

Friends Meeting House, Diss

10 Frenze Road, Diss, Norfolk, IP22 4PA

National Grid Reference: TM 12019 79953



Statement of Significance

The building has high heritage significance as a good example of a purpose-built eighteenth-century meeting house, later altered, but with some original fittings. The adjoining earlier farm building and attractive burial ground also have high significance.

Evidential value

Attached to the meeting house is a much older building, a timber-framed former stable building, evidence of the previous agricultural use of the site. The date 1745 is cut into some of the bricks on the building. The interior of the

meeting house is relatively unaltered, retaining its gallery, elders' seating and some benches. On site is an eighteenth-century carved headstone, a rare example from a time when headstones were proscribed in Quaker burial grounds. The fabric of the building and the burials on the site could yield evidence about building construction and past patterns of Quaker life and worship. The building and the site have high evidential value.

Historical value

The present building replaced one built outside Diss at the end of the seventeenth century and the current site closer to the town centre, is evidence of greater religious toleration in the town and nationally, and Quakers' greater confidence. The meeting house retains its historic internal layout, as well as a number of original features, including one of the galleries and some historic benches. The simple rows of round-topped headstones in the burial ground remain in situ, and include the grave of the architect of the Diss Corn Exchange. The attached timber-framed building is possibly 150 years older than the meeting house, and is evidence of the previous use of the site. The site has high historical value.

Aesthetic value

The design is typical of a mid-eighteenth-century meeting house, combining vernacular and 'polite' qualities, rectangular in plan and with a pantile roof. The main frontage faces away from the street towards the burial ground, and is up-to-date in design, while the 'rear' elevation facing towards the street is more old-fashioned in character. The late nineteenth-century additions are well detailed, maintaining the character of the building. The timber framed and thatched former stables act as an attractive foil. Inside, the meeting house gallery retained at one end has high aesthetic significance, although the corresponding gallery and other fittings are gone. As is typical of a Quaker meeting house, the design is characterised by plainness. The design, materials and detailing of the buildings, as well as their setting and their setting on the edge of the conservation area, give them high aesthetic value.

Communal value

The meeting house was built for and remains in primarily Quaker use, but is also a community resource. It makes a notable and positive contribution to the local conservation area, and is appreciated by local people and visitors who may not be users of the building. The building embodies Quaker values of simplicity and welcome. These spiritual and social values give the site high communal value.

Part 1: Core data

- 1.1 Area Meeting: *Ipswich and Diss*
- 1.2 Property Registration Number: *0024000*
- 1.3 Owner: *Friends Trusts Ltd (as holding trustees for Area Meeting)*
- 1.4 Local Planning Authority: *South Norfolk District Council*
- 1.5 Historic England locality: *East of England*
- 1.6 Civil parish: *Diss*
- 1.7 Listed status: *II*

1.8 NHLE: 1049735

1.9 Conservation Area: *Diss*

1.10 Scheduled Ancient Monument: *No*

1.11 Heritage at Risk: *No*

1.12 Date(s): *1744; 1894/7*

1.13 Architect (s): *Not established*

1.14 Date of visit: *3 July 2014*

1.15 Name of report author: *Andrew Derrick*

1.16 Name of contact made on site: *Adrian Rowe*

1.17 Associated buildings and sites: *Adjoining former stables, warden's house*

1.18 Attached burial ground: *Yes*

1.19 Information sources:

Butler, D.M., *The Quaker Meeting Houses of Britain*, 1999, vol. 2, pp. 438–9
van Melzen, C., E. Seaman and P. Foreman, *Three Centuries of Quakers in Diss*, 1997
Heritage Gateway, NHER no. 48350
South Norfolk District Council, *Diss Conservation Area Appraisal and Management Plan*, 2012
Local Meeting survey by Adrian Rowe, May 2014 and 2015

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

2.1 Historical background

In 1696-7 a meeting house with attached burial ground was built on land given by Nicholas Phillips outside Diss on the road to Walcot Green. This was demolished in the 1760s, but the site was retained and only sold by the Friends in 1983.

The present building was built in 1744, on an acre of land closer to the town centre which had been bought for £42 from Charles Simpson, a brewer in Diss. This land included a seventeenth-century timber framed stable building, which survives today at the northeast corner of the site. An adjoining plot was left to Friends in 1750. As originally built, the meeting house was a brick and pantile building, with its main elevation facing away from the road, towards the burial ground.

