

Mansefield, Duns

David McLean (2023)



Introduction

Mansefield, located in Easter Street in Duns, is one of the town's oldest houses. Title deeds for the property survive from as far back as the 1640s but these are now relevant only to the land on which the house stands. The present building was constructed in the later eighteenth century but has undergone numerous changes over its long history with additions in the earlier nineteenth century and then a substantial refurbishment and remodelling in 1910. And there were further alterations as the twentieth century progressed, including the rebuilding of all the chimney stacks in brick. The property is quite often spelled as 'Mansfield' even in more recent sources. Today, it is category B listed.

The name 'Mansefield' is logical enough, given that the property was constructed in the corner of the Duns Parish Church glebe. But it actually served as a manse for a time when the house was occupied by the Reverend John Ralston of the South Church in Currie Street (now the carpet store) in the 1820s. Subsequently, a house in Bridgend was purchased to serve as the South Church minister's manse.

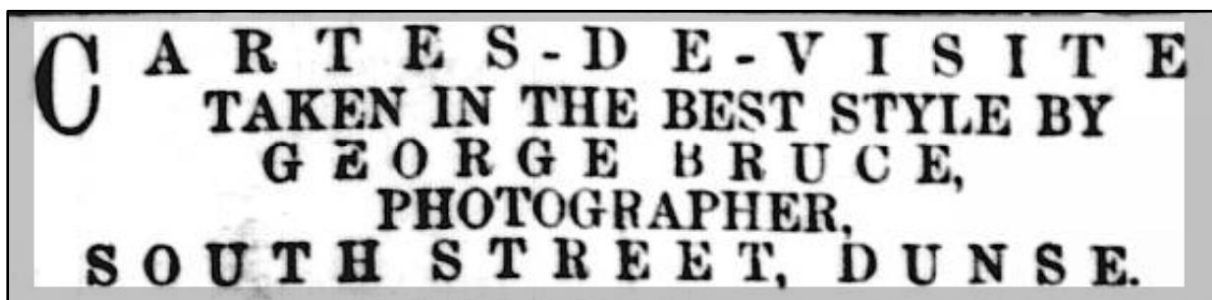
By the 1870s, Mansefield (or 59 Easter Street) was owned by Janet Darling Campbell, the wife of Doctor William Watson Campbell, a medical practitioner in Dunse. The Campbells,

however, did not live in the property – their home was at Westwood, 44 Newtown Street (now the Jim Clark Motorsport Museum). Mansefield was rented out. Later, Doctor Campbell himself also owned Viewlaw near the top of Bridgend, a house which he bought around 1890 for three of his unmarried sisters. Janet Darling Campbell died in 1894 at which point ownership of Mansefield passed to her husband. When he died only three years later in 1897, ownership was assumed by the trustees of the doctor's estate and remained with them until the early 1920s.

Mansefield and the Bruce Family

George Bruce, who was tenant of Mansefield for at least 30 years, became one of the most acclaimed photographers of his time. But his early career could not have hinted at such a profession. Bruce was born in Gifford in 1832. In Dunse, in 1857, he married Isabella Patterson who was some fourteen years older than her husband. She was a direct descendant of Doctor Thomas McCrie the elder, secession minister and historian and one of Dunse's most famous men. They had a son called George Roger who was born in 1859 (and died at the age of 16) and a daughter whom they named Isabella McCrie, born in 1860. There is a family tree at the end of this paper.

At the 1861 census, George Bruce (age 28) and his family were living in Newtown Street and he earned a living as a plumber, employing one boy. In 1865, he changed his occupation and set himself up as a photographer, moving to South Street which presumably offered space for a studio. He clearly had a keen interest in scientific subjects and became fascinated by the relatively new art of photography. It must have taken considerable courage to leave his plumbing trade behind and, with a wife and young family to support, invest in camera equipment and studio facilities. But George Bruce never looked back. In the early days, he was advertising illustrated visiting cards but his reputation for photographic portraiture was soon spreading across the borderlands and beyond; leading families with the ability to afford this new art were arranging to have their portraits taken in Bruce's studio.



Advertisement for visiting cards in the Illustrated Berwick Journal, 1865

By 1875, George Bruce had moved from South Street and become tenant of Mansefield although he was soon joining the owner of nearby Wellfield in sending a letter of complaint

to the Dunse Police Commission (the town council). A narrow lane called 'the Slits' which ran off into fields opposite his house had for some years, they claimed, become the 'common privy' for many people living in the east end of the town and had become worse since a 'common lodging-house' had opened in Easter Street. It sounds as if the Slits was being used as the preferred site for disposing of the contents of chamber pots!

