



## John Muir's Birthplace Fact Sheet

### Number 3.07 – Religion in Dunbar



Dunbar Parish Church © ELMS

Religion dominated Muir family life during their time in Dunbar and after. In the 1840s there were more ways to worship than ever there had been before – provided one was Christian. The stranglehold of the established Presbyterian Church had been broken and the town of 3,500 people had seven different churches and chapels by the time the Muirs emigrated. In addition, wandering preachers, revivalists and evangelicals were commonplace.

The 'established church', the Presbyterian Church of Scotland, occupied the site of the ancient Collegiate Church of St Bey; it was new built between 1819-22. John's grandfather served as an elder in this congregation. John Jaffray was the minister.

To cater to the growing population at the west end of the parish another church was built at Belhaven in 1840. By 1843 tensions caused schism and the Free Presbyterian Church was born. They used Belhaven until the Abbey Free Church was built at the south end of the High Street in 1850.

Even before then, in 1733 Ebenezer Erskine and his followers dissented with the Church of Scotland to form the Associate Presbytery. In 1747, that body split again. Dunbar had followers of both factions who had separate meeting places: 'anti-burgher' (established 1763) and 'burgher' (established 1766). Records show that Daniel Muir was a major contributor to the upkeep and administration of the burgher Ebenezer Erskine church, built 1814; Alexander Jack was then minister.



Abbey Free Church © ELMS

Dunbar's Methodists first met in 1752 and their chapel, built 1764, is the oldest such in Scotland. The Episcopal Church in Scotland appealed to people from the upper classes and English settlers. In the 1840s its nearest chapel was in Haddington, 15 miles away. Many of the landowners around Dunbar saw little conflict between Episcopalian worship and their role as Presbyterian heritors (administrators) but this was a major source of concern for John Muir's father. An Episcopal chapel had been built in Dunbar by the time Muir returned in 1893. Finally, in the 1840s a small Roman Catholic chapel opened in a room across the High Street from John Muir's house. A priest came from Haddington until a permanent church was built in 1877.

None of the different Dunbar congregations suited Daniel Muir's needs, leading to family friction. He took to attending meetings of itinerant evangelicals and he became a follower of the Disciples of Christ (or Campbellites). They promised that freedom of worship could be found in the New World and in 1849 Daniel uprooted his family to follow his dreams.

## More information

The earliest written record of Dunbar suggests that a Christian presence had been established by the 7<sup>th</sup> century, if not before: around 680AD the Northumbrian bishop Wilfred was imprisoned here. The town and everyone in it was Catholic until the Reformation of the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Many surviving place names recall old, vanished religious establishments – Friars Croft, Parsons Pool, Abbey Lands, Temple Lands, Maison Dieu and more. Between the Reformation and the early 18<sup>th</sup> century only Presbyterian worship was allowed and there was only one church. Disputes about the proper form of worship, organisation and Methodist revivalism introduced religious diversity into Scotland. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century diversity increased even more with the formation of more Presbyterian churches and increasing tolerance of Roman Catholic, Baptist and Episcopal congregations.

## Further Reading

- McWilliam, Colin, *The Buildings of Scotland - Lothian, except Edinburgh*, London, 1978
- Miller, James, *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*, 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)
- Dunbar Traders Association [www.dunbar.org.uk](http://www.dunbar.org.uk)
- Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) [www.disciples.org](http://www.disciples.org)
- Dunbar Churches Together [www.dct.dunbar.org.uk](http://www.dct.dunbar.org.uk)