

Quaker Meeting House, Esher

3 Claremont Lane, Esher, Surrey, KT10 9DP

National Grid Reference: TQ 13932 64514



Statement of Significance

A little-altered late eighteenth-century meeting house with attached burial ground, of high evidential, historical and aesthetic significance.

Evidential value

The meeting house was built in 1793 or 1797 (accounts vary) and retains much of its original character and fabric. Features such as the vertical shutters and the fixed seating in the elders' stand are important survivals, evocative of Quaker tradition and worship. The burial ground retains a number of historic headstones.

Historical value

This is one of the oldest meeting houses in the Area Meeting and is of high historical value.

Aesthetic value

The meeting house has a plain late Georgian character, with notable details and features including fine external brickwork and joinery. Inside, the shutters and other high quality fixed furnishings, including the unusual splayed form of the elders' stand, contribute to the aesthetic value of the building. It stands within a small and well-maintained burial ground behind a brick boundary wall with raised entrance. It is an oasis of calm and human scale in an area which has seen larger-scale redevelopment in recent years. The half blocking of two of the windows and the addition of a dormer have somewhat compromised the aesthetic value of the building, which nevertheless remains high.

Communal value

The meeting house was built for and remains in Quaker use. However, it is also a community resource, making a positive contribution to the local conservation area, and as such is seen by residents and visitors as well as users. The building and burial ground symbolise Quaker values, such as the testimony of simplicity. These spiritual, commemorative and social values give the site high communal value.

Part 1: Core data

- 1.1 Area Meeting: *Kingston & Wandsworth*
- 1.2 Property Registration Number: *0005000*
- 1.3 Owner: *Six Weeks Meeting*
- 1.4 Local Planning Authority: *Elmbridge Borough Council*
- 1.5 Historic England locality: *South East*
- 1.6 Civil parish: *Esher NPA*
- 1.7 Listed status: *II*
- 1.8 NHLE: *1030244*
- 1.9 Conservation Area: *Esher*
- 1.10 Scheduled Ancient Monument: *No*
- 1.11 Heritage at Risk: *No*
- 1.12 Date(s): *1793 or 1797*
- 1.13 Architect(s): *Not known*
- 1.14 Date of visit: *10 November 2015*
- 1.15 Name of report author: *Andrew Derrick*
- 1.16 Name of contact(s) made on site: *Rebecca Price, Wendy Sim*
- 1.17 Associated buildings and sites: *Attached warden's accommodation*

1.18 Attached burial ground: Yes

1.19 Information Sources:

Butler, D. M., *The Quaker Meeting Houses of Britain*, 1999, Vol. 2, pp. 587-8

Haynes, R., *A Brief History of Esher Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends*, 1971 (1997 reprint)

Lidbetter, H., *The Friends Meeting House*, 1979, p. 27, fig. 35 and pl. XLVII

Local Meeting Survey, by Wendy Sim and Rebecca Price, 2015

Quinquennial survey, 2014

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

2.1. Historical background

Until the late eighteenth century Friends in the Esher area gathered in one another's houses; in 1669 a Meeting was reported to be 'attended by 40 or 50 at Thomas Edlin's house' (its location unknown, quoted in Hynes, p. 5) and there is a record in 1675 of Kingston (monthly) meeting providing funding for forms and benches. A meeting house with burial ground was built at Cobham in 1678-80, but this was sold (except for the burial ground) in 1739.

In 1793 a plot of land, the present site, was bought for £20 from John Biddle, a Quaker, and a meeting house built and burial ground laid out (1793 is the date given for the building by Haynes and Butler; Lidbetter, the list entry and the date over the gateway to the meeting house say 1797). The meeting house comprised two rooms originally (according to Butler) divided by a folding shutter, later replaced by timber sliding shutters. The smaller room is described by Haynes as for the women's business meeting but Butler suggests that this function took place in the upper room (now residential accommodation for the warden). Whatever its original function, it appears that, like the main meeting room, the smaller room was originally double height; the upper half of its large arched windows have been blocked, suggesting the insertion of an upper floor. This appears to have taken place around the middle of the nineteenth century. In 1860 the smaller room (described as a library) was used for worship, being smaller and warmer than the main meeting room (it had its own fireplace). The larger room was let to other groups, including a Baptist congregation (1868). In 1908 Kingston Monthly Meeting approved the setting up of Esher Preparative Meeting.

