

***Friends Meeting House, Blackheath***

*Lawn Terrace, London, SE3 9LL*

*National Grid Reference: TQ 39518 75930*



***Statement of Significance***

***A small concrete Brutalist jewel of the early 1970s, sitting happily alongside earlier buildings, within the Blackheath Conservation Area. Although of relatively recent date, the meeting house has overall high significance.***

***Evidential value***

***This is a purpose-built structure of relatively recent date, although it retains some loose furnishings from previous meeting houses. It is of medium evidential value.***

### **Historical value**

***The Blackheath Meeting has its origins in the late seventeenth-century meetings at Woolwich and Deptford, but has only occupied the present site since the early 1970s. The architect of the meeting house is a notable figure in post-war modernist design, and this gives the building high historical value.***

### **Aesthetic value**

***The meeting house is a small, jewel-like Brutalist design (terms not usually conjoined), ingeniously planned to overcome and then exploit the level changes presented by the site. The chamfered square form evokes a medieval chapter house, and the raised square lantern acts as a beacon. The building forms an arresting termination of the view down Independents Road, and makes a positive contribution to the local conservation area. It is thought to be the only concrete Brutalist meeting house in the country. It is of exceptional aesthetic value.***

### **Communal value**

***The building and its facilities are well used by Friends and by the wider community. The building is a prominent feature in the local townscape, within London's oldest conservation area. The meeting house is of high communal value.***

## **Part 1: Core data**

- 1.1 Area Meeting: *South East London*
- 1.2 Property Registration Number: *0000950*
- 1.3 Owner: *Six Weeks Meeting (beneficial owner), Friends Trusts (legal owner)*
- 1.4 Local Planning Authority: *London Borough of Lewisham*
- 1.5 Historic England locality: *London*
- 1.6 Civil parish: *Blackheath NPA*
- 1.7 Listed status: *Not listed*
- 1.8 NHLE: *N/a*
- 1.9 Conservation Area: *Blackheath*
- 1.10 Scheduled Ancient Monument: *No*
- 1.11 Heritage at Risk: *No*
- 1.12 Date(s): *1971-2*
- 1.13 Architect (s): *Trevor Dannatt*
- 1.14 Date of visit: *7 October 2015*
- 1.15 Name of report author: *Andrew Derrick*
- 1.16 Name of contact(s) made on site: *Jean Edwards*
- 1.17 Associated buildings and sites: *None*

1.18 Attached burial ground: No

1.19 Information sources:

- Butler, D. M., *The Quaker Meeting Houses of Britain*, 1999, Vol. 1, pp. 375-6  
Cherry, B., and Pevsner, N., *The Buildings of England, London 2: South*, 1983, pp. 416-7  
Dannatt, T., *Buildings and Interiors*, Lund Humphries, 1972  
Stonehouse, R., *Trevor Dannatt: Works and Words*, Black Dog Publishing, 2008  
Edwards, J., *Our Story, Minutes to Remember*, Blackheath Quaker Meeting, September 2013  
Blackheath Quaker Meeting, *Blackheath Quaker Meeting House*, leaflet, September 2013  
*Architectural Review.*, Vol. 9, 1974, pp. 266-9  
*Arup Journal*, Vol. 9, 1974, pp. 21-3  
*Concrete*, Vol. 8.6, 1974, p. 41  
*The Friend*, Vol. 129, no. 22, 28 May 1971  
Local Meeting Survey, by Ruth Owens, June 2015

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

### 2.1. Historical background

Quaker Meetings were held in Woolwich as early as 1674 and in Deptford from 1692. The Deptford meeting house was attended by Peter the Great when he was studying shipbuilding at the nearby naval dockyards in 1698. This meeting house was demolished in 1906, soon after the revival of the Woolwich meeting. Regular Meetings for Worship took place at various Woolwich locations until 1912, when the small adult school hall in Eglinton Road was used. This building suffered bomb damage in 1944, but was repaired in 1948. By 1960 the meeting space had become too small, and in 1963 a decision was taken to relocate to Blackheath. In June 1964 the Meeting moved to the hall (former schools and vestries of 1884 by T. L. Banks & Townsend, Architects) behind the Congregational church on Independents Road, a bomb-damaged Gothic Revival building of 1853 which had been repaired and adapted by the architect Trevor Dannatt in 1957.

