

History and Heritage

The Castle is an ancient scheduled monument and Grade I listed building. It forms part of an ancient inheritance known as the Duchy of Lancaster which began in 1265. John O'Gaunt became Duke of Lancaster in 1359 as a result of his marriage to Blanche of Lancaster in 1359. When John's son Henry Bolingbroke came to the throne in 1399 he passed a law which aligned the ancient inheritance to the reigning Sovereign.

Prison and Incarceration

The Castle is steeped in history and tales of incarceration. It has been a prisoner-of-war camp and a police training academy. The Lancashire Witches were imprisoned and tried here in 1612. By the mid-19th century, it was one of the largest debtors' prison outside London. The world's first female-only penitentiary was built here in 1821 and innovative designs such as the Bentham Panopticon and Pentonville styles were also introduced around that time.



Justice and Judiciary

Until 2011 Lancaster Castle was operated as a Category C prison by the Ministry of Justice. It boasts of the country's oldest continuously working Crown Courts, complete with 18th century branding iron in the dock. The magnificent 10-sided Shire Hall designed by Joseph Gandy today houses one of the finest displays of chivalric heraldry in the UK.

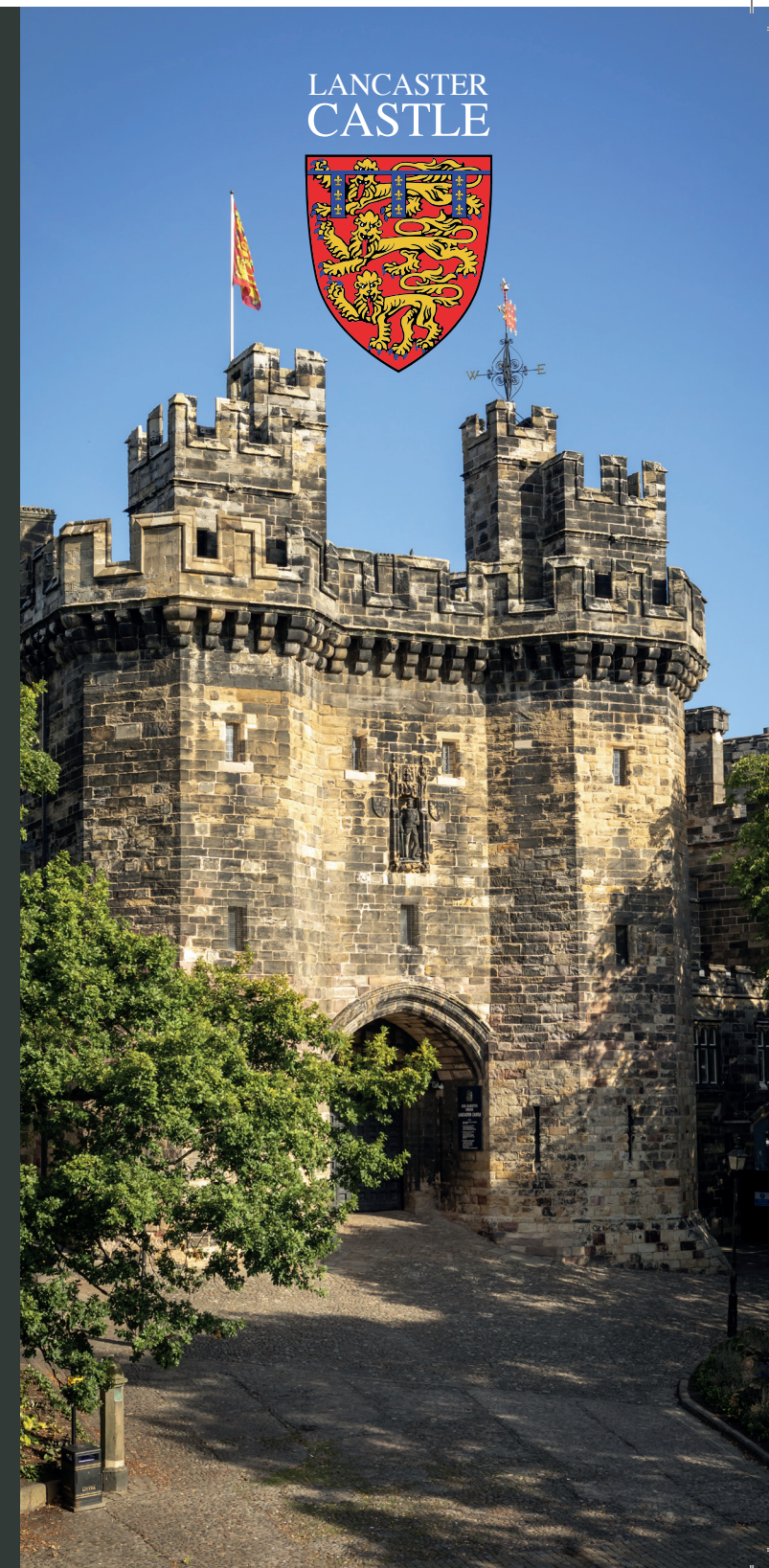
Restoration and Renewal

Since the Castle reverted to the Duchy the focus has been on the conservation and protection of the fabric of these historic buildings. In 2015 the current Duke of Lancaster Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II visited Lancaster Castle and in 2019 the Duchy unveiled a stunning refurbishment of the Castle's lower courtyards, revealing buildings which had remained unseen for more than a generation.



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14 Medieval Keep

Also known as the Lungess Tower

This is part of the original stronghold built in the 11th or 12th century. An additional 'top storey' is clearly visible. This was added by Queen Elizabeth I in 1585 to protect Lancaster against a potential invasion by the Spanish Armada.

15 Crown Court

Continuously sitting Crown Court

One of the oldest continuously sitting Crown Courts in the country, this oak-panelled room still features the original branding iron used on 'malefactors' appearing in the dock. The courtroom and trapdoor leading to the holding cells are still in use today.

16 Shire Hall

Joseph Gandy's masterpiece

This magnificent ten-sided room was completed in 1802. Its Gothic pillars support an impressive timber ceiling and stunning plaster vault over the surrounding aisle. The Shire Hall features one of the UK's finest displays of chivalric heraldry.

17 The 'Old Cells'

Holding and Solitary Cells

