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THE DICKSON NURSERYMEN UNRAVELLED

HAMISH JOHNSTON

**M**OST STUDENTS of Edinburgh will at some point turn to the *Book of the Old Edinburgh Club* (*BOEC*) for authoritative information on their subject. I was one such person after research had led me to a memorial stone in St Cuthbert's burial ground on which the first name was 'James Dickson, nursery and seedsman, who died 29 April 1834, aged 57' (fig. 1). A *BOEC* article by the late Priscilla Minay on 'Eighteenth and early Nineteenth Century Edinburgh Seedsmen and Nurserymen' identified the main companies active in Edinburgh in that period, traced their fortunes and described aspects of the business.<sup>1</sup> I hoped that the article would answer my questions. I was disappointed, therefore, to read that 'it is very difficult to unravel the various strands of the Dickson family', and to find that Minay had left several conundrums unresolved.

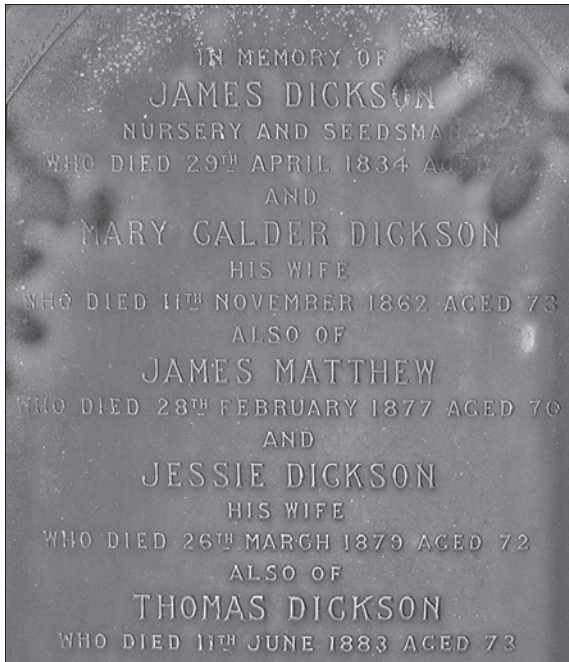


Fig. 1. Tombstone of James Dickson (1777–1834), St Cuthbert's Churchyard. (Photo Hamish Johnston.)

Minay quoted a contemporary source, John Loudon, who wrote, 'Walter Dickson began the house of Dickson & Co of Edinburgh ... in connection with Mr James Dickson, who was no relative of the family'.<sup>2</sup> Minay's problem was that there were several contemporary James Dicksons in the nursery trade and two separate and equally prominent Dickson businesses in Edinburgh. Without a lead Minay had not been able to work out who was who, but now the memorial stone provided the breakthrough. Research into old parish records, wills, inventories, Edinburgh *Directories* and further contemporary secondary sources not used by Minay produced the solution to the puzzle of the non-family James Dickson and cast more light on the main Dickson family (fig. 2).<sup>3</sup>

In 1729 Robert Dickson (d. 1744), patriarch of the family regarded by Minay as the principal Dicksons, founded a nursery at Hassendeanburn in Teviotdale near Hawick. The new research shows that Robert Dickson's son Archibald Dickson (1718–1791) developed the business and 'was instrumental in extending it to other parts of Scotland'.<sup>4</sup> He in turn had ten children, five boys and five girls. The first and fourth sons, Robert (1741–1814) and Archibald (1755–1834) remained in the Hawick area where the family business was a major employer. It was:<sup>5</sup>

a long established and extensive nursery and seed business, which has been successfully conducted by the same family, for nearly a hundred years – the Nurseries of Messrs. Dickson of this place and known over the island. The healthiness and variety of their trees and plants, together with an extensive selection of seeds, exotic as well as indigenous, have acquired for this company a name, and an extent of business, perhaps unequalled in the trade.

The Dickson brothers in Hawick, and Archibald in particular, extended the family concern beyond the nursery and seed trade. Archibald had business interests in ironmongery, dealt in wines and spirits and was also a partner in a Hawick company making

stockings and yarn. The brothers acquired farms and estates in the area at Huntlaw and Alton as well as other properties in Hawick and the surrounding area. Archibald inherited the lands of Housebyres through his wife.

