

## **Quaker Meeting House, Maidstone**

170 Union Street, Maidstone, Kent, ME14 1EE

National Grid Reference: TQ 76474 55977



### ***Statement of Significance***

***A nicely-detailed design of 1976 by Norman Frith, replacing an early nineteenth-century meeting house, of overall medium significance.***

#### ***Evidential value***

***The polygonal form might suggest a place of worship, but there is little to denote the building's function as a meeting house. It is of low evidential value.***

#### ***Historical value***

***A Quaker Meeting was established in Maidstone in the 1670s, and a purpose-built meeting house erected in 1812. This was demolished in the 1970s, when the current meeting house was built. The building is therefore of relatively recent date and as such has low historical value.***

#### ***Aesthetic value***

***This is a pleasing design, its hexagonal form and copper roof making it a minor local landmark. The large meeting room is an attractive, well-lit space with interesting roof construction. The small garden with its enclosing brick wall adds to its (medium) aesthetic value.***

#### ***Communal value***

***The building is well used by local groups, including homeless people, and as such has high communal value.***

## **Part 1: Core data**

1.1 Area Meeting: *West Kent*

1.2 Property Registration Number: *0011970*

1.3 Owner: *West Kent Area Meeting*

1.4 Local Planning Authority: *Maidstone Borough Council*

1.5 Historic England locality: *South East*

1.6 Civil parish: *Maidstone NPA*

1.7 Listed status: *Not listed*

1.8 NHLE: *N/a*

1.9 Conservation Area: *No*

1.10 Scheduled Ancient Monument: *No*

1.11 Heritage at Risk: *No*

1.12 Date(s): *1976*

1.13 Architect(s): *Norman Frith*

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: *Pam Page, Mary Bain*

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. 284-5

Pearce, C., *Maidstone Quakers 1655-1976*, 2000

Kent County Council, *Kent Historic Towns Survey: Maidstone; Archaeological Assessment Document*, 2004

Local Meeting Survey, by Pam Page and Mary Bain, June 2015

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

### 2.1. Historical background

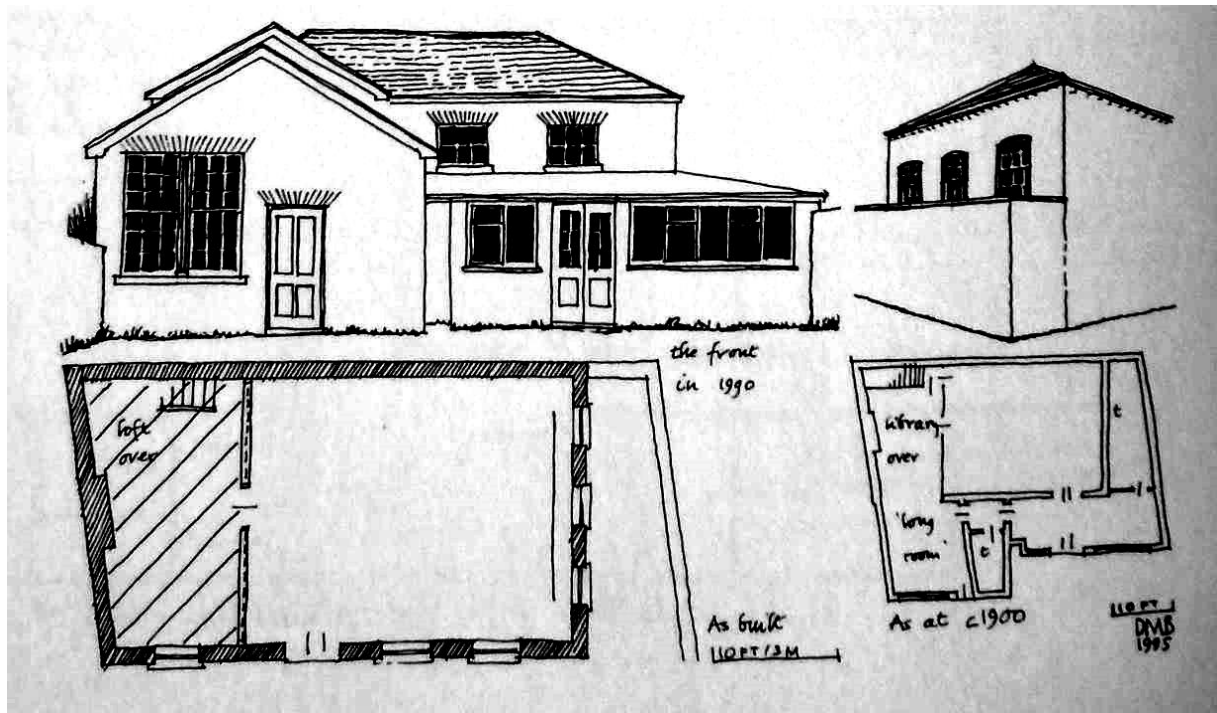


Figure 1: Plan and elevations of 1812 meeting house as in c.1900 (demolished in 1970), from Butler, vol. 1, p. 284

