

Friends Meeting House, Northfield

Church Road, Birmingham, B31 2LD

National Grid Reference: SP 02342 79721



Statement of Significance

The building has medium heritage significance as a meeting house purpose-built in 1929, by Quaker architect Ernest Hickman. The site has connections with the Cadbury family who donated the site for the present meeting house.

Evidential value

This is a purpose-built structure dating from the beginning of the twentieth century, not on a site of a former building. It is of low evidential value.

Historical value

The meeting house has medium historical value, as a relatively recent building typical of the small, plain, Neo-Georgian meeting houses of this date in the Birmingham area. It has associations with George Cadbury who donated a piece of land for the present meeting house. Church Road is also home to the former Friends meeting house and collectively provides a local context into Quakerism in the area.

Aesthetic value

The meeting house is designed in neo-Georgian style following the trend set by Hubert Lidbetter for inter-war meeting house designs. The symmetrical frontage, sweeping eaves, attractive brick work and the large sash windows are all typical of this style. The building is well-designed and has medium aesthetic value.

Communal value

The meeting house was built for Quaker use. However, it is also a community resource and has high communal value.

Part 1: Core data

- 1.1 Area Meeting: *Central England*
- 1.2 Property Registration Number: 0026650
- 1.3 Owner: *Area Meeting*
- 1.4 Local Planning Authority: *Birmingham City Council*
- 1.5 Historic England locality: *West Midlands*
- 1.6 Civil parish: *Birmingham*
- 1.7 Listed status: *Not listed*
- 1.8 NHLE: *Not applicable*
- 1.9 Conservation Area: *No*
- 1.10 Scheduled Ancient Monument: *No*
- 1.11 Heritage at Risk: *No*
- 1.12 Date(s): *1929; 1961; twenty first century*
- 1.13 Architect (s): *Ernest Hickman; not established; not established*
- 1.14 Date of visit: *7 November 2015*
- 1.15 Name of report author: *Emma Neil*
- 1.16 Name of contact made on site: *Harriet Martin*
- 1.17 Associated buildings and sites: *No*
- 1.18 Attached burial ground: *No*
- 1.19 Information sources:
 - Broomfield, M. A., *Bournville Then and Now* (York: William Sessions Ltd, 2001)
 - Butler, D.M., *The Quaker Meeting Houses of Britain* (London: Friends Historical Society, 1999), vol. 1, pp.83-87.
 - Pickvance, E., *Northfield Meeting House*, 2000
 - Harriet Martin, Local Meeting Survey, October 2015.

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

2.1 Historical background

In the late nineteenth century George Cadbury had purchased Street Farm, an area of 105 acres about 200m north of St Laurence Church, the centre of the ancient village of Northfield. Most of the farm was added to the Bournville Village Trust and now forms its southwest boundary. In 1905 some of the land was given to Birmingham Council to add to the city park now called Victoria Common opened in 1901. A plot was kept back and eventually used for Quaker purposes. During the nineteenth century Friends from Cofton Hacketts (south of Northfield) had first began to meet in Longbridge, in what is known today as the Christadelphian Hall. Friends later met at various locations including a hall in Station Road and a disused malt house located along Bunbury Road. George and Elizabeth Cadbury built the “Friends Meeting House” (later called the “Northfield Institute”, today “The Adult Education Centre”) for Friends’ use on land from Street Farm. George and his brother Richard were advocates of providing facilities to provide educational, leisure and worship facilities under one roof in Birmingham. The “Friends Meeting House” on Church Road opened in 1892 and consisted of a school room, skittle alley and a coffee tavern. Following in this tradition the Selly Oak Institute opened in 1894 and the Friends Institute (Moseley Road) in 1899. The Northfield Institute remained the venue for worship for the next thirty-eight years.

Other structures built on the plot acquired as part of the Street Farm purchase included six cottages (the Sudbury Cottages). These were intended originally to house Friends but are now all in private ownership. Southeast of the Northfield Institute another building was constructed which George Cadbury gave to Warwickshire Monthly Meeting. Originally it served as a post office; in recent years the main building has been leased to an estate agent. An annex to the rear which had served as a used bookshop for many years was renovated and extended in 2007 by Central England Area Meeting to make the Northfield Ecocentre.