In 1966 the lease of some land next to the hall was negotiated with the Congregationalists and (at the request of the Congregationalists), Dannatt was invited to draw up plans for a meeting house seating 100. Although not a Quaker, Dannatt had recently (1965-6) prepared designs for the Assembly Hall at the Quaker Bootham School, York. The concrete Brutalist design for the Blackheath Meeting House was ready by December 1967 and a building appeal was launched on October 1968. Building finally started in September 1971, with the first Meeting for Worship on 8 October 1972. The consulting engineers were Ove Arup & Partners, and the contractors R. Mansell Ltd. The building was connected to the Congregational hall at two levels, and was designed as 'a modern building to fit in with the forward-looking community around it' (1968 appeal document, quoted in Butler). It received a Civic Trust Award in 1973 and a commendation from the Concrete Society in 1974. The final cost was £37,842.

In 1974 the Congregational church closed after merger of the Congregational and Presbyterian Churches (to form the United Reformed Church), and in 1979 the church and hall were sold to Watts & Partners, a firm of surveyors, who adapted them to serve as their offices. In 1981, the church hall was sold to Lewisham Council, who sold it on to the Blackheath Montessori Centre in 1998. The former church building was sold by Watts & Partners to Blackheath Hospital in 2007.

In 1977 responsibility for maintenance of the building was handed over to Six Weeks Meeting and various repairs were undertaken. A major refurbishment took place in 2013.

