

Duns Public Park

David McLean (2022)



The First Park

The earliest efforts at providing Duns with a public park were made in 1876 when a field of some four acres next to the Boston Free Church was secured from Hay of Duns Castle. The map below shows what the area would have looked like at that time. The Blinkbonnie lane, a long-time public right of way, linked the Market Place to the Boston Church and Station Road. To the east of the lane was a drying green for laying out linen cloth after it had been washed or bleached. Down the west side of the lane ran a set of allotment gardens but, beyond that, there was nothing but open fields belonging to Duns Castle Estate. A committee had been formed to acquire land on which sports might take place and in which the town's children might play - many had wanted this for a long time. Hay agreed to provide the field next to the Boston Church for a moderate annual rent of £20, with a five-year lease in the first instance.



Ordnance Survey Map, 1857

The field was ‘at once put in order for athletic sports etc’ which sounds grand but probably meant that they cut the grass. In May 1876, arrangements were being made for a fund-raising bazaar in the Corn Exchange later in the year to finance improvements but it would appear that respect for the town’s new amenity was not universal since the committee was simultaneously requesting visitors to the park not to destroy the grounds or fences!

Nor was the new park without controversy. A letter to the editor of the Berwickshire News in the summer of 1877 condemned the ‘would-be and self-appointed committee’ managing the park and questioned how the money raised at the bazaar had been spent. Instead of the field being free to all, the committee in ‘high-handed fashion’ had charged the cricket club £8 to use it for the season. And, to make matters worse, a flock of sheep (rumoured to belong to a committee member’s relative) had appeared in the park together with a rather aggressive mule. In fairness, letting the public park for sheep grazing became an annual practice; it helped to keep the grass down.

Andrew Smith and Sir James Miller

The public park was set on its modern footing thanks to the benevolence of two local landowners. Andrew Smith, a partner in the Edinburgh brewing company of Youngers, bought Whitchester estate near Longformacus in the 1890s; he became a major benefactor to both the hill communities and the people of Duns. Sir James Miller owned Manderston Estate and rebuilt the mansion house in its present form in the early 1900s.

Andrew Smith clearly felt that the inhabitants of Duns deserved something better than the rather rough-and-ready field which they were renting from Duns Castle Estate. In 1890, he donated £1000 for the purchase of land for a public park; after looking at another site (the location is unknown), a decision was taken to buy land from Duns Castle which included the field already being used. Smith also paid for the town's old mercat cross - removed from the Market Place in 1816 to make way for building the Town Hall - to be rescued and re-erected in the new park for Queen Victoria's diamond jubilee in 1897.

In 1894, Sir James Miller of Manderston followed Smith's initiative by paying for the impressive iron gates and railings along the Station Road frontage of the park. The central gates carry the arms of the town of Duns while the side gates show those of the families of Miller and Smith (somewhat randomly, in the latter case). Miller went further and offered to pay the costs of adapting and laying out the site so that it could become a proper public park, worthy of the name, as long as the town council undertook to maintain it for all time. Andrew Smith's wife, Ida, got involved in planning the new park.



Park gates and railings gifted by Sir James Miller of Manderston

Developing the Park

The appointment of a park-keeper was an early priority. In 1895, the job was given to Alexander Duncan who had served his apprenticeship in the grounds and gardens at Manderston before going abroad to work in South America for some time. He remained as Duns park-keeper for the next 45 years, living in Langtongate with his wife Maggie and,

eventually, six children; he retired at the age of 75 in 1940. He was totally committed to the job, laying out paths, planting trees and shrubs and creating flower beds. Most impressive of all was his initial work on the site. It must be remembered that this was not just an agricultural field but a remnant of that long bog which had originally served as the southern flank of the town's defences. So, over a period of years as time allowed, Alex Duncan set to work on his own with spade and wheelbarrow, digging ditches over the whole field to reduce water-logging and shifting soil to level out the centre of the park so that games like football could be played. It was remarkable work.

Keeping the grass short enough was a perennial challenge. Letting the park for sheep grazing was tried for a number of years. It earned some income but a flock of sheep was hardly conducive to organised games like football. Once flower beds and the like had been laid out, sheep were impossible without fencing off the centre of the park which would have detracted hugely from its appearance. So the next solution was to let the grass but only for cutting as hay, an attractive proposition to any townspeople who kept horses. But, whenever the grass got too long, Alex Duncan (together with an assistant over the summer months) worked from one end to the other with a scythe, sometimes three or four times a year. By the 1920s, fortunately, mechanical mowers were making life easier.

