

History of Craigencalt



A history of Kinghorn Loch and Craigencalt from the land form at the end of the last Ice Age through to the twentieth century.

CRAIGENCALT RURAL COMMUNITY TRUST

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Cover picture:

Artistic impression (courtesy of Ron Edwards) of Craigenalt Mill in the seventeenth and eighteenth century. This mill was replaced around 1900 but the building remains.

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Foreword: Setting the scene:



Before 1878.

George Simpson (based in Edinburgh) had processed some oil shale from Binnend.

1878 to 1881.

With a partner he set up the Binnend Oil Company to expand operations.

1881 to 1892 .

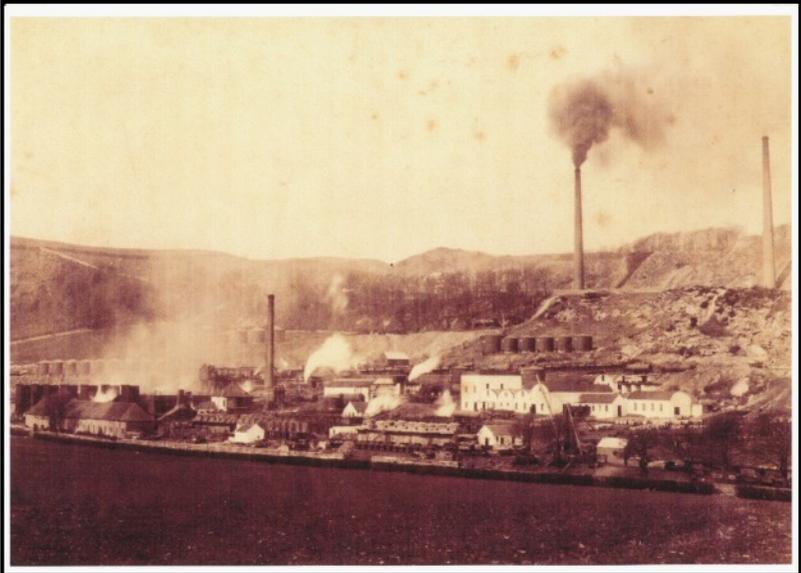
John Waddell bought the company and set up the Burntisland Oil Company. The prospectus was quite extensive in both land and minerals:

“This company has been formed with the purpose of purchasing the Estates of Whinnyhall, Binnend, Common, Rodanbraes, Kinghorn Loch, Lochlands and parts of Craigencur and Galahill, near Burntisland, containing Shale, Coal, Limestone, and Freestone, and also the Oil Works erected thereon, and for completing and enlarging the present Oil Works”⁽¹³⁾

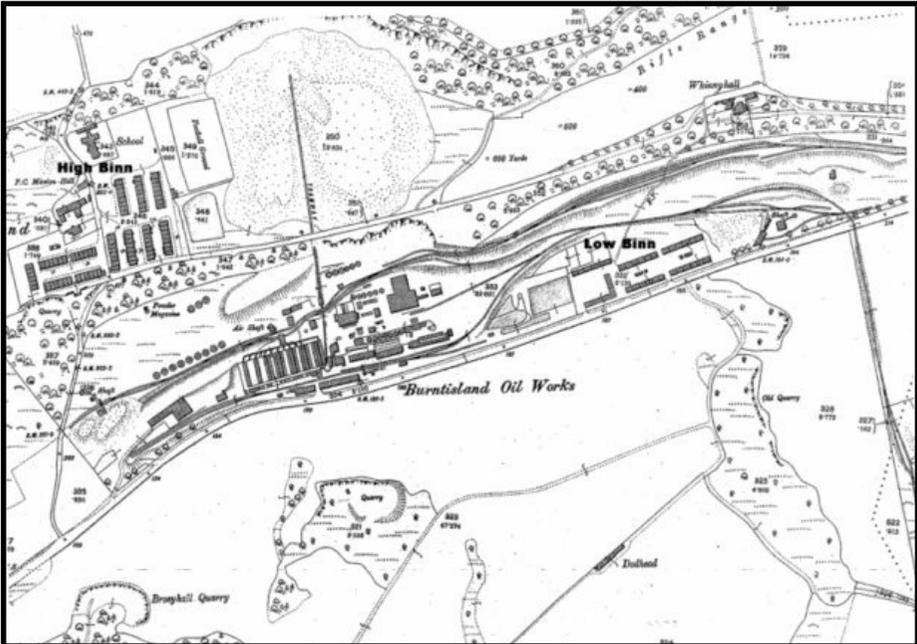
By 1884 production was booming:

