

Friends Meeting House, Chesham

Bellingdon Road, Chesham, Buckinghamshire, HP5 2HA

National Grid Reference: SP 95910 01937



Statement of Significance

A late eighteenth-century meeting house, with a little-altered interior, adjoining an earlier burial ground. It is of high heritage significance.

Evidential value

The meeting house was built in 1798 and retains much of its original character and fabric. Features such as the full-height shutters and the fixed seating in the elders' stand are important survivals, evocative of Quaker tradition and worship. The burial ground contains several historic headstones. The building and site are of high evidential value.

Historical value

The meeting house has been in use since 1798 and the burial ground for more than a century longer. The site is all that remains of Chesham's Saffron Garden Meadow. Both building and site are of high historical value.

Aesthetic value

The meeting house is externally little-altered and has a plain late Georgian character, with notable details and features such as the fine external brickwork detailing and joinery. Inside, the shutters and fixed furnishings contribute to the aesthetic value of the building. It stands within a small former burial ground, a valuable open space. Additions of 1962-4 have not significantly reduced the aesthetic value of the building, which is high.

Communal value

The meeting house is not currently widely used by the wider community on account of poor facilities, and is not prominently located in the townscape. Nevertheless the building and open space of the burial ground contribute to the character of the area, giving them medium communal value.

Part 1: Core data

- 1.1 Area Meeting: *Chilterns*
- 1.2 Property Registration Number: *0031680*
- 1.3 Owner: *Chilterns Area Quaker Meeting*
- 1.4 Local Planning Authority: *Chiltern District Council*
- 1.5 Historic England locality: *South East*
- 1.6 Civil parish: *Chesham*
- 1.7 Listed status: *II*
- 1.8 NHLE: *1158263*
- 1.9 Conservation Area: *No*
- 1.10 Scheduled Ancient Monument: *No*
- 1.11 Heritage at Risk: *No*
- 1.12 Date(s): *1798; 1962-4*
- 1.13 Architect (s): *Not known; N.H. Pymer*
- 1.14 Date of visit: *4 November 2015*
- 1.15 Name of report author: *Andrew Derrick*
- 1.16 Name of contact(s) made on site: *Nicholas Sims, Liz Pilbeam*
- 1.17 Associated buildings and sites: *None*
- 1.18 Attached burial ground: *Yes*

1.19 Information Sources:

Butler, D. M., *The Quaker Meeting Houses of Britain*, 1999, Vol. 1, pp. 23-4

Davis, E. Jack, *Aylesbury Quakers and their Meeting House 1689-1933*, 1933 (updated by Michael Davis, 2004)

Stell, C., *An Inventory of Nonconformist Chapels and Meeting-Houses in Central England*, 1986, p. 14

The Building of the Meeting House, Notes based on Mary's North's listing report prepared for the DoE, revised by N.A.S., 1998

Local Meeting Survey, by Nicholas Sims, June 2015

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

2.1. Historical background

A Chesham Meeting was in existence by 1668, and in 1682 land on the 'northwest corner of the Saffron Garden meadow' was acquired as 'a burying ground and meeting place'. It is not certain that a meeting house was built. The present, adjoining, plot was acquired in 1796 for £455 1s 7d, and the present meeting house was up and in use by 1798. A porch was added later, possibly in 1806. It was certainly in existence by 1810, when a porch was added to the meeting house at Aylesbury 'after the manner of Friends Meeting House at Chesham' (quoted in Davis, p. 11). This was removed in 1962-4, when a lobby, kitchen and WCs were added from designs by N. H. Pymmer (not Ryder, as given in Butler). In 1967-70 the western boundary wall of the burial ground was realigned by Chesham Urban District Council for a road scheme, and some of the burial ground was taken for this purpose.

