

# FRIENDS of JOHN MUIR'S BIRTHPLACE

Newsletter No. 39, Winter 2017

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## **Annual General Meeting of 28<sup>th</sup> November 2017**

### **Convener's Report**

It is customary to begin the Convener's report by stating the aims of Friends of John Muir Birthplace (FoJMB) as given in our constitution. These aims are:

to advance the education of the public concerning John Muir, as the Dunbar-born pioneer of world nature conservation, and his belief in the unique and irreplaceable value of wild places and wild creatures;

to implement John Muir's philosophy practically by conserving, restoring and enhancing landscape and wildlife in East Lothian and Scotland;

to support the ongoing work of the John Muir Birthplace Charitable Trust and the staff of John Muir's Birthplace.

Over the past year we have continued to further these objectives by:

- Delivering a programme of talks and other events on John Muir and environmental topics, both within and outwith John Muir's Birthplace.
- Publishing regular newsletters containing items regarding John Muir, environmental issues and the work of JMB; circulated to members, available at the Birthplace and online on the Friends website<sup>1</sup>.
- Liaising with people and organisations of influence both locally and nationally. Including: John Muir Birthplace Charitable Trust; John Muir Trust; VisitScotland; US National Parks Service; Sierra Club.
- Production of exhibitions for the JMB.
- Providing volunteers on a regular and ad hoc basis to support JMB staff and to promote JMB both locally and further afield.
- Welcoming fellow Muir groups/enthusiasts to Dunbar.
- Donations and fund-raising initiatives.

Full details of the highlights over the past year have been given in the newsletters published during 2017 and the archive of all past issues is available via the FoJMB website<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://muirbirthplacefriends.org.uk>

<sup>2</sup> <http://muirbirthplacefriends.org.uk/newsletters/past/>

The events that FoJMB have helped to organise and deliver since the 2016 AGM include:

- April 21<sup>st</sup> to July 26<sup>th</sup>: FoJMB exhibition celebrating 125 years of the Sierra Club.
- May 14<sup>th</sup>: *The Artistic Expressions of John Muir*: Talk by Michael Wurtz - curator of the John Muir Papers at University of the Pacific, Stockton, CA
- July 30<sup>th</sup> to October 5<sup>th</sup>: FoJMB exhibition which explored John Muir's passion for geology and the role this played in his own adventures and discoveries.
- August 30<sup>th</sup>: Photography Sharing Evening - John Muir and Geology
- 1<sup>st</sup> October: Geology Walk led by geologist Angus Miller.
- 25<sup>th</sup> October: Talk: *The Wonders of Geology* by Fiona McGibbon
- Outreach talks. For instance to: Eyemouth Probus Club; Musselburgh Probus Club; Aberlady History Society.

The success of the Birthplace is due, of course, to the hard work and dedication of the museum staff and, also, the Friends that help out on a voluntary basis. Their heroic efforts have maintained the museum's Gold 'Green Tourism' award and the Scottish Tourist Board five star visitor attraction status.

I'd like to thank all my fellow Council members - past and present - for their tireless efforts in promoting Friends and the Birthplace.

Best wishes for 2018.

