

Friends Meeting House, Letchworth

Howgills, 42 South View, Letchworth, Hertfordshire, SG6 3JJ

National Grid Reference: TL 21903 31945



Statement of Significance

The meeting house was built in 1907 for Juliet Reckitt to the designs of Bennett & Bidwell, who later became leading architects in the development of Letchworth Garden City. The building is an attractive product of the Edwardian Arts & Crafts movement and is based loosely (and in the case of the main meeting room modelled closely) on the meeting house at Brigflatts in West Yorkshire. The building and its setting have been little altered and the whole is of high heritage significance.

Evidential value

The building has suffered remarkably few alterations since it was built and offers little in the way of archaeological evidence of past change, so it is of medium evidential value.

Historical value

The meeting house was built in 1907, and belongs to the early twentieth-century development of Letchworth. Its primary historical interest is perhaps as a design by Robert Bennett and Benjamin Wilson Bidwell, associates of Parker & Unwin and significant figures in the garden city movement. The link with the Reckitt family is also of historical interest. As such the meeting house is of high historical value.

Aesthetic value

The meeting house is an attractive arts and crafts design, retaining many external and internal features of note, especially the meeting room itself modelled on the seventeenth-century example of Brigflatts in Yorkshire. The appearance of the building both externally and internally has remained little altered and it is of high aesthetic value.

Communal value

The meeting house is well-used by local groups and is of high communal value.

Part 1: Core data

1.1 Area Meeting: *Hertford & Hitchin*

1.2 Property Registration Number: *0004150*

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: *Letchworth Garden City*

1.7 Listed status: *II*

1.8 NHLE: *1347287*

1.9 Conservation Area: *Letchworth*

1.10 Scheduled Ancient Monument: *No*

1.11 Heritage at Risk: *No*

1.12 Date(s): *c1907; children's room added 1957*

1.13 Architect (s): *Robert Bennett & Benjamin Wilson Bidwell; 1957 addition by William Barnes*

1.14 Date of visit: *30 October 2015*

1.15 Name of report author: *Neil Burton*

1.16 Name of contact(s) made on site: *Avril Beeseley (Warden)*

1.17 Associated buildings and sites: *None*

1.18 Attached burial ground: *No*

1.19 Information sources:

Butler, D.M., *The Quaker Meeting Houses of Britain*, 1999, vol.1 p.262
Miller, Mervyn, *Robert Bennett and Benjamin Wilson Bidwell*, Letchworth Garden City Heritage Foundation, vol.4 of *Architects of Letchworth Garden City (1999-2000)*, Hertfordshire Historic Environment Record, ID no. 30887
Local Meeting survey by Philip Croton & Avril Beeseley, October 2015
Local Meeting archives

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

2.1. Historical background

The meeting house was commissioned in 1907 by Juliet E Reckitt, the niece of wealthy Hull industrialist and philanthropist Sir James E Reckitt, director of Reckitt & Coleman. For her architects she chose Robert Bennett and Wilson Bidwell, both from northern England, who were closely associated with Parker & Unwin and the Garden City Movement. The two men opened an office in Letchworth in 1907 and over the next thirty years went on to design many buildings in the town. The new meeting house building was loosely based on the 1675 Quaker meeting house at Brigflatts near Sedburgh in the West Riding of Yorkshire. That is to say, the galleried meeting room was a fairly close copy of the original, but slightly larger and with a fireplace and with much larger mullion and transom windows to provide more light. The entrance front to the street with its twin gables and central chimney was an original Arts & Crafts composition. Much of the detailing, including the stone mullioned windows, the joinery and the metalwork was copied from north country examples. Carved timber inscriptions over the entrance hall and meeting room fireplaces are apparently early work by Eric Gill. Equally remarkable is a decorative copper plaque by the main door with an inscription commemorating Juliet Reckitt's gift of the building to the Society of Friends. From the beginning the building was called Howgills, presumably after the Howgill Fells which form the landscape setting for Brigflatts.

