



John Muir's Birthplace Fact Sheet

Number 3.04 – Schools in John Muir's Dunbar

In the 1840s every child in Dunbar was obliged to go to school until the age of 12 – at least in principle. There were many schools to choose from. Although public and private schools existed to make sure everyone was provided some still slipped through the net.

The town council ran the Grammar and Mathematical Schools, the *burgh schools*, located at the East Links since 1824. The teachers were appointed and paid by the town council but they charged extra for some advanced lessons to augment their salary.



A selection of tawses (whips) © ELMS

The Grammar School taught English grammar and literature, French, Latin, and the Classics as well as geography, arithmetic and science. John went to this school, where the master was David Lyon. Lyon's discipline was brutal and direct. The school dated from at least 1564 and continues today.

The Mathematical School was similar, but navigation, advanced mathematics and mechanics replaced French and Latin giving the curriculum a practical bias. James Morton ran this school. John remembers wonderful fights between Grammar and Mathematical pupils.

The Mechanics Institution, opened in 1825, provided an advanced, college-level education. Visiting lecturers were paid from students' subscriptions. It gave working craftsmen a means of learning about the new technologies of the industrial revolution as well as offering accounting and other business related courses.

There were several schools for infants but in John's time almost all of them were private ventures. John went to Mungo Suddon's private school, which was somewhere behind the Methodist Church, off the Dawell Brae. Mungo taught all



The Dawell Brae, John Muir's Playground © ELMS

his varied pupils in a single room. To them he was *the good dominie* who gave us a lot of gooseberries or currants before school skaled (closed) for the summer. The Misses Knox and others ran similar establishments. There were even small boarding schools – one for *young ladies* was near the public schools.

Even with all this activity there was concern that education did not extend to all the community's needs. Further along Castle Street from Mungo's schoolroom a committee of well-meaning people opened a charity school in 1824. It provided a basic education for anyone who could pay a penny a day.

Outside the town nearby villages had their own schools. The Parochial Board ran a school at West Barns (opened in 1790) and a private venture at East Barns catered to the rural population on the east side of Dunbar. These schools took children of all ages from infants to age 12 or so, but some able pupils from both went on to the burgh schools when they were old enough.

More information

Dunbar schools continued developed after the Muir family left Dunbar. Successive Education Acts brought more structure to the system as the 19th century neared its end. Most of the old private dominies, charity schools and dame schools disappeared. By the time that John returned to visit Dunbar in 1893 the headmaster of the Grammar School ruled an empire that took in infant, primary, secondary and continuation departments. The old parochial schools acted as feeders after the primary stages. When John was at dinner with the then headmaster, William Dick, someone joked if he didn't wish he had *the immortal glory of having whipped John Muir* – at least the tawse was still the same!

Further Reading

- Glass, L (editor), *From Slate to Disk*, Dunbar Grammar School, Dunbar, 1997
- 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
- Dunbar's John Muir Association www.djma.org.uk
- Dunbar Grammar School www.dunbargrammar.org.uk