



Royal  
Geographical  
Society  
with IBG

# From Scotland to the Sierra Nevada

A self-guided walk around Dunbar



Find out how Dunbar's landscape influenced conservationist John Muir  
Visit Muir's childhood home and the places that shaped his youth  
Explore a spectacular coastline home to a variety of wildlife  
Discover how Muir's work in the United States is celebrated in Scotland

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**the stories of our landscapes  
discovered through walks**







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Cover image: St Margaret's bay © Martin Haslett

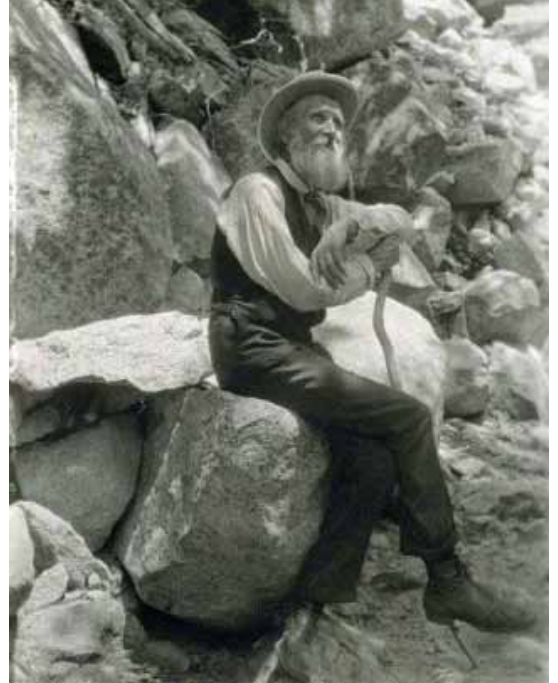
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## From Scotland to the Sierra Nevada

### Discover how Dunbar influenced the life and work of conservationist John Muir

Walker, explorer and author. Botanist, geologist and naturalist. John Muir was a remarkable man. In the nineteenth century he fought to protect nature and today he is often considered as the founder of the modern conservation movement.

Though he travelled the world, Muir is most famous for helping to protect the American wilderness. While the United States was developing rapidly, Muir's campaigns and writings preserved remarkable natural landscapes, including Yosemite Valley and Mount Rainier. He helped to establish National Parks and the Sierra Club environmental organisation.



Muir's interest in nature however stemmed from the other side of the Atlantic. Muir was born and grew up in Dunbar on the east coast of Scotland.



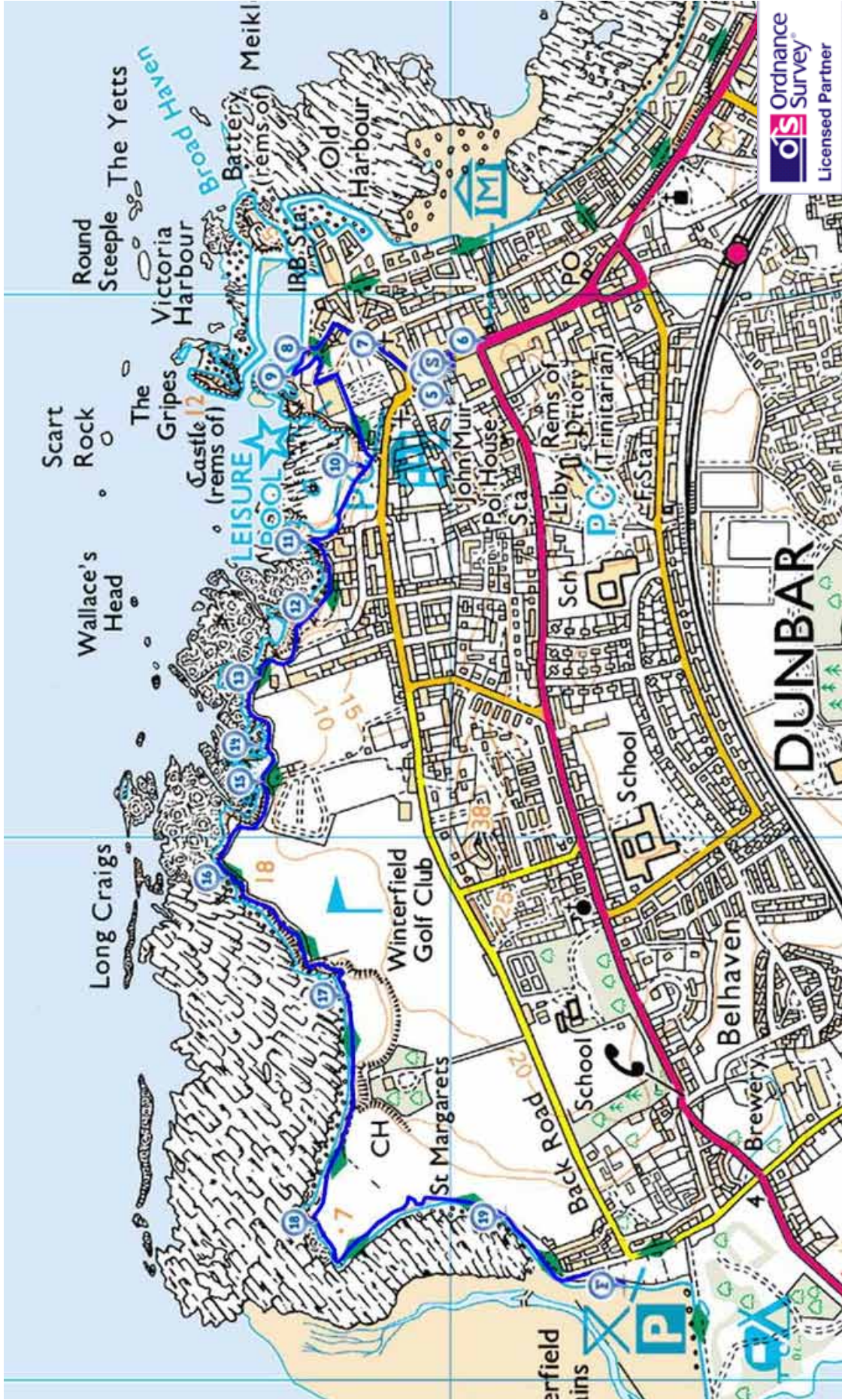
This walk explores the landscape around Dunbar that inspired Muir's early life.

Visit Muir's childhood home and the places that shaped his youth. Follow in his footsteps along a spectacular coastline home to a variety of wildlife.

Also discover how Muir is celebrated in Scotland and how Dunbar inspired his work in the United States.



# Route overview



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## Practical information

<b>Location</b>	Dunbar, East Lothian, Scotland
<b>Getting there</b>	<p><b>Car</b> - Dunbar is located on the A1 / A1(M) between Edinburgh and London. Parking is available at the Leisure Pool (charges apply). Free parking on Dunbar High Street is restricted to 1 hour stay.</p> <p><b>Train</b> - Dunbar station is on the East Coast Main Line between Edinburgh Waverley and Berwick-upon-Tweed. Most services are provided by CrossCountry between Plymouth and Edinburgh. Some local services link with Musselburgh.</p> <p><b>Bus</b> - Regular services run to Dunbar from Edinburgh, Berwick-upon-Tweed and North Berwick. The nearest stops to the start of the route are on the High Street.</p> <p><b>Bicycle</b> - Dunbar is on National Cycle Route 76 (Kirkcaldy to Berwick-upon-Tweed)</p>
<b>Start point</b>	John Muir Birthplace Museum, EH42 1JJ
<b>Finish point</b>	Shore Road car park, The John Muir Country Park, EH42 1NX
<b>Directions from railway station to start</b>	From the station bear left down Station Road. At the end carefully cross over and bear left onto Abbey Road, following signs for the town centre. This road merges with the end of the High Street. Continue along the left hand side of the High Street for about 300 metres to reach the John Muir Birthplace.
<b>Walk distance</b>	2½ miles
<b>Level</b>	Moderate - The coastal section can be very blustery, some uneven paths
<b>Terrain</b>	The first part of the walk is on town pavements. The rest follows cliff top paths along the coastline. These are mostly on gentle gradients but with several twists and turns. There are a couple of flights of steps to follow.

