

Friends Meeting House, Hertford

50 Railway Street, Hertford, Hertfordshire, SG14 1BA

National Grid Reference: TL 32812 12705



Statement of Significance

Built in 1670, Hertford is the earliest purpose-built Quaker meeting house still standing, and is still in Quaker use. There have been some alterations to the fabric over the last 350 years but the building retains much of its original character, both externally and internally. It is of exceptional heritage significance.

Evidential value

The original fabric has suffered a number of alterations to suit changing requirements, many of which are documented. This makes the building of high evidential value.

Historical value

As the earliest surviving meeting house in the world, the building is clearly of exceptional historical value.

Aesthetic value

The exterior of the building is attractive and the interior still preserves much of its early character. The building is of high aesthetic value.

Communal value

The building, or at least the Quaker Room (formerly the Women's Meeting Room - built in 1738) is well-used by the wider community and the site is of high communal value.

Part 1: Core data

1.1 Area Meeting: *Hertford & Hitchin*

1.2 Property Registration Number: *0012330*

1.3 Owner: *Area Meeting*

1.4 Local Planning Authority: *East Hertfordshire District Council*

1.5 Historic England locality: *East of England*

1.6 Civil parish: *Hertford*

1.7 Listed status: *II**

1.8 NHLE: *1268759*

1.9 Conservation Area: *Hertford*

1.10 Scheduled Ancient Monument: *No*

1.11 Heritage at Risk: *No*

1.12 Date(s): *1670; extensively restored 1953, major strengthening works 1979/80*

1.13 Architect (s): *Original architect or builder not known; 1953 restoration by Hubert Lidbetter; 1980 works by Kirby Cove*

1.14 Date of visit: *19 October 2015*

1.15 Name of report author: *Neil Burton*

1.16 Name of contact(s) made on site: *Neil Atkins, Ray Bomber*

1.17 Associated buildings and sites: *Next to the Meeting House is what is now called The Quaker Room, originally the Women's Meeting Room, built in 1738 but much altered. It is separately listed at grade II (see list description below).*

1.18 Attached burial ground: *The enclosure behind the meeting house is identified by Butler as a burial ground, but the main Quaker burial ground was at Port Hill (see 2.5 below)*

1.19 Information sources:

Butler, D.M., *The Quaker Meeting Houses of Britain*, 1999, vol.1 pp.256-258

Page, W (ed.). 1912. *Victoria County History of Hertfordshire* vol.3. p.492

Rowe, A. Violet, *The First Hertford Quakers* (1970)

Stell, C., *An Inventory of Nonconformist Chapels and Meeting-houses in Eastern England*, 2002, pp.136-8

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

2.1. Historical background

This is the earliest purpose-built Quaker meeting house still standing and the building has been in more or less continuous use for Quaker worship since it was built in 1670. The first meeting of the Society of Friends in Hertford was held in 1655 and land for a burial ground was acquired on the west side of Port Hill in 1661. The present site was purchased in 1669 and the meeting house (for which detailed building accounts survive) was erected in the following year. The exterior has the general appearance of a two storey house, or pair of houses, and indeed was occupied by two women in 1676, but the front conceals a single large room rising the full height of the building. The meeting house was damaged in 1684 but repaired and re-occupied in 1686.

In 1717 it was agreed that the windows on the north and south sides should be made into sash windows and 'the two doors next the gallery closed up and made windows'. It is not clear whether 'gallery' here means the stand, which now occupies the space between the closed-up doorways, or whether there was an actual gallery which has been removed. In any case it is clear that the present stand cannot be earlier than 1717. In 1737 (according to Stell) the sash windows were themselves removed and the lower part of the window openings on the north front bricked-up, leaving only small casements. Confusingly, the two windows on the south front which are not bricked-up now have timber mullions and transoms.

