

Lancaster Civic Vision

Celebrating our Heritage – Enhancing our Environment – Shaping our Future

THE MILL RACE, LANCASTER

Lancaster Civic Vision Guide 79

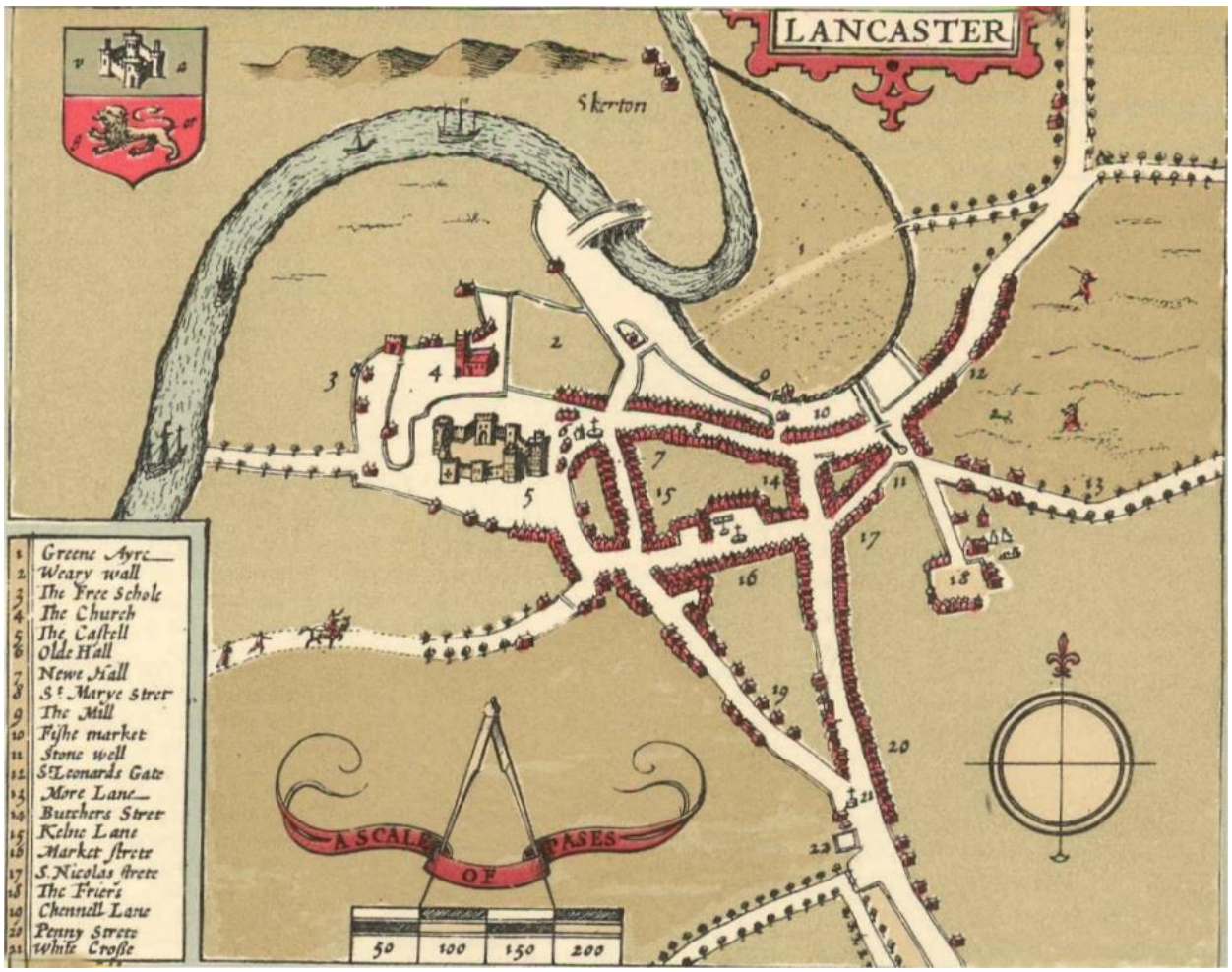
When you look at a map of central Lancaster, one of the things that catches your eye is the long curved road comprising Parliament Street, North Road and Damside Street.