In the summer of 1875, Bruce was advertising his 'new photographic studio' which he had constructed in the Mansefield garden. He described it as a 'glass house' although it appears to have had timber sides and a slate roof and had dimensions of some 30 feet by 12 feet. He had also invested in 'first class lenses' so that 'beautiful and artistic pictures may be secured'. He emphasised that appointments should be made before visiting his studio since he was increasingly busy.

Bruce was clearly a pioneer in this new art of photography, experimenting with equipment and developing techniques so as to produce the very best portraiture and landscape pictures. In 1879, one of his photographs was selected by the Edinburgh Photographic Society as the 'presentation print' for its members that year; some 400 copies were made. In 1881, he won a prize medal for photographs submitted to the International Exhibition of Fine Arts in London. His work was acknowledged 'to be amongst the finest and most truthful portraits made by the aid of light and lenses'. He was eventually submitting scientific papers on the subject to the leading institutions of the time and his work was rewarded with life membership of both the London Photographic Society and the Photographic Society of Great Britain. No wonder the Berwickshire News described him as a 'prince in the art of photography'.

But, outside of his work, George Bruce made a significant contribution to his home town. The 1872 Education Act required every parish to elect a school board and, where necessary, build new public schools able to accommodate all the children of the parish. When the new Dunse School Board looked at land opposite Mansefield as a potential site for a new school in 1877, Bruce and others objected and won the argument. But he became a member of the board a couple of years later in 1879 and was soon involved in condemning the shabby construction of the new school going up in Langtongate – the walls had been built so poorly that two of them had to be demolished and the work started over again.

Bruce was an elder of the East Church in Easter Street for over 40 years, Sabbath School teacher for even longer and session clerk for 20 years. He was a committed campaigner for temperance and was particularly keen on working with young people through the Band of Hope. He was also much involved with a musical association in the town, singing both sacred and secular music.

Bruce's wife died at the age of 71 in 1890 and George Bruce himself died of heart disease at Mansefield in 1906 after some years of poor health. Throughout his professional photographic career, Bruce had been ably assisted by his daughter, Isabella McCrie Bruce who never married. She too was a committed temperance supporter and she served for many years as a Sabbath School teacher in the East Church. She was a member of the Duns Ladies Reading Circle and the Duns Young Women's Club. After her father's death in 1906, she carried on his photographic business but only for three years – her own untimely death at the age of 49 occurred in 1909 when she suffered a brain haemorrhage. It was fitting that her death certificate recorded her occupation, like her father, as 'photographer'.

Such was the regard in which the Bruces were held that, after the death of Isabella McCrie Bruce, the last of the family, a subscription was raised to erect a tombstone of white Creetown granite in Duns New Cemetery. The appeal was generously supported by friends far and wide and the memorial was duly fashioned by the Duns monumental firm of Dods and Hogg. The base of the stone, now partly obscured below ground, reads 'Erected by friends on the occasion of the death of Isabella McCrie Bruce, as a memorial of the good deeds done by the family'.



Bruce family memorial in Duns New Cemetery

In November 1909, 'the photographic apparatus and stock-in-trade of the noted artist, the late Mr George Bruce, Photographer' together with the household furniture was sold at Mansefield by Swans, the town auctioneers. In early 1910, Bruce's photographic studio (which had been constructed in sections) was also advertised for sale.

Mansefield, 1910-1920

With the unexpected death of Isabella McCrie Bruce, Mansefield was suddenly vacant. The house was still owned by the trustees of Doctor William Watson Campbell and they decided that the time was right to give the property a major make-over. In March 1910, Mansefield was advertised for let although not immediately since it was 'about to be thoroughly overhauled and repaired and certain alterations carried out'. It would then have two public

