Lancaster Chapter of On the Way of the Roses

It's a beautiful late November day, with a cloudless, pale blue sky, when I arrive in Lancaster by cycling along the trackbed of the original mid-1800s Morecambe-Lancaster-Skipton railway line.

The railway path runs by the river between Caton and central Lancaster. To mark the Millennium, a number of sculptures were placed along it, and this stretch of the riverside was given the name River Lune Millennium Park[19].

Some of the artworks haven't fared well since 2000.

A rotating oval sign at Green Ayre was removed because it dazzled passing motorists when the sun reflected off it. Three translucent glass blocks called River Rocks were, predictably, washed away by the river; a public art project became an exercise in littering.

Giles Kent's work Upside-Down Trees was literally some trees placed upside down, with their roots in the air and the treetops buried in the ground. What could possibly go wrong? Yes, they started rotting – of course they did - and had to be felled for safety reasons.

Of the surviving sculptures, When Traffic Cones Take Root by Renn & Thacker is the most appealing. It's under the M6 bridge, and features upside-down metal cones on stalks, painted black. They look like giant versions of the torches used for torchlit descents on skis.

The lesson I draw from all this is that when I'm asked to produce a work of art to commemorate a special occasion, I should avoid the temptation to do something whacky and instead create a pleasing piece that will last.

My *oeuvre* may well be upside-down, though; I'm not prepared to rule that out.

The best thing Lancaster did for the Millennium was to commission the Millennium Bridge, which provides a vital river crossing for people on foot and on bikes.

Its two pylons are intended to resemble the masts of ships; they allude to the historic Port of Lancaster.

Britain was jolly busy building pedestrian bridges around the year 2000. There are Millennium Bridges in London, Gateshead, Lancaster, Glasgow, Salford, Stockton-on-Tees and York[20].

It was definitely worth having a Millennium if for no other reason than to accumulate useful bridges. My only reservation about the whole affair is the spelling of Millennium; it seems to me that it has a superfluous 'n'. When I'm put in charge of English spelling (which will have to be after I've finished creating my non-whacky piece of public art), I'll have the offending 'n' removed straight away. If I'm asked to justify my decision, I'll commission consultants to write a report showing an economic benefit in the millions due to time and space saved.

To balance things up, though, I'll add the spare 'n' to inoculate. Also, if you don't mind, I would like to give impresario an extra 's'.

Lancaster is a big name but a compact city. 'Small city big story' is how the council puts it.

The origin of the city can be traced to 71AD, when the Romans built a fort here.

The name Lancaster is an evolution from *Loncastre*, as the settlement was called in the Domesday Book of 1086. *Lon* was the river Lune, and *castre* was the castle.

The castle is associated with the Dukes of Lancaster, particularly John O'Gaunt (1340-1399). It has been used as a prison and court, and the Pendle witches were tried there in the 1600s.

Lancaster became a bustling port in the 1700s. During the Industrial Revolution, local

industries included the manufacture of linoleum.

Today the population of the city itself is 52,660[21], although there are around 145,000 people within the wider district governed by Lancaster City Council[22]. That makes Lancaster smaller than Harrogate.

Because Lancaster is compact, it's easy to explore on foot. I have a pdf of the council's Lancaster City Trail on my phone, and I'm keen to follow the route. It starts at Lancaster Castle.

The account that follows describes my walk, but the sights and stories are in historical order, more or less, rather than in the order in which I see them.

Lancaster Castle is on a hill that overlooks the city (to the east) and the river Lune (to the north). This is where Lancaster began when the Roman governor of Britain Quintus Petillius Cerialis (Mr Cornflakes) decided to build a turf and timber fort here in the early 70s AD. It was rebuilt in stone in 102AD.

The fort protected a crossing of the river below; alongside it a civilian town, or *vicus*, developed.

The Roman fort may have been called Galacum, but other suggested names include Calunium, Lunium or Longovicus. I'm not a Professor of Roman Times, and I simply don't know. All I can go on is what I've read, which is inconclusive.