2.2. The building and its principal fittings and fixtures

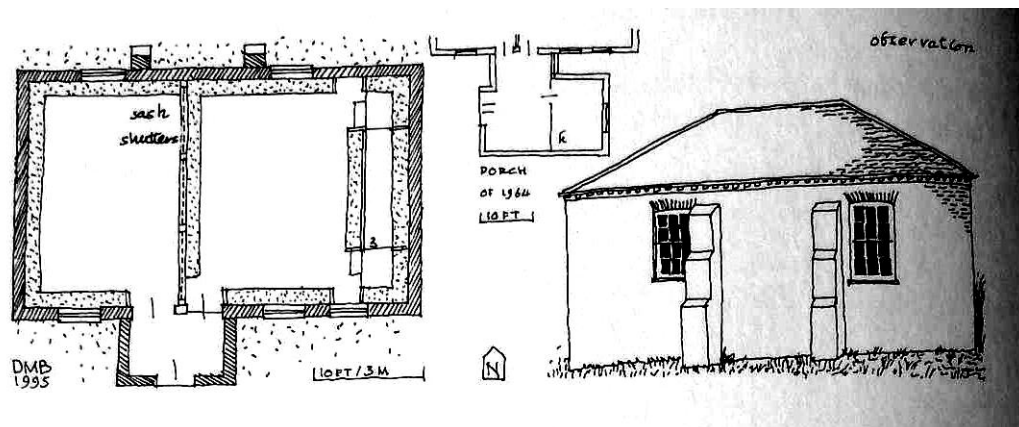


Figure 1: Plan and elevation, from Butler, 1990, p. 24

The meeting house was built in 1798, and extended in 1962-4. It is of rectangular plan, faced in red brick, with a brick dentil eaves cornice, under a hipped tile roof. The blank return west elevation presents itself to the road. The 'front' elevation faces south, and has an off-centre link of 1962-4 placed in the position of the previous porch. One window to the left (west) of this lights the small (women's) meeting room and two windows to the right the large meeting room. The north elevation has two windows, one to each of the rooms. Between them are two large stepped buttresses, later additions. The east flank elevation is also plain, with two raking buttresses. The brickwork to the front elevation is laid in Flemish bond, and on the other elevations in English bond, with some glazed headers. The window openings all contain double-hung sash windows with cambered brick arches (not flat as stated in the list entry), their sills renewed in concrete on the south elevation. The early 1960s addition

incorporates some reused dated bricks on the east side of the link, including one with 'M. P. 1806', which Stell suggests might relate to the date of the previous porch. Stell also refers to other inscribed bricks, not seen at the time of the writer's visit: 'JP 1776' and 'M.P' on the north wall at the east end, and '1.7.9.7' in the south wall east of the link.

The small addition of 1962-64 is single storey, red brick with a tile roof. It houses a lobby, kitchen and WCs. From it two flush-panelled doors with their original pegged frames lead into the meeting house, that on the left into the small meeting room, that on the right to the large. The floor level in the former is a little higher, with floorboards running from front to back rather than side to side. Both rooms have perimeter boarded dado panelling, higher on the east side of the large room to accommodate the elders' stand, which has a panelled front. There is fixed seating around the perimeter of both rooms, and in the stand. A timber partition with vertical sliding shutters divides/connects the two spaces, in the common late-eighteenth-century manner.

2.3 Loose furnishings

There are some historic open-backed benches of indeterminate date in both rooms.

2.4. Attached burial ground

This was acquired in 1682. To the north of the meeting house in the burial ground is a brick wall feature with ramped sides and half-round terracotta copings and with a board inscribed '18th century Quaker burial ground'. Most of the marked graves are plain stone square markers laid flat in the grass. There are some headstones, all of nineteenth-century dates apart from one of 1915, reset alongside the realigned west boundary wall. It is understood that burials also remain outside the wall, under the current pavement.

2.5. The meeting house in its wider setting

The burial ground is all that remains of the open space former Saffron Garden Meadow. The surroundings now consist of nineteenth and twentieth-century, mainly residential development. Alongside is Chesham Youth Centre, in a former drill hall. The dual carriageway of the A416 (St Mary's Way) lies close by to the southeast.

