

MOAT BRAE HOUSE

'In The Beginning' & Historical Timeline Of Previous Owners

The ground on which Moat Brae House was built was part of five acres of land owned by John Clerk Maxwell of Middlebie. He sold plots of this land to several people including Robert Threshie of Barnbarroch, who commissioned Moat Brae House to be built. He also sold land to Walter Newall, who was the architect of Moat Brae House.

Moat Brae House was commissioned in 1823 by Robert Threshie and was *the* premier residential dwelling in Dumfries. The original drawings by Walter Newall, the architect, show that the house has four floors. These consist of a lower ground, (basement) level; ground level, first floor and attic level. There were conditions placed on the design of the building by John Clerk Maxwell. The original Disposition states that the front elevation should have no more than two stories above street level. The elevation at the back of the house was to consist of no more than three stories above street level, with the inclusion of a lower ground, sunk or basement level. Walter Newall had prepared drawings for approval by John Clerk Maxwell who declared that all properties in George Street conform to these plans.¹

1823

Moat Brae House was built in 1823 as a dwelling house for Robert Threshie of Barnbarroch. Robert Threshie was a solicitor and Postmaster of Dumfries. These were very important positions in society at that time. He lived there with his family and three servants.

Robert Threshie of Barnbarroch, purchased land from James Clerk Maxwell, and commissioned the architect Walter Newall to draw up plans for the dwelling house.

Walter Newall was born at Doubledyke, in the parish of New Abbey, on the 23rd of April, 1780. He died on Christmas Day, 1863 at Craigend, New Abbey, two years after he retired in 1831. He was a provincial architect, working mainly in Dumfries and Galloway. Little was known about his accomplishments until the discovery of several sketchbooks and bound volumes of his drawings in a barn in Canada belonging to descendants of Walter Newall, which are now kept in the Dumfries Archive Centre.

1841

Mrs Babbington became the next owner of the house and was the widow of the Reverend Babbington. She lived in the house with her servants until her death in 1863.²

1863

Moat Brae House was advertised for sale and was purchased by the Gordon Family. Henry Gordon was a Bank Agent and solicitor. The 1871 census shows that, on that date, Henry Gordon, and his sons Henry and Stewart lived in the house. There is no mention of Mrs Gordon, and it is assumed that she was elsewhere at that time.

¹ Dumfries Archive Centre, GGD 56/35/5

² Jean S. Maxwell, The Centenary Book of St. John's, Dumfries

There were also three servants living in the house, Eliza Little, Janet Williamson and Agnes Howat. It was around this time that Henry and Stewart made friends with James Barrie (J. M. Barrie) whilst he was a pupil at Dumfries Academy. The young James Barrie visited the Gordon boys at Moat Brae house and all three children played in the garden that was to become the inspiration for *Peter Pan*. J. M. Barrie confirmed this when he revisited the new Dumfries Academy in 1924,

“when the shades of night began to fall, certain young mathematicians shed their triangles, crept up walls and down trees, and became pirates in a sort of odyssey that long afterwards was to become the play Peter Pan. For our escapades in a certain Dumfries Garden, which is an enchanted land to me, were certainly the genesis of that nefarious work”.³

1906

The next owner was James McGeorge, who owned the house from 1906 until his death around 1914. James McGeorge was a knitwear Manufacturer in Dumfries.⁴

1914

The Royal Scottish Nursing Home Institution purchased Moat Brae House. From that time it was in constant use as a Nursing Home until 1997. Moat Brae Nursing Home was a private facility for surgery and medicine. There was also a facility for respite care for the elderly in order that their families could have a break from looking after them. Even though there was a modern National Health Service Hospital, Dumfries and Galloway Royal infirmary, it was felt that there was still a need for the services offered at Moat Brae Nursing Home. There was a Redevelopment Appeal during the late 1980s to modernise the building, as it existed and a proposal to build an extension.⁵

1922

The Royal Scottish Institute put the Home up for sale in order to raise funds for an extension to the building they had in Edinburgh. The facilities of the Nursing Home continued when purchased by Miss Isobel H R Cochrane of Edinburgh.⁶ It is believed that Miss Cochrane lived in Moat Brae house until it passed into the control of the Moat Brae Nursing Home Trust?

1974

Dumfries and Galloway Council

1981

Moat Brae Nursing Home Trust.

1986

Moat Brae Nursing Home Limited, per Symons and McDonald, 3 Great King Street, Dumfries.

³ W. McGair, Power Point, *J. M. Barrie and Dumfries Academy*

⁴ Valuation Roll, Dumfries Burgh, Greyfriars District, 1906

⁵ Dumfries Archive Centre GGD660/5/1/1

⁶ Dumfries and Galloway Standard and Advertiser, 19/4/1922, 4C

2001

James Brown purchased Moat Brae House. He was a businessman from Paisley, who is thought to have wanted to turn Moat Brae House into a themed Hotel. He was unable to fund this project and the house was sold to the Loreburn Housing Association.

2008/2009

Loreburn Housing Association

2009

Sold to the Peter Pan Moat Brae Trust.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Over the lifetime of Moat Brae house, Dumfries has seen many changes to its fortunes. In 1832 a cholera epidemic swept through Dumfries, around 837 people contracted the disease, and the officially reported deaths numbered 421. It also had a devastating effect on commerce when people and businesses kept away from the area. A second Cholera Epidemic in 1848 affected around 600 people, resulting in 317 deaths. The effect of the second epidemic was less severe than the first one, in terms of the population and its effect on trade in Dumfries.⁷ The cause of the epidemic was traced to the water supply and after many years of proposals, from 1765, to have a clean water supply this was finally introduced in 1851. This clean water came from Lochrutton Loch and to celebrate this fact a fountain was built on High Street.

In **1835** Maxwellton Windmill had been converted to the Observatory to coincide with the appearance of Halley's Comet.⁸

By **1850** Dumfries Passenger Railway Station was opened in Dumfries. This was one of the contributing factors in the decline of shipping.

1851/52 Piggot and Slater's Directory of Commerce quotes Dumfries as, 'a wealthy and pleasant place to be'.

1872 Education Act (Scotland) 1872, took control of schools into government hands.

It gave every child the right to be educated in school.

1914 – 1918 World War 1

1939 – 1945 Second World War

1948 Introduction of National Health Service

⁷ William McDowall, *History of the Burgh of Dumfries, Fourth revised edition, with additional notes.* pp 742 and 818

⁸ <http://www.scottish-places.info/towns/townfirst349.html>

(Grateful acknowledgments to Lilian Carrick, a Level Three student from the University of Glasgow, Dumfries Campus. This extract was taken from the report Lilian completed during her placement with Peter Pan Moat Brae Trust in 2011)