In 1738 a separate building was erected in the yard for the women's business meeting but in c1930 it was halved by a road-widening scheme and rebuilt as a classroom. In 1953 the main building was thoroughly restored with the help of a grant from The Pilgrim Trust and in the late 1970s a steel frame was inserted inside the building to provide additional structural support for the historic fabric.

2.2. The building and its principal fittings and fixtures

See list description below. The meeting house is rectangular on plan and built of old red brick laid in an irregular bond. The tiled roof has twin ridges running back from the main (north) front with a single continuous ridge across the rear (southern) half of the building. The main front has two large gables, each with a three-light casement window at upper level. At lower level were originally three window openings flanked by doorways. The left hand (east) doorway and the lower parts of the windows have been partially bricked-up, leaving only small two-light leaded window openings. The remaining (west) doorway has similar windows in the head. The east front has two small windows. The rear (south) front has two large windows with timber mullions and transoms, originally flanked by doorways but the eastern doorway has been part bricked-up. On the west front, now largely concealed from view, is a substantial brick chimney stack. North of the stack is what appears to be a blocked door opening with a cambered head.

The interior is principally a single large full-height meeting room space, with a shuttered gallery across the west side and a shuttered lobby below. The meeting room has a timber boarded floor. Across the full width of the east side is a triple stand with doors and shaped ends to the benches. A substantial freestanding timber post in the centre of the room supports the wall plates of the roofs, and close to it in the floor is a stone slab marking the former location of a stove. Standing just proud of the walls on all sides are the vertical members of the steel frame inserted in 1980. The lobby has a stair in the south west corner with splat balusters. Both the lobby and the gallery above are heated by very substantial

hearths. The gallery is now divided into two smaller spaces, one of which contains the meeting house library. Both Butler and Stell suggest that the gallery arrangements have been altered and that the present shutters may have replaced a plastered partition.

