

Friends Meeting House, Rochester

Northgate, Rochester, Kent, ME1 1LS

National Grid Reference: TQ 74371 68631



Statement of Significance

A late eighteenth-century meeting house, extended in the early nineteenth and late twentieth centuries, prominently located in the Historic Rochester Conservation Area and occupying a site of high archaeological potential. The building retains much of its external character but is internally altered. A former burial ground adjoining is now a car park. Overall, the meeting house is of high significance.

Evidential value

The building has been altered and enlarged at various stages, and each phase reflects developments in the use of the building. Although the interior has been

much altered, it retains elements which are characteristic of historic meeting houses. The building's design, construction, detailing and fitting out are of high evidential value.

Historical value

A meeting house since the late eighteenth century, occupying a site in Quaker use since the 1670s, lying within the historic core of the city and close to the line of the Roman wall, the building and site are of high historical value.

Aesthetic value

The exterior, with its tile roofs, historic brickwork and joinery and garden setting are of high aesthetic value, and make an important contribution to the local townscape. The interior is altered and although still displaying some of the character of a historic meeting house is of medium aesthetic value.

Communal value

The building and site are of high communal value for their longstanding Quaker witness, for their contribution to the local townscape, and for the facilities they offer.

Part 1: Core data

- 1.1 Area Meeting: *West Kent*
- 1.2 Property Registration Number: *0026260*
- 1.3 Owner: *Friends Trusts*
- 1.4 Local Planning Authority: *Medway Council*
- 1.5 Historic England locality: *South East*
- 1.6 Civil parish: *Rochester NPA*
- 1.7 Listed status: *II*
- 1.8 NHLE: *1115680*
- 1.9 Conservation Area: *Historic Rochester*
- 1.10 Scheduled Ancient Monument: *No*
- 1.11 Heritage at Risk: *No*
- 1.12 Date(s): *1780-81; 1812; 1990*
- 1.13 Architect(s): *Not known for earlier work; 1990 work by Belcher & Clapson*
- 1.14 Date of visit: *30 November 2015*
- 1.15 Name of report author: *Andrew Derrick*
- 1.16 Name of contact(s) made on site: *Jane Brown*
- 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, pp. 287-8
Kent County Council Historic Environment Record (HER no. TQ 76 NW 458), full report generated by HBSMR from exeGesIS SDM Ltd, June 2015
Medway Council, *Historic Rochester Conservation Area Appraisal*, 2010
Local Meeting Survey, by Jane Brown, July 2015

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

2.1. Historical background

In 1675 a piece of ground in Pump Lane was acquired for £31 to serve as a Quaker burial ground, and a meeting house was built soon afterwards. This was replaced in 1780-1 by the present building, which is said to incorporate materials from the old meeting house, and which was erected at the opposite end of the burial ground. The total cost was £445 19s 6d. An addition was built on the northeast side, probably in 1812, its upper floor serving as a loft or gallery, with shuttered openings onto the large meeting room from both here and the lower level.

In 1986 the building was found to be in a dangerous condition, its footings discovered as having been built on Roman and medieval rubbish pits rather than solid ground. Works of underpinning, partial rebuilding, internal adaptation and extension costing £250,000 were completed in 1990 (architects Belcher & Clapson).

