Lancaster Civic Vision

Celebrating our Heritage – Enhancing our Environment – Shaping our Future

FRIENDS MEETING HOUSE, LANCASTER

Lancaster Civic Vision Guide 4



Friends Meeting House, Lancaster

Next to Lancaster Castle and the railway station lies the (Religious Society of) Friends Meeting House.

This is where the Quaker community gathers and where many local groups hold their meetings. There is generally open access to the building and grounds. Quaker services are held on Sundays and Wednesdays.

George Fox, who founded Quakerism, visited Lancaster in 1652. Meetings were initially held in members' houses until the first Meeting House was built on this site in 1677, 12 years before the Toleration Act gave Non-Conformists legal protection.

The 1677 date-stone from the original building can still be seen. The central part of the current building dates from 1708 and is shown on the 1778 map later in this leaflet, with an extension eastwards (to your right as you face the building) in 1779 and westwards in 1789/90.

The difference in window shapes is a clue. The Venetian window on the east end is visually impressive. Compared with other denominations' places of worship, the building displays a characteristic simplicity.

In the late-eighteenth century this area was on the edge of town, with open spaces and gardens to the rear of the large houses on Castle Park, between the Castle and Meeting House. More building took place to the west of the site around 1852 for a warden's accommodation and for the Quaker School.

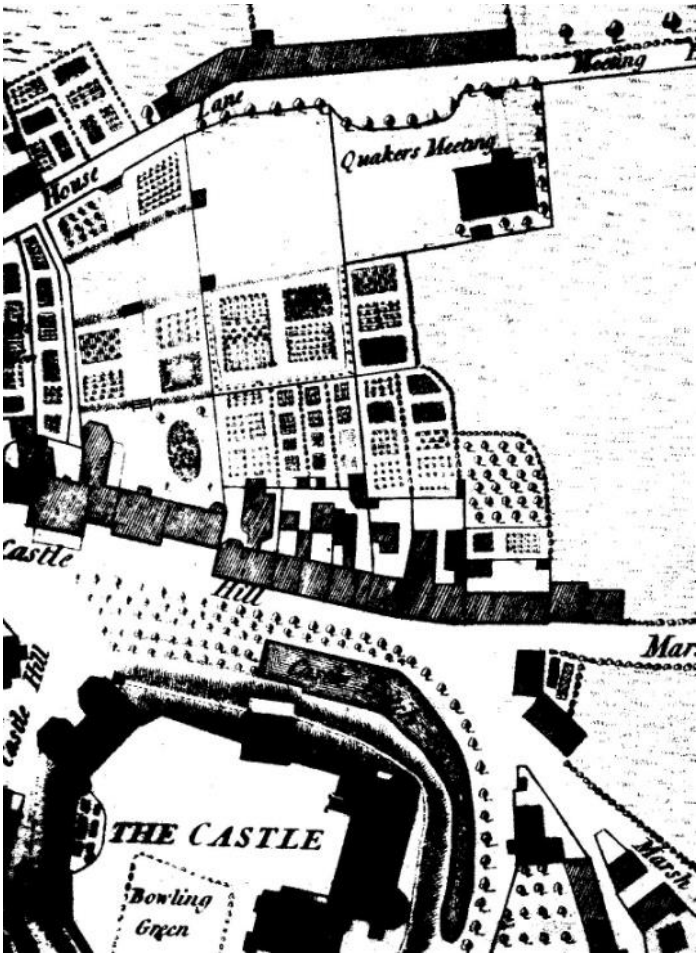
Inside there have been always been two rooms on the ground floor – the larger (on your right, to the east) for major meetings and the smaller (on your left, to the west) for women's or weekly meetings or for the Quaker School.

The larger meeting room was always very simple in design – pews, a stove, galleries for more seating (removed after around 1900) and a platform for the minister's stand. This room was refurbished in 1969 The smaller room and the others are all modern in terms of furnishings.

