

The Hermitage, Duns: The First Hundred Years

David McLean (2021)



The Hermitage, Station Road, Duns

Introduction

The nineteenth century building of villas outwards from the town along the west side of Station Road followed a chronological pattern - The Hermitage around 1840, then Southfield in 1857, followed by Norham Lodge (originally South Side Villa) in 1860 and, finally, The Knoll in 1871. It would come to be called 'ribbon development' in the twentieth century although the nineteenth century version moved at a much gentler pace! The Hermitage, in common with these other houses, is today Category B listed because of its historical and architectural significance. Externally, it is almost completely original; only the chimney stacks have been rebuilt in brick. Its Tudor detailing refines a simply proportioned structure. Most striking are the timber sash windows with sixteen panes to each one downstairs and twelve panes upstairs. The Hermitage was built as a private residence but spent time as a nurses' home and maternity hospital before reverting to its original purpose.

The First 40 Years : James Stuart and Robina Trotter

According to British Listed Buildings, The Hermitage was built around 1840. It was not named in the 1841 census but simply listed under 'suburbs Todlaw'; however, subsequent evidence shows that this was certainly the house which came to be called The Hermitage. It was occupied by 'James Stewart' (his surname misspelled - it should have been 'Stuart'), a surgeon, together with his niece, Robina who lived on independent means; there was also a servant. Given the dates, it therefore seems highly likely that Stuart built this property. Ten years later, the 1851 census correctly spells his name as 'James Stuart', an unmarried man aged 62 and a Royal Navy surgeon, retired on half pay. He was the son of a tenant farmer at Fogorig. Still living with Stuart was his niece, Robina Davidson Trotter, also unmarried and aged 46; she was a farmer's daughter and had been born at Edrom. A servant also lived in the property. The 1855 valuation roll confirms James Stuart as the proprietor (owner) and occupier of 'house, offices and garden at Todlaw, Duns'.

James Stuart and his niece were still there at the 1861 census but Stuart died at the age of 73 the following year. In the 1865 valuation roll, Robina Trotter is confirmed as owner and occupier. In the 1871 census, the house is named as 'The Hermitage' and Robina Trotter, now aged 66, was living on 'interest of money' with two servants, namely a cook and a housemaid; it would appear that she lived a comfortable life! Ten years later, in the 1881 census, she was still there and still had two servants.

Robina Trotter died later that same year. In November 1881, she set off on the 12.40 pm train from Dunse station to visit a friend in Edinburgh, apparently in her normal health. The friend met her at Waverley Station in the capital and the two ladies climbed into a cab. Miss Trotter suddenly fell forward into her friend's arms. The cab was driven straight to the Royal Infirmary but Robina Trotter was dead on arrival, apparently of a heart attack. Her death certificate gave her age as 77 and referred to her as a 'fundholder', a nineteenth century term for someone whose income was derived from investments.

The Next 40 Years : Alexander Brown; John and Catherine Ferguson

In February 1882, Robina Trotter's heirs put The Hermitage on the market, the sale being conducted by Swans, the town auctioneers, in the Black Bull Hotel. The upset price was £900 but no bids were made for the house. A fortnight later, they tried again. This time, bidding began at £750 but it quickly climbed and The Hermitage was sold to a shopkeeper called Alexander Brown for £900 as had originally been sought.

Brown was a grocer, spirit merchant and brewer, employing two men. The 1881 census shows him at No 14 South Street, already a widower for over ten years at the age of 56. His younger daughter Isabella, aged 27, still lived at home. His older daughter Catherine, aged 29, had married local solicitor John Ferguson in 1879 and they lived in the Market Place. Alexander Brown bought The Hermitage in 1882 and retired from business that same year. It would appear, however, that his daughter Catherine and husband John soon left their Market Place home and moved in with Brown at The Hermitage! The 1891 census shows them living

there, now with their three children - Esther Mary aged 9, William Lee aged 7 and Alexander John aged 3. There was also a domestic servant and a nursemaid living in the house. John and Catherine Ferguson would remain at The Hermitage for the next thirty years.

In 1884, Brown's younger daughter, Isabella, married James Todd in The Hermitage. He was minister of the South United Presbyterian Church in Currie Street (now the carpet store); Brown may have been glad that at least they had a manse in which to live!

Alexander Brown died at home of heart failure in 1909 at the age of 84. He had been born in Duns in 1824 and it was said that he had never been out of the town except when he went on holiday. He succeeded to his father's grocery business in South Street and conducted it until his retirement in 1882 when he bought The Hermitage. He also acted as a director of the Duns Water Company and had interests in angling and gardening. On his death, The Hermitage passed to his older daughter Catherine Ferguson, as evidenced by the 1916 valuation roll.

John Ferguson became a well-known and respected figure in Duns. As well as being a solicitor and deputy procurator-fiscal, he acted as factor for Duns Castle Estate. At some point after the Great War, he formed a brief legal partnership with Charles Petrie who was a native of Dundee and had lived in Edinburgh for many years before moving to Duns in 1918. The business name of 'Ferguson and Petrie' survived long after Ferguson left.

Ferguson was a keen and knowledgeable antiquarian who was eventually elected a Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland. He was a long-time member and President of the Berwickshire Naturalists' Club, contributing numerous historical articles to their archives from his researches and often leading field trips. He was described as one of the 'mighties' of the Club. It would also appear that Ferguson was involved in local politics with Duns School Board and Berwickshire County Council.

In the autumn of 1922 - there are no clues as to why - John Ferguson and his wife moved to Edinburgh and lived in Ann Street. Catherine Ferguson died in a city nursing home in 1924; John Ferguson died two years later in 1926 in Forgardenny, Perthshire at the age of 75.