Loudon wrote that ‘from it [i.e. Hassendeanburn] sprang, in 1767, the nursery of Messrs Dickson, now Dickson & Turnbull, at Perth’.<sup>6</sup> It was the second son, James Dickson (1746–1820) who started the family’s nursery at Kinnoull in Perth before returning to the family businesses in Hawick and Hassendeanburn.<sup>7</sup> He was replaced in Perth by the third son, his brother William (1753–1835). ‘The magnificent plantations and forests in Perthshire are a testimony to the result of his long sojourn in the county town, where he is much respected’, said the *Annals* of the Jedforest Club.<sup>8</sup> The firm in Perth was called Dickson & Brown until 1830 when, presumably, James Brown died. It was renamed Dickson & Turnbull when William’s nephew William Turnbull joined and became a partner. He succeeded his uncle in 1835. It was the fifth and youngest son, Walter Dickson (1759–1836) who set up a Dickson business in Edinburgh in c.1785.

Priscilla Minay found difficulty in sorting out the various Dicksons in Edinburgh because of the James Dickson ‘who was no relative of the family’. New research has identified him as James Dickson (c.1744–1795), described in the parish records as a gardener. Other than short periods working at Prestonpans and at Broughton James spent most of the last 25 years of his career working at, and latterly probably owning, a nursery business in Leith Walk. He was married twice and young James Dickson (1777–1834), who is commemorated on the gravestone at St Cuthbert’s, was one of five children by his first wife, another being Thomas (1771–1817). James remarried in 1782 after his first wife died and had a second family of six children that included sons George (1783–1825) and Francis (1793–1866). Thomas, young James and George all come into the Edinburgh picture later, while Francis left and founded what became a major nursery at Upton, Chester.

The link between the two Dickson families and businesses was forged when Walter Dickson came to Edinburgh from Roxburghshire and formed a joint enterprise with James Dickson from Leith Walk.

