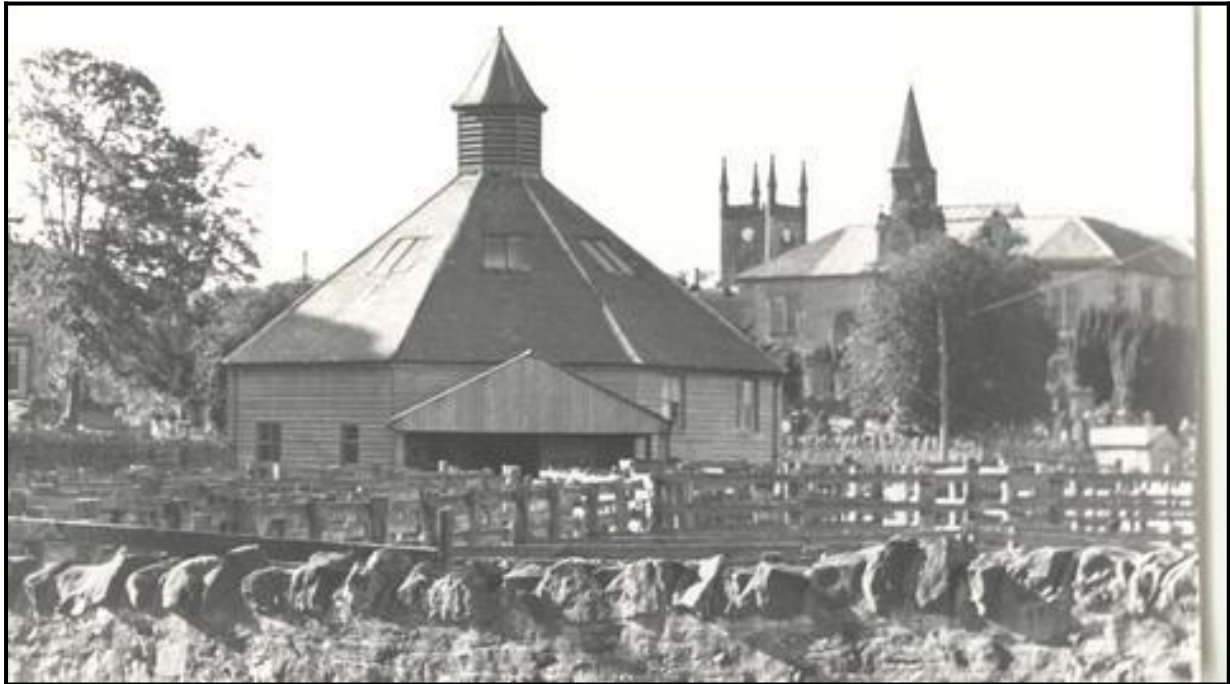


DUNS AUCTION MART

David McLean (2021)

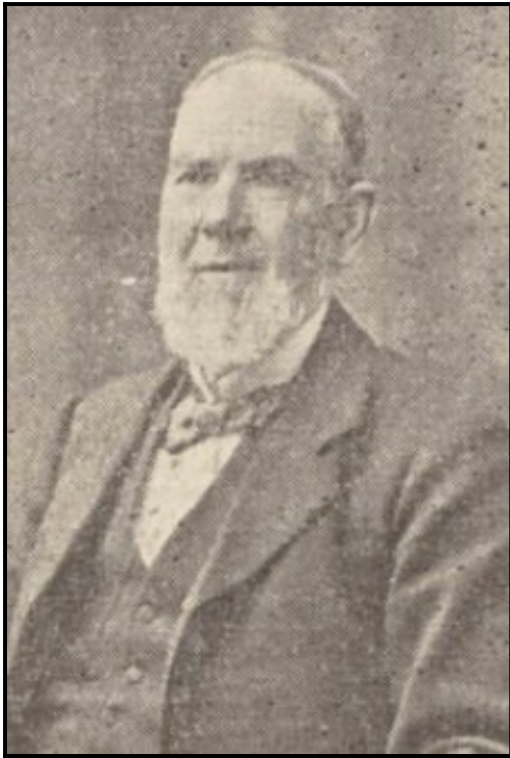


Introduction

Being the main town (with burgh status) in Berwickshire and given its central location in the county, Duns was a market town long before it gained its nineteenth-century auction mart. Cattle and horses had traditionally been sold at regular markets in Newtown Street which was especially wide for its time and therefore very suitable for the purpose. By the early 1800s, horses were habitually sold at the west end of the street and cattle at the east end; sheep were sold round the corner in Castle Street.

