Corn Exchange, Duns

David McLean (2025)

Duns Corn Exchange as the Swan Garage around 1960

Introduction

Corn exchanges were, essentially, places where farmers conducted business with the representatives of local and national companies which bought from and sold to the farming community. Farmers made deals to sell their field crops to flour merchants, millers, brewers, distillers and similar dealers. And they purchased products such as seed corn, animal feeds, fertilisers and chemicals like sheep dip. Most exchanges eventually attracted middle-men known as corn factors who purchased grain from farmers and then made their own deals to sell it on. A corn exchange became a symbol of a town's prosperity although it was often in use as an exchange on only one day each week and, even then, perhaps only for a few hours.

By the middle of the nineteenth century, a town like Dunse was a likely setting for the construction of a corn exchange. The agricultural revolution had turned Berwickshire into a prime farming area and Dunse was the principal market town at the heart of this busy agricultural hinterland. Furthermore, the government had repealed the Corn Laws in 1846. These laws were designed to favour British farmers either by blocking imports when grain went below a certain price or by imposing tariffs to make foreign grain more expensive. While these laws kept grain prices artificially high and benefitted farmers and landowners, they also kept food prices high for the working classes; the Irish potato famine of 1845 was

the principal catalyst for their abolition. By mid-century, therefore, there was a much more open market in buying and selling grain. Traditionally, farmers had often sold their grain and other crops by bringing them into town by the cartload and meeting traders and shopkeepers in the street to do business. It was rough and ready, especially if the weather was bad and, if suitable deals could not be done, the cartloads went back to the farm. The convenience and greater sophistication of a corn exchange were required.

Building Dunse Corn Exchange

From the surviving Dunse Corn Exchange Company Sederunt Book (minute book), we know that a meeting of 'landed proprietors, tenant farmers and others interested in the prosperity of the Dunse Corn Market' was held in the Town Hall in June 1855; they agreed to proceed with the construction of a 'covered Corn Exchange'. They unanimously decided to purchase a site at the top of Black Bull Street and they also agreed to raise capital by offering shares in their Dunse Corn Exchange Company at £2 10s each. The new venture attracted instant support; by the following month, they were well on their way to raising £900 in share sales and donations (purchasing power of around £100,000 today). They immediately placed adverts in a number of newspapers, inviting architects to submit plans for the new building within fourteen days. Four sets of plans were received by the closing date – two from practices in Edinburgh, one from Coldingham and the fourth from a young Dunse architect called Alexander Cassy. Three plans which came in after the deadline were not considered. Cassy's plans were chosen.

The 1851 census shows Alexander Cassy at the age of 30 living at a property in the Clouds with his wife Jessie, age 25, and one-year old son, James. For its primary purpose, a plain building of sufficient size was all that was needed. But Dunse was like all other towns of the time which built corn exchanges and other public buildings – it was necessary to make a statement and create something as good as, if not better than, other towns. So, Cassy designed a suitably ornate building, complete with clock tower, spire and weather vane.

Estimates from tradesmen to build the exchange were being considered in September 1855 (only some three months after the initial Town Hall meeting) and building work soon commenced. A few people had to be compensated and moved from some old houses before the site could be properly cleared and the foundation stone of the corn exchange was then laid on the corner of Newtown Street and Black Bull Street; the building was completed a year later in the autumn of 1856. The trading chamber was 70 feet long, 30 feet wide and 40 feet high. Large windows with quarter-inch thick glass were set into the roof; this was usually considered essential in corn exchanges to maximise the natural daylight so that the quality of grain offered for sale could be properly inspected. It had gas lighting for use at night. While the original cost target for the exchange was £700, the impressive uptake of shares and level of donations meant that a larger building could be afforded; the eventual spend was £1100.

Sadly, Alexander Cassy never saw his building completed. Work was proceeding on the spire of the tower when he contracted typhus fever in April 1856 and died at home at the age of 36, leaving a wife and three children. His burial in Dunse churchyard was confirmed on the death certificate by his father James who was a joiner and undertaker in the town.

Dunse Corn Exchange clock tower, spire and weather vane, centre-right

Business in the Corn Exchange

Corn exchanges represented a major change in both efficiency and convenience in how crops were bought and sold since business was conducted by what was called ‘sample-selling’. No longer did farmers bring cartloads into town; now, they brought small samples to display in the exchange and, in Dunse, they were charged 6d for each such sample displayed. This explains the need for good light since purchasers were often undertaking to buy tons of grain on the strength of a small sample bag. In common with other local corn exchanges (Berwick, Kelso and Earlston), the main products sold at Dunse were wheat, barley, oats, peas and beans. The Dunse exchange operated on Tuesday mornings.

