

Lancaster Civic Vision

Celebrating our Heritage – Enhancing our Environment – Shaping our Future

JUDGES' LODGINGS, LANCASTER

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The Judges' Lodgings is one of Lancaster's Grade I listed buildings. It occupies a prominent site near the top of Church Street, close to the Castle with which its history is very closely linked.

The site has a long settlement history. The remains of a Roman-period kiln have been found here, the site being near the eastern gate of the Roman fort. We know that two large houses, Old Hall and New Hall occupied roughly this site, both now demolished.

The present building started its long life sometime between 1625 and 1631 when Thomas Covell (1561–1639), the six-times Mayor of Lancaster and Keeper of Lancaster Castle for 48 years, built himself a grand town house. There is evidence that, to save money, some foundations, stonework and roof and cellar timbers were reused from earlier buildings and the demolished Old Hall supplied the fireplace in the entrance hall. Otherwise Covell chose the then fashionable style we see today.

Built of sandstone rubble, the design has similarities with other Lancashire houses of the period – three storeys (plus cellars) and seven bays with north and south wings extending to the rear. Covell's wealth can be seen in the scale of the building, the wood panelling and the elaborate entrance door with its wrought-iron gates and railings and complex door case.

There are records of Covell accommodating judges and their "followers and servants" in his house in 1635. The spare space in his house might be needed. Throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries the judges who presided over the Assize trials in Lancaster were members of the Northern Circuit who came from York Assizes and would move on after Lancaster. They needed accommodation for themselves and their staff that befitted their status and offered some security while in Lancaster.



The Judges' Lodgings today (Source: Author)

The Assizes were an important part of Lancaster life for many centuries. They were the highest court in England, dealing with the most serious cases. Lancaster was the site of the Assizes for the whole of Lancashire after 1362.

The long slow journey from south Lancashire to Lancaster led to several attempts to get other assizes set up, given that the bulk of the county's population was increasingly in the rapidly expanding towns of the south. Some legal work was transferred to Preston in 1798 but it was not until 1835 that Lancaster's legal monopoly on the county's Assizes was fully broken when an Assize was established in Liverpool.

It was not just the county town's local pride that was at stake. The Assizes were held two or three times a year, often in spring and autumn. In 1827 Edward Baines noted that, to deal with 92 criminal cases and 242 civil ones, 116 barristers had come to Lancaster, doubtless along with juniors and staff. This influx of the well remunerated – for a week at a time in the late-eighteenth century and for two to three weeks at a time in the early nineteenth century – was a major boost for the local economy in terms of accommodation, meals and ancillary spending.

Running parallel with the legal work, a lively social season developed albeit not on the scale of, say, Bath. There were concerts, plays, horseracing and balls at the Assembly Room. You could see and be seen as you promenaded along the new walk round the Castle or along Ladies Walk by the River Lune and the Mill Race. The whole town benefitted from the county Assizes being held in Lancaster.

The building's architectural history after the 1630s is complex with numerous re-modellings and extensions. After the Royalists damaged much of Lancaster in 1643 during the Civil War, some repairs may have been needed to the Judges' Lodgings. There were extensions in 1675, perhaps to the north wing.

At some point, perhaps in the eighteenth century, most of the original cross windows – they opened left to right – were replaced by sash windows, which open up and down. After the Covell era, the house was owned by the Brockhole, Butler and Cole families, each updating what was their town house in Lancaster to complement their country houses and estates elsewhere in Lancashire. There were extensions in the early nineteenth century to the south wing.

Thomas Butler Cole took over the house in 1811 and sold it to the County Magistrates. The building then became the official lodgings for the visiting judges. The first floor was their main living area. It was in these early years of the nineteenth century that further changes were made to the house, extending the south wing and then doubling the depth of the building.

Lancashire County Council took over running the building when the Council was set up in 1888. This lodging function continued until 1971 when the principal Crown Court for Lancashire moved to Preston.

There was a further period of restoration before the building opened to the public in 1975 as the Judges' Lodgings Museum operated by Lancashire County Council. The Museum closed in 2016 due to financial pressures and fully reopened in 2020 run by the County with help from volunteers, many being members of an active Friends Group.

The Museum has three sections. One illustrates the Assizes in Lancaster. The second is one of the finest public displays of Gillow furniture, which was made in Lancaster. The third is a Museum of Childhood focusing on toys and a late Victorian classroom.



The Rawlinson bookcase by Gillow in the Judges' Lodgings
(Source: Lancashire Museums Service, gratefully acknowledged)

Note that some of the events described here have slightly different dates in some sources.

Further information is available at the website of the Judges' Lodgings:
About Us - Lancaster Judges Lodgings Museum https://lancasterjudgeslodgings.org.uk

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