

Friends Meeting House, Bull Street

40 Bull Street, Birmingham, B4 6AF

National Grid Reference: SP 07175 87159



Statement of Significance

The meeting house designed by the eminent Quaker architect Hubert Lidbetter in 1931-33 in a cubic neo-Georgian architectural style. The site has been in Quaker ownership since 1703, with two former meeting houses previously on this site. The building has high significance for communal and historical value and for the architectural significance of the main meeting room, although the buildings external aesthetic value has been reduced by major changes.

Evidential value

This is a purpose-built structure which dates from the early 1930s, built on the site of a former Quaker burial ground and two previous meeting houses. It is of high evidential value.

Historical value

The building has medium historical significance. As an important city meeting house designed by Hubert Lidbetter, it has strong associative value with the architect and his other Quaker work. The site itself has a high historic value for its association with Birmingham Quakers since 1703, and provides the local context of the Birmingham Meeting.

Aesthetic value

The 1930s building has high aesthetic value as a larger meeting house designed by Lidbetter and influenced by his design for Friends House in London (1925-27), although it has been altered. Its setting is dominated by Lewis's department store and it makes a fairly neutral contribution to the character of the townscape. Internally, the main meeting room retains fittings and furnishings and this element of the building has high aesthetic value.

Communal value

The meeting house has high communal value as a building developed for the Quakers which has been in use since it opened in 1933. The building provides a local community focus and its facilities used by a number of local group and commercially.

Part 1: Core data

- 1.1 Area Meeting: *Central England*
- 1.2 Property Registration Number: *0007390*
- 1.3 Owner: *Area Meeting*
- 1.4 Local Planning Authority: *Birmingham City Council*
- 1.5 Historic England locality: *West Midlands*
- 1.6 Civil parish: *Birmingham*
- 1.7 Listed status: *Not listed*
- 1.8 NHLE: *Not applicable*
- 1.9 Conservation Area: *No*
- 1.10 Scheduled Ancient Monument: *No*
- 1.11 Heritage at Risk: *No*
- 1.12 Date(s): *1931 -33; 20th century; c.2001*
- 1.13 Architect (s): *Hubert Lidbetter; not established; Peter Hing and Jones*
- 1.14 Date of visit: *25 November 2015*
- 1.15 Name of report author: *Emma Neil*
- 1.16 Name of contact(s) made on site: *Beth Sadler*
- 1.17 Associated buildings and sites: *Lodge Hill: SP 02800 82600*
- 1.18 Attached burial ground: *No*
- 1.19 Information sources:

Butler, D.M., *The Quaker Meeting Houses of Britain* (London: Friends Historical Society, 1999), vol. II, pp.615-622.

Gawne, E., *Buildings of Endearing Simplicity: the Friends Meeting Houses of Hubert Lidbetter*, *The Twentieth Century Church*, *Twentieth Century Architecture* 3, 1998, pp87-92

Local Meeting Survey, October 2015.

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

2.1. Historical background

Quakerism in Birmingham dates back to the seventeenth century when Friends are recorded to have been meeting at the houses of William Reynolds in 1659 and of William Baylis in 1660. In 1681, Joseph Hopkins conveyed a house and yard (used as a burial ground) in a lane called Colmore's Lane to the Friends and this was registered as a place of worship in 1689. The building was converted into a dwelling in 1793 and subsequently demolished in 1726 but the burial ground remained in use until 1821.

Land for a new meeting house in 1703 was purchased in Bull Street from John Pemberton at a cost of £25, further plots of land were purchased in 1778, 1803 and in 1853 to accommodate expansion. The meeting house was built in 1703 and the site included space for a new burial ground. A number of repairs and alterations took place over the years and by 1806 proposals had been drawn up by George Jones for a new meeting house or conversion of the existing building into three shops. Neither of the two proposals took place and instead the existing building was enlarged in 1824 by the architect Edward Jones. By 1857, the meeting house had been demolished and a new meeting house built to the designs of Thomas Plevin on the same site. Bull Street in Birmingham, by this time, had become a main shopping district; Benjamin Cadbury had a drapers at 92 Bull Street and his brother John Cadbury had a neighbouring property selling cocoa and chocolate. Shortly before the new meeting house was built, David Lewis opened a department store on the corner of Corporation Street and Bull Street in 1855.

