Britain's declaration of war on Germany on the 4th August 1914 resulted in many able bodied young men choosing to leave their mothers, wives, children and homeland to sign up and fight for their country; for many as a means to guarantee themselves food and regular wages.

After the Military Services Act was passed in 1916, conscription began and men aged 18 to 45 years old were liable to be called up for military service unless they were widowed with children or ministers of a religion.

For countless shale miners and oil workers in West Lothian whose role was regarded as 'essential', this was not the case, as they produced many of the necessities required for the war effort such as motor spirit, diesel oil and candles and as such were exempt from service.

The industry also produced heavy oil that fuelled much of the British Navy, while the ammonium sulphate produced as a by-product from shale was used in the production of explosives.

This Territorial battalion, seemingly pictured at Livingston railway station, were equipped with bicycles for duties such as guarding oil installations. They were based at West Calder and had a drill hall in Addiewell.

This package of Broxburn candles from the museum’s collection bears War Department markings showing that they were ordered for military use in 1917.

The Glasgow Evening News was one of many bodies to organise a "Comforts Bureau", collecting socks, clothes, sweets, corn plasters and other home comforts for men serving overseas. Here boxes of Young's candles sit ready for dispatch, hopefully to provide a little warmth and light to the men in the trenches.

Museum of the Scottish Shale Oil Industry
at the Almond Valley Heritage Centre

www.scottishshale.co.uk
FROM PITS TO TRENCHES

A Tale of Two Soldiers

Private James Anderson (1896-1917)

James Anderson from Bathgate was a shale miner by trade, following in the footsteps of his father George and worked at Deans Crude Oil Works owned by Pumperston Oil Company Limited. When war broke out he joined the Royal Scots and was stationed at Berwick-on-Tweed until 1916 when he was transferred to the Royal Scots Fusiliers 6/7th battalion and sent to France.

It is thought that James Anderson died at the attack launched from the Ypres Salient on July 31st 1917, the first day of the Third Battle of Ypres, perhaps better known as the Battle of Passchendaele. In this first attack, the 6/7th Scots Fusiliers had 2 officers and 43 other ranks killed; 10 officers and 205 other ranks wounded; and 28 men posted missing.

Official word from the War Office was received on the 3rd of October that Anderson and two others had been killed through a shell bursting on the 31st July 1917, James Anderson died aged just 21 and left behind a wife and 3 children. He has no known grave; his name is recorded on the Menin Gate.

James Anderson is listed on the memorial to Livingston Kirkyard to the staff of Deans Oil Works who fell in the Great War.

Sapper Thomas Fairley (1881-1917)

Thomas Fairley was born in South Queensferry, the eight and youngest child of William Fairley, a fisherman and his wife Janet. Thomas was a shale miner to trade and also served with the 8th Royal Scots prior to the war and re-enlisted in 1914 as part of the Royal Sussex Regiment and was sent to France in 1915.

He was transferred to the 180th Tunnelling Company Royal Engineers on 1st February 1916 to serve as a Sapper (combat engineer) before being gassed on 9th June 1916 and hospitalised until 17th July 1916.

Upon recovery, he was then required to put his shale mining experience to good use when he was transferred for the last time to the 250th Tunnelling Company, Royal Engineers. The 250th was responsible for deep-level mines under the Messines Ridge during the Battle of Messines (7–14 June 1917); digging from 1500ft behind the British line to reach the strong point under the enemy trenches. 21 mines packed with 450,000kg of explosives, were buried 57 feet below the German line. Two of the mines failed to detonate but the remaining 19 fired at 3.10am on 7th June 1917 and devastated the German front line defences. This was the largest planned explosion up to that point and killed more people than any other man-made, non-nuclear explosion in history. The craters left by the mines still scar the landscape today.

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Thomas Fairley died of wounds received in action, aged 36, on the 2nd November 1917, leaving in his will £107 1s. 4d. to his wife of 18 years, Ellen. He is buried in the Oosterstee Communal Cemetery Extension, Bauleau, France alongside the other 1,392 Commonwealth graves and commemorations of the First World War.

The Battle of Messines that Sapper Thomas Fairley and the rest of the 259th Tunnelling Company were an instrumental part of was regarded as a prelude to the much larger Third Battle of Ypres campaign which began on the 11th July 1917 and one that ultimately claimed the life of James Anderson.

These two shale miners came from comparable family backgrounds, had grown up within the shale mining communities, and lived similar lives that were both cut short in their prime. It is strange how close in proximity they were throughout most of their lives and yet probably never met.

Their stories are not unique and are echoed by the many other soldiers that were once shale miners, bricklayers, joiners, fathers, brothers, and sons who fought and died for their country and the safety of their loved ones waiting for them at home and to whom many never returned.

The Oil Guard

Many chose to join in the war effort at home, over and above their essential duties at work and signed up for the Army Reserve or the Oil Guard to defend the home front and the precious commodities that the oil works were producing. The importance of protecting these valuable resources is also evidenced by the omission of oilworks from maps produced during this period.

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