

Friends Meeting House, Saffron Walden

High Street, Saffron Walden, Essex, CB10 1AA

National Grid Reference: TL 53741 38269



Statement of Significance

The meeting house has medium heritage significance as a Victorian building which was remodelled and reordered in the late 1960s, but retains some original fittings. The adjacent earlier historic burial ground has high significance.

Evidential value

The building largely dates to 1879 and 1969 but, is reputed to contain earlier fabric from the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century meeting houses on the site. The attached burial ground has been in Quaker use since 1676. The building has medium evidential value and site has high evidential value.

Aesthetic value

The aesthetic value of the meeting house resides chiefly in the street façade of 1879 by an unknown architect, and some of the interior with fitted joinery. The front elevation has high aesthetic value, while other parts of the building are of low aesthetic value.

Historical value

The meeting house and the burial ground are associated with several local families, most notably the Gibsons. George Stacey Gibson brought the Friends' School to Saffron Walden and paid for the rebuilding of the meeting house in 1879. The meeting house and burial ground have high historical value.

Communal value

The building was originally built for Quaker use and the meeting house is a popular venue for local community groups. Its association with the Gibsons also links it to a group of other buildings paid for by the family, which collectively form part of the local identity. The meeting house has high communal value.

Part 1: Core data

1.1 Area Meeting: *Thaxted*

1.2 Property Registration Number: *0002300*

1.3 Owner: *Area Meeting*

1.4 Local Planning Authority: *Uttlesford District Council*

1.5 Historic England locality: *East of England*

1.6 Civil parish: *Saffron Walden*

1.7 Listed status: *Not listed, not locally listed*

1.8 NHLE: *N/a*

1.9 Conservation Area: *Saffron Walden*

1.10 Scheduled Ancient Monument: *No*

1.11 Heritage at Risk: *No*

1.12 Date(s): *1879; 1969*

1.13 Architect(s): *Not known (1879); Norman Frith (1969)*

1.14 Date of visit: *19 June 2014*

1.15 Name of report author: *Johanna Roethe*

1.16 Name of contact(s) made on site: *John Capper and Jane (archivist)*

1.17 Associated buildings and sites: *Warden's cottage (69A High Street), former adult school (69 High Street)*

1.18 Attached burial ground: *Yes*

1.19 Information sources:

Bettley, J. and N. Pevsner, *The Buildings of England: Essex*, 2007, p. 658

Butler, D.M., *The Quaker Meeting Houses of Britain*, 1999, vol. 1, pp. 197–9

Crosfield, J.B., 'Saffron Walden School, a sketch of 200 years, 1702–1902',

<http://www.friends.org.uk/fsswosa/history/swschool200years/swschool200years.htm>

Essex Historic Environment Record, MonUID: MEX1034577

Interpretative panels inside the meeting house

Saffron Walden Meeting House archive, architectural drawings and photos

Uttlesford District Council, planning database
Uttlesford District Council, 'Saffron Walden Conservation Area Appraisal and Management Proposals', 2012
Local Meeting survey by John Capper and Penelope Cummins, 2014 and 2015

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

2.1 Historical background

From 1666 an orchard in Seward's End was used as a Friends' burial ground but only ten burials were recorded there before a cottage on part of the present site was bought in 1676 for £20. The cottage had a large room attached to the rear, which was possibly originally a weaver's room. The garden behind the cottage was used as a burial ground. Later the adjoining two cottages were bought, initially for use by poor widowed Friends. In the 1790s, a new larger meeting room was added to the rear of the three cottages. (Butler and others give the date as 1791; however, the reset date stone on the present rear elevation has actually the date '1798', not '1791' as in Butler's drawing (figure 1).) Around the same time, additional land was acquired to enlarge the burial ground.

In 1879, the Friends' School moved to Saffron Walden at the invitation of George Stacey Gibson (1818–1883), a member of a prominent local Quaker family, a banker, botanist and twice the town's mayor. The school had been founded in 1702 in Clerkenwell, had moved to Islington in 1786 and in 1825 to Croydon. Gibson donated 6¼ acres of land. A further 10 acres were purchased with the proceeds from the sale of the Croydon site which also covered nearly the cost of the construction of the School (architect: Edward Burgess). As the move of the school would mean larger meetings, Gibson also paid for the extension of the meeting house. (While the architect has not been established, it does not seem to have been Burgess (according to Butler).) The three cottages to the front were demolished and replaced by a red brick gabled front containing committee rooms and a narrow first floor room. The meeting room was much extended to the east and provided with a gallery, a timber dado and benches to seat 250 people (figures 2–3). It seems likely that the rear (west) elevation was also rebuilt during this time, reusing the 1798 date stone.