In 1859, further land was purchased on Upper Priory for the construction of a girl's Sunday School, and the Priory Rooms were built in 1861. By 1882, a building to accommodate the Friends Society library, the Monthly Meeting office housing the Bevan-Nash library and a caretaker's house had been built. These buildings were demolished in the early twentieth century as part of road works by the Birmingham Corporation.

The neighbouring Lewis's Department Store required more space in 1930 and by agreement with the Birmingham Corporation and the Friends the land boundaries were altered. In 1931 the 1850s meeting house was demolished and a new meeting house designed by Hubert Lidbetter and built in 1931-33. It was originally built as a two-storey building, the principal elevation to the south west was of 5-bays, with 12-pane sash windows at first floor and four 8-pane windows at ground floor with an open porch. During the late twentieth century the building was extended in a sympathetic style in order to create a third floor to accommodate a warden's flat.

In 1963-4, Doctor Johnson House designed by Clifford Tee and Gale was built to provide space for halls, offices and lettable rooms. A covered passage linked the building with the meeting house. By the 1990's Doctor Johnson House was in need of repairs and major refurbishment. A decision was made to demolish the building and part of the site was let for the building of One Colmore Square. The architects Peter Hing and Jones were appointed and they put forward proposals for an atrium, new courtyard, and basement extension. The plans were approved by the City Council and the new Priory Rooms were built in 2002. The burial ground was excavated and burials re-interred to Lodge Hill Cemetery.

