Lancaster Civic Vision

Celebrating our Heritage – Enhancing our Environment – Shaping our Future

FREEHOLD, LANCASTER

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The Freehold area in Lancaster catches your eye – for its rectangular street pattern and for its modern legalistic name. How can these distinctive features be explained?



The rectangular street pattern of Freehold today, viewed from the west.
(Source: Google Earth)

In the early nineteenth century the two-party Parliamentary system comprised the Whigs (who became the Liberals later in the century) and the Tories/Conservatives. The right to vote in a constituency was traditionally available only to its male property owners – the so-called 'forty shilling freeholders'. The Representation of the People Act of 1832 extended voting rights in counties and boroughs to include some copyholders, leaseholders and tenants. This was a modest extension of the franchise that both parties believed could benefit them electorally, the Whigs in the towns and cities and the Tories in the countryside.

The Whigs in particular saw increasing the number of borough freeholders and other property owners as a route to greater electoral success locally and nationally. Following pioneering groups in Birmingham, London and Manchester over a hundred Freehold Land Society estates were set up across the country using money raised to buy land and sell house plots to builders and new freeholders.

The National Freehold Land Society and the Second Freehold Building Society set up a Lancaster Branch in 1848 and offered £100 shares for sale, and they raised more than the £6,500 (£928,000 in 2020 values) needed in 1852 to buy the 38 acres of what came to be known as 'Freehold Park'. The fields they bought are shown in the centre of the map below – between Bath House and Highfield and between Moor Place Farm and the municipal boundary. The field boundaries coincide with the development's shape.

