

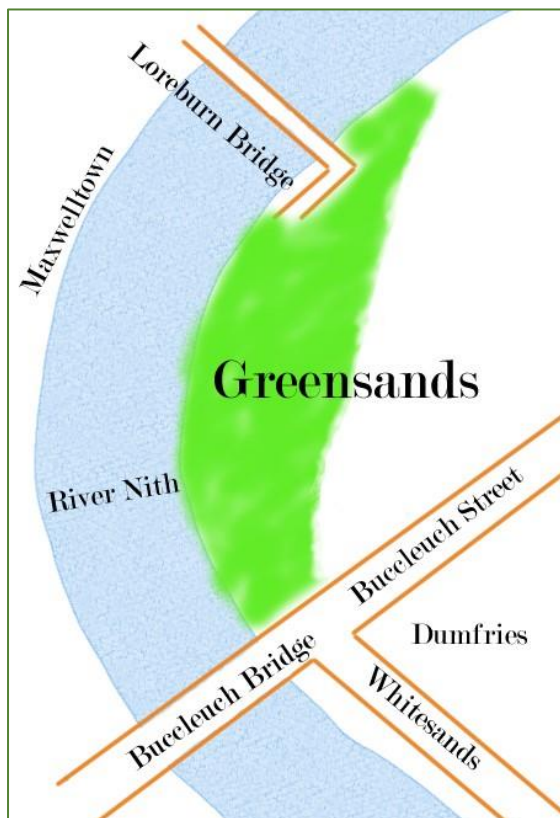
# Green Sands, Dumfries

## Local History Notes



Over many generations Dumfries Town Council has reclaimed and developed the Greensands to create a tranquil riverside park.

Doonhamers can be proud of this half-hidden green corner of the town.



### Marshy place

Originally the Green Sands or Greensands was a marshy area down by the bend in the river Nith above the *Old Bridge*. Over time the Town Council reclaimed the land by draining it, building river walls and infilling the ground.

When the *New Bridge* (the Buccleuch Bridge) was built in Robert Burns' time the Greensands was still left undeveloped presumably because it was prone to flooding.



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### Over Sandbeds

We know this area, north of the Buccleuch Bridge on the Dumfries side, as the Greensands, but its older name was 'Over Sandbeds' or 'Green Sandbeds'. The 'Green' element signified that this area was marshy. (The Whitesands was known as 'Nethersandbeds' or 'Laigh Sandbeds').

There used to be a caul (weir) upstream that directed water into a mill lade (water channel) which ran through the Greensands to a water mill at the bottom of Friars Vennel, known as Sandbedmiln. The mill lade ran under the easternmost arch of the Devorgilla Bridge before the bridge was truncated from nine to six arches.

### Friars' Haugh

Before the Reformation when the Greyfriar's Monastery was still in existence it is possible that the land then known as "Friars' Haugh" was the area we know now as the Greensands. "Haugh" is the Old Scots word for water meadow.

It is likely that the Friars had the fishing rights on the Nith all the way from the Castledyke to Greensands.

### Riding of the Marches

In medieval times the Riding of the Marches was a civic function rather than a celebration as it is now. The purpose was to protect and maintain the rights of the town over its boundaries and common land, which included the Green Sands.

The original route of the riding of the Town's Marches started at the Mercat Cross, up the High Street, down Friars' Vennel, along the Green Sands and up the road of the high Haugh to the Moat (and so on). It took place on the last day of October.

### Stakeford

About where the Loreburn Bridge (also known as the Millennium Bridge) is there once used to be a ford across the river from the Greensands. It was called the 'Stakeford' because stakes were driven into the riverbed to guide travellers, probably on horseback, across the ford.



In medieval times there was a road and causeway that ran from the castle garden (now Castle Street) across the marshy section of the Greensands to the Stakeford. The causeway enabled the Maxwell Lords of Nithsdale to leave their fortified town house (the

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'castle' where the present Greyfriars Church is) on horseback and cross over to their country mansion at Terregles Park without having to go through the town.



### Poliwaddum

In a pre-Reformation charter of 1555, there is reference to the road north from the (original) Church of the Grey Friars in Dumfries "*passing oute to poliwaddum callit the Staikfurd*".

A '*poliwaddum*' was the quaint sounding Old Scots word for a ford. The first element is probably similar to a '*powe*' which means a marshy place (like the Greensands) or a slow-moving stream. The second element is from '*wade*' which was Old Scots for a ford (which could be waded).