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### Conditions

Ensure you wear sturdy shoes. The coast path can be blustery so wrap up warm! Do not attempt the coastal section in strong winds or heavy rain - though the paths are generally in good condition there are several sheer drops.

### Suitable for

**Families** - Children will enjoy the views and exploring the rock pools. They must be supervised by adults along the coast path.

Only the town section of the route (Stops 1 to 9 up to Victoria Harbour) is suitable for pushchairs / wheelchairs.

### Refreshments

There are plenty of cafés and shops on Dunbar High Street. Dunbar Leisure Pool café (between Stops 9 and 10) serves hot meals and packed lunches.

There are no places that serve food on the coast path so you may like to prepare / buy provisions beforehand.

### Toilets

Toilets, including disabled facilities, are available at the museums. Further toilets are available at Dunbar Leisure Pool.

### Places to visit

**John Muir Birthplace Museum** is open daily from April to September. Open times are 10am-5pm Monday to Saturday, 1-5pm Sundays. From 1st October to 31st March it is closed on Mondays and Tuesdays. Free admission. Tel: 01368 865899 Email: info@jmbt.org.uk

**Dunbar Town House Museum and Art Gallery** is open daily 1pm-5pm from April to September. Guided tours including the Council Chamber are usually available on request. Free admission. Tel: 01368 866030 Email: museumseast@eastlothian.gov.uk

### Other information

You may like to bring binoculars for bird watching along the coast path

The Scottish Book Trust have created a free to download graphic novel about John Muir. Available at:  
<http://www.scottishbooktrust.com/learning/teachers-librarians/teaching-resources-cpd/john-muir/>



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## First section of the route



### Stopping points

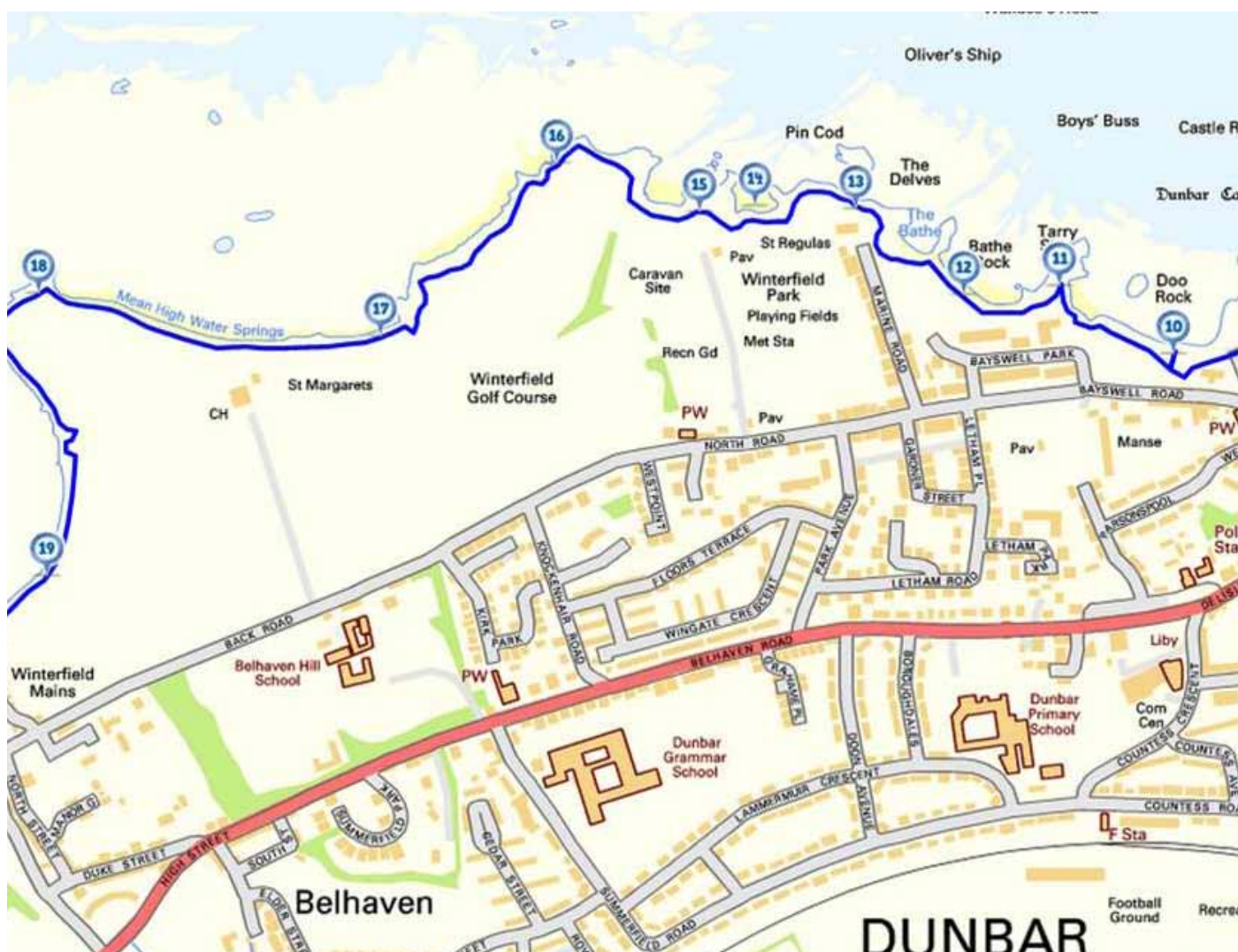
- Start** High Street outside the John Muir Birthplace Museum
- 2.** View along Dunbar High Street
  - 3.** The John Muir Birthplace Museum, 126 High Street
  - 4.** 130-134 High Street
  - 5.** Garden of 130-134 High Street
  - 6.** Dunbar Town House Museum and Art Gallery
  - 7.** Wesleyan Chapel, Victoria Street
  - 8.** Bench overlooking Victoria Harbour
  - 9.** View of Dunbar Castle
  - 10.** Foreshore west of Dunbar Castle

### Grid references

NT 67687 79161



## Second section of the route



### Stopping points

- 11.** Path on Tarry Ship headland
- 12.** Centre of Bathe Rock bay
- 13.** First bench with a view of the Bass Rock
- 14.** Bench overlooking narrow bay
- 15.** Bench opposite navigation marker
- 16.** Bench facing North Berwick Law and the Bass Rock
- 17.** Coastline at the edge of Winterfield Golf Course
- 18.** Bench near Hole 15 of Winterfield Golf Course
- 19.** Benches overlooking Belhaven Bay
- Finish** Shore Road car park, The John Muir Country Park

### Grid references

- NT 67548 79262
- NT 67308 79340
- NT 67220 79332
- NT 67115 79334
- NT 66887 79355
- NT 66493 79176
- NT 66220 79209
- NT 66261 78852
- NT 66187 78689

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## 1. Welcome to Dunbar

### High Street outside the John Muir Birthplace Museum

**“Everybody needs beauty as well as bread, places to play in and pray in, where nature may heal and give strength to body and soul alike.”**

These are the words of John Muir, a man often regarded as the father of the worldwide conservation movement. Although John Muir is well-known in America, sadly this far-thinking and influential man is less well-known in Britain - despite being born in here in Dunbar.

