

Far Ben, Duns

David McLean (2024)

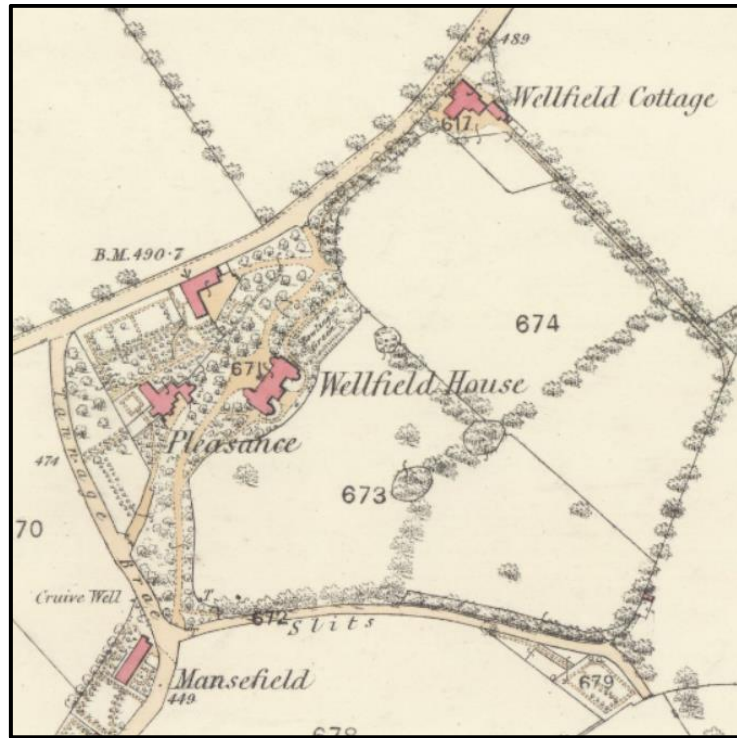


Introduction

Today, Far Ben is one of a line of dwelling houses stretching along the south side of Preston Road in Duns, eastward from the top of Tannage Brae towards the town cemetery. The house only took its present name in the 1930s; previously, and for more than a century, it was known as Wellfield Cottage. This can give rise to immediate confusion since another house farther west on Preston Road, originally the coach-house and stables for Wellfield House, later revived the name Wellfield Cottage. It must therefore be emphasised that this paper is not about the house *presently* called Wellfield Cottage; it concerns the house *originally* called Wellfield Cottage, now known as Far Ben.

This is not the end of the potential confusion. A number of properties were erected in the grounds of the mansion known as Wellfield House. The map of 1857 below shows Pleasance to the west (which eventually comprised two dwellings), the coach-house and stables to the north on Preston Road and Wellfield Cottage to the east. Later in the nineteenth century, Wellfield Lodge was built at the foot of Tannage Brae around the time Pleasance was demolished. With these various dwellings, officials were occasionally careless when identifying houses on the estate. In the 1921 census, for example, Wellfield Cottage is listed three times! One of the entries is actually referring to Wellfield Lodge and another is a separate listing for a third adult who lived in Wellfield Cottage. Similar inaccuracies can

sometimes be found in newspapers as with William Leslie who was born in Dunse in 1854, served his apprenticeship with an ironmonger in the town and left for India in 1877. In 1890, he founded W Leslie & Co in Calcutta and it became the largest hardware and metal business in that part of Asia, an impressive story of commercial success by a Duns man. Newspaper reports at the time of his death in Calcutta in 1929 claim that he was born at Wellfield Cottage; valuation roll evidence shows that he was almost certainly born at Pleasance.



Wellfield House and grounds in map of 1857

Wellfield Cottage and the Hunters

Dating old houses is seldom easy. Wellfield Cottage surely cannot have been built before Wellfield House which was constructed around 1780. John Wood's 1824 map of Dunse does not go far enough east to show whether the cottage had been built by then. The earliest historical reference to the cottage is an advertisement in the Berwick Advertiser in May 1830, offering the 'villas' of Pleasance and Wellfield Cottage for let. The latter was described as a 'snug fancy building covered with heath'. It had a dining room, parlour, three bedrooms, kitchen, back kitchen and cellars; it was well supplied with water. We can only guess what the word 'heath' meant to someone in the early nineteenth century but, if the cottage was covered in ivy or the like, then that must have taken some years to establish. The best we can say, therefore, is that Wellfield Cottage was probably built in the early 1800s. Its purpose is also curious. While Wellfield Cottage accommodated a gardener at one time (although for no more than a few years), a house with two public rooms and three bedrooms was not built for a servant or similar employee. It was more likely intended for a member of the Hunter family

who owned the estate for most of the nineteenth century, perhaps originally as a dower house (a home for an estate owner's widow or 'dowager').

