

The Knoll and the Wilsons

David McLean (2020)



Introduction

Any casual research into the history of Duns in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries shows one name above all others cropping up with seemingly endless regularity – that of Philip Wilson, corn factor. But deeper research uncovers not one man but three generations of father, son and grandson, all called Philip Wilson and all corn factors! The family tree at the end of this article will help in following them. In many ways, the family were not just grain factors but benefactors since the town of Duns gained greatly from their generous public spirit. The family also built the fine house called the Knoll in Station Road, now part of the community health centre.

The First Philip Wilson : Corn Factor

We can pick up the story of the first Philip Wilson in the 1851 census when, at the age of 23, he worked as assistant to his father, John, who was a draper in Dunse. The family lived in the Market Place, most probably above their shop. Three years later, in 1854, Philip married Isabella Wood Luke whose father was also in the clothing trade in Edinburgh. By the time of

the 1861 census, Philip and his wife were living at West End Cottage in Langtongate with their three children. Fast forward another ten years to 1871 and the family were still living in Langtongate but now with a total of eight children, four sons and four daughters ranging in age from 15 years to 2 months. They employed a nurse, a cook and a housemaid. Moreover, Wilson was having a fine new house built for his family in Station Road. He was clearly prospering.

His success, however, was unconnected with his father's drapery business. Around the time of his marriage, Philip Wilson changed occupation and became a corn factor. In a thriving market town like Dunse (the focus of much of the agricultural business of the surrounding area), this was a key profession. A corn factor was essentially a middle-man, a purchaser of grain and other crops from farmers and a seller to the flour milling, brewing and distilling industries – or a deal maker between such sellers and buyers.

The grain dealing business which Philip Wilson developed moved down through another two generations of the family and became one of the longest running enterprises in the area. Originally, the company had an office in Castle Street (and later the Market Place) and a storage granary at the railway station, employing staff at both locations.



Wilson's station granary, destroyed by fire in 2021 and now demolished

Much of Wilson's work would be done in the town's corn exchange, a trust of which he became a director. Having a corn exchange building became one of the symbols of a town's prosperity. The Dunse Corn Exchange was built in Newtown Street in 1856 which must have been very close to the time when Wilson went into the grain business. It was later altered and operated as a garage for many years before being demolished and replaced by the current Co-operative store. In some ways, the irony was that, like most similar (and expensive) buildings, the Dunse corn exchange was often used only one day each week for its primary purpose, and then perhaps only for a few hours. The building was hired out at other times for meetings,

concerts, dances, elections and even as an overspill classroom when there were too many pupils for Dunse Parish School. There were other local corn exchanges in Berwick, Earlston and Kelso.

Wilson was widely respected for his expertise in grain quality and dealing but he slipped up at least once; in 1880, he was prosecuted at Berwick Petty Sessions by the Inland Revenue for failing to declare purchases of corn. It would seem that corn factors in general resented the need for this but the figures were used by the government for tracking grain production and prices. The Berwick Advertiser adopted the moral high ground and reckoned that the prosecution would have an 'extensive and salutary effect' on others.

He augmented his corn factor income by acting as local agent for two insurance companies - Scottish Widows and Sun Fire and Life. He would gain commission on the transactions and act as the point of contact for those making claims. In fact, he was once congratulated for having fire insurance paid out exactly one week after the grain and hay stacks in question were burned down! He also sold cattle feeds and agricultural fertilisers.

The First Philip Wilson : Town Benefactor

Wilson was a keen promoter of education in Dunse. There were plenty of schools in the town (around ten in the 1860s) but a significant number of children in the area went to work, especially on the land, from about the age of 10 onwards. To continue education for them, there was an 'industrial' school which consisted of evening classes in reading, writing and arithmetic. In Wilson's time, these classes were held in a room of the Free Church school in Newtown Street. The school operated for only half of the year, starting each season in the autumn and closing again the following spring; summer was too busy a time out in the fields.

As both secretary and treasurer, it was Wilson who kept the industrial school going. It was a subscription school so that, as well as contributing money himself, Wilson had to encourage annual donations from a considerable list of other subscribers. Occasionally, when these subscriptions fell short of the amount needed to pay the teachers, he would help to organise fund-raising events in the town to boost the funds. No doubt to encourage regular attendance at the school, each pupil was required to contribute one penny per week. On average, 30 boys and as many girls attended these classes.

