

Lancaster Civic Vision

Celebrating our Heritage – Enhancing our Environment – Shaping our Future

THE ASSEMBLY ROOMS, LANCASTER

Lancaster Civic Society Guide 121

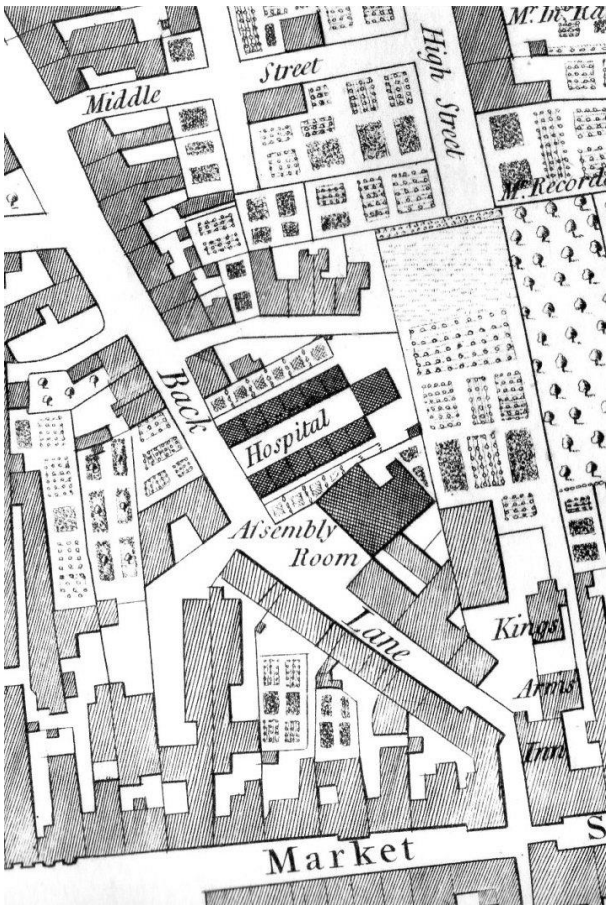
In the Georgian period of the later eighteenth century, high society in Lancaster was for much of the year a close-knit group of local wealthy families. However, when the Assizes (the courts) came to Lancaster Castle two or three times a year, the social scene was transformed by a county-wide influx of lawyers and important families coming to see, be seen and enjoy themselves. One of their favourite venues was the Assembly Rooms on what is now King Street in the centre of Lancaster.

Many British towns had an Assembly Room. Lancaster's is quite modest in size – two floors high and five windows wide. Built in 1759, the two floors have separate entrances so that two events could be held simultaneously.

The map below shows the plan of the building on a map of 1778, but not the semi-circular porch with its neat Tuscan columns at the main front door, which were added in the nineteenth century.

There were extensions to the back of the building in the early nineteenth century and more work later that century to create the rectangular shape we see today. The ground floor interior has often been altered, two iron columns having been added sometime in the nineteenth century to support the first floor.

The interior of the first floor has more original features including an elaborate cornice and a gallery with a 'Chinese Chippendale' style of frontage with attractive geometric carving, probably by Gillow of Lancaster. It has been suggested that the architect of the whole building was Richard Gillow who designed the Custom House on St George's Quay.



The Assembly Room on Mackreth's map of Lancaster, 1778.
South is at the top of this map.



The Assembly Rooms with porch, Penny's Almshouses and Gillison's Hospital for women on an OS map of surveyed in 1845 (1:1056).

The maps above and the photograph below show that the Assembly Rooms are right next door to the 'Hospital', which we now call Penny's Almshouses. These were set up in 1720 using money left in his will by William Penny, a lawyer.

They provided – and still do – sheltered accommodation for those in need – at that time they were all men.

Running such a charitable place needed money and the Hospital's Trustees built the Assembly Rooms to provide an income stream to support their work with the poor – much as today when celebrities support charity events.



The Assembly Rooms on the right with the later extensions at the back, and Penny's Almshouses on the left.

The main rooms could be hired for family parties or other meetings during much of the year. Travelling entertainers sometimes hired the Rooms. During the Assizes seasons, the Rooms would host grander and larger receptions and balls.

Once the Assizes had diminished along with its social whirl, and after hotels, churches and pubs had developed large function rooms, there was competition among places where groups could meet.

Nonetheless, up to 1914 there was a steady stream of bookings for the Assembly Rooms for sales, auctions, bazaars for good causes, talks, concerts, exhibitions, dances and public meetings including political ones. More recently, after periods when it was unused, the Rooms have housed local and national government offices for social security and employment.

Today, owned by Lancaster City Council, small independent shops are found on the ground floor and on the upper floor a dance studio has recently been succeeded by a gallery and artists' workshop space. The building is Grade II listed.

Text and photograph – Gordon Clark.
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