

Friends Meeting House, St Helens

Church Street, St Helens, WA10 1AJ

National Grid Reference: SJ 51477 95251



Statement of Significance

The meeting house has exceptional heritage significance, as an attractive sixteenth or seventeenth century building with historic fittings and furnishings from several periods and a historic former burial ground. It is both the oldest building in St Helens town centre and the oldest meeting house still in use in Lancashire.

Evidential value

The building and site have medium evidential values primarily associated with the potential to yield information about the building's construction, past Quaker activity and the archaeology of the site.

Historical value

The meeting house has high historical value as a domestic building adapted for Quaker use, and it retains several historic features, such as the unusual sliding partition, early fireplace and evidence of a first floor level. It is associated with notable Quaker George Shaw.

Aesthetic value

The building is a good example of vernacular architecture which makes a positive contribution to the conservation area; the meeting house is of high aesthetic value. The twentieth century additions to the rear are neutral in their impact, and the fine frontage is unaltered.

Communal value

The building is used by the local community as well as for worship by the meeting. It is a positive feature in the conservation area, and the Quaker Garden can be appreciated by local people and visitors who may not be users of the building. It is of high communal value.

Part 1: Core data

- 1.1 Area Meeting: *Hardshaw and Mann*
- 1.2 Property Registration Number: *0006790*
- 1.3 Owner: *Area Trust*
- 1.4 Local Planning Authority: *St Helens Metropolitan Borough Council*
- 1.5 Historic England locality: *North West*
- 1.6 Civil parish: *St Helens*
- 1.7 Listed status: *Grade II*
- 1.8 NHLE: *1075910*
- 1.9 Conservation Area: *George Street*
- 1.10 Scheduled Ancient Monument: *No*
- 1.11 Heritage at Risk: *No*
- 1.12 Date(s): *Seventeenth century*
- 1.13 Architect (s): *Not established*
- 1.14 Date of visit: *4th June 2015*
- 1.15 Name of report author: *Emma Neil*
- 1.16 Name of contact(s) made on site: *Roy Vaughn*

1.17 Associated buildings and sites: *Quaker Garden*

1.18 Attached burial ground: *Yes*

1.19 Information sources:

David M. Butler, *The Quaker Meeting Houses of Britain* (London: Friends Historical Society, 1999), vol. 1, pp.337.

R.Pollard and N.Pevsner, *Buildings of England, Lancashire: Liverpool and the South-West*, 2006

Mary Presland, *Friends Meeting House, Church Street St Helens*, nd.

Roy Vaughn, *Local Meeting Survey*, June 2015

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

2.1. Historical background

The meeting house is the oldest building in St Helens town centre, but there are uncertainties over the exact date of the building. Butler suggests a date of c1600, the Historic England List entry states it dates from 1679 – 92 and Presland dates the building earlier than 1597. The Historic Environment Record notes that the building and burial ground were conveyed in 1679. What is clear, however, is the beginnings of the meeting house and burial ground. A horse collar maker from Bickerstaffe named George Shaw purchased three plots of land in the area in 1676; he gave the building and surrounding land to fellow Quakers of Hardshaw Monthly Meeting in 1679. Presland writes that the building purchased by Shaw was already constructed when three plots were sold by Sir Thomas Gerrard of Bryn (a well-known family in the area) to a John Tarbock of Windle in 1597.

The building appears to have been built for domestic use; there is a large chimney stack with a bread oven and hidden fireplace at the west end, and there is evidence of a former first floor removed to create a meeting room (evidence for joists at west end, and the central mullioned window seen in the a drawing of c1800 (Fig.1) has since been infilled).



Figure 1: St Helens Meeting House drawing approx c1800 (St Helens meeting house archive)

Prior to the 1689 Toleration Act, in 1684 local constables seized items such as doors and tables to be sold as payment for hosting unlawful meetings. After 1689, the building was certified and registered as a place of worship for the Religious Society of Friends.

From 1773 the meeting house was in use only by the Hardshaw West Monthly Meeting whilst regular Sunday Meetings discontinued. The building was used and perhaps altered by the Prebyterians in 1863 and in 1874-5 by a Welsh congregation. The Friends began their weekly Meetings again in 1884. The sliding partition was installed after this date. It is not known when the 7ft wide fireplace (Fig.2) was first sealed to accommodate the raised stand for the Elders.



Figure 2: Fireplace on the west wall now blocked, nd (St Helens meeting house archive)

During the twentieth century a disused lean-to building to the north was removed and in the 1965-6 an extension was built for ancillary facilities and a small meeting room / children's room using recycled stone from the demolished building. Other improvements included the insertion of partitioning internally at the main entrance.

In 1995 the sundial (dated 1753) on the front elevation was restored by Professor Alan Smith of the Sundial Society; a sundial was first recorded here in 1691.

