

Lancaster Civic Vision

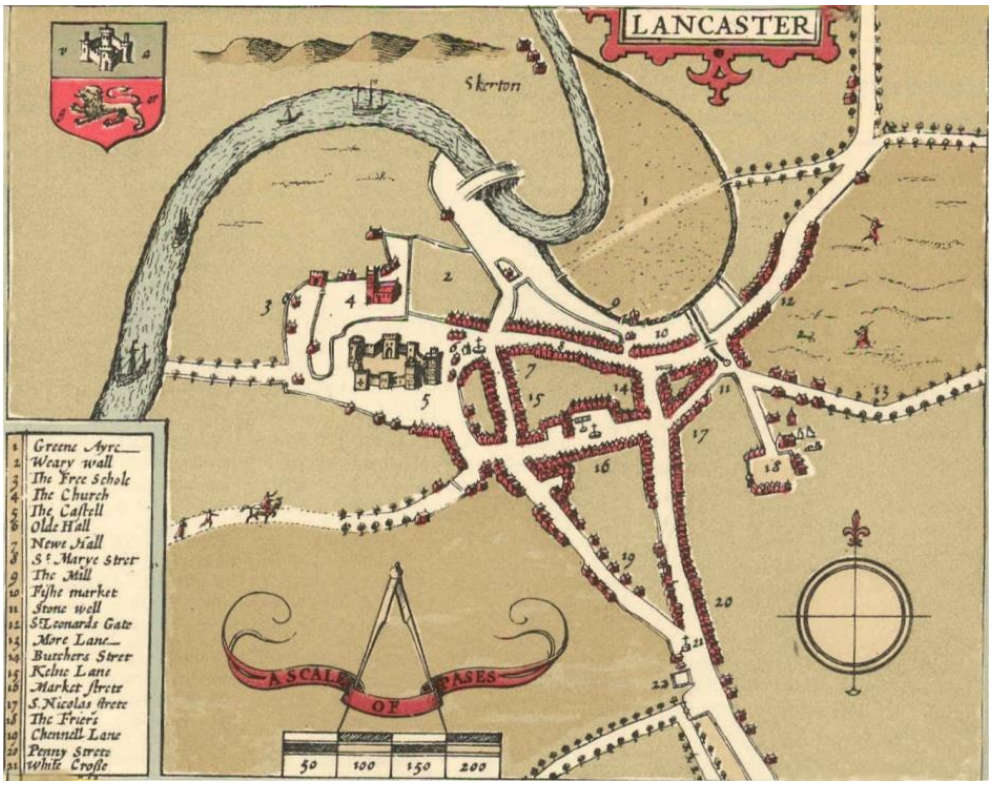
Celebrating our Heritage – Enhancing our Environment – Shaping our Future

LANCASTER'S RACECOURSES

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We do not know when people in the Lancaster area first raced horses but the earliest detailed records of organised horse racing in Lancaster refer to the Green Ayre in the 1720s and 1730s. The first detailed account of a meeting was for one held on 29 August 1732, established by the Dowager Duchess of Hamilton who lived at Ashton Hall.

