

SERENDIPITY FROM A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE: A CASE STUDY OF LANCASTER BETWEEN 1780 AND 1920

Abstract

Following the ‘historical turn’ within entrepreneurship and organisational research, we use a historical case study of Lancaster (UK), 1780-1920, to examine and demonstrate the importance of considering serendipity in a historical perspective. We raise the factors from social, spatial and economic contexts, that are overlooked due to the traditional individual, organizational, and short-term focus on theorizing serendipity. This, coupled with three illustrative cases that assumes a universal entrepreneurial experience. In particular, we found four factors, the variety of circumstances that can drive the manifestation of serendipity, including the role of the geographical environment, the technological developments, the regional social structures, and family firm dynamics. This research demonstrates the value of historical perspectives to entrepreneurial research. We also extend the understanding of the historiographical investigations to cities like Lancaster that could have rich insights into entrepreneurship research but were traditionally overlooked.

Introduction

“It is not the strongest of the species that survives, nor the most intelligent that survives. It is the one that is most adaptable to change.”

- Leon C. Megginson (1963)

Recently, there has been a renewed call to further our understanding of serendipity, “surprising discovery that results from unplanned moments in which our decisions and actions lead to valuable outcomes” (p. 1112), in organizations (Busch, 2024). The unexpected discoveries, leading to successful innovations, create a difficult but attractive theorization of chances and luck required. While current definitions of serendipity allude to a conclusion of simple assumptions of luck or good fortune, we are encouraged to seek to recentre the entrepreneur’s agency within discussions of their fortunes (Busch, 2024). Entrepreneurial behaviours, perhaps, speak a lot about serendipitous stories, from the opportunity discoveries to innovation studies. It is without saying that, to gain success, entrepreneurs need to take conscious action and be prepared for changes, making entrepreneurship a spontaneous process (Dew, 2009; Denrell et al., 2003). However, while scholars acknowledge that serendipity is under the influence of contexts (e.g., Andriani et al. 2017; Busch & Barkema, 2022), the conversations so far rely on the individual (e.g., knowledge, Austin et al., 2012), group (e.g., collaborations, Irving et al., 2020), organizational (e.g., resources, Fultz & Hmieleski, 2021), or inter-organizational (e.g., network and platforms, Eagle, 2004) elements (Busch, 2024). Yet, for all the promises of re-contextualisation these terms offer, they find themselves held back by a modern gaze that assumes a universal, western-style, entrepreneurial experience that focuses too greatly on the individual. It is here that the benefits of a historical perspective become apparent.

We argue that the existing literature on entrepreneurial serendipity is held back by one key issue, the lack of contextual discussions. For theories designed to combat assumptions beyond

luck determining an entrepreneur's fortunes, they are guilty of overly alluding to the individual circumstances governing any instance of their manifestation (Lubinski, 2018). History goes beyond implying contextual impact but can underpin the essence of decisions made in organizations (Vaara & Lamberg, 2016). Thus, taking a consideration from a historical analysis perspective and theorizing with history in mind creates an opportunity to understand the phenomenon in its entirety (Argyres et al., 2020; Godfrey et al., 2016; Wadhvani & Lubinski, 2017). The purpose of this research is to revisit the current understanding of serendipity from a historical perspective. Through a historical investigation of businesses in Lancaster (UK) between 1790 and 1920, four key themes emerge from the existing scholarship on Lancaster: overarching technological advancements, the impact of the city's natural surroundings, the role of regional societal structures, and the effect of family networks on entrepreneurship.

Lancaster between 1790 and 1920 was marked by rapid and extensive technological, social, and political change across the world and the British Empire. As an Atlantic trading port, the city experienced a brief 'Golden Age' during the later years of the eighteenth century before seeing its role in the tapestry of slave economies begin to unravel. Lancaster saw renewed growth and prosperity during this industrial revolution (Janes, 1974; Price, 1990). However, the city also saw the decline of several of its prominent entrepreneurs during the period that left it lagging behind its competitors. The historical analysis provides a thorough contextualisation that allowed us to illuminate the contextual impact on the phenomenon, serendipity. This research adopts a historical analysis and takes this methodology further, incorporating a nuanced theoretical overlay, considering the lived entrepreneurial experiences, which is overlooked by broader traditional research. It also allowed us to explore the impact of regional influences on entrepreneurship, which is too often overlooked in business history.

Literature Review

Serendipity

Defined as “the notion of making surprising and valuable discoveries”, serendipity plays a significant role for organisations and entrepreneurs (Denrell et al., 2003; Merton and Barber, 2004; Yaqub, 2018). This was further emphasized by the “surprising discoveries” being

“results from unplanned moments in which our decisions and actions lead to valuable outcomes” (p. 1112), where agency, surprise, and value are considered necessary conditions for understanding serendipity (Busch, 2024). It is, therefore, a particularly attractive phenomenon, due to the promise to explain antecedents and processes that explain unintentional business outcomes in both mature organizations, including topics like product development (e.g., Godoe, 2000) and organizational culture that enables serendipitous activities (e.g., Denrell et al., 2003), as well as younger enterprises, including topics like networking (e.g., Dew, 2009; Busch & Barkema, 2022). Research positions serendipity as a fusion of luck and some form of active engagement, “effort and luck” that must be “joined with alertness and flexibility” for a successful response (Denrell et al., 2003). ‘[U]nexpected’ rather than the ‘lucky’ to previous theories and anticipated outcomes (Merton & Barber, 2004).

Research notes that while experiencing serendipity may be down to luck, harnessing it for one’s own advantage requires a skillset and mindset to turn chance occurrences into meaningful outcomes. Busch (2024) found that prior research refers to knowledge, preparedness for opportunities (alertness), open-mindedness in unexpected outcomes, and various cultural and procedural mechanisms that assist the appearance of serendipity. Processes that combine, for example, active search with contingency and sagacity are found to lead to these favourable outcomes (Dew, 2009). Paradoxically, in other words, research develops a strong focus on understanding elements of deliberations that could lead to unintentional outcomes.

While this focus on individual and organizational level explanations of serendipity advances its construct clarity, research discusses important boundary conditions created by the strength and timing of certain events (Busch, 2024). Not only, personal and organizational events (Busch, 2020), but a stream of research also further shows that, in reality, the boundaries of purposive strategy and serendipity are a lot more blurred due to the intertwining nature of life,

where individual, business, and societal changes tend to happen simultaneously (e.g., the development of three companies in Church and Clark 2010).

Unquestionably, the ability to make these “surprising and valuable discoveries” naturally depends on the unique context an entrepreneur finds themselves in, by virtue of birth, social and political change, or some other external influence. Despite this, the inextricable links between serendipity and context remain a notable omission.