### Meeting place

In medieval times there were no public buildings for indoor meetings apart from the kirk. Consequently, the trade organisations (the Incorporations) such as the Weavers and Shoemakers would hold their annual meetings outdoors at open spaces like Kingholm or the Greensands.

### Brick Kilns

One history of Dumfries refers to Brick Kilns on the Greensands in the 18th century. There must have been a plentiful supply of clay there.



### The Doctor's Well

Before clean water was piped to Dumfries in the mid-19th century the town's residents were dependent on water from the river or from wells dotted around the town. One such well was the "*The Townes Physic Well*" or Doctor's Well on the Greensands that was fed from a spring. It was located at some steps on the edge of the Nith. In 1732 John Donaldson, who maintained the well, was granted an annual payment of £1 by the Council.

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### Buckleuch Bridge

When the 'New Bridge' was built in 1794 and Buckleuch Street created, the Greensands was partially cut off from the Whitesands. Plans were drawn up in the early 19th century to develop the land between the river and Buckleuch Street but excluding the Greensands.

About this time a fence was erected dividing Greensands from the development land, which would become George Street, Charlotte Street, Gordon Street and Castle Street. The line of the wall there today marks this division.

The lower end adjacent to the Greensands was the last to be developed. At that time the path across the Greensands, from the bridge to Nith Avenue, was alongside the wall.



### Burns Walk

The path along the eastern bank of the river Nith beginning at the north end of the Greensands is known as "*Burns' Walk*" because it is believed that it was a favourite walk of the poet Robert Burns when he lived in Dumfries.



### Greensands School

There was once an elementary school on the Greensands. It was located on the now empty plot adjacent to Park Lane and the building presently occupied by The Standard newspaper.

The Greensands school was established in 1812 by the Dumfries & Maxwelltown Female Benevolent Society to educate the children of labourers. This charity was formed and endowed by church women.

The charter for a school building on the Greensands was dated 3rd November 1821. The Town Council leased the plot to "*the ladies for a charitable school*" only for so long as it was run as a charity.

The management committee continued to be female led, so it was often known as the "*Ladies' Free School*" or the "*Benevolent School*" as well as the "*Greensands School*".

It was overseen by the Dumfries Presbytery. After the Education (Scotland) Act of 1872 the Dumfries School Board was formed and it took over the Dumfries elementary schools including Greensands. The charity was wound up.

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In 1853 there were 160 boys and 47 girls being taught by two teachers.

Additionally, there was a Female School of Industry. As well as learning to read etc. the girls were taught knitting and sewing.

The teachers would have had to teach very large classes covering the whole school age range from 5 to 13. If they were lucky, they would be assisted by Pupil Teachers. The teacher was reliant on the older pupils helping the younger children.

Before the 1872 Act school attendance was not compulsory. Even working-class parents would have to pay small fees for their child to attend school. In 1866 the fee was one penny per week.

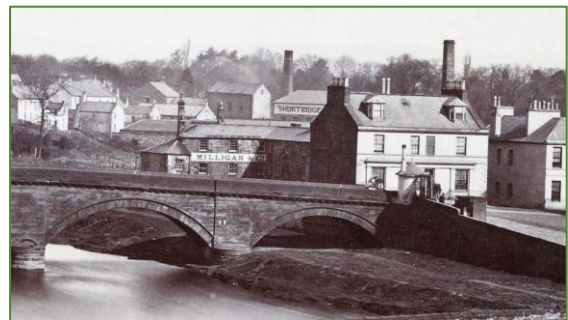
By the start of the 20th century the school building was very run down. In 1900 the school moved a few yards to the new building on George Street and became the Loreburn Primary School.



*Site of the old school behind the bench*

### Hosiery Works & Bleach Green

There used to be a hosiery, glove and underwear manufacturing workshop and warehouse on the site now occupied by The Standard newspaper premises. The buildings appear on a map dated 1845. The business was originally Milligan & Co. until it was taken over by the Dinwiddie family to become Milligans & Dinwiddie Hosiery.



*Milligans Hosiery in centre of picture, behind the Buccleuch Bridge*

A portion of the Greensands besides the workshop was set out as a Bleach Green. Stenters were erected there, and the garments produced in the workshop were hung out to dry and whiten under the sun.