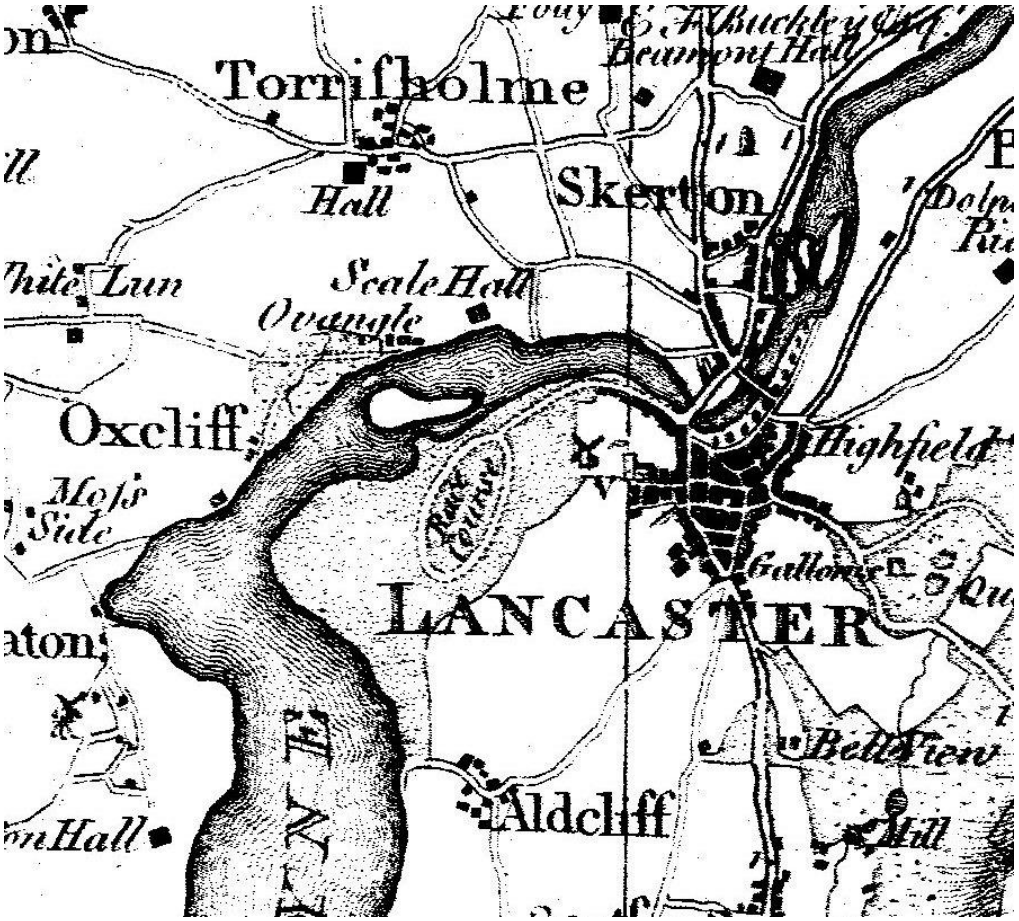
Not only did people exercise their horses on the Green Ayre, there was also a rudimentary race course. The starter's chair was at the west side of the Green Ayre, an outward leg paralleling the Mill Race (see Guide 79) and, after a tight turn round a post at the east end, a homeward leg along the riverside. Speed's map of Lancaster shows that the Green Ayre was then a largely open area handy for local spectators.



Speed's map of Lancaster in 1607. The Green Ayre is No. 1 on the map and map key.

However, as the eighteenth century progressed, more profitable uses for the Green Ayre were found. Several bridges were built across the Mill Race and paths crossed Green Ayre, needing to be covered over before racing. Buildings encroached from the landward side and the river side had a Quay and wood-yard by the time of Mackreth's map surveyed in the mid-1770s. Clearly the horse racing had to relocate, but where to?

The first move was probably to Salt Ayre, then a flat island off the north bank of the River Lune, or to nearby Scale Hall, that were both within the municipal boundary. This seems to have been a short-term solution, access by road being tricky. The longer term move – by at least 1758 – was to 'Lancaster Marsh', west of the town on the south bank of the River Lune and accessed by a continuation of the new St George's Quay. The race course is shown on Yates's map surveyed in 1786 (below). There is no sign of a grandstand. We know that there were named races with cups and plates as prizes along with money and owners' prestige. The races were promoted by prize money from major landowners such as the Duke of Hamilton. The Duke was a major breeder and trainer of race horses and had a training gallop of 1 mile and six furlongs on his estate at Ashton Hall. The subsequent owner of Ashton Hall, Le Gendre Nicholas Starkie, was also a keen supporter of the Lancaster races. Lancaster Corporation sponsored a race because they saw race meetings as adding to the social prestige of Lancashire's county town. Lancaster was once one of only 37 courses in England to host a Queen's Plate race funded by the sovereign. However, the races on the Marsh lapsed in 1797 when the area was enclosed and fenced off for farming.



Lancaster race course when it was on the Marsh.
(Source: detail from William Yates's map of Lancashire, surveyed in 1786

The first sign of the revival of horse racing was in 1808 when a note appeared in the *Lancaster Gazette* inviting tenders to build a grandstand for the new racecourse being set up on Lancaster Moor to the east of the town. Racing restarted on the new course in June 1809. The earliest representation on a map showing the new course on the Moor is Greenwood's map of 1818 (below).