2.2. The building and its principal fittings and fixtures

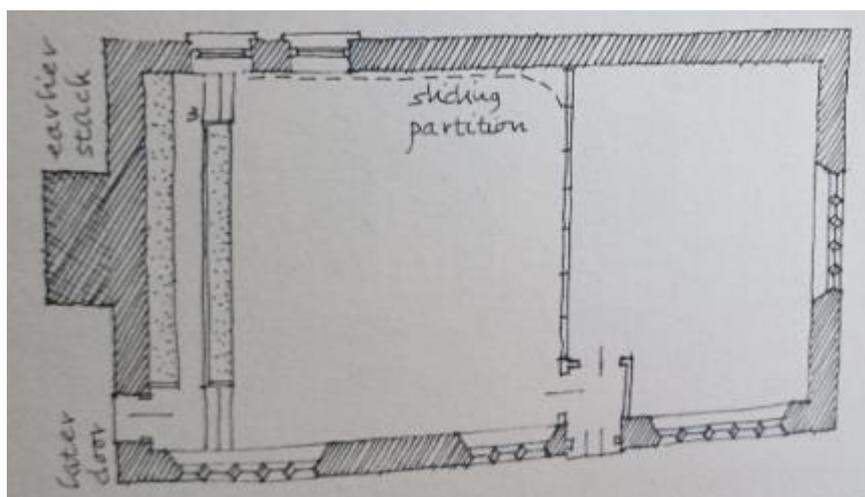


Figure 3: Ground floor plan of the meeting house as reconstructed by Butler (north is to the top; not to scale) (Butler (1999), vol. 1, p.337)

The Quaker Meeting House was probably built in either the late sixteenth or early seventeenth century, as a house. It is built of sand stone with a stone slate roof. The L-plan building consists of the principal range to the south, once 2-storey, now a single-storey range aligned east to west containing the meeting rooms, with the single storey late twentieth century extension to the north.

The south front elevation at ground floor level has a series of five, three and 5-light double-chamfered mullioned windows with diamond leaded glazing. The entrance doorway is right of centre, and has a stone segmental-headed opening with central keystone and stone quoins. Above is a sundial dated 1753. A continuous drip mould runs above ground floor windows. The second floor has one 6-light and one 3-light chamfered mullioned windows. The roof has two copper ridge vents.

The gables have coped verges. To the west is a large projecting chimney stack with a red brick lean to building and the east gable has is a 7-light window with transom and label mould. On the north rear elevation the masonry reveals how the fabric has been altered in phases. To the east is an area of cleaned stonework where a large lean-to building once stood. There is a three light stone mullioned window to the left, and to the right two sash windows with small panes below the eaves. To the far right of the elevation is a blocked doorway with a large stone lintel. To the left is a single-storey 1960s addition, aligned north to south and with a felted flat roof and a glazed elevation. At the north end of this extension is a single-storey lean to building built from recycled stone with three uPVC windows.

The interior of the historic meeting house is now in use a five-bay single volume space. The late nineteenth century roof is exposed, carried on king-post trusses with a single tier of purlins with raking struts. The wooden flooring has been carpeted. The walls are plastered and painted white with tongue and groove panelling to dado level. On the north wall is a full height timber and glazed partition, installed in the early twentieth century, which slides to separate the main meeting room from the east area formerly used as the women's meeting room. The raised ministers' stand on the west wall is eighteenth century, with access via steps to the left and right, with a balustrade of pierced splat balusters.

Benches are arranged in a rectangle around a central table.

Access to the 1960's extension is from a doorway in the north wall which leads into a corridor laid with parquet flooring which leads to the kitchen, WC facilities and the small meeting room to the north.

2.3. Loose furnishings

The main meeting room contains pine benches (Fig.4), probably dating from the early twentieth century. These have tongue and groove panelling to the backs and shaped ends with a pierced trefoil detail.



Figure 4: St Helens meeting room benches

2.4. Attached burial ground

To the east of the meeting house is the Friends Garden (Fig.5) on Shaw Street, which is now leased to the town and managed as a public park. This was once the burial ground and three flat gravestones are located to the south wall. The burial ground has a low brick wall with stone copings and metal railings. In 2010, improvements were made including landscaping and seating areas. It is now known whether burials are still in situ.



Figure 5: Friends Garden

2.5. The meeting house in its wider setting

The meeting house is located to the east of St Helens town centre, close to the retail spine. It is set back from the road enclosed within a landscaped garden with a sandstone boundary wall with stone coping and railings, and metal gates with stone gate piers. Directly in front is a roundabout, to the east three-storey Wolverhampton House and to the west a former pub which is now vacant. To the east is the attractive well cared for Quaker Garden which provides the only green space in George Street Conservation Area. The street names near the meeting house remind people of the man that brought the building into Quaker use; Shaw Street, George Street and Bickerstaffe Street.

2.6. Listed status

The meeting house is listed at grade II which is considered appropriate, given the altered interior. The list entry for the meeting house would benefit from being updated, as it states

that the interior has no interest, although some of the internal features are clearly significant.

2.7. Archaeological potential of the site

The conservation area has been defined as having low archaeological significance, but it is considered that the Friends Garden, a former burial ground represents an area of medium to high archaeological potential.

Part 6: List descriptions

Name: FRIEND'S MEETING HOUSE

List entry Number: 1075910

Location

FRIEND'S MEETING HOUSE, CHURCH STREET

County	District	District Type	Parish
	St. Helens	Metropolitan Authority	Non Civil Parish

Grade: II

Date first listed: 23-Aug-1985

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

Details

SJ 59 NW ST. HELENS CHURCH STREET (north side)

4/71 Friends' Meeting - House - II

Meeting house. 1679-92, altered 1763. Stone with stone slate roof. 2 storeys, 2 bays. Drip mould over ground floor. Windows have double-chamfered mullions, those to ground floor of 5:3:5 lights and those to 1st floor of 6 and 3 lights. All have leaded glazing tied back to iron bars. Segmental-headed entrance between 2nd and 3rd windows has sundial over dated 1753. Left return has large projecting stack. Right return has 7-light window with transom and label mould, possibly C18 or later. C20 extension to rear. Interior of no special interest. Oldest meeting house still in use in the Historic County of Lancashire, Pevsner, Buildings of England, South Lancashire, p385.

Listing NGR: SJ5147795251