

Friends Meeting House, Cockermouth

Kirkgate, Cockermouth, CA13 9PH

National Grid Reference: NY 12446 30499



Statement of Significance

The building has medium heritage significance as a good example of a meeting house, built in the eighteenth century and substantially remodelled in 1884. Most of the original fittings have been removed or concealed, but the handsome frontage contributes to the street scene, and the attractive burial ground has high significance.

Evidential value

The meeting house is on the site of a much older building, first built in the early eighteenth century by the Friends. The interior of the meeting house has been altered but the retained structure from the 1782 building and the concealed shutters (1880s) have evidential value. The building and the burial ground have high evidential value.

Historical value

The present building incorporates some fabric from the 1782 meeting house, and the site has been associated with Friends since the early eighteenth century. The meeting house retains some of its historic internal layout but most of the fittings have been removed or covered over. The building has medium historical value, and the site as a whole has high historical significance.

Aesthetic value

The main frontage to the street has high significance as an example of late Victorian classical revival architecture, a relatively unusual style for Friends meeting houses. The rear and side elevations are plain and most of the windows have been renewed with double glazing. Inside, most of the historic fittings are gone or concealed by later linings and the aesthetic value of the interior is of a medium level. The building has an attractive setting on Kirkgate and with the burial ground it contributes to the conservation area. Overall, it has high aesthetic value.

Communal value

The meeting house was built for Quaker worship and business, and has been an important community resource for over forty years, as a Pre-school during the week. These spiritual and social values give the site high communal value.

Part 1: Core data

- 1.1 Area Meeting: *Cumberland*
- 1.2 Property Registration Number: *0096750*
- 1.3 Owner: *Friends Trust Limited*
- 1.4 Local Planning Authority: *Allerdale Borough Council*
- 1.5 Civil parish: *Cockermouth*
- 1.6 Historic England locality: *North West*
- 1.7 Listed status: *No*
- 1.8 NHLE: *N/A*
- 1.9 Conservation Area: *Cockermouth*
- 1.10 Scheduled Ancient Monument: *No*
- 1.11 Heritage at Risk: *No*
- 1.12 Date(s): *1782, rebuilt 1884*
- 1.13 Architect: *RS Marsh*
- 1.14 Date of visit: *16 June 2015*
- 1.15 Name of report author: *Marion Barter*
- 1.16 Name of contacts made on site: *Christopher and Catherine Young*
- 1.17 Associated buildings and sites: *None*
- 1.18 Attached burial ground: *Yes*
- 1.19 Information sources:

David M. Butler, *Quaker Meeting Houses of the Lake Counties* (London: Friends Historical Society, 1978), pp. 48-51.

David Bradbury, *Cockermouth Meeting, the first 300 years*, 1988

Peter Fox, Local Meeting Survey, March 2015

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

2.1. Historical background

George Fox spoke at the parish church in Cockermouth in 1653, while touring the area: ‘when the priest had done I began to speak’ (Fox’s Journal, 1694, p153). The Cockermouth meeting grew out of the thriving Pardshaw meeting, and from October 1688 Friends had a meeting house in the town, probably in a converted house. The precise date that a purpose-built meeting house was built is not known, but from 1719, it is known that local meetings made collections to support Cockermouth Meeting House. This first meeting house was on the site of the existing building on Kirkgate, shown on a map dated 1770, according to Butler. In 1782, a new larger meeting house was built on this site, large enough to host the quarterly meeting. The land behind the building was used as a burial ground, with a small front forecourt behind high walls.

In 1884-85, the meeting house was substantially rebuilt as the 1782 building was in poor condition. The plans were drawn by architect R.S.Marsh, and the building works and furnishings cost a total of £1190. The south and east walls were apparently retained, with a new west frontage built in classical style, along with a new lobby and staircase and new north wall. The new building had two large meeting rooms of equal size and at the back, two small rooms to ground and first floor. The ministers’ stand in each meeting room was along the south wall, with rails to two levels of platform, but no fixed benches (see Fig.1). Heating was by a hot air system served by a cellar boiler, with gas lighting.

In 1972 the building was repaired and altered internally to create a new upper floor for a classroom over the entrance hall, reached by a new staircase, and suspended ceilings were inserted in the meeting rooms. The high front wall was lowered in two stages, in 1960 and again in 1972, by a group of Young Friends. In 1984, gravestones were moved from the west part of the burial ground and placed against the walls, as part of landscaping. In 2007, improved toilet and kitchen facilities were provided by adding a single storey extension to the north side, designed by surveyor Robert Banks. The suspended ceilings were renewed at the same time. The building has been used by a pre-school play group since 1969, which now operates five days a week as Kirkgate Pre-School, and has exclusive use of the front meeting room and uses the landscaped burial ground as an outdoor play area.