By 1877, two semi-detached buildings containing the caretakers' (now warden's) cottage and adult school had been built on the plot to the south of the meeting house (according to map evidence). Over time, further small additions were built along the south side, mainly containing toilets. In 1969, the interior was remodelled and a new entrance built (architect: Norman Frith). During these works, the meeting room was reduced in size again to form a square room, the former gallery was enclosed to create an additional upstairs room, and the dado panelling and benches were largely removed, apart from those on the east wall which formed part of a new foyer (photos bottom left and bottom right on p.1). The west wall of the meeting room was altered (again reusing the date stone of 1798), with three tall windows with French doors (photo top right, p.1) in place of three high-level clerestory windows (figure 2). The ground floor front rooms were connected to form a larger social room with a larger kitchen. The 1879 staircase was removed and a new staircase built in the newly created foyer. The cost of the alterations was £12,000. In 1988, repairs were made to eradicate wet rot in the kitchen and tea room, costing £35,000.

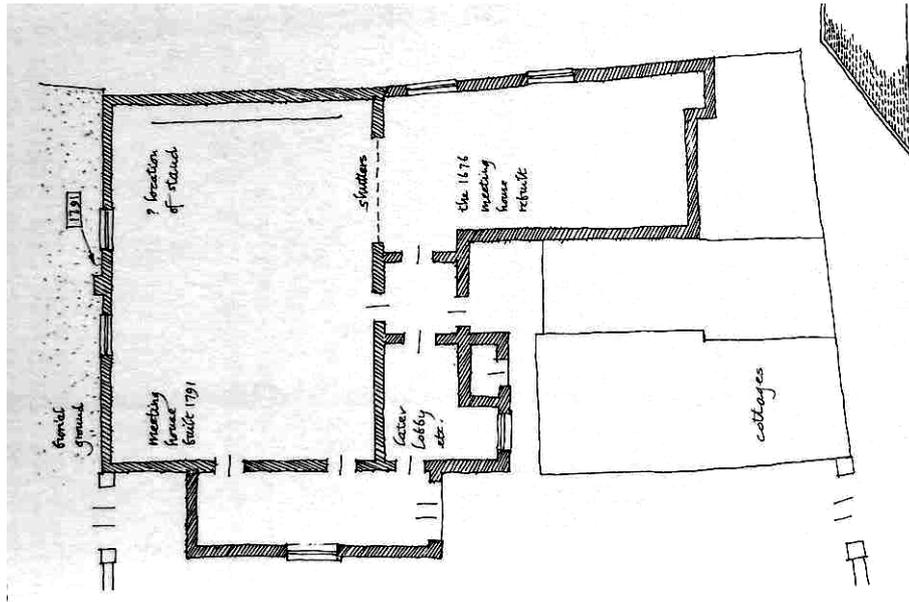


Figure 1: Butler's reconstruction of the meeting house in c.1798 with the weaver's room behind the northern cottage and the 1790s meeting room behind (north is at the top; not to scale) (Butler (1999), vol. 1, p. 197)



Figure 2: Photo of the meeting room in 1968, looking west (Saffron Walden Meeting House archive)



Figure 3: Photo of the meeting room in 1968, looking east
(Saffron Walden Meeting House archive)

2.2 The building and its principal fittings and furnishings

The meeting house largely dates from 1879 and 1969 (Norman Frith), built using brick laid in English and Flemish bond. The street elevation has a stone plinth and stone dressings, and the roof is tiled. The plan is roughly oblong, with a canted street front which follows the line of the street and is not at right angles to the rest of the building. The square meeting room is to the rear (west). The street elevation has two gables, each with oblong four-light ground floor windows and larger four-light first floor windows with transoms. (The truncated pilaster or wall strip beside the southern gable does not seem to relate to a previously adjoining building.) The rear elevation is plain with three tall French doors and the reset date stone of 1798. The roof is complex, with two hipped ranges over the meeting room, a flat roof over hipped slopes above the eastern part of the building, and a hipped roof along the south.

