Lancaster Civic Vision

Celebrating our Heritage – Enhancing our Environment – Shaping our Future

RIVER LUNE AND LANCASTER CANAL

Lancaster Civic Vision Guide 39

There are two waterways through Lancaster – the River Lune and Lancaster Canal. Both provide excellent walking and cycling routes across the city, along or close to both banks of the river and on the canal towpath.

River Lune

The Lune follows a tortuous course on its short journey (44 miles, 71 km) to the sea. It rises at Ravenstonedale in the Howgill Fells (Cumbria) and travels west till it reaches Tebay where it turns south and flows through the Lune Gorge, seen clearly from the M6 and the West Coast Mainline Railway.

When it reaches Hornby, it turns south-west and meanders widely across the distinctive floodplain of the Lune Valley. At Crook O'Lune it has carved a steep-sided route in a tight loop till it emerges for a course south then west through Lancaster. In its final stretch, four sharp bends lead the river into the Lune Deep, Morecambe Bay and the Irish Sea.



JMW Turner *Crook O'Lune*, c.1816–18 (Tate Gallery)
For more details about his painting see Guide 86

The water levels in the Lune are highly variable. Heavy rain in the limestone areas of its upper catchment and high spring tides coming in from Morecambe Bay can give very high flows through the city. Today the Lune is tidal as far up as Skerton Weir, above which the more stable water level allows the local rowing clubs to practise and water to be abstracted for Blackpool and the Fylde.

Lancaster takes its name from the river – as do Lonsdale and Lancashire – but the etymology of 'Lune' is debated. It may be from a Celtic god's name. The river has always played a major part in the town's development. A medieval bridge, which allowed north-south road traffic, was finally demolished in 1846.

For road traffic it was replaced by Skerton Bridge in 1788, Greyhound Bridge in 1972 (converted from a railway bridge first erected in 1848) and by the two M6 bridges at Junction 34 (the first opened in 1960 and the second in 2016). Carlisle Bridge has carried trains since 1846 and Lancaster Canal's aqueduct over the Lune has carried canal boats since 1797. The Millennium Bridge, for pedestrians and cyclists, opened in 2001. See Guide 22 for more details about these bridges.

The river allowed Lancaster to develop as a port; first, Irish Sea coastal trade, then trade with and between West Africa and the Caribbean. Some ships were built at Green Ayre; crews, captains, shipowners and merchants came from the area; and goods like sugar were imported and processed locally. The profits from these trades and that in slaves made Georgian Lancaster a wealthy county town. The trade in tropical hardwoods supported the well-known furniture maker, Gillow (Guide 5 on the firm). Guide 62 discusses Lancaster and the slave trade.

However, the Lune was always a difficult river to sail up to reach St George's Quay, built from the 1750s (Guide 59). The large tidal range could leave even small vessels far out in mid-channel. The deepest channel shifted between the riverbanks and the Lune's many changes of direction made it difficult to navigate the 7 miles (12 km) from Sunderland Point to Lancaster in strong winds that could come from any direction. Various outports nearer the sea were tried but only Heysham and Glasson have survived until today. See Guide 8 on Glasson, Guide 9 on Sunderland Point and Guide 92 on Heysham Harbour.

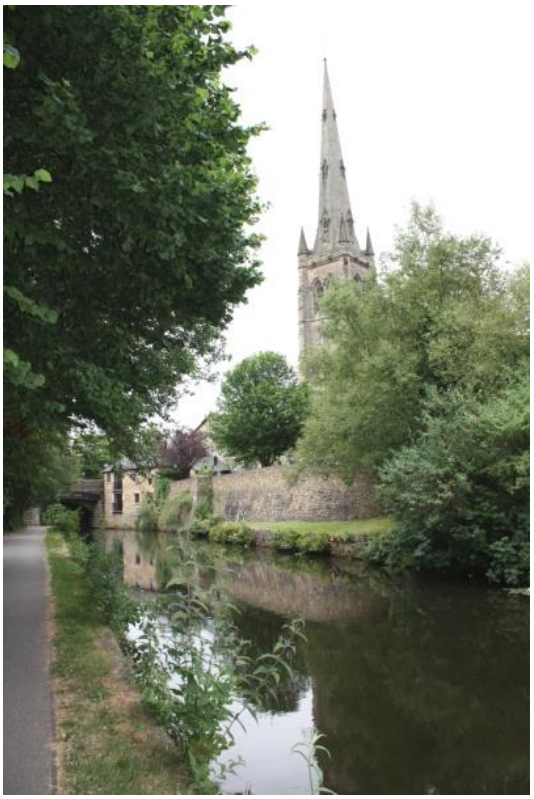
Below Carlisle Bridge were the Luneside works of Williamson, the largest British manufacturer of linoleum. It closed in 1999 and it has been demolished for new private housing and student accommodation. Further downstream are the marshes by Aldcliffe and Overton which are designated for nature conservation, reflecting their national and EU-wide importance for birdlife and marsh plants. See Guide 25 on bird watching locally.

Lancaster Canal

The Lancaster Canal today runs for 42 miles (68 km) from Preston to Tewitfield without any locks. It was opened in 1797 after 7 years under construction. The 14 miles (22 km) onwards to Kendal was opened in 1819 and finally closed in 1968 when severed by the M6. The branch to Glasson Dock and hence the Irish Sea was opened in 1826 with its six locks. Canal cruises through Lancaster are available from Aldcliffe Road. In 2002 Lancaster Canal was linked to the national network south of Preston via the Ribble Link.

The towpath is well surfaced and maintained and it provides a delightful walking and cycling route through the city. As it curves around the east of Lancaster excellent views are afforded over the city to the Castle. You will pass the three remaining textile mills of the eight that were built along the canal between 1802 and 1864. See Guide 21 for more on the mills' history.

The highlight is a walk across the Grade 1-listed aqueduct that carries the canal 62 feet (19 metres) over the Lune. Built in stone to a design by John Rennie, the recently restored aqueduct affords impressive views west to Lancaster city and east to the M6 bridges and the hills beyond.



Lancaster Canal at St Peter's Cathedral



Lancaster Canal aqueduct from Lune Bank Gardens



The Lune from Skerton Weir up to the Lancaster Canal aqueduct (Google Earth)


Millennium Bridge

Text and modern ground photographs – Gordon Clark.
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