

## Number 13 North Street, Duns

David McLean (2024)



### Introduction

Number 13 North Street in Duns is today an unassuming two-storey and attic property, an old building occupying a place in one of the oldest streets in the town. But this house has a history more intriguing than its neighbours since it was for many years the burgh chambers of Duns Town Council.

The Local Government (Scotland) Act of 1889 set up the first town and county councils and so, from 1890, management of the civic affairs of Duns passed from the Burgh Police Commission to Duns Town Council. The new council held its meetings, as the old police commission had done, in a room in the town hall and continued to do so for almost fifty years. Then, in the late 1930s, a decision was taken to look for new premises for the town council. There were a number of motivations for the move. If the council were able to secure a space of appropriate size, it would mean that a council meeting space (or ‘burgh chambers’) could be combined with office space for the town clerk and the burgh surveyor, all under one roof. In turn, this might save money since the town council currently had to pay for the upkeep of office spaces for these officials as well as paying a rent to the Duns Feuars for their use of the room in the town hall. But there was probably more to it. By the 1930s, the town

hall was deteriorating in a variety of ways and the Feuars (who did not have the funds to properly maintain the building) were regularly pressing the town council to take it over. Councillors had no intention of doing so since the costs of upkeep and repair would be unacceptably high. Taking this stance while continuing to use the town hall for meetings perhaps became uncomfortable for the members of Duns Town Council; in any case, the room they hired had never been particularly spacious.

## **Finding Premises**

Housing, both old and new, was a major issue for all towns in the 1920s and 1930s. In Duns, an increasing number of properties in the likes of North Street, South Street and Easter Street were identified as unfit for habitation; many were incapable of being brought up to acceptable standards, especially where they had been built back-to-back, limiting both light and fresh air. It was a matter of finding alternative accommodation for the tenants of such properties, often in the new council houses which were being built in those years with government subsidies. Once old properties had been condemned and their tenants re-housed, it was illegal for them to be occupied again. Their owners could then be compelled to put them into proper repair where feasible or have them demolished. Duns Town Council (and especially its housing committee) fought endless battles with the owners of condemned buildings in the years between the wars.

Such a property was number 13 North Street. In 1936, it was owned by an absentee landlord, James Tait Waddell, who lived in Clarkston, Renfrewshire. The building contained two dwellings, one on the ground floor and the other upstairs, a typical scenario in the old streets of Duns. The tenants in 1936 were James Utterson, a baker, and Alfred Waddell, an ironmonger. By October 1937, a notice had been served on the owner since the house, after survey, had been declared unfit for human habitation. Local solicitor James Herriot represented Waddell at a meeting of the town council's housing committee. Waddell had said that he was prepared to put the house in order by turning it into a single dwelling as long as it could be done at a reasonable cost. The chairman of the housing committee was sceptical since the ceilings of the downstairs flat were very low; the building would need to be completely gutted and rebuilt. The burgh surveyor reckoned on a minimum cost of £200 for reconstruction. Waddell was given three months either to submit plans for rebuilding the property or to arrange its demolition. It should be added that, where all efforts had been exhausted, town councils had legal powers to demolish buildings themselves and charge the cost to their owners.

It is unclear what happened next but James Waddell did not undertake a reconstruction and, around the early summer of 1938, Duns Town Council had purchased the property from him. At the time, however, the intention was not to turn number 13 into burgh chambers but to create a soup kitchen (the 'food bank' equivalent of its time) and an air-raid gas decontamination station for the town. There was a great fear, even terror, as the 1930s progressed of the use of poison gas bombs in the event of another conflict and so a decontamination station was understandable; whether its construction in a property shared with a soup kitchen made equal sense certainly seems curious from today's perspective.

## Burgh Chambers and Acrimony

Some members of Duns Town Council then had a change of mind and, in July 1938, the members of its housing committee met to discuss the conversion of number 13 North Street into council chambers. The meeting had begun with a measure of humour when it was noted that the item on the agenda had been mis-typed as ‘city chambers’.

Ex-Provost William Winter explained his view that it would be ‘a waste of a good building’ to make a soup kitchen and decontamination station. There was space to create burgh chambers where the town council and its committees could hold their meetings as well as space to create separate offices for the town clerk and his staff and for the burgh surveyor. There would even be capacity left over for some store rooms. The burgh court (which had traditionally held its meetings in the town hall) could also use the new burgh chambers.

