

Friends Meeting House, Cirencester

53 Thomas Street, Cirencester, Gloucestershire, GL7 2BA

National Grid Reference: SP 02079 02243



Statement of Significance

A late seventeenth-century meeting house, altered and extended in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, with a large former burial ground to the rear. The site was formerly land belonging to Cirencester Abbey, and is within the Roman town of Corinium. The building has a little-altered interior, retaining many historic furnishings. Externally, it makes a notable contribution to the Town Centre Conservation Area. The building and site are of high evidential, historical, aesthetic and communal value and significance.

Evidential value

The building has been a meeting house since the late seventeenth century, and has evolved over that time. These changes reflect the varying fortunes of the meeting, and can be read in the fabric and fitting. The burial ground contains marked and unmarked graves going back to 1673. The building and site are of high evidential value.

Historical value

Similarly, the fabric and fitting out of the meeting house and the records of the burial ground, both here and at Siddington, are of high historical value. The site is also of historical value for its pre-Quaker history, having been attached to the medieval abbey and in antiquity part of the Roman town of Corinium.

Aesthetic value

The mellow Cotswold stone and roof tiles of the building, and its well-managed interior, with stone flagged floors and historic joinery and absence of jarring modern features, combine to give the building a high aesthetic value, enhanced by its garden setting at the rear. The nineteenth-century porch addition is not of the same architectural quality, but is not unsympathetic and provides some useful additional facilities.

Communal value

The building and its facilities are well used by the wider community as well as by Friends. The contribution that the building makes to the townscape of the local conservation area adds to this high communal value.

Part 1: Core data

- 1.1 Area Meeting: *Gloucestershire*
- 1.2 Property Registration Number: *0019040*
- 1.3 Owner: *Area Meeting*
- 1.4 Local Planning Authority: *Cotswold District Council*
- 1.5 Historic England locality: *South West*
- 1.6 Civil parish: *Cirencester*
- 1.7 Listed status: *II**
- 1.8 NHLE: *1206705*
- 1.9 Conservation Area: *Cirencester Town Centre*
- 1.10 Scheduled Ancient Monument: *No*
- 1.11 Heritage at Risk: *No*
- 1.12 Date(s): *1673, 1726, 1809-11, 1865*
- 1.13 Architect(s): *Not established*
- 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: *Paul Freke, Rob Lloyd-Sweet, Jan Gronow, Pat Beard, Colin Gerard*

1.17 Associated buildings and sites: *49 and 51 Thomas Street (49 listed Grade II, 51 included in Grade II* listing of meeting house)*

1.18 Attached burial ground: *Yes*

1.19 Information sources:

Barker, J., *Notes on the Architectural History of the Friends Meeting House, Cirencester*, 1973

Butler, D.M., *The Quaker Meeting Houses of Britain*, 1999, vol. 1, pp. 213-4

Hawkins, B., *Taming the Phoenix; Cirencester & the Quakers 1642-1686*, 1998

Lidbetter, H., *The Friends Meeting House*, 1979, p.16

Stell, C., *An Inventory of Nonconformist Chapels and Meeting-Houses in Central England*, 1986, p. 80

Stephens, L., *Cirencester Quakers 1655-1973*, 1973

Local Meeting Survey, by Paul Freke, 2016

Quinquennial Survey, March 2015

Gloucestershire Sites and Monuments Record (HER 8435)

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

2.1 Historical background

Quaker meetings for worship were being held in or around Cirencester by 1660, when land at Siddington was given by John Roberts for a burial ground. In 1673 a lease of the present site in Thomas Street, formerly land belonging to Cirencester Abbey, was obtained from the Crown. It is likely that the present building was started at this time (there is a date of 1673 over the rear door, to the burial ground in what is now the back garden), although some accounts suggest that an existing building was converted (Butler cites the blocked mullion window on the original front elevation, now internal, and the southeast stack as evidence of this). Butler's suggested plan for the original meeting house (bottom left corner of figure 1) shows a loft at the northwest end, reached by an external stair.

The next significant stage in the building's development seems to have been in 1726, a date inscribed on a quoin at the southeast corner. Association with this date is not certain, but the fitting out of the roof space over the meeting house certainly resulted in a room of Georgian character. Today this is reached via a stair in the early nineteenth century linked property at 51 Thomas Street. From 1726 may also date the enlarged arched form (but not the glazing) of the windows on the burial ground elevation. The wider window over the doorway here may relate to a former loft. This phase in the building's evolution remains uncertain, and would merit further detailed study.

