

Wellfield House, Duns

David McLean (2026)



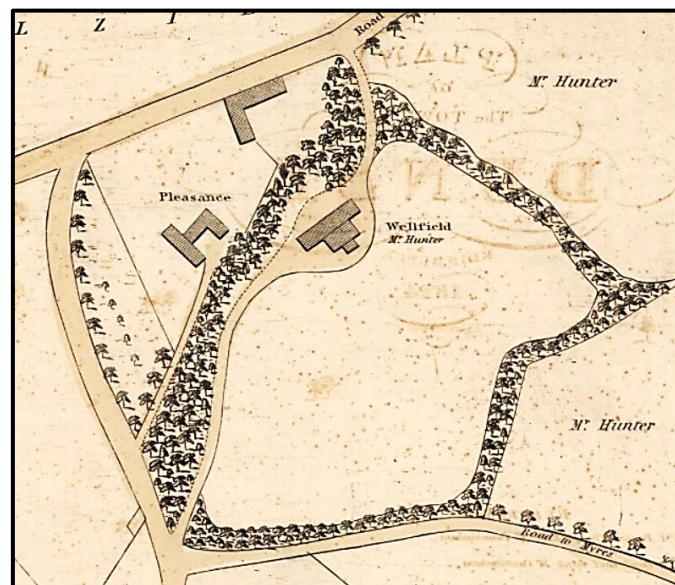
Introduction

According to British Listed Buildings, Wellfield House was built about 1780, making it one of the earliest of the ‘new’ houses built in Duns as the town began to prosper from the agricultural revolution across the Berwickshire Merse; the original house comprised the central section shown in the picture above, without the turreted wings. For most of the nineteenth century it was owned by the Hunter family although, from 1859, it was let for some 20 years to accommodate the private school known as Wellfield Academy. It was a substantial house from the outset but it went through two phases of extension and alteration which changed both the exterior and interior of the building considerably. It is claimed that major extension work was undertaken in 1895 (perhaps the construction of the two wings) although this is hard to reconcile with the house being rented out at that time while its owner lived in the USA. In 1903, there were further additions and alterations especially to the interior of the property. Both the 1895 and 1903 changes are attributed to Hawick architect James Pearson Alison (1862-1932). Today, Wellfield House is category B listed, together with the original Wellfield Cottage (now Far Ben) on Preston Road and Wellfield Lodge on Easter Street, the last of which was probably built in the later nineteenth century and may also have been the work of J P Alison.

Wellfield's history has a number of links to India. In the second half of the nineteenth century, three of the Hunter family (brothers Thomas Fraser Hunter, John Hunter and James Hunter) went to India to develop tea plantations, undertakings which often required strenuous efforts in isolated locations. A fourth brother (Francis Charles King Hunter) was posted to India with his regiment for a time. And then, in the years just before 1900, Wellfield estate was owned briefly by high court judge William Young who had spent over thirty years in government service in Bengal and Oudh. These various connections are detailed below.

William King Hunter at Wellfield

John Wood's 1824 map of Dunse shows Wellfield House owned by 'Mr Hunter', together with lands to the south and east of the property. This was William Hunter of Pilmure. He died in 1827 but his sons James Hunter and William King Hunter continued to live in Wellfield, both being lawyers or 'writers' as they were then known (as in Writers to the Signet). Wood's map also shows a property called Pleasance a short distance to the west of Wellfield. In 1830, both Pleasance and Wellfield Cottage (which was farther east along Preston Road and not shown on the map below) were advertised as villas for let, each with two public rooms and three bedrooms; the cottage was a 'snug fancy building covered in heath'. Pleasance was still there in the next town map of 1857 but had been demolished by the end of the century.



