



## John Muir's Birthplace Fact Sheet

### Number 2.04 – Grandfather Gilrye



A Victorian Butcher in East Lothian © ELMS

David Gilrye was John Muir's grandfather. He came from Northumberland in 1793 and worked and lived in Dunbar for more than 60 years. He was a successful flesher (butcher) at 109-113 High Street. His business flourished because Dunbar was a garrison town for much of the Napoleonic period.

David married Margaret Hay of Coldstream and they had 10 children; seven of them died from white plague (tuberculosis) in their teens and twenties. Their names are recorded on the family headstones in Dunbar Kirkyard.

Grandfather Gilrye became an elder in the Old Parish Church and served two turns (6 years) as a town councillor. He was well respected, appearing many times as a witness to births and marriages or recommending the trustworthiness of aspiring licensed publicans or grocers. His association with the regular establishment caused friction with his son-in-law, Daniel Muir.



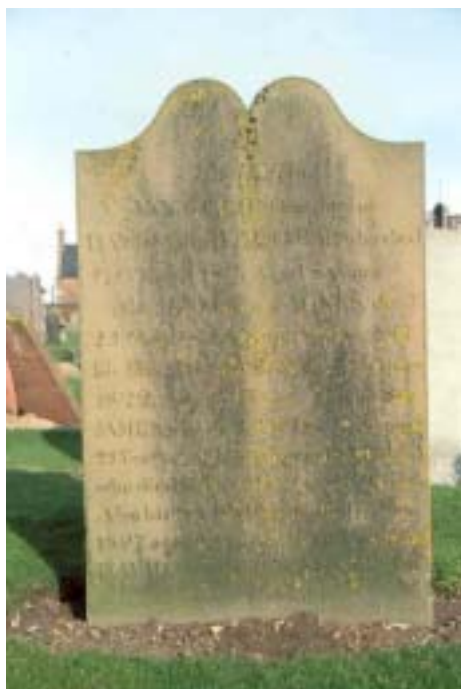
Dunbar Town Council © ELMS

However, John Muir had fond memories of his grandfather.

David encouraged an early love of nature in young John in walks around Dunbar. He taught him to read from shop signs along Dunbar High Street and to count from the public clock in the Town House steeple.

David Gilrye was well aware that Daniel Muir risked everything when he threatened to uproot his family and take off for the New World in pursuit of religious freedom. He was able to make Daniel agree that the youngest children could stay until a home was prepared for them. But once the decision was made, he could not keep the family in Dunbar.

David's wife died in 1853 and he died in 1855, without ever seeing his grandchildren again. He is buried in Dunbar Kirkyard.



The Gilrye grave © ELMS

## More information

Flesher is the old Scottish word for a butcher. A flesher bought animals from farmers, grazed them on rented fields, slaughtered them at need and sold meat and made sausages, black puddings and similar products. In Grandfather Gilrye's time there was no refrigeration. Butcher shops relied on rapid turnover, shade and the breeze to keep meat fresh!

During the Napoleonic period, between 1799 and 1815, Britain was more or less continually at war with France and the Emperor Napoleon. Extra soldiers were raised all over Britain as fears of invasion swept the country. 3000 men were based Dunbar – infantry, cavalry and artillery units.

In Presbyterian churches the elders each supervise the moral and spiritual well-being of part of the membership or congregation. Together, they assist the minister to run the church.

Dunbar's town councillors ran all local services – even the police and courts. The council began in 1369 and lasted to 1975.

## Further Reading

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)