

Friends Meeting House, Dunmow

New Street, Great Dunmow, Essex, CM6 1BH

National Grid Reference: TL 62781 21626



Statement of Significance

The meeting house has high heritage significance as a building of 1833 with some original furnishings, and is set in an older burial ground.

Evidential value

The meeting house was built in 1833 on the site of a 1706 meeting house. Quakers have been buried on the site since 1706. Romano-British pottery had been found on nearby sites. All of these lend the building and its burial ground high evidential value.

Historical value

The building retains most of its original elevations and planform as well as some fittings, notably two timber partitions forming a corridor. These illustrate early nineteenth-century Quaker usage of meeting houses. It is associated with the local physician and botanist Dr Robert Courthope Sims. It has high historical value.

Aesthetic value

Despite a modern extension, the meeting house retains several decorative features, such as recessed brick panels and a segmental pediment, which make the involvement of a (hitherto unidentified) architect likely. It has medium aesthetic value.

Communal value

The building has spiritual value due to its primary purpose as a Quaker meeting house. For over fifty years it has also been used as a pre-school nursery and will figure as such in the collective memory of many people. It has high communal value.

Part 1: Core data

- 1.1 Area Meeting: *Thaxted*
- 1.2 Property Registration Number: *0007940*
- 1.3 Owner: *Area Meeting*
- 1.4 Local Planning Authority: *Uttlesford District Council*
- 1.5 Historic England locality: *East of England*
- 1.6 Civil parish: *Great Dunmow*
- 1.7 Listed status: *Not listed, not locally listed*
- 1.8 NHLE: *N/a*
- 1.9 Conservation Area: *Great Dunmow*
- 1.10 Scheduled Ancient Monument: *No*
- 1.11 Heritage at Risk: *No*
- 1.12 Date(s): *1833*
- 1.13 Architect(s): *Not known*
- 1.14 Date of visit: *19 June 2014*
- 1.15 Name of report author: *Johanna Roethe*
- 1.16 Name of contact made on site: *Margaret Somerville*
- 1.17 Associated buildings and sites: *None*
- 1.18 Attached burial ground: *Yes*

1.19 Information sources:

Bettley, J. and N. Pevsner, *The Buildings of England: Essex*, 2007, p. 402

Butler, D.M., *The Quaker Meeting Houses of Britain* 1999, vol. 1, pp. 184–5

Dunmow Meeting House archive, photos

Heritage Gateway entry for New Street

Area Meeting archive at Saffron Walden, architectural drawings of 1989 and 1993

Typescript notes on 'The Claytons of Dunmow' and 'Dr Robert Courthope Sims'

Uttlesford District Council, 'Great Dunmow Conservation Area Appraisal and Management Proposals', 2007

Local Meeting survey by Margaret Somerville, 2014 and 2015

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

2.1 Historical background

A first meeting house was built in 1706. By 1810, the meeting had declined. In 1833, the present meeting house was built on the site (and possibly on the foundations) of the 1706 building. The name of the architect is not known but David Butler has suggested that it may be the same person responsible for the meeting house at Halstead (built 1851, closed c.1970 and sold 1975) where the architect is also unknown.

At some point during the mid-twentieth century, the meeting was in abeyance, when the building was in full-time use as a nursery (from c.1966). The meeting house was reopened for weekly meetings in 1978. In 1975, when Butler visited, the entrance had a columned porch (figure 1) – this had been removed by 1989 (when a survey was undertaken). Also removed were the elders' bench and dais shown in Butler's drawing (figure 1). In 1993, the architect Simon Ward RIBA built a small single-storey rear extension providing toilets, a store and kitchens. The cost of the extension was about £34,000. In 2007, repairs were made to the roof where the extension adjoins the building.