From 1833, following the deaths of his father and older brother, Wellfield estate passed into the ownership of William King Hunter, a lawyer or 'writer' as the profession was then known. He and his wife Isabella had twelve children. Around 1857, the large Hunter family moved out of Wellfield House and went to live in the modern and spacious accommodation above the Royal Bank which had only recently been built in the Market Place; in addition to being a lawyer, William King Hunter was also agent (manager) of the Royal Bank. In 1859, Wellfield House became a boys' school under the esteemed headmastership of James Wood. The 1865 valuation roll shows that William King Hunter still owned the mansion house, the lands and most of the properties in the grounds; however, ownership of Wellfield Cottage had been transferred to his oldest son, William Archibald Hunter, aged about 22 at the time and still living above the bank with his parents and siblings.

Perhaps, therefore, Wellfield Cottage was now intended as an eventual family home for William Archibald Hunter. If so, it never happened. William King Hunter and his wife Isabella died within a month of each other in 1870 and oldest son William continued to live above the bank (he was also bank agent and solicitor like his father) with some of his brothers and sisters. As it turned out, he never married and there is no evidence of him ever having lived in Wellfield Cottage; William Archibald Hunter died in Chicago in 1891, on his way to visit a sister in California.

Wellfield estate continued in the ownership of the Hunter family until the 1890s when it was purchased by Alexander Middlemas Laidlaw, proprietor of the woollen blanket mills at Cumledge near Preston village, remaining in his ownership until the 1930s. The story of Wellfield Cottage over all these years must therefore be that of its numerous tenants, together with the associated events of their lives and times.

Wellfield Cottage, 1850-1900

The 1851 census shows the cottage as the home of **Stephen Underhill** (age 46), superintendent of police, his wife Amelia (35) and their four children – Stephen (9), Walter (7), Margaret (5) and Sarah (2). Despite the family being of no great size for the time, they employed three servants including a nursery maid. Underhill must have been one of the earlier policemen in Dunse since the force was very patchy at that time; it was only in 1857 that the Police Act required organised forces to be set up in every county. The Underhills were still in Wellfield Cottage at the time of the 1855 valuation roll but Stephen Underhill was a retired chief constable living in Lauder by the time of the 1861 census. It was also in the later 1850s that the town's new cemetery was established farther east on Preston Road after Dunse Parochial Board bought land there from Hay of Dunse Castle.

Thomas Johnston, wood merchant, was living in Easter Street in early 1860 when the Illustrated Berwick Journal reported the death of his youngest son Martin at the age of eighteen months. But the family had moved to Wellfield Cottage by the time of the 1861 census which lists Thomas Johnston (37), his wife Jane (41) and four sons – Thomas (10),

Robert (9), George (7) and Ralph (4); there was also a servant. Johnston's timber business went wrong a few years later, however, since his name was listed in various newspapers throughout Scotland in May 1866 as a 'Scotch Bankrupt' in sequestration. He was due to be 'examined' in the sheriff courthouse in Dunse and his creditors were called to a meeting in the Black Bull hotel. Within a very short space of time, his 'whole household furniture' and other possessions were up for auction to pay his creditors, including poultry, timber supplies, various carts and wagons and 'five powerful draught horses'. One can only imagine the effect on his family with all they owned sold from underneath them. In early 1867, Johnston's creditors were informed that they would receive a 'dividend' (a share of the sold assets) from the office of the trustee handling the sequestration, Alexander Weatherhead, solicitor, who lived at the Barniken.



Apart from the sun room (far right), the house footprint is largely original

We find **John Halliday**, gardener, in residence by the autumn of 1870. The 1871 census lists John Halliday (56), his wife Janet (60), daughter Margaret (26) and son George (16) who was also listed as a gardener. One presumes that father and son were employed to look after the extensive gardens and grounds of Wellfield House.