In nineteenth century America, Muir fought to protect nature. This was a time when American wilderness areas were rapidly opening up for farming and urban development. Muir campaigned for outstanding landscapes to be designated as National Parks. He could see that some areas needed to be protected and that making money should not be America’s only aim.



John Muir in one of the National Parks (1902)  
© Library of Congress (CCL)

This walk visits the places that Muir knew as a child. It reflects on how his early life in Dunbar and the landscape here on the southeast coast of Scotland influenced his later work. The walk was launched in 2014 as part of the commemorations of the centenary of John Muir’s death.



John Muir Way sign  
© Martin Haslett

The walk was created by Martin Haslett, a Fellow of the Royal Geographical Society.

**Martin:** “I have always had a great interest in our landscape and the forces that have formed the world as we see it today. I am also a conservationist and in my work as a town and country planner I have helped to protect the countryside from development.

The work of John Muir is important to me so I hope you enjoy finding out more about him, and exploring Dunbar and its coastline.”

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#### Directions 1

From the Birthplace Museum look to the right along the length of the High Street.

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## 2. The attraction of Dunbar

### View along Dunbar High Street

The town of Dunbar owes much to its strategic location on the main road between Newcastle and Edinburgh. The road passes through rolling country along the coastline, avoiding the more direct but more difficult route through the Lammermuir Hills.

This coastal location encouraged the growth of the town through the ages. The fertile soils of the area made an important agricultural centre and the abundant fish, particularly herring, landed at the harbour made Dunbar comparatively important.



Dunbar High Street  
© Martin Haslett

The town has also prospered from its connections with the army. During the Napoleonic Wars (1803 to 1815) Dunbar was a recruiting centre. Local people made a living from supplying the men's various needs and continued to do so in the following years. In fact it was the military that brought John Muir's father, Daniel, to Dunbar in the 1820s. He was a British Army recruiting sergeant.



Fishing was one of Dunbar's staple industries  
© Rory Walsh

At that time Dunbar was a small but thriving town with a population of about 3,000 people. Today that figure has risen to nearly 7,000. The town's economy has greatly changed, particularly due to the decline of the fishing industry.

Although there is local employment based on cement manufacture, brewing and nuclear power generation, many people commute to jobs in Edinburgh, just 30 miles away, a journey made comparatively easy by the good road and the mainline railway station.

#### Directions 2

Stay outside John Muir Birthplace Museum.



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### 3. A very modest birthplace

## The John Muir Birthplace Museum, 126 High Street

John Muir's name is respected across the world as one of the founders of the conservation movement, so this very modest Scottish house where he was born is very significant!

In the 1820s Daniel Muir (John's father) married Helen Kennedy, who was the lessee of this building. Together they managed an oats and grain business from here. When Helen died prematurely in 1832, Daniel inherited the lease and business from her. He married Ann Gilrye in 1833 and their third child, born in 1838, was John.

It is worth noting that John's family did not occupy the whole house – they lived in the room behind the shop on the ground floor. That is because this is a Scottish tenement, designed for several families to live in one building. In fact there were three families living here when John was born.



The John Muir Birthplace Museum  
© Rory Walsh



The sign above the museum entrance  
© Rory Walsh

Tenements were often built directly onto the pavement but commonly had space to the rear, as in this case. The building has been the home of dozens of families and businesses through the years and many changes have been made to its appearance.

It has now been restored, however, to something like its appearance in John Muir's time. The building is now known as the John Muir Birthplace Museum. It is well worth a visit to appreciate more of John Muir's life and work. Admission is free of charge.

#### Directions 3

With the Birthplace Museum behind you turn left and go to the building next door, in the direction of the red stone building across the end of the street.

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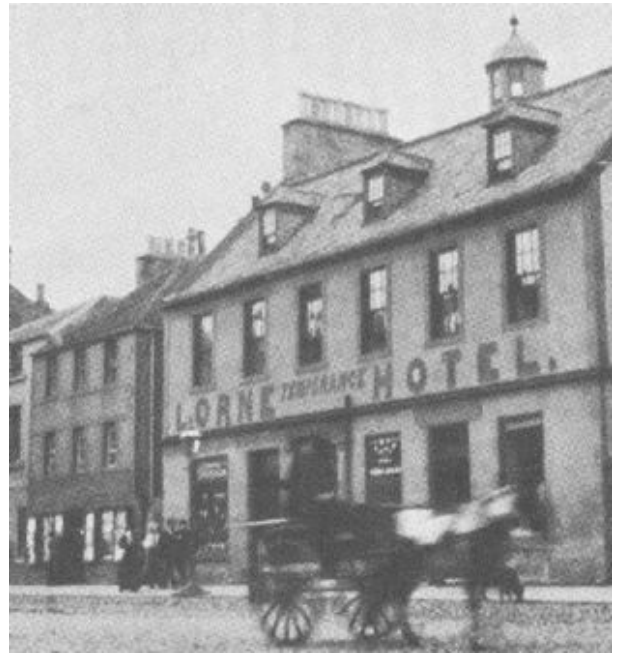
## 4. Happy childhood memories

### 130-134 High Street

By the early 1840s the family business was prospering and they soon were able to move out of the cramped tenement. In 1842 Daniel Muir bought outright this rather grand building next door. In an age when few people were able to buy their own homes, the purchase of such an impressive house was a clear sign of the family's success.

John Muir's early memories of life at home come from this building. Much later he wrote a memoir of his time in Dunbar called *The Story of My Boyhood and Youth*. The book is well worth the read for wonderful stories of what John and his brother David got up to.

According to the book the boys practised their mountaineering skills by climbing out of their garret bedroom window and up onto the roof. All while their parents thought they were safely tucked up in bed!



John Muir's birthplace (left) and childhood home (right) in the late nineteenth century  
Wikimedia Commons (CCL)



The Muir family home in 2014  
© Martin Haslett

John also recalls how the two of them made nocturnal excursions into the room next to their bedroom. This room had been used by a doctor who had previously occupied the house and it was allegedly haunted. The boys' visits were made even spookier as the doctor's ancient equipment was still inside.

These childhood explorations and adventures were to prepare John for the outdoor challenges in the life ahead of him.

#### Directions 4

Stay where you are for the next stop.

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## 5. A life-long interest in nature

### Garden of 130-134 High Street

Much of John Muir's interest in nature dated back to playing in the garden of this house, as well as in the countryside and on the seashores around Dunbar. We cannot see the garden but it formed such an important part of his upbringing that we need to pause here to consider it.

John took a great interest in nature from an early age and the garden had many examples of wildlife to study. Daniel Muir gave the children a small plot each in the garden to grow whatever they wished. John recalled that he used to dig up the larger seeds each day to see their progress – perhaps something many of us have done!

Other exploits were less harmless. To test whether cats always landed on their feet, the boys dropped a cat out of the top window of the house. Yes, the cat did land on its feet, albeit with one fewer of its nine lives left!

The boys could show great compassion too, however. When visitors stole baby robins from a nest in the garden, they were so distraught that they had to be comforted by their mother. John Muir's interest in nature defined his life's work and so much of that can be traced back to this house and its garden.

As he grew older, John and his friends would go on long walks in the countryside around Dunbar. They often annoyed local farmers and gamekeepers who distrusted the town boys. The boys were often greeted with "You're up to mischief Ise warrant!"



Muir grew up surrounded by diverse examples of nature  
© Martin Haslett / Rory Walsh

#### Directions 5

Retrace your steps, keeping the John Muir Birthplace Museum to your right. Cross over the road at the pedestrian crossing and turn right. Continue along the High Street to the tall building with a clock tower. Stop next to the sculpture outside.



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## 6. A respected family

### Dunbar Town House Museum and Art Gallery

This is Dunbar Town House, the Scots equivalent of the Town Hall. It was built in the seventeenth century and the Council Chamber is thought to be the oldest one still functioning in Scotland.

