Lancaster Civic Vision

Celebrating our Heritage – Enhancing our Environment – Shaping our Future

St GEORGE'S QUAY, LANCASTER

Lancaster Civic Vision Guide 59



St George's Quay, Lancaster

Lancaster as a port has always been difficult for mariners to navigate. The voyage up the River Lune from the Irish Sea involves many changes of course to follow the narrow and shifting deepest channel, with fast tidal flows and winds from any direction threatening to push you off course.

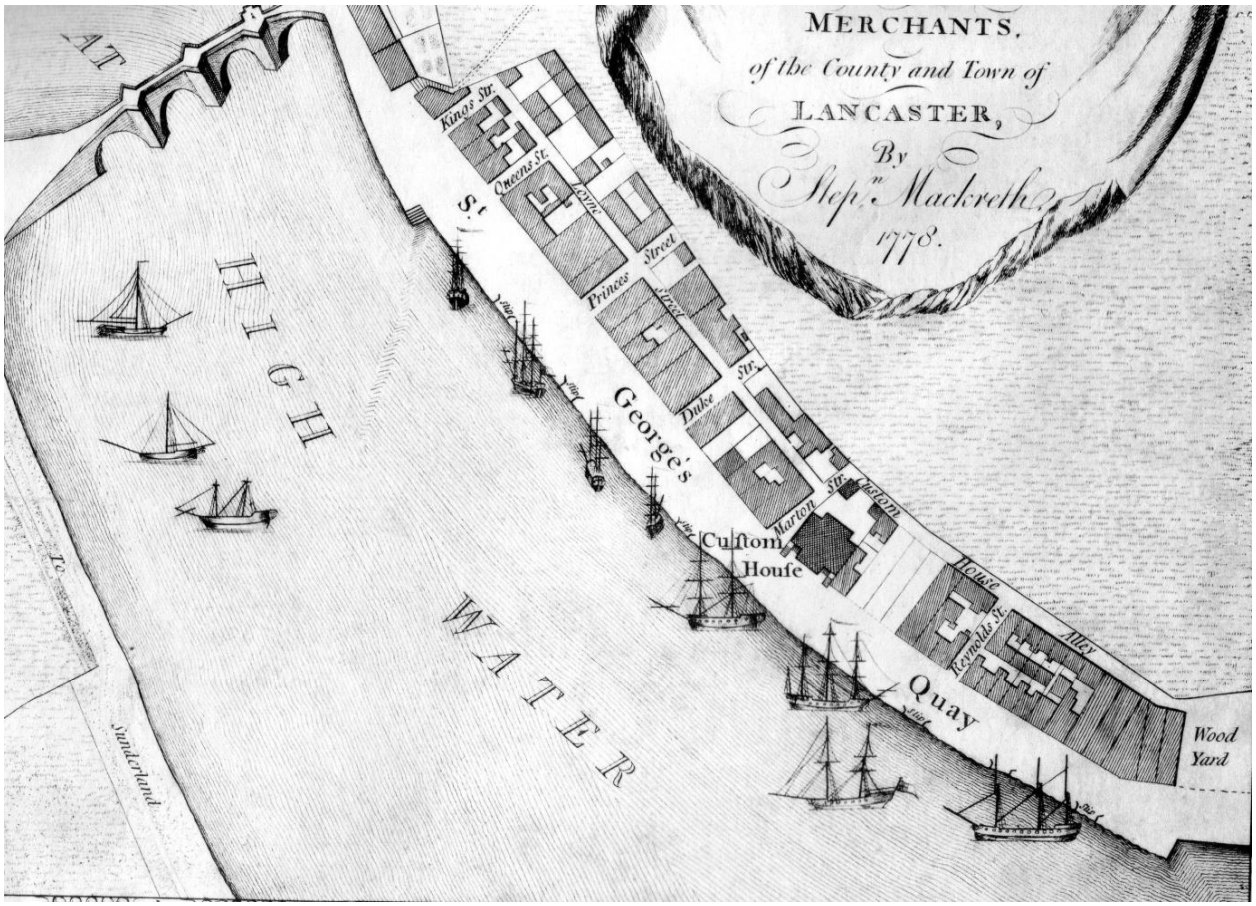
Additionally, the river can vary markedly in depth, given the big tidal range in Morecambe Bay. The amount of river water also varies depending on the rainfall in the river's upland catchment area. Around 1680, an attempt to create an outport at Sunderland Point, much nearer the river mouth, was only partly successful given the costly need to horse-and-cart all the goods across tidal tracks the 8 miles (13 km) to Lancaster.

Before 1750 there was another problem for merchants once the ships had reached Lancaster, their upstream passage being limited by the medieval bridge shown in Figure 2. Unless the river level was high, ships would have to anchor mid-stream and discharge their cargo into small boats to be rowed to the river bank. Alternatively,

the ships could get closer to the land and rest on the riverbed for unloading, waiting to refloat at the next high tide. Moreover there was nowhere secure from the weather and theft to store the goods until they were needed.

With Sunderland Point an expensive option and the town's facilities limited and slow, the Act of Parliament of 1749 allowing a quay to be built was an obvious improvement, as other ports, notably Liverpool, had already found.

The wealthy merchants formed the Lancaster Port Commission and the building of the Quay was completed in the 1750s. Plots of land alongside the quay were sold off in 1751 and 1781 on which merchants rapidly built the warehouses shown on Mackreth's map (Figure 2) and still standing today (Figures 1 and 3).



St George's Quay as depicted on Stephen Mackreth's map of Lancaster published in 1778

The traffic through the port and in the warehouses would reflect the Georgian-era industries and needs of the town of Lancaster – tropical woods for Gillow the furniture maker and sugar for the local refinery, alongside more local trade in cloth, wool, fish, building stone and manufactures (Figure 3).

As trade grew a second quay (New Quay) was built in 1768 just downstream that allowed for larger ships to call. This was useful when the land nearby later became

industrialised. Soon after, a pier (1781–2) and wet dock (1787) were built at Glasson near the river mouth. Guide 8 in this series gives more information about Glasson.

For bulky commodities such as coal and limestone there was some local competition from the Lancaster Canal when it opened in 1797 and in the subsequent decades when it attracted many mills to its banks. There are separate leaflets in this series on Sunderland Point (No. 9), Glasson (No. 8) and the town's canalside mills (No. 21).

However, port traffic started to drift away from Lancaster itself, and Heysham Harbour opened in 1904. Guide No. 92 describes the growth of Heysham Harbour. Goods landed at larger docks such as Preston, Liverpool and Manchester could be brought to Lancaster by train after the railway reached Lancaster from the south in 1840 (Guide 20 for details).



Former warehouses on St George's Quay, Lancaster

The most impressive building on the Quay is the Custom House, which was completed in 1764. It was designed by Richard Gillow and provided a place for customs dues to be paid and for mariners to meet. Today it is the city's Maritime Museum (Figure 4).



Custom House, St George's Quay, Lancaster

As port traffic declined, other users moved in. The area became run down and 'rough'. The warehouses lacked maintenance and it showed. Some became empty and derelict.

From around 1970 architectural revival and social gentrification began to accelerate. Warehouses became flats, the poorest buildings at the quay's west end were demolished and replaced by blocks of flats that respected the warehouse style of the neighbouring buildings.

Eateries and offices moved in. Figures 1 and 3 show the quay's frontage in 2020.

Reading

A White (ed.) *A History of Lancaster 1193–1993*. Keele: Ryburn University Press. Chapter 3

Text and photographs – Gordon Clark
Published by Lancaster Civic Vision (©2022)
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