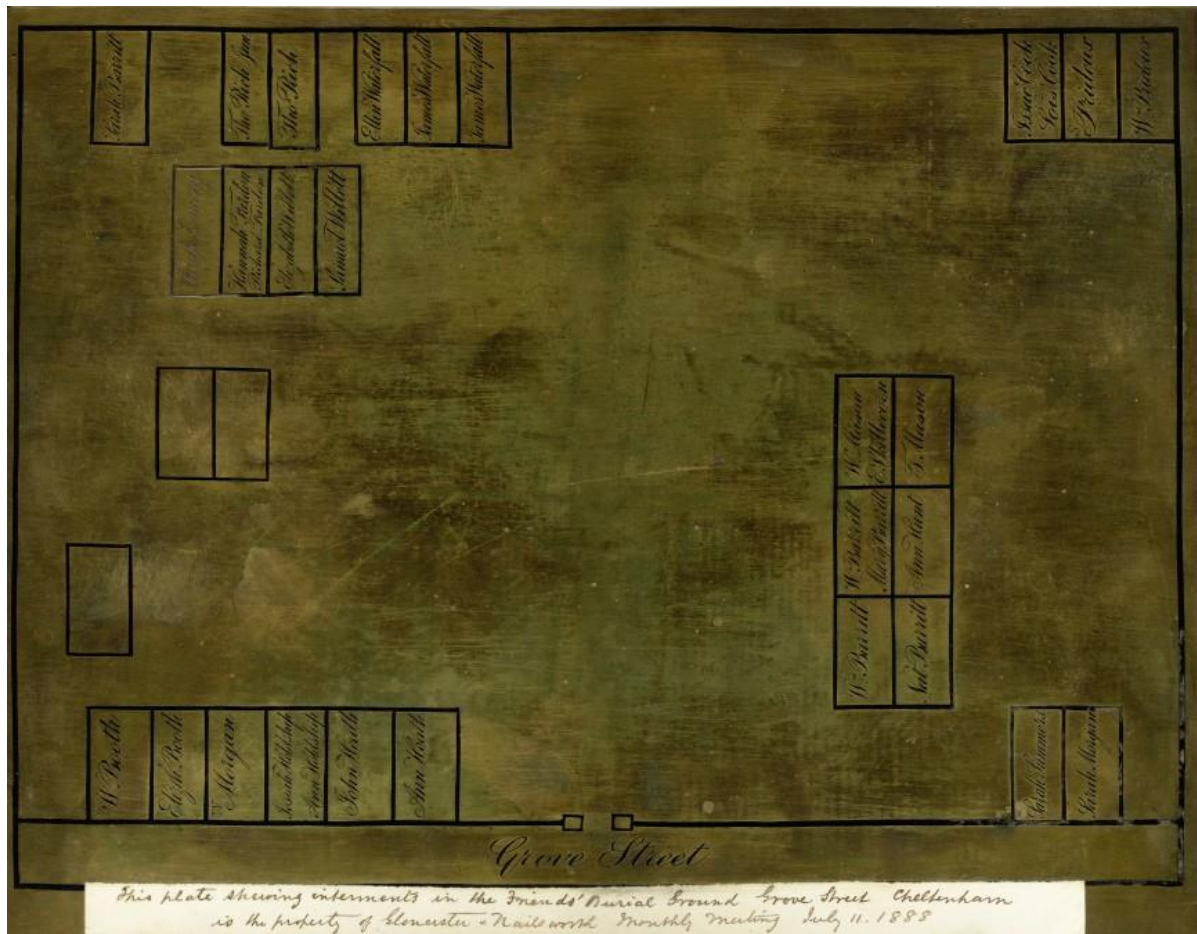


Figure 5: Brass plate on wall of meeting house, identifying interments at Grove Street burial ground

The meeting house has simple modern furnishings. There are also two solid wooden benches of late nineteenth or early twentieth-century character, possibly brought from the Portland Street Meeting House (although the 1903 account in *The Friend* says it was furnished with chairs).