The Historical Perspective

Business historians as pioneers of entrepreneurship in forming a multidisciplinary research approach merging sociology, economics and history, which allowed for an approach that could take into account wider spatial circumstances to contextualise research and theoretical contributions (Jones et. al., 2012). A historical perspective allows “the study of a subject in light of its earliest phases and subsequent evolution” (Lawrence, 1984). Following the ‘historic turn’ (Clark & Rowlinson, 2004), history-informed organisational studies emerged as a hybridisation of history with theory (Godfrey et al., 2016). Here, investigation of history started as a tool to inform the understanding of a theory rather than as the focus itself. Further understandings of the implication of historical context, which weighs heavily on the actors’ actions, were raised as a key area for theory development (Decker et al., 2021; Wadhwani et al., 2020; Wadhwani et al., 2018). One of the most remarked upon claims is that this perspective allows one to contextualise the origins of management practices and track their evolution (Keulen & Kroeze, 2012). This contextual understanding reveals the various factors that can affect entrepreneurial decision making and allows for a retrospective application of modern theories (Wadhwani, 2010).

A historical perspective entails a revisit to the multiple institutions that provide frameworks for understanding and analysing social, political and economic context. Here, the emphasis is placed on the role of the titular ‘institutions’, and how they shape organisational behaviour along with its societal outcomes. There is no universally agreed definition of an ‘institution’. However, the term is generally accepted to include systems with established norms, practices, regulations and behavioural structures which guide others (Zhao & Li, 2019). They can exist at multiple societal levels, be that, local, regional, national or wider (Zhao & Li, 2019). They can exist as formal or informal entities, though in either case the greater their longevity, the more legitimacy ascribed to them. More recently, scholars call for greater exploration of society as it is constituted by multiple institutional orders (Greenwood, Raynard, Kodeih, Micelotta, & Lounsbury, 2011). For example, taking religion as a wider institutional factor (Liu et al., 2019; Pearce et al., 2010), van Werven (2023) examined the development of entrepreneurial orientations of the Church of England and reveals interplay between religious institutions and entrepreneurship. For this dissertation’s case study, this research will provide some interesting parallels.

Additionally, a historical investigation allows investigation into spatial context, which affects entrepreneurs as individuals, informing their decision making and priorities (Scranton, 1996). However, such is often underrepresented in discussions of business history. Instead, it appears that overarching historical shifts and world events supersede more local concerns within existing literature. The concept of spatial context has had many interpretations and saw a renaissance of debate in the 1970’s (Scranton, 1996). David Harvey attacked the “diminishing and marginal returns” to research and dismissed so-called “liberal” interpretations of the theory (Harvey, 1973). Moreover, Neo-Marxist critics attacked existing interpretations for what they perceive as a persistent elision of power relations and the social structures which support them (Jaret, 1983; Scranton, 1996). Charles Jaret analysed the explosion of Neo-Marxist critiques of Spatial theory in the late 1970’s (Jaret, 1983). Chiefly, this analysis revealed how reductive

Neo-Marxist interpretations on external factors affecting urban centres, such as migration, technological advancements and the societal changes that accompanied could be (Jaret, 1983). Combined, historical perspective provides valuable insights into understanding the bigger picture, albeit necessary, of organization and entrepreneurship. We propose that to fully understand serendipity investigation through historical analysis is warranted. We move next to explain our case and methods.

Methodology

The purpose of this research is to analyse entrepreneurial serendipity through the case study of the city of Lancaster between 1790-1920. The research utilises a historical perspective and fits within the subgenre of organisational history. Given the focus of this research, this work forms something of an organisational micro history. Utilising a historical perspective to contextualise and develop modern understandings of entrepreneurship (Wadhwani et al., 2020). By Lawrence's definition, historical perspectives do not aim to produce a work of traditional academic history, but rather to utilise existing sources and literature to inform understandings of the present (Lawrence, 1984). Namely, to develop modern theoretical scholarship surrounding entrepreneurial serendipity. Crafting a balance between theory and data was of particular importance to this research to prevent the research from becoming a narrative of the economic history of Lancaster. Instead, the research had to remain focused on analysing entrepreneurial activities within the city's historical context.

Research Tradition

This research forms an organisational micro historical approach to investigating Lancaster and its composite elements to better inform understandings of serendipity in entrepreneurship. This entails focusing on cultivating a deep understanding of the region and its character rather than focusing on producing extrapolatory findings. Microhistories are largely concerned with overlooked persons and areas, this research will continue this tradition with the addition of analysing overlooked theories (Brewer, 2010). Historical approaches to entrepreneurial research have been of varying success. However, one common theme across them is their lack of consideration for the ‘lived experience’ of entrepreneurs (Wadhwani, 2020). Microhistory emerged in the twentieth century in response to the limitations of traditional methodologies which focused on broad social, economic, and cultural patterns (Iggers, 2005). The early microhistorians believed that these traditional forms had lost sight of the mechanisms and processes through which individuals interacted with, in order to change their contexts. Their response was to shift focus to examining ‘clues’ in a detective-like way in order to contextualise them for new general insights to be drawn out (Decker, 2015; Hargadon & Wadhwani, 2023).

This research uses a combination of primary and secondary data. At their core, qualitative research methods seek to address questions concerned with developing an understanding of the meaning and experience dimensions of human lives and social worlds (Fossey et al. 2002). For this research, a thorough understanding the social and cultural context of the case study is essential before one can attempt to apply a theoretical overlay. The case study and its time period are best investigated through expert interviews. The city of Lancaster during this period is largely an academic blind spot, thus interviewing those with the relevant expertise is the best form of investigation.

This research fits into the tradition of utilising qualitative research within organisational studies for the purpose of contributing to theory (Pratt 2008). The scale of this contribution will be the key marker for its success. Serendipity remains something of an academic niche within entrepreneurial and organisational studies. The limited existing literature employs few contextualised examples of the theories in practice and those it does use appear almost colloquial (Busch, 2024). Here, the use of a historical perspective will assist in providing an example showing the theories in practice and their relationship to spatial and social context.

Research Setting and Context

This research will focus on the city of Lancaster (UK) between 1790 and 1920, is ideal for answering questions relating to serendipity and entrepreneurship, benefiting from this exceptional longitudinal perspective (Eisenhardt, 1989). This case represents a geographical area and business market that experienced rapid infrastructure changes, prosperity, and decline within an isolated period of time. The city saw unprecedented growth during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. This period of varied business activity can help to inform our modern understanding of entrepreneurial theory. For example, the city's early prosperity was largely due to its role in the Atlantic slave trade (Potter, 1992). This role was largely dependent on the city's geographical position as a port town. Conversely, the decline of the Lancaster quay was due to external factors. Other cities such as Liverpool had wider rivers than the Lancaster Lune, therefore allowing a greater passage of trade in and out of them. Later in the period, many of the city's entrepreneurs became involved with mill production, which demanded natural features in the form of rivers. Furthermore, while Lancaster's mill economy saw early success within the period, technological advancements and market forces demanded production changes to the use of coal. Coal is one natural resource that Lancaster severely lacks. These issues were far from unpredictable, so why would most of these Lancastrian entrepreneurs choose to remain? Furthermore, why did they adapt to these challenges in the

ways they did, and can harmful decision-making cycles be identified? Lastly, this research also aims to note and exploit that Lancaster, and cities like it, have been underutilised by business historians despite the opportunities they offer to illuminate entrepreneurial theories.

