

Duns Town Hall

David McLean (2024)

Introduction

Between the laying of the first stone of Duns Town Hall and the removal of the last one, there was a passage of 150 years; construction of the hall started in 1816 and it was demolished in 1966. In medieval and early modern times, it was an essential requirement of any burgh such as Dunse to have a tollbooth – the word at its simplest meant a building where dues were paid. Among the privileges of burghs was the right to hold regular fairs and weekly markets, this right being symbolised by a mercat cross; those who wished to enter the town on market and fair days to sell their goods paid ‘tolls’ at the tollbooth for the right to do so. As time passed, tollbooths or town-houses assumed other functions, most commonly as meeting chambers for the town authorities, as court houses and as prisons. Dunse’s tollbooth on the west side of the Market Place was so badly damaged by a fire in 1795 that it had to be taken down. By this time, the town was in some measure of debt – for reasons unknown – and the considerable resources needed to build a replacement town-house were therefore not readily available. Twenty years passed before work started on a new building and only then because of the substantial financial contributions of others.



Dunse Market Place with mercat cross on the right in the early 1800s; the tall building in the centre (a town dwelling built for the local Cockburn family of Langton) had been erected on the site of the tollbooth which was destroyed by fire in 1795

Dunse Feuars

Dunse feuars were the owners of all houses, shops and other buildings in the town. By the system of feudal land tenure in Scotland, these feuars owed an annual feu duty to the town superiors, ultimately the Hays of Dunse Castle. A burgh such as Dunse required some form of local government to avoid chaos. Law and order had to be maintained, water supplies had to be provided, refuse needed disposal, goods needed to be made and sold in a fair manner. Such local government in a town like Dunse was traditionally provided by the feuars of the town annually electing a Council of Feuars from their number; that Council had authority to make decisions for the whole town. In Dunse, the Council of Feuars was originally helped by the leaders of the main town trades like the weavers, tailors and shoemakers and by an individual called a 'baron bailie' appointed by the Hays. By the early nineteenth century, however, it was just the Council of Feuars in control and so they would be much involved in providing Dunse with a new town-house.

Building the Town Hall

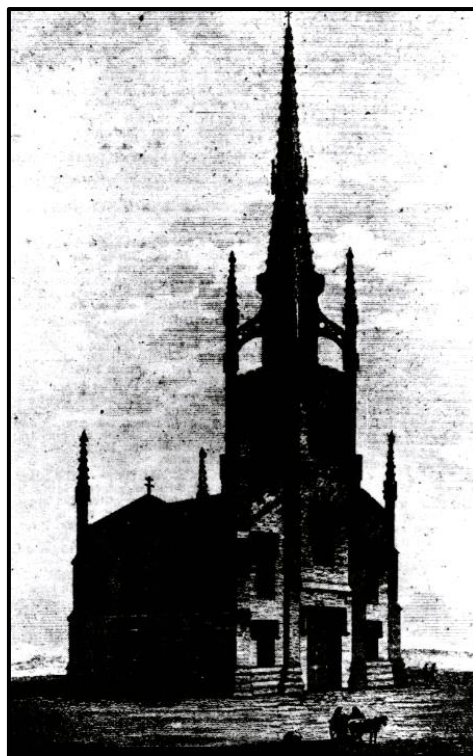
In 1815, Alexander Hay of Dunse Castle had obtained a court order regarding Dunse's common lands which lay to the north-west of the town, allowing these lands to be divided and sold, as appropriate. The feuars agreed to most of the town's share of the common being sold, partly to pay off the burgh debt and partly to help finance a new town-house. We know that a remnant of the common was left in the feuars' possession since, in 1902, an effort was made to negotiate with the Hays to swap that remnant for a town right-of-way footpath to the top of Duns Law, something which never happened.

The feuars realised £1488 from the sale of the common and, after relieving the burgh of its debt, they were left with £652 to put towards the new town-house. A memorial inscription which was set into the foundations of the new building acknowledged the feuars' actions and recorded that the rest of the cost was covered 'by William Hay Esq of Drummelzier, a noble and honourable man, also many other respectable persons in the County of Berwick who promoted it by their patronage and contributions'.

