

Quaker Meeting House, Colchester

6 Church Street, Colchester, Essex, CO1 1NF

National Grid Reference: TL 99312 25090



Statement of Significance

The building has overall medium heritage significance as a meeting house built in the early 1970s behind the retained façade of an early nineteenth-century house. The surviving fabric of the house and the garden have high significance for aesthetic and historical values, and the site has high archaeological potential.

Evidential value

The meeting house originated as an early nineteenth-century town house. It has only been in Quaker use since the 1970s, when the building was rebuilt behind the façades. This has greatly reduced the building's evidential value, which is medium. The site and gardens may have archaeological potential, giving it high evidential value.

Historical value

Although relatively new to this site, the Quaker movement has a long, illustrious and at times dramatic history in Colchester, a centre of Nonconformity on the seventeenth century. The present meeting house is also of historic significance, having been built as a house by a notable local solicitor (whose clients included the artist John Constable). The building is located within the Roman town walls, close to the medieval churchyard of St Mary's. Although the present meeting house, dating from the 1970s, cannot be said to be of great historical value, the surviving parts of the early nineteenth-century building and the context are of high historical value.

Aesthetic value

The frontage of the early nineteenth-century town house is of high aesthetic value, both inherent and in terms of its contribution to the townscape and conservation area. The landscaped garden at the front is also of high aesthetic value. The modern building behind its façade is of low aesthetic value, apart from the main meeting room itself, which is an attractive internal space.

Communal value

The meeting house was built for and remains in primarily Quaker use, but it also serves as a local community resource. Its frontage makes a positive contribution to the local conservation area, and is appreciated by local people and visitors alike. The building occupies a central but quiet corner of the town and embodies Quaker values in its welcoming quality and sense of tranquillity. These spiritual and social values give the site high communal value.

Part 1: Core data

- 1.1 Area Meeting: *Southern East Anglia*
- 1.2 Property Registration Number: *0000870*
- 1.3 Owner: *Friends Trusts Ltd*
- 1.4 Local Planning Authority: *Colchester Borough Council*
- 1.5 English Heritage locality: *East of England*
- 1.6 Civil parish: *Colchester*
- 1.7 Listed status: *II*
- 1.8 NHLE: *1123678*
- 1.9 Conservation Area: *Colchester Town Centre*
- 1.10 Scheduled Ancient Monument: *No*

- 1.11 Heritage at Risk: *No*
- 1.12 Date(s): *1802; 1971–4*
- 1.13 Architect(s): *Not established; Bryan K. Thomas*
- 1.14 Date of visit: *1 July 2014*
- 1.15 Name of report author: *Andrew Derrick*
- 1.16 Name of contact made on site: *Unaccompanied*
- 1.17 Associated buildings and sites: *None*
- 1.18 Attached burial ground: *No*
- 1.19 Information sources:

David M. Butler, *The Quaker Meeting Houses of Britain*, 1999, vol. 1, pp. 179–183
Heritage Gateway, Colchester Urban Archaeological Database: Church Street (UAD no. MCC2403)
Victoria County History, <http://www.british-history.ac.uk/report.aspx?compid=22011#s3>
<http://www.qcolpm.demon.co.uk/history.html>
Local Meeting survey by Robert Parkes, 2014 and 2015

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

2.1 Historical background

‘In the latter part of the seventeenth century Colchester became a centre of the Quaker movement [...] the town had for many years housed a community of ardent Protestant religious refugees from the Low Countries, and its Protestantism had been a by-word. The spiritual home of the Quakers in Colchester was the Dutch quarter’ (quoted in Butler, p. 179). James Parnell, a young follower of George Fox, preached in Colchester in July 1655. He later spoke in Coggeshall, where he was arrested and charged with speaking blasphemy and causing a disturbance. He was ordered to pay a fine but refused to do so and was imprisoned in Colchester Castle, where he died in April 1656 as a result of his mistreatment. His fate and example fuelled the expansion of the Quaker movement in the town and surrounding villages.

A rented meeting place and burial ground were in use by 1663, when ‘a party of county troops were employed to go to the meeting, where they beat some, and carried others to prison, having first broke the forms, seats and windows of the meeting house’ (quoted in Butler, p. 179). This meeting house was in a large converted property near St Martin’s church, West Stockwell Street, in the Dutch quarter of the town (a use commemorated in the present Quaker Alley). In 1669 its doors and windows were blocked on more than one occasion, by order of the mayor, but each time the Friends found their way back in. A loft was installed in the 1680s and the building was registered in 1689. In 1672 it was sold to trustees to the Colchester two weeks meeting, and enlarged. It was enlarged again in 1701 and 1772-3.

