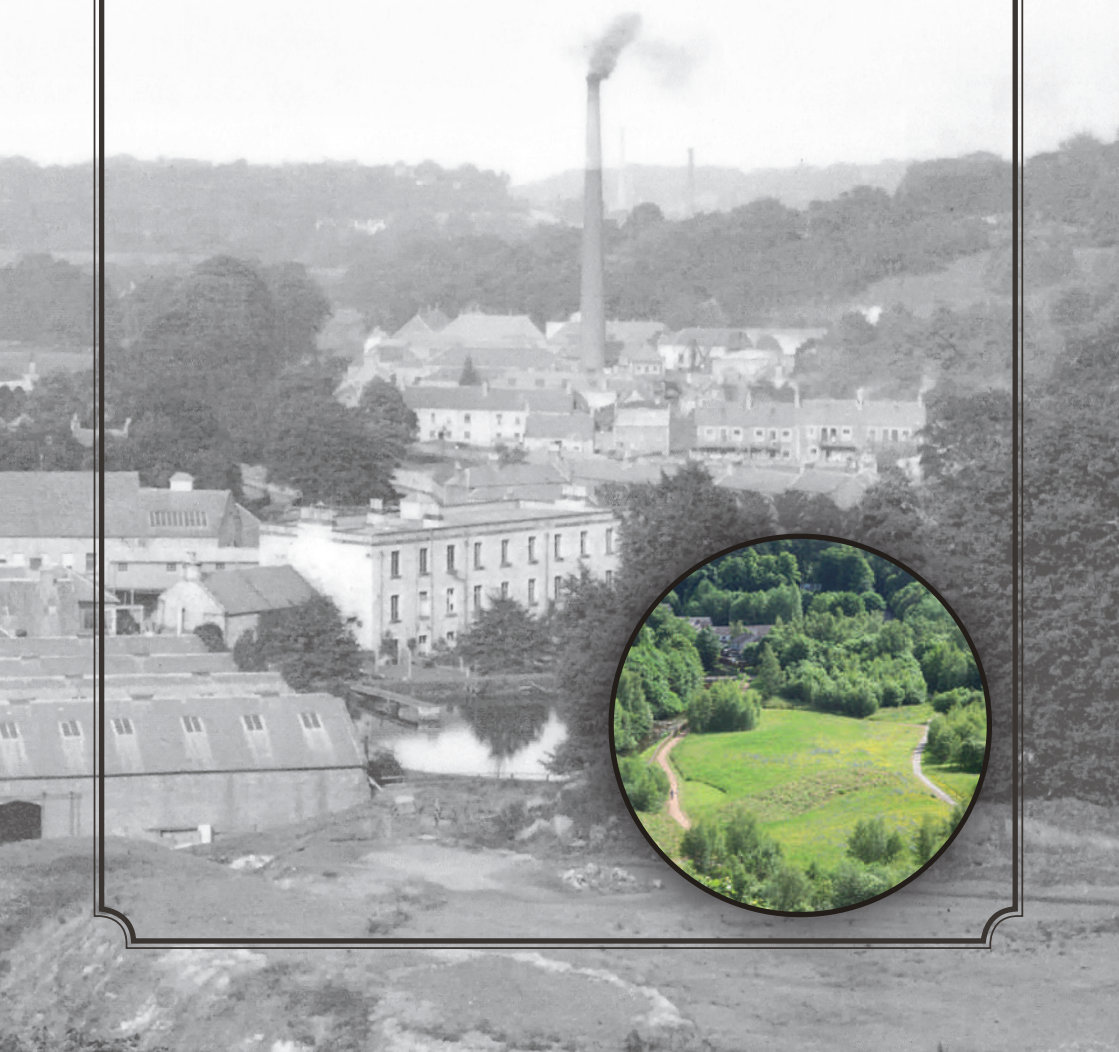


Memories of Springfield Mill and Polton



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Memories of Polton

by Rev Cameron MacKenzie

Polton is a bonnie wee place; it lies between two hills
The river Esk runs straight through by, and worked the Paper Mills.

A winding brae at either end, the station in the centre
The Asylum and the Colony, Beware! To all who enter!

The hooses werenae a' that posh; a bedroom, livin' room wi' sink
A bed settee and polished range... a lavvy shared, it makes you think!

The silent, dirty Esk flowed through, supplying Light and Power
And by its banks and braes we played, for many a happy hour.

No polis station, sheriff court, no church, no school, no pub;
No swimming pool, no library, no bank to get a "sub".

No mobiles, telephones, DVDs, no coffee percolators;
No microwaves or TV sets, just wirelesses and accumulators!

The train came three times a day, to take us to "the Town"
To Broomieknowe and Porto baths. But where's the steam train now?

The vans came down but once a week; butcher, baker, from the "Store"
The coalman, milkman, grocery... but not much more.

The place where man and boy would sit, to talk of village failings
Between the bridge and telephone box, a structure called "the railings".

Miss Henderson and Mrs Stewart provided us wi' sweets
But with money tight and ration books, we hadnae many treats.

Each day the kids went off to school in three different ways,
To Loanhead, Rosewell and Lasswade and every road had braes.

