Lancaster Civic Vision

Celebrating our Heritage – Enhancing our Environment – Shaping our Future

# LANCASTER IN 1909

**Lancaster Civic Vision Guide 48**

1909 was a memorable year in Lancaster and nationally.

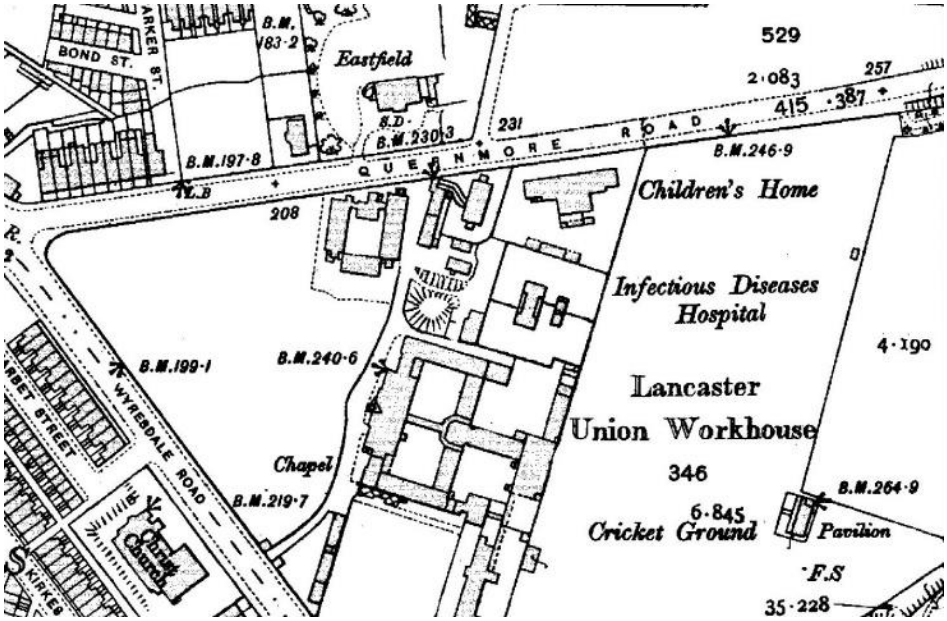
Lancaster's richest citizen, Lord Ashton (James Williamson junior), donated the new town hall (below) which opened in 1909, overlooking his earlier donation of the Queen Victoria Monument and a restyled Dalton Square (1907) and overlooked by the Ashton Memorial which also opened that year in Williamson Park which was his father's donation. The extremes of wealth (and poverty) that allowed such philanthropy were perhaps rather more common locally in 1909 than today.



The town's MP, Norval Helme, (a Liberal like Williamson, a previous Lancaster MP), was supporting Herbert Asquith's Liberal Government which introduced pensions from 1

January 1909. Financed by taxation and means tested, these gave the poorest a basic income – £13 a year if you earned less than £21 a year and tapering to nothing if earning over £31. These pensions were available only to those over 70, at a time when the average life expectancy was just 45. In Lancaster today it is 77 for men and 81 for women. This threshold of 70 is less restrictive than it might seem because the average lifespan is reduced by the very high infant mortality rate, then 130 per 1000 births in England and Wales in 1911, which is far higher than in even the poorest Third World country today. Nonetheless the poorest died the youngest, then as now.

Some of the poor in Lancaster could be found in the almshouses (e.g. Penny's and Gillison's), the workhouse on East Road (see below) and eventually in the paupers' sections of Lancaster Cemetery on Quernmore Road. They lived perhaps in the yards and courts of old central Lancaster that would be cleared in the interwar years as council housing developed.



The Lancaster Workhouse (Ordnance Survey 1910)

The Edwardian years were ones of expansion in Lancaster in two senses. The borough's population rose by around 7000 between 1891 and 1911. Some crammed ever tighter into the footprint of old Lancaster. Others moved into new terraced housing to the east up to Freehold, south towards Bowerham and west beyond the railway station. Fourteen per cent of the workforce was employed in construction and allied trades. Only 10 per cent of homes were owner occupied then, compared with 66 per cent in Lancaster today.

