

# NOW and THEN

## Ringwood Meeting House



Early 1970's

The recent restoration work on Ringwood Meeting House that was carried on throughout the summer has created a great deal of interest in this Grade II\* chapel, one of Ringwood's most historic buildings.

Ringwood Meeting House was built by a local group of Presbyterian dissenters in 1727. This date can be seen high up on the triangular pediment on the north front. They were known as non-conformists or dissenters because they did not conform to the Church of England's Articles of Religion as laid down in the Book of Common Prayer. They wished to worship God in their own way, without the dogma of bishops or creeds. Their tastes were what we would term 'puritan' - plain and unadorned. The term 'Meeting House' was used by all 18th century dissenters, not just Quakers. Unlike the Quakers, Presbyterians held structured services or 'meetings', led by a minister employed by the congregation. He preached his long sermons from a



November 2011

to us today that the pews are arranged in squares so that some people sat with their backs to the pulpit, but it did not seem to be other than an 18th century congregation. By the 19th century the congregation had become Unitarian, but numbers gradually dwindled, which is probably why the layout remained largely

centrally placed pulpit.

The first minister of the newly erected Ringwood Meeting House was James Whitaker. He was the grandson of Alice Lisle, the lady of Moyles Court, just outside Ringwood, who was executed following the Monmouth Rebellion of 1685. Although by 1727 the dissenters felt confident enough to build a proper chapel in which to worship, they chose a quiet site tucked away from the main streets of the town in a small lane overlooking a field known as the Furlong. They would be very surprised to find that their

Meeting House now faces the Furlong car park and the main entry into Ringwood!

Ringwood Meeting House is now the only dissenting Meeting House in Hampshire to survive from the period before 1800 in a virtually unaltered state and is one of the best examples in the country. The architectural style inside the building reflects early Georgian taste in general; it is symmetrical, with plain walls and windows, and is surrounded by galleries on three sides. The family box pews, which we now find so unusual, were very common in England during the 18th century but were removed from most churches and chapels during Victorian times. It may seem strange

for us today that the pews are arranged in squares so that some people sat with their backs to the pulpit, but it did not seem to be other than an 18th century congregation. By the 19th century the congregation had become Unitarian, but numbers gradually dwindled, which is probably why the layout remained largely

unchanged. In 1976, a few years after the old exterior photo was taken, the Unitarians found they were unable to maintain the building and combined with a congregation in Bournemouth. The Meeting House, the adjoining Conway Hall and surrounding graveyard were sold to a development company. The Conway Hall was demolished and a supermarket (now Sainsburys) and a precinct of shops were built in the early 1980s.

Meeting House Interior around 2000



View from the same location in November 2011 showing the newly transformed light and bright interior.



Hampshire County Council, New Forest District Council, Ringwood Town Council and money from private benefactors. This has enabled the Meeting House Association Trustees, under the current chairman Mr John Waddington, to employ professionals to secure the future of the building by underpinning its foundations and improving the lighting, heating and disabled facilities. Fresh paint and new glass in the windows have given it a much lighter feel.

Opening up the blocked-up window above the main door has given the exterior a much better appearance. A replica of the clock stolen in 2002 has been made and the organ has been given a complete overhaul. A new History Centre telling the story of Ringwood is displayed in the galleries and the Meeting House's large collection of old photographs is gradually being transferred

on to computer. Children can enjoy solving a new quiz trail around the building and play with a variety of replica old-fashioned toys.

The restored Meeting House was officially reopened on November 10th 2011, by Councillor Anna McNair Scott, Chairman of Hampshire County Council. The Meeting House is now open every morning except Sunday. Admittance is 70p including a cup of tea or coffee.



Interior showing new clock and newly restored organ - November 2011

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