

Williamson Park and the Ashton Memorial, the Queen Victoria Monument and the Town Hall are the subjects of separate leaflets in this series.

Some of Lord Ashton's gifts bore his name – like the Ashton Wing of the former Royal Albert Hospital, Ashton House at Lancaster Royal Grammar School, Ashton Hall within the new Town Hall complex or Ashton Gardens at St Anne's. However, many of his gifts are less public.

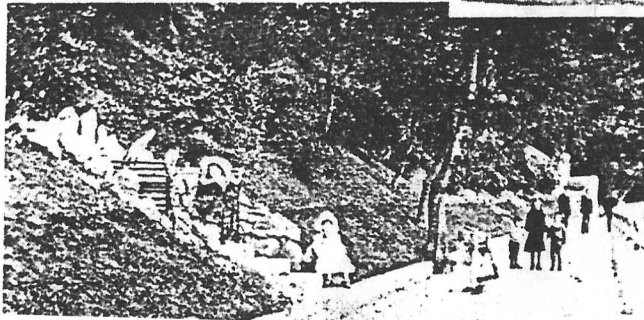
Town Hall and Victoria Monument Dalton Square



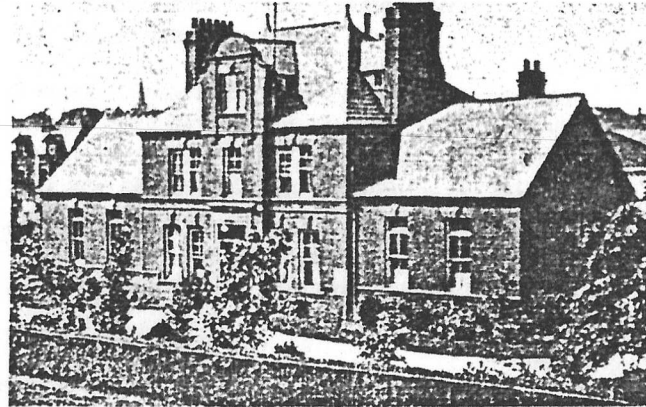
Opening the Town Hall, 27 Dec 1909

Williamson gave almost £10,000 towards the building of Lancaster Infirmary in the 1890s and a much smaller sum to Morecambe's Queen Victoria Hospital Building Fund in 1901. Three years later he donated £1,000 for Lune Bank Gardens (or Skerton Park) to be laid out for local residents.

Below: Skerton Park



Not all his philanthropic works were building projects. In 1887 he bought out Corporation Tolls payable by traders on goods bought for sale in Lancaster to aid family budgets and in the same year he paid for 5,000 scholars to travel to the Manchester Jubilee Exhibition for their education and enjoyment. He supported local churches, providing a peal of bells and a four-dial clock for St Mary's Parish Church, sports organisations – like the Cross Bay Swim and Lancaster Rugby Union Football Club – and charitable giving too, like the Jubilee Town Mission in Skerton.



Queen Victoria Hospital (above) & Royal Lancaster Infirmary (below)



In his obituary he is even credited for supplying water from his wells to Morecambe and Heysham in a time of acute drought in 1929!

Lord Ashton's benevolence in Lancaster was not a lifelong trait. After a public dispute with the Independent Labour Party Williamson turned his attention away from his native town and bestowed further favours on St

Anne's. Williamson died at Ryelands, his Lancaster home, on 27th May 1930 aged 88 years. Despite his surviving family – his widow, daughter and grandson – he left no will. It took until March 1934 for his estate to be valued at over £10,500,000. The state took half this sum in death duties.

Cover: Portrait taken during a speech in Parliament and later published titled "Philantropy"

Text by Sue Ashworth.

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Lord Ashton

'The Lino King'



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James Williamson : Lord Ashton

'It is at any rate no great exaggeration to give to Lancaster the appellation of "Lord Ashton's Town". From the moment I entered it to the moment I left the city I heard of very little besides what Lord Ashton had done and was doing for it.'