As the century progressed, Duns (or Dunse as it was spelled until 1882) grew in size and prosperity. By the 1850s, the town boasted a number of banks - the British Linen, the City of Glasgow and the Bank of Scotland in Newtown Street and the Royal Bank not far away in Black Bull Street. The Corn Exchange was built in 1856. The range of shops and services (including insurance agencies) was expanding all the time. Successful shopkeepers and professional men began to build impressive houses away from the town centre in Teindhillgreen, Station Road and Bridgend. Duns was becoming a more refined town. Herds of cattle and flocks of sheep milling about the thoroughfares became increasingly inconvenient. As market towns everywhere were finding, something more modern was needed.

R G and W B Swan, Auctioneers



Robert George Swan
(1830-1913)



William Bertram Swan
(1844-1908)

Robert George Swan (born 1830) and William Bertram Swan (born 1844) were the sons of Thomas Swan, the proprietor of a successful joinery and house carpentry business in Duns, employing 11 men and 2 boys at the 1871 census. Both Robert and William followed their father into the joinery trade. Robert was still working as a joiner when he married in 1858 but, in the early 1860s, he set up in business as an auctioneer and appraiser (valuer). By 1871, he was living with his wife and three daughters at Albert Cottages on Bridgend; he later moved to Elm Bank in the same part of the town.

In 1871, his brother William was still living at home with his parents in Easter Street and working for his father as a journeyman joiner. William married in 1879, by which time he was also recorded as being an auctioneer. William was 14 years younger than his brother and we can probably assume that Robert encouraged William to join him in the auction business.

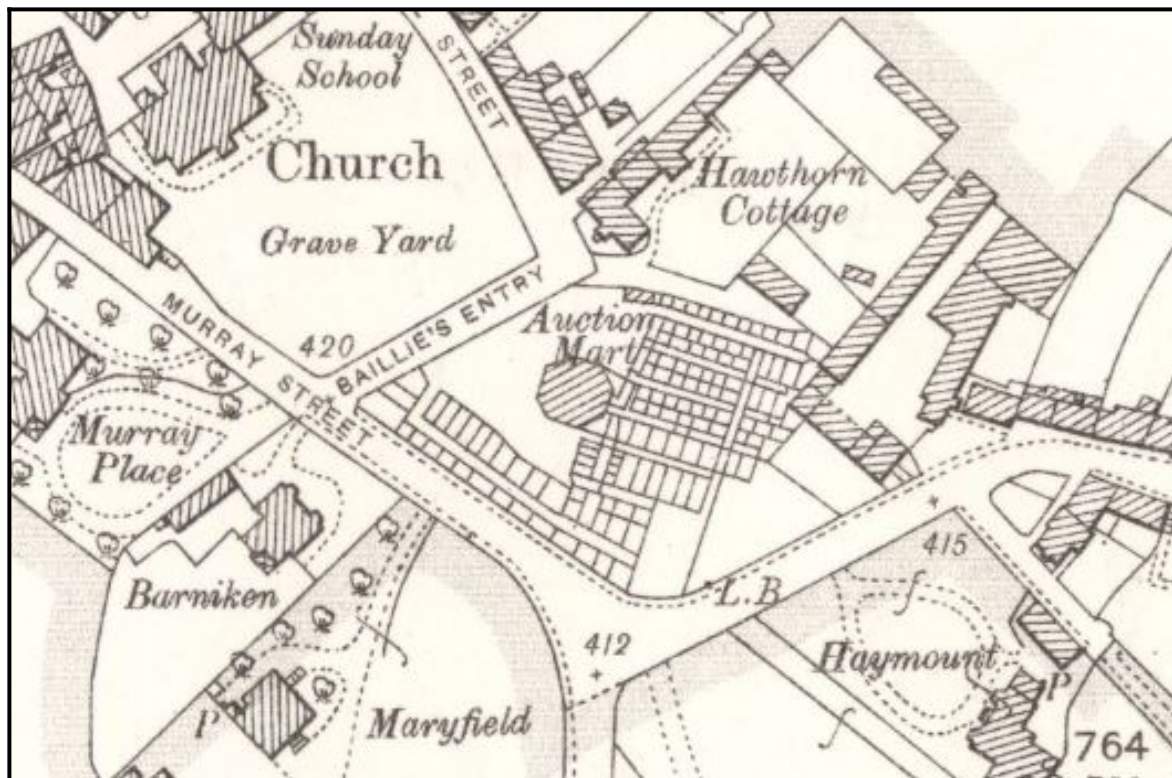
In 1869, Robert Swan rented land at the bottom of Bridgend on which to construct an auction ground. The site covered the position of the current Aitchison's Garage and the car park at the foot of Murray Street; the alignment of the roads was different then. There was no building; he set up his sale ground as a set of pens in which to hold the stock. But at least there was now a properly focussed location for livestock sales, away from the busier streets of the town and not too far from the railway station for animals transported by train.

