

Black Bull Hotel

David McLean (2026)



Introduction

The Black Bull Hotel sits at the northern end of Black Bull Street (or Black Bull Wynd, as it was originally known) in Duns, old enough to have given its name to the street itself. As with any such early property, dating the building is difficult. It has long been claimed that the hotel dates from the early nineteenth century but this claim may well be based on nothing more than the fact that the 'Black Bull Inn' appears, clearly annotated, on John Wood's 1824 map of Dunse. It may, of course, have been there for some considerable time before that. For example, in the Berwick Advertiser in 1840, it was offered as a 'tavern in Dunse to let' with a 'large ballroom', three parlours, a bar and seven bedrooms as well as closets (toilets). Interestingly, the advert went on to assert that the Black Bull had been the 'principal Inn of Dunse for upwards of a hundred years'. That would date the inn to the earlier eighteenth century! This, of course, is another claim which is impossible to verify without further evidence but, on the balance of probabilities, the Black Bull may be considerably older than previously thought. It has, however, been extended and altered internally several times over its many years. Today, the property is Category C listed.

It may also be worthwhile clearing up a misunderstanding here. For many years, there was also a temperance hotel in Black Bull Street. Newspaper references to 'Wilson's Temperance Hotel' in the street can be found from the 1870s. In the 1890's, it was taken over by a new proprietor

and became 'Miss Liddell's Temperance Hotel'. The original Miss Liddell – Jane Liddell – died at the age of 52 in 1903 but other family members, especially her sister Elizabeth, carried on the business until the property was sold in early 1931, ending the existence of a temperance hotel in Black Bull Street at that point. Some sources imply that the Black Bull Hotel became the Temperance Hotel and then changed back again. This is not the case – they were separate hotels in the same street for at least sixty years. Census records also clearly confirm them as different properties.

George and Catherine Hownam, 1820s and 1830s

John Wood's 1824 map of Dunse shows the Black Bull Inn kept by 'Mr Hownam'. This was George Hownam (in his early 20s then) who managed the inn with his wife Catherine; they had one child, William, born in 1836. The stagecoach trade was an important part of business at that time and coaches travelled between the Black Bull and Edinburgh in both directions on a daily basis. In 1834, a new service was also started between Berwick and Dunse, using an 'elegant new light post coach' named the True Briton. It ran daily, leaving the Hen & Chickens in Berwick at 9am and reaching the Black Bull Inn in Dunse 90 minutes later, implying an average speed of around 10 miles per hour; the return coach left the Black Bull at 5pm each day. Fares for the full journey were 4s 6d to sit inside the coach and 3s to travel outside.

Annoyance at tax levels is no modern phenomenon. In the early nineteenth century, taxes were payable on carriages and the horses which pulled them and Dunse hotel keepers were clearly unhappy. George Hownam was one of the key figures who organised a petition in the town in 1840 'praying for an amelioration of the duties on post-horses and chaises'. The petition was perhaps extended to a wider area since it was not presented to the House of Commons by the Berwickshire MP but by John Elliot, Whig MP for neighbouring Roxburghshire. One imagines that it was unsuccessful.

Hownam was also among some 20 individuals who desired to set up a gasworks in Dunse so that the town's streets (and houses if the owners so wished) could be lit at night. They met in the Town Hall in April 1835 and were advised by an engineer that setting up a gasworks and installing the main pipes would cost around £1000. Feeling encouraged, those present agreed to set up the Dunse Gaslight Company and issue £5 shares to raise the necessary capital. Such was their enthusiasm that a substantial amount of money had been pledged before they even left the hall. The original plan was to build the gasworks on the site later occupied by the Boston Church and now by the Boston Court housing complex but, when this was opposed by George Peat across the road at Wellnage, it was built further out of town – fortuitously, because the railway station ended up being built beside it in the 1840s. Taking just a few months to build, the gasworks was operational by February 1836 and George Hownam soon had the Black Bull 'brilliantly lighted with Gas' in time for hosting a celebratory company dinner. He went on to serve as a director of the Dunse Gaslight Company.