A competition was launched for a design for the town-house and this was won by James Gillespie Graham. Born James Gillespie in Perthshire in 1776, son of a solicitor and sheriff-substitute in Dunblane, he may have trained as a mason and joiner before working in an architect's office. While employed as a superintendent on the Macdonald estates on Skye and North Uist, he embarked upon a parallel career as an architect around 1800. He married Margaret Graham in 1815 and, when his wife's father died ten years later, he adopted the name James Gillespie Graham. Other notable properties which he designed in this area include Ayton Castle and Milne Graden House; he was also responsible for the remodelling of Duns Castle, creating the building with which we are familiar today.

He was therefore plain James Gillespie when he won the competition to design a new town-house for Dunse. He would design in a style to any client's brief but, this being a competition, he was free to indulge his particular passion in what was known as Gothic Revival, an

architectural style which became increasingly popular in the early nineteenth century. It aimed to bring back medieval forms of building, including such features as pointed arches, towers, finials and lancet windows, all achieved with often complex stone carving. Gillespie's design for Dunse's new town-house included a tall, buttressed spire on the roof of the tower. This spire was almost certainly never built, perhaps when funds ran short; the engraving below was an illustration of the design, not the finished building. Oddly, the Ordnance Gazetteer of Scotland for the early 1880s described Dunse's town hall as 'a Gothic structure with elegant spire' but this must surely have been a mistake or misunderstanding since there are no reports of the spire's removal in newspapers of subsequent years.



Original design for Dunse Town Hall

Work on the building started in December 1816 when the foundation stone was laid, amid solemn ceremony, by Alexander Christie of Grueldykes, another of the principal landowners of the Dunse area and Master of the Dunse Masonic Lodge. In his speech, Christie supposedly said that it had been found necessary 'to have a Townhouse both useful and ornamental'. Perhaps that latter consideration helps to explain why James Gillespie's design won the competition - like many other towns, Dunse wanted its new town-house to make a statement. It was built in the middle of the Market Place and so one of the first tasks was the removal of the old mercat cross which was now in the way. Surprisingly, the cross was not put up elsewhere but spent most of the nineteenth century lying, probably, in someone's back yard; it was only re-erected in the public park in 1897 to mark Queen Victoria's 60-year jubilee. Work on the town hall, using stone from Putton Mill quarry to the south of the town, took over three years and it was officially opened by Christie of Grueldykes in March 1820.



Postcard from early 1900s, probably sold by Adam Wilkie, Duns printer and postmaster

Structure and Function of Duns Town Hall

The new town hall was designed as a two-storey and basement main block, fronted by a three-storey tower at its southern end. The **basement** originally included a prison cell – indeed, this was considered one of the primary needs of the new building. From a prison inspector's report in the 1830s, we know that the single lock-up under the hall was 15 feet by 8 feet and 8 feet high. But its purpose was only to hold prisoners awaiting trial; criminals sentenced to imprisonment were sent to the jail in Greenlaw. The Dunse cell had no heating and its unglazed, barred windows were at the top of its walls and, therefore, at ground level to the street outside. Sometimes, people attempted to pass items to prisoners through these gratings. It is possible that the cell was set to the east side of the hall since photographs show iron railings along that side of the building, perhaps designed to keep people back from the cell windows. Prisoners were given loose straw for bedding and a pair of blankets. Being underground and lacking heating, the stone cell was often damp and, when conditions got too bad, prisoners had to be moved to an upper room, probably in the tower. Since that room was not secure, prisoners had to be watched, a lesson apparently learned from experience when two inmates escaped in the early 1830s; fortunately, they were only being held for petty crimes.

The **ground floor** of the town hall contained a house for a caretaker on the east side and a shop on the west side. Valuation rolls invariably listed hall, dwelling house and shop collectively as 58 Market Place, being the property of the town feuars. The job of town hall caretaker was probably a part-time one since some of those who took on the role pursued other occupations. For example, the 1881 census shows William Fraser, age 44, living in the

hall house as the ‘town hall keeper’ but he was also a shoemaker; by the time of the 1905 valuation roll, he had died and his widow, Sarah Fraser, was acting as hall caretaker. From about 1920, the caretaker was Thomas Cockburn, a native of Swinton and a tailor to trade. He had fought in the Boer War and with the KOSB in the Great War. It seems that he was still town hall caretaker not long before he died in 1948; he also acted as commissionaire at the Regal Cinema in Easter Street.