Its route indicates the line of the Mill Race, a channel off the River Lune that, before it was culverted, separated the higher parts of the town from the flat, low-lying land we now call the Green Ayre. An 'ayre' is a local word for an island, of which the lower Lune had and still has several, near Skerton and at Salt Ayre downstream, for example. Guide 84 gives more details about the islands.

The origin of the Mill Race is unclear. The most likely explanation is that it is a natural feature, one of many branches off the Lune – a 'braided' river – that create gravel and silt islands which change location and shape with the effects of floods and natural river meandering. Subsequently the main channel of the Lune moved northwards to its current line, leaving the Mill Race as a minor channel.

Today the Mill Race comes off the Lune at Dalton Dam near Skerton Weir and the former Wagon Works on Caton Road, and it now re-enters the Lune near Fleet Square at the eastern end of the former railway bridge from Green Ayre Station to Lancaster Castle Station. It is nearly 1500 yards long and in the eighteenth century was about 6 yards wide and between 1 foot 8 inches and 2 feet 8 inches deep.

The 'Race' part of its name seems an exaggeration. However, the 'Mill' part is correct because for centuries there was a corn mill roughly opposite where Caulkeld Lane joins Damside Street. It was demolished soon after 1769 and was one of several mills there have been along the Mill Race at various times.



Speed's map of Lancaster, surveyed in 1607, showing the loop of the Mill Race and Green Ayre at the top. No. 9 on the map is "The Mill" and No. 1 is the "Green Ayre".

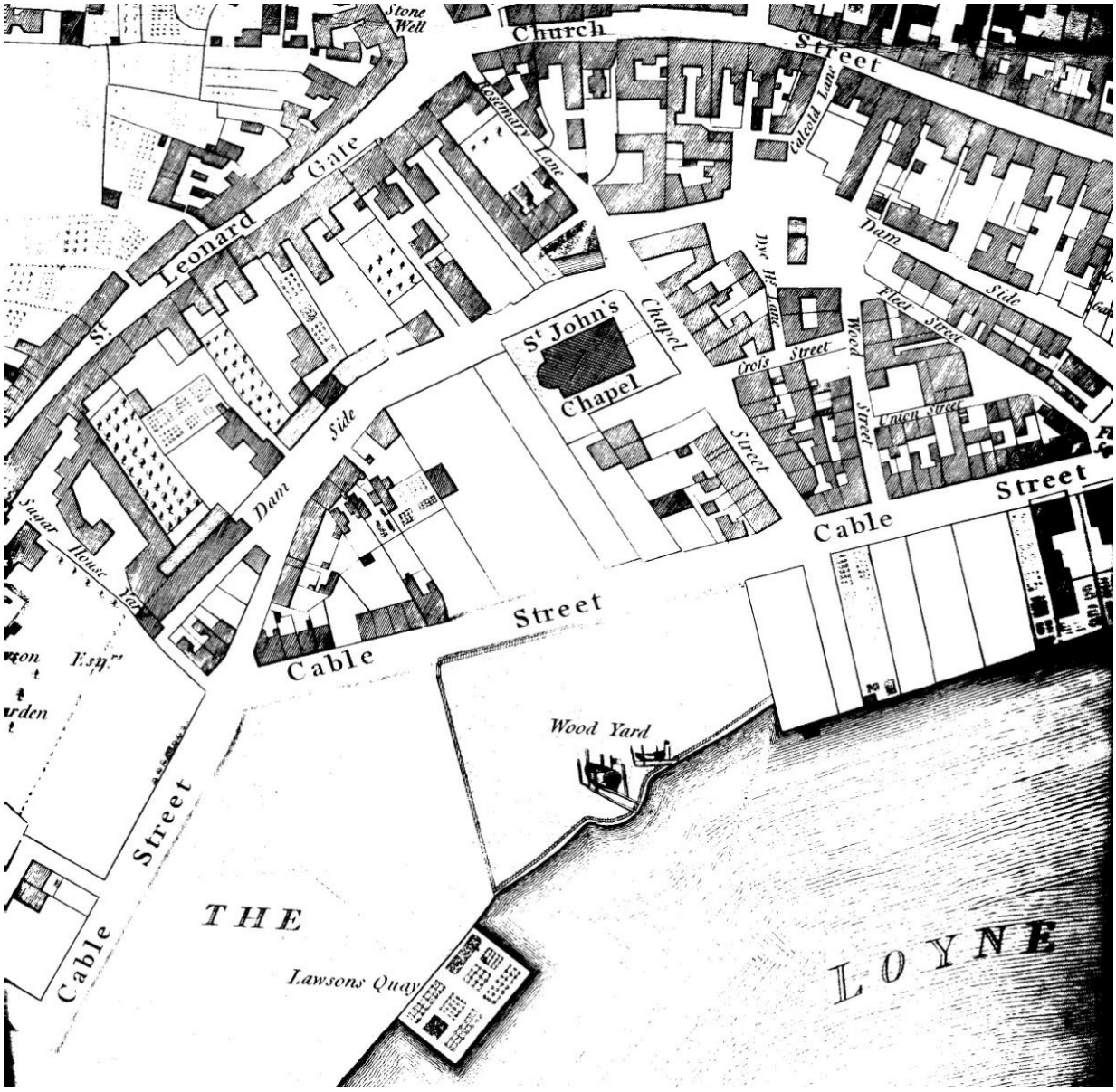
The first map of Lancaster to show the Mill Race is John Speed's, surveyed in 1607 (see above), which shows the Mill Race, the Mill and the Green Ayre, the latter then an open area. Apart from bridges at the Mill only two bridges crossed the Mill Race. By the time of Kuerden's map of 1685 there were five bridges but the area remained largely undeveloped and it still was in the 1720s.