The Hallidays' time in Wellfield Cottage was associated with an event which is very illustrative of life at the time and, particularly, of how the judicial system then worked. In December 1870, they suffered a burglary when two local boys, Patrick Higgins (12) and his brother James (9), broke in at a window when there was nobody home and stole some clothes. They were arrested the following day, the task made easier by the fact that one of the boys was wearing some of the stolen apparel. Despite their age, they were sent to the jail in Greenlaw to await trial. It then transpired that James had also been at Wellnage in Station Road where he told Mrs Peat that he had been sent by his father to borrow six shillings since a family member was ill. Mrs Peat gave him the money but the story was a pack of lies. Since this was Patrick's third conviction for theft in the past few months, Sheriff Dickson sentenced

him to 30 days imprisonment followed by five years detention in a reformatory. He was inclined to send James to the reformatory as well but, after his father Edward Higgins made a plea on his behalf, James (a first offender) was given 20 days in prison.

It is difficult not to sympathise with Edward Higgins' situation in life. The 1871 census shows him at the age of 35 as a drainage labourer and already a widower, living in Easter Street with three children – Bridgid (14), James (9) and Alice (3). There was also a chimney sweep living in the house as a lodger, doubtless to earn Higgins some extra money. Fourth child Patrick does not appear in the census, presumably because he was now in the reformatory.

As already mentioned, Wellfield House became a private school for boys in 1859 with James Wood as headmaster and it became Wellfield Academy for the next twenty years. Wood's mission had always been to provide what he called a 'middle class education' and Wellfield was focussed on preparing its pupils for university and the professions. It became one of the most successful schools in the south of Scotland and, by the early 1870s, there were over 30 boarders in the school plus a considerable number of other boys who lived locally. Eventually, even the six or so bedrooms in the mansion were not enough to accommodate potential boarders. The 1865 valuation roll shows that **James Wood** had taken over Pleasance for extra boarding space and, by the time of the 1875 roll, he was also renting Wellfield Cottage. The school closed around the turn of the year 1879-1880.

Wellfield Cottage was then available to a new tenant but there now followed a few years where it appears to have been difficult to let. **James Farnington**, a cutler and blade maker, was briefly in the house with his wife and family in 1881 but it was then advertised for let in the Berwickshire News no fewer than five times between May 1881 and October 1882; either the tenancies were extremely brief or the cottage was lying empty much of the time. At first sight, this seems surprising since it was a reasonably spacious dwelling with a gig-house, a two-stalled stable and a good garden. It now also had a gas supply. And the adjacent 4-acre field was sometimes available to let if a tenant desired. However, the last two adverts in the local newspaper might provide the clue. After describing the house, it was added that 'to an eligible Tenant on Lease, improvements will if necessary be made to suit requirements.' Perhaps its use for a few years as a dormitory for boarders at Wellfield Academy had taken its toll.

James Aitchison, a retired farmer, was in Wellfield Cottage from at least 1885 until his death at the age of 92 three years later. Through the 1890s, the house was home to **Agnes Wilson**. She was the second wife and widow of George Wilson, a draper in Duns, who built Viewlaw Villa at the top of Bridgend. Three years after the death of his first wife in 1873, he married farmer's daughter Agnes Webster of New Horndean near Ladykirk who was some twenty years younger. George Wilson died at Viewlaw in 1884. In his will, his second wife Agnes was given Viewlaw rent-free for life 'as long as she is unmarried'; on her death, the house would go to Wilson's sons John and George. But Agnes Wilson stayed in Viewlaw for only a few years after her husband's death, taking the tenancy of Wellfield Cottage by 1889; she was still there in 1895 but appears to have moved to Edinburgh around the turn of the new century.

Wellfield Cottage, 1900-1930

In 1890, Wellfield estate was still owned by the Hunter family, specifically by Thomas Fraser Hunter, second son of William King Hunter who was mentioned earlier. In the early 1890s, Thomas Fraser Hunter decided to emigrate to California and it was not long before the mansion house, lands and associated properties of Wellfield were bought by Alexander Middlemas Laidlaw, owner of Cumledge Mills. In the years to come, Wellfield Cottage would occasionally be tenanted by one of Laidlaw's employees.