Caretaker house on ground floor (east)



Grocer shop on ground floor (west)

The ground floor on the west side was probably always meant as space for a shop and it certainly contained one by the 1840s, tenanted by grocer Thomas Gray. The rental income helped the feuars to defray maintenance costs on the hall. However, when Gray informed the feuars in 1844 that he was giving up the lease the following year, they decided to review use of the ‘under flats of the Town House’ and decided on a vote of 46:8 to change how the space was used. They reckoned they could obtain the same rent by creating a billiard room, reading room and town museum together with a weigh-house and weights and measures office for the county. These would apparently be ‘places of greater public usefulness to the town’. There is no evidence as to whether this change was a success but the reading room and museum functions were moved to the Workingmen’s Institute when it was opened in the 1870s and the town hall space went back to being a grocer’s shop under various proprietors. In the mid-1880s, it was taken over from grocer James Low by Alexander Malcolm who lived at South Side Villa (later called Norham Lodge) in Station Road; he ran the shop until the early 1920s. William Moffat was grocer and wine merchant in the 1930s and, from about 1940, the shop was run by John Cossar Plews; it was still trading as J C Plews & Son in the 1960s.

The **first floor** of the town hall accommodated the main chamber and it was certainly put to a wide variety of uses. It was the meeting place for the town authorities – the Dunse feuars, of course, the Dunse Police Commission from 1842 and Duns Town Council from 1890. It

accommodated regular sessions of the Burgh Court, the accused being brought up on occasion from the cell below. Local and parliamentary elections were held in the hall and it would frequently be hired for meetings of local political parties and by politicians wishing to address the town electorate on the pressing issues of the day. And when local suffragists campaigned for women to have the vote in the years before the Great War, the town hall was the natural venue for meetings which were often packed.

The hall was regularly hired for entertainments, very often combined with the purpose of raising funds for local organisations or causes. There were lectures, dances, whist drives, concerts, dramatic performances from such as Duns Amateur Dramatic Society and, probably, occasional dinners provided by one of the local hotels. Music and dancing instructors hired the hall from time to time to offer lessons.

Meetings of a wide range of local organisations took place in the town hall. As a small sample, there was Berwickshire Agricultural Association, Duns & District Cow Insurance Society, the Berwickshire Hunt, Duns Water Company shareholders, the Whiteadder Angling Association, Berwickshire Nursing Association, the Agricultural Benevolent Institution and the British Women's Temperance Association. When local property was auctioned, the Town Hall was often the chosen venue. Among the more unusual events, there was a meeting on the subject of repealing the tax on shepherds' dogs in 1868, a Cumledge Mill employees 'spinsters dance' in 1920, an exhibition of radios in 1934 and an exhibition of gas cooking and heating appliances in 1936.

