Lancaster Civic Vision

Celebrating our Heritage – Enhancing our Environment – Shaping our Future

LANCASTER CASTLE

Lancaster Civic Vision Guide 28

Does Lancaster have a castle? The maps and guidebooks say it does. The large collection of Grade 1-listed buildings at the top of Castle Hill has always been called a castle. But is it really a castle?



Lancaster Castle

It certainly looks like a castle. There is a central Norman keep; tall battlements and stone, six-foot-thick walls; and the John O'Gaunt gateway (photographed above) dates from around 1400 and looks like it is meant to keep out attackers.

Lancaster Castle started as a military base – the remains of the Roman fort from around AD80 to AD400 became the foundations of the Norman castle's Keep from 1100–1150.

Until the Scotland–England border had been settled and invasion from the north was no longer likely, the defensive structures of the castle multiplied with extensive battlements around the central area reinforced by towers – Adrian's Tower (*c.*1210) and the Well Tower (*c.*1325) being the oldest.

Militarily the Castle has rarely been tested. Some of the outer walls were demolished after the English Civil War, but soon rebuilt in the 1660s. So, militarily, the Castle has been an expensive white elephant. Defence was its main function only in the distant past, and even then only occasionally. So, what has the Castle been for?

As early as the twelfth century the Castle was also a court and prison. The earliest court cases were held here in 1166 and in 2020 it is still a court, probably the oldest continuously used court site in the UK. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries the two periods in the year when court cases were held in Lancaster (the Assizes) were major social events in this, Lancashire's county town.

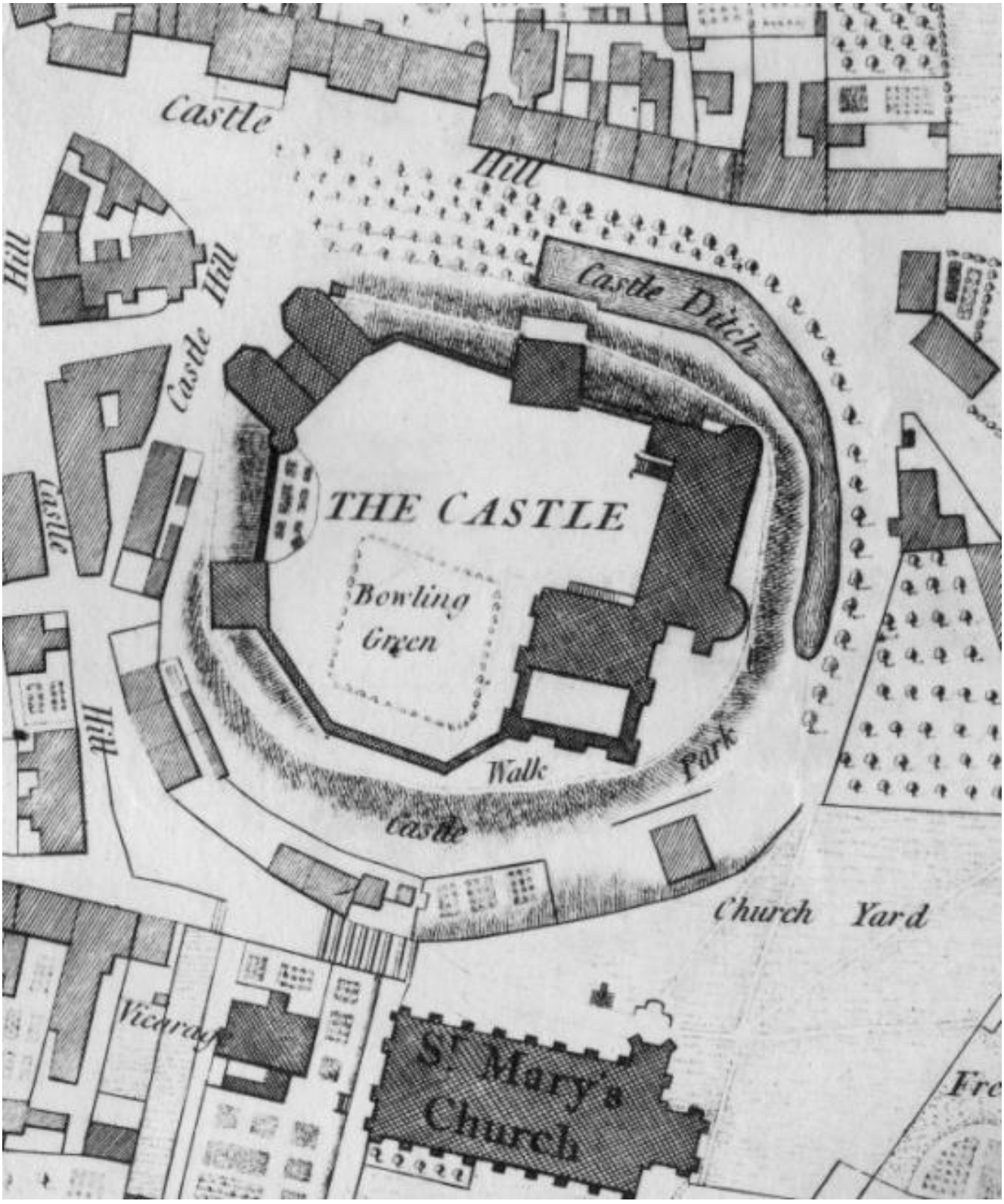
The county's social scene included balls in the Assembly Rooms. The circuit judge was housed after 1776 in the Judges' Lodgings (see Guide 95). This house dates from at least the 1550s although today we mostly see the alterations in 1640 and 1826. It is now a museum with a splendid collection of Gillow furniture (see Guide 5 on *Gillow of Lancaster*).

