

## **Viewlaw, Duns**

**David McLean (2024)**



### **Introduction**

Viewlaw, once known as Viewlaw Villa, sits towards the top of Bridgend on the outskirts of Duns, one of numerous properties built on roads leading out of the town by prospering families in the nineteenth century. British Listed Buildings dates the property as ‘later nineteenth century’ but research can narrow that date further. A map of 1857 shows that no houses had been built beyond the lower slope of Bridgend at that time. But Viewlaw is shown as owned and occupied in the valuation roll of 1865 and birth records show that a child was born in the property in 1866. From this evidence, we can probably date its construction to the early 1860s. This might tie in well with the neighbouring property called Mainhill which is known to have been built in 1866. With its rear aspect facing the hill known as Duns Law, Viewlaw had its present name from the beginning; it is category C listed. For most of its first hundred years, the house was home to only two families, the Wilsons and the Campbells.

### **The Wilsons at Viewlaw**

John Wilson ran a drapery business in Duns and lived in the Market Place, probably above his shop. In the 1851 census, he described himself as a ‘draper and silk mercer’ and the business was still going twenty years later when he was employing two men and three

apprentices. John and his wife Mary had six children. Their oldest child, George, was born in 1823. At the 1851 census, George (age 27) was single, still living at home and working as a solicitor's clerk.

In 1857, George married Eliza Smith at Fountainbridge Manse in Edinburgh; George was 34 and Eliza was 26. By the time of the 1861 census, George and Eliza Wilson were living in a house in Currie Street in Dunse and George was no longer a clerk but pursuing the curious hybrid occupation of 'clothier, seed and manure merchant'. However, valuation roll evidence shows that George Wilson had moved from Currie Street to become owner and occupier of Viewlaw by 1865.

George and Eliza Wilson had seven children between 1859 and 1868; there is a family tree at the end of this paper. Their first five children were born during the time they lived in Currie Street; the last two children were born at Viewlaw. This further helps to date the property since child number five was born in 1864 in Currie Street while child number six was born in 1866 at Viewlaw. While there can be no certainty that George Wilson built Viewlaw, it seems highly likely. Most of the 'new' houses in Dunse in the nineteenth century were built by professional men (especially solicitors) or shopkeepers, then known as merchants.

The story of George and Eliza Wilson's children, however, was both tragic and a reflection of the medical realities of their time since five of the seven died very young. Jane Wilson, born in 1859, died in 1867 at the age of 8 of scarlet fever; James Smith Wilson, born in 1861, died in 1863 of complications from measles; Mary Wilson, born in 1863, died the following year from teething convulsions; Elizabeth Wilson, born in 1864, died that same year of convulsions from croup (a respiratory infection); and Thomas Thomson Wilson, born in 1868, died the following year of 'tabes mesenterica', a form of glandular tuberculosis which most commonly affected children. So, the Wilsons lost five children in the space of a little over six years, two of them in the single year of 1864.

The 1871 census suggests that George had decided to work full-time in his father's drapery business since he described himself that year as a 'woollen draper'; as it turned out, his father lived for only a few more years, leaving George to run the business. George was a brother of Philip Wilson, corn factor in Dunse, whose business included the granary at the railway station and who built the property in Station Road which he called the Knoll in 1871.

Eliza Wilson died at Viewlaw in 1873 at the age of 41 when their youngest surviving child was only seven years old. George Wilson re-married three years later in 1876. His second wife was farmer's daughter Agnes Webster of New Horndean, Ladykirk who, at the age of 33, was some twenty years his junior; there were no children from this second marriage.

Like most professional and business men of the town, George Wilson was ready to support worthy causes. In 1870, he donated £1 (worth £100 today) to the French Peasant Farmers Seed Corn Fund; many in the French countryside were struggling at this time due to the devastation caused by the Franco-Prussian War. When the City of Glasgow Bank collapsed amid scandal in 1878 (it had a branch in Dunse), there was huge sympathy everywhere for around a thousand shareholders who had unlimited liability and were financially ruined. Relief funds were set up in many areas, inviting people to donate money to help those who had lost everything. In December 1878, George Wilson was on a published list of subscribers in the Berwickshire News, having given £20 to the relief fund; this would have a purchasing

power today of around £2000. A few years later, he donated £5 to the Eyemouth Disaster Relief Fund.