The educational landscape changed in 1872 with the passage of the Education (Scotland) Act which made schooling compulsory to the age of 13 and led to the construction of new schools like Dunse Public School, built in the Langtongate just a few years later. There was now little purpose to schools like Wilson's industrial school and such enterprises soon closed. But Wilson remained involved in the education of the town's children. The 1872 Act required the election of a school board in every parish. Wilson stood as a candidate at the very first election; he was successful and was chosen to be the first chairman of Dunse Parish School Board, a position he retained for some years. Much of his effort in the early days was in warning parents that the law now required their children to attend school.

Another example of Philip Wilson's public spirit was his institution of the Dunse Penny Savings Bank in 1867. Working people were often either not inclined to save since it was

never a part of their culture or were perhaps discouraged from entering an imposing bank to deposit a mere penny or two; in any case, most would always be working during bank opening hours. So, Wilson started up and acted as secretary of this new venture in partnership with the town's Bank of Scotland. He set it up 'with a view to encourage provident habits among our working classes' so that they would more easily cope with rent day or buying coals or with misfortune in their lives.

For an hour each Monday evening in a schoolroom in Newtown Street, a bank employee would manage deposits and withdrawals, recording the transactions in each depositor's bank book. Annual interest was paid at sixpence in the pound (2½%). Within five years, the Penny Savings Bank had over 700 depositors and held some £500. It was, in fact, becoming almost too successful and, by 1876, as the number of customers approached a thousand, a minimum of one shilling was imposed on any future deposits or withdrawals.

Wilson was a member of the East United Presbyterian Church in Easter Street and acted as church treasurer. In the early 1880s, he was closely involved in the creation of an 'Evangelistic Association' in Dunse, aiming to boost religious fervour in the town. Examples of his Christian and philanthropic nature abound. In 1871, he joined a local committee to raise donations of seed corn and potatoes 'for the suffering peasant farmers in the north of France' (victims of the Franco-Prussian War). In 1878, he contributed £50 to the relief fund for the share-holders ruined by the collapse of the City of Glasgow Bank. A few years later, he gave money to the relief fund set up after the Eyemouth fishing disaster. But perhaps his oddest charitable involvement was spending some Sunday evenings in the Free Church schoolroom, helping to entertain some 30 to 40 'tramps and beggars' from Dunse lodging houses to supper; the Berwickshire News was careful to report that each was given a large jug of hot coffee and 'a thick slice of bread and meat'.

Philip Wilson died suddenly and unexpectedly in 1895 at the age of 68. The family were on holiday in Leven, Fife when he suffered a heart attack. When the Berwickshire News, in its report of his death, described him as having 'long been one of the most prominent and respected public men in Duns', even these fine words must have seemed, to some, like an under-statement. His wife, Isabella, died only five years later.

Building the Knoll, 1871

As the first Philip Wilson prospered through his grain business, he was similar to many successful shop-keeping and professional families in the town in desiring to move from the older parts of Dunse and build a modern house on the outskirts. He purchased a desirable, elevated site overlooking the railway station, convenient for its location and open in its outlook. From its position on a small hill, he called his house 'the Knoll' – unimaginative perhaps but neatly descriptive!

As architects, Wilson employed Beattie and Sons of Edinburgh and they designed a finely proportioned and distinctive property. The public rooms on the ground floor had bay windows permitting miniature balconies on their tops protected by delicate iron railings.

These features were repeated above the front door. With unusual, tapered steps on the gables and above the upper floor windows, the house had a deliberate continental, Flemish style.



The building contractors were all local – John Spiers of Gavinton for the masonry and, from Dunse itself, John Crombie for carpentry, George Young for plumbing and Thomas Fortune for slater work. During construction, there was a nasty accident in early 1871. The masons had erected a hut in which to work. A storm blew the roof off and tossed it into the field on the opposite side of Station Road, striking the telegraph wires on the way. Fortunately, there were no injuries.

The following month, there was an afternoon holiday to allow people of the town to celebrate the marriage of HRH Princess Louise. In his usual charitable fashion, Wilson took the opportunity of entertaining all the men working on his new villa - 38 in all - to an afternoon dinner in a local hotel. And then, in the evening, he presided over a ‘fruit soiree’ in the Corn Exchange. Wilson’s property was completed towards the end of 1871. It included substantial garden grounds and Wilson employed a gardener.

