

Duns Post Offices

David McLean (2024)

Dunse Post Office to 1868

The earliest substantial record concerning the postal service in Dunse is the parish entry of 1792 in the Old Statistical Account when the Rev Dr Robert Bowmaker was clearly unimpressed. He pointed out that mail between Edinburgh and Dunse now went a long way round via Berwick, the added distance meaning the price of a letter had increased from 3d to 4d. Letters between Edinburgh and Kelso also went by Berwick; when the Kelso populace complained to the Post Office in Edinburgh about the subsequent increase in charges, they were granted a 25% reduction but a similar appeal from Dunse had met with silence.

The Rev Bowmaker had a further complaint. Traditionally, letters had always been delivered to people's houses within the town (rather than recipients going to the post office to collect them) but, in recent years, the Dunse postmaster had decided that an extra charge would apply for such a service. After complaints to Edinburgh and then to the General Post Office in London had got nowhere, consideration was being given to taking the matter before the courts.

There is some evidence that, in the years just after 1800, the Dunse post office was kept by a woman called Margaret Young. Her husband, Ebenezer Young, was factor of Dunse Castle Estate and a town bailie; he apparently also kept a shop since his death record in 1799 described him as a 'merchant'. After his death, his widow 'kept the Dunse Post-office'. Given these facts, it is not impossible that Ebenezer Young actually ran the post office himself as part of his shop and that his wife essentially took over or carried on when he died. There is no evidence as to where the post office was then located.

It was during those earlier years that Alexander (Sandy) Park was the Dunse postman or 'letter carrier' as he would have been called then. Not that he had many letters to deliver – a dozen some days which he wrapped in a handkerchief. He delivered the letters within the town and also carried the post on foot twice a week between Dunse and Greenlaw, visiting a few houses along the way. These were the days before the universal penny post and letters were paid for by the recipient not the sender. Charges depended on the weight and the distance carried and were usually quite expensive. Sandy Park got irritated when he attempted to make deliveries only for recipients to question whether they wanted to pay for their letters, perhaps even refusing them altogether, as was their right.

At the 1841 census, the Dunse post office was being run by Magdalene Selby from a house in 'Pleasance Street', now Tannage Brae but top of Easter Street was probably meant; she may, of course, have been running it for some years before that. She was still postmistress in 1851 but, by the 1861 census, Magdalene Selby's niece, Magdalene Davidson Jeffreys (single, age 49), had taken over as Dunse postmistress although her aunt was living with her. By this time, there were about half a dozen postmen carrying the mail around and beyond the town. The

post office was now located in a house on the corner of Easter Street and Currie Street shown in the photograph below. It is the property on the near right with the sign-board protruding above the door and use of a magnifying glass can determine the name 'JEFFREYS' painted in capital letters on the sign; the rest is impossible to make out.



Dunse post office in Easter Street (on near right, with sign-boards)

Delivering the post, especially in country areas, had become a more demanding business. Rowland Hill's penny post had started in 1840 – a single, universal charge, evidenced by an adhesive postage stamp and paid by the sender, meant that letters cost the same whether they were delivered in the next street or at the opposite end of the country. The penny post was a massive success and the volume of letters increased hugely.

James Sutherland started as a Dunse postman two years after the introduction of the penny post. Over the next 30 years, he walked the rural route between Dunse and Greenlaw (and various places in between) every day which originally included Sundays. His route then seems to have changed but, when he eventually retired after 38 years of service, it was reckoned that the distance he walked during his career would have taken him eight times around the world. He retired on a pension of ten shillings per week and, at his retiral supper, his fellow Dunse postmen presented him with an easy chair – he probably needed it!

By the 1860s, all such rounds and deliveries were, of course, organised by postmistress Magdalane Jeffreys from her Easter Street post office. As well as the vast increase in the volume of letters, the business expanded during her time to take in money orders, book postage and perhaps even a branch of the post office savings bank which was introduced in 1861. She was, by all accounts, rather eccentric and she conducted her post office business through a small window in the entrance lobby of the house. Her aunt, Magdalane Selby, died in 1862 and Magdalane Jeffreys herself died suddenly of a heart attack at the age of 56 only six years later in 1868.

The post office then moved and the house in Easter Street at one point became a temperance hotel. The junction at the corner of Easter Street and Currie Street was very narrow and it became a definite problem as traffic increased and motor vehicles became more common. Just after the Great War, Duns Town Council was negotiating with the old post office property's owner, local builder James Johnston Cowper. He was prepared to take the west gable wall back a distance but this did not satisfy the council. So, in 1919, they bought the building from him for £60 so that it could be demolished in order to widen the junction. The Berwickshire News headed its report on the matter 'Old Landmark Doomed'.

