

New 'Shale Trail' tells the story



Massive monument to the industrial past: The Five Sisters bing at West Calder.

WORK IS UNDERWAY on a new £310,000 shale oil heritage trail, to tell the story of the days when West Lothian was the shale oil capital of the world, even meeting 2% of the world's oil needs in the 1890s, reports *Hugh Dougherty*.

It tells the remarkable story

of a 100-year period, stretching from the 1860s, when Glasgow chemist, James 'Paraffin' Young patented a method of extracting oil by heating shale mined from pits across West Lothian. His discovery turned the area into an energy power-house, which, at its height, before the First World

War, boasted of 100 mines and oil works, run by 20 companies. The industry employed around 40,000 workers at its height, the majority living in company houses built in new towns and villages founded to service the boom.

Thousands of immigrants moved into the area to towns such as West Calder, Addiewell and Broxburn, all of which owe their origins to the shale boom, with many Irish workers coming after the Great Famine of 1848, while Cornish tin miners also arrived in large numbers, using their expertise to mine shale rather than tin, having heard of the oil bonanza in West Lothian.

The refineries, indeed the first oil refinery in the world, was opened in Bathgate in the 1850s, shortly before Young really got down to work, producing paraffin which was in great demand for oil lamps, replacing tallow and whale oil, fuel oil, detergents and chemicals, in massive quantities for use at home and throughout the then

British Empire.

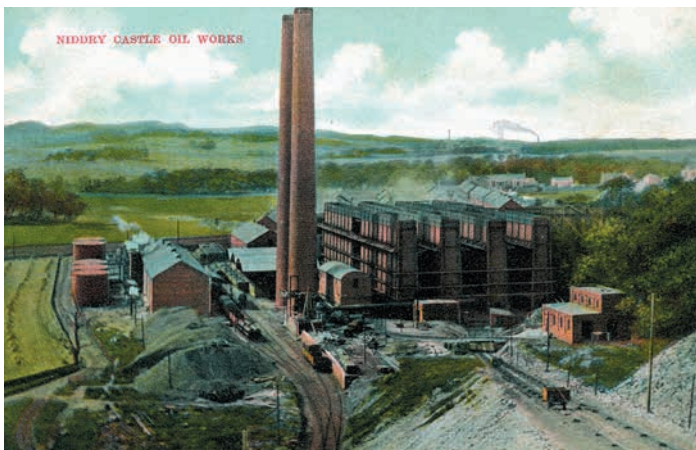
Mines and works were supported by a network of 2ft 6in gauge railways, some even employing early electric locomotives, while there were branch line connections to the mainline railway system to move the products from the refineries.

The industry worked flat out during the First World War to produce as much oil as possible for the war effort, but, by the 1920s, was in decline as the impact of cheaper Middle East and American crude oil began to bite, although the Second World War again saw shale as king, before decline set in, with closure of the last works taking place as late as 1963.

Today, the most visible remains of the industry are to be found in the 'bing's', the massive slag heaps which were created by dumping the remains of the heated shale after the oil had been extracted. One, at West Calder, known as The Five Sisters, is a listed monument, and dates from 1942, as a monument



Pumpherton Oil Works: The scale of the operation is clear. MUSEUM OF THE SCOTTISH SHALE OIL INDUSTRY



Niddy Castle Oil Works: Demolished in the 1960s, the Niddy works dominated the local village. MUSEUM OF THE SCOTTISH SHALE OIL INDUSTRY



Pictures of the past on the memorial bench at West Calder.

of West Lothian's oil-rich past

not just to the work of the miners and refinery workers, but also to the war effort of the entire industry. The bings also support unique eco systems and vegetation.

Edinburgh & Lothians Greenspace is taking the heritage path forward, using a combination of LEADER and Heritage Lottery Fund grants, and project officer, Heath Brown, says that the 16-mile trail, linking significant sites and remains of the shale era, will ensure that memories of this long-forgotten industry will live on.

