



John Muir's Birthplace Fact Sheet

Number 1.01 – Remembering John Muir at his Birthplace

From the beginning of the 1960s visitors seeking John Muir's roots and ancestral connections began to make the journey to Dunbar, in East Lothian, Scotland, where their hero was born. Arriving there, they found little in the way of commemoration or acknowledgement of such (to them) a significant figure. In Dunbar, he was practically forgotten.

Their interest stimulated a local response. The local tourism officer was early into the field, following up the creation of the John Muir National Historic Site in Martinez and the John Muir 5 cent stamp in 1964 with an exhibition in Dunbar during the summer of 1965. After a later visit by Bill and Mamie Kimes, renowned Muir enthusiasts, a plaque was gifted to mark the house where he was born. Muir featured again in a programme of events, Celebrating Countryside, in 1970 and at the creation of a new coastal park in 1976 it appealed to all partners that its name should be the John Muir Country Park.



John Muir's Birthplace © ELMS

Then at the end of the 1970s negotiations began over the future of the building where Muir had been born in 1838. Over the years it had served many purposes: residences on the upper floors and a wide spectrum of businesses on the lower. By 1979 most of the building had been given over to a commercial dry cleaning operation but the proprietor wished to open a fish restaurant. A deal was done whereby the building was

cosmetically restored to something like its appearance in the oldest available photographs, the first floor was reinstated and the second floor became a small museum dedicated to John Muir. This was an early public-private partnership as the property remained in private hands and the local authority secured only a lease to the museum flat.

The little museum served an important role in keeping Muir's significance alive in local awareness but suffered from a lack of strategic planning. In 1996 East Lothian Council Museum Service took responsibility and it received its first ever redisplay. The Museum Service and a new local organisation, Dunbar's John Muir Association (DJMA), which had been formed in 1994, began to work together in succeeding years.



John Muir's Birthplace ©
Glyn Satterley

DJMA attempted over the next few years to secure a comprehensive memorial to Muir's life and work. Their efforts culminated in September 1998 with the launch of the John Muir Birthplace Trust, a new partnership formed to buy the entire building and convert it into an interpretive centre dedicated to Muir. The aim was successful and the new facility opened on 23 August 2003.

In the next few years the Birthplace team worked to establish the facility as an essential part of a visit to Dunbar and East Lothian. Active outreach with schools and community groups continues to reinforce Muir's message. A new coastal path, the John Muir Way, means that the spirit of John Muir is never far from anyone who ventures to see John's *stormy North Sea*.

More information

Further reading

Muir, John, *The Story of my Boyhood and Youth*, Canongate Publishing Ltd., Edinburgh, 1987 (first published Houghton Mifflin Co., 1913)

Friends of John Muir's Birthplace, *John Muir's Dunbar*, DJMA, 1998

McWilliam, Colin, *The Buildings of Scotland - Lothian, except Edinburgh*, Penguin, London, 1978

Websites

John Muir's Birthplace

www.jmbt.org.uk

Friends of John Muir's Birthplace

www.muirbirthplacefriends.org.uk