Quaker activity in Maidstone is reported as early as the 1660s, although premises were not acquired until 1807, when a Preparative Meeting was established and a room in a property owned by Edward Briggs registered for meetings. Evidently this proved unsatisfactory, not least to Briggs, and in 1811 land for a purpose-built meeting house (and burial ground) was purchased on the west side of Wheeler Street. Designed (according to Butler) by Edward Briggs himself, this consisted of a large meeting room and a smaller one with gallery over, the two areas separated by a partition wall with vertical sliding shutters, in the common manner for late Georgian meeting houses (the shutters were altered and partially removed in 1965). A ministers' stand was placed below high-level windows in the north wall (plan at figure 1).

Altered and added to at various stages, this building was compulsorily purchased by Maidstone Borough Council in 1974-5 for a car park. A replacement building was built for the Friends by the council in nearby Union Street from designs by Norman Frith, a Quaker architect nominated by the Meeting. It cost £40,000 and opened in 1976. Headstones from the old burial ground were reset in the garden of the new meeting house.

## 2.2. The building and its principal fittings and fixtures

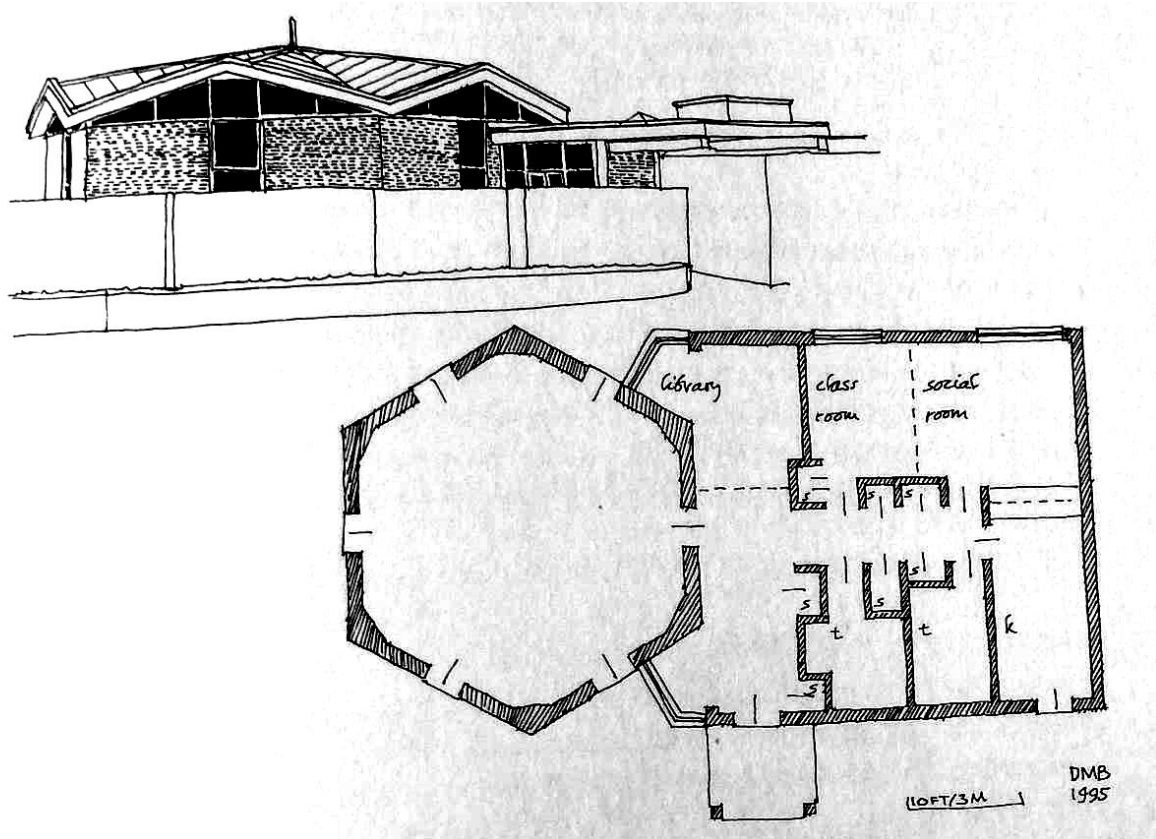


Figure 2: Plan and elevations of present meeting house, from Butler, vol. 1, p. 285