No photographs exist of the interior of Dunse Corn Exchange and no written evidence has survived to explain how it was laid out. Normally, exchanges were fitted up with small booths or stands or they were laid out with numerous small tables or desks with facilities to display the grain samples; 150 sample bags could be displayed in the Dunse exchange. Companies associated with buying from or selling to the agricultural community rented some of these booths or tables and company representatives would often be in the exchange in their allotted places on business days. These annual rents made up an important part of the exchange’s income which, in turn, helped the corn exchange company to pay an annual dividend to its shareholders; over the years, the Dunse exchange paid out dividends of between two and a half and five percent.

So, we can only guess what the interior of Dunse Corn Exchange would have looked like but, like most other exchanges, the booths or tables were removeable since the main hall of the exchange often had to be cleared for other events to take place – hiring out the exchange was another key element of the exchange company’s income. The Volunteer Hall was not built until the 1890s; until then, the Town Hall was the only other venue capable of being hired for events and so the corn exchange was always in demand.

Three generations of the Wilson family (all called Philip) were corn factors in Dunse; the first Philip Wilson built the fine house which he called the Knoll at the southern end of Station Road in 1871. He was also one of the directors of the original Dunse Corn Exchange Company. The Wilsons made their living by purchasing crops from farmers in the exchange and then arranging delivery of these to the town's railway station where their large granary had its own siding. This made transport easy once deals were done to sell on these stocks, to flour millers, brewers and distillers around Edinburgh or beyond.

Other Events in the Corn Exchange

A great variety of other events, especially entertainments, took place in the exchange when the booths or tables were removed and benches filled the hall. The very first event was a celebratory dinner to mark the opening of the exchange in October 1856 when '200 gentlemen' sat down to a meal provided by James Purves, landlord of the nearby Black Bull Inn. Sir Hugh Hume Campbell of Marchmont was in the chair. The dinner had been put back by a week when the original date was found to clash with Kelso Races. Perhaps the delay was no bad thing since it had been discovered, earlier in the month, that the exchange roof was leaking! They were soon making not just repairs but substantial improvements to the roof.

Musical and theatrical performances from touring artistes were regularly staged in the corn exchange and were usually well attended. A popular act (since they returned to the town more than once) was the 'marvellous impersonations' of characters and scenes from Scottish, English, Irish and French life provided by Mr George Cecil Murray and Miss Louise Gourlay. In seats costing one or two shillings, the audience could enjoy 'a merry medley of melody, mirth and mimicry'.

Sometimes, one imagines, the audience would be bemused as to what to expect from the advertised events. An example would be when 'Professor Pepper's Proteus and Mr Gompertz's newly-invented wondrous spectroscope' performed for five nights in 1871. Equally mysterious was the performance in 1875 of the 'world-renowned Professor Cristo, prince of ventriloquists, organophist and wizard of wizards'! His show had the more mundane title of 'Oddities in the Drawing Room' but it was, by all accounts, of the highest quality.

But the entertainments were not always totally appreciated. The 1875 return appearance of George Cecil Murray and Louise Gourlay was probably of its usual high standard but was spoiled by the disgraceful behaviour of some boys in the back row who greeted arriving audience members with 'insulting applause' and then threw peas at them (from a left-over sample bag perhaps) after the performance started. And a letter writer to the Berwickshire News using the pseudonym of 'Doh, Ray, Me' in 1877 felt obliged to condemn the 'band of female minstrels whose performance and personal appearance in the Corn Exchange lately was not fitted to improve the morals of the town'.

While concerts and other entertainments were the most common events hosted in the corn exchange, the building served numerous other purposes. When there were too many children for the parish school, then located right beside the church, an overspill class was housed in

the exchange. The First Berwickshire Volunteers regularly held drills and their annual ball in the exchange and, once organised county police forces became established in the 1850s, a yearly inspection of the local constables and their equipment was often carried out there.

Town organisations frequently hired the exchange to hold fund-raising or business events such as the Free Church tea and fruit soiree in 1875 or the two-day grand bazaar organised the following year to raise money for the town's first public park. The annual meeting of the Dunse and District Cow Insurance Society (better known as the Cow Club) was held in the exchange in 1875. In 1876, the Dunse Young Men's Association staged a lecture by an Edinburgh professor on the 'chemistry of lucifer matches', complete with experiments; that was the same year as the Dunse poultry and pigeon show followed by the autumn show of the Berwickshire Amateur Horticultural Society. Household furniture and book auctions were sometimes staged in the exchange.

