Bathgate Chemical Works was established by James “Paraffin” Young and his partners in 1851 and is generally accepted to be the first in the world to process mineral oils on an industrial scale.

However, in 1859 the first commercial oil well was drilled in Pennsylvania which led to an influx of cheaper, imported oils. This fierce competition from abroad bred innovation amongst the Scottish shale oil companies and for much of the remaining 100 years of the industry they were at the forefront of worldwide oil technology.

Plant was continually redesigned and improved to maximise output of the most valuable products and to take advantage of the different qualities of shale processed at different sites.

Even the waste products of processing shale oil were exploited to their full potential. The discovery, by Robert Bell, of sulphate of ammonia as a by-product of shale oil manufacturing soon became one of the most important commodities to the industry due to its great demand as a fertiliser.

Innovation, technological expertise and diversification, together with government support in the latter years of the industry contributed to it’s survival until 1962.

The range of products that were manufactured from shale oil was remarkable and a selection of some of these products are displayed.
The BP Archive

In 1919, shares in the five surviving Scottish shale oil companies - The Broxburn Oil Company Ltd, The Oakbank Oil Company Ltd, The Pumpherston Oil Company Ltd, James Ross & Company and Young's Paraffin Light & Mineral Oil Company Ltd - were acquired by a new company, Scottish Oils Ltd. This new company was a subsidiary of government-backed Anglo-Persian Oil Company Ltd which grew into the major international company now known as BP. Some of the Scottish shale companies remain active as operating companies for BP's activities in the North Sea and other areas.

For many years the records of Scottish Oils Ltd and the five companies that they took over were stored at BP's Grangemouth Refinery. This archive included company minute books, ledgers, production statistics, legal agreements and a limited amount of general correspondence. Other paperwork was assembled at the former Pumpherston Refinery, which continued in operation as a detergent plant into the 1990's. This material related to the operation of the refinery and the activities of the Pumpherston Oil Company Ltd.

In 2000, BP transferred material from Grangemouth and Pumpherston to the National Archives of Scotland in Edinburgh for safekeeping from where it was later moved to join the BP company archives at the University of Warwick. In 2011 BP started the lengthy process of returning the majority of the archive to Scotland under the custodianship of Almond Valley Heritage Trust. The archive remains the property of BP.

In April 2013 a major volunteering project funded through Museum Galleries Scotland's Recognition Fund began with the aim of digitising the archive and making it available through the museum's website www.scottishshale.co.uk