

Southfield and the Robsons

David McLean (2020)



Introduction

The villa which presently serves as Southfield Community Centre in Station Road, Duns was built by James Curle Robson in 1857 and was home to three generations of the Robson family before becoming, in turn, a military hospital during the Great War; a hostel for girls attending the Berwickshire High School in the 1920s and 1930s; and then departmental offices for Berwickshire County Council until 1975. This paper attempts to chart these times and changes although the clear emphasis is on the Robson years since little has been known about them in the past. There is a family tree at the end of this paper.

James Curle Robson

James Curle Robson was a native of Kelso. He came to Duns in 1844 as a clerk to a lawyer called Allan Purves. In 1845, he changed employer and went to work for John Johnston who was procurator-fiscal for the county of Berwickshire. In the 1851 census, it would appear that Robson was renting a room from a family in South Street. By that time, he had already become a partner in Johnston's legal practice and was joint-procurator with him. When

Johnston died in the early 1860s, Robson continued as procurator-fiscal until his own death in 1878.

When Robson built Southfield, he was 33 years old and not yet married and it may therefore seem surprising that he should build such a large and clearly expensive property. Three years later, in 1860, he married Mary Anne Somner Frier, the daughter of Thomas Frier of Fans near Earlston. They were married in Edinburgh; Robson was eleven years older than his wife. They had three children - William Frier Robson (1862), Charles Maclaren Robson (1863) and Mary Jean Robson (1864). William and Charles were educated at Wellfield Academy for boys in Dunse.

James Curle Robson fulfilled numerous other roles during his career as solicitor and procurator-fiscal. He became local agent for the City of Glasgow Bank after a crisis in 1857 and helped the branch in Newtown Street to resume operations; when the whole bank was closed amid scandal in 1878, he donated £50 to the relief fund for the ruined share-holders. He served as clerk to the Berwickshire Prison Board and was a member of the visiting committee for the jail in Greenlaw. He was also clerk to the turnpike trust which was responsible for the road between Greenlaw and Coldstream (the present A697) as well as Coldstream Bridge. And he was treasurer of the Dunse Gaslight Company. Robson was clearly a much-respected professional figure in the town. He was a member of the West United Presbyterian Church - now forming the two large houses at the north-west corner of the Clouds.

His wife died of pneumonia in 1873 at the age of 38 when they had been married for 13 years and Robson himself died only five years later in 1878 at the age of 54. Two weeks earlier, he suffered what was described as a 'severe bilious disorder' and, when he worsened, he was visited by Doctor John MacWatt who diagnosed Bright's disease of the kidneys. Nothing could be done. When James Curle Robson died at Southfield, his three children were left orphans, William (the oldest) being only 16.

Robson had an extensive portfolio of investments and left an estate with a value of almost £24,000. To achieve the same purchasing power today would require close to £2.5 million. Whether he accrued all this in his lifetime or started with an inheritance is unknown. Strangely, he had not made a will.

Building Southfield

Dunse became an increasingly prosperous town in the nineteenth century and well-to-do professional men and shopkeepers built some of the town's finest houses during that period. Such building took place in three main areas - at Teindhillgreen, Bridgend and Station Road. James Curle Robson acquired a substantial building plot of one acre at the last of these locations and had Southfield constructed in 1857.

Station Road was, of course, convenient for its close proximity to the railway station but was also, by that very fact, one of the busiest streets in the town and, in dry summer weather, it became very dusty. It was also the street along which the town refuse cart made its daily, odorous journey to the tip at Cheeklaw. It may have been for these reasons that Robson chose

to build his house at the very back of his site, as far away as possible from the roadway. He surrounded his grounds on three sides by high stone walls and by a low wall with iron railings and pillared gateway at the front, along Station Road.

While Southfield (sometimes called Southfield House or Southfield Villa) hardly ended up as one of the most elegant houses in the town, it surely competed to be the grandest. It had three public rooms on the ground floor - in fact, four rooms if one counted Robson's 'business room' (now Room 2 of the community centre) at the back. Upstairs, there were perhaps six bedrooms. In the courtyard behind the house - constricted though the space was - there was stabling for horses and a coach house.