In 1840, George Hownam gave up his lease on the Black Bull Inn and announced that he had instead taken over the White Swan Inn in the Market Place where he had laid in 'a large stock of wines and spirits of superior quality'. He died of heart disease in his Swan hotel at the age of 67 in the autumn of 1869. His widow Catherine died at Briery Hill seven years later in 1876.

James and Thomasina Purves, 1840s and 1850s

It seems likely that the next landlord of the Black Bull was James Purves since the Kelso Chronicle carried an announcement in early 1843 that a son had been born in Dunse to 'Mrs James Purves, Black Bull Inn'; this is confirmed in Church of Scotland birth records. On a less happy note, there was a report in that same newspaper in January 1847 of a case at the Sheriff Court in Greenlaw. John Burton was a 'hostler' in Dunse – hostlers or ostlers were men who looked after horses in the stables of inns and the like. Burton pleaded guilty to having assaulted James Purves, innkeeper, Dunse the previous November and was fined 20s. Perhaps he had been one of James Purves' employees.



Plain Doric doorway with pilasters either side

The 1851 census shows James Purves (43), innkeeper and his wife Thomasina (45) together with their eight children – John (18) was a clerk in the Berwickshire Sheriff Clerk's office; George (16), Mary (12), Agnes (9), James junior (7) and Isabella (5) were all at school; Margaret (14) had left school and was apprenticed to a dressmaker; and Thomasina junior was just 6 months old.

The 1855 valuation roll shows James Purves as owner of the Black Bull Inn together with its stables and gig-house (coach-house) as well as two other nearby properties – another house in Black Bull Wynd and a dwelling house with bakehouse in Newtown Street. Given that he was the son of a shepherd, it seems that he had made a reasonable success of his career. James Purves, hotel keeper, died in his inn at the age of 51 in 1859. He had operated the Black Bull for some twenty years.

James and Christina Lauder, 1860s to 1880s

At the 1861 census, James Lauder, age 46, was working as a butler for the Brown family of Longformacus House and living in the village with his wife Christina, age 29, and 2-year-old son James junior. Within a short period, he had taken a considerable step up in life. By October 1863, he had already been innkeeper of the Black Bull for some little while since he placed an announcement in the Kelso Chronicle that month, thanking the people of Dunse and district for their support since he had taken over. He also reported that he had fitted up a bathroom 'for the comfort of commercial and other gentlemen staying in his house where hot and cold baths can always be had'. Travelling salesmen were an important part of the hotel trade then.

It was common for local clubs and societies to patronise their local inns for meetings and events. In 1870, for example, the Black Bull hosted the annual dinners of Dunse Curling Club and the Dunse Gaslight Company and dinners following a day's competition by each of the Berwickshire and Dunse Fishing Clubs. Lauder also catered out at events such as farm sales. In 1870, James Lauder was president of Dunse Bowling Club (at Teindhillgreen) and he presented the club with a pair of 'handsome bowls' for competition. He was also a curler on the lake at Dunse Castle where he once slipped on the ice and fell, fracturing a bone in his arm.

The 1871 census lists James Lauder (56), his wife Christina (40) and six sons – James junior (12), Adam (9), William (7), David (5), Alexander (3) and John (1). Two guests appear to be staying in the hotel – John Ellsworth (45), a cattle dealer and Robert Foster (70), a retired merchant (shopkeeper). There were four staff, namely Jane Wait (29), waitress; Margaret Spence (36), cook; Isabella Wood (25), housemaid; and Isabella Allan (19), nursemaid to look after the younger children. There may have been other staff who did not live in the hotel. In 1875, the Lauders had another son whom they named George – so they now had seven sons!

