



## John Muir's Birthplace Fact Sheet

### Number 1.03 – John Muir's Birthplace

John Muir was born in 1838 in a small house on Dunbar High Street. Today, it houses a centre dedicated to Muir revitalising all that remains of a classic Scottish tenement house. The building has seen many changes since it was built in the latter part of the 18<sup>th</sup> century.



In the 1820s Mrs Janet Kennedy leased the building. When Janet died, her daughter Helen took over lease, business, and debts. Helen then married Daniel Muir and he began to manage the business. Helen died in August 1832 leaving Daniel with all her assets. Very quickly, on 1 December 1833, he married Ann Gilrye. Their third child was John Muir.

The family's quarters were very cramped – little more than the room behind the shop on the ground floor. So Daniel and Ann sought a new home for their growing family. Daniel bought the neighbouring plot to the north in 1842 but evidence from 1841 suggests the Muirs were already in residence and a retired sea captain and William Howell, a bookbinder, had apartments in the Birthplace; Daniel may have kept the shop. In 1846 Matthew Watt bought the building and Daniel's lease was given up.

Over the years the building was improved as each generation installed the latest innovations: water, gas and eventually electricity were supplied. By 1900 a shop front with large display windows was in the ground floor, then called Black's Drapery Warehouse. In the 1960s the old shop was ripped out and metal and glass hanging display windows were inserted; at this time the ground floor was probably raised to street level – previously there had been steps down into the shop. Around 1970 the first floor flat disappeared completely when the building was adapted to fit dry cleaning machines.



Then, in 1979-80, the building was gutted and restored in a partnership between East Lothian District Council and the owners. The exterior was returned to something like the appearance shown in early photographs, the first floor flat was reinstated, and the second floor flat became a small museum dedicated to Muir.

Increased concern in environmental matters and the work of the John Muir Trust helped spread knowledge about Muir. Four interested bodies united to create the John Muir Birthplace Trust and lottery funds helped buy the building outright in 1999. In 2002 work began with the aim of producing a centre to convey John's pioneering message and ever more relevant philosophy to a 21<sup>st</sup> century audience. John Muir's Birthplace opened on 23 August 2003.

## More Information



The streets of many Scottish towns are lined with tenements built gable-to-gable to make a continuous frontage. They often start right at the pavement, leaving no room for a front garden, but hidden at the back are long, narrow plots with outbuildings and greens.

Our building was built with three flats (apartments) and a stairwell set to the rear where a small courtyard held a coalhouse and midden (waste heap). The close on the north side allows access. We know that the ground floor of the Birthplace has been used by a mealdealer, a linen draper, a taxi firm, a drycleaner and many more. Over the course of the two centuries the two upper flats or apartments have been rented to literally dozens of families.

The exterior walls are of sandstone rubble (although substantial parts have been repaired with brick) covered with harling – painted lime mortar or pebbledash. It is likely that for much of its life layers of lime-wash would have been used to protect the outside rather than paint. The pitched roof is clad with orange terra-cotta pantiles, a popular local roofing material, although the number of repairs over the years mean that an original roof of (heather) thatch or slate tiles cannot be ruled out.

## Further Reading

- McWilliam, Colin, *Lothian Except Edinburgh (Buildings of Scotland)*, Penguin, London, 1976
- Friends of John Muir's Birthplace, *John Muir's Dunbar*, DJMA, Dunbar, 1998

## Websites

- John Muir's Birthplace [www.jmbt.org.uk](http://www.jmbt.org.uk)
- Friends of John Muir's Birthplace [www.djma.org.uk](http://www.djma.org.uk)