Later on my City Trail walk, I come across a piece of evidence which suggests that the fort's name began with 'L'. The item is in the City Museum, in Market Square.

In fact, it stands at the bottom of the stairs leading to the museum proper. It's a rough-hewn stone milepost, and it is taller than the (life-size) cardboard Roman soldier next to it.

There's something magical about it. Perhaps it's the imperfect way in which the stone has been cut that makes it enchanting – far more characterful than if it were smooth and uniform. Equally, it might have a special appeal because it is a tangible link to people who lived here an impossibly long time ago.

Either way, I set my heart on owning it as a home or garden decoration. I'm very close to picking it up and making off with it, but then at the last moment it dawns on me that there may be a reason why it is at the bottom of the stairs and not in the museum above. I make a mental note to add an extra session of weight-training to my weekly schedule, and decide to come back for it at a later date.

The clue to the name of the Roman fort is in part of the inscription on the milepost: 'L MP IIII'. This indicates that from where it was found – in Artle Beck at Caton - it was four miles to somewhere beginning with 'L'. Lunium?

In the early years (71-125AD), the fort's garrison was a 480-strong auxiliary cavalry unit called Ala Augusta Gallorum Proculeiana[23].

Ala (wing) signifies auxiliary, Augusta Gallorum means that the regiment was formed in Gaul by the Emperor Augustus, and Proculeiana was the first commander.

In the City Museum, I find out more about one member of this regiment: Insus, son of Vodullus. His tombstone or memorial, which dates from around 80AD, is on display.

It's a stone carving or relief of Insus on horseback, holding the horse's reins in his left hand. In his right hand he has a sword, and dangling down from the hand is the severed head of a native warrior. The warrior's body is on the ground.

The inscription underneath identifies Insus as a citizen of Treveri (western Germany), and a cavalryman of the Ala Augusta.

The museum's information panel points out that when the tombstone was found in 2005 by Manchester University's Archaeology Unit, Insus's own (stone) head had become separated from his (stone) body.

I think the implication is that this fact could be considered by Alanis Morissette for

inclusion in a song, Ironic Part II, if she ever decides to write it.

Whether or not the memorial to Insus features in a future ditty by the Queen of Alt-Rock Angst (thank you Wikipedia), it remains a remarkable object – simultaneously horrifying and beautiful.

The Roman fort at Lancaster may have been abandoned for a period around 150AD, and again in the early 200s.

When it was reoccupied, it was by the Ala Gallorum Sebosiana, a regiment formed in the Loire valley from the Sebusiani people.

There may have been another unit at the fort around the same time, the Numerus Barcariorum Tigrisiensium, who were lightermen (marines who sailed barges).

The final iteration of the fort came after it was remodelled in the 300s (either 330AD or 343AD, depending on which source you believe).

The renovated fort is said to have been a Saxon Shore-type construction.

Most of the Saxon Shore fortifications were built on the south and east coasts of England in the 200s or 300s, and on the other side of the Channel in France and Belgium.

Their purpose was to defend Roman territories against seaborne attacks by Saxons and Franks. The Lancaster fort's defences, on the other hand, were to protect it against raiders from Ireland.

These forts had massive stone walls, with projecting bastions.

From present-day Lancaster Castle I walk a short way down the hill, then take a muddy path to the right; in front of me now is a surviving fragment of Lancaster's Saxon Shore-type fort.

It really is just a fragment – about four metres of wall that was part of an external bastion. It's called the Wery Wall – a *wery* good name that probably stems from an Anglo-Saxon word meaning 'to defend'.

The Wery Wall stands next to the remains of a Roman bath house, which was in a *mansio* – a Roman hotel or lodging-house in the *vicus*.

The Wery Wall seems to have been built right over and through the *mansio* and its bath house.

All these fortifications were not enough for the Romans to maintain their grip on Britain, and by 410AD the Roman period was over.

Little is known about Lancaster (not just by me, but also by actual experts) in the years immediately after the Romans left.

From the 500s, there may have been a Saxon monastery by the castle, on the site of the present-day Lancaster Priory.