John Muir's father and grandfather both served as councillors, indicating that they were established and respected members of the local community.

This and other buildings that we have passed were all here in John Muir's boyhood, and the overall appearance of the street has not changed so much in the years since.

One of John Muir's early memories was of his grandfather taking him along the High Street and teaching him to read from the signs above the shops. Perhaps it was clear to the older man that here was a rather remarkable boy.



Dunbar Town House  
© Martin Haslett



Detail from the sculpture of Muir outside Dunbar Town House  
© Rory Walsh

The sculpture outside depicts John Muir as a young boy looking up at a flock of birds. It is mounted on a piece of Scottish sandstone.

It reflects the recent interest in marking the importance of Muir's young life in Dunbar, even though all his pioneering work was to take place in America.

The building is now the Dunbar Town House Museum and Art Gallery. It is open to visitors during the summer months with guided tours usually available on request.

#### Directions 6

Return along the High Street, with the John Muir Birthplace Museum across the road on your left. At the red stone building across the end of the street, turn right into Victoria Street. Stop when you are outside the Wesleyan Chapel.

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## 7. School days

### Wesleyan Chapel, Victoria Street

In the 1840s children in Scotland were obliged to go to school until they were aged 12, although some managed to avoid it! Not so John Muir, whose father sent him to Mungo Suddon's private school which was located here behind the Wesleyan Chapel.

Muir attended the school until he was seven or eight and there is no doubt that he received a good education. In his autobiography he recalls happy times at the school, although, if the book is to be believed, the boys spent much of their time fighting!



The Wesleyan Chapel  
© Rory Walsh

Later John attended the Grammar School in East Links, not so far from the railway station, which was a school for more academically gifted students. Even so, from his autobiography, the fighting seems to have been even more intense including pitched battles on Saturdays, probably against the adjoining Mathematical School.

Nonetheless, John learned his lessons well, mastering English, French, Latin, spelling, history, arithmetic and geography. These studies were to be very useful to him in later life - but all the fighting inevitably earned him the wrath of his disciplinarian father.

#### Directions 7

With the Chapel behind you cross over the road and turn right keep the high wall on your left and continue downhill into Castle Gate. Where the road forks, take the left fork and pass some houses. Stop when you reach a bench overlooking a harbour.

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## 8. A busy harbour

### Bench overlooking Victoria Harbour

This is Victoria Harbour. As John grew up, the view of hundreds of fishing boats here would have been one of the sights of Dunbar. When the boats came in the harbour would have come alive with the sights and sounds of fishermen, their wives, and fish merchants.

There has been a harbour in Dunbar since at least the eleventh century. This was when the monks of the Isle of May in the Firth of Forth are recorded as being granted a 'toft' (homestead) at nearby Belhaven. Fishing was an important livelihood in Dunbar for many centuries. Fish caught here were salted and exported to Ireland, Europe and even the West Indies.

As its name suggests, Victoria Harbour was built in the nineteenth century. By then the old harbour – just to the right of Victoria Harbour – was no longer big enough to support the town's fishing industry. So plans were drawn up to build the new harbour that we can see today. It opened when John Muir was four years old.

As leading members of the local community, Muir's parents and grandparents would have known all about the ambitious new plans. When Victoria Harbour opened a Masonic procession led the way to lay the foundation stone, which included a time capsule. Afterwards there was a dinner and ball at the Assembly Rooms.



Fishing boats and locals landing a catch  
© Rory Walsh / Martin Haslett

#### Directions 8

Proceed towards the stone ruins above the far end of the harbour. Stop at the side of the harbour when you have a good view of them.



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## 9. Exciting ruins

### View of Dunbar Castle

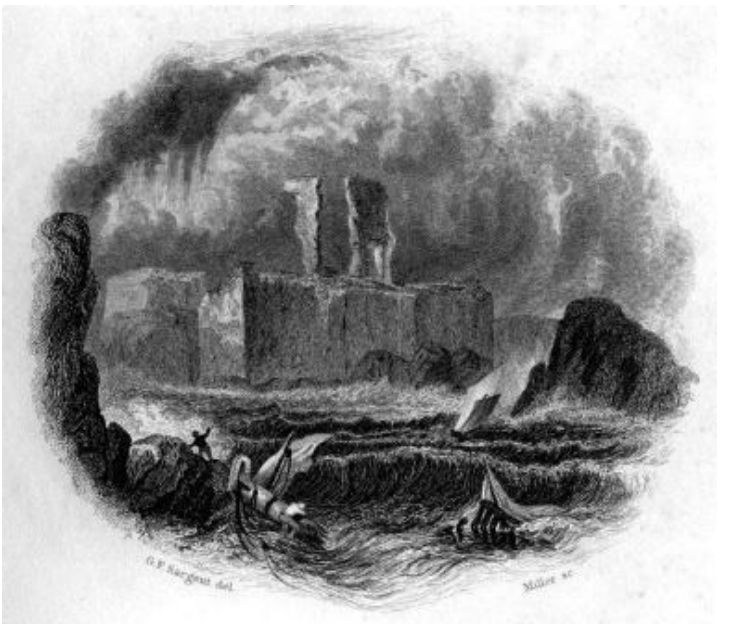
While at Victoria Harbour you can't help noticing the stone ruins above the entrance. These are the remains of Dunbar Castle. Notice that the construction work for Victoria Harbour involved driving a channel through the Castle Rock.

Dunbar Castle has a longer history than anywhere else in the town – and a somewhat chequered history at that. It is thought to have been a defensive site since the Iron Age. Around 1075 King Malcolm III of Scotland granted lands to a family that became the Earls of Dunbar.



Dunbar Castle  
© Richard West, Geograph (CCL)

On occasions the Castle was captured by the English and retaken again by the Scots. In 1513 it was held by a French garrison and much of the surviving structure dates from this period, when additional defences were added. Mary Queen of Scots' husband, James the Earl of Bothwell, was 'protector' of the Castle. After she was deposed, the Scottish Parliament required the Castle to be dismantled.



Left: Engraving of Dunbar Castle by William Miller after G F Sargent (1830s).

Right: A surviving section in 2014  
Wikimedia Commons (CCL) / © Rory Walsh



Left: a precarious arch of the Castle (1990) Right: erosion and structural damage mean it has since fallen into the sea  
© Sarah Charlesworth / Anne Burgess, Geograph (CCL)

Some of the stone was salvaged and weathering has taken its toll on the rest. The ruins are dangerous – in fact, portions regularly fall into the sea – so you cannot visit it.

It was not off limits though when John Muir was a boy. Muir often played around here and of his many memories of Dunbar “best of all were the hoary ruins of Dunbar Castle”. He practised his climbing skills on the Castle, which must have been very dangerous even then, and told stories of the Castle for the rest of his life.



Left: the Castle above Victoria harbour Right: the harbour entrance was created by cutting through Castle Rock  
© Richard West, Geograph (CCL)

### Directions 9

With the castle behind you bear right and join the path towards the leisure centre. Turn left at the information board, then turn right following the ‘John Muir Link’ signpost. Pass the front of Dunbar Leisure Pool on your right and continue past a low stone building on the left. Go down the sets of steps all the way to the foreshore and stop in the bay.



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## 10. A chance to explore

### Foreshore west of Dunbar Castle (NT 67687 79161)

The foreshore was, and still is, a popular playground for children, with rocks to climb, caves to explore, shells to collect and waves to jump. Only a few steps from his home, it seems certain that John Muir would have played here.

Muir later recorded that he loved to wander “along the seashore to gaze and wonder at the shells and seaweeds, eels and crabs in the pools among the rocks when the tide was low; and best of all to watch the waves in awful storms thundering on the black headlands and craggy ruins of old Dunbar Castle”.



