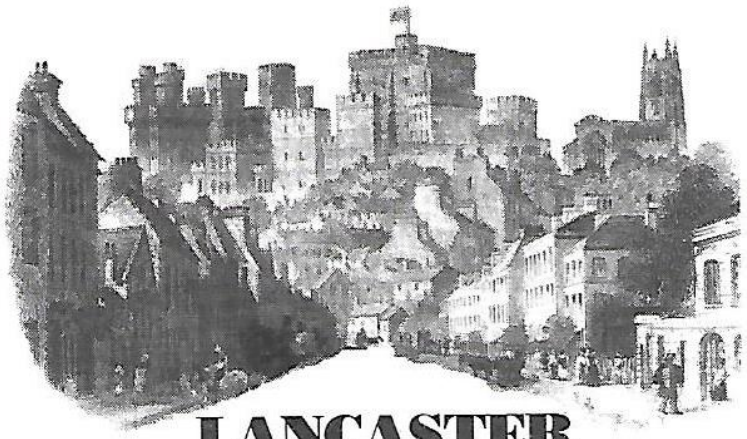


A HISTORY OF LANCASTER CIVIC SOCIETY

THE FIRST 40 YEARS

1967 – 2007

By Malcolm B Taylor
2009

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Lancaster Civic Society: the first 40 years

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A. INTRODUCTION

Comprises: Introduction. Glossary

When the author started this voyage down memory lane, he was concerned whether there would be sufficient recorded in documents or through human recollection. Would there be enough for a whole book? He knew that an attempt ought to be made to record the service the Society had rendered to the community of Lancaster over the years. So much service by some very special people. The memories of some pivotal early members and others had to be tapped while the memory was still there. Sadly, he was already too late in respect of some key players who are no longer with us

Phrases started to form, like “there is only circumstantial evidence for this, but it is possible to speculate that…” He need not have worried. There only had to be a hint to the committee that someone might be volunteering to take on the job, when boxes of documents arrived on the doorstep. If the author has managed to contrive a half decent account of the Society’s doings, it is down to the care with which the members who have had custody of some precious archives, have not only preserved them, but have handed them over in impressive order.

Having taken some small part in the early activities of the Society, the author thought he had an idea of the many ways in which it has enhanced and protected our precious city. But when he started to try to devise some sort of structure for a book, he had no idea of the mountain he would have to climb. He hopes that readers will be as impressed as he was at the range of challenges the Society has risen to over the years. In fact, one certain criticism which will certainly be voiced is “why on earth did he miss that out?” It may well be that a future author will have to add the missing pieces of the jigsaw puzzle to produce a truly definitive account.

The author is largely ignorant of the histories of other civic societies, so it is perhaps foolhardy to speculate how many societies will have achieved for their communities what the Lancaster Society has achieved for its city, so consistently and over such a long period. However, whether Lancaster is a pygmy compared with others, a history would not be complete without trying to find out why it has been so successful.

There are many reasons for why some civic societies flourish and others wither. For success, there must be an underlying core of citizenry in an urban settlement who respect and love their town so much that they seek a focus for preserving the best and condemning the worst. That begs the question of whether there is anything worth preserving in the first place. Lancaster came late to the possibilities of civic aspiration compared with the well-established and venerated city centres elsewhere with whom it is sometimes compared: York, possibly, or Chester come to mind. The author suspects that an immediate post war Lancaster would not have appealed to many civic well-wishers. But as prosperity gradually returned to a war bankrupted country, civic design became something of a buzzword nationally and initiatives started to emerge. Town planners achieved credibility as well as scorn. Planning departments in town halls started to have some clout, given them by increasing regulations. Despite the negative publicity town planners have always attracted, they were there essentially to encourage good and discourage bad design.

It was seen that Lancaster had the potential to be a very attractive City. The Scots may have plundered its medieval centre but its footprint remained. It was replaced by the buildings we enjoy today, a comfortably Georgian/Edwardian/Victorian mix of solidly built stone buildings. Its slums had largely gone. It had many landmarks on which future planners could focus: Williamson's Structure, the Quay, the Castle, the Priory Church: Harrison's bridge over the Lune – and of course, the river itself. The contrasting topography of the flat lands of the estuary, and the hills rising above it, added to its potential. Although it had been a Lancashire mill town, it had always been detached from the rest of industrial Lancashire. No one industry had ever dominated the town with the dark satanic mills typical of the cotton era. Its wealth base having started as a port and a shipbuilding town was to be fortuitously continued by linoleum manufacture, itself tucked away from the historic centre where, in its turn, it could rot away without attracting too much notice.