Research Sample and Data Sources

As is typical with a case study approach, this research utilised a combination of qualitative data sources (Eisenhardt, 1989). In this case, written historical sources and expert interviews will be utilised for the purposes of data collection. The written historical sources include the limited contemporary writings which show first-hand accounts of the city during the period (Clark, 1807). These sources allow the researcher to examine contemporary understandings of Lancaster's social and entrepreneurial context. Additionally, more modern historical works will be utilised to help form a base from which to inform the historical perspective, as defined previously, of this research. Archival sources have been utilised to provide a data point for the purposes of tracking entrepreneurial activity over the period. These sources are again limited, as such compilations such as those by Linda Moorhouse have been of particular use (Moorhouse, n.d.).

Literature on Lancastrian entrepreneurship is extremely limited, few works discuss the city's business landscape with any great depth of analysis. However, there are a small number of valuable exceptions to this historiographical blind spot. Terry Potter's *Reflections on Lancaster* provides a detailed overview of the city's physical, social and commercial development (Potter, 1992). This work tracks the evolution of the city more through the eyes of a local historian rather than a lens of entrepreneurial theory. Despite this, the coverage of the years 1790-1920 identifies the key actors of the period (Potter, 1992). The work benefits from a holistic research approach that discusses firms in conjunction with relevant individuals from the city's history and firmly situates them within their contemporary social contexts. The book suffers from its provenance as a work produced primarily for use in the leisure tourism

industry rather than as a traditional work of history. Sources such as this are frequently overlooked as being too colloquial and lacking academic rigour. However, these sources can benefit from unparalleled levels of local knowledge and researcher access. Ultimately, they should not be ignored but their claims should be triangulated with multiple data sources to ensure their validity.

Regarding interviews, relevant experts were approached to gain insights into current understandings of the case study (Table 1). These experts represented a breadth of different expertise and research focuses. Through the use of an unstructured and conversational interview style, new facets to the case study were able to emerge. These new avenues for investigation were then pursued through existing historical literature and relevant contemporary documents. Through this use of multiple sources, data point triangulation could be performed to ensure the validity of the information. This has been of particular importance due to the scarcity of scholarship and surviving archival documents specific to the case study. These interviews offered the opportunity to access information that may not be covered by methods such as questionnaires (Alshenqeeti, 2014). It was also important as the interviewees' expertise varied so much for a standardised list of questions to be utilised. Interviews allowed questions to be elaborated on or rephrased to ensure mutual understanding with their interviewees, an opportunity not afforded to other methods (Alshenqeeti, 2014).

Insert Tables 1 and 2

Findings

The findings of this research demonstrate the importance of context to discussions of serendipity. Too often are discussions of the theory in practice centred only around how serendipitous occurrences play out within individual firms, taking for granted the cascade of external factors from which they spring. These findings will show the precipitating factors for serendipity, beginning with those beyond an entrepreneur's control and tracking through to those directly affected by their actions (Figure 1).

Insert Figure 1 Timeline of Lancaster 1780-1920

Geographical Context: The City's Natural Surroundings

One theme that is prevalent amongst the findings of this research is Lancaster's geographical position for facilitating exploration. Interviewee B, an expert on the transatlantic slave trade during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, emphasised the importance of the city's river Lune to its early economic success during the period (Figure 2). At the beginning of the period "there's not a great deal going on here beside a small amount of trade with Europe, some farming and a bit of fishing. But if you look at the end of the high [empire] period and at the beginning of yours, you see a transformation and that's largely driven by Atlantic trade" (Interview B). Thus, the river was instrumental for allowing "access to the sea and the sea gives access to the world" (Interview B). Furthermore, the Lune provided access to "the other parts of Britain" for "coasting trade round to other ports and indeed up into places like the Morecambe Bay where a lot of products flow to and from" (Interview B).

Insert Figure 2

Historical works also emphasise the role of the port to the city's early entrepreneurial success. As early as 1749, "the state of the river and the increasing interest in the possibilities of trade caused an Act of Parliament to be procured" (Wilkinson & Tyson, 1982). This established a Port Commission to improve navigation down the Lune (Wilkinson & Tyson, 1982). More immediately, this resulted in "the building of St George's Quay", opening up the city for greater trading opportunities (Wilkinson & Tyson, 1982). In the early days of the port at Glasson, it experienced success as "a busy shipbuilding and repairing centre" with "yards all along the quays" such as Caleb Smith and Co and Nicholsons (Potter, 1992). This industry remained in Lancaster until the 1960's when Nicholsons, the final Lancastrian yard, shifted its manufacturing efforts to automotive silencers (Potter, 1992). These yards were well serviced by the city's sail cloth manufacturers, a process requiring enormous amounts of water that the Lune provided (Clark, 1807). The period 1750 to 1800 has been described as the "Golden Age" of Lancaster (Potter, 1992). The wealth and rapid growth of the city during this period created the character of the city that endured beyond the period of this case study. "Lancaster today [1992] is still very much an eighteenth-century town, albeit on a medieval street plan" (Potter, 1992).

Insert Figure 3

The importance of the Lune was not lost on contemporaries. The trade it facilitated was essential for many Lancastrian entrepreneurs. Imports of mahogany, satinwood, and other luxury manufacturing materials serviced "Messrs Gillow & Co", "furniture manufacturers and decorators" (Price, 1990). "The Gillows appear to have had their full share of the prevalent spirit of enterprise", importing their own mahogany as well as rum and sugar which had a "ready sale" in the city (Price, 1990). Gillow's furniture was a major export to the West Indies

during the nineteenth century (Clark, 1807). Accompanying these Lancastrian products were other British made goods, most notably from Liverpool but also Glasgow, Birmingham and Sheffield (Clark, 1807).

The most important of the Lune mills was the industrial complex of James Williamson, later passed to his son James “the Lancaster magnate Lord Ashton” (Potter, 1992). His pre-eminence began in 1844 when Williamson, a city alderman, “founded [what was then] a new business in England” (Potter, 1992). The Williamsons were pioneers of “oilcloth” and later linoleum, with their manufacturing practices becoming the “standard the world over” (Potter, 1992). The Lune mills of the Williamsons were such major employers that it seemed “there was always a job available at James Williamson and Son Ltd” (Potter, 1992).

The geographical importance of the Lune is complex and extends beyond seaborne trade. The river also provided a natural power and water source for several mills within Lancaster’s peripheries supplying the city and utilising it as a trading hub. However, the Lunes geography was not naturally conducive to mill production. For there is “only Halton on the main river which has got a drop” that could be harness the rivers flow (Interview C). Thus, the insistence of so many entrepreneurs to adapt and invest in their manufacturing plants to harness the river rather than establish their operations elsewhere warrants investigation. Interviewee C, an expert on the history of the city and its development over the eighteenth, nineteenth and twentieth centuries remarked that the draw of Lancaster for certain firms is somewhat unclear from a geographical perspective (Interview C). Indeed, the other power sources of the day were also a natural scarcity, most importantly for the mills was the lack of coal (Interview C). As Clark remarks, “the only natural production in the immediate neighbourhood of Lancaster, worthy of any notice is the beautiful white and variegated freestone” (Clark, 1807). Therefore,

the geographical advantages of other areas make the pull of Lancaster and the Lune for certain entrepreneurs worthy of exploration.

