

Friends Meeting House, Taunton

Bath Place, High Street, Taunton, Somerset, TA1 4EP

National Grid Reference: ST 22568 24419



Statement of Significance

The meeting house was built in 1816 to replace an earlier meeting house on the same site, but has been very much altered externally and internally. A new small meeting room by Philip Proctor Associates was added at the south end of the building in 2014/5 and the old meeting room was converted to provide ancillary spaces. Overall, the building and site has medium heritage significance.

Evidential value

The building has been the subject of a very thorough refurbishment and much of the fabric has been renewed but there is still evidence of past functions and the building is of medium evidential value.

Historical value

The site has been in Quaker use since the 1690s and on these grounds the building has high historical value.

Aesthetic value

The exterior of the old building is functional and has been altered and little of the original interior survives. The new building is unassuming externally but the modern meeting room is an attractive modern space and the building is of medium aesthetic value.

Communal value

The site has been occupied by a Quaker meeting house since the 1690s and with the refurbishment it is expected that use by the wider local community will increase considerably. The building has high communal value.

Part 1: Core data

- 1.1 Area Meeting: *West Somerset*
- 1.2 Property Registration Number: *0012290*
- 1.3 Owner: *Area Meeting*
- 1.4 Local Planning Authority: *Taunton Deane Borough Council*
- 1.5 Historic England locality: *South West*
- 1.6 Civil parish: *Taunton NPA*
- 1.7 Listed status: *Not listed*
- 1.8 NHLE: *N/a*
- 1.9 Conservation Area: *Castle Green*
- 1.10 Scheduled Ancient Monument: *No*
- 1.11 Heritage at Risk: *No*
- 1.12 Date(s): *old building 1813, new building 2015*
- 1.13 Architect(s): *original architect not established; new building by Philip Proctor Associates*
- 1.14 Date of visit: *11 October 2016*
- 1.15 Name of report author: *Neil Burton*
- 1.16 Name of contact(s) made on site: *Lynn Shorthouse (warden)*
- 1.17 Associated buildings and sites: *There is a detached burial ground at Milverton (NGR ST 1063 2603)*
- 1.18 Attached burial ground: *Yes*
- 1.19 Information sources:
Butler, D.M., *The Quaker Meeting Houses of Britain*, 1999, vol.2 p.548/9
Paratt, T and Harris B, *Quakers in Taunton from 1693*, second edition, 2008
Somerset HER, reference 18519 (meeting house) and 32382 (watching brief)

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

2.1 Historical background

There was a purpose-built meeting house in Taunton as early as 1669, but by 1693 'a very considerable meeting house' had been built on part of the present site with a burial ground attached. A complete rebuilding was approved in 1813 and completed by 1816 (Butler). The new building had two meeting rooms and a gallery as shown in figure 1 below. A caretaker's cottage was built next to the meeting house in 1831. It was sold in 2005. The meeting house was considerably altered internally during the twentieth century as the meeting contracted and for a time the large room was let as a commercial space. In 2014/15 an entirely new meeting room was added at the south end of the old building replacing an existing toilet block. The old building was refurbished and converted to provide additional meeting spaces on the ground floor with two flats above for a warden and for commercial letting. The architects for the work were Philip Proctor Associates, who also refurbished the new (2010) meeting house at Salisbury.