So Lancaster did not have to suffer a disintegrating cotton dominated industry as did some of the other Lancashire towns. It had always diversified. West Indies trading, then furniture making, and latterly as a centre for the care of the mentally sick - the Moor and Albert Hospitals. What is less obvious today, but equally important to its claims to be a city worth preserving was its establishment in medieval times as the region's centre for the dispensation of justice. From this it owes its title of county town and status of city. More recently it has become a centre for education in the form of St.Martins Teacher Training College, followed by a large and internationally respected University. Such developments and the increasing popularity of the area as commuter territory produced an emergent middle class which might be expected to demand a pleasant town to work in, live in, shop in, spend leisure time in.

Whether, at the time the Amenity Society was formed in 1962, there was already this burgeoning middle class demanding a better civic environment, is perhaps a little fanciful, but the seeds must surely have been there. But there had to be a few more factors necessary to produce the critical mass of a successful civic society. The first, the author would submit is prosperity, a constituent which may need some explanation. To argue that a civic society can flourish in hard times and argue for civic improvement is not usually realistic. However, it was a fact that the formative years of the Society coincided with a period during which there was growing awareness of the need for good design, but not a lot of money to achieve it. There was little taste by the commercial sector to build, compared with the honey pots further south. Lancaster's economy was tenuous and unemployment was high. So, everything was slow, and, broadly, there was time to plan for and achieve value for money. Thus, Lancaster escaped most of the appalling early examples of mass demolition and retail excess, although it did not escape the Arndale disgrace. There was time for City and citizens to come together to plan what could be achieved from a limited resource. Real pressure for the scale of retail development which the Market Hall fire triggered was probably the first (and since then only) example of commercial ambition of a scale with the potential to destroy entirely an ancient town structure. The important point the author is trying to make here is that when the post Market Hall fire boom exploded on Lancaster, we had an established civic society, with the influence and know-how to temper the later commercial pressures for massive re-development.

This brings the author to his final, and not least important reason for the Civic Society's initial success: the Town Hall. As we will explore later, Lancaster was fortunate to have a Town Hall sensitive of the need to preserve the civic scene. A half open door was there, waiting to be pushed**.**

The substantial material the author has sifted might suggest that there is nothing of civic importance to have escaped the Society's enthusiastic attentions. But two surprising subjects have received a decidedly mute attention: the Storey Family, and the University. Lancaster was dominated by two families in the 18th and 19th centuries: the Williamsons and the Storeys. Broadly, Williamson and his son who became Lord Ashton, gave linoleum to the world, and Storeys gave it oilcloth. In the annals of the Society, Williamson pops up everywhere: the town hall, t' Structure - how could we avoid the family? Yet the Storey family, also one of the City's great benefactors, hardly gets a mention. This may be partly because they gave us fewer dramatic memorials, there were more Storeys than Williamsons spread over more generations, partly because there is a lesser archive and partly because the family's benefaction was less public than Williamson's grandiloquence. But the Storeys deserve some recognition, if we are to complete the reasons for Lancaster's civic importance. It is surely ironic that the future of the only prominent building in Lancaster with "Storey" in its title is so fragile.

Considering its size, and the prominence of its buildings, the University's relative low-key treatment by the Society is noteworthy. Out of sight and out of mind? A different community? Not until recent years with the Ruskin Library and the building of the

controversial new residences at the southern end has there been the briefest mention in the Society's archives of this expanding township This puzzle is dealt with at greater length elsewhere, but its absence from the Society's attentions deserves a mention in setting the scene for this account.

Glossary

Lancaster Civic Society is usually referred to as "the Society". Occasionally it is abbreviated to LCS. Where the generic root is intended, ie reference to civic societies generally, the word "society/ies" in lower case is used.

Similarly, "Town Hall" and "The City" are intended to refer to officers and councillors of the Lancaster District and its predecessor. "town hall" and "city", in lower case, refer respectively to the town hall as a building, and the physical area comprising the urban centre of the District.