Conversion costs were estimated at around £200 but that included the £35 they had already paid to purchase the property from James Waddell. The cost of borrowing money for the conversion work, plus upkeep costs of cleaning, heating and the like, would come to about £66 per annum. At present, the costs for separate staff offices and paying rent for the town hall came to around £61. So, for only £5 more per year, they could have their own dedicated council premises within the convenience of a single building. There was also another condemned property on the opposite side of North Street (number 8) which might be purchased instead for the soup kitchen and decontamination station.



*Number 13 North Street*

Two weeks later, a meeting of the full town council was called to consider the proposal. It was clear from the outset that the atmosphere was acrimonious. Rumours had been circulating in the town; there was talk of misunderstandings and accusations of ‘irregularities

in procedure' since the housing committee meeting. Some councillors believed that nothing definite was to have happened until they had all had the chance to inspect number 13 but it turned out that local architect George Walker had already met a request to draw up plans for the conversion.

Then, ex-Provost Winter launched into one of his characteristic, rather lengthy speeches to which some council members listened 'with signs of boredom'. Bailie David Cochrane eventually lost patience and interrupted him by pointing out that he had only just managed to grab his tea and shave before getting to the council meeting. 'I have no time to listen to a lot of d——d nonsense', he said. 'No wonder people won't come to the meetings; I move we get to business'. He argued that there was no reason why the property should not be converted into an acceptable dwelling house. There was another proposal to go back to the original soup kitchen plan but, on a vote, five councillors voted for burgh chambers and four councillors voted for the soup kitchen. It was not an auspicious start.

Bailie Cochrane then objected when the architect's plans were put on the table; the meeting, he said, was finished since the plans were not on the agenda. His motion not to proceed was declared as incompetent by Provost Charles Petrie. Insults and angry scenes followed and Cochrane was threatened with being removed from the meeting. The conversion plans were eventually approved although heated argument went on afterwards.

Number 13 North Street therefore became burgh chambers and council offices and the first meeting of Duns Town Council in their new building was held in the middle of January 1939. Provost Petrie wished everyone a happy new year and said that they might congratulate themselves on their new premises. He expressed the hope 'that now that the Council was in the new building, its meetings would be peaceful and conducted in good accord'. It was not to be. Bailie Cochrane set the tone from the outset by declining to take his seat as junior bailie on the provost's left hand, declaring his intention to relinquish that position. The rest of the meeting was characterised by bad-tempered argument and ill-feeling.



*North Street, described by the Berwickshire News in the 1930s as 'only a shade above shabbiness'*

The Berwickshire News correspondent 'Man-in-the-Street' attended the meeting. He was much impressed with the new burgh chambers and had 'nothing but admiration for the interior'. The only down side was that the building itself was 'undistinguished' and in a side street which was 'only a shade above shabbiness'. But he was very unimpressed with the atmosphere of the council meeting where 'the hatchet is unburied; the demon of discord seems to have got possession of the Town Council'. There was nothing but acrimony throughout the two-hour public part of the meeting. Councillors then went into a further lengthy private session. Man-in-the-Street 'was mercifully spared the infliction of having to sit and listen to another two hours of wrangling which was one crumb of comfort'.

When the town council had met in the town hall, the provost, senior bailie and junior bailie had occupied three carved ceremonial chairs which belonged to the Duns Feuars. In February 1939, the Feuars were asked whether they might consider selling or lending the chairs to the town council so that they could be transferred to the new burgh chambers in North Street. The Feuars refused. Given that Duns Town Council's move had deprived them of rent money at a time when their finances were in considerable trouble, the decision was perhaps not surprising.

The burgh chambers remained in North Street for thirty years. In 1964, plans to extend and make alterations to the building were rejected as not being worth the cost; alternative premises would instead be sought. In the autumn of 1968, Duns Town Council purchased the house called Westwood at 44 Newtown Street at a cost of £6500 for new burgh chambers, council offices and a memorial room for over 100 Jim Clark trophies ('one of the most unique collections in the whole world') which had recently been presented to the town by the Clark family. In early 1969, an appeal was launched to raise £4000 to facilitate the creation of the trophy room; it attracted donations from all over the world. The new burgh chambers were officially opened in March 1969 by Provost Tom Lennie and the trophy room opened the following month. As part of local government re-organisation, however, Duns Town Council was abolished in 1975. Westwood remained in local authority possession and continued to house what was known as the 'Jim Clark Room'; the property has in recent years been transformed into the much grander Jim Clark Motorsport Museum.

*The information in this paper has mainly been researched from newspapers of the time, especially the Berwickshire News, and from valuation rolls.*

**David McLean (2024)**