Such was the case in 1901 when the census shows Wellfield Cottage as the home of **John Henderson Barrie** (32), cashier in the accounts department at the mills, and his wife Thomasina Davidson Barrie (26). A son whom they called John was born in the house that same year. They did not stay much longer, however, since the entire household furniture of the cottage was put up for sale by Swans, the town auctioneers, in May 1902. The sale (not advertised as a debt issue) included curtains, towel rails, fire irons, even a lawnmower and garden tools. What happened is a mystery. The 1911 census shows Thomasina Barrie and her son John living with her mother Isabella Hastie at Cockburn Mill on the Whiteadder water, west of Preston village. It has proved impossible to trace John Henderson Barrie in public records beyond the 1901 census. Thomasina Davidson Barrie died near Selkirk at the age of 61 in 1936 although her death certificate gave her usual place of residence as still being Cockburn Mill and recorded her as 'married to John Barrie : cashier', suggesting that he was still alive. John Barrie junior worked as an engineer in the Cammo Foundry at Clockmill outside Duns but appears to have moved to the Bristol area in the 1930s.

Wellfield Cottage remained on its own on Preston Road until the Duns Parochial Board built Cemetery Cottage (now called Corner Stone Cottage) next to the graveyard to accommodate a gravedigger; the house was there by the time of the 1893 valuation roll. But it was in the early years of the twentieth century that Wellfield Cottage first found itself with a real neighbour. It started simply enough with a letter to Duns Town Council from James Burns, law agent and accountant, in October 1902. He asked what the sewage arrangements would be if houses were built in the field to the east of Wellfield Cottage. The nearest town sewer was somewhere around the top of Easter Street from where it ran through Wellfield ground before reaching Hawthorn Park and what was long known as the 'Common Myres', the low boggy ground to the east of the town. Burns was informed that a sewage connection pipe would be laid to within 100 yards of any new dwelling house; the new property owner would pay to join the house to that pipe.

So, in early 1903, Burns submitted plans for the house which he would call the Rowans. At this point, town councillors started to identify problems. It would take about 350 yards of 6-inch pipe to reach Burns' new house from the Easter Street sewer and this would be costly as well as requiring permission to go through Wellfield land. Moreover, the town surveyor was fearful that the Easter Street sewer was already at capacity; it was taking a huge amount of drainage water running off fields on the north side of Preston Road for which it was never intended. It was agreed that the council would withdraw the offer of the connection pipe and suggest to Burns that he instead build a cesspool for the new property within his grounds and at his own expense. Sadly, James Burns' reaction is not recorded.

Burns was saved, however, when the town council's own sewerage committee rejected the proposal for the cesspool. It was likely, in any case, that other houses would follow after Burns had built his property. The council had to agree to lay a pipe all the way to the Rowans at a cost of around £28 (equivalent to around £3500 today). The new pipe would run right past Wellfield Cottage and, if the property owner or tenant there wished to access the new pipe, all they would pay was the cost of the short connection needed to the house. To treat James Burns equitably, therefore, he could hardly be charged for the last 100 yards of the new pipe as was common practice and as some councillors had suggested. James Burns built his house and his family were living there by 1904. In November 1905, he was elected to Duns Town Council.

From 1902 until at least 1911, Wellfield Cottage was rented by retired farmers **Peter and George Aitchison**. Peter (71) and George (70) are shown in the 1911 census, together with a servant called Elizabeth Liddle (67). Previous to taking the tenancy at Wellfield Cottage, the Aitchison brothers had lived at St Mary's Cottage on Duns Castle Estate and, before that, at Burnhouses, some four miles north-west of Duns. In 1907, the Aitchisons complained about water flowing off Preston Road and running down through their garden. This became a recurring problem – the fields of Duns Law Farm sat quite high along the northern edge of Preston Road and, in bad weather, it was common for water to drain off these fields and flood the road. To alleviate the problem, Duns Town Council offered to build a gutter on the south side of the road past the Rowans and Wellfield Cottage but only if the owners of the properties agreed to pay for an adjoining concrete footpath. Councillor James Burns at the Rowans was content to pay for the section past his house but the owner of Wellfield Cottage, mill-owner Alexander Laidlaw, declined since he believed that a pavement would be of no use on that part of the road. Provision of the gutter was therefore left for the time being.