The third phase was in 1809-11, when the footprint of the meeting house was almost doubled in size, to provide a separate room (with gallery or loft) for separate women's business meetings. A central passage between the two meeting rooms led from a new front door to the old back door to the burial ground. The partitions on either side of the passage were made capable of being raised, to allow the interior to be used as a single space. The main meeting room was refitted, and timber columns added to support the floor above. The addition was provided with Gothick glazing in the windows on the burial ground elevation, a pattern which was extended to the windows in the older part. It is also likely that no. 51 Thomas Street, which wraps around the original building, was added at this time.

In 1847 Friends built a Gothic Temperance Hall across the road, the gift of Christopher Bowly. This is now a Salvation Army Hall (Grade II listed).

The last major phase of adaptation of the meeting house was in 1865, when a large single storey porch and lobby was added at the front of the building.

Regular meetings ceased in 1922 or 1923, and the building was used as a labour exchange from 1926 to 1947. Quaker meetings resumed in 1949, and major repairs were undertaken in 1979 and 1996.

2.2 The building and its principal fittings and fixtures

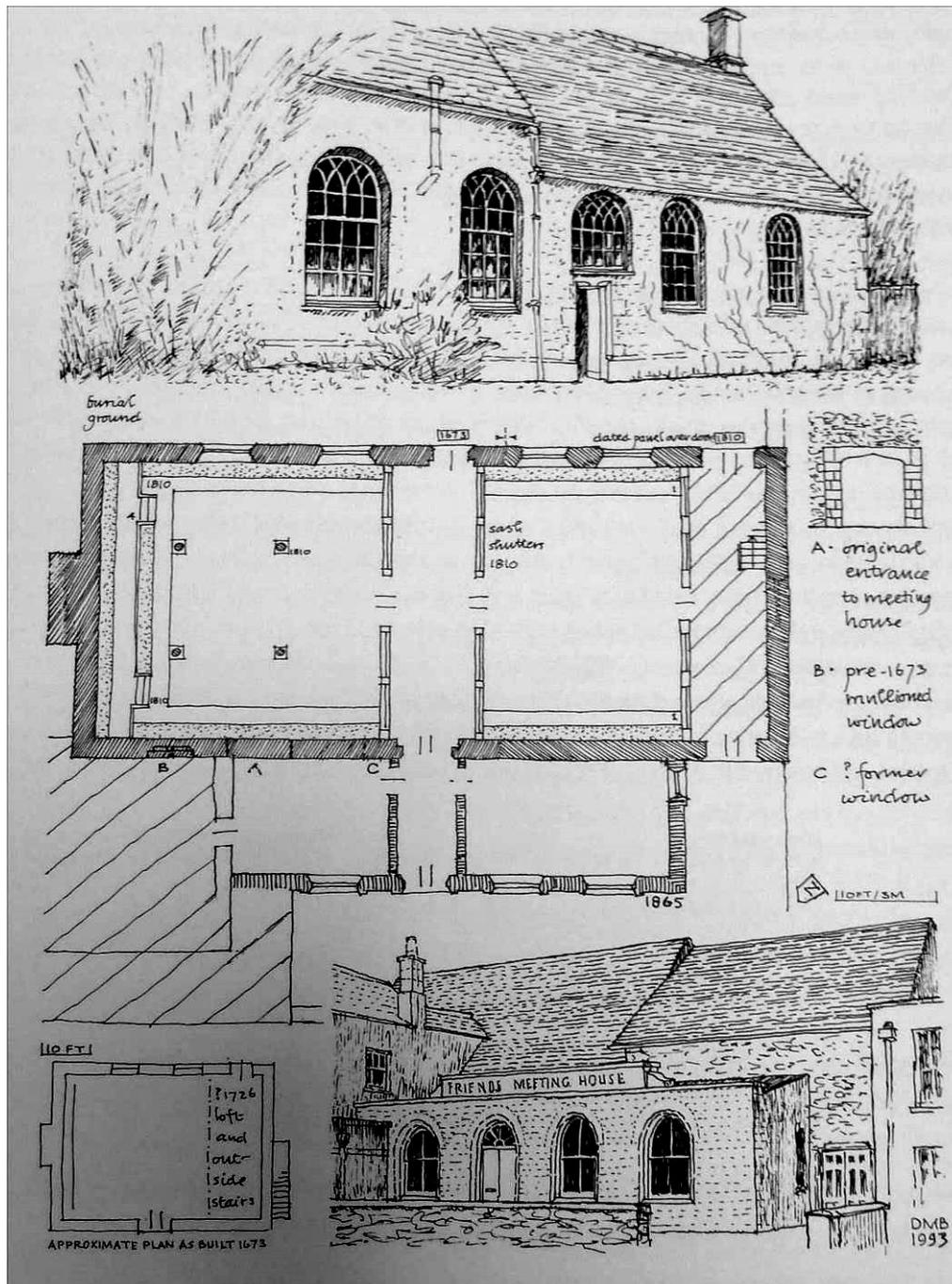


Figure 1: Plan, elevations and details, from Butler, vol. 1, p.213

The meeting house (figure 1) is physically attached to the house at no. 51 (the warden's house), and the two are combined in one list entry (see Part 6, below). The following is a description of the meeting house only.

The meeting house dates from 1673, with alterations and additions of 1726, 1809-11 and 1865. It is built of coursed squared limestone rubble, with the 1865 porch addition in coursed squared limestone. The steep roofs of the original meeting house and early nineteenth-century addition are covered in Cotswold stone slates roof, while the porch addition has a flat roof covered in felt behind a parapet. The meeting house consists of two meeting rooms parallel to, and set back from, the street. The earlier portion to left is larger and includes a central through-passage, while the later (c1810) is to the right. The original street elevation of the 1673 building had a central doorway with depressed four-centred arch, and mullioned windows on either side. These features (now blocked) are now internal, respectively visible from the entrance porch area and the kitchen of no. 51. The blocked window is of three lights with thick ovolo mullions. The evidence for the other window is less obvious (a straight joint in the stonework).