During the early years of the twentieth century Northfield Friends were considering relocating the Meeting to a new meeting house. Factors such as changes in membership, costs of maintaining a building the size of the Northfield Institute and increased traffic on Church Road played a strong part in the decision. Friends of other institutes in the city were also facing similar predicaments. Butler (1999) notes that the meeting house was damaged by fire, which influenced the decision for a new smaller meeting house. The institute was given to the Birmingham Education Authority and is now occupied by the Northfield Ecocentre.

The new meeting house was designed by Ernest J Hickman, and opened in 1930, at a cost of £3,400. It was located on a site donated by George Cadbury to the southeast of the Sudbury Cottages and the Northfield Ecocentre. To the rear it adjoins Victoria Common. It is separated from Church Road by three Bournville Trust houses. Meeting House Lane (still in Friends ownership) gives access to the Meeting House and Victoria Common.

In 1961, the meeting house was extended to provide a class room (now quiet room) to the north west of the meeting house. In 1975 a suspended ceiling was introduced into the main meeting room and by the late twentieth century the kitchen and additional storerooms and accessible WC had been added.



Figure 1: The interior of the meeting room prior to the installation of the suspended ceiling (Northfield MH Archive)

2.2 The building and its principal fittings and fixtures

The meeting house was built in 1929 from designs by Quaker architect Edward Hickman and opened in 1930. The building was built in three phases; the original meeting house with an I-plan, extended in 1961 to the north east corner and further extended in the twenty first century. It is built in brown / red brick laid in Flemish bond, the hipped roof is covered in clay tiles. The main entrance is to the south west (for clarity in the report this will be referred to as the west); the symmetrical front has a slightly projecting hipped central porch with pilasters, swept eaves and dog tooth detailing to eaves. The arched brick doorway with keystone surrounds the double timber and glazed doors with fanlight. To each side of the entrance are 2-light timber casement windows.

The north and south side elevations are symmetrically arranged with a 3-bay range to the main body of the meeting house with a parapet to the roof, 20-pane sash windows flanking the central double glazed doors leading to the garden on the south-east elevation. At each end of the elevation are projecting bays with sweeping hipped roofs and 12-pane sliding sash windows. The twenty first century extension is attached to the north east corner of the meeting room; a small flat roof structure built in red / orange brick. To the rear is the 1961 extension designed sympathetically to the main meeting house, with pitched roof and built in a brown brick.

The main entrance from the west leads into a small lobby area flanked each side by toilet facilities. The meeting room is light and spacious, with a hardwood herringbone floor, walls are plastered and painted with picture rails. The timber roof structure was formerly exposed but now there is a suspended ceiling but this still retains the beam structure creating a grid design. The room is well lit from the sash windows to the north and south walls. Two doorways are located to the north east leading to the ancillary facilities, nursery and quiet room. The corridor has exposed brickwork where the original external wall of the meeting house can be seen.

2.3 Loose furnishings

There are no furnishings of particular note.

2.4 Attached burial ground (if any)

None

2.5 The meeting house in its wider setting

Northfield is located six miles south west of Birmingham. Much of the area developed prior to the First World War; properties lined on Church Road are a mixture of detached dwellings with gables facing the road and short terraces with pitched roofs and bay windows. The former meeting house is located along Church Road now occupied by the Northfield Adult Education Centre. There are areas of infill development including a telephone exchange in a four storey blue / black brick flat roofed building which is characterised by a series of semi-circular sliding sashes at ground level. Meeting House Lane (owned by Central England Area Meeting) runs off of Church Road between three Bournville Village Trust houses to the north and the telephone exchange to the south. It gives access to Northfield Meeting House to its left, Victoria Common and a Council car park behind the telephone exchange to its right. The meeting house grounds include parking for about twelve cars and a garden with mature trees. High hedges and a gated fence enclose these grounds.

2.6 Listed status

Not listed. The meeting house would be worthy inclusion on a local list.

2.7 Archaeological potential of the site

The Birmingham Historic Environment Record was consulted and no records have been identified for the site. Historic OS maps reveal no previous building on the site of the present meeting house. The site is likely to be of low archaeological potential.