



John Muir's Birthplace Fact Sheet

Number 3.03 – Shops in John Muir's Dunbar

John Muir's grandfather and father were both successful businessmen in Dunbar. Working a full generation apart, both men faced different challenges to provide for their families.



David Gilrye, John Muir's grandfather, came to Dunbar in 1793. He was a butcher (or *flesher*). David faced an obstacle: to trade legally he had to become a *burgess* and existing burgesses controlled admission. In effect, there was a cartel for each and every trade. Candidates had to own property, pay a fee, and swear an oath of loyalty – and David did. He bought livestock

from local farmers, rented grazing land and slaughtered the animals.

As well as meat, David sold on other products – animal skins went to a tannery at Belhaven, tallow to William Combe for candles or Henry Otto, the soap-boiler, and bones to a fertiliser and manure works. Nothing was wasted. The Gilryes got every necessity from other nearby traders: food, furniture, clothes and shoes – there were around 50 shoemakers in Dunbar! Many of these businesses were in workshops, ordinary homes and even streetside stalls rather than regular shops. However, the trend to a formal place of business where goods could be securely displayed was well underway during David Gilrye's working life and his property housed two conventional shops. In retirement David rented them out. The butchery continued for many years in other hands. The other shop was used by a clock and watchmaker, then a shoemaker and then a tailor.

In the first half of the 19th century old burgh system was 'Reformed' several times. Ancient trading privileges were repealed, the franchise was extended and new rules opened up trade. Anyone could now set up in business. Daniel Muir benefited from these changes when he arrived in 1828 or 9. He could set up in any business he liked, without hindrance from the burgesses. He first appears in records as *shopkeeper* (1833) but later he was *mealdealer*. John said his father

had a reputation for *good Scotch measure* so his business grew. Meal was a staple, every ordinary family getting through 1-2 kilogrammes every week.



By the 1840s the shops had changed. Cheap manufactured goods were available, such as china and domestic hardware. Streetside booths were disappearing and the number of 'proper' shops increased. However, homeworking was still common. William Howell occupied one of the flats in John Muir's birthplace and for nearly 40 years worked as a bookbinder from there.

That Daniel was an able businessman was soon recognised. In October 1847 he was elected to the reformed town council for a three-year term – but in February 1849 he left to lead his family on their American adventure.

More Information

Dunbar had its own administration from at least 1370. In David Gilrye's day about 100 men (the burgesses) were entitled to vote (from a population of around 3000). They elected a town council of 24 members, who each served three years. A provost (mayor), three bailies (magistrates) and a treasurer were elected from amongst the 24. Limited franchise meant that the system was wide open to abuse. Councillors could stay 'elected' for years. The electorate was around 500 after 1830s reforms. The new council was reduced to a dozen directly elected members but these 12 still nominated the senior positions. Four councillors demitted every October after serving three years; they were eligible to stand again but effectiveness was becoming more important than family or favours and many failed to keep their seats.

Further Reading

- Muir, John, *The Story of my Boyhood and Youth*, Canongate Publishing Ltd., Edinburgh, 1987 (first published Houghton Mifflin Co., 1913)
- Miller, James, *The History of Dunbar*, Downie, Dunbar, 1859
- Pugh, RJM, *Swords, Loaves & Fishes: A History of Dunbar*, Harelaw Heritage, Balerno, 2003
- Friends of John Muir's Birthplace, *John Muir's Dunbar*, DJMA, Dunbar, 1998

Websites

- Dunbar Traders today www.dunbar.org.uk
- John Muir's Birthplace www.jmbt.org.uk
- East Lothian Museums www.eastlothian.gov.uk/museums