

## Architectural Notes on the Friars Meeting House, Bristol

THE property known as the Friars in Bristol is situated between Broad Weir, Philadelphia Street, Rosemary Street and the street called Quakers' Friars. It is just outside the old city wall to the north-east of the old city and in the shadow of the castle. The castle was demolished after the Civil War, but when Friends first went to the Friars in 1670 and built their "Great Meeting House" on Dennis Hollister's ground at a cost, including the land, of £857, they had to have the city gate opened for them to go out to meeting on Sundays.

In the course of three centuries, Friends have extended their holding in the area to comprise a large portion of the site of the Black Friars monastic buildings. Much of this expansion dates from last century, when buildings were purchased to house the rapidly expanding First Day School and other educational activities, but some of it dates from the eighteenth century, as for instance the 1749 Rosemary Street entrance and coachyard.

The meeting house of 1670 was found in 1747 to be in such bad repair that it was decided to demolish it and rebuild on the old foundations. The present meeting house was completed and first used early in 1749. The total cost was £2,050, which included the freestone pillars, an item of £96.

It is interesting to note the increased cost over three-quarters of a century of more than 100 per cent., and to compare the cost of the freestone pillars with the larger ones at Friends House (1925)—although the comparative diameters differ considerably, the height is not much different and the comparable price per cubic foot is as eight to one, and nowadays the cost would be about twenty times more than in 1750.

Friars was built at a period when meeting houses were developing to a larger type with a gallery running round three sides supported on columns—wood or iron, but reaching only to the underside of the gallery, not up to the ceiling as herein-after described at Bristol.

There never was, nor has there ever been, any definite Quaker architectural tradition other than simplicity and

suitability, and most of the earlier examples, with the exception of the Friars and Gildencroft, Norwich (and a rather smaller example at Hertford) were small buildings which, in the words of Martin Shaw Briggs, have maintained even to this day their architectural integrity.

The Friars did, however, differ from its contemporaries in the method of supporting the gallery, and went so far as to make the columns serve the dual purpose of supporting the roof also. It also indulged in a rather richer standard of furnishing and finishings than its contemporaries, and followed the Georgian tradition of panelling, though not indulging in any of its extravagancies; there is, however, a note of solid opulence about the gallery front and ministers' gallery, perhaps influenced—who can say—by the Merchant Venturers who made Bristol so prosperous.

The late Sir George Oatley compared the Friars with John Wesley's Chapel in the Horsefair, known as the New Room, which was possibly built at the same time—and also with the Penn Street Tabernacle built for George Whitefield (1753). In his opinion all three of these buildings must have had the same architects, George Tully and his son, William. He also draws attention to the lantern over the centre of the Chapel, somewhat similar to that at the Friars, through which Wesley, it is said, used to watch his preachers when he himself was not in the congregation.

The peculiarity of the gallery construction has been stressed, but the lantern in the centre of the ceiling is a much greater curiosity, the use of which can hardly have been the same as Wesley's use; presumably, therefore, it was in the interest of ventilation.

It is doubtful whether many Bristol Friends, other than those who serve or have served on the Premises Committee, have squeezed up the narrow staircase at the junction of the south and east galleries and reached the "leads"—an old-fashioned term for a roof, but in this case an accurate description. Those who have not done so should, before it is too late—they will be rewarded by the sight of the unique erection best perhaps described as a "gazebo" some sixteen feet square and twelve feet high, surrounding and enclosing the comparatively small five feet square opening in the Meeting House ceiling.

The outside is covered with small slates and the whole is supported by sloping roofs at each corner covered with much

larger slates: on three sides are windows and on the fourth is a door.

The glimpse of this feature from the burial ground gives little idea of its extraordinary character. There is a sliding panelled door in the opening in the meeting house ceiling which can be manipulated, presumably for the control of fresh or vitiated air, assisted by the four somewhat ungainly gas pendants, of course a much later addition. What, if anything, was there before?

The flat roof presents a somewhat hybrid appearance—slate in the centre, wide expanses of lead, and over the north and south galleries tiled roofs. Once having solved the problem of supporting the roof and gallery on the same pillars it would appear that the Georgian Quaker architects, George Tully and his son, were rather at a loss to know what to do. It is possible that some of the eccentricities are the result of later “improvements” and rearrangements.

So much for the interior of this fine old building which retains its charm even though it has lost much of its original use and suitability. Externally it is simple and straightforward and must have been more so before the extraordinary covered ways were erected, no doubt, with the best intentions if with the minimum of grace. Take these away and also the south porch, and you have a square building in the best traditions of Quaker architecture, with a rather more than ordinarily ornate east porch much more in the contemporary Georgian tradition than is usually found in our meeting houses. It is also repeated inside in the same tradition. This porch is the work of Thomas Paty.<sup>1</sup>

Of the ancillary buildings there is little to be said, and the less said the better of the library, erected in the Victorian era—it is not even structurally sound, though some of the book-cases can well be adapted and made good use of in the new buildings.

The design of the Small Meeting House, added in 1759, shows a considerable falling off from the original inspiration of the main building erected only twelve years previously. It is as traditional as a Friends Meeting House can be, and the high windows afford no view other than of the sky.

The residential quarters are evidently of the Regency period, and though by no means convenient according to

<sup>1</sup> See p. 29 *ante*.

present day standards, they have the quiet dignity of their period.

The buildings to the north of the meeting house are of little architectural value and call for no comment, neither is it proposed to make much mention of the three halls which are adequately dealt with in the booklet compiled by Marian Pease<sup>1</sup> with the assistance of W. H. Woolley and Frederick C. Hunt, to whom the writer of the foregoing is indebted for certain particulars and dates particularly.

A great relic of the past is passing out of the Society of Friends—it is the fervent wish of all, including the undersigned, that the new buildings will be worthy successors, and in every way suitable for the twentieth century and after.

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<sup>1</sup> *A Brief Historical Account of the Friends Meeting House Premises called The Friars . . . Bristol, period 1227 to 1939.*

Accounts for the year 1954 and *Journal*, vol. xlvi

	£	s.	d.		£	s.	d.
<i>Journal of Friends' Historical Society</i> , vol. xlvi, parts 1 and 2 ..	171	1	10	Balance brought forward	306	12	9
Taylor. J. G. Whittier. Supp. No. 25 ..	71	10	6	Subscriptions and Donation .. .. .	244	8	8
Nuttall. J. Nayler. Supp. No. 26 .. .. .	48	7	0	Sales .. .. .	21	13	3
Stationery .. .. .	21	6	3	Advertisements ..	5	4	0
Expenses, including postage .. .. .	23	4	2	Donations towards Supplements Nos. 25 and 26 .. .. .	65	8	1
Balance carried forward to 1955:				Interest on Post Office Account .. .. .	4	14	8
Post Office Account—							
247	5	8					
Barclays Bank—							
65	6	0					
—————	312	11	8				
	£648	1	5		£648	1	5

Examined with the books of the Society and found correct.

16.v.55.

(Signed) BASIL G. BURTON.