



History of Quaker Premises at Bull Street

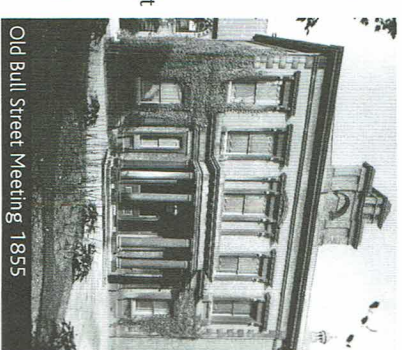
It is known that during the 1650s Quakers in Birmingham were meeting to worship in private houses because there are records of these meetings being broken up.

In 1661 Quakers purchased a house and land in New Hall Lane. The address later became Bull Lane; Bull Lane became Monmouth Street and finally Colmore Row. In 1689 after the accession of William III and the Toleration Act, Warwick Quarter Sessions registered the building as a place for "Dissenters' Meetings". At this time it is estimated that there were 200 to 225 members of the Society of Friends (Quakers) in Birmingham. This first Birmingham Meeting House was ultimately demolished.

In 1702 Quakers acquired land and built a new Meeting House in Bull Street. This was the first of three Meeting Houses to be built on this site. Shortly afterwards land at the back of the Meeting House was acquired and used as a burial ground. There was a Declaration of Trust in 1714 which established the ownership of the property.

In 1793 the premises were extended and the windows on the street side were bricked up presumably to reduce noise disturbing the Meetings. A new entrance lobby was built with a gallery over it. In 1850 the Great Western Railway built the line including a tunnel and cutting through to Snow Hill Station. The land purchased by the railway included the old Quaker burial ground in Bull Lane and the remains from here were transferred to a vault in the Bull Street burial ground.

In 1855 a new Meeting House was built on the same site but well back from the street. The Meeting House with its galleries was large enough to accommodate all Birmingham Quakers.



Old Bull Street Meeting 1855

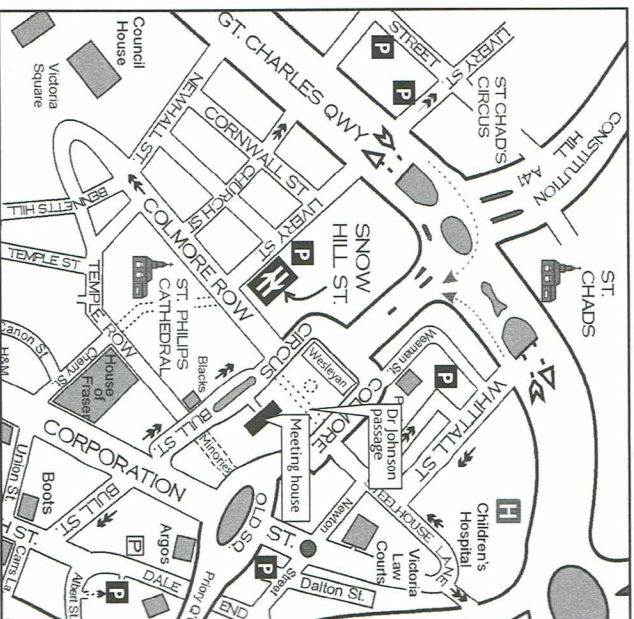


Entrance to Bull Street Meeting today

In 1994 plans to develop Colmore Circus by filling in the subway to create a pedestrian area were proposed by the City Council. As part of that development it was agreed to sell the now deteriorating Dr Johnson House to the development company. The sale went ahead in 1999 and a long lease on the land was negotiated. The building was demolished in 2001 with the remains being removed from the graveyard and transferred to the Quaker burial ground in Lodge Hill Cemetery in Selly Oak.

The new Priory Rooms have been built in and below an attractive garden. The philosophy remains to provide accommodation for a wide range of Quaker and other groups while offering a high standard of conference facilities to the professional and business communities and continuing to serve as a base for Quaker witness.

Bull Street Friends, 2010.



The building was completed in 1965 but many more changes followed. The City did not take up the lease and instead sub-let to a succession of Chinese restaurants. The kitchen on the top floor was, however, unsatisfactory. The City was persuaded to give up the lease and the two bottom floors were leased to the Citizens' Advice Bureau. A new warden's flat was built on the roof of the Meeting House. The restaurant kitchen and the warden's former flat were converted to offices and the whole top floor was let. The central gallery of the Meeting House was altered to accommodate the Monthly Meeting Office. This left the whole of Dr Johnson House for short or long-term letting and occasional Quaker use.