Building Duns Auction Mart

By 1877, Robert Swan was doing well enough to take the decision to construct an indoor auction mart so that sales could at least be conducted out of any inclement weather. It was built on the sale ground which he already operated and can be seen in the photograph at the top of this article and in the map below.

It was an octagonal structure with timber walls, about 50 feet (15 metres) in diameter and with a slate roof. It was constructed, of course, by his father's joiners. The interior was lit both from windows and roof lights. The sale ring was about 30 feet (9 metres) in diameter with seating all around. There was a ventilator grille on the apex of the roof - a useful feature on those days when hundreds of cattle and sheep passed through the mart! Opportunity was taken to increase and re-organise the holding pens outside the mart. The new venture was opened in November, 1877.

However, although Swan had re-configured his outside pens, he had clearly given insufficient thought to the underfoot (or under-hoof) conditions which became unpleasantly churned-up and muddy in wet weather. Five years later, in 1882, he added more pens and 'paved the alleys' leading through the yard. Now, with a modern auction mart, Duns was even more the market town of Berwickshire.



(Ordnance Survey Map, 25 inches to the mile, published 1899)

Livestock Sales

There were generally auctions on a fortnightly basis, usually on Mondays. Farmers would be there mainly to sell animals but also to purchase calves and lambs for bringing on; dealers would have similar intentions. On occasion, these dealers came from as far afield as Newcastle, Leeds, Bradford and Halifax as well as from various Border towns. And butchers would always be present in considerable numbers especially because, in the days before refrigeration, they needed regular, fresh supplies. Hundreds of skins were also auctioned; these would come from local butchers and be bought by tanners in the town and elsewhere.

Sometimes, there were auctions dedicated to cattle or to sheep but, generally, it was a mixture of such animals, together with smaller numbers of horses and pigs and even the occasional poultry. Notice of sales always appeared well in advance in newspapers such as the 'Berwickshire News', inviting entries for the next auction. A few days before the sale, a ballot was held to determine the order in which the lots would appear in the auction ring. On sale days, it was common for one of the Swan brothers to sell the cattle before the other took over for the sheep. And, throughout the day, the shops and hostelrys in the town expected to benefit!

A few random examples of auction sales will give an impression of the numbers involved :

	<i>Cattle</i>	<i>Calves</i>	<i>Sheep/Lambs</i>	<i>Pigs</i>
<i>June 1881</i>	148	26	520	28
<i>June 1903</i>	167	27	933	74
<i>January 1907</i>	97	14	1712	39
<i>March 1928</i>	195	40	1500	150

Sometimes, there were special auction events. The most anticipated was the annual show and sale of stock when prizes (mainly donated by the big local landowners) were awarded for various classes of animals. At one time, there were nine prizes - five for cattle, two for sheep, one for pigs and one for collie dogs. Prizes could be money, cups or gifts like silver-plated tea services which were sourced from local shops. Winning any of these prizes brought great credit to the successful farms and guaranteed top prices when the animals were afterwards sold in the ring. For some show sales (1888 and 1905 are examples), the North British Railway Company ran special goods trains to bring stock from the central Borders.

These shows only started in the 1870s but 1879 was a highlight year. There were just four cattle prizes that year but James Craw of Whitsome Hill swept the board by winning all four, picking up eight guineas in prize money and two silver cups, one of them presented by the town of Dunse for the best four fat bullocks. His prize single animal afterwards made £40 in the ring and his best pair of bullocks fetched over £70.

The annual dedicated lamb sales were also important events. Around 3500 animals went through the ring in the 1882 sale, over 8000 in 1901 and some 8500 in 1908.

Other Business at the Auction Mart

Some of the big landowners in Berwickshire rented their grass parks to the highest bidder, the auctions often being conducted in the Duns mart. As an example, the grazings of Whitchester, Marchmont and Longformacus estates as well as Bonkyl Glebe were let in this way in the spring of 1925. Farmers might also let fields of turnips in a similar way, through the auction mart, such as the 40 acres of turnips let at Brieryhill in 1907; the usual stipulation was that the turnips must not be lifted - sheep must be put to feed on them. When a farm fell vacant (perhaps a tenant moving on at the end of a lease or on the death of a farmer), the livestock and implements would usually be sold off. Again, the auctioneers were called but, in these circumstances, it was much easier to go out and conduct the sale on site rather than attempt to transport everything to the mart.