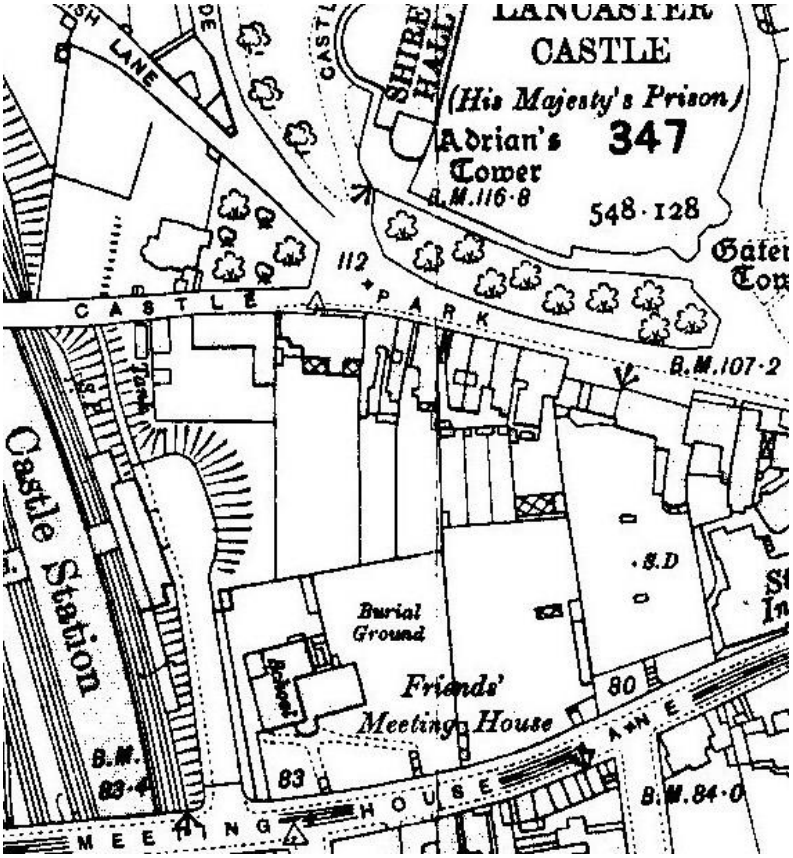
The area around the Meeting House was formerly the Quaker burial ground and is now a lovely place to sit quietly in the centre of town.

From a community that was persecuted in the later seventeenth century, the Quakers had become an important part of Lancaster's society and economy by the second half of the eighteenth.

Some of Lancaster's merchants and traders with the West Indies were Quakers. Some of the strongest abolitionists were Quakers and the latter position soon became dominant. By 1719 the road on which the Meeting House had been built was known as Meeting House Lane, which it still is.



Friends Meeting House, 1778 (north at bottom) - Mackreth's map



Friends Meeting House and George Fox School, 1913 (north at the top) - Ordnance Survey

The School

The Quaker community set up the Friends' School in 1690. The School was run by the Quakers until 1968 when it became the independent George Fox School until this closed in 1988. The School's name lives on in an educational charity. The colours of Lancaster University are Quaker grey and Lancashire red.

Other Quaker sites

Fenton Street (200 metres nearer the city centre) was where the Quakers had their red-brick Hall from 1904, which was used for adult education and social functions. For a period from 1988 it was a mosque.

On Wyresdale Road opposite the entrance to Williamson Park, is a small walled area that was the original Quaker burial ground, used from 1661, even before the first Meeting House was built, perhaps for both burials and meetings. In the porch of the Meeting House is the tombstone of John Lawson (who died in 1689) which was moved here from the Wyresdale Road site.



The Venetian window

Some other Guides of interesting nearby sites include:
28 Lancaster Castle; 56 The Priory Church of St Mary, Lancaster

Reference
R. Dove and H. Segebarth *A History of the Friends Meeting House Lancaster* (*c.*1991).
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