

Morelands, Duns and Dr John MacWatt



Introduction

Morelands was home to one of the most remarkable men ever to live in Duns, Dr John MacWatt – highly respected and much-loved medical practitioner; breeder of champion dogs; nationally renowned botanist; and husband to three wives. The first challenge is whether to call him ‘MacWatt’ or ‘McWatt’ since the two spellings are used almost indiscriminately across a wide variety of sources, from newspapers to official documents. The confusion is not helped by the fact that his name is spelled ‘McWatt’ on his birth registration but ‘MacWatt’ on the registration of his death! But the balance of evidence suggests ‘MacWatt’ as the correct version and that is the spelling employed in this paper.

Morelands

When more prosperous families started to build houses away from Duns town centre in the early nineteenth century, the first locations they chose were not too far away in Murray Street and at the foot of Bridgend. The house called Morelands is one of four properties (the others being Haymount, Blythebank and Wellnage) which stretch in a broad arc southward from the bottom of Bridgend. Originally, the whole area on which these four houses were built was called Haymount although, eventually, the name was reserved for just one of the properties – this, in itself, can cause confusion.

The construction of Morelands can be dated to the earlier nineteenth century. While the other three houses in that southern arc are shown on John Wood's 1824 map of Dunse, the house which became Morelands does not appear; the area is still shown as a field belonging to 'Wm Hay Esq of Drummelzier'. So, Morelands was not there before 1824 although it is likely that it was built soon afterwards, probably in the 1830s. Census information shows that the house did not originally have its modern name. For example, in the 1871 census, it was listed as '2 Haymount'. But the 1892 valuation roll identifies the house as 'Morelands' with John MacWatt as the owner and so it is possible that he gave the house its current name.

Morelands is a villa built in the classical style with a two-storey main block and single-storey pavilions (wings) on either side. The doorway is what architects call 'Tuscan Doric' with two pilasters each side – these are stone pillars protruding from the wall although their function is purely decorative. The exterior is largely original. One chimney stack has been re-built in brick and the ground floor windows which today contain plate glass panes would probably have been 12-pane sash and case originally, like the upper floor. The house is category B listed.

Dr John MacWatt : Family History

John MacWatt was born in Dunse in 1857; the family tree at the end of this paper will help to follow his story. His father was Robert Charles MacWatt, a medical doctor in the town, who lived in the house eventually called Haymount – so, John MacWatt was born and brought up, with his brothers and sisters, in the property right next door to the one in which he would later bring up his own children.



In 1884, John MacWatt married 20 year old Mary Jean Robson in Southfield Villa, Station Road, a property built by her father, James Curle Robson. He had been procurator-fiscal for the county but was deceased by the time of his daughter's marriage. In 1885, when the MacWatts lived in a house in the Market Place, they had a daughter whom they named Annie Frier MacWatt but, tragically, she died on the same day as she was born, a child just too weak to survive. The 1891 census finds John and Mary Jean MacWatt still living in the Market Place but they had moved to Morelands by 1892. The 1901 census shows them there with two servants. Mary Jean MacWatt died the following year of Bright's disease (inflammation of the kidneys), at the age of 38.

In 1910, John MacWatt married again and we find him in Morelands with his second wife, Gladys Elizabeth Walford, at the 1911 census; her father was the Medical Officer of Health in Cardiff. They had four children between 1911 and 1915 although the second child, a boy whom they named John Logan MacWatt, lived for less than a fortnight. The other three children were left without a mother when Gladys MacWatt herself met a most bizarre death in Morelands at the age of 36 in 1919. It is believed that she was dusting a 'souvenir' shell case in one of the ground-floor rooms. Unfortunately, the detonator had never been removed and the case exploded, almost certainly killing her instantly. Two servants, working elsewhere in the house, naturally heard the explosion but assumed it must have originated outside the house. A short time later, one of them went to fetch Mrs MacWatt to take a telephone call and opened a door to find the room full of smoke and Gladys MacWatt lying on the floor. John MacWatt was assisting with an operation in Haddington at the time and had to be summoned home by telegram.

