



John Muir's Birthplace Fact Sheet

Number 3.08 – Dunbar in the 1840s

John Muir was a boy in Dunbar during the 1840s, a time of great change.



High Street, Shore and Harbours © ELMS

The town was much smaller then: 3,500 people lived in and around the High Street or Shore – there was nowhere else. The streets and a few of the houses were lit with gas lamps; everybody else relied on candles and oil lamps. Most people got water from wells in the streets. Very few families had water supplied direct to their house but there was a plentiful supply to wells along the streets.

The economy was built around self-sufficiency – most food was grown or raised nearby; most clothes were homemade or made by local tailors; and local businesses made everything from iron nails to steam engines. Even candles came from a workshop a few doors away from John's home.

When John was growing up the town built a new harbour – the Victoria Harbour. In 1846 the railway was built connecting Dunbar to Edinburgh and Newcastle, and then London. Although the fishing industry benefited, the town's sailing ships soon went out of business.



View of the Shore from Lamer Island © Dunbar & District History Society

There were lots of schools – church schools, parish schools, burgh schools, charity schools and private schools. At the age of 7 John went to the grammar school – you can read about his schooldays in his autobiography.

Later in life John was worried about all the poor people he remembered. People who could not work had few options in the 1840s. Well-off families like the Muirs



Dwellings at the Shore © ELMS

could invest in property for security. Working class people relied on friendly societies that gave benefits in return for a regular subscription. The poorest people got hand-outs from the church: sometimes money, sometimes nursing care but usually in kind – a bed, coals, clothes or food.

Most people had a busy social life.

There were lots of societies like

the freemasons, total abstainers and free gardeners; there were literary, debating and reading groups; there were shooting and sporting clubs and more. Other groups were organised through local churches. There were four Presbyterian congregations as well as Methodists, Baptists, and a Roman Catholic chapel. They all had busy programmes beyond their core religious functions - study groups, choirs, charities and social events. There were other regular events in the Assembly Rooms – balls, concerts and dinners – and performances from travelling actors, musicians and fairs.

More information

Further reading

- Muir, John, *The Story of my Boyhood and Youth*, Canongate Publishing Ltd., Edinburgh, 1987 (first published Houghton Mifflin Co., 1913)
- Miller, James, *History of Dunbar*, Downie, Dunbar, 1859
- Pugh, RJM, *Swords, Loves and Fishes, a History of Dunbar*, Harlaw Heritage, Balerno, 2003
- Friends of John Muir's Birthplace, *John Muir's Dunbar*, DJMA, 1998
- Perry, David P., *Castle Park Dunbar: Two Thousand Years on a Fortified Headland*, Society of Antiquaries of Scotland, 2000

Websites

- For Dunbar and Fishing see: SECF @ www.historyshelf.org/secf/index.php
- For Dunbar Society see SHELF @ www.historyshelf.org/shelf/index.php
- 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
- Dunbar Grammar School www.dunbargrammar.org.uk

All text copyright East Lothian Council Museums Service, March 2004; images as acknowledged.

Produced by John Muir's Birthplace, 126 High Street, Dunbar, East Lothian, Scotland.

E-mail: info@jmbt.org.uk. Website: <http://www.jmbt.org.uk>.