Lancaster Civic Vision

Celebrating our Heritage – Enhancing our Environment – Shaping our Future

THE ALHAMBRA IN MORECAMBE

Lancaster Civic Vision Guide 109



The Alhambra, Morecambe, soon after opening (Source: Cinema Treasures)



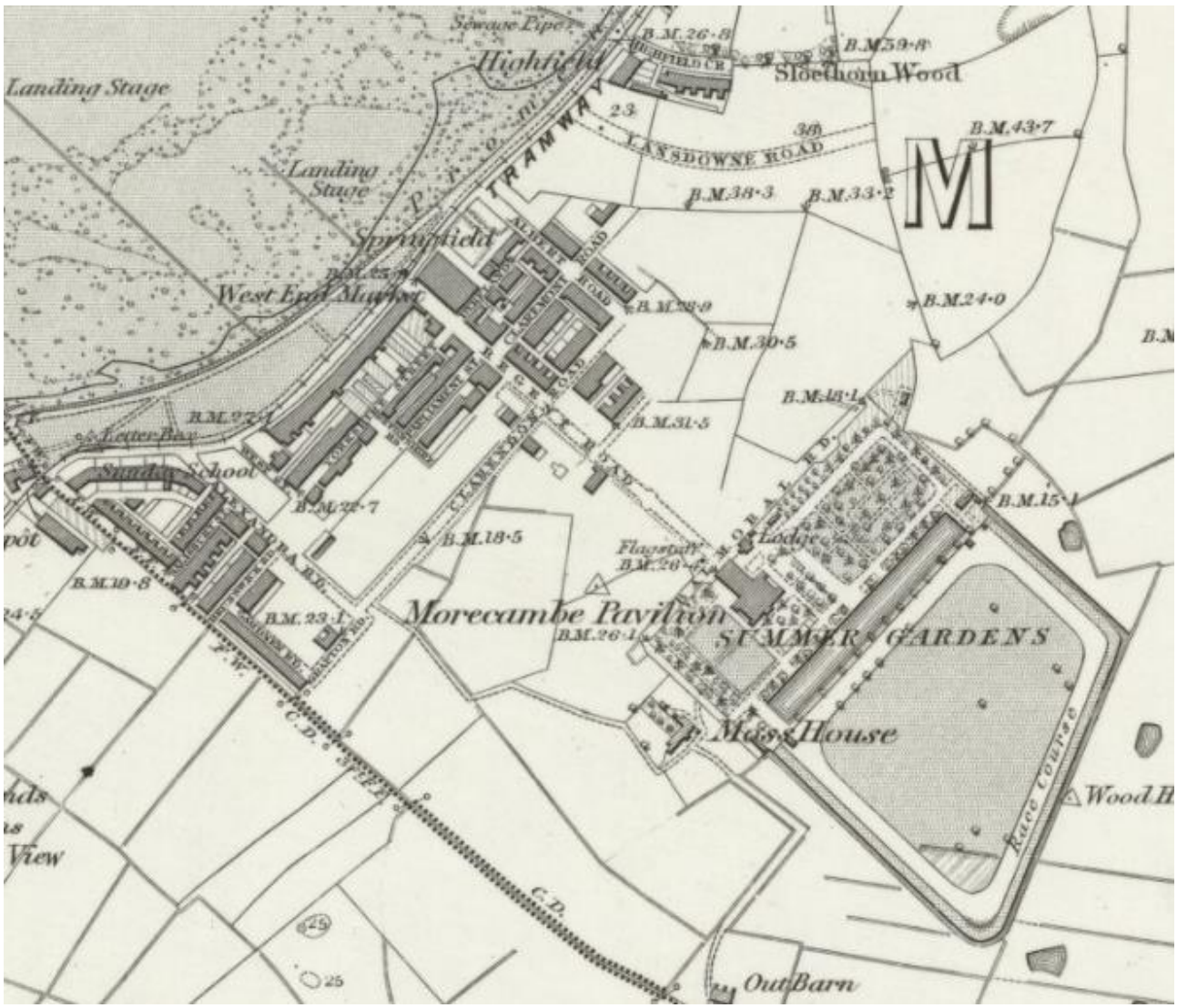
The Alhambra building in 2022

The rapid expansion of Morecambe as a seaside resort in the late nineteenth century created commercial opportunities for new places of entertainment. In 1896 the new West End Pier opened and the following year the Victoria Pavilion (today's Winter Gardens) opened its doors, the original Winter Gardens having started in 1878.

