

## Fenton Lodge and the Fortunes

David McLean (2021)



*Fenton Lodge (originally known as Kilmeny), Bridgend, Duns*

### Introduction

The house known today as 'Fenton Lodge' stands at the top of Bridgend in Duns, near the Roman Catholic chapel. Between the 1890s and 1950, when the house was called 'Kilmeny', it was home to the Fortunes. George Fortune was a builder and well respected architect, an acknowledged expert in church architecture in particular, and responsible for numerous church renovations in this part of Berwickshire. He also became owner of a very sizeable portfolio of properties in Duns. Dating the house is not easy. British Listed Buildings sets its construction as 'later nineteenth century'. If houses were built up Bridgend in a broadly linear progression, outwards from the town, this would make sense. An architectural drawing, created in 1882 in preparation for the building of the Roman Catholic chapel and published in the 'Building News', seems to show a gap site where Fenton Lodge now stands. The 1895 valuation roll is the first to identify Fortune's property on Bridgend as being called 'Kilmeny' but feu duty figures strongly suggest that he was already living there in 1894. So, from the above, we might surmise that the house was built in the early 1890s. It was almost certainly

built by George Fortune himself as evidenced by his 'GF' monogram, shown below, in a couple of the stained glass windows. In fact, his love of stained glass was carried in simpler chequerboard form in the upper sections of all the windows around the house.



### **The Fortune Family**

George Fortune, born in 1843 and named after his grandfather, was the oldest of nine children - five girls and four boys - born over a 20-year period to Thomas Fortune and his wife, Jane. The family tree at the end of this article will help to follow their story. Thomas Fortune, the son of a farm steward, was a master slater and thatcher in Duns. His wife, Jane, was the daughter of John Tait, the parish schoolmaster at Smailholm. They lived in various properties in the town - in Easter Street, in Church Square and in Currie Street.

In the summer of 1870, George Fortune married Elizabeth Howie of Eccles. Their only child, Jeanie, was born the following year when the 1871 census shows them living in Hawthorn Cottage at the foot of Currie Street. At the age of 27, George had followed his father's trade and was also a slater and thatcher, already employing four men. Ten years later, this had become six men and two apprentices so business was clearly going well.

Then comes the mystery. In the 1891 census, George Fortune was describing himself as both architect and slater - although, in fact, he had started operating as an architect at least ten years earlier. Even the Dictionary of Scottish Architects does no more than list some of his projects and offers no clues as to how he came to be in the profession. For the next 20 years, he continued to run his roofing business in tandem with his architectural work until his decision in 1911 to transfer the building side to a man called William Cormack who had been an employee of Fortune's for nearly 30 years.

As we have seen, evidence from valuation rolls shows George Fortune as proprietor and occupier of a property called 'Kilmeny' (otherwise identified as 42, Bridgend) by the mid-1890s; a Fortune would remain there for the next half-century. George Fortune's mother came to live with them at some point after the death of his father in 1901 and she died at Kilmeny ten years later in 1911, aged 91.

Jeanie, daughter and only child of George and Elizabeth Fortune, was married in the house in 1903 to Charles Eason, a master baker and confectioner from Carluke in Lanarkshire. The ceremony was conducted by the groom's brother, James Eason, who happened to be minister of the South Church in Duns, now the carpet store in Currie Street.

George Fortune died at home in Kilmeny in 1915 at the age of 71. His widow, Elizabeth, lived to the great age of 98 and was the oldest lady in Duns when she died, still at Kilmeny, in 1940. The house then passed to their daughter, Jeanie Eason, still living in Carluke and seems to have been rented out. When Charles Eason died at the age of 75 in 1946, Jeanie gave up their Carluke property and returned to Duns to live in the family home at Kilmeny. She enjoyed only a few more years in the property, however, being found dead in bed of accidental carbon monoxide poisoning in September 1950; she was 79. Since she had been an only child and since it would appear that she and Charles Eason had no children of their own, this represented the end of the family line of George Fortune.