The Edwardian decade in Lancaster was one of expansion, modernisation and innovation. The railway from Green Ayre to Morecambe via Castle Station (extended in 1899–1902) was electrified in 1908 to test this new technology. In 1908 railway-carriage building had ended when the Lancaster Wagon and Carriage Works on Caton Road finally closed, leaving around 2000 people unemployed. There are always dangers with big employers in small towns. In the bad times unemployment peaks; in the good times there is prosperity.



Part of Dorrington Road, Lancaster's longest late-Victorian/Edwardian terrace

Williamsons at this time employed around a quarter of the town's workforce and fortunately still had many decades of trading ahead, as had Storey's, the smaller local firm in the textiles and coverings sector (linoleum and table baize).

All those new Edwardian houses nationally and in Lancaster needed furnishing and at the top end of the market – in Cannon Hill and Haverbreaks, for example and their equivalents across the country – Waring & Gillow found markets for their furniture and furnishings and Thomas Mawson for his garden designs. Good design was the key to success for Storey's, Gillow and Mawson, as Arts and Crafts and Art Nouveau become fashionable.

Waring & Gillow oversaw the construction of the new Town Hall (1906–09) and many examples of their work can still be found there. The growth of the town prompted new pubs, hotels and public buildings that created opportunities for Lancaster's stained-glass firms to sell their products, such as Shrigley & Hunt and Abbott.




Part of the Donor's Board, Royal Lancaster Infirmary

The town was still prey to infectious diseases, which were the main cause of death in 1909 unlike today when the chronic conditions of old-age dominate. The present Royal Lancaster Infirmary had opened in 1896. In 1909 there was an Infectious Diseases Hospital by the Lune as well as the one at the Workhouse. The separation of those then diagnosed as mentally ill was also widely practised. The Moor Hospital housed 1833 people in 1908 and the Royal Albert was home to more.

Local philanthropists contributed extensively to the growth of the Royal Albert and the Infirmary in those pre-NHS days when doctors required payment from their patients. At the Moor Hospital there were class distinctions in mental illness – there were separate villas for the better off at Campbell House for men and Ridge Lea for women. In 1911 around 10 per cent of Lancaster's population lived in an institution of some kind – asylum, workhouse, barracks or orphanage. Today we have two universities.

Shopping in Lancaster was also on the cusp of change. The Market Hall and the small independent traders were now competing with the Lancaster and Skerton Co-op whose main store on New Street/Church Street had opened in 1901 and it had 20 branches by 1914.

The national multiples had started to trade in Lancaster – Boots, Liptons and Home & Colonial, for example – along with their mass-produced, bulk-bought brands. Banking also consolidated: the Lancaster Banking Company on Church Street and its 18 branches had been taken over in 1907 by the Manchester and Liverpool District Banking Company.

It would be five years (1914) till Lancaster Girls Grammar School paralleled Lancaster Royal Grammar School for boys and nine years (1918) till most women over 30 could vote. Equal pay was a distant dream and equal opportunities across the economy and society were far off – not till 1932 did Lancaster have a Mayoress, Annie Helme.

There are companion Guides in this series that provide more detail on:
*Almshouses in Lancaster;*
*Philanthropy in Lancaster;*
*Lancaster Cemetery;*
*Three Town Halls;*
*Stained Glass in Lancaster;*
*Thomas Mawson of Lancaster;*
*Gillow of Lancaster;*
*Railways around Lancaster and Carnforth;*
*Four Parks in Lancaster and Morecambe;*
*Philanthropists in Lancaster;*
*Lancaster Wagon Works;*
*The Development of Haverbreaks;*
*Hospitals in Lancaster and Morecambe.*

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