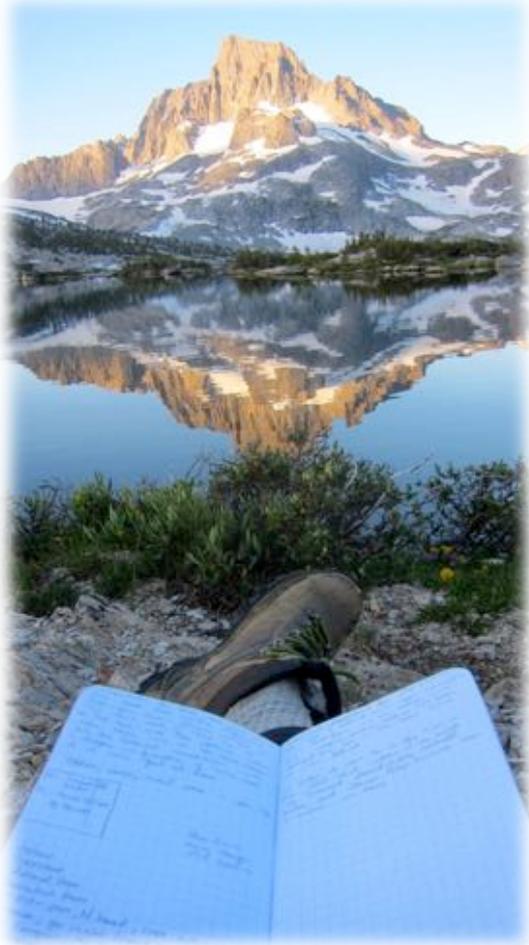
Duncan Smeed

## **Peering into the Abyss of Time: Siccar Point**

After the AGM business Friends' members were joined by non-members at Craig Pritchett's illustrated talk on Hutton and Siccar Point. There was a full house in the Community Room and the audience thoroughly enjoyed Craig's purely personal 'take' on what is undoubtedly a local wonder that's well worth a visit – Siccar Point. These extraordinary rock formations were visited by Hutton in 1788, when he and his two companions got off their boat at Siccar Point. Craig also explained the Unconformity's main contours and its significance in lay-terms and to convey Hutton's claim (made by others) to be

the Father of Modern Geology, which is undoubtedly strong. Photographs that Craig and his daughter took on a recent descent to Siccar Point provided a dramatic backdrop to this illustrated talk.

## Inspired by Muir



[The following 'letter' is a contribution by Jamie Hinrichs - a PhD student of Environmental History at the University of St Andrews. Her research evaluates the cultural values of walking in Britain, c. 1850 - 1950, and how walking contributed to the conservation of British landscape. She considers John Muir her "PhD Trail Guide", because his life, legacy, and writing underpins the way in which she examines the "saunterers" that were rambling in Scotland and England while he was wandering American landscapes. Prior to moving to Scotland, she received a certificate in Forestry Recreation & Interpretation, training as a naturalist, and did field work for the California Department of Fish and Wildlife (her 'First Summer in the Sierra') and the Forest Service. In the future, she hopes to do field work, research, and writing for a wilderness-focused organisation in the hopes of living a "John Muir life".

The photo is a 'selfie' of Jamie with her notebook (in the theme of John Muir's notebook-carrying habit) looking at Mt Banner and Thousand Island Lake - part of the John Muir Trail in California. Ed]

Hello John,

I was thinking today about when we first met. As I recall, you were poetic prose and wilderness-themed proverbs to me before you were a face and biography. So, your friendship came as a slow awareness, until the voice you gave to wild lands was so interwoven with my own outdoor experiences, so central to the inspiration for my own writing, that it seemed I'd always known you.

You might find this ridiculous, but the importance of your friendship can be partially illustrated by a locket. This locket is shaped like a book because anyone who knows me knows of my shameless affection for words. I printed out a small portrait of you and put it inside this friendship locket, because your

words are indeed friends to me – friends that continue to inspire me to write words of my own.

My creative exploits, and my current pursuit of a PhD in Environmental History, are in no small part due to a John-Muir-inspired notion of writing about the wilderness as you did, with the objective to catalyse readers to a personal hunger for outdoor exploration and conservation. I'm glad to be doing this in Scotland, finding my (hopeful) birth as a writer in the nation of your birth. I even carry a notebook with me constantly as you did, although I have not found the best way to affix it to my belt, can you show me how?

I know you spoke of writing being “*like the life of a glacier; one eternal grind*” – but I, for one, am ever thankful that you grinded on from your “Scribble Den”. I know this required you to endure low altitude sickness, but your words prompted, and continue to prompt, your readers to seek wellness in places where silence and stillness yet survive.

Looking forward to our next conversation,

Jamie

## Oldest Visitor Views Muir Link



Janet Skea with Ronnie Skea (l) and Will Collin (r)

On Thursday 25<sup>th</sup> January, the Birthplace welcomed its oldest visitor, Mrs Janet Skea who will reach the grand age of 104 on 8 April 2018. She was accompanied by her son Mr Ronald Skea and his wife Anthea. They had come to see the temporary presentation in the ground floor exhibition room. The centre-pieces of that are three first edition Muir books gifted to Friends by Mr Skea in celebration of his mother's 100<sup>th</sup> birthday in 2014.

