

No. 42, South Street, Durham

John Meade Falkner had been living in the North East since 1883, fulfilling the functions of a tutor to John, and then Philip, Noble. Once the latter had reached his fifteenth birthday in the autumn of 1885, there was no longer a need for a home tutor. Luckily for Falkner, Sir Andrew Noble began to use him for secretarial work. By 1888 his position was formalised when he was made Company Secretary to Sir W.G. Armstrong Mitchell and Company. Falkner lodged in Newcastle until 1892 or 1893.



On 10th February 1889, he wrote to John Noble, 'I am thinking of moving my earthly tabernacle from Jesmond Road to better rooms in Victoria Square'.

On 2nd March 1889 he was able to tell John that he had changed his rooms to No.4 Victoria Square and *have at last got fairly settled down again after a hideous nightmare of moving, enduring for a week. I think you will like the rooms. There is no comparison at all between them and me (sic) old ones in any way – except the cooking. This article I am afraid is inferior in Victoria Square, and as you know I do depend somewhat upon creature comforts. However, no rose is without thorns and I hope by the time you return I shall have got the people somewhat into the right culinary line. The rooms are very sunny and light, which is a great improvement on my old ones, which were quite the reverse.*

I have had a battle royal with my old land-lady. She insisted on my papering my room when I went out, and to this I very naturally objected. She threatens to "take the law" of me on this point, and I certainly shall not paper it unless the law so decrees. It seems to me a monstrous idea altogether.

Falkner then moved to the city which would be his home for the rest of his life. On 1st June 1899, he was writing to Lord Rendel, not only about his impending marriage, but that he was *lucky enough to get what I think a most delightful old house at Durham. It is not of course a castle but large enough I think for us, and with some alterations it ought to make a pleasant home. It faces the Cathedral churchyard, and is the only private house on the North Side. I hope you will see it some day & not disapprove of it. Its name also pleases me – “The Divinity House”*. Although writing to the same correspondent that October that he had not yet moved in due to the alterations that were *like my clothes...terribly backward. So I am renting one of the Canon’s houses till we can shake in*, he was firmly settled in by the end of the year.

From 1892 or 1893, he had been residing elsewhere in the city. South Street, where he took lodgings at No.42, is on a steep incline up from Framwellgate Bridge. In the early 1890s it boasted inhabitants from the upper reaches of society – a clerk of works, an architect, two sub-vergers and several ‘ladies – as well as three ‘beerhouses’, a grammar school and a chimney sweep.



**Durham
Cathedral from
South Street**

Unfortunately, no letters have come to light written from South Street itself (although Falkner often used Elswick Works headed notepaper, even when he was elsewhere). What we do know is that this period saw the writing and publication of two of his three novels - *The Lost Stradivarius* (1895) and *Moonfleet* (1898) – his short story *A Midsummer Night’s Marriage* (1896), and the Murray’s *Handbook to Oxfordshire*

(1894). Perhaps the culinary standard had so improved as to unlock his Muse. The owner of the property at the time was Samuel Dean. Was Mrs Dean a wonder in the kitchen?

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The building in South Street dates back to 1742, but was refurbished in 1920. At some time in its history it was christened *Abbey View*. When it was sold on 26th April 2002, for a mere £450,000, the purchaser remembers some of the rooms being quite dark and uninviting. The walls and ceilings were covered in thick textured wallpaper (surely not papered by Meade Falkner as another penance?) which had a sombre effect.



No 42 from South Street

Some readers who use the internet will know of the website Zoopla.co.uk, which estimates the value of property throughout the United Kingdom. Presently, its estimate for No. 42 South Street is £732,094. However, the national estate agents Fine & Country (“Country Homes, Unique Properties, Period Properties, Luxury Apartments”) have had the property on the market for many months at the eye-watering amount of £1,250,000 - admittedly, *in the region of* (1). It is fascinating to speculate on Meade Falkner’s likely reaction to this.

Obviously, many changes will have occurred over the 120 years or so since he lodged there, but Fine & Country's description still excites interest:

Abbey View is one of Durham's most interesting buildings, a truly exceptional residence in this unique city. Its importance has been recognised with a grade two listed, ensuring its character and historical features are protected for future generations.

Today, the property provides an extraordinary home in a charming street packed with fascinating buildings. It offers a prestigious address in the heart of Durham, located alongside the River Wear and enjoying an unparalleled view of what has become an iconic vista of the World Heritage Site Cathedral. Built by W.Y. Jones in the vernacular revival style, the beautifully kept exterior has a Jacobean-style front door with exposed black beams and leaded windows.



**The Drawing Room in 2010
(oak panelling added since 2002)**

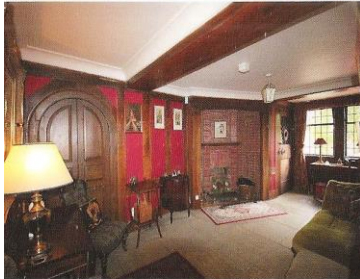
Features such as stone flagged floors, oak beams and panelling, and period fireplaces abound inside. At the centre of the home is a magnificent, warm and welcoming dining kitchen with the layout and appliances to meet the needs of a busy family and for entertaining. (Surely, more than enough to satisfy Meade Falkner's 'creature comforts').

It appears to be still for sale. Perhaps the very steep climb up from the city centre deters more elderly (and therefore wealthier?) prospective buyers. Moreover, there is no garage – nor room for one – and only space for one car on the street in front. What the sales brochure has failed to mention, is that a revered author once lodged there and that one of the most exciting adventures stories was written there. Have they missed a trick and a sale thereby?

(1). In July 2010, the Sale Price apparently had dropped to £899,950, but looking on Fine & Country's website in early June 2011 it was still being marketed at the full price.



**Reception
Hallway**



Hall area



**Dining
Room**