

Friends Meeting House, Westminster

52 St Martins Lane, London, WC2N 4EA

National Grid Reference: TQ 30098 80757



Statement of Significance

A post-war rebuilding by Hubert Lidbetter of a bomb-damaged late-nineteenth century meeting house, placed behind a late eighteenth-century building in the heart of London's West End. Furnishings include a large collection of oak chairs made by Gordon Russell's Broadway Works. Overall it is of high significance.

Evidential value

The meeting house was built in 1954-6, on the site of and incorporating fabric from its 1883 predecessor. It is of high evidential value.

Historical value

The Westminster Meeting is one of the oldest in London, originating in 1655. This is the fourth purpose-built meeting house and the second on this site. It is of high historical value.

Aesthetic value

The meeting house is somewhat hidden, being placed behind the frontage of an earlier building, and with a utilitarian elevation to the narrow passage at the side. Its contribution to the conservation area is therefore modest. However, internally it has some good finishes and furnishings. Overall, it is of medium aesthetic value.

Communal value

The meeting house is widely used by local groups and businesses, and is of high communal value.

Part 1: Core data

- 1.1 Area Meeting: *London West*
- 1.2 Property Registration Number: *0033720*
- 1.3 Owner: *Six Weeks Meeting*
- 1.4 Local Planning Authority: *City of Westminster*
- 1.5 Historic England locality: *London*
- 1.6 Civil parish: *City of Westminster NPA*
- 1.7 Listed status: *II (by virtue of attachment)*
- 1.8 NHLE: *1264792*
- 1.9 Conservation Area: *Covent Garden*
- 1.10 Scheduled Ancient Monument: *No*
- 1.11 Heritage at Risk: *No*
- 1.12 Date(s): *1883; 1954-6*
- 1.13 Architect (s): *W. W. Lee and J. A. Tregelles; Hubert Lidbetter*
- 1.14 Date of visit: *1 September 2015*
- 1.15 Name of report author: *Andrew Derrick*
- 1.16 Name of contact(s) made on site: *Jonathan Lingham*
- 1.17 Associated buildings and sites: *None*
- 1.18 Attached burial ground: *No*
- 1.19 Information sources:

Bradley, S. and Pevsner, N., *The Buildings of England, London 6: Westminster*, 1994, p. 361
Butler, D. M., *The Quaker Meeting Houses of Britain*, 1999, Vol. 1, pp. 428-432
Colvin, H., *Biographical Dictionary of British Architects 1600-1840*, Fourth edition, 2008, p. 123

Lee, D. and D., *Glimpses of Westminster Meeting, 1655-1956*, 1983
Lidbetter, H., *The Friends Meeting House*, 1979
Local Meeting Survey by Jonathan Lingham, June 2015

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

2.1 Historical background

Westminster is one of the oldest Friends' Meetings in London, originating in 1655, with meetings held at lodgings in the Strand, New Palace Yard and the Savoy. The first meeting house was in a house at the Little Almonry, within the precincts of Westminster Abbey, adapted for this purpose in 1666. Here the Friends acquired a lease in 1688, which was periodically renewed (but briefly terminated by the Dean and Chapter in 1717) until 1776, when a suitable site was found for a new meeting house, acquired on a 99-year lease from the Earl of Salisbury. This was built in 1779 at Peter's Court or Hemming's Row, on what is now St Martin's Lane. Building of the meeting house required the demolition of a number of properties, including the home of the sculptor Louis-François Roubiliac. Costing £2,634, with a Dr Fothergill the principal benefactor, this meeting house, with its commodious galleried interior, was considered one of the best in London. Butler gives the architect as John Bevan (probably John Bevans of Plaistow, see Colvin, p. 123).

A burial ground is first recorded in Westminster in 1675, and lay somewhere between Long Acre and King Street, where there was also a small and very basic meeting house. The lease on this land expired in 1757 (the site was excavated in 1892, and the remains of over 500 burials uncovered; these were re-interred at the Friends' burial ground at Isleworth). Westminster Friends were also buried at Bunhill Fields.

The lease on Peter's Court came to an end in 1879, and the site was redeveloped as the present Duke of York's Theatre. Land was eventually acquired nearby behind a Georgian property at 52 St Martin's Lane, the site of stabling and a coach house, bounded to the south by Hop Gardens and to the east by Bedfordbury. Here a new meeting house was built in 1883 from designs by W. W. Lee and J. A. Tregelles (figure 1). This was the first meeting house in Westminster for which Friends owned the freehold. It was not universally loved, being described by one visitor as 'a bare hall, badly lighted from the roof, and depressing in its appearance'. A 1926 description spoke of its 'mellowed oak panelling' and described it as 'semi-ecclesiastical' and 'our most "churchy" meeting house' (quotes from Butler). No photographs showing its internal appearance appear to survive.

