



John Muir's Birthplace Fact Sheet

Number 3.02 – Dunbar Events and History



Dunbar Castle © ELMS

Dunbar is a small Scottish town lying on the coast of East Lothian 30 miles east of Edinburgh and 30 miles north of the border at Berwick. In John Muir's day it was a market centre for the surrounding agricultural land and a fishing port – a quiet place, far removed in character from its violent past. Episodes

from Dunbar's tumultuous history have been told and retold to generations of schoolchildren – John's biography reveals he knew these stories well.

Dunbar's written history begins around 680AD when an important bishop was imprisoned here. Dunbar was already a regional centre at this early date. Recent archaeological work shows that the settlement was even then 500 – 1000 years old. Around the year 1075 Malcolm III, king of Scots, awarded Dunbar to his relative Gospatric, exiled earl of Northumbria, a territory that once included Dunbar. Gospatric's descendants ruled for 11 generations as earls of Dunbar. Their castle was built in the 12th century and had strategic importance. It was continually fought over until political changes rendered it redundant. Over time its clifftop remains became just a favourite playground for local children.

Dunbar Castle became a royal holding in 1435 and thereafter passed from the hands of one Stewart to another. Their own loyalties led to Scottish, English and even French garrisons at different times. It was finally demolished in 1568 after playing its part in the eventful last days of freedom of Mary Queen of Scots. Dunbar town became a free burgh in 1370 and was confirmed as a royal burgh in 1435. It elected its own town council to manage its own affairs. Both John Muir's father and grandfather were elected as town councillors.

Dunbar Town House © ELMS



In John's day the council ran all public services – street lighting, water supply, harbours, roads, sewerage, education and more – and applied relevant national legislation like weights and measures. It accomplished all this with a staff of three part-time professionals, a few officers or constables, a few craftsmen and a few labourers. The town profited from its location – rich fishing grounds, access to North Sea trade routes to Europe (and beyond) and proximity to the best agricultural land in Scotland. In John Muir's time it imported timber, ashes (for fertiliser), salt and coal but exported potatoes, grain, salt herring in season and phenomenal amounts of whisky (mostly made at nearby East Linton).



Dragoons on Dunbar High Street © ELMS

Dunbar was the site of two major battles (1296 and 1650AD) between the armies of England and Scotland and several sustained sieges. The most notable was in 1338AD when Black Agnes, countess of Dunbar, famously mocked the English and held out for months. The town was burnt to the ground at least five times. It had a brush with John Paul Jones, who shot at the town as he

cruised the North Sea in his epic role in the embryonic United States Navy. It became a garrison town again at the start of the Napoleonic wars – and soldiers were still a common sight when John was growing up.

More information

Further Reading

- Muir, John, *The Story of my Boyhood and Youth*, Canongate Publishing Ltd., Edinburgh, 1987.
- 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*, Dunbar's John Muir Association, Dunbar, 1998.

Websites

- John Muir's Birthplace www.jmbt.org.uk
- Friends of John Muir's Birthplace www.djma.org.uk
- Dunbar Traders today www.dunbar.org.uk