The entrance leads into a large foyer which until 1969 was part of the meeting room. It retains some of the Victorian dado panelling and fixed benches which were removed from the reconfigured meeting room in 1969. The staircase in the foyer also dates from 1969. The meeting room itself is plain, with a timber floor and suspended ceiling. The ground floor room along the street front is now one room with a kitchen. Below this is a disused cellar which can be accessed via a hatch and which still has the basement steps in the location of the 1879 staircase (which was removed above). A corridor runs along the south of the meeting room and gives access to toilets. On the first floor are a narrow room to the east and a larger room to the east (created from part of the former gallery). Reputedly, earlier fabric survives in the building, but none was seen during the site visit.

2.3 Loose furnishings

The meeting room has a few open-backed and unvarnished benches. The meeting house has a collection of eighteenth and nineteenth-century Quaker books, an 1863 print of Elizabeth Fry visiting Newgate, an engraved portrait of her signed by Fry, and a print after Benjamin West's painting of William Penn's Treaty with the Indians (1771–2).

2.4 Attached burial ground (if any)

The burial ground is located to the west of the building. It was acquired in two parts: that to the north in 1676, the larger southern part in the 1790s. It contains burials from c.1676, with the older burials (c.1667–1790s) along the northern boundary. The headstones in the centre of the burial ground (forming six rows) have been laid flat (photo top right). Burials include several members of the Gibson family, including that of George Stacey Gibson, the benefactor of the meeting house and the Friends' School. He was partner in the family firm, the Essex and Saffron Walden Bank (later Gibson, Tuke and Gibson), which in 1896 was one of the twenty banks (mostly with Quaker origins) which merged to form Barclays Bank. The Gibson family also built the town hall, the museum and the former hospital in Saffron Walden. Unusually for a Quaker cemetery, the burial ground also contains a war grave: 2nd Lieutenant Stephen Walker (died 1918), RAF pilot and son of the headmaster of Friends' School, was buried here but the grave has no headstone.

The burial ground is no longer used for burials, but the scattering of ashes takes place here. Plaques on the boundary wall commemorate those whose ashes have been scattered in the burial ground. Inside the meeting house hangs a plan of the burial ground, surveyed in 1930 by C.B. Rowntree and updated up to 1986. It refers to a separate list for the burials before 1724 which do not have headstones. Some of the burial records are in the meeting house archive; others are deposited with the Essex Record Office.

2.5 The meeting house in its wider setting

The meeting house is located in the centre of Saffron Walden, towards the residential southern end of the long High Street. The former adult school (69 High Street, now let as offices) and the warden's cottage (no. 69A) are to the south of the meeting house. The warden's cottage is a two-storey building with a hipped roof, a narrow entrance door and a small canted single-storey bay window. The adjoining former adult school has a gable with bargeboard over windows with architraves. The entrance door is placed centrally between the two ground floor windows. (The interiors were not inspected.)

Nearby houses are of red or gault brick or have rendered façades. The main view of the meeting house is that of the gabled street elevation. The conservation area appraisal highlights the group of meeting house, former adult school and warden's cottage as a group of unlisted buildings which make an important architectural or historical contribution to the conservation area.

2.6 Listed status

The meeting house is currently not listed. It is a confident Victorian statement of the Quaker presence in the town. Unfortunately, neither the identity of the architect of the meeting house nor of the adjacent adult school and warden's cottage has so far been established. The meeting house was extensively altered in 1969, losing most of its Victorian meeting room furnishings and fittings. On balance, it is not considered to be a candidate for listing. It would be a suitable candidate for a local list, should Uttlesford District Council decide to establish one.

The former adult school and warden's cottage are semi-detached buildings of yellow gault brick. They are shown on maps of 1877. It is not clear if these buildings were built for the

Quakers. As relatively plain nineteenth-century buildings they might not be eligible for listing but further research into their dates and architect might provide new information.

2.7 Archaeological potential of the site

The meeting house was built on the site of three small cottages and a weaver's room, possibly of the seventeenth century. The burial ground contains burials from c.1676, with the older burials (c.1667–1790s) along the northern boundary. To the northwest of the site was the site of a medieval cemetery (seventh to eleventh centuries), highlighted on older OS maps. The site of the meeting house and burial ground has high archaeological potential.