Lancaster Civic Vision

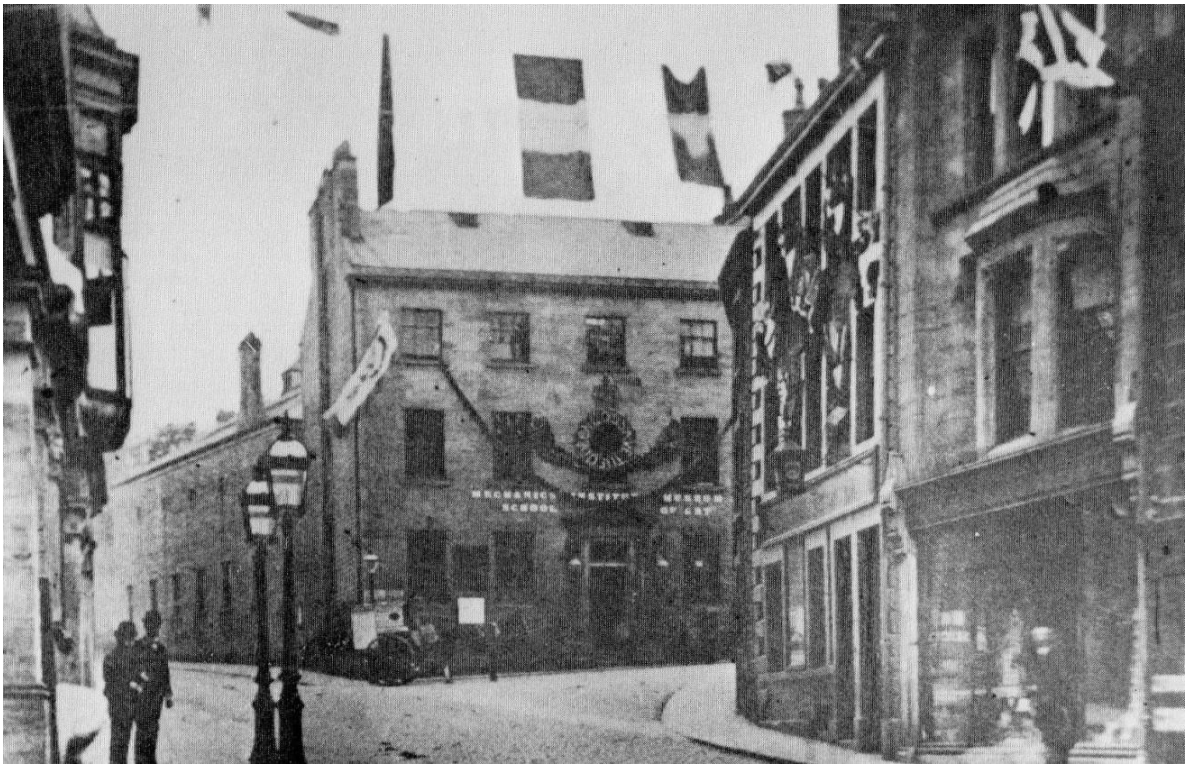
Celebrating our Heritage – Enhancing our Environment – Shaping our Future

THE STOREY

Lancaster Civic Vision Guide 68

The story of The Storey begins in 1824 when Lancaster industrialists founded the Mechanics Institute, one of many set up in towns across Great Britain in the 1820s and 1830s. Originally in William Rothery's house in Mary Street, it moved via Back Sun Street and Penny Street to a three-storey building at the junction of Meeting House Lane and Castle Hill. The Institute's focus was on improving the technical skills of the employees in the town's manufacturing firms.

The photograph below shows the Mechanics Institute in 1887 before its demolition.