“Symptoms of prosperity continue to characterise the Burntisland Oil Company's works in the the neighbourhood. New shale pits have been sunk with excellent results, and two additional benches of retorts, with refining accessories, are now in course of erection. Fully 600 hands are now employed and the existing house accommodation has been found inadequate.”⁽¹⁴⁾

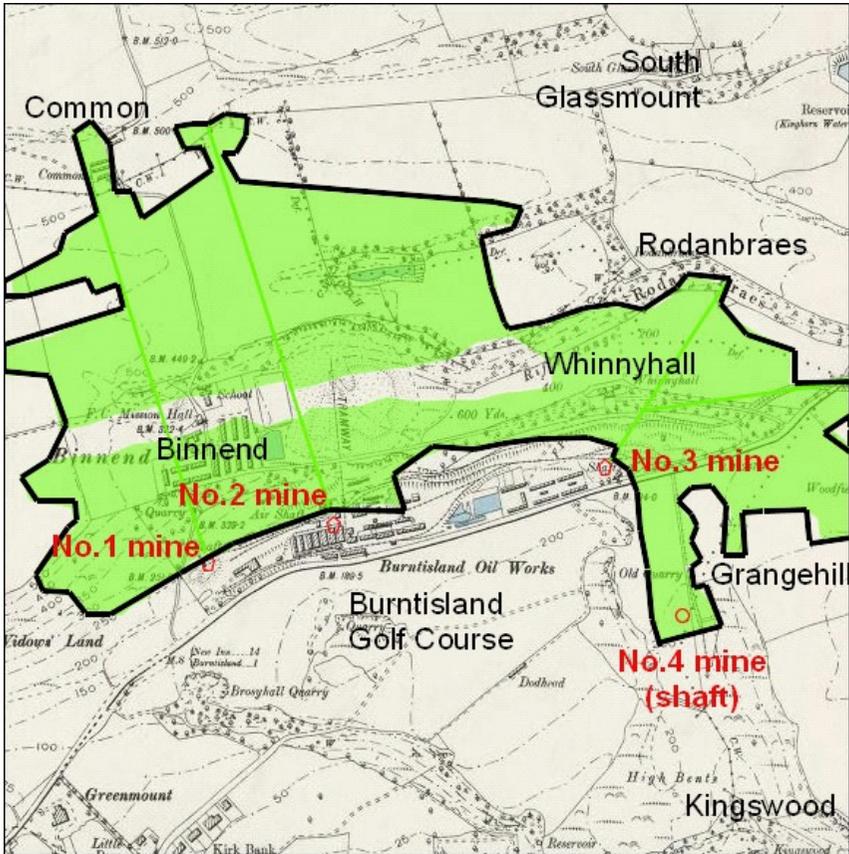
5: Mining the oil shale.



The works in its heyday.



Extent of working



The mine stretched from the fractured rock close to The Binn volcanic rocks to Gallowhill at the head of Kinghorn Loch and 900 metres north to Common. The mine workings were some 2 metres in height and descended some 200-300 metres below ground level as they followed the rock.

Before closure the owners negotiated a lease with the Philp Trust to take the mine further under Grangehill in a huge expansion. However market economics were against them.

7: The Candle Works, Kinghorn



The Burntisland Oil Company was one of a number of smaller shale oil companies that produced its own candles.

