

## A short history of Newbury Quaker meeting house

Unlike many Meeting Houses, ours is not obviously a place of worship ... or, and let's be honest, a thing of beauty. However, it is our home.

Let's get the architecture out of the way first. In 1922 a pebble-dashed dwelling was designed and built for William Brain (a local coal merchant) and his wife, Kate. Facing due south, with its back to Highfield Avenue and the Cattle Market, Mr Brain could look out over his extensive coal yard and gravel pit which occupied the land between his garden and the Railway Station. He then developed the land stretching west along Highfield Avenue into a row of houses - now boarded up and awaiting demolition. He didn't live to see the gradual deterioration of Highfield Avenue; indeed, not many people could see it because the private road was largely hidden from view. A few years after the 1963 demolition of the Cattle Market, a particularly unattractive multi-storey car park was built - overshadowing the avenue. In time, that also was demolished to make room for the current (but not for much longer) Bus Station. Over decades the area has changed from a place of bellowing cattle to one of belching buses, during which time Highfield Avenue has seen few passers-by.

However, Newbury Quakers found their way to it in the early 1950s when they were searching for a permanent Meeting House. The sale of their own Meeting House in the latter part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century had followed a period of declining numbers, but the early 20<sup>th</sup> century heralded the start of a steady growth - numbers which merited more than hiring other organisations' accommodation. By the early 1950s they needed their own space - and Mr Brain's old house suited their needs and available funds. It took but a few months to acquire the property, and the first Meeting for Worship was held on 6<sup>th</sup> June 1955.

For 35 years Mr Brain's old house served us well, having adapted it to provide a spacious flat upstairs, and a Meeting Room and smaller room downstairs. In time, however, we outgrew the space, chiefly because the smaller room was insufficient for Children's Meetings. Plans to extend were approved by Monthly Meeting in

1990, and the extended and remodelled building was completed by the end of the following year. By extending the smaller room, enough space was created above for a studio flat. In place of the Scullery, a dedicated entrance and staircase to the first-floor flats was created - and the existing staircase removed. Effectively, the first floor became independent living accommodation, whilst the ground floor became usable and flexible space for Quakers and community groups.

Shortly after completing the extension, the newly-formed West Berkshire Council cast a covetous eye over the Meeting House and surrounding properties. So persistent was the threat of compulsory purchase that expenditure on the Meeting House was kept to a threadbare minimum. It's one thing to become shabby through gradual decline, but quite another to know that the shabbiness may be hiding structural deterioration. Alleluia! A reprieve was granted in early 2016 when we heard our site would be spared the coming housing development. Whilst our secluded location will be lost (and perhaps not before time), our keenness to refresh the Meeting House is growing.

If the Meeting House is so lacking in architectural significance, why do we cherish it so much? One reason may be that it's so close to the earliest known Quaker sites in Newbury, namely the first authorised Meeting House and Burial Ground dating from at least the 1670s. More research is needed to determine the exact site of that Meeting House, but the Burial Ground is known. Take a look out of the Kitchen window at the large chestnut tree over the road - beneath its spreading branches lay the earthly remains of Newbury's earliest Quakers. A building may not make the heart beat faster, but memories and loving fellowship do.

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