

Wellnage, Duns

David McLean (2022)



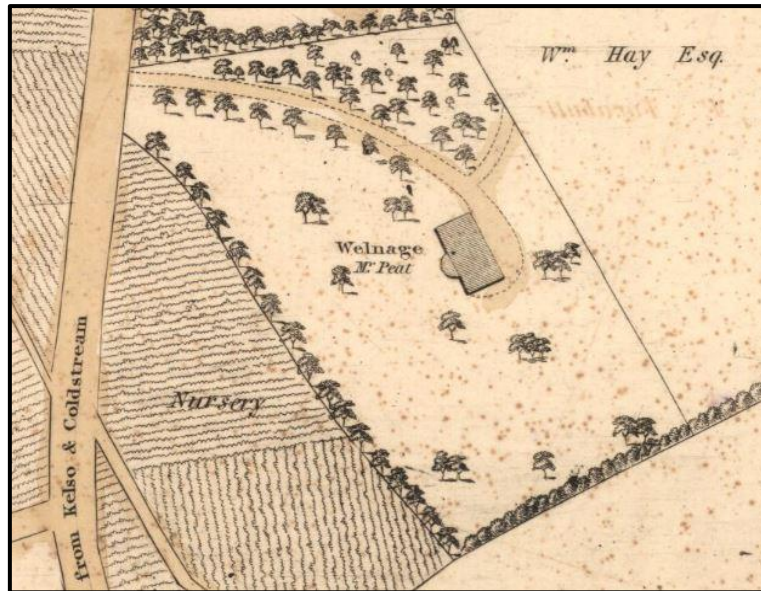
Introduction

Wellnage sits with three other early nineteenth-century properties (Haymount, Morelands and Blythebank) in a broad arc reaching southward from the foot of Bridgend in Duns; originally, this whole area to the south of the town was known as ‘Haymount’, the land being owned by the Hays of Duns Castle. There must have been a house in this area some time before the modern property was built since an advert in the Newcastle Chronicle of 1778 offered for let ‘that house and ground called the Wellnage, lying on the east side of Dunse, in Berwickshire, much adapted for a Nursery and Kitchen Garden’. The advert also stated that the property would lend itself to being a public house, suggesting that it lay close to the road, with the potential to attract the custom of travellers; that would have been the old road south out of Dunse, now Trinity Lane. Perhaps this older house was demolished when the modern Wellnage was built. ‘Wellnage’ is only one of four spellings of the name in maps and other documents; it is also to be found as ‘Welnage’, ‘Wallnage’ and ‘Walnage’.

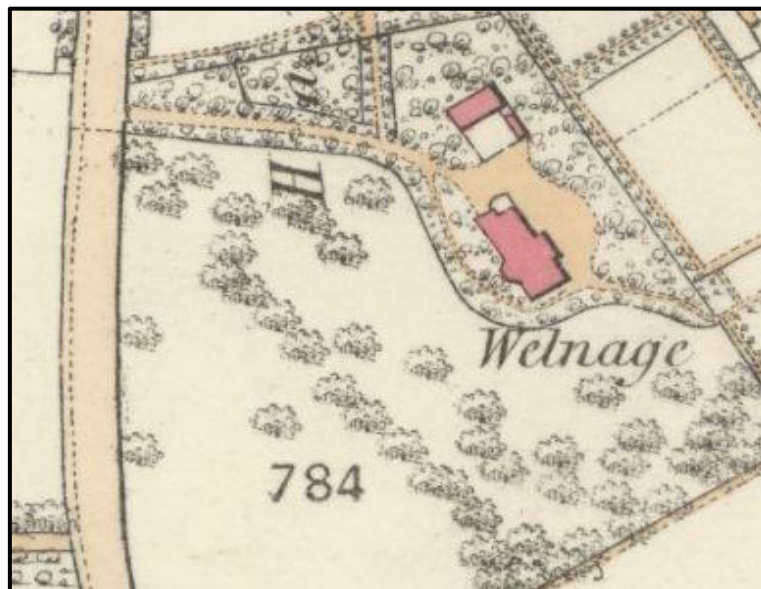
Building Wellnage

It is impossible to date the building of the house more precisely than to say that it is early nineteenth century; we know that it was there by 1824 and that it was built by a man called

George Peat. He was born around 1770 and started in business in Dunse as a ‘writer’ (lawyer) in 1792. In 1793, he married Elizabeth Cumine (or Cumin) in Edinburgh and, in 1796, they had a son, also called George, the first of five children; there is a family tree at the end of this paper. The house remained in the family until 1876. The property, however, went through a number of alterations.



