

Friends Meeting House, Stafford

Foregate Street, Stafford, ST16 2PX

National Grid Reference: SJ 92017 23719



Statement of Significance

The meeting house has exceptional heritage value as a fine example of a Quaker meeting house and one of the earliest surviving non-conformist buildings in Stafford, built in 1730. The purpose-built meeting house has a little altered interior which retains its historic gallery and fittings.

Evidential value

The building and site has medium evidential value as the site of a Quaker burial ground in use since the late seventeenth century.

Historical value

The meeting house has exceptional historical significance. Quakerism has a long history in Stafford and the meeting house has strong associations with the Babb family who were key drivers in the development of Quakerism in the area. The meeting house retains its historic layout, as well as features dating from the eighteenth century, including the gallery and seating. It is considered to be the best surviving example in Staffordshire.

Aesthetic value

The form and design of the building is typical of early eighteenth century vernacular meeting houses. The exterior, interior spaces and the simplicity of the historic fittings have exceptional aesthetic value.

Communal value

The meeting house has high communal value. It has been in use by Quakers since 1730 and today it is also used by local community groups.

Part 1: Core data

- 1.1 Area Meeting: *Staffordshire*
- 1.2 Property Registration Number: *0013500*
- 1.3 Owner: *Area Meeting*
- 1.4 Local Planning Authority: *Stafford Borough Council*
- 1.5 Historic England locality: *West Midlands*
- 1.6 Civil parish: *Stafford*
- 1.7 Listed status: *II**
- 1.8 NHLE: *1211911*
- 1.9 Conservation Area: *Foregate and St George's*
- 1.10 Scheduled Ancient Monument: *No*
- 1.11 Heritage at Risk: *No*
- 1.12 Date(s): *1730; 1892; 1979*
- 1.13 Architect (s): *Edward Firth; not established; not established*
- 1.14 Date of visit: *24 November 2015*
- 1.15 Name of report author: *Emma Neil*
- 1.16 Name of contact(s) made on site: *Margaret Crossland*
- 1.17 Associated buildings and sites: *Not applicable*
- 1.18 Attached burial ground: *Yes*
- 1.19 Information sources:

Margaret Crossland, Local Meeting Survey, October 2015.

Butler, D.M., *The Quaker Meeting Houses of Britain* (London: Friends Historical Society, 1999), vol. II, pp.560-561.

Dennis, S., *The Early Quaker Movement in Staffordshire 1651 – 1743: From open fellowship to closed sect*. Unpublished PhD Thesis, University of Leicester, 2001.

Hughes, J.R., *Historic Meeting Houses of the Society of Friends in Staffordshire*, 1948

Pevsner, N., *Staffordshire (Buildings of England)*, 2002, p. 246

Staffordshire Borough Council, *Foregate and St George's Conservation Area Appraisal*, 2014

Stafford Meeting House, *historical notes* (undated).

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

2.1. Historical background

In the seventeenth century Friends initially met in each other's houses. The Babb family were influential in the development of Quakerism in Stafford. In 1668, Matthew Babb gave a piece of land for use as a burial ground to the Friends at a cost of 13 shillings, close to his house in Foregate Street. Friends were meeting in a property presumably owned by the Babb family adjacent to the burial ground. In 1725 Friends were given a grant by the Babb family which led to purchase of land behind the old burial ground, for the construction of the present meeting house which was built in 1730, at a cost of £141. Further land was purchased on site in 1758. The meeting house met the needs of the Friends for 134 years until space was needed to accommodate mission and Adult School work. An extension was built in 1892 at the expense of George Sandy, at a cost of £209.1s.4d. Thirteen years later additional space was required again to continue the mission and schooling work; at a cost of £400 a corrugated iron structure was built on the burial ground to the west of the meeting house. By 1975, this structure had been demolished as a result of a decline in mission work. In 1956 Butler (1999) records that the lattice windows on the meeting house were replaced by the architect Frederick Gregory and by 1979 there was an extension to the rear of the 1892 building to provide ancillary facilities.