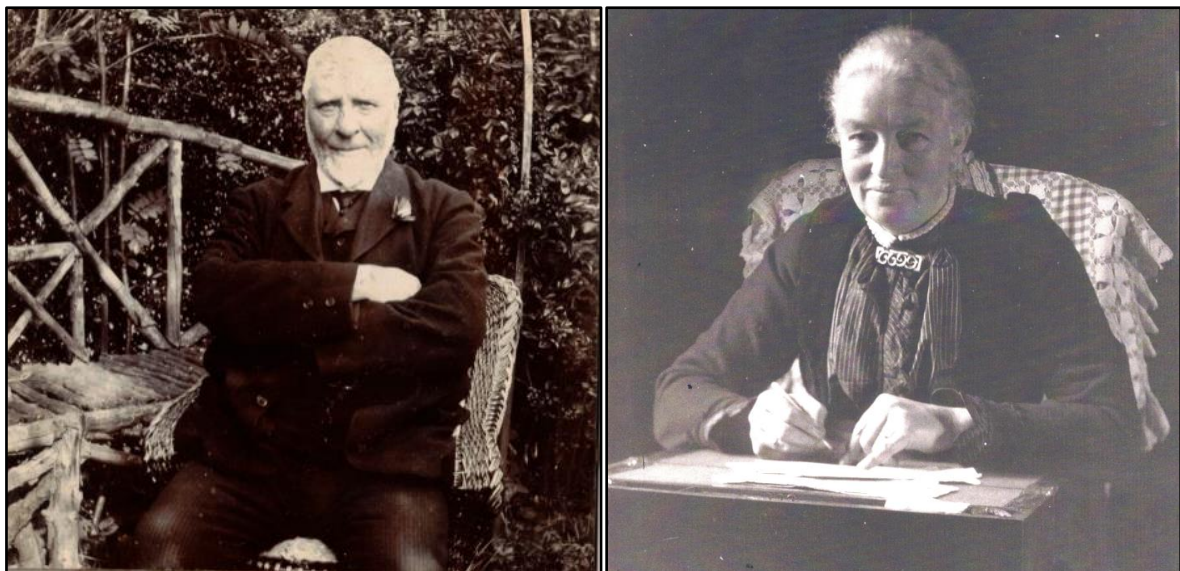
rooms, four bedrooms, a servant's bedroom, kitchen, pantry, scullery, coal store, WC and bathroom with hot and cold water. There was also a large garden.

Not much is known of the occupiers of the property over the next ten years. The tenant who moved in after the renovations was tailor James Veitch with his wife, Elizabeth, and their six children; they can be found in Mansefield at the 1911 census. However, for whatever reason, the family did not stay in Easter Street for very long. They appear to have left Mansefield by 1916 and were living in Castle Street by the time of the 1921 census.

From 1916, Mansefield was tenanted by Robert Gemmell and his wife; he was an inland revenue and customs officer. Their daughter Margaret was born during their time in the house but they appear to have vacated the property around 1920 and are not to be found in Duns in the 1921 census.

Mansefield and the Thomson Family

There was possibly another short-term tenancy of Mansefield following the Gemmells but the trustees of Doctor William Watson Campbell now decided to dispose of the property and it was advertised for sale in 1923. The next valuation roll of 1925 shows the house in the four-person joint ownership of Samuel Thomson, his wife Isabella and their two daughters, Janet and Isabella junior (usually known as Ella). There is also a family tree for the Thomsons at the end of this paper.



Samuel and Isabella Thomson who bought Mansefield in the early 1920s (photos courtesy Thomson family collection)

Samuel Thomson (age 30) and Isabella Mitchell (age 21) married in the parish of Urr in Kirkcudbright in 1881; both were born in the county and both came from farming families.

Their first child, John, was born in 1881. Samuel Thomson pursued the occupation of farm manager and, some time after the birth of John, the family moved to Perthshire where four more children were born - Janet in 1884; Samuel junior in 1887; Elizabeth in 1891; and Isabella (Ella) Mitchell in 1893. Within the next few years, the family moved again, to Berwickshire, where Samuel Thomson had been appointed overseer (factor) on Manderston Estate to the east of Duns.

Two stories help to characterise Samuel Thomson. Lord Curzon (at one time Viceroy of India and then British Foreign Secretary in the years after the Great War) was once a guest at Manderston. Whatever Thomson said or did on this particular occasion clearly irritated Curzon who addressed the factor by saying 'You're stupid, Thomson, aren't you?' Thomson merely nodded his head and replied 'Yes, my Lord'.

Samuel Thomson served as an elder at Duns Parish Church. On one particular Sunday, the collection had been taken as usual by parishioners dropping their money into the plate at the church door. The pulpit was occupied by a visiting preacher that day and, having become well enthused by the subject of his own sermon, he paused part way through and called on the elders to take up a second collection. Thomson began by climbing the steps of the pulpit, offering the plate to a confused and embarrassed minister who perhaps had no money on him. When asked later why he had done this, Thomson replied 'Well, sir, to such a worthy cause, I was sure you would be the first person who would want to give'.

