Friends Meeting House, Hitchin

1 Paynes Park, Hitchin, Hertfordshire, SG5 1EH

National Grid Reference: TL 18282 29279

Statement of Significance

A meeting house of 1957 designed by Paul V. Mauger and erected on an old Quaker burial ground. The building is typical of the 1950s in style and is raised on piloti to minimise the disturbance to burials. The site is of medium heritage significance.

Evidential value
The building itself is wholly of the 1950s and of little evidential value, but combined with the 1750s burial round the site is of medium evidential value.

Historical value
The site was acquired by the Quakers in 1750 for a burial ground, but the meeting house was only erected in 1957. It is of medium historical value.

Aesthetic value
The building is an interesting though not particularly distinctive 1950s design whose appearance is partly dictated by the need to minimize disturbance to surrounding burials. It is of medium aesthetic value.

Communal value
The meeting house appears to be well-used by the local community and has high communal value.

Part 1: Core data

1.1 Area Meeting: *Hertford & Hitchin*

1.2 Property Registration Number: *0008130*

1.3 Owner: *Area Meeting*

1.4 Local Planning Authority: *North Hertfordshire District Council*

1.5 Historic England locality: *East of England*

1.6 Civil parish: *Hitchin NPA*

1.7 Listed status: *Locally listed*

1.8 NHLE: *N/a*

1.9 Conservation Area: *Hitchin*

1.10 Scheduled Ancient Monument: *No*

1.11 Heritage at Risk: *No*

1.12 Date(s): *1957*

1.13 Architect (s): *Paul V. Mauger*

1.14 Date of visit: *6 November 2015*

1.15 Name of report author: *Neil Burton*

1.16 Name of contact(s) made on site: *Bob Harrold*

1.17 Associated buildings and sites: *Detached burial ground at St Ippollitts (see section 2.5 below)*

1.18 Attached burial ground: *Yes*

1.19 Information sources:

Butler, D.M., *The Quaker Meeting Houses of Britain,* 1999, vol.1 p.259-260
Stell, C, *Nonconformist Chapels and Meeting Houses in Eastern England,* 2002, p.139
Local Meeting survey by Bob Harrold, June 2015.

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

2.1. Historical background

The first Hitchin meeting house was built in 1694 in Codpiece Alley, later Quaker Alley. There were two detached burials grounds, at Salter's Dell in the town and at St Ippollitts (Tibbs Bush), two miles to the south. These burial grounds were superseded by a large new ground in what is now Paynes Road, which was first used in 1757. In 1840 the old meeting house was also superseded by a larger new building across the road from the burial ground, designed by Samuel Dawkes. Over the years the building became almost surrounded by additions. By the mid-twentieth century it was too large for the local meeting and was sold to Hitchin Rural District Council in 1956 for use as council offices. The building still survives.

Its replacement, which opened in 1957, was an entirely new building erected on the burial ground to the designs of Paul V. Mauger. All the rooms were at first floor level and set on a concrete raft supported on piles. The building was given a Civic Trust Design Award in 1962. In recent years, the market area adjoining the burial ground has been built-up and the junction of Bedford Road and Paynes Road has been widened, much of the old brick wall surrounding the eighteenth-century burial ground has been reconstructed or rebuilt and the original arched entrance (fig.1) has been lost.
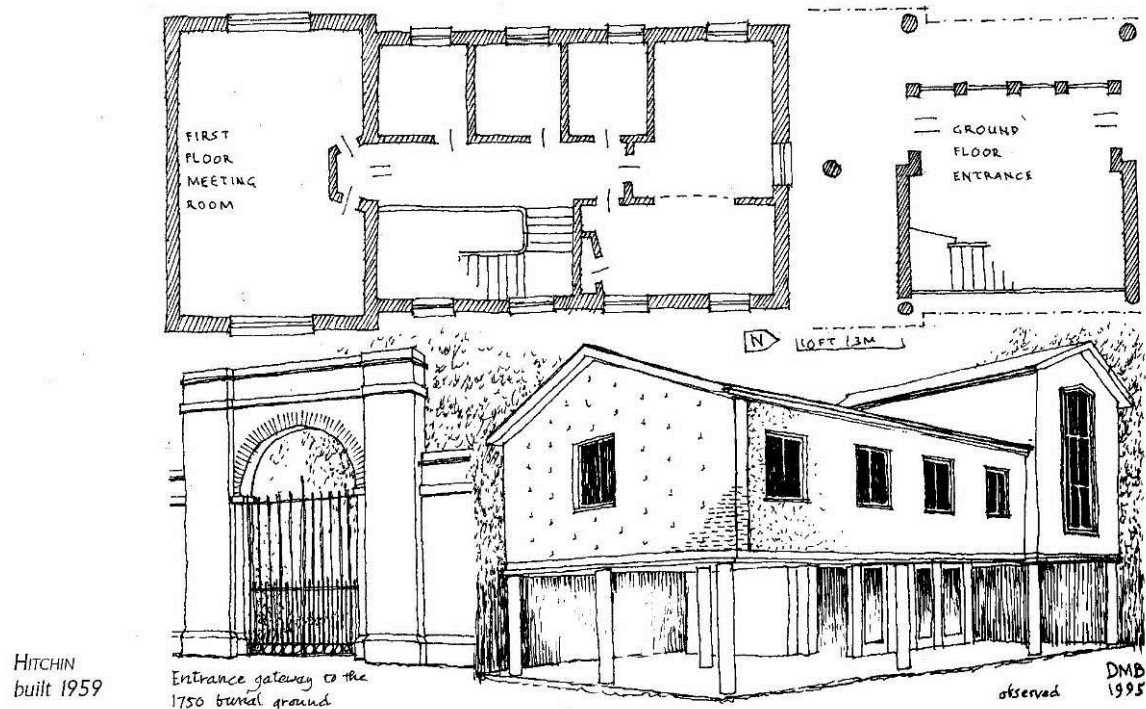

