



John Muir's Birthplace Fact Sheet

Number 3.06 – Dunbar Castle

John Muir had many memories of Dunbar, his hometown, but *best of all were the hoary ruins of Dunbar Castle*. John told stories of the old castle all his life.



Dunbar Castle Ruins © ELMS

Around 1075 King Malcolm Canmore gave Dunbar to the refugee lord Gospatric. His family became earls of Dunbar. The earldom was unique in all Britain: the Dunbars were not Gaelic, Pictish, British, Anglo-Saxon or Norman; instead they had the blood of them all.

When Henry III invaded Scotland in 1214, Dunbar Castle was *impregnable* and survived. It must already have been a stone-built castle. Over time it was extended and reinforced many times.

1296 was a busy year. A siege, a battle outside the walls, surrender to England, surrender to William Wallace, another nearby battle all followed in succession and Wallace burnt the lands of the earldom for good measure. In 1333-4 the castle was dismantled and then rebuilt – but with an English garrison. In 1338 it was back in Scottish hands. Agnes Randolph, Countess of Dunbar, defended it against the English for six weeks – some say three months – and the stories of her heroism are part of Dunbar's lore, well known to John Muir.

James I grabbed the castle in 1435 by disqualifying the then earl from his lands. But thereafter,



The Castle rock in a storm © ELMS

extended and developed, it had just as stormy a time as before. Around 1480 it was bombarded by artillery in a royal squabble. It had an English garrison in 1482 but the Scots took it back in 1485 and made improvements. By 1513 it had a French garrison and much of the surviving structure dates from this period. A blockhouse, forework and an artillery redoubt or fort were added to the defences.

The castle was heavily involved in the last days of Mary Queen of Scots. Her husband and 'protector' Bothwell was captain of the castle. After Mary was deposed in 1567 Parliament ordered that the castle be slighted (dismantled). In 1581 the ruins became the property of William Boncle, burgess of Dunbar. Since then weathering and demolition have reduced the surviving fabric to remnants. The ruins demonstrate only a fraction of the importance of this strategic site in the age-old tussles between England and Scotland (and France).

More Information

We don't know when the first stone castle was built. A good guess would be sometime in the twelfth century (1100-1200), but by then there had been fortifications (ditches and wooden palisades) around the castle headland for well over a thousand years. *Dunbar* means *fort on the height* in the old British language spoken in this area before and after the time of the Romans; archaeology has shown their traces near the castle.

The surviving parts of the castle are only a small fraction of its extent. They comprise the forework or main gatehouse, the court and grassed-over foundations of the great hall, and the massive artillery bulwark or bastion perched on its own isolated crag. For many years Dunbar housed much of the Royal Artillery of Scotland. In 1568 towers and walls were torn down, the ashlar facing was recycled and the rubble cores were left to weather. In 1842 a channel was driven through the Castle Rock for a new harbour and more of the ruins fell.

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*, William Miller, Dunbar, 1830
- Pugh, RJM, *Swords, Loaves & Fishes: A History of Dunbar*, Harlaw Heritage, Balerno, 2003
- Perry, David P., *Castle Park Dunbar: Two Thousand Years on a Fortified Headland*, Society of Antiquaries of Scotland, 2000

Websites

- The Castle custodians today www.dunbarharbourtrust.co.uk
- More on Black Agnes www.historic-uk.com/HistoryUK/Scotland-History/BlackAgnes.htm
- John Muir's Birthplace www.jmbt.org.uk
- East Lothian Museums www.eastlothian.gov.uk/museums