Foreshore past Dunbar Castle  
© Martin Haslett

There were other excitements too. On one occasion Muir recalled going close to a new shipwreck and picking up the spoils, in this case a cargo of apples. As with young boys, there is no talk of the sadder side of the wrecks – men’s lives lost and families ruined. We now know that on that night several ships were lost and many men killed.



If you visit at low tide, do take the opportunity to look into the rock pools.

You are likely to see crabs, worms, fish, molluscs and many types of seaweed

Look for seaweed, limpets and barnacles in the rock pools  
© Rory Walsh / Martin Haslett

#### Directions 10

Leave the foreshore using the steps then turn right at the path lined with railings. Follow this path, keeping the sea on your right, to start along the John Muir Way. Ignore the set of steps and path to the left and carefully continue onto the headland. The harbour will be visible to the right. Look out to sea.



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## 11. Scotland's loss

### Path on Tarry Ship headland (NT 67548 79262)

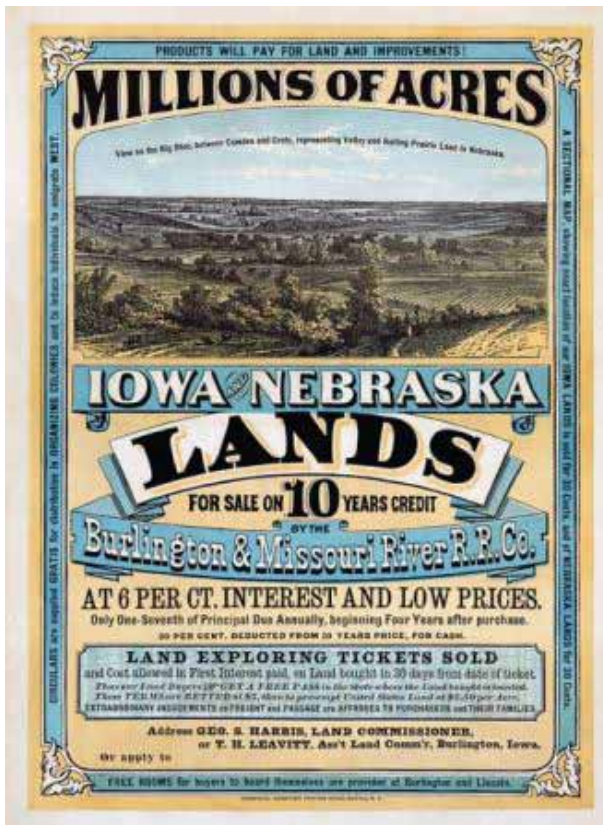
One evening in 1849, when John and his brother were doing their school work, their father told them some momentous news: the very next day they were emigrating to America! The news was probably a shock but well received. John later reflected "we were utterly, blindly glorious".



Goodbye to Dunbar - a view from Tarry Ship  
© Rory Walsh

Muir had learned a lot about America from his school lessons and, perhaps, from other people in the town who had emigrated. It was a land of opportunity and excitement.

He wrote: "No more grammar, but boundless woods full of mysterious good things; trees full of sugar, growing in ground full of gold; hawks, eagles, pigeons, filling the sky; millions of birds' nests, and no gamekeepers to stop us in all the wild happy land."



Real estate posters were designed to encourage people to emigrate to America  
Wikimedia Commons (CCL)

At first only four members of the family went to America – Daniel Muir with three of his children, Sarah aged 13, John aged 11, and his brother David, aged 9.

Other members of the family were to stay in Dunbar until Daniel had established a farm. John recalled his grandfather gave the two boys a gold coin each as a keepsake. His grandfather could not hide his sorrow as he knew that he would never see the boys again.

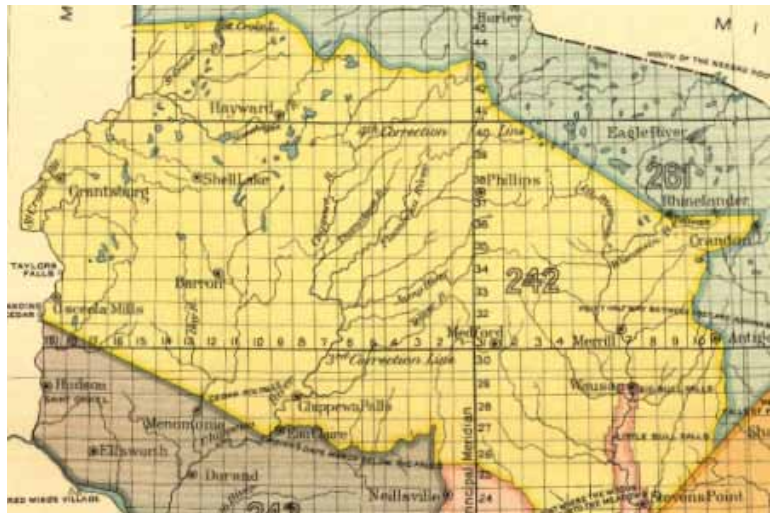
This was the period when the United States was expanding rapidly westwards and there were enormous migrations of people. In 1849 over 200,000 people arrived in America from Europe. Scottish families were encouraged to emigrate to ease unemployment at home.

The America that the Muirs moved to was largely an undeveloped wilderness. The family had a comparatively comfortable life in Dunbar so the reasons for swapping it for a very hard life in America are worth considering.

One reason was that Daniel Muir had very strong religious views and wanted to escape to the religious freedom of the New World. The Muir family's destination, the state of Wisconsin, was also one of the areas where migrants were granted plots of land to develop.

The four emigrants left Dunbar by train to Glasgow where they boarded a sailing ship. The journey across the Atlantic took six weeks and three days. Many of the passengers suffered from seasickness but John and his brother had a wonderful time.

He recalled: "As we neared the shore of the great new land, with what eager wonder we watched the whales and dolphins and porpoises and seabirds, and made the good-natured sailors teach us their names and tell us stories about them!"



The Muirs' new home - map of Wisconsin (1837)  
Wikimedia Commons (CCL)



View of Madison, state capital of Wisconsin, from the South Side of Lake Monona (1855)  
Wikimedia Commons (CCL)

### Directions 11

Retrace your steps and take the first footpath up the steps to the right. Go through the stone arch and stop on the path at the centre of the next bay.



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## 12. A very hard life

### Centre of Bathe Rock bay

When the Muirs eventually arrived in Wisconsin, a very tough life awaited them. Their farm plot was on virgin land, consisting of a patchwork of trees and clearings on poor boggy soil. The first job was to clear an area of it and build a simple log cabin, the next to begin creating a viable farm.

When this was complete, Daniel Muir's wife Ann and the other children joined them later in the year. But this was only the beginning of a very harsh existence. There were no proper roads, no schools and the nearest town was 12 miles away.

John worked on the farm but continued to study nature. He came to know the abundance of wildlife on the family's holding. He studied every animal and plant in the little spare time that he had. By the age of 15 or 16, however, he hungered for some more formalised education.

His father believed that the Bible was the only book that should ever be read but eventually allowed John to read some textbooks and works of literature. Even then John's self-education was in the form of snatched moments.

He was clearly a man of enormous physical stamina. His father insisted on the family going to bed at eight o'clock after family worship. John soon discovered he could awake refreshed at one o'clock and realised that he had gained five hours of freedom, which he continued to grasp for some time afterwards.

Using the knowledge gained from his reading, he started to make machines from the wood on the holding. These included wooden clocks, a thermometer, and a machine to get you out of bed in the morning! This was to be the start of the next phase of his life.



John Muir's 'desk clock', an invention he built to regulate the amount of time to spend upon reading a book. After a set time studying, the central wheel revolved - forcing Muir to stop reading or switch to another book  
© Vige, Flickr (CCL)

#### Directions 12

Continue along the path around the bay. Go up the steps – take your time as they are quite steep - and pass the war memorial on your left. Continue along the path onto the headland. Stop when you reach a bench facing out to sea. Look to the left for a view of the Bass Rock.