Wellfield estate in John Wood's 1824 map of Dunse

William King Hunter was born in 1806 and educated at the celebrated Dunse Academy, a school in Currie Street operated by the Rev Thomas Maule or 'Tommy Maule' as he was known to many. After qualifying as a lawyer, Hunter went into partnership with his older brother James at Wellfield although James died in 1833. In 1841, William King Hunter married Isabella Fraser. They would go on to have twelve children; there is a family tree at

the end of this paper. Like many lawyers, he pursued a number of side-lines to his main profession which was one of the most lucrative occupations of the nineteenth century. After the senior George Peat of Wellnage suffered severe illness in 1836, Hunter was appointed in his place as Clerk to the Commissioners of Supply (tax authority) for the county. He became public procurator, responsible for investigating and prosecuting criminal cases, around the same time. He was one of the leading figures who pushed for Dunse to be provided with gas and water supplies and he acted as secretary and treasurer of Dunse Water Company which was set up in 1859. Hunter also campaigned successfully to persuade the North British Railway Company to extend the line westwards from the town. He served as county agent for the Conservative party. As a keen antiquarian, he was author of a 'History of the Priory of Coldingham'.

But it was another of his additional occupations which gave Wellfield a new chapter in its life. William King Hunter served as agent for the Royal Bank of Scotland which at one time had its premises in a property, long demolished, about half way down Black Bull Street on the east side. In 1857, the Royal Bank opened fine new premises in the Market Place, only closed as a bank in recent years. On the first and second floors were spacious and modern living quarters and Hunter decided to move his family from Wellfield and live above the bank. While the bank directors may well have required this if he wished to remain as agent, there are clues as to further motives. Dunse Academy seems to have gone by the 1850s and Hunter was just one of many who earnestly wished for another high-quality school in the town which would be capable of educating boys for university entrance and the professions. They soon had a particular schoolmaster in mind but they would naturally require suitable premises to attract him to Dunse. Hunter seems to have suggested that Wellfield House could accommodate such a school especially since there was now alternative residential space for his family above the Royal Bank which was perhaps more comfortable and convenient.

Wellfield Academy opened in 1859 and the 1861 census shows William King Hunter, banker and solicitor, living in the Market Place above the bank with his wife and ten children; their first-born child, Agnes, appears to have died by this time and their youngest child (for whom they repeated the name Agnes) was yet to be born. There were also three servants.

Neither William King Hunter nor his wife Isabella lived to see the next census. By the late 1860s, both were suffering from ill-health. It was reckoned that Isabella Hunter (who, remember, had borne twelve children between 1841 and 1861) was further worn down by looking after her sick husband. They decided to go to Melrose in the early summer of 1870 in the hope that the change might be of some benefit. Isabella Hunter deteriorated and she died in Melrose of heart disease at the age of 49 on 23 June. The shock of her death worsened her husband's condition – only a month later, on 24 July, William King Hunter was also dead at the age of 64.

Family of Isabella and William King Hunter

Oldest son **William Archibald Hunter** was educated at Oxendean Tower Academy which was located a couple of miles north of Dunse and opened in 1856; the fact that a new boys' school was started up in Dunse itself only three years later suggests that Oxendean perhaps

had limitations. Hunter went on to Edinburgh University where he qualified in law. He joined his father in legal practice in Dunse and, in 1869, the directors of the Royal Bank appointed him joint bank agent with his father who, as we have seen, died the following year. At the 1871 census, William Hunter, banker and solicitor, was still living above the bank with five of his siblings – Isabella, James, Francis, Lawrence and Agnes who was just 9 years old. William also assumed his father's roles as Clerk of Supply and as secretary and treasurer of Dunse Water Company. With the changes to local government in the 1880s, he became County Clerk and County Road Clerk with Berwickshire County Council. His health deteriorated at a fairly young age and, in 1891, he decided to take a break and visit one of his sisters and her husband in California. He only made it as far as Chicago where he died of pneumonia in the spring of 1891 at the age of 48. He had never married.

