

Friends Meeting House, Central Bristol

Champion Square, St Pauls, Bristol, BS2 9DB

National Grid Reference: ST 59634 73403



Statement of Significance

The Bristol area was a major centre of Quakerism in the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The present meeting house is relatively recent in date, having been built in 1962 as the successor to Quakers Friars, a major building of the mid-eighteenth century (now in secular use). It is on the site of a burial ground associated with the adjoining Quaker workhouse (now flats). Although the present building is of overall low significance, it occupies a site of high evidential and historical value, and the building is of high communal value.

Evidential value

The meeting house was built in 1962, and is of low evidential value. However, it occupies the site of a seventeenth-century burial ground, next door to the former Quaker workhouse (listed Grade II), both elements of high evidential value.

Historical value

Quaker witness arrived in Bristol in the 1650s, and the city proved to be fertile ground. A meeting house was built on the Blackfriars site in 1670, replaced by a fine new building in 1747-9 (listed Grade I). The present meeting house is the successor to this, and while in itself of low historical value, is on a site (the former burial ground and adjoining workhouse) of high historical value.

Aesthetic value

The meeting house is an economical design of the early 1960s and, while functional and fit for purpose, is of low aesthetic value. The small courtyard garden at the rear is an attractive space.

Communal value

The building is well used by local community groups as well as Friends, and is used each night as an emergency shelter for the homeless. It is of high communal value.

Part 1: Core data

- 1.1 Area Meeting: *Bristol*
- 1.2 Property Registration Number: *0031800*
- 1.3 Owner: *Area Meeting*
- 1.4 Local Planning Authority: *Bristol City Council*
- 1.5 Historic England locality: *South West*
- 1.6 Civil parish: *City of Bristol NPA*
- 1.7 Listed status: *Not listed*
- 1.8 NHLE: *N/a*
- 1.9 Conservation Area: *No*
- 1.10 Scheduled Ancient Monument: *No*
- 1.11 Heritage at Risk: *No*
- 1.12 Date(s): *1962*
- 1.13 Architect(s): *Not established*
- 1.14 Date of visit: *31 August 2016*
- 1.15 Name of report author: *Andrew Derrick*
- 1.16 Name of contact(s) made on site: *Sam McNair (warden), Colin Milsom*
- 1.17 Associated buildings and sites: *Detached burial ground in Lower Hazel, Alveston, near Thornbury; detached burial ground in Lawrence Weston (walls Grade II); former Quaker workhouse adjoining (Grade II, now separately owned); former Quaker's Friars Meeting House nearby in city centre (Grade I, now separately owned)*
- 1.18 Attached burial ground: *On site of former workhouse burial ground (no interments)*
- 1.19 Information sources:

Butler, D.M., *The Quaker Meeting Houses of Britain*, 1999, vol. 2, pp. 515-528

Foyle, A., *Pevsner Architectural Guides: Bristol*, 2009, pp. 173-4

Higginbotham, P., Workhouse website, <http://www.workhouses.org.uk/BristolQuaker/>

Lidbetter, H., *The Friends Meeting House*, 1979, pp. 18, 20, 24, 27, 29, 93

Mortimer, R., *Early Bristol Quakerism; The Society of Friends in the City 1654-1700*, Bristol branch of the Historical Association, reprint 2004

Stell, C., *An Inventory of Nonconformist Chapels and Meeting-Houses in Central England*, 1986

Local Meeting Survey, by Roger Cann, April 2016

HER info on *Know your place* (maps.bristol.gov.uk/knowyourplace)

Website, <http://www.thornburyroots.co.uk/church-cemetery/quakers-350-years/>

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

2.1 Historical background

The Central Meeting House is the successor to two earlier meeting houses in central Bristol. A brief account of these is given here, along with mention of two now-demolished meeting houses belonging to the Temple meeting and three detached burial grounds in the Bristol area which are no longer attached to any one meeting. Reference is also made to other meeting houses outside the city which have been closed or demolished.