To climb the “brae” with all its bends was tough for kids at school
For mums wi’ prams the climb was steep, and gasping was the rule.

The summer months were all too short for outdoor games to play
The winters long with weeks of snaw, and sledging through the day.

The Loanhead brae on “Blackout” nights gave us quakes and qualings,
And the place that made us feart of the most was the dreaded, dark Black Pailings!

The winter nights were long and dark, with “kick the can” around the Square
And pranks, and cuddles with the girls... or happily playin’ by the fire.

What kept us doing right from wrong? “I’ll tell your faither, tell yer maw”
Getting up to childhood pranks... the clype was never far awa’!

The “birds and bees” was strict taboo, from father and from mother;
The facts of life and their delights, were learned from one another!

Beyond the village, space to play; the woods, the cast, the waterside
The bings, the green, the cornfield sheaves... and mair beside.

Wages low and perks but few; blanket “felts” and railway sleepers
Scraps of paper from the mill; and sometimes “finders keepers”.

Forbidden places all around; the railway line, the station yard,
The war memorial, paper mills... a challenge to the brave of heart!

The big events that drew our awe, but once a year; the memories thrill
Sheep dipping, steamrolling, Big Hoose teas, esparto lorries to the mill.

Looking back on childhood days, the memories are still alive
Polton was a pleasant place to be, for those of us who still survive.

Introduction

“Polton is a bonnie wee place; it lies between two hills, the River Esk runs straight through and worked the Paper Mills.”

This small community, nestling along the river, attracted workers from near and far. They learned their skills in Springfield and Polton Mills and indeed some people took these skills to far flung corners of the world where they continued in the proud tradition of paper making.

Springfield, the second oldest mill in Scotland, opened in 1742 to service Edinburgh’s growing publishing trade. Springfield Mill supplied paper for the “The Edinburgh Courant” and “The Caledonian Mercury”, both popular newspapers of the day.

The paper was initially made from rags. Esparto grass became the preferred raw material from the mid 19th and mid 20th century, eventually giving way in the final years of operation to straw and wood pulp.

The mills used innovative technology, sometimes successfully for example the air drying machine introduced by George Bertram in 1842 and sometimes less so as with the 1923 experiment to manufacture a type of plastic. Volume of production varied –

sometimes the Mill worked three shifts over 24 hours, other times it shut for periods due to lack of orders. This was a time when the river Esk was considered to be the most industrialised 17 miles in the whole of Europe¹.

Springfield also pioneered social innovation. As early as 1794 it joined with four other local mills in introducing an employee/ employer contribution scheme offering sick pay for mill workers

The Mill finally closed in 1967.

Work

“Wages low and perks but few; blanket ‘felts’ and railway sleepers,
Scraps of paper from the mill; and sometimes ‘finders keepers”

In 1842 the Mill employed 20 men, 3 boys, 35 women and 14 girls.
Elizabeth Carmichael was 11 in 1842 and worked at the Mill . . .

“I began to cut rags two years ago. I liked it guid. The stour doesna’ disagree with me, it does with some lassies. I can weave like my father but don’t earn so much as I can by rag work. I can cut 1 hundred weight (50 kilos) a day, each cwt earns me 1 shilling (0.5p). We get our pay monthly”².

In 1945 women were paid £1.2s.6d. (£1.12.5p) take home pay for five days work, 7-30am to 5pm. Women had to give up their work when married, though they could be re-employed if they became widowed. Maintenance Staff, called the Black Squad were paid more than labourers. There was a maintenance joiner who received £21/week in 1953. Compare this with the £8.50 he earned prior to working at Springfield Mill.

In 1866 William Tod acquired Springfield Mill after a shut down period and introduced the use of esparto grass as the raw material. It was imported and transferred from Leith docks by train. The grass went into the duster and the boiler where it was processed before it was forked out and put into the poacher where it was pulped.

From there the product went into the mixing machine breakers and across to the cutters. Finally women checked the paper for blemishes after it had passed from the over haulers.

The Esk provided water required for production, but when it flooded it became a hazard to machinery. In autumn fallen leaves floated down the Esk and blocked the flow to the turbines. It was the task of Angus Mackenzie, the maintenance electrician, to go out in the evening and in the middle of the night to get the power and lights going in the mill and in the houses.

Clogs were the only items supplied to the workers and then only to the men who were working on the “wet side of the Mill” such as the Beaters and Packers.



Women workers in the 'Finishing House'

The recollection from the Springfield Mill workers was that the owners – the Tod family – were good employers. There were memories of strawberry teas in the Summer, Mrs Tod tending to the sick, and employees being given other forms of work in the mill if they became less able to do the job they were originally employed to do either because of sickness or injury.

Work very much defined the community. There were, at the height of production, three shifts: 6am – 2pm, 2pm – 10pm & 10pm to 6am. Loanhead, Rosewell and Bonnyrigg were as far away as anyone lived who came to work at Springfield Mill.

This suggests that the topography – the Mills in the North Esk Valley – may have enhanced the community identity.

The Trucks used in the mill sites were requisitioned by the government and used for other requirements during the war.