The 1883 meeting house was gutted by fire bombs on the night of 16 April 1941 (figure 2), although part of the adjoining lobby and the schoolroom survived. Meetings continued in the lobby until 1954, when the Archbishop of Canterbury made Church House available while rebuilding took place. Pleasingly, Church House is on the very site of the original Little Almonry meeting house. The present building was rebuilt under the direction of Hubert Lidbetter and opened on 8 July 1956. Lidbetter retained much of the fabric of the earlier building (indicated on the plan at figure 3). In the rebuilding, it had a three-storey block (not four, as previously) on the Hop Gardens frontage, housing classrooms and a flat for the warden. The 1883 lobby, with its 'mellowed oak panelling', was retained and restored.

The building has changed little since 1956. A major refurbishment took place in 2013-14 (cost £500,000, half of which was met by the Meeting).

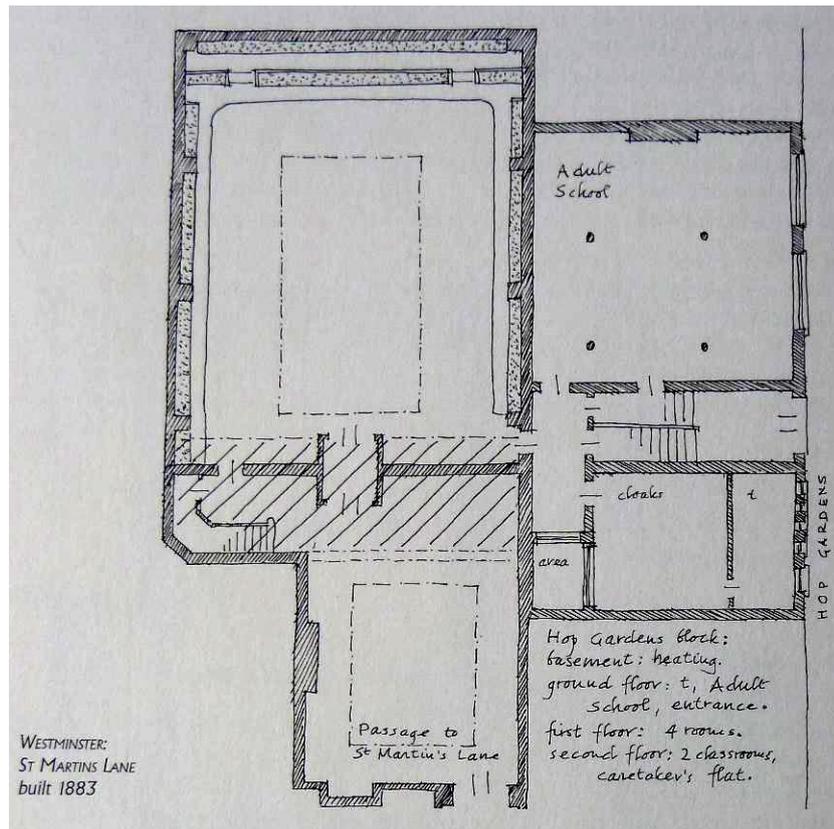


Figure 1: Plan of the 1883 meeting house, not to scale (north is to the left), from Butler, Vol. I, p. 430



Figure 2: Bomb damage to the 1883 meeting house, 1941, looking west towards the lobby (photo supplied by Westminster Friends)