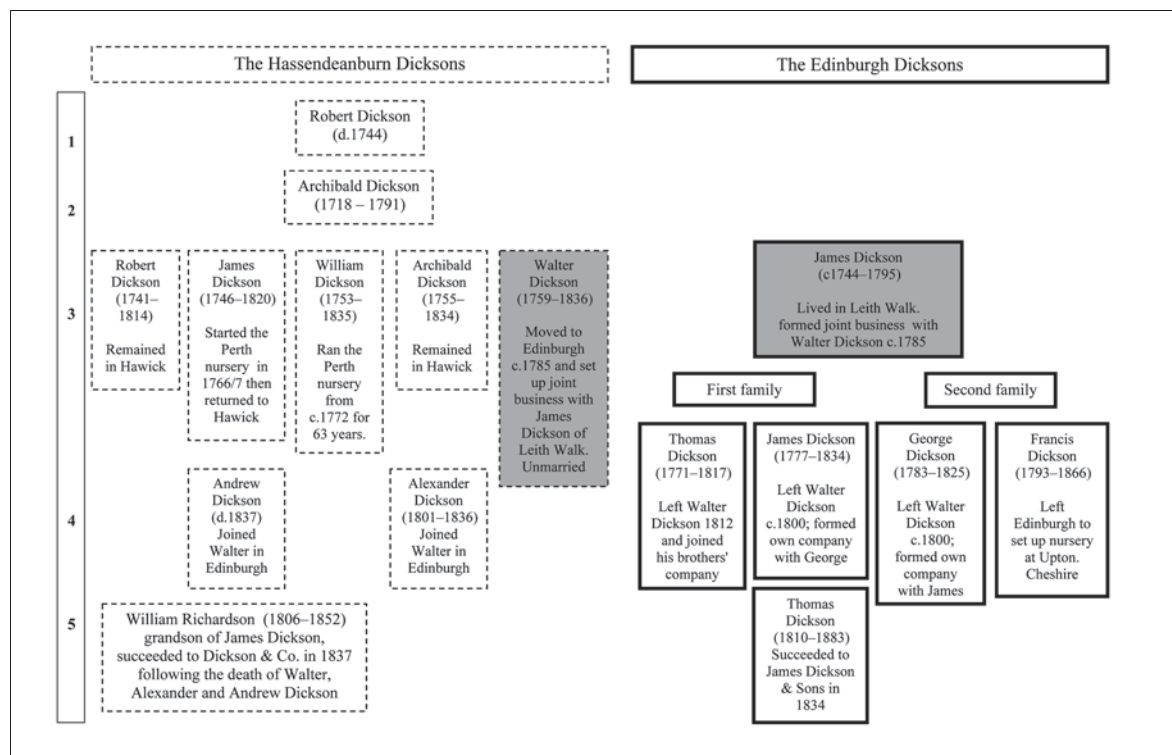


Fig. 2. Five generations of Dickson Nurserymen.

James had already set up a florist's business in Shakespeare Square by 1784.<sup>9</sup> Shakespeare Square was at the north-east end of North Bridge where the former GPO building now stands. Minay refers to a newspaper advertisement in 1785 saying that James and Walter Dickson were partners in a shop at Shakespeare Square with nurseries 'middle of Leith Walk'. It seems that old James had the local nursery and new shop premises, while Walter probably brought capital and further expertise to the new business – the Hassendeanburn Dicksons specialised in trees. Minay wrote that Walter and James now probably traded under the name Dickson and Fair with premises in Leith Walk. This seems likely because Williamson's *Directory* for 1790–92 (which has no reference to other Dickson nursery businesses) records this firm at the Leith Walk nursery and at 2 Shakespeare Square – the same address as is recorded for the firm of Dickson & Co. in 1794 and for many years thereafter.

James Dickson, Walter Dickson's partner, died in December 1795. In the next few years his sons Thomas, James and George retained their family's professional and financial interest in Dickson & Co. while continuing to learn the business. Then, from c.1800, a second Dickson business appears in the *Directories*. While Thomas remained with Dickson & Co. and became a partner, James and George, now ready to strike out on their own, sold their interest (including their share of the Leith Walk nursery) and formed with Thomas Shade the new firm of Dickson & Shade. It had a shop at 2 Leith Street and nurseries at Broughton, newly acquired from Anderson & Co.<sup>10</sup> Young James Dickson and his half-brother George were two of the new proprietors because they are mentioned by John Loudon in his treatise on the construction and operation of hot-houses based on his practical work at Dickson & Shade's Broughton nursery.<sup>11</sup> Amongst other benefits Loudon claimed to have achieved at least a four fifths improvement in fuel efficiency.

In 1806 Thomas Shade moved on and set up his own business, which led to the creation of a new Dickson-only business.<sup>12</sup> The 1807 *Directory* records it as 'Dickson, James and George, nursery seedsmen and florists, 4 South St Andrew St, Nursery Broughton Park'. Over the next ten years little changed save for the occasional shop relocation in St Andrew Street and the acquisition and/or disposal

of nursery premises. All was not well at Dickson & Co., however. It suffered financial problems and was dissolved in 1812.<sup>13</sup> Thomas Dickson now left the company and joined his brothers James and George in their business. Dickson & Co. must have been quickly refinanced because its place in the Edinburgh *Directories* is uninterrupted.

Thomas Dickson died in 1817 and that year James and George renamed their firm as Dickson Brothers. After George died in October 1825 the company became James Dickson and Sons. In 1826 James moved his shop premises from South St Andrew Street to 32 Hanover Street and supplemented the Broughton nurseries with nurseries at Inverleith.

During his career young James Dickson lived successively at Broughton, 8 London Street, Warriston Crescent, Stockbridge House, Saxe Coburg Place, Claremont Crescent, Inverleith Row, 41 East Claremont Street and finally 11 London Street, where he died in 1834. His inventory is interesting for a long list of 938 account holders that includes Henry Raeburn, Lord Cockburn and most of the dukes of the realm.<sup>14</sup> James's son Thomas took over the business until he apparently sold his interest in c.1846.