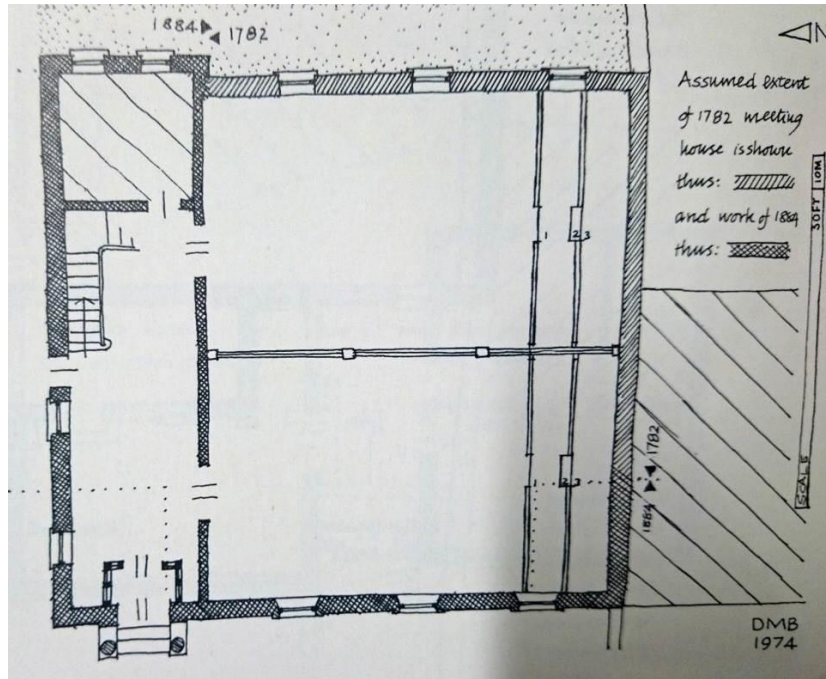


Fig.1: plan of the 1884 meeting house, prior to 1972 alterations (north is to the left; not to scale) (Butler (1978), p.50)



Fig.2: panelled shutters in situ above suspended ceiling, 2007 (Cockermouth Meeting House archive)

2.2. The building and its principal fittings and fixtures

The meeting house was built in 1884, to designs by R.S.Marsh, but retaining some structure from the 1782 building on the site. The west front is built of rock-faced sandstone with ashlar dressings. The hipped roof is laid with graduated Cumbrian slates. Rainwater goods are cast-iron. The 4-bay meeting house is arranged with a lobby and ancillary spaces in the northern 2-storey bay and two single-storey meeting rooms to the south. The front elevation facing west has a pedimented Tuscan portico to the left, dated 1884; the double panelled doors have a transom light above. Three windows to the right have fixed glazing with hopper lights, set in bolection moulded

stone architraves. The elevation is articulated with corner pilasters, moulded plinth, sill band, cornice and parapet. The left return wall is rendered, with plate glass sashes to the right, modern inserted first floor windows and a single-storey extension to the left, built in 2007. The right return partly abuts the adjoining building and is blind to the rear part. The rear elevation, dating from 1782, is rendered with three plastic windows to the east meeting room. The 2-storey bay projecting to the right, added in 1884, has a pair of 4-pane sashes to the first floor and plastic windows to the ground floor.

Inside, the entrance hall leads to the WCs, kitchen, meeting rooms and a staircase inserted in 1972 (when the 1884 staircase was removed). The flat plaster ceiling of the entrance hall also dates from 1972. The meeting room is to the rear facing the burial ground; the room has plain plastered walls, a carpeted floor and a suspended ceiling, renewed in 2007. The former meeting room to the west, now in use by the pre-school group, has similar finishes and the partition for the 1970s staircase projecting into the north end of the space. The platform for the stand has been removed from both rooms, but the panelled vertically sliding shutters are in situ behind modern linings (Fig.2). To the rear of the entrance hall is a kitchen with modern fittings, and the room above this is the library; both rooms have blocked fireplaces to the projecting chimney breasts. The classroom above the entrance hall has plain modern finishes and fittings. The roof was not seen during the visit, and it is not known if this is an eighteenth century structure or if it was renewed in 1884.

2.3 Loose furnishings

The meeting room has a collection of pine benches with turned front legs, which are the same as those in Pardshaw and were brought here at an unknown date. The chair with arms is also from Pardshaw, and probably dates from the late eighteenth or early nineteenth century.