The Green Ayre was an area for bowls, exercising and racing horses (see Guide 78 on Lancaster's race courses) and for taking exercise. Yet to some landowners the area was a potentially profitable development site for housing and industry, even though prone to flooding. Each development needed to cross the Mill Race, so bridges abounded. By 1754 13 bridges over the Mill Race had been marked on maps and four others are recorded in documents.

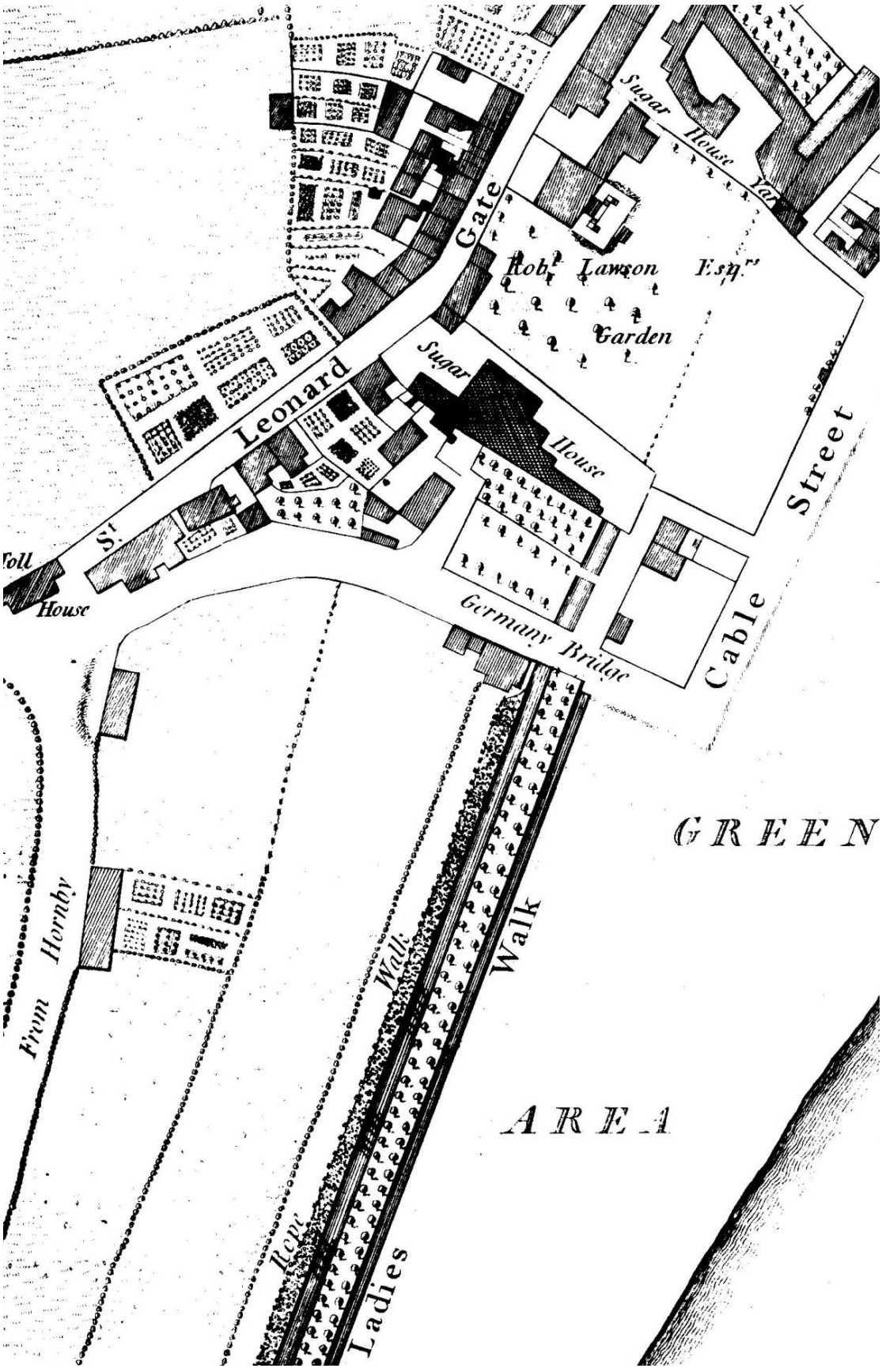
By the time of Mackreth's map surveyed in the mid-1770s (see below), most of the western part of The Mill Race had been completely covered over by Damside Street, which was extended soon after 1769 to meet the Mill Race's exit to the Lune.