How much Southfield cost to build is unknown and we have no way of knowing how Robson financed its construction - although he may already have done quite well from his investments. A procurator-fiscal also received an attractive salary - the post was worth around £390 per annum at the time of his death. But building a house on this scale while still a relatively young man must surely have been a considerable undertaking. He saved money, however, at the back of the building. While the front and side walls are constructed of regular, dressed stone (ashlar-built), the rear walls are built in random, irregular stone (rubble-built).

There was plenty of room in front of the house for garden grounds. Trees were planted, including a later row of limes along the south wall (a few remain) and Southfield boasted probably the largest lawn in the town. There was also a vegetable garden where the car park now stands and a glass-house vinery against the west wall. A gardener was needed and, for 35 years, Peter Paterson served both James Curle Robson and then his son, William Frier Robson, as coachman and gardener. He started work at Southfield around 1861 and retired in 1896. Paterson and his wife lived in Castle Street and celebrated their diamond wedding anniversary in 1902 by which time he was retired and living on a pension arranged some years before by Robson's second son, Charles Maclaren Robson.

It is difficult to see more than glimpses of what life must have been like for the Robsons. Servants were inevitable - indeed, there is often the impression that anyone who could afford servants in these days employed them whether needed or not. The Robsons were no exception. For example, around 1870, James Curle Robson was living at Southfield with his wife and three children, all under 10 years old. The 1871 census shows three servants at the house. Hannah and Agnes Henderson (presumably sisters) were housemaid and cook respectively and Janet Mercer was employed as nurserymaid. This was in addition, of course, to Peter Paterson, the gardener.

Southfield after James Curle Robson

With the death of James Curle Robson in 1878, Southfield passed to his elder son, William Frier Robson. But William was only 16 with a younger brother and sister and clearly the three could not live on their own. In the years after the death of Robson's wife, the name 'Turnbull' crops up at Southfield from time to time. In both 1874 and 1877, for example, the Robson family took a summer break at Spittal, accompanied by 'Miss Turnbull, Southfield'. In 1875, at a church soiree in Dunse Corn Exchange, 'Miss Turnbull, Southfield' presided at one of the tables.

This was Margaret Robson Turnbull who was a niece of James Curle Robson; her father was Mark Turnbull of Lempitlaw, near Kelso. Margaret would have been about 28 years of age and unmarried when James Curle Robson's wife died in 1873. The likelihood is that she came to live at Southfield to help look after the three children following their mother's death. Then, when her uncle died unexpectedly only five years later, she appears to have stayed on for the youngsters. In the 1881 census when William Frier (at the age of 19) was designated head of the household, his cousin Margaret was listed as 'housekeeper'. In July 1882, Margaret was married in Southfield to John Laidlaw, a manufacturer of Jedburgh.

William Frier Robson

William Frier Robson married Lizzie Blanche Fenton in 1888. They had five children although only two out-lived their parents. **Irene Winifred Osborne Robson** was born in 1889 and died ten years later when the family lived briefly in Southport. **Charles Ashlyn Robson** was born in 1890. In 1912, he left Duns railway station on the first leg of a journey to Bristol from where he sailed on the 'Royal Edward' to Montreal, Canada. He was heading for British Columbia to gain experience in fruit farming. Eighteen months later, in 1914, he fell overboard from a steam tug on Lake Kootenay and was drowned. **Ethel Christian Robson** was born in 1893 and died in 1979. **Beatrice Evelyn Robson** was born in 1895 and died at the age of 13 in 1909 in Haymount hospital in Duns. **Dorothea Violet Robson** (sometimes known as Doris) was born about 1910 and died in 1984. So, only Ethel and Dorothea survived their parents.

In trying to sum up William Frier Robson (usually styled 'Frier'), it seems safe to say that he was a controversial character. In the census of 1881, at the age of 19, he was described as a 'general clerk (law)' but that is the last mention of such a vocation. On his marriage certificate, he was a 'fundholder'. In the 1891 census, he described himself as 'living on private means' - no doubt the money and investments inherited from his father's estate. Valuation rolls, however, show he was investing in property at one time; in the mid-1890s, he owned about eight houses and shops in the town, mainly in North Street and Castle Street. His obituary report in the Berwickshire News failed to mention any occupation.