2.2. The building and its principal fittings and fixtures

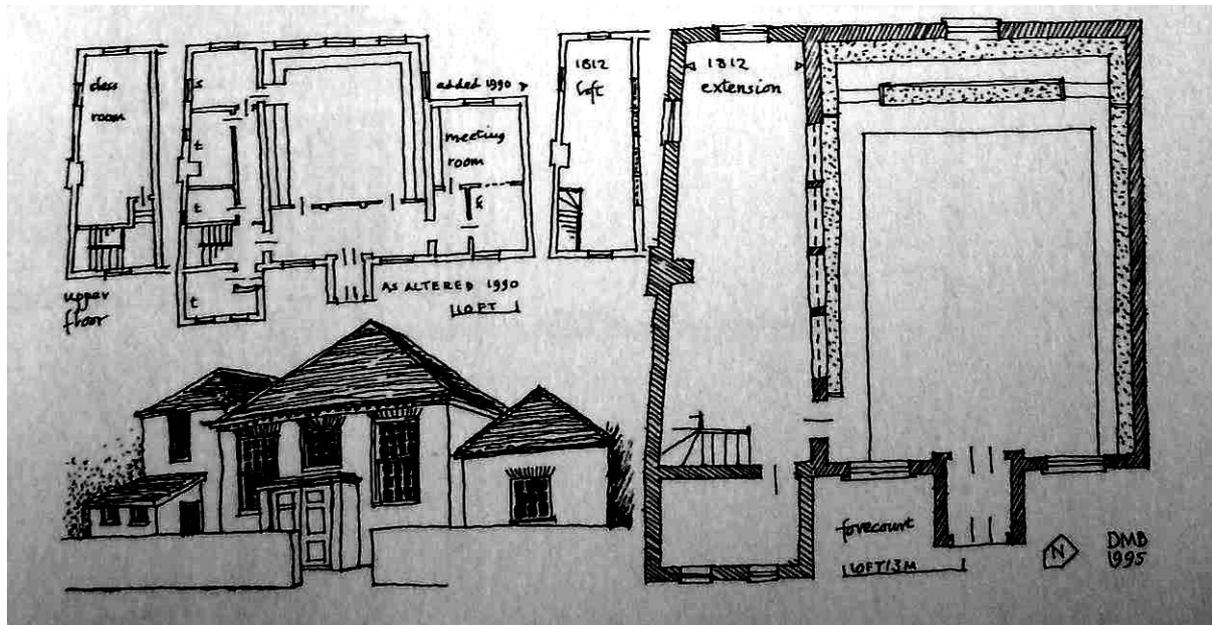


Figure 1: Plan and elevation, from Butler, vol.1, p. 287

The meeting house was built in broadly three phases, consisting of a large meeting room of 1780-1, a two-storey addition to the north housing a classroom and gallery (probably 1812) and a single storey addition to the south providing a small meeting room, kitchen and library (1990). Other additions of indeterminate date are a porch at the front of the meeting house (probably nineteenth century) and a lean-to addition against the front of the early nineteenth century addition (which appears to be late twentieth century). The original meeting house is built of red and purple brick laid in Flemish bond, smartly tuck pointed and with gauged brick arches on the front elevation, plainly pointed on the rear (where the windows have

cambered heads). It has a timber modillion cornice and a hipped or pyramidal tiled roof. The central projecting porch is of lighter brick, has a flat roof and two three-panel doors. Above it is a (possibly truncated) sash window, four panes over eight, and on either side are full-height sashes of twelve panes over twelve. The rear elevation has a high battered brick plinth, broad rendered band and three high-level sash windows, each of four panes over eight. It has a brick dentil cornice. A lean-to structure previously abutted the building in front of the present right-hand window, the scar from its flashing still apparent. The south return appears to have been rebuilt in 1990; it has an even higher plinth with cement capping and black painted brickwork above, with one sash window (four panes over eight). The early nineteenth-century extension on the north side has a separate hipped roof. On the entrance front is a disfiguring lean-to structure and above this a six-over-six sash window above with gauged brick arch. Its north elevation is mostly brick-faced, but is faced with stained weatherboard at first floor level towards the front. There is an off-entre chimney stack and small paned windows set within cambered arched openings. Its rear elevation towards the car park is rendered and ochre painted or limewashed, with six-over-six sash windows to the ground and first floors. Finally, the southern extension of 1990 is a low-key single storey addition, red brick under a hipped roof, with glazing bar sash windows.

The front porch originally led into the large meeting room, but this space has been subdivided, presumably in 1990, to create a full-width inner lobby with additional room above. The meeting room is now lit by three high-level windows on the east side and one on the south. Between these windows, full-height pilaster projections divide the wall plane into three bays. The north wall and (inserted) west wall are more plainly treated, but the former retains vestigial evidence of the former shuttered openings at ground and first floor levels (visible in photo bottom left). There is no ministers' stand at such, but there is a raised platform around three sides of the interior, with a high horizontal pine boarded dado and fixed benches, mostly renewed in 1990, but possibly incorporating some older bench ends. The remaining internal spaces are much altered and do not contain any historic features or finishes.

2.3 Loose furnishings

There are no loose furnishings that call for special mention.

2.4. Attached burial ground

The attached burial ground is now a local authority car park, although it is still bounded by its high (but rebuilt) brick wall.

2.5. The meeting house in its wider setting

The meeting house lies close to the medieval core of the city, within short walking distance from the castle and cathedral. To its north is the dual carriageway of Corporation Street (the A2) and beyond that lies the railway line. The meeting house lies within the Historic Rochester Conservation Area, but the land to the north is not included. The council's Conservation Area Appraisal writes:

The development of the railway and Corporation Street has changed the tight layout on the northeast side, to a more ragged, open edge, with few well-considered building frontages along a wide, dull and intimidating thoroughfare, which acts as a barrier to pedestrian movement as well as a poor setting to the historic core. Prior to the development of the railway and Corporation Street, Blue Boar Lane and Northgate connected the historical core to Rochester Riverside. The frontage and roadway of Corporation Street presents probably the most important enhancement opportunity for the area.