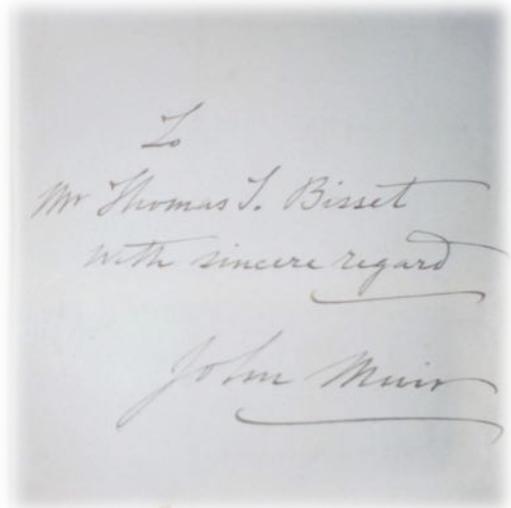
Since then the books have been in storage awaiting a suitable home but with plans afoot to provide one on

the top floor, hopefully in time for the Birthplace's 15<sup>th</sup> anniversary on 23 August, it was decided that it was time to put the three volumes on display.



One is a copy of Muir's *Mountains of California*, published by Century in 1894. Inscribed on its flyleaf is "To Rev Hugh Ross with very best wishes from his friend Thomas Magee, San Francisco, Oct 14/96". Magee was a climbing friend of Muir and had accompanied him on parts of his first two visits to Alaska.

A second is a copy of *The Story of My Boyhood and Youth*, published by Houghton Mifflin in 1913, containing a card which reads "From Mrs W H Averell, 325 East Avenue, Rochester, New York". The recipient is unknown. Mrs Mary Blossom Averell was the sister-in-law of E H Harriman who organized and financed the Harriman Expedition to Alaska in 1899 on which Muir and Mrs Averell first met. They remained friends until Muir's death.



The third, another copy of *Boyhood and Youth*, is especially interesting as Muir's inscription on it reads "To Mr Thomas T Bisset, with sincere regard, John Muir, Martinez, California, January 1914". Bisset was a Dunbar photographer who had sent Muir a parcel of his photographs and a copy of his letter to the author explains the circumstances. Muir and Bisset kept up a sporadic exchange of letters until the end of August 1914.

As Mr Skea wrote in his dedication that appears on the front of the display case, "For 8 months Janet breathed the same air as John Muir."

Among other items in the display is a copy of Bisset's earlier letter to Muir that explains Muir's gift and four 'Bisset Series' postcards.

## Friends' Next Birthplace Exhibition

Following the current temporary exhibition in the Birthplace will be one on the life of artist William Keith and his friendship with John Muir. Currently entitled '*William Keith and John Muir: Kindred Spirits*', it traces Keith's life from his birth on 21 November 1838 in Oldmeldrum, Aberdeenshire, until he



**Hetch Hetchy side canyon, 1908**

and Muir first met in Yosemite Valley in October 1872. The two instantly became friends bound together by similar interests in, and attitudes towards, nature and of course their Scottishness. The exhibition continues to trace their togetherness until Keith's death on 13 April 1911. As a measure of how close the two Scots were, John Muir was the leading pallbearer at his friend's funeral.

Over nearly 40 years, Keith accompanied Muir on numerous expeditions into the Sierra Nevada and further afield. One in 1888 saw Muir return to his wanderings, after a number of years as a fruit farmer, in preparation for his role as editor and part writer of '*Picturesque California*' for which Keith provided some of the illustrations. Keith's studio in San Francisco was a meeting place for Muir and other friends, from which came the movement to create Yosemite National Park in 1890. The same group of friends were instrumental in founding the Sierra Club in 1892. Muir had around a dozen of Keith's paintings in his home in Martinez and Keith did portraits of Muir's daughters Wanda and Helen and his in-laws John and Louisiana Strentzel.

