Lancaster Civic Vision

Celebrating our Heritage – Enhancing our Environment – Shaping our Future

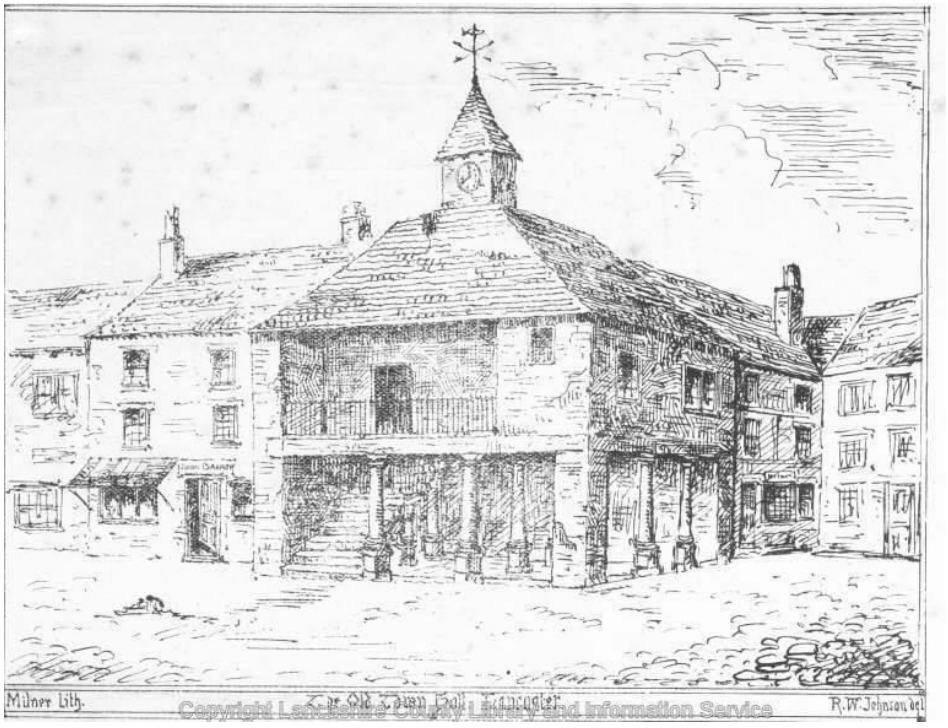
Lancaster Civic Vision Guide No. 114

LANCASTER'S FOUR TOWN HALLS

We know of four town halls in Lancaster, three on Market Square and one on Dalton Square. This guide describes them.

The first Town Hall

By 1363 Lancaster had a Tolbooth that housed a council chamber and a lock-up (cells), but we know little more about it. The first modern-style Town Hall in Lancaster that we know of was on the west side of Market Square roughly where the City Museum stands today. The building was damaged during the Civil War but, with repairs, it continued up to 1670. There is a subsequent engraving of it as it was around 1670 (below). The ground floor was open for stallholders and traders. An outside staircase led up to a meeting room and court room on the first floor.



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An engraving of the first Town Hall around 1670 (Source: Lancaster City Council)

The second Town Hall

In 1670 it was decided to build the second Town Hall which opened in 1671 at a cost of £200. The drawing (below) is dated to the 1770s. As you can see, it was a fairly modest structure by today's standards, but it would have looked the part in the seventeenth century.

There were two storeys. The ground floor was open for market traders who would rent the space in this central location from the Corporation. The second floor had an external staircase up to meeting rooms for the Corporation and a local court. Note the pillars and the clock tower.

The basic structure of the building was quite similar to that of its predecessor. Three Tuscan columns from the frontage of the building, saved when it was demolished in 1781, can be seen today in the grounds of Westfield War Memorial Village.



The second Town Hall on the left-hand side of Market Square in a drawing, c1770s
(Source: Whitworth Art Gallery, artist unknown)

The third Town Hall

After a century, the second Town Hall was unimpressive for Lancaster as the county town of Lancashire and the site of the County's Assizes (courts) in the Castle. The intention to build a new Town Hall first emerged in 1766 when Richard Gillow submitted a plan for one – he had just finished designing the new Custom House on St George's Quay, which opened in 1764. However, there was no progress until 1780.