Dunse Post Office and James Mills Wilkie, 1868-1890

Following the death of Magdalane Jeffreys in 1868, James Mills Wilkie took over the running of the Dunse post office. He can be found at the age of 30 in the 1851 census as a bookseller and printer in South Street. Two years later, in 1853, he married Helen Farnington, daughter of a farm steward, and they had ten children between 1855 and 1870 when twin sons were born; there is a family tree at the end of this paper. By the time of the 1861 census, the Wilkies were living in a property in the Market Place and so it was here that the post office moved when James Wilkie took it over and added it to his existing business in 1868. It was on the north side of the Market Place next to the Swan hotel in the building which would later be occupied by David Porter's watchmaker and jeweller business (shown in the photograph below) and which today houses the China Palace restaurant.



Site of James Wilkie's post office (photo Canmore 1962)

One of the biggest changes in post office services occurred only a couple of years after Wilkie took over when the telegraph was brought from Dunse railway station into the town. In 1868, the Postmaster-General in London had taken over all private telegraph companies in

Britain, effectively nationalising them. It was common for towns to be connected by telegraph wires mounted on poles running alongside railway lines and, by the time James Wilkie became postmaster, it was possible for townspeople to send telegrams from Dunse station. But it would be much more convenient if this could be done at the post office in the town centre.

In early 1870, three telegraph wires were carried on poles from the station to the bottom of Murray Street. There, they were attached to a tree outside the Barniken – technical solutions were much simpler in those days. Then, the wires went over the rooftops to be affixed to a chimney at the top of Murray Street and from there ‘across the Market Place’ to a chimney on the property adjoining the post office, descending from there into Wilkie’s building.

Although the first telegrams from the Dunse post office were delayed for a month while proper connections were made to local towns, one of James Wilkie’s daughters had already been trained in operation of the telegraph apparatus which would have included proficiency in Morse Code. This daughter may have been Ann Margaret Wilkie who tragically died at the age of 15 the following year. She had been staying at the Chirnside sub-office for a fortnight to look after the telegraph there while the regular operator was absent. After suffering severe headaches and collapsing, a doctor was called but it was too late; cause of death was given as an epileptic fit. The Wilkies lost two more children before the decade was out.

In 1870, Postmaster Wilkie became embroiled in a legal dilemma. A steward on Manderston Estate called Peter Aitchison had disappeared after defrauding his employer to the tune of some £1500; he had been selling estate property like timber and keeping the money. The procurator-fiscal wanted Dunse post office to look out for any letters which might be sent between Aitchison and his family or friends in order to determine where he might have fled but James Wilkie refused on grounds of confidentiality. It took an intervention by the Postmaster-General who instructed Wilkie to co-operate. A letter from Peter Aitchison was soon intercepted – it showed that he was in America!

A new postal service was introduced between Dunse and Swinton in 1878. A messenger (postman) left Dunse at 10.30am and met a colleague from Coldstream around 1pm in Swinton to swap bags. He left the village at 1.30pm and was back in Dunse about 4pm. The times confirm that he was walking the twelve-mile (plus diversions) round trip.

The 1881 census shows that the Dunse post office had very much become a family affair. There was James Wilkie as ‘postmaster and printer’, his daughters Isabella and Helen ‘employed in post office’ and his son Adam working at the age of 15 as ‘telegraph clerk’.

The extension of the telegraph service to the post office was the main change during James Wilkie’s tenure but he also saw the introduction of the halfpenny postcard, newspaper postage, the parcel post and postal orders. The volume of mail had become so great that people were now encouraged to fit letter-boxes to their properties. And, of course, Wilkie had to order a new franking stamp for the office in 1882 bearing ‘Duns’ instead of ‘Dunse’ when the controversial decision was taken to change the spelling of the town’s name.

James Mills Wilkie died in 1890 at the age of 69 from disease of the bladder. He had been postmaster in Dunse for over 20 years but, since his family had always been very involved in the business, the next generation was experienced and ready to take over.

Duns Post Office and Adam Henry Wilkie, 1890-1926

At the age of 25, Adam Henry Wilkie was appointed as Duns postmaster on the death of his father in 1890 and is shown as such in the 1891 census; he had worked in the post office since leaving school more than ten years earlier and so the transition would have been a smooth one. In any case, his mother was still there to help and two of his siblings, brother James Mills Wilkie junior and sister Helen Farnington Wilkie, were also now employed either in the post office or in the printing side of the business and remained so for many years.

