Lancaster Civic Vision

Celebrating our Heritage – Enhancing our Environment – Shaping our Future

THE BUILDING STONES OF LANCASTER

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The older buildings of Lancaster were built or rebuilt in sandstone, unlike Kendal and the Kellets where limestone was favoured. Stone lasts longer than wood and it is less prone to fire damage – there was a major fire in Lancaster in 1643.

But stone, like coal, is very expensive to transport to the building site by horse and cart and so, until canals and then railways reduced transport costs, affordable building stone needed to come from very local quarries. Therefore Lancaster's building stone reflects the nearby geology, especially that to the south and east of the town where the rocks are nearer the surface.

The major quarries in the local area were at what is now Williamson Park, Ellel Crag (east of Galgate), Scotch Quarry (Primrose), Caton Moor, Clougha and Ward's Stone and Greaves. There were also many smaller quarries across the countryside. Quarried stone was also reused from buildings demolished, for example from the Roman forts. These quarries produced what was called locally 'Lancaster freestone'. Each quarry produced a slightly different sandstone, but they were mostly light in colour, darkening with weathering, and often with attractive brown streaks from iron oxides. These fine-grained or medium-grained sandstones were very suitable for building as they could be cut, shaped and decorated and they resisted water penetration and erosion.



Iron oxide patterning in local sandstones – Fenton Street on the left and The Custom House on St George's Quay on the right

They are old rocks geologically, being between 326 and 313 million years old. Traditionally they are called Millstone Grits of the Upper Carboniferous period; now called the Namurian stage of the Carboniferous.

They formed in a shallow equatorial sea where complex delta structures and rivers were depositing muds, silts and coarser materials that over time became compressed and transformed into the mudstones, siltstones and sandstones that we see in the quarries today.

The nearby equatorial land areas were densely forested which produced the coal measures that are not too distant from the sandstones geologically or, today, geographically.

The 320 million years or so since their formation has seen the rocks drifting northwards, the strata being tilted, folded and faulted as the African and Eurasian continental plates jostled each other while they moved towards their present locations.

Unsurprisingly the rocks that have been produced from all the local quarries have varied in texture, colour and quality as the quarries were deepened and widened. Therefore it is often unclear from exactly which quarry a particular stone was taken.

The 'Lancaster freestone' is seen in many of Lancaster's oldest public buildings up to the nineteenth century – the Castle, Priory, St John's Church, City Museum, Custom House, Lune Aqueduct and Skerton Bridge.

Ellel quarry provided the stone for the columns for the Custom House and City Museum (formerly the Town Hall). A quarry on Clougha supplied flagstones for interior flooring. Local sandstones can also be seen in the houses of that era in, for example, Castle Park, Castle Hill, St Mary's Parade, Church Street and High Street.

These are, of course, the buildings of well-off individuals and groups. The simpler houses of the poorer were of wood and have not survived fire and rot so well. Stone, if used, would have been of a random rubble construction with timber supports and ties. The grander the client the more likely the stone has been polished or patterned (ashlar), at least for the frontage; the back might be in plainer stone (see below).

As the nineteenth century progressed, cheaper transport allowed a wider range of building stones to be accessed affordably.

The Crimean War Memorial (1860) in Lancaster Cemetery is in a limestone from near Dalton in south Cumbria. Lancaster Town Hall (1909) and Lancaster War Memorial (1924) are of Longridge sandstone from central Lancashire that is similar in colour and properties to the local stones.



The contrast between the stone on the frontage and the sides at the Music Room (Sun Street, left) and St George's Quay (former warehouse, right)

The Town Hall's columns are another Namurian sandstone from Darley Dale in Derbyshire. The Queen Victoria Monument (1907) in Dalton Square is in Portland Stone (Dorset) on a Cornish granite plinth, a combination found in the Ashton Memorial (1909, Williamson Park). In the nineteenth century Lake District (Coniston) slates supplanted sandstones for roof tiles.



Portland stone (left) and Cornish granite (right) on Queen Victoria Monument (Dalton Square)

A few more exotic stones have also been used. There is a green and cream marble from Sweden in the main entrance and stairway of the Town Hall, and a highly polished pink

granite with large crystals in the columns beside the front door of the NatWest Bank in Church Street (1870, formerly the Lancaster Banking Company's head office).

A number of recent buildings have continued the tradition of stone facing – New Look, the Market Hall (now Primark), Mitre House (Church Street), CityLab (Dalton Square), the Roundhouse (Robert Street), Travelodge (King Street) and many new blocks of flats in central Lancaster.

The recent re-paving of Penny St and Market St has used stone and the new flood-defence wall at St George's Quay is stone-faced.

Lancaster will continue to be a town in stone.







Patterned and polished ashlar

Text & photographs – Gordon Clark.
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