William Frier Robson at Southfield, probably with daughters Ethel and Beatrice

He had a sizeable ego (occasionally referring to himself as 'Disraeli of Duns' or 'Dizzy') and was an inveterate writer of letters to the local newspaper, the Berwickshire News. Sometimes, these letters were political in nature as he discussed issues such as progress, reform and socialism; Robson himself was an avowed Unionist. Sometimes, the letters were on matters concerning religion or music. The trouble for many readers was that these letters were invariably long, verbose and meandering. Eventually, Robson's political diatribes became too much for one reader who, in 1887, felt compelled to write his own letter pointing out that Robson was deluding himself about his abilities with a pen. Robson's contributions were described as 'weak, wandering and senseless harangues' and 'unutterable trash upon grievances which really do not exist'.

Where Robson clearly made enemies was in his seemingly endless stream of letters criticising how the town was run, originally by the Burgh Police Commission and then by the Town Council. The men on these municipal bodies were regularly accused of inactivity, indecision and incompetence. The state of the roads and pavements was a common cause of criticism as was the town's sewage tanks, the town rubbish dump - the 'burning mountain of

indescribable filth' at Cheeklaw - or what Robson perceived as the regular waste of ratepayers' money.

Robson's letters became increasingly vitriolic. In 1917, he described Duns Town Council as 'our local Parliament, an august assembly, gifted with almost unsurpassed genius, rare and commanding tact, brilliant and superb talent' - truly a masterclass in sarcasm. In return, someone once described Robson as 'a mere insignificant nothing of no importance'; he claimed that the insult did not trouble him.

The obvious course of action for someone constantly critical of the municipal authority was to get himself elected to it and attempt to do better. Robson appears to have succeeded in being elected at least twice but did not last long on either occasion. He was a police commissioner (town councillor) in the 1880s and became one of two county road trustees on behalf of the town. But, in 1888, he wrote a letter resigning his seat and it was 'unanimously resolved to accept the resignation'. He was back in the 1890s but that went wrong too. In 1895, he wrote a letter to the press on a matter of some delicacy which was currently before the Burgh Police Commission - a dispute with Milne-Home of Wedderburn about his water being polluted by Duns sewage. Provost Swainson was so incensed by Robson's action that he proposed his suspension for four months but his motion was not seconded. Robson was probably too abrasive and opinionated to last long on such a public body. In any case, he was soon living in Southport for a few years.

There may well have been plenty of townspeople who enjoyed Robson's frequent attacks on the town authority, of course, and there was certainly another side to him. He occasionally gave 'magic lantern' or 'lime-light' shows to entertain children or help raise money for good causes; his slides covered Bible stories, the Royal Family, Scottish and foreign scenes, and London Zoo! In the early years of the new century, he was instrumental in creating an amateur dramatic society in the town; his wife, Blanche, had particular talents on the stage. Robson and his wife were also among the sponsors of the Berwickshire News Children's Club. And Robson was an office-bearer in the town's Burns Club.

He had his own visions for his home town. One of his perennial favourites was for the erection of a bandstand in the public park. He endorsed the campaign to establish a tennis club. At the end of the First World War, he favoured the idea of locating Julian the tank (which the town won for its success in purchasing war bonds) at the top of Duns Law. He hoped that Hay of Duns Castle would gift the hilltop to the town and a public right of way would be created to access it. Ultimately, it was Julian - and not the bandstand - which ended up in the public park.

Southfield with William Frier Robson

While the Robsons would remain associated with Southfield until 1915, there are a number of periods when they appear not to have lived in the house and, presumably, rented it out. William Frier and Blanche married in 1888 but, at the time of the 1891 census, they were living with two servants in Newington, Edinburgh where their second child, Charles, was born. But they were back in Duns the following year.

In the late 1890s, they were living in Southport for a few years where their first child, Irene, died at the age of ten. They were back in Duns by the early years of the new century.

Between 1906 and 1908, Southfield was occupied by Captain Alexander of the Seaforth Highlanders and his family. Curiously, the Robsons seem to have been living in Duns at the same time since, in 1907, William Frier Robson appeared in the valuation roll as tenant of number 31 Bridgend (the Nook).

And for a period in 1909 and 1910, the Seton-Karrs were living in Southfield; Sir Henry failed to win the Berwickshire seat for the Conservatives in the general election of January, 1910. In December of that year, however, the Robsons were apparently back at Southfield when they suffered a fire in the 'business room'; it was soon put out although some considerable damage was done. Fortunately, they were insured - as newspapers of the time always delighted to report. The patchy nature of the Robsons' residence in Southfield - and where they lived when not at the property - must largely remain a mystery.