2.2. The building and its principal fittings and fixtures

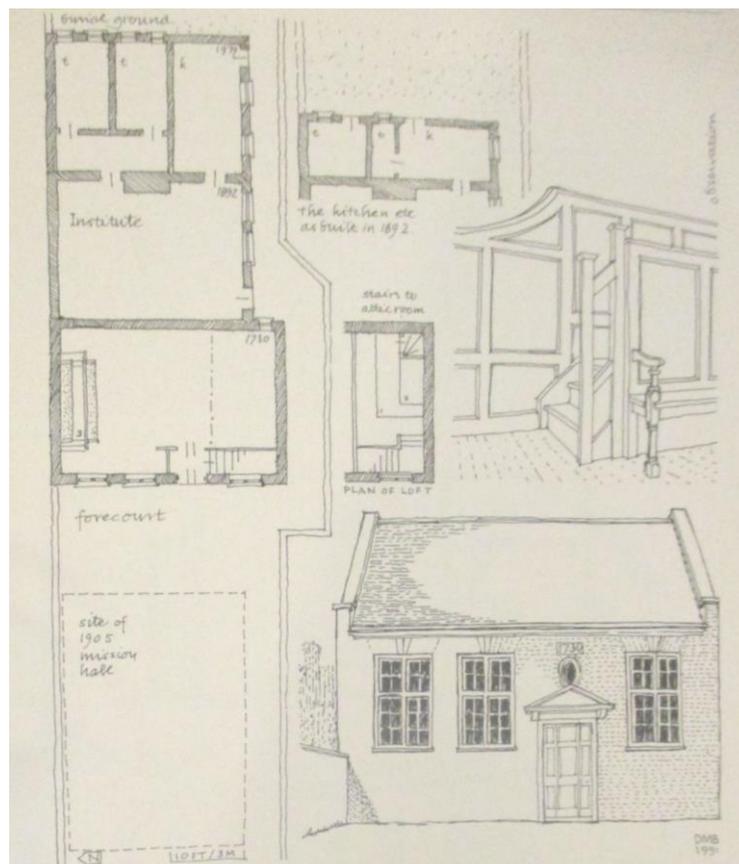


Figure 1: Ground floor plan of the Priory Road meeting house in 1952 as reconstructed by Butler (north is to the left: not to scale) (Butler (1999), vol. 2, p.561)

The meeting house was built in 1730 and extended in 1892 and 1979. The 1730 building is constructed in red brick and has a tiled roof with coped gables. Rectangular in plan this is a

single storey, three window range structure. The west elevation forms the principal entrance into the meeting house with a panelled door to the right of centre with a pedimented canopy and bull's eye window above and a date stone below the cornice '1730'. The 12-pane windows have rubbed brick flat arches with fluted keystones and casements (replaced in the twentieth century). To the east elevation is a small 4-pane window and adjoining the 1730 building to the rear (east) is a one-storey two-span extension built in 1892. On the south elevation is a planked timber door providing the rear entrance into the building, and two 6-pane timber windows. Adjoining the west elevation of the 1982 range is a modern single-storey flat roofed extension providing the ancillary facilities, built in 1972.

Internally, the main meeting room is a small handsome space, lit by three windows along with the bull's eye window to the west, the floorboards have been covered with carpet. The walls are panelled in oak to head height, there is an elders' stand with fixed benches to the north end with original fittings. The gallery space is to the south; the original gallery stairs with turned balusters are reached via a folding door to the right hand side. The gallery contains tiered steps and further stairs leading into the attic, which contains a fire place and small window. Leading from the meeting room is the 'Institute' dating 1892 with a M-shaped roof exposed, supported by a queen post truss with a series of purlins and rafters, supported on decorative timber corbels at the eaves. The walls are covered with tongue and groove panelling with a fireplace to the east, the door to the left leads to the ancillary facilities.

2.3 Loose furnishings

No loose furnishings of particular note.

2.4 Attached burial ground

The former burial ground is located to the west of the meeting house and is now a car park. The burials cover a date range between 1795 and 1900, records are held in Staffordshire Records Office.

2.5 The meeting house in its wider setting

The meeting house is located on the edge of Stafford town centre to the north, and falls within the boundaries of Foregate and St George's conservation area. The building is within the character area of Foregate which is characterised by a number of institutional buildings including Stafford HM Prison (parts listed grade II) and the unlisted Staffordshire General Infirmary (now offices). Foregate Street itself comprises a mixture of buildings dating from the eighteenth century with some twentieth century infill developments. The meeting house is set well back from the road, with a small red brick wall and metal gate to the entrance, a car parking area in front of the building to the west and additional metal fencing directly in front of the building. The urban setting includes a modern one-storey brick Kingdom Hall of the Jehovah's Witnesses to the north and the meeting house is partly overshadowed by a three storey mid-twentieth building to the south with shop fronts and flats above, the majority of which are unoccupied. To the east of the meeting house the two phases of extensions and an area of landscaping are bounded by a red brick wall.

2.6 Listed status

The building is appropriately listed at II*.

2.7 Archaeological potential of the site

The Staffordshire Historic Environment Record was consulted. An earlier building used as a meeting house was on the site and there was a burial ground here from the late seventeenth century. Overall, the archaeological potential of the site, including the former burial ground, is considered to be medium.

Part 6: List description

Name: FRIENDS' MEETING HOUSE

List entry Number: 1211911

Location

FRIENDS' MEETING HOUSE, FOREGATE STREET

County: Staffordshire

District: Stafford

District Type: District Authority

Parish:

Grade: II*

Date first listed: 16-Jan-1951

List entry Description

Details

STAFFORD

SJ9223NW FOREGATE STREET 590-1/9/24 (East side)

16/01/51 Friends' Meeting House

II*

Friends' meeting house. Dated 1730 with late C19 addition. Brick; tile roof with coped gables. Rectangular structure set back from road Single-storey; 3-window range. Top wooden cornice. Entrance to right of centre has pegged frame and altered panelled door, bracketed gabled canopy and bull's eye window with bull's eye glass above, and datestone below cornice. Windows have rubbed brick flat arches with fluted keys and cross casements. Small window to left return. Rear has single-storey wing next to window with pegged frame. INTERIOR has original fittings: panelling, gallery with stair with turned balusters; overseers' bench and elders' gallery. A well-preserved example of an early meeting house, the best in Staffordshire. (Buildings of England: Pevsner N: Staffordshire: London: 1974-: 246; Victoria County History of Staffordshire: Greenslade MW: A History of Stafford, taken from V.C.H.: London: 1979-: 253).

Listing NGR: SJ9202223722

Selected Sources

Books and journals

Page, W, The Victoria History of the County of Stafford, (1979), 253

Pevsner, N, The Buildings of England: Staffordshire, (1974), 246