At the 1921 census, sisters Janet Thomson (age 37) and Ella Thomson (age 28) were living in a house in Castle Street; Ella was described as a dressmaking teacher. Valuation roll evidence shows their parents still living at Buxley on Manderston Estate until at least 1919 although they cannot be found at all in the 1921 census. Around this time, Samuel Thomson retired from his work at Manderston on health grounds although he would have been around 70 by then anyway. Mansefield was advertised for sale in the autumn of 1923. With his wife and two daughters, Samuel Thomson purchased the house and the two sisters went to live with their parents in their new home.

Samuel Thomson died of bronchitis at Mansefield in 1929 at the age of 79; his wife, Isabella, died of heart disease at the age of 75 in 1934, also at Mansefield. Their two daughters, Janet and Ella, continued to live in the property.

Both sisters had considerable craft skills and Ella in particular had extensive talents not just in dressmaking but in fabric crafts generally, including upholstery which she once demonstrated to the ladies of Preston WRI. In 1925, Berwickshire Horticultural Society decided to include an 'industrial section' for the first time in their annual flower show, staged in the Drill Hall. Ella Thomson had been persuaded to act as secretary for this new venture. Her sister, Janet, won a prize for her gingerbread. One of the sisters (which one is unclear) was elected treasurer of the society the following month.

The industrial section proved to be a great success and went from strength to strength in subsequent flower shows. Ella Thomson continued her organisational work and, in 1932, she was described in the Berwickshire News as the 'indefatigable' secretary of the industrial section 'who is herself an admirable and artistic exponent of various arts and crafts and labours without stint to secure support for this section of the show'. This work was continued for many years since she was secretary for the industrial section of Berwickshire County

Show as late as 1959. And, as if all that was not enough, she was also long involved with Duns Amateur Dramatic Society, whether as secretary, treasurer, stage manager, producer or player – she was ‘always a prime favourite with a Duns audience’, according to the Berwickshire News.

In 1930, Janet Thomson was advertising Pure White Leghorn eggs for hatching, 5d per egg or 4/6d per dozen; fresh eggs were also available for sale. This seems to have been a long-term venture since the 1942 valuation roll shows her still owning some ‘poultry houses’, presumably in the Mansefield garden.

One of the curiosities about Mansefield in the 1930s is that a telephone exchange functioned inside the property, a common enough practice at the time. The 1934 valuation roll brackets ‘Mansefield’ and ‘telephone exchange’ together as a single entry and the Postmaster-General is recorded as a tenant at the property. In 1931, the Postmaster-General had advertised in the Berwickshire News, seeking premises on a long lease for an exchange in Duns.

Specifications were given for the necessary technical spaces as well as rest rooms for the operators. It was clarified that occupied premises would be considered as long as the occupiers were prepared to take on caretaker operator roles for which they would be paid.

At that point, an exchange was set up in a house in Castle Street but the Berwickshire News reported in 1933 that the exchange had been moved to Easter Street. This was one of the downstairs rooms at Mansefield where the Thomsons welcomed the opportunity to earn income from the Post Office rent and from being paid as caretaker operators every weekday night once the day staff had gone – basically 6pm to 8am. They also had to cover every weekend. Ella Thomson was described on her later marriage record as a telephone operator and Janet Thomson’s death certificate recorded her as a retired telephone operator. They worked this way until 1956 when an automatic exchange was set up behind the house.



Janet Thomson at the Mansefield exchange (photo courtesy Thomson family collection)

In 1936, the Thomson sisters were none too happy at the prospect of a children's playground being built nearby for families living in the council houses at Tannage Brae. They sent a letter of objection to Duns Town Council whose members were unsure whether there was any right to object to such a proposal but confirmed that there were no immediate plans to go ahead.

Ella Thomson was involved with the town committee organising the first 'Wynsome Mayde' ceremony in 1944 although they were originally proposing the crowning of a 'Queen'. Nominations for the role at 6d per time were to be sent to 'Miss E M Thomson, Mansefield'. In the 1947 event, Janet Thomson was chosen to crown the Wynsome Mayde (Jean Utterson) during the ceremony in the public park beside the Mercat Cross.

In October 1947, Ella Thomson (age 54) married Archibald Barbour (age 65) in Duns Parish Church; Ella was Barbour's second wife. He was a pharmacist, having set up his business in Chirnside in 1936, and he served as a Justice of the Peace for Berwickshire.