While William was given ownership of Wellfield Cottage by his father, it is at first sight surprising that the main house and estate did not pass to him as eldest son; perhaps he was in line to inherit land or property elsewhere. Valuation roll evidence shows that Wellfield went to second son **Thomas Fraser Hunter**. In the late 1860s, he left for Assam, India to be a tea planter on an estate he named 'Amluckie' after a native tree; he never saw his parents again. His tea plantation seems to have been a success but a carriage accident and poor medical care resulted in the loss of a leg, causing him to return to Duns. He can be found in the 1891 census as a retired tea planter living back in Wellfield with his wife Louisa, three children and two servants. But the wanderlust had not left him. He is not to be found in the next census since he had gone off to the USA, to California (where one of his sisters lived, as we saw above), apparently believing that a better future for his family lay there. Valuation rolls in the mid-1890s show Wellfield as still being the property of Thomas Fraser Hunter residing in California where he died in 1922; he had been the last surviving son of William King Hunter.

Third son **John Hunter** followed his brother Thomas to Assam, India around 1870 and was also engaged in tea planting although on his own separate plantation which clearly required a great deal of attention and hard work. He returned to Scotland in 1885 and stayed for about a year before going back to India. He did not live for much longer, however, dying of liver disease at his brother's residence at Amluckie in November 1886 at the age of 37.

Fourth son **James Hunter** was also involved in tea-planting in India although whether on his own or with one of his brothers is unknown. He married Annie (or Anna) Elizabeth MacWatt, originally of Haymount, Duns, in St Paul's Cathedral, Calcutta in October 1892.

Fifth son **Francis Charles King Hunter** was fascinated by all military things from boyhood, having once had his nanny's father (who was a tailor) turn a red tablecloth into a child-sized soldier's tunic for him. His first commission was in the Northumberland Fusiliers before he was transferred to the South Wales Borderers. In 1884, at the age of 27, he married Eliza Emily Williamson, age 20, in St George's Cathedral, Madras (his second marriage). His regiment had been posted elsewhere at two days' notice and this was a hurried marriage so that his new wife could travel with him. It ended in tragedy when, less than a year later, both his wife and baby son were dead; a stained-glass window in Christ Church in Teindhillgreen commemorates the terrible events. Colonel Hunter, who also fought in the Boer War, rose to become commanding officer of the South Wales Borderers. Retirement was brief when he returned to duty on the outbreak of the Great War. He died in 1922 not long before his brother Thomas and was interred in Westminster Cemetery.

Wellfield Academy

For some twenty years, Wellfield Academy in Dunse was one of the best-known and most successful private schools in the south of Scotland, many of its pupils going on to acquire renown in a variety of professions and in many corners of the world. The reputation of the school was synonymous with that of its head, James Wood. He was born at Spott in East Lothian and, after studying at Edinburgh University, he became a schoolmaster, a profession for which he clearly had a boundless enthusiasm and talent. After gaining experience in a number of schools, he went to Sunderland to become head of a new academy in Villiers Street, designed to provide education 'to the children of the middle class'. By the later 1850s, there was a clear desire to establish something similar in Dunse and the name of James Wood was apparently known to some. He accepted an invitation to set up a 'middle class school for boys' here in the town – it opened in 1859 as Wellfield Academy. An advertisement in the Kelso Chronicle in 1861 described the academy as being 'for the board and education of young gentlemen. The courses prepare fully for the universities and higher class of commercial pursuits'.



Wellfield's north (actually front) elevation

Following its first year in operation, a public examination of its pupils was held in the Town Hall in early August 1860. The Chronicle's report of the event provides a good picture of the town's new institution. The hall was well filled by a 'large assemblage of ladies and gentlemen', some of whom were doubtless there just to be seen and some of whom were perhaps hoping to find that the fees they were paying for their sons' education were justified.

Around 10am, some forty pupils marched down from Wellfield in such order as to impress any watching townspeople; some would be boarders at the academy and some would be day

pupils living in the town or close by. They spent the morning being tested in Scripture, English, History and Geography, German, Latin, Greek, Arithmetic, Algebra, Trigonometry and Geometry by James Wood and his assistant Walter Henderson as well as a visiting examiner from Edinburgh. The audience in the Town Hall were hugely impressed.

But they were not finished. After lunch, all were invited to Wellfield Park, the academy's playing field, to witness the boys taking part in a display of military drill and sword exercises under the watchful eye of their instructor, a retired sergeant-major called George Wells who had fought in the Crimean War. The whole proceedings ended around 4.30pm.