Fig.3: loose benches in meeting room



Fig.4: chair from Pardshaw meeting

2.4. Attached burial ground

The rectangular burial ground is on the east side of the meeting house, enclosed by stone walls on three sides, ramped up towards the east side, with half-round copings. The date of the earliest burial is not known, but may be eighteenth century. The earliest documented burial is c1830. Headstones are arranged in rows at the east end of the burial ground; those to the west were cleared to stand against the walls in 1984. The stones are of three different but similar designs have moulded semi-circular heads, plain semi-circular heads or plain segmental heads. The inscriptions are on the east faces of the stones. Most of the area is laid to grass, with two lime trees

(subject to tree preservation orders) along the north side, and a late twentieth century garden area in the south-east corner. Part of the area was landscaped in 2000 to provide a paved play area at the west end, and a wooden fence separates the east front of the meeting house from the garden.



Fig.5: burial ground from the south-west

2.5. The meeting house in its wider setting

The meeting house lies at the upper end of Kirkgate, a north-south street that developed in the post-medieval period on the east edge of Cockermouth. The street is lined with 2-storey rendered terraced houses and has a generally Georgian character. Towards the north end of the street on its west side is All Saints Church, set in a large burial ground. The meeting house has a forecourt to the street frontage, formerly enclosed by high stone walls, but now with a low wall and flower beds to the edge of the street. A pair of timber gates hung on stone gate piers lead to the side yard; the piers appear to be of late nineteenth century date. The forecourt is tarmac.

2.6. Listed status

Not listed. The building would probably not meet criteria for national designation due to the extent of internal alterations, but the frontage is handsome and due to its historical significance, the meeting house could be eligible for a local list.

2.7. Archaeological potential

There has been a meeting house on this site since the early eighteenth century, and the site and the burial ground have some archaeological potential. It is not known whether there were buildings on the site before the first meeting house was built, but the site may have some potential to shed light on the Georgian expansion of Cockermouth.

Part 3: Current use and management

See completed volunteer survey

3.1. Condition

i) Meeting House: Good. The last QI was undertaken in 2013, by Day Cummins and no problems were recorded.

ii) Attached burial ground: Optimal/generally satisfactory.

3.2. Maintenance

The meeting house is well-maintained at present, and the recommendations in the last QWI have been addressed. The pre-school group provides funds for ongoing maintenance, but the income would not be sufficient to cover the cost of major works. The burial ground is partly used as a play area for the pre-school group and is well-maintained. Lime trees are pollarded and the boundary walls were last repaired following a collapse to one section of the south wall in 2013.

3.3. Sustainability

The meeting does not use the Sustainability Toolkit, but has undertaken some measures to improve sustainability:

Energy: Loft insulation improved, boiler controls installed on 4 year old boiler (reduced gas consumption by 25%), energy supplied by Ecotricity.

3.4. Amenities

The meeting has all the amenities it needs including a well-equipped kitchen, WCs, an office and library on the first floor.

3.5. Access

No access audit has been done, but the 2007 alterations improved access to the ground floor with a ramped side entrance and a WC suitable for disabled people. The first floor is not accessible, however.

The meeting house is on the edge of the town centre and accessible on foot or by bicycle. There is a local bus service with a frequent weekday service, and on Sundays the nearest bus stop is half a mile away (buses from Keswick and Workington). There is room for a few cars to park on the forecourt, and nearby on-street parking.

3.6. Community Use

The meeting house is used by Friends for four hours per week. The main other user of the building is the Kirkgate Pre-school which uses the meeting house for a total of 75 hours on weekdays. This precludes use by other groups during their open hours, and the meeting is concerned that if the pre-School were to increase their hours of operation, this would make it more difficult for them and other groups to use the building. In evenings there are other users for about 14 hours per week, including a meditation group. The meeting does not have a lettings policy, but expects users to have aims and objectives that are in sympathy with Quaker values. Room hire is free to Quaker and other ecumenical groups, including for meditation, and the building is regarded as an attractive venue due to its central location, low cost and proximity to car parking.

3.7. Heritage Crime

The only reported crime relates to minor theft from coats hung in the lobby a few years ago, which was reported to police. Sign in the entrance lobby warns of the risk.

3.8. Plans for change

The meeting has no plans for change, except for redecoration. It is anticipated that the Pre-School group may want to increase their hours of operation (see 3.6).

Part 4: Impact of Change

4.1. To what extent is the building amenable or vulnerable to change?

i) As a Meeting House only: The building provides the meeting with the facilities it needs, and has already been altered. Further internal changes could be made without affecting the significance of the building, but it would be desirable to retain the front elevation as it is.

ii) For wider community use, additional to local Meeting use: the building is well-used throughout the week by a Pre-school, and has been remodelled and extended to provide the facilities needed. Further changes could be made to the interior, without affecting the significance of the building.

iii) As a consequence of being laid down as a Meeting House and passing into secular use: closure of the meeting house for worship would be regrettable, but in this event, the building should be retained and could be further adapted for community use. The burial ground would need to be taken into account.

Part 5: Category: 3