This blue card with an engraved label was presumably the top of a box of candles. The lettering reads "Burntisland Holyrood Paraffin Candles. 8s. Burntisland Oil Co Ltd." the main illustration is of Holyrood palace with images of ornate candlesticks and the trademark of the Burntisland company; a star with an oil barrel in the centre.

Image Courtesy of SCRAN

Prior to its conversion to the Candle Works the works was owned by Swan Brothers who had the Upper, Mid and St Leonard's Flax Mills and Tyrie Bleachfields in Kinghorn and 13500 spindles and 1160 workers in Fife and Dundee together with ships for export. The company went bankrupt in 1886.

The Upper Mill was rebuilt and opened as the new Candle Works in 1887. This produced paraffin burning oil and wax, lubricating oils and sulphate of ammonia. There were probably 200-300 men employed at the Candle Works. It closed in 1894.

The process, by law, required careful refining of the crude wax and paraffin and this is evidenced by the number of fatal fires caused by less safe American lamp oil (in 1895 in London there were 3633 fires from lamps accounting for 25% of all fire related deaths).

8: The railway.

A railway built in 1886, and opened 1887 with the Candle Works, travelling from no. 1,2 and 3 Mines and Refinery at Binnend and a branch to No.4 pit in 1891, to Kinghorn Station.

It had a steep gradient up to 1 in 50, especially at Kinghorn. There was a re-entrant (switchback) at Viewforth Place and there may have been a stationery engine and hawser here to help the heavy trains enter the station safely. It transported more than 200 tonnes of product each day. Although a problem for operations, the re-entrant reduced the gradient of the line and could safely derail trains or prevent a heavy train crashing onto the main line.

Indeed it was reported in the Edinburgh Evening News of 9th February 1889, that three wagons loaded with coal on their way to the oil works broke loose from the engine at Kinghorn Loch and went down the incline and smashed into pieces, scattering the coal, near the switchback.

9: Environmental Pollution.

Pollution of Kirkton Burn through Burntisland

The Kirkton Burn evidently suffered badly from the Oil Shale works, with permanent pollution of its waters. It is a small stream with no abstraction or use.

However, In 1880 Robert Kirke complained about pollution in the stream running through his property and the offensive smell from the works. He tried unsuccessfully to halt production at the works, but the company eased the pollution problem by laying a waste pipe from the works to the sea ⁽¹¹⁾. It is unlikely that this would have alleviated the problem due to the many springs in the area.

Protection of Kinghorn Loch

The bed (solum) of Kinghorn Loch was owned by the oil company but the water was owned by Kinghorn Town Council and free to use for the flax mills throughout Kinghorn. The free and effective supply of water to the mills and spinners was essential.

In 1882 the oil company diverted water (presumably at Common) for its use and water stopped flowing to the loch. Investigations found the company had diverted with a 3" pipe and not a 1" pipe to raise steam as they claimed. Kinghorn Town Council were vindicated.

In 1886 when the railway was built, it broke the banks of Whinnyhall lochans and reduced water flow to the loch. It stopped the mills for a while.

In 1887, the Upper Flax Mill of Swan Brothers was sold for the Candle Works and the oil company started abstracting water from the loch without paying for it. Litigation once more.

Fortunately, the oil company did not pollute the loch as badly as it fouled the Kirkton Burn down through Burntisland. However things were not good and its use as a public supply put in severe jeopardy. On 13th July 1888⁽¹⁷⁾ analysis of the water found it to be of inferior drinking quality, affected by excessive amounts of ammonia and phosphate infected by protozoa making it unfit for dietary purpose.

By 1888 the Police Commission of Kinghorn (of Town Council) ⁽¹⁸⁾⁽¹⁹⁾ recommended a clear water reservoir at Common with a pipe to new reservoir and treatment works at Craigencalt, all in iron pipework to Kinghorn. However they were unable to secure the land so the problem with water supply to the burgh, affected by the oil works, remained.

Also since the Candle Works opened it was reported that perch and pike had died in their hundreds⁽²⁰⁾. The water supply was certainly in jeopardy and water supplied from Kirkcaldy could not be guaranteed.