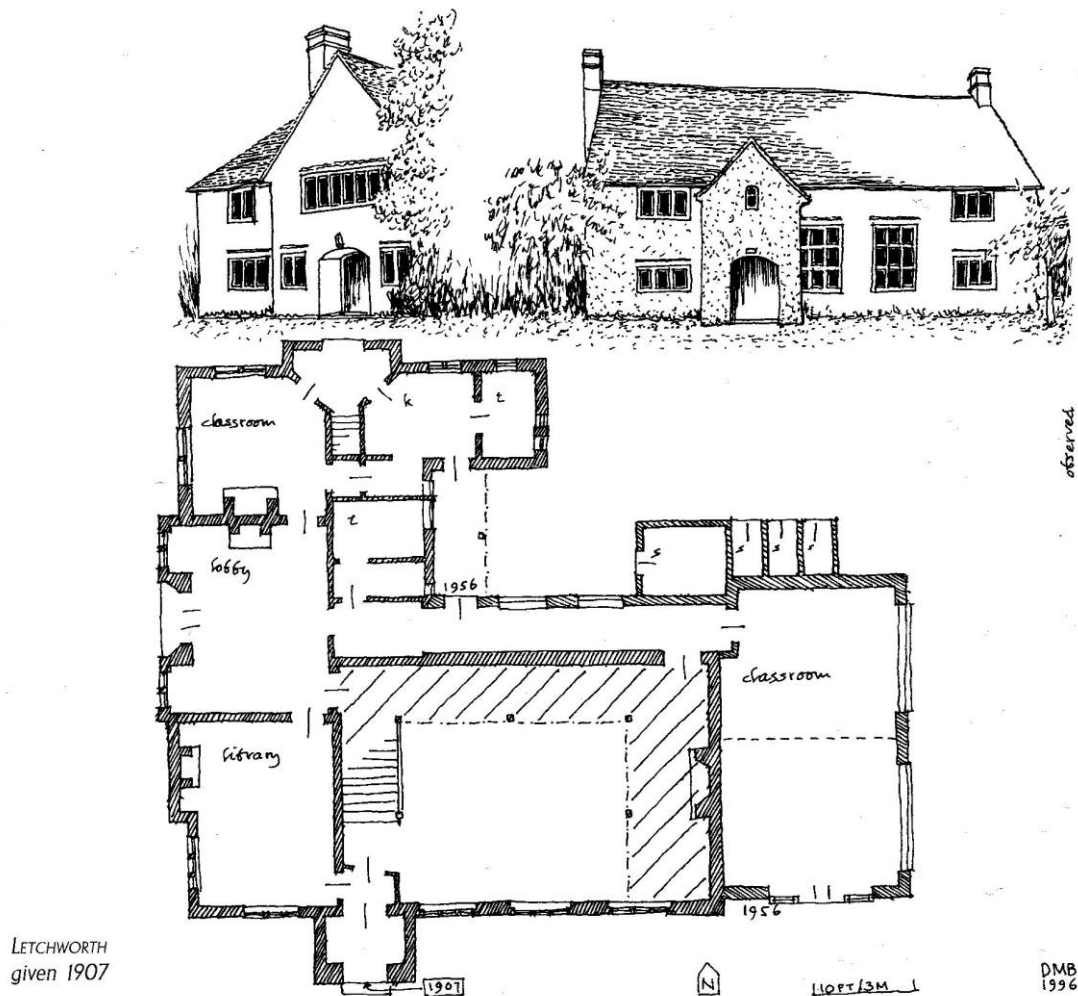


Figure 1: Ground floor plan and two sketch elevations, from *Butler*, Vol. 1, p. 262

2.2. The building and its principal fittings and fixtures

The building is probably constructed of brick but is faced in roughcast, with sandstone window surrounds and tile roof-coverings. The west-facing entrance front has a gabled centre with the entrance door in segment-headed recess, flanking two-light windows and a long six-light window above. To the left of the centre is a plain front with one three-light window on each floor and a tall hipped roof. To the right is a large asymmetrical brick chimney stack and the taller gabled end of the meeting room range with three-light windows on both floors, off-set to accommodate the stack. The south front with its two-storey projecting gabled porch is clearly based on the main front of Brigflatts meeting house, but with two large 9-light windows to the right of the porch instead of the smaller windows of the original. Attached to the east end of this range is a modern single-storey flat-roofed classroom block with roughcast walls and timber windows.

The main (west) entrance gives into a low-ceilinged lobby with a woodblock floor and a simple chimneypiece of glazed brick with one of the Gill overmantel carvings. Opening off the lobby to the south is the library, with panelled shutters on the east wall. The meeting room is rectangular and galleried on the north and east sides. The gallery is supported on turned timber posts and is reached by a broad stair rising from inside the south entrance door. The west wall behind the stair has shutters at both ground and first floor level. The gallery has a timber balustrade and the timber supporting posts are continued up to the flat timber-beamed ceiling as plain timber posts of rectangular section. All the detailing is of seventeenth-century character and based on the detailing at Brigflatts. One concession to modern comfort is a hearth under the gallery on the east wall with a four-centred stone arch opening and a second Gill overmantel with a carved inscription.

