

White Swan Hotel

David McLean (2026)



Introduction

The White Swan Hotel is one of the oldest commercial properties in Duns, long owned by the Hays of Duns Castle and let to a number of tenant landlords over many years before being sold in 1899. Built as a coaching inn in the eighteenth century (exactly when is impossible to determine), it originally consisted of the single building, above right, running along the north side of the Market Place although there were also stables and carriage facilities to the rear. The range of buildings running at right angles towards the south, now designated as Cygnets bar, was only bought and added to the hotel in the early twentieth century. The hotel is constructed in stone although the walls were harled by the 1960s; the building is category B listed today.

The 'Swan Inn' is shown on John Wood's 1824 map of Dunse and annotated as being kept by 'Mrs Craig'. She would appear to have been there for some time before that since the Berwickshire News reported in summer 1951 that Duns resident Mrs Sheila Romanes had a 'perfectly preserved receipt' from the Swan Inn, dated 09 December 1805, on which the proprietor was shown as 'Mrs Craig'. The receipt included a dinner priced at 8s 8d and a supper at 3 shillings; punch had been provided for a cost of over £1 with ale and porter at 4s 6d; and 10d was charged for horses' hay and corn.

Archibald and Helen Jamieson

Mrs Craig did not manage the Swan Inn much beyond 1824 since Archibald Jamieson (sometimes spelled Jameson) moved to Dunse with his wife Helen around 1825 to take over the hotel. He would have been in his later 30s at that point and had been tenant farmer at Whittingham Mains in East Lothian – his father was factor on the Whittingham estate. There was some nearby land which came with the Swan Inn in Dunse and this perhaps encouraged his move. His farming background also helps to explain his decision to gain a licence as an auctioneer at which additional occupation he was very popular and successful, especially selling properties and the lets of grass parks. By the 1830s, the ‘Swan’ was also being called the ‘White Swan’.

One version of the famous Dunse resurrectionist story of 1826 involves Jamieson. Two farmers had stayed rather late in the Swan Inn one market day before setting off to walk the road home to Longformacus. Out on Hardens moor, they heard a horse-drawn gig coming up the road behind them and they stopped it, hoping for a lift. Two of the three people in the gig immediately jumped off and ran for cover; the two farmers discovered to their horror that the third was a dead body. It turned out that it had recently been exhumed from the churchyard at Edrom by the two grave robbers and was on its way to Edinburgh, doubtless to be sold for dissection. The shaken farmers drove the gig back down to Dunse and banged on the door of the Swan Inn, seeking Archibald Jamieson’s help. He arranged for the body to be taken across to the parish church while the horse and gig were lodged in his coach-house in Shambles Wynd (now Murray Street). This version of the story has the enraged Dunse townspeople wrecking and burning the gig in the Market Place the following day, not waiting until someone came to reclaim it about a year later. It was also alleged that Jamieson had to save the horse from the mob; the horse had been hired from its owner in Edinburgh, not in Kelso as in the other version of the tale.

Jamieson had given up the lease of the Swan Inn by 1840, apparently preferring to concentrate on his auctioneering business. His daughter Agnes married local lawyer Alexander Weatherhead in 1847 and they owned the Barniken in Murray Street by the time of the 1851 census. It was there that Archibald Jamieson died of a stroke at the age of 82 in 1870.

George and Catherine Hownam

The Dunse map of 1824 shows the town’s other main coaching inn, the Black Bull, being kept by George Hownam; since he was only in his early 20s at that point, he can only have taken over the hotel very recently. He seems to have been a successful innkeeper, managing not just his inn but also its associated ‘posting’ business – the coach and carriage trade. The Black Bull had substantial stables where the horses of visitors and travellers were accommodated and looked after. Daily coaches ran between the Black Bull and both Edinburgh and Berwick, and the coach-horses required changing. Hownam stayed at the Black Bull until 1840 at which point he gave up his lease to take over the Swan Inn in the Market Place instead. It is difficult

to see his motivation for the move except for the fact that the Swan was more centrally placed and in the busiest part of the town.

It was not long before George Hownam was improving some local land, perhaps that associated with the hotel. It was reported in the Kelso Chronicle in the autumn of 1840 that he had been draining a couple of 'bog fields' and had been carting in soil to further improve them. This description would suggest that these fields lay to the south of the town in the area of marshy land which had for centuries stretched from east of the town through what is now the public park and west towards Clockmill. His efforts clearly worked since it was not long before his fields were producing a very substantial potato crop. Hownam's farming interests were also evidenced by his becoming local agent for a Liverpool company which sold 'nitrate of soda' to farmers, a fertiliser most likely imported from South America.