Despite their appearance these cells actually date back to 1784. Their 'ancient' appearance is probably due to their surroundings.

18 Hadrian's Tower

A history of transportation

Built in 1210, this circular tower would originally have had a flat roof. The dome and upper galleried landing were added in 1796-98. Today Hadrian's Tower houses many historic artefacts, particularly those relating to the history of transportation from the Castle.

19 Debtors' Prison

Hansbrow's Hotel

By the mid-19th century the Castle housed the largest debtors' prison outside London. Conditions here were so good it was nicknamed 'Hansbrow's Hotel' after the governor of the time. Debtors Prisons were abolished in 1869 following the passing of the Bankruptcy Act.

20 Female Penitentiary

Bentham's panopticon principle

The female penitentiary is a five-floor tower housing 46 cells. Its panopticon design ensured constant surveillance with minimum staffing. It was built in 1821 after the Prison Reform Acts of the late 18th-century dictated the separation of female and male prisoners.

13 Chapel Courtyard

A place of prayer

Enclosed by the walls of the Keep, the Male Penitentiary and the old Debtors Workshops, the courtyard is named for the original Castle Chapel. All executions carried out at Lancaster Prison between 1865 and 1887 took place here.

12 Cloister Walk

Public seating area

This colonnade of archways was uncovered by the removal of the former prison visitors building in 2018. It has now been restored to provide a covered walkway and seating area for visitors linking the clock tower to the Male Penitentiary or A-Wing.

11 Turnkey's Lodge

Oversight of prisoners

Turnkeys or prison guards supervised prisoners' exercise in the open air. They needed a vantage point which allowed a clear line of sight across the 'segmented' exercise yard. Today this building is used as gallery space for local artists and artisans.

10 Male Penitentiary

Also known as 'A-Wing'

A-wing is the male penitentiary added in the mid-1800s. Built in the classic Pentonville style, it is two separate buildings linked by mezzanine walkways. With 44 double occupancy cells and four 6-person dormitories it can accommodate 112 prisoners.

9 Topping Yard

The Castle's dark history

The 'topping shed' stood in this courtyard. It housed the gallows, although these were only used once on this spot - for the execution of 31-year-old Thomas Rawcliffe for murder in 1910. Hanging was then abolished, but the topping shed remained here until 1965.

8 Kitchen Courtyard

Restored and revealed in 2019

Part of the restoration project involved the lowering of the curtain wall to its original height and the opening up of the Kitchen Yard to visitors. It is now a popular meeting point for visitors and part of the Atkinson's coffee kitchen.