Co-operative News 13th February 1909

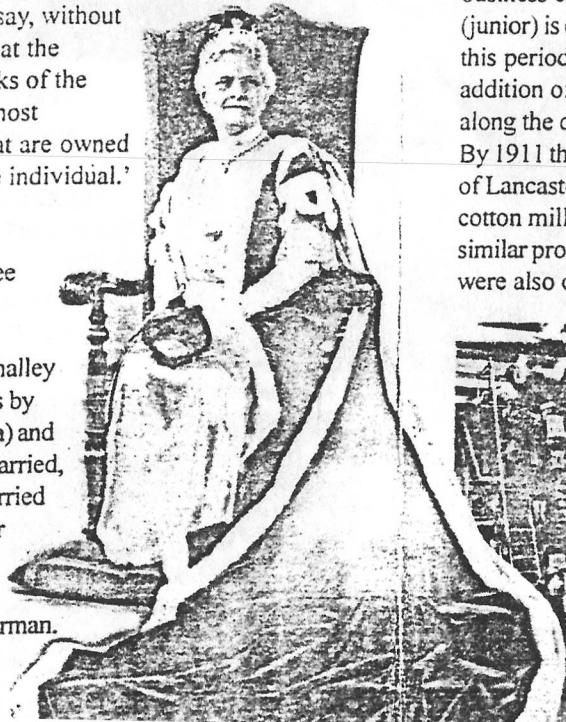
Who was he ?

James Williamson was born on 31st December 1842. He was the third of four surviving children of James and Eleanor Williamson, who had established a coated fabrics business in the town in the 1840s. James (junior) was educated at Lancaster Royal Grammar School and worked all his life in the family business. He had the strength of vision and business acumen to transform his father's works into a huge enterprise specializing in linoleum production alongside its leathercloth and other coated fabrics. Indeed in a publicity article, in 1894, it was said that 'the present undertaking constitutes the largest manufactory of its class in the world; and further, we may say, without any fear of contradiction, that the mammoth works on the banks of the Lune, at Lancaster, are the most extensive in the universe that are owned and controlled solely by one individual.'

What of his family ?

James Williamson married three times; Margaret Gatey (1869), Jessy Hulme (1880) and his surviving widow Florence Whalley (1909). He had two daughters by his first marriage; Eleanor (Ella) and Maud. Maud was to die, unmarried, at the age of 30 years. Ella married Viscount Peel in 1899 and their son, the second Earl Peel, was directly involved with the family business as its Chairman.

Florence, Lady Ashton, in



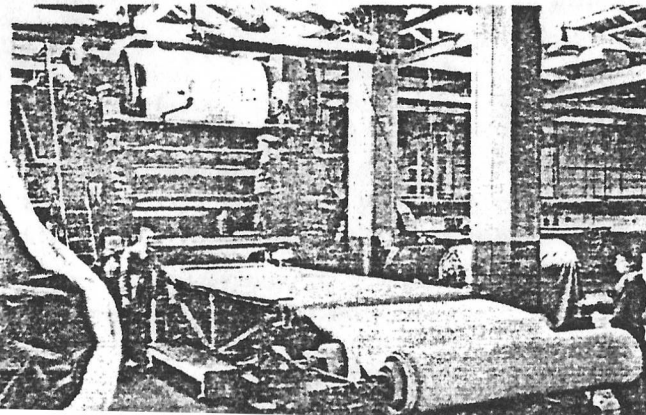
Public Offices and Honours

Williamson seems to have been intensely private, shunning informal and formal portraiture. Even in his grand gift of the Town Hall no portraits of the patron were allowed other than his coat of arms. The painting by Howard Somerville, at the top of the main staircase, was presented to the Corporation by Lady Ashton in 1932 and was created after Lord Ashton's death from an existing watercolour now in the City Museum collections.

However, despite apparent shyness, Williamson held many positions of authority alongside that of major employer in the town; Town Councillor for Lancaster (1871-80), Justice of the Peace (1881+), High Sheriff of Lancaster (1885), Liberal MP for Lancaster (1886-95), Peerage – Baron Ashton of Ashton (1895), Constable of Lancaster Castle (1921), Freeman of Lytham (1923).

Fortune and Philanthropy

In the 1870s, Williamson's coated fabrics business expanded rapidly. James (junior) is credited with masterminding this period of success, including the addition of the vast new Lune Mills along the quay from St George's Works. By 1911 the firm employed around 25% of Lancaster's working men. With busy cotton mills in the town, perhaps a similar proportion of working women were also on his books.



A rare glimpse of Williamson in Market Square, c1895



Local workmen on Penny Street Bridge, c1905

Some assert that Williamson's business success was built on the exploitation of his workforce. He claimed his skilled staff were paid Union rates whilst his unskilled labourers received £1-0-3d (£1.1p) a week with a bonus

for good time-keeping. Alert to public criticism, even then, Lord Ashton let it be known through the press that this was markedly more than his main rivals Storey Bros., who were reputed to pay 18/6d (92p) a week. Whatever conclusions are reached on the labour front it is clear that, with the Williamson family, Lancaster had major contributors to local institutions and organisations.

Lord Ashton was following a path well-recognised amongst industrialists and society figures. His father had already supported local churches and schools and it was his scheme to start laying out Williamson Park.