

Friends Meeting House, Wisbech

21 North Brink, Wisbech, Cambridgeshire PE13 1JR

National Grid Reference: TF 45822 09625



Statement of Significance

The meeting house has high heritage value as a purpose-built mid-nineteenth-century meeting house with historic fittings, an earlier burial ground and strong connections to the local Peckover family.

Evidential value

The meeting house was built on the site of two cottages dating back to at least 1711. Below the elders' bench are reputedly two eighteenth-century burials. The burials in the attached burial ground are largely undisturbed. The site has high evidential value.

Historical value

The burial ground and the 1850s building have strong links to the prominent Peckover family. The meeting house was erected by Algernon Peckover and several family members are buried there. Another important burial is that of Jane Stuart, illegitimate daughter of James II. The meeting house has high historical value, due to these associations.

Aesthetic value

In keeping with Quaker principles, the meeting house is a plain, but attractive building, and retains a good set of benches and panelling. The exterior and the interior were slightly altered in the 1970s. The building has high aesthetic value.

Communal value

The meeting house is primarily a place of worship. It is also used by local community groups and is occasionally open to the public, in conjunction with the National Trust's Peckover House. Due to the Peckover connection and the building's position in a famous streetscape, the meeting house features prominently in the collective memory and identity of local residents and visitors. The meeting house is of high communal value.

Part 1: Core data

- 1.1 Area Meeting: *Cambridgeshire*
- 1.2 Property Registration Number: *0008660*
- 1.3 Owner: *Area Meeting*
- 1.4 Local Planning Authority: *Fenland District Council*
- 1.5 Historic England locality: *East of England*
- 1.6 Civil parish: *Wisbech*
- 1.7 Listed status: *Grade II*
- 1.8 NHLE: *1331634*
- 1.9 Conservation Area: *Wisbech*
- 1.10 Scheduled Ancient Monument: *No*
- 1.11 Heritage at Risk: *No*
- 1.12 Date(s): *1854*
- 1.13 Architect(s): *Algernon Peckover*
- 1.14 Date of visit: *11 July 2014*
- 1.15 Name of report author: *Johanna Roethe*
- 1.16 Name of contact(s) made on site: *Tessa Selman*

1.17 Associated buildings and sites: *None*

1.18 Attached burial ground: *Yes (tombstones listed grade II)*

1.19 Information sources:

Butler, D.M., *The Quaker Meeting Houses of Britain*, 1999, vol. 1, p. 40

'Friends Meeting House, Wisbech', leaflet

'The Princess and the Peckovers', leaflet

'The Quakers of Wisbech', leaflet

Laity, P., 'Peckover, Priscilla Hannah (1833–1931)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004 [<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/50758>, accessed 4 July 2014]

Pevsner, N., *Cambridgeshire* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1970, 2nd edition), p. 501

Pugh, R.B. (ed.), *A History of the County of Cambridge and the Isle of Ely: Volume 4: City of Ely; Ely, N. and S. Witchford and Wisbech Hundreds*, 2002, pp. 242, 250-251

Wild, T., *Peckover House (National Trust guidebook)*, 2004

Plans, photos and documents in Local Meeting archive

Local Meeting survey by Tessa Selman, 2014 and 2015

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

2.1 Historical background

From 1711 two thatched cottages were adapted as meeting house (not apparently a purpose-built structure as described by Butler) (figure 1). John Hancock (died 1737) and his daughter (died 1746) were buried below the elders' bench in the meeting house. (According to tradition, the burials are still there, although this seems unlikely given the later rebuilding.)



Figure 1: Watercolour by Algernon Peckover of the previous meeting house in 1853 (Wisbech Meeting House)

In 1854, a new meeting house (figures 2-3) was erected on the same site by Algernon Peckover (1803–93), an amateur architect and a member of a local Quaker family. His father, Jonathan (1755–1833) had come to Wisbech in 1777 and set up as a grocer. He later

founded the Wisbech and Lincolnshire Bank which for some time operated from his house, Bank House (now Peckover House); in 1896 the bank merged with other (mostly Quaker) banks to form Barclays Bank. In about 1898, the meeting house was renovated.

