



FRIENDS of JOHN MUIR'S BIRTHPLACE

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Contents

John Muir & America's Best Idea.....	2
Lee Stetson walks the John Muir Way	3
<i>The Spirit of Muir</i> by Lee Stetson	4
Following in John Muir's footsteps	5
US links growing	6
Visitors to the Birthplace	6
Membership News	8



Exhibition
August 5th to September 30th



John Muir & America's Best Idea

In 2009, US film-maker Ken Burns produced a six-part series on America's National Parks for the US Public Broadcasting Service. He called it *'The National Parks: America's Best Idea'*. So whose idea was it? The first episode and much of the second was about John Muir. It was as if Burns was saying that was where it all started. Who are we to argue!

The US National Park Service (NPS) came into being on 25 August 1916. This year is being celebrated as its centennial at 59 national parks and 352 other sites managed by the NPS. They include 83 national monuments such as Muir Woods, a grove of coastal redwoods 12 miles north of San Francisco, dedicated to John Muir in 1908. There are 90 national historic sites, including Muir's home in Martinez that became one in 1962.

But it is the Parks that principally come to mind, like Yellowstone, Yosemite, Sequoia, Glacier Bay, Mount Rainier and Grand Canyon. John Muir was involved with the creation of all of these except Yellowstone, and he visited and wrote about that one.

Friends could not let the NPS centenary pass without celebrating John Muir's involvement. He was one of the first to recognise the need for areas of the US to be preserved for posterity, and what better way than as national parks. He quickly realised that a dedicated federal agency, with sufficient funding and human resources, was essential. Although he died two years before its creation, the NPS was as much his idea as anyone's, just as his vision and powers of persuasion were crucial in the creation of many of the first national parks.

The result is a Friends' exhibition, *'John Muir and America's Best Idea'*, which will run in the Birthplace through August and September. It tells the story of all of the aforementioned NPS sites and more, and of Muir's involvement. It has been supported by the Birthplace Trust, the US NPS, Dunbar Community Council and ELC's Museum Service. Don't miss it; bring you family; tell your friends!

Lee Stetson walks the John Muir Way



At the end of April the famed John Muir impersonator, Lee Stetson¹, accompanied by his wife Connie and two friends, arrived in Scotland to walk the John Muir Way. Starting at Helensburgh and walking east, Lee gave performances at various locations including the Tom Weir statue at Balmaha, the Kelpies and the Sheep's Heid Inn in Edinburgh.

He arrived in Dunbar on Friday 13th May, staying at the Dunmuir Hotel in the aptly named Yosemite suite. Saturday was spent sauntering around the town, savouring the boyhood of Muir. He spent some time at the harbour where Muir played as a boy climbing the castle walls.

He also enjoyed a tour of the 16th century Town House (right) where Muir's grandfather and father both served as town councillors. On Sunday Lee paid his respects at the Gilrye family graves where Muir's grandparents and eight of his mother's siblings lie.



Lee's performance was in Dunbar Parish Church. The present building, although badly damaged by fire in 1987, dates back to 1822 and Grandfather Gilrye was ordained an elder in that year. Lee gave an inspirational performance as John Muir, reminiscing on his life and including many inspiring Muir quotes. In the evening, a group of friends joined Lee and Connie at dinner in the Dunmuir Hotel to say farewell, safe journey home and Haste Ye Back. Just before leaving on Monday morning, we presented Lee and Connie with two of Friend's 'Wee Books', '*John Muir's Dunbar*' and '*A Scotchman Comes Home*' and certificates acknowledging that they had walked the John Muir Way.

¹ <http://www.johnmuirlive.com>

The Spirit of Muir by Lee Stetson

In 2004 I was fortunate enough to be in the first group of pupils from Dunbar Grammar School to make the inaugural trip to America to 'follow in John Muir's footsteps'. During our time in Yosemite Valley I noticed posters around where we stayed promoting Lee Stetson's performances as John Muir. Due to our busy schedule it was not possible for me to see him, but I always remembered thinking it was perhaps a missed opportunity - after all, we knew that Lee had been portraying Muir since 1983, so he must have been pretty famous for it by then! When I returned from my trip, I admired John Muir more than ever. I was proud that he was from my home town and had achieved so much with his inventions, writings and adventures. I was so inspired that I went on to work in the John Muir Birthplace Museum for many years. Now that over a decade has passed, during which time I both left Dunbar and returned again with a family of my own, you can imagine how I almost fell off my seat to read that Lee Stetson himself was coming to town!



Lee performed in Dunbar Parish Church in front of an admiring and equally keen audience. He delivered a captivating performance as Muir, reflecting on his childhood in Dunbar and providing anecdotes relating to his inventions, his struggles and successes and his many adventures. I have read Muir's books and can often finish quotations after hearing the first few words, but what I found particularly inspiring about Lee's performance was his way of placing these famous quotes into seemingly effortless context. He spoke the words of Muir and literally brought them back to life for everyone in the room - a chance for us to get a step closer to what it would have been

like to listen to the man himself. At the end of the event I introduced myself to Lee and told him that it was worth the twelve year wait to see his performance. I also made a promise that I will take my own family to Yosemite to see him perform again, this time in what remains for me one of the most magical locations in the world.

