

Friends Meeting House, Portishead

11 St Marys Road, Portishead, Somerset, BS20 6QP

National Grid Reference: ST 46572 75517



Statement of Significance

A vernacular-style building, probably originally a house which was adapted to serve as a meeting house in the late seventeenth century, with attached contemporary burial ground. Inside, historic furnishings include an eighteenth-century elders' stand. The building and site are of high evidential, historical, aesthetic and communal value.

Evidential value

The building is said to be converted from an existing house, but the evidence for this is now elusive. Its present character is of a traditional meeting house, originally entered from the west side and now from the north. The interior

retains historic furnishings redolent of past Quaker worship patterns, including the elders' stand. The attached burial ground retains a large number of marked graves. The building and site are of high evidential value.

Historical value

This is a very early meeting house, in use from about 1670 (year of the Second Conventicles Act). It survived early years of Quaker persecution, and has remained in use ever since. The attached burial ground is contemporary with the establishment of the meeting and contains a large number of marked graves. The earliest headstone, from 1687, is now in the meeting house. The building and site are of high historical value.

Aesthetic value

The original rubble stone construction, thatched roof and atmospheric interior, complemented by the well-maintained historic burial ground, combine to give the building and site high aesthetic value.

Communal value

Wider community use of the meeting house is hampered by parking and access issues and the lack of facilities, but the classroom block is used by community groups. The site is of high communal value for its historic character and contribution to the local scene.

Part 1: Core data

- 1.1 Area Meeting: *Bristol*
- 1.2 Property Registration Number: *0020760*
- 1.3 Owner: *Area Meeting*
- 1.4 Local Planning Authority: *North Somerset Council*
- 1.5 Historic England locality: *South West*
- 1.6 Civil parish: *Portishead and North Weston*
- 1.7 Listed status: *II*
- 1.8 NHLE: *1220359*
- 1.9 Conservation Area: *No*
- 1.10 Scheduled Ancient Monument: *No*
- 1.11 Heritage at Risk: *No*
- 1.12 Date(s): *Probably c1670*
- 1.13 Architect(s): *Not known*
- 1.14 Date of visit: *1 September 2016*
- 1.15 Name of report author: *Andrew Derrick*
- 1.16 Name of contact(s) made on site: *Kelvin Boot, Colin Milsom*
- 1.17 Associated buildings and sites: *Detached classroom block*

1.18 Attached burial ground: *Yes*

1.19 Information sources:

Butler, D.M., *The Quaker Meeting Houses of Britain*, 1999, vol. 2, pp. 542-3

Cross, K., *The Story of Portishead Friends' Meeting and Meeting House*, 1973, reissued 1996

Stell, C., *An Inventory of Nonconformist Chapels and Meeting-Houses in South West England*, 1991, p. 188

Local Meeting Survey, by Kelvin Boot, April 2016

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

2.1 Historical background

A meeting was established at Portishead by 1658, with Friends gathering in private houses. Minutes of a Monthly Meeting held at Keynsham in 1668 refer to a gift of land at the house of Thomas Hodds, to serve as a meeting house and burial ground, and the Friends' Book of Deeds (1702) says that land on the road from Portishead to Clevedon was given by William Powell. Cross concludes that these were one and the same site, and that the present meeting house was adapted from an existing cottage belonging to Thomas Hodds in about 1670. The list entry suggests likewise, but Stell suggests (without giving reasons) that the present building may be an early eighteenth-century replacement.

1670 was the year of the Second Conventicles Act ('to prevent and suppress Seditious Conventicles'), and like many others, Portishead Quakers faced persecution. One of their number, Thomas Parsons, died in jail after arrest in 1671.

In common with other early meeting houses, the building was originally entered from the long side elevation (in this case the west side, towards the burial ground). It was later moved to the gable end (north) wall, possibly at the same time as small stone additions were built both here and against the west elevation (the original building is dark hatched on Butler's plan at figure 1). These additions are probably of mid-nineteenth-century date.