In 1971–72, four flats for single elderly people and one warden’s flat were created on the upper floors of the meeting house in co-operation with the East Anglia Housing Association (architect: Cecil J. Bourne of Cambridge); a proposal that had been planned since the mid-1960s. At the same time, the smaller of the two originally separate meeting rooms (the former women’s meeting room) became a dining room (photo bottom left, p. 1) and the sash shutters between the two rooms were replaced by a brick wall. An attic was added above the meeting room with three dormer windows to the street, and a new floor was added above the new dining room (formerly full height like the main meeting room). A three-storey rear extension was built over part of the burial ground, replacing a small single-storey extension, containing toilets and a kitchen on the ground floor and flats on the two upper floors. The rear elevation was rebuilt (photo top right, p. 1), replacing the high-level sash windows to the former women’s meeting room with French doors and casements to the ground and first floors. A lift was inserted. The larger warden’s flat was on the first floor, above the former women’s meeting room and in the extension. On the second floor were four flats, three of which were above the meeting room. Later the four flats were reduced to three of equal size.



Figure 2: 22–24 North Brink and the meeting house (right) in an undated photograph (Peckover family photo album, Wisbech Meeting House archive)

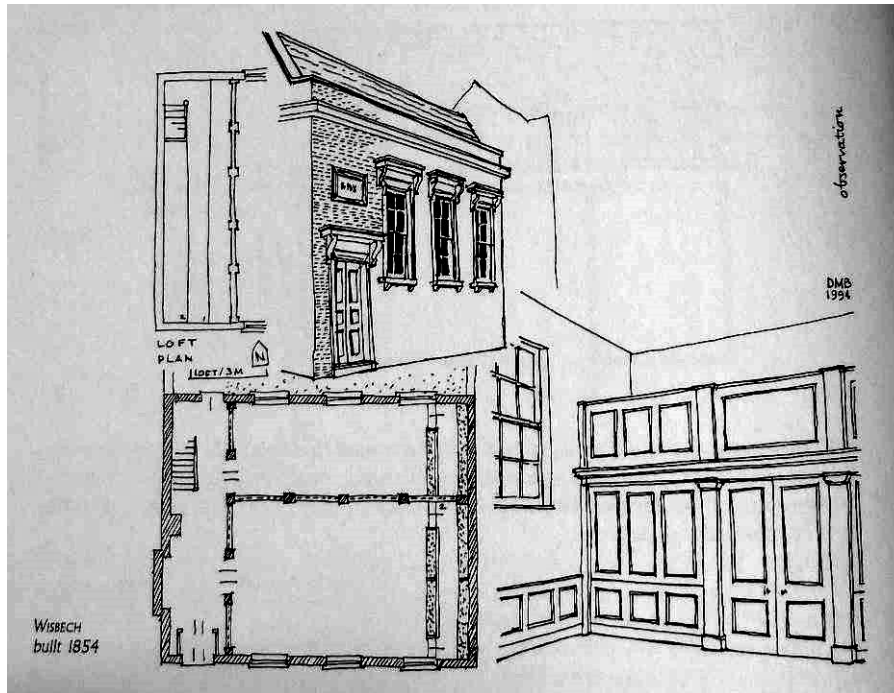


Figure 3: Plan (without the rear wing), perspective and detail of interior (southeast is at the bottom of the plan; not to scale) (Butler, *The Quaker Meeting Houses of Britain*, 1999, vol. 1, p. 40)

2.2 The building and its principal fittings and furnishings

The street elevation faces southeast. The meeting house was built in 1854 to designs by Algernon Peckover. In 1971-72 it was extended and altered by Cecil J. Bourne, adding a floor above the meeting room and a full-height rear wing. The materials are gault brick with stone dressings. The mansard roof is of artificial slate. The plan is L-shaped and comprises the original building on a nearly square plan as well as a rear wing at the northwest. The main elevation is four bays wide. The six-panelled entrance door is in the west bay with a stone architrave and a corbelled hood under a stone with the date '1854'. To the east are three tall sash windows (with 6-over-6 panes), with stone architraves, sills and corbelled hoods. Below the easternmost window is another paneled door with an architrave surround, known as the 'coffin door' as it was used for funerals. Above are three dormer windows of the 1970s. The rear elevation was largely rebuilt in 1971-72 due to the addition of the three-storey wing and the re-fenestration of the original building. The rear walls are of brick in stretcher bond and the wing has a pitched roof.