In the lobby area an old brass plate (labelled 1888) identifying some of the interments at the Grove Street burial ground (including 'E Skillecorn') is mounted in the wall.

2.4 Attached burial ground (if any)

None.

2.5 The meeting house in its wider setting

The building faces on to Warwick Place, a cul-de-sac, and backs on to the dual carriageway of the northern ring road, from which it is sheltered by a high reconstituted stone boundary wall. The enclosed garden area contains a large weeping silver birch tree, protected by a TPO. The site lies within the Old Town Character Area of the Central Conservation Area.



Figure 6: Entrance gate to old burial ground in Grove Street (from Cheltenham meeting website)

The Grove Street burial ground (NGR SO 944 288) was still in use in 1872, but was later asphalted to become a school playground. By 1960 was part of a coal yard, and it now belongs to a builders' yard. A length of original stone and brick boundary wall survives, with a metal plaque over the blocked entrance. It is listed Grade II: <https://www.historicengland.org.uk/listing/the-list/list-entry/1104317>

2.6 Listed status

The present meeting house is not listed and is not considered to be a candidate for listing.

2.7 Archaeological potential of the site

The site lies within an area of early nineteenth-century expansion of the town. Any underlying archaeology is likely to have been disturbed by the construction of the meeting house and the associated ring road, and the archaeological potential is therefore considered to be low.

Part 3: Current use and management

See completed volunteer survey

3.1 Condition

- i) Meeting House: Fair
- ii) Attached burial ground (if any): Not applicable

3.2 Maintenance

The most recent QIR (2015) identified no major fabric or maintenance problems, but noted that 'both the internal and external finishes are tired and in need of attention'. It continued 'housekeeping is not to a high standard, and the entrance area is unwelcoming'.

3.3 Sustainability

The meeting uses the Sustainability Toolkit and has implemented measures to reduce its environmental impact. This has included the installation of PV panels on the roof, recycling, use of environmentally friendly products and encouraging lift sharing.

3.4 Amenities

The meeting reports that it has the amenities that it needs. In addition to the main meeting room, these include an additional room, kitchen with double sink and cooker, WCs (including disabled) with baby changing facilities, and children's room. There is no resident warden. The site is well served by public transport; there is off-street parking for three cars only. There is secure parking for bicycles.

3.5 Access

There are steps at the main entrance, but ramped access is provided from the rear entrance in the courtyard for those unable to use these. An accessible WC and hearing loop have been installed. A disability audit is planned.

3.6 Community Use

In addition to the average of four hours a week in which the building is used by Friends, the premises are hired out for fifty eight out of a possible 200 hours a week. The building is let to groups and organisations whose objectives and practices are congruent with Quaker beliefs, and in particular to those groups who find it difficult to obtain accommodation elsewhere because of a shortage of funds (largely therapeutic and support groups). There is no charge for Quaker-related and interfaith activities. Users cite the good location, right size/price, and comfortable feeling.

3.7 Vulnerability to crime

The only recorded crime has been some graffiti. The area is not considered generally well cared for, being near the town centre, with a transient population and problems with litter. Although crime and deprivation levels are low, there is not a strong community feeling. The meeting has not developed a liaison with the neighbourhood policing team, but would consider doing so.

3.8 Plans for change

The meeting has recently received two legacies and is considering an extension and other improvements.

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 building is not listed but lies within a conservation area, and this will be a material planning consideration should external change be contemplated. The three squares of the plan form give the building a strong geometrical character, which might be undermined by additions. Inside, the suspended ceilings and grimy walls would benefit from refreshment.

ii) For wider community use, in addition to local Meeting use: The building is already widely used by the wider community. Similar considerations would apply should change for extended community use be contemplated.

iii) Being laid down as a Meeting House: The building would lend itself to some alternative uses, such as a surgery or offices, subject to the normal planning controls. The alternative is site redevelopment, which would need demonstrably to preserve or enhance the character and appearance of this part of the conservation area.

Part 5: Category: 3