Originally part of North Somerset and Wiltshire Monthly Meeting, Portishead joined Bristol and Frenchay Meeting in 1893. In about 1897, according to Cross, a proposal was advanced to replace the thatched roof with tiles, and put to Sir Edward Fry, who was a Court of Appeal judge as well as the son of Joseph Fry. Sir Edward did not favour the idea, and paid for renewal of the thatch. In about 1912 the fireplace at the back of the meeting room was blocked and a stove installed in front of it (since removed). Running water and electricity arrived in 1951, and a window from the kitchen was moved to the blocked former door opening facing the burial ground. More recently (in 1973-4) a detached classroom block was built in the burial ground.

2.2 The building and its principal fittings and fixtures

The building is possibly seventeenth-century in origin, converted from a cottage to a meeting house in about 1670. Cross refers to evidence of a previous upper floor, 'although the signs are now somewhat obscured'; such evidence was not seen at the time of inspection. The original building is constructed from painted or limewashed rubble stone, under a thatched roof; there is one stack, at the north gable end. The entrance was originally placed centrally on the west elevation, facing towards the burial ground, with a window on either side. One of these windows survives, a three-light casement with rectangular leaded lights (photo upper right at top of report). The blocked doorway now contains a window (apparently relocated from the kitchen in 1951, possibly since renewed). There are two single-storey stone-built additions with slate roofs and window drip moulds, probably of c.1850. One, at the north gable end, is now the entrance, with a pair of beaded panelled doors in a shallow projection

on the west side. This leads into a lobby with a small room giving off. The other addition, on the west side, is for a WC; it has a shallow lean-to roof with parapet on one side and eaves on the west side (altered since drawn by Butler in 1983, figure 1).

