

## Langton Cottage, Duns

David McLean (2025)



*Langton Cottage, 13 Langtongate, originally known as West Cottage*

### Introduction

Langton Cottage, or number 13 Langtongate, was constructed in 1865 by local builder George Duns in what would then have been the western outskirts of the town. It is a house of the 'small villa' type, characteristic of a number of properties built towards the top of Bridgend around the same time. It did not have its current name, however, until the 1960s at the earliest. It appears confusingly in some nineteenth century historical records as both 'West Cottage' and 'West End Cottage' although other records suggest these to be separate properties. By the twentieth century, the house was more commonly referenced as 'West Cottage, 13 Langtongate'. For consistency, this paper will use the property's more traditional name of 'West Cottage'.

The north wall facing the street was built with dressed stone to enhance the appearance of the house frontage while the rest of the building was constructed more economically in random stone. Elegant corbelling above the bay window helps to support the weight of the extended storey above. There is clear evidence, both external and internal, of two extra rooms having been added at the rear of the property. However, the construction style and the lack of weathering differences suggest strongly that this addition either represented a change of mind during building or was carried through in the early years of the cottage's life. Three of the

original four chimney stacks have been taken down although some of the octagonal cans survive as garden planters. The low wall enclosing the front garden, together with its pyramidal stone gate pillars, is also original although its decorative ironwork was lost as salvage during the Second World War and later replaced. The front northern aspect of the house is therefore largely unchanged; today, the property is category-C listed.

### **George and Janet Duns at West Cottage**

The surname 'Duns' was common enough in the town in the nineteenth century; a fair number of the family lived in various properties in Gourlay's Wynd and many of them were involved, one way or another, in the building trade. It seems that, like the town itself, they originally spelled their name as 'Dunse' before changing it to 'Duns'. In 1834, William Dunse, mason, married Christian Anderson of Bunkle. They had eight children between 1835 and 1855 although two of them died at a very young age. This is why the names William and John appear twice in the same generation of the family tree at the end of this paper – when a child died, it was not uncommon then for parents to repeat the name for a subsequent child.

At the 1851 census, William Duns (he seems to have now dropped the 'e') and his family were living in Gourlay's Wynd, probably at number 5, and he was employing 30 workmen in his building company, a mixture of masons, labourers and boys; it was clearly a thriving concern. Second son George was then still at school. Ten years later, at the 1861 census, George at the age of 20 was employed in his father's business as a journeyman mason.

In 1863, in Dunse, George Duns married Janet Rutherford according to the forms of the Free Church; both were age 23. Janet's father was William Rutherford, a butcher, who lived with his family in Golden Square. Now married and with his father's building company behind him, it is hardly surprising that George decided to build a house for his prospective family. He secured a plot from Abbey St Bathans landowner John Turnbull in Langtongate, near the junction of that street with the New Road, and building work on his new home was undertaken around 1865 as evidenced by the date stone which he set in the eaves above the front bay window.

By the time of the 1871 census, George was still employed as a mason and he and wife Janet had four children. They would go on to have six more – George's family can also be followed in the family tree at the end of this paper. In 1876, George Duns was elected as a member of Dunse School Board, coming top of the poll with 319 votes on a list of twelve candidates. It was a significant time since the board was soon proposing to build a brand-new public school in the town in line with the requirements of the 1872 Education (Scotland) Act; it ended up being built just a short distance from West Cottage. George Duns also attempted to become a police commissioner (town councillor) around this same time but fell narrowly short in the election.

At the 1881 census, George at the age of 40 now managed his own building business, employing 15 men and, at the 1891 census, he was describing himself as 'architect and builder'. This self-declared evolution from builder to architect, almost certainly with no formal qualifications, was virtually identical to the career path followed by a contemporary of

George Duns called George Fortune who built and occupied Kilmeny (now Fenton Lodge) at the top of Bridgend.



