

Lancaster Civic Vision

Celebrating our Heritage – Enhancing our Environment – Shaping our Future

THE ROYAL ALBERT, LANCASTER

Lancaster Civic Vision Guide 73

The Royal Albert Asylum (later Institution and then Hospital) on Ashton Road is one of Lancaster's most architecturally distinctive buildings. Its history shows Victorian philanthropy at its best.

The story begins in 1864 when James Brunton, a local Quaker, offered £2,000 to provide a house to care for the mentally ill. Lancaster had hosted the County Lunatic Asylum on Lancaster Moor since 1816 – see Guide 74). Dr de Vitre, who worked there, recognised the need for greater provision than a single house for those with lesser mental impairments.

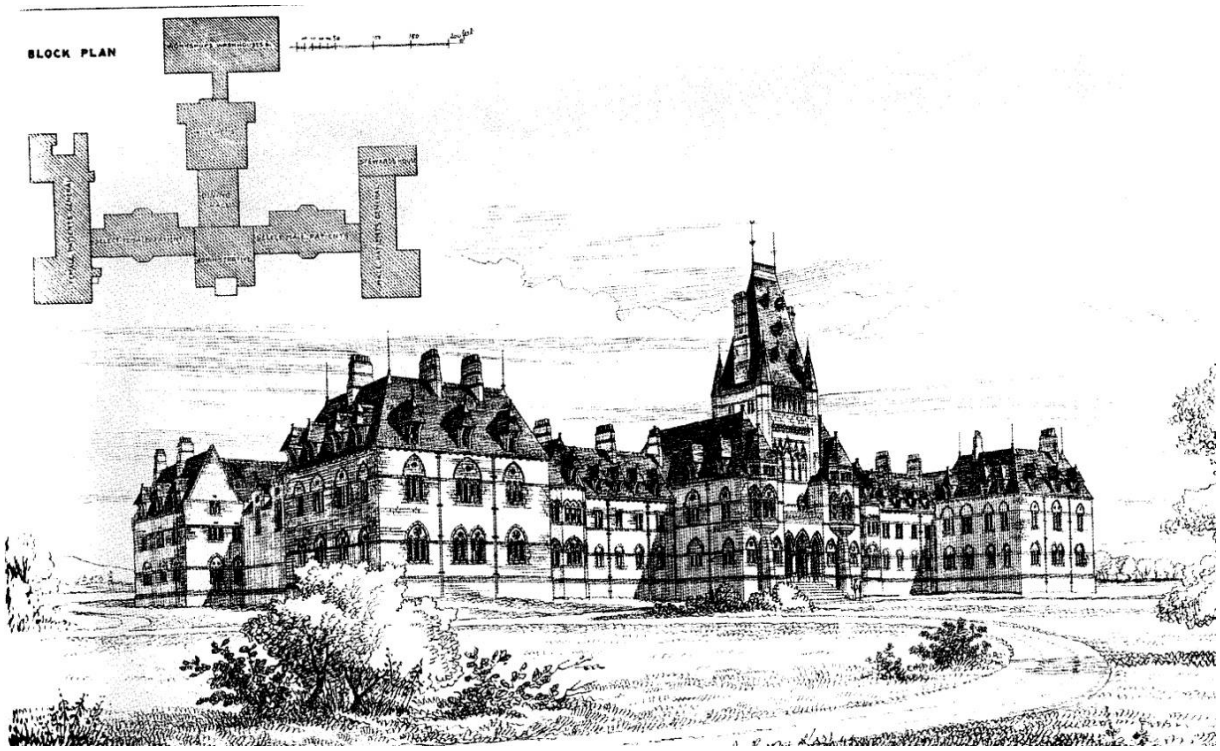
A public meeting late in 1864 saw the formation of a committee to raise funds, find a site and create a plan. Donations came from all over northern England, much of it from Freemasons. A 67-acre site was purchased in the south-west of Lancaster.

The architects were the renowned Lancaster firm of Paley and Austin and it was one of the practice's two biggest commissions. Edward Paley, the senior partner, was a member of the steering committee and his son, Edmund Graham, had Down's syndrome. An initial plan was presented in 1866.

Building began in 1868 to a revised plan and many local building firms were employed. The opening ceremony was held in 1870 and the main building was completed in 1873. The boys wing was on the south side (on the right of the picture below) and the girls wing to the north (left). There was a large dining hall, an assembly room, swimming bath, grocer's shop (for training), offices and workshops.