Early Quakerism in Bristol



Figure 1: Enlarged detail from Millerd's plan of Bristol, 1673, showing 1770 meeting house (<http://www.brh.org.uk/gallery/millerd.html>)

The Quaker message was brought to Bristol in July 1654 by John Audland and Thomas Airey. One of the first followers was Dennis Hollister, a former Anglican minister and member of Cromwell's Barebones Parliament. By 1656 two public meeting places were in use, the old Friary orchard (belonging to Hollister) for larger meetings, and a site in Broadmead for smaller gatherings. George Fox preached to thousands in the orchard in 1656, and in total his *Journal* records ten visits to Bristol. In 1662 Friends rented a first floor room in Broadmead, which was adapted and extended; it was here that Fox married Margaret Fell in October 1669.

Also in 1669, land was purchased for the first purpose-built meeting house in the city, on the site of a thirteenth-century former Dominican friary (Blackfriars). Part of the site was owned by Hollister, from whom it was purchased for £200. Here a meeting house was built in 1670 at a cost of £655, along with a burial ground (on the site of the medieval burial ground of the friars). The precise appearance of this first building is not certain; a sketch on Millerd's plan

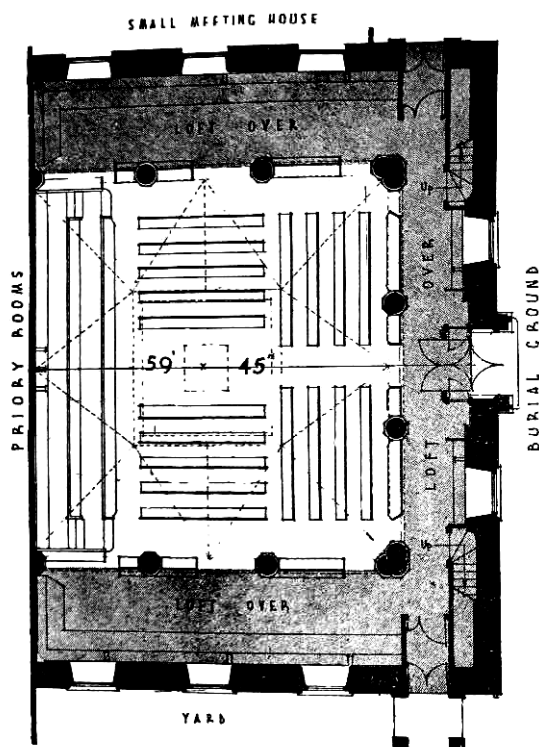
of Bristol (figure 1) indicates a not untypical late-seventeenth-century design, of two storeys with a steep roof surmounted by a cupola or lantern. A conjectural plan in Butler (p. 517) gives an idea of its possible internal layout, based on various documentary sources.

As was common at this time (the Conventicles Act was passed in 1670), the meeting house was almost immediately closed by the authorities. Meetings resumed in due course, but the building was again attacked and damaged by a mob in 1681. Between 1697 and 1699 William and Hannah Penn lived in Bristol – the streets on the Hollister estate laid out about this time included the names Penn, Philadelphia and Hollister.

The Temple Street Meeting Houses

A second Bristol meeting was established in 1667, when a lease was acquired on premises in Temple Street, south of the river and outside the city boundary. Like the meeting house at the Friars, this was briefly closed by the authorities in 1670 and suffered damage in 1681. In 1764 it was replaced by a purpose-built meeting house, built nearby. This remained in use until 1834, and was sold by 1845. The building does not survive.

The 1747-9 Meeting House



Figs. 38 and 38a Bristol (1747)
See also plates XXXIII and XXXIV
Reference to the former will assist in the understanding of this curious erection on the flat roof.