Another important part of the innkeeping business in the nineteenth century was 'posting' which meant stabling and looking after the horses of travellers and visitors – something we would call a 'livery service' today. And stagecoaches needed their horses changed and given appropriate attention. This is why many inns employed ostlers. The Black Bull had sizeable stables and a yard in which coaches and carriages could be parked. Like the White Swan in the Market Place, the Black Bull also ran its own horse-drawn omnibuses once the railway arrived in Dunse so that passengers and their luggage could be more conveniently transported to and from the station. This led to occasional complaints from Dunse citizens who found these omnibuses left in the street and obstructing the passage of others going about their daily business. A local horse-and-gig 'taxi' service may also have been on offer.

But James Lauder reached something of a pinnacle in his posting trade in February 1878. The funeral of Lady Elizabeth Pringle required her coffin to be carried from her home at Langton House to the family vault at Stichill Churchyard, a distance of some thirteen miles. For this purpose, a special cortege consisting of a hearse and accompanying carriages, together with 16 horses, was hired and brought to Dunse by train. All the coach drivers and horses were accommodated overnight at James Lauder's Black Bull Inn while the vehicles stood in his posting yard. This would have been considered a prestigious piece of business.

Tragedy struck the Lauder family later that same year, however, when Christina Lauder died in the Black Bull in June 1878 (age given as 45) from liver disease. Three years later, at the

1881 census, James junior at the age of 22 was helping his father run the hotel; Adam does not appear in the census but he was still in Dunse the following year; William was a draper's apprentice; David was apprenticed to a cabinet maker; Alexander, at the age of 14, was apprenticed to a tailor; and remaining brothers John and George were still at school.

James Lauder's death in 1885 was the result of an accident. He had been in poor health for some time before he fell down the stairs in the Black Bull, sustaining serious injuries. A cut to his head bled profusely until medical help arrived but he probably also suffered a bad concussion. He survived for about a fortnight before dying in the hotel on 21 June 1885 at the age of 71. Cause of death was given as 'shock from injury to head'. The Illustrated Berwick Journal reported the death of an innkeeper who had conducted 'an extensive posting and hotel business'. He had been for many years a trooper in the East Lothian and Berwickshire Yeomanry Cavalry (local defence volunteers) and had also long served as a Duns Police Commissioner (town councillor).



South courtyard elevation still retains the hotel's coaching inn character

Porteous, Miller and Meikle, 1880s and 1890s

The earliest reference to the next innkeeper is a Berwickshire News item in October 1889 when 'Robert Porteous, hotel keeper, Black Bull Hotel, Duns' was reported as being sued for £21 7s 5d by Mrs Ann Stoddart Porteous of Edinburgh (not his wife) on account of the balance of a loan not being paid by him; he claimed to have a receipt proving the repayment. The valuation rolls for the early 1890s show that Porteous was tenant of the Black Bull, the property then being owned by William Weatherhead, a qualified lawyer but at that time farmer at Bogangreen near Coldingham; the Weatherhead family originally lived at the Barniken in Duns.

The 1891 census lists Robert Porteous (54) as hotel keeper, his wife Janet (50) and four grown-up children – Marion (29), Alice (25), Violet (22) and William (19). Oddly, only William is shown as having an occupation, that of ‘ostler’. The census also lists a cook, a waitress, a groom and a busman (presumably for the horse-drawn omnibus). But the Porteous family had left the Black Bull by 1893 and valuation rolls show that the inn was then tenanted briefly over the next few years, firstly by James Miller and then by James Roy Meikle.