In 1949, Ella Barbour had the honour, as president of the Duns WRI, of presenting colours to the followers of the first ever Reiver and his Lass. At the start of the summer festival celebrations, Bailie Miss Dorothy Burns entrusted a brand-new burgh standard to Reiver David Young. The material for the flag had been donated by the ladies at Mansefield and Ella Barbour had undertaken all the sewing and other needlework. It was also her idea to set up a Duns Reivers Association in 1950 so that fund raising work might be done all year round to support the summer festival.

Ella's marriage lasted only seven years, however, when her husband, Archibald, died of pneumonia in the Whitcheater Hospital in Duns (now Haymount) in the spring of 1954 at the age of 72. Isabella (Ella) Mitchell Barbour died of a brain haemorrhage in the same hospital in 1969 at the age of 76. And her sister, Janet, died there of heart failure in 1970, aged 86.



The children of Samuel and Isabella Thomson, left to right, Samuel, Janet, Isabella (Ella), John and Elizabeth who died at the age of 8 (photo courtesy Thomson family collection)

Mansefield continued in the ownership of the Thomson family until the death, in 2012, of Samuel Wood Thomson, grandson of the Samuel Thomson who bought the house in the 1920s. At that point, a family decision was taken to sell the property. It had been in the possession of four generations of the Thomson family.

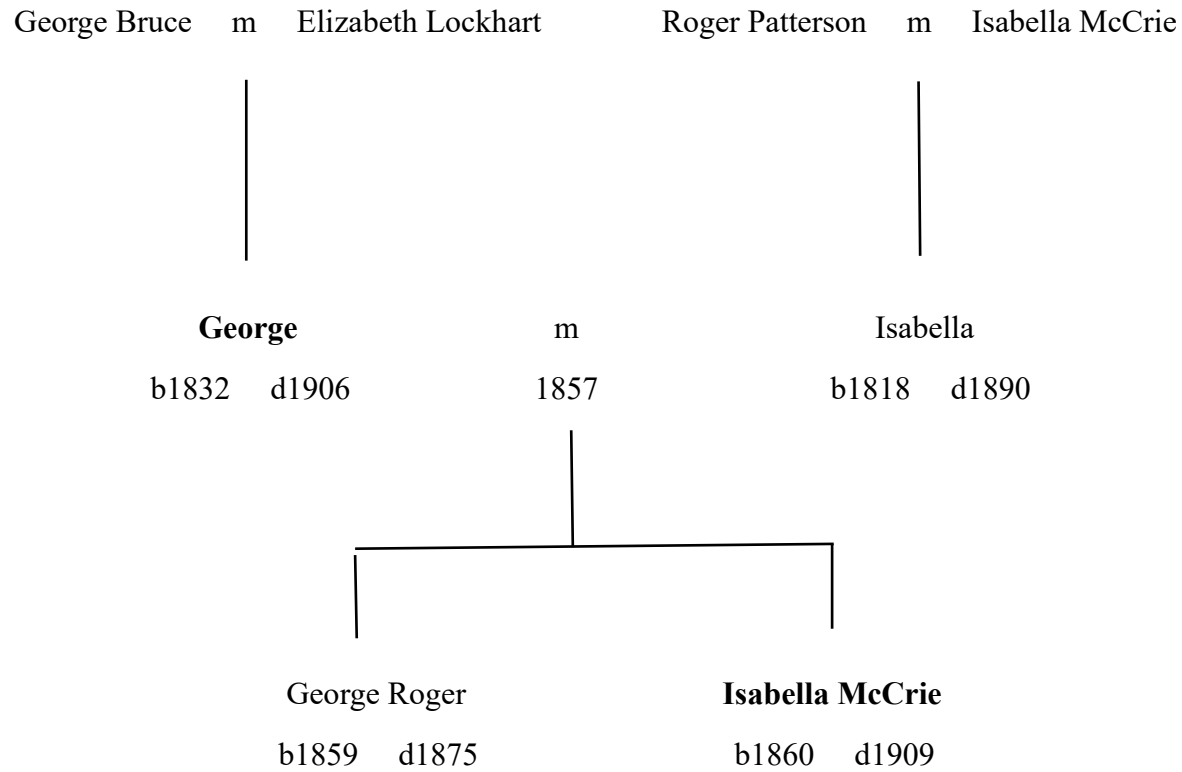


Evidence of various additions and alterations at Mansefield

The information in this paper has been researched from various newspapers of the time (especially the Berwickshire News); from information and photographs kindly supplied by the Thomson family; and from public records – census; valuation rolls; and birth, marriage and death records

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Bruce (Mansefield, Duns) Family Tree



Thomson (Mansefield, Duns) Family Tree

