

Friends Meeting House, Reading

2 Church Street, Reading, Berkshire, RG1 2SB

National Grid Reference: SU 71744 73017



Statement of Significance

The meeting house was built in 1835, replacing a meeting house of 1716, and extended in 1964. Several notable Quakers are buried in the attached burial ground. The meeting house has high heritage significance.

Evidential value

The meeting house of 1835 with its historic fittings and furnishings has high evidential value.

Historical value

The meeting house is the second meeting house on the site. It has associations with the Quaker partners in Huntley & Palmers, the local biscuit-makers, and Alfred Waterhouse, father of the architect. The meeting house has high historical value.

Aesthetic value

The building is a plain brick building whose 1960s extension detracts somewhat from its aesthetic value. Overall, the building has medium aesthetic value.

Communal value

The meeting house is well used by Quakers and local community groups. It has high communal value.

Part 1: Core data

- 1.1 Area Meeting: *Mid-Thames*
- 1.2 Property Registration Number: *0004430*
- 1.3 Owner: *Area Meeting*
- 1.4 Local Planning Authority: *Reading Borough Council*
- 1.5 Historic England locality: *South East*
- 1.6 Civil parish: *Reading NPA*
- 1.7 Listed status: *II*
- 1.8 NHLE: *1113452*
- 1.9 Conservation Area: *London Street/Market Place*
- 1.10 Scheduled Ancient Monument: *No*
- 1.11 Heritage at Risk: *No*
- 1.12 Date(s): *1835 and later*
- 1.13 Architect(s): *Not established*
- 1.14 Date of visit: *22 September 2015*
- 1.15 Name of report author: *Johanna Roethe*
- 1.16 Name of contact(s) made on site: *Paul Kingston*
- 1.17 Associated buildings and sites: *4 and 6 Church Street*
- 1.18 Attached burial ground: *Yes*
- 1.19 Information sources:

Butler, D.M., *The Quaker Meeting Houses of Britain*, 1999, vol. 1, pp. 15-17

Lidbetter, H., *The Friends Meeting House*, 1979, p. 24

Melville, A., 'Reading Quaker Meeting House. Conservation Plan', August 2013

Stell, C., *An Inventory of Nonconformist Chapels and Meeting-houses in South-west England*, 1991, p. 15

Tyack, G., S. Bradley and N. Pevsner, *Berkshire (Buildings of England)*, 2010, p. 451

Berkshire Archaeology HER, MRM 16018, MRM 16028

Local Meeting survey by Paul Kingston, June 2015

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

2.1 Historical background

There was a meeting house in Reading by 1655. In 1671, a purpose-built meeting house was constructed in Sun Lane, partly at the cost of Thomas Curtis and adjoining the George Inn. A burial ground at the Orts on Wharf Lane, off the London Road, was bought in the seventeenth century. (This was used until 1716.) In 1684, a schism occurred in the Reading meeting due to national dispute among Quakers (known as the Wilkinson-Story Controversy) over a number of points, including the influence and authority of George Fox,

and the role of women. The two meetings at Reading – one led by Curtis, and the orthodox remnant led by Leonard Cole – initially had joint meetings for worship but separate business meetings, albeit in the same meeting house. In 1686, the meeting house closed and the Curtis group met in private houses, while the other group met in the yard of the meeting house. In 1693, the meeting house reopened for the Curtis group, while the orthodox group used a leased building in Sim’s Court. (Around the same time, there was a further separate but short-lived group led by George Keith who used a building in Gutter Lane (now Cross Street) in around 1693.)

Following Curtis’s death in 1712, the two groups were reconciled and bought the present site in 1715 where they built a new meeting house in 1716. In 1835, this was demolished and replaced by the current building. The lower entrance block with classrooms (figure 2) may have been original (Butler) or added later (Melville). In 1879, an adjoining plot was purchased for £1,000. A mission hall and classroom block was erected there for £1,799 by the architects Brown & Alcock (according to Butler; according to Tyack and Pevsner they were called Brown & Albury) and opened in 1880. A caretaker’s cottage was extended for use as an institute over a club room. This and the lobby were demolished in 1964 when a new lobby and entrance block was built for about £14,000 (Austin & Partners). This was further extended in 1994.