B. BEGINNINGS

The Lancaster Amenity Society

In a sense, the Civic Society was an offspring of the Amenity Society: if members of the Amenity Society had been able to avoid the bad feeling which eventually destroyed it, the Civic Society would not have been born in 1967 and we might still have an Amenity Society.

On the face of it, the Amenity Society's civic credentials were beyond reproach: its constitution would be acceptable to any civic society, and on paper it had the right links to the Civic Trust. In 1965 it was engaged in a scheme to restore Church Street, and other worthy civic matters were attracting its attention. However, in 1966 something went wrong. At this distance in time, it is difficult to determine the precise origins of the dispute, despite profuse press comment. But it is clear that dissent became very public, and very personal.

Open warfare erupted after the chairman, Colin Hearnshaw, at the AGM in April had deferred the election of officers and committee. He claimed (according to newspaper reports) that the meeting was insufficiently attended. He again deferred the election, on

the same grounds. This prompted the Rev Harold Kellett (of whom we will hear more later) and two City councillors to call an informal protest meeting in July. This meeting, chaired by Harold Kellett, was a bad tempered affair in which insults were exchanged across the floor. The Lancaster Guardian reported it as a “winning show at the end of Blackpool Pier” and (precipitately) as “the last shot in the weary who-does-what battle between members”: the Lancashire Evening Post: “bitter wrangling, petty arguments”. Here, there were scenes which would be quite unthinkable in any meeting held by the Civic Society.

This meeting seemed to have cleared the air, because (according to the minutes) an almost uncontentious “Specially Adjourned Fifth AGM” took place in July. *Almost* uncontentious, because there was a ballot, unusual at most AGMs for the chairmanship, which Hearnshaw won, against CE Pearson, head of the well known and respected architectural practice in the City. Pearson beat Kellett for the vice chairmanship: nor was Kellett elected to the committee. So this was no doubt perceived as a vote of confidence in Hearnshaw. There was also a curious spat by two candidates (one of whom was Michael Argles of whom, too, we will be hearing more) protesting that they had not been sponsored by the University. This might indicate that one of the features of the Amenity Society was that committee members were intended to represent the interests of individual factions, a feature which the Civic Society has never sought. One other point of note, is that (according to the Morecambe Visitor), Don Waddell, the Town Clerk, offered Town Hall secretarial help, which (Lancashire Evening Post) Hearnshaw refused.

Otherwise, activities proposed for the coming year were entirely worthy: the future of the Music Room, scaffolding on t’ Structure (Ashton Memorial) following a fire (Waddell confirmed was coming down soon), John Towers talked about restoration of Church Street and street furniture. All a good run-of-the-mill programme, and one would have anticipated, a base for future harmony.

Not so, apparently, because in November, according to the Guardian, Argles wrote a pointed letter to Hearnshaw protesting that the aims of the society were not being fulfilled. Hearnshaw defended his position and dismissed Argles’ complaint. Kellett joined in, in a later letter to the Guardian supporting Argles. “Unless there is a programme of activities, the Society might as well wind up”. So, clearly, all was not well. That is the last we hear of the Amenity Society, which we have to assume was wound up before 1967, when the Civic Society was launched.

Formation of the Lancaster Civic Society

Before proceeding to the crucial formation account, It may be of interest to readers to learn that when this section was first drafted, most of the period 1967 to 1974 was a big black hole in the Society’s archives. Only the foresight of someone who had carefully preserved newspaper cuttings enabled the writer to put together a tentative essay on

the crucial Formation meeting. However, despite several requests in recent Newsletters and meetings, there had been no sign of the missing years. Then, miraculously the Minute (sic) Book appeared, just in time to record much important Society activity over the period – including a more reliable account of its formation.

The Minute Book also provides a fascinating insight into how business conventions and technical progress have changed over the 40 years of the Society's history. The now fragile bound volume records the formal Minutes of meetings of the early years in careful and mercifully clear handwriting by the first three secretaries. There were, it seems, no copies taken. Even after adoption of the typewriter, pages were pasted in. It was not until 1974 that the formality of a Minutes book was abandoned.

Changing social convention is also mirrored in the content of the Minute Book. People were always pre-fixed "Mr", Mrs", or "Miss", their initials sometimes omitted and first names never used. It would have been an unheard of breach of etiquette to refer to the Town Clerk by his first name, a liberty the author has however dared to take.