7 Castle Café

Atkinson's Coffee Roasters

In 2017 the Duchy of Lancaster began work on the restoration of the Kitchen Yard. This building was previously part of the Prison kitchen complex. Today it houses a café run by Lancaster's renowned coffee roasters and baristas, Atkinsons.

6 Male Felons Tower

Segregating Prisoners

Built in 1798 for convicted male felons, this men's prison was originally separated from the female prison tower by a high wall. Inside there were four floors housing a series of individual and dormitory cells.

5 Lancaster Suite

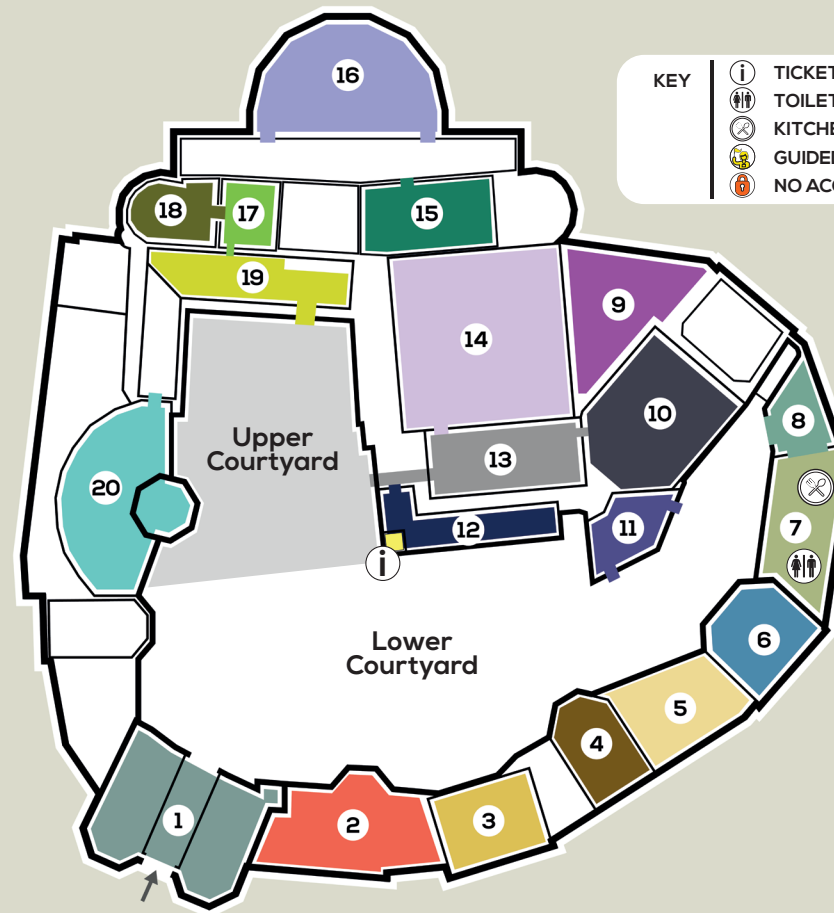
Lancaster University @ Lancaster Castle

Originally known as the 'link block' this building was added to the Castle in 1798. It was converted in 2019 to provide a dedicated teaching and presentation suite at the heart of the Castle. It is currently let to Lancaster University.

4 King's Evidence Tower

A place of safety

This is one of the 'new' towers added to the Castle c.1810. It was used as a place of safety for those who had 'turned King's Evidence' i.e. had agreed to give evidence for the prosecution in return for their own freedom.



1 John O'Gaunt Gate

One of England's finest gatehouses

Built c.1405, the semi-octagonal towers of the John O'Gaunt Gatehouse rise 20m above massive sloping plinths. With its portcullis and battlements built out over corbels, it is perhaps the finest gatehouse of its date and type in England.

2 Governor's House

A family home within the Castle

Designed in 1788 by the architect Thomas Harrison to house the prison governor and his family. In the 1920s and '30s when the Castle served as a Police Training Academy, it was home to the Chief Police Superintendent and his family.

3 The Well Tower

Also known as 'The Witches' Tower'

This part of the Castle was built around 1325. The Tower contains two wells and three stone-flagged underground dungeons believed to have housed the Lancashire Witches prior to their trial here in 1612.