Figure 2: Plan and section of 1747-9 meeting house, from Lidbetter, p.73

In 1747 it was decided to demolish the 1670 meeting house at the Friars and replace it with a new and more commodious building on the same site. This was the work of Quaker builders, George Tully and his son William, with the stonework and architectural details supplied by the renowned Bristol architect Thomas Paty. The building (figure 2) had similarities with Wesley's New Rooms at Bristol, the oldest Methodist chapel in the world, which had been completed in 1739 and extended, possibly by George Tully, in 1747. Both buildings had galleries or lofts on three sides, with the bay divisions marked by a giant order of Doric columns, and a central lantern.

The new meeting house opened in 1749, by which time the whole site (including burial ground) had also been enclosed by a wall. The list entry describes the building as 'exceptionally ambitious for a Quaker building', and not everybody approved of this show of architectural extravagance. Butler quotes one Friend visiting from Ireland in 1794 who considered 'it would do as well to have less mouldings, cornices etc., which I think would probably cost a good deal less'. However, a Bristol Friend thought the interior 'a good specimen of chastened and correct taste'.

Enlargement took place from 1828 with the purchase of more of the friary buildings, including Cutler's and Baker's Halls, and the erection of further ancillary buildings, including a library. A caretaker's cottage was added in c.1833-5, possibly to the designs of George Dymond (Foyle).

After the Second World War plans for the redevelopment of the city centre led to the sale of the meeting house to the City Council, agreed in 1954 and completed in 1956. The building was converted to use as a registry office, and is described as such in the list entry (first written in 1959). More recently it has been turned into a restaurant (figure 3), in association with the creation of a new civic square and retail centre. The building is little altered externally, and retains its main internal volumes and galleries, but the seating and elders' stand have been lost. A new stair to the gallery has been installed near the position of the stand.



Figure 3: Interior of 1747-9 former meeting house, 2016

The 1962 meeting house and the Quaker workhouse



Figure 4: Former Quaker workhouse (listed Grade II), on site adjoining present meeting house

The new meeting house was built in what was New Street, then River Street and is now Champion Square (named after the eighteenth-century Quaker family firm of porcelain manufacturers). The site was already in Quaker ownership, being the burial ground of the adjoining former workhouse. Founded in 1696 and established on the present site in 1700, this was the first Quaker workhouse in the country. The complex included an orphanage, school, almshouse as well as the burial ground. The inmates (up to forty five in number) were mainly employed in the manufacture of worsted cloths. The building was extended in 1867, but was sold in 1929 for conversion to workers' flats. It was later taken over by the council, becoming New Street Flats (under which name it is listed Grade II), but in 2013 was sold for refurbishment as modern apartments (figure 4).

The burial ground was not sold in 1929, although the burials were disinterred and relocated to Avon View Cemetery in 1932. Most of the surviving headstones were moved to Bedminster Meeting House (*qv*) when the present Central Meeting House was built in 1962. The site was chosen after one at 31-35 Queen Square, offered by the City Council, had been rejected as too large and costly (after Hubert Lidbetter had drawn up plans). The architect for the present meeting house has not been established. It may have been Lidbetter, who with his son was still designing meeting houses at this time, but the design also has similarities with Imrie, Porter & Wakefield's earlier (1954) meeting house at Bedminster. This needs further research.

Alterations to the meeting house were carried out in 1994-5 under the direction of Quattro Design Architects, mainly to improve access, and further works of refurbishment took place in 2014-15 (architect Tangent Studios Ltd).