The third Town Hall was built on the site of the first two between 1781 and 1783. The Corporation wanted a building with the 'presence' worthy of a county town and they had the money to afford this given the income they were now getting from the sale or leasing of land to builders as Lancaster expanded steadily during the late-eighteenth century.

The architect chosen was Major Thomas Jarrat. His architectural credentials for such an important commission are unclear; he was an Irish military engineer. Nonetheless his design was built and has survived, supplemented by the bell tower and cupola designed by Thomas Harrison in 1782.

Harrison certainly was a major name in architecture. He was working in Lancaster at the Castle, the New (Skerton) Bridge and the tower of St John's Church. He altered parts of Jarrat's design. The building cost around £2000.

The main contractors were Robert Charnley (a stonemason) and Robert Dickinson (a carpenter), who had to provide an up-front bond of £3000 to ensure the building's completion, which was on time.



The third Town Hall (now the City Museum) in 1838. The ground floor is still open for traders. Note the urns on each corner, removed in the 1950s on safety grounds. Hand coloured. A similar picture is dated 1829. (Source: an engraving by Samuel Rawle after a drawing by William Westall)



The third Town Hall (now the City Museum) in 2021

The third Town Hall shared some features with the first and second – the ground floor and basement were still open to house traders, the butter market, corn exchange and some lock-up shops; the meeting rooms were on the first floor; there was a cupola with clock and bell.

It differed from its predecessor by having good masonry walls, a vaulted undercroft and a very impressive portico of four large columns (the sandstone from a quarry at nearby Ellel).

Overall it was a building that would impress the elite of Lancashire who came to Lancaster for the social scene during the Assizes at the Castle.

As local government expanded in the nineteenth century, more space was needed for new or expanded functions. In 1846 the traders relocated and later the gated openings in the ground floor were filled in and became windows.

In 1873 the first floor was remodelled and furnished by Gillow. The Town Hall was enlarged in 1871–4 and again in 1886 by an extension westwards on to New Street and another northwards to provide a new Borough Court and Police Station, designed by the Lancaster architects, Paley & Austin.

When the fourth (the current) Town Hall was opened in 1909 the Market Square building acquired a range of new uses – a bank, Canadian Forces during World War 2, and from 1923 the City Museum, which expanded into the whole building in 1977 along with the Museum of the King's Own Royal Regiment.

The fourth Town Hall

Lancaster's fourth (and the current) Town Hall was needed because of the continuing expansion in the responsibilities of local government in the later nineteenth century. More duties required more staff and offices: even the extended third Town Hall was now too small. A major difference was that, whereas the previous town halls had been funded by the Corporation, the fourth was paid for by Lord Ashton (James Williamson II) who was Lancaster's richest man. In addition to paying for the Ashton Memorial in Williamson Park and the re-design of Dalton Square with its Queen Victoria Monument, he paid the £155,000 for the new Town Hall in Dalton Square, which opened in 1909.

The architectural aim for this Town Hall was again, not only the provision of more office space, but also a desire to impress. Other towns in the North of England had been building large town halls: Lancaster needed to keep up. The architect set this challenge was E W Mountford, assisted by F Dare Clapham. Mountford was just completing the Old Bailey (the Central Criminal Court) in London, and the Edwardian Baroque stye of that building was carried over to Lancaster's Town Hall.

The slope of the land requires steps up to the front door, flanked by six massive Ionic columns in Longridge sandstone with a triangular pediment above framing a carving of King Edward VII looking down to his mother below on her Monument in Dalton Square. Although the architects were not local, much of the building inside is – stained glass by Shrigley& Hunt; fittings, fixtures and furniture by Waring & Gillow. The green and cream Swedish marble and the electroliers (chandeliers) are impressive. Understandably, given his generosity, a large painting of Lord Ashton fills the wall at the top of the main staircase.

The building houses the Council Chamber and offices; there is also a banqueting hall and a small magistrates court with cells beneath it (no longer used). Next door was the fire station. Accessed from the back of the building is the large Ashton Hall for big public events. Today some of these functions have moved out to their own specialist premises elsewhere in Lancaster. The City Council also uses Morecambe Town Hall.

The Town Hall still impresses.



The fourth Town Hall (Source: Lancaster City Council)



Source: *Lancaster Guardian*

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