Fiona Johnston

Following in John Muir's footsteps

As reported in the last newsletter² a group of 22 senior students and five members of staff from Dunbar Grammar School were heading off to California on 26 June. These biennial visits began in 2004, so this was the seventh, resulting in over 150 S5 and S6 students having followed in some of the footsteps of DGS's most famous former pupils.

The visit started with a homestay in Martinez, including visits to Muir Woods and the John Muir National National Historic site. Accommodation was arranged by former teacher Sue Hammond³ mainly with families with students at Alhambra High School. Then it was on to Yosemite Valley and accommodation in the Valley school – apart that is for two nights



sleeping under the stars as part of a three-day high level hike. With most of the country over 6,000 feet and a large backpack full of supplies, this was not for the faint-hearted.

The final stop was in San Francisco, accommodation in a youth hostel, and a few days spent exploring probably California's most interesting and ethnically diverse city. They were there for the fireworks of Independence Day before returning home on July 8th, a 10 hour journey compared with John Muir's five week one when he came back to Dunbar in 1893.

[As mentioned in the last newsletter the possibility of the group putting on an exhibition in the Birthplace after their return to give visitors a glimpse of the group's experiences was discussed prior to their visit. It is hoped that this will take place sometime in the autumn. We will keep you informed. Ed.]

² muirbirthplacefriends.org.uk/files/2016/03/FoJMB_Newsletter_2016_03.pdf

³ www.facebook.com/Dunbar-Visits-Martinez-1431765337051153/

US links growing

The visit⁴ of five John Muir Association (JMA) board members and partners in May 2015 had already led to various exchanges of correspondence between Dunbar and Martinez. When Friends decided to mount an exhibition, to mark the centenary of the National Park Service (NPS), it was logical to get in touch with JMA. After all, the Association was established 60 years ago to protect Muir's home, resulting in it becoming the John Muir National Historic Site – and the JMA secretary, George Turnbull, who organised the Martinez end of last May's visit, was a former employee of the NPS.

An initial e-mail brought back the news that George was no longer JMA secretary, because he had gone back to the NPS for the period of the centennial. He was now in a position to contact all ten of the NPS sites we had provisionally listed and ask them to cooperate with us. Then he suggested setting up a conference call to allow ideas to be discussed. On 20 March, representatives from Yellowstone, Yosemite, Sequoia and Kings Canyon (which are managed jointly), Petrified Forest and Redwood Nat Parks along with Muir Woods and the John Muir Nat Historic Site took part along with our convener Duncan Smeed and Will Collin who has coordinated the production of the exhibition. A very useful hour was spent, contacts were identified, information and images were collected and production of the exhibition went ahead.

Visitors to the Birthplace

On 18 May, three Americans visited the Birthplace when Pauline Smeed and David Anderson were on duty. Conversations revealed that two of the visitors were geology professors, one from the University of Illinois and another from the University of the Pacific (UoP), Stockton Ca. The third was Mike Wurtz who is the curator of the Holt-Atherton Special Collections at the UoP. Since 1970 that has been the home of the John Muir Papers and a dozen other Muir related collections meaning that over 75% of the extant Muir papers are there. The three were investigating the possibility of bringing a group of geology students to Scotland and specifically Dunbar in summer 2017. It's fair to say that they left suitably impressed.

⁴ See P6 of muirbirthplacefriends.org.uk/files/2015/07/FoJMB_Newsletter_2015_07.pdf

But Mike was back the following week to see more of John Muir's Dunbar. Again time was spent with David Anderson at the Birthplace and a meeting was arranged at short notice with Will Collin who took Mike for a visit to some of the Dunbar sites that feature in Muir's *'The Story of My Birthplace and Youth'*. Mike and Will parted company with Mike hoping that he would be back in 2017 with "a boatload of students".

Jay Goldsmith



On July 16th Jim Thompson and Duncan Smeed (Friends' President & Convener respectively) welcomed Jay Goldsmith (Chief of Natural Resources, Pacific West Region, US National Park Service), to the Birthplace. Jay and his host in Edinburgh, Guy Booth, spent time in the museum after which Jim presented Jay with several of our 'wee books' to mark the occasion.

They were then joined by Pauline Smeed, Secretary of Dunbar & District History Society, who led them on a historic tour of John Muir's Dunbar. After looking around the historic Town House where John Muir's father and grandfather were Town Council members, Jay and Guy visited the Gilrye family grave.

As Guy said in a follow up e-mail: "*Jay is a modest man of some importance in the management of John Muir's heritage in the National Parks under his stewardship, so it meant a great deal for him to see where his hero actually lived. He said before he left how much he had enjoyed and valued the visit. He was also very impressed by the museum itself and by the kindness of everyone who went to so much trouble to greet him and show him around.*"



The Negraeff Family finish the John Muir Way



The Birthplace welcomed some special visitors on July 29th. From Canada, Michael Negraeff and his lovely family - Kathleen, Alex and Michaela - had just finished walking (and in Michael's case handcycling) the John Muir Way. Congratulations! The staff at JMB are always delighted to hand out certificates to those that have completed the John Muir Way. This was a special occasion!



Membership News Online Delivery of Newsletters

If you still receive paper copies of the newsletter and would like to opt out of receiving paper copies in the future then please do let us know.

Membership Renewal Reminders

Friends' Council hopes that the initiatives, events and publications that are produced to help promote Muir's life and work and that support John Muir's Birthplace have been of interest to the membership. If our records show that your membership is due for renewal then a subscription form will be included in this newsletter (e-)mailing.

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