

Friends Meeting House, Tunbridge Wells

1a Grosvenor Park, Tunbridge Wells, Kent, TN1 2BB

National Grid Reference: TQ 58381 39982



Statement of Significance

A handsome late nineteenth-century design in seventeenth-century domestic style, untypical of traditional Quaker meeting house architecture. The building makes a positive contribution to the local conservation area. Overall, it is of medium significance.

Evidential value

The interior of the building has not been inspected. There is little about the external character and appearance to suggest a meeting house, although there is much to denote its character as a late-nineteenth-century building of quality. It is of medium evidential value.

Historical value

As a purpose-built late-nineteenth-century meeting house by regional architects of some consequence, the building is of medium historical value.

Aesthetic value

The interior has not been inspected. The exterior is a handsome example of late Victorian architectural eclecticism, displaying a loosely seventeenth-century character, with good quality detailing. It makes a positive contribution to the conservation area, and is of high aesthetic value.

Communal value

The building is currently unused. An approved scheme to convert the frontage building to affordable accommodation, with the meeting house function continuing and its facilities made more widely available, will give it high communal value.

Part 1: Core data

- 1.1 Area Meeting: *West Kent*
- 1.2 Property Registration Number: *0000960*
- 1.3 Owner: *Not established*
- 1.4 Local Planning Authority: *Tunbridge Wells Borough Council*
- 1.5 Historic England locality: *South East*
- 1.6 Civil parish: *Tunbridge Wells NPA*
- 1.7 Listed status: *Not listed*
- 1.8 NHLE: *N/a*
- 1.9 Conservation Area: *Tunbridge Wells*
- 1.10 Scheduled Ancient Monument: *No*
- 1.11 Heritage at Risk: *No*
- 1.12 Date(s): *1894*
- 1.13 Architect(s): *Clayton & Black*
- 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: *Unaccompanied*
- 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. 289

Newman, J., *The Buildings of England: West Kent and Weald*, 2012, p. 615

Website, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Clayton %26 Black](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Clayton_%26_Black)

Press release, <http://habitatforhumanitygbhomes.org.uk/joint-press-release-fmh-tunbridge-wells/>

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

2.1. Historical background

The site of the present meeting house was acquired in 1893 and plans prepared by architects Charles E. Clayton and Ernest Black of Brighton. The building cost £1,824 and opened in 1894.

In 2014 planning consent was given for the conversion of the front part of the building to ten bedsits for young vulnerable people. The main hall is to be refurbished (with a single-storey side extension added) for continued use by the local Meeting as a meeting house. This is a partnership project between Friends, West Kent YMCA and Habitat for Humanity, builders

of affordable homes. The meeting house was closed at the time of preparation of this report, and the interior has not been visited.