In the late nineteenth century Morecambe was expanding to the west. The Summer Gardens (part of which is now Regent Park) and Morecambe Pavilion (a large music venue) had begun the development of tourist facilities and footfall in the West End, as the Ordnance Survey map of 1891 shows (below).

The 30-acre Summer Gardens (opened in 1877) were mostly funded by Blackpool investors but eventually proved to be financially unviable due their scale and location despite hosting a wide range of activities including horse racing and boating.

In 1896 the site was sold to Morecambe builders, John Gardner and John Scott. They reduced Regent Gardens to its current size and used the south-western part of the site for housing. The Pavilion was demolished. This freed up capital for a new entertainment venue.

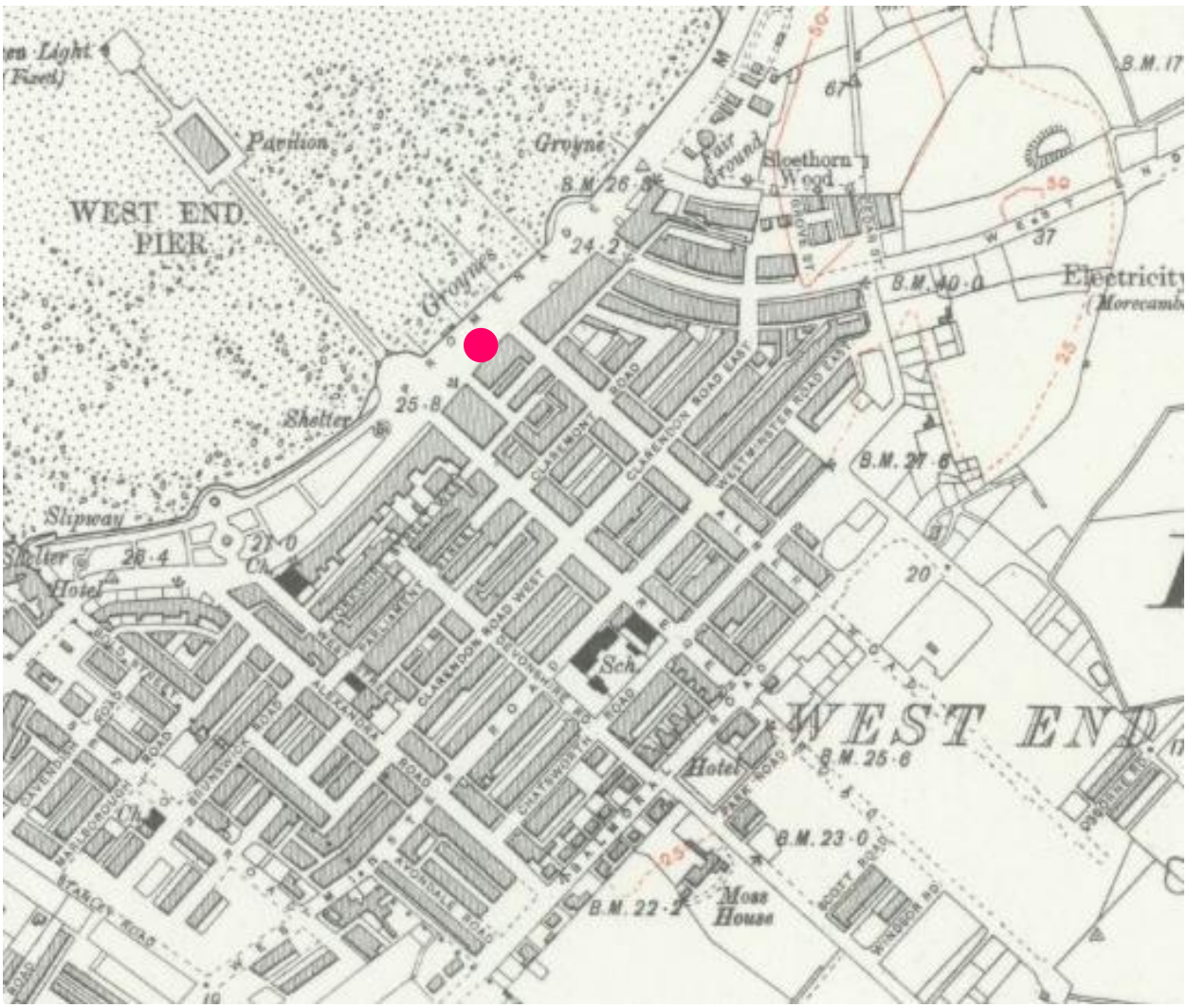


Morecambe's developing West End. (Source: OS 6-inch map surveyed in 1891)

The key development was the opening in 1896 of the West End Pier and the large-scale development in the 1890s and early 1900s of housing, hotels and boarding houses in the West End area. Maximising the footfall for a new entertainment venue in the West End suggested a site near the entrance to the Pier. That site had been occupied since 1889 by the single-storey West End Market, which is marked by the red dot on the OS map below.



The West End Market sign, the date being its original opening,
now commemorated on the south wall of the Alhambra building.



The West End in 1911 (Source: OS 6-inch map surveyed in 1911)

Gardner and Scott demolished the Market and Herbert Howarth, a local architect, designed what is now The Alhambra.

It was constructed by a local builder, John Edmondson, between 1899 and 1901 and opened in April 1901, having cost nearly £28,000. They retained the ground floor as retail – useful rental income off season – with the entertainment areas above.

Around this time the neighbouring streets were filling with new houses (as the 1911 map above shows) and the nearby Park Hotel opened in 1900, which Gardner and Scott also ran.





The Alhambra from the air in 1920 (Source: Historic England)

The Alhambra started as a concert hall with a reported capacity of 3000 and was adapted later to serve as a theatre. The external design is complex and in stone (unlike the Winter Gardens which uses terracotta) while its interior was similarly intended to impress as lavish. John Gardner became its manager but financial problems soon emerged – how to fill it consistently in the high season to pay the bills during the long, low season, and how to combat the competition from the Winter