One particularly significant example of geographical serendipity within a Lancaster family firm is that of the Storeys. The family's enterprise had its beginnings around 1849, during the city's plateau phase (Potter, 1992). Taking advantage of the Lune, they created a small empire of mills expanding outwards down the valley. Their first mill, White Cross, was founded through the combined efforts and resources of Thomas, Edward and William. The site mill developed into a vast complex and a testament to the power of familial entrepreneurship to take advantage of a favourable geographic position (Potter, 1992). The Storeys would expand their empire with the Moor Lane mills within the city itself and Low Mill in the village of Caton (Potter, 1992). As previously discussed, the ever-growing connectivity of Lancaster with other economic centres likely contributed to the city's attraction for their base of operations. The expansion of their enterprise was no doubt assisted by their ability to pool knowledge, connections and most importantly funds, illustrating the importance of internal family networks for Lancastrian entrepreneurs (Interview C).

However, it took more than just favourable geography for the Storeys to build their empire. In order to take advantage of the opportunities Lancaster's position offered, the family needed to be positioned with relevant expertise and resources. Thus, perhaps the most important factor in the Storey family's ability to expand and their enduring prominence was the size of their family (Janes, 1974). "Where there were but two great Williamsons, father and son, there have been many notable stories" (Janes, 1974). Each family member involved in the business brought with them individual experiences and expertise which altered the trajectory of their business model. For example, Thomas Storey had provided the "business sense" in the original firm, having trained under Edmund Sharpe "one of Lancaster's most prominent citizens",

during the first half of the nineteenth century (Janes, 1974). An example of a non-Quaker apprenticeship within the city and a further reflection of the societal structures supporting entrepreneurs. He was joined by Joseph Storey, an industrial chemist of high regard who founded the Heron Chemical Works on Moor Lane in 1860, bringing his scientific expertise to the firm (Janes, 1974). The Storey case can be used to assess the role of serendipity through their ability to harness the talents of their individual family members.

Technological advancements: Being Prepared in an Industrialising World

We notice the significant impact from the rampant industrialisation and rapid technological advancements taking place. Lancastrian entrepreneurs had mixed relationships with these developments. Changes to the physical infrastructure of the city could facilitate new businesses or trade routes. Conversely, new technologies and scientific discoveries created the opportunities for new products and markets, depending on an entrepreneur's willingness to experiment and take risks.

The creation of the Lancaster canal and the later expansion of the railway network linked up British merchants and manufacturers like never before. Firstly, the digging of the canal, beginning in 1792 and being first used in 1797, was celebrated with an opening of such fanfare and splendour that its importance to the region was evident (Potter, 1992). For contemporaries, the principal purpose of the endeavour was to facilitate the transport of quarried "limestone and slate from the North, and coal from the neighbourhood of Blackrod, Haigh and Chorley in the South" (Clark, 1807). As previously discussed, this transport of natural resources was essential for many of the region's mills (Interview C). The original plan for the canal would never be fully executed as a new form of mass goods transportation became the mode (Potter, 1992; Holt, 1986). The project was backed by several Lancastrian merchants who recognised the potential of this new method of goods transportation. Perhaps the most famous contributors

were the Rawlinson family. This wealthy Quaker clan was based in Lancaster and linked through marriage to several of the prominent industrialist families of the age (Interview D). It is possible they realised the importance of ensuring their city's infrastructure was developed to remain competitive with other industrial centres. The town's first railway, the Lancaster and Preston line, would open in 1840 and halved the transport time of goods to London, which previously took a day (Potter, 1992). This was followed in 1846 by the Lancaster and Carlisle line, finally allowing for the seamless passage of goods through almost the length of England (Potter, 1992). However, while these infrastructural developments facilitated greater business activity, this was reliant on the simultaneous adaptability and preparedness of the city's entrepreneurs.

Another string of partially external developments was the technological advancements taking place during the period. It is important to recognise that while many Lancastrian firms were playing catch up with larger enterprises elsewhere, the city was also home to several industry leaders. The most frequently remarked upon being the "lino king" James Williamson II (Price, 1990; Potter, 1992). The manufacture of linoleum, a wonder product of the mid-nineteenth century, put Williamson's enterprise at forefront of the industries development (Interview A; Interview C; Potter 1992). However, this product also shows the importance of a continuous commitment to innovation and exploration within firms. The decline in the popularity of linoleum was detrimental to Williamson and Sons, having dedicated much of their operation to its manufacture with little consideration paid to their other products (Interview C; Janes, 1974).

As these findings have established, technological developments during this period took place at a rapid rate. Yet, it would be foolish to underestimate the challenges facing Lancastrian entrepreneurs trying to take advantage of them. Smaller families had the benefit of more centralised decision-making but lacked the human capital of their larger counterparts. In

contrast to the expansive Storey clan is the Williamson family. Here the lack of suitable heirs and relatives with helpful industry experience would cause the decline of their fortune and business interests in the city. After the death of James Williamson II, first Baron Ashton, his estate was divided equally between his widow and daughter, the Countess Peel (Potter, 1992). The management of the firm remained in family hands until a succession of mergers in the twentieth century (Interview C, Gooderson, 1975). The decline of Williamsons has an interesting relationship with serendipity. Under the stewardship of Williamson II the business experienced a successful partnership with Storey Bros, demonstrating how networks within the city could be leveraged to take advantage of new technologies for mutual benefit. This being said, existing historical scholarship has varying assessments of the capabilities of the man himself (Potter, 1992; Janes, 1974, Gooderson 1975).

Some literature has argued Williamson II was a benevolent manager who was “known to keep employees on the payroll in periods when work was slack, he paid out sums to people who were too old to work, providing they were still able to reach his works and he carried out a number of private acts of kindness, especially to senior members of his firm” (Ashworth, 2016). This would suggest a mindset that valued an experienced workforce and the need to maintain a state of preparedness. However, in contrast, there exist accusations of micro-management and “surveillance” to the point of a paranoid tyranny surrounding industrial action (Ashworth, 2016; Gooderson, 1975). This fear and subsequent overstepping of his managerial responsibilities do not give the impression of a workplace that incentivised innovation and exploration, key requirements of serendipity. Indeed, the extreme measure taken by Williamson II can be seen as a corrupting decision-making cycle damaging the company through the measures designed to protect it.