The accused, the convicted and debtors were held in cells in the Castle, which ceased being a prison only in 2011. Probably nowhere else in the UK has such a range of types of prison.

There are mediaeval dungeons, which you can visit. The Female Penitentiary (1821) has a unique, multi-storey Benthamite panopticon where one warder can keep a set of cells under constant supervision from a single viewpoint.

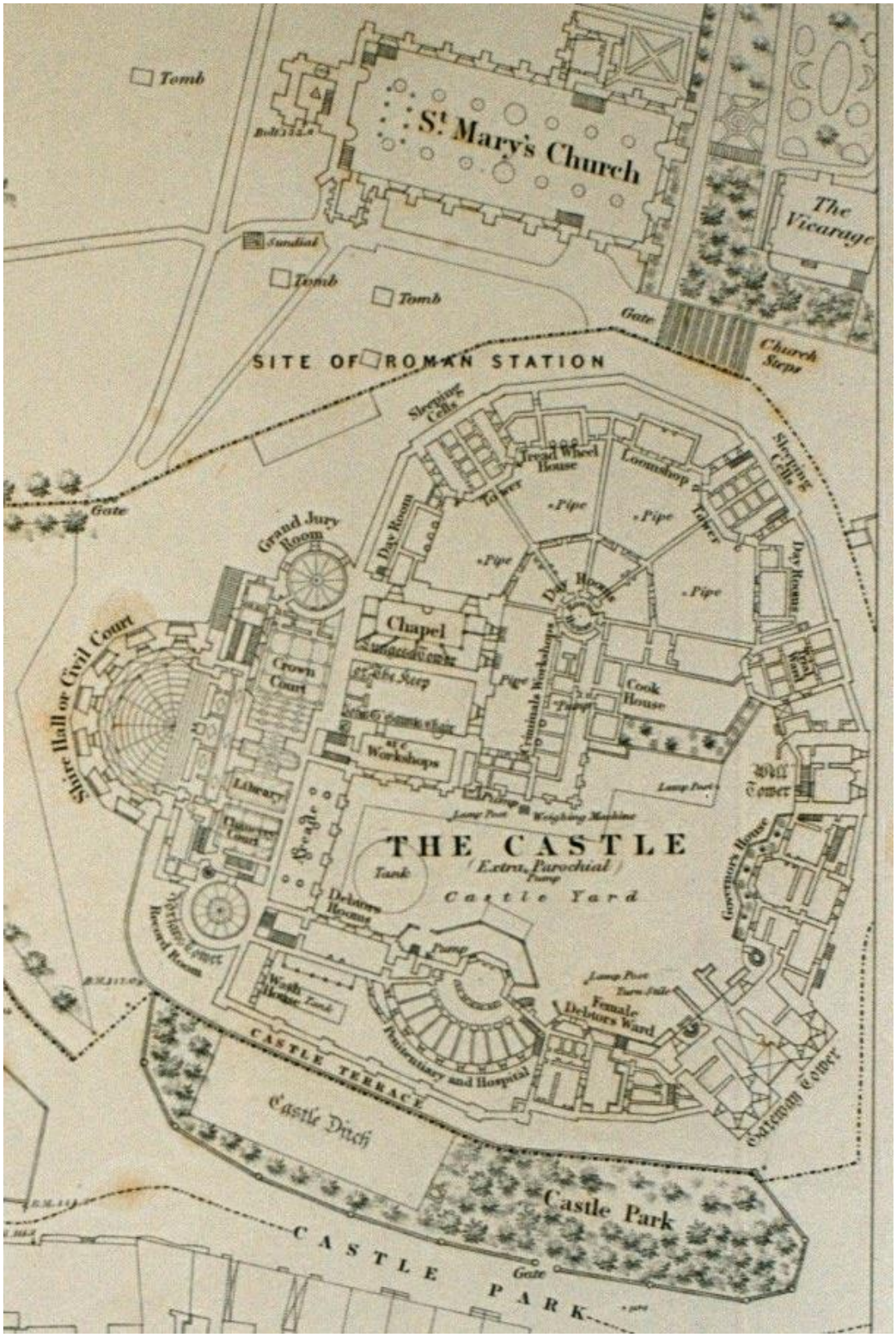
The Male Felons' Prison (from 1796) had a set of Pentonville-type cells added in the early 1850s. They are on long landings with rows of cells above each other on each side of a central atrium lit from above.