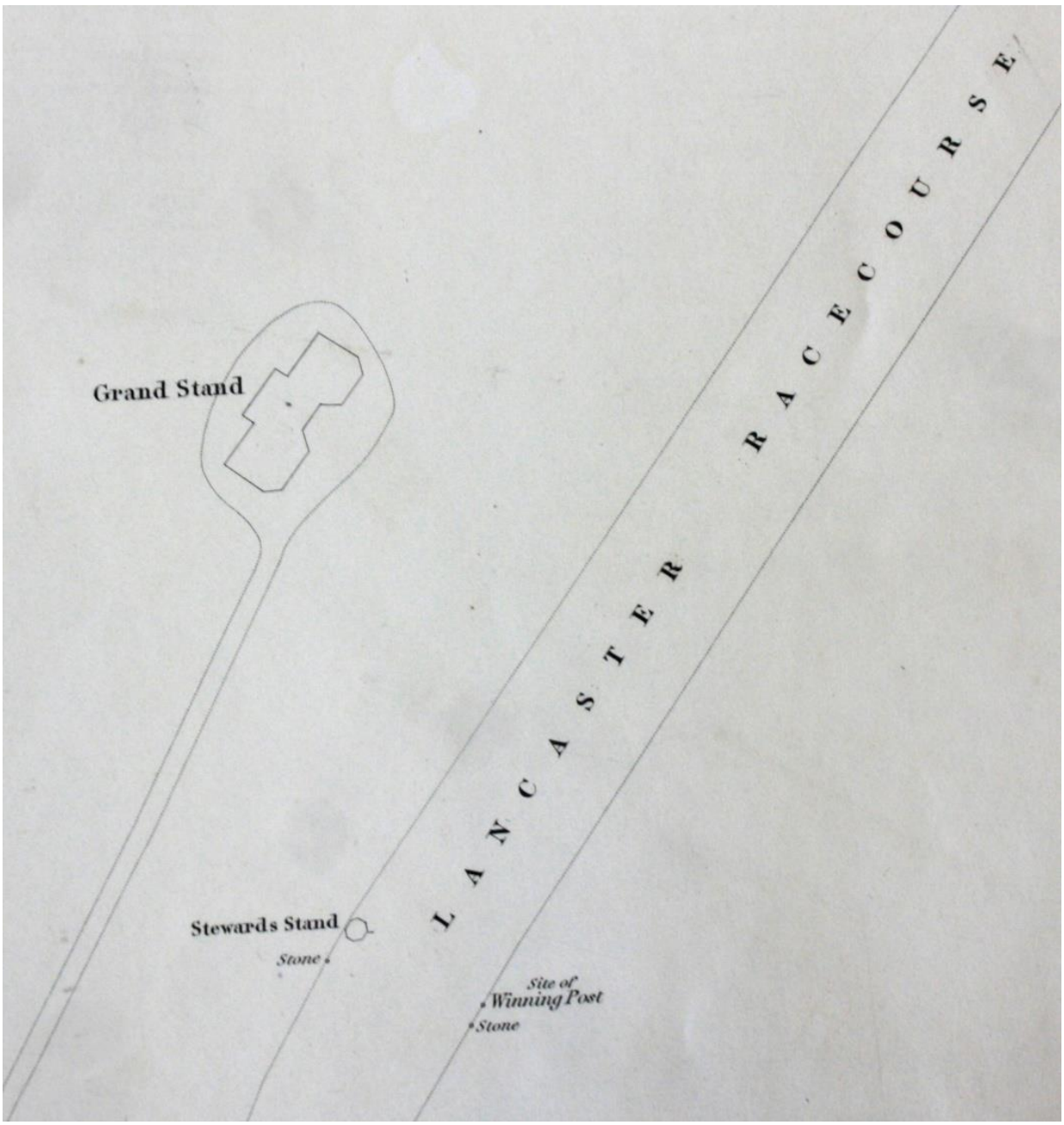


Lancaster racecourse, gone from the Marsh and sketched in on Lancaster Moor in 1818.
(Source: Detail from Greenwood's map of Lancashire)

The course's popularity required William Coulthart, then Lancaster's leading architect, to design and oversee the building of a new grandstand in 1825. It was on a new site to the west side of the course near the winning post, the old stand having been demolished. The early Ordnance Survey maps of the area in the mid-1840s (see below) show the course and the details of the grandstand, stewards stand and the finishing line.



Lancaster Racecourse on the Moor (Source: Ordnance Survey, 1:10,560 map, 1844/5 survey)



The 1825 Grandstand, Stewards Stand and Winning Post of Lancaster Racecourse
(Source: Ordnance Survey map, 1:1056, 1844/5 survey)

Lancaster's race week continued annually in late June or early July, four races each day of a two-day meeting. Most of the races were between one and two miles. The more genteel visitors paid for a place in the grandstand – cheaper in the northern viewing area than in the southern one – and the rougher elements were elsewhere. The western half of the racecourse was within the municipal boundary and so could in theory be controlled by the local magistrates: the eastern half was not.