Lancastrian Society: Regional Societal Structures

Accompanying these attractive new trade prospects, Lancaster saw something of a population boom (Figures 4 & 5). Before our period, “in 1781 Lancaster contained 694 houses”, by 1801 this number had ballooned to “1,598 houses” (Clark, 1807). The city had a population of roughly 9,030” making up 1,999 families (Clark,1807). These population figures are undoubtedly too low as they fail to account for absent seamen and their families who belonged to the port (Clark, 1807). The real figure would likely be upwards of 10,000 (Clark, 1807).

Insert Figure 4 and 5

The entrepreneurial character of Lancaster was intrinsically linked to the city’s social context. As a trading port with such strong links to the Atlantic slave trade, the city naturally attracted many families involved in the sale and transport of enslaved peoples and goods produced using slave labour (Interview B). Prominent families can be seen in many of the city’s high offices, widening their networks within the city as well as with the regional governments of other economic centres. “The association between trade and politics in the in these court towns is a very, very close one”, an experience shared by the city’s contemporary rivals such as “Liverpool and Bristol” (Interview B). Families such as the Hindes feature extensively in the City’s government during the period, providing the city with three mayors (Lancaster City Council, 2023). The Hinde family are credited with forging Lancaster’s early involvement with the slave trade (Schofield, 1976). They represent a trend within the Lancastrian elite to engage in the local governmental institutions, potentially as a means to extend their clientage networks (Interview A).

The representation of the city’s entrepreneurs in local government extended beyond the passing of the Slave Trade Act in 1807 and throughout the three phases of Lancaster’s development defined previously. For example, another prominent family, the Storeys, would produce two

mayors during the height of their business success in the mid-nineteenth century (Lancaster City Council, 2023). The draw of local office to the city's entrepreneurs is obvious, though the reasons for this are open to interpretation. One possible explanation is the attraction of the control of customs collection and control over infrastructure (Interview B). For cities like Lancaster, with economies based around overseas trade, it seemed only logical "that the people who are running them should also be engaged in that commerce" (Interview B).

Naturally, the question of social networks arises when examining the city's entrepreneurial character. These networks were essential for the success of several firms, however, their precise nature and origins are hard to track. Religious institutions provide some of the most identifiable networks through which Lancaster's entrepreneurs interacted. The Quaker Meeting of Lancaster was the only place of worship for many of the city's non-conformist entrepreneurs. At the start of the period and throughout the city's growth phase "the main West Indian traders in Lancaster were largely Quaker" (Interview B). This included "the Rawlinsons" as well as other "famous names" associated with the city (Interview B). This community provided the opportunity for entrepreneurs to network and forge partnerships. Crucially, this institution provided "a network of credit because you [as a member of the community] would trust the Quakers" (Interview C). "It operates as a mutual insurance company, in a way, if you're a Quaker, then you're a friend, and if you renege on your obligations, you could be thrown out of the Quakers, so you'd lose all your networks." (Interview C).

One of the most notable Quaker practices functioning as an entrepreneurial incubator was their apprenticeship system (Interview D). As Quakers had a legacy of exclusion from higher education due to their status as dissenters, they developed a network within the merchant and trade professions to ensure their economic prosperity (Interview D). These apprenticeships

were highly sought after, with Lancaster's mercantile position offering unparalleled prospects for those who could arrange one. So significant were the economic prospects of Lancastrian mercantile apprenticeships that they attracted individuals from across the country. The case of John Heathcote, the second son of an aristocratic Derbyshire family, demonstrates the draw of Lancaster to prominent individuals seeking fortune. He arrived in Lancaster to apprentice for Thomas Satterthwaite, a Quaker slave trader (Interview D). He had found the prospects offered by Lancaster's Quaker merchants to be substantial enough to relocate from his ancestral home. Heathcote's prospecting paid off, he developed a successful partnership with local merchant Dodshon Foster, co-owning a ship and amassing a relatively substantial fortune (Interview D).

The Quaker population of Lancaster has produced several entrepreneurs of note who leveraged their connections within their wider religious community for financial benefit. William Stout's story shows a rise from iron monger to wholesaler to maritime merchant (Constantine et. Al., 1993). His rise encapsulates the hallmarks of the Lancaster Meeting as an entrepreneurial incubator. Firstly, his beginnings in a skilled trade profession, which would have required an apprenticeship with a fellow Friend to establish himself. His move into wholesale goods is again reflective of a Lancastrian entrepreneur leveraging a network obtained through membership of a particular societal institution to further their business interests. Stout also maintained business links to other British cities supporting his endeavours, again facilitated by the Quaker Meeting's network. It must be noted that he was far from the only Lancastrian Quaker enjoying such links. The Barrow family of Lancaster became linked through marriage to the Cadbury family, with the sons of Candida Barrow going on to establish the Bourneville confectionary works (Interview D). Furthermore, the marriages of Abraham Rawlinson's daughters helped establish links to the banking dynasties of Barclays and Gurneys (Interview D).

Perhaps the most significant example of Lancaster's entrepreneurs joining together for a common cause happened at the start of the city's plateau phase. In the 1820's the first signs of a banking crisis began to emerge. In 1822, the first of the city's two banks, Worswick's, collapsed (Gooderson, 1975). This was followed by the collapse of Dilworth, Arthington and Birkett's in 1826 (Gooderson, 1975). The loss of both banking institutions was enormous, with an estimated figure of £600,000 of the city's money lost (Gooderson, 1975). However, the impact could have been far more dire had it not been for the gumption of a consortium of the city's leading merchants and manufacturers (Gooderson, 1975; Interview C). This group took advantage of the post-crisis legislation to establish a Joint Stock Bank with capital of £300,000 (Gooderson, 1975). Though born out of necessity, the new bank would see successful operations for several years before experiencing a gradual decline from the 1870's along with many other Joint Stock Banks (Gooderson, 1975). The Lancaster Banking Company represents an example of Lancastrian Entrepreneurs of varying backgrounds joining together due to shared economic interests and for the betterment of the city (Interview C).

Lancaster had a long legacy as a legal centre, housing a Court of Assizes within the city's castle. The right to hold the Assizes courts was a centuries-old privilege. The courts provided a regular income through the guaranteed, twice-yearly influx of legal representatives and their clients (Interview A; Goodier, 2024). The inns and taverns would be filled with this clientele and their custom was valued for its supposed security. So important were the courts of the Northern Circuit that wealthy families involved in them developed a grand enclave around Castle Hill (Goodier, 2024). Despite the Lancaster Assizes wanning importance over the nineteenth century, particularly after the establishment of the Liverpool courts in 1835, the city remained a haven for legal professionals. This was in large part due to the spatial context of Lancaster and its peripheries. The area surrounding the city was home to multiple stately homes and their attached estates (Interview C). The influence of these estates in shaping the

city's entrepreneurial character can be seen through the businesses servicing them. In this case, the city's various lawyers performed property and land agency related services (Interview C).