2.2 The building and its principal fittings and fixtures

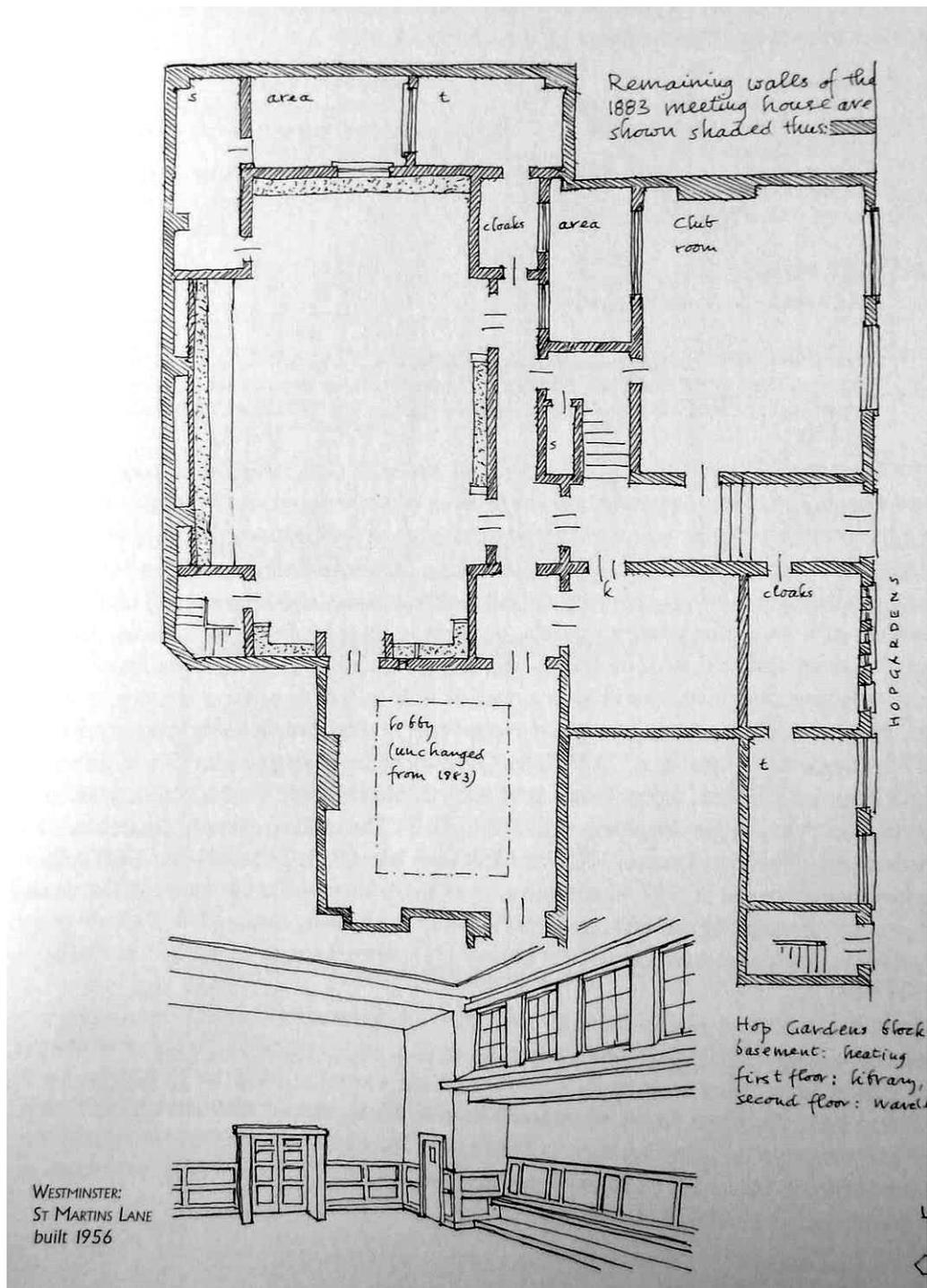


Figure 3: Plan, as rebuilt by Hubert Lidbetter in 1954-6, not to scale (north is to the left), from Butler, Vol. I, p. 431

The meeting house was built in 1954-6 from designs by Hubert Lidbetter, incorporating the basement and outer walls of the predecessor building of 1883. There are two entrances, from St Martin's Lane (photo top left) and from Hop Gardens (photo top right). The main entrance is from St Martin's Lane, though a passage formed in the ground floor of the listed building at no. 52 (list entry below). This has a neo-Georgian shopfront of mid-twentieth century character - it is not clear whether this and the shallow segmental-vaulted ceiling over the passageway belong to Lidbetter's rebuilding (the frontage building is not owned by the

Friends). The flank elevation to Hop Gardens is utilitarian in character, being built of London stock brick with wide cambered arched window openings with metal windows; this appears essentially to be a remodelling by Lidbetter of the 1883 building.

From the wide vaulted passage from St Martin's Lane hardwood double doors (probably of 1883, with a decorative rectangular fanlight over) lead into a square lobby, now used as a library. This has a woodblock floor and a raised skylight. It retains its oak chimneypiece (photo middle right) and high oak dado panelling of 1883 (the photograph of wartime bomb damage at figure 3 shows these features intact, and they were retained – or possibly replicated- by Lidbetter). Two pairs of 1956 oak doors with glazed panels lead to the meeting room beyond, a large, rectangular, space, also top-lit. Clerestory lighting is provided along the long north and south walls, while in the east wall is a tall rectangular window. Glazing is of the 1950s Crittall-variety. The meeting room has a woodblock floor and oak dado panelling around its perimeter, of a streamlined and simpler pattern, typical of the 1950s. A pine dais runs along its north side, set within a recess.

2.3 Loose furnishings

There are two long open-backed oak benches on the dais. The remaining seating (both in the meeting room and the lobby/library) consists of a large number of oak chairs, fine pieces made by Gordon Russell's Broadway Works, Worcestershire (photos bottom left and right).

2.4 Attached burial ground

None.

2.5 The meeting house in its wider setting

The meeting house is in the heart of the west end, within the Covent Garden Conservation Area. It has no townscape presence, being placed behind a row of Georgian buildings on the St Martin's Lane frontage, and behind the plain brick elevations of the side block facing onto Hop Gardens. Alongside, a large hotel block is a 1960s former office building by Richard Seifert, converted by Harper Mackay with Philippe Starck as consultant.