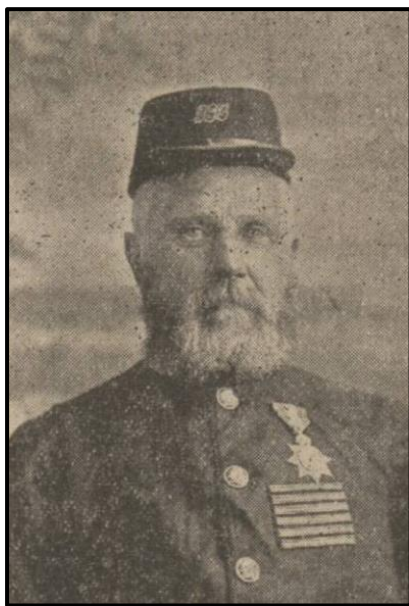
However, with a post and telegraph office, a stationery and book shop as well as a printing facility to be accommodated, the premises on the north side of the Market Place had become too small and, at some point in the 1890s after Adam Wilkie took over, the post office and shop moved again, this time to the opposite side of the square. The business moved into number 48 Market Place (now Duns News Plus) and the family moved into the house above, number 49. They were certainly there by 1901 as evidenced by the census of that year.



Site of Adam Wilkie's post office – still a stationer/printer in the 1960s (photo Canmore)

Two years later, in 1903, Adam Henry Wilkie, 37, married Elizabeth Darling Campbell, 32, who lived at Westwood in Newtown Street, now the Jim Clark Motorsport Museum. She was a daughter of Dr William Watson Campbell, a medical practitioner in the town, although both he and his wife were dead by this time. While the rest of the Wilkie family continued to live at 49 Market Place, Adam Wilkie went to live in Westwood with his wife and one of her sisters, Isabella Watson Campbell. It appears that Adam and Elizabeth Wilkie did not have any children.

The post office continued its development and, in 1902, the authorities were talking of introducing the telephone to Duns. The Liberal government which came to power in 1906 introduced old age pensions in 1909 and they had to be collected from post offices which also sold national insurance stamps. But delivery of letters naturally remained at the heart of the business and, by 1900, house to house delivery was close to being universal across Britain, regardless of the remoteness of the location. The bicycle and the pony and trap came more into use as the years passed but there were still plenty of postmen who walked their rural rounds. It was one of Adam Wilkie's pleasant duties to recognise the service of some of these men such as Thomas Smith of the Greenlaw sub-office shown in the photograph below. In 1909, Wilkie presented him with the King's Imperial Service Medal for 39 years of service. Note the six service or 'good conduct' stripes which he is wearing on his tunic, each of which had added an extra one shilling to his weekly wage.



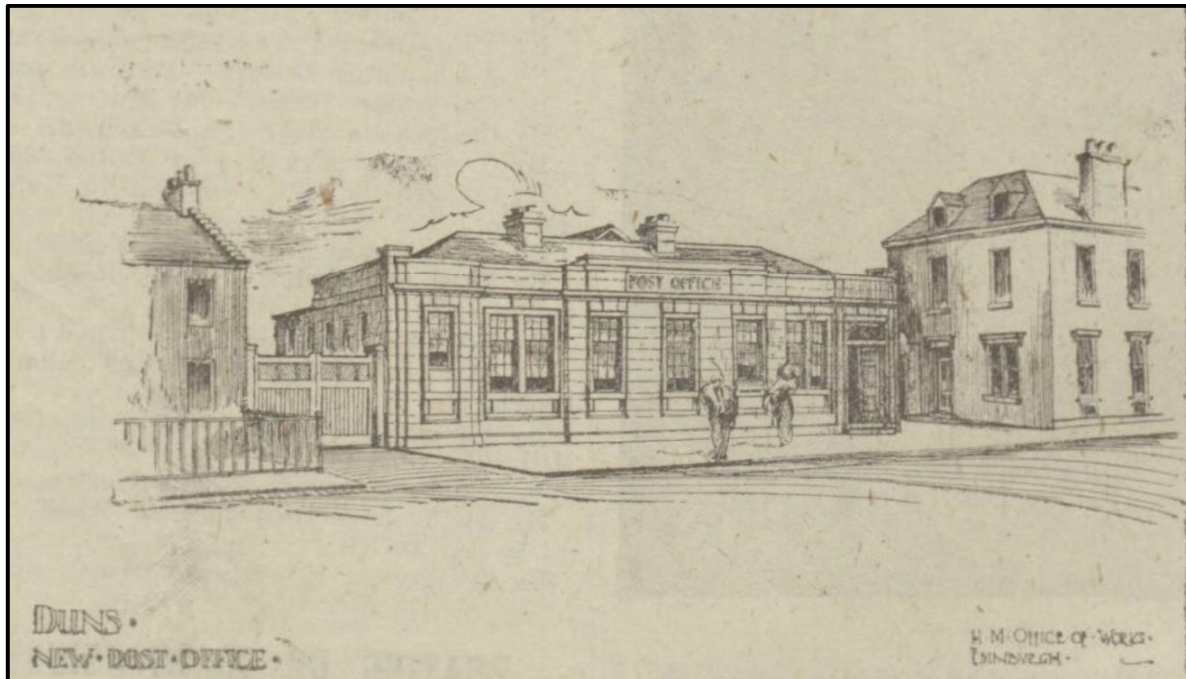
Tom Smith, Greenlaw postman for 39 years