One family firm worthy of particular notice for their leveraging of Lancastrian society is the grocers T.D. Smith's. The firm was a Lancastrian institution founded in 1858 which grew into a successful chain during the period of our wider case study (Figure 4.5). Scholarship has largely ignored smaller firms like Smith's, focusing more on "revolutionary" developments such as the rise of department stores and cooperatives (Winstanley, 1991). The success of Smith's is a complex combination of successful business networks within the city and the ability to advantageously respond to serendipitous occurrences. The Smith family consolidated their position within local society "through a complex network of intermarriages with other families of a similar social standing over a geographical area which stretched from Lancaster in the West well into Yorkshire in the East" (Winstanley, 1991). These marriages, particularly those with prominent farming families in the region, allowed for a network of suppliers to be established within the founder's extended family (Winstanley, 1991; Interview C). Without the specific societal context of Lancaster in the nineteenth century, this network would not have been able to exist in the form it did. T.D. Smith's early success relied on setting his firm apart from the other city grocers who held a monopoly on the goods trade (Winstanley, 1991). Here, his network of rural suppliers and clientele was instrumental in undercutting their trade through a delivery service (Winstanley, 1991; Interview C). This case represents a curious variation of traditional serendipity, where not only is a ready and curious mindset present, but also the ability of the founder to influence their socio-economic context.

Discussion

Building on this research's findings, this section will illuminate the aforementioned research gap and demonstrate the value of a historical perspective to the development of serendipity in entrepreneurial theory.

A Historical Perspective of Serendipity

Using historical approaches affords us the ability to understand serendipity in entrepreneurship research, through its longitudinal nature and attention to the wider contexts. Current literature places great emphasis on the individual entrepreneur (Busch, 2024; Dew, 2009). Much focus is paid to the importance of cultivating the correct mindset to exploit serendipitous occurrences to one's best advantage. As a result, this sociological-historical perspective is an emerging field and thus relevant works are limited, noted as the "where gap" in entrepreneurship literature (Hindle, 2010). Namely that the social context of a region is axiomatically linked to the entrepreneurial endeavours that take place within it (Wadhwani et al., 2020; Welter, 2011). Typically characterised as a mindset which values experimentation, innate curiosity and perpetual preparedness (Busch, 2024; Dew, 2009). For the avoidance of all doubt, serendipity

does not rely on luck (Dew, 2009). However, our research demonstrates how spatial and social context could be misconstrued as the driving forces of these occurrences. Thus, it draws the focus away from the agency of the entrepreneurs existing within them and incorrectly suggests an element of luck. The city's geographical position added a further layer of complexity to experiences of serendipity, which is absent from the current understanding of serendipity in entrepreneurship (e.g., see Dew, 2009). Here an organisational historical perspective is of particular value, as it allows one to better assess the evolution of circumstances affecting an entrepreneurial landscape through a theoretical lens (see Figure 7 Factors Taken for Granted in the Existing Serendipity Research).

Insert figure 7

Factors Taken for Granted in the Existing Serendipity Research

Moreover, we found that multiple layers of manifestations of institutions play a key role in understanding serendipity. While there is a growing revisionist scholarship analysing the lasting impacts of infrastructure and spatial circumstances on regional entrepreneurship (Boggart, 2022; Rogerson, 2011), our research reveals the lasting effects of infrastructure changes on the economy of a region, but more importantly on its social fabric. There was a consensus among the interviewees regarding the importance of institutions to the entrepreneurial development of Lancaster (Interview A; Interview B; Interview C). For example, the importance of a diverse range of social institutions, ranging from religious houses of worship to the high offices of the city were essential for the creation and maintenance of networks of credit and collaboration that could help entrepreneurs to maintain a state of preparedness that could allow them to take advantage of serendipitous occurrences. This would suggest that the need to maintain a perpetual state of preparedness was a burden that could be shared amongst a collaborative network. This can be seen through the case of T.D. Smith's, where after identifying a shortcoming in the services of the existing grocer monopoly, the firm's founder was able to draw on the networks of his family and Methodist community

to establish a supply network (Winstanley, 1991). We show that communities could pool resources and connections to allow a member to take advantage of an instance of serendipity. This reduces the burden held by a single firm or individual and reveals a new avenue of investigation for serendipity.

Importance of the Historical Perspective

This research demonstrates the value of incorporating historical perspectives and methodologies into the research of entrepreneurial theory. The integration of historical context into examinations of entrepreneurial serendipity has revealed several new facets to these theories. Traditional definitions lack any sustained and robust engagement with spatial and social context (Busch, 2024). Ignoring these factors, which are intrinsically linked to entrepreneurial experiences, prevents theoretical conceptualisations from truly representing lived realities. Historical perspectives have offered the opportunity to utilise case studies from the past to inform our contemporary understandings of theory. Specifically, this work forms an organisational microhistory, where region and time-specific examples are melded with theoretical overlays.

It is important to situate this research as a distinct sub-section of business historiography. As the advancement of the theories of serendipity was at the forefront of this research's intentions, the use of different data sources was imperative to enable a holistic approach to the case study. Traditional works of business history focus on "primary archival research", producing narrative works with little conceptual contributions (Jones & Zeitlin, 2008). This dissertation has proved the value of qualitative data for the exploration of entrepreneurially significant case studies. Using solely traditional archival sources would not have revealed the same cultural complexities that the triangulated combination of data points used in this research.

While the current discussions in family business research attribute the success largely to the agencies of the actors, our research advances this discussion by revealing the impact of the context where the family businesses are embedded in. The experience of T.D. Smith's of Lancaster is a notable subject of one such work. In *A Traditional Grocer*, the rise and fall of a Lancastrian firm from a small going concern to a county institution is explored in remarkable detail (Winstanley, 1991). This research not only explores the business's growth and decline but examines several key themes. The work examines the internal social structures of the firm, both amongst the workers, but also the founder's family (Winstanley, 1991). T. D. Smith's is situated within the region's social and economic shifts, exploring the company's relationship with competitors such as the cooperative movement (Winstanley, 1991). The research's greatest strength is its examination of the multitude of influences affecting decision making within the family-owned firm. However, where the work could be taken further is in its discussion of the firm's decline and closure. The firm is briefly compared to E. H. Booths, a grocer that was able to adapt to the changing times more deftly and which transitioned to a grocer-supermarket hybrid (Winstanley, 1991). Lastly, while the existing theoretical literature largely ignores the influence of family networks, our research shows their important role equal or over the commonly featured internal dynamics within a firm and the actions of individual entrepreneurs. Micro-historical research, therefore, demonstrates important implications to advance conversations in family businesses research, overcoming the issues of over-emphasizing agency and overlooking the context.