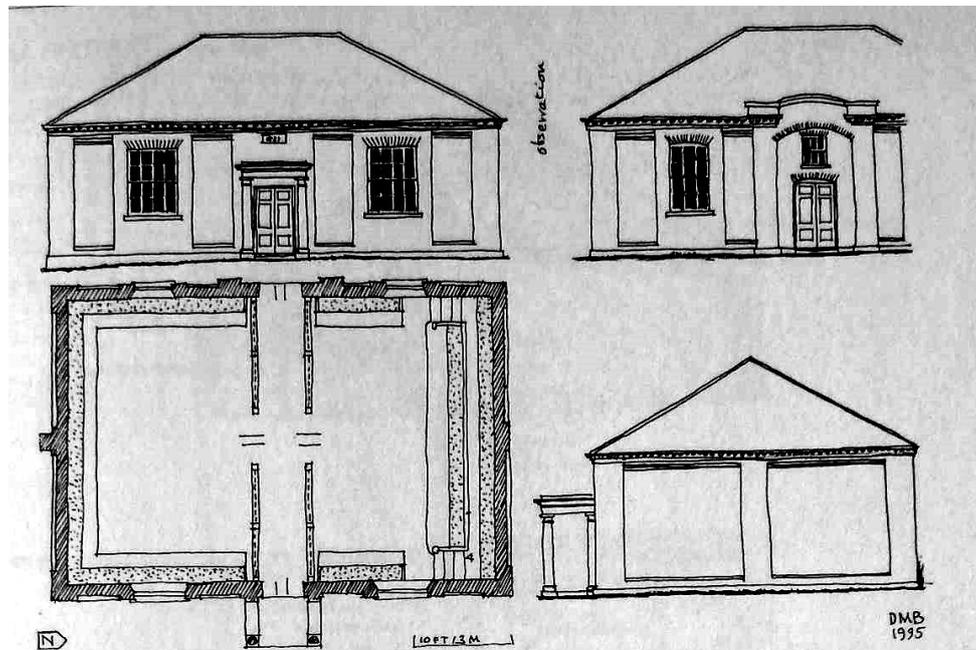


Figure 1: Plan and elevations (north is to the right of the plan; not to scale)
(Butler (1999), vol. 1, pp. 185)



Figure 2: Undated (post-1975) photo of the front (east) elevation
(Great Dunmow Meeting House archive)



Figure 3: Undated photo of the rear (west) elevation before the 1993 extension
(Great Dunmow Meeting House archive)

2.2 The building and its principal fittings and furnishings

The meeting house was built in 1833 (according to a date stone on the east elevation) and extended in 1993. It is a red brick building (in Flemish bond) with stone dressings and a hipped slate roof. The plan is oblong, with the wider sides to the east and west. The east elevation has a central entrance with the date stone above, flanked by two sixteen-pane sash windows. On either side of the windows are recessed brick panels. This motif is repeated on the south and north elevations which have two larger panels and no windows. The west (garden) elevation was originally similar to the front elevation in its rhythm of recessed panels (the outer southwest one has an inserted window), sash windows (here only twelve-pane) and a central entrance bay. The latter was originally surmounted by a small window and the whole encompassed by simple brick pilasters supporting an arch and a segmental pediment above. Only the top of the pilasters and the pediment are now visible above the 1993 extension (a plain brick structure with a hipped roof).

The interior is divided by a corridor of timber-panels into two rooms of equal size (photo centre right). This may have been originally moveable panelling to create one large room. All four doors appear to have been replaced. The room to the north is the current meeting room (photos bottom left and right). It has timber dado panelling which ramps up to the north wall, the former location of the elders' bench. It has fixed benches against the north, east and west walls, and a suspended timber floor. The other room (in nursery use during the visit) is similar. Both rooms have octagonal recesses in the ceiling, probably for light fittings. The modern extension contains toilets, a kitchen and a store room.

2.3 Loose furnishings

The meeting room furnishings were not visible during the visit.

2.4 Attached burial ground (if any)

The burial ground is a long oblong plot, with the meeting house roughly in the centre. To the street, the burial ground has a brick wall with a wrought-iron gate. The circular paths of the front burial ground are first shown on the 1897 OS map. Behind the meeting house is a small detached garden shed. The back part of the site has three large yew trees.

The back (west) part of the burial ground is the new one and the front (east) burial ground is the older one. Burials have taken place at the site since 1706. Only ten headstones survive, few of which are legible: in the rear area there are four standing headstones with the only legible date of death being 1924. In the front area there are two standing stones (including one for Susannah Clayton who died in 1821), one lying stone, and three against the wall (one of which has a death date of 1835 or 1853). The burial ground is no longer used for burials.

Older burial records are deposited at the Essex Record Office; more recent ones are at the Saffron Walden Meeting House archive. The Dunmow meeting does not have a burial plan, only a record drawing of 1982 showing five delaminating headstones in the front burial ground. It is recommended that the local meeting create a full record of all the remaining ten headstones, their inscriptions and locations.