## 2.2. The building and its principal fittings and fixtures

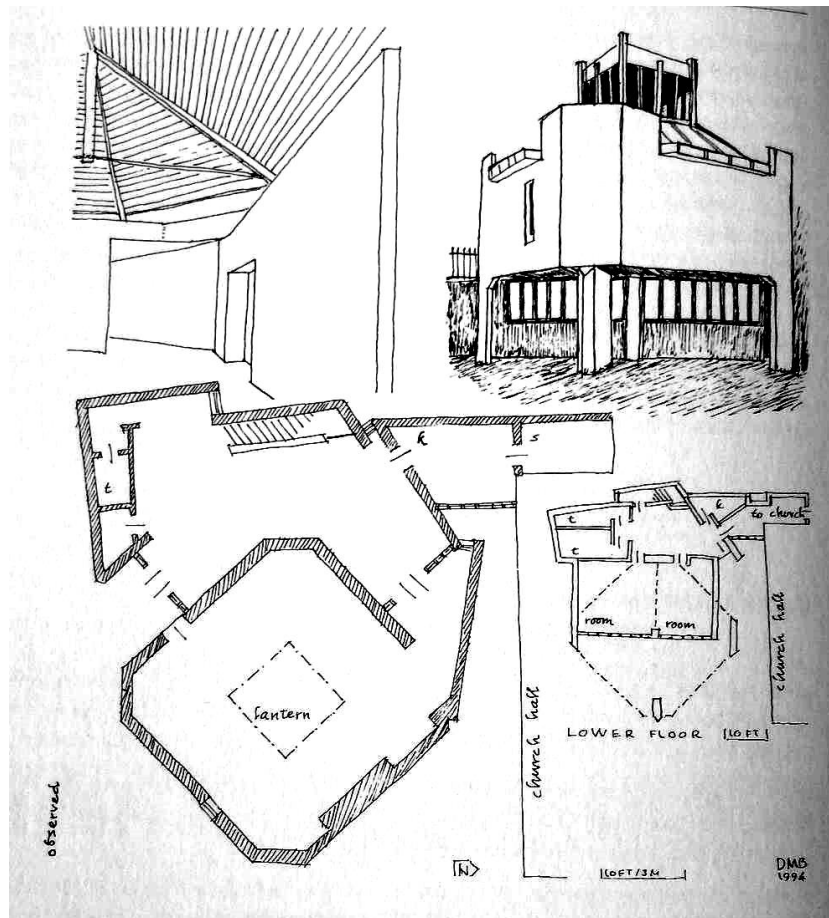


Figure 1: Plans, internal and external view, from Butler, p.376

The main meeting house is square on plan, chamfered at the corners, and turned by forty-five degrees to be on the diagonal towards Lawn Terrace. It is a two-storey structure, lit by a square central lantern over the main meeting room. The walls at the chamfered corners of the main square are carried up as concrete turrets, with concealed top lighting. Level access to the lower level is from Independents Road to the east, where the structure is raised on stilts, while level access to the main upper spaces is from Lawn Terrace to the south. The main entrance hall and subsidiary elements wrap around the building on the west side. The principal structure is of reinforced concrete construction, with shuttered concrete and blockwork walls and tern coated steel (originally zinc) sheeting to the roof and lantern, while the subsidiary elements are flat-roofed and faced in Warnham Wealden light stock brick.

The entrance hall has flat low ceilings, exposed concrete walls and quarry tiles to the floors. Giving off this is a small kitchen, WCs, and a stair (with treads placed unnervingly at an angle) leading down to the lower level, where there are further WCs, a divisible room and a further small kitchen (the kitchens were placed close to the link with the church hall, and were intended as shared facilities). From the stepped walls and low, stepped ceilings of the entrance area, a recent additional lobby leads into the higher, lighter 'calm but climatic' (*Architectural Review*) main meeting room, its octagonal form evoking the character of a medieval chapter house. Here the materials are warmer: plaster to the walls, and redwood boarding to the ceiling (the original cork tile floor has been replaced or at least covered by carpet). The square (ten by ten metres) space is lit from above by a square (three by three metres) lantern supported by interlocking trusses and steel rods. The chamfered corners receive indirect top natural lighting from the external turrets. Electric light is provided by stainless steel luminaires at the corners of the lanterns, recent copies of the original ones by

Dannatt (which were of zinc), and supplemented by spotlights. There is just one low-level window, towards Lawn Terrace; this 'provides the visitor with a view of the street he has just come from – a means of reorientation after the spiral journey' (*Architectural Review*). It has been renewed with a thick-framed uPVC window.

### 2.3 Loose furnishings

There are three oak benches, one in the meeting room and two in the entrance hall (visible in photos middle right and bottom left at top of the report), which came from the Eglinton Road and possibly the Deptford meeting house. The wooden chairs were acquired at the time of the opening of the meeting house (some of Dannatt's drawings show benches). In the entrance hall hangs a quilt made in 1997 for the Meeting's twenty-fifth anniversary (visible in photo middle right).

### 2.4. Attached burial ground

None.

### 2.5. The meeting house in its wider setting

The meeting house lies at the end of a private road (Independents Road), adjacent to and connected with the former church hall (1884) to the north, now the Blackheath Montessori Centre. It is, in Cherry's words, 'an arresting termination to the road'. The main entrance is from an upper level road (Lawn Terrace) on the south side. The building lies within the Blackheath Conservation Area, jointly designated with the Borough of Greenwich in 1968 and London's first conservation area.

### 2.6. Listed status

Not listed. The building is a small, thoughtful and well-detailed design by Trevor Dannatt, 'one of the younger veterans of the modern movement' (Walter Segal, *RIBA Journal* in 1972, reviewing Dannatt's *Buildings and Interiors*). Born in 1920, Dannatt studied under Jane Drew and Maxwell Fry and later joined the London County Council Architects' Department. He worked with Peter Moro and Leslie Martin on the Royal Festival Hall and designed the distinctive tea-bar room (1951) for the Festival of Britain. He was the last honorary secretary of the MARS (Modern Architecture Research) group. He set up in independent practice in 1952. Segal speaks of Dannatt's preoccupation 'with continuity and the achievement of quality. That his buildings lack provocation, make good neighbours and often show in their quiet way a fine sense of purely architectural values must count as an asset with clients and public'. The description certainly applies here.

