For over a century, oil was produced from the seams of shale that lie beneath much of West Lothian and surrounding districts. Shale mines, oilworks and refineries brought industry to previously rural areas, and an influx of workers and their families from throughout Scotland and Ireland.

To house this workforce, new company villages were built in the shadow of the works, and often remote from established towns. The shale villages had their own special character and shared a strong sense of community.

This exhibition was created in 2010 as part of “Shale Villages”; a twelve-month project supporting groups and individuals from many of West Lothian’s former shale mining communities in the research, recording and celebration of their local heritage.

The Trust gratefully acknowledges the efforts of everyone who contributed towards the work of the project, assisted in the creation of this exhibition, and made available the images and objects that feature in it.

We would also wish to thank West Lothian LEADER Local Action Group and the Heritage Lottery Fund who provided the funds that made this work possible. If this exhibition contain errors or omissions we’d be grateful if you could bring these to our attention.

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In 1850, James “Paraffin” Young patented a method for producing oil from coal. He opened a works near Bathgate where he developed many new processes and accumulated great wealth and fame. In 1864 he began construction of a major new works at Addiewell, exploiting local supplies of oil shale.

Many tried to copy Young’s success and oil works were soon opened throughout the shale districts of West Lothian. Few were successful and, after bankruptcies and amalgamations, only six major oil companies remained in 1900 to enjoy a period of prosperity prior to the first world war. These companies were brought together under government control during WW1 to form Scottish Oils, subsequently part of BP. Soon afterwards, the import of oil from overseas made production from shale uneconomic, leading to major closures of mines and oil works.

Government support kept the industry alive, and major investment, including new plants at Addiewell, ensured a source of home produced oil during WWII. Once wartime shortages were over, works were again run down and closed, the last surviving until 1962.