*North elevation with corbelling and 1865 date stone*

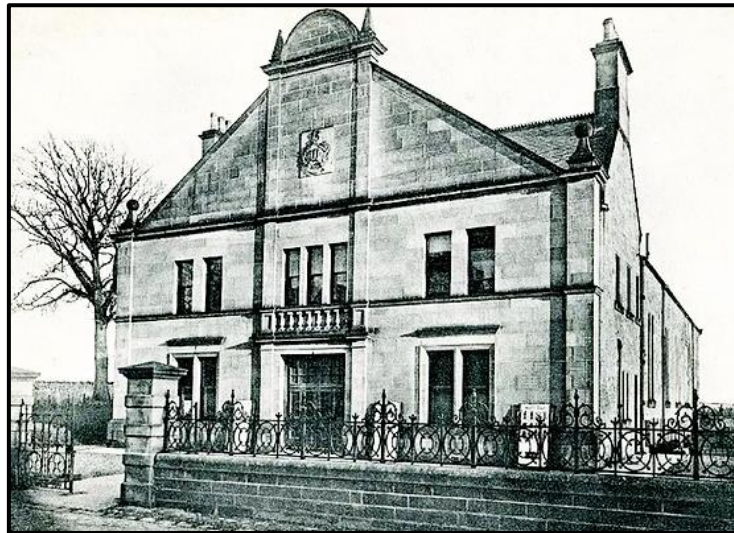
Tragedy visited the family of George Duns early in the new century when fourth son George junior was killed in the Boer War. Towards the end of 1900, he was training in a surveyor's office in Queen Street in Edinburgh when he decided to volunteer for the Scottish Horse – the war in South Africa had broken out the previous year. After being selected for service, he was sent to Aldershot for training. He visited his home in Duns in February 1901 before sailing for South Africa the following month. In October 1901, he was in eastern Transvaal in the rearguard section of Colonel George Elliott Benson's 'No 3 Flying Column' which was mainly comprised of Coldstream Guards. In heavy rain and mist, this section became detached by some miles from the main column and was attacked on three sides on a ridge at Bakenlaagte by an overwhelming force of around 1000 Boers who outnumbered them four to one. Over 70 men of Benson's column were killed including Trooper George Duns, age 23. Trooper Thomas Bradford from Chirnside was killed in the same engagement. They are buried in Primrose Cemetery at Germiston in South Africa and commemorated on the Scottish Horse Boer War memorial on Edinburgh Castle esplanade.

### **George Duns, Architect**

With extensive knowledge and experience of house building and repair, it was perhaps only natural that a man such as George Duns should turn his attention to designing houses. It

probably started with the purchase and renovation of old properties in the town – Duns eventually owned and rented out houses in Gourlay’s Wynd, South Street and Newtown Street. As his reputation grew, he began to attract more substantial commissions. In the 1880s and 1890s, he undertook extensive work at Hutton Castle as well as at the West Lodge and stables there. He was responsible for interior modifications at Greenlaw parish church and acted as clerk of works for alterations at the church at Edrom. He also worked on the public schools at Westruther and Coldstream.

His greatest architectural contribution to his home town was the Volunteer Hall in Langtongate. This was built on the initiative of Colonel Charles Hope of Cowdenknowes near Earlston, commander of the Second Berwickshire Volunteer Battalion of the KOSB and was designed to offer both a drill facility for the Volunteers and a public venue for entertainments and other events. The plans were drawn up by George Duns and the £2000 cost was largely met by donations from a wide variety of local residents. Colonel Hope started the subscription list with his own gift of £100 and the offer of a loan on easy terms to cover any remaining costs at the end of the project. The foundation stone was laid by Mrs Julie Hope in June 1894. Built in stone from Swinton quarry by Henry Steel of Greenlaw, the northern section consisted of two storeys so as to provide a three-bedroom flat on the upper floor for the Sergeant Instructor. The hall was a spacious 80 feet by 45 feet with a gallery at the back and a platform with gas footlights at the front, capable of accommodating over 1000 people. Pitch pine was used for the floor and for lining the lower walls. The hall was officially opened on a Friday evening in February 1895 with a performance of Handel’s ‘Messiah’, undertaken by a choir of local enthusiasts (with leading soloists from Edinburgh) under the direction of Johannes Albe, organist at the parish church. Around 1000 people were present and it was reckoned to be the finest musical entertainment ever produced in the town.



*Volunteer Drill Hall, designed by George Duns and opened in 1895*

Another of George Duns’ grander achievements was Rathburne House near Longformacus which was built between 1898 and 1900 for Charles Henry Holme, a retired civil engineer who had been in the service of the British government in India; two of his children were born

there. When the Berwickshire Naturalists were shown round the house in 1907, they were much impressed by the vast collection of Holme's hunting trophies which adorned many of the rooms! The Holmes remained in Rathburne House until the 1930s when the property was acquired by the Duke of Roxburghe.

Longformacus itself benefitted from the skills of George Duns in the years just before the Great War. In 1912, he drew up plans for the layout of the new cemetery (Townhead Cemetery as it is called) to the south of the village. And, in 1913, he produced the plans for a new Longformacus village hall, gifted to the local people by Andrew Smith of Whitchester and constructed on land donated by the Browns of Longformacus House.

George Duns was responsible for all the plans to extend the County Buildings in Newtown Street in Duns in 1901. The changes were scarcely noticeable from the street since the work was carried out on what had been garden land to the rear of the property but the extension and alterations doubled the size of the sheriff court and county council buildings. The reporter for the Berwickshire News commented that the finished work 'does credit alike to the architect and contractors'.