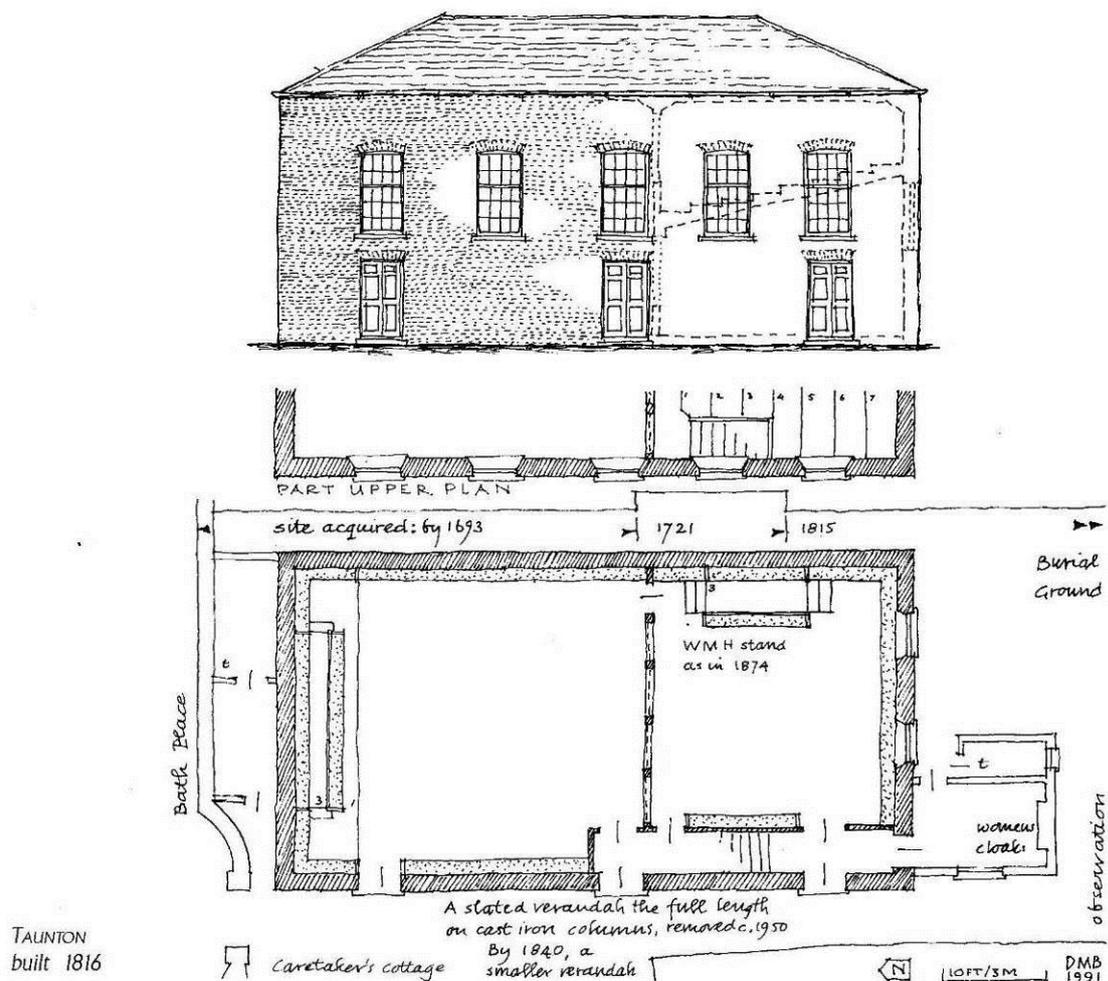


Figure 1: West elevation and original ground plan of the early nineteenth-century meeting house (Butler, vol. 2, p. 549)



Figure 2: A perspective view of the front of the new meeting house

2.2 The building and its principal fittings and fixtures

The old meeting house is rectangular on plan with two-storey elevations. The walls are of brown brick laid in Flemish bond, with a pitched roof, hipped at both ends and covered in pantiles. The north elevation to Bath place is partly obscured by other buildings. It was originally blind, but a new window with a timber surround of late Georgian character has been inserted on the ground floor with a new sash window above. The long west elevation originally had three doors on the ground floor with five segment-headed windows above (see figure 1). Most of the openings have been altered, new openings have been made and the brickwork of the wall has been much renewed. The central entrance door is now flanked by windows and the first floor openings have been shortened and given new straight heads. Against the south wall of the old building is the new meeting house which is of one storey and has walls of red brick laid in Flemish bond with a pyramidal roof covered in pantiles with a glazed skylight at the apex. The main south elevation overlooking the garden has central French doors flanked by full-height windows, all sheltered by an open canopy on timber posts.

The interior of the new meeting room has a timber floor and plain plastered walls with curving timber cladding on the north side. The tented ceiling is covered in acoustic tiling. The internal plan of the old meeting house has been completely changed, but some of the original dado panelling has been re-used in the Welcome Space immediately inside the main entrance.