Following the death of the first Philip Wilson in 1895, The Knoll continued as home to his son and daughter, Philip and Grace, neither of whom ever married. After the death of the second Philip Wilson in 1930, the house was sold to Miss Elizabeth MacFarlane. By the 1930s, the Duns nurses’ home and maternity hospital (the NHS was, of course, still in the future) was located in the Hermitage, a house which still stands just further along Station Road at its junction with Todlaw Road. But it had become too small. At the same time, it would appear that the Knoll soon became too large for Miss MacFarlane. So, they arranged a swap. Miss MacFarlane gained the Hermitage plus £300 and Berwickshire Nursing Association gained the Knoll for its maternity wards and nurses’ home. It was opened by the Earl of Home in October, 1937. The house has retained its medical function ever since and

proudly remains today as the front section of the Duns community hospital and health centre, the rest of the buildings occupying what was once the Knoll's garden.

The Second Philip Wilson

Following the death of his father in 1895, the second Philip Wilson (then aged 32) took over the running of the corn factor business and continued to live at the Knoll for the rest of his life; he never married. After his education at Wellfield Academy in Dunse and then the Royal High School in Edinburgh, it would appear that he went straight into his father's business since, at the 1881 census, he was listed as a corn factor's clerk. He would therefore have been well placed to take over the business in 1895, having become well known in other corn markets such as Berwick and even Edinburgh.

A few years later, Wilson decided to diversify and he took the tenancy of the farm at Crumstane, to the south-east of the town. This must have been around 1900 and he retained the tenancy for the next 30 years, until his death. For a time, his younger brother James lived at Crumstane, presumably in the farmhouse; he worked with Philip in the corn trade.

The second Philip Wilson's main contribution to the well-being of his home town lay in his involvement in local politics. In 1890, he consented to be a candidate for the Duns South Ward on Berwickshire County Council. In the resulting election, Wilson polled 111 votes and his opponent, Dr James Denholm, polled 110. A petition calling for scrutiny and a recount was then presented to the sheriff by 60 electors. Sheriff Dundas threw it out on the reasonable grounds that he could hardly review his own decisions as returning officer; in any case, the possibility of miscounting a total of 221 votes was probably quite small!

In the run-up to the next election in 1892, an interesting and anonymous letter appeared in the Berwickshire News, attacking Wilson's lack of activity in attending to the town's interests, especially with regard to the condition of the main streets which were 'a perfect scandal and disgrace'. According to the letter writer, it would 'puzzle anyone to find any one thing he had done' to fulfil his election promises. The criticism did not prevent Wilson's re-election; in fact, he served as a county councillor for many years.

In 1900, he was one of seven candidates for four seats on Duns Town Council and was successful, coming third with 195 votes. At the first meeting of the new council, Wilson was chosen to be senior baillie. In those days, three office-bearers were chosen (usually based on experience) from among the elected councillors – a provost and two baillies, senior and junior. The senior baillie deputised for the provost when necessary and the two baillies also presided on the bench of the Burgh Court. In this latter role, Wilson heard low-level cases concerning breach of the peace and careless driving – of horses and carriages, of course! Provost Swainson once described Philip Wilson as 'one of the ablest of the rising men of our town'. But his luck on the Town Council ran out in 1905 when he failed to be re-elected.

As if he was not already sufficiently involved in municipal activities, Wilson was also successful in being elected to Duns Parish Council in 1901.

During the First World War, Wilson was a member of the Appeal Tribunal for Roxburgh, Berwick and Selkirk Sheriffdom, hearing appeals against men being conscripted into the armed forces, usually on the grounds of their occupation. In 1919, when the conflict was over, Wilson was one of those Duns citizens who favoured siting Julian the tank (which the town won for its success in purchasing war bonds) on the top of Duns Law – but Julian was eventually located in the public park.

After suffering health problems for some months, the second Philip Wilson died at the Knoll in September, 1930, age 67. Like his father, if in a different style, he had served his home town selflessly for many years.



Bay windows, balconies and stepped gables at the Knoll

The Second Philip Wilson : Sisters and Brothers

The second Philip Wilson had four sisters and three brothers. There is not space here for more than glimpses of their lives. Two emigrated to America.

Margaret Wilson (or Maggie) married a man called Joe Hardie and died in Greensboro, North Carolina in 1929.

Mary Wilson married Free Church minister James Stewart in the Knoll in 1885; she died in Aberdeenshire in 1941.

Joanna Wilson married James Martin of Carluke (later a timber merchant) and died there in 1921. Her husband fought as a lieutenant in the Highland Light Infantry during the Great War. At Givenchy in France, he was left wounded on the edge of a German trench following an attack. Lance-Corporal William Angus, also of Carluke, volunteered to go out to rescue him while his comrades provided covering fire. Despite the Germans lobbing grenades from their trench, the two made it back. For their actions, James Martin won the Military Cross and William Angus was awarded the Victoria Cross.