It is intended that the exhibition, which is being produced and funded by Friends, will open in the Birthplace around 1 April and will run to the end of July or beyond. It had been hoped that it would then be taken over by Aberdeenshire Museums Service in time for it to be on show in or around Oldmeldrum by 21 November 2018. Unfortunately this is no longer an option but it may be re-considered by Aberdeenshire Library Service as Friends had made the original contact with them. We will let you know of any developments in a future newsletter.

In the USA, William Keith is known today as the 'Dean of California painters' and 'California's Old Master'. In Scotland he is virtually unknown, even in Aberdeenshire where he was born. One of the reasons for the exhibition was to promote William Keith as a leading American landscape painter and to try to raise his profile in the country of his birth.



**'Indian Camp' aka 'Hop Pickers', 1880**

## **21 Years Ago: National Launch of John Muir Award Scheme**

[This article is reproduced from the original version published in Dunbar's John Muir Association (DJMA) Newsletter #7, February 1997<sup>3</sup>. Note also that the original DJMA web pages are no longer online except for those captured by the Wayback Machine Internet Archive<sup>4</sup> ten years or so ago. Ed.]

Representatives from DJMA were invited to participate in the Public Launch of the John Muir Award Scheme on Wednesday 26th February, 1997, at Dunbar Leisure Pool. There were many exhibits from organisations that had piloted and/or supported the John Muir Award since its inception in June last year [see Newsletter #6<sup>5</sup>]. DJMA, for example, had arranged for details of the Award and for some of the work that pupils of Dunbar Primary School had undertaken under the scheme to be included in the DJMA web site. See this web page<sup>6</sup> for further details.

Nigel Hawkins, Director of the John Muir Trust, writes: "The close links between the John Muir Trust and Dunbar's John Muir Association were further cemented - and celebrated - with the very successful national launch in Dunbar of the Trust's John Muir Awards.

<sup>3</sup> <http://web.archive.org/web/20081011115757/http://www.djma.org.uk/djma/newsletters/newsletter07.html>

<sup>4</sup> <http://web.archive.org/web/20081011115757/http://www.djma.org.uk/>

<sup>5</sup> <http://web.archive.org/web/20081011115757/http://www.djma.org.uk/djma/newsletters/newsletter06.html>

<sup>6</sup> <http://web.archive.org/web/19990430051341/http://www.cs.strath.ac.uk/Contrib/JMC/JMT/JMAAward/index.html>

The awards - which are creating for themselves a special place in the environmental field - add a complete new dimension to the work of the Trust adding to our vital task of being guardian of our four estates with their superb wild landscapes in the Highlands and Islands.

Aimed at encouraging people to appreciate and understand the value of the world's wild places, the awards are helping to bring John Muir's message to wider audiences in this country. And this in turn is increasing awareness that Dunbar was the place where the young John Muir developed his love of the wild.



Photo courtesy of John Muir Trust

It was therefore very appropriate that the John Muir Awards should be launched by Lord Lindsay, Scottish Office Environment Minister and a group of young people from Dunbar Primary School, treading in the footsteps of John Muir and exploring rock pools on the beach at Dunbar. And all in front of the BBC cameras.

Lord Lindsay highlighted the fact that less than one per cent of young people are actively involved in conservation. "The ultimate aim of the John Muir Awards is to increase this to engage the majority of young Scots and I very much hope the next step will be to expand the range of the scheme to the whole of Britain", he said.

This is good news for Dunbar. As more people become aware of John Muir's work and vision, there will be real appreciation of the achievement of Dunbar's famous son and more people will want to come to Dunbar to learn about his life and work.

This fits in so well with the aspirations of the DJMA who have worked hard to increase knowledge and understanding of the importance of John Muir's life and work and the relevance of his message to the world today.

The John Muir Trust was delighted to further strengthen our links with Dunbar and with DJMA through the launch of the award. We hope this will help the

association to bring to reality its inspirational plans for explaining and presenting John Muir's world in the proposed centre looking out at the very rocks and seashore which fashioned the young man who was to become one of the world's great heroes."

