

THE MILLBURN SCHOOLS (DUNS PARISH) AND THE HAPPERS

David McLean (2022)

Introduction

Millburn lies in the northern part of Duns parish, to the west of the village of Preston. For more than 160 years, two schools provided education for the children of the area – the ‘old’ Millburn School between 1820 and 1877 and then the ‘new’ Millburn School between 1877 and the early 1980s. Two generations of the Happer family (father and daughter) served as head teachers of these schools for over 50 years; there is a family tree at the end of this article. The Happer family only arrived at Millburn, however, following a notable tussle between the Millburn community and the area’s principal landowner.

Following its closure as a school in 1877, the ‘old’ Millburn building was converted into a smithy, the blacksmith’s forge occupying what had once been the schoolroom. The ‘new’ Millburn school was closed in the early 1980s (probably 1983) due to dwindling pupil numbers, a fate which befell many small country schools in the second half of the century during a time of rural depopulation. Today, both the ‘old’ and ‘new’ Millburn school buildings happily enjoy new leases of life as private dwelling houses.

The ‘Old’ Millburn School

An Act of the Scottish parliament passed in 1696 required every parish in the country to have a school, maintained and supported by local landowners and the Church. For smaller parishes, this might work but, for larger ones like Duns, the number of children was too high and the distances to school too great for one school to be anything like sufficient. So, in the early nineteenth century, another law permitted ‘side schools’; the term simply meant that a parish could establish one or more additional schools somewhere else in the area.

Parents in the northern part of Duns parish were keen to have a school in their locality and the necessary funds were raised by a ‘public subscription’ - the main contributors would be local tenant farmers and landowners. It would appear that Hay of Duns Castle, the main landowner in the parish, did not contribute much financially but he allowed a piece of his land on which to build the school. It was a fairly restricted site, wedged in between the elevated public road on its southern edge and a steep drop to the Mill Burn to the north, but it was sufficient. The two-storey schoolhouse for the schoolmaster and adjoining schoolroom opened around 1820. Originally, therefore, it was a ‘subscription school’ built and maintained by the voluntary donations of local people but it was later officially adopted as a ‘side school’ which meant that all landowners in Duns parish would then become responsible for its upkeep.

Disaster struck on the first day of February 1844 in the early afternoon when the schoolhouse was burned to the ground, probably caused by a small fire in the chimney which then spread inside the roof space. There were no injuries and the schoolmaster’s furniture was saved by

the efforts of local people. It is not clear whether the schoolroom was also affected but the schoolhouse (which was insured) had to be totally rebuilt.



The 'old' Millburn schoolhouse (left) and schoolroom

Apart from the fire, the schooling of the Millburn children seems to have proceeded without incident until trouble erupted in 1869 when the schoolmaster of the time retired. The Duns parish heritors (landowners) prepared to make arrangements for appointing a new teacher when Colonel Hay of Duns Castle Estate threw a spanner in the works. He declared his intention to close the school and take the building back into his own possession for other purposes. Furthermore, he declined to pay any compensation to the original subscribers and even threatened to claim rent for all the years in which the building had been occupied free of charge. The reasons for his heavy-handed action would become apparent in time.

The question of ownership of the land and building obviously arose but no title deeds could be found – perhaps none had ever been drawn up. Apparently, an entry in the local heritors' minute book made reference to the school land being 'granted gratuitously by Mr Hay' and neither Hay nor his estate factor had ever disputed the words but it seems unlikely that a legal case could have stood on so flimsy a piece of evidence.

The matter dragged on until a meeting of Duns parish heritors was called in the summer of 1870; the Reverend John Macleod of Duns summarised the purpose of the meeting as being 'the question of discontinuing a side school'. 49 residents had signed a memorial (petition) asking for the school to be kept open, claiming 55 local children between the ages of 5 and 11. There had been no education for them over the many months since the retirement of the previous schoolmaster. There was much discussion and even talk of legal action although that might cost more than building a new school.

