



John Muir's Birthplace Fact Sheet

Number 1.04 – John Muir's Childhood Home



Childhood Home © Muir-Hanna Trust

John Muir grew up in one of the finest properties in Dunbar. It was a great transition from the family's first home in the back room of the ground floor of the property next door (left in this photo). It was a mark of Daniel Muir's business acumen that he was able to buy the property outright in the spring of 1842.

The house was built a century before (around 1730-40) for one of Dunbar's (and Scotland's) foremost merchants. By the 1840s his descendants were living far from Dunbar and decided to sell the property, which had been rented out for many years, per the advertisement that appears below.

House, gardens, etc., in Dunbar to be let.

To be let for one or more years as may be agreed on, and entered into immediately. That large and commodious house, in the town of Dunbar, belonging to Dr. Wightman, and presently occupied by Mr. Sandilands, with two good gardens, stables, and coachhouse. The house is well calculated for the accommodation of a genteel and numerous family, consisting of parlour, dining room, drawing room, and five excellent bedrooms, with a light bed closet to each of them, besides four garret rooms, kitchen and servant's room, cellars and other conveniences. The house, stable and garden, immediately behind it, may either be let separately or along with the coachhouse and the other stable and garden, as may be agreed to. For further particulars apply to Mr. Turnbull, surgeon, Dunbar, or to Mr. Sievwright, 102 South Bridge, Edinburgh.

Edinburgh Evening Courant, 17 December 1821

By far the majority of Dunbar's housing stock was occupied as rental accommodation when John Muir was a boy. Only a select few had the resources to be able to purchase any property, let alone something as substantial as that the Muirs' acquired. Possession of this building was akin to a statement by Daniel Muir that he had 'arrived' as someone to be watched. However, in taking on the property he found that it also came burdened with duties imposed by the previous

owners: the rights of an elderly lady, the heir of one of the tenants of the gardens, were written into the deeds. She occupied an apartment above the Muirs' laundry and she had the right to stay there for life. The gardens had been worked for many years as a commercial market garden and so were well provided with fruit trees and bushes in a good soil. They became Daniel Muir's pride and joy and John and his siblings' prison – however the stable, coachhouse on the enclosing wall and the elms at the west end provided many routes to freedom for an enterprising boy.

In the house itself the Muir family had more than sufficient space – John makes clear in his account that there were unused rooms – bedrooms, garrets and Dr Wightman's spooky old laboratory. The boys occupied one of the garret bedrooms where easy access to the roof provided ample scope for adventures out of sight of the adults. It would be reasonable to assume that their room overlooked the garden rather than the street.

The Muirs sold the property to a Dr John Lorn and his mother when they left Dunbar in 1849. In turn during 1871 the Lorns sold to William Brodie a local businessman who opened it as a temperance hotel – a popular category of accommodation in the Victorian and Edwardian period. Despite a brief period as a residential, private girls' school, it was still the Lorne Temperance Hotel, managed then by Thomas Thompson, when John Muir revisited Dunbar in 1893. The property was sold again during 1901 to John Smith, a baker, in whose family it still remains. The Smith family has adapted the property several times over the years, building a bakehouse over part of the garden around 1927-8 and by extending the top floor upwards in 1953, when the exterior walls were also clad in a cement render. The hotel closed many years ago and the apartments are once again domestic dwellings.

More information

Further reading

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

Miller, James, *History of Dunbar*, Downie, Dunbar, 1859

Pugh, RJM, *Swords, Loves and Fishes, a History of Dunbar*, Harlaw Heritage, Balerno, 2003

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

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

Websites

John Muir's Birthplace

www.jmbt.org.uk

Friends of John Muir's Birthplace

<http://muirbirthplacefriends.org.uk>

Scotland's Built Heritage

<http://www.rcahms.gov.uk/>