Lancaster Civic Vision

Celebrating our Heritage – Enhancing our Environment – Shaping our Future

THE ASHTON MEMORIAL, LANCASTER

Lancaster Civic Society Guide 55

The Ashton Memorial is Lancaster's most obvious landmark and perhaps its best known (see below). It stands to the east of the city on a site 70 metres above even the top of Castle Hill. The 45-metre memorial is readily visible to travellers passing Lancaster on the train or M6. You can see its green dome and white stonework from many parts of the town.



The Ashton Memorial, Lancaster

The memorial sits at the heart of Williamson Park, which till the 1840s was the site one of the town's quarries for building stone – the quarry faces can still be seen. The area was landscaped in the 1870s by James Williamson, the textile and linoleum magnate. Guide 35 on Lancaster's parks gives more information about the Park.

His son, also James Williamson (and later Lord Ashton) gave the land to the town in 1881 as a public park with funds to maintain it. He also embellished the park with a bandstand (no longer there), shelters and a stone bridge (replacing a wooden one) over the man-made lake. This was one of Lord Ashton's many gifts to Lancaster, both large and small.

He commissioned the Ashton Memorial in 1904, just after his wife died, having probably had it in mind for some time. It was constructed in 1906–9. His chosen architect was the nationally renowned Sir John Blecher aided by J J Boass. Their preferred style, then fashionable, is variously called High or Edwardian Baroque or 'Wrenaissance', which they had used on previous commissions.

The key point is that Lord Ashton spent a huge sum on the building – some say £63,000 and others say £80,000. The equivalent in 2019 money is between £7.6 and £9.6 million. The architects did not hesitate to spend it, creating a lavish and complex building.

There are three layers to the building from the ground floor to the lantern above the dome. The more you study the building, the more you appreciate the complexity of its design. The basic structure is a steel frame rising from deep foundations and in-filled with load-bearing brick and reinforced concrete. The whole structure below the copper-clad dome is faced in white Portland limestone. Leading up the building are long flights of steps in speckled Cornish granite.



The Lancaster crest

Inside the building the ground floor has a strikingly decorative floor, elaborate light fittings and allegorical paintings on the ceiling by George Murray. There is a family commemoration on a plaque.

Steps lead up to smaller rooms and to balconies with wonderful views in all directions. From the balconies you get a better view of the four sculptures on the outside representing Commerce, Science, Industry and Art that were created by Herbert Hampson. He also designed the Queen Victoria Monument in Dalton Square, another gift from Lord Ashton in 1909. See Guide 17 more about the Queen Victoria Monument.



Lord Ashton's initial on the Ashton Memorial, Lancaster

The Williamson family funded repairs to the building in 1930 and it suffered some damage in a fire in 1962. In 1981 the whole building was closed to the public because it had become structurally unsound and it was threatened with demolition. Water had seeped in and rusted the steel reinforcing bars in the concrete, which caused the bars to expand and crack the concrete. However, a major fund-raising campaign allowed the city to pay for repairs in 1985–7.

Lord Ashton originally intended the Queen Victoria Monument to be the pinnacle of the Park. The Memorial displaced the royal monument to Dalton Square. People have speculated on why he chose this enormous design. He was not an easy man to understand. The idea of it as a memorial to his late wife has been replaced by seeing it as a legacy from the wider family to Lancaster. Certainly it has been hard to find a use for it.

The Palm House or Orangery next to it is an obvious visitor attraction, now a butterfly house, and with a café and gift shop nearby. But finding a use for the Memorial itself has been harder. It was a local museum for a while. Now it is a wedding venue as well as a place to visit and admire. It verges on being a folly – a glorious structure without a clear use but desired by a man so rich he could afford to build it.



The Palm House and Lancashire Rose stone mosaic, Williamson Park, Lancaster

Reading

S. Ashworth 1989 *The Lino King: The Life and Times of Lord Ashton*. Lancaster: Lancaster City Museum
S Bradshaw 2022 *The People's Park: A History of Williamson Park Lancaster.* Lancaster: Palatine Books

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