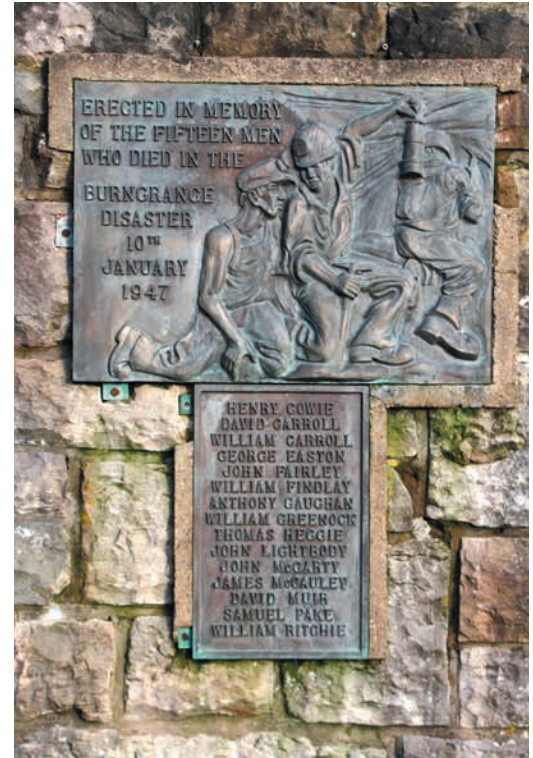
“What we’re working on is a 16-mile path from West Calder to Livingston, which will provide easy access to the industrial heritage of the area, while providing a pleasant trail accessible to walkers and cyclists, playing its parts in health promotion by getting people out and active in the country. We’ve involved the community and schools in building sections of the path and in collecting the personal stories behind the industry. Not only did the shale oil industry change what had been an agricultural area forever, but equally, its demise has left its mark on the area, as with so many places throughout Britain. We have spoken to people whose great grandfathers and fathers worked in shale mining or processing, and by using this material, plus industrial history, we tell the story of this pioneering industry.” said Heath.

Heath said that the bings are seen daily by thousands passing through West Lothian, but few know the story behind them, and the path’s information boards, directing people to an on-line source at each location, will ensure that the shale era will be brought to life again.

Also playing a major part in the project is the Almond Valley Heritage Centre at the east end of the trail in Livingston, a new town in which many of the houses are built on flattened shale bings, and which is home to the centre’s Museum of the Scottish Shale Oil Industry. The centre and museum is working with Heath to provide information and images which



Man on a mission: Heath Brown on a newly-completed section of the Shale Trail at West Calder, with a bing in view.



The trail takes in memories of the past such as this mining disaster memorial.



This horse-drawn lamp paraffin oil tanker is preserved at the Almond Valley Heritage Centre. HUGH DOUGHERTY



Baldwin-built, 2ft 6in gauge electric locomotive of 1902. HUGH DOUGHERTY

will be used on location boards and on-line.

Almond Valley Heritage Trust director, Dr Robin Chesters, said: “I greatly welcome that the trail will help highlight this fascinating heritage and provide a link between the evidence that survives in the local landscape with the stories in our collections. It comes at a time when we’re creating a new platform for our shale website, www.scottishshale.co.uk funded by a £50,000 grant from the Recognition Fund administered by Museums Galleries Scotland.”

The Almond Valley Heritage Centre’s collection includes one of the oldest electric locomotives

to run in the UK in the shape of Baldwin-built, 2ft 6in gauge locomotive of 1902, Niddry Oil Co’s No 2, which ran on the company’s shale oil works line at Winchburgh until 1961. The centre operates the 2ft 6in gauge Almond Valley Light Railway, which recalls the local ‘standard’ gauge of the shale industry, and includes thousands of images and records of the shale oil industry in its collection.

The Shale Trail also links with the wider industrial past of the area by including a section of the Union Canal towpath, while Heath showed me where the trail passes a memorial plaque and bench recalling the Burngrange

shale mine disaster of January 10, 1947, which took the lives of 15 miners.

“This trail keeps alive local human stories as much as one of astonishing, pioneering, industrial progress by John ‘Paraffin’ Young,” said Heath, as we stood by the memorial. “When it’s complete later this year, it will ensure that everyone using it taps into the rich seam the industrial heritage of the shale oil industry, which, before WWI made West Lothian the oil capital of the world. We hope that *Old Glory* readers will visit both the trail and the Almond Valley Heritage Centre. They’ll be very welcome indeed.”