Stephen Mackreth's map 1778 (north is at the bottom of the map below) shows a smaller castle than today – fewer towers and a more open, central area.



Stephen Mackreth's map, 1778 (north is at the bottom)

The 1846 Ordnance Survey map below (north is at the top) shows all the new prison blocks (especially to the north), the Shire Hall to the west, the new buildings in the central area and the expanded outer wall.



1846 Ordnance Survey map (north is at the top)

The word 'castle' suggests a building of great age. Parts of Lancaster Castle do date back to around 1100, built on Roman foundations, but much of it was built in later centuries.

There were extensive additions in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries to meet the evolving prison and court operations – the Governor's House (1788), the Debtors' Wing (1796) and the Shire Hall (1798– 1802). The latter was built in a Georgian-Gothick style appended outside the west wall of the Castle.

It has functioned as a civil court and as the setting for ceremonial events such as the annual induction of the High Sheriff of Lancashire, their coats of arms adorning the walls. The Shire Hall verges on the theatrical.

The battlements added in the Elizabethan heightening of the Keep (*c.*1585) were by then decorative not military, as were the new outer walls in the 1790–1820 period. They were to keep people in, not to deter invaders.

The prison closed in 1916, then the Castle held German prisoners of war and between 1931 and 1937 it was a training college for Lancashire Constabulary. It was re-designated as a prison in 1954 until its final closure in 2011.

The court function continues (though the county's main Crown Court is now in Preston), but the closure of the prison has allowed the Castle's owners, the Duchy of Lancaster, to open more of it the public. Additions over the past century to bring the prison up to modern standards have been removed.

A very major programme to repair the basic structures has begun and will continue. The Shire Hall and dungeons have been open to the public for many years, but now visitors can see much more of the Castle beyond the John O'Gaunt Gate.

There is a café. In 2022 a Police Museum for Lancashire Constabulary opened in what had been A Wing.

So, does Lancaster have a Castle? Yes, it does, but it is not quite what it seems.

Further Reading J. Champness *Lancaster Castle: a Brief History.* Preston: Lancashire County Books, 1993.

Text and photographs – Gordon Clark.
Published by Lancaster Civic Vision (©2014; revised 2022).
Lancaster Civic Vision is the trading name of Lancaster Civic Society, registered charity no. 258434