A conjectural plan of the building as originally designed is shown in Butler, p. 439 (figure 1). There appears to have been a loft or gallery on both the east and west sides. In 1894 (van Melzen *et al*) or 1897 (Butler) a schoolroom was added to the east. Butler states that this originally had a lower roof, which was raised in height and doubled in size in 1903, giving the L-shaped plan form also seen at figure 1. However, Van Melzen *et al* (p. 37) only record internal changes at this time, including removal of the gallery on the east wall and 'alteration of the reading desk', possibly the relocation of the stand from the north to the east wall. In 1907 the thatched roof of the former stables was covered with galvanised iron.

During the twentieth century the west entrance became disused and that part of the building became covered in creeper. This was removed and the entrance restored in 1981, when a small lobby was fitted under the gallery, and the stand on the east side also removed (architect Philip Woods). The new west lobby replaced one which had been installed inside the south door in 1973 (also in 1973 the timber-framed stables were adapted to provide WCs). At the same time the ministers' stand was removed. In 1987-8 a new kitchen was installed in the schoolroom and other improvements made. In 1990-1 the old stable building was re-thatched.

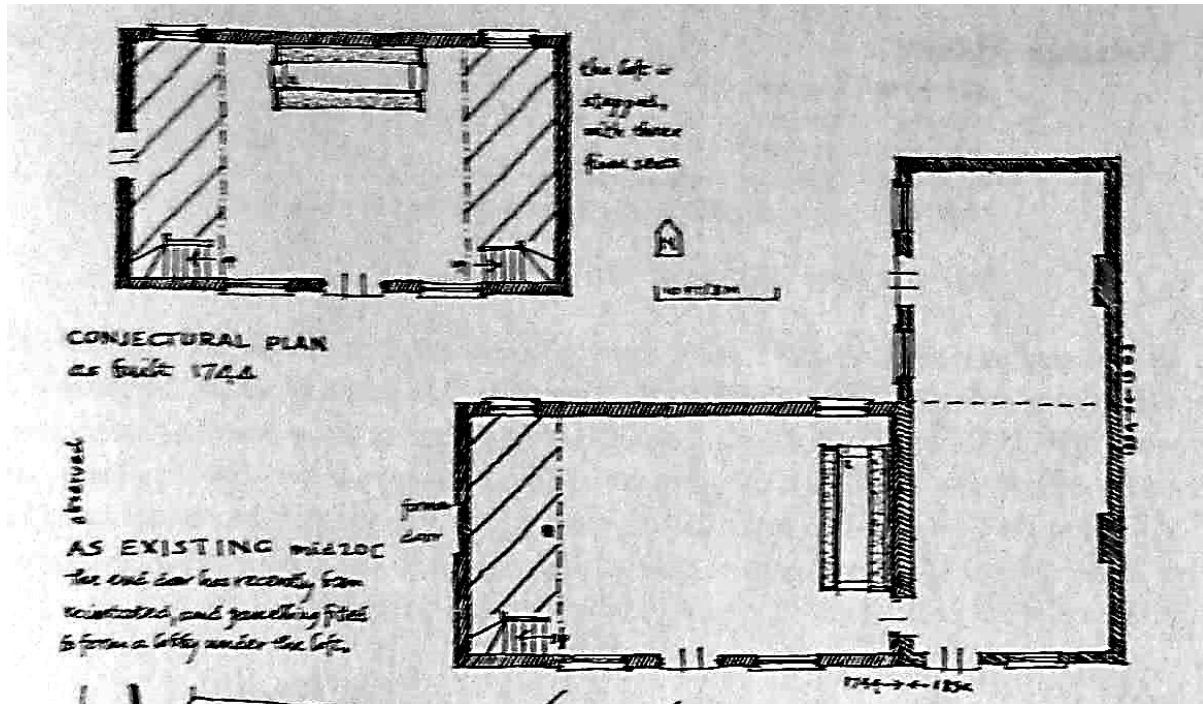


Figure 1: Plan as existing in mid-twentieth century and conjectural original plan, from Butler, p.439