A new water supply tank was built by 1916, sorting future problems.

10: Workers and their families.

Please see Walter M Stephen ⁽¹⁰⁾ and www.Burntisland.net ⁽¹²⁾ for more detail.

The company built two new villages, the High and Low Binn, and added to houses at Common.

The High Binn (now referred to as Binnend or Binn Village) was built at Binnend Farm, which already housed workers. It had twelve rows of six or eight stone dwellings of two rooms each. By 1890's there was also a wooden, corrugated steel roofed Mission Hall, Institute (reading room and community hall), football pitch and latterly a school for 220 children.

The Low Binn was seen as the poorer relation and comprised mainly immigrant (Irish) families.

12: Early History of Whinnyhall (Binnend)

The National Archive of Scotland, in a letter to Kinghorn Historical Society ⁽²¹⁾ suggests that King William I granted Burgh Status to Kinghorn sometime between 1165 and 1172. The Great Seal reference ⁽²²⁾ is a ratification of King David II in 1364, of a charter of confirmation granted by King Alexander II in 1285.

The Common Lands held by the Burgh of Kinghorn stretched from Lochacres in the east, the Mire, many parcels in Kinghorn (including Bowbutts) through Kinghorn Loch to Whinnyhall, Rodanbraes and Common. The all important water supply originated from the Banchory Burn from beyond Common and diverted to Kinghorn Loch as the Loch Burn to supply the mills sometime before 1584, and springs in various places, importantly at the Mire (Ladyburn). The Loch Burn was compromised during the Oil Shale era, as was the Kirkton Burn flowing from Whinnyhall to Burntisland.

Whinnyhall may have been sold by the Burgh at some time but it was sold on by Private Treaty in 1875 ⁽²³⁾ as “The desirable estate of Whinnyhall including Binnend, Common, Roddenbraes, Kinghorn Loch and Lochlands”. This describes productive wood, three steadings and site for mansion house and grassland and is known to have been hunting grounds (probably with Royal connections to Pettycur) since early times.

George Simpson immediately progressed with the Binnend oil Works but by 1878 offered the land for sale and in 1879 John Waddell set up the Burntisland Oil Company ⁽²⁴⁾ which agreed with reduced mineral right costs to proceed in 1881 with the purchase ⁽²⁵⁾. By 1896 the company was in liquidation ⁽²⁶⁾ and by 1903 was gone. By 1910 the lands of Whinnyhall were being used for military training ⁽²⁷⁾ and by 1920 the camp was being closed ⁽²⁸⁾. The estate remained as Crown Estate until sale to British Aluminium.

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A particular thank you to Iain Sommerville (burntisland.net) and Ian Archibald (Burntisland Heritage Trust) for assistance and editing.

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Short glossary

Kerogen

Shale (or other sedimentary rock) containing solid bituminous material from which oil can be extracted.

Anticline

Rock strata that have been arched by earth movements that can collect oil beneath the arch.

Paraffin

Light heating oil, also called Kerosene

Sulphate of ammonia

Ammonium sulphate used as fertiliser, a valuable by product of the refinery.

Room

Each individual working area of the mine.

Stoop

The rock supports, left to support the roof of each room.

Stooped

An area of the mine where stoops have been removed allowing the roof to collapse.

Hotbedding

The practice where workers who work shifts, share a bed in relay.

“Today, as you pass alongside the golf course on the way to Kinghorn Loch, it is difficult to envisage the vast industrial undertaking which for a relatively short period, only 16 years, dominated the area on the other side of the road. This was the Burntisland (originally Binnend) Oil Works, which at its peak, gave employment to almost a thousand men”.

Ian Sommerville
Burntisland Heritage Trust

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This booklet is available on-line at
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Also as a booklet at Kirkcaldy Tourist Office, Kinghorn Library, Kinghorn Community Centre , Burntisland Heritage Trust, Burntisland Library and local shops.

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