Duns Post Office Moves Again, 1926

It was not long before the 48 Market Place premises were also proving to be unsuitable. In 1913, the Edinburgh Evening News reported that the Post Office had started its search for a site for a new facility in Duns 'which they have had in contemplation for some time past'; this time, a purpose-built post office was clearly intended. It was not easy since sites in the town were scarce and land was expensive. At first, they thought they had identified a possibility in Newtown Street near the County Buildings but that fell through.

In early 1915, with vacant land being impossible to find on suitable terms, it was decided to purchase some old houses in South Street and, once the tenants had moved out, demolish them for a site on which to build the town's new and modern post office. HM Office of Works produced a sketch plan. The post office chamber itself would occupy a 20- by 22-foot space at the front right of the building with public entrance and letter boxes; the rest of the front

section would accommodate an instrument room, a boys' room (telegram messengers) and a women's room. The rear of the building would house a large sorting office, rest rooms, the postmaster's office and a battery room. A gateway to the left of the new building would access a loading yard with toilets and sheds for bicycles and coal. In the autumn of 1915, tenders for the work were being invited and it was expected that construction would begin by the following summer.



The new South Street post office as intended in a drawing of 1915

However, another ten years would pass before the new post office was actually built. With the country now embroiled in the Great War, the priorities for money, labour and materials lay elsewhere. And, once the war was over, there were new challenges with an economy to rebuild and a crippling national debt to address. Duns Town Council became increasingly frustrated at the delay and the state of the site and, by 1920, they were questioning why properties were being allowed to stand empty in South Street at a time of housing shortages. Perhaps the post office should stay where it was in the Market Place.

It was 1925 before work started on the South Street site – in March, John Spiers & Son were advertising in the Berwickshire News for masons and builders to start work on the new post office at 1/8d per hour. As can be seen from the drawing above and photograph below, the building design was completely altered and the plan was reversed, with the post office chamber and public entrance moved to the left and the gateway and yard to the right. It was June 1926 when the new Duns post office was opened (without fanfare) for business.

There was perhaps a time when postmaster Adam Wilkie hoped to occupy his new office in the South Street building but, if so, it never happened. His wife, Elizabeth Darling Wilkie, died at Westwood at the age of 53 in 1924 and, by 1926, he had decided to retire and allow

another postmaster to manage the new post office. Adam Wilkie retired in late May 1926, about two weeks before the facility in South Street opened its doors to the Duns public. The new postmaster was James Borland, a native of Ayrshire who had worked in the post office for 20 years and had most recently been sub-postmaster at Kingussie.



The new South Street post office as actually built in 1926

Adam Wilkie, who had served the town post office all his working life and been postmaster for over 35 years, continued to live in Westwood, Newtown Street. He served on Duns Town Council for a few years in the early 1930s and died of pneumonia and heart failure at the age of 79 in the town's Whitcheater Hospital in 1945. Between them, James and Adam Wilkie, father and son, had given almost 60 years of continuous service to Duns post office.

Today, the South Street building serves as a mail sorting office but the post office moved out some years ago when a decision was taken to discontinue an independent facility in the town. Since then, the Duns post office has been accommodated within two shop premises, firstly in the building in the corner of the Market Square which now serves as the church office; and presently in Nairn's shop on the north side of the Square, right next door to where James Wilkie's post office was first located over 150 years ago.

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

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Wilkie (Duns Post Office) Family Tree

