



John Muir's Birthplace Fact Sheet

Number 3.1 - Dunbar Town House

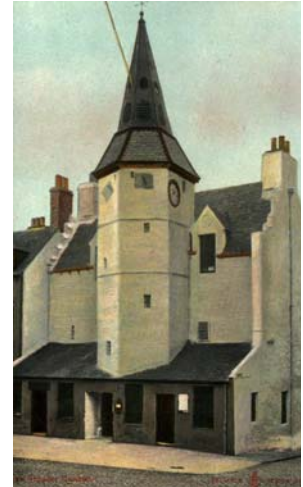
As a small boy John Muir loved to go walking with his grandfather. In his 'Boyhood and Youth' he tells of how he learned his numbers by reading the shop signs on the High Street. In the centre of the street stood the old Town House or **Tolbooth**. This was where the local town council looked after the affairs of the **burgh** for over 400 years.

The ground floor of the building has had several uses. For many years it was the local police station. Later, it was used as the local Tourist Information Office. At one time the town's library was housed in a wooden hut at the back of the building.

'You ascend up a narrow dirty staircase into two small cells...severely furnished with a little straw...' So reads an early 19C description of the jail which was on the middle floor. All kinds of prisoners were kept here, from debtors and drunks to 'witches'.

The councillors and magistrates managed the affairs of the town from the Council Chamber on the top floor. Their powers were widespread. In the Chamber are two large heraldic panels, one at each end of the room. One, dated 1686, bears the royal arms of King James VII or II. The second represents the Hanoverian period. Photographs of past **provosts** hang on the walls.

A small door leads into the tower and steeple, which house the town clock and bell. References to the clock, and a **knocksmith** from as far back as the 16C show that the clock was tended to carefully.



Courtesy of Dunbar & District History Society



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The inscription on the bell tells us that it was 'built in this first year of Burgh Reform, 1834'. A 10 o'clock curfew was rung, originally to warn frequenters of the ale-houses that it was closing time.



Today the building houses a small museum managed by East Lothian Council Museums Service. A display on local archaeology and the local history society's photographs and archives can be seen on the ground floor. Summer exhibitions are held in the jail room. The Council Chamber is still used for civil weddings. Functions and meetings are also held by the local Community Council and other organisations.

Glossary

Tolbooth – a town hall, often incorporating an office where market dues were collected, and/or a prison.

Burgh – a town with special privileges conferred by charter, with a corporation.

Provost – the head of the town or burgh council.

Knocksmith – a clockmaker.

Further reading

- Muir, John. *The Story of My Boyhood and Youth*. Wisconsin; The University of Wisconsin Press.
- Miller, James. *The History of Dunbar*. Dunbar; James Downie, 1859.
- Anderson, David. *Old Dunbar*. Ochiltree: Stenlake Publishing, 2000.
- Pugh, Roy. *Swords Loaves and Fishes*. Mid Lothian, Balerno; Harlaw Heritage, 2002.

Websites

- John Muir's Birthplace www.jmbt.org.uk
- The Sierra Club www.sierraclub.org/john_muir_exhibit
- Dunbar www.dunbar.org.uk
- Dunbar's John Muir Association www.djma.org.uk
- East Lothian Council Museums Service www.eastlothian.gov.uk/museums
- Resources for Learning in Scotland (RLS) www.rls.org.uk
- SCRAN – Access to cultural resources www.scran.ac.uk