

# HIDDEN IPSWICH: INSIDE THE QUAKER MEETING HOUSE

As part of a new heritage series, Danielle Lett explores some of the town's most interesting and oldest historical buildings

**L**ocated at 39 Fonnereau Road, just opposite Ipswich's Christchurch Park, is a beautiful building dating all the way back to the mid-19th century.

But do you know what it is, what it's used for, and its history? You may have walked past it time and time again, noting its impressive façade... wondering what it would be like to take a peep inside?

That building is in fact the Quaker Meeting House, a place of worship and meeting for the Quakers - a Christian denomination who describe themselves as 'radical, contemporary, and free-thinking'.

Quakerism started in England in the 17th century, following the aftermath of the English Civil War. Its key beliefs were formed at this time, and included the idea that each individual can experience God without needing a priest or the Bible. Early Quakers also preached there was no need for churches, rituals, holy days, or sacraments in order to practice religion - and rather that religion should be something a person lived and acted out every day.

Here in Ipswich, the Quakers have a long and rich history, with the group's roots going all the way back to the late 17th century.

In 1699, founding member of the Quakers George Fox visited

Ipswich and said of the town: "We had a little Meeting, and the Lord's power came over them. After the Meeting I said, 'If any had the desire to hear further they might come to the Inn and there came a company of rude butchers that had abused Friends; but the Lord's power so chained them that they could do no mischief?'"

Just a year after this visit, the first Quaker Meeting House was built in Ipswich by Joseph Clarke. It was located on College Street, and cost £200. It included seats, benches, forms and partitions, along with the adjoining cottage and sufficient land for a burial ground.

In 1797, a plot of land next to the College Street Meeting House was purchased, so a larger premises could be built. This sat 500 people, and was made from brick with a hipped slate roof.

And six decades later, Henry Alexander, one of the Quaker partners in Alexander's Bank, donated a piece of land to the Meeting House for a library in 1858.

During that time, the Meeting House was filled with people who would turn up for worship, with some of Ipswich's most prominent families regularly attending. Think the Ransomes, the Alexanders, the Corders, the Frys, the Bishops, and the Collinsons.

Well-known in Ipswich's social scene, the Quakers at the time adopted 'plain dress', and could be identified by their grey dresses and bonnets for the women; while the men wore plain, collarless coats and hats. Hats were kept on in meetings, as they didn't subscribe to the belief that one place was 'holier' than another (as many places of worship ask that patrons remove their hats upon entering).

But as the industrial revolution grew in that part of town, the Quakers decided to up and move.

"Everything became more industrialised down by the docks, and they felt like it wasn't the place to be," explains Mike Medhurst, resident Quaker.

So in 1924, the original meeting house was sold to sugar refiners Burton Son & Saunders who converted the former Quaker building into a warehouse (which was later demolished in 1990).

The Quakers needed a new place to meet, and for a period of 10 years they rented out various places for meetings until the group purchased the mid-19th century home on Fonnereau Road in 1935, commencing meetings there just a year later.

"This house was built in 1870, and a lot of houses down this road were actually lived in by widows from the Napoleonic Wars," adds Mike.

The current Quaker Meeting House is a red brick classical villa with a hipped slate roof, overhanging eaves, painted stucco dressings and plate glass sash windows. And round the back, there is a garden filled with trees, shrubs, and plants.

And inside?

As you enter, just to your left, is in fact a relic that was preserved from the old house - a wooden bench that dates back to the 1700s. When you go through the entry way, there's three rooms ahead of you.

The first, on your right, is the quiet room, which is used both of reflection, as well as a place for the service of the community.

"We use this ourselves for worship on Wednesdays and Sundays, and for counselling. But we also rent rooms out during the week to various groups such as Gamblers Anonymous, mental health groups, dance groups, baby groups - all sorts, really."

Explaining the reason behind this, Mike says: "The Quakers try



**MAIN:** The Quaker Meeting House in Ipswich

**BELOW:** Resident Quaker Mike Medhurst

Pictures: CHARLOTTE BOND



to see the best in people. It's easy to see the worst in people, but we want to see the best in them and bring that out."

Mike has been a Quaker for over 30 years, and joined the denomination as he found the group "brilliant" and "non-judgmental".

"We try to be open-minded, and show our love in action with open arms," he adds.

Opposite the quiet room is the library, featuring a wall stacked high with books from a variety of faiths and denominations.

"Although we're rooted in Christianity, we're open to new ideas and we look at other teachings. We haven't got all the answers, and equally you can't say that another denomination has all the answers. There are other ways of thinking out there that we look at, while still accepting others."

And thirdly, the biggest room is the main meeting room.

"Meetings are held in silence every Sunday between 10.30am and 11.30am, and what we do is listen to the spirit within. It's a way for people to find the way ahead as an individual and be at





one with whatever they consider to be God," explains Mike.

The main meeting room is actually an extension and was added on in 1935. Further additions were later made to the side in 1972, giving the Quakers additional meeting rooms and kitchens.

And upstairs are the living quarters, where Mike lives as the resident Quaker.

"One of the main tenets of Quakerism is that there's no hierarchy and nobody is in charge. I'm the resident Quaker, which means I oversee the premises and deal with the day-to-day running of the Meeting House, and sort out any bookings."

The Quaker Meeting House is open for worship on Sundays at 10.30am for an hour and on Wednesdays between 1pm to 1.30 pm.

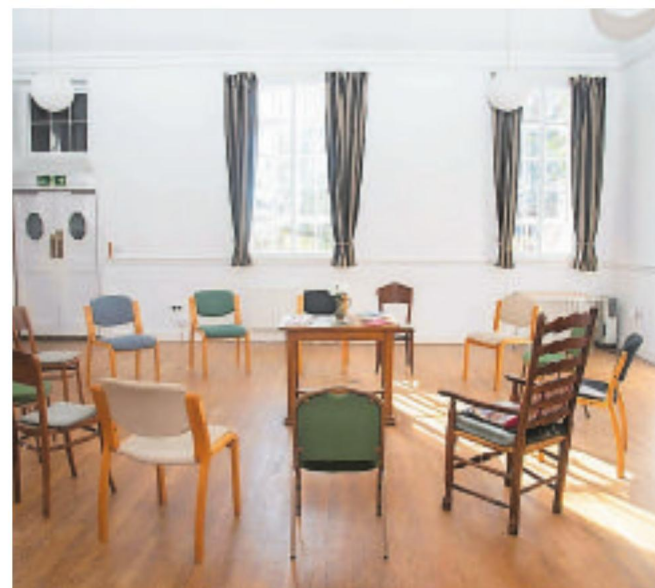
To find out more, visit [ipswichquakers.org.uk](http://ipswichquakers.org.uk)

Are there any other historic or interesting buildings in Ipswich that you've gone past but aren't sure what they are or what they're used for? Email [danielle.lett@archant.co.uk](mailto:danielle.lett@archant.co.uk) to share your suggestions.



Ipswich Quakers

Picture: IPSWICH QUAKERS



The meeting room



The library inside the Quaker Meeting House



The garden at the Quaker Meeting House