The Hermitage as Nurses' Home and Hospital

When the Fergusons left Duns, The Hermitage embarked on a new chapter in its history as a nurses' home and later maternity hospital. The National Health Service would not appear until after the Second World War. Before then, health care in communities like Berwickshire was very much dependent on voluntary effort, the financial and organisational support of big local landowners and endless rounds of fund-raising.

Duns benefitted particularly from the benevolence of Andrew Smith and his wife, Ida, of Whitcheater House near Longformacus. Smith was a partner in the Edinburgh brewers, Younger and company. In the 1890s, he purchased Cranshaws estate. He renovated the churches at Cranshaws and Longformacus and built a village hall for the latter community. Together with Sir James Miller of Manderston, he funded the creation of Duns Public Park as well as paying for the erection of the old Mercat Cross there. In 1898, Andrew Smith bought

Haymount villa at the bottom of Bridgend and turned it into a hospital for the town. It opened in 1901 as 'Haymount Hospital' but the name was later changed to 'Whitchester Hospital' in honour of the Smiths' generosity; they also paid the running costs. It had two wards downstairs (three beds for males and three for females) and two wards upstairs, each with a single bed. The rest of the house accommodated the matron and staff.

The next effort of the Smiths came in 1907 when they were instrumental in setting up the Berwickshire Nursing Association. In essence, this was a co-operative insurance society to supply trained nurses to help the sick in rural districts at a cost which working people could afford. Anyone could become a member on payment of an annual subscription - 2 shillings a year for the likes of farm servants, 5 shillings for tenant farmers and 10 shillings for landowners. Membership guaranteed that a nurse would be sent out for any illness in the family. This 'cottage nurse' would stay in the home of the sick person for as long as required (bringing her own folding bed if necessary) and, especially if the patient was a mother, she would undertake the household chores as well as nursing the patient. Members paid fees of sixpence per day for such a service. Non-members of the Association could also seek help but the availability of a nurse was not guaranteed for them and the fees were doubled.



Andrew and Ida Florence Smith of Whitchester – benefactors of the town of Duns

The Berwickshire Nursing Association was a great success. Membership rose from around 500 at the outset to some 2000 by the 1920s. They started off with about six nurses but within just a few years had to double that figure. By the 1930s, the cottage nurses were dealing with well over 200 patients every year, about half of these being maternity cases. Working class families made up the great bulk of their work - which was, of course, the whole intention. The service cost far more than the subscriptions and fees ever returned and there was reliance on donations from the well-to-do and endless fund-raisers such as concerts, fetes, whist drives and sales of work.

The cottage nurses needed a base. The first nurses' home was in Newtown Street - exactly where is unknown. But it was clearly too small and Andrew Smith of Whitchester came to the rescue again. In 1909, he bought Rose Villa near the top of Bridgend and gifted it to the Nursing Association. That solution lasted for thirteen years by which time Rose Villa had also become too small to house a superintendent and around a dozen nurses - even though some of them were often staying overnight in their patients' homes.



Rose Villa, Bridgend : location of the nurses' home from 1909 to 1922

In the early 1920s, John and Catherine Ferguson of The Hermitage were planning to leave the town. They were clearly sympathetic to the aims of the Berwickshire Nursing Association and aware of their difficulty. The Fergusons therefore made them an offer - they set a moderate selling price for their property and gave the Association first refusal. With the help of Ida Smith of Whitchester (her husband had died in 1914), the offer was taken up. Rose Villa was put up for auction at an upset price of £700 but made £955. That was still a long way short of what was needed to buy The Hermitage. So Mrs Smith donated £500 and some other Association committee members paid for the necessary alterations. The nurses' home was now located in The Hermitage, not far from the town centre and, equally beneficial, close to the railway station. A gardener had to be employed but at least there would be plenty of fruit and vegetables for the nurses! The garden also provided a pleasant location for the occasional fund-raising fete.

In 1928, a decision was taken to set aside one room at The Hermitage as a maternity ward although with just a single bed. Preference would be given to mothers living in more outlying rural areas and the charge was set at 30 shillings per week for working class families. In the first year or so, it was only used three times but it grew in popularity such that there were

frequent occasions when expectant mothers could not be accommodated. The maternity ward was being used around ten times per year by the mid-1930s and an equal number of applications were having to be refused. Soon, new fund-raising efforts were under way to build a maternity extension to The Hermitage, estimated to cost around £300.

The extension became unnecessary. Further along Station Road, at The Knoll, Miss Elizabeth MacFarlane was looking for a smaller house just as Berwickshire Nursing Association was planning a larger one. So, they arranged an exchange. Miss MacFarlane acquired The Hermitage plus £300 and the Nursing Association gained The Knoll for its new nurses' home and maternity ward.

The King George V Memorial Fund helped with the purchase and the cost of alterations to The Knoll. A large ward provided space for three mothers and babies while a smaller room contained an additional maternity bed. Each mother had to give two months' notice of application for a bed and was allowed a maximum stay of 14 days. The rest of The Knoll accommodated the county superintendent, seven nurses and two maids. It was opened by the Earl of Home in October, 1937.

The Hermitage had served as a nurses' home for fifteen years and also as a maternity ward (albeit with only one bed) for the last nine of those. Now, towards the end of its first century, its medical days were done and it could revert to being a private dwelling as it remains to this day.



The information in this article has been researched from newspapers of the time (especially the 'Berwickshire News' and the 'Berwick Advertiser') and from public records – census; valuation rolls; and birth, marriage and death records.

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