Lancaster Civic Vision

Celebrating our Heritage – Enhancing our Environment – Shaping our Future

HOSPITALS IN LANCASTER AND MORECAMBE

Lancaster Civic Vision Guide 83

Among the more important buildings in the local area have been its hospitals. This guide tells you more about them.

The Leper Hospital

This is the first hospital we know of in the Lancaster area. It was solely for lepers and was more a hospice than a hospital in the modern sense. Treatments to alleviate or cure this serious and feared disease were very limited. The Leper Hospital was situated outside Lancaster, deliberately isolated, roughly where St Leonard's Gate meets Bulk Road, near Factory Hill and Hinde Street. Little survives of it. It is believed to have been founded by John, Earl of Mortain in the early 1190s and it was operational for around 300 years until the early 1500s when it fell into disuse and was demolished. The Hospital was supported by income from a nearby corn mill and farmland. The site comprised Spittel House where the lepers lived, a chapel and perhaps a warden's house.



The location of the Leper Hospital (Source: Ordnance Survey 6-inch map, surveyed in 1844/5

The Dispensaries

Before Lancaster had a hospital, it had a Dispensary. This provided care for wounds and those basic treatments for illnesses thought efficacious at the time. Public subscriptions paid for some care for the very poor. Lancaster's dispensary has operated from three locations. The first was at Castle Park (its photograph is below) which was in operation between 1781 and 1785. The building was demolished in 1906 to make way for the expansion of the Storey Institute (see Guide 68 in this series).

The second location was used between 1785 and 1833 and was at 19 Castle Hill. It was purpose-built as a dispensary by public subscription and the building still stands today. The third location, used between 1833 and 1906, was at 6 Thurnham Street on its corner with George Street. The building dates from around 1800 and was converted to medical use. The northern part survives as Owen House, the southern part having been demolished around 1900 and the site is now the Royal Hotel. It merged in 1832/3 with the House of Recovery which had been established in 1815 on Plumb Street off Bulk Street. This has been demolished and is now a car park.

A Coade stone image of the Good Samaritan has been a part of each of the Dispensaries and is now to be found above the entrance to Medical Unit 1 of the Royal Lancaster Infirmary.



The first Dispensary, Castle Park (Source: Red Rose Collection, Lancashire County Council, gratefully acknowledged)



The second Dispensary, 19 Castle Hill (Source: Author)

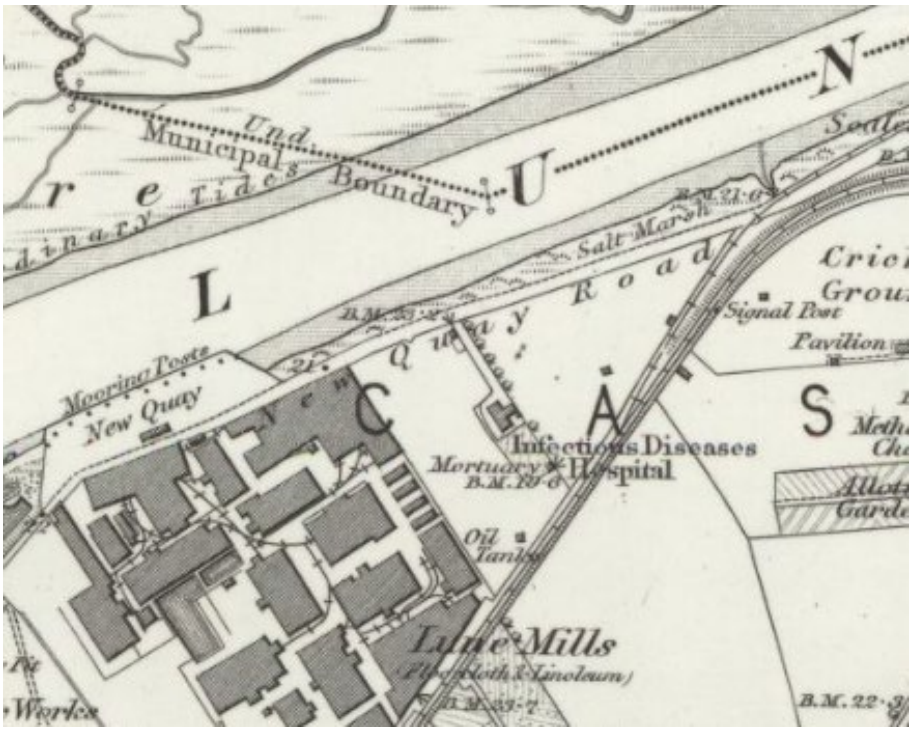


The Third Dispensary, 6 Thurnham Street (Source: Lancaster City Museum, gratefully acknowledged)