Several of Dannatt's buildings are listed. These include a private house in Cambridge (3 Clarkson Road, 1958) and several buildings for the University of Leicester (1958-62, with Leslie Martin). More relevant in this context, his Assembly Hall at the Quaker Bootham School, York (1965-6) is listed Grade II. This is also of reinforced concrete construction with board markings, and was 'conceived as a freestanding sculpture in a courtyard' (list entry).

The meeting house at Blackheath is a small building, beautifully detailed and executed, which responds creatively and sensitively to its site (on two levels, and close to older buildings within a conservation area) while remaining a striking and distinctive modern design. The building has undergone some unsympathetic alterations but these do not fatally undermine the quality of the design, and are reversible. The building is considered to be a possible candidate for listing.

### 2.7. Archaeological potential of the site

Little is known about the archaeological potential of the site but it is considered to be low.

## **Part 3: Current use and management**

*See completed volunteer survey*

### **3.1. Condition**

- i) Meeting House: Good.
- ii) Attached burial ground (if any): None.

### **3.2. Maintenance**

The most recent quinquennial inspection was in 2011. Since that time there has been a major refurbishment (2013), with renewal of the downstairs entrance, door and window replacement (uPVC), improved accessible WCs, and general redecoration (including new floor finishes in the meeting rooms). The meeting house is well maintained and there is a five-year maintenance plan (in conjunction with Six Weeks Meeting).

### **3.3. Sustainability**

The meeting does not use the Sustainability Toolkit. Various measures have been undertaken to improve energy efficiency. The original night storage heaters have been replaced by a hot water boiler and fan-assisted radiators. Some single glazing has replaced by double glazing in the 2013 refurbishment. Low energy lighting has been installed throughout. The central heating boiler is about (June 2015) to be replaced by a condensing boiler. Electricity comes from an all-renewable supplier. The meeting house is close to public transport facilities (including the railway station) and there is secure parking for bicycles. There are two car parking spaces, and free parking is currently available in the street on Sundays.

### **3.4. Amenities**

The meeting considers that it has the facilities it needs. These include a main meeting room, kitchen and accessible WC on the main floor and one room with retractable screen, two WCs and a small kitchen on the lower floor.

### **3.5. Access**

The meeting has not conducted a disability audit. There is step-free access into the meeting house from both floor levels, but no lift between the floors. Both floors have WCs suitable for disabled people and there is a hearing loop in the main meeting room. New signage was installed in 2013.

### **3.6 Community Use**

Friends use the meeting house for three to six hours each week. Facilities are available for up to 136 hours, with a take-up of about seventy six hours a week. The meeting has a lettings policy. Lettings involving alcohol are not allowed because AA uses the building. Organisations with unacceptable (e.g. racist) aims are excluded. Rates are negotiable and AA and NA are subsidised. Hirers like the atmosphere, the light through the lantern roof, and the efficient administrator.

### **3.7. Vulnerability to crime**

The building has been subject to heritage crime (including theft of a bench, said to be that sat upon by Peter the Great when he visited the Deptford Meeting House in 1698, and lead theft, replaced with Decothane). There have been other thefts from the building, including a desk,

kettles etc. Problems with a vagrant were dealt with, with the help of police. However, crime levels are considered low (for London). The Meeting liaises with the local police.

### 3.8. Plans for change

None at present.

## **Part 4: Impact of Change**

### 4.1. To what extent is the building amenable or vulnerable to change?

*i) As a Meeting House used only by the local Meeting:* The meeting house is modern and fit for purpose. Future changes should respect the original architect's design intentions (e.g. it would not be appropriate to paint or treat the shuttered concrete, and consideration might be given to restoring original floor finishes and window details in the meeting room).

*ii) For wider community use, in addition to local Meeting use:* The building and its facilities already lends themselves very satisfactorily to such extended use.

*iii) Being laid down as a Meeting House:* The building is linked to the adjacent building and, in the event of being laid down, it could relatively easily be incorporated into that accommodation, with appropriate alternative provision made for the loose furnishings of interest. Alternatively, it could serve a community or even an office use but would not lend itself to residential use without loss of character.

## **Part 5: Category: 2**