Meanwhile the original firm of Dickson & Co. continued at Leith Walk and Shakespeare Square until 1819 when they moved their shop to the newly built Waterloo Place. From 1815 Walter Dickson's domestic address was 31 St James' Square. Around 1830 he bought a big estate at Chatto near Jedburgh. He was unmarried and with an eye to the future brought in as business partners two of his nephews – Andrew Dickson (son of James) and Alexander Dickson (son of Archibald) and a grand-nephew William Richardson (grandson of James). In the period to c.1835 the firm acquired and disposed of various nurseries. Leith Walk nursery was a constant, and the others listed were at Blandfield, Redbraes (whose mansion Walter used as a residence), Dean Bank and Pilrig. 1836 and 1837 were difficult years for the Dickson & Co. succession. In 1836 Alexander died in May and Walter died in June. Exactly a year later Andrew Dickson died, leaving the company in the hands of William Richardson, the surviving partner. Walter left a huge estate, excluding property, of £36,143.<sup>15</sup>

Some of the nurseries of the two Dickson firms may be seen named on Kirkwood's Edinburgh map





Fig. 3. Broughton Park and Bellevue nurseries of Dickson Brothers, and Leith Walk nurseries of Dickson & Co. shown on Kirkwood's 1817 map. (Map courtesy of National Library of Scotland.)

of 1817 (fig. 3). In the 1833 *Edinburgh Directory*, the first in which kindred tradesmen are grouped together, the firms were two of fourteen businesses listed in the nursery and seedsmen section. Throughout the nineteenth century the Dickson businesses co-existed and competed, though not always amicably: the National Archives of Scotland hold records from 1815 of an attempt by Dickson Brothers to secure damages from Dickson & Co., and there was further litigation in 1830.<sup>16</sup> Both companies were still in business – if not in family ownership – at least until 1911 when they both appear in the *Directory*.

To conclude, the problems encountered by Priscilla Minay in understanding the Dickson family have a solution. The Borders Dicksons developed their business over three generations, expanding from Hassendeanburn to Hawick and Perth. In c.1785 Walter Dickson moved to Edinburgh where

he and the unrelated James Dickson were partners for ten years. After a name change their company in Edinburgh was, from 1794, called Dickson & Co. When James Dickson died his son Thomas remained a partner while James and George left and set up a new business with Thomas Shade. Next, young James and his half-brother George set up the firm of James and George Dickson in 1806. In 1812 Thomas left Dickson & Co. and joined his brothers, but died in 1817 and the firm was renamed Dickson Brothers. This company became James Dickson & Sons after George died in 1825. Young James' son Thomas inherited the business in 1835. Meanwhile the original firm of Dickson & Co continued to be run by Walter Dickson and his nephews from the Hawick family. From 1837, following the death of Walter and two partners, the company was run by Walter's nephew William Richardson, who went on to adopt the Dickson name.

# THE DICKSON NURSERYMEN UNRAVELLED

## APPENDIX

### *Priscilla Minay's Article: Notes and Corrections*

It is probable that Priscilla Minay did not have access to primary sources for the Borders Dicksons or for the James Dickson who was unrelated to that family. If she had seen this information she would surely have amended her article along the lines shown below.

*Page 11, last paragraph.* It was not the Kelso James Dickson who took over Anderson & Co. in 1800 but James Dickson (1777–1834), the son of James Dickson (c.1744–1795) of Leith Walk. The latter was the business partner of Walter Dickson of the Borders family. It was James and George, two sons of the Leith Walk James Dickson, who later set up Dickson Brothers.

*Page 21, first column, last paragraph ff.* Minay presumed correctly that it was not the Borders James Dickson who set up in Edinburgh with Walter but the non-family James Dickson, i.e. James Dickson (c.1744–1795) of Leith Walk. Then, using a secondary source, she states incorrectly that Walter was the son of this non-family James but admits ambiguity by referring to Loudon who said correctly that Walter was a member of the Borders family. Walter was one of the five grandsons of Robert Dickson, patriarch of the Borders family.<sup>17</sup>

*Page 21, second column, central paragraph.* Minay does not say which James Dickson was involved in Dickson and Fair in c.1789. The evidence of the Old Parish Records and the subsequent history of the businesses point to James Dickson (c.1744–1795) of Leith Walk as the partner in Dickson & Fair.