Sanatoria and Isolation / Infectious Disease Hospitals

Whereas the Dispensary was always conveniently near the centre of Lancaster, the prevalence of infectious diseases in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries prompted the building of hospitals well outside the built-up areas to protect the healthy from infection and to cater for those with tuberculosis whose treatment required the cleaner air of the countryside. These diseases included tuberculosis, smallpox, diphtheria and scarlet fever.

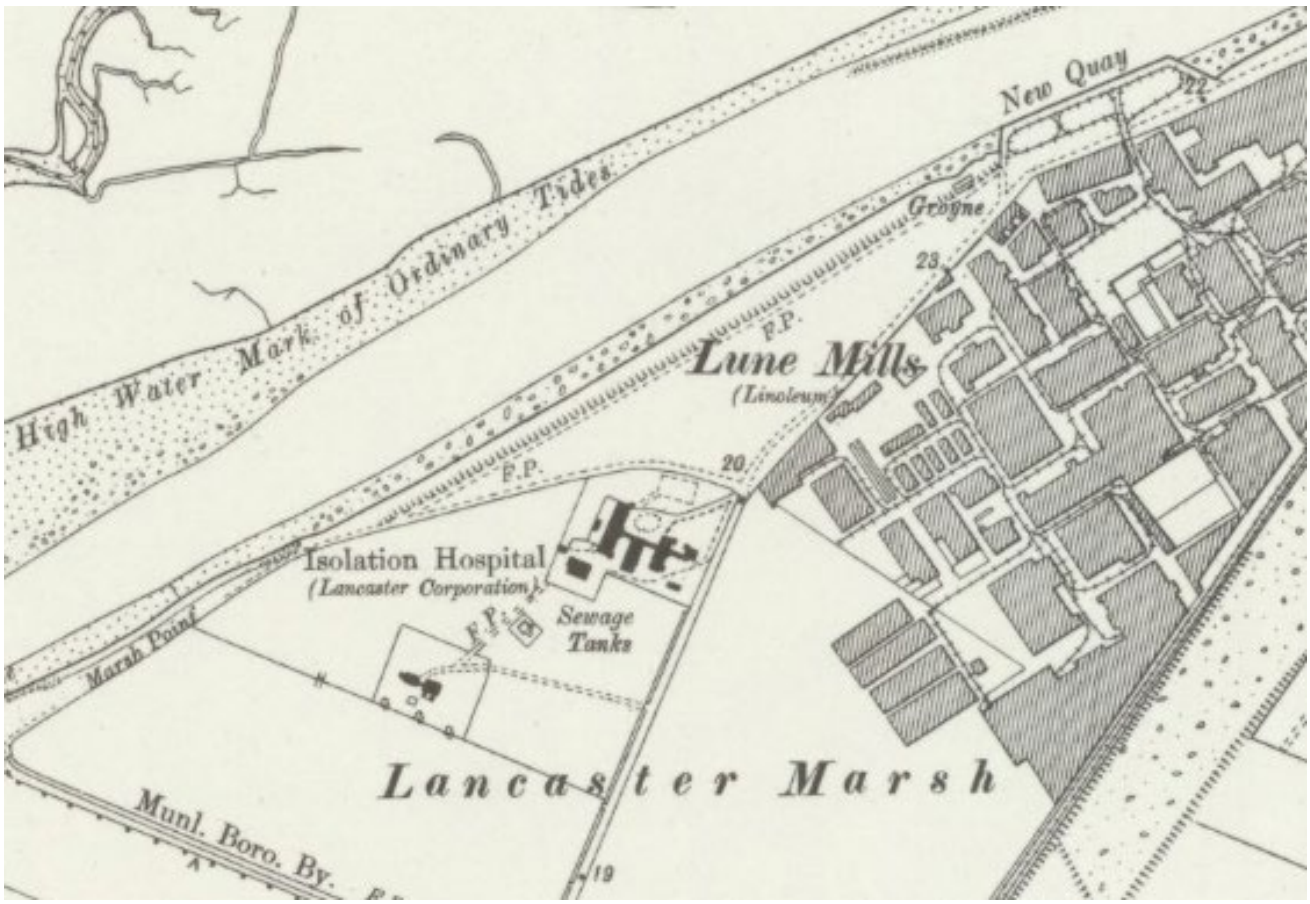
The first to be built was the Luneside Hospital in 1880 off New Quay Road. It was closed in the very early 1890s and the site was taken over by Williamson's for an extension to their Lune Mills. These too have been demolished and the hospital's site is now housing on Nairn Road.