In 1683 the Friends had also acquired the thirteenth-century chapel of St Helen (nearby in Maidenburgh Street), which was fitted up as a small meeting house in 1700.

In the eighteenth century the numbers of Colchester Quakers declined, but nevertheless in 1801 the building on St Martin's Lane was virtually rebuilt at a cost of about £900, funded in part by the sale of two of three burial grounds (another burial ground was opened in Roman Road, first used in 1857 and still in use) and the small meeting house in Maidenburgh Street (which survives today in Greek Orthodox use).

At the time of the 1851 census the main meeting house, which was capable of seating 757, was attended by 58 in the morning and 48 in the afternoon. This building was gutted by fire in 1871, and the site sold. At this time there was a Quaker revival in the town, and a new site was acquired in Sir Isaac's Walk, where a replacement building large enough to accommodate the Quarterly Meeting, weekday meetings and Sunday schools was built in 1872 (the cost of purchase and construction an estimated £2,685). The building, which was extended in 1892, is illustrated in Butler, p. 183.

Membership of the Colchester monthly meeting reached a peak of 193 in 1924. However, the building in Sir Isaac's Walk was becoming too expensive to maintain, and in 1938 it was sold to Lexden & Winstree District Council, the meeting room becoming a council chamber. A new smaller meeting house in neo-Georgian style was built nearby in Shewell Road, which was enlarged in 1969 (architect Bryan K. Thomas).

The Shewell Road building was sold to the Corporation in 1971 and has since been redeveloped as part of the Culver Square shopping centre. In its place, the Friends acquired St Mary's House, a late Georgian building with an earlier timber framed rear range and other outbuildings, adjoining the churchyard of St Mary's church. The frontage building had been rebuilt in 1802 by William Mason, a solicitor whose clients included the painter John Constable. By 1971 the building was in a run-down state, and after initial surveys the Friends considered total demolition. In the event plans prepared by Bryan Thomas were adopted which involved retention of the front and side elevations. Redevelopment behind the façade included the addition of a hexagonal meeting room at the back. The new facilities opened in 1974. Part of the site was sold to the Ogilvie Trust for a development of four old people's flats (Estella House, at the bottom of the garden).



Figure 1: The first meeting for worship in the new meeting house, 1974, photo: Robert S.F. Cathmoir (provided by John Hall) <https://www.flickr.com/photos/qmh/356854584/in/set-72157594152098470>
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2.2 The building and its principal fittings and furnishings

The remaining elements consist of the front elevation, a short return elevation on the east side and a longer return on the west side. The flank elevations are plain, dating from 1802. These are built of grey gault bricks, under a slate roof. The front elevation has a central bay breaking forward slightly, with a Tuscan Doric portico with sash window over. The parapet is no longer ramped (as per the list description) but steps down slightly for the flanking bays, which each have a shallow two storey bow window with louvred external shutters on the ground floor. To the left (east) is a secondary range, with a tripartite sash window to the ground floor and a twelve-pane sash above. In the angle between this range and the projecting bay is a rainwater head dated 1802 with the initials of William Mason. A modern wall-mounted oval stone plaque bears the inscription *QUAKER MEETING HOUSE Religious Society of Friends*. There is a secondary entrance on the east flank elevation, with a projecting doorcase with scroll volutes. The west return elevation (towards the churchyard) is entirely plain.

Behind these retained frontages, the building dates entirely from the 1970s; the only early features that remain are the window shutters in the ground floor bay windows. Externally, the new work is faced in brown engineering bricks. The building is functionally laid out, with several meeting rooms, and no historic features or furnishings. The most notable newly-created space is the octagonal meeting room at the rear of the building, which opens out onto the garden (photos middle and bottom right on p.1 and Fig.1). This room is lit by a continuous clerestory, below which the walls are lined with channelled horizontal boarding.

Fixed to one of its external faces is a modern low-relief roundel depicting James Parnell in prison.

2.3 Loose furnishings

There are no historic loose furnishings.

2.4 Attached burial ground

None.

2.5 The meeting house in its wider setting

The meeting house is in a central, but quiet corner of the Town Centre Conservation Area, close to St Mary's church (redundant and now an arts centre) and churchyard, the Mercury Theatre and the Jumbo water tower. It is set back from the road, behind an attractively laid out front garden, with some mature planting. There is also a garden at the rear, at the bottom of which (on the site of former stables) is Estella House housing elderly people's flats.

The detached burial ground is in Roman Road (not visited as part of this review; NGR: TM 00147 25553).