In 1925, John MacWatt married for a third time. His wife (almost thirty years his junior) was Dorothy Gertrude Powys Sketchley whose father was a church parson in Exmouth, Devon.

John MacWatt died of liver cancer at the age of 80 in Morelands in 1938. His third wife, Dorothy MacWatt, continued to live in the house and seems to have still been there in 1947 although she had perhaps left the area by 1950. Dorothy MacWatt died in Morningside, Edinburgh at the age of 89 in 1975.

Dr John MacWatt : Medical Practitioner

John MacWatt was educated at Wellfield Academy in Dunse before studying at Edinburgh University where he qualified as a Bachelor of Medicine in 1878. Soon afterwards, he was appointed as house surgeon in the city's maternity hospital but, apparently, it was not long before he went off to spend some time as a ship's doctor. This colourful fact strangely appears in only one research source and might therefore be dismissed except that the source in question had access to MacWatt family papers and interviewed John MacWatt's two daughters.

However, MacWatt cannot have sailed the seas for very long since he was back in his home town of Dunse in the early 1880s when he went into medical partnership with his father. The NHS was, of course, more than sixty years in the future and medical practice was an entirely different affair in John MacWatt's time. For a start, people had to pay to access medical

services. Doctors had their surgeries in their own homes but would forever be travelling over considerable distances to reach their patients. One of the most common phrases in newspaper reports of illnesses or accidents was of a doctor being 'sent for'. And, as today, it made sense for doctors to share the workload by having partners. After his father's death in 1897, John MacWatt sold his childhood home of Haymount to Andrew Smith of Whitechester so that the house could be turned into the town's first hospital; Smith paid for the building and its conversion to 'Whitechester Hospital' as well as some of the running costs in the years which followed. John MacWatt now went into partnership with Dr John Mackenzie who lived in nearby Maryfield although the two men dissolved their partnership in 1912.

MacWatt was clearly dedicated to the people of the area, travelling whatever distances were necessary and turning out at all hours of the day and night to attend to his patients, including performing basic operations. Originally, he travelled around on horseback, up into the Lammermuir hills or wherever, before progressing to a carriage and groom to drive him around. And then, in 1903, he became the first person in Duns to acquire a motor car for everyday use – a 5 horse-power Humberette two-seater, costing around £130 and capable of 25mph. All in all, he became the archetypal trusted and much-loved country doctor.



1903 Humberette Cycle-Car of the type owned by John MacWatt

In 1897, he was appointed to the additional role of Medical Officer of Health for the burgh of Duns, following his father into the office. The annual salary was £40. This post required him to take an oversight of births and deaths; inspect places like food shops and the slaughter-house; and supervise the town's water supply, sanitation and housing. He had to be particularly vigilant to respond whenever there was an outbreak of infectious disease. Regular reports on all such matters had to be presented to the Town Council.

In the early 1930s, John MacWatt started to wind down his medical activities and retired properly in 1935 when he resigned as Medical Officer of Health. He was overwhelmed when he was presented with a cheque for over £500 (around £35,000 value today) raised by local people together with a bound book listing the names of all those who had contributed – and

who were, of course, registering their profound gratitude. Dr John MacWatt lived for only a few more years, dying in February, 1938. Towards the end, he spent around ten days in an Edinburgh nursing home before returning to Morelands. The Berwickshire News headed its report on his death, 'Duns loses beloved physician'.

Dr John MacWatt : Dog Breeder

John MacWatt had a keen interest in dogs, especially greyhounds and Bedlington terriers which are noted for their similarity in appearance to lambs. He regularly won prizes in dog shows far and wide, including Berwick, Newcastle and Dunfermline. In 1889, he won first prize in the Bedlington pup class at the Alexandra Palace Kennel Club Show in London.