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## 13. Leaving home

### First bench with a view of the Bass Rock (NT 67308 79340)

In 1860 John Muir, then aged 22, left the family farm to exhibit his inventions at the State Agriculture Fair in Madison, Wisconsin. People were impressed by them and there were favourable reports in the local newspaper. Muir used these to help get a place at the University of Wisconsin.



The Bass Rock  
© Rory Walsh

Despite having so little formal education, John spent two and a half years at the university. He never formally took a degree, instead he chose subjects that interested him relating to the natural world.

When the American Civil War started in 1861 many of his student friends enlisted in the Union Army. Muir wrote that he took a different path – he left “for the University of the Wilderness”. Although he initially returned home to his family, John grew restless. He was soon on his first botanical journey, on foot along the Wisconsin River to the Mississippi.

In 1864 he travelled to Canada where he remained for two years. He worked for a sawmill in Meaford, Ontario, where he used his mechanical skills to improve the production processes.



Left: Calypso borealis orchid. Right: Muir in the 1870s  
© Walter Siegmund / Wikimedia Commons (CCL)

Meanwhile Muir’s love of plants continued. Wading through a swamp in Ontario one evening he discovered a new orchid, *Calypso borealis*. It became the subject of his first published writing.

In 1866 the Meaford factory burned down and Muir returned to the United States. He was employed as foreman and engineer at a carriage factory in Indianapolis, where he automated the machinery.

This was to be the next great turning point of John Muir’s life.

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In an accident at the carriage factory Muir was blinded. After weeks of agony, during which he thought his blindness would be permanent, his sight returned. His recovery led Muir to decide to leave factory work and devote his life to the study of nature.

Later that year Muir set out on a thousand-mile walk to Florida and Cuba, with South America as his ultimate goal. Though he was far away from Dunbar he never forgot its landscape. As he reached the sea in Florida he wrote that the smell of the salt air “suddenly conjured up Dunbar, its rocky coast, winds and waves... I could see only dulse and tangle, long winged gulls, the Bass Rock in the Firth of Forth, and the old castle, schools, churches, and long country rambles in search of bird’s nests.”



“Conjured” sights and sounds of Dunbar:  
Clockwise from top left: coastal rocks, wintering geese, Dunbar Castle remains, a gull at the harbour  
© Martin Haslett / Rory Walsh

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### Directions 13

Continue along the coast path. Pass the next bench and the entrance to a playing field on the left. Keep the field on your left and follow the coast path as it bends to the left. Stop at the next bench overlooking a narrow bay.



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## 14. Wandering in the Sierra

### Bench overlooking narrow bay (NT 67220 79332)

John Muir never made it as far as South America because he suffered from a serious illness, probably malaria. When he recovered, Muir decided to travel to California to visit Yosemite Valley.

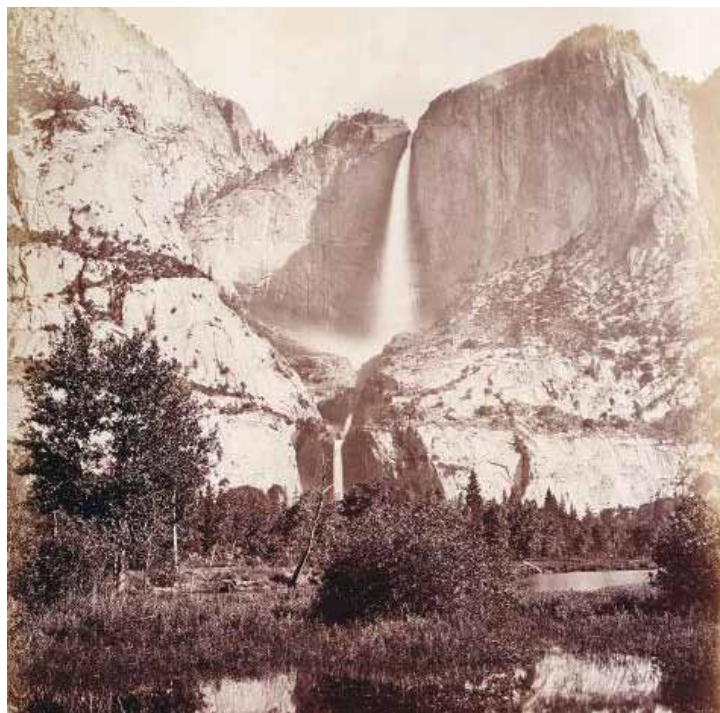
Seeing Yosemite for the first time, Muir notes that he “was overwhelmed by the landscape, scrambling down steep cliff faces to get a closer look at the waterfalls, whooping and howling at the vistas, jumping tirelessly from flower to flower”.

He was so impressed with Yosemite that it became the focus of much of his work. Muir gained employment as a shepherd which meant that he could spend long periods high up in the mountains. There he could study nature and climb the peaks.

President Abraham Lincoln had placed Yosemite under Californian state control in 1864. The area was just beginning to become a tourist destination.



Mirror Lake, Yosemite Valley  
(Carleton Watkins, c.1861-70)  
© RGS-IBG Collection



Yosemite Falls (Carleton Watkins, c.1861-70)  
© RGS-IBG Collection

Muir started to lead some guided tours. He also wrote about the landscape and how it had been formed. He was convinced that glacial action had formed the Yosemite Valley.

But this brought him into conflict with the California state geologist who believed that earthquakes were responsible for the valley’s remarkable shape. He dismissed Muir as a “mere shepherd”.

Leading scientists visited Yosemite to see the evidence for themselves. Muir was later proved right, which established his credibility as a scientist.



John Muir wrote more newspaper articles and the income from these gave him the chance to wander through the Sierra Nevada. In 1875 he set out on a three-month mule trip collecting botanical specimens.

While there he was horrified to see the destruction wreaked by men felling trees, especially the giant redwoods (*Sequoia gigantea*). These trees were being felled to provide access to others with more commercial value. Muir was determined to stop this devastation.

His one-man campaign attracted the attention of leading botanists who accompanied him on his trips, including the Director of Kew Gardens in London. Muir's career as a nature campaigner had begun.



A man standing at the foot of a sequoia tree, Mariposa Grove, Yosemite Valley (Carleton Watkins, c.1861-70)  
© RGS-IBG Collection



A group of tree loggers in Millwood, California (nineteenth century)  
Wikimedia Commons (CCL)

### Directions 14

Continue along the coast path as it zigzags around the shore. Stop when you reach a bench set in the wall with a stone plaque above. It is opposite a small green space with a stone navigation marker in the middle.



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## 15. An unsuitable travel companion

### Bench on coast path opposite navigation marker (NT 67115 79334)

Through his work and campaigns John Muir built up a wide circle of influential academic friends in California. Through them he met his future wife - Louie Wanda Strentzel, the daughter of a successful Polish migrant and fruit farmer.

In 1879 they became engaged. Almost straightaway, however, John went on a major expedition to Alaska, a wilderness area purchased by the USA from Russia 12 years previously. In 1880 John and Louie were married but a few weeks later he was off to Alaska again, followed by a further visit the next year.

Muir was not a man to settle down. At the same time, Louie was not one for travel. John and Louie did go to Yosemite together but as travel companions they were ill-matched. John, as usual, travelled very light but Louie took several trunks of clothes and objected to all the walking!



John and Louie at home with their daughters,  
Wanda and Helen (c.1888)  
Wikimedia Commons (CCL)

With such an unlikely partner family life could have been the end of John Muir's explorations. But Louie was very far-sighted. She could see that John's wanderlust should not be tamed and encouraged him to travel and write.