An account of 1965 (quoted in Haynes, p. 26) refers to 'the elegant bookcase in the library and the plain restrained fireplace which replaced the cheerful, re-tiled but ugly Victorian one ... the bricks built into the surrounds of the fireplace are probably as old as the building itself, as they were found under the floor-boards when these were found to be rotten and had to be renewed in the 1950s. Soon after, the wooden schoolroom was built at the back of the Meeting House...'

The staircase to the upper floor shown in Butler's plan at figure 1 is no longer present. Instead the upper floor is reached from a stair in the twentieth-century extension of the building to the rear.

2.2. The building and its principal fittings and fixtures

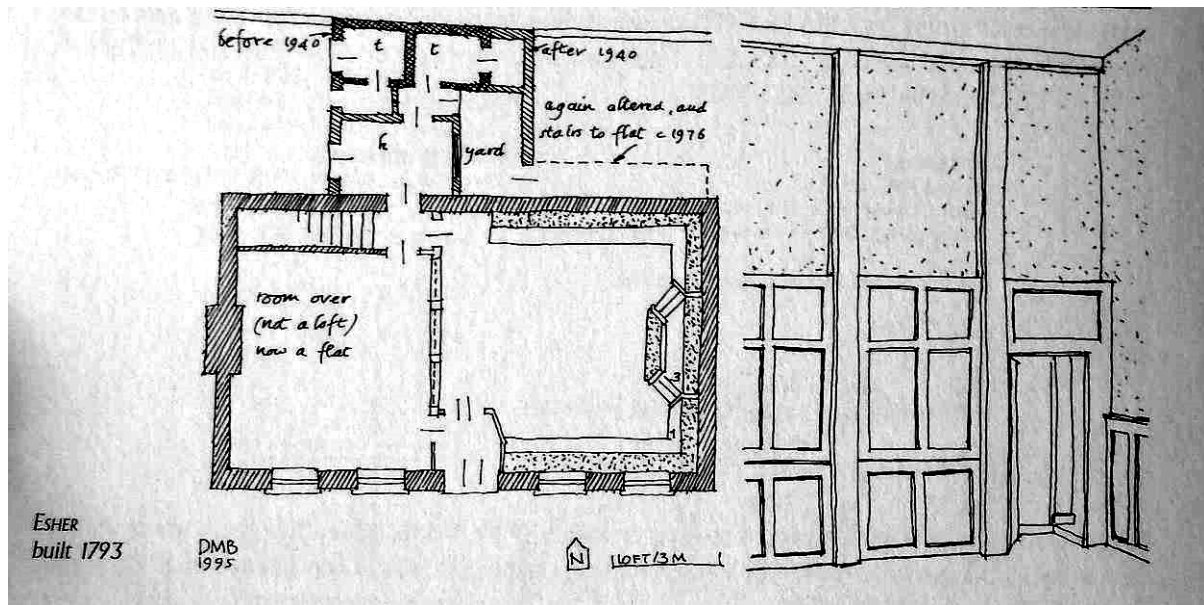


Figure 1: Plan, from Butler, Vol. 2, p. 588

The Meeting House was built in 1793, and altered in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. It is built of yellow stock brick laid in Flemish bond, on a low rendered plinth and under a hipped slate roof with box gutters at the eaves. There is a brick stack to the west (street) elevation. The main meeting room is a double-height space, while the western part of the building is of two storeys, with first floor casement windows and a flat-roofed dormer (all later insertions). The main (south) front is of five bays, with central double doors under a flat hood supported on scroll brackets. Above this is a rectangular recessed brick panel. On either side are two large arched glazing bar sash windows with gauged brickwork to the arches. The upper half of the two western windows is blocked, possibly associated with the insertion of an upper floor in the nineteenth century. The building has been extended to the rear in the twentieth century, providing additional warden's accommodation.

The main entrance leads into a small timber panelled lobby to the main meeting room. This retains its late-eighteenth-century character, with its elders' stand on the east side, panelled dado, and perimeter benches. Timber vertical sliding shutters between full-height divisions separate the room from the adjoining space. The elders' stand has splayed ends rather than the more usual square treatment, with ramped sides and dado. Above the dado, the walls and flat ceiling are plastered. Adjoining this space is a smaller space, now used as a library, with panelled dado, doors with their original ironmongery and a twentieth-century brick fireplace which is said to incorporate reused original brickwork. A stair to the upper room shown on the plan at figure 1 has been removed, and the stair to the first floor is now within the twentieth-century addition on the north side. This addition contains kitchens, WCs etc. and, on the upper floor, residential accommodation for the warden.

2.3 Loose furnishings

There are several open-backed benches in the main meeting room, plain in character and difficult to date, but possibly of the nineteenth century.