The 1861 census at Wellfield lists James Wood, his wife Mary and their four children plus two assistant teachers, five servants and around a dozen boarders ranging in age from 10 to 17. The academy went from strength to strength and soon Wellfield's bedrooms were insufficient to accommodate all the boys who wished to board. The 1865 valuation roll shows that Wood was renting the nearby Pleasance and, by 1875, he had also taken Wellfield Cottage (now Far Ben); both were probably extra boarding space.

This expansion is mirrored in the 1871 census which shows James Wood now employing four assistant teachers (two being his teenage daughters) and five servants. There were 32 boarders, around a dozen of whom, interestingly, were recorded as born in England. The number of day pupils is unknown but, from later pupil reminiscences, a number of downstairs classrooms were all very full. While most boys would start a new session in September, some started after the Christmas holiday.

University was clearly the target for many of the pupils and James Wood cultivated close relationships with a number of institutions. Admission to university then depended on taking examination papers set by the relevant university departments but these could only be taken in nominated centres, usually the bigger towns. Wood persuaded Durham University to set up an examination centre in Berwick to make access easier and he went further when Edinburgh University agreed to make Dunse itself a centre; the university notice below shows the select company which Dunse kept.

NOTICE.

The following Examination Papers are those set at the Examinations held simultaneously at Edinburgh, Inverness, Greenock, Elgin, Dunse, Wick, and Ringford, Castle Douglas, on the 20th, 21st, and 22d of June.

The total number of Candidates examined was 69—viz., 26 Seniors (13 Boys and 13 Girls), and 43 Juniors (35 Boys and 8 Girls).

Edinburgh University examination report, 1871

While the education at Wellfield was rigorous, there was time for other pursuits. Cricket was the most popular sport and the academy turned out very competent teams which played against other local clubs such as the second XI of Berwick Cricket Club. They also played 'football', actually rugby, but this was clearly less important. There were music lessons and classes in pencil and chalk drawing which were sometimes aided by teachers from a nearby girls' school located in Teindhillgreen. At the end of each session in the summer, it was common for an exhibition of drawings to be put on in Wellfield.

A number of Wellfield's 'old boys' decided to create a former pupils' society which they called the Wellfield Academical Club. Their first official meeting was in 1876 with a dinner in the Swan Hotel followed by a dance. James Wood was invited to address the meeting. He said that he had begun his work in Dunse in 1859 'with a well-defined idea about middle-class education' and that, since then, some 300 boys had attended the academy. They had gone on to forge careers in law, divinity, medicine, teaching, engineering, banking and many other professions. He said that 'they could point to Wellfield men in all parts of the world who held positions of great responsibility and honour'.

And then, at a time which might be judged as the height of its success, Wellfield Academy suddenly closed around the turn of the year 1879-1880. All had seemed normal in September 1879 when the first term of the new session was advertised in the press with an invitation, as usual, to obtain a syllabus from Mr Wood, headmaster. But then, almost at the same time, James Wood clearly faced financial difficulties when he put his personal library of over 1400 books up for sale in the Swans' town auction mart. Many of his former pupils rallied in support and the bulk of the library was bought by these pupils and donated back to James Wood. The autumn term progressed as normal and the second term was advertised in December for the following month when a beginners' class would be formed; inclusive fees for boarders were between 42 and 45 guineas per session. James Wood even advertised new evening classes in Latin for ladies, starting immediately after the Christmas holiday.

Whether the new term ever started in January 1880 is unknown but Wellfield Academy soon closed. The whole household furniture of Wellfield (which included school desks and 22 iron bedsteads) was auctioned by Swans in April 1880; the sale, however, was conducted by warrant of the sheriff! James Wood returned to Sunderland from where he had been tempted to Dunse twenty years earlier. In an edition of the Sunderland Daily Echo in early February 1880, it was advertised that he would open, the very next week, a new middle-class school for boys in the town's Toward Road. What happened to the pupils attending Wellfield in late 1879 is unclear although some may have moved to Sunderland. And around this same time, a new school which resurrected an old name by calling itself Dunse Academy was opened in a property in Newtown Street by Doctor of Philosophy Andrew Baxter – so perhaps he was taking advantage of the situation.