The arrival in Lancaster of the railway from the south in 1840 and from the north in 1846 meant that horses and visitors could be attracted from a wider area. However, a decline in the meeting's popularity in the early 1840s – there were seven other listed courses in Lancashire alone in 1840 – was countered by a new management committee and improvements to the grandstand in 1847/8.

In the late 1840s the Lancaster meeting followed those in Newcastle and Carlisle and was followed by the Liverpool meeting.

The final race meeting on Lancaster racecourse was held on 8 and 9 July 1857.

Soon after, criticism of the meeting by a *Manchester Guardian* reporter appeared in a letter to the *Lancaster Guardian* – it cited immorality, fighting, drunkenness, betting scams and "roughs from Preston". A robust rebuttal then appeared in a letter to the *Lancaster Gazette* from the Race organisers.

Whatever the merits of these specific charges, it had become clear during the 1850s that Lancaster race course was steadily losing out to competitor meetings, some quite longstanding like Cartmel and Carlisle and some newcomers like Ulverston. Competition for the best horses and sponsors was now national not local.

In 1800 there were 66 horse-racing courses in England: in 1839 there were 132. To survive, a course needed to attract major sponsors who created large prize funds and so attracted many good horses. It was no longer sufficient to rely on income from subscribers, hiring the grandstand during the year, leasing the grandstand and stalls during the race meeting, and entry charges for the horses and for spectators in the grandstand. The summer flat-racing season was now increasingly crowded.

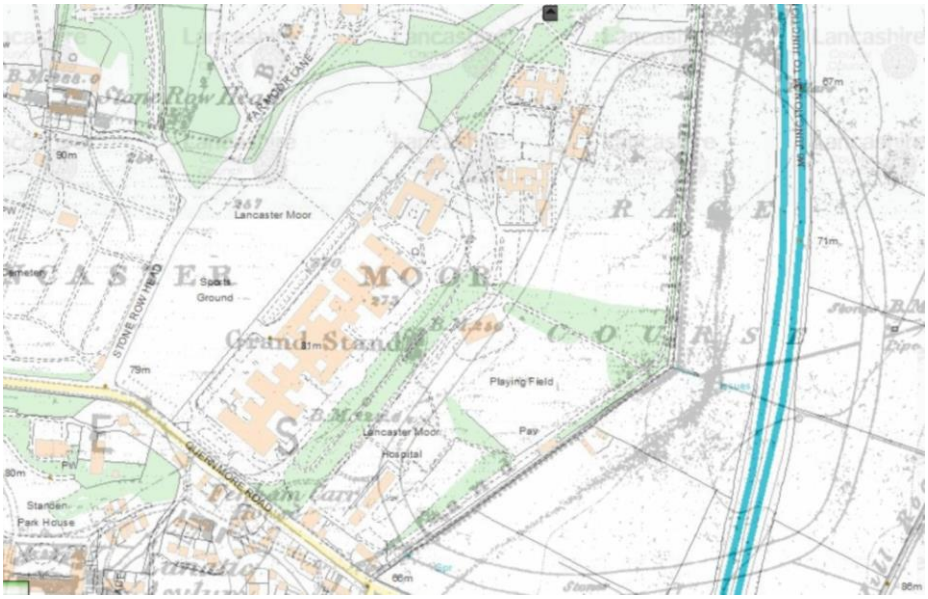
The newspaper reports of that final meeting complained about "thin fields" and competition from race meetings at Carlisle and Worcester. There were seven races on the two days of the 1857 meeting. Five horses were in the top three finishers in more than one race, sometimes in races on the same day. Two horses were 'placed' in three races during the meeting. Even Her Majesty's 100 sovereigns sponsoring the 'Her Majesty's Plate' race were not enough to save Lancaster Races.

Soon after the 1857 meeting the land was sold off and fenced for farming. The grandstand was demolished and nothing but memories and newspaper reports were left of this part of Lancaster's summer social scene. Until, that is, some recent aerial surveys of the area using LiDAR, a remote-sensing system that uses laser light to detect very small variations in the height of the ground. It is a very useful technique for archaeologists.

The faint outline of the southern and eastern legs of the course can still be seen in the fields either side of the north-south M6 motorway (below). The site may soon be developed for housing.



LiDAR imagery of parts of the racecourse, still just visible to the north-west of the red curved line.
(Source: https://houseprices.io/lab/lidar/map)



The racecourse track superimposed on a modern map.
(Source: www.greyhoundderby.com, originally from Terry Ainsworth, gratefully acknowledged.)

A reminder of Lancaster's horse-racing history is found in the streets in south Bowerham that are named after major British race courses.

Text – Gordon Clark.

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