2.6. Listed status

The meeting house is appropriately listed, Grade II. The list entry (below) is very brief.

2.7. Archaeological potential of the site

As an early meeting house on the site of a burial ground of seventeenth-century origin, the archaeological potential of the site is high.

Part 3: Current use and management

See completed volunteer survey

3.1. Condition

- i) Meeting House: Good.
- ii) Attached burial ground: Optimal/generally satisfactory

3.2. Maintenance

The writer's assessment of the general condition of the building as 'good' has now been confirmed by a QIR, which was conducted in August 2015. The building fabric appears to be sound, although it has on the evidence of the buttresses on two sides it would appear to have

suffered from structural movement or subsidence in the past. However, that is not to say that the building is not in need of investment (see below). Minor repairs and maintenance are carried out by the Meeting, and CAQM Trustees are asked for support with anything major.

3.3. Sustainability

The Meeting does not use the Sustainability Toolkit.

- Energy efficiency: There is hardly any energy use: just a minimal amount of electric lighting and heating for a few hours a week.
- Recycling: Rubbish is recycled and teabags composted.
- Wildlife and ecology: The burial ground is being established as a wildflower meadow, with less frequent mowing planned.
- Transport: Most members and attenders walk to meetings; there is no off-street parking.

3.4. Amenities

There are two meeting rooms, a kitchen and WCs. However, these are basic in character and do not meet modern expectations and requirements. The questionnaire reports that 'we are in the queue for hot water and disabled access alterations to toilets'. There is no resident warden/Friend.

3.5. Access

An access audit was carried out in 2002, after which (in 2005) a sloping ramp and handrail replaced steps at the entrance. Other improvements await implementation. There is a step down into the main meeting room from the lobby but a movable ramp is available. The WCs are not to accessible standard, there is no hearing loop and no provision made for partially-sighted people.

3.6 Community Use

The meeting house is used by an average of nine Friends for two hours each week (plus one half-hour midweek Meeting each month and the occasional social gathering). Strong local competition, the lack of hot water and car parking, access issues and the poor facilities mean that the building is seldom used by other parties, who can take advantage of all these facilities and more at the Amersham meeting house. There is a lettings policy, which excludes political parties.

3.7. Vulnerability to crime

The Meeting reports occasional antisocial behaviour (there is a youth club next door), though less so than in the past. There was an attempted break-in in 2006, although nothing was stolen. The area generally is well cared-for and has low crime levels, but Chesham is socially mixed.

3.8. Plans for change

Improved kitchen and WC facilities in the 1960s addition are desired.

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 two historic spaces retain their historic character and furnishings, and the scope for major change is limited. It may be possible (with care) to provide secondary glazing in the windows. The 1960s

addition is of low significance and could be altered and even rebuilt if there was a desire and a budget (although the inscribed bricks are of historic value and should not be lost).

ii) For wider community use, in addition to local Meeting use: There is currently a very low level of community use. This could be enhanced by the provision of better facilities (see above). The nearest (pay) car parking is five or ten minutes' walk away, which hinders extended use.

iii) Being laid down as a Meeting House: This would be highly problematic. The building does not lend itself easily to other uses because of the Grade II listing and the quality and completeness of its internal fitting out. Development on the historic open space of the burial ground would be highly contentious. It is therefore hoped that the building will continue in use as a meeting house, with the necessary investment in new facilities and other improvements to attract extended community use and hirings.

Part 5: Category: 2

Part 6: List description

Name: QUAKER MEETING HOUSE

List entry Number: 1158263

Location: QUAKER MEETING HOUSE, BELLINGDON ROAD

Grade: II

Date first listed: 07-Sep-1973

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

BELLINGDON ROAD 1. 967 (East Side)

Quaker Meeting House SP 9501 NE 2/328

II. C18. Red brick, hipped old tiled roof. 1 storey, 2 sash windows with glazing bars under flat arches.

Listing NGR: SP9591001937