#### Directions 15

Continue along the coast path. Take care as the next section can be very blustery. Shortly after the path bends to the left, stop at a bench facing a distinctive hill on the horizon (North Berwick Law). The Bass Rock should still be visible to the right.

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## 16. Different views of National Parks

### Bench facing North Berwick Law and the Bass Rock (NT 66887 79355)

John Muir's continuing travels revealed more destruction of the natural environment. California was expanding rapidly and wilderness land was being developed. Muir could see the need to protect its remarkable and pristine landscape.

He wrote a series of campaigning articles and these were published in influential journals across America. Muir advocated that Yosemite and Sequoia should be specially protected so that wildlife could develop and people could enjoy these unique natural landscapes. In 1890 Muir's efforts were rewarded - Yosemite and Sequoia were designated as National Parks.



Three Brothers, Yosemite Valley  
(Carleton Watkins, c.1861-70)  
© RGS-IBG Collection

It is worth reflecting here how we protect outstanding landscapes in Britain. The importance of landscape had been recognized for many years. For example, the English poet William Wordsworth described the Lake District in 1810 as a "national property, in which every man has a right and interest who has an eye to perceive and a heart to enjoy".

The first British National Parks were not established until the late 1940s and, although the original report suggested suitable locations in Scotland, the country had none until as recently as 2002.

British National Parks are significantly different from American ones in two respects: in Britain they are not true wilderness areas and the land is privately owned rather than government owned. There are reasons for this. All the land in Britain was already in private ownership so the government could not make the parks 'national property'.

Furthermore, in Britain there are few, if any, landscapes untouched by human activity. People have been farming the land for around ten thousand years. This was not the case in America, where the Native Americans had relatively little impact on their environment. American National Parks could be preserved close to their natural state.

#### Directions 16

Continue along the coast path until it stops at a set of railings. Turn left and carefully descend the set of stone steps. Again take care as the steps are exposed and can be breezy. At the bottom turn right. Keep the sea on your right and stop after a short distance before the edge of a golf course.



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## 17. A Scotchman at home again

### Coastline at the edge of Winterfield Golf Course (NT 66493 79176)

During the Yosemite campaign John Muir had seen the value of cooperation with like-minded people. The battle to protect the Sierra Nevada was not yet over though. So with a number of other influential local people Muir founded the Sierra Club in 1892. He was its first president and this conservation society is still active today.

By now other members of Muir's family were managing the fruit farm, so he was free to undertake more travels. After a trip to the American East Coast, in 1893 he decided next on a visit to Europe with Scotland as the main destination.



Rock strata along the coastline  
© Rory Walsh

Muir spent nearly two weeks in Dunbar. He visited family, met old school friends and took nostalgic trips to the countryside. During a walk along the shore he said he "seemed a boy again and all the long eventful years in America were forgotten."



Winterfield Golf Club  
© Martin Haslett

While here, Muir didn't neglect the rest of Scotland and took trips to all the famous tourist areas. He also travelled to Norway, Switzerland and Ireland. But his visit to Dunbar seemed to make the greatest impression on him. He wrote to Louie; "Now I am a Scotchman and at home again".

Not everything he saw in Dunbar was good - Muir was shocked by the poverty he found with the decline of the fishing industry and afterwards he sent an annual donation for the town's poor.

#### Directions 17

With the beach on your right continue along the edge of the golf course. The path is lined with wooden stakes – take care as one section passes close to the foreshore. Stop when you reach a bench facing out to sea, it is located close to Hole 15 of the golf course.

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## 18. Thank you, Mr President!

### Bench near Hole 15 of Winterfield Golf Course (NT 66220 79209)

Back in America John Muir returned to the campaign trail. Thanks to the campaigns of Muir and others, in 1899 Mount Rainier was made America's fifth National Park.

In the same year, John Muir was included as part of a scientific expedition to Alaska which brought him into contact with more influential people. He remained friendly with some of them for the rest of his life.

Muir's most influential contact was the President of the United States, Theodore Roosevelt. Roosevelt accompanied Muir on a camping trip in Yosemite in 1903. Muir realised that this was a wonderful opportunity. He could talk to the President about the importance of protecting America's forests, wildlife and wilderness areas.

The two men got on well and became lasting friends. Roosevelt seemed to agree with much of John Muir's philosophy and during his presidency approved five National Parks, 18 national monuments, 55 national bird sanctuaries and wildlife refuges, and 150 national forests.



President Theodore Roosevelt (left) with Muir  
on Glacier Point, Yosemite Valley (1906)  
© Library of Congress (CCL)



Muir and colleagues at the summit of Mount Rainier (1888)  
Wikimedia Commons (CCL)

Although many of these protected places were set up in John Muir's lifetime, there was no single controlling body until 1916. This was when the US National Park Service was established, with a Sierra Club member as its first director.

Not all of John Muir's campaigns, however, were as successful.

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One example is the O’Shaughnessy Dam. It was built to form a reservoir to supply the city of San Francisco with water. The dam’s boundary is in the Hetch Hetchy valley in Yosemite National Park. Muir was horrified by the proposals but despite his efforts these eventually went ahead. There are people campaigning to this day to have the dam removed.



Top: The Hetch Hetchy Valley shortly before it was dammed (The Sierra Club Bulletin, January 1908)  
Above left: Hetch Hetchy filled with water. Above right: O’Shaughnessy Dam  
Wikimedia Commons (CCL)

### Directions 18

Keep the sea on your right and continue following the path around the golf course. The path has some ascents and descents so watch your footing. Follow the path as it bears right around a metal bridge set off the coast – at low tide it stands in the middle of a sandy beach, at high tide it is cut off by the sea. Stop when you reach a row of benches facing the bridge.



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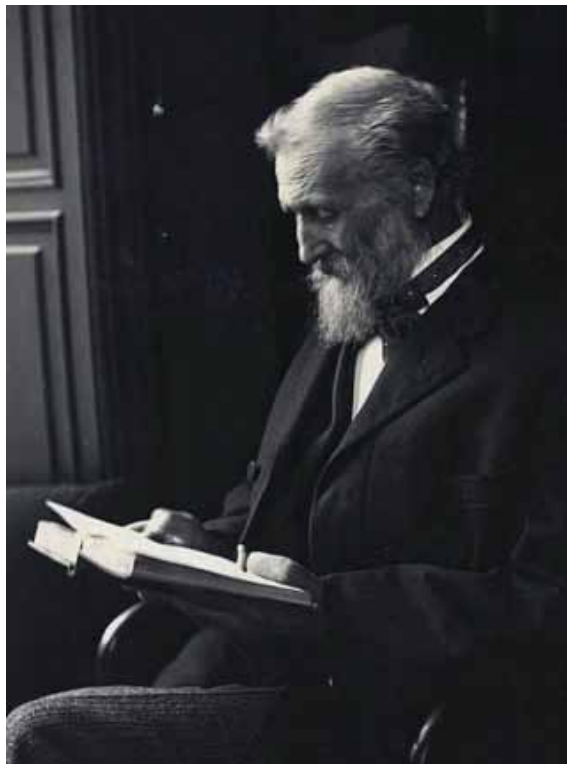
## 19. At last, time to write!

### Benches overlooking Belhaven Bay (NT 66261 78852)

By the 1900s John Muir was well-known and respected, and his articles were much in demand. Then in 1905 the death of Muir's wife, Louie, was a devastating shock and caused a setback to his writings. Muir was now aged 67, time for many a man to retire.

But not John Muir. He spent the rest of his life travelling, writing and campaigning. He travelled the world and continued as the President of the Sierra Club. On his travels Muir accumulated vast amounts of information, which he kept unpublished in notebooks.