Gardens, the other theatres and the emerging cinema sector. Gardner was declared bankrupt in 1911. The Alhambra was at various times a concert hall, theatre, pantomime venue and a music hall, when needed. Films had been shown since 1909 and in 1930 it changed its name to the Astoria as a full-time cinema. The Alhambra has also featured boxing, wrestling and exhibitions. Between 1940 and 1945 the building was an RAF depot, as part of their major training operation in Morecambe. The pattern of events in the 1950s and into the 1960s continued the interwar pattern. The film *The Entertainer* starring Laurence Oliver was partly filmed here and released in 1960.

The aerial picture above, taken in 1920, shows the Alhambra at the start of Regent Road and near the entrance to the West End Pier, a key location for customers. Note the fly tower at the back of the building that was used for theatre scenery and the cupola half way along the roof.

In 1970 a major fire destroyed much of the original interior of the building and the cupola on the roofline. The classic, seaside-resort trade of Morecambe was declining steadily at this time but in the 1970s its place was taken for 30 weeks of the year by the students at the expanding Lancaster University, many of whom were living in the former boarding houses in the West End. New interior fittings and name changes followed – The Inn on the Bay and the Carleton Inn and the Carleton Club. Until 2015 it was a favourite night-out for many students even when the student accommodation had left Morecambe for Lancaster. The ground-floor retail units have also evolved. Over recent years they have housed an amusement arcade, an antique market and a fishing tackle shop as well as many smaller firms.

Since 2015 a new owner has been developing the building as a community events centre, a bar, and a base for Morecambe Fringe festivals, along with music nights and wrestling. There are aspirations for the Alhambra to become again a major music venue.

The author is grateful for the historical information collected for the owner of the Alhambra by an unnamed researcher.

Other Guides in this series have featured the Winter Gardens (Guide No. 58) and the piers (Guide No. 81).

Text – Gordon Clark.
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