



John Muir's Birthplace Fact Sheet

Number 3.09 – Lord Lauderdale's Garden



Lauderdale House from the North © ELMS

A large mansion house dominates the north end of Dunbar High Street. In John Muir's day it was just one of the homes owned by the earl of Lauderdale. The bounty of the earl's garden was one of the young John Muir's treasured memories of his Dunbar boyhood.

The earls had played a leading role in Scotland for centuries before John's day. James Maitland (1759-1839), the 8th earl, invested

heavily in Dunbar in the 1780s and 1790s. He was a great statesman and served in both houses of parliament, first as an MP and subsequently as a representative peer for Scotland in the Lords. He was renowned for his sympathies for the French Revolution ('Citizen Maitland') but despite this taint of radicalism he held many offices of State and was entrusted to negotiate peace between France and Britain in 1806. He kept weather eye on his backyard while pursuing his national career: his sons James and Anthony (later the 9th and 10th earls respectively) served on Dunbar's town council (along with John's grandfather David Gilrye), gaining experience for their own parliamentary careers and looking after the family's local interests.

The Maitlands' household was considerable: in 1841 there were around 25 resident servants looking after the 9th earl and his guests. A further set of 'outside' servants probably matched this total – the stable hands, grooms, coachmen and gardeners of the establishment. The gardeners' main domain was a 5 acre (2 hectare) kitchen garden sheltered behind 15' high stone walls a little bit to the west of the big house. The garden had to supply all the fruit, vegetables and flowers required by the household year-round – a fair challenge in the Scottish climate.

The head gardener was George Brown. John mentions figs and apples but Brown grew much more. He exhibited his produce in horticultural shows and accounts of his prizes survive. There were thirty varieties desert apples alone. They included



Ribston Pippin Apples

the well known and widely grown Ribston Pippin, Astrachan, and Nonpareil together with more than a dozen other pippin varieties, reinettes of all kinds, the wonderfully named Pomme de Violet and Ramboun d'Hiver and at least one purely local variety, Collector Lorimer. Noblesse peaches were grown on the open wall beside Breda and Mowpark apricots. The glasshouses produced white Muscat of Alexandria, black Hamburg and Grizzly Frontignac grapes and green fleshed melons amongst other produce (pineapples were a local mark of professional proficiency). We can be assured that there would have been a full range of vegetables, but only Mr Brown's celeriac seems to have won him a prize.

But how did John Muir get into this oasis of horticulture?

Brown had worked for the Maitlands' for many years – his daughter Julian Jane was named after one of the 8th earl's daughters. In 1844 Julian Jane Brown married a young man called William Mather, a full cousin of Ann Gilrye, John Muir's mother. Further, David Gilrye and George Brown were well known to each other. David had rented land from the earl via George to graze his butcher stock. When the families united, what could be more natural than David and the young John Muir on one of their walks dropping into the garden where the two elderly men could discuss family matters in peace and John could eat apples and figs to his hearts content?

More information

Further Reading

- Muir, John, *The Story of my Boyhood and Youth*, Canongate Publishing Ltd., Edinburgh, 1987 (first published Houghton Mifflin Co., 1913)
- Friends of John Muir's Birthplace, *John Muir's Dunbar*, DJMA, Dunbar, 1998
- Miller, James, *History of Dunbar*, Downie, Dunbar, 1859

Websites

- John Muir's Birthplace www.jmbt.org.uk
- Friends of John Muir's Birthplace www.djma.org.uk