The porch of 1865 is of four bays, with arched openings. Left-of-centre is the entrance, with a pair of four-panel doors with simple fanlight with radiating spokes. In the other three bays sash windows each have a single central vertical glazing bar, and are each in a chamfered reveal with flat stone surrounds. The windows and door are linked by an unmoulded impost band. A raised central section of the parapet is supported by scrolls and bears the incised lettering FRIENDS MEETING HOUSE. To the right of this porch, and set back, is a pair of part-glazed six-panel doors, leading to a passage under the loft of the 1810 meeting room addition.

The rear elevation faces towards the former burial ground (now garden) and is shown in the top right and middle left photographs on page 1. It has five round-headed sash windows of c1810 with intersecting Gothic glazing bars. Doorway lintels are dated 1673 (to the central passage) and 1810 (to the passage under the loft in the early nineteenth-century addition). The flank (southeast) elevation is articulated by a projecting chimney stack, but is otherwise plain. The small square chimney stack shown on Butler's 1993 sketch (figure 1) has been removed and the ridge capped at this point.

Inside, the entrance from the lobby leads to a central stone-flagged passage flanked by screens formed of four tiers of deal shutters between pilasters. These were installed in the 1810 remodelling, and the vertically-sliding shutters are capable of being raised above ceiling height to form a single interior space. The main meeting room to the left has a stone-flagged floor at the centre and four timber Tuscan Doric columns, probably of c1810, which support stop-chamfered ceiling beams and the room above. The plaster ceiling is coved. The fitting out of this space is of c1810, with a raised timber boarded stand on the northeast side with panelled dado and front and stepped approaches at either end, with columnar newel, stick balusters with delicate reeding, and moulded handrail (figure 2). The slightly longer side walls also have boarded stands with fixed seating and high dado panelling. The 1810 room to the right hand side of the passage is similarly panelled. The front to the loft on the far side remains, but the gallery itself was closed off in 1989.

Above the main meeting room is a large space approached via a staircase in the warden's house (photo bottom right above). This is of eighteenth-century character, and may relate to the works carried out in 1726. It was originally divided into three wide bays by panelled segmental arched partitions with central keystones, and has a fine Coalbrookdale-type fireplace with cast-iron hob at the far end. The room formerly continued over the through-passage, but is now closed off by an early nineteenth-century partition, with one segmental arched bay beyond. From here the original roof structure is visible, with substantial rafters and purlins to the original structure and less substantial scantling to the 1810 build.