2.3 Loose furnishings

There are two painted timber benches with open rail backs and shaped arms, probably nineteenth-century in date.

2.4 Attached burial ground (if any)

The small rectangular space of the former burial ground behind the meeting house was closed for burials in 1932. It is surrounded by modern brick walls and is now laid to grass with a planted border. Modern framing has recently been erected on the walls for climbing plants which will shield the space from the adjacent public car park.

2.5 The meeting house in its wider setting

The meeting house was at one time closely surrounded by other buildings and reached by a passage known as Hunt's Court. Now called Bath Place, this has become an attractive pedestrian thoroughfare with small shops and restaurants. The north end of the old meeting house fronts onto a small square in Bath Place. An entry from the square between the meeting house and the former caretaker's house (now in private ownership and occupation) leads along the west side of the meeting house and former burial ground. The land to the south and east of the meeting house has now been cleared and is a large public car park

There is a detached burial ground at Milverton (NGR ST 1063 2603). Details are supplied in the report on Wellington meeting house.

2.6 Listed status

The building is not listed. Given the amount of external and internal alteration, both past and recent, the building is not a candidate for the statutory list. It should certainly be included in any local list and is rightly noted in the Conservation Area appraisal document as an important unlisted building.

2.7 Archaeological potential of the site

This is a city centre site, which has been developed since the seventeenth century and possibly earlier, and is of high archaeological potential. A watching brief of 2013 found no features or finds of archaeological significance.

Part 3: Current use and management

See completed volunteer survey

3.1 Condition

- i) Meeting House: Good
- ii) Attached burial ground (if any): Optimal

3.2 Maintenance

The building was completely refurbished in 2014/15 and no QI has been made since then. The meeting has enough money to maintain the building.

3.3 Sustainability

The meeting has used the Sustainability Toolkit in the past. An important aspect of the recent refurbishment was the incorporation of measures to reduce the environmental impact of the building.

- The rebuilt meeting house incorporates energy efficiency in its design, with underfloor heating, air source heat pump, rainwater harvesting and solar panels on the roof.
- Everything possible is recycled through the local authority waste management scheme.
- It is hoped to incorporate wildlife features in the burial ground garden.

The building does have an EPC. The Energy Efficiency Level of the wardens flat is 65, of the meeting house 40; the Energy Impact Level of the flat is 51.

3.4 Amenities

The meeting has all the amenities it needs with a two meeting rooms, a library a welcome area a modern kitchen and toilets. These are all in the meeting house. There is a self-contained flat on the first floor for the warden and a second flat rented out for income. The meeting is easily accessible by public transport, though Sunday services are infrequent. There is no parking on site but there is a public pay car park immediately adjacent. There is secure parking for bicycles.

3.5 Access

All the meeting house spaces are easily accessible to people with disabilities. There is an accessible toilet, and a hearing loop but no special facilities for partially-sighted people. There has not been a Disability Access Audit.

3.6 Community Use

Friends use the meeting house for about 6 hours per week. The building is theoretically available for community lettings for a maximum number of 200 hours per week. It is used for an average of about 20 hours per week at present but bookings are already increasing with the newly appointed resident warden. The meeting has a lettings policy which is currently being revised. Free use is afforded to Quaker groups and organisations of which the Meeting is a member. Users value the building for its good location, low prices, peaceful ambience and new facilities.

3.7 Vulnerability to crime

There has been some general crime, with rough sleepers and needles being found on the site. Police were notified when one rough sleeper refused to leave. Some incidents have not been reported to the police. There has been no heritage crime. The locality is generally well-cared for, has low crime levels, low levels of deprivation and high community confidence. The Meeting is an associate member of the Bath Place Traders Association and would probably work with them rather than the police.

3.8 Plans for change

Some snagging items in the new building remain to be dealt with.

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: there is probably scope for some change within the building, though it has only recently been completed.

ii) For wider community use, in addition to local Meeting use: as above

iii) Being laid down as a Meeting House: If the meeting were to be laid down, the well-appointed meeting house building has a good location and could probably find a suitable alternative use without difficulty.

Part 5: Category: 3