2.6 Listed status

The meeting house is listed by virtue of its physical attachment to the Grade II listed building at 52 St Martin's Lane, which is in separate ownership. The list entry (below) makes no reference to the building behind. As this incorporates the remains of a meeting house of 1883, as modified and rebuilt by Hubert Lidbetter (a significant Quaker architect, responsible for many designs, notably the Grade II-listed Friends' House on Euston Road) it is of architectural and historical interest, and an expansion of the list entry to include reference to it might be desirable. Assessed on its own merits, the building perhaps falls short of listing quality, although it would certainly merit inclusion in a local list.

2.7 Archaeological potential of the site

Low. The site is said to have previously housed stables and a coach house (probably of late eighteenth century date), but any significant below-ground remains are likely to have been lost with the 1883 basement excavation (under the library and Fry Room, but not the Meeting Room itself).

Part 3: Current use and management

See completed volunteer survey

3.1 Condition

- i) Meeting House: Good. A QIR was carried out in 2011, and its recommendations recently implemented in a major refurbishment.
- ii) Attached burial ground: None.

3.2 Maintenance

The buildings are well maintained, and 5% of rental income is set aside for repair and maintenance.

3.3 Sustainability

There is no EPC and the meeting does not use the Sustainability Toolkit. Measures to reduce environmental impact include:

- Climate change & energy efficiency: Recent refurbishment works included installation of LED lighting and some double glazing (most of the windows are single-glazed metal-framed windows of the 1950s; replacing these may give rise to conservation concerns, although the provision of secondary glazing might be considered).
- Resource use, recycling & waste management: The same works included installation of low-volume flush WCs. General waste is sorted into paper/plastics/glass/compost.
- Transport. The central London location makes the meeting house easily accessible by public transport.

3.4 Amenities

The meeting house is well provided for with the amenities it needs, including several meeting rooms, kitchen, library and accessible WCs, all recently improved and upgraded.

3.5 Access

A disability audit was prepared in about 2012 and some of its recommendations were implemented. There is level access from the St Martin's Lane entrance, accessible WCs and a hearing loop is installed. There are steps down to the meeting house from the Hop Gardens entrance.

3.6 Community Use

Friends use the meeting house for about fifteen hours each week. In addition to this, the central London location generates a significant 'passing trade' of Quakers from other parts of the country and overseas. Along with the associated meeting rooms and offices, facilities are available for up to 288 hours a week; the meeting house is let for about eighty hours a week. The meeting has a lettings policy and there is a discount for charities and Quaker groups. Overtly political meetings are not permitted. The facilities are well used on account of this being a very convenient and competitively priced (no VAT) central London location. Westminster generates significantly more income from letting its rooms than any other Meeting House in London (nearly £200,000 in 2015). These funds are used to maintain the building, with the surplus pooled to support less well-endowed Meetings in the London area.

3.7 Vulnerability to crime

There are no reported incidents of heritage crime, but the meeting house has been affected from time to time by low-level antisocial behaviour of the type that can be expected in any city centre location.

3.8 Plans for change

None known.

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 house offers a series of flexible spaces. The historic features and finishes such as doors, panelling and fireplaces should be respected, but within these constraints change should be possible. The seating, particularly the Gordon Russell chairs, are part of the 1950s design and it would be regrettable for them to be replaced (although these are not subject to listed building control).

ii) For wider community use, in addition to local Meeting use: The building and its facilities already lends themselves very satisfactorily to such extended use.

iii) Being laid down as a Meeting House: The building could very readily convert to an office use, with the main space of the meeting room and lobby and their historic features retained. The biggest loss would be of the moveable seating.

Part 5: Category: 2

Part 6: List description (52-53 St Martin's Lane)

Name: No name for this Entry

List entry Number: 1264792

Location: 52 AND 53, ST MARTIN'S LANE WC2

Grade: II

Date first listed: 15-Jan-1973

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

Details

TQ 3080 NW CITY OF WESTMINSTER ST. MARTIN'S LANE, WC2 72/89

15.1.73

Nos. 52 and 53

G.V. II

Former terrace house. Late C.18, altered. Multicoloured stock brick, concealed roof. 4 storeys. 3 windows wide. Mid C.20 neo-Georgian shop front to ground floor with doorway to right. Upper floors have recessed glazing bar sashes under gauged flat arches except on 1st floor where the windows have stone architraves. Stucco or painted stone sill courses to 1st and 3rd floors and crowning cornice and blocking course. Interior retains cut string geometrical staircase and delicate frieze and cornice mouldings with similar plasterwork to 1st floor ceilings, etc. Survey of London; Vol. XX.

Listing NGR: TQ3009880757