The Infectious Diseases Hospital for Lancaster in 1891 just before it closed. (Source: Ordnance Survey 6-inch map surveyed in 1891, gratefully acknowledged)

In 1885 a unit for infectious diseases was opened next to but separate from the Lancaster Workhouse on Quernmore Road. This catered for the Workhouse patients but also some people from the town. It has been demolished and the site is now part of Lancaster Royal Grammar School.

The role of Luneside Hospital (see above) was taken over by Lancaster Sanatorium at Marsh Point further west down the River Lune. This opened in 1891 and despite the flooding in 1907 and 1927 it remained open until 1934 when its role was taken over by Beaumont Hospital (see below). There were three main buildings for the infectious cases and the staff, huts in the grounds for tuberculosis patients and there was also a small smallpox unit on the south-west edge of the site. Until recently the site has been a depot for a builders merchant. By 2021 only the middle of the three original sanatorium blocks remains. By 2025 the site had been cleared and plans approved for building a self-storage facility on the site.

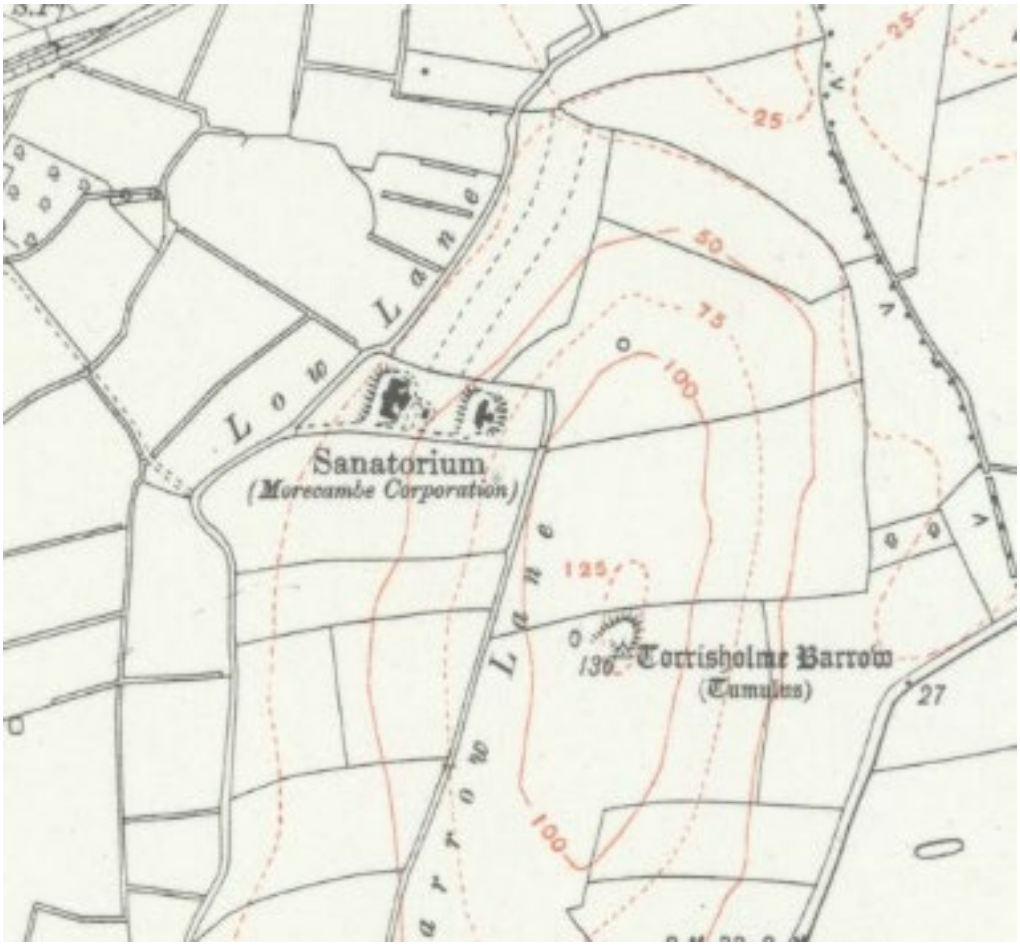


Lancaster Isolation Hospital (Source: Ordnance Survey 6-inch map surveyed in 1931, gratefully acknowledged)

In 1895 a very small unit for smallpox cases was opened on Little Fell Lane. The buildings are now private houses.

Similar developments were taking place in Morecambe at about the same time. By 1889 a small, infectious-diseases hospital for Morecambe had been opened on open fields set back from, and north of Lancaster Road, roughly where Lathom Avenue is. Nothing remains of the buildings, which burned down in 1900, and the area has been suburban housing for many decades.

The 1911 OS map shows its much larger replacement just west of Torrisholme Barrow.



Morecambe Sanatorium (Source: Ordnance Survey 6-inch map surveyed in 1931, gratefully acknowledged)

In the Lune Valley Lunesdale Rural District Council developed its own isolation hospital south of Farleton, high above the River Lune. It opened in 1891, closed in 1934 and was demolished in 1938.

The role of all these sanatoria and isolation and infectious-diseases hospitals was taken over in 1934 by the new Beaumont Hospital on Slyne Road.

It was built in an Art Deco style and, after infectious diseases became rarer and more treatable, it took on other medical specialities. It closed in 1990 and was demolished to make way for Beaumont Park housing estate.



