



“... the home of many souls...”

uncovering the link between **Duns, Berwickshire, Scotland, UK** and **Gillespie Church (Uniting Presbyterian Church in Southern Africa)** at **Mount Ayliff/eMaxesibeni, Dundee, Eastern Cape, South Africa**

This is a story of 2 forgotten Duns women and their legacy to South Africa. It is also the tale of how a lost connection between 2 continents has been rekindled – after over a century elapsing.

Eleanor Hownam was born together with her twin sister Christiana on Wednesday 22nd June 1853 at Lowick manse in Northumberland, England¹ – her father was Rev William Hownam and her mother Isabella Hillston. (Spelling was fluid then so they also appear as Hounam or Hilston, Hillson, Hilson, even Hillstane!). William had been born in Coldstream, Berwickshire, Scotland on Monday 8th September 1817² son of Thomas Hownam a merchant and his wife Eleanor Atkin; he later studied at Edinburgh University and was ordained as minister of Lowick ‘Scotch Church’ on Friday 7th July 1848³. Isabella was born in Duns, Berwickshire on Saturday 16th May 1818⁴ daughter of James Hillston manager of the British Linen Bank branch – first bank in Duns – and his wife Christian Carss. William and Isabella married at Duns on Wednesday 6th October 1852⁵. Unlike today, the wedding was likely held at the manse – which stood east of the current manse, now Glebe Park and Manse Gardens – or at the Hillston’s house, not in the church itself.



Duns Parish Church

In those days both the Church of Scotland and other large Scottish presbyterian denominations maintained churches and ministers across England, catering for expatriates and indigenous presbyterians – these were particularly concentrated in northern England as many crossed the border for work. Over time most of those churches came together into the Presbyterian Church of England and then in 1972 entered the United Reformed Church; but Lowick church remained in the Church of Scotland throughout, eventually uniting with Berwick-upon-Tweed St Andrews Wallace Green in 1987. It was closed in 2002 and has been turned into a private house; a book about this conversion was published in 2021 called *The New Country: City Style for Rural Living*.



Lowick Scotch Church

Rev William Hownam appears in local newspapers from time-to-time performing marriages and serving upon the Ford & Lowick Turnpike Trust, the local toll road. He died in Lowick manse on Monday 25th February 1867 aged 48 when his twin girls were only 13 years old⁶. He is buried at Cornhill-on-Tweed, on English side of the border opposite Coldstream. His family likely came from here – there is a headstone nearby in the same row to a William & Margaret and their sons William and George who all died at Ford, between Cornhill and Lowick, between 1830 and 1860; plus another stone directly beside his to a David Hownam who died at Middlesbrough in 1878.



Image courtesy Coldstream History Society

Rev William Hownam's gravestone in Cornhill parish churchyard

Isabella and her daughter Eleanor evidently returned to Scotland because in the 1871 census Isabella is assisting her father-in-law keeping the Queen's Head Hotel in Kelso while 17 year old Eleanor is still at school⁷; her twin sister Christiana is not there, indeed the only other woman sharing their surname in all south-east Scotland was a 64 year old Catharine in Duns – almost certainly a relative. It must be remembered in those days most children left school in their early or mid-teens so Christiana may already have entered work, perhaps back in Northumberland – or of course she may simply have been away visiting somebody over the border on census night!



Queen's Head Hotel on Bridge Street, Kelso

From the slightly bizarre fact the *Berwick Advertiser* printed lists of “visitors arriving at Spittal”, with their home towns, we know both twin sisters were living at Kelso in 1870 to 1872; with their mother at Edinburgh in 1875; then Duns by 1878 and 1879. Happy holidays! Christiana became a teacher but died of tuberculosis at Bridgend, Duns on Saturday 20th July 1878 aged 25⁸ and is buried in Preston Road cemetery here; her death was registered by her uncle John Hillston.

