

Lancaster Civic Vision

Celebrating our Heritage – Enhancing our Environment – Shaping our Future

THE MOOR HOSPITAL, LANCASTER

Lancaster Civic Vision Guide 74

The story of the former Moor Hospital on Quernmore Road in Lancaster starts with the County Asylums Act of 1808 ("for the better care and maintenance of lunatics"). This allowed a county's Justices of the Peace to build and fund asylums for lunatics who were paupers or criminals. Those who were not paupers could be committed after 1815.

In 1809 Lancashire started to plan its asylum. Previously lunatics, however defined, were held in workhouses or, if criminals, in prisons. They lived their lives with little treatment, care or kindness.

Where in Lancashire should the County Lunatic Asylum be built? Somewhere in the populous south of the county was the obvious choice but Lancaster won out. The Corporation wanted to bolster Lancaster's status as the county town. It offered the county a five-acre site on Lancaster Moor, east of the town, at no charge. It argued that building costs would be reduced because the site was surrounded by quarries for the fine sandstone needed to face the building. Lawyers and magistrates could easily visit the site for inspections when they were already in Lancaster for the Assizes (the courts) at the Castle. Lancaster Corporation's offer was accepted.

Building began in 1811/12 and the Asylum opened in 1816, the fourth county asylum in England. The architect and building manager was Thomas Standen, a local slater and plasterer who had very limited experience of architecture or such large projects. How did he get the commission? Though inexperienced, he succeeded in producing a very fine Georgian building in a Greek Revival style that would grace any

gentleman's country house (see below). The interior was similarly well designed to the best standards of the time.

