



John Muir's Birthplace Fact Sheet

Number 3.13 – 1840s Dunbar and the land

Around my native town of Dunbar, by the stormy North Sea, there was no lack of wildness, though most of the land lay in smooth cultivation.

Our amusements on Saturday afternoons and vacations depended mostly on getting away from home into the country, especially in the spring when the birds were calling loudest.

Among the country folk we were far from welcome. Farmers passing us on the roads often shouted by way of greeting: "Oh, you vagabonds! Back to the toon wi' ye. Gang back where ye belang. You're up to mischief Ise warrant. I can see it. The gamekeeper'll catch ye, and maist like ye'll a' be hanged some day."

The tales of John Muir's boyhood ring down across the years and bring to life a time when Dunbar was intimately linked to its rural hinterland. Despite the protestations of the country dwellers noticed above town and country depended upon each other much more than they do today.

The district around Dunbar (its parish) had at the time 23 substantial farms, most leased by tenant farmers from the local nobility and gentry.



The estates of Broxmouth, Lochend or Belton each controlled several farms. The pattern repeated in the nearby parishes. The core of each estate was patrolled to keep poachers (and local children) away from the landowners' game and gardens.

The nearest working farm was just 100 metres from John Muir's home © D Anderson

Most of the farms were arable. The rotation could include wheat, barley, pease, potatoes and turnips as well as clover, grass or fallow. Livestock was commonly stocked for fattening or in the winter months when hill stock benefited from the milder conditions nearer the coast.



Fields near Dunbar © D Anderson

Despite many improvements and the introduction of labour saving machinery, a process well under way when John Muir was a boy, the farms needed a large input of temporary labour at peak times in the year.

The town supplied the extra hands, as well as suppliers of fertilisers and essential equipment from locally built reapers and binders or efficient steam engines for driving threshing mills. A market in the town regulated prices and quality and a twice-annual hiring fair gave employers and employees a chance to seek mutually agreeable deals. Granaries and maltings down by the Shore stored and processed much of the crop. Men like John Muir's father, a grain and (oat)meal merchant provided much of the contact between town and country.

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

Websites

- 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