The meeting house consists of two elements, a hexagonal main meeting room capable of seating 100, and the ancillary accommodation (library, small meeting rooms/classrooms, kitchen, WCs) adjoining in a lower building of roughly rectangular plan. Both elements are faced in the same pale concrete bricks, with a folded copper-covered roof to the meeting room and a flat roof covered in felt to the ancillary accommodation. Windows and doors are metal framed. The roof of the meeting room has oversailing eaves, and is lit by tall vertical windows/doors on each of the six faces, supplemented by high-level lighting in the triangular gables. Downpipes are tucked into two of the re-entrants. A deep projecting flat-roofed porch supported on two brick piers marks the main entrance. The accommodation alongside is mainly lit by high-level glazed strips on the street side, and by larger windows and doors on the garden side. Inside, the ancillary spaces are utilitarian in character, though well-detailed and fit for purpose. In the entrance lobby and the large meeting room the walls are of fair-faced brick. The meeting room is an attractive hexagonal space, well-lit on all sides, with the timber roof joists stiffened by steel ties which repeat the form of the hexagon. Seating is arranged in a circular pattern around a central table.

## 2.3 Loose furnishings

There are no loose furnishings calling for special mention.

## 2.4 Attached burial ground

There is no burial ground, but some headstones from the old meeting house have been reset in the garden (photo bottom right).

## 2.5. The meeting house in its wider setting

The meeting house is in Union Street, northeast of the town centre. This is a busy street, lined mostly with eighteenth and nineteenth-century terraced properties and some larger post-war blocks of flats. To the east of the meeting house (towards the A249) the tight urban townscape peters out somewhat, with large areas given over to surface car parking. The meeting house sits on the corner of Tufton Street. A boundary wall of the same bricks as for the meeting house has narrow breaks in it, affording glimpses from the street into the garden. The garden is attractively landscaped, with reset headstones against the east wall and a small stone sculpture of a man and child by Janet Sturge, a member of the Meeting.

## 2.6. Listed status

The meeting house is not listed, and although well-designed and fit for purpose is not considered to be a candidate for listing under current criteria.

## 2.7. Archaeological potential of the site

Probably low. Maidstone is a market town of pre-Conquest origin, which later became the county town and administrative centre of Kent. Union Street belongs to the post-medieval suburban spread of the town, and contains a number of eighteenth or early nineteenth-century properties, including a Grade II listed terrace at nos. 38-70. The meeting house lies just outside Kent County Council's Urban Archaeological Zone 2, but as the county advice stresses, it should not be assumed that areas which are not included do not contain archaeological remains. For more information, see:

<http://archaeologydataservice.ac.uk/archiveDS/archiveDownload?t=arch-459-1/dissemination/pdf/Maidstone.pdf>

## **Part 3: Current use and management**

*See completed volunteer survey*

### 3.1. Condition

- i) Meeting House: Good
- ii) Attached burial ground (if any): Not applicable. There are some reset headstones, whose condition appears to be optimal/generally satisfactory.

### 3.2. Maintenance

The meeting house appears to be well maintained. The most recent QIR was in 2009 (J. A. Warner & Partners, Surveyors). It recommended repairs to the copper-clad roof of the meeting house and the felt-clad roofs of the adjoining structures. It is not clear from the questionnaire return whether these repairs have been carried out. The Meeting considers that it has enough money to repair and maintain the meeting house.

### 3.3. Sustainability

It is not stated in the return whether the meeting uses the Sustainability Toolkit. Recent measures to improve energy efficiency and sustainability have included the installation of solar panels on the flat area of roof. The meeting house is well placed for local public transport (bus and rail). There is no secure parking for bicycles. There is a public car park next door for those arriving by car.

### 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.

### 3.5. Access

An access audit has not been carried out, but the building is all on one level and has step-free access and circulation, 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 about 16 out of an estimated possible 67 hours per week. Parts of the building are used as a homeless shelter in the winter months. There is a lettings policy, and hirings are at the discretion of the Local Meeting. Users of the building cite its atmosphere and its warmth, comfort, good facilities and fair price.

### 3.7. Vulnerability to crime

There are no reported instances of crime or antisocial behaviour. The area is considered to be well cared-for, with low levels of crime and social deprivation. Friends have not developed a liaison with the Local Neighbourhood Policing Team but would consider doing so.

### 3.8. Plans for change

None stated.

## **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 meets the stated needs of the Meeting. However, there would be no formal heritage constraints should change be proposed.

*ii) For wider community use, in addition to local Meeting use:* The building already serves a range of wider community uses. Again, there are no formal heritage constraints.

*iii) Being laid down as a Meeting House:* The building, its garden and boundary walls form a pleasant ensemble and it would be desirable for a new use to be found. The polygonal space of the meeting room does not lend itself very obviously to other uses, apart from a community hall or possibly open-plan offices. The rest of the building would adapt more easily to a range of alternative uses.

## **Part 5: Category: 3**