Come the 1881 census we find Isabella and Eleanor living at Albert Cottages on Bridgend in Duns⁹ which suggests they may all have been living there in 1878; their house has 6 rooms with windows while another at the same address has 5 and is home to Mary, Jane and John Hillston who are all in their 60s being Isabella's brother and sisters-in-law. This is the first time we find Eleanor Hownam and her aunt Jane Hillston living adjacent to each other. It was common then for relatives to stay nearby. Isabella died of heart disease + rheumatism + gout on Sunday 28th August 1881 aged 62¹⁰; her death was registered by her brother John Hillston, as he had for her daughter 3 years earlier. She was buried beside her husband at Cornhill – also buried there are his mother Eleanor Atkin (who had died in Kelso on Tuesday 8th November 1870 aged 72) and his father Thomas (who had died on Saturday in Kelso on Saturday 25th January 1873 aged 76)¹¹.

Fast forward to 1891 and Eleanor is head of the household at Elm Bank on Bridgend living with 3 of her Hillston aunts: Margaret Drysdale, Mary and Jane (uncle John had died in 1885¹²) – their house had 9 rooms with windows while at the same address is 1 unoccupied house and 2 each with 4 windows occupied by the Cairns family (head James a retired butler) and the Laurie family (head James Darling a drapers manager): these are likely the previous Albert Cottages¹³.

Certainly in 1886 an auction was advertised at the White Swan Hotel to sell – “if not previously disposed of by public bargain” – “that cottage tenement of three dwelling-houses with gardens behind and flower-plots in front pleasantly situated at the Bridgend, presently occupied by Miss Hownam, Miss Hilston, and Mr Kyle draper” for minimum price £525. Then in 1888 we find “Miss Hownam, Albert Cottages” subscribe £6 0s 6d to Longmore Incurables Hospital in Edinburgh¹⁴.

Later in 1901 we find Eleanor and Jane at what they now termed 18 Bridgend¹⁵ with 8 windowed rooms. Both other aunts had died – Mary in 1894¹⁶ and Margaret Drysdale in 1891. Perhaps having grown close Margaret was buried with Eleanor’s twin sister Christiana in Duns cemetery, not with her own parents and siblings in Duns churchyard; her husband John Drysdale SSC – a solicitor who also served as Session Clerk of College Street UP Church, Edinburgh¹⁷ – had died in 1877¹⁸ and been buried with his parents in Grange Cemetery on the capital’s southside¹⁹. Duns churchyard was closed in 1850s, but internment was still allowed for existing family plots.

Eleanor appears in local papers from time-to-time... examples include advertising for a maid; attending a bazaar to raise funds for the United Free Church to build a manse at Burnmouth on Berwickshire coast; visiting wedding receptions; and attending a horticultural show²⁰. It seems she inherited wealth and so did not need to work being described as “living on private means”²¹. When a Grand Bazaar was held in Duns in 1884 to relieve some of the town debt ‘Miss Hownam’ gave a “devotional chair, covered with sewed tapestry, a sweet floral design down centre, £3”!²²

Eleanor never married. She died of ovarian cancer at Elm Bank²³ 20 Bridgend on Tuesday 19th November 1907 aged 55²⁴ and buried with her twin sister and aunt Margaret in Duns cemetery²⁵.



Image courtesy Ronald Morrison (Dunse History Society/Borders Family History Society)

Eleanor Hownam’s gravestone in Duns cemetery



Elm Bank #20 and #18 Bridgend, Duns; #22 out of shot to left is identical to #20

Eleanor seems to have had no remaining close family: her death notice specifies she was “only surviving daughter of the late Rev William Hownam”²⁶; her death was registered by a Miss Catherine Macintyre, “intimate friend”, of 112 Shiel Road Liverpool who had been present²⁷; a public notice was issued giving 7 days to place any claims against the estate with a solicitors in Kelso²⁸; and the contents of Elm Bank were then auctioned on Wednesday 18th January 1908²⁹.

Jane Hillston was born in Duns on Friday 27th May 1814 and baptised by the parish minister on Sunday 3rd July³⁰; her father was James Hillston “writer” i.e. solicitor, so presumably yet to become bank manager, and wife Christian Carss... Jane was older sister of Isabella Hillston so in time became sister-in-law to Rev William Hownam and aunt to twins Eleanor and Christiana. In the 1841 census the Hillstons – James now “banker”, wife Christian, and children Mary, ‘Jean’ i.e. Jane, John, Margaret and James – reside in Newtown Street, Duns with a live in servant girl³¹. This would have been in the newly-built bank and manager’s house halfway along the north side opposite what is now Mason Hall, then the newly-built Free Church school. Earlier the BLB used Hawthorn Cottage, Currie Street; later built what became the Bank of Scotland, Market Square.