*Page 21, second column, last paragraph.* (1) John Shanklie first appears in the 1813 *Directory* as 'Shanklie, John, gardener, Dickson & Co. nursery Leith Walk'. Presumably Walter made him a partner for a while, but he had his own *Directory* entry throughout this period until the 1840s. The Dickson & Co. and Shanklie nurseries were co-located at 37 Leith Walk. Shanklie was operating with the help of loans from Walter and Andrew Dickson totalling £3107 that were still unredeemed when they died.<sup>18</sup> (2) Thomas Dickson (1771–1817) was oldest son of James Dickson (c.1744–1795) of Leith Walk. He left Dickson & Co. when it was dissolved in 1812 and joined his brothers.

*Page 23, first column, second paragraph.* Minay does not say which James Dickson was involved in Dickson & Shade. The new evidence shows that it was young James Dickson (1777–1834), son of James Dickson (c.1744–1795) of Leith Walk.

## NOTES AND REFERENCES

A longer paper containing all the details and sources of the new research into the two Dickson families is available in the Edinburgh Room, Edinburgh Central Library. I would like to thank those who have helped me research the Dicksons, in particular: Susan Varga and other staff of the Edinburgh Room; Leonie Paterson, Archives Librarian, Royal Botanic Garden, Edinburgh; Mark Lawley, British Bryological Society; Steve Connelly, Archivist, Perth and Kinross Council Archive; and Kyle Armstrong, Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland.

- 1 Priscilla Minay, 'Eighteenth and early Nineteenth Century Edinburgh Seedsmen and Nurserymen', *Book of the Old Edinburgh Club*, New Series 1 (1991), pp. 7–27.
- 2 John C. Loudon, *Arboretum et Fruticetum Britannicum, or the Trees and Shrubs of Britain*, 1st edn, 8 vols (London 1838), I, p. 105.
- 3 Wills and testaments of Robert, James, Archibald, William, Walter, Archibald junior, Andrew and Alexander Dickson (Borders Dicksons) and Thomas, James and George Dickson (Edinburgh Dicksons) per Index of Wills and Testaments (Scotlandspeople website).
- 4 George Tancred, *Annals of a Border Club (The Jedforest)* (Jedburgh, Edinburgh and Glasgow 1899), pp. 99–104.
- 5 Robert Wilson, *A Sketch of the History of Hawick* (Hawick 1825), p. 253.
- 6 Loudon, *Arboretum*, I, p. 105.
- 7 T. Hunter, *Woods, Forests, and Estates of Perthshire with Sketches of the principal Families in the County* (Perth 1883), p. 20. There was a well known James Dickson (c.1738–1822),

also a nursery and seedsman, who is recorded in the *Dictionary of National Biography*: Anita McConnell, 'Dickson, James (1738?–1822)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford 2004). This James Dickson came from Traquair and went to London where he set up a business in Covent Garden. He was a researcher and author, knew Sir Joseph Banks and became a founding member of the Linnaean Society, and of the Royal Horticultural Society. The author of this paper has found no evidence to link this James Dickson with the Perth nursery, or with the Borders Dickson family.

- 8 Tancred, *Annals of a Border Club*, p. 102.
- 9 Williamson, *Directory for the City of Edinburgh, 1784–85* (Edinburgh 1784), p. 23.
- 10 Minay, 'Seedsmen and Nurserymen', p. 11.
- 11 J. Loudon, *A Short Treatise on several Improvements recently made on Hot-houses* (Edinburgh 1805), preface and p. 118.
- 12 Minay, 'Seedsmen and Nurserymen', p. 11.
- 13 Edinburgh Sheriff Court Inventories, ref. SC70/1/32 (Thomas Dickson [d. 1817] his inventory, page 363).
- 14 *Ibid.*, ref. SC70/1/53 (Inventory of James Dickson [1777–1834], pp.140–156); Raeburn pp. 146,155; Cockburn p. 153.
- 15 Worth £1,789,000 at 2011 values (National Archives currency converter).
- 16 National Archives of Scotland, CS228/D/9/19; CS231/D/8/35; CS311/385; CS311/391.
- 17 Loudon, *Arboretum*, I, p. 105.
- 18 Worth £137,000 at 2011 values (National Archives currency converter).