

## The Edinburgh Quaker Meeting House, 7 Victoria Terrace

Victoria Terrace and Victoria Street were first **planned** around the end of the 1820s when it was realised that the narrow wynd leading down between the tenements to the Grassmarket (now Upper Bow) was hard to navigate, especially with sedan chairs.

### History of the building

**Numbers 4 to 7 Victoria Terrace** were built in 1865:

Number 4 (now Baden Powell House) was a Primitive Methodist Chapel; Numbers 5 and 6 are the rebuilt rear of Riddle's Court (just refurbished); and Number 7 was built as a chapel for the United Original Secession Church (opening in 1866).

The chapel was described as "plain and unpretentious". The main floor was the present Hall, with a pulpit in the centre of the front wall and with galleries running round the back, probably reached from stairs within the main body of the chapel.

The chapel was purchased by **The Boys Brigade** in 1956, being modified by Basil Spence Architects and reopened in 1960 as their Scottish headquarters. They inserted the floor at the mid-height of the chapel to provide the upper floor meeting

room, and they purchased buildings behind the main building providing toilets and other rooms.

**Quakers** bought the building in 1987; they remodelled the hall and meeting room, building foyers for each and linking them with a new staircase. The first Quaker meetings were held in the new meeting house in November 1988.

### The United Original Secession Church

There were many secessions from the Church of Scotland during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, often followed by mergers and reuniting. One, the "United Original Secession Church", was meeting in a hall in Nicolson Street under its pastor, the Rev. James Smellie, "a man of rare talent and devotedness as a preacher and pastor", who led them to purchase the building in Victoria Terrace. They had missionary work in India and presbyteries in Aberdeen, Perth and Glasgow as well as Edinburgh.

As described by a visitor in 1882, the interior of the chapel was free from all ornamentation; ministers did not wear gowns; sermons were not read; there was no hymn singing, no organ or harmonium; lines of the psalms were read out to the congregation who remained seated. There were services on Sunday mornings and afternoons and a variety of Bible classes during the week. There were

about 150 members, with a strong belief in the scriptures as the Word of God.

### The extended building

The original chapel building is today linked to 6 Upper Bow, the tenement block adjoining the west face of the building. On the ground floor level there is a passage linking the foyer area to the office and to the Bow Room on the ground floor (up a few steps). On the first floor level the Library opens out of both the Hall and the first floor foyer; beyond it the kitchen area and crèche rooms occupy the whole of the two converted first floor flats off the 6 Upper Bow staircase.

In addition there is a toilet block extending from the north-east side of the building on the ground and first floors. Looking across from the window of the library one can see that this is an old building, believed by some to be what is left of "Major Weir's House". Major Weir (1599-1670) was an infamous Jekyll-and-Hyde character who lived here in the seventeenth century, a soldier and strict Presbyterian, a pillar of the community who in 1670 confessed to having lived a secret life of crime and vice by night.

## Quakers in Edinburgh

1655: The earliest recorded meetings for worship (in members' homes), with a visit by George Fox in 1657.

1675: Purchase of land at the Pleasance for use as a Quaker burial ground.

1681: The first Quaker meeting house was rented in West Port.

1730: A meeting house was built in Peebles Wynd, close to present-day Hunter Square, with meetings attended by over 600. This was purchased by the city in 1789 to make way for the construction of South Bridge.

1791: A Quaker meeting house was constructed on the Pleasance beside the burial ground.



*The former Pleasance Meeting House*

1924: An “allowed meeting” was established in the New Town, moving to Stafford Street, off Shandwick Place in the west end in 1933, where 28 Stafford Street was purchased as a new Friends meeting house in 1938. The Pleasance Meeting House was closed in 1944. The building is now owned by the University of Edinburgh and forms part of the complex of buildings on the Pleasance site, which is heavily used during the Edinburgh Festival Fringe.

1969: Establishment of South Edinburgh Meeting in the Morningside area.

1987: Sale of the Stafford Street premises and purchase of Kirk House (7 Victoria Terrace). Conversion of the building included provision of lobbies to form entrances to the two meeting halls with a new internal staircase linking the two, and the installation of a lift. The first meetings for worship were held there in November 1988.

2014: Establishment of Quaker meeting in Portobello/Musselburgh.

For information on hiring a room in the meeting house: <http://www.equaker.org.uk>  
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South East Scotland  
Area Meeting

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