

Hall Green Quaker Meeting House

Description and a brief history

The building was built in 1883 as a Reading Room for the Hamlet of Hall Green – a small garden village development. It was built by the Severne family who were the second largest landowners in the parish of the Manor of Yardley at the time. It is not thought they lived in the parish then – as far as we know their family seats were in Shropshire and Northamptonshire.

Later generations inherited and lived in Hall Green Hall (demolished about 1936), opposite the parish Church of the Ascension.

The Severne Estate here in Hall Green was sold in 1912.

The Reading Room was built for use by the Hamlet residents - in Hamlet Road and Fox Hollies Road (then known as Church Rd). We know it was also used for a Sunday School but have found no record of other ways in which the Reading Room benefited the community. However, generally, reading rooms were built as an alternative community building to the public house, and provided newspapers, magazines and books for their users.

The small seven sided library (now used as store room) was shelved for books and perhaps the large room held daily newspapers. Both rooms would have been heated by an open fire in winter. The fireplaces are still visible. The fireplace in the store room backs onto that in the reading room, and there was a double chimney above.

The plaque on the front of the reduced chimney stack has the emblem 'MS' and is dated 1883. The MS could either stand for - Meysey Severne - families on whose land the Hamlet stands or, in memory of Marian Severne. The same MS is found on other houses that date back to the Hamlet.

The Latin inscription over original front porch (facing Stratford Road) is from Psalm 127 v.1, which translates as 'Except the Lord build the house, they labour in vain that build it' (KJV).

Stepping into the front tiled porch there was an L shaped bench along the left hand wall and facing wall. The door into the Reading Room was on the right hand wall leading into what could have been an original vestibule with 2 rows of coat hooks - children and adults. Past these you would part some curtains and walk into the main room. Near this point on the wall of the main room (on your left) was the back door for the lavatories in the garden on the Hamlet Road side at the back of the caretaker's cottage.

The kitchen and back door of the caretaker's cottage would have been where our toilets are now.

The floor of the Meeting House is not the original. The original floor boards were found to be rotten due to there being a 'spring' underneath. This was capped and the floor boards remain uncovered to enable them to breath.

The leaded light windows in the hall are original as are the coloured glass panels - beautiful Arts & Crafts detail. Each one is different.

Other original features include the tiling finish outside below some of the windows; the mantelpiece in the main room; plaster work; and the high internal roof timberwork.

Arts and Crafts Movement

The Reading Room is an early example of the Arts and Crafts style. The movement was led by William Morris, and grew in influence from about 1860 until 1910. The phrase “Arts and Crafts” was not used to describe it until 1887, when the Arts and Crafts Exhibition Society was formed. The style was a reaction to industrialised, machine made, repetitive decoration and to the inhumane conditions of factory work. It attempted to revive and promote traditional craftsmanship, using simple forms and drawing on folk styles and mediaeval art.

Twentieth Century use

1903: First recorded date we know of Reading Room being called the 'Simcox Reading Room'. It is not known exactly when it was purchased by a John Simcox - understood to be John Walford Simcox, Solicitor (b.1840), living at Kyott's Lake, where South Birmingham College now stands (corner of Stratford Rd and Colebank Rd). Simcox died in 1923 aged 83.

We know the Baptist Church used Reading Room on Sunday morning for worship until their church was built – also on Stratford Road, towards the city. The Sunday School children's log book now identified the building as Hall Green Reading Room. Around this time it is thought Quakers may have met here for Meeting for Worship in the evening on Sundays.

In the 1920s it is quite certain that Quakers were using the building and it was purchased by them in 1931.

In 1928 it was recorded that the Reading Room was used as a Polling Station, as it still is today.

It is thought the alterations to the building were largely carried out by Hall Green Quaker Meeting.

This is only a guide as not all these facts have been authenticated. Comments welcomed.