The circumstances behind Wellfield's closure are not entirely clear although there were obviously financial issues. Moreover, when James Wood died in 1903, his obituary in the Sunderland Daily Echo referred to his time in Dunse and commented that 'a change in the management of the estate necessitated the closing of Wellfield Academy'. As we have seen already, Wellfield in 1880 was still in the ownership of William King Hunter's second son, Thomas Fraser Hunter. Perhaps this was when he returned from India and wanted the house

back for residential purposes. His family were certainly living in the house by 1883 and were confirmed there at the 1891 census.

Wellfield and the Laidlaws

In the early 1890s, as mentioned earlier, Thomas Fraser Hunter, retired tea planter, decided to move to the USA. In May 1892, the whole contents of 'Wellfield Mansion House' were once more up for auction. The advertisement referred to the contents of a dining room, drawing room, library, office, five bedrooms, lobby, bathroom, schoolroom, nursery, kitchen, pantry and laundry. Valuation rolls for 1894 and 1895 show the property still owned by Thomas Fraser Hunter in California but tenanted by Dr James Lockhart Wilson who was also renting Wellfield Lodge for his gardener.



Wellfield Lodge on Easter Street, built at some point after 1857

But it was not long before Wellfield was sold, causing Dr Wilson to rent Southfield in Station Road instead. The Edinburgh Evening News reported in autumn 1896 that Wellfield had been purchased for William Young, 'a gentleman who has resided for a considerable time in India'. Young had attended university in both Heidelberg and London before becoming a lawyer. He entered the Bengal Civil Service in 1856 and was still in India thirty years later in 1886 when he was appointed Judicial Commissioner of Oudh. He was back in Britain and serving as a high court judge by 1890 and was created a Companion of the Star of India (CSI) the following year. He retired in late 1891. William Young's ownership of Wellfield lasted little more than a year, however, when he died there at the age of 64 in early 1898.

The next valuation roll of 1905 shows Wellfield House, together with its associated cottages and grassland, in the ownership of Alexander Middlemas Laidlaw, a member of the family

which owned the Cumledge Mill blanket manufacturing business near Preston village. What made this purchase of extra interest was that he had been educated at Wellfield Academy and so he had bought his old school. In 1904, he appealed against the rates valuation of his property being set at £75 and claimed that £55 would be a fairer figure. Since Wellfield had been recently restored and modernised at great expense, Laidlaw's appeal was dismissed.

His wife, Isabella Laidlaw, was a committed supporter of votes for women. In early 1909, she held a 'drawing room meeting' in Wellfield. Such meetings were quite common at the time. A circle of friends would be invited, normally on a weekday afternoon, to listen to a suffrage speaker and take up a collection for the cause. The Wellfield meeting was addressed by Mrs Margaret Hope of Sunwick farmhouse, a well-known local suffrage speaker. Around this same time, Isabella Laidlaw was appointed honorary vice-president of Berwickshire Women's Liberal Association; her husband was also a staunch Liberal.

Wellfield remained with the Laidlaws for many years. Alexander Middlemas Laidlaw died at Wellfield at the age of 77 in late 1934. After his education at Wellfield Academy, he had learned business management with his father and gained experience at a mill in Crieff with his brother William. The brothers then managed the Cumledge Mill together for many years and Alexander became chairman of the business when it became a limited liability company in 1933. He was a Justice of the Peace for Berwickshire. By the time of Alexander Middlemas Laidlaw's death, his son William Alexander Laidlaw (who owned Wellnage in Station Road for a few years in the 1930s) was managing the Cumledge business.