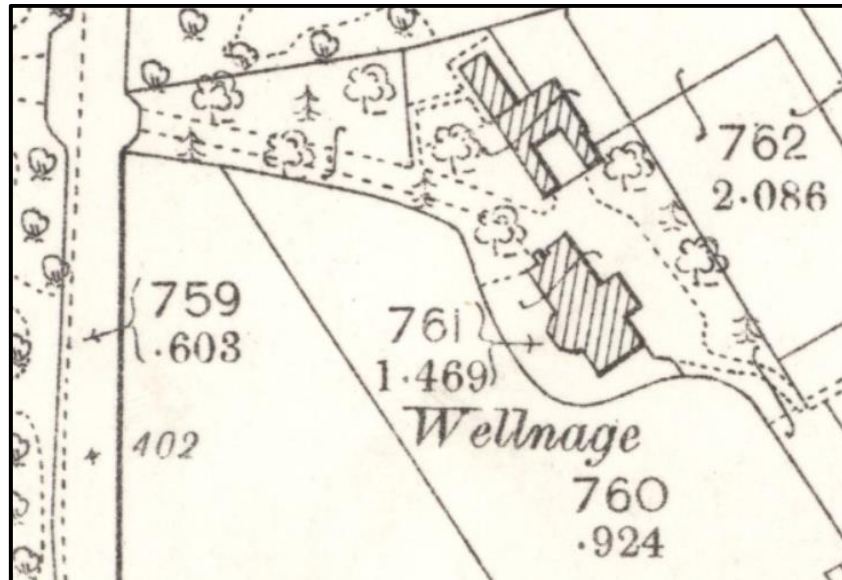
Wellnage in map of 1824



Wellnage in map of 1857

The map of 1824 above shows how George Peat senior built a smaller property although in extensive grounds. By the time of the 1857 map, three main changes had taken place, probably executed by his son, George Peat junior. Firstly, the house was extended to the north; secondly, an additional entrance porch was built to the rear of the property; and,

thirdly, a cottage and stable were constructed a short distance away, on the town side. But the changes were not finished. As the map of 1899 below shows, the cottage itself was later enlarged by building an extension on the north side and the stable courtyard was further developed. Whether this final set of changes was carried out by the Peats or the subsequent owners is unclear. Today, Wellnage is category-B listed and has undergone further change very recently, being divided into two, semi-detached properties.



Wellnage in map of 1899

The Peat Family at Wellnage

As we have seen, George Peat senior came to Dunse in 1792 to practise as a lawyer, married the following year and had five children by 1804. He clearly thrived in his chosen profession, being appointed procurator fiscal for Berwickshire in 1808 and then sheriff-substitute for the county in 1823. His name is associated with one of the more bizarre stories associated with the town. In 1826, two grave-robbers (or 'resurrectionists' as they were often known) were challenged on the road over Hardens Hill, transporting a body which had been exhumed from Edrom churchyard to Edinburgh in a horse-drawn gig. The culprits fled on foot over the moor, the body was re-interred at Edrom and the horse, which had been hired, was returned to its rightful owner in Kelso. The gig was stored in a shed near the top of Shambles Wynd (Murray Street today). When someone appeared about a year later to reclaim the gig, an incensed Dunse mob removed the vehicle and dragged it round the streets before smashing it to pieces and burning it in the Market Place. It became a full-blown riot and it was allegedly sheriff-substitute and justice of the peace George Peat who appeared on the scene to read the Riot Act to the violent crowd. It made no difference since he was simply ignored but the authorities, perhaps wisely, decided not to pursue the matter further.