The west wall of the meeting room has a pine panelling up to a gallery; the modern glazed door is flanked by Doric pilasters. The two-stage elders' stand is against the east wall. There is a pine dado on the north, south and east walls; that to the north being a sympathetic recreation of 1970-2 when the wall between the two ground floor rooms was built. The smaller meeting room has no remaining historic features. The upstairs flats were not inspected.

2.3 Loose furnishings

There are ten pine benches (probably of the nineteenth century) in addition to the two fixed benches for elders. The meeting room also has a pendulum clock by Dawes of Islington on the east wall. The smaller meeting room has another two open-backed benches.

2.4 Attached burial ground (if any)

The burial ground is to the rear (north) of the meeting house. In the early 1970s, most of the headstones were moved to the east and west walls. The headstones were listed grade II in 1983 (see list entry below). There are 32 recorded burials (30 with surviving headstones) covering the period 1742–1948, including 18 for the Peckover family. These include the graves of Jonathan; his son Algernon, the architect of the meeting house; Algernon's daughter Priscilla Hannah (1833–1931), a peace campaigner, who was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize several times (1903, 1905, 1911, 1913); her brother Alexander (Baron Peckover of Wisbech, 1830–1919), the first Quaker peer and Lord Lieutenant for the County of Cambridgeshire; and the last member of the family, Alexandrina (1860–1948), who in 1943 gave the family home and garden to the National Trust. The 18 Peckover stones as well as two other headstones of relatives are placed in two rows against the west garden wall (photo bottom right, p. 1); one stone is in the fernery in the southwest corner; another 8 stones are along the east wall. In the southeast corner of the garden is the grave of Jane Stuart (1654–1742), the illegitimate daughter of James II. It has a headstone, as well as the following inscription in small box hedges: 'JS/AGE/88/1742'.

The burial ground is no longer used for burials. The burial records covering the period 1711–1834 are kept in the meeting house library. In the meeting house is a drawing showing the pre-1970 position of the headstones (figure 4), as well as a full transcript of the inscriptions (compiled in 1956 by Leonard Walker). Both of these record 32 burials, two of which are anonymous and have no headstones, as well as one burial of ashes.