June 27 1967 was a propitious day for Lancaster. Moreover, it is clear from the records that a great deal of planning had been put into making the launch a success. One recognises the strong hands of the Town Clerk, Don Waddell as a major player.

The meeting was chaired by Graham Ashworth, Director of the Civic Trust for the North West. He set the civic gravity of the occasion. Part of the work of the Civic Trust was to promote Amenity or Civic Societies (readers will note that at this stage, there is reluctance entirely to drop the title of the body the Civic Society was about to supersede. Was this a sign of sensitivity towards the lately demised body?)

It seems worth paraphrasing Ashworth's recital of the aims of the Civic Trust in the context of Amenity/Civic Societies' activities, because they seem to capture well the principles which the Society has followed to this day:

- Educate, stimulate the public to instigate better design and planning: teach the public to demand better standards of planning and architecture

- Assist the local authority with development and housing problems

- Be widely representative: avoid becoming a clique for architects or anyone else: represent many walks of life: comprise people interested in the area in which they live

- Be financially secure: raise funds through subscriptions, investment

- Be well informed on matters affecting the City

Ashworth advised that the next steps should be to elect a management committee, prepare a constitution and draw up a programme for the next 12 months.

General debate preceding these actions was led by the Mayor, who was preoccupied with the need to avoid forming cliques. (Was this also an echo from the defunct Amenity Society?). Ashworth advised him not to worry about this possibility.

The Town Clerk stated that the City Council would welcome formation of a civic or amenity society. His sentiments (and his appointment as the Society's first secretary) may not have been entirely altruistic, because he had a list of jobs ready:

- "Work with the City's officers on problems which might elude the Council's attention, and so help in forward planning

- Act as a sounding board for Council projects

- If the Society is widely represented, for the City to give it tasks, and come back to the Council with suggestions, eg use of open spaces, the Quay, problems with terraced housing"

(In complementing the principles highlighted above by Ashworth, this list is also significant to the future of the Society, in that it captures the City welcoming Society's participation in the civic work of the City. This principle too, has endured, although whether it would be for a latter day town clerk to have the desire and the authority to pledge such a partnership might be a subject for interesting debate)

Dr K Bell then proposed, and Tom Mawson seconded a motion that a Civic or Amenity Society be formed. The election of a management committee followed. For the first time a question was asked about dropping "Amenity" from its title, but we have to await a decision from the first meeting of the new committee for an answer.

Names of the members of all committees are given in Appendix 1, but the constitution of the first committee is given in full here, because it sets an important scene for the initial activities of the Society:

JD Waddell (Town Clerk)
CE Pearson (architect)
M Argles (University)
PR Osborne (College of Art)
G Barton (retired art master)
TP Mawson (architect)
C Craig (antiques dealer)
Miss M Fulcher (University)
AE (sic) Heppenstall (City Architect)
JL Spencer (Headmaster LRGS)
The Rev Kellett (Vicar of St John's)

The meeting then closed and the management committee held its first meeting.

JL Spencer was elected the Society's first chairman, and JD Waddell (Town Clerk) its first secretary. A date for a further meeting was fixed, at which it was intended to consider comments on a draft constitution, to be circulated to the members. Who drafted it is not recorded, but a guess that the Town Hall typewriter was the origin of the agreed draft may provide a clue.

The ghost of the late Amenity Society was finally laid to rest by the adoption of the title "Lancaster Civic Society" (suggested by Michael Argles, after several alternatives had been aired), and agreement that the chairman should ask Mr Hearnshaw for the return of the documents for the Church Street Scheme.

There is a letter from Waddell to Kellett dated 12 July 1967 summarising suggestions from the management committee. Guy Barton suggested adopting the model Civic Trust constitution.

Michael Argles suggested appointing a president and vice president. A letter in 1970 from the Society's chairman – still John Spencer – to Col. HJ Darlington, inviting him to become president (an office later dropped until Charles Wilson became president many years later) and his reply accepting informs us that the Society already had vice presidents: the vice chancellor of the University and the City Architect. Col Darlington had just become High Sherriff, so it would appear to have been the Society's policy to cultivate the establishment.

Guy Barton and Harold Kellett suggested a wide variety of activities – visits, eyesores, preservation of properties.