As we have seen, only two of George and Eliza Wilson's children survived beyond childhood, namely John and George junior. John appears in the Berwickshire News at the age of 10 in 1870 when he won various prizes in the flower categories, including hollyhocks and roses, at two local horticultural shows – it sounds as if the garden at Viewlaw was already well established! John was educated at Wellfield Academy in the town and went on to Edinburgh University to become a minister. He was back in Duns in 1882, as part of a university committee examining students at the Young Ladies Seminary in Newtown Street – all nine young ladies passed! He also preached a special sermon the following month in the Free Church at Allanton in his capacity as a member of the New College (Edinburgh) Missionary Society. After serving as minister of the Free Church in Canonbie, he became minister of the Church of Scotland in Trinidad where he died in 1931; his wife Helen (one of the Wilsons of Wellnage) also died there ten years later.

George Wilson junior qualified as a doctor of medicine at Edinburgh University in 1891. He went on to do missionary work abroad and died in Tangier, north Africa, in 1914, age 48.

As another example of the family's strong religious commitment, Agnes Wilson (George's second wife) was president of the Duns Young Women's Christian Association in the 1880s, at the same time as she was acting as secretary of the local branch of the Ladies Zenana Mission Society which promoted missionary work in India, attempting to convert Indian women to Christianity.



*Crow-stepped (or corbie-stepped) gables at Viewlaw*

George Wilson senior, woollen draper, died at Viewlaw in 1884 at the age of 60 of scrofula, a form of tuberculosis which was a common cause of death in those days. In his will, he left estate worth a little over £2000; this would have a purchasing power today of around

£220,000. It included money deposited at the Royal Bank, a number of life assurance policies and shares in the Duns Water, Duns Gaslight and Duns Corn Exchange companies as well as shares in a number of mineral companies (iron, copper and silver) and the Southampton Tramways Company.

He arranged for his second wife (and now widow after only eight years), Agnes Wilson, to have a yearly allowance of £200 as well as Viewlaw rent-free for life 'as long as she is unmarried'; ownership of the property was bequeathed to his two surviving children, sons John and George. For whatever reason, however, Agnes Wilson moved out of Viewlaw a few years later; the 'unfurnished villa' was advertised for let for one year in April 1889 and much of its furniture - 'the whole in beautiful order and of first-rate quality' - was sold by Swans the local auctioneers the following month.

Valuation rolls show that Agnes Wilson moved across town to become tenant of Wellfield Cottage until at least 1895; this is also confirmed by the 1891 census. She seems to have left Duns by the turn of the new century and she died at her home in South Lauder Road, Edinburgh in 1920 at the age of 77. She had considerable investments both in the UK and overseas and left estate of some £7200 (purchasing power today of over £300,000). She granted legacies to a long list of relations and friends as well as to some charitable causes; her heritable property, presumably her Edinburgh home, was left to her sister, Emma Duncan Webster.

### **The Campbells at Viewlaw**

Following the Wilsons, Viewlaw would now become a female household for many years. The property was bought around 1890 by Doctor William Watson Campbell, a general practitioner in Duns. He did not purchase it for himself, however, since he lived with his family at Westwood, 44 Newtown Street (now the Jim Clark Motorsport Museum); instead, he appears to have bought Viewlaw for his sisters who previously lived at properties in the Clouds and Currie Street. At least some of these sisters had moved to Viewlaw by the time of the 1891 census.

The 1901 census shows Viewlaw occupied by Mary Campbell (68), Beatrice Campbell (64) and Isabella Campbell (62). And also in the property was a fourth sister called Elizabeth (56) who, in 1873, had married William Webster, originally from Coldingham but then farmer at Chalkielaw, Dunse. They had five children but William Webster died of pneumonia in 1887 at the age of 42. So now, in 1901, the widowed Elizabeth Webster was living in Viewlaw with her three unmarried sisters. And also in the house were Elizabeth's two youngest children, Margaret (19) and Elizabeth junior (15). There is another family tree for the Campbells at the end of this paper.

William Watson Campbell, who purchased Viewlaw, died in 1897; his wife, Janet, had pre-deceased him in 1894. Viewlaw is mentioned only once in Doctor Campbell's will. His father had been gifted a silver tea service and salver by Mrs Baillie Hamilton of Langton House and these items were kept by his sisters at Viewlaw; Campbell now bequeathed that silver to his son, Alexander. So, Campbell's will does not show him disposing of Viewlaw but the 1905

valuation roll shows the property now in the ownership of three of his sisters – Mary, Beatrice and Isabella Campbell. The presumption might therefore be that Doctor Campbell transferred ownership of Viewlaw to his sisters before his death.