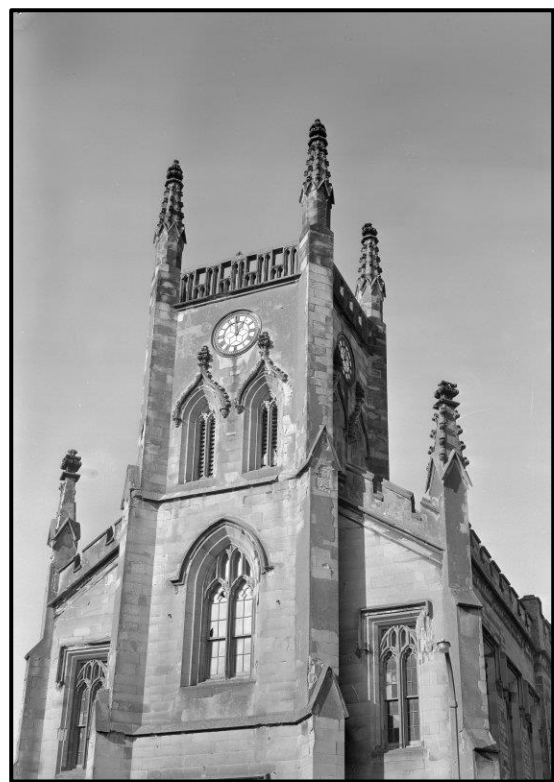
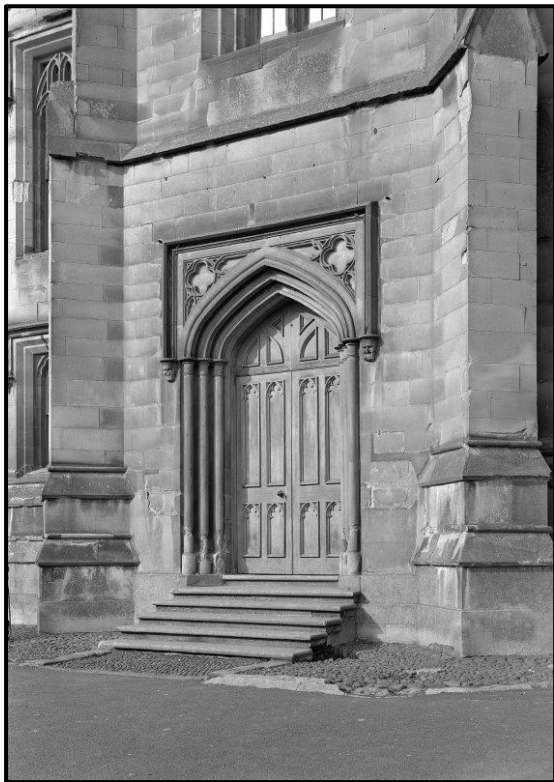
The hall **tower** contained the town clock with faces on all four sides. In 1887, to mark Queen Victoria's 50-year jubilee, the Hays contributed £40 towards the £53 cost of illuminating the dials by gaslight, the feuars paying the rest. The tower also housed the town bell which was pealed on special occasions such as coronations and at New Year. It also served for a long time as the town fire bell; in 1927, an alarm was installed in the hall house so that the caretaker could be awakened to ring the town hall bell in the event of a fire in the town. The bell survived the eventual demolition and, after many years in other places, is now prominently displayed near the entrance to the parish church. An upper room in the tower also housed the town's subscription library from 1820 until 1875 when a new library was built in Newtown Street; membership cost 10 shillings per annum and the 5000 books could be accessed for an hour each Tuesday and Saturday.

Problems for the Feuars

In the 1840s, the Dunse feuars found themselves in a quandary regarding their town hall. In 1833, parliament passed the Burgh Police Act. This was not the modern meaning of the word 'police' – this act created a new form of town government. Householders would annually elect a police commission (essentially a town council) which could assume powers over water and sewage, streets and roads, 'nuisances' like dung heaps and other matters relating to public safety and health. These new police commissioners also had the power to levy rates to pay for improvements to town services.

Adopting the 1833 Act was voluntary and the townspeople of Dunse did not do so until 1842. From that point, however, the Dunse Police Commission effectively replaced the town feuars when it came to all matters relating to the organisation and administration of town affairs. Although the feuars did not own a great amount of other property in the town, they were required to hand over control of assets such as water pumps and wells, together with the town fire engine and the garage in which it was housed.

But then came the dilemma. The town hall was, of course, the principal property owned by the Dunse feuars. When the hall was built, title deeds of ownership were legally required and, since this was a public property, ownership had been vested in a number of trustees, chosen from among the Council of Feuars, on behalf of the townspeople. There was a clear belief that these trustees and their successors had no legal power to dispose of the town hall. So, the feuars decided that they could not (or would not) hand over the town hall to the Dunse Police Commission.

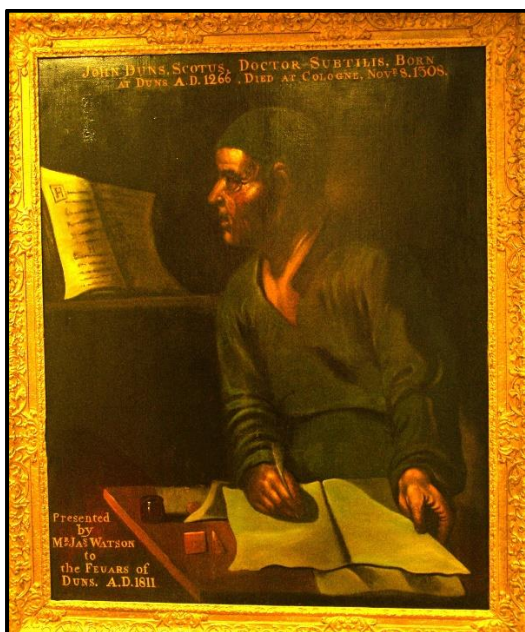


The town hall's imposing Gothic architecture (photos Canmore 1962)

With the passage of time, the Dunse feuars increasingly regretted this position. By 1900, the external walls of the hall were deteriorating. In 1921, the hall finances seemed reasonable – they had £46 in the bank, aided by the £10 they had received from the War Office to compensate for damage done to the roof of the tower when it had been turned into a war-time observation post. But £17 had to be spent on repairing decayed masonry in 1923 and, by 1927, annual income was at best meeting expenditure, leaving little in reserve. The question of handing over the hall to Duns Town Council was discussed at the feuars' annual meeting that year; the title deeds and the feuars' constitution would have to be checked.