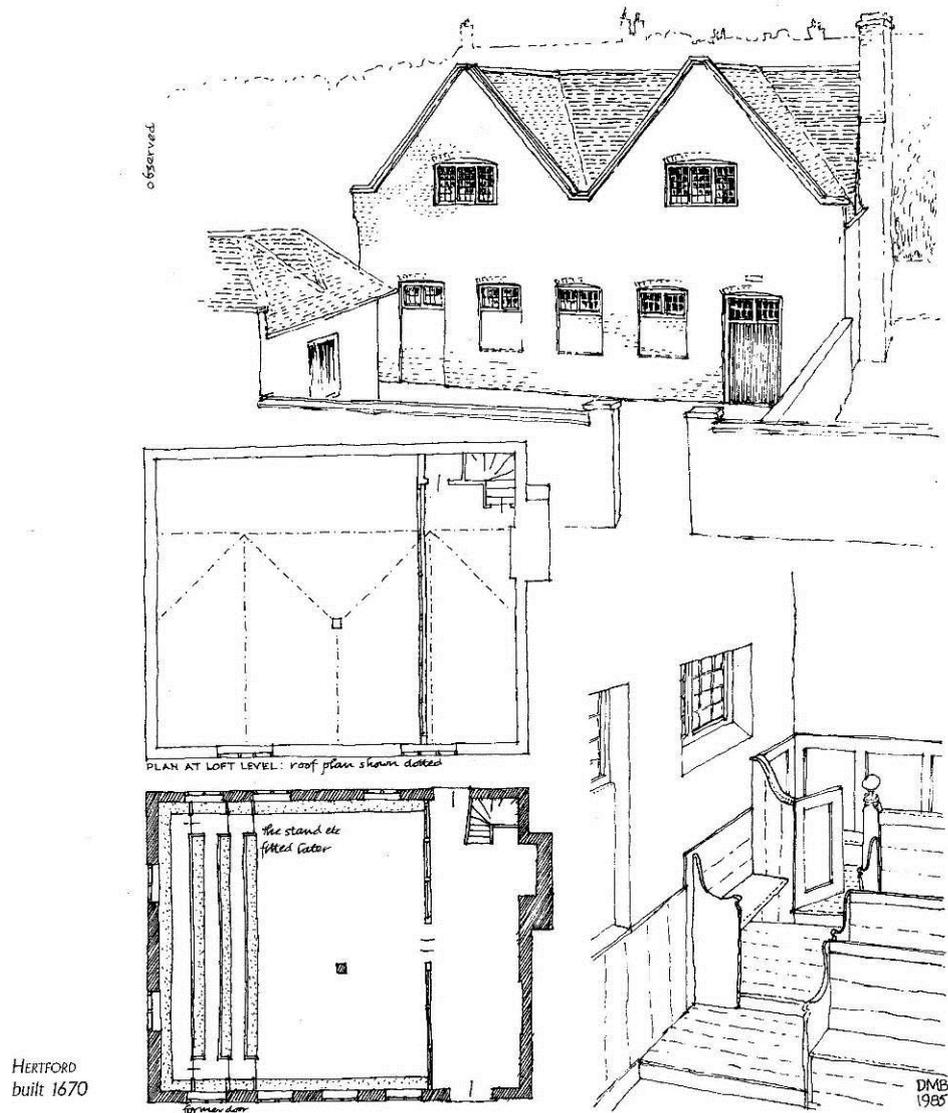


Figure 1: Plan, elevation and detail of elders' stand, from Butler, Vol. 1, p. 256 (north is at the bottom of the plan)

2.3 Loose furnishings

There are a number of unpainted deal benches with shaped ends which probably date from the eighteenth century and later. In the lobby is an elaborate oak chair of seventeenth century type, commonly known as George Fox's chair.

2.4. Attached burial ground (if any)

There is a small burial ground at the rear of the building. It now contains a number of nineteenth century gravestones brought from the Port Hill burial ground (see 2.5 below) and also some twentieth century wall memorial plaques, including one to the architect Charles Holden, best known as the designer of many inter-war London Underground stations.

2.5. The meeting house in its wider setting

The meeting house stands on the east side of the urban centre of Hertford, set back from the busy Railway Street behind a brick wall which was presumably erected when the road was widened in the 1930s. Next to the main meeting house is the former Women's Meeting Room, which was truncated by the same road widening.

A detached burial ground at Port Hill was acquired by the Quakers in 1661. The land was sold to a private owner in 1971 (according to the Local Meeting Survey; Butler says 1872) and the headstones were moved to the garden behind the meeting house (National Grid ref. TL 32301301; HER ID no.10026).

2.6. Listed status

The meeting house is currently listed grade II* and the former women's meeting room is listed grade II. Although it appears that the listing has been reviewed fairly recently, there must be a case for upgrading the main building to grade I if it really is the oldest extant Quaker meeting house in the world (cf the meeting house at Ifield in Sussex which dates from 1675 and is listed grade I).

2.7. Archaeological potential of the site

The site has been in continuous Quaker occupation for at least 350 years and has high archaeological potential.

Part 6: List description (s)

This building is listed under the Planning (Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas) Act 1990 as amended for its special architectural or historic interest.

Name: FRIENDS MEETING HOUSE

List entry Number: 1268759

Location

FRIENDS MEETING HOUSE, RAILWAY STREET

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

County	District	District Type	Parish
Hertfordshire	East Hertfordshire	District Authority	Hertford

Grade: II*

Date first listed: 10-Feb-1950

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

Legacy System Information

The contents of this record have been generated from a legacy data system.