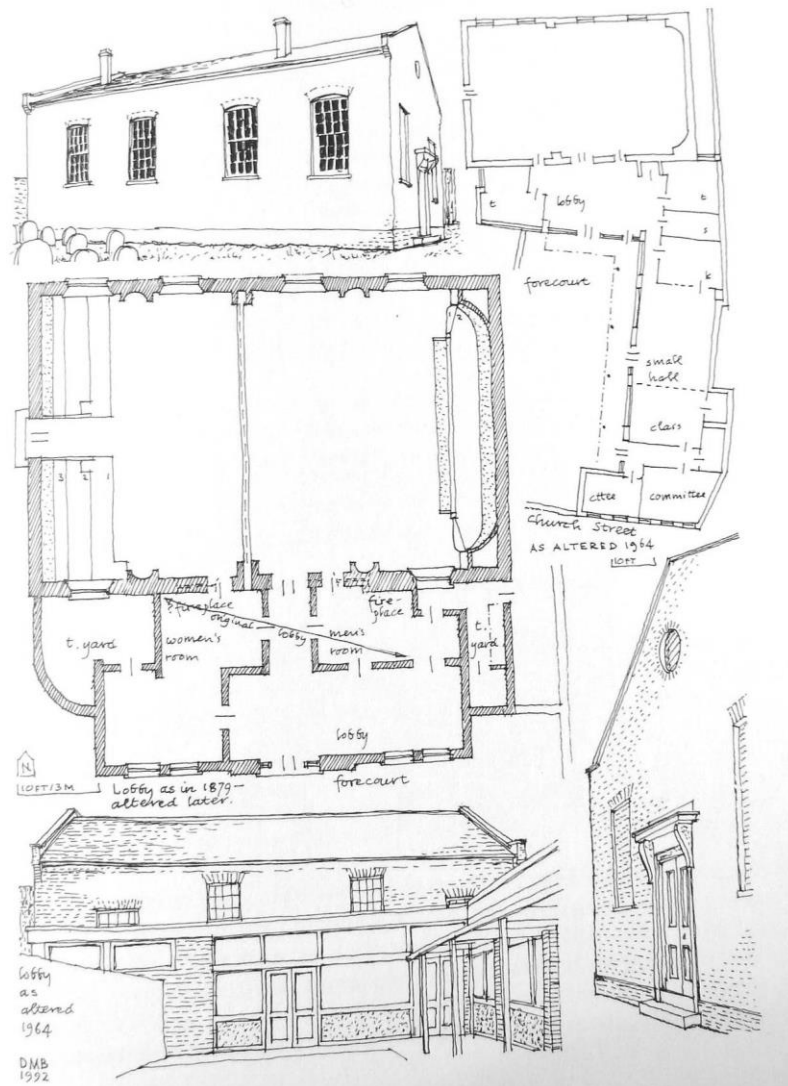


Figure 1: Perspectives, plan as in 1879 and as altered in 1964 (Butler, *The Quaker Meeting Houses of Britain*, 1999, vol. 1, p. 15)



Figure 2: The entrance to the meeting house in c.1880
 (© Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) in Britain)

2.2 The building and its principal fittings and fixtures

The main elevation faces southeast. The meeting house is built of red brick in Flemish bond. The slate roof has coped gables on brick kneelers. All four chimneystacks have been removed above roof level. The plan of the 1835 building is oblong, with an attached L-shaped extension of 1964. The latter is of brown brick in stretcher bond and includes a lobby in front of the building. The upper part of the original front elevation has two central 12-over-12 sashes flanked by 12-over-4 sashes at a lower level which were truncated by the modern extension. The west side elevation has a disused entrance with an architrave surround and a short canopy on decorative corbels. On either side are former window openings which were bricked up in header bond using burnt bricks. The gable above has a circular opening with ventilation slats. The rear elevation has four 12-over-12 sashes. The east elevation has another circular ventilation opening.

The interior of the 1835 meeting house was formerly divided into two by a vertically sliding partition under the central three-centred arch which could be lifted into the roof space. (Apparently, part of the mechanism still survives in the roof space.) Another three-centred arch is above the stand at the east wall. The flat ceilings have cornices and circular ventilation openings with grilles (five to the east room, one to the west). Only three sides of the room (south, east and west) have dado panelling. The stand at the east has a balustrade with turned balusters in front of a fixed bench. The northern corner of the stand hides a door to a ladder access into the roof. On the opposite (west) wall is another raised dais (on either side of the entrance) but without fixed benches. On the west wall are shelves and on either side of the west door are curved timber panels. Compared to Butler's plan showing the internal arrangement as it was in 1879, the west dais has been altered from three steps to one deeper platform. The south wall has two disused lobby doors (shown on Butler's 1879 plan), on either side of the central lobby entrance (with 1960s doors). Only one arched recess remains in the meeting room, of formerly four which contained cast-iron stoves. The 1964

extension includes a small hall, a small meeting room, a children's room and a committee room, as well as ancillary rooms.

2.3 Loose furnishings

There are twelve benches in the meeting room, most of them open-backed and with turned arm-rest supports which are similar to those of the stand. Two of the benches have panelled backs.