Locally notable individuals buried in the graveyard include the physician and botanist Dr Robert Courthope Sims (died 1812), who lived in Dunmow over fifty years. In 1793 he published 'An Essay on the Nature and Constitution of Man' and in 1807 'The Constitution and Economy of Man's Nature'. He was the father of John Sims (1749–1831), a founder member of the Linnean Society and physician to Princess Charlotte. (John Sims had to resign from the Society of Friends as his wife was not a Quaker. He is buried in Fittleworth, Sussex.)

2.5 The meeting house in its wider setting

New Street is a narrow street whose junction with the High Street is divided by the local war memorial. The street has some terraced houses and opposite the meeting house site is a United Reformed Church of 1860 with an attached car park. The meeting house is set back from the street and the main view is the axial view through the gates. It makes a positive contribution to the conservation area by virtue of its scale, form and materials and the presence of the burial ground.

2.6 Listed status

The meeting house is currently not listed. It is only slightly later than the early nineteenth-century meeting houses at Great Bardfield (*qv*, 1806) and Maldon (*qv*, 1820–1), both of which are listed grade II. While the meeting house at Great Dunmow does not have an original surviving elders' bench, it retains its original planform and several original features such as the panelling forming a central corridor, the dado panelling and wall benches. While a later extension has obscured part of the rear elevation, this is generally sympathetic and has allowed the building to continue in use. According to the general criteria of statutory listing, most building dating from between 1700 and 1840 are listed. Therefore, the meeting house is considered to be a possible candidate for statutory listing.

2.7 Archaeological potential of the site

The current meeting house was built on the site (and possibly foundations) of the predecessor building of 1706. Burials have taken place on the site since that date. The origins of Great Dunmow may go back to Roman times and Romano-British pottery has been found in the gardens of several houses in New Street. The site's archaeological potential is high.

Part 3: Current use and management

See completed volunteer survey

3.1 Condition

i) Meeting house: Good.

ii) Attached burial ground (if any): Generally satisfactory but with minor localised problems. The boundary wall has a crack (due to a tree behind) and some decayed bricks due to hard pointing. The use of the front burial ground as playground may be leading to bald patches in the lawn and potential risk associated with the remaining standing headstones. Some of the latter are delaminating. There is no plan of burials and no plan for the future care or maintenance of the burial ground. At the time of the visit the burial ground had a slightly overgrown appearance.

3.2 Maintenance

In November 2011, the building was inspected by AJG Dickson FRICS of Cheffins, Cambridge. He found the building in generally sound condition. Since then, some items of maintenance and repair have been carried out. The main problem is the boundary wall (see below) which is kept under review. The meeting has enough money for routine maintenance and repairs but had to draw on area meeting funds for major roof repairs a few years ago. Apart from the QI report, there is no five-year maintenance and repair plan.

3.3 Sustainability

The meeting does not use the Sustainability Toolkit and has not implemented any measures to reduce its environmental impact. No fertilisers or herbicides are used in the garden. The meeting does not have an Energy Performance Certificate but might consider obtaining one in the future.

3.4 Amenities

The meeting house has all the required amenities. It is accessible by public transport. There is no on-site car parking but the meeting has the use of some car parking spaces in the URC car park opposite. There are on-site spaces for bikes but no bike stands. There is no resident warden or Friend.

3.5 Access

It has level access through the back door and an accessible WC. There is no hearing loop or specific facilities for partially sighted people. There has been no Disability Access Audit.

3.6 Community Use

Friends use the meeting house for 2-3 hours per week. The building is theoretically available for community lettings for a maximum number of 48 hours per week. It is used for an average of 30 hours per week. There is no formal lettings policy. The main user is a pre-school nursery which has used the meeting house since c.1966 (and who use the main meeting room for storage when they use the other room). Groups whose aims are not in accord with Quaker principles are excluded from lettings.

3.7 Vulnerability to crime

The area has low crime levels and there has been no heritage crime reported at the site. There is no established liaison with the Local Neighbourhood Police Team and the meeting does not consider this necessary at present.

3.8 Plans for change

There are currently (2015) no plans for alterations 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 meeting house has all the facilities it needs. Original and historic fittings should be left *in situ* if possible.

ii) For wider community use, in addition to local Meeting use: Although primarily a Quaker meeting house, the building's main user is a pre-school nursery which has used the building since c.1966. They have all the required facilities.

iii) Being laid down as a Meeting: Should the meeting close, the most obvious new owner would be the nursery which is already the main user of the building. Retaining original fittings including the panelled screens and spatial form of the interior will be important.

Part 5: Category: 2