Bull Street Quaker Meeting is a constituent part of Central England Quaker Meeting Charities: Registered Charity Number 224571

40 Bull Street, Birmingham B4 6AF

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Later, however, many other Meetings were established, the first in Edgbaston. Fewer members attended Bull Street so that the Meeting House became too large.

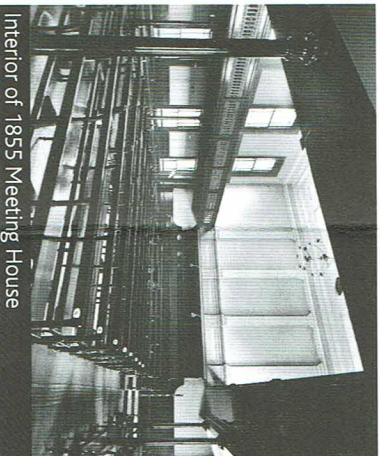
Quaker property continued to expand with Adult Schools in mind. In 1853 two houses in the north-west corner of Old Square had been purchased. A further purchase of 345 square yards of land in Upper Priory in 1859 enabled the Priory Rooms to be built in 1861. Further purchases in 1862 and 1867 made possible additions and improvements to these premises and finally a new entrance hall and staircase in 1929. A large room was used by Quakers for social gatherings and, like the other rooms, for letting. The letting of rooms was an important consideration in due course when rebuilding was planned.

In 1879 the Society acquired land in Dr Johnson Passage, a narrow thoroughfare which ran from Bull Street to Upper Priory parallel to Steelhouse Lane, this acquisition was the result of negotiation with Birmingham Corporation and was in exchange for the two houses in Old Square. This enabled the Friends' Reading Society Library to be built adjacent to the graveyard in 1880.

Other additions at this time provided accommodation for the caretaker, the Monthly Meeting (now Area) Office, the Bevan-Naish Library (a collection of valuable old Quaker books now transferred to the Library at Woodbrooke Quaker Study Centre) and some provision for storage of bicycles. As in Upper Priory, shops at street level on Dr Johnson Passage were also let by the Society, one door only giving access to that part of the building used by Friends.

A bell fixed to this door alerted the caretaker in his living room next to the graveyard. The privations of his life may be imagined when his attic bedroom is visualised a separate door and two long staircases away.

By 1933 Lewis's, the department store, was a near neighbour towering over the Meeting House. Adjustments to the boundaries followed negotiations with Lewis's and the Corporation, the Meeting House was demolished and the current one built. It was designed by Hubert Libbeter, the Quaker architect and built by Nichols of Gloucester. The cost was covered by sale of land to Lewis's and donations from Quakers. During the war (1939 – 45) the City took over the Priory Rooms, apart from two upstairs committee rooms, and used them as a British Restaurant.



Interior of 1855 Meeting House

Despite damage due to air raids the City kept the Priory Rooms after the war until finally the building was demolished.

The next development came in the 1960s with the re-planning of central Birmingham and particularly the inner ring road. The plans meant the disappearance of all buildings the other side of Dr Johnson Passage and the widening of Old Square and Upper Priory as a result Quakers lost half their land facing Dr Johnson Passage and half on Upper Priory.

After long negotiations with the City land was exchanged and a small area was purchased giving Quakers all the land between the graveyard and Colmore Circus (later Colmore Square and formerly Steelhouse Lane) and the graveyard and Upper Priory. It was also agreed to continue the availability of accommodation for a Civic Restaurant. This was the third exchange of land between Quakers and the Corporation.

Lewis's were anxious to extend their building and it was agreed to enter into a long lease of the land between the graveyard and Upper Priory up to and including the corner of Colmore Circus. This straightened the boundary and entailed alteration to the women's lavatories. The land left to Quakers between the graveyard and Colmore Circus was too narrow to take a satisfactory building and it was obvious that part of the graveyard would have to be built on. To do this required an Act of Parliament which the City already had for the road-widening scheme. The graveyard was sold to the City for £1 and bought back for the cost of removing the remains from the graves concerned. They were re-buried in the central vault which had been made to take the remains of the Bull Lane graveyard at the time the Snow Hill tunnel was built.

The new building was known as Dr Johnson House and was eight storeys high to match other local buildings. The City had two lower storeys for their restaurant with an entrance from the pedestrian way below Colmore Circus and a kitchen on the top floor. The door on graveyard level gave access to a concourse area, hall and offices for Quaker use and for letting. A flat for the warden was created on the top floor alongside the restaurant's kitchen.



Interior of the Meeting house today