George Peat remained as sheriff-substitute for Berwickshire until 1836 when he had a 'severe paralytic attack' (in other words, a stroke) which forced him to give up the office. He died four years later in 1840, aged 70, at his Wellnage home. His wife, Elizabeth, had died five years earlier, in 1835.

George Peat junior followed his father into the legal profession; in the 1851 census, he is listed as also having achieved the office of procurator fiscal. He was also agent for the Bank of Scotland and auditor of the Dunse burgh accounts. He never married and continued to live at Wellnage with his sister, Marjory who also appears to have remained single. He was one of the founding members of the Ellem Fishing Club and its president for some years. In the early 1860s, he was treasurer of a Berwickshire committee which raised funds for the relief of unemployed cotton workers in England - the industry had been hit hard by the American Civil War. George Peat junior died in 1869 at the age of 72.

The historical record becomes trickier at this point. In 1870, the Berwickshire News reported a 'Mrs Peat of Wellnage' purchasing a property in Bridgend for conversion to a school for the children of Catholic families in the town. There were not many Roman Catholic families living in Dunse at this time; they tended to be the families of Irish labourers. But 'Mrs Peat' was clearly concerned for the education of their children and some 20 attended the school which she started.

Another newspaper, the Teviotdale Record, also covered the story and described Mrs Peat as being 'the sister-in-law of the late George Peat'. A look at the family tree at the end of this paper must conclude that the Mrs Peat in question could only be Elizabeth Peat, widow of George Peat's younger brother, Alexander, who had been a major in the service of the East India Company and was deceased by this time. It would appear, therefore, that Elizabeth Peat (maiden name Elizabeth Charlotte Scott - she was related to Sir Walter Scott) was now living in Wellnage with her daughter, Marjory, who was married in the house in 1873 to Robert Slight, owner of the paper mill at Chirnside; Slight's first wife (Mary Susan Rose Slight) had died of diphtheria the previous year, at the age of 28.



Baronial-style interior at Wellnage

Two notable stories concerning servants occurred during the Peats' time at Wellnage. George McDougall was the classic 'loyal servant', being an employee of George Peat senior, then George Peat junior and, finally, of Elizabeth Peat who founded the Catholic school. When George Peat junior died in 1869, it was George McDougall who was sent to register his death. In 1873, McDougall was presented with a silver teapot in recognition of his having completed 41 years of service with the Peat family!

The other story was a tragic one. Elizabeth Hay was one of the servants employed by George Peat junior. In 1847, the body of a new-born female child was discovered in one of the privies at Wellnage. Hay was charged with concealing a pregnancy and with child murder. Her pleas of guilty to the first charge and not guilty to the second were accepted. After George Peat and her previous employer had testified to the excellence of her work as a servant, Elizabeth Hay was sentenced to six months in the jail at Greenlaw.

The Wilson Family at Wellnage

By late 1876, the last Peat had left Wellnage when the whole household furniture was sold at auction; the house was described in the notice of sale as having a dining room, drawing room, library, hall, kitchen and eight bedrooms. The library must have been well stocked since Swans, the town auctioneers, sold all the books at a separate auction in the Corn Exchange the following day. Wellnage had been bought by tenant farmer John Wilson ahead of his retirement from Edington Mains east of Chirside.

John Wilson was born in 1810 into a family which could trace back its farming tenancies of Edington over some 300 years; Wilson was particularly proud of the extensive collection of written leases which his family had preserved through the generations. He married twice. His first marriage in 1846 to Margaret Cunningham, daughter of a Duns lawyer and bank agent, produced no children. He was married again in 1862, to Margaret Currie Hogue with whom he had five daughters between 1864 and 1871 (by which time he was in his early 60s). The Wilson family tree can also be seen at the end of this paper. The Edington lands which Wilson farmed had long been owned by the Hays of Duns Castle and their decision to sell them seems to have prompted Wilson's retirement in 1877. Now in his late 60s, it was time to give up the farm, especially since he had no sons to take on the lease.