William Frier Robson was once described as an 'ardent floriculturist' and he and Blanche were ready to further develop the Southfield grounds. Access from Station Road to the back yard was clearly unsatisfactory and, in 1892, Robson sought permission to take 50 cartloads of broken paving stones from a heap lying behind the Boston Church to improve the lane.

Blanche Robson had a keen interest in poultry and, in 1901, set up a 60 by 20 feet poultry run protected by wire netting down the south side of the grounds, beside the lime trees. She had some 70 birds at that time and was collecting around 200 eggs each week.

A year later, in 1902, the Robsons laid out a 40-foot-long strawberry border to contain sixteen rows of plants, protected by a fruit net 'thought to be the largest in Duns'. That same year, the local newspaper reported a 'record potato crop for Duns from Southfield Garden'. In typical William Frier Robson fashion, this set off a protracted argument in the press about whether or not he grew the best potatoes in the town, a claim particularly challenged at nearby Trinity Lodge. It is perfectly possible that some people were deliberately provoking Robson, knowing how he would react and enjoying the joke.

Argument with the Town Council was stirred again in 1904. There were now plans to lay a concrete pavement along Station Road - at the proprietors' expense as the law then dictated and so Robson would be responsible for the section past Southfield. When he had lived in Southport, he had seen footpaths laid with 'blue adamantine tiles' (the word means 'unbreakable') - fired clay blocks about 9 inches square and 2 inches thick. Robson wanted the Council to use these instead. Hoping to win an order, the Southport manufacturer even sent 150 tiles up to Duns free of charge and they were laid at the Southfield gateway to demonstrate their quality - but to no avail. What happened to these tiles is unknown but, interestingly, small pavers of very similar description can be seen today on either side of Southfield's doorstep so some of them may have been moved there.

Then, in 1911, something seems to have gone badly wrong. In February, Robson executed a trust deed with his solicitor 'for behoof [benefit] of his creditors'. In March, a notice appeared in the Berwickshire News advertising the sale of 'the whole household furniture in Southfield'. From the summary list of items, it meant what it said - right down to the crockery, fire irons and garden bench. And, in the same edition of the newspaper, Southfield itself was announced for sale by auction with an upset price of £1400.

Some clues can be detected in the record of his estate after Robson's death. They show a man worth perhaps no more than £20, the sum total of his personal effects and household furniture. There was substantial money in the names of his three deceased children but, for whatever reason, he seems to have been unable to access that. The record also shows that, at some point, he had taken out a loan from The Scottish Reversionary Company of Edinburgh against a life policy which paid out £44 on his death after recovering the amount of the loan. If Robson originally received one-third of his father's estate, he must have been worth around £8000 at one time but, ultimately, he appears to have been left with virtually nothing. Perhaps he lost his money in bad investments. Like his father, he died without making a will but there was nothing to pass on anyway.

Southfield failed to sell at the auction in March, 1911 for its target of £1400 and another effort was made in April with the upset price reduced to £1200. Still there was no buyer. In the summer of 1912, Colonel Menzies of Kames near Leitholm rented Southfield for six months, moving his family and furniture into the house while his own mansion at Kames was being renovated. In the spring of 1913, yet another effort was made to sell Southfield at £1000 - with yet another failure. Where the Robsons lived from 1911 is a muddled picture. In the census of 1911 (when things went wrong), Blanche Robson and her daughter, Ethel, were 'boarders' at a house in Castle Street. The Robsons were living in that same street in 1917 but were in Easter Street when William Frier Robson died in 1923 in an Edinburgh nursing home at the age of 61. An August holiday resulted in what seemed like a severe chill. His symptoms worsened shortly after his return to Duns; he was taken to Edinburgh where he underwent an operation for twisting of the colon but he gradually failed.



Blanche Robson (standing second left) on stage in Duns Town Hall

His widow, Blanche, lived to the great age of 94. She had always had a strong talent for singing and acting; she was much involved in producing plays, musical shows and pantomimes in Duns right up to the 1950s! She purchased Kilmeny near the Roman Catholic chapel at the top of Bridgend in 1950 and renamed it Fenton Lodge after her maiden surname; how this purchase was financed is another mystery of the family story. She lived in Fenton Lodge with her two surviving daughters, Ethel and Dorothea, the latter sharing her mother's theatrical talent. Blanche Robson was living in Edinburgh by the time of her death in 1961.