*South elevation of Fenton Lodge : stained glass in all the upper panes*

## George Fortune, Architect

As already noted, there are no clues as to how George Fortune qualified as an architect but this interest may well have been a natural progression of his skills as a builder. He developed a particular knowledge and love of church architecture and it was in this field that he became best known. In 1881, the Boston Free Church in Duns (now the site of Boston Court sheltered housing) was closed for five months while alterations and improvements designed by George Fortune were carried out. The roof was re-slatted, the ceilings were raised and a hall was built, the £700 cost being met by Hay of Duns Castle.

Fortune supervised renovations in Longformacus Church in 1892 but his next project would become arguably his triumph. Cranshaws Church had been in a poor state of repair for many years before Andrew Smith, a partner in the Edinburgh brewing company of Youngers, bought Cranshaws estate in the 1890s and moved to Whitchester House near Longformacus. Smith became a benefactor in various ways to the hill communities as well as to the people of Duns and one of his foremost contributions was to rebuild the church at Cranshaws.

In 1898, following the improvements at Longformacus, he again employed George Fortune of Duns to draw up plans for a new church. The original building of 1739 was taken down, leaving the base of the walls as foundations for the new construction. Fortune designed a building in what is known as the Romanesque Revival style on a rectangular plan with gabled porch to the south, a curved apse to the east and crowned with a fine belfry. He designed all aspects of the interior furnishing and decoration as well and he made a personal gift of the stained glass window in the porch. The new Cranshaws Church was completed in 1899. It has always been recognised as one of the most picturesque country kirks in the south of Scotland.



*Cranshaws Church, re-built in 1899 to plans by George Fortune*

A few years later, Fortune was the architect for improvements to the Parish Church in Eyemouth. This was followed by his designing an octagonal memorial pulpit in oak for the same church to the memory of Colonel Milne Home. His attention turned next to Houndwood Church near Grantshouse, now a crematorium. His plans called for the original entrances in the south wall to be turned into windows while a new porch was added at the west end of the church. He moved the pulpit, installed new pews of pitch pine and replaced the glazing in all the windows. He also designed a new oak communion table and lectern. The renovated Houndwood Church was dedicated in 1903. Two years later, Fortune was responsible for restoration and alterations at Bonkyl Church, north of Preston, including the addition of the porch to the west end; he gifted one of the stained glass windows.

In 1912, the congregation of Duns Parish Church turned to George Fortune when they wished to commemorate the 35-year tenure of the late Herr Johannes Albe as church organist and teacher of music. He organised the design of a stained glass window showing Cecilia, patron saint of music, seated at an organ and made arrangements with a company in Newcastle to have it crafted and installed in the church vestibule.

There were, of course, architectural projects which were not associated with churches such as the new farmhouse built at Earnslaw on the Charterhall Estate in 1906 and two houses built in Easter Street in Duns for a man called John Elliot that same year. He did various pieces of work for Andrew Smith at Whitchester. In 1914, the year before his death, Fortune helped his daughter and son-in-law in Carluke by preparing plans and supervising the work to renovate and enlarge their bakery, shop and tea rooms in the High Street.

Fortune also undertook various projects for his home town. In 1887, as part of the jubilee celebrations marking Queen Victoria's fifty years on the throne, he designed and gifted a new concrete horse watering trough in Castle Street - hardly glamorous but functional! In the early 1890s, his scheme for numbering the houses in Duns and fixing enamelled iron name plates around the streets was adopted. Around the same time, he was commissioned to inspect all properties in the burgh following the collapse of a gable wall in the Clouds which had caused a death. At a more mundane level, he was employed in 1904 by Duns Town Council, together with George Duns, another well-known local architect, to make recommendations for concreting the footpaths around the town.

It would have been surprising if an ambitious man such as Fortune had not felt the desire to get involved in local politics. He was a member of Duns Town Council in the 1880s and rose to the position of junior magistrate. But his success did not last when, in 1890, he came last in a poll of nine candidates for five seats.

### **George Fortune, Property Owner**

As we have seen, George Fortune doubled as both architect and proprietor of a roofing business throughout most of his career. This put him in an ideal position to acquire older property, do whatever work was necessary and then let the houses for rent. Over the years, he acquired an impressive property portfolio in Duns.