Wellfield Cottage before the Great War; the porch was later removed and the doorway blocked up, probably since the house frontage was so close to the road

The next cottage tenant was another of Alexander Laidlaw's employees called **James Blythe Cowe** who, like John Barrie, worked as a cashier in the Cumledge Mills; his family were living at number 8 Bridgend at the 1911 census but the 1915 valuation roll shows that they had moved to Wellfield Cottage. The 1921 census lists James Blythe Cowe (42), his wife Agnes (41) and children William (14) and Sybella (10). Also living with them – as he had been since at least 1915 – was widower Charles Ellison (71) who was Agnes Cowe's father. He was a retired gamekeeper whose last employment had been on Duns Castle Estate and he served as church officer at the South Church in Currie Street by this time. The drainage problems were back in early 1921 when the Cowes suffered flooding in the cellars of Wellfield Cottage; water had poured off the fields on the other side of the road due to a burst field drain and come in through both east and front walls. The agents of Duns Castle Estate were notified to address the cause of the flood. On a happier note, James Cowe set a record of sorts for Duns Golf Course in the summer of 1922 when he went round nine holes (to which the course was limited then) in a score of 35; unfortunately, it was well into the evening by the time he finished and he was unable to go round again. Charles Ellison died in 1925 and the Cowes left Wellfield Cottage around 1926.



The high fields on the north side of the road caused periodic flooding issues

By 1927, Wellfield Cottage was rented by **Walter Carrick Matthews** and his second wife Margaret who seem to have only recently moved to the town. Matthews was a master upholsterer to trade and was employed by a Duns man called McLaren; this may have been William McLaren who was a joiner and cabinetmaker in the town. Matthews later decided to work on his own account. He was also something of an expert in ceramics; he gave a talk on old porcelain to Duns SWRI in November 1932 and brought along some of his collection for the ladies to inspect. Walter Carrick Matthews died suddenly at Wellfield Cottage in 1933 at the age of 51.

Wellfield Cottage becomes Far Ben, 1935

It was around this time that Wellfield Cottage was sold and changed its name. Alexander Middlemas Laidlaw, owner of Cumledge Mills and Wellfield, died at the age of 77 in late 1934. His wife, Isabella Laidlaw, continued to live at Wellfield but she was soon making efforts to dispose of the whole estate. Wellfield House itself proved difficult to sell and it was 1938 before it found a purchaser; selling the other houses on the estate proved easier.

The 1935 valuation roll contains no mention of a property called Wellfield Cottage; neither do subsequent rolls through to 1942 when digital access to valuation rolls ceases. However, the 1935 roll shows that Wellfield Cottage had been bought by **John and Isabella Christie** and so the property had its first owner-occupiers. It was now called, curiously, 'Farben'. It was still listed as this single-word name in the 1942 valuation roll; we can only speculate as to whether this was intentional or a repeated clerical error. Regardless, it was John and Isabella Christie who purchased Wellfield Cottage from Isabella Laidlaw in 1935 and apparently decided to re-name the house, cutting the ties with a name which had existed for more than a century.



North elevation today – compare to pre-Great War photo shown earlier

John Christie featured in a case at Duns Sheriff Court in the summer of 1942. Theodore James, a coal merchant from Bedlington in Northumberland, was charged with delivering over five tons of coal to the Christies' home. The wartime Fuel and Lighting Order regulated the supply of fuel to one ton per month per household. James pleaded guilty but explained that he had been supplying the Christies and other Duns customers since before the war and this was the Christies' first delivery in over a year. While they were actually burning far less than their ration, Theodore James was not adhering to the letter of the regulations which

required no more than one ton to be delivered to a customer at any one time. Sheriff Macgregor fined the coal merchant £5 and told him he was getting off lightly. The Procurator pointed out that John Christie himself could also have been charged but circumstances suggested he was not at fault since he had trusted Theodore James with the details of his coal supply. It is interesting, however, that in its report of this case, the Berwickshire News also referred to the Christies' house as 'Farben'.



West elevation of Far Ben (originally Wellfield Cottage)

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; and birth, marriage and death records.

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