Wilson was one of the most enterprising tenant farmers of his day and a man who commanded the full respect of all in the agricultural community. To mark his retirement and achievements, his fellow Berwickshire farmers commissioned Norman MacBeth RSA to paint his portrait in oils for 250 guineas; it was presented to Wilson by Hay of Duns Castle (his last landlord) at a special ceremony in the Red Lion Hotel in Berwick in 1878.

Such was the respect in which Wilson was held for his knowledge of farming in this part of Scotland that he was chosen to contribute the article on agriculture for two successive issues of Encyclopedia Britannica. In 1869, he had been elected president of the Scottish Chamber of Agriculture, described as the 'most likely individual who could smooth the strained relations between landlords and tenants'. After his retirement, he wrote an article which was presented at an international congress on agriculture in Paris.



Timber panelling and ornate plaster ceilings at Wellnage

John Wilson was a deeply religious man who sided with the Free Church following the Great Disruption which split the Church of Scotland in 1843. He was one of the main figures in forming the Free Church congregation at Allanton; the new church had to be built some distance south of the village when no landowner would sell them a site anywhere closer. When Wilson moved to Dunse in 1877, he transferred his allegiance to the Boston Free Church in Station Road and often acted as local delegate to the General Assembly of the Free Church of Scotland. In the 1880s, he was president of the Duns Evangelistic Association which sought to encourage religious fervour in the town and he was closely involved in the work of the National Bible Society.

Wilson also had a keen sense of civic duty. Following the passage of the landmark Education Act of 1872, he became chairman of the parish school board in Chirnside and was chosen as a member of the equivalent board in Dunse after he moved to Wellnage. It was Wilson who gave the address at the opening ceremony of the new Dunse Public School in Langtongate in 1880. He was appointed a justice of the peace in which role he was always keen to reduce the number of licensed public houses in the area. In 1889, he accepted a nomination for the Duns ward on Berwickshire County Council.

Wilson's two eldest daughters both married Free Church ministers. Margaret Cunningham Wilson married the Reverend James Miller of the Eyemouth Church who helped the community through the aftermath of the fishing disaster of 1881; six years later, he became minister of the Free Church in Bridge of Allan. Wilson's second daughter, Helen Wilson, married her namesake Reverend John Wilson of Viewlaw who became minister of the Free Church in Canonbie and then of the Church of Scotland in Trinidad; they both died there, John in 1931 and Helen in 1941. Wilson's third daughter, Mary Todd Wilson, married a Berwickshire man called Thomas Hood in 1906; they eventually moved to Essex where Hood was employed as a land agent, having learned his trade with John Ferguson, the factor of Duns Castle Estate. As a second lieutenant in the Suffolk Regiment, Thomas Hood was killed in action on the Somme battlefield in 1916; Mary died in Bridge of Allan in 1924.

John Wilson died at Wellnage at the age of 81 in 1891. His obituary in the Berwick Advertiser described him as a 'highly esteemed and widely respected gentleman'. He was interred in the churchyard at Foulden. His widow, Margaret Currie Wilson, continued to live at Wellnage until her death in 1913 at the age of 85.

Wellnage remained the home of John Wilson's two youngest daughters, Elizabeth and Katharine, who were unmarried. Newspaper references in the 1920s also show that, following his retirement, the Reverend James Miller and his wife, Margaret (John Wilson's eldest daughter) moved to Wellnage; James Miller died there in 1922. With her two sisters, Margaret was still living in the house in 1930 but the property was sold soon afterwards. This means that, essentially, Wellnage spent its first hundred years in the possession of only two families.



Rear entrance porch, added by 1857

The Laidlaw Family at Wellnage

Wellnage now became home to the Laidlaws although only until 1934. At this time, on the eastern edge of Duns, that other fine house known as Wellfield was owned by Alexander Middlemas Laidlaw and his wife, Isabella. Laidlaw was a woollen blanket manufacturer at Cumledge Mill near Preston. In April 1931, their son William Alexander Laidlaw (living at Wellfield and also in the family textile business) married Isabella Gibson Nicoll in St Giles Church in Edinburgh. He was 28 years old and she was 32. The family clearly had connections in high places since the new Mrs Laidlaw was presented by her mother at Their Majesties' Court in 1932!