By the early 1890s, he was sufficiently respected in dog-breeding circles to be appointed a judge at shows. In 1892, he donated a number of financial prizes for greyhound and Bedlington classes at the annual Berwick and Border Kennel Club Show. His finest animal was his 'famous greyhound bitch' called 'Merry Mabelle' which won prizes and a gold medal in Edinburgh as well as taking the challenge prize for the third year running at the National Dog Show in Birmingham in 1892.

Dr John MacWatt : Botanist

John MacWatt found national recognition in his other pursuit as botanist and plant-breeder, especially of primulas. Over the years, he developed the three acres of gardens at Morelands with herbaceous borders, rock gardens, an orchard, greenhouses and frames. His garden came to be 'noted far and wide' with 'one of the finest collections of herbaceous plants in Berwickshire'. In 1927, Morelands was visited by the editor of Amateur Gardening magazine. From boyhood, MacWatt's special interest had been in flowers and he became fascinated by primulas – studying them, growing them, showing them, acquiring and experimenting with non-British plants (fewer than half a dozen primula varieties are native to this country) and eventually developing and selling his own new varieties, some of which are still popular today such as MacWatt's Blue and MacWatt's Cream.

To help with the garden (MacWatt was, after all, a busy country doctor), he employed a Duns man called Joseph Taylor as gardener. In fact, Taylor was also MacWatt's groom when the doctor was driven around the countryside in a horse-drawn carriage to see his patients. And, after MacWatt acquired his Humberette motor car, it was Taylor who became his chauffeur. During the Great War, the doctor even had to plead Taylor's case at the local military tribunal to avoid him being called up for military service. Taylor became so expert in primulas himself that he aided MacWatt in judging at shows. After John MacWatt's death in 1938, Taylor continued to work for the doctor's widow, Dorothy MacWatt, and afterwards for the next owner; he eventually completed some 50 years of service at Morelands!



Joseph Taylor, MacWatt's gardener, groom and chauffeur; flower border at Morelands

John MacWatt's achievements in the field of primula-growing were hugely impressive. In 1912, he won a silver medal and diploma of honour at the Royal International Horticultural Exhibition in London for his collection of primulas which was described as 'one of the most comprehensive in Great Britain'. In their cultivation, MacWatt was already 'a recognised expert'. He was growing such a large number of the plants in his Duns garden that, between 1910 and 1915, he was publishing his own catalogues, offering primulas for sale. In 1913, he spoke at a conference beside Gertrude Jekyll, one of the greatest British horticulturalists and garden designers of all time. In 1923, he wrote a book entitled 'The Primulas of Europe', published by the Country Life Library. It became a classic reference work for the identification and cultivation of the flowers and can occasionally be found in second-hand bookshops today – although perhaps only purists would take an interest in it now. The writer's name on the book cover is 'John MacWatt MB' – one of the indications that the 'Mac' spelling is correct or at least preferred since it seems unlikely that the author would have allowed an error.

His show successes are far too many to list but his special achievements came at the London shows to which his plants were transported in boxes loaded at Berwick Station on to a special goods wagon attached to a regular passenger train. But, of all his diplomas, cups, medals and other awards, two events stood out. At the Chelsea Flower Shows of 1925 and 1930, Queen Mary was so captivated by MacWatt's show of rare primulas that she asked for the exhibitor to be presented to her. On one occasion, MacWatt just had time to grab some of his spare flowers and make them up into a small posy which he presented to the Queen at his display during a brief conversation; she apparently carried them with her for the rest of her trip around the show.

To be 'a chief among experts' on primulas, as *Amateur Gardening* magazine described MacWatt in 1931, would surely have been enough but, in his last years, he was developing

his Morelands garden further by growing hardy ferns and writing articles about them for publications such as *The Rock Garden*. For a man kept so busy by his medical practice, John MacWatt's dedication and drive to become an expert of such botanical renown were remarkable. But then much of his life could be similarly described.



The information in this paper has been researched from various newspapers of the time such as the Scotsman, Berwickshire News and Berwick Advertiser and from public records – census; valuation rolls; and birth, marriage and death records.

David McLean (2023)