2.2. The building and its principal fittings and fixtures

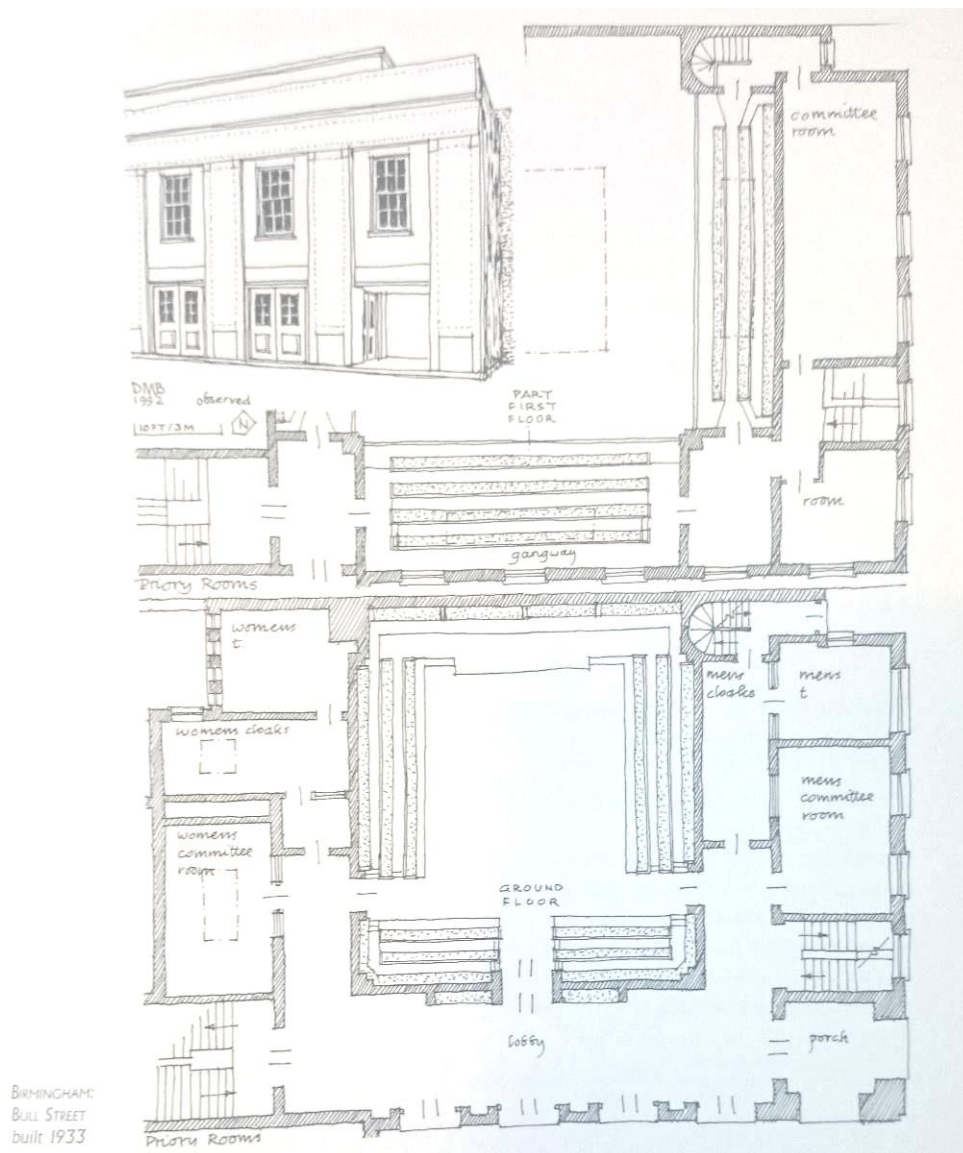


Figure 1: Lower floor plans of the meeting house as reconstructed by Butler (north is at the bottom left; not to scale) (Butler (1999), vol. 2, p.621)

The present meeting house was built to the designs of Hubert Lidbetter and opened in 1933, extended in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Rectangular in plan the three-storey 5-bay building is designed in a cubic neo-Georgian architectural style. It is faced with multi-coloured sand-faced bricks laid in Flemish bond, with artificial stone plinth and dressings. The original fenestration on the principal entrance to the south west was replaced in the late twentieth century when a roof-top extension was added. The ground has three 2-light and one 3-light windows all with artificial stone lintels, the first floor has five uPVC sash windows and the added second floor has five top-hung casement windows. The entrance is to the west bay of the elevation is via double timber doors introduced in the late twentieth century. The first two storeys are articulated with recessed panels separated by a flat pilasters carrying a plain deep fascia previously topped with a plain parapet. The south east and north east elevations are obscured by the neighbouring high rise buildings. The new glazed Priory Rooms adjoin the north-west elevation.

Internally, the former open porch contains a plaque detailing the history of previous meeting houses on the site. The foyer area retains its oak panelling and fitted seats, along with the architraves. The original doors have since been replaced. The parquet flooring has been covered with carpet. The foyer provides access to the main meeting room, stairway and lift to the upper floors and to the new Priory Rooms. The main meeting room is spacious in design. Oak panelling lines the room with galleries to the south-west, and north-east walls with corridors beneath, a feature also used at Friends House. On each wall is a platform lined with oak benches. The high plastered ceiling is divided into two levels, the lower level has a soffit with mutules frieze with clerestory windows to the upper level.

2.3 Loose furnishings

The main meeting room includes oak benches which date from the 1930s, probably designed by Lidbetter. Within the Southall Room there are a collection of paintings by Joseph Edward Southall (1861 – 1944) a Quaker who was President of the Royal Birmingham Society of Artists.



Figure 2: Self portrait by Joseph Edward Southall

2.4 Attached burial ground (if any)

The site formerly contained a burial ground. Gravestones remain to the north west of the meeting house, in front of the Priory Rooms, including those for Charles and Mary Lloyd, Mary Capper, Lucy Ann Cadbury and Emma Cadbury. The graves were interred and sent to Lodge Hill Cemetery during work to construct the Priory Rooms in 2001.



Figure 3: Plaques of those who were once buried at Bull Street

2.5 The meeting house in its wider setting

The meeting house is located in a central position in Birmingham's city centre. The building is set back from the road, and access is provided via an opening off Bull Street. The meeting house sits within a courtyard enveloped by tall buildings. To the south west is an area of car parking and to the north-west is an area of landscaping surrounding the Priory Rooms. The general area is part of a city centre commercial district with a series of shops and offices lined along Bull Street.