A couple of years later, in 1903, George Duns designed a 'handsome block of buildings' in Murray Street, on the site of an old coach-house, when he produced plans for a new cycle workshop and showroom with dwelling house above for Alexander Luke. He also planned alterations at the Red Lion Hotel in Chirnside to improve the sanitary arrangements and provide extra bedrooms; without these changes, it is likely that the hotel would have lost its licence.

Any small-town architect had to be prepared to take on the more mundane commissions too in the course of earning a living. George Duns produced the plans for the town's new slaughterhouse near the railway station in 1889. He provided the town council with a comprehensive layout of all the sewage, water and gas pipes running through the streets. With fellow architect George Fortune, he devised plans for laying the Duns footpaths in concrete. And, in 1909, he planned a new public lavatory in Baillie's Entry.

George Duns, at the age of 76, died at his West Cottage home of a stroke in the summer of 1917. He left estate valued at £1320 which would have a purchasing power today of around £88,000. He had been assisted in his building and architectural work by his son Walter. In fact, George Duns had tried – and failed – to obtain an exemption from military service for his son in 1916; the refusal was upheld on appeal. Walter Duns served his country and, in early 1919, announced in the Berwickshire News that he had been discharged from the army and would carry on his late father's architectural business. In his will, George Duns granted his wife Janet life-rent of West Cottage but she died there of 'senile decay' at the age of 78 only two years later in 1919; the Duns family had been in the house for over fifty years.

### **Grace Wilson at West Cottage**

Following the death of Janet Duns, West Cottage was advertised for sale in the Berwickshire News in early 1920. It was described as having three public rooms (although one was very small, probably being George Duns' office), four bedrooms, boxroom, bathroom, kitchen,

scullery etc and garden. It was bought by or for Grace Wilson, one of the Wilsons of the Knoll. Her father Philip Wilson originally worked in the family's Dunse drapery business but, around the time of his marriage to Isabella Luke in 1854, he became a successful corn factor, purchasing grain crops from Berwickshire farms and then selling them on to the flour milling, distilling and brewing industries in Edinburgh and beyond. He had his own storage granary at Dunse railway station and, in 1871, he built that fine house called the Knoll in Station Road. Between 1855 and 1871, Philip and Isabella Wilson had eight children; Philip junior was the fifth, born in 1863 and Grace was the sixth, born in 1865. On the senior Philip Wilson's death in 1895, Philip junior took over his father's corn factor business, having worked in it since he left school. Neither Philip Wilson junior nor his sister Grace ever married and both continued to live at the Knoll.



*Rear elevation showing additional two rooms (one up, one down) on right*

The 1920 valuation roll shows 'house and garden, West Cottage, 13 Langtongate' owned by 'Grace Wilson, spinster, the Knoll'; she would have been around 55 years of age at that time. There is a puzzlement as to the reason for purchasing West Cottage since she did not go to live there until ten years later. The 1921 census shows Thomas Murray (age 35) as tenant of the property; he was a corn factor's clerk employed by Grace's brother, Philip. Valuation roll evidence confirms Murray living in West Cottage with his wife Henrietta and their children through the 1920s.

After some months of poor health, Philip Wilson junior died in 1930 and the Knoll was sold soon afterwards. Grace Wilson then went to live in West Cottage. Perhaps, therefore, her ownership of the house was always with a view to the day when she might be obliged to leave the Knoll. She continued to live in Langtongate 'on independent means' for the next fifteen years. She was always much involved in the work of the church, originally at the East Church in Easter Street (which closed in 1932) and then at the Parish Church. As often as not, she would be found in charge of the 'tea-room' at any sale of work or other fund-raising

event. In 1912, she was chosen to make the presentation of a silver salver to the Reverend David Keir who was leaving the East Church for a parish in Greenock. In 1917, she was one of three local women presented with special bibles in recognition of their long service as annual collectors for the work of the National Bible Society of Scotland.

Grace Wilson sold West Cottage in 1945 to move to North Berwick where she died of a stroke at the age of 81 in 1947. At a meeting of the Berwickshire Presbyterial Woman's Guild a few weeks later, tribute was paid to someone who 'inspired many to a deeper devotion in Christianity'.

### **John and Edith Baillie at West Cottage**

John Baillie, a native of Forfarshire, spent his career with the British Linen Bank. He started at the branch in Haddington, transferred to Hawick in 1898 and then worked in Broxburn, Cupar and Falkland in Fife. While working in Cupar, John Baillie (41) married Edith Jane Robertson (42) in the Baptist Church in Edinburgh's Dublin Street in 1916. He came to Duns from Falkland in 1925 to be agent (as bank managers were then called) of the Linen Bank branch which was at 24 Newtown Street. He and his wife Edith lived above the bank.