The eastern part was partly covered and partly still open. Both the Mill Race's entry and exit points were moved in the mid-nineteenth century to accommodate the sidings east of Green Ayre Station and the new railway bridge from Green Ayre westwards to Lancaster Castle Station.

The section east of what is now Bulk Road (formerly Germany Street) was wholly open alongside Ladies Walk until filled in at the time of the First World War.



As shown on Mackreth's map surveyed in the mid-1770s, the road here called Dam Side (now North Road) has the Mill Race on its southern side (south is at the top of the map), partly bridged and built over and party still open. The Green Ayre is filling up with housing to the west, industrial uses and St John's Chapel (now Church).



The Old Mill Race between the Rope Walk and the Ladies Walk, east of the town centre, as shown on Mackreth's map surveyed in the nmid-1770s. South is at the top of this map.

So far the story of the Mill Race has been one of the progressive bridging over of this obstruction to accessing and developing the Green Ayre.

After 1812, the Mill Race acquired a new use – as the town's largest sewer. It had always been tempting to dump rubbish and waste materials into this broad sluggish channel. But after 1812 central Lancaster acquired an expanding network of stone-lined sewers beneath the streets into which houses could empty their liquid wastes. These sewers also took away some of the rainwater.

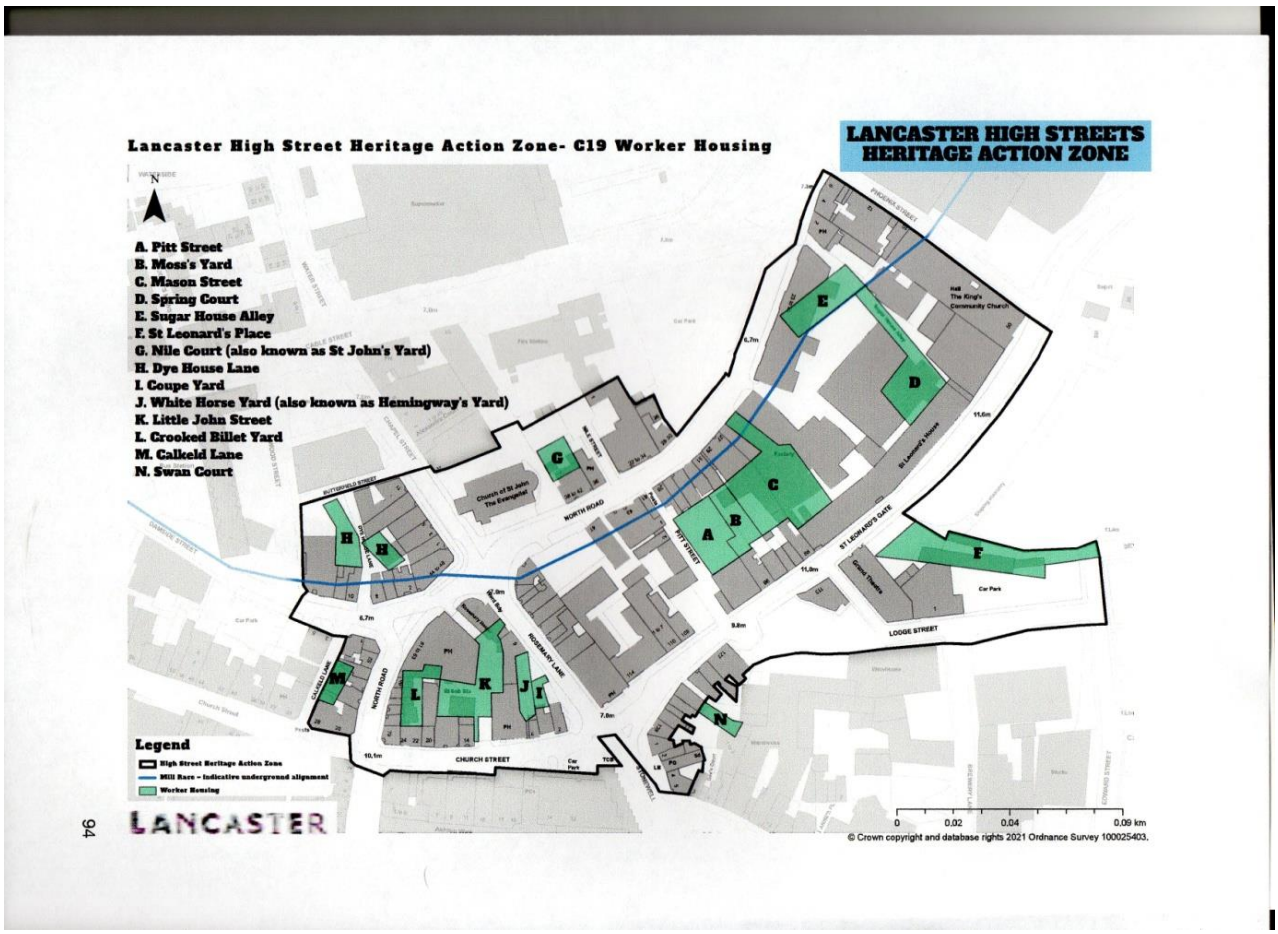
The street sewers all led downhill to the town's lowest point, the Mill Race and so to the River Lune, unless heavy rain and/or a high tide caused the Mill Race to back up into the leaky street sewers, people's basements and their wells for drinking water. Richard Owen's report in 1845 publicised the town's very poor mortality record – particularly in the lowest-lying part of town – and therefore the need for a better sewage system.