Stenters (or tenterhooks) were wooden frames (with hooks) onto which wet garments (in this case woollen socks) were stretched so that they would not shrink as they dried. This is where we get the expression "*being on tenterhooks*".

The business had a shopfront on Buccleuch Street by the end of the *New Bridge*.

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### 1838 Nith Regatta

In 1838 the crowds gathered on the Greensands to watch a Regatta on the river Nith organised by the recently formed Nith Boating Club. It was part of the celebrations for the coronation of Queen Victoria.

There were five boats and three races. The boats started at the Greensands, rowed up the river to round a buoy opposite Albany Place and back. The finish was between the Buccleuch Bridge and the Devorgilla Bridge.

The Caledonian Mercury reported that *“The entire space of the Green Sands in front of the river was densely crowded by the citizens and others, with their wives, sisters and daughters, all dressed in holiday attire, and whose countenances were lightened up by the smile of satisfaction and delight”*.

### Curling and Skating

From time immemorial the Nith has occasionally frozen over sufficiently at the Greensands to allow curling matches to take place, as well as skating. Unfortunately, there were also numerous times when lives were lost when someone fell through the ice.



### Circuses

In Victorian times the Greensands vied with Dock Park as the location for visiting circuses. Usually, a circus would parade around town to attract an audience before setting up their tent on the park.

Just one example – Cooke’s Circus came to the Greensands in the summer of 1846. *“Mr Alfred Cooke, when seated on his fleet-footed charger, performs his daring feats of horsemanship, delighting and fascinating the on-lookers —the thousands whom we doubt not will crowd to the pavilion on the Green Sands Monday night. Other entertainments scarcely less attractive are promised in the bill of fare —tight-rope dexterities from Mr Henry Cooke”*.

### Pasture

Back in the 1840s & 50s the Town Council let the Green Sands out on Sundays for Pasture. That’s one way to keep the grass cut.

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### Cholera

In 1848 Dumfries suffered its second Cholera epidemic. It was belatedly realised that a major contributor to the cholera was the dirty water taken from the river Nith and distributed around town by the Watermen. They had been filling their water barrels from the Nith at the point where all the effluent from Bank Street discharged into the river. They sold this contaminated water to the townsfolk for drinking and washing. *Uuurgh!!*

The Watermen were encouraged to fill their barrels from the Nith further upstream, at the Greensands, where it was reckoned that the water quality would be better. The Council even constructed a road on the Greensands for use by the Water carts.



### Clean water

In the aftermath of the Cholera tragedy of 1848 the authorities decided that the town needed to have a clean water supply. Ultimately it was decided to pipe water from Lochrutton Loch, but another option, the Nith or Greensands Scheme, was also considered.

Instead of having gravity bring the water supply to the town (as with the Lochrutton scheme) it was proposed to pump water from the river Nith into the town. The Pumping Station at the Greensands would have had two 32 horse-power steam engines. Cost and reliability counted against the Greensands proposal.

### River threat

It was in the 1850s that the Town Council first decided to build a river wall to protect the Greensands. It was feared that the large quantities of ash being dumped in the river by the Stakeford Foundry on the opposite bank were diverting the river towards the Greensands causing it to flood more frequently.

### Brewery, Stone Yard, Sawmill & Timber Yard

'Brewery Street' runs off the Whitesands but the brewery was actually on the north side of Buccleuch Street adjacent to Bridge Bank (now Park Lane) leading to the Greensands.

Further on the land on the other side of the wall from the Greensands was occupied as a Stone Yard in the 1850s and later by a Saw Mill and Timber Yard.

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### Sheep Market controversy

In early 1853 it was proposed to give the Dumfries Sheep Market a permanent site. The north end of the Greensands was suggested, where a new wall had been constructed between the Sands and the orchard behind Gordon Street.

Opponents felt a market, able to accommodate thousands of sheep, even if it was only for one day a week for eight weeks of the year, was incompatible with the use of the Green Sands for the washing and drying of clothes and for recreation, which *“had been so used from time immemorial”*.

Herding thousands of sheep past the Greensands school was also considered unacceptable. They asked the Council to find another site e.g., a field near the new rail station.

Despite several months of acrimonious debate, the Town Council still decided to go ahead with plans to locate the Sheep Market on the Green Sands. This prompted a Petition to be raised.

