Lancaster Civic Vision

Celebrating our Heritage – Enhancing our Environment – Shaping our Future

ALMSHOUSES IN LANCASTER

Lancaster Civic Vision Guide 1



Penny's Hospital, King Street

An almshouse traditionally provided free accommodation for needy people in their old age, in the period before state pensions became universal. Over the centuries rich benefactors have endowed almshouses in many British cities. Lancaster's almshouses continue to thrive.

The first of Lancaster's almshouses (then called a chantry) was established in 1485, funded from the estate and will of John Gardyner of Bailrigg. Four old men were accommodated at St Mary's Gate next to the vicarage on Castle Hill near the Priory. They also had a maid and a cash allowance for food. Gardyner's legacy also endowed a school master for the grammar school. The almshouses were rebuilt in 1792. By 1870 the beneficiaries included widows, and legacies over the years topped up the funds. Sadly the building has been demolished.

We can still visit Penny's Hospital on King Street. William Penny (1646–1716) was a mayor and alderman whose bequest provided the funds to build and endow 12 small houses and a chapel for 'poor indigent ancient men and women'. Up to two widows were

accommodated if enough men could not be found. They received the house, an allowance, a suit of clothes and the services of a chaplain.

Built in 1720 around a quadrangle, they were refurbished in 1974 and are Grade II* listed. The widening of King Street in 1929–30 led to the demolition of the two houses nearest the street and their replacement by two others built next to the chapel, which was refurbished at the same time. The plaque over the entrance records Penny's generosity and warns in Latin '*profanos hinc abesse*' – those of ill-repute should keep away. Only people of good character would be nominated by the trustees for these houses. Currently ten single people and one couple can be accommodated. Over the chapel door is the reminder 'Forget not the congregation of thy poor'.



The Assembly Room next to Penny's Hospital

The Assembly Room next door (1759) was built by Penny's Trustees so that social events could be held whose profits would be added to the funds to support the almshouses.

Anne Gillison's Almshouses of 1781 (as shown in the black-and-white photograph below) gave preference to women, each getting accommodation, an allowance and a gown each year. This almshouse was on Common Garden Street, near her house and just round the corner from Penny's Hospital. It was demolished in 1960 in the comprehensive redevelopment of this area.

The beneficiaries were eight "destitute unmarried women of good character and behaviour" or widows if there were insufficient unmarried women. The Mayor and Aldermen selected the women. The almshouses were replaced in 1959/60 by nine bungalows built in Lindow Square where there is a memorial tablet to Anne Gillison who died in 1790.



The original Gillison Almshouse



Gillison's Courtyard today, Lindow Square

Today, Penny's Hospital is run by Lancaster Charity. Set up in its modern form in 1860, Lancaster Charity brought together diverse small local charities and their endowments and properties. Lancaster Charity runs eight almshouses:

Penny's Hospital (King Street);
Jellyman House (16 Queen Street, bought in 1972);
Queen Street Bungalows (built in 1938 to replace Gardyner's Almshouse);
Lindow House and Watson Bungalow (18 Queen Street, acquired in 1952);
Lindow Close (built in 1978, off Lindow Street);
William Penny's Almshouses (1968, Regent Street);
Gillison's Courtyard (Lindow Square, opened in 1959);
Platten and Benson Almshouses (in Morecambe).

Their website is at: https://lancastercharity.org

William Penny's and Queen Street Bungalows were designed by C.B. Pearson's firm of Lancaster architects, which also worked on the refurbishment of Penny's Hospital.



William Penny's Almshouses, Regent Street



Queen Street Bungalows

Residents are selected by the Trustees, several of whom are Lancaster City Councillors. This mirrors the early tradition of the Mayor and Aldermen or burgesses choosing the beneficiaries. The residents are 'contractual licensees' not tenants, paying not a rent but a modest weekly maintenance charge. The Lancaster Charity maintains the properties' fabric. The residents decorate and furnish their houses. A resident warden can provide some support for the residents. John Gardyner's charity lives on in the city after over five centuries.

Other Guides in this series that may be of interest include:
43 Philanthropists in Lancaster
56 The Priory Church of St Mary, Lancaster
75 The Workhouse for Lancaster and Morecambe

Text – Gordon Clark. Photographs – A. White (1990) *Lancaster: a Pictorial History*. Chichester: Phillimore (the historic picture); Gordon Clark (the modern pictures).

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