In 1066, the Normans invaded England – as you may already have heard. William the Conqueror became King of England, and gave lands and titles to his followers. Sometime after the Conquest, Lancaster ended up as a possession of Roger de Poitou.

Lancaster Benedictine Priory was founded in 1094. Around the same time, a wooden castle was built on the site of the Roman fort, probably on Roger de P's orders.

For a period in the 1100s (1141-53), the castle was granted to the Scottish King David I, and it may have been at this time that the castle keep was built. Another part of the castle, Hadrian's Tower (so-called because it is wrongly attributed to the Roman Emperor Hadrian), was built under King John around 1210.

The Scots raided and damaged the castle in 1322 and 1389.

Having realised that, in the context of Scottish people armed with Swan Vestas and not afraid to use them, the castle was quite flammable, someone ordered the building of a big stone gatehouse to keep them out. It was probably King Henry IV around 1405, but the work is attributed to his father, Duke of Lancaster John O'Gaunt.

When I enter the castle today it is through John O'Gaunt gate. In the archway is a

white cast of John's head, appearing to float eerily in a niche.

His face is framed on the bottom and two sides by chainmail, and on top by a crown. His furrowed brow makes him look a bit worried ('am I going to get the credit for building this gatehouse?' he could be thinking), but he has a thrusting moustache.

The Gaunt in question is actually Ghent, where John was born. He was a son of King Edward III, and he spent a number of years in France fighting in the One Hundred Years War.

John's older brother Edward, the Black Prince, died before their father Edward III, so it was the Black Prince's son Richard (II) who became king at 10 years old. John of Gaunt was appointed Steward of England, and conducted the affairs of state for his nephew.

John was quite unpopular, and during the Peasants' Revolt of 1381 his Savoy Palace on the Strand in London was looted and burned by a mob.

Later, when Richard II was over eighteen, John went off to Spain to pursue a claim through his second wife to the Kingdom of Castile.

At that time John left his son Henry Bolingbroke in charge of his English possessions, which included the Duchy of Lancaster. John had obtained those lands through his first marriage to Blanche of Lancaster - so all in all he had done quite well out of his wives.

In Shakespeare's play King Richard II, the king banishes Bolingbroke from the kingdom 'till twice five summers have enrich'd our fields' (for 10 years from 1398). Soon after, in 1399, John O'Gaunt is on his deathbed. John is concerned about the rash and intemperate way youthful Richard is ruling England.

John hopes that, because he is near death, the king will listen to his counsel:

O, but they say the tongues of dying men
Enforce attention like deep harmony:
Where words are scarce, they are seldom spent in vain;
For they breathe truth that breathe their words in pain.

Then comes a famous speech in which Gaunt says (and I précis here) that England is a jolly nice place but it is being mismanaged. These are some of John's lines:

This royal throne of kings, this scepter'd isle
This earth of majesty, this seat of Mars
This other Eden, demi-paradise;
This fortress built by Nature for herself
Against infection and the hand of war;
This happy breed of men, this little world;
This precious stone set in the silver sea,
Which serves it in the office of a wall,
Or as a moat defensive to a house,
Against the envy of less happier lands;
This blessed plot, this earth, this realm, this England,
This nurse, this teeming womb of royal kings,
Fear'd by their breed, and famous by their birth,
Renowned for their deeds as far from home, -
For Christian service and true chivalry, -
As is the sepulchre in stubborn Jewry
Of the world's ransom, blessed Mary's Son; -
This land of such dear souls, this dear dear land,

Dear for her reputation through the world,
Is now leas'd out, - I die pronouncing it, -
Like to a tenement or pelting farm:
England, bound in with the triumphant sea,
Whose rocky shore beats back the envious siege
Of watery Neptune, is now bound in with shame,
With inky blots, and rotten parchment bonds:
That England, that was wont to conquer others,
Hath made a shameful conquest of itself.
Ah, would the scandal vanish with my life,
How happy then were my ensuing death!

When John died Richard II confiscated his estates, including Lancaster, then went off on an expedition to Ireland.