*“By causing .... at a narrow entrance into the town .... such an obstruction to the thoroughfare as to be unbearable and would create a storm of public indignation”*.

*The Council, by sanctioning it, were interfering with the desire generally manifested to secure public parks and places of recreation, and turning the matter into a question of pounds, shillings and pence.*

*Instead of sacrificing the Sands, or any portion of them, they ought to preserve them with scrupulous care;*

*and if the town, as they all hoped it would, increased in size, the Sands would be too restricted .... so that they should keep well what they at present possessed”*.

1,139 signatures were obtained; a considerable number considering the population then was only about 11,000.

The editor of the Standard newspaper was in favour of a Sheep Market, but not on the Greensands.

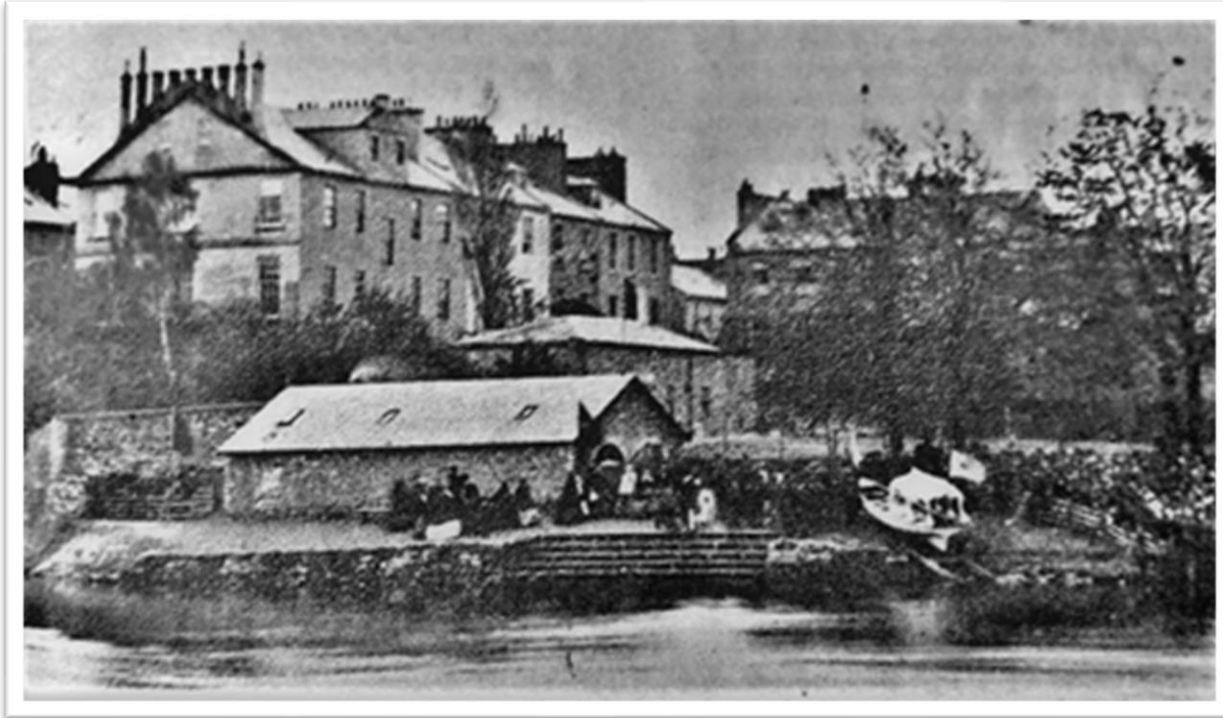
*“The Council must be aware that they are the guardians, but not the owners, of the Green—that it is a common belonging to the inhabitants. In these times, when communities are busy getting public parks, the lieges of Dumfries ought not to allow theirs to be 'scrimped of its fair proportions'”*.