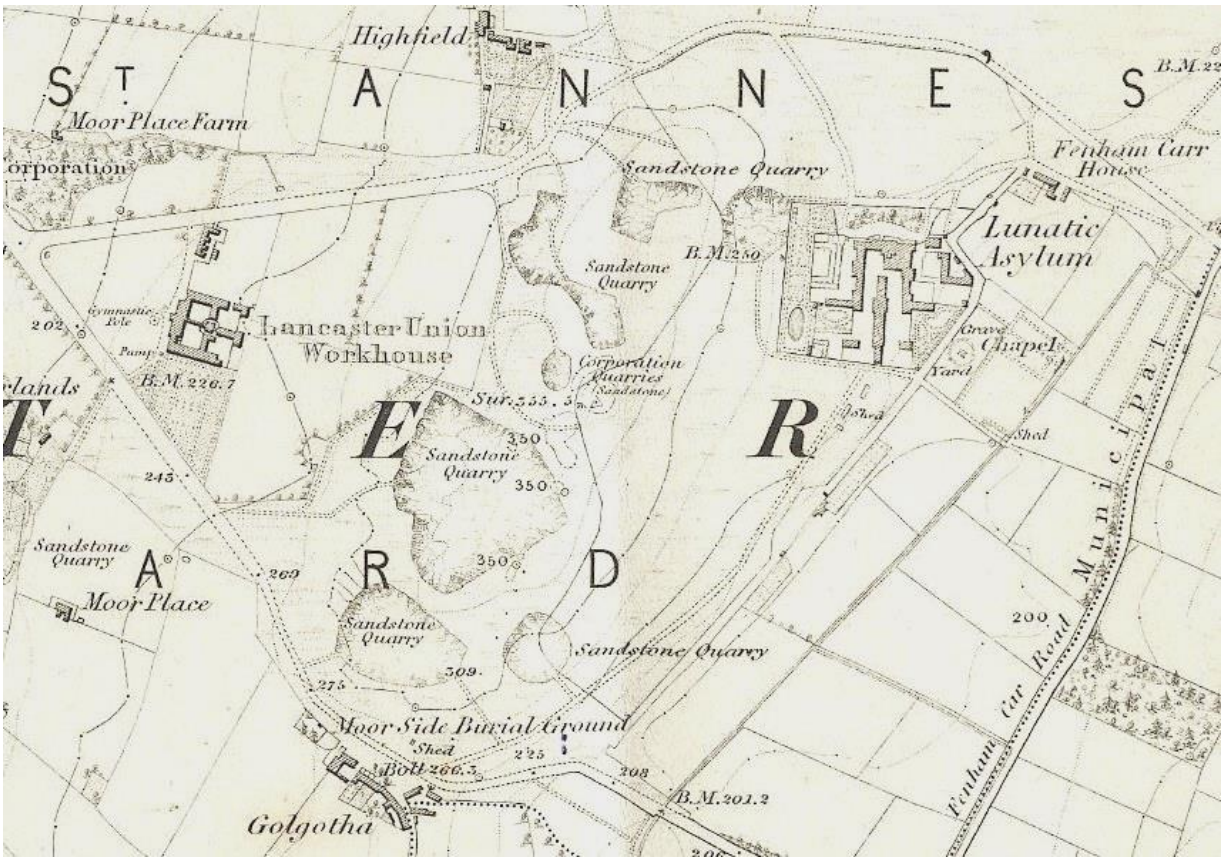


Photograph of the centre of the 1816 frontage, the date in the pediment

The only problem was the Asylum's capacity. Designed originally for around 280 patients, the demand for places soon far exceeded this. Extensions were needed. Standen had gone bankrupt in the early 1820s so other architects were used and after 1837 Edmund Sharpe was the Asylum's principal architect (see LCS Guide 32 for more details about Sharpe's career).

The map below shows the many new buildings erected south of the original building as recorded on the OS map of 1844/5, which also shows the many nearby sandstone

quarries. By 1841 the Asylum's capacity had risen to 611 and by 1877 it was over 1000. Was this because there were more lunatics (the county's population was rapidly growing), or because the trend was for more lunatics to be sent to asylums, or because the definition of Lunacy had been widened to include epileptics, vagrants, single mothers and others whom we would not consider today as mentally ill?



The County Lunatic Asylum in 1844/5 (Source: Ordnance Survey 6" map)

A further major expansion was needed, this time north of Quernmore Road. Built between 1879 and 1882 the massive new facility ('The Annexe') was designed by Arnold W Kershaw and cost over £100,000 (£12.5 million in 2020 values). Its predominant colour is red sandstone, unlike the grey sandstone of the original building. It provided 825 beds.

Even this proved inadequate and additional 'Villas' or 'Houses' were built next to Kershaw's building at the instigation of Dr Cassidy. These included Campbell House for men (opened in 1909) and Ridge Lea for women (opened in 1916). Both were for patients whose families paid for better and separate accommodation.

By 1940 capacity peaked at 3200 (up from the 280 in the 1816 building) and by 1948 the whole site had reached 587 acres, up from the five acres in 1816.

It was by now a major community with a huge kitchen, laundry and boiler house. There were two chapels, workshops, a theatre and library, a cricket pitch and three farms. It was also a major source of local employment: by 1911 238 staff and their families were resident on the site and many more lived in Lancaster. The Royal Albert Hospital provided similar employment opportunities (see LCS Guide 73). The map below shows the site in 1931 near its peak.



The County Mental Hospital in 1933, Ridge Lee ('Ladies Villa') at the top and the original asylum buildings at the bottom (Source; Ordnance Survey 6" map)



Part of the 1882 extension

From the start and particularly from the 1840s the Asylum's doctors – men like David Campbell, Edward Denis de Vitre and Samuel Gaskell – aspired to treat the mentally ill much better than before – less restraint, decent food, better hygiene, more activities and kindness and various therapies. 'Asylum' then meant a place of safety.

The 1832 cholera outbreak necessitated two emergency hospitals being built in the grounds; and diarrhoea was sometimes a problem with so many people living in increasingly crowded wards. Some of the violently ill might not respond to the available treatments. The bigger the hospital got, the harder it was to meet these higher standards for everyone. Nevertheless, in the 1930s the site was noted for its high (i.e. good) ratio of patients discharged to patients admitted.

In 1948 the Moor Hospital joined the NHS and in the following decades the number of mentally ill patients decreased as pharmaceutical treatments and talking therapies became available. New smaller care units were set up nearer the patients' families across the county and specialist centres were established for the treatment of addictions. This left spare capacity in the Moor Hospital which came to specialise in geriatric medicine and housed several other hospital departments and the Schools of Nursing and Radiology.

Eventually the under-used facilities at the vast Moor Hospital became too expensive to continue. The 'Old Side' (the original 1816 building and its extensions) closed in 1991 and, after some demolition of mid-Victorian extensions, it was converted to housing, flats and town houses. It is now a Grade II* listed building. The 'New Side' (the later Victorian extension) finally closed in 2000 and, after many years of abandonment, this huge, Grade II building has been converted into flats and the nearby grounds are used for new modern houses. Ridge Lea closed in 2016 exactly 200 years after the original Asylum opened.

All the areas described in this leaflet are now private housing estates.



Gothic Revival

Reading:

Watts-Tobin M A (2010) A History of Lancaster Moor Hospital. *Morecambe Bay Medical Journal* 6(3), 71–4

Williamson P (1999) *From Confinement to Community*. Lancaster

Other guides of interest in this series include:
73 The Royal Albert, Lancaster
83 Hospitals in Lancaster and Morecambe

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