The building was also used for political purposes. Parliamentary candidates or elected MPs often favoured the exchange when they wished to canvass support or address the local electorate. And the exchange sometimes served as a polling station for general elections as well as elections to the Dunse parish school board.

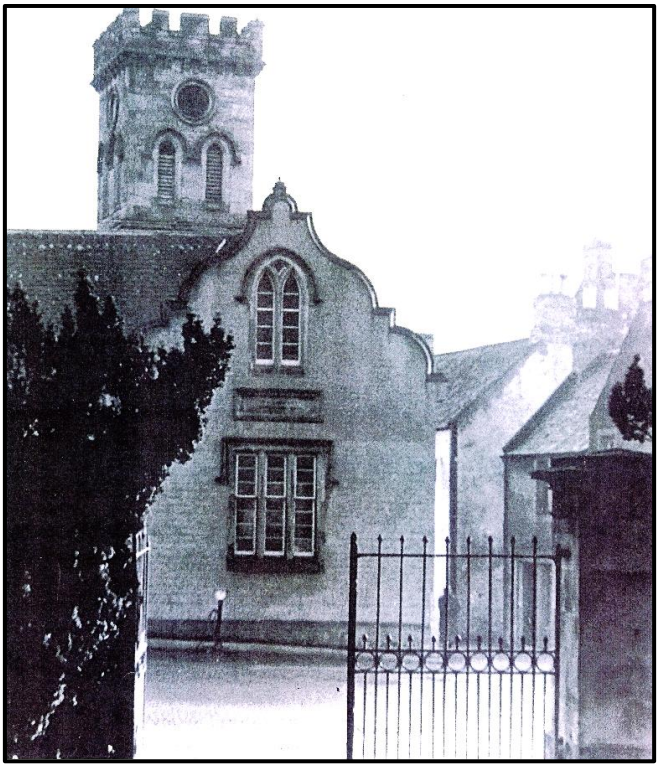
In March 1892, the Berwickshire News reported that the annual Duns hiring fair for married farm servants 'was held on the streets of Duns on Tuesday'; a popular public dance took place in the corn exchange at 2pm that same afternoon. In the twentieth century, the exchanges at Kelso and Earlston eventually took the hiring fairs indoors to avoid both inclement weather and the 'cattle market' spectacle of men and women standing in the street hoping for employment. The Duns corn exchange did not survive long enough to take on a similar function.

After the Corn Exchange

By the 1880s, the importance of corn exchanges, especially in smaller towns like Dunse, was beginning to fade. It is interesting to note that the weekly reports of grain prices which were faithfully carried in the Berwickshire News for the Dunse and other local exchanges in the 1870s virtually disappeared in the next decade. New ways were being found for trading in agricultural products. As the century progressed, the postal service, the telegraph and later the telephone became much more convenient for communication and motor transport also made business easier.

With the Dunse corn exchange becoming increasingly redundant, the annual meeting of company shareholders in late 1891 discussed selling the building although no decision was taken at that time. The exchange continued to host local events for a while but then the Volunteer Hall was opened in 1895, taking away most of this business and, with it, the last remaining opportunity for the exchange to earn income. At the annual meeting that year, it was decided to seek the opinion of all shareholders 'for the purpose of dissolving the company and selling the property'. It is likely that no dividends had been paid out for some considerable time because of low annual revenue. The exchange building itself inevitably

deteriorated over the years and eventually lost the spire and weather vane from the top of its tower – it was clearly cheaper to remove them than to undertake repairs.



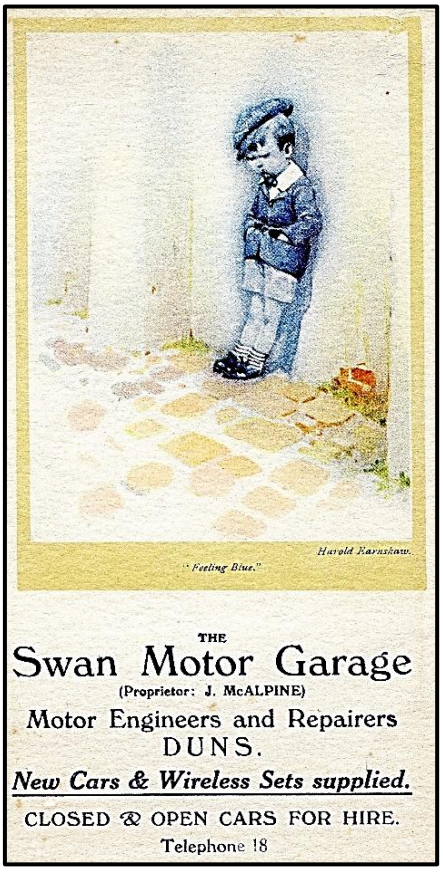
The Corn Exchange after it had lost its spire;
note name and date stone between the windows