But livestock and goods associated with farming were far from being the only subject of sales in Duns auction mart. Over the years, an enormous amount of furniture went under the hammer. On the death of a lone householder, it was common practice for the house to be cleared and the contents to be sent to the mart - and not just from Duns but from a fairly wide area beyond the town. The same often happened when people left the area to live in another part of the country. Before the days of motor transport, house removals over a distance were very problematic and so it was often more convenient to sell up the furniture and effects at the Duns mart and purchase replacement furniture at the other end! There was also enough supply and demand to warrant a general sale of furniture every year. Newspaper evidence shows these annual sales starting before 1890 and they were still going strong after the Second World War. In fact, monthly sales of furniture were being advertised in 1947.

Timber sales were conducted in the mart occasionally such as the 'several hundred larch stobs (fence posts)' auctioned on the sale ground in 1875. Tons of potatoes and carrots, usually made up in hundredweight bags, were sold from time to time. Bedding plant sales were almost annual events, from the local 'big house' gardens such as Langton House and Duns Castle. And when a tradesman such as a blacksmith or joiner died or retired from business, it was not uncommon for all his tools and materials to end up in the auction mart.

The Weighing Machine Debate, 1892

A new law of 1891 required most dealers in livestock to use weighing machines for fairness to both buyers and sellers but there was discretion for auction marts and it was up to local councils to decide in each case. One auction day in March 1892, Duns town council invited farmers and dealers to a meeting in the town hall to help determine whether the Swans should be obliged to install such a machine. Not many bothered to attend.

The Swans were not inclined to go to the expense of installing a weighing machine for what they saw as a small business. Robert Guy, a Duns butcher, agreed and said that anyone with experience could judge an animal's weight well enough just by looking at it. Walter Hogarth, a butcher from Berwick, was of similar mind. A Swinton butcher by the name of Bell took the opposite view, believing that many farmers wanted a weigh-bridge. But he was a lone

voice and there were no farmers present to back his opinion, so the council agreed exemption for the Swans.

Before a fortnight had passed, the town council had received a petition from 40 local farmers regretting the exemption decision and arguing for a weighing machine to ensure 'fair dealing' and accuracy! They were too late, of course, and had missed their chance. The Berwickshire Agricultural Association decided instead to contact the local MP (Edward Marjoribanks, Liberal), asking him to introduce an amendment to the law in parliament so that all auction marts would in future be bound by the requirement to have weighing machines. On reflection, the fact that most farmers wanted a weighing machine while most butchers did not perhaps tells its own story!

Trouble in the 1930s

In November 1931, Duns Town Council received a petition calling for the removal of the auction mart to another site, ideally on the outskirts of the town; a location near the railway station surely made sense especially since the slaughter house was also close by. Most of the signatories to the petition were people who lived in the vicinity of the mart and they complained of noise from bawling cattle and traffic issues on market days; they also described the mart as a 'menace to health'.

There was some consternation when it was discovered that Provost Winter and a number of town councillors had also signed the petition - which was, of course, addressed to themselves! It now appeared that the Town Council was in danger of acting as both prosecutor and judge in the case.

Opponents of the plan argued that, despite all the doctors of the town also having signed, no evidence of any health risk had been presented. The noise from markets once each fortnight could surely be tolerated and the police controlled the traffic on market days. Duns was not enjoying particular prosperity by the 1930s and was also losing population; moving the mart to the outskirts of the town would adversely impact on the business of the local shops and inns. Worse still, if the auction mart was forced to move, the company might simply decide to close down altogether and that would be even worse for the town.

A counter-petition was started to keep the mart where it was. The issue clearly caused much argument in the town and the council seems to have tied itself in knots over the matter. But the upshot was that the auction mart stayed at the foot of Murray Street.

The issue had not totally disappeared, however, since the Department of Health had to contact the Town Council in December 1937 after it received a letter of complaint, alleging insanitary conditions at the auction mart. The local Sanitary Inspector and Medical Officer inspected the premises and found them to be in a clean condition; it was habitual practice to disinfect the mart after every sale day.

The Evolution of RG and WB Swan, Auctioneers

Although the name of ‘Messrs RG and WB Swan, Auctioneers’ survived until after the Second World War, brothers Robert and William had both retired from the company and, indeed, died before the outbreak of the First World War. An attempt to trace the history of the business might therefore be useful.