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Table 1 and 2

Interviewee	Expertise	Key Findings	Number of Interviews	Time (Minutes)
Participant A	Expert on the Lancashire and Westmoorland areas, focusing on the cultural history of landscape.	Cultural influences, Family business, Lancaster as a legal centre, Local government, Natural resources, Religious institutions, Rural influences, Social structures, Trans-Atlantic slave trade, Trans-Atlantic trade.	1	37
Participant B	Expert on the Atlantic world and the Trans-Atlantic slave trade, with a specialism in the analysis of merchantile endeavours relating to the trade of enslaved persons and goods produced by them.	Competition with other economic centres, Family business, Local government, Natural resources, River-borne trade, Trans-Atlantic slave trade, Trans-Atlantic trade.	1	44
Participant C	Expert historian on the city of Lancaster and its development, with specialist knowledge of its individual businesses and the region's entrepreneurial landscape.	Cultural influences, Family business, Family networks, Government, Institutional theory, Lancaster as a legal centre, Microhistories, Natural resources, Religious institutions, Rural influences, Social structures, Trans-Atlantic slave trade, Trans-Atlantic trade.	1	47
Participant D	Expert and author on the Lancaster Quaker Meeting, with a particular focus on the earlier years of the research period. They had a specific research interest in the socio-economic aspects of Lancaster's Quaker population.	Cultural influences, Family business, Trans-Atlantic slave trade, Trans-Atlantic trade, Microhistories, Social structures, Religion, Family Networks.	1	55
			Total: 4	Total: 183

Title	Date	Author	Page Number	Purpose of the book/significance of the books	Use in the Research
A Regional History of the Railways of Great Britain	1986	Geoffrey O Holt	268	Historical Literature	Foundational research
A Traditional Grocer, T.D. Smith's of Lancaster 1858-1981	1991	Michael Winstanley	47	Historical Literature	Used to illuminate a case study firm, of particular use for discussions of family businesses in the city
An Historical and Descriptive Account of the Town of Lancaster: Collected from the Best Authorities	1807	Chistopher Clark	234	Historical Literature/Travel Writing	Used for illuminating contemporary experiences of the city's business landscape during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries
Lancaster	1974	Derek C. Janes	70	Historical Literature	Foundational research, provides an overview of this micro historie's case study period
Lancaster A Century Ago	1990	James Price	61	Historical Literature	Foundational research, specifically for nineteenth century examples
Lancaster as it Was	1973	Kenneth Docton	45	Historical Photography Anthology	Foundational research, provides a photographic history of Lancaster
Lancaster: The Evolution of its Townscape to 1800	1981	Stephen H. Penney	47	Historical Literature	Provided an overview of the city's development
Reflections on Lancaster	1992	Terry Potter	102	Historical Literature	Foundational research, covers the entire research period, references specific industrial developments
The Assize Town of Lancaster in 1821	n.d	Linda Moorhouse	148	Historical Literature	Details the legal institutions of the city and
The Opening of Ripley Hospital, Lancaster	n.d	Linda Moorhouse	55	Historical Literature/Source Anthology	Micro-historical account of the opening of the Ripley Hospital, details contemporary reactions and the Hospital's charter
The Port of Lancaster	1982	Eric Wilkinson	15	Historical Literature	Details the physical transformation of the port at Glasson and its supporting infrastructure, which helped illuminate the role of the port in the city's development
Lancaster A History	2003	Andrew White	144	Historical Literature	Foundational research
A History of Lancaster 1193-1993	1993	Stephen Constantine et al.	155		Foundational research, details trade developments and external events and trends affecting the city
The Social and Economic History of Lancaster 1780-1914	1975	Phillip J. Gooderson	691	Historical Literature	Foundational research
Total Number of Pages			2081		