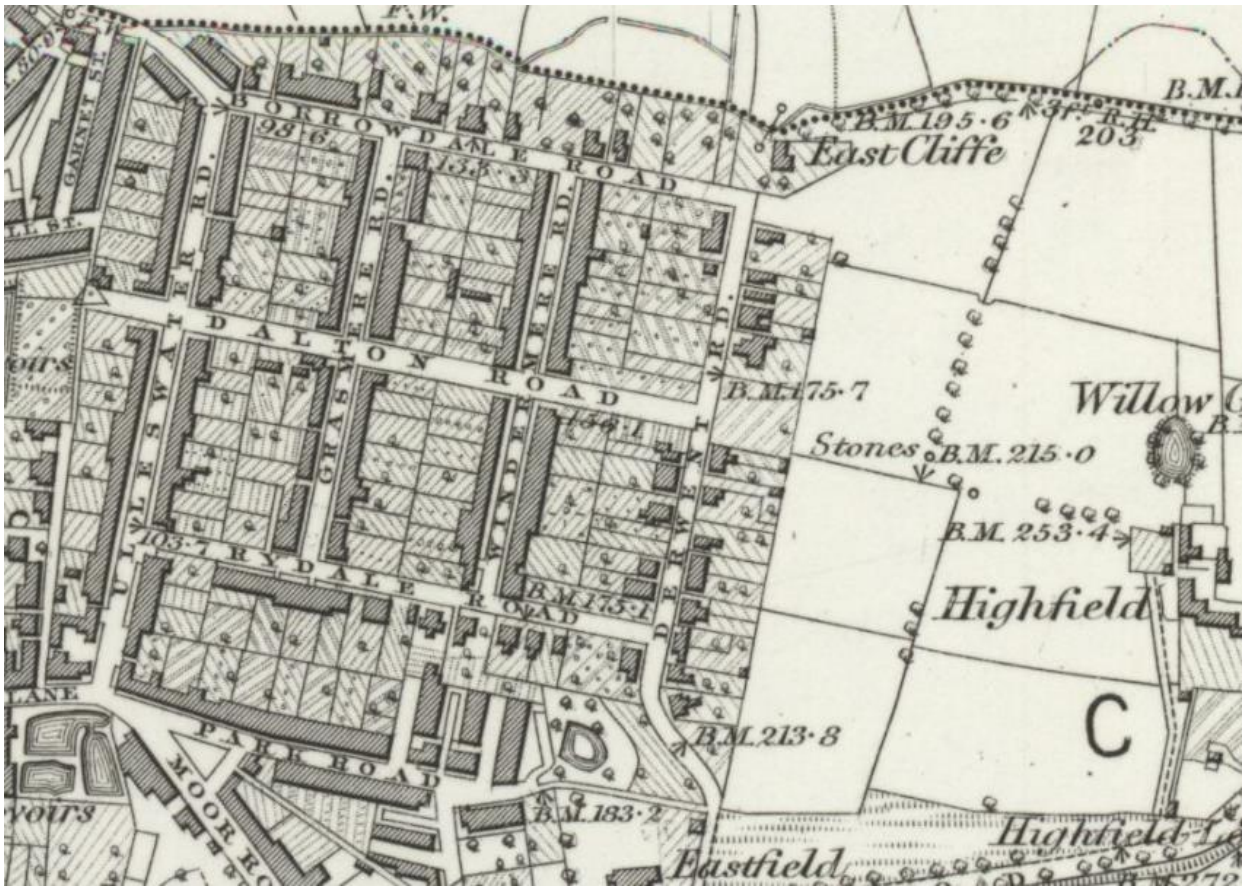


The site of Freehold in 1844 (Source: Ordnance Survey)

A plan for the streets, drainage system and house plots was drawn up in 1852, creating 364 house plots for sale at £30 a plot, payable at 1 shilling a week. By December 1853 only a few plots remained unsold. The long, thin gardens, the views over the town and beyond, and the broad, clean streets made this an attractive area for those who could afford to buy. Rydal, Dalton and Borrowdale Roads rose the 100 feet or so from Ulleswater /Ullswater Road to Derwent Road.