As we have seen, Robert Swan set up his livestock auction business in 1869, at that time in partnership with a J B Kellie - probably John Bertram Kellie who lived at Rosebank in the Clouds, a farmer and at one time deputy sheriff clerk to his father. As ‘Swan and Kellie’, Swan did the auctioneering and Kellie looked after the books. But Kellie left the business five years later in 1874 and Robert’s brother, William, became a partner instead. William lived with his wife and family at Cheeklaw House, on the southern edge of the town. The company name now became ‘Messrs RG and WB Swan, Auctioneers’.

Robert Swan’s enterprise, however, also included the auction mart in Reston which he set up in the early 1870s, not long after he had established himself in Duns. With impressive business vision, he had seen that auction marts were the future of livestock trading, replacing the traditional trysts and street fairs such as Duns had entertained for so long in Newtown Street. Duns and Reston were both key rural towns, situated ideally on the railway. Auctions were held in the two marts on alternate weeks.

This, of course, also explains the concern of those who opposed moving the Duns mart away from Murray Street in the 1930s. They were afraid that, if the company was threatened with the expense of relocation to another site on the outskirts of the town, they would simply close down the Duns operation and concentrate on their other mart at Reston.

By the mid-1890s, Robert Swan had retired from the business, probably on health grounds since he suffered from chronic rheumatism. He lived the rest of his life at Shawbraes Farm, just west of Reston, where he was tenant; his brother, William, took over the tenancy of the Duns auction mart. But on the first day of January 1907, the Duns and Reston auction business officially passed to the next generation - to William Swan’s sons, Thomas and Allan, and to George Hogarth (a son-in-law of Robert Swan) as a third partner; the original company name of ‘Messrs RG and WB Swan’ was retained. Before long, the founding brothers had died, William in 1908 and Robert in 1913.

William Swan’s two sons did not enjoy long lives. Allan Swan died of a heart attack at the age of 42 in 1924; his older brother, Thomas Swan, died six years later, in 1930, at the age of 51. He had served as Provost of Duns and lived at Lanark Lodge. The third partner, George Hogarth, died only three years after that at the age of 76 in 1933. It appears that his son, George Burn Hogarth, took over the business. He was the only active partner in 1941 when he found himself charged with causing unnecessary suffering to animals. By a bizarre set of muddles, a pen of sheep was left in the Duns mart, unfed and unwatered, for a whole week during a period of heavy snow in April. One animal died but the rest recovered fully. The lorry driver who delivered them apparently put them into the pen and did not inform anyone. How everyone else failed to notice them is anyone’s guess but the snowstorm did not help.

Hogarth (who did not live in Duns) was found not guilty since he genuinely had no knowledge that the sheep were there.

In 1946, the company of 'Messrs RG and WB Swan' was taken over by Archibald Veitch and amalgamated with the Berwick Auction Mart Company Ltd of which he was managing director; he was also a farmer. There had been links between the two businesses for a long time, however, since Allan Swan was appointed as an auctioneer in the Berwick mart, beside the railway station, as far back as 1910. The Swans had also used the Berwick mart on Saturdays over the years to sell cattle privately, on commission.

Auctions in the Duns mart were still being reported in the 'Berwickshire News' in the later 1950s but the number of cattle, sheep and pigs sold was often down to a few dozen of each. With the convenience of motor transport for livestock, it became more attractive for farmers to use bigger marts like Newtown St Boswells where more buyers would be present. Auctions ceased at Duns around 1960 and the mart building was demolished. Aitchison's Bridgend garage was built on the eastern part of the site in the early 1960s. The rest of the site remained vacant for many years until a decision was taken to build a by-pass road around Duns town centre in the early 1980s. Currie Street was widened and extended and a roundabout and car park were created where the mart once stood.

Postscript

The name of Swan is also associated with the auction mart in Newtown St Boswells, today one of the most important in the south of Scotland. John Swan of Edinburgh (a member of the same extended family as Robert and William Swan), together with his sons Thomas and James, formed the company of 'John Swan & Sons' in 1856. They started auction marts in Earlston and Newtown St Boswells broadly around the same time as their relatives were establishing marts in Duns and Reston. The Swans can therefore be seen as very much the pioneers of auction marts in this area.

The information in this article was mainly researched from newspapers of the time (especially the 'Berwickshire News' and the 'Berwick Advertiser') and from public records - census; valuation rolls; and birth, marriage and death records.

David McLean (2021)