In the Shakespeare play, the reason Richard takes Gaunt's wealth is to help pay for the Irish expedition:

And for these great affairs [we] do ask some charge:
Towards our assistance we do seize to us
The plate, coin, revenues, and movables,
Whereof our uncle Gaunt did stand possess'd

Henry Bolingbroke, already disgruntled because Richard II had exiled him, was now even less gruntled because he hadn't inherited his father's estate.

With Richard in Ireland, Henry sailed from Brittany to Ravenspurn – a port on Spurn Head, on the north east coast of England, which has since been lost to coastal erosion.

Henry took advantage of the king's absence and marched through England and Wales, building support. By the time Richard sailed from Ireland back to Wales, his supporters had melted away.

Richard had to submit to Henry at Flint Castle in Wales, then he was taken to London as a captive and an abdication was extorted from him. Shakespeare has him say:

With mine own tears I wash away my balm,
With mine own hands I give away my crown,
With mine own tongue deny my sacred state,
With mine own breath release all duty's rites;

Richard was imprisoned in Pontefract Castle while Bolingbroke became King Henry IV.

When the deposed king is in prison, Shakespeare has him lament:

I wasted time, and now doth time waste me;

In the play, Richard is killed in his cell on Henry's indirect and deniable orders.

In fact, Richard may have starved to death. A very new theory holds that all he was offered to eat in prison was Pomfret cakes, and because he rightly despised liquorice, he declined them.

John O'Gaunt owned Lancaster Castle as Duke of Lancaster, and the castle still belongs to the Duchy of Lancaster. The current Duke of Lancaster is King Charles III.

Part of the castle is used as a Crown Court, and it is one of the oldest continuously-sitting courts in England. It still has a branding iron (as an artefact of historical interest,

not for use), and a trapdoor leading to holding cells (which is still used).

The castle first served as a prison in 1196, and it was still HMP Lancaster until 2011.

Some of the best-known past prisoners in the castle are the Pendle Witches. They were held in the Well Tower in 1612, then tried when a judge came to Lancaster for the Summer Assize.

'Assize' is an old-fashioned word for a court sitting, and I guess it dates back to the period after 1066 when Norman French was the language of the court and formal legal proceedings.

Witchcraft might conjure up exciting images of broomsticks, potions and spells, but the story of the Pendle Witches is rather tawdry so I'll rattle through it quickly.

It starts with a young woman called Alison Device, who really thought she was a witch[24]. On the road to Colne, she begged a pin from a man called John Law, but he refused.

Device's 'familiar spirit', which was in the shape of a dog, asked her if she would like to harm Law, and she said yes, the dog should make him lame.

Law immediately fell to the ground, paralysed down one side, presumably by a stroke. He was taken to a local inn.

Device came to him at the inn, admitted her imagined part in what had happened to him, and asked his forgiveness. Law forgave her.

Law's son was not so merciful, and escalated the matter to the local magistrate Roger Nowell. Nowell interviewed a number of local people, and ended up arresting quite a lot of them on suspicion of witchcraft. Those accused included men as well as women.

Among the charges were murder by witchcraft, and bewitching a neighbour's horses to death. In court there were allusions to familiar spirits, and stories of the making of clay images in order to cause death. Much of the evidence was provided by a nine-year-old girl called Jennet Device, who was the daughter of one of the witches and the younger sister of Alison Device.

Of the twelve alleged Pendle Witches, one died in prison, ten were convicted (including Alison), and one was found not guilty.

Under the Witchcraft Act 1604, the sentence for witchcraft was death. The judge, Sir Edward Bromley, condemned the prisoners and had them taken to Lancaster Moor to be hanged.

Most of what we know about these events comes from an account of the proceedings by the court clerk, Thomas Potts – 'The Wonderfull Discoverie of Witches in the Countie of Lancaster'.

At the time of the witch trials, Lancaster Castle was still of use as a military fortress, but not long afterwards, towards the end of the English Civil War, it was 'slighted' (1649). From then on it was militarily redundant, but still used as a prison.