By the end of the meeting, Mr Hay relented and agreed to re-open the school (which must have been deteriorating in the meantime) and maintain it as long as his tenant farmers paid

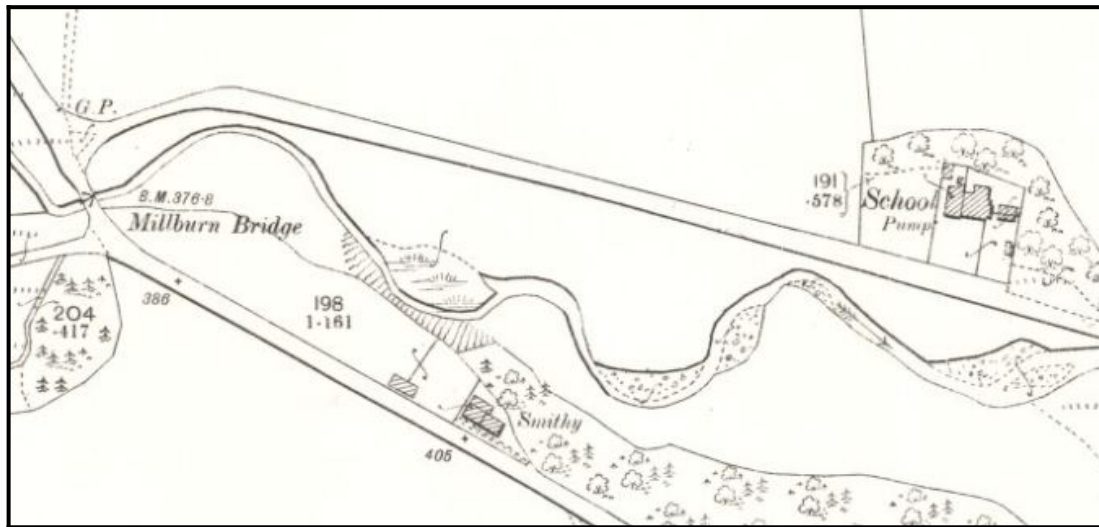
their share and the children's parents paid their school fees. The fact that these financial conditions were emphasised suggests strongly that this had been behind Hay's decision to close the school in the first place; it seems that he had been conveniently left to meet the school's various expenses on his own. The school re-opened in February 1871 after being shut for nearly two years and Thomas Stalker Happer was appointed as the new schoolmaster or 'dominie' as country teachers were often known. Happer was born in Earlston in 1835 and taught in Ayrshire before returning to the Borders as schoolmaster at Smailholm and Coldingham from where he came to Millburn.



Thomas Happer, schoolmaster at Millburn

The 'New' Millburn School

However, moves were soon being made to replace the school. Partly, this was almost certainly due to its poor condition – a few years later, one of HM inspectors would describe the old school as a 'wretched hovel'. In addition, the passage of the landmark Education Act in 1872 meant that education became compulsory to the age of 13 and so the number of regular scholars would increase. The Act also changed how schools were administered, requiring every parish to set up an elected school board. It was therefore a committee of Duns School Board which examined the situation at Millburn. They looked at extending the existing school but understandably declared the site too small. The options were narrowed down in the summer of 1876 to the nearby site on the other (northern) side of the Mill Burn. £920 was borrowed by the school board for the construction (a debt finally cleared in 1903) and Thomas Happer and his pupils moved to their new school in 1877. The building which they left reverted to the ownership of the Hays and it was converted into a smithy, the schoolhouse becoming the blacksmith's dwelling and the schoolroom being turned into the smithy workshop. Today, it is a private dwelling house still called 'The Smithy'.



The original Millburn School of 1820 (marked 'Smithy' on the above map) and the new Millburn School of 1877 (marked 'School') on the other side of the Mill Burn

There was a tradition at this time, especially in country schools, known as 'barring-out'. It took place on the shortest day of the year just before Christmas when older pupils in particular would make every effort to get into the school first thing in the morning and bar the door against the teacher. The hope was that, after some pretend protestation, the teacher would relent and declare the day to be a holiday when the children would cheerfully rush off home. Alternatively, the action might lead to lost tempers and a liberal use of the 'tawse' once the teacher gained entry. The story goes that Thomas Happer cautiously approached the schoolroom door one barring-out day and heard his pupils chuckling on the other side. So, he quietly headed off over the hill to enjoy the curling on Duns Castle Lake and left them to it!

As the number of pupils attending the 'new' Millburn School grew, Thomas Happer had some help from his only daughter Elizabeth who served as a pupil-teacher. This was a common practice in schools of the time. Older pupils, both boys and girls, might spend a good part of each school day working with the younger pupils, essentially passing on the teacher's instruction. These pupil-teachers then stayed behind at the end of the day, when the other children had gone home, to catch up on their own education! They were paid for this role and it was especially useful for any pupils who aspired to become teachers themselves one day.