2.4 Attached burial ground (if any)

The attached burial ground to the rear was part of the site acquired in 1715 and is still in occasional use. It contains about 80 or 90 headstones dating from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Notable people buried here include: Thomas Huntley (1803-1857), who joined the biscuit-making firm, J. Huntley & Sons, founded by his father; George Palmer (1818-1898), who became a partner in the same firm (renamed Huntley & Palmers), and who was also mayor of Reading in 1857 and MP for the borough in 1878-85; and Alfred Waterhouse (1798-1873), father of the architect Alfred and the accountant Edwin. There are also commemorative plaques relating to ashes buried here which are fixed to the rear elevation of the meeting house.

2.5 The meeting house in its wider setting

The meeting house of 1835 is set back from the street but the 1964 extension has a street frontage. To the west are 4 and 6 Church Street, two red brick cottages which are used by the warden (no. 4) and rented out (no. 6). To the east is the three-storey former classroom block of 1879-80 (now known as Folk House); this is no longer in Quaker ownership. To the rear, the site is bounded by two industrial sheds beyond which is the A329 and Reading city centre.

A former detached burial ground was located off London Road. It was in use from the late seventeenth century to 1716. It is no longer in Quaker ownership and, as far as is known, no traces remain above ground.

2.6 Listed status

The meeting house is appropriately listed grade II. The list entry (see Part 6) is very brief and would benefit from amplification. The 1960s and 1990s extension might be specifically excluded under the provisions of the ERR Act.

2.7 Archaeological potential of the site

The meeting house was built on the site of an earlier meeting house. In 1966 and in 2007, Bellarmine jug sherds have been found on the site. As the site also contains burials, it is considered to be of high 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 most recent quinquennial inspection report dates from September 2011 by surveyors Faithful + Gould. Most of the urgent items have been addressed. Plant growth needs to be removed from the drains at the south corner and from the west door lintel. The condition of the former outbuilding just outside the east elevation is poor. The meeting has enough money to maintain and repair the building.

3.3 Sustainability

The meeting does not use the Sustainability Toolkit but has undertaken an environmental review in December 2008. It has implemented measures to reduce its environmental impact. These include:

- Climate change & energy efficiency: solar panels on lobby roof, double-glazed some windows, insulated cavity walls, LED lights, A-rated kitchen equipment
- Building maintenance & refurbishment: use of low-emission paint
- Wildlife, ecology and nature conservation: deliberately wild areas of garden, insect-attracting plants
- Transport: cycle racks, car-sharing scheme

The meeting does not have an Energy Performance Certificate.

3.4 Amenities

The meeting has all the amenities it needs. These are all in the meeting house and its extension. There is a resident Warden who lives nearby at 4 Church Street.

The meeting is accessible by public transport. There is very limited parking on site. There are cycle racks on site.

3.5 Access

The meeting house is accessible to people with disabilities. There is level access, an accessible toilet, a hearing loop and some facilities for partially-sighted people. A Disability Access Audit was conducted in c.2009. Its recommendations were considered to be largely inappropriate for the building and have not been implemented.

3.6 Community Use

Friends use the meeting house for 24 hours per week. The building is available for community lettings for a maximum number of 350 hours per week. It is used for an average of 50 hours per week. The meeting has a lettings policy. Applicants are assessed on a case-by-case basis. Users value the building for its convenient location, comfortable, clean and flexible spaces, efficient invoicing procedure, competitive prices and peaceful atmosphere.

3.7 Vulnerability to crime

There are no signs of general crime or anti-social behaviour at the site. There has been no heritage crime, general crime or other incidents. The locality is generally well-cared for, has low crime levels, low deprivation and high community confidence.

3.8 Plans for change

There are currently 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 currently has all the required amenities. There should be limited changes to the historic building, while the extension can sustain further alterations (without affecting detrimentally the setting of the listed building).

ii) For wider community use, in addition to local Meeting use: The current pattern of community use does not require any changes to the historic building. Again, any changes could more easily be accommodated in the more recent extension.

iii) Being laid down as a Meeting: Should Quaker use of the site cease, a new and sympathetic user would need to be found. While the 1835 building would be much improved by the removal of the later extension, such a future use would probably depend on the facilities contained in the extension.

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: FRIENDS MEETING HOUSE

List entry Number: 1113452

Location

FRIENDS MEETING HOUSE, CHURCH STREET

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

County	District	District Type	Parish
	Reading	Unitary Authority	

Grade: II

Date first listed: 14-Dec-1978

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

Legacy System: LBS

UID: 38878

Details

CHURCH STREET 1. 5128 (North Side) Friends Meeting House SU 7173 SE 3/453 II GV 2. 1835 replacing the 1715 Meeting House (The Reading Meeting of Friends is among the oldest in the country). A plain red brick building. Slate-roof with corbelled cope. 4 windows, glazing bar sashes to north. Double doors to west with brackets to hood of stone doorcase. Flanking blind windows. Interior divided by segmental diaphragm arch. Modern annexe to south.

Listing NGR: SU7174473017