In 1929, the British Linen Bank directors sold their premises in Newtown Street when they built a brand-new branch at 10 Market Place, just across the street from the Royal Bank. 24 Newtown Street was bought by Berwickshire County Council for offices. Perhaps the house above the new bank was not ready in time since it seems that John Baillie and his wife lived briefly in Easter Street before moving to the Market Place.

Baillie spent almost twenty years as manager of the Linen Bank in Duns. He made a huge contribution to the town in a variety of ways especially during the Second World War when he acted as treasurer and fund-raising organiser for a host of causes including the Berwickshire branch of the Red Cross Society, the Soldiers', Sailors' and Airmen's Families Association and the special savings weeks which were a regular feature of the country's war effort. He acted as an air raid warden and, in 1942, he was appointed to the Duns 'invasion committee' at a time when the threat of German landings was particularly real. The Berwickshire News would later declare that 'his work during the present war has been on a colossal scale'.

John Baillie retired in early 1944 and, since he had to give up the house above the bank, he went to live in Gavinton for a short while before buying West Cottage from Grace Wilson in 1945. The Berwickshire News reported that he intended 'spending the evening of his days in the town'. He had always taken a keen interest in the education of young people and, after retirement, he continued as a member of the county education committee until he stood down after sixteen years' service in 1949; he remained a member of its library sub-committee. He also continued as chairman of the management committee of the Berwickshire High School, then in Newtown Street; in this capacity, he presided over many annual school speech days. He was long-time treasurer of the county branch of Scotland's Gardens Scheme. For his work over 35 years supporting the National Savings movement, he was awarded the MBE in the

King's birthday honours list in 1951, receiving his award from the Duke of Gloucester at an investiture in Buckingham Palace in November of that year.

At the age of 80, John Baillie died suddenly of a heart attack in Duns South Church in Currie Street on Sunday 27 May, 1956; he had lived his last moments in the church to which he had devoted so much time and effort over the years as elder, treasurer and presbytery representative. At a special meeting of the county education committee, tribute was paid to John Baillie as a man who had 'served his town and county well'. It was particularly sad that he did not get to see the new Berwickshire High School completed – it opened in 1958. John Baillie's widow, Edith Jane Baillie, continued to live at West Cottage where she died of heart disease and senility at the age of 87 in 1962.



*Some of the original octagonal chimney pots*

### **West Cottage from 1962**

Ownership of the house now passed to members of the Malcolm family. At the 1921 census, the Malcolms can be found living at number 10 North Street, otherwise known as the Plough Inn – William Malcolm (38), innkeeper, his wife Bessie (39) and their two children, Robert (14) and Georgina (10). Seven years later in January 1928, at the age of 20 and now a master butcher to trade, Robert Malcolm married Alison Purves Alexander (19) in Edinburgh by declaration, the civil marriage of the time; she was a domestic servant and came from Coldingham. Their daughter, Christine Elizabeth Pitt Malcolm, was born in Duns that same year; in some records, her name is given as 'Christina'.



Also in that year and only six months after Robert Malcolm's marriage, his father William Malcolm died in Duns in August 1928 at the age of 45. His widow, Bessie McDougall Malcolm, managed the Plough Inn for the next twenty years until her death at the age of 66 in 1948. It seems that Robert then gave up his butcher's trade to take over the running of the inn since he described himself as a 'wine and spirit merchant' at the time of his daughter Christine's first marriage in the summer of 1949. At the age of 21 and employed as a hairdresser, she was married in the registrar office in Edinburgh's Haymarket to 24-year-old Thomas Aitchison Turnbull, a telephone engineer who lived at Maisondieu Farm near Kelso. They divorced in 1960. In 1962, in Duns, Christine Turnbull nee Malcolm married again; her second husband was Douglas Baxter.

Following the death of Edith Baillie in 1962, the executors of her estate sold West Cottage in the summer of that year to Robert Malcolm. He only retained the property for some six months, however, transferring ownership in December 1962 to his daughter and son-in-law, Christine and Douglas Baxter. The latter died in Duns at the age of 72 in 1984 and four years later, in 1988, Christine Baxter sold West Cottage, or Langton Cottage as it had now come to be known, to its present owners. Christine Elizabeth Pitt Baxter died in Duns in 2013 at the age of 85; her father, Robert Malcolm, had died in the town in 1983, age 76.

*The information in this paper has been researched from newspapers of the time (especially the Berwickshire News); from information including the inventory of title deeds supplied by the current owners; and from public records – census, valuation rolls and birth, marriage and death records.*

**David McLean (2025)**

**Dunse/Duns (Langton Cottage, Duns) Family Tree**