The tenancy of the Swan Inn becomes rather muddled in the 1850s. In 1855, George Hownam further expanded his farming interests by becoming tenant of Peelrig Farm just outside the town. Three years later, in 1858, the Illustrated Berwick Journal carried an announcement by Robert Kinghorn, until recently butler at Haggerston Castle, informing 'commercial gentlemen and the public generally' that he had taken over the White Swan Hotel in Dunse. The 1861 census shows him as hotelkeeper there at the age of 52 with his wife Mary, age 48, three staff who lived on the premises and two commercial travellers as guests.

From this, it might be assumed that George Hownam had given up the hotel lease to concentrate on farming. But Robert Kinghorn died in 1864 and the valuation roll for 1865 lists George Hownam as being tenant of the White Swan. He died there of heart disease at the age of 67 in 1869. It appears that his widow Catherine managed the business herself for the next few years. It was during her time that the hotel's horse-drawn omnibus was badly damaged in an accident at Dunse railway station. A locomotive coming into the platform startled a horse which was harnessed to a cart; the horse bolted and the cart caught the Swan omnibus, dragging it on to its side and smashing most of its roof. Fortunately, no passengers were on board at the time. Catherine Hownam was still shown as tenant of the Swan in the valuation roll of 1875 but she died at Briery Hill to the south-east of the town the following year.

The 'White Swan Hotel and Posting Establishment, Dunse' was then advertised for let in April 1876. It was described as a 'family and commercial hotel' with six sitting rooms including one large room, six bedrooms, kitchen, back kitchen, attics, pantry etc. Its considerable stables had sixteen large stalls and a loose box with corn and hay lofts. There was a coach-house (probably the one in Murray Street) together with a byre and a piggery; it seems that the hotel sometimes used the byre since a newspaper advert once sought a kitchen maid who could milk a cow.

James and Mary McAlpine

The next landlord of the White Swan remained for almost forty years and was one of the most popular and successful proprietors who has ever managed the hotel. James McAlpine came to Berwickshire from the Dalkeith area in the late 1850s to work for William Learmonth of the Castle Inn in Greenlaw, another important coaching inn, as an ostler looking after the horses. In 1863, he moved to Dunse to take up similar employment with James Lauder, then landlord

of the Black Bull Inn. He worked for Lauder for eight years but clearly had both ability and ambition since, in the early 1870s, he was selected to become tenant of the Railway Hotel in the Market Place which later became the Royal Hotel and, later still, the Whip and Saddle.

On the death of Catherine Hownam in 1876, James McAlpine was selected as the new tenant of the White Swan. He continued to run the Railway Hotel in tandem for a while but gave it up at the end of its lease in 1880.



Sketch and photograph of James McAlpine, 'genial' landlord of the White Swan

Over the many years of James McAlpine's tenure, the Swan was patronised at one time or another by virtually every club and society in the area for meetings, annual dinners and other events. Dunse Curling Club, Dunse Burns Club, Berwickshire Agricultural Association, the Ellem Fishing Club, the Edinburgh Borderers Union and Dunse Gaslight Company were just a few of the organisations which chose to meet in the Swan. Given the regularity of such events and the numbers who attended, the Swan's kitchen and waiting staff must have been kept very busy and compliments were invariably paid to the standard of food and service provided by James and Mary McAlpine. And there was also a great deal of casual trade especially on market and hiring fair days when many took refreshments in the Swan. Occasionally, McAlpine had to remind his customers that the time for serving alcohol was past when he would stand by the door of an evening and genially call 'Come, gentlemen, it is 10 o'clock'.

McAlpine also catered out for events such as farm sales. When a tenant farmer retired or moved on, it was quite common for the stock and implements of the farm to be sold. An auctioneer came out on the allotted day, normally selling the implements in the morning and the animals in the afternoon. In between, prospective buyers were treated to a substantial lunch. When James McAlpine catered for these, he frequently set up a sizeable marquee which usually worked well although not at the farm sale at Billie Mains – he had set up his tent the previous day and an overnight storm tore it to shreds. Being ever resourceful, he used a couple of barns instead.

James McAlpine must scarcely have been able to believe his luck when he was informed, only a couple of months after taking over the White Swan in May 1876, that a member of the Royal Family would be staying overnight in his hotel! Prince Arthur William Patrick Albert, Duke of Connaught, was the seventh child and third son of Queen Victoria; he was on his way from Manchester to Edinburgh in the summer of 1876, commanding a company of the Seventh Hussars. Dunse was the convenient end-point for one of their days on the road.

With a couple of days fore-warning of the Duke's arrival, the townspeople of Dunse went to incredible efforts to provide an appropriate welcome. Money was quickly raised and numerous floral arches were set up, including one at the foot of Murray Street and a triple arch on the western side of the Town Hall. Banners were hung with messages such as 'Welcome to Scotland' and 'Welcome, Duke of Connaught'. Flags and other decorations were everywhere and hundreds of people filled the streets when the Duke and his Hussars arrived in Dunse, having ridden up the road from Berwick. The soldiers had to exercise extreme caution when riding up Murray Street to prevent their horses barging into the crowd.