The experience seems to have benefitted Elizabeth Happer. As the number of pupils climbed beyond 60 and, therefore, too many for one teacher, she became assistant teacher to her father and is shown as such in the 1891 census when she was age 22. In the autumn of 1902, it would appear that pupil numbers still justified the continuation of this post and Elizabeth was re-appointed as assistant teacher at Millburn at a salary of £30 per annum; her duties included instruction in sewing.

Thomas Happer remained at Millburn until his retirement in 1903; the appointment of his successor as head became quite interesting. Elizabeth Happer applied for the post – she was

well qualified and Duns School Board received a letter signed by no fewer than 76 local people, endorsing her application. The board, however, decided that they should seek advice from the Scotch Education Department, as it was quaintly known, on whether it was appropriate to appoint a woman to be head of the school. They received a rather curt reply telling them the decision was the board's alone and Elizabeth Happer got the job. The Millburn community presented her father with a rocking chair on the last day of the summer term when he retired after fifty years of teaching. At his retiral dinner in 1904, organised by his colleagues in the Educational Institute of Scotland, he recounted the claim once made by the Cranshaws schoolmaster about the 'old' Millburn schoolhouse – he said it was the place where you could stand with one leg on the road and put the other down the chimney! Anyone familiar with the property will understand the joke.

Since his unmarried daughter had been appointed school head, Thomas Happer could continue to live with her in the 'new' Millburn schoolhouse; he died there four years after his wife Rebecca at the age of 80 in 1915. Elizabeth Happer resigned as head of Millburn School for health reasons in October 1922 and died the following month at the age of 53.

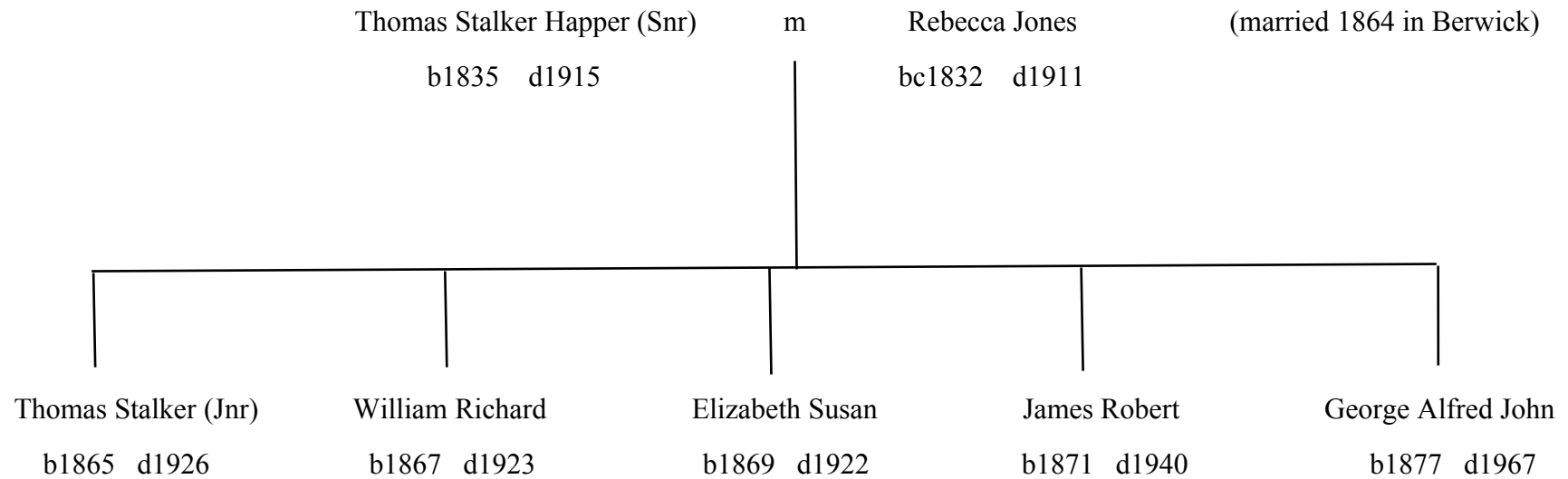


The 'new' Millburn schoolhouse (left) and schoolroom, opened in 1877

The information in this article was mainly researched from the 'Berwickshire News' and from public records – census and birth, marriage and death records.

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HAPPER (MILLBURN SCHOOLS, DUNS PARISH) FAMILY TREE



Thomas Stalker Happer (Snr) was schoolmaster of 'old' Millburn School 1871-1877 and 'new' Millburn School 1877-1903

Elizabeth Susan Happer was schoolmistress of 'new' Millburn School 1903-1922