Figure 2: Stand in main meeting room

2.3 Loose furnishings

Loose furnishings in the main meeting room consist of a combination of open-backed long benches of indeterminate date and individual modern wooden upholstered chairs. There are also some long benches in the second room. In the upper room is an old lead safe.

2.4 Attached burial ground (if any)

The burial ground behind the meeting house was re-landscaped as a garden after the First World War by six German prisoners of war, when the headstones (mainly late nineteenth-century) were moved to the perimeter wall. The earliest interment was in 1673 (Thomas Barnfield). Others buried here include Giles Fettiplace, son of the Civil Governor of the Parliamentarian garrison, who led the unsuccessful defence of Cirencester against Prince Rupert's Royalists on 2 February 1643 and members of the Bowly family, prominent in local affairs over many generations. The garden is still used for the scattering of ashes.

2.5 The meeting house in its wider setting

The meeting house is set back slightly from the main building line in Thomas Street, behind a stone boundary wall. The immediate setting consists mainly of stone-built houses of eighteenth and nineteenth-century date. The Quaker-built former Temperance Hall lies opposite. This is townscape of high quality, within the Cirencester Conservation Area.

In addition to the former burial ground behind the meeting house, there is a detached and disused Quaker burial ground at Siddington, given by John Roberts in 1660 and in use until 1783 (NGR SU0365199926).

2.6 Listed status

The meeting house was listed as early as June 1948 (while still in use as a labour exchange), and fully merits its current Grade II* listing. The early nineteenth-century house occupied by the warden (51 Thomas Street) is physically inseparable from it. It was listed in 1971, and partakes of the same grading, but does not merit listing in a high grade in its own right. If it were to be separately listed, it would no doubt be Grade II. The adjoining property (no.49), outwardly early nineteenth-century with later additions, is also in Quaker ownership and is listed Grade II. Adjoining properties at 55-63 Thomas Street are included in the scheduled ancient monument of Corinium Roman Town.

2.7 Archaeological potential of the site

The site has been a place of Quaker worship, and a burial place, since the late seventeenth century. In the medieval period the land belonged to Cirencester Abbey. It lies within the Roman town of Corinium, much of which is designated as a Scheduled Ancient Monument. The site has high archaeological potential.

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 building is well loved and well maintained. The roof is regularly checked and maintained. The only area identified as needing attention during a superficial inspection were the rainwater goods on the front elevation, which are in need of repair and redecoration. The most recent QIR (January 2016) has not been seen.

3.3 Sustainability

The meeting uses the Sustainability Toolkit, and has undertaken measures to reduce its environmental impact. These have included insulation of the roof spaces, a new and more efficient heating system and the re-fitting of windows. The usual recycling procedures are in place.

3.4 Amenities

The meeting considers that it has all the amenities it needs. In addition to the meeting rooms, these include a kitchen (in the passageway under the former loft of the 1810 room) and two WCs (one fully accessible). There is a resident warden in the linked house (no. 51 Thomas Street). The meeting house is in a central location, and is accessible on foot and by bus. There is no rail service. There is no car parking on site and no secure parking for bicycles.

3.5 Access

The meeting house is accessible to people with disabilities. There are no level changes, a hearing loop is installed, and there is an accessible WC.

3.6 Community Use

In addition to use by Friends for approximately five hours per week, the meeting house facilities are used by members of the local Unitarian Fellowship and other community groups for up to twenty five hours a week out of a possible thirty five. There is a lettings policy. Charities pay a reduced rate, and Quaker associated meetings are free. Users cite the lovely atmosphere, town location and well-priced facilities.

3.7 Vulnerability to crime

This is an area of low crime and deprivation levels, and is generally well cared-for. There is just one reported instances of heritage or other crime, when in 2001 the Meeting House was broken into and a TV monitor/DVD player was stolen.

3.8 Plans for change

None reported.