2.6 Listed status

Not listed. The building has strong associations with the renowned Quaker architect Hubert Lidbetter, but it is not considered to be a candidate for listing due to the extensions and alterations that have taken place in recent years.

2.7. Archaeological potential of the site

The Birmingham Historic Environment Record was consulted and no records have been identified for the site. However, the site has been in Quaker use since 1703, and two previous meeting houses have previously been located in the footprint. Depending on the level of ground disturbance, the site has medium archaeological potential.

Part 3: Current use and management

See completed volunteer survey

3.1 Condition

i) Meeting House: Good. A quinquennial inspection has not been undertaken. However, the building is well cared for and in good condition.

ii) Attached burial ground (if any): Not applicable.

3.2 Maintenance

The building is well-maintained and cared for by the Trustees' Property Committee which meets on a regular basis to discuss the maintenance needs of Friends' properties along with any major works. The Friends have enough money to maintain and repair the meeting house.

3.3 Sustainability

Although the meeting does not use the Sustainability Toolkit steps have been taken to improve sustainability and develop new environmentally-friendly initiatives:

- Climate change and energy efficiency: Insulation in the roof and walls, and lights and electrical equipment are switched off when not in use.
- Resource use, recycling and waste management: Harvested rain water is used to flush the ground floor ladies toilets, all waste packaging and paper is recycled.
- Wildlife, ecology and nature conservation: the grounds are planted with trees and shrubs which provide wildlife habitats.
- Transport: Power point for charging electric cars, bicycle stands and due the central location of the meeting house Friends and other users are encouraged to take public transport.

3.4 Amenities

The meeting house has all the amenities it needs. This includes WCs (fully accessible), lobby, foyer, cloak rooms and six meeting rooms. The adjacent Priory Rooms include a social area, preparation area, WC facilities, cloak room and four meeting rooms.

An on-site car park is available along with secure bicycle parking. The central location of the meeting house means it is a short walking distance to the railway stations (New Street, Snow Hill and Moor Street), served by a local bus service and a new metro line (completion due in 2016) is being developed along Bull Street with a stop planned outside the meeting house.

3.5 Access

A Disability Access Audit was undertaken in July 2015, and all recommended minor changes have been undertaken. The meeting house has level access into and throughout the building, with the exception of the Sturge Room. The meeting house and Priory Rooms span different floor levels, a lift has been installed and a chair lift can provide access to the office areas if required. A hearing loop has been installed and there are facilities for partially-sighted people with contrasting stair nosings and clear signage.

3.6 Community Use

The meeting house is used by Friends for approximately 12 hours. The meeting rooms in the meeting house and adjacent priory rooms are potentially available for 540 hours each week. The whole building complex is well used each week. Rooms can be hired for the day (9am – 5pm) or as sessions (morning 9am-noon, afternoon 1.30pm-5pm, and evening 6.00pm-9.30pm). Evening room hire is available on Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday evenings. All

meeting rooms are also available for use on Saturdays. A 10% discount is available for charities and not-for-profit organisations. Equipment at an additional charge is available for use including laptops, whiteboard, data projector with screen and speaker phones. The Priory Rooms Meeting and Conference Centre operate a strict no smoking policy and the venue does not hold a license to with supply or allow consumption of alcoholic beverages on the premises. If the event being held will involve playing recorded music a PRS licence is required. The meeting house is popular for lettings due to its peaceful atmosphere, cleanliness of the building and central location.

3.7 Vulnerability to crime

The property has been subject to anti-social behaviour due to its central location. Heritage crime has included in the past the theft of lead. All the crimes and incidents of anti-social behaviour have been reported to the local police. The Friends have developed a liaison with the local neighbourhood policing team.

3.8 Plans for change

There are no future plans for change.

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 has already been altered and extended. At present it fulfils the needs of the Meeting. Any further alterations would need to be carefully considered, to protect its character, particularly of the main meeting room.

ii) For wider community use, in addition to local Meeting use: The meeting house is already in use by local and wider groups and has all the facilities to support these.

iii) Being laid down as a Meeting House: In the unlikely event of the meeting house being laid down the building has the potential to continue to be used as a conference centre.

Part 5: Category: 3