2.4. Attached burial ground

There is a small burial ground in front of the meeting house, containing 42 interments, some of them marked by simple headstones with half-round tops, in four rows. The first recorded burial was in 1807, the most recent in 1952. It is still used for the interment of ashes.

2.5. The meeting house in its wider setting

The meeting house is in Claremont Lane, not far from the centre of Esher. It is set back from and at right angles to the road, behind a brick boundary wall which ramps up to frame a gate and archway (the latter probably mid-twentieth century). The meeting house and burial ground make a modest but positive contribution to the local conservation area (modest because the side elevation facing the street is plain, and altered; the qualities of the building are best appreciated from close up).

2.6. Listed status

The meeting house is listed Grade II, appropriately reflecting its special architectural and historical interest.

2.7. Archaeological potential of the site

As an eighteenth-century meeting house with attached burial ground, the archaeological potential of the site is likely to be high.

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 meeting house is generally well maintained. However, the quinquennial inspection report of 2014 identified repairs estimated at over £35,000, the most urgent including repairs to areas of timber decay around the front door. Quotes for repairs were awaited at the time of preparation of the questionnaire return.

3.3. Sustainability

The Meeting does not use the Sustainability Toolkit. Measures taken to reduce environmental impact include:

- Climate change & energy efficiency: spaces only heated when needed, windows and doors draft-proofed, low energy light bulbs, DIY double glazing in warden's flat
- Resource use, recycling and waste management: Recycling, composting, use of recycled lavatory paper and ecological cleaning materials where possible, Fairtrade tea and coffee
- Building maintenance & refurbishment: The last interior paintwork was done using ecological paint
- Wildlife, ecology and nature conservation: The garden encourages wildlife, especially birds and insects. Trees in the garden help to counteract pollution from the road.
- Transport: Bicycle racks are provided. There is no car parking.

3.4. Amenities

The Meeting considers that it has the amenities it needs. These include two meeting rooms, two WCs and a kitchen. There is a resident warden.

3.5. Access

A disability audit was conducted in about 1997, as a result of which an accessible WC, handrails, ramps and widened doors were installed (as appropriate and necessary). There is now step-free access into and around the ground floor of the meeting house. A hearing loop is installed. There is no special provision for the partially sighted.

3.6 Community Use

The meeting house is close to public transport and is well used by community groups (42 out of a possible 80 hours a week). This is in addition to 5.5 hours' a week use by Friends. The lack of on-site car parking can however be a problem. There is an informal letting policy that the building should be let only to group activities compatible with Quaker values. Users of the building cite its central location, peaceful atmosphere, cleanliness, good piano, nice kitchen and WCs, its warm and welcoming atmosphere and pleasant garden.

3.7. Vulnerability to crime

There has been some experience of low level antisocial behaviour, e.g. littering and graffiti. The questionnaire refers to theft of lead from the low wall in the car park (?) in 2012. Generally the area is affluent and well cared for, with low levels of crime.

3.8. Plans for change

None stated.

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 main meeting room retains much of its original historic character and fittings and there is not scope for significant change without compromising this character. It would be possible to introduce secondary glazing in the windows, if carefully detailed. Similarly the smaller space retains its original doors and panelling, which should be retained. Elsewhere there is scope for carefully-considered change.

ii) For wider community use, in addition to local Meeting use: The building has already been adapted to serve a wider community use. The chief constraint on extended use is perhaps the lack of off-street car parking, but this cannot be remedied without damage to the setting of the meeting house and burial ground.

iii) Being laid down as a Meeting House: The intactness of the meeting house and the existence of the burial ground mean that the building would not lend itself easily to another use without loss of historic character and significance. Any new use would need to retain the two main historic spaces, along with their historic fittings.

Part 5: Category: 2

Part 6: List description

Name: FRIEND'S MEETING HOUSE (*sic*)

List entry Number: 1030244

Location: FRIEND'S MEETING HOUSE, 3, CLAREMONT LANE

Grade: II

Date first listed: 14-Aug-1953

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

TQ 16SW BOROUGH OF ELMBRIDGE CLAREMONT LANE

Esher 5/113 No. 3 (Friend's 14.8.53. Meeting House)

II

Meeting house. 1797 with C20 additions. Yellow stock brick on rendered plinth with hipped slate roof. Stack to left end. 1 storey and attic under flat roofed dormer to left. 5 Bays, 4 arched glazing bar sash windows across, two on left with upper half blocked. Central double doors under flat roof hood on scroll brackets. Rectangular recessed panel over. C20 extension to rear. Interior: Rectangular room with dado panelling.

Listing NGR: TQ1390464463