Lancaster Civic Vision

Celebrating our Heritage – Enhancing our Environment – Shaping our Future

CHINA STREET

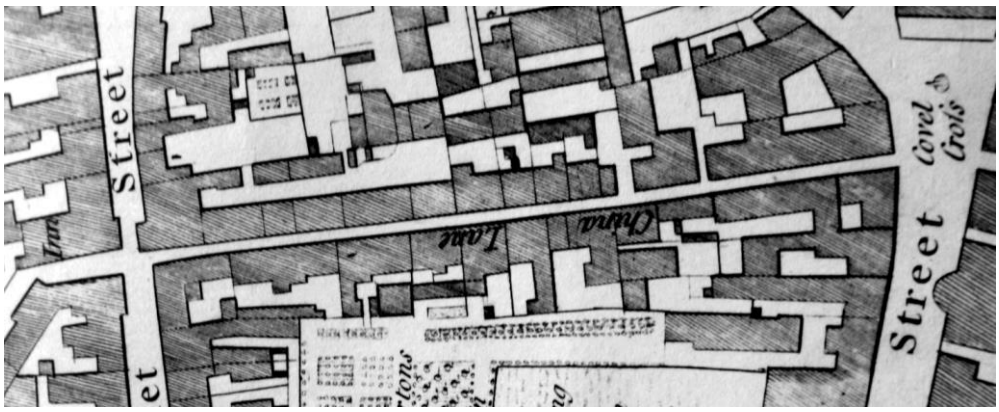
Lancaster Civic Vision Guide 111



China Street today is part of Lancaster's one-way gyratory system, driven along quickly. In fact it is one of the town's oldest streets and has seen major changes in the last 200 years. Before 1899 it was called China Lane and for the Corporation it was a problematic road in two senses: it was far too narrow for traffic and it went through a dangerous area.

The narrowness was no exaggeration – it was about eight feet wide. Wide enough for a cart to pass along provided that the pedestrians backed against the buildings' walls, but otherwise a bottleneck for traffic.

Mackreth's map of Lancaster in the mid-1770s shows just how narrow it was compared with the streets around it – China Lane is the narrow road running from left to right across the middle of the map below (North is to the right-hand side of the map). Until Skerton Bridge was built, this was the main, north-south route through Lancaster via the medieval bridge across the River Lune, roughly where the Millennium Bridge is today.



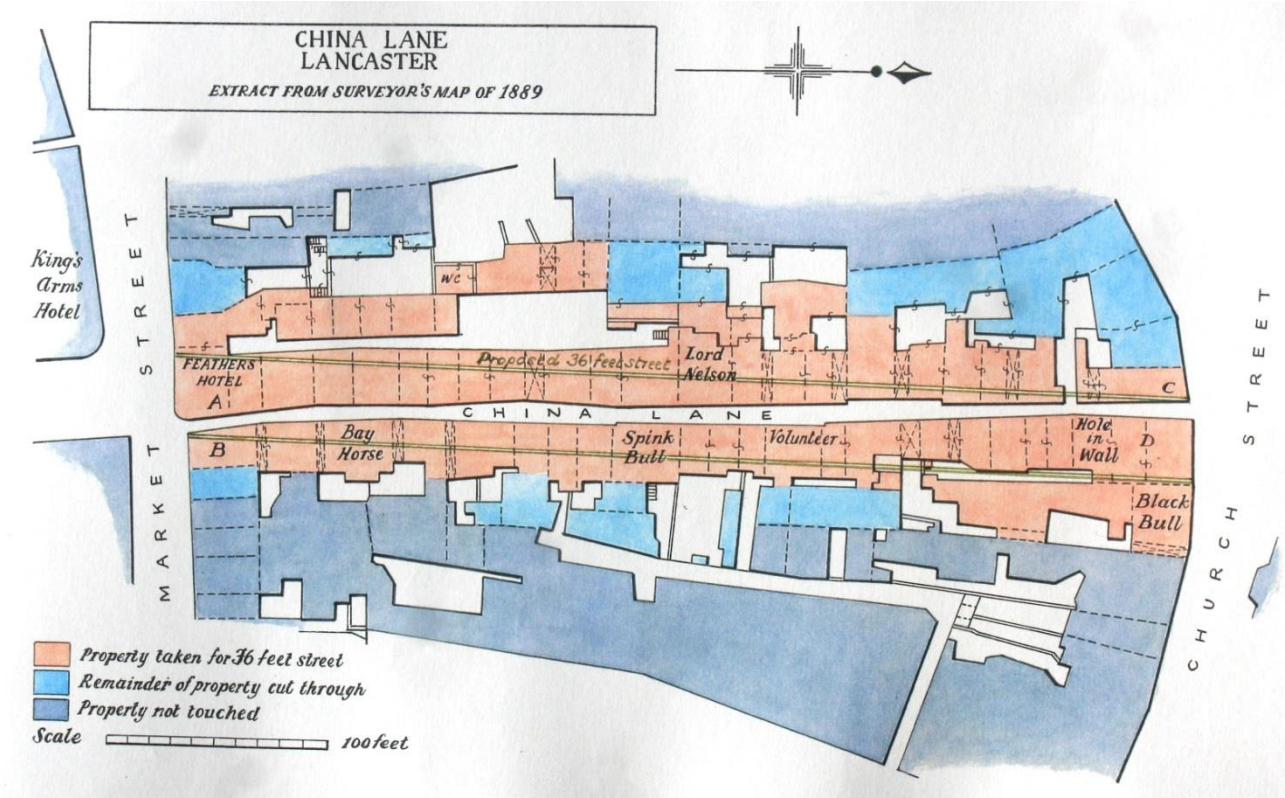
This photograph of China Lane in the early 1890s (below) makes the point well (Source: Red Rose Collection, Lancashire County Council).



The second problem was the poor reputation that China Lane area had acquired by the second half of the nineteenth century. The houses were small, crammed together, and many were cheap lodging houses for the poorest and transient in society. The newspapers of the time reported numerous court cases involving violence, drunkenness, theft and prostitution in and around China Lane.

The solution to these two problems – a too-narrow road in a rough area – was to widen the street by sweeping away the poor housing, the lodging houses and those who lived in them. The plan was to demolish the west side of the old street and a

small part of its north-east corner to create the wider road we see today. The map below (north to the right) shows the effects of this on the original buildings – few survived (Plan source: Eleanor Fisher)



These photographs show the demolition in progress.



(Left) China Lane and Back China Lane during demolition of the west side looking south towards the Royal Kings Arms Hotel. (Right) China Lane and Back China Lane during demolition of the west side, looking north.

The only substantial building to survive was about mid-way along the east side, as shown in the photographs below.



East side of China Lane, nos 37–43 in the mid-1890s, their first and second floors being recognisable today (Source: Red Rose Collection, Lancashire County Council).



East side of China Street, nos 37–43 in 2019 (Source: Gordon Clark).

The rebuilding of the west side proceeded slowly and it was not complete until the Priory Hall and Jubilee Hall opened in 1936/7, over 40 years after demolition began. By then the street had much less residential accommodation having become largely commercial. Its importance for traffic was enhanced when China Street was extended northwards via Bridge Lane to Cable Street and again when it became one-way in 1972. After 2010 some China Street buildings were converted into apartments aimed at the student market, a very different group of transient residents. And where did the 429 people who lived on China Lane in the 1890s go? We don't know: they just had to find somewhere else to live.

Text – Gordon Clark.
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