Legacy System: LBS

UID: 461474

List entry Description

Summary of Building

Details

HERTFORD

TL3212NE RAILWAY STREET 817-1/17/191 (South side) 10/02/50 Friends Meeting House

II*

Friends Meeting House. Dated 1670, with C18 alterations. Red brick, irregular bond generally single stretcher course between courses of alternate headers and stretchers; old tiled roofs. EXTERIOR: single storey; open meeting room with west gallery. Front (north) elevation has two 3-light wood casement windows with leaded glazing below segmental header arches, 1 window in lower part of each gable; four 2-light casements on ground floor, that at left originally a doorway, and remainder originally larger mullion and transom windows, but with lower lights removed and brick infilled early C18. Door at right with 2-light fanlight and moulded architrave to frame. Rear (south) elevation has similar door to front, at left, 2 mullion and transom casement windows and at right a 2-light window, originally a fanlight above the now blocked doorway below. Twin gables with moulded brick copings facing the street (north elevation), and main gabled roof at rear with 1 small leaded casement gabled dormer at left. Large brick chimneystack, with projecting band, offset above external chimneybreast on rear right (west) flank. INTERIOR: entrance hall in west bay below gallery, with moveable shutters in panelled partition. Main meeting room has central

octagonal oak column and braces supporting roof structure above. Pine benches, with raised deacons' seat at east - plain bench ends and plank and panel backs, newels with ball finials, panelled dado behind rear row. Red brick fireplace with wood bressumer at rear below gallery, opened up 1970, with 'George Fox's Chair' alongside. Newel stair to right of rear door - square post with tongue moulding and ball on pedestal finial, close string with cut profiled splats and chamfered handrail. Gallery has 2 compartments with plastered front with removable panelled shutters above, some with carved initials and early C18 dates; simple plank doors with strap hinges.

HISTORICAL NOTE: the Hertford Friends Meeting House is believed to be the oldest purpose-built meeting house to have been in continuous use for worship throughout its existence. A Quaker preacher first came to Hertford in 1655, and services were held in private houses, until 1669 the decision was taken to build, at a cost of »243 12s od. George Fox visited the building at least 3 times. It possibly sustained damage in 1683 and was repaired. In 1717 sash windows were installed, but were replaced in 1731 by casement windows, with the lower openings bricked up. In 1981 comprehensive repairs costing »72,000 took place, entailing insertion of a steel corset to take the weight of the roof and tie back the walls. Charles Lamb wrote 'A Quakers' Meeting' one of the 'Essays of Elia' after visiting the Hertford Meeting House in early C19.

(East Herts Archaeological Society Newsletter: 3: Hertford: 1949-1953; The Buildings of England: Pevsner N: Hertfordshire: Harmondsworth: 1977-: 186; Page FM: History of Hertford: Hertford: 1993-: 94-7; Green L: Hertford's Past in pictures: Ware: 1993-: 122; Rowe Dr V: The First Hertford Quakers: 1970-; Hertfordshire Countryside: Clymo HJ: A Hertford Tricentenary: 1970-: 26-7).

Listing NGR: TL3281212705

Priory Rooms (50 Railway St)

This building is listed under the Planning (Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas) Act 1990 as amended for its special architectural or historic interest.

Name: PRIORY ROOMS TO FRIENDS MEETING HOUSE

List entry Number: 1268760

Location

PRIORY ROOMS TO FRIENDS MEETING HOUSE, RAILWAY STREET

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

County	District	District Type	Parish
Hertfordshire	East Hertfordshire	District Authority	Hertford

Grade: II

Date first listed: 09-Sep-1996

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

Legacy System Information

The contents of this record have been generated from a legacy data system.

Legacy System: LBS

UID: 461475

List entry Description

Summary of Building

Details

HERTFORD

TL3212NE RAILWAY STREET 817-1/17/192 Priory Rooms to Friends Meeting House

GV II

Women's Meeting House, now schoolrooms. 1738, altered and part demolished for road widening in 1932 when facade set back by 1 bay. Red brick, laid to Flemish Bond, with double-hipped old tiled roofs, set back behind parapet front. EXTERIOR: two 3-light casement windows at front, 3-light casement window at side, 2-light casement at rear, all with leaded glazing. Reset C18 6-panel door (upper 2 glazed) in C20 projecting flat-roofed porch on south side. Panelling and furnishings removed from interior early C20. INTERIOR: not inspected.

Listing NGR: TL3281512722