The issue of such a hand-over resulted in two meetings of the feuars being called in February 1928 when one of the main problems was immediately evident – few of the Duns feuars ever took an interest in what was going on and only 20 turned up to the second meeting which was called specifically to discuss future ownership of the town hall. Some now argued that Duns Town Council was the natural and legal successor of the Council of Feuars in running the town’s affairs and so it was entirely proper that the feuars should hand the hall over to them; indeed, it was perhaps even the duty of the feuars to do so. This, of course, had been the situation since the 1840s when Duns Police Commission was first formed. While there were others who stuck to the claim that the feuars had no legal right to transfer the hall, those in favour of handing it over were clearly winning the argument.

The matter remained unresolved and, in the meantime, hall costs mounted. Water and drainage were put into the main hall in 1932 (they had been in the caretaker’s house since 1915) and further repairs to the roof and stonework were necessary in 1934. In 1937, more money had to be spent on the water supply and a better heating system for the main chamber. All the time, hall lets were going down. The Berwickshire News correspondent, Man-in-the-Street, had attended the annual feuars’ meeting in 1934 and he found ‘an ancient and truth-to-tell somewhat anomalous body whose sole function is the control and management of the Town Hall’. Even if the hall were handed over, he said, the town council would not acquire much of an asset. And here, of course, was the crux of the matter – as the town hall continued to deteriorate and costs continued to mount, there was less and less chance of Duns Town Council agreeing to take over the building. Then, in 1939, the council aggravated the situation by ceasing to meet in the town hall when they converted an old house at 13 North Street into new ‘burgh chambers’; this further deprived the feuars of rental income. The council even had the nerve to ask whether the feuars’ three carved ceremonial chairs (used over the years by the provost and bailies) could be moved from the town hall to North Street! The feuars decided to keep the chairs for the time being.



John Duns Scotus portrait



Dr Thomas McCrie medallion

At one point, in the late 1930s, the feuars thought that they might have found a solution. Among the town hall's various adornments was a portrait in oils of John Duns Scotus and a plaster medallion of Dr Thomas McCrie, two of the town's most famous men. The Scotus painting had been presented to the feuars in 1811 and it had hung in the hall, neglected, for many years to the point where complaints began to be made in the 1930s about its condition and the serious need for restoration. It then occurred to the feuars that they perhaps had a valuable asset on their hands, the sale of which might solve all their financial problems. Such hopes were dashed when an expert examined the 'dilapidated' picture and declared it to be an eighteenth-century copy of an older original.

The town hall was still in the ownership of the feuars in the autumn of 1950 when gales loosened one of the stone finials on the east side of the tower; it was seen to sway and part of the Market Square was roped off. An expert reckoned it was unlikely to fall since it had an iron rod in its core but it clearly needed repair. The feuars sought estimates and discovered that they did not have sufficient funds to undertake the work. They appealed to Duns Town Council for financial help and offered to transfer the hall and 'all their resources' but they received only sympathy – the council pointed out that they were under no legal obligation to assist. Someone even suggested, apparently without irony, that the town hall should be taken down and replaced by a flower bed or public conveniences! The finial was repaired although how this was financed is unknown.

In 1952, as efforts continued to persuade the council to take over the town hall, Duns Town Council officially informed the feuars that they could not accept ownership 'in view of the state of the building and the burden for repair and maintenance'. The hall was clearly in trouble.

Demise of the Town Hall

The town hall had faced various difficulties over a long number of years. It had competition fairly early on when the Corn Exchange in Newtown Street opened in 1856. The trading chamber of the exchange was 70 feet by 30 feet and it was designed so that the floor could be cleared for dances and benches could be brought in for audiences. Musical entertainments were frequently put on in the exchange and it was hired for meetings. It was sometimes considered more convenient as the town polling station for parliamentary elections. Then, in the 1890s, the Drill Hall (Volunteer Hall) was built in Langtongate; it provided a space for dances and other events which was considerably larger than the town hall. And, of course, both the Corn Exchange and the Drill Hall had ground level access while the town hall required the negotiation of a flight of stairs.

