

## Rose Villa, Duns

David McLean (2025)



### Introduction

Rose Villa sits towards the top of Bridgend in Duns, a two-storey house characterised in particular by its projecting central bay with small stone balcony supported on scroll corbels above the front door and octagonal chimney stack on the apex of the gable. These and many other architectural features are identical to numbers 20 and 22 Bridgend and there are also a few similarities with the larger Mainhill (43 Bridgend) which is known to have been built by James and John Crombie, a town firm of joiners and builders. It is possible, therefore, that all four properties, including Rose Villa (28 Bridgend), were the work of the Crombies who probably built one or more of them speculatively for selling on.

Historic Environment Scotland claims that Rose Villa was built around 1865; Mainhill is known to have been built in 1866 and so, if the Crombies built both houses, this might tie in quite well. However, an advert in the Berwickshire News in December 1879 reads as follows:

*'To Let, Rose Villa, a New House at BRIDGE END, DUNSE, containing 2 Large Rooms, Kitchen &c. Entry may be had now, or at Whitsunday. Apply to James Swan, Bookseller, Dunse'.*

It seems unlikely that Rose Villa would be described as a 'new house' in 1879 if it was almost fifteen years old but it may simply be that the house was described this way to clarify for potential tenants that it was not one of the older buildings further down the street.

There is also an oddity concerning its ownership in the early years. From at least 1885, valuation roll evidence shows Rose Villa as the property of Robert Thomson who was tenant farmer at Whinkerstones on the Charterhall Estate of the Trotter family near Fogo. The house remained in his ownership until his death at Whinkerstones at the age of 81 in 1908. However, there is no evidence of Robert Thomson ever having lived in Rose Villa. It must remain a mystery whether he bought the Duns house to provide an additional income from its rent or whether he perhaps intended to retire there one day and it never happened.

### **The Whyte and Johnston Families at Rose Villa, 1880 to 1908**

It would appear that the tenancy of the house following the advertisement of 1879 was taken by the Whyte family. In early 1881, according to the Berwickshire News, Mrs Jessie Whyte of Rose Villa presided at one of the tea tables following the ordination of the Reverend James Todd to Dunse South Church in Currie Street. At the 1881 census, Jessie Whyte was listed as a widow, age 60, and an annuitant, meaning that she received an annual income from invested money, a type of pension. She shared the property with her four children – daughters Euphemia (30) and Jane (24) with no occupations given and sons William (21) and James (20) who were both banker's clerks by profession although at least one of them was unemployed at the time. All four children were unmarried.

The Whytes did not stay at Rose Villa for very long. The house was again advertised for let in November 1881 with entry available at Whitsun the following year; it seems that the Whytes had given notice of their intention to quit the tenancy at the May term in 1882. This time, the house was more accurately described – dining room, drawing room, four bedrooms, kitchen etc and garden. The Johnston family were the next to occupy Rose Villa.

The Johnstons originally lived at Bankhead, just outside Duns. Robert Waugh Johnston, a farmer, and his wife Elizabeth had two children. In 1877, while Elizabeth was pregnant with their third child, Robert Johnston died of typhoid fever at the age of 45. The Johnstons were still in Bankhead in 1878 but had moved to South Street in Duns by the time of the 1881 census. It is likely that Elizabeth Johnston took the lease of Rose Villa in 1882; they were certainly in the house by 1885. At the 1891 census, Rose Villa was occupied by Elizabeth Johnston, widow, age 52, living on private means and her three sons – James Dodds Johnston (18), clerk; John Whitelaw Johnston (16), bank apprentice; and Robert George Johnston (13), scholar. Also living in the house was Elizabeth's elderly mother, Alison Whitelaw (86).

By the time of the next census in 1901, Elizabeth Johnston's mother had died and only her youngest son, Robert George Johnston, was still living at home. In 1902, he passed his final examination as a law agent, having served his apprenticeship with Duns solicitor John Ferguson. Robert Johnston then set himself up in business as a solicitor in his own right, apparently operating from Rose Villa.

Robert Johnston and his mother continued living in Rose Villa until they were obliged to leave in 1908 when the property was sold; the Johnstons had therefore been in the house for over 25 years. Elizabeth Johnston died in Murray Place, Duns at the age of 73 in 1911.

## Rose Villa as the Nurses' Home, 1909 to 1922

Before the establishment of the NHS, the health of the people of Duns and district benefitted hugely from the benevolence of Andrew Smith and his wife, Ida Florence Smith, of Whitchester House near Longformacus. Smith was a partner in the Edinburgh brewers, Younger and company. He purchased Cranshaws estate in the 1890s. Andrew Smith's first community health project was to purchase Haymount villa at the foot of Bridgend in Duns so that it could be turned into the town's first cottage hospital. Haymount (later Whitchester) Hospital opened in 1901 with Smith paying the bulk of the running costs over the ensuing years.