2.2 The building and its principal fittings and fixtures

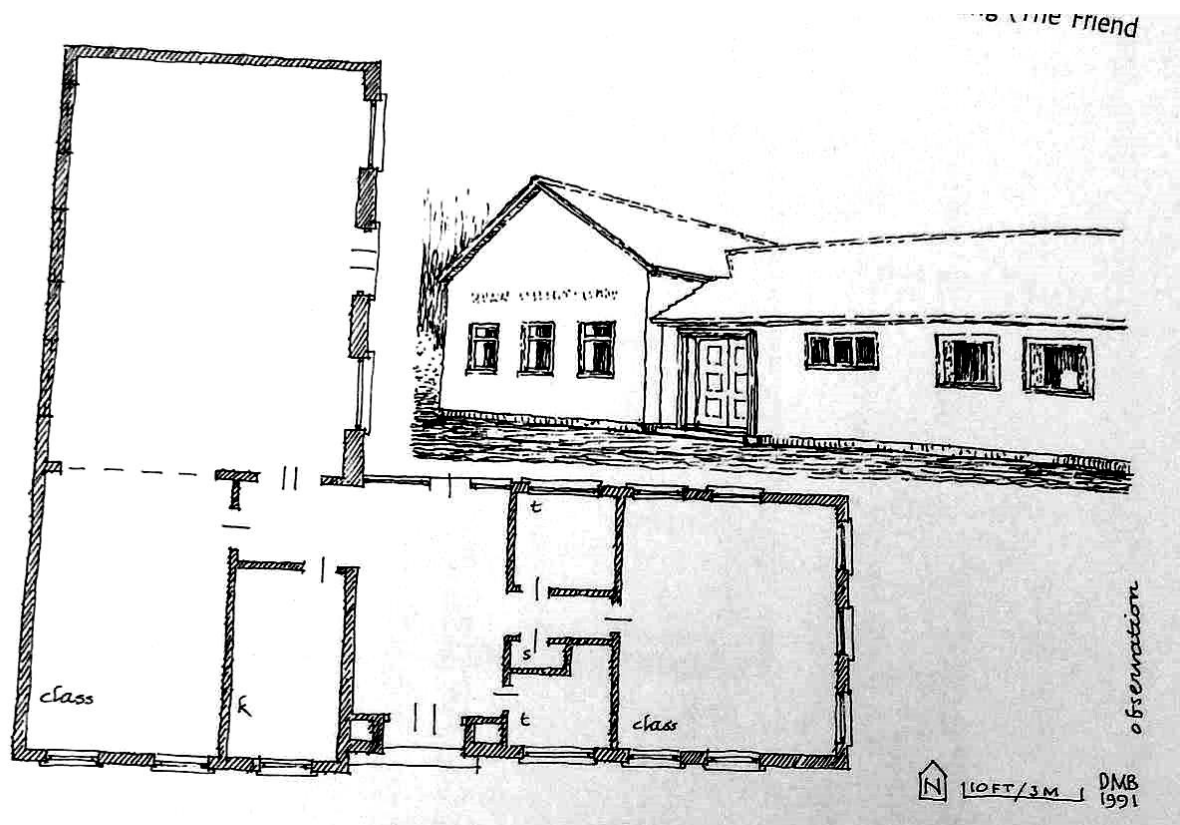


Figure 5: Plan and elevation of present meeting house, from Butler, Vol. 2, 1999, p. 528

The meeting house was opened in 1962. It is a single storey structure, L-shaped on plan, faced in buff coloured bricks laid in an irregular bond, under pantile roofs. The original metal-framed windows have been in some cases renewed in uPVC. The building consists of two ranges, the slightly higher one with a gable end towards the street, which houses the main meeting room, a smaller meeting room, a kitchen and WCs (the ancillary spaces reconfigured in 1994-5 and no longer as drawn by Butler in 1991, figure 5). A subsidiary range at right angles is set back a little, and contains the main entrance, with reconstituted stone surround, and further meeting/class rooms and WCs giving off the entrance lobby to the right. In the angle of the two ranges at the rear is a small courtyard garden, with three full-height windows/doors to the meeting room. The interior spaces are plain in character, with woodblock floors and plastered walls. The main meeting room has a suspended ceiling.

2.3 Loose furnishings

There are no loose furnishings of particular note, but the meeting does possess a painting of elders in the elders' stand at Quakers Friars, dating from 1894 and possibly a copy of an earlier painting, acquired in 1998. There is also an interesting (unframed) post-war plan showing the City Council's plans for redevelopment around Quakers Friars.