The Duke spent part of the afternoon in the Swan meeting local dignitaries and then turned his attention to the arrangements made for his men about which he was most fastidious. The Hussars and their horses were to be billeted overnight around various inns in the town and he carefully inspected every room and stable involved; he even asked to see the hay and corn which would be fed to the horses. After being satisfied with the arrangements made for his company, the Duke was taken to Dunse Castle and Langton House where he viewed some paintings and then down to Kimmerghame for dinner. He later rode back to Dunse, passing through the central of the three floral arches beside the Town Hall to arrive in front of the White Swan which was his own quarters for the night – he had probably insisted on staying in the town with his men. The Illustrated Berwick Journal reported that 'Mr McAlpine, the landlord, had spared no trouble or expense to make the best possible provision for his Royal Highness'.



Prince Arthur, Duke of Connaught, guest at the White Swan

The 1891 census lists James McAlpine (52), 'spirit dealer' and his wife Mary (42). Oldest daughter Annie (20) was helping her parents in the hotel and Jane (17) was a dressmaker. Mary junior (14), Frederick (12), Jessie (9) and Agnes (5) were all at school. And the last of the seven children was John (3). Three staff lived in the hotel – a nurserymaid to help look after the children, a housemaid and a waitress.

James McAlpine had spent his early career looking after horses and so he was well placed to develop the White Swan's 'posting' trade, stabling the horses of visitors to his hotel and providing coach and carriage transport where needed. He therefore acquired a considerable number of his own vehicles and horses, including a prize-winning hunter named 'Lodestone'. He also added a 'first class hearse' which could be pulled by one horse or two as preferred and was available for hiring out. And shortly after taking over the Swan, he was awarded the contract to run the Sunday mail gig between Dunse and Ayton.

The scale of his operation was well illustrated when he was asked to provide transport for a tour of central Berwickshire by the Edinburgh Borderers Union in May 1894. 108 ladies and gentlemen got off the train at Chirnside Station to be met by James McAlpine and no fewer than ten vehicles, varying from a one-horse wagonette to a four-horse brake. He had calculated that he would be just one vehicle short of requirements and had borrowed an extra wagon from Ayton. Lunch for the touring party in the Town Hall in Duns was provided by the McAlpines and, after more driving around the local countryside, they all departed on the evening train from Duns Station.

The posting trade of both the Black Bull and the White Swan was not always popular with other Dunse citizens. Their horse-drawn omnibuses, used for transporting passengers and luggage to and from the railway station, were sometimes left in the streets, causing an obstruction. And James McAlpine caused a debate in Duns Town Council in 1903 over whether his practice of allowing farmers to park their carriages outside the Swan on market and hiring days was acceptable. He doubtless saw it as a useful way of tempting these farmers to take their refreshments in his hotel but councillors encouraged him to use Newtown Street instead where there was more space.

Expansion of the White Swan's facilities was always on McAlpine's mind. In the 1890s, he bought some old property behind the hotel and created stable space for another 20 horses. When the near-by redundant Corn Exchange building came up for sale in 1898, he purchased it for £350 for conversion to a 'posting yard', in other words a garage for his coaches and carriages. And then in 1899, when he had been tenant of the White Swan for almost 25 years, he purchased the hotel and its accompanying posting facilities from the Hays of Duns Castle – owning his hotel was the ultimate accolade of his success. But he was not finished. He soon bought the range of buildings on the west side of the Swan (now Cygnets bar) so that he could increase the hotel's accommodation. And, as if all this were not enough, he took the tenancy of Putton Mill farm to the south of the town around this same time.

James McAlpine, hotel keeper, died in the White Swan of pneumonia at the age of 71 in 1912. His widow Mary soon leased the hotel (without its posting facilities) to a new tenant but she retained ownership of the property until deciding to sell at some point between 1920 and 1925 according to valuation roll evidence. She died at number 19 Bridgend in December 1931 at the age of 81; cause of death was given as old age and heart failure. Following James McAlpine's death in 1912, his youngest son John (then in his mid-20s) kept on his father's posting business

at the old corn exchange but he was soon selling off the carriages and horses in order to go into the motor trade; the exchange building then became the Swan Motor Garage.

The White Swan in the Twentieth Century

The new tenant in 1912 was **Ernest James Harris**. For the previous four years, he had run the Waverley Temperance Hotel on the top floors of the Dunlop Building in the Market Place. He took over the White Swan in November 1912 when he applied for the transfer of the hotel's certificate. Interestingly, one of the members of the Berwickshire Licensing Court, John Turnbull of Abbey St Bathans, questioned the suitability of the Swan's premises; he wondered whether the court should insist on their modernisation. The application by Ernest Harris was granted but the Chief Constable was asked to inspect the White Swan and report to the court at a subsequent meeting. Perhaps James McAlpine had concentrated on quantity more than quality. Ernest Harris stayed in the Swan for only five years since the hotel's certificate was granted to **John Gray** in 1917. But Gray's tenure was also brief – he had left by 1920 to take over the Wheatsheaf in Reston. He died in the Deaconess Hospital (a nursing home) in Edinburgh in 1922.



