Lancaster Civic Vision

Celebrating our Heritage – Enhancing our Environment – Shaping our Future

THREE TOWN HALLS

Lancaster Civic Vision Guide 47

Three current town halls may seem excessive. Two are still used for local public administration; the third is now the city museum.

The old town hall



The old Lancaster town hall, now the City Museum

The first town hall in Lancaster, of which we know significant details, is in Market Square. It has been used as the City Museum since 1923. It is Grade II* listed and was built in 1781–3 when Lancaster was the county town, the location of the county assizes and home to several wealthy traders.

The Corporation, a small organisation by modern standards of government, needed a new base befitting its and the town's status. The main architect was Major Thomas Jarrat, a little-known Irish military engineer.

The cupola of 1782 was by Thomas Harrison who also designed Skerton Bridge – see Guide 22. There were extensions in 1871–4 (by the local architectural practice of Paley and Austin) and in 1886, mostly on the north side (facing New Street) as the town acquired new responsibilities for health, policing and courts. These extensions later housed banks and are now used by the public library and museum.

The ground floor was originally open and used as a corn and butter market. The portico is impressive, with four massive Tuscan columns. The windows are classic round-headed Georgian in style. The building stone is a hard sandstone ashlar, a Millstone (Pendle) Grit of the Upper Carboniferous era.

The exterior is grand and imposing rather than complex or elegant. The interior (two floors, attic and basement) has been remodelled several times; the open ground floor enclosed, a new internal staircase added and the room layouts changed. There are two Gillow chimneypieces on the first floor.

The current Town Hall

The current Lancaster Town Hall on Dalton Square (also Grade II* listed) took over from the original one in Market Square when it opened in 1909. Whereas the old town hall was quite modest in its Georgian style and size, the new one was Edwardian grandeur on a scale the town could not afford but its wealthiest citizen and largest philanthropist, Lord Ashton, could.

He paid £155,000 (£18.6 million in today's money) for the Town Hall, the remodelling of Dalton Square and the Queen Victoria Monument (See Guide 17). His other major donation, the Ashton Memorial in Williamson Park also opened in 1909 (See Guides 35 and 55).

The style is Edwardian baroque – sometimes called Wrenaissance – with six huge Ionic columns supporting the portico with a carving in the pediment above of King Edward VII in full regal splendour surrounded by female representations of Truth, Justice, Freedom and Loyalty. The stone work is in Longridge sandstone, the columns in Darley Dale sandstone.

The architects were Edward Mountford (who had designed Sheffield Town Hall and the Central Criminal Court (the Old Bailey) in London) and F. Dare Clapham. The scale of the building not only bolstered the town's municipal status against other Lancastrian boroughs but also reflected the expanding remit of local government in the Edwardian era.




The present Lancaster Town Hall

The building provided a council chamber, offices for the departments of the Town Clerk, Surveyor, Education, Accountant, Medical Officer, Cemeteries and Tramways. There was the police station and magistrates court with cells, and next door was the fire station.

The Ashton Hall is now a major venue for events, originally designed to seat 1700. The interior design and fittings and furnishings are impressive, with red and green marble and multi-coloured stucco work by the Bromsgrove Guild who designed Winged Victory for the town's War Memorial in the adjoining Garden of Remembrance designed by Thomas Mawson. See Guide 46 on Mawson.

The Lancaster firm of Waring and Gillow was responsible for not only the overall build but also all the wood panelling, word carving, organ case and furniture – see Guide 5 on Gillow). The stained glass is by the Lancaster firm of Shrigley and Hunt – see Guide 6. The original electrolier light fittings by Verity & Co are very distinctive. The Ashton Hall's organ by Norman & Beard of Norwich is particularly fine.

Morecambe Town Hall

In the 1930s Morecambe was a separate borough. It had originally leased premises for its staff and meetings in Morecambe Road West and later Victoria Street. In 1931–2 the Borough developed a new Town Hall on Marine Road. They used the Borough Engineer and Surveyor (P.W. Ladmore) to design it with Alfred and Kenneth Cross and C. Sutton responsible for the façade.

This being the Great Depression, the project was funded by the Unemployment Grants Committee. The symmetrical building – two storeys and 13 bays wide – uses a red-brown brick mostly, with elements of Darley Dale sandstone in the corners, the window surrounds and the portico. It is Grade II listed. There is little external ornamentation.

The construction – a steel frame, concrete flooring and metal-framed windows – is typically interwar. The interior fittings and furnishings are excellent and mostly original examples of interwar design with, for example, a terrazzo floor in the entrance hall containing the Morecambe shield and motto in mosaic.

A sunken formal garden separates the building from Marine Road. The building is used today as offices for Lancaster City Council and Morecambe Town Council.



Morecambe Town Hall

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