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 fit for purpose, and the existence of the Victorian lobby entrance, an area of lesser significance and sensitivity, has allowed for the provision of improved ancillary services without detriment to the more historic interiors. The scope for change within the historic spaces is very limited, while the Grade II* listing and location in the Conservation Area also limit the scope for external alteration or addition.

ii) For wider community use, in addition to local Meeting use: The building is already used by the wider community, and this use could be extended, subject to the same constraints outlined above.

iii) Being laid down as a Meeting House: The building did fall out of Quaker use between the wars, not resuming until 1949. Fortunately, use as a labour exchange did not require any damaging or irreversible changes. The building does not really lend itself easily to another use, or not without harm to its special architectural and historical interest. It is well loved and well used, and laying down seems unlikely, but in that regrettable event it would be necessary to investigate the possibility of its preservation as publically-accessible heritage asset, through the agency of a building preservation trust or similar.

Part 5: Category: 1

Part 6: List description

Name: FRIENDS' MEETING HOUSE

List entry Number: 1206705

Location: FRIENDS' MEETING HOUSE, 51 AND 53, THOMAS STREET

County: Gloucestershire

District: Cotswold

District Type: District Authority

Parish: Cirencester

Grade: II*

Date first listed: 14-Jun-1948

Date of most recent amendment: 24-May-1993

Legacy System: LBS

UID: 365454

CIRENCESTER SP0202 THOMAS STREET 578-1/4/317 (South side) 14/06/48 Nos.51 AND 53 Friends' Meeting House (Formerly Listed as: THOMAS STREET (South side) No.51) (Formerly Listed as: THOMAS STREET (South side) Friends Meeting House)

GV II*

Quaker meeting house and attached house. 1673 with major alterations and extension 1809-1811, porch and minor rooms added 1865; house early C19 with later alterations. Meeting house is coursed squared limestone rubble, 1865 addition in coursed squared limestone; stone slate roof, corrugated asbestos on 1865 lean-to extension; external stack to left end now closed off. House is coursed squared limestone; Welsh slate hipped parapeted roof with hip facing street; brick ridge stack and stone lateral stack to right. Meeting house is range of 2 meeting rooms parallel to and set back from street; earlier portion to left is larger and includes central through-passage. Porch and minor rooms added 1865 as lean-to on street front. House to left occupied by caretaker is linked internally to meeting house at ground floor and attic. Meeting house range is single-storey and attic, 3-windows. Porch extension has three 2/2-pane sashes in round-headed openings with chamfered reveals in flat stone surrounds, pair of 4-panel doors with simple fanlight to left in similar surround. Windows and door linked by unmoulded impost band; low parapet and coping with raised portion to centre with flanking brackets with incised lettering FRIENDS MEETING HOUSE. Pair of part-glazed 6-panel doors to far right into 1810 range. Rear elevation to garden has 5 early C19 round-headed sash windows with intersecting tracery; dated 1673 and 1810 on lintels of doorways. INTERIOR has central stone-flagged passage flanked by screens formed of 4 tiers of early C19 deal shutters hung as sash windows with pilasters between forming sash boxes, capable of being raised above ceiling height to remove partition entirely except pilasters. Room to left has stone-flagged floor and 4 timber Doric columns supporting beams with step-stopped chamfers. Coved ceiling. Early C19 fittings include panelling to approximately 2m, benches around walls and freestanding stand with panelled front and two entrances with balustraded handrails. Room to right of passage has similar panelling, gallery with front closed off 1989. Former meeting room in left attic approached via staircase in caretakers house has early C19 benches, and C18/early C19 chimneypiece. This room formerly continued over present through-passage, now shortened by early C19 partitions. Roof structure concealed by 3 panelled arches, probably C18, one now beyond partition.

Caretakers house to left is 2-storey one-window range. First floor has one 8/8-pane sash in plain reveal; ground floor has one similar window. 6-panel door with top 2 panels glazed has simple fanlight in round-headed plain reveal to right. Plat band over ground floor; unmoulded string over first floor; coped parapet. INTERIOR partially inspected; blocked 3-light ovolo-moulded stone-mullion window of 1673 meeting house in ground floor rear left.

Quakerism in Cirencester dates back to at least 1660; a lease of this site obtained 1673. Regular meetings ceased 1922, resumed 1949 and still continued. No.51 Thomas Street was listed 23.7.71.

(Nonconformist Chapels and Meeting-houses: Stell C: Gloucestershire: RCHME: 1986-: P.80; Cirencester Museum Historical/Listed Building Record).

Listing NGR: SP0207902243