Eventually Muir realised that he was too old to climb mountains, so he concentrated on bringing together his notes on the American wilderness. He also, though reluctantly, wrote his autobiography. This came about when a friend asked his personal secretary to help Muir with the job. The arrangement was a great success; an intended visit of a few days extended to two months! The result was the book referred to throughout this walk - *The Story of My Boyhood and Youth*.



Muir in 1912  
Wikimedia Commons (CCL)

On Christmas Eve 1914, John Muir died of pneumonia in hospital in Los Angeles. The unfinished manuscript of *'Travels in Alaska'* was by his bedside.

There are many quotations that one can take from Muir's writings that remain applicable today. One of the best comes from *My First Summer in the Sierra*, published in 1911. It is as follows:

**"When we try to pick out anything by itself,  
we find it hitched to everything else in the Universe".**

#### Directions 19

With Belhaven Bay on your right, pass the benches and join the footpath beside the road. Follow it past a row of houses. Soon a car park will appear on the right. Carefully go into the car park and stop after a short distance at the information board for John Muir Country Park.

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## 20. John Muir's legacy

### Shore Road Car Park information board, The John Muir Country Park (NT 66187 78689)

John Muir's legacy spans the world but Americans in particular have so much to thank him for. His work is highly recognised in the United States which has issued stamps and coins in Muir's memory and many Americans have edited and published his works.

In 1938 the centenary of Muir's birth was marked by the completion of the John Muir Trail, a 211 mile footpath in California. John Muir's family home, at Martinez in California, is a National Historic Site.



Left: Muir's home in Martinez, California  
Right: A United States stamp commemorating Muir (issued 1964)  
Wikimedia Commons (CCL)

Muir's legacy also remains in the Sierra Club, one of the largest and most influential environmental organisations in the United States. The Sierra Club successfully opposed the damming of the Grand Canyon. It campaigns for the protection of landscapes, reduction in pollution and leading the move away from the use of fossil fuels. One of its foremost directors went on to found Friends of the Earth in 1969, an organisation of which, one feels, John Muir would have approved.



A John Muir Way signpost near Falkirk  
© Rory Walsh

In Scotland, recognition was much slower. American visitors to Dunbar in the 1960s were disappointed to find little mention of their hero but all this has now changed. In 1976 the John Muir Country Park was designated. It extends westwards from where we are now at this car park to the village of Tynninghame.

Then in 1981 a small museum opened at Muir's birthplace and in 1983 the John Muir Trust was founded to conserve Scotland's wild places. For example, the Trust now owns Ben Nevis and part of the Cuillin mountain range on the Isle of Skye.

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In 2003 the Birthplace was restored to something like its original appearance and re-opened to the public. It is a centre for understanding Muir's message and encouraging people to take part in conservation.

Another good example of the way Scotland celebrates Muir is the coastal path from Dunbar town centre – the John Muir Link. The Link is an extension to the John Muir Way, a 134-mile route from Helensburgh in the west to the Dunbar in the east. Along its course it goes through part of Scotland's first national park - the Loch Lomond and the Trossachs National Park. The extended John Muir Way opened in 2014 to mark the centenary of Muir's death

Perhaps Scotland's most fitting tribute to Muir is at the Scottish Parliament Building, at Holyrood in Edinburgh. John Muir's words, from the Sierra Club Bulletin in 1896, are carved in stone:

**“The battle for conservation will go on endlessly.  
It is part of the universal battle between right and wrong”.**



View over Belhaven Bay, The John Muir Country Park  
© Martin Haslett

### **Directions 20**

You can return to Dunbar town centre by following the route back along the cliffs. Alternatively follow Back Road and North Road from the car park. If you follow this route you have the opportunity to make a brief excursion to Lauderdale Garden, another of John Muir's childhood haunts. To do so follow the directions on the next page.



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## Optional excursion: Just a saunter

Many years after he left Dunbar, John Muir liked to describe his epic walks as “saunters” despite their immense length and physical difficulty. You may like to make a genuine saunter to see this place!

### Directions to Dunbar High Street via Lauderdale Garden

From the car park entrance turn right. Follow the pavement up to the Stop sign. Carefully cross the road here and continue ahead into Back Road. Take care as the first section (past the other side of Winterfield golf course) has no pavement. Pass the tennis courts on the left and the entrance to Lauderdale Garden will soon appear across the road on the right.

To return to Dunbar High Street from here, continue ahead following Back Road. If you visit Lauderdale Garden, turn right when you leave and rejoin Back Road. You will meet the High Street at Lauderdale House.



Flowers, plants and even toadstools at Lauderdale Garden  
© Rory Walsh

“My earliest recollections of the country were gained on short walks with my grandfather when I was perhaps not over three years old. On one of these walks my grandfather took me to Lord Lauderdale’s gardens where I saw figs growing against a sunny wall and tasted some of them, and got as many apples to eat as I wished.”

This was John Muir’s account of visits to what is now a public park, Lauderdale Garden. His grandfather, a butcher, used to rent paddocks from the Earl of Lauderdale as grazing land for his livestock. There were also family links with the head gardener, so this was the natural place for John’s grandfather to visit on his walks with his grandson. Then, this area was the kitchen garden for Lauderdale House, the large house, now converted, that we saw set across the top of Dunbar High Street

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## **Further information**

### **John Muir Birthplace Museum**

[www.jmbt.org.uk](http://www.jmbt.org.uk)

### **Dunbar Town House Museum**

[www.eastlothianmuseums.org/content/pages/visit-our-museums/dunbar-town-house.php](http://www.eastlothianmuseums.org/content/pages/visit-our-museums/dunbar-town-house.php)

### **Dunbar Castle**

[www.visiteastlothian.org/heritarch-castle-dunbar.asp](http://www.visiteastlothian.org/heritarch-castle-dunbar.asp)

### **Dunbar Harbour Trust**

[www.dunbarharbourtrust.co.uk](http://www.dunbarharbourtrust.co.uk)

### **John Muir Country Park**

[www.visitscotland.com/info/see-do/john-muir-country-park-p252991](http://www.visitscotland.com/info/see-do/john-muir-country-park-p252991)

### **The John Muir Trust**

[www.jmt.org](http://www.jmt.org)

### **The John Muir Way**

<http://johnmuirway.org>

### **Discover Dunbar**

[www.dunbar.org.uk](http://www.dunbar.org.uk)

## **Muir-related websites in the United States**

### **National Park Service**

[www.nps.gov](http://www.nps.gov)

### **The Sierra Club**

[www.sierraclub.org](http://www.sierraclub.org)

### **John Muir Association**

<http://johnmuirassociation.org>

### **John Muir Historic Site**

[www.nps.gov/jomu/index.htm](http://www.nps.gov/jomu/index.htm)

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## Credits

The RGS-IBG would like to thank the following people for their assistance in producing this Discovering Britain walk:

**Martin Haslett** for researching and creating the walk, providing photographs and the audio narration

**Malcolm Reid** for providing the audio commentary

**Jenny Lunn** for editing the walk resources

**Rory Walsh** for compiling the walk materials and providing photographs

**Caroline Millar** for editing the audio files

**Debbie Chalmers and all the staff at the John Muir Birthplace Museum** for helpful advice on the life of John Muir, publications and image advice.

**Staff at Dunbar Town House Museum** for helpful advice and a tour of the building

**Meg Reid** for her kind hospitality to the Discovering Britain team

**Joy Wheeler** and **Jamie Owen** for images of Yosemite National Park from the RGS-IBG collection

**Robin Stott, Director of Geograph** for image advice

**Anne Burgess, Sarah Charlesworth, Walter Siegmund, Vige, Richard West and the United States Library of Congress** for additional images reproduced under Creative Commons Licenses



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<http://www.discoveringbritain.org/walks/region/scotland/edinburgh.html>



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<http://www.discoveringbritain.org/walks/region/scotland/edinburgh-royal-mile.html>



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