The 1890 valuation roll shows George Fortune as proprietor (owner) of a house, garden and stable in Currie Street - modest beginnings. He built and owned Kilmeny by 1894/1895 and made it his family home. He had acquired a property in the Clouds in 1893 and then added another in the same location in 1895 when the congregation of the West Church joined with that of the South Church in Currie Street; the redundant West Church building was bought by Fortune for £170. Today, it forms the two white-painted houses at the western end of the Clouds.

And the acquisitions continued. By the time of his death in 1915, in addition to Kilmeny, he owned five houses in Currie Street, three in the Clouds (Woodside, Dingleside and The Elms) and another couple of properties on Bridgend. A handful of stables and garages was thrown in for good measure. From time to time, advertisements appeared in the 'Berwickshire News' offering houses to let, 'apply George Fortune, Kilmeny'.

In 1913, the 'Scotsman' reported him buying Cairnbank mansion house with its 17 acres of grass parks on the eastern outskirts of Duns for the upset price of £2200. This was a strange purchase, surely out of his league and, certainly, nothing more is heard of it in Fortune's name. It is more likely that he acted as an agent on this occasion to purchase it on behalf of someone else - farmer Andrew Pate was soon living in the property.

On his death in 1915, George Fortune left personal estate worth some £500 and property valued at around £3000; the records also suggest that he had around a dozen tenants. His extensive property portfolio passed to his wife. It can be traced through succeeding years and was still intact at the 1940 valuation roll when Elizabeth Fortune herself died. The portfolio was then inherited by their daughter, Jeanie Eason. It is therefore not surprising that, when she died in 1950, she left estate worth over £25,000; to achieve the same purchasing power today would require around £875,000.

### **'Kilmeny' becomes 'Fenton Lodge'**

In December 1950, following Jeanie Eason's death, the furniture and effects of Kilmeny were among the lots for sale at auction in the Berwick Corn Exchange. At the same time, the 'detached and substantial dwelling house known as Kilmeny' was advertised for sale. On the ground floor, it comprised a drawing room, dining room, study, box-room and kitchen with scullery; upstairs were four large bedrooms, a maid's room and bathroom. A lined attic and small garden completed the property.

It was acquired by Blanche Robson, the widow of William Frier Robson, one-time owner of Southfield Villa in Station Road; he had died in 1923. Her maiden name was 'Lizzie Blanche Fenton' - hence, surely, the change of name to 'Fenton Lodge'. She lived in the property with her two surviving adult daughters, Dorothea and Ethel, and her granddaughter, Vivien (Dorothea's child).

Blanche Robson had a great love of the stage as well as theatrical talents which were shared by both Dorothea and Vivien. They formed the 'Fenton Lodge Players', a group of enthusiastic local amateurs who put on concerts and annual pantomimes in Duns and other towns and villages such as Chirnside, Eyemouth and Kelso. Their productions normally

raised money for good causes, especially the Royal British Legion of which Blanche Robson was a keen supporter. By this time, she was in her later 80s but that did not stop her helping to produce the shows and making many of the costumes. The performances of the Players were apparently of a very high standard.

In 1953, they started another venture with a new club for children aged between 5 and 16 called the 'Fenton Lodge Coronation Club'. It was run by Dorothea and her sister, Ethel, and children were able to learn handicrafts at the weekly meetings.

But the Robsons were soon planning to leave Fenton Lodge. It was put up for sale in 1953, now with electric light and 'entirely redecorated and modernised in recent years'. It did not sell, however, since they were still there in the summer of 1954 when it was advertised again. Still there was no buyer and the Robsons remained in the house in March 1956 when Ethel Robson was fined five shillings in the burgh court for having allowed one of the Fenton Lodge chimneys to go on fire! The house was advertised for sale again in the 'Berwickshire News' at the end of that year. It is unclear what happened next but Blanche Robson died in Edinburgh at the age of 94 in 1961.



*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; wills and testaments; and birth, marriage and death records.*

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**Fortune (Fenton Lodge, Duns) Family Tree**

