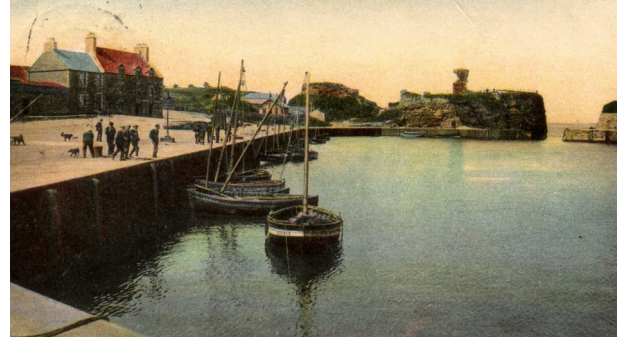




John Muir's Birthplace Fact Sheet

Number 3.2 – Dunbar's Victoria Harbour

When John Muir was growing up in Dunbar, one of the largest and most exciting developments in the town's history began. The long awaited Victoria Harbour, built in the shelter of the castle ruins, was opened in 1842. A Masonic procession led the way to lay the foundation stone, along with a time capsule. This was followed by a dinner and a ball in the Assembly Rooms.



Courtesy of Dunbar & District History Society

A harbour was recorded at Dunbar as early as the 11C, when the monks of the Isle of May, in the Firth of Forth, were granted a **toft** at the Port of Bele [Belhaven]. For centuries, fishing was one of the town's main industries. Each year hundreds of fishing boats would come to the summer herring fishing off the Dunbar coast. Their catches were gutted and packed in barrels in layers with brine, ready to be sent to Europe, Ireland or the West Indies. In the winter months local fishermen fished for white fish such as cod and whiting and shellfish such as crabs and lobsters.

Encouraged by the British Fisheries Society and the newly formed Board of Fisheries, the herring industry took off in the early 19C. Many new harbours began to be built around the Scottish Coast. As elsewhere, Dunbar's old Cromwell Harbour, just to the south of the new site, was no longer big enough.



Courtesy of Dunbar & District History Society

Dunbar Town Council received £4500 from the Fishery Board on condition that they matched this sum. One stormy day in October, members of the council and the appointed chief engineer met some of the local fishermen on the castle rock. They discussed the most suitable place for their new harbour entrance. Plans were drawn by David Stevenson of the 'lighthouse Stevenson' family.

Fifteen years after the harbour was opened, members of the council were again in London, lobbying Parliament for more funding. A recent storm had caused serious damage to the north wall. They received a further grant and a loan of over £2000.

In 1893 John Muir returned to Dunbar as part of his European tour. Then he would see a very different harbour and fishing industry from when he was a boy.

Potatoes had replaced herring and salt as the main export from the harbour. The railway, opened when John was eight years old, now carried most of the catch to home markets. While local fishermen still used smaller open boats in the winter, the larger decked **fifies** were now a common sight. Trawling, as opposed to earlier driftnet fishing, had been introduced amid much controversy. Boats were also using steam power which in turn was replaced after the turn of the 20C by engines.



Courtesy of Dunbar & District History Society

In John's absence an RNLI lifeboat had been established in the town. At the time of his visit there were also plans for a fish hatchery to be built around the castle. This was to replace white fish stocks in the North Sea. It opened one year later.

By the late 19C the south east coast had also had its share of disasters. In 1881, 189 fishermen drowned in what became known as the Great Storm or Black Friday. Eyemouth alone, to the south of Dunbar, lost 129 men. Fishing always had been, and still was, a dangerous occupation.

Glossary

toft - a homestead on a piece of land.

fifie - a type of fishing boat used mainly on the Scottish South East Coast, with an almost vertical stem and slightly raked stern, normally 2 masted.

Reading List

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- East Lothian Council Museums Service www.eastlothian.gov.uk/museums