The town hall was therefore hit, especially in the twentieth century, by declining use and income at the same time as its deterioration required increased expenditure. By the later 1940s, it had changed its function altogether in an effort to survive and the main chamber had become a branch knitwear factory of Innes, Henderson & Co of Hawick, finishing garments which had been manufactured elsewhere and employing twenty women. The establishment of

this factory was down to the efforts of Councillor Dorothy Burns who had made it her mission to bring more employment to the town. The factory would also have brought a new rental income for the feuars.

This branch factory did not survive too many years, however, since the town hall was empty and available for another enterprise in early 1959 when the Berwick Advertiser reported that knitwear company Ballantyne of Peebles were to open a similar factory where workers would sew up sports clothing which had been manufactured in Innerleithen. The report went on to comment that this 'may mean an end meantime to the difficulties of keeping the building by the Feuars who it will be remembered have already asked if the Town Council will take it over'. But this new venture lasted only three years when Ballantynes closed their Duns branch with the loss of sixteen jobs in the autumn of 1962.



Part of the knitwear factory in Duns Town Hall

Being in the centre of a market square on which no fewer than five streets converged, the town hall was always going to present an obstacle to increasing motor traffic. The problems became more acute in the 1930s when the need for car parking and bus stances added to the risks. A policeman had to be placed on points duty in the square every second Monday when the auction mart at the foot of Murray Street was operating. An 'island' was built in front of the town hall and road markings were painted so as to show definite lines for traffic.

Ultimately, however, it was the town hall's condition which determined its fate. In March 1965, the Berwickshire News front page headline was 'Duns Town Hall A Danger – Move To Have It Demolished.' Pieces of stone had been falling from the building and part of the area around the hall had been cordoned off. The Duns Feuars were served with a dangerous building order and, without the money for substantial repairs, they responded in time-honoured fashion by offering the town hall and their £2000 assets to the town council; the offer met with the usual refusal but something clearly had to be done.

The strategy now pursued was for Duns Town Council to ask Berwickshire County Council as roads authority whether the latter would undertake a traffic improvement scheme in the town which would involve demolition of the town hall; the feuars' £2000 would be contributed to the cost. By the summer of 1965, the county council had agreed to this plan but progress was now hampered by the Scottish Development Department which, exercising its statutory interest in historic buildings, had to give permission to demolish. The department eventually saw the inevitable logic of taking the hall down but believed that the clock in the tower should be saved; apparently, some claimed that this clock was actually older than the hall itself, that is, pre-1816.

The prospect of demolition caused fierce argument in the town. There were those who could see no sense in attempting to retain an old building which had become a serious hazard and which would require endless expenditure for limited, if any, return. It had not hosted events for over fifteen years. Others proudly viewed the hall as the town's focal point; it had always been there and should be repaired so that a new use could be found for it, perhaps as a town museum. A petition to save the town hall was started by Duns architect David Mylne (who did not believe that the hall's condition was as bad as some made out) and hairdresser John Elliot; it attracted a good deal of support. But it was to no avail. Scaffolding went up around the hall in June 1966 as Edinburgh company John Hunter & Sons prepared for its demolition. One of the firm's owners did not foresee problems although he confirmed that the stone was in 'poor condition'; work was expected to take around six weeks.



Scaffolding goes up around the town hall, ready for demolition, June 1966

Perhaps the whole situation was summed up appropriately by Alan Swinton, chairman of Berwickshire County Council's planning committee when he wrote a letter to the Berwickshire News while the work was proceeding. He wanted to address some 'uninformed criticism' around the demolition. He said that the Duns Feuars had handed the town hall and their £2000 assets to the county council; the cost of demolition would be well inside that figure. He argued that the hall would have cost too much to repair even if repairs were possible and, in any case, who would use it? The upstairs main chamber had lain empty for the past four years. The ground floor shop tenant could not have stayed; J C Plews had moved to new premises in Murray Street some time ago. His conclusion was blunt - 'we could not maintain a ruin'.



Market Place c1970, following demolition of the town hall

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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