Fast forward to 1851 she is still in Newtown Street, Duns with her parents (her father labelled now a “retired bank agent”) and siblings Mary, John, Isabella and Margaret, a visiting governess, a female servant and girl farm labourer³². Then in 1861 their father is noted as blind; all siblings are still present, except Isabella – by now married to Rev William Hownam in Lowick of course. However also in the house besides a servant girl are twin nieces Eleanor & Christiana Hownam, aged 7 and attending school³³! Were they just visiting from Lowick or actually living in Duns with their grandparents, aunts & uncles? 1871 finds Jane now at 40 Newtown Street with a schoolgirl boarding in – by now her father is a widower and brother John “formerly bank clerk”.³⁴ Thereafter of course we recall we found her living beside Eleanor Hownam in Bridgend in 1881 and 1891.

Jane never married. She died of degenerative heart failure + gastritis at 20 Bridgend on Saturday 28th September 1901 aged 87, registered by her niece Eleanor and she was called an annuitant i.e. a private pensioner³⁵. Jane was buried in Duns parish churchyard beside her brother James (died in 1848 aged 22), mother Christian Carss (died in 1864 aged 82) and father James (died in 1873 aged 83), her brother John (died in 1885 aged 69) and sister Mary (died in 1894 aged 81)³⁶.

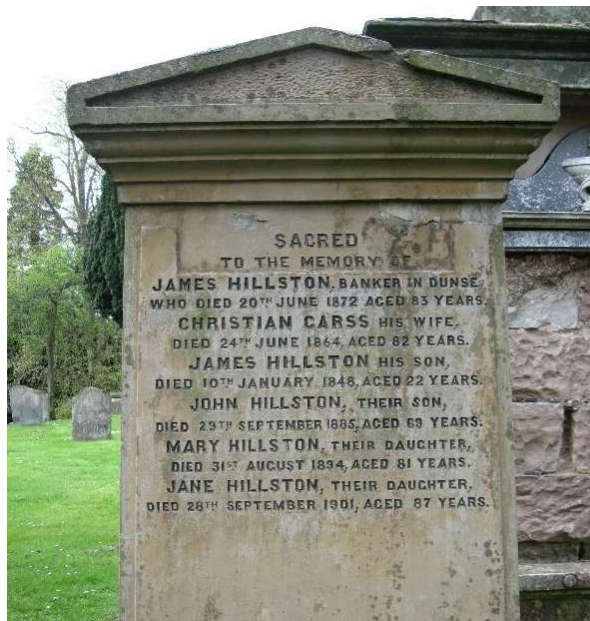


Image courtesy Borders Family History Society

Jane Hillston's gravestone in Duns churchyard

We know that in 1907 a visit was made to the South United Free Church in Duns by Rev Peter L Hunter and Isabella his wife. They served the **Gillespie Mission Church** at Mount Ayliff, Cape Colony, in South Africa – which became Cape Province and later Eastern Cape. (It was named after Gillespie Church in Dunfermline which was itself named after Rev Thomas Gillespie who in 1761 with 2 other ministers founded a liberal Scottish presbyterian denomination called the Relief Church – it is worth noting that 1 of those 2 other ministers was Rev Thomas Boston Junior whose father Rev Thomas Boston was from Duns and famous in eighteenth century Scotland).

Chief Jojo of the Amaxesibe had heard good reports of Christian ministers operating beyond his lands. He sent advisors to find out more then invited the United Presbyterian Church to establish a new mission in his territory. This would be arduous work over a vast area of tracks and rivers. Having trained at Glasgow University with a view to Chinese missions – Peter spent a year after graduating as an assistant in Dunfermline where he met Isabella; they married a month before sailing to their calling in Africa, where they named the church after a hero of their denomination and of her home town. Once settled they built a school of brick and a temporary church of mud.