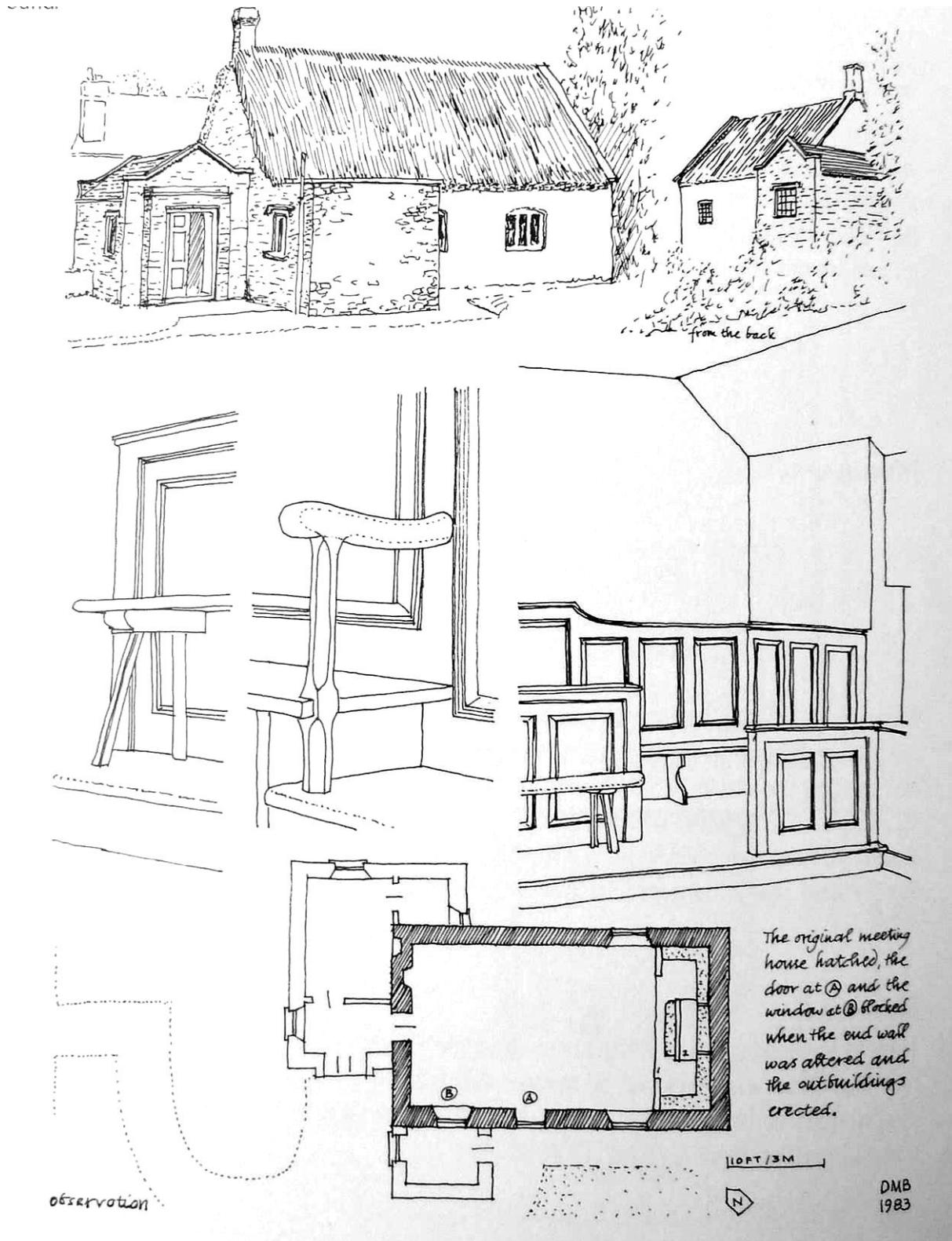


Figure 1: Plan, elevation and details, from Butler, Vol. 2, 1999, p.542

Inside, the meeting room is a rectangular space measuring 30ft x 15ft 6ins (9.1m x 4.72m). The stand at the south end has raised and fielded painted panelling which ramps up behind the top bench, of unconfirmed date but mid-eighteenth-century character. The panelled dado returns for a short distance along the side walls, before becoming a simple dado rail. The floor is boarded and the walls and ceiling plastered, the latter up to collar level. The original window openings on the west and east sides have splayed reveals. At the back of the room is a small blocked fireplace, as also in the smaller room giving off the lobby.

2.3 Loose furnishings

There are a number of open-backed benches with columnar supports to the arm rests, possibly contemporary with the elders' stand. The oldest headstone from the burial ground, inscribed WH 1687, has been relocated to the entrance lobby (photo bottom left at top of report). Framed on the wall of the small room giving off the lobby is a plan of the meeting house and burial ground, traced from one of 1916.

2.4 Attached burial ground

The burial ground contains a large number of burials, some marked by headstones laid flush with the ground (photo bottom right on page 1). Marked graves range in date from 1687 to 1967; the earliest (WH 1687) is upright, and has been brought inside. The addition of 1973-4 was built over part of the burial ground, with a shallow raft foundation.

2.5 The meeting house in its wider setting

The meeting house gives off a narrow lane, in what is now a fairly suburban setting (although one or two other historic properties remain nearby). The building is raised above street level, approached by a path and steps. Within the burial ground, the 1970s classroom is built of reconstituted stone with a shallow concrete tile roof.

2.6 Listed status

The meeting house was listed Grade II in 1981 and the list entry (below) is brief. Given its age, character and relative intactness, upgrading to II* might be considered. The building would benefit from a more forensic examination than was possible at the time of the site visit, in order to establish whether it is in fact a converted cottage or, as Stell suggests, a purpose-built early eighteenth-century replacement.

2.7 Archaeological potential of the site

As a meeting house and burial ground of seventeenth-century origin, possibly incorporating elements of an earlier building, the building and site are of high above- and below-ground 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/generally satisfactory

3.2 Maintenance

The meeting house and burial ground are well maintained. The most recent (2012) QIR has not been seen by the writer, but the questionnaire return states that its recommendations have been acted upon. The thatched roof will inevitably have a relatively short life expectancy and certain areas, such as the ridge, will particularly need to be watched. It would be desirable for permanent ventilation (and more regular use) to be introduced to counter the slight air of mustiness in the meeting room. There is no maintenance and repair plan, but the meeting considers that it has sufficient funds to meet anticipated repair needs.