Quaker George Fox was held as a prisoner in Lancaster Castle in 1660. Not wishing to suffer the same fate as George, I decide it is time to escape from the castle.

Having already walked part way down the slope to the Wery Wall and bath house, I now continue downhill to the river Lune and St George's Quay.

Here I find the Maritime Museum, in the old Customs House, closed.

Luckily, my Lancaster City Trail leaflet conjures up a vivid picture of what this quay may have been like in its heyday.

'Transport your mind back to the 1750s. Lancaster's bustling quayside was England's fourth largest port – you would have seen jostling crowds of sailors, merchants, errand boys, traders and ladies of both good and ill repute. Legend has it that there were 50 hostelries along this quay, catering for the crews that brought cargoes of rum, spices, sugar and tobacco from the colonies'.

Unfortunately there is a dark aspect to Lancaster as a port, because it was involved in the slave trade. It was sometimes called the Triangle Trade, as the shipping routes made up a triangle[25]:

- Manufactured goods such as cloth and guns were taken from England to Africa
- The goods were exchanged for captured African people, who were then taken to the Americas to be sold
- Raw materials and goods produced by slaves (cotton, sugar, rum, tobacco and mahogany) were shipped from American colonies or the Caribbean back to England

Some of the mahogany was bought by Robert Gillow, who established a cabinet-making business in Lancaster in 1730. He developed a reputation for quality furniture. A selection of his pieces can be seen in the Judges' Lodgings Museum.

Slave ships were built at Brockbank's Shipyard, and merchants with Lancaster connections were involved in the capture and sale of around 30,000 people. The slave trade peaked in the 1750s and 1760s, but Brockbank's made its last slave ship, The Trafalgar, in 1806.

It is an uncomfortable fact that Lancaster was partly financed and made wealthy by slave-trading.

I walk along the Lune towards Millennium Bridge, then away from the river on Water Street. The former Brockbank's site is on my left; there are no ships for sale here now, but instead I could acquire a Taste the Difference Winter Berry Crumble from the Sainsbury's superstore.

Now I have to cross the A6 Cable Street, one of several very busy main roads in Lancaster. If the motor vehicles don't get you, their exhaust fumes will.

Eventually, I walk past the St Nicholas Arcades shopping centre ('there's more to this place than meets the eye – I loved both Rymans and HMV' says reviewer CliveN on Google), through Ffrances (yes there really are two 'fs' in it, but they will not survive the Great Spelling Reform) Passage, and past Diggles Café and Bakery.

I'm now in a pedestrianised area away from the traffic.

On Market Street, a horseshoe that definitely used to belong to our old friend John O'Gaunt is embedded in the pavement. Lancaster shoppers walk over and past it with total indifference.

After my visit to the City Museum at Market Square, I make my way to Sun Street and Sun Square. In the square I admire the Music Room, a narrow but elegant three-storey stone building dating from around 1730. The City Trail leaflet tells me that it was once a folly or extravagant summer house in the ornamental gardens of a dwelling belonging to prosperous London lawyer Oliver Marton.

Today, the ground floor is occupied by Atkinsons Coffee Roasters, a business founded by Thomas and Jane Atkinson in 1837 as the Grasshopper Tea Warehouse.

Atkinsons call their Sun Square premises 'hands down the best-looking café in the North West on a sunny Lancashire day'. It's hard to disagree: the square is central but away from the crowds, and this must be one of the nicest places in Lancaster for a coffee.

The two upper storeys are self-catering accommodation owned by the Landmark Trust. They say that the building's name, the Music Room, is probably a corruption of the Muses Room[26].

The muses themselves are in the building's fancy plasterwork ('a Baroque interior of the highest order', according to the Trust). They are Zeus's daughters Eloquence, History, Music, Astronomy, Tragedy, Rhetoric, Dancing, Comedy and Amorous Poetry.

When the Landmark Trust acquired the building in 1973 almost all the plaster had fallen off the walls, but luckily it was still in the building. It took 6,000 hours of work to repair it and put it back in place.