2.4 Attached burial ground (if any)

The meeting house is built on the site of the burial ground associated with the former workhouse. The burials were disinterred in 1932, and most of the headstones relocated to Bedminster (*qv*) when the present Central Meeting House was built. However, a few headstones remain, incorporated into an outside table in the courtyard (figure 6).



Figure 6: Reused headstones supporting slab table top in courtyard

2.5 The meeting house in its wider setting

The meeting house occupies a fairly central location, close to the Cabot Circus retail development, in the old market area. It is a short walk from the 1747-9 meeting house. Champion Square is an informal space, not really a square, which has been nicely repaved, with priority to pedestrians. There is a small car park in front of the meeting house. Next door, the Grade II-listed former workhouse building survives (figure 4), now much altered and converted to apartments. On the other side of the square is a surviving row of red brick and rendered late Georgian properties, including the Phoenix pub, listed Grade II. Nearby, a small green space has been created out of the burial ground of the former St Matthias church.

Other meeting houses and detached burial grounds

A number of meeting houses and burial grounds in the Bristol area that do not survive in Quaker ownership, or at all, or are not attached to a particular local meeting, may be mentioned here. They have not been visited as part of this review.

The earliest burial ground in the city was near the church of St Mary Redcliffe, off **Redcliffe Hill** (NGR ST590724). This was an existing burial ground acquired for Quaker use in 1665. By 1950 it had been made into a public garden, with the burials reinterred at Avon View Cemetery. It is understood that a grotto in the cliff at the rear of the site contains some memorials. It is no longer in Quaker ownership.

Before this, in 1656, a burial ground had been established at **Lower Hazel**, Alveston, near Thornbury (NGR ST6261787465) in South Gloucestershire. This remains in use, and the Area Meeting is responsible for its care and maintenance. It is said to contain a number of decorative early headstones.

A burial ground at Kings Weston Lane, **Lawrence Weston**, to the west of the city, dating from 1690, also remains in nominal use, and is maintained by the Area Meeting. Lying at the junction of Kings Weston Lane and Broadlands Drive, it is a long, narrow, rectangular plot, enclosed by a rubble stone wall with a gateway at the southwest end with stone tablet inscribed 'FRIENDS BURIAL GROUND 1690' (figure 7). The wall is listed Grade II (NHLE entry number 1209719).



Figure 7: entrance to Quaker burial ground at Kings Weston Lane (photo: Local Meeting)

The Kings Weston Lane burial ground was associated with a meeting house in **Kings Weston Road** which had been built in 1718, replacing one of 1670. Extended in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, this was closed in 1893 and sold in 1924. The buildings survive in residential use ('Quakers Meet') and are listed Grade II (listing NGR: ST5493878145).

In 1693 William Rogers donated a farmhouse at **Olveston**, South Gloucestershire. This was adapted to serve as a meeting house, and extended to the rear in 1782. The meeting was laid down in 1868, and after a period of use as a Methodist Sunday School the building was sold in 1951. It is now in residential use, and is listed Grade II (listing NGR: ST6005986792).

Also in South Gloucestershire, and associated with the burial ground at Lower Hazel, a meeting house was built in the early eighteenth century at John Street, **Thornbury**. It was rebuilt in 1791 and remained in use until 1847, after which it was let. It was sold in 1934 and became a warehouse, before finally being demolished in 1984. The site is now occupied by Quaker Court, providing sheltered accommodation for the elderly (the meeting reconvened in 1976 and today uses hired premises).

2.6 Listed status

Central Meeting House is not listed and is not considered to be a candidate for listing. The former workhouse adjoining the site (no longer in Quaker ownership) is listed Grade II. The former meeting house (Quakers Friars), built in 1747 and also no longer in Quaker ownership, is listed Grade I. The boundary walls of the detached burial ground at Kings Weston are listed Grade II.

2.7 Archaeological potential of the site

The meeting house is built over a burial ground close to the historic core of the city. Although the burials were reinterred in the 1930s, this is unlikely to have been under archaeological supervision. The site is of high archaeological potential.