Rev Peter L Hunter and Isabella Hunter



original Gillespie Mission Church

Images courtesy Rev Thembeke Pitoyi/Thomas Gillespie Memorial Presbyterian Church

They would labour for 46 years – not only building up a congregation and a Christian community but schools, outlying churches and training evangelists. They retired to Durban in 1935 – sadly Isabella only living to 1936 and Peter passing at Pietermaritzburg in 1950 “ever remembered by thousands”. (Incidentally son William hurdled & jumped for Team GB at 1912 + 1920 Olympics).

Rev Hunter had addressed a “well attended” meeting in Duns South church hall on Friday 22nd February 1907 where he gave a “most interesting account of mission work” and activity among deprived local people. He even showed “a number of ornaments, specimens of work, spears, etc”! He led the Sunday morning service, and his wife addressed a “filled” meeting in the hall that afternoon where she “described the educational and religious work carried on under the supervision of her husband and herself” and “the amelioration of the social condition of the people” plus “spoke in great hopefulness of the steady advance of the cause of Christ”. Rev James Eason the South minister said their visit had caused great pleasure, citing the “increased interest which he was sure had thereby been awakened in the foreign missions of the church”.

Duns South Church is directly opposite Duns Parish Church and the town churchyard on Currie Street. It entered the Church of Scotland at 1929’s great reunion; closed in 1976; and is now a carpet warehouse, while the church hall is a private house. (It is worth noting Duns South was the town’s Relief Church, later part of the United Presbyterian and United Free churches; also worth recalling this denomination was that of the Cairns family, notably their famous leader Principal Cairns who was born near Ayton, Berwickshire – and served in Berwick-upon-Tweed).



**former South Church on Currie Street, Duns
– photographed from Duns churchyard**

Jane Hillston left her estate to niece Eleanor Hownan who was also her sole executrix. Jane had previously also inherited her sister Mary’s estate³⁷. Catherine Macintyre was sole executrix of Eleanor’s estate. Eleanor’s will left funds to her (‘Kate’) plus Hownam relatives, neighbours and friends. She also bequeathed £200 to Duns Parish Church, which she had belonged to – half for local work and half for mission; £200 to Duns South UF Church similarly divided, in memory of her aunt Jane Hillston; £100 to Lowick Scotch Church in memory of her father Rev William; plus £25 each to the Duns poor’s coal fund and hospital, and £25 each to 4 hospitals in Edinburgh³⁸. £100 then would be equivalent to over £13,000 at today’s prices but Edwardian times were an era of low wages and cheap materials: so to pay or build to equivalent standard now might cost between £50,000 and £75,000. We must assume she had been inspired by what she had heard about foreign missions and maybe even specifically by listening to the Hunters earlier that year.

While her will was written in 1903 with those clauses on church donations, she may have later given a verbal indication that she wanted the funds applied to Africa or specifically Mount Ayliff.

It clearly took time for the £100 to be disposed of, but the Annual Meeting of the South Church on Wednesday 23rd February 1910 was read this excerpt from a recent Kirk Session minute:

It was unanimously agreed to devote the sum of £100, being the amount at the disposal of the Session for Mission purposes bequeathed by Miss Hounam, to the renovation and enlargement of the Mission Church at Gillespie, Kaffraria, under the charge of the Rev Peter Hunter MA who has preached in the South Church, Duns, and is well known to many of its members. It is the wish of the Session the Church at Gillespie should be provided with an inscription to the following effect:

To the Glory of God, and in dear and tender memory of Miss Jane Hilston, of Duns, Scotland, and of Miss Eleanor Hounam, her niece, also of Duns, whose bequest of £100 to the Minister and Session of the South United Free Church, Duns, in memory of her Aunt they have devoted toward the renovation and enlargement of this House of God in a far off land

They were also read an extract from the Kirk Session at Gillespie:

We the Session of Gillespie Mission take the opportunity of conveying our thanks to the Rev James Eason MA, the Minister, and to the Session of the South UF Church, Duns, Scotland, through whom the bequest of £100 by Miss Eleanor Hounam in memory of her Aunt, Miss Jane Hilston of Duns, has been granted towards the renovation and enlargement of the House of God at Gillespie, Mount Ayliff, Cape Colony. We acknowledge the goodness of God in helping us with this work in a time of great financial depression in South Africa, and we feel assured that the Minister and Session of Duns South will be gratified to learn that the work of fitting the building at Gillespie for a Church has now been completed in a way that would have been altogether beyond our unaided efforts, and that we now possess a Church at our main station both suitable and comfortable, which will, we trust, be a standing witness for God's Word and the home of many souls. The marble tablet in the wall will commemorate the names of the two departed friends.