I could have a three-night stay in the Music Room in March 2026 for £501. Included in the experience is the opportunity to play a baby grand piano; I don't think chopsticks would cut the mustard in such fine surroundings, so I might refrain.

The piano is in the bedroom, which has a four-poster bed. Upstairs, there's a living/dining/kitchen area and bathroom. There's even a roof terrace.

The reviews are unanimously positive. The only person who could think of any criticism at all was Mrs Wemyss, who points out that 'the enormous microwave takes up far too much room on the small worktop'. Even she gives the Music Room five stars.

Next I make my way to Meeting House Lane, and find the Quaker Meeting House that gives it its name.

I'm still in the 1700s, but slightly out of chronological order because the meeting house is from 1708 – so 22 years older than the Music Room.

It's a whitewashed bungalow of a building, set in a garden that's generously-sized given its location on the edge of the city centre.

A sign tells me that the grounds are part of the Quiet Garden Movement. Benches are placed around it, and anyone can use them for calm contemplation. That's a nice idea.

The Quaker Meeting House and the Music Room were built at the start of the Industrial Revolution. As well as building ships, Lancaster made sailcloth, ropes, candles, cotton and linoleum.

Throughout much of my walk, I've been able to see a domed building on high ground in the distance. It looks a bit like St Paul's Cathedral to me, but the City Trail leaflet instructs me that I should think of it as Lancaster's Taj Mahal. That's because both the Taj Mahal and its Lancastrian cousin, the Ashton Memorial, are tributes by husbands to their wives.

James Williamson, or Lord Ashton, built the Ashton Memorial in honour of his second wife Jessie when she died.

While I respect and appreciate Lord A's building, unless it turns out that he had a cat called Moses and a trailer by the sea, it will never be my favourite tribute to a Jessie. That honour is held by Joshua Kadison.

James Williamson was born (1842) into a rich family that ran a coated fabrics business. They specialised in linoleum, or lino, which is a kitchen and bathroom floor covering. Their lino was exported around the world.

Lino is made with solidified linseed oil, pine resin, ground cork dust, sawdust and calcium carbonate. These materials are (and I apologise if I am using too many technical lino-making terms) gooped up and applied to a hessian or canvas backing.

My objective here is to give you a thorough knowledge of what's in lino, but not to provide a full instruction manual for someone who wants to make a batch. Lino has largely been superseded by vinyl flooring, so if you do produce some there may not be many buyers.

James W was not just a businessman but also a politician, elected for two terms as the Liberal MP for Lancaster.

With his father he created Williamson Park on the site of former stone quarries, to the east of Lancaster city centre on Lancaster Moor.

The Ashton Memorial is in the park, and was finished in 1909. It is made of Portland stone, and has a copper dome. Its style is Edwardian Baroque.

In the park, there's also a Butterfly House with butterflies and, as a bonus, tortoises and meerkats.

Walking around Lancaster in the middle of a weekday there are plenty of older people

out and about, but according to the 2021 census the city's median age is 40.

Students might be bringing the average age down. Lancaster University is to the south of the city, and there's a campus of the University of Cumbria near Williamson Park.

Students who review Lancaster University on whatuni.com are almost all enthusiastic. They say it is small and friendly, and the college system gives it a community feel. One mentions events on campus such as farmers' markets and free ice skating.

That reminds me that it's time for me to get my skates on too.

While I've been traumatised by Lancaster's history, some of which is horrifying or gruesome, I've enjoyed the modern city.

I have just one piece of unfinished business here – my proposal for a public artwork to mark the Millennium 3000.

I will create four mileposts, like the Roman one, and place them along the riverside path so that they count from 4 miles down to 1 mile to Lancaster Castle.

They're not going to be upside down or made out of trees; no, they will be proper heavy stone mileposts that will last. If the council insists on an element of whacky, I'll embed horseshoes in them and tell everyone that they belonged to John of Gaunt's favourite nag. There will be four horseshoes for four mileposts, so it will be plausible. That should do it.

And with that, I gallop off to Clapham.