Ongoing maintenance by a dedicated employee like Duncan was crucial to the park's development. As it turned out, there was rather too much enthusiasm when the trees were first planted around the park's perimeter; some years later, every second one had to be felled so that the remainder had proper room to grow. There were occasional special enhancements such as the Coronation flower beds (King George VI and Queen Elizabeth) laid out by Duncan near the mercat cross in 1937 - red, white and blue flowers, naturally. And, in 1946, Major Bailie of Manderston gifted a sundial, still in position but long since lacking its metal dial and pointer.

The people of Duns came to be proud of their public park where various sports and games could be played, where events could be held and where people could enjoy a stroll of an evening or Sunday. It was eventually considered to be the town's jewel, one of the finest park settings in the south of Scotland. Visitors, whether they were holiday makers or day trippers, would always make time for a visit to Duns Public Park.

Sports and Games

Bowling greens in Duns have occupied various sites over the years. Originally, there were two rinks right behind the Boston Church. Then, an improved green was made near the new public school in Langtongate, probably in the 1880s. When it was eventually worn out, a new green and pavilion for 'Duns Bowling Club' were made at the top of the town, on Teindhillgreen. Bowling was extremely popular and there was clearly enough demand to justify the creation of a second club and green. This duly happened in 1896 with the establishment in the town's new amenity of 'Duns Park Bowling Club' on the site of the old linen drying green beside Blinkbonnie lane. The other club at the top of the town (which people now started calling the 'upper bowling green') continued in good-natured rivalry but it had become defunct by the Second World War.

In 1906, the Duns Park Bowling Club (now with over 100 members) sought permission from the town council to build a timber pavilion on the east side of the green. Many townspeople made donations and the Council contributed money from the Common Good Fund. Inevitably, however, Andrew Smith of Whitechester again stepped in with financial help. The new pavilion was opened in the summer of 1907; it had a reception room and a smaller committee room, all designed by Duns architect Arthur Warriner. It had cost about £120.



Bowling club pavilion (the building with the veranda), opened in 1907

Tennis is the other long-established sport still played in Duns Public Park. In the beginning, it was a lawn tennis club with two courts which, given the rough nature of the early park, must have represented a considerable undertaking both in construction and maintenance. In early 1929, however, the town council decided to set aside money for the provision of hard courts surfaced with what was then known as 'blaes', hardened clay or shale. A tender was accepted from the Fernden Tennis Court Co Ltd of London and two new, municipal hard courts were constructed for around £450. There was then some debate, when the bill came to be paid, as to whether the work had been done properly, a few councillors claiming that some of the ash clinker used in the base was too large. The London company was bemused by the accusation and, since none among Duns Town Council could claim to be expert in laying tennis courts, the matter was dropped and the bill was paid! Agnes Swan, wife of the town Provost, opened the new courts in July 1929 by hitting the first ball. Tennis club members were soon holding fund-raising events to construct a pavilion.

In 1947, the tennis club sought permission from the town council to play on the courts on Sunday afternoons. This caused an immediate dilemma. The bye-laws for the park prohibited sports on Sundays and, while they could obviously be changed, the move would almost certainly split opinion in the town. It was decided to put the issue to a public vote so that the councillors could be guided in their decision. The result was 522 : 460 against Sunday use, clear but hardly decisive. When the town council voted on the matter, they split right down

the middle and Provost Tait had to use his casting vote to deny the tennis club their Sunday games. It was altogether an interesting example of how social attitudes were changing.

Duns Amateur Athletic and Harriers' Club had held an annual summer sports meeting in a field to the west of the town (Geans Park) since around 1924. In 1937, they were unable to use their traditional field and the town council granted them use of Duns Public Park instead - only to be condemned by numerous townspeople who declared that the town council had no such right! The issue was probably that the Harriers wanted to charge spectators for entry to the sports but people had the right to pass freely through the park since Blinkbonnie lane was a right of way. Soon, a new running and cycling track (even banked on the bends) was laid around the outside of the park's football pitch; as early as 1938, it was of sufficient quality to host the two-mile Scottish grass track cycling championship with its sixteen competitors.

As well as football, bowling and tennis, the park hosted quoits, croquet and putting. Swings and a merry-go-round were installed for the children. Only those playing cricket became disappointed - while the sport had been allowed in the early days, it was eventually considered to be too dangerous for others using the park.

