Lancaster Civic Vision

Celebrating our Heritage – Enhancing our Environment – Shaping our Future

# ST JOHN'S, LANCASTER: A GEORGIAN TOWN CHURCH

**Lancaster Civic Society Guide 16**



The Church of St John the Evangelist in Lancaster is doubly important and worthy of a visit. It is a gem of a Georgian church in terms of its architecture, inside and outside – it is Grade II* listed. It is also a full of reminders of Lancaster in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. It is at the junction of North Road and Cheapside (LA1 1PA).

**The architecture**

From the outside you see a west-east oriented Anglican church in a simple rectangular plan with five round-arched windows along the nave and a slate roof. It was perhaps designed by Henry Sephton and built in 1754–5 in finely cut, local sandstone. The quoins (the neatly cut stones in the corners) are prominent.

The interesting tower was added in 1784, designed by Thomas Harrison (who also designed nearby Skerton Bridge). The tower has a clock with three faces (1886), a louvered section with the bells and a rotunda with short columns and a small spire. The treble bell is even older than the church – cast in 1747.

The curved apse to the east of the nave is striking. The porch in the SW corner was added in 1873 and the vestry (SE corner) and chapel (NE corner) were created in the 1920s. Old tombstones have been laid flat around the church. The iron gates in from North Road date from 1818. In the mid-eighteenth century this was a fashionable area.



St John's clock

Inside the church there are many interesting details. On each side of the nave are box pews in oak. Those at the front were reserved for the dignitaries of the Corporation of Lancaster. This was the 'town church', originally a chapel of ease of St Mary's (Lancaster Priory) up by the Castle, then a parish in its own right after 1842 as Lancaster's population expanded.

The apse to the east is remarkable for the Lord's Prayer, Ten Commandments and Apostle's Creed painted in large letters and the bright, stained-glass windows (*c.*1870). Originally the windows would have been clear glass. A three-deck pulpit used to stand in front of the apse, but was replaced in 1875 by the current iron one to the side.

At the west end is the organ (1785, possibly by Langshaw, the local organ builder, and rebuilt and expanded four times since then). It sits in a mahogany case by Gillow (the

famous Lancaster cabinetmakers). They also made a small communion table. Below the organ is the coat of arms of George II.

The stained-glass windows in the north aisle (*c.*1895) are by Shrigley and Hunt, a noted Lancaster firm. The clear glass panels between the font and nave are original Georgian glass.

Upstairs are three seating galleries, formerly with box pews, which are no longer publicly accessible on safety grounds. The ceiling is barrel-vaulted, giving very good acoustics.



Box pews

**Lancaster life**

Lancaster roughly doubled in population from around when St John's was built and the 1801 census, and the necessarily large seating capacity is obvious – the box pews in oak downstairs and the large gallery space. The pews are still numbered and they could be rented or bought by those who wanted the best seats to hear the preacher and to be seen by the congregation.

The front pews on the south side are labelled as reserved for the dignitaries of the Lancaster Corporation, who paid for the church along with Queen Anne's Bounty and private donations. William Stratford, a lawyer, gave £1,020 in total (£189,800 in current money) for the building and the site. Abram Rawlinson MP, a trader, gave the organ. A legacy from Thomas Bowes funded the tower. There was a wealthy and philanthropic section of Lancaster society, often based directly or at one remove on the West Indies trades, including slaves, rum, sugar and hardwoods.

Outside there are gravestones to Captain Greenwood, James Clark of Jamaica, John Nunns (a Skerton sea captain interred in Trinidad) and John Lowther, a merchant who died

in St Thomas (West Indies). The Brockbanks who built many of the Lancaster traders' ships, are commemorated. So is John Belsey, the Port of Lancaster's Collector of Excise.

There are plaques to the Town Architect, the druggist, a merchant and a doctor's two infants. Inside there are plaques to Benjamin Satterthwaite, of the West Indies trading family, and Thomas Howitt, a surgeon. James Williamson Senior, the wealthy linoleum manufacturer in Lancaster and donor of the town's Williamson Park, had the Ten Commandments inscribed on the apse wall.




The Lord's Prayer in the apse

St John's is a reminder of many aspects of Lancaster's development as a town in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries – a few people were very wealthy (and some of them philanthropic), and it was an expanding, diverse, church-going town. The congregants' connections to Caribbean and slave trading are obvious. St John's is truly the town's church.

The Church merged in 1958 with nearby St Anne's (now the Dukes Theatre) and was closed for worship in 1981. Since 1983 it has been cared for by The Churches Conservation Trust. There is an annual service on St John's Day (27 December). The church was restored in 1955. The church has suffered recently from flooding and rotting timber work. In 2025 an extensive programme of repairs to the roof was completed.

The building awaits a new use. It is open to the public occasionally.

There are separate guides in this series for *Gillow of Lancaster* (No. 5), *Stained Glass in Lancaster* (No. 6), Skerton Walk (Guide 24), *The Priory Church of St Mary, Lancaster* (No. 56), *St Peter's Cathedral* (No. 57) and *The Mill Race* (No. 79).

**Text – Gordon Clark. Photographs – *Lancaster Guardian* (the clock); Gordon Clark (the others).**
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