Southfield after the Robsons

Southfield became a VAD (Voluntary Aid Detachment) hospital for the recovery of wounded soldiers during the Great War. Despite his financial difficulties, it would appear that Southfield was still, legally, Robson's property since the house had failed to sell. In the spring of 1915, the Red Cross took a lease of Southfield 'from the proprietor, Mr W Frier Robson' in order to convert the building into a second line military hospital.



Southfield as a military hospital during the Great War

Then, Francis Hay of Duns Castle decided to purchase Southfield, paying a little over the most recent upset price of £1000. The presumption would be that this money went into the solicitor's trust fund to repay Robson's creditors. Hay seems also to have paid for much of the required equipment for the hospital before handing the building over to be run by the Red

Cross; Hay was County Director of the British Red Cross Society. So, Southfield had left the Robsons after less than sixty years.

The ground floor contained dining and recreation rooms (the front and rear sections respectively of what is now Room 1 in the community centre), staffroom (Room 2) and a ward (Room 3). The whole of the upper floor was given over to wards so that the hospital had a capacity of 26 beds. A shelter was constructed so that men could sit outside in the fresh air. Some staff lived in the hospital while others lodged across the road at Todlaw. By the middle of May 1915, there was already a virtually full complement of soldiers in Southfield. That summer, wooden hoardings were erected inside the front wall railings – the Station Road dust was probably once more causing problems. It was at one point intended to close the Southfield hospital in August 1918 but it remained in use until January 1919; a Red Cross report following its closure claimed 960 soldiers had come and gone through its doors.

Francis Hay of Duns Castle now decided that he would gift Southfield to Berwickshire Education Authority so that it could become a hostel for girls attending the Berwickshire High School. With limited transport facilities, many girls were unable to take the opportunity of a secondary education. Hay would pay for the necessary renovations but his first plans were rejected due to inadequate light and ventilation in some of the bedrooms. The opening of the hostel was therefore delayed but all was ready for the start of the new term in August 1919. The hostel was capable of accommodating 24 girls, up from the planned 20 after the matron volunteered to move to a smaller bedroom. The girls literally came from every corner of Berwickshire and, by 1927, some 75 girls had been boarders at Southfield.

In 1922, members of the county education authority donated to a subscription for a brass plaque to mark the Hays' generosity. This was fixed in the dining room of the hostel; it would be interesting to know what eventually happened to it. Simultaneously, Colonel Hope of Cowdenknowes near Earlston, who was vice-chair of the education authority, announced that he had purchased land from Hay to donate as a playing field for the school. This was the field at Todlaw which is now the Longfield social housing estate.

Southfield remained as a hostel for twenty years but, by May 1939, plans were being made for it to close. More regular and extensive bus services meant that more and more girls were able to stay at home and travel daily to Duns. Running Southfield as a hostel had become uneconomic. It was decided to close the facility in August. By the terms of the deed of Hay's gift in 1919, ownership of Southfield now reverted to the Hays.

Francis Hay had died in 1928. His widow consulted family members and took the decision, in the summer of 1939, to hand Southfield over to Berwickshire County Council 'for its use as they might please'. This did not happen straight away since, at the outbreak of war in 1939, Southfield was equipped as an emergency hospital and was run in conjunction with the Knoll (then a maternity hospital) to look after evacuated expectant mothers. It appears to still have been used for maternity cases in the spring of 1940 but that need ended.

The Council, now with control of Southfield, decided to locate its education offices in the building. This was the time when the front wall iron railings were lost to the war effort. Very few other property owners in Duns were inclined to part with their iron but the Clerk to the Council kindly volunteered the Southfield railings! By 1946, the Director of Education was pressing for a second entrance to the grounds to cope with the motor traffic but a car park was

built instead - and so Southfield lost its vegetable garden as well. The county council also moved its roads and planning departments to Southfield.

This arrangement broadly continued until 1975 when a re-organisation of local government saw the disappearance of the four county councils and the creation instead of Borders Regional Council which set up its headquarters centrally in Newtown St Boswells. Southfield was no longer required for administrative purposes and it became a community centre which remains its function today.



The information in this paper has been researched from newspapers of the time (Berwickshire News especially, Berwick Advertiser and Scotsman) and from public records - census; valuation rolls; wills and testaments; and birth, marriage and death records.

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Robson (Southfield, Duns) Family Tree

