

A Berwick Boyhood between the Wars: The Memoirs of Jock Wilson

A talk by Dr Elizabeth Wilson

What was Berwick like in the 1920s and 1930s, especially if your parents ran one of the main shops in the town, was on the Town Council and was active in the Methodist church? And how did this family business come to be, and what happened to it as the next generation moved away? Our speaker, Dr Elizabeth Wilson, has recently published a book based on a written memoir produced by her father late in life, and shared some insights from her father's memoir with us.

Her father was born at the end of World War 1, the third of four children. The first, a daughter, died as an infant, and all the rest were boys. Missing a daughter, Jock's mother treated him almost as a girl for a long time, although he always felt he lacked attention as his younger brother was disabled and needed a lot of support from his mother. He was also not much good with a ball, so he missed out on enjoying many of the usual boys' sports. But he was very musical, had a lively personality and engaged in many aspects of local life as he grew up, and of course experienced the life of his parents' flourishing furniture business.

Our speaker suggested that the driving force behind the business was Jock's grandmother, Dorothy. Their story shows how people could move from poverty into the established middle class. Jock's grandfather, Thomas Wilson, came to Berwick as a labourer, living in crowded accommodation in Walkergate, where Dorothy and her husband had a small business dealing in second hand clothes. Both Thomas and Dorothy were widowed early in life, and between them built up the second hand business into dealing in second hand furniture and furniture making. They moved to a store in Marygate and began to do well. Their son Thomas, Jock's father, became a well known figure in Berwick life, both in church circles and as a town councillor and mayor, having married the daughter of another family doing well in the tailoring business. He was also active in the Liberal Party. Jock remembers in his account many characters from Berwick commercial life that he knew as a child, including Skelly the butcher and the Cowe sisters.

Jock seems to have been very aware of the differences between the privileged life he lived and the experience of the poorest, such as those in the crowded Walkergate dwellings where his grandparents had grown up. This sensitivity to the cares of others, as well as his organ-playing ability, led to a career on the church. His memoirs finish in 1937, but our speaker updated the story. Both Jock and his elder brother Graham became professionals, Graham as a doctor and Jock as a minister. Graham served in the army medical core in the Second World War, but Jock was a convinced pacifist and went to work instead for the YMCA in Edinburgh. Their parents died during the war and the furniture business was left to the two brothers. But neither of them lived in Berwick so they appointed a manager for the shop, until finally selling it.

Her father's memoirs are clearly full of insights into life in Berwick in the interwar period. Our speaker told us that *A Berwick Boyhood* can be obtained from local bookshops.