After two years of debate the Council backed down. Instead, the Sheep Market was located on the Whitesands between Banks Street and Assembly Street. **The Greensands was saved.**



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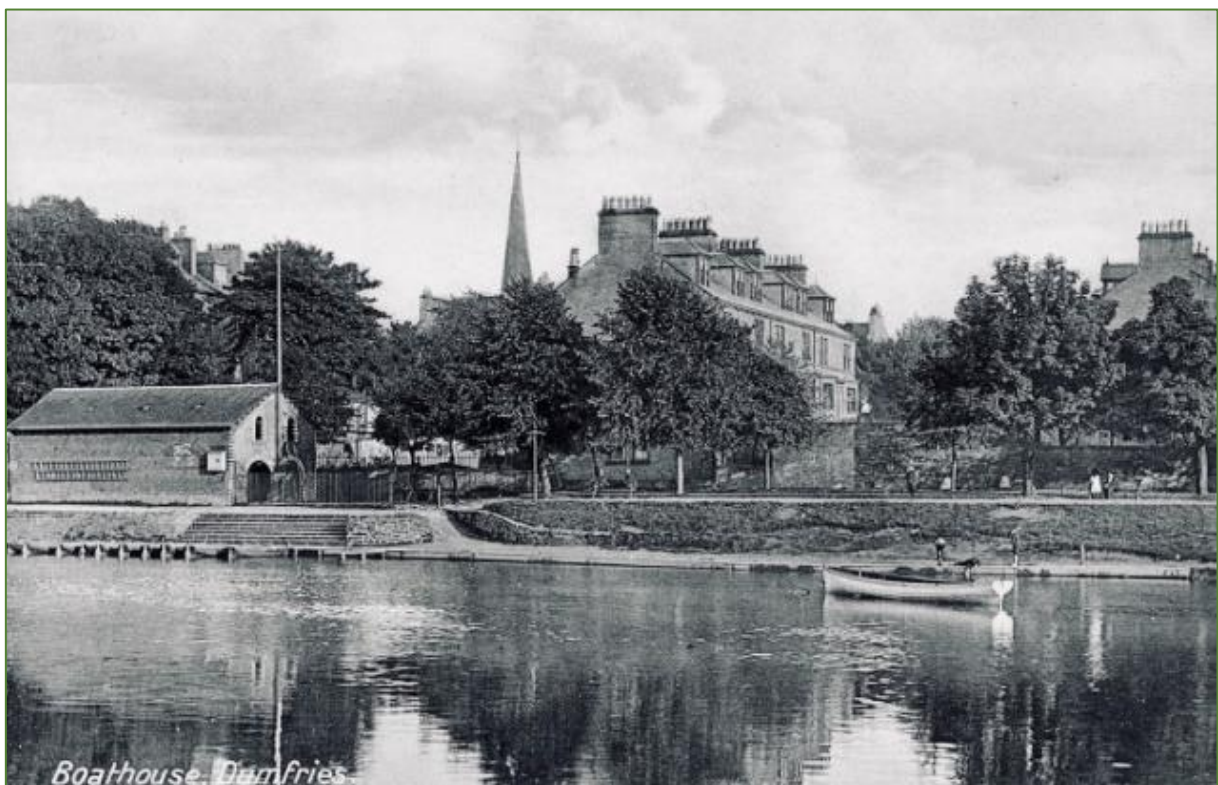
### *The Boat House*

In 1865 the Nith Regatta Club was formed. By the following year the club had raised sufficient funds to build a boathouse on the Greensands and to

organise their first regatta watched by thousands of spectators.

### *Nith Regatta Club Boat House*

*Posted on the 'Old Dumfries'  
Facebook page by Ronnie Waugh*



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In time the Nith Regatta Club became known as the Nithsdale Amateur Rowing Club.

Apparently, the original boathouse is contained within the structure of the current 1980's boathouse!

Earlier maps show there was a small boat house at the same location that was known as the *Humane Society's Boat House*, but it seems that over time the lifeboat and the boat house had fallen into disrepair and disuse.

### Russian Cannon

Those mementoes of the Crimean War, the Russian cannons, which are now to be found in the grounds of Dumfries Museum, were briefly located at the Greensands. They were removed to the Greensands from Church Square prior to the installation of the Burns Statue in 1882.

### Public Park

Although the Greensands was a public space, by the 1880s it had become something of a wasteland. In 1884 the Town Council decided to turn Greensands into a public park.

The ground was cleared, levelled and sown with grass. Trees were planted alongside a new riverside path. Those beautiful mature trees, which we see today, are now almost 140 years old.

Generous donors provided park benches. The park benches are still there as well. The 1893 OS map shows a pair of trees planted either side of each of the six benches.