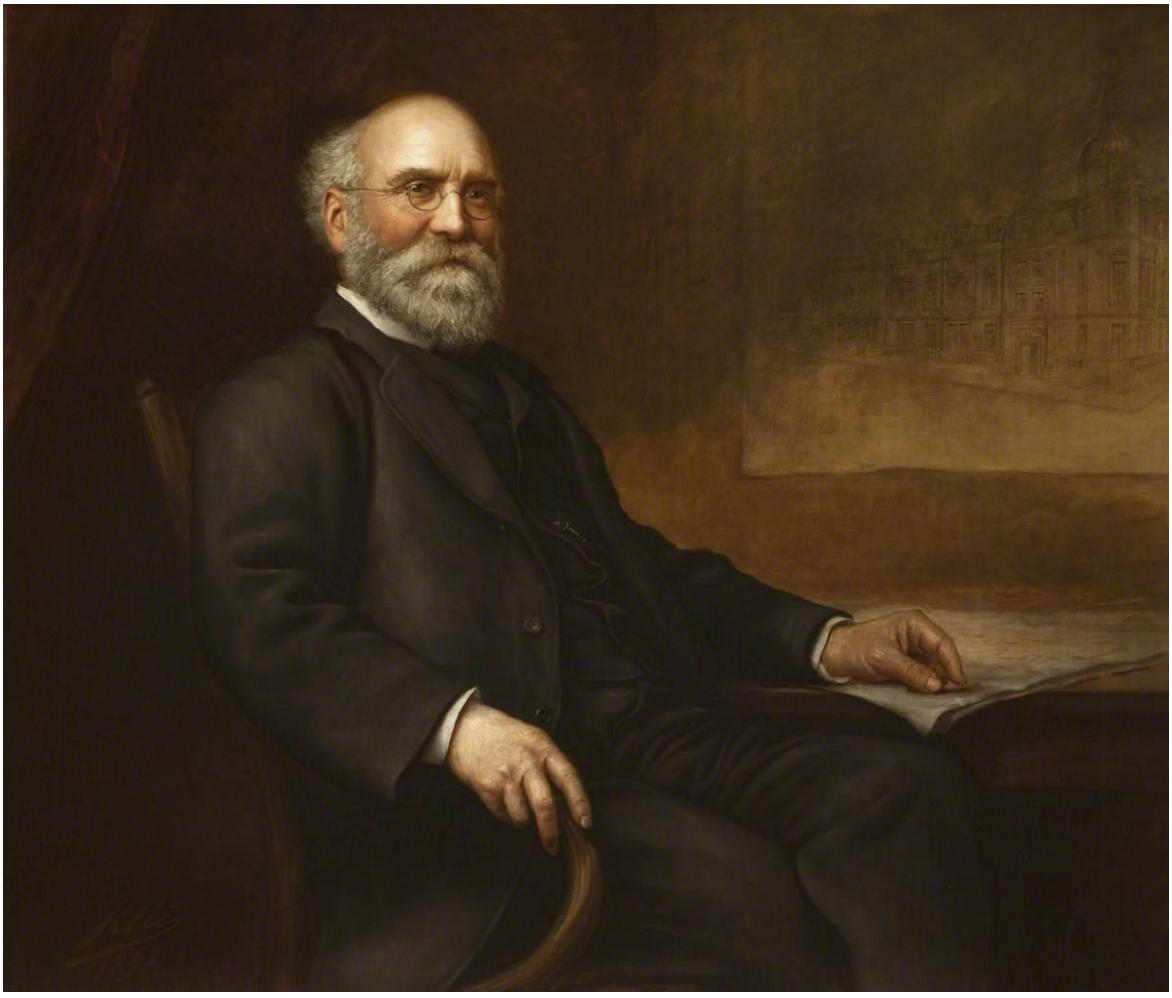


Source: Lancashire County Council, Red Rose Collection

1887 was an important year for Thomas Storey – a member of the Storey manufacturing firm based at White Cross Mill in Lancaster – because he was knighted that year and was Mayor of Lancaster for the fourth time. To commemorate Queen Victoria's Golden Jubilee in 1887 he gave £20,000 – nearly £2.7 million in 2020 money – to build a new, more ambitious Institute for Lancaster.