The White Swan in the 1920s, still with its passage-way to the rear stables

The next landlord of the White Swan was **James Prentice** who had previously operated the Wheatsheaf in Swinton. He was the tenant who bought the property from Mary McAlpine and he remained at the Swan until 1937. His stewardship of the hotel was beset by a number of controversies. In April 1922, he was cautioned for breaching the terms of his licence for refusing to supply non-alcoholic refreshments. And only a few months later, in October 1922,

a formal complaint was submitted to the licensing court by a JP from Lanarkshire called McNaughton. He had been with a motoring party which stopped off at the White Swan around 6.30pm on a Sunday, requesting a meal. Prentice had declined to provide anything, again breaching his licence. He was given a warning by the licensing court.

More issues followed. In April 1923, he was convicted for selling alcohol in prohibited hours on a hiring day but was admonished – often in such cases, landlords would plead misunderstandings or failures by some of their staff. But Prentice's licence for the hotel came up for renewal that same month and, at the meeting of the county licensing court, the Chief Constable gave his opinion that James Prentice was not a suitable person 'to be entrusted with the conduct of one of the principal hotels in the county'. He reported that police had visited the hotel about 3.30pm on an August day in 1922 and found a large number of farmers and evidence of alcohol being supplied outside permitted hours. Prentice's solicitor took great exception to this claim being brought up without notice and questioned why the police had not taken the alleged offence to a prosecution at the time. In the end, the hotel's licence was left with James Prentice but with the equivalent of a final warning.

While such misdemeanours cannot have done Prentice's public image much good, he was clearly a trusted figure in the eyes of many townspeople since he was elected to Duns Town Council in 1927 and remained a councillor for a number of years. It would also appear that the White Swan maintained a high reputation for its food and service. Prentice retired in 1937 and he and his wife Isabella moved to the town's Todlaw Road where they had built a villa which they called 'Whitberry'. It was there that James Prentice died in 1941 and Isabella Prentice in 1952.

The White Swan was next bought by **George Gillie**. He was a native of Duns, having been born in Newtown Street, but after his education at Duns Public School and Heriot Watt College in Edinburgh, he spent sixteen years with a wine and spirit company in South Africa, rising to a high position. And it was there that he married Gertrude Johnson from Kent. After returning to Scotland and working in the hotel trade in Edinburgh for many years, George and Gertrude Gillie purchased the White Swan in Duns in 1937. Their management of the hotel lasted only seven years, however, since George Gillie died of heart failure in 1944, age 78, in the town's Whitcheater Hospital. It seems that his wife Gertrude and daughter Dorothy initially had thoughts of running the Swan themselves but there is evidence that they had moved to Cambridge by the time of Dorothy's marriage in 1945.

In November 1947, the White Swan's licence was granted to **Archibald Blair Jackson** who was a native of Maybole in Ayrshire. He had worked for the Union Bank of Scotland for nearly twenty years, originally in London and latterly in Troon. He rose to the rank of captain in the Royal Marine Commandos and took part in the Normandy landings in 1944. He was demobilised at the end of 1945 and came with his wife from Prestwick to Duns to take over the Swan two years later. However, the Jacksons stayed in Duns for only three years and sold the hotel in 1950.

Arthur Smith and his wife purchased the Swan that same year; they came to Duns from Dysart in Fife. The string of relatively short tenures continued and the Smiths sold up five years later in 1955. This time, the White Swan was purchased by **Thistle Inns Ltd**, a subsidiary company of Edinburgh brewers William Younger; one of the company directors applied for the hotel's licence. In granting this application, the licensing court was departing from previous rulings

that a licensee had to reside on the premises. The court was informed that William Gow, manager of the Abbotsford Hotel in Galashiels, would be moving to Duns to manage the Swan. It is unclear whether this move actually happened since the hotel appears to have been under the management of a couple called Sturrock by the following year.

In some ways, the corporate take-over of the White Swan was a sign of the times as increasing numbers of hotels and public houses around the country came to be owned by hospitality groups and brewery companies. Perhaps the most recent limited tenures of the Swan were evidence that the hotel trade now benefitted from the economies of scale. The advantage to the breweries of such ownership was in insisting that their tenant landlords sell only the company's alcoholic products, a restrictive trade practice which has been outlawed in our own time.



The White Swan Hotel in 1962 (© Crown Copyright : HES)

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

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