In the 1850s an interceptor sewer was eventually built along the south side of the Mill Race, which emptied into the Lune. This normally kept the sewage securely separate from the Mill Race, though there could still be an overflow. The floor of the Mill Race was concreted over in 1890/1 and given a smoother gradient to improve its flow. Today the sewage is led along new pipes by the side of the Lune to the wastewater treatment works at Stodday, south of Lancaster.

The roads over or near the Mill Race carry large numbers of vehicles every day and in 1998 major repairs to the Mill Race and the sewers were needed at the junction of Damside Street, North Road and Rosemary Lane. In the 2010s major works were carried out at several places along the Mill Race to construct very large, underground overflow tanks in central Lancaster to cope safely with major inflows of rainwater and prevent flooding in the town.

The map below shows the present-day relationship of Damside Street, the Mill Race and the buildings. Sometimes the Mill Race is south of the road: sometimes north of it; and often it now lies underneath the neighbouring buildings. The road works in 1998 mentioned above were where the road crossed the Mill Race.

Today it is hard to spot the Mill Race itself but it has left a clear imprint on this part of Lancaster.



The approximate alignment of the Mill Race today in relation to Damside Street, North Road and neighbouring buildings (Source: Lancaster City Council)

Reading

The main source for this leaflet is:
Horsfield K (2001) *The Lancaster Mill Race with notes on the Green Ayre.* Settle, North Yorkshire: Hudson History
Lancaster City Council (2021) *Lancaster Highstreets Heritage Action Zone. Mill Race Conservation Management Plan, Stage 1 (Draft).* p95. Lancaster: Lancaster City Council

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