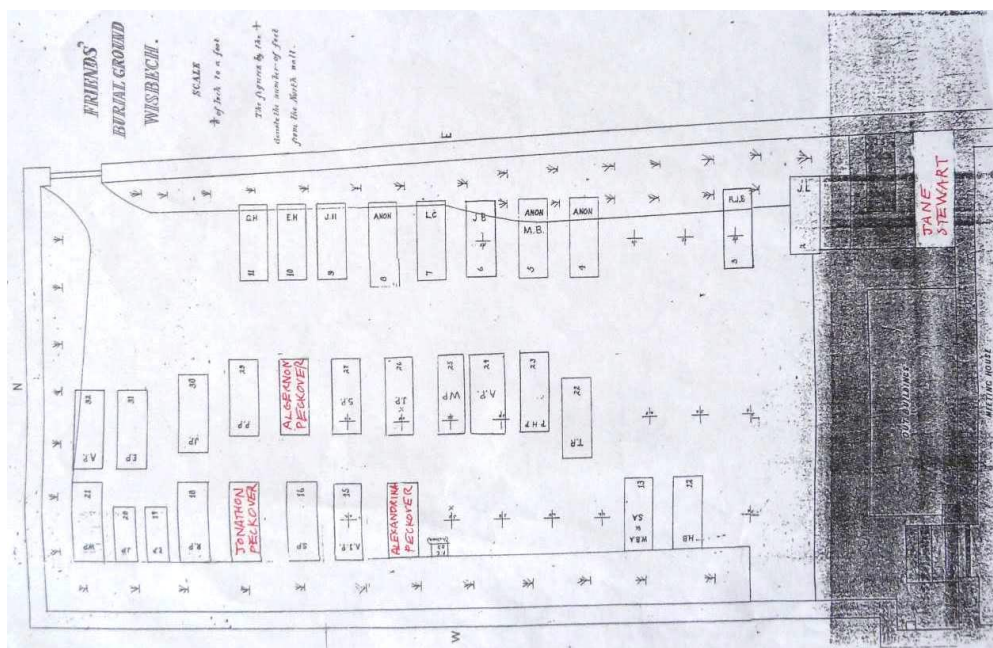


Figure 4: Plan of the Wisbech burial ground (north is to the left; not to scale)
(Wisbech Meeting House archive)

2.5 The meeting house in its wider setting

The meeting house is located on the north bank of the river Nene. North Brink is generally considered to be one of the finest brick-built Georgian streets in England. The main views of the meeting house are oblique views from North Brink and direct views from across the river.

To the east of the meeting house is the stable block (II*) for Peckover House, a battlemented building with blind ground floor arches and Gothick detailing, dating from c.1790. This is 'a rare survival of an urban stable with intact fittings' (NT guide). It also has a small block to the rear which used to be the Quaker Sunday School. A few houses further east is Peckover House (1722 and later, grade I, National Trust), whose grade II-registered garden extends behind several houses to the west, including behind the meeting house's garden. Several houses in the street were designed and built by Algernon Peckover, including the meeting house, and nos. 22–25 to the west of the meeting house (listed grade II). Of these houses, Pevsner stated that: 'Algernon Peckover ... cannot have had any feeling for what a Georgian Street means. He would not otherwise have been able to ruin the precious continuity of the street façade by Nos. 22–24, with their Jacobean stepped gables, too high and too restless' (figure 2). Today, the varied architecture of the street can be regarded as part of its interest.

There is no detached Quaker burial ground, as the General Cemetery at Leverington Road was laid out in 1835, specifically for non-conformists (closed in 1972; NGR: TF 45833 10260).

2.6 Listed status

The meeting house is listed grade II which is considered appropriate. The list description (see Part 6) requires a few corrections and additions. Although the meeting house was first listed in 1969 it includes the 1971–2 alterations (at least to the front elevation), even though a later revision date is not included in the entry. However, the alterations are not distinguished as such from the original fabric. The description does not mention the rear elevation or the internal alterations. The list descriptions of the meeting house and the tombstones in the burial ground contain various small typographical errors.

2.7 Archaeological potential of the site

Wisbech has Anglo-Saxon origins as a settlement. Following the drainage of the fens, Wisbech experienced great prosperity and growth, especially during the Georgian and Victorian periods. The previous buildings on the site were two cottages which dated from at least 1711. They were replaced in 1854 by the current meeting house. It is not clear if the two eighteenth-century burials under the elders' bench were exhumed or are still in situ. Overall, the archaeological potential of the site, including the burial ground, is considered to be high.

Part 3: Current use and management

See completed volunteer survey

3.1 Condition

- i) Meeting house: Good.
- ii) Attached burial ground (if any): Optimal/generally satisfactory

3.2 Maintenance

The most recent QI report was written by Cheffins following an inspection on 6 May 2011, but failed to spot a problem with a leaking valley gutter behind the front parapet. Repairs were underway at the time of the visit (2014). It was also planned in 2014 to replace the

dormer windows. The meeting has enough money to maintain and repair the building but has no five-year maintenance and repair plan.

3.3 Sustainability

The meeting uses the Sustainability Toolkit and has implemented measures to reduce its environmental impact. These include:

- Climate change & energy efficiency: careful monitoring of boiler usage
 - Resource use, recycling & waste management: Council recycling; compost and natural garden cultivation
 - Building maintenance & refurbishment: within the confines of listed building status
 - Wildlife, ecology and nature conservation: compost and natural garden cultivation
 - Transport: shared transport for meeting attendance when possible; local members walk
- The meeting does not have an Energy Performance Certificate but might consider obtaining one.