These are reported in *Berwickshire News*³⁹ – it would likely be possible to find more detail in the Duns South Church records⁴⁰ which are now held at the Heritage Hub in Hawick or available digitally at General Register House, Edinburgh; perhaps also in Gillespie Church's own records.



Images courtesy Rev Thembeke Pitoyi/Thomas Gillespie Memorial Presbyterian Church

Gillespie Mission Church new sanctuary erected from 1909 before recent restoration

Evidently the proposed memorial plaque would have proven a bit too wordy as it actually reads:

1909 In Memory of JANE HILSTON and ELEANOR HOWNAM Duns Scotland



Image courtesy Rev Thembeke Pitoyi/Thomas Gillespie Memorial Presbyterian Church

It presumably cannot be coincidental that a treasured possession of the Gillespie Church is a communion cup inscribed “United Associate Congregation Kelso 1836”, not far from Duns. This congregation originated as Kelso Secession Church becoming successively part of the Burgher, United Associate, United Presbyterian and United Free Church denominations. It entered the Church of Scotland at 1929 great reunion and was called Kelso Trinity. It closed in 1981 and is currently disused. There are 4 cups with the same inscription “United Associate Congregation Kelso 1836” still held by Kelso North congregation⁴¹, the church with which the Trinity united. It was not unknown for churches to donate surplus communion-ware overseas after a local union but Trinity did not join with another church until 1940 – is a more likely link that it was rebuilt in 1886, so only just before the congregation at Mount Ayliff was founded and the Hunters set out?



former Trinity Church on Bowmont Street, Kelso



Kelso North Church of Scotland

Images courtesy Geograph.org



Image courtesy Rev Thembeke Pitoyi/Thomas Gillespie Memorial Presbyterian Church

Gillespie Church communion cup inscribed “United Associate Congregation Kelso 1836”

While generosity of Duns and Kelso has never been forgotten in South Africa, regrettably it long passed from memory here. However in April 2025 a communication arrived from Rev Thembeke Pitoyi pastor of Gillespie Church in Mount Ayliff (now also called eMaxesibeni) who was seeking to find out about the ladies on their plaque, his congregation being in the process of refurbishing the old church into school and meeting rooms. This burgeoned first into correspondence then culminated in April 2026 with Rev Pitoyi visiting the Hunter grave in Durban before travelling to Scotland to spend a week each in Campbeltown, Dunfermline and Duns: an historic occasion.



Images courtesy Rev Thembeke Pitoyi/Thomas Gillespie Memorial Presbyterian Church

Gillespie Mission Church sanctuary erected 1909 now undergoing restoration

It is noticeable and sad that all the UK churches at the core of this story – Lowick, Duns South and Kelso Trinity – have closed due to declining numbers and unions. Thankfully this is not the case at Gillespie where a larger modern church has been required with seats for 2,000 people. Indeed the Uniting Presbyterian Church in Southern Africa now serves more members than the Church of Scotland: the seeds planted almost 150 years ago have made for a bountiful harvest! Chief Jojo, Rev Peter & Isabella Hunter, Eleanor Hownam and Jane Hillston all played their part.



Images courtesy Rev Thembeke Pitoyi/Thomas Gillespie Memorial Presbyterian Church

Gillespie Church latest sanctuary

It is remarkable to think that all the above information and images have been found using online resources, computerised records and a couple of reference books, having started with no more information than an email from South Africa detailing 2 names and 1 place from a plaque. It has opened-up the forgotten story of the lives of 2 women and their families. More remarkably it has rekindled links between Scotland and South Africa that had lain dormant for perhaps a century.

Future research could include: a) finding excerpts in Duns Church records held in Hawick and Gillespie records in South Africa; b) identify what mission purpose the £100 left to Duns Parish Church was used for; and c) research if links to Mount Ayliff did continue for a time after 1910.