Alexander and Jane Law, 1900s to 1920s

Alexander Law had taken over the tenancy of the Black Bull by the summer of 1901, as evidenced by a reference in the Berwickshire News; the hotel was then owned by the trustees of the estate of the late John Purves. But the property was not long in being offered for sale twice within the space of a year. In December 1904, the Black Bull Hotel with stables, coach-house, offices and garden was advertised for sale by roup (auction) in the Town Hall with an upset price of £1700. It apparently failed to sell since, exactly a year later in December 1905, ‘that commodious and old-established hotel called the Black Bull with stables, coach-house, offices and garden’ was again advertised for sale in the Town Hall with an upset price of £1650. This time, tenant Alexander Law purchased the hotel for £1600 (around £200,000 value today); he soon appealed against the rates valuation of his property and got it down from £70 to £55.

When Alex Law applied to the County Licensing Court for the renewal of his licence in 1906, consent was given on condition that certain alterations were carried out at the hotel within six months. When it came time to renew his licence a year later in 1907, the court heard that the changes were under way but not yet completed. The Chief Constable said that he was satisfied with the progress being made and Law’s certificate was renewed. Unfortunately, no indication was given of the nature of the required alterations.

Alexander Law (58) is shown as hotel keeper in the 1911 census with his wife Jane (54). Their son David (21) was employed as a barman in the business and daughter Janet or Nettie (15) was a milliner’s apprentice. A general servant, Agnes Bell (29) also lived in the hotel.

Alexander Law died at the age of 68 of heart and kidney failure in the town’s Whitcheater Hospital in March 1922. The following month, his wife Jane Law was granted a renewal of the certificate held by her late husband so that she could carry on the business. But Jane Law herself died in the hotel at the age of 66 a little over two years later in the summer of 1924, cause of death being hardening of the arteries. In November of that year, the Berwickshire News advertised the upcoming sale of the whole household furniture and effects of the Black Bull Hotel, being the contents of a commercial room, billiard room, smoke room, seven bedrooms, kitchen and back kitchen.

Bernard and Mary Fitzsimons, 1920s

The next tenure was a short and highly unfortunate one. The Berwickshire News reported in December 1924 that the tenancy of the Black Bull had been taken over by ‘Sergeant-Major

Fitzsimons' who, for some years, had been drill instructor for the Haddingtonshire (East Lothian) Battery of the Royal Garrison Artillery. This was Bernard Fitzsimons, a native of County Down, who had married Mary Kate Costello in Sheffield five years earlier in 1919; Mary was born in Cork City. In the 1921 census, Bernard and Mary Fitzsimons were living in Dunbar's High Street. Following their move to Duns, a son whom they called Patrick was born to the couple in the Black Bull in the summer of 1925. But, only a few months later in October 1925, Mary Fitzsimons died of septicaemia in Dunbar at the age of 33. And then, in April 1926, a newspaper article reported that an application had been lodged with the Berwickshire Licensing Court by a 'trustee on Bernard Fitzsimons' estate'. Perhaps this implies a bankruptcy; it was not a death since Bernard Fitzsimons re-married in 1933 and died in Renfrewshire at the age of 76 in 1961. It has proved impossible to uncover more around these events.

John Keane, 1920s to 1940s

A native of Dalkeith and a miner's son, Major John Lockhart Keane had 37 years' service in the Army. He joined as a private in the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders in 1889 and served for ten years in India and the East. He then fought in the Boer War in South Africa and with the Royal Scots in the Great War, acquiring several decorations. He retired from the Army in 1926 and, after a brief spell living in Edinburgh and working as a commercial traveller, he was granted a transfer of the licence which had been held by Bernard Fitzsimons and became landlord of the Black Bull in Duns. He would have been around 50 years of age at that time.



John Keane certainly threw himself into town life. He became president of Duns Park Bowling Club. He was an official of both Duns Football Club and the Berwickshire Motor Cycle Club although the latter had become defunct by the mid-1930s. Having been an enthusiastic boxer

in his time, he sometimes officiated at boxing tournaments, one such event taking place in the Volunteer Hall. He was chairman of Duns Workingmen's Institute and a director of the Duns Co-operative Society. He was a keen supporter of the Boy Scouts movement and a Freemason in the Dunse Lodge.