Julian the Tank

Two issues caused considerable debate in Duns in the year after the end of the Great War - the first was Julian the tank and the second was the town and parish war memorial. In 1919, there was a national effort to encourage people to invest in war savings certificates and national war bonds, essentially lending money to the government. Towns competed with each other to see which could achieve the best results and winners were promised one of the tanks which toured the country advertising the scheme. For its town size and total of funds invested (some £340 per head), Duns won a British tank called 'Julian', named after Great War tank commander, General Sir Julian Byng. In truth, some questioned whether the accolade was really deserved since quite a lot of money had come from people who lived in other parts of the county, not just in Duns. But that was best kept quiet!

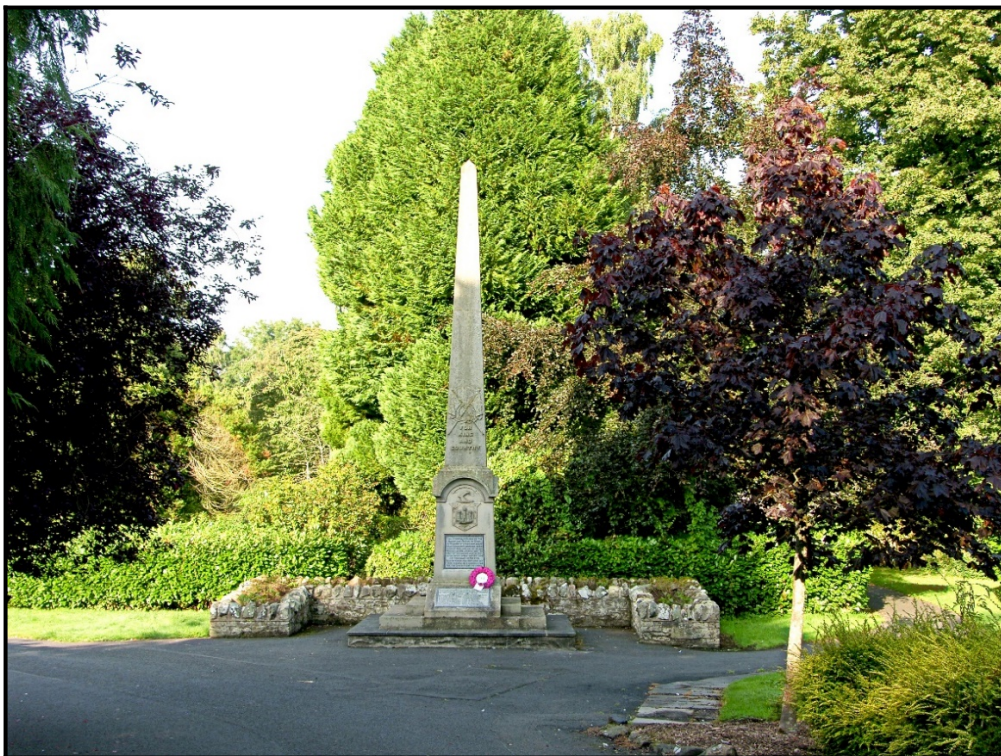
Some townspeople saw the winning of Julian as a great honour, something in which Duns could take pride. Others saw it as some twenty-plus tons of metal which they could well do without - one letter to the Berwickshire News described it as a 'hideous mass of scrap iron'. There was therefore huge debate about where Julian should be located. There was considerable support for placing the tank on the top of Duns Law (if Julian could make it up there) as long as Hay of Duns Castle donated the site and allowed a right of way footpath to access it. Perhaps the war memorial could go there as well. Hay was not totally opposed to the idea but he was concerned about a public path running through agricultural fields and, when his tenant at Duns Law Farm made a similar objection, that idea fell through.

The town council discussed alternative locations at various meetings and an extensive list developed - the Market Place (in front of the Town Hall or before the Royal Hotel, later the Whip and Saddle); the Clay Road near the foot of Teindhillgreen; the west end of Newtown Street; inside the railings of the public school in Langtongate; beside the Drill Hall; and in the public park. A ratepayers' meeting was held in the Town Hall in September 1919 and they

voted on the options with limited enthusiasm. But the public park was the choice and there Julian was located, together with a couple of captured German field guns. Railings were installed around the tank to stop children climbing on it.

The tank sat in the park for over twenty years, given an occasional coat of paint but, in essence, rusting away. The accompanying German field guns were removed in 1927 and Julian was sold for £66 as war salvage scrap to a Motherwell company in 1940. Back in 1919, the tank had only just scraped its way in through the park gates with inches to spare; it was easier in 1940 when it made its exit in pieces. Unlike Julian, the park gates and railings fortunately survived the call for salvage although even that did not meet with everyone's approval.