We should all be very proud of what Jane and Eleanor gave to South Africa: it was a gift made in faith, and which they knew they would never see in person nor even hear the fruits of. We should perhaps be a little ashamed it was totally forgotten here while kept up in high esteem on the far side of the world. Most of all though we should be thankful this link across the wide seas has at last been resurrected – for their deeds yet live. God bless the people of Duns and of Mount Ayliff.

Kenneth McLean *Session Clerk, Duns & District Parishes, Church of Scotland*

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Sources:

- ¹ *The Kelso Chronicle*, Friday 1st July 1853, page 3
- ² Coldstream Old Parish Register Births page 155 and gravestone in Cornhill churchyard; in the register his mother Eleanor Atkin is given as 'Helen Aitken' and in *Fasti Ecclesiae Scoticae* his birth is given as 1818 in Kelso
- ³ Hew Scott, *Fasti Ecclesiae Scoticae: Succession of Ministers in the Church of Scotland since the Reformation* volume 7, Edinburgh 1928, page 462
- ⁴ Duns Old Parish Register Births page 377 and gravestone in Duns churchyard
- ⁵ Duns Old Parish Register Marriages page 357
- ⁶ *The Berwick Journal*, Friday 1st March 1867, page 3 and *Fasti Ecclesiae Scoticae* and Cornhill gravestone
- ⁷ Kelso Census 1871, page 10
- ⁸ Duns Statutory Death Register 1878, entry 56
- ⁹ Duns Census 1881 volume 3, page 20
- ¹⁰ Duns Statutory Death Register 1881, entry 54
- ¹¹ gravestone in Cornhill churchyard
- ¹² gravestone in Duns churchyard
- ¹³ Duns Census 1891 volume 3, page 20
- ¹⁴ *The Berwick Journal*, Thursday 19th August 1886, page 4; Thursday 7th June 1888, page 3
- ¹⁵ Duns Census 1901 volume 3, page 23
- ¹⁶ gravestone in Duns churchyard
- ¹⁷ *New Edinburgh Leith & County Business Directory*, Edinburgh 1868, page 633
- ¹⁸ Newington Edinburgh Statutory Death Register 1877 volume 5, entry 495
- ¹⁹ BillionGraves.com database entry
- ²⁰ *The Berwickshire News*, Tuesday 8th March 1892; Tuesday 29th October 1901; Tuesday 20th October 1903; Tuesday 12th September 1905
- ²¹ Duns Census 1891 volume 3, page 20 and Duns Census 1901 volume 3, page 23
- ²² *The Berwick Journal*, Thursday 23rd October 1884, page 3
- ²³ *The Berwickshire News*, Tuesday 26th November 1907, page 3
- ²⁴ Duns Statutory Death Register 1907, entry 45
- ²⁵ grave cross in Duns cemetery
- ²⁶ *The Berwickshire News*, Tuesday 26th November 1907, page 3
- ²⁷ Duns Statutory Death Register 1907, entry 45
- ²⁸ *The Berwickshire News*, Tuesday 10th December 1907, page 2
- ²⁹ *The Berwickshire News*, Tuesday 7th January 1908, page 2
- ³⁰ Duns Old Parish Register Births page 335
- ³¹ Duns Census 1841, volume 4, page 21
- ³² Duns Census 1851, volume 1, page 48
- ³³ Duns Census 1861, volume 1, page 23
- ³⁴ Duns Census 1871, volume 1, page 13
- ³⁵ Duns Statutory Death Register 1901, entry 47
- ³⁶ gravestone in Duns churchyard
- ³⁷ Last Will & Testament of Jane Hillston, Duns Sherriff Court register, volume 44, folios 8 to 9
- ³⁸ Last Will & Testament of Eleanor Hownam, Duns Sherriff Court register, volume 40, folios 327 to 332
- ³⁹ *The Berwickshire News*, Tuesday 1st March 1910, page 2
- ⁴⁰ CH3/1146/1 has Abstract of Accounts 1910; CH3/1146/10 are Kirk Session Minutes 1894-1922; CH3/1146/15 and /16 are Managers & Congregational Board Minutes 1895-1976; CH3/1146/14 is unspecified Correspondence
- ⁴¹ GAC Binnie, *The Churches & Graveyards of Roxburghshire*, Kelso 2001, page 196

If anybody has more detail on this subject: please contact the church or history society