Lancaster Civic Vision

Celebrating our Heritage – Enhancing our Environment – Shaping our Future

20 CENTURIES IN LANCASTER: A SHORT WALK

Lancaster Civic Vision Guide 51

The story of Lancaster as a town begins beneath the courtyard at the centre of Lancaster Castle. This was the heart of the Roman forts on this hilltop. The first two forts (built around AD71–4 and AD98–117) were the usual square layout, stone walls obliterating the initial wooden ones. The third fort of AD330–40 may have been the biggest. All are now concealed by today's buildings, except for the bath house north-east of the Priory and some intriguing geophysical finds in Vicarage Field to the north-west.

The west-east street now called Church Street follows the Roman road from the forts' east gate downhill through the civilian settlement. Some of today's building plots along Church Street coincide with the Roman and medieval ones. The City Museum in Market Square has many Roman artefacts found locally including the impressive Roman cavalier's tombstone.



John O'Gaunt Gateway to Lancaster Castle (right, *c.*1400) and Castle Park houses (1720–67, left)

Today the hill is dominated by the Castle whose Keep is Norman, dating from somewhere between 1080 and 1150. As you look round, you see a string of buildings linked together by the outer walls. Aidan's Tower dates from *c.*1210, Well Tower from *c.*1325 and the John O'Gaunt Gatehouse you walked through from *c.*1400.

The Keep was heightened in 1400–30 and given its decorative battlements in 1585. The period between 1788 and 1821 saw six new prison buildings and the Shire Hall added to the complex. So Lancaster Castle is Norman, Medieval and Georgian. It is more prison and court than military fortress.

If you leave the Castle through the Gatehouse and turn right, walk along Castle Park. The elegant houses on your left date from *c.*1720 (No.20) to the later 18th century. Their grandeur reflects Lancaster then; it was the county town, site of the Lancashire Assizes and home to wealthy traders, merchants and lawyers. As you walk around the outer wall of the Castle you will come to the Shire Hall (1798) which housed the six-monthly Assizes (courts) that were the lynchpin for the county's social scene.

Walking on, you will see the Priory Church ahead. Officially called the Priory and Parish Church of St Mary, the earliest Christian church here was Anglo-Saxon (7th–8th century), predating the Benedictine priory. The impressive oak choir stalls date from *c.*1345 and much of the nave is fifteenth-century Perpendicular in style.



The Priory – the porch (left, 1903), tower (1755) and nave/south aisle (right, 15th century)

If you walk past the Priory, keeping the Tower on your right, you come to Vicarage Lane, a path that leads you beside Vicarage Field steeply downhill to St George's Quay and the River Lune. Some of Lancaster's Georgian wealth came from North Lancashire agricultural estates, but from the eighteenth century much also came from trading, initially with Ireland and the British west coast and then to West Africa and the Caribbean.

Sugar was imported and refined, and tropical hardwoods formed the basis for Gillow's renowned furniture business. The merchants and port commissioners built today's St George's Quay in 1750–5 on land reclaimed from the Lune. Warehouses followed later in the eighteenth century, converted to flats in the late twentieth century.



Castle (far right), spire of St Peter's Cathedral (right, 1859), Ashton Memorial (on horizon, 1909) and St Mary's Parade houses (foreground, 18th century)

Walk upstream along the Quay, the river on your left. Pass under the bridge that took the railway from Green Ayre Station (roughly where Sainsbury's is now) to Castle Station – it is now a path and cycleway. The railway arrived in Lancaster from Preston to the south in 1840 and in 1846 carried on to Carlisle and then Glasgow.

This position on what is now called the West Coast Mainline Railway helped the nineteenth-century industrialists like the Williamsons and Storeys to import the raw materials and coal for their factories making linoleum and domestic coverings and it let them export their products globally. Soon you will pass *Captured Africans* by Kevin R. Dalton-Johnson, which is a moving memorial to the slave trade that further enriched some of Lancaster's merchants.

Where Damside Street meets the one-way system, turn right up the steep and curved road called Bridge Lane. Where this road levels out you can see to your left Church Street (Roman in origin, medieval in structure with Georgian and Victorian buildings), ahead of you is China Street (widened from just eight feet wide in 1895), and on your right the Judges' Lodgings.



Judges' Lodgings (left, mid-17th century), St Mary's Gate (centre, c.1792) and Mitre House (early 1970s)

Its core had been built by 1639 for the Keeper of the Castle, then rebuilt and extended as accommodation for the circuit judges at the Assizes in the Castle. It is Lancaster's oldest house and is now a museum of Gillow furniture from that firm's golden era of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Facing the Judges' Lodgings, on your right is Mitre House, a government office building inserted carefully into Lancaster's historic core in the early 1970s.

You can end this short circular tour of **20 Centuries in Lancaster** by walking up either Castle Hill, Nip Hill or Church Street to reach your starting point at the Castle.

There are many other guides in this series that provide more details about the places and buildings noted in this walk.
28 Lancaster Castle
56 The Priory Church of St Mary, Lancaster
59 St George's Quay, Lancaster
61 Georgian Lancaster
62 Lancaster and the Slave Trade

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