2.2. The building and its principal fittings and fixtures

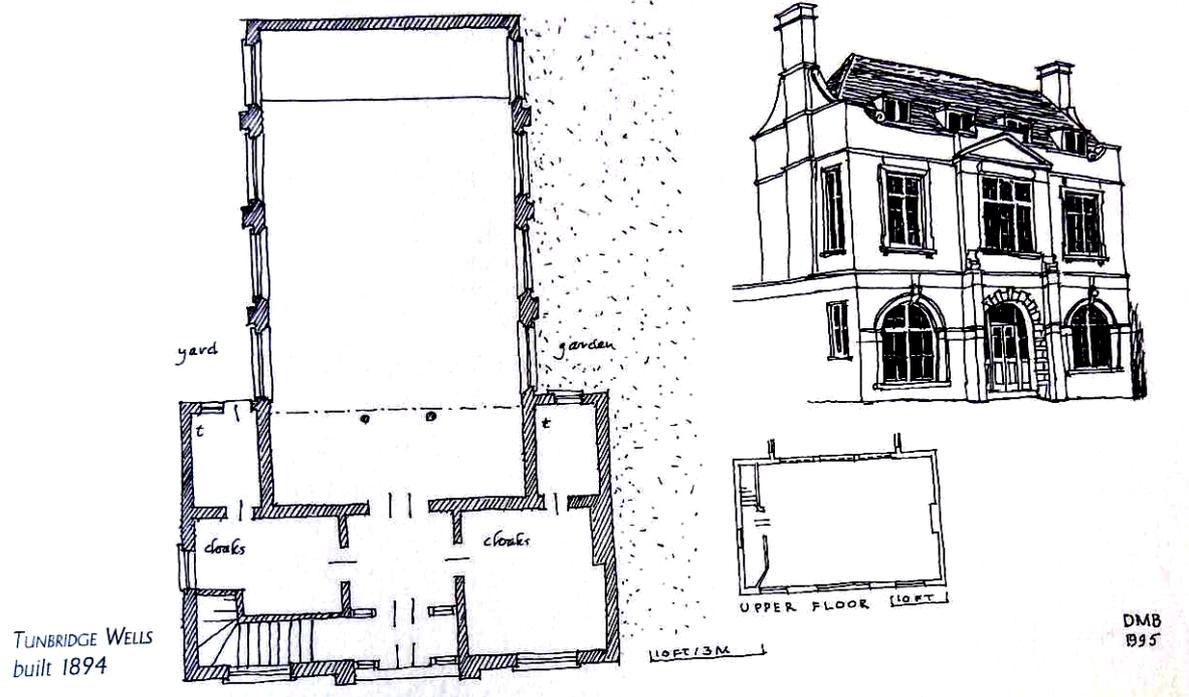


Figure 1: Plan and elevation, from Butler, vol. 1, p. 289

The meeting house was built in 1894 from designs by Clayton & Black of Brighton. It is in a loosely seventeenth-century domestic revival style, built of red brick with Bath stone dressings. It consists of two elements, a frontage building of elaborate design and a somewhat plainer rear hall. The frontage building consists of two storeys and an attic and three bays. The windows all have stone surrounds, arched with keystones to the ground floor, eared architraves and bolection moulded cornices to the first. The central bay projects slightly and has an arched ground floor entrance with keystone surround, first floor stone-framed mullion and transom window, and pediment. The remaining windows have timber mullions and transoms, all with small-paned fixed lights and casements. A stone band with cornice separates the two floors. In the attic are four flat-topped dormer windows with timber casements. Square-section downpipes on either side of the front elevation have cast iron hoppers bearing the date 1894 (see photo at top of report). On the flank elevations of the frontage range the stone banding between the storeys is continued; in the attic, shaped parapets rise on each side at the front to a central stack (south side only), the parapet plainer and squared-off on the rear side. There is one tall window, on the northern flank elevation.

The single-storey rear range has a lower ridge and is faced in pale brick with red brick dressings. Plain red brick pilasters marking the bay divisions, with flush-framed small-paned paired sash windows under gauged brick segmental arches.

The interior has not been inspected. Butler describes a large classroom over the ground floor cloakroom and lobby in the frontage range, opening onto the meeting house as a loft with roller shutters. Internet photos (e.g. <https://www.flickr.com/photos/qmh/2884091815>) show a single large space for the meeting room with painted arched braces to the ceiling, wood boarded floor and boarded timber perimeter dado.

2.3 Loose furnishings

Interior not inspected.

2.4. Attached burial ground

None.

2.5. The meeting house in its wider setting

The meeting house is close to the town centre, towards the top end of Grosvenor Park, a cul-de-sac giving off Grosvenor Road, which is close to the junction with St John's Road (the A26), the main approach to Tunbridge Wells from the north. Although a substantial building, the meeting house is somewhat dwarfed by its red brick neighbour on the Grosvenor Road frontage, a giant Queen Anne design of c1891, originally built as a carriage factory (listed Grade II). Like Grosvenor Road, Grosvenor Park slopes down steeply, and is mostly lined with late-nineteenth-century red brick terraced villas. The site lies within the Town Centre (North) Area of the Tunbridge Wells Conservation Area.

2.6. Listed status

Not listed. The architects of the meeting house were Clayton & Black, a prolific and eclectic Brighton practice of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. A number of their buildings are listed, notably the baroque offices for the Royal Assurance Society, Brighton (1904, Grade II). They also remodelled and extended the early nineteenth-century Quaker meeting house in Brighton (1877-8, Grade II, *qv*). On the basis of an external inspection, the meeting house at Tunbridge Wells would not appear to hold the special interest that would justify statutory listing, but it is a handsome design which would certainly merit consideration for inclusion in the council's list of local heritage assets (see <http://www.tunbridgewells.gov.uk/residents/planning/conservation-and-heritage/local-heritage-assets>).

2.7. Archaeological potential of the site

None known. Archaeology was not raised as an issue in the determination of the recent planning application.

Part 3: Current use and management

The building is not currently in use and a volunteer survey has not been provided.

3.1. Condition

- i) Meeting House: Fair (based on external assessment)
- ii) Attached burial ground (if any): None

3.2. Maintenance

From an external inspection the condition of the building appears to be fair, although it can be expected to deteriorate if left empty and unoccupied for long.

3.3. Sustainability

No information available.

3.4. Amenities

No information available.

3.5. Access

It is understood that improved access to the meeting house forms part of the present proposals.

3.6 Community Use

It is intended that the meeting house will continue in use, and the updated and improved facilities will no doubt allow for the resumption and increase of wider community use.

3.7. Vulnerability to crime

No information available.

3.8. Plans for change

Planning permission has been given for the conversion of the front part of the building to ten bedsits for young vulnerable people, with communal areas. The main hall is to be refurbished and a single-storey side extension added for continued use by the local Meeting as a revamped and accessible meeting house.

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: It is understood that the meeting house will continue to be used by the local Meeting. Details of the scheme have not been seen, but the local authority is satisfied that it preserves the character and appearance of the conservation area and the setting of the adjoining listed building.

ii) For wider community use, in addition to local Meeting use: In addition to the provision of much-needed affordable housing for vulnerable young people, the conversion scheme will provide enhanced and accessible facilities, thereby encouraging wider community use.

iii) Being laid down as a Meeting House: The current proposals represent an investment in the future of the building as (at least in part) a Quaker meeting house. Should that scheme founder, it would be necessary to secure a viable alternative scheme which retained the building and ensured that the positive contribution it makes to the conservation area and the setting of the adjoining listed building was not harmed.

Part 5: Category: 3