It was built in the then fashionable early-Gothic Revival style (particularly apparent in the design of the windows), whereas the central section with its very steep roof and soaring chimneys looks French. The red sandstone bands are from St Bees in Cumbria and the greenish slates are from Coniston. The imperial staircase with its wrought-iron balustrades is a key feature of the design of the interior.

The main building is Grade II* listed.



The revised design of the Royal Albert Asylum as built
(Source: Building News 9/10/1874; Brandwood 2012, 77)

The full name was the Royal Albert Asylum for Idiots and Imbeciles of the Northern Counties. The wording may shock us today but 'idiot' and 'imbecile' were then medical terms for those with lesser mental impairments than 'lunatics' and for whom care and training offered the prospect of a better life back in the community.

The target group were children, boys and girls, aged between 6 and 15, excluding the most severely impaired. It was renamed the Royal Albert Institution in 1909/10 and the Royal Albert Hospital in 1948 when the NHS took it over.

Often there were 500 to 700 residents and by 1911 110 staff and their families lived on site or nearby. Staff houses were provided on Ashton Road (Royal Albert Cottages and De Vitre Cottages in 1877 and Hibbert Terrace c.1898).

Later in the nineteenth century several additional facilities were added – farm buildings (1870s), an infirmary in 1882, Winmarleigh Recreation Hall (1886–8), Brunton House on Scotforth Road as a residence for private, paying patients (1887), the Storey Home for older girls (1898), the Ashton Wing (1901), Derby House (1912–13), and an industrial school and workshops.

Like the main building, these were largely funded by private donations.



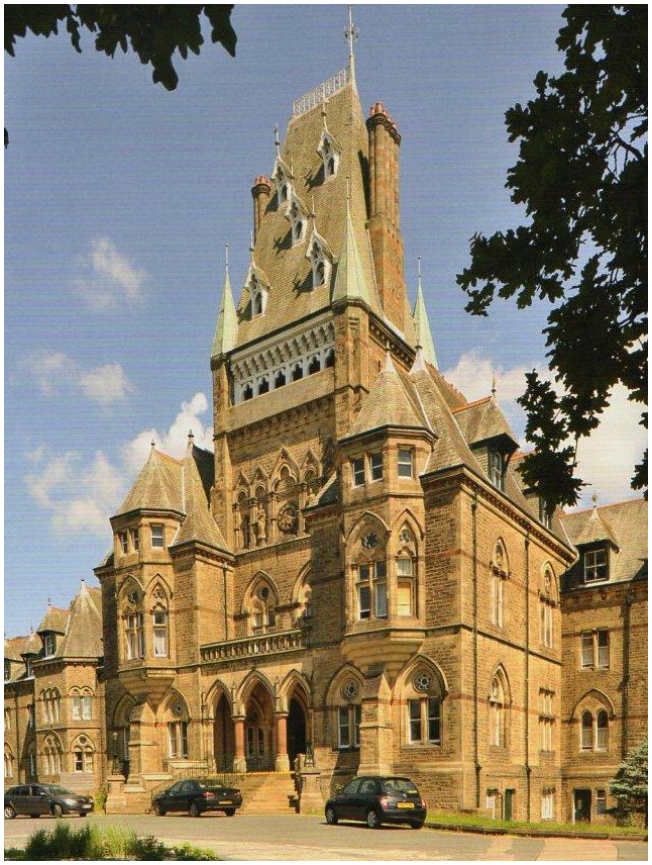
The Royal Albert site in 1939 (Source: Red Rose Collection, Lancashire County Council)

The emphasis was on educating and training the children so that they would be able to live and support themselves back in the community. Many did leave, but those for whom this aim proved too difficult stayed at the Royal Albert and gradually a long-term resident community developed.

The age range of the patients was widened so that by 1948 45 per cent of patients were over 35. The Royal Albert became an NHS Hospital in 1948.

By the 1960s there were over 1000 patients. Like so many former asylums it closed (in 1996), but unlike so many it was not demolished. Since 1996 the building has been the home of an independent boarding college for Muslim girls, Jamea al Kauthar.

Please note -The grounds of the Royal Albert are private property with no right of way.



The central section of the elaborate frontage. Statues of Queen Victoria and Prince Albert flank the clock. (Source: Brandwood 2012, 78)

Reading

Brandwood G 2012 *The Architecture of Sharpe, Paley and Austin.* Swindon: English Heritage

Historic England
Royal Albert Hospital (original part only) , Non Civil Parish - 1194930 | Historic England

Other useful guides in this series include:
74 The Moor Hospital, Lancaster
83 Hospitals in Lancaster and Morecambe

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