## **John Muir Award – 21 Years On**

The John Muir Trust's Journal & News of January 1997 refers to "the John Muir Award initiative", telling Trust members that it's "now coming to fruition and will become an important aspect of the Trust's work". Referring to Muir's strategies for protecting wild places, the article says "he soon realised that...mass-education and awareness raising was the only way in which Conservation could be kept high on the national agenda. Muir used the Sierra Club plus his own writings and lectures to educate the public and gain support for conservation. In a similar vein The John Muir Trust has created the John Muir Award as a vehicle for involving many more people in our work."

Twenty-one years on, over 333,000 people of all ages and backgrounds have achieved a John Muir Award. And inasmuch as Muir's approach to experiencing wild places is captured in the four Challenges at its heart – Discover a wild place, Explore it, Conserve it, Share what you do – you could argue that they've all followed in Muir's footsteps to some degree.

Many have been local to Dunbar. Dunbar Primary School helped to pilot the Award pre-launch and was amongst the first to present certificates in 1996. Dunbar Grammar School and East Lothian Ranger Service are without doubt in the 'stalwarts' category, having encouraged thousands of pupils to get out into the wild nature of East Lothian, whether school grounds, woods and moorlands, or its famous coastline. And East Lothian Council, through Alan Blackie and Tom Shearer, helped to create its first major partnership, with the Rank Foundation.

Links with John Muir's Birthplace have been mutually beneficial. Local Award participants take pride in the global impact of one of their own, as we found when making a short film<sup>7</sup> about what young people think of Muir in 2014: "It's Dunbar's claim to fame. He was a really important man, and very inspirational." Visitors also hail from further afield, from Scotland's west coast and northern England, to bring Muir's story into their own personal Award experiences, to explore his legacy and contemporary relevance. "The staff at

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<sup>7</sup> <https://vimeo.com/95260067>

the Birthplace Trust were fantastic with the group” said the teacher from Glasgow’s St Bridget’s Primary School. “We had the opportunity to explore old castle ruins, cliff faces and the rocky shores, to skim stones and enjoy being out on the coast.” Not unlike a young lad 170 years ago, you might say.

The John Muir Trust is looking forward to returning to Dunbar Leisure Centre on February 26th to revisit the John Muir Award launch ceremony, to spend time on the beach (weather and tides permitting) and to offer a respectful nod towards John at the Birthplace. Were you there in 1997? If so, do get in touch. Even if not, read a John Muir Trust Journal<sup>8</sup> piece about its origins and early days, and read (and contribute to) a growing collection of testimonials from people who have been involved over two decades and more.

Rob Bushby  
John Muir Award Manager, John Muir Trust

## John Muir Award – Turning 21 Exhibition



EL Council Museums Service has coordinated an exhibition to celebrate 21 years of the John Muir Award in East Lothian. It is currently on display in John Muir’s Birthplace until 25<sup>th</sup> March (closed Mon and Tue). Stories of local JMA activity are also on show. Anyone with stories, film, photos, etc., they’d like to share are encouraged to email [museumseast@eastlothian.gov.uk](mailto:museumseast@eastlothian.gov.uk)



<sup>8</sup> <https://www.johnmuirtrust.org/Award21>

# John Muir County Park

[The following article has been contributed by Tara Sykes, Countryside Ranger. Ed]

The last year at JMCP has been a busy and interesting one. Monitoring of wildlife continues at always. This year three species of plants we monitored during the spring and summer in line with the management plan, these were seabind weed, cowslips and primrose. In addition monitoring of wildfowl and waders continued with the monthly WeBS (wetland bird survey) counts which is a national count which provides information to the British trust for ornithologists whole compile the data for the UK as a whole and it is used to assist in designations of site, examining the health of sites and assisting in management decisions.



The tern fence was erected in early April closing off the tip of Spike Island dunes to reduce the disturbance in this area where the little tern historically and over the last 7 years have nested. Unfortunately due to storms in early July the little terns abandoned the site and did not lay any eggs. However, within the fenced area three ringed plover chicks fledged.

Erecting the tern fence was undertaken with help from Dunbar Conservation Volunteers (DCV) who also worked on several other projects within JMCP such as raking the wildflower meadow, clearing out the frog pond, repairing the bridge at the frog pond, and removing tree tubes from young trees we planted a few years ago with volunteers.