Beaumont Hospital (Source: National Archives, gratefully acknowledged)

The hospitals

As the nineteenth century progressed, it became increasingly clear that the Dispensary on Thurnham Street was becoming unfit for purpose. It was a house, albeit a large one, that had been converted to medical uses. The rooms were too small and their layout unhelpful. Developments in medicine during the century required not only more space but also different sorts of specialist space, especially for the expanding field of surgery. The Thurnham Street site was becoming landlocked preventing its expansion. A new hospital on a new site was needed.

Discussions about a new hospital began in the 1880s and initial plans were drawn up in 1889. The foundation stone was laid in 1893 and the Royal Lancaster Infirmary opened in 1896. It was designed by the Lancaster firm of architects Paley, Austin and Paley. Today this is Medical Unit 1 on the northern side of the current hospital site.



Royal Lancaster Infirmary soon after its opening (Source: https://historic-hospitals.com)

Subsequently the hospital was extended in 1929 and 1934 and more recently by Medical Unit 2 on the west side, the Women's Unit and the Centenary Building, the latter designed by Tom Mellor and Partners and opened in 1996. As you enter Medical Unit 1, passing the Good Samaritan carving above the doorway, you see in the lobby the wooden boards commemorating the donors who paid for the new hospital and its running costs. One of the most generous was James Williamson who laid the foundation stone.

In Morecambe the foundation stone for the Queen Victoria Cottage Hospital was laid in 1900 and it opened in 1902. Again there were periodic extensions (1912, 1923, 1932 and a Nurses Home in 1934). The original building was demolished in 2002 and replaced by the current one. The building that was the Nurses Home remains as private accommodation.

By 1938 several community clinics had been set up in the Lancaster area – three for child welfare and two for maternity.

There were also medical facilities at the Royal Albert Hospital and Lancaster Moor Hospital – see Guides 73 and 74 in this series.

The Lancaster Private Hospital on Meadowside was established in the late 1970s, converting the research unit of Storeys to medical uses.

Acknowledgement
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