2.3 Loose furnishings

The meeting room may retain some of its original furniture, though early photographs show chairs with horizontal back rails rather than the vertical splats of the present chairs.

2.4. Attached burial ground (if any)

None

2.5. The meeting house in its wider setting

The meeting house has an ample garden and stands in a broad tree-lined street with other buildings of similar date and character.

2.6. Listed status

The meeting house is properly listed at grade II. The list entry does not describe the interior.

2.7. Archaeological potential of the site

Low: the building was erected on a greenfield site.

Part 3: Current use and management

See completed volunteer survey

3.1. Condition

- i) Meeting House: Good
- ii) Attached burial ground (if any): Not applicable

3.2. Maintenance

The most recent quinquennial inspection was carried out in October 2015 by Messrs Brown & Lee, chartered surveyors. It recommended providing additional support to the roof-struts and an asbestos survey. This work has not yet been carried out. The meeting has enough money to cover the costs of maintenance and repair. The meeting has an annual maintenance schedule.

3.3. Sustainability

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

- new high efficiency gas boiler.
- low-energy lightbulbs
- recycling of all kitchen waste
- only eco-friendly cleaning products are used.
- Wild areas are left in the garden

The meeting does not have an Energy Performance Certificate for the building.

3.4. Amenities

The meeting has all the amenities it needs in the meeting house, with a main meeting room, library, classroom, kitchen and toilets. There is a resident warden who lives on the first floor of the building.

There is good public transport, with a bus stop nearby and a main line railway station 10 minutes walk away. The meeting house has parking space for 8 cars. There is also on-street parking. Secure storage for bicycles is available.

3.5. Access

The meeting house is accessible to people with disabilities. There is level access into and inside the building, an accessible WC and a hearing loop. No special facilities are provided for partially-sighted people. There has not been a Disability Access Audit.

3.6 Community Use

Friends use the building for approximately 2-3 hours per week. The building is available for lettings for 48 hours per week and is let for an average of 30 hours per week. The meeting does not have a lettings policy. Free use of the building may be allowed to groups on written application to the Clerk. Users value the quiet location and beautiful building.

3.7. Vulnerability to crime

There are no current signs of general crime at the site and there has been no heritage crime. The locality is generally well cared-for, has low crime levels, low deprivation and high community confidence. Friends have not developed a liaison with the Local Neighbourhood Policing Team but would consider doing so.

3.8. Plans for change

There are no plans for change at present

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: scope for change to the original meeting house is limited by its grade II listed status

ii) For wider community use, in addition to local Meeting use: Scope for change in the main building is also limited by listing.

iii) Being laid down as a Meeting House: If the meeting were laid down, any new use would have to respect the historic character of the building

Part 5: Category: 2

Part 6: List description (s)

This building is listed under the Planning (Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas) Act 1990 as amended for its special architectural or historic interest.

Name: HOWGILLS (SOCIETY OF FRIENDS MEETING HOUSE)

List entry Number: 1347287

Location

HOWGILLS (SOCIETY OF FRIENDS MEETING HOUSE), 42, SOUTH VIEW

The building may lie within the boundary of more than one authority.

County District District Type Parish

Hertfordshire North Hertfordshire District Authority Letchworth Garden City

Grade: II

Date first listed: 07-Sep-1979

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

Legacy System Information

The contents of this record have been generated from a legacy data system.

Legacy System: LBS

UID: 161918

List entry Description

Summary of Building

Details

SOUTH VIEW 1. 5255 No 42 'Howgills' (Society of Friends Meeting House) TL 2131 NE 11/143 II 2. 1907 by Bennett and Bidwell. Public hall designed in the free-style manner of this firm of architects. The Meeting Room is based on "Briggflatts" in Yorkshire. Two storeys. Irregular facade of 3 bays with projecting, central entrance bay with gable. Tile roof with hips

and gable. Tall brick stacks with moulded caps; chimney stack on front facade with weathered offsets. Roughcast walls. Stone, mullioned, casement windows with leaded lights and tile labels. Recessed, segmental-arched entrance with boarded double doors. Plaque in Art Nouveau style in porch.

Listing NGR: TL2190331945