If you are interested in volunteering with the Ranger Service, please get in touch with [DCV@eastlothian.gov.uk](mailto:DCV@eastlothian.gov.uk) or look up our facebook page<sup>9</sup>.

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/East-Lothian-Countryside-Ranger-Service-139367542929212/>



The Countryside Rangers also run a series of events throughout the year to help people of all ages discover more about the natural world that surrounds us.

A number of events and guided walks are put on each year. Most of these events are suitable for everyone but, due to the nature of the terrain encountered, some may not be suitable for those with limited mobility or the very young.

There is usually something on offer to suit all tastes and abilities, including:

- Guided activities
- Long distance hikes
- Practical conservation tasks

Further details of these events are available on the Ranger Events web site.<sup>10</sup>

## **John Muir's Birthplace – News Online Presence**

As reported in previous newsletters John Muir's Birthplace staff are increasingly turning to social media and other online opportunities to promote exhibitions and events. The new version of the website<sup>11</sup> for the John Muir Birthplace Trust has undoubtedly improved the online presence of John Muir's Birthplace. If you would like to keep in touch through social media please follow John Muir's Birthplace on Facebook<sup>12</sup> or @JM\_Birthplace on Twitter<sup>13</sup> using #JohnMuirDunbar #EastLothian hashtags. Feedback via social media is always appreciated.

In addition to these direct means to maintain online contact with (potential) visitors other outlets, such as Tripadvisor, provide a valuable resource. Since the last newsletter a new Tripadvisor review for John Muir's Birthplace<sup>14</sup> has been submitted and is quoted below.

*5/5 Well worth a visit: Didn't realise how important John Muir was until we visited his birthplace. This is not really a museum, but a story of his life told in*

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<sup>10</sup> <https://www.eastlothian.gov.uk/rangerservice>

<sup>11</sup> <http://www.jmbt.org.uk>

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/JMBirthplace>

<sup>13</sup> [https://twitter.com/JM\\_Birthplace](https://twitter.com/JM_Birthplace)

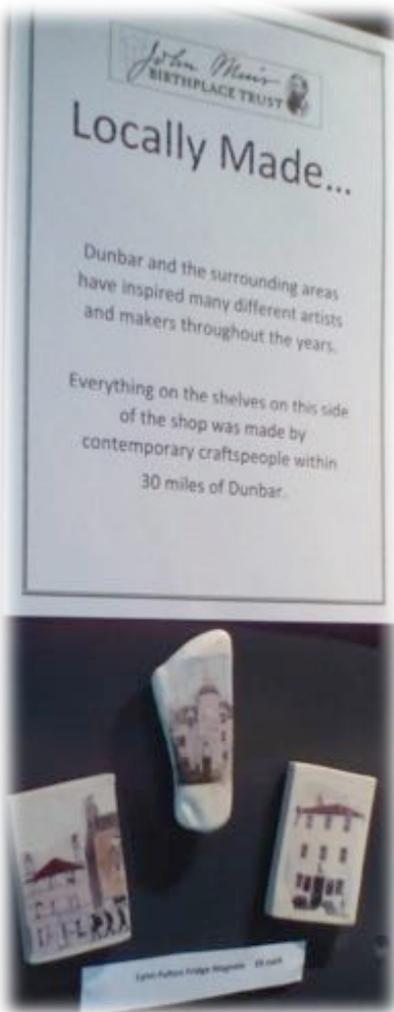
<sup>14</sup> <http://tinyurl.com/yc28xfv3>

*just enough detail to keep you interested. We were warmly welcomed by one of the staff who gave us an overview of John Muir's achievements. He was very enthusiastic, as was the lady in the small gift shop. The displays were well presented and easily understood. The American people owe John Muir a debt of gratitude and it is nice to know how well he is regarded particularly in California.*

## Locally Made

As a Gold Green Tourism venue, we are always striving at John Muir's Birthplace to find new ways of looking after the environment and championing local producers.