The War Memorial



Designing and siting a war memorial to the Great War fallen of Duns town and parish gave rise to some of the same arguments as had beset Julian the tank. The community agreed that they wanted a monument - some towns and villages, for example, decided to build facilities such as 'memorial halls' instead. But then the trouble started over what the design of the monument should be and where it should be located. In part, such decisions would depend on how much was raised by the community when an appeal was made for funds; by the autumn of 1919, some £430 had been subscribed.

The proposal to locate the memorial in the Market Place split opinion. The Duns feuars (occupiers of land or houses in the town) were reluctant to remove the railings in front of the

Town Hall which would be required if the monument were placed there. In any case, such a position would require the memorial to have an appropriate Gothic design so as not to look out of place against the Town Hall itself. There was also the objection that, wherever it was placed in the square, it would risk becoming an obstruction to traffic. Some suggested erecting it in the middle of Newtown Street at its junction with Black Bull Street.

In the end, the choice came down to a site somewhere in the middle of the Market Place or a location in the public park. A large majority at a public meeting in December 1919 voted for the park. A position opposite the entrance gates was advised, immediately visible and giving the memorial a backdrop of trees. Since it was considered important that the war memorial should be higher than the nearby mercat cross (which was 23 feet), an obelisk design was suggested since that could be most easily adjusted for height. Hay of Duns Castle formally proposed the obelisk and it was agreed almost unanimously.

Sculptor John W Dods of Dumfries (who was brought up in Duns) produced the design and the monument was fashioned and erected by Duns monumental sculptor Charles Strachan. Foundation excavations required to go down through seven feet of peat - another illustration of the park's previous existence as a bog. The stone came from a quarry near Gateshead and the panels carrying the 85 names of the fallen (not the 84 commonly reported in some newspapers) were of Aberdeen granite. The memorial was unveiled by Francis Hay on a Sunday afternoon in November 1920. The only drawback was evidenced in the notice advertising the ceremony which also invited subscriptions to meet the £50 deficit caused by the increased price of materials after the war.

The Role of Duns Town Council

As we have seen, the new public park was run by a voluntary committee in the early years but this had to change in 1894 when Miller of Manderston made it clear that his offer to fund the proper laying out of the park was conditional on Duns Town Council maintaining it 'for all time'. So the council was obliged to assume full responsibility at that point. They had to pay for the park's maintenance (and, therefore, the park-keeper's wages) and for the upkeep of facilities like the tennis courts and bowling green.

For the bowling and tennis clubs, however, regular use of the park meant seeking the town council's permission annually and negotiating a payment. The tennis club originally took subscriptions for the year from its members and, after covering any expenses, paid any surplus to the council. By 1947, the club was finding such an arrangement too haphazard and wanted the council to grant them use of the courts for a fixed annual payment of £20. In similar fashion, the council was responsible for the bowling green and assumed ownership of the new pavilion after it opened in 1907 but the club required to pay an annual charge.

After taking management responsibility for the park in 1894, the town council considered that a proper framework of rules was necessary and, in 1902, they applied to the Secretary of State for Scotland to have their list of bye-laws for the park approved. These bye-laws required permission to be sought from the council for any organised use of the park even if it was for a single occasion. They also included bans on Sunday sports and on cycling in the

park at any time; over the years, a number of transgressors were fined in the burgh court for ignoring this latter ban. But it assumed somewhat ludicrous proportions in 1930 when Celeste Forte (who had a shop, restaurant and billiard room in North Street) applied for permission to sell his popular ice cream in the park. For this purpose, he had a tricycle cool-box of the 'stop me and buy one' type - so councillors felt obliged to debate whether this would offend the bye-law forbidding cycling! One presumes that Forte received his permission but he would, of course, have had to negotiate a suitable payment for the privilege.



The sundial gifted by Bailie of Manderston in 1946

Over the years, the park has hosted a variety of special events from outdoor religious services and athletic sports to pipe band performances and fireworks displays. Following the Second World War, it took on an additional importance as the setting for many of the events associated with the town's annual summer festival - Reiver's Week as it became - not least the Crowning of the Wynsome Mayde. The park is today managed by Scottish Borders Council but it has to be said that numerous efforts over the years have never quite managed to solve the drainage problems first tackled by Alex Duncan with his spade and wheelbarrow back in the 1890s.

The information in this article was mainly researched from newspapers of the time, especially the 'Berwickshire News'.

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