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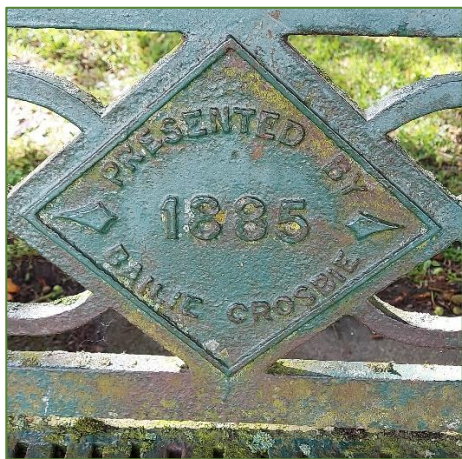
## Local History Notes

### Park Benches

There are eight ironwork park benches on the Greensands. Each bears a memorial of the name of their donor and the year. Five are from the year 1885 when the public park was created and three were presented in 1894.

Two of the benches were donated by Bailie William Crosbie, the senior councillor who had championed the creation of the park. He was a Writer (solicitor) with Harkness & Crosbie which had their offices in nearby Castle Street.

1885 was also the year that The Scottish Office was formed, and the position of Secretary for Scotland created. Bailie Crosbie was one of the councillors who had lobbied for this at a National Convention.



Another two of the benches were donated by Miles Leighton who was the Commodore of the Rowing Club. His family business was Wholesale Grocers and Tea & Provision Merchants which had expanded into Importing. He lived in George Street, so the Greensands was almost his back garden.



The fifth park bench from 1885 was donated by J.B.A. McKinnel of McKinnel & Co., Engineers and Ironfounders. This company owned the Dumfries Ironworks so it is more than likely that the park benches were manufactured locally.

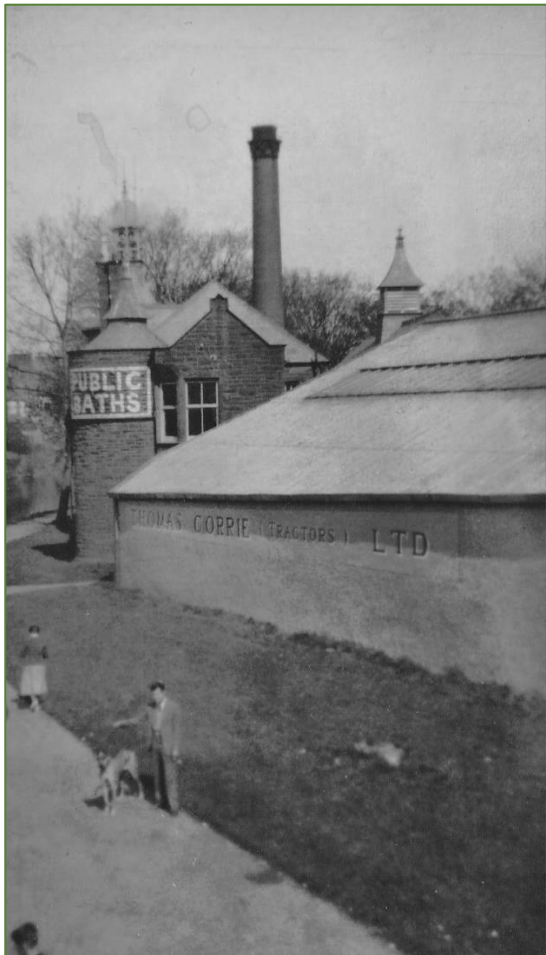
The park appears to have had a further makeover about 1893. On the 1900 map the Greensands looked more like a public park than a Drying Green.

One of the 1894 benches, the one nearest to the Buccleuch Bridge, was presented by Alex Thompson who owned Queensberry Ironworks. The other two 1894 benches were donated by the Dinwiddie family which had a Hosiery business and they had taken over the hosiery workshops on the Greensands run by Milligan & Co. William Dinwiddie J.P. was on the School Board so he would have had an interest in the Greensands school.

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### The Steamie



*Posted on the 'Old Dumfries' Facebook page by Ian Anderson*

*"The Steamie"* was the popular name for the Public Baths & Wash House located on the Greensands on the plot where the old school used to be.

This was from the days before most homes had adequate plumbing and hot water, let alone electricity for washing machines; and before there were commercial laundrettes.

Women would bring their laundry to the Wash House where there was lots of hot

water. The Steamie became a place for socialising as well as hard work.