In front of the meeting house is a small garden, while behind it the area of the former burial ground is now a car park.

2.6. Listed status

Grade II. Despite the high level of rebuilding and internal alteration, the external architectural character of the building and its historic significance amply justify listed status. The list entry mistakenly dates the building to 1814, which may be the date of the northern addition.

2.7. Archaeological potential of the site

High. According to the HER, sometime before 1932 a section of the Roman wall was exposed during building works on the site. In 1986 Maidstone Area Archaeological Group dug test pits around the building to investigate subsidence, at which point it was found that the original foundations had been built on Roman and medieval rubbish pits, and twelfth-century pottery was found. The area of what is now the car park is also of high archaeological potential, being the site of the former burial ground.

Part 3: Current use and management

See completed volunteer survey

3.1. Condition

- i) Meeting House: Good
- ii) Attached burial ground (if any): No longer applicable

3.2. Maintenance

The building appears to be in good condition and well maintained. It underwent major renovation in 1990. The last QIR was in 2009 and its recommendations (chiefly relating to electrical and kitchen improvements) have been implemented. The Meeting considers that it has enough money to maintain and repair the meeting house, and there is a five-year repair and maintenance plan.

3.3. Sustainability

The Meeting does not regularly use the Sustainability Toolkit but has undertaken measures to improve energy efficiency, including roof insulation and high-tech water management. There is a recycling bin in use.

3.4. Amenities

The Meeting considers that it has the amenities it needs. These include large and small meeting rooms, hall/library, kitchen and WCs. The meeting house is served by a good rail service, but bus services are said to be infrequent and unsatisfactory on Sundays. There is secure parking for cycles and for those arriving by car there is a large car park adjacent.

3.5. Access

An access audit has not been carried out, but there is step-free access and circulation around the ground floor, a chair lift to the first, an accessible WC and a hearing loop.

3.6 Community Use

In addition to use for two hours per week by Friends, the building and its facilities are used by third parties for around 25 out of a possible 40 hours per week. There is a lettings policy, and political parties and profit-making businesses are not allowed to use the facilities. A Quaker-run homeless project uses the building free of charge. Users of the building cite its good location, warmth, quiet and fair price.

3.7. Vulnerability to crime

A small strip of lead was stolen on one occasion, and some small items from the kitchen on another. The area is considered to be generally well cared-for, with low levels of crime and social deprivation. Friends have developed a liaison with the Local Neighbourhood Policing Team.

3.8. Plans for change

None reported.

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 building is fit for purpose and has been adapted to meet the stated needs of the Meeting. Despite the listing, the interior has been greatly altered, and there would be scope for change, provided items of evidential value such as the former shutter openings were respected. However, the listing, prominent location within the conservation area, and below-ground archaeological potential all limit the scope for major external change.

ii) For wider community use, in addition to local Meeting use: The building is already much used by the wider community; the constraints governing change in this regard would be as above.

iii) Being laid down as a Meeting House: There has been a meeting house on or near this site since the 1670s, and the present building has been in use since 1781. Laying down of this historic meeting house would therefore be very regrettable. In that event, the Grade II listing of the building and its important location within the conservation area would demand that a suitable new use should be found. Given the extent of internal alteration that has taken place, the main consideration would be to ensure that any new use preserved the external character of the building and the volume of the large meeting room.

Part 5: Category: 2

Part 6: List description

Name: FRIENDS MEETING HOUSE

List entry Number: 1115680

Location: FRIENDS MEETING HOUSE, NORTHGATE

Grade: II

Date first listed: 24-Oct-1950

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

ROCHESTER NORTHGATE TQ 7468 NW 7/185 Friends Meeting House 24-10-50

GV II

Chapel (Quaker) with house attached. 1814. Brick; Kent hipped roof. The chapel is almost square in plan. Front: 3 window range; 24-pane hornless sash windows, the central one partially blocked by later flat-roofed porch with double doors. Modillion cornice. House (2 storeys) attached to north side with sash windows, partly weather-boarded to north (Corporation Street); lateral stack.

Interior. Very plain. N, 2 tiers of shallow recesses, now cupboards (planked with hinges). They may originally have formed part of a gallery (now converted).

Listing NGR: TQ7437168631