The site of the Mechanics Institute was given to Storey by its Trustees for this venture, so the Storey donation was spent on the demolition of the existing buildings, the new building and the furnishing and fitting out of the new facilities. The Storey family had long been associated with the Mechanics Institute, Sir Thomas's brother William, a keen educationalist, having been its Secretary for many years. Building started in 1887 and had been completed by 1891.

Now named the Storey Institute, Sir Thomas gave the building to the town of Lancaster in 1893: today Lancaster City Council runs it. After Sir Thomas's death in 1898, his son, Herbert Lushington Storey, gave another £10,000 in 1904 to extend the building up Castle Hill, and this was completed in 1906. This provided more space and a caretaker's house.



Sir Thomas Storey, 1825–1898, painted by Karel Klič in 1892. Source: Lancaster City Museums

The Storey Institute is an interesting building architecturally. Described in its Grade II listing as 'Jacobean Revival' in style, it is viewed most impressively when looking up the hill from the junction of King Street and Market Street. The architects were the noted Lancaster firm of Paley, Austin and Paley.



A plaque in Latin on the south wall commemorates Sir Thomas Storey's generosity and Queen Victoria's Golden Jubilee. At roof level the carving displays an 'S' monogram for the Storey family.





Inside, a gentle and broad staircase leads up to a first-floor corridor in which the north wall is a commemoration in stained glass of many famous artists and of the Arts in general. The window was designed by Edward Holmes Jewett who worked for the noted stained-glass firm of Shrigley and Hunt whose works on Castle Hill were just across the road from the Storey Institute.



Also on the first floor, in the Gallery, is a large sculpture of Queen Victoria and Prince Albert, in white marble carved by Percy Wood.



The rear entrance to the building is also interesting. It comprises a cut-down doorway re-sited here from the Fenton-Cawthorne house after it had been demolished in 1921 to make way for what is now the former Post Office building.

There is also a door-hood from one of the eighteenth-century houses demolished to make way for the Institute's expansion in 1904–06. This back entrance also leads into the Storey Garden to the west of the building – a calm oasis amid the bustle of central Lancaster.



The Storey Institute was far bigger than the Mechanics Institute it replaced because it was so much more than just a site for technical training, though that continued. Sir

Thomas saw the new Institute as being for "the promotion of art, science, literature and technical education". "If anything can be done to give an impetus to the study and practice of science and the arts, especially as applied to manufactures, it would be of advantage to the town."

The Storeys personally were keen on the arts and they recognised the competitive advantage their firms gained from good product-design. The building provided a new home for the School of Art and the Art Gallery held its first exhibition in 1891 with pictures by Constable, Gainsborough and Canaletto.

There was space for recitals in the Music Room. The public library and a newsroom were housed in the Institute. Lecture theatres and other teaching rooms could be hired for meetings and training as well as for educational classes. Foreign languages were taught. There were two science rooms.

The Storey Institute combined in one building elements of what today would be called further education, adult education and an arts centre. Over the years the functions of the Institute have gradually changed – the College of Art has closed, the public library has relocated and the Visitor Information Centre has moved in. A restaurant came and went. For over two decades the Gallery hosted over 100 exhibitions of high-quality contemporary art, achieving a national reputation. The Museum now has its own premises elsewhere in the town, the lecture theatres have been updated. Offices can be rented. Many creative businesses and organisations are based here.

Interestingly the adult-education programmes transferred to part of the White Cross site after the Storeys firm had closed. The building's name has been shortened to 'The Storey'. Doubtless there will be other changes in the future for this important and useful building. The Storeys' £30,000 was very well spent.



Further reading
Christie G (1964) *Storeys of Lancaster.* London: Collins
Text and photographs (unless otherwise stated) – Gordon Clark.
The author's thanks to John Angus.
Published by Lancaster Civic Vision (©2021, revised 2022). www.lancastercivicsociety.uk.
Lancaster Civic Vision is the trading name of Lancaster Civic Society, registered charity no. 258434