3.4 Amenities

The meeting has all the amenities it requires. There is no resident Warden. The meeting is accessible by public transport. There is no on-site car parking, with parking for blue badge holders only outside. There is no on-site bike parking.

3.5 Access

The meeting house has level access, a lift and an accessible toilet. There is no hearing loop or any specific facilities for partially-sighted people. Following a Disability Access Audit in 2010, the accessible toilet and ramps were installed.

3.6 Community Use

Friends use the meeting house for 4 hours per week. The building is theoretically available for community lettings for a maximum number of 25 hours per week. It is used for an average of 12 hours per week. There is a lettings policy. Regular users are the Alcoholics Anonymous, the University of the Third Age, and study groups. Applications for renting the meeting house are decided on merit. Depending on proven need, use free of charge may be granted. Users value the meeting house for its convenient location, competitive pricing, and warm and quiet atmosphere.

3.7 Vulnerability to crime

The area has low crime levels and there has been no heritage crime recorded at the site. There is no established liaison with the Local Neighbourhood Policing Team but the meeting might consider making contact, should the need arise.

3.8 Plans for change

There are currently (2015) no plans for changes to the building.

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.

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

iii) Being laid down as a Meeting: In the unlikely event of closure, the meeting house might continue in residential use, with the ground floor rooms rented out; as a listed building it would need to have a sustainable future.

Part 5: Category: 2

Part 6: List descriptions

Meeting house

List description

Name: FRIENDS MEETING HOUSE

List entry Number: 1331634

FRIENDS MEETING HOUSE, 21, NORTH BRINK

The building may lie within the boundary of more than one authority.

County	District	District Type	Parish
Cambridgeshire	Fenland	District Authority	Wisbech

Grade: II

Date first listed: 10-Feb-1969

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

The following previous listing date shall be added.

Page 71 Item number 5/163 10.2.69

WISBECH NORTH BRINK TF 4509 5/163 No. 21 (Friends Meeting House) GV II

Chapel built in 1854 replacing earlier meeting house. Designed by Algenon Peckover (1803-1893). Gault brick with stone dressings. Low pitch, slate mansard roof. One storey with attics. Brick plinth, shallow parapet with stone coping. Deep, moulded cornice repeated above stone windowcases. Three twelve-paned hung sash windows, three flat roofed dormer windows. Main entrance to west, doorcase similar to windows, double, three-panelled doors. Plaque above door with date. Interior has original fittings and gallery in pine and pine benches. RCHM (C.F. Stell), 1976. VCH Cambs, p.242. Pevsner, Buildings in England, p.501. Wisbech Annual Report, 1948. A. Peckover, Watercolour, 1854. Photographs and prints, C18 and C19, W. & F. Mus.

Listing NGR: TF4582209625

Tombstones in burial ground

Name: TOMBSTONES IN GRAVE YARD TO REAR OF NUMBER 21 (FRIENDS MEETING HOUSE)

List entry Number: 1229400

Location

TOMBSTONES IN GRAVE YARD TO REAR OF NUMBER 21 (FRIENDS MEETING HOUSE), NORTH BRINK

The building may lie within the boundary of more than one authority.

County	District	District Type	Parish
Cambridgeshire	Fenland	District Authority	Wisbech

Grade: II

Date first listed: 31-Oct-1983

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

Details

WISBECH NORTH BRINK TF 4509 5/164 Tombstones in grave yard to rear of No. 21 (Friends Meeting House)) GV II

Tombstones to Peckover family and tombstone to Jane Stuart (b.1654, d.1742) illegitimate daughter of James II. Simple round-headed stones with plain inscriptions. Friends Burial Register. Wisbech Annual Report, 1948. Craddock and Walker, History of Wisbech, p.389, 1847. Gardiner, History of Wisbech, p.35, p.263, 1898.

Listing NGR: TF4582109633