John Wilson (Jack) excelled in rugby in both pupil and former pupil teams of the Royal High School of Edinburgh and won an international cap. He was the second of the family to emigrate, dying in Punta Gorda, Florida in 1926.

Grace Wilson, like her brother Philip, never married and was still living in the Knoll when Philip died in 1930. The house was sold soon afterwards. It is not clear whether Grace moved to North Berwick at that point but she died there in 1947.

Of all the family, **George Robert Wilson** became the most widely known. He studied medicine at Edinburgh University and specialised in psychiatric medicine from the outset, writing a number of books on 'insanity' and opening his own hospital for the treatment of nervous diseases. He was a golfer, cricketer and curler but made his sporting name in rugby; 'Doddy' Wilson was an internationalist for two years. He died prematurely in 1908.

James Hood Wilson, the youngest of the eight siblings, stayed in the local area and worked with his brother Philip in the corn trade. He became chairman of Duns Unionist Association. He played for Duns Football Club, winning the Border Cup in 1891 and eventually became president of the club. He was also a member of Manderston Cricket Club. He too was elected to Duns Town Council and became provost in 1937; he intimated his resignation from the Council only days before his death at the Bield, Duns in 1939.

The Third Philip Wilson

Philip Frederick Hood Wilson was the grandson of the first Philip Wilson and the nephew of the second Philip Wilson; his father was George Robert Wilson (see above) of medical and rugby fame. He was educated at Merchiston Castle School. Despite his young age, he reached the rank of captain in the Highland Light Infantry during the First World War and was awarded the Military Cross. When the second Philip Wilson died in 1930, Philip Frederick Hood Wilson took over the corn factor business from his uncle and appears to have been living at the Knoll at that time.

He married Jean Boyd Riddell of Berwick in the town's Wallace Green Church in 1934. He and his wife lived in Duns at Todlaw, the house on Station Road opposite Southfield and just a short distance from the Knoll. Occasional advertisements appeared in the local press in the 1940s seeking domestic servants. By this time, they were clearly harder to attract since one such advert gave reassurance of 'Esse cooker [a cast iron range stove]; no scrubbing; good outings'.

In 1941, Wilson was awarded the British Empire Medal in the King's birthday honours list for his work as Head Observer with the Royal Observer Corps; he had been instrumental in setting up a Duns wing. His wife made her own distinctive contribution. During the Second World War, Duns YMCA opened a canteen in the parish church halls. It started in 1940 for the servicemen camped around the town. It was open every night between 6pm and 9.30pm for light refreshments and snacks and the sale of simple essentials like soap. Mrs Jean Wilson acted as quartermaster for a time. It closed in 1946.

The third Philip Wilson was a keen and highly successful sportsman, especially in cricket where he was a talented all-rounder, regularly topping both bowling and batting averages at Manderston Cricket Club. In 1929, he played for the Rest of Scotland team. He also played competition tennis regularly and enjoyed curling although this last sport resulted in a nasty accident in 1930; he and a curling companion fell waist deep into the freezing water of Duns Castle Lake when the ice broke and they had to be rescued by means of a ladder.

As with previous generations of his family, Wilson gave much of his time to local organisations. He was secretary and treasurer of The Berwickshire Agricultural Association for a couple of years in the early 1920s before increasing business commitments caused his resignation. But even in that brief period, he helped to revitalise (perhaps even save) an institution and annual show which had been on the point of folding. In the 1950s, he was chairman of Duns Pipe Band committee. He was also honorary secretary of Manderston Cricket Club for 25 years and acted as Adjutant of the Berwickshire Squadron of the Air Training Corps.

Like his uncle, he involved himself in local politics, being a member of both Duns Town Council (where he was elected senior baillie) and Berwickshire County Council in the late 1940s. The third Philip Wilson died, aged 65, in Edinburgh's Western General Hospital in 1962.



The house is now part of the Knoll Community Health Centre

Few families can have contributed as much to the town of Duns as these three generations of Wilsons as businessmen and employers, public servants and philanthropists. But perhaps a touching way to conclude their story is through the report of the death in 1910 at the Knoll of Jane Paxton, aged 78, the ‘valued nurse and friend’ in the service of the Wilson family. This was the same Jane Paxton who was recorded in census data at West End Cottage in the Langtongate where the story started. She had been with the family for 55 years! This loyalty of employer and employee - in both directions - was not altogether uncommon but somehow encapsulates the essence of the Wilsons of the Knoll.



The information in this paper – written in 2020 and revised in 2024 - 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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Wilson (the Knoll, Duns) Family Tree