Figure 1: Plan and perspective view from the north west, *Butler*, Vol. 1, p. 260

2.2. The building and its principal fittings and fixtures

The meeting house building stands in the middle of the old burial ground and is designed in a modern style typical of the 1950s. It was built on pile foundations to minimise disturbance to the burials and these support concrete *piloti*, which in turn support a rectangular concrete raft on which the main meeting house accommodation rests. The ground floor is largely open, apart from a partly-glazed entrance lobby containing the stair. Some displaced grave markers have been set into the brick side walls of the lobby. The main meeting room is set across the south end of the raft and has yellow brick walls with large windows in both gable ends and a shallow-pitched copper-clad roof. The other rooms are contained in a lower range set at right-angles to the meeting room. This range has painted concrete facings to the side walls with four rectangular window openings on each side and a shallow-pitched copper-clad roof. The gable-end wall to Paynes Road is faced in yellow brick with brown brick flecking. Apart from some minor modernisation, the interior of the building is much as designed. The upper floor is reached by an open concrete stair. The main meeting room has plain plaster walls with a timber panelled dado and a slightly pitched plaster ceiling.

2.3 Loose furnishings

There are no loose furnishings of heritage interest.

2.4. Attached burial ground (if any)

The burial ground on which the meeting house stands was opened in 1757. It is closed for burials, but still open for the interment of ashes. The burial ground was originally surrounded by a brick wall, which has been mostly rebuilt. The original entrance to the burial ground was by means of an arched entry on the east side (see fig.1), but this has been lost to road improvements. The concrete slab pathway which led from the arch to the meeting house still remains, but will probably be removed to make way for a proposed Peace Garden. There are several simple headstones of the usual Quaker pattern; the earliest date from 1762 and 1763. Many commemorate significant local families, including the Seebohms. Frederic Seebohm (d.1990) was chairman of Barclays Bank and an innovator in social work.

2.5. The meeting house in its wider setting

The meeting house stands within its burial ground a short distance west of the High Street in the centre of Hitchin. Immediately across the road to the north east is the former meeting house, built in 1840 and sold to the council in 1956 for use as offices. There is a detached burial ground at Tibbs Bush in the village of St Ippollitts two miles to the south (grid reference unknown).

2.6. Listed status

The meeting is not included in the statutory list but is locally listed. This is probably the appropriate level of designation.

2.7. Archaeological potential of the site

The site is fairly close to the town centre and has been in use for burials since 1757. It is of medium 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

3.2. Maintenance

There has been no recent quinquennial inspection but the building fabric has been inspected recently by an architect member of the Meeting. The building is generally in good condition; there is some minor structural cracking which is being kept under observation. The meeting has adequate funds to cover the costs of maintenance and repair. Recent refurbishment works to the burial ground have been funded by grants and the AM Premises Fund. The meeting does not have a written 5-year maintenance and repair plan, but there is an annual maintenance and repair schedule which forms the basis for action.

3.3. Sustainability

The meeting does not use the Sustainability Toolkit. A local architect was asked to survey the Meeting House and grounds and propose measures to reduce environmental impact but funds have been diverted to refurbishment and his suggestions have not been implemented. The building does not have an Energy Performance Certificate.

3.4. Amenities

The meeting has all the amenities it needs in the meeting house - a small kitchen, recently refurbished, toilets, and two meeting rooms of different sizes. There is no resident warden.

The meeting house is in the town centre and there is a fairly good bus service and a main line railway station within walking distance. There is no on-site car parking available but there are pubic car parks within easy walking distance and there are racks for bicycles.

3.5. Access

All the rooms in the Meeting House are on the first floor. There is a stair-lift from the ground floor entrance lobby. The first floor is level and there is an accessible WC and a hearing loop. There are no specific facilities for partially-sighted people. There has not been a Disability Access Audit.

3.6 Community Use

Friends use the building for about 2 hours per week. The building is available for community lettings for a maximum number of 174 hours per week (2 rooms available 9am to 10pm) and is used for approximately 12 hours per week. The meeting does not have a lettings policy. No groups are allowed to use the meeting house for free but on occasion PM may agree to make a donation towards user costs. Users value the good town-centre location, peaceful atmosphere and good pricing.

3.7. Vulnerability to crime

There are no signs of general crime at the site, apart from slight littering as the burial ground is used by members of the public as a cut through. There has been no recent heritage crime, but metal downpipes have been stolen in the past and rough sleepers damaged a door to the building. Police were consulted about the rough sleeping problem, which now been resolved. The locality is generally well cared-for and has low crime levels and low deprivation.

3.8. Plans for change

There are no plans for change to the building. It is proposed to form a Peace Garden in the burial ground.

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:* there is limited scope for significant alteration since the building stands on a burial ground.

> *ii) For wider community use, in addition to local Meeting use:* as above, there is limited scope for alteration since the building stands on a burial ground.

> *iii) Being laid down as a Meeting House:* the building could probably find another use, though the location within a burial ground might be a limiting factor.

Part 5: Category: 3