Our latest innovation is to highlight local craftspeople in our shop. We now have a new '**Locally Made...**' section in which all items for sale are produced within 30 miles of Dunbar. So why not pop in for a look and treat yourself to some lovely toiletries from Chain Bridge Honey Farm, or some lovely Sea Glass Jewellery from Back from the Beach. We have lovely ties and scarves in John Muir Way Tartan from Gordon Nicholson as well as Sheila Sim and Gordon Jenkinson Cards and Lynn Fulton Ceramics. Gifts from Lothian Lavender – a newly established lavender grower whose family farm is nestled at the foot of the Lammermuir Hills in East Lothian – include soap, candles, wax melts and lavender bags.



Dunbar and East Lothian have long provided inspiration for artists and makers, and this is our small way of celebrating their work.

Don't forget that members of the Friends of John Muir's Birthplace are eligible for a 10% discount on items bought at the Birthplace.



# FREE Weekend Activities with EAST Lothian COUNCIL MUSEUMS

All our museums have FREE ADMISSION and lots of drop-in crafts and activities that are perfect for that last-minute day trip. For details please see [www.eastlothian.gov.uk/museums](http://www.eastlothian.gov.uk/museums)

## Fun & Crafty Weekend Drop-in Activities in February

From Friday lunchtime to Sunday afternoon and during school holidays, 1pm-4pm please join us in John Muir's Birthplace for fun drop-in crafts and activities! Suggested donation £1 per craft.

February 14<sup>th</sup>–18<sup>th</sup> and 23<sup>rd</sup>–25<sup>th</sup> - **Craft stick dolls**

Follow us on Facebook at East Lothian Council Museums Service or John Muir's Birthplace<sup>15</sup> to find out more.

## National Museums and Wellbeing Week

Tuesday 13<sup>th</sup> March 2–4pm in the foyer at Bleachingfield Centre. Our museums are free to visit and open to everyone. We are happy to discuss the needs of any individuals or groups who would like to visit any of the museums so that we can tailor a visit just for you.

## EXHIBITIONS

**Turning 21.** The John Muir Trust formally launched the John Muir Award in Dunbar in February 1997. We are currently sharing the stories of local John Muir Award activity at John Muir's Birthplace until 25<sup>th</sup> Mar (closed Mon and Tue). Do you have stories, film, photos etc that we could share during this exhibition? If so, please email [museumseast@eastlothian.gov.uk](mailto:museumseast@eastlothian.gov.uk).

**Digging Up Dunbar.** Over ten thousand years of history in this exhibition of archaeological discovery. Sat and Sun 2pm - 4pm courtesy of Dunbar & District History Society. At Dunbar Town House Museum & Gallery until 25<sup>th</sup> Mar.

## Festival of Museums 2018

**SAVE THE DATE** – Festival of Museums 2018, Friday 18<sup>th</sup> to Sunday 20<sup>th</sup> May. Events in Dunbar, Haddington and Prestonpans.

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<sup>15</sup> <https://www.jmbt.org.uk/whats-on/>

## **Membership News**

### **Online Delivery of Newsletters**

A significant number of Friends have opted out of receiving paper copies of the Newsletter and now read the online version<sup>16</sup> instead. This is a significant saving since the production and delivery cost of the Newsletter is now a substantial proportion of the membership subscription. 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.

### **Online News**

Due to the fact that this ‘paper’ newsletter is only produced four times a year some announcements and news items are past their ‘use-by date’ by the time of production. Many of these news items are published/announced on the Friends’ website and/or the Friends’ Facebook page<sup>17</sup> and, for local events, on the Dunbar Events Facebook page<sup>18</sup>. The revamped John Muir’s Birthplace website now makes it much easier to post news items and is now an excellent resource for being kept up to date with developments there. There are, of course, many other online outlets for Muir-related news and Friends’ also use these for promoting events, etc.

### **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.

**Official address: Friends of John Muir’s Birthplace, John Muir’s Birthplace, 126 High Street, Dunbar EH42 1JJ: tel: 01368 865899**

**Friends Email: [info@muirbirthplacefriends.org.uk](mailto:info@muirbirthplacefriends.org.uk)**

**Friends Website: [www.muirbirthplacefriends.org.uk](http://www.muirbirthplacefriends.org.uk)**

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<sup>16</sup> <http://muirbirthplacefriends.org.uk/newsletters/current/>

<sup>17</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/groups/fojmb/>

<sup>18</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/groups/497808383660101/>