Figures

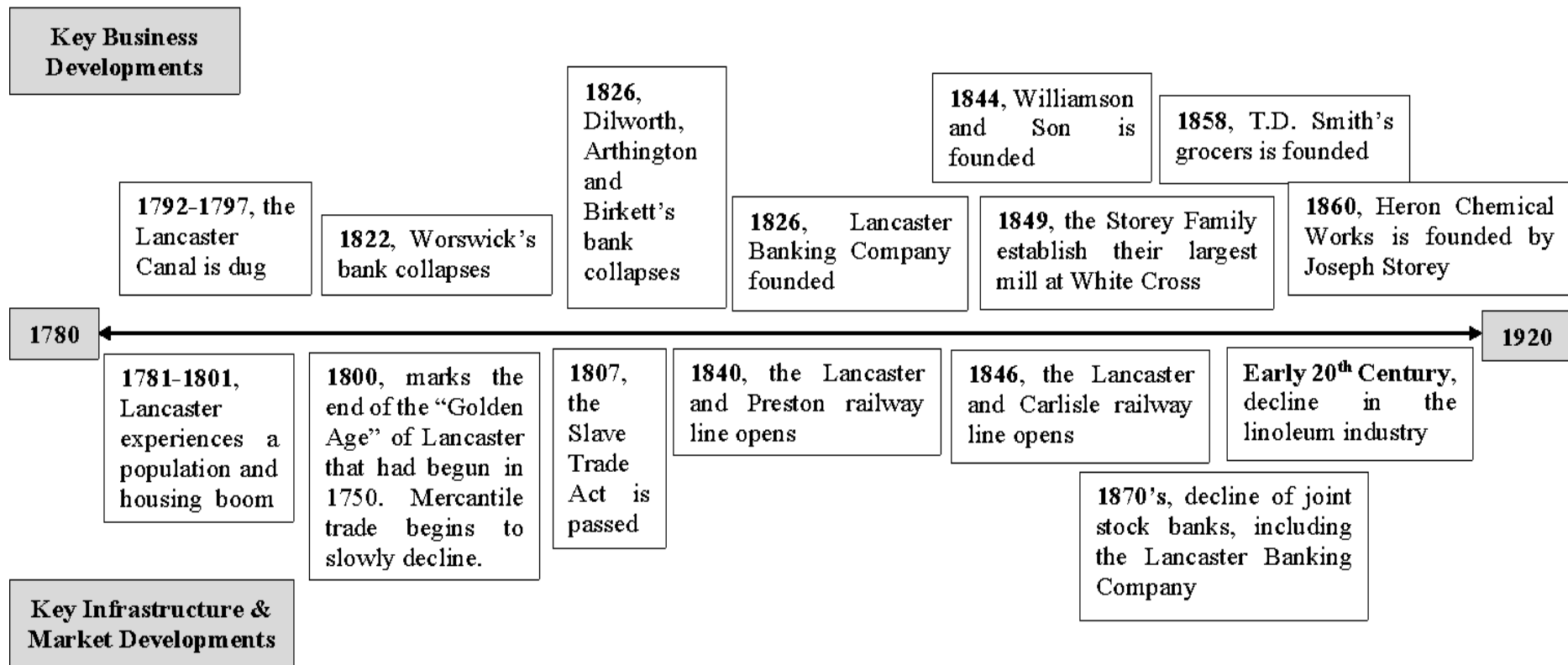


Figure 1 Timeline of Lancaster Between 1780 - 1920

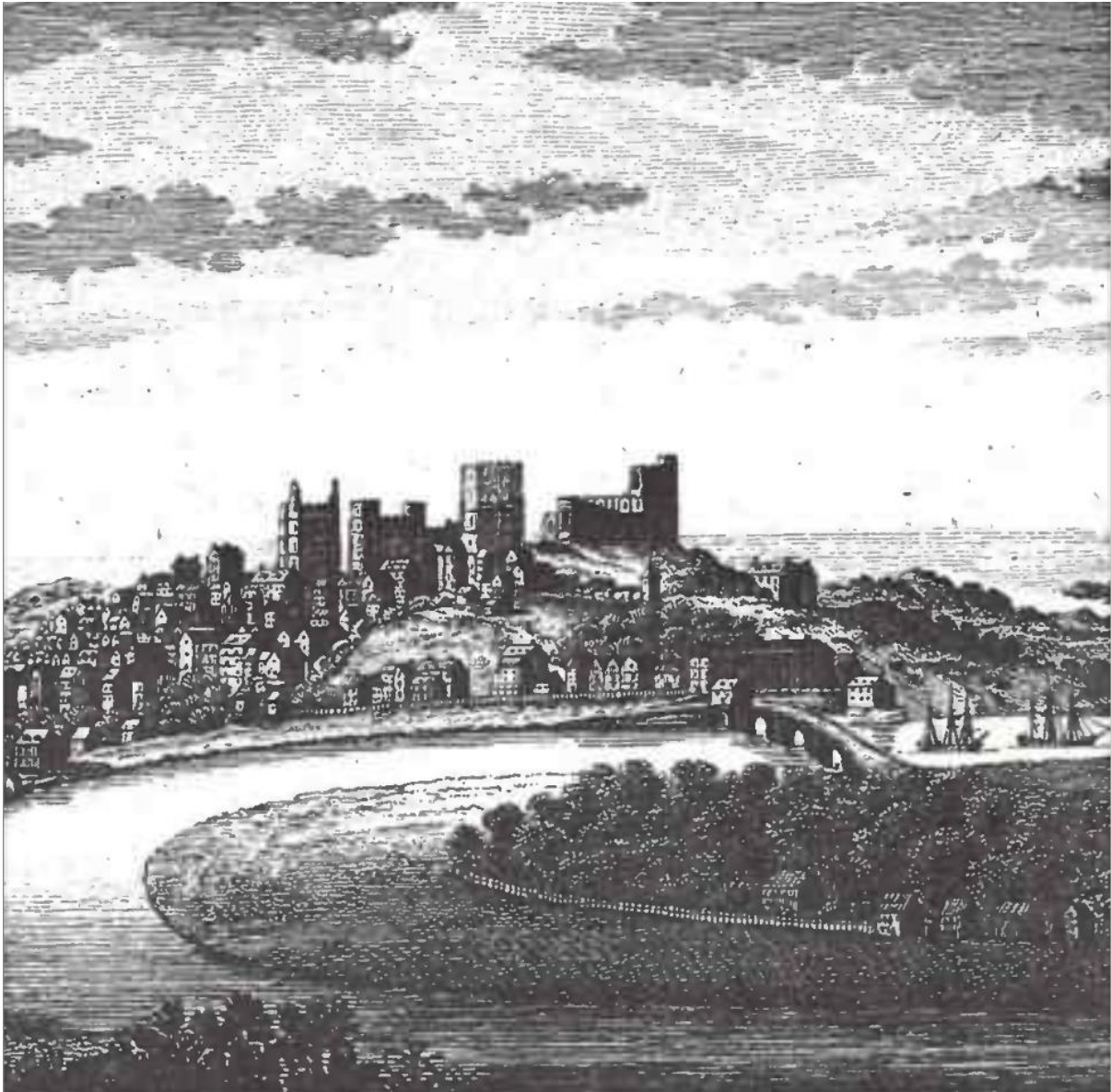


Figure 2, An eighteenth-century view of Lancaster and the Lune



Figure 3, 'The Wennington', the first iron clipper ship built at Glasston in 1865



Figure 4, Stephen Mackreth. Plan of the town of Lancaster 1778.



Figure 5, Jonathan Binns. Map of the town and castle of Lancaster. With inset: Speed's map of Lancaster, 1610.



Figure 6, T.D. Smith's Owen Road Branch

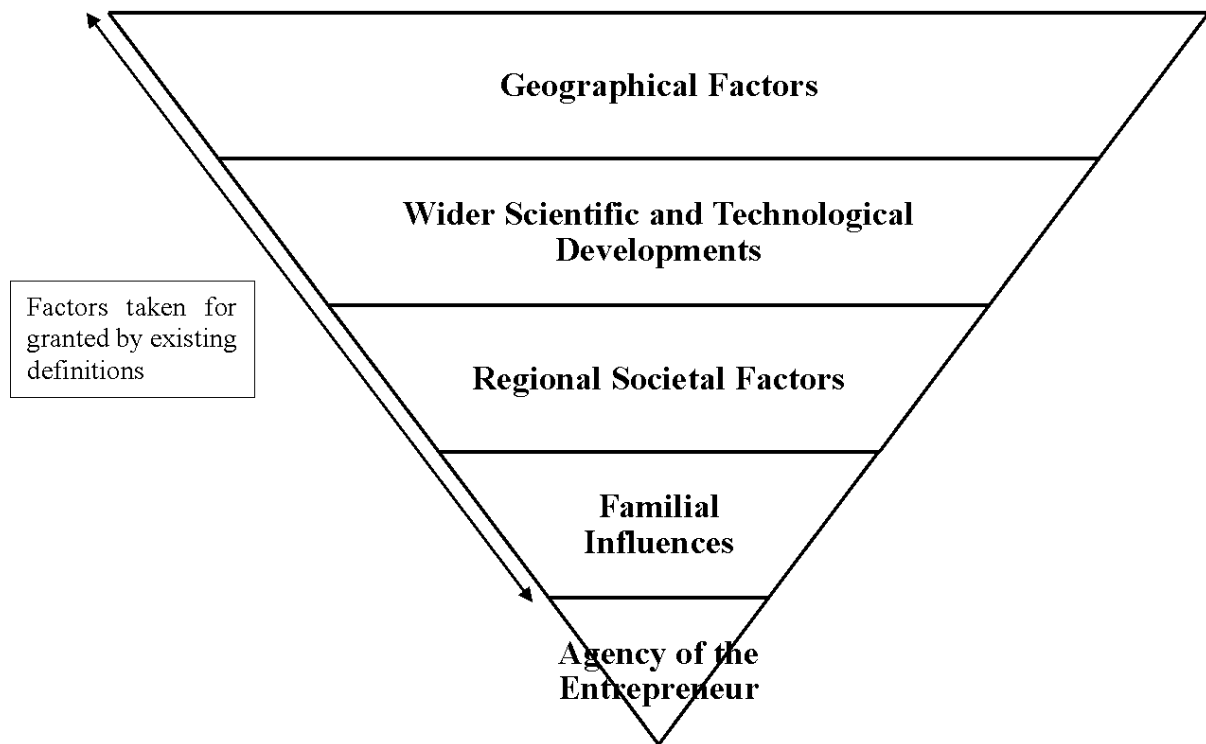


Figure 7. Factors Taken for Granted in the Existing Serendipity Research