2.6 Listed status

The house is listed Grade II. The architectural quality of the frontage and the historic interest of the building mean that it probably still merits listing, despite having been rebuilt behind the façade. However, the list description needs to be amended, to clarify and define elements which possess special architectural and historic interest, and to exclude those which do not. It is out of date, insofar as it was written before the 1970s rebuilding, and the timber-framed range at the rear does not survive.

2.7 Archaeological potential of the site

The site is of high archaeological potential. It lies within the Roman town walls, and the first edition Ordnance Survey map records that tessellated pavements were excavated in St Mary's churchyard in 1871. St Mary's is of Saxon origin, as may be Church Street (although the earliest references date from the thirteenth century). The Colchester Urban Archaeological Database does not appear to contain any records relating to excavation or a watching brief on the site at the time of the 1970s rebuilding; this development must have had a significant impact on below-ground archaeology.

Part 3: Current use and management

See completed volunteer survey

3.1 Condition

- i) Meeting house: Good
- ii) Attached burial ground: Not applicable

3.2 Maintenance

The last quinquennial inspection took place in November 2011 (Countrywide Surveyors). No copy was seen during the visit. The local meeting has enough money to maintain and repair the building. Apart from the QIR, there is no five-year maintenance and repair plan.

3.3 Sustainability

The meeting does not use the Sustainability Toolkit but has implemented measures to reduce its environmental impact. These include:

- Climate change & energy efficiency: programme of building insulation including additional loft insulation, internal wall cladding & secondary glazing; there is a long term project to improve energy efficiency (including replacing existing heating system); users are urged to turn-off lights when not in use; the meeting seeks to strike a balance between energy efficiency and making the place welcoming e.g. the question has arisen whether to keep the external lights on in the evening to make it a town centre landmark, as part of outreach, or whether to turn them off to save energy
- Resource use, recycling & waste management: routine recycling plus composting
- Wildlife, ecology and nature conservation: the garden is a balance of flowers and wildlife; there are beehives in the burial ground

There is no EPC certificate for the meeting house. The local meeting has undertaken other investigations into how to improve the energy efficiency of the building.

3.4 Amenities

The meeting house has all the required amenities. There is a resident warden. The meeting house is on public transport routes. There is limited on-site car parking, as well as space for bicycles (but no racks).

3.5 Access

The ground floor is accessible to all: it has level access, an accessible WC and a hearing loop. There are no specific facilities for partially sighted people. There has been no formal Disability Access Audit but measures have been implemented by the premises committee.

3.6 Community use

Friends use the meeting house for 7-10 hours per week. The building is theoretically available for community lettings for a maximum number of 220 hours per week. It is used for an average of 132 hours per week. The meeting has a lettings policy which excludes political parties and religious groups. Users value the meeting house for its convenient location, the highly competitive rates and the warm welcome.

3.7 Vulnerability to crime

The area has generally low levels of crime and there has been no heritage crime at the site. The only known incidents are unauthorised on-site parking, damage to perimeter gates and walls by reversing lorries (and one locked-in unauthorised car driver), as well as occasional unwelcome visitors and the theft of unattended articles. There is no formal liaison with the Local Neighbourhood Police Team but the warden has a positive but informal relationship with the police. Should the need arise for a more formal liaison the meeting will consider it.

3.8 Plans for change

There are currently (2015) no plans for changes to the building.

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 contains modern worship facilities which meet the needs of the meeting and are not of heritage significance or sensitivity.

ii) For wider community use, in addition to local Meeting use: This is already a multi-purpose building in extended use.

iii) Being laid down as a Meeting: The building could revert to residential use, but office use seems more likely. The history of the Quaker movement in Colchester has witnessed several 're-pitchings of the tent', and another move would probably not raise any heritage issues, provided a suitable new use were to be found for this building.

Part 5: Category: 2 (façade); 4 (interior)

Part 6: List description

Name: ST MARY'S HOUSE

List entry Number: 1123678

Location

ST MARY'S HOUSE, 6, CHURCH STREET

Grade: II

Date first listed: 19-Feb-1959

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

1. CHURCH STREET 995 (South Side)

No 6 (St Mary's House) TL 9925 SW 4/15 19.2.59.

II

2. Late C18 brick house, 2 storeys, the roofs of tiles and slates. Grey gault brick front, centre breaking forward slightly with ramped parapet, 2 storeyed shallow bow windows either side. 3 window range of double hung sashes with glazing bars. The rear wing is timber framed and plastered and has 2 hipped dormers on the west. Rain water head on west wall with initials end date WM 1802, on the east side is a one bay extension.

Listing NGR: TL9931225090