It would appear that William and Isabella Laidlaw acquired Wellnage around the time of their marriage. The clue is an advertisement in the Berwickshire News in April 1931 – the same month in which they were married – placed by the groom's mother, looking for a cook to

start work not at Wellfield but at Wellnage; perhaps the young couple were still on honeymoon and William's mother was preparing Wellnage for their arrival.

The young Laidlaws of Wellnage were soon taking an active part in the life of the local community. In the summer of 1932, they were among the judges at the annual Duns pageant which raised money for the Royal Infirmary in Edinburgh. Later that year, they were part of the platform party at the church sale of work at Bonkyl and Isabella Laidlaw (or 'Iby' as she was usually known) was a stallholder at a sale of work in Preston a short time later.

In September 1933, a son was born in Edinburgh 'to Iby (nee Nicoll), wife of W A Laidlaw, Wellnage, Duns'. In the 1934 valuation roll, William A Laidlaw is shown as proprietor (owner) of the house, offices and garden at Wellnage, together with land which was being rented by James Miller & Sons, local butchers, and the cottage which was tenanted by William Stevenson, their gardener. However, the Laidlaws were soon on the move although presumably not far since William A Laidlaw became manager of the Cumledge business when his father died in late 1934. The next valuation roll of 1935 shows Wellnage with new owners.



The gardener's cottage with bell-tower at Wellnage

The Simpson Family at Wellnage

The 1935 valuation roll shows that ownership of Wellnage had passed to Walter Thorburn Simpson; he apparently bought the house in 1934. He was a native of London but spent most of his earlier life in Peebles. As it happened, the Simpson family was also involved in the cloth manufacturing business and Walter first worked in his uncle's Peebles company, Walter Thorburn & Brothers – Walter Thorburn Simpson had been given his uncle's names.

At Moffat, in 1902, he married Mary Sinclair Pottinger, a native of Shetland. They had two sons, both born while the Simpsons were still in Peebles. Robert Alison Crichton Simpson was born in 1903 and David Shirley Crichton Simpson was born in 1910. The different spellings of 'Crichton' and 'Crighton' are how they appear on their birth certificates.

After acquiring experience with his uncle, Walter Thorburn Simpson moved to Leeds to manage a mill for a company called Edwin Woodhouse. He stayed there for some twenty years, retired in 1933 and returned to the Scottish borderland in 1934 when he purchased Wellnage. Although supposedly in retirement, he seems to have kept up quite a lot of business activities and was often travelling. In addition to the 1935 valuation roll, Simpson is shown as owner of Wellnage in the rolls of 1936, 1940 and 1941. He was granted permission to make alterations at Wellnage in 1936 but this may have concerned walls and balustrading in the garden rather than changes to the house itself.

Walter Thorburn Simpson was appointed to Duns Town Council in the spring of 1936 as an interim councillor to fill a vacancy caused by a resignation. Later in the year, he stood for election in his own right but came fifth by some 50 votes in a contest for four seats and so his brief spell as a councillor was over. In any case, ill health would soon prevent him from making the civic contribution which he would have desired. His wife, Mary Sinclair Simpson, died in a Carlisle nursing home in 1938. Walter Thorburn Simpson himself died at Wellnage at the age of 75 in May 1942.