It was Ida Smith who took the next initiative in setting up the Berwickshire Nursing Association in 1907 to supply trained nurses to help the sick in country areas at a cost which working people could afford. Membership of the association was secured by paying an annual subscription - 2 shillings a year for farm servants, 5 shillings for tenant farmers and 10 shillings for landowners. This membership guaranteed that a 'cottage nurse' would be sent out for any illness in the family, staying in the home of the sick person if necessary for as long as required. If the patient was a mother, the cottage nurse would also undertake household chores such as cooking and cleaning – but not washing clothes!



*Ida Florence Smith of Whitchester*

The association was a great success with some 500 members signing up in the initial months. Having started off with half a dozen nurses, the number soon had to be increased. In fact, one of the benefits of the system was that the Nursing Association periodically financed the training of additional nurses. But these cottage (or 'district') nurses needed a base. They first

used a property of unknown location in Newtown Street as the nurses' home but this was almost instantly too small.

As we have seen, tenant farmer Robert Thomson, owner of Rose Villa, died at Whinkerstones in 1908; the trustees of his estate then sold the Duns property, requiring the Johnstons to give up the tenancy. This time, the house was advertised as having two public and four bedrooms, large bathroom (H&C), WC (separate), kitchen, scullery, pantry etc. It was purchased by Andrew Smith of Whitcheater who presented it to the Berwickshire Nursing Association as a new home for the cottage nurses; he also gifted £250 worth of investments, the interest of which would help to pay the annual taxes (rates) on the house.

The cottage nurses therefore lived in Rose Villa and travelled beyond the town as required to visit their patients. There were doubtless Duns inhabitants who would be glad to put their pony and trap or motor car at the disposal of the nurses. Perhaps bicycles were used at times when they became more popular. And, of course, the nurses would take advantage of the local trains running in and out of Duns Station. They were even known occasionally to take a folding bed with them when they knew they would have to stay over for a few days in a patient's home which had no spare beds!

The association went from strength to strength with some 2000 members by the early 1920s. This meant that Rose Villa was now having to accommodate a superintendent and around a dozen nurses; after some thirteen years, the space had, in turn, become inadequate. Andrew Smith had died in 1914 but his widow, Ida Smith, helped the association committee look for another property. It did not take long. In the summer of 1922, John and Catherine Ferguson were preparing to sell the Hermitage in Station Road; negotiations were begun and an agreement was reached. In September 1922, Berwickshire Nursing Association advertised Rose Villa for sale with an upset price of £700. Ida Smith gifted a further £500 towards the purchase cost of the Hermitage and the association's cottage nurses had a new home.

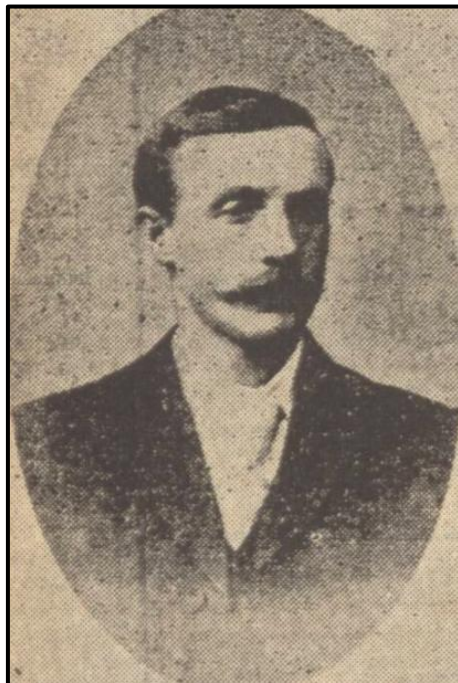
### **The Couplands at Rose Villa, 1922 to 1948**

Although Rose Villa had been offered for sale at an upset figure of £700, it actually made £955 and the purchasers would appear to have been John and Jeanie Coupland – they were certainly in ownership of the house by 1925. John Coupland had come to Duns in 1909 when he was appointed as Sanitary Inspector by Berwickshire County Council.

John Coupland was a native of Kirkcudbrightshire and he spent two years as head joiner on the Duke of Buccleuch's estate at Drumlanrig before going into the sanitary profession. In 1900, at age 32, he married Jeanie (actually Jane) Gordon, age 30, when he was already working as Assistant Sanitary Inspector for the county of Dumfries. His work was clearly highly regarded and, after some nine years of service there, he applied for the post of Sanitary Inspector in Berwickshire when it was advertised in 1909. His abilities were further reflected in the fact that Berwickshire County Council received 42 applications for the job; from the leet of three, John Coupland was successful. He was given a leaving ceremony in the Royal Restaurant in Dumfries when he was presented with a gold watch and his wife, Jeanie, with a gold bangle.