The exchange took on a temporary new role in the spring of 1897 when it was rented by local blacksmith Alexander Luke who set up a business selling and repairing bicycles; he offered a stock of over 100 machines at his 'cycle depot' in the corn exchange. But a few months later, in June 1897, the exchange shareholders unanimously agreed to wind up the company and sell the building; it was put on the market with an upset price of £400, around a third of its original cost. The only expression of interest came from tenant Alexander Luke but his low offer of £320 was refused and the exchange went back on sale with the upset price reduced to £350. It still took until May 1898 before the building was purchased for the £350 asking price by James MacAlpine, owner of the nearby Swan Hotel; he used his new acquisition as a 'posting yard' where he kept his horses and carriages. Alexander Luke was given notice to quit. He moved his cycle business further along Newtown Street and then, in 1903, to showroom and workshop premises in Murray Street, specially designed by town architect George Duns.

After James MacAlpine's death in 1912, his son John McAlpine gave up his father's hotel business but used the exchange to go into the infant motor selling and hiring trade, calling his premises the Swan Motor Garage. By 1914, he was the sole agent in Berwick and Berwickshire for Pick motor cars made in Stamford, Lincolnshire. In fact, all the horses and carriages owned by the Swan Hotel were sold off at auction in 1920; their days were done.

John McAlpine served his country in the Great War but, in 1920, he was very much back in business, announcing that he had installed new machinery at the Swan Garage and was employing mechanics (with Wille White as foreman) for all kinds of motor repairs. At that time, it was possible to access the garage from three directions – from Newtown Street, from Black Bull Street and from the Market Place. In 1922, John McAlpine married Agnes Annabella (Nan) McDougal of Coldstream.

In 1924, the next logical step was taken in his garage business when he applied to the town council to install a storage tank and petrol pumps (instead of selling fuel in two-gallon cans) but his plan was found to be unacceptable, presumably on safety grounds. It took a letter to the council from the Scottish Oil Agency the next year to move matters along. The first petrol pumps were installed in 1925 with the fuel at that time costing about 10d per gallon – around 4 pence in today's money and worth some £3 in today's values.



'Feeling Blue' : Advert for John McAlpine's Swan Garage

The business was sold in 1933 to John Wallace who re-constituted it in 1946 as the Swan Garage (Duns) Ltd with himself and George Thomson as directors. But, in 1950, that business went into voluntary liquidation and was bought over by Croall Bryson & Co Ltd, a highly successful Borders motor company which had originally been established in Hawick but also had branches in Kelso, Selkirk and Melrose by this time. George Thomson was kept on as manager of their new Duns branch and continued as such until his death in 1964.

The photograph at the start of this paper shows the Croall Bryson business name above the garage entrance in the front wall of the old corn exchange. In 1951, the company applied to Duns Town Council to alter the garage so as to provide a car showroom with no objections being made and, in 1960, they were given permission to take down the exchange's tower due to its poor condition; the spire had been removed some years before that.

But Croall Bryson's directors reckoned, understandably, that this old building was no longer suitable and so, to make space for new premises, they soon obtained permission to demolish it altogether, along with an old adjacent house on the east side which had once been home to a blacksmith. The demolition and reconstruction works were undertaken in well-planned stages between 1962 and 1965 so that normal garage business could be carried on throughout the building operations. By early 1965, the last vestiges of the old corn exchange had disappeared and in its place was a modern garage complex with car showroom, workshop, parts department and office facilities; the work was done by Henry Steel of Greenlaw.

Eventually, the Swan Garage ceased to be sufficiently viable and Croall Bryson closed the branch. In turn, the garage premises were themselves demolished in 2005 to make way for the current Co-operative store which opened the following year. Respectfully, the old name and date stone which had been saved from the demolition of the original Dunse Corn Exchange in the 1960s – and displayed on a plinth outside Croall Bryson's garage – was set into the Newtown Street wall of the new building.

Original corn exchange date-stone set into Co-operative store wall

The information in this paper has been researched from the Dunse Corn Exchange Company Sederunt Book; from various newspapers of the time (especially the Berwickshire News); and from public records – census and birth, marriage and death records.

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