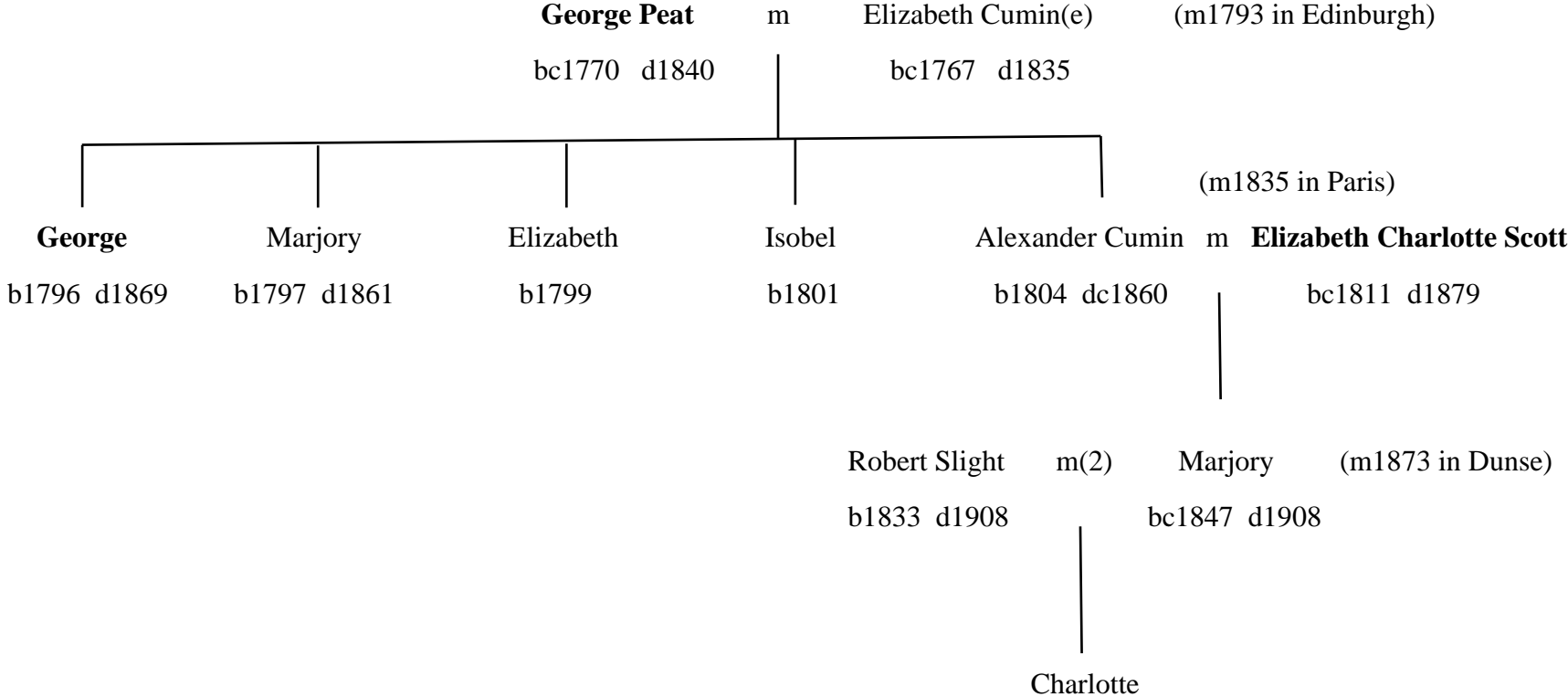
Valuation rolls cease to be digitally accessible after 1941, but it appears that Simpson's elder son, Robert A C Simpson became proprietor of Wellnage. Both he and his brother served as officers during the Second World War, Robert in the Royal Scots and David in the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders. After the war, Major Robert A C Simpson continued to live at Wellnage; he was an architect by profession with a business in Duns but he remained as second-in-command of the 4th Battalion of the Royal Scots (Territorial Army). In 1950, both he and his brother were involved in the presentation of Colours by the Princess Royal at Glencorse barracks outside Edinburgh.

Robert A C Simpson, married to Rosemary Euphemia Morrison, had become a member of Duns Town Council by 1949. In 1950, he wrote a letter to the Scotsman, endorsing the idea of combining the forthcoming 1951 census with a plebiscite (referendum) on Scottish devolution. He remained a Duns town councillor in 1956 but had moved to Ellem Lodge, Ellemford by the time of his death in September 1962 at the age of 59. That same year, Wellnage was bought by Lieutenant-Colonel John Trotter who remained in the house until his death in 1983; his wife, Yolande Joan Sophia Trotter had died the previous year.

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

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Peat (Wellnage, Duns) Family Tree



Wilson (Wellnage, Duns) Family Tree