3.3 Sustainability

The meeting does not use the Sustainability Toolkit, and no particular measures have been undertaken to improve the energy efficiency of the meeting house (although it probably has a low carbon footprint, and the thatched roof is a natural insulator). Recycling does not take place. Insulation has been improved in the classroom block.

3.4 Amenities

The meeting considers that it has the amenities it needs. These include a meeting room with WC and small office, and a separate classroom block with kitchen and WC. There is no resident warden.

The building is served by public transport, with regular buses to and from Bristol and other locations (but fewer on Sundays). There is no on-site parking, but limited parking is available in the street (this is said to be a minor concern). There is no secure parking for cycles.

3.5 Access

The meeting house is not accessible for those unable to negotiate the fairly steep and winding stepped approach from the lane. Without an accessible approach, expenditure on step-free access into the buildings or provision of accessible WCs would not be justified. There is a hearing loop, but no special provision has been made for partially-sighted people.

Landscape adjustments to make the building and site fully accessible would be expensive, and possibly unacceptable in listed building and archaeological terms. However, it might be beneficial to carry out an access audit to establish whether reasonable adjustments would be possible, and determine the scope for auxiliary aids and services.

3.6 Community Use

The meeting house is used by Friends for approximately three hours each week, but is not normally hired out to other parties. The detached classroom block has a kitchen as well as WC, and is available for six days out of seven – it is generally hired out for about ten hours a week. All are welcome; no activities or uses are formally excluded but Quaker values would determine matters should the issue of exclusion present itself. Users appreciate the good

location, peaceful atmosphere, value for money and competitiveness with other locally available options. Parking and access issues do however constrain extended community use.

3.7 Vulnerability to crime

There are no recorded instances of heritage or other crime. This is a well-cared-for area with low levels of crime and deprivation.

3.8 Plans for change

None are given in the questionnaire return. At the site meeting the possibility of reopening the central doorway on the west elevation was raised, but this is not currently proposed (see below).

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 sensitive historic character of the building, inside and out, and the Grade II listing, limit the scope for major change. For understandable reasons, the meeting has in the past opted to put new facilities in a detached building rather than opting to adapt or further extend the historic meeting house. This has however had the effect of making the building itself less easily lettable. The possibility of reinstating the central doorway on the west elevation of the meeting house was raised at the site meeting, and has been informally discussed with the local Conservation Officer (who raised no objection in principle, subject to detail). Possibly more contentious – and, it should be added, not currently contemplated – would be the removal of the WC addition on the west elevation; this is now historic, but a case could be made for its removal to better reveal the design and significance of this part of the historic meeting house. This would however further reduce the available facilities. Adaptations to improve access to the building from street level are likely to be prohibitively expensive, and may be unacceptable on historic buildings grounds.

ii) For wider community use, in addition to local Meeting use: Community use is constrained by parking and access issues, and currently takes place in the detached classroom, which has a kitchen. There appears to be no reason why the meeting house should not be put to greater use by hirers who are not deterred by these constraints. Adaptation of the meeting house building for extended community use is subject to the same constraints as those outlined above.

iii) Being laid down as a Meeting House: The meeting house has been in continuous use since the late seventeenth century. In the regrettable event of its being closed, it would be desirable to investigate the possibility of the building and site being vested for future preservation in a building preservation trust. The other likely alternative, which is residential conversion, would be harmful to the special interest and character of the building and its setting.

Part 5: Category: 1

Part 6: List description

Name: FRIEND'S MEETING HOUSE

List entry Number: 1220359

Location: FRIEND'S MEETING HOUSE, ST MARY'S ROAD

District: North Somerset

District Type: Unitary Authority

Parish: Portishead and North Weston

Grade: II

Date first listed: 04-Aug-1981

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

Legacy System: LBS

UID: 394091

1. 5121 ST MARY'S ROAD (south side) Friend's Meeting House ST 4675 4/21

II

C17 in origin, said to have been converted from old cottage circa 1670. Painted rubble, thatched roof. One storey, 3 windows, 3-light casements. Two later single storey additions - entrance at north gable and lavatory block at north end of west wall. Interior has C18 panelling at south end.

Listing NGR: ST4657275517