



John Muir's Birthplace Fact Sheet

Number 2.05 – Grandmother Gilrye

John Muir's grandmother was Margaret Hay of Coldstream, in the Scottish Borders. Margaret married David Gilrye of Dunbar in 1795, but as David had grown up near Mindrum, which is just on the English side of the border from Coldstream, their relationship was probably one of some standing.

Margaret was the daughter of a respectable artisan family in Coldstream. They had been established there as wrights (joiners or woodworkers) for several generations. As feuars or owners of property in the town, they would be amongst the established middle classes. The Muir family believed (or perhaps teased their grandmother) that the 'Hays were gentry', a not unnatural association given the number of wealthy landowning families of that name in East Lothian and Berwickshire (the counties around Dunbar and Coldstream, respectively). There is no evidence of a direct connection between Margaret Hay Gilrye and these families.

David and Margaret had made a good move to Dunbar. There were thousands of extra mouths to feed, soldiers stationed nearby guarding beaches against French invasion. As a butcher, David was in line for profitable contracts; the evidence of their house in Dunbar and David's

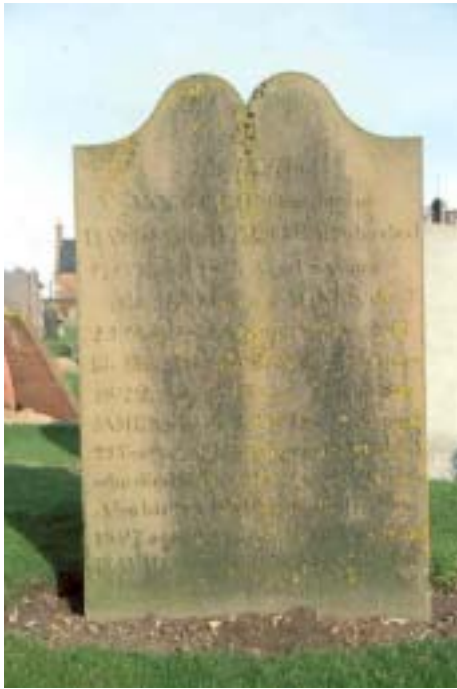


The Gilryes' home on Dunbar High Street

position as a burgess (enfranchised citizen), town councillor (an elected position), Presbyterian elder and even as a local freemason all suggest that the family prospered.

Margaret Hay probably never had a job, although she might have helped in the early years of the family business. Instead she looked after her husband, family and, eventually, helped to look after her grandchildren. Margaret probably helped her first daughter Ann with the family sampler presently displayed in John Muir's Birthplace.

At the opening of the 19th century the social life of a Dunbar merchant's wife was inevitably based around the church. Reading groups, charitable activities and events like balls and musical entertainments in the town's assembly rooms were other respectable activities for a woman of her standing.



Gilrye headstone, Dunbar

Margaret and David had 10 children. However, seven of them died from what is likely to have been tuberculosis in their teens and twenties. Although it was not uncommon to lose a child at that time, to lose so many was exceptional. Margaret seems to have transferred her devotion to her daughter Anne's growing brood – John Muir and his brothers and sisters. Most of the children seem to have spent much of their after-school evenings settled by their grandparents' fireside. There, they did their homework and absorbed the tales and ballads of Scotland's past glories related by the older folks.

Margaret died in 1853 and is buried in Dunbar Kirkyard with her husband and eight of her children.

More information

Further Reading

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

Bade, WF, *the Life and Letters of John Muir*, Houghton Mifflin, Boston, 1924

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

Pugh RJM, *Swords, Loaves & Fishes: A History of Dunbar*, Harlaw Heritage, Balerno, 2003

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

Websites

John Muir's Birthplace

www.jmbt.org.uk

Friends of John Muir's Birthplace

<http://muirbirthplacefriends.org.uk>

John Muir Exhibit

www.sierraclub.org/john_muir_exhibit/intro.html

Muir genealogy @ Martinez

www.nps.gov/archive/jomu/muir.htm