2.2 The building and its principal fittings and furnishings

The meeting house dates from 1744. It is built of red brick laid in Flemish bond under a hipped roof of glazed pantiles. According to Butler, two bricks on the northeast corner of the building bear the date 1741, whereas the Norfolk Historic Environment Record more plausibly refers to bricks inscribed 'SB 1745', 'RH 1745 and 17 EH 45' (none of them was easily legible at the time of the visit in 2014). Together with the later wings on the north side the building forms an L-shaped plan. The principal elevation (photo upper left) is to the south, facing the burial ground. This was designed in an up-to-date style, with an eight-panel central entrance, with a projecting timber pediment over. On each side of the entrance is a large flush-framed sash window, each of twelve panes over twelve, below a segmental arch. A second entrance (today the main entrance) is on the west elevation, also with a panelled door and pediment (reinstated in the early 1980s). The north elevation facing towards the street is more old-fashioned for its date, with four mullion and transom windows and leaded panes, lighting the gallery areas. The late nineteenth and early twentieth-century additions are designed in a contextual style, red brick and pantile, with flush-frame sash windows and simple classical door surrounds. At the northeast corner of the site, and attached to the schoolroom, is a timber framed, rendered and thatched former stable building of early seventeenth-century date.

The interior of the meeting house is a single undivided space with a central Doric column. On the west side is a gallery with panelled front and handsome closed string stair with columnar newel, turned balusters and moulded handrail. The gallery retains its raked floor and historic

benches. The underside of the gallery was enclosed with a pine partition in the 1980s to form a lobby. Originally there was a corresponding gallery on the east side. That has been removed, as has the stand (the 'lectern platform' mentioned in the list description) which had been relocated to this position from its original position on the north side, possibly in 1903. The panelled dado here is of Georgian character, whereas elsewhere it consists of vertical matchboarding of nineteenth or early twentieth century character. There are further meeting rooms and a kitchen in the late nineteenth/early twentieth-century additions; in the former stable block attached to the northeast (now WCs) much of the timber framing is exposed (photo bottom right, p. 1).

2.3 Loose furnishings

There are some loose benches in the meeting room and former schoolroom.

2.4 Attached burial ground

This (visible in photo top left, p.1) lies to the south, and consists of an area of unmarked graves and several rows of uniform round-topped headstones dating from the mid-nineteenth century onwards. Amongst these is the grave of George Atkins, architect of the Corn Exchange, Diss. There is a further gravestone of 1732, now in the garden of the warden's house, presumably from the earlier meeting house, and a rare example from a time when headstones were proscribed in Quaker burial grounds.

2.5 The meeting house in its wider setting

The building lies about a quarter of a mile to the west of the town centre, in a former rural area largely developed as a suburb in the twentieth century, mainly with council housing. It is set back from the road, behind railings and mature pollarded trees. The Conservation Area Appraisal and Management Plan states:

The Meeting House is a fine eighteenth-century building, simple and dignified and well proportioned. It has good brick detailing, while the thatched outbuilding makes for an unusual contrast. The front railings are of value while the two pollarded limes and the yew provide a discrete level of privacy. The graveyard behind is pleasant with some fine mature trees forming the south boundary. There is a good view of the church tower from this point, although further along the presence of poles and overhead wires is unfortunate. The only other building of note is Corner house and no 2, on the street edge and a good 'stop' in the view down Uplands Way.

2.6 Listed status

The meeting house is considered to be appropriately listed in Grade II. The list entry would benefit from updating to take account of changes since 1972. The earliest structure on the site, the former stables, is only briefly covered in the list entry.

The warden's house next door dates from 1930 and is not considered to be listable.

2.7 Archaeological potential of the site

Burials on site go back to the mid-eighteenth century. The former stables suggest that there may have been other pre-eighteenth-century buildings here, although none are mentioned in the published accounts. The site may therefore have medium archaeological potential.

Part 6: List description(s)

List entry Number: 1049735

FRIENDS MEETING HOUSE, FRENZE ROAD

Grade: II

Date first listed: 08-Jun-1972

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

FRENZE ROAD 1. 1044 Friends' Meeting House TM 1279 5/112 II

2. 1745 red brick with dark header ends. 8-panel central entrance door with one tall sash window, each side, with glazing bars and segmental arch. Together with later wing on North forms an L on plan. Pantiled roof, hipped. Interior: panelled gallery, on central Doric column, with small mullion casements on North side. Panelled lectern platform, Early C17, one storey and loft, thatched, stable at North-East corner.

Listing NGR: TM1201979953