The Couplands moved to Duns in spring 1909 following his appointment in Berwickshire. They were tenants of two properties on Bridgend – number 31 (the Nook) until 1916 and then number 39 (the Haven). When Rose Villa was offered for sale by Berwickshire Nursing Association in 1922, it seems that the Couplands took the opportunity of purchasing the property. Since the Haven is directly across the street from Rose Villa, it was probably a relatively easy removal!

John Coupland made an equally strong impression in Berwickshire and became one of the County Council's longest-serving and most highly respected employees. The work of the Sanitary Inspector was demanding in two main respects – firstly, the responsibilities were numerous and covered the entire county of Berwickshire; and secondly, the early decades of the twentieth century saw a continuous flow of government legislation covering matters such as housing and public health which had to be implemented.



*John Coupland, Sanitary Inspector for Berwickshire*

Coupland's annual reports to council committees typically covered the volume and purity or otherwise of water supplies to a variety of towns and other communities; drainage of waste water and sewage, sometimes dealing with property owners who failed to install WCs; the cleansing of town streets and insisting on the removal of 'nuisances' which usually involved dung heaps and pig sties; investigating overcrowded and insanitary houses; advising on the construction of council housing which became a key matter in the years after the Great War; checking schools especially for their sanitary arrangements; inspecting slaughter houses and shops, frequently taking samples of items such as milk, flour, sugar and whisky to check for adulteration or contamination; verifying the accuracy of weights and measures in shop premises; and, perhaps most important of all, taking responsibility, in common with the county medical officer of health, for the identification and control of infectious disease.

In 1911, Coupland supervised a new drainage scheme for Chirnside, using his knowledge and experience to keep the costs down. Berwickshire County Council declared it to be 'the best job they had ever done in Chirnside' and Coupland appears to have been awarded a bonus of 25 guineas for his work. Perhaps the council already saw the need to keep this man in their employment since the following year saw the council's finance committee agree to raise his salary from £140 to £160 per year with further annual instalments of £5 until it reached £180.

While Coupland doubtless welcomed these increases up to a point, he was not entirely satisfied since the question of his salary caused a considerable upset in 1913. Parliament had passed the Housing and Town Planning Act in 1909 and, four years later, Coupland pointed out that, in his view, the considerable extra responsibilities he had assumed were still not reflected in his salary. At exactly the same time, however, the county medical officer of health, Doctor Andrew McWhan, claimed that responsibility in relation to housing under the Act had originally been given by the county council to himself, not Coupland. There was a heated argument between the two men and some harsh words were clearly spoken since Coupland later apologised for what he had said; the two men shook hands and the incident passed. It is unclear how the legal overlap was resolved; in truth, both men had to take a measure of responsibility under the 1909 Act since housing standards were key to the prevention of infectious disease.

Coupland was clearly kept extremely busy but his talents were such that, in 1915, the county council agreed to his dual appointment as sanitary inspector for the Burgh of Duns 'provided he did not let these duties interfere with his county work'. That was the same year when it was recommended that he should have an annual allowance of £150 for the upkeep of a motor car to facilitate his duties.

By 1926, his salary had been increased to £360 per annum and he was soon provided with an assistant since the law now required that county councils undertake comprehensive surveys of all farm cottages in their jurisdiction. This was a massive task and the job of getting the owners of many of these rural properties to improve water supplies and sanitary arrangements was equally demanding, whatever the law said. By 1935, his dual role with Duns Burgh was obviously proving to be too much (although Coupland had carried out both jobs for 20 years) and the County Council requested the termination of the arrangement with Duns Town Council.

In any case, John Coupland retired a few years later in 1938 at the age of 70. The Earl of Home, chair of Berwickshire County Council, referred to his 'skill and efficiency, unrestricted patience, and charming tact and courtesy'. In recent years, said the Earl, their sanitary inspector had read and interpreted innumerable Acts of Parliament and 'a faithful, loyal and willing servant of the public of this county is laying down his burden'.

Jeanie Coupland died in Rose Villa in October 1945 at the age of 75. John Coupland died in the house at the age of 80 in February 1948. The Berwickshire News obituary described him as a 'glutton for work', always very reasonable and never insisting on the impracticable when trying to apply regulations. He also, apparently, had a talent for detecting the presence of water with divining rods. He had lived in Berwickshire for almost 40 years, had worked for the county council for almost 30 years and had lived in Rose Villa for over 25 years.



*Many identical architectural features at Rose Villa, 28 Bridgend (above) and numbers 22 and 20 Bridgend (below)*



*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.*

**David McLean (2025)**