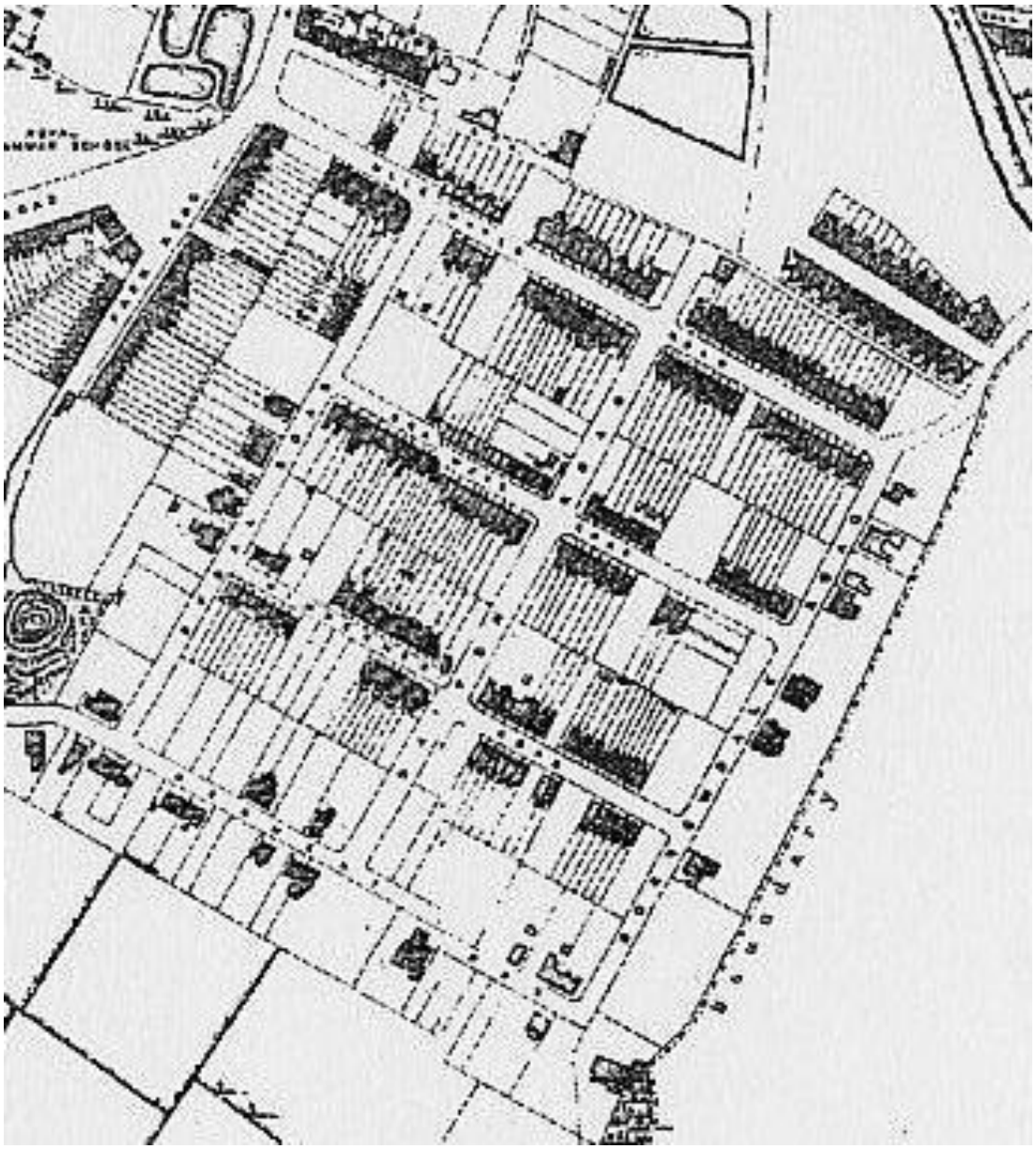
The first house went up on Derwent Road in 1853. However, the ability to build and sell new houses was limited in Lancaster (a small town without rapid population growth) and the economy in the 1850s and 1860s was not particularly buoyant. This was a very large development for a town the size of Lancaster, therefore housebuilding was steady over the next two decades rather than rapid.

As early as 1855 some newly-built houses were being sold on. However, by 1877 all the streets (except for some of the larger plots on Borrowdale and Derwent Roads) had been substantially built up. Building continued more slowly into the 1890s and there have been some new houses in recent years. The houses, built over several decades by many different builders, vary in style and size. The smallest are terraced, one room wide and only two storeys: often on the western side of Freehold. Others are three storeys, and higher up on the eastern side the houses are larger, being semi-detached or detached.



Freehold in 1891 (Source: Ordnance Survey)

Did the political aim succeed? Perhaps, but only slowly as the new houses went up and were sold. As early as 1855 some of the houses were being rented rather than sold. In 1861 there were 102 households but only 30 freehold owners.



Freehold in 1877, west at the top
(Source: Harrison and Hall map, via Lancaster University Library and Andrew White)

The Representation of the People Acts of 1867 and 1885 gradually extended voting rights to men who were resident in an area but were not property owners. Also the extensive corruption through voter bribery in Lancaster elections up to 1865 undermined voting intentions based on party loyalty and property ownership.

The ballot was not secret. Hence the expansion of freehold housing did not guarantee the electoral success that the Whigs/Liberals had hoped for.

Today there are still around 370 residential addresses on the seven core streets of Freehold. Some houses have been subdivided or converted and recently there have been a few new houses. The retail and commercial facilities in Freehold have evolved over the decades. Nevertheless, Freehold remains recognisably as it looked in the 1890s, a distinctive and popular part of Lancaster.



The view from Derwent Road to the Castle (Source: Gordon Clark)

Text – Gordon Clark.
Published by Lancaster Civic Society (©2021, revised 2022). www.lancastercivicsociety.uk
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