Isabella Laidlaw continued to live in Wellfield after her husband's death but she was soon making attempts to sell or let the property. These efforts met with no success and, in 1937, she was appealing, as her husband had done many years earlier, to have the rates valuation of the house reduced. Her legal agent argued that around 20 people had come to view Wellfield but no offer to buy or rent had resulted. He then made the interesting observation that 'houses of this class were simply not wanted about Duns and the amenity of this house had been damaged by the erection of council houses which overlooked its ground'. Mrs Laidlaw seems not to have waited too much longer since Swans auctioned 'the valuable antique and modern household furniture' of Wellfield in the spring of 1938.

Wellfield and the Millers

Valuation rolls for the early 1940s show that Wellfield had been purchased by medical practitioner Dr Andrew Cowan. But his ownership of Wellfield was brief since the house was sold again in 1945 to Edward Kerr Miller who ran the Duns butcher's business known as 'Messrs J Miller & Sons' in Golden Square. Miller was a native of Dumfries who was in business in Hawick before coming to Duns in 1898 when the Miller family bought the butcher's shop; he was then only around 20 years old. The business thrived and, by the 1940s, the family company also had shops in Innerleithen, Dunbar, Musselburgh, Edinburgh and Leith.

When Miller bought Wellfield, the house was being tenanted by Dr Douglas MacGilchrist. In 1947, MacGilchrist gave notice of his intention to quit and another medical practitioner, Dr

Alexander Corrigan, was allowed to take over the rest of the lease; he moved his wife and three children into Wellfield. The lease, however, was due to expire at Martinmas (November) 1949 and this resulted in a legal dispute.

Edward Miller lived in the Clouds as tenant of a house called The Elms, one of two properties which had been created out of the old West UP Church. In 1949, with the termination of the lease on Wellfield approaching, Miller informed Dr Corrigan that he would not be renewing it since he wished to move into Wellfield himself. But he had arranged a swap – the owner of The Elms had agreed that Corrigan could take over Miller's lease of the house and move there from Wellfield. Corrigan refused and, in the summer of 1950, the dispute ended up in the Duns court of Sheriff de Bois Murray.



Golden Square, site of a butcher shop for over 150 years

Corrigan argued that The Elms was not a comparable property to Wellfield, being smaller in size and having a limited area of garden. In particular, The Elms was not suitable as a doctor's house since he would need a room for a surgery. Miller disputed these arguments and explained that he wished to develop the land at Wellfield as an agricultural holding with piggeries and poultry. He needed to live in the house to make this work and it was his intention to alter the basement of Wellfield so as to provide accommodation for employees. He also wanted the Wellfield garages for his butcher vans. When it was pointed out to Miller that his original application to erect piggeries at Wellfield had been knocked back since it would adversely affect the amenity of that part of the town, matters became rather heated. Miller said that he 'proposed to go on with his scheme for keeping pigs even if it did spoil the amenities. The authorities could not stop him keeping pigs and poultry'.

Sheriff de Bois Murray ruled that, ultimately, the whole question revolved around whether or not The Elms was a suitable house for Corrigan and his family. The sheriff believed that The Elms was perfectly adequate for a family with three children. He also saw no reason why a

doctor could not practise from such a house but pointed out that, in Scots law, any business purpose to which a house might be put was irrelevant in a dispute of this nature. He ruled in favour of Edward Miller and Corrigan was served with an eviction order. It is unclear whether Dr Corrigan moved to The Elms but he was soon advertising his medical surgery at a property in Easter Street; his notice in the Berwickshire News pointedly informed all that he had been 'recently evicted from Wellfield'.

Edward Miller's residence in Wellfield lasted less than a year since he died in the house in the spring of 1951 at the age of 73. The property was then inherited by his daughter Agnes (Nan) Scott Miller who resigned from her employment at the Ministry of Education to move into Wellfield and oversee her father's Golden Square butcher business which was re-branded as 'AS & J Miller, Butchers', the 'J Miller' probably being her older brother Joseph. Nan Miller (who never married) died in Duns at the age of 81 in 1985 and the principal contents of Wellfield were sold at auction by the executors of her estate in May of that year.

The information in this paper 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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Hunter (Wellfield, Duns) Family Tree