Since Mary Campbell was the oldest of the sisters, she acted as head of the household and, in this capacity, she wrote a letter of complaint to Duns Town Council in 1904. The council had embarked on a programme of laying the town's footpaths in concrete which required the roads to be lowered in some places to maintain appropriate levels – although some questioned whether this was really necessary. This happened right outside Viewlaw and the result was that their gateway ended up at a considerably higher level than the footpath. It was like taking a step up to get into the Viewlaw drive and, as Miss Campbell pointed out, the difference in levels was so bad that it was now impossible to drive a carriage or motor vehicle into their property.

Some councillors insisted that the matter should be put right at the council's expense since their work had caused the problem. Councillor Laidlaw 'thought it very hard upon proprietors that the Council should go and alter the level of roads in front of property, and leave them in this state'. Others felt that paying to lower the Campbells' driveway would be setting a bad precedent (a favourite council tactic) and that it would not be legal to use rates money for such a purpose anyway. In the end, the matter was remitted to the Streets Committee with powers to spend a maximum of £3 from the common good fund to make repairs to the Viewlaw drive; the Campbells themselves would pay for adjustments to the gates.



*The Viewlaw gateway which caused a row in 1904*

The sisters lived off private means, probably quite comfortably, and they always had a servant in the house. Adverts in the Berwickshire News were frequently seeking an 'active young girl as a general servant'; sometimes, 'one from the country' was preferred. The Viewlaw ladies involved themselves in the usual round of good causes. Margaret Webster was a keen supporter of the temperance movement. The concerns of the time were well

expressed by the Reverend John Miller at a meeting in the Town Hall in 1903 when he feared that, if not suppressed, the evil of drink 'would drag our nation down very speedily amongst the nations of the world'. At that meeting, Margaret Webster of Viewlaw was appointed president for the next year of the Duns branch of the British Women's Temperance Association.

Margaret Webster also joined a scheme during the Great War whereby ladies were encouraged to 'adopt' a British prisoner of war and undertake to send weekly food parcels. Her prisoner was Private T C Laidlaw of the 4<sup>th</sup> Dragoon Guards who was being held in a detention camp in Hanover, Germany; he had been captured before Christmas 1914.

Mary Campbell, the oldest of the family, died at Viewlaw in 1908 at the age of 74. Her three sisters all died in the 1920s and all at Viewlaw – Beatrice Campbell in 1923 (87), Elizabeth Webster in 1925 (80) and Isabella Campbell in 1929 (91). The valuation rolls of 1930 through 1942 show that ownership of the property passed to Elizabeth Webster's two surviving children, her daughters Isabella Watson Webster and Elizabeth Kirk Webster who continued to live in the house. They soon disposed of some surplus items from Viewlaw by sending a harmonium, a sewing machine, a mahogany sideboard and other items of furniture to one of the Swans' regular town auctions in 1929.

In 1938, an advertisement in the Berwickshire News read 'Wanted, young country girl as maid, two in family. Webster, Viewlaw, Duns.' Specifying 'two in family' was meant to imply, of course, that the work would not be too demanding. In 1942, they were once more ridding the house of unwanted items by advertising for sale a 15-gallon portable boiler in good condition.

Digital access to valuation rolls ceases after this time but Isabella and Elizabeth Webster were apparently still living at Viewlaw in the summer of 1953 when they put the house up for sale. It was described as having three public rooms; a kitchen with Rayburn and immersion heater; a scullery with a gas cooker and wiring ready for an electric one; maid's room; two small pantries off the hall and one larger pantry; linen cupboard; coal store; four bedrooms; and bathroom. The house had electric light and power and there was a good garden with two sheds (one built of brick) and a greenhouse, all in good order. Viewlaw appears to have sold reasonably quickly since the house contents of 'superior antique and modern furniture' were auctioned by Millers of Berwick a few months later under the instruction of the 'Misses Webster'. It has proved impossible to trace the story of the Webster sisters beyond this point.

It seems that the purchaser of Viewlaw in 1953 was George Wood. He had come to Duns in the summer of 1949 at the age of 46 when he was appointed as treasurer and collector of rates for Berwickshire County Council. He had a degree in commerce from the University of London and had spent the previous twenty years as an accountant with Clackmannan County Council in Alloa. Within a couple of years of moving to Duns, his wife, Elizabeth, died suddenly of a brain haemorrhage in 1951; two years later, George Wood purchased Viewlaw from the Webster sisters.



*The view of Duns Law, the hill to the north of the town, which gave the property its name*

*The information in this paper has been researched from various newspapers of the time (especially the Berwickshire News and Berwick Advertiser) and from public records – census; valuation rolls; wills and testaments; and birth, marriage and death records.*

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**Wilson (Viewlaw, Duns) Family Tree**