Most working class Victorian and Edwardian houses did not have a bathroom or running hot water, so the Bath House is where people came to have a bath. Otherwise, it was a matter of filling a tin tub with water heated in the kettle. *"Cleanliness is next to godliness"* was a common expression back then.

A Bath House was suggested when Dumfries finally got a piped water supply in the 1850s.

In 1896 the Council was offered an anonymous donation of £2,000 to build a Bath and Wash House on the Greensands.



The donor was the inestimable Miss Jessie McKie, the Dumfries philanthropist who was a benefactor of so many projects in the town, including the widening of the Buccleuch Bridge.

### *Public Baths & Wash House on the left*



*Posted on the 'Old Dumfries' Facebook page by Ronnie Waugh*

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The Bath and Wash House opened in 1900. It was run by a charity until it was taken over by the Council in 1939 and during the Second World War the Washhouse was designated as a Decontamination Centre for gas casualties.

It operated up until the 1960s, by which time it would have been losing custom to the commercial laundrettes with their electric washing machines and dryers.

### Boats for hire

Rowing boats were available to hire on the Nith from Victorian times. The Boatman had a hut and landing stage located at the Greensands beside the Buccleuch Bridge. Latterly it was known as 'McMillan's'. Many older Doonhamers can recall hiring a boat to row on the river.

### Ferry across the Nith

Older Doonhamers also recall the boatman who would ferry passengers across the Nith in his rowing boat for a penny. The crossing was approximately where the pedestrian bridge now is.

*This view from the Maxwelltown side of the river shows the wall dividing the Greensands from the new school.*

*The Baths & Wash House is on the right. Note the chimney. The Drying Ground is still in use but perhaps not so much as latterly.*

*Note the park benches, each with a pair of trees.*

*The family in the rowing boat have probably hired it, but the chap in the bottom left corner might be the ferryman.*



*Posted on 'Old Dumfries' Facebook page by John Kerr*

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*Posted on the 'Old Dumfries' Facebook page by Ronnie Waugh*

*Aerial photo 1928 of the Buccleuch Bridge and the Greensands on the bend in the river.*

*Milligans workshops can be seen beside the Public Baths and Wash House*

### Birching

In 1918 eight boys were each fined five shillings for playing football on the Greensands Park on a Saturday afternoon. They were warned that if they appeared before the Dumfries Police Court again, they would receive a birching.

### Moat Brae

Greensands is only two hundred yards from Moat Brae where supposedly *Peter Pan* came to life in the imagination of a young J.M. Barrie.

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### Swimming Pool

In 1914 Dumfries Council in partnership with Maxwelltown Burgh Council announced plans for a swimming pool to be built on the Greensands. Unfortunately, the First World War intervened.

In 1939 the government offered a grant of £10,000 towards the cost of constructing the swimming pool at the Greensands. Unfortunately, the Second World War intervened.

Short of funds post war the idea of building an outdoor pool on the river was even mooted.

The new swimming pool on the Greensands was finally opened by Provost Edward Watt on the 12th October, 1963.

The 'old' swimming pool, which seems to be fondly remembered by Dumfries folk, closed in 2007 and the building was demolished in 2009.

It was a relatively small swimming pool. The area where the building stood has been grassed over but presumably the road between Park Lane and Nith Place as well as the remaining tarmac, still used for car parking, is from that era.



*Posted on the 'Old Dumfries' Facebook page by Allan Johnston*

*The new swimming pool on the left and the old Public Baths & Wash House on the right*

*Posted on the 'Old Dumfries' Facebook page by Ronnie Waugh*



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### Millennium Bridge

This pedestrian and bicycle bridge, also known as the Loreburn Cycleway bridge and the Boathouse Bridge, completed in 2001, crosses the River Nith from Stakeford & Nithside on the Maxwelltown side to the Greensands on the Dumfries side.



The steel truss bridge was constructed by John Hope Engineering of Annan.

*Any suggestions or corrections to this local history jumble are most welcome, Jim*

[jimmackison@btinternet.com](mailto:jimmackison@btinternet.com)

### National Cycle Route 7

The route from Inverness to Sunderland passes through the Greensands. It comes down College Street from the Maxwelltown Path, crosses the bridge, runs along the riverside path on the Greensands, under the Buccleuch Bridge and onto the Whitesands.

### *Members of Cycling Dumfries gathering at the Millennium Bridge*



*Photo by Sally Hinchcliffe*