An undated note from Miss Fulcher added to the growing list of suggestions for activities.

There is also an undated note from Don Waddell, listing in further detail activities in which members of the Society could become involved. By suggesting that the Council could assist by providing materials and equipment, he is hoping that members will provide voluntary labour.

The Management Committee's second meeting on 17July is also worth summarising in some detail. In agreeing a Constitution, membership, meetings, officers and committee structure components are unremarkable, but the following is of interest:

<u>Objects:</u>

(a) To encourage high standards of architecture and town planning in the City of Lancaster

(b) To stimulate public interest in and care for the beauty, history and character of the area of the town and its surroundings

(c) To encourage and actively participate in the preservation, development and improvement of features of general public amenity or historical interest

(d) To pursue these ends by means of meetings, exhibitions, lectures, publications, other forms of instruction and publicity, and promotion of schemes of a charitable nature.

Subscriptions

£2.0s.0d (Corporate Members), £1.0s.0d (Full Members), 5s.0d (Student members). A handwritten amendment for Full Members records 50p. Whether this adoption of decimalisation is an anachronism or a later change is not known.

Title of the Committee

The agreed constitution starts with “Management Committee”, then later and almost casually the term “Executive Committee” appears, and has been adopted ever since. One wonders at the reason for this rather pretentious title, or whether the former management committee anticipated that there might be other committees with less power?

The meeting went on to consider more practical matters. Three working groups were suggested: **Planning, Research**, and **Works**. Lectures by Mr Heppenstall on future planning of the City, Professor Pevsner, Peter Sheppeard (architect for the new University of Lancaster) on landscaping and Mr Fleetwood-Hesketh on the work of the Georgian Group were agreed.

The immediate workload would include attention by the **planning group** to the recent Buchanan report and St George’s Quay, the **research group** would undertake a photographic survey of the City (There is no further reference: tantalisingly one wonders if it was ever carried out), and the **works group**, the completion of the Church Street Improvement Scheme, study of a Leisure Survey questionnaire for Civic Trust of the North West, and investigation of the possibilities of a civic theatre for Lancaster in conjunction with a recent visit by the Century Theatre (the Century Theatre comprised a number of demountable steel boxes which toured the north, coming to rest on its winter lot next the canal at the top of Penny Street, then being re-born as the Blue Box at Keswick, forerunner of the Lakeside Theatre)

The first AGM was agreed for 15 September (actually 20 September) in the town hall.

Nominations were taken for the first officers. This is a little confusing, since the Society already had a formally appointed chairman and secretary. However “at the appropriate

time” (presumably the first AGM), if the nominees agreed, Mr Spencer would become chairman, the Reverend Kellett vice chairman, Mr Osborne secretary, and Mr Hacking treasurer. Thus the Town Clerk was in post as secretary for less than three months, probably having decided (correctly as it turned out) that the infant Society would survive without his overt help. He, and Allen Heppenstall (who also did not stand for election at the first AGM) may have realised that sooner or later matters would arise which would create conflicts of interest between Town Hall and the Society if they had continued in office.

Further procedural steps need to be described before we can be absolutely certain of the infant Society’s credentials. It seems that there had to be a public meeting before the first AGM could take place at which the Management Committee (note the temporary reversion of its title) reported on progress, and sought ratification of the draft constitution. Those members of the public who then joined the Society were entitled to attend the first AGM which took place immediately afterwards. Nominations for officers and committee were taken and, no vote being necessary, elected.

The chairman reported the initial activities the Society proposed to undertake, which broadly agree with what the interim committee had discussed (above).

According to the Minutes of this AGM, the Society’s full title should be “The City of Lancaster Civic Society”. So the Society was still having a little difficulty with some of its definitions.

Thus end the formative stages of the Society’s history. It is noteworthy that essentially the Society’s aims and activities have not changed significantly over its first 40 years.

Early years

Where sufficient material has been available, the more significant events involving the Society have been recorded in subsequent chapters, usually in some detail, eg Mitre Yard, Roads, the Market Hall. Many of the events during the years 1967 to 1974 are available only through the necessarily brief detail of the original Minutes Book. Such material, while precious, can only be seen through the pens of the secretaries who wrote it up in often painstaking near copperplate styles. Extracts are given below.

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