He first put his name forward for Duns Town Council in 1931 but was unsuccessful on that occasion. When he tried again in 1937, he was one of five candidates for four seats and came top of the poll with 311 votes, although on a disappointing turn-out. He was elected Provost of Duns in 1940 and, in 1941, was appointed a Deputy Lieutenant of Berwickshire, quite possibly the first inhabitant of the burgh of Duns to be so honoured.

Keane was indirectly involved in a legal case in Edinburgh in 1936. A fraudster called Frederick Weir had pretended to Mrs Mary King that he was a representative of Major Keane and had been instructed by him to offer her £8000 and the Black Bull Hotel in Duns in exchange for her public house in Leith. He then claimed to be short of money. Fortunately, Mrs King handed over only a small sum before the fraud was uncovered. Repeat-offender Weir went to prison for 12 months.

With the outbreak of the Second World War, Major Keane was quick to offer his military experience. In May 1940, he registered his name at the police station to become the first volunteer from Duns and district in the Local Defence Corps; there were soon 130 names on the local list. In early 1941, he was appointed head Air Raid Precaution warden for the area. In April 1944, however, he announced his resignation from Duns Town Council. He sold the Black Bull and bought a house in Bonnyrigg, desiring a quieter life in his remaining years. As it turned out, he still had substantial time left – he died in Bonnyrigg at the age of 90 in 1963. It appears that he had long been a widower (certainly before he came to Duns) with four sons, all of whom went into the Army.

Ann Dobson, 1940s

After Major Keane sold the Black Bull in the spring of 1944, widow Ann Nichol Dobson took over the hotel. Her husband Herbert George Dobson had died a few months earlier; he had been a motor garage proprietor in Duns with premises in Currie Street. It would appear that Ann Dobson had some years of hotel experience with her sister, Mary Wilson, at the Royal Inn in the Market Place (later the Whip and Saddle). It is also possible that she was helped at the Black Bull, at least for a time, by her only son and daughter-in-law, James and Rosemary Dobson. Ann Dobson was soon applying to the licensing court for alterations and an extension at the Black Bull.

She was clearly a resourceful lady. On a Tuesday in June 1950, she had a lunch booking for a party of 35 Welsh farmers who were on a tour of the Borders. Her staff were busy making tomato soup when the gas supply went off in the kitchen about 11am to much consternation. Ann Dobson then looked out of the window to see two Duns Gas Company workmen digging a hole in the street – they had shut off the supply without telling her. They were unable to switch the gas back on but Ann Dobson saw that they had a brazier in the middle of the road filled

with red-hot coke. So, the large soup pan came out of the hotel and went on to the brazier. The Welsh farmers were served ‘Tomato Crème au Brazier de la Rue’ – and a cold salad.

After six years running the Black Bull, Ann Dobson left the trade in the autumn of 1950 and sold the hotel which had benefitted from numerous improvements. She went to live near Greenlaw but died in the Whitchester Hospital in Duns in December 1951 at the age of 51 after a short illness.



Postscript, 1950s

After Ann Dobson, the licence for the Black Bull was granted in November 1950 to Margaret Ford Wilson who came from the Largs area. She clearly desired further alterations since the hotel was closed for a while and re-opened after thorough modernisation in the summer of 1951. It then had a ‘spacious dining room’ and modern kitchen on the first floor. The public bar and other ground floor rooms had been completely altered and all the bedrooms had ‘running water’ with H&C basins. The hotel offered B&B, lunches, teas, dinners and a 7-day licence. A few months later, Mrs Wilson added a cocktail bar. She ran the Black Bull for some five years. In November 1955, the hotel’s licence was granted to David Henderson and his wife, previously of the Ship Inn in Newhaven, Edinburgh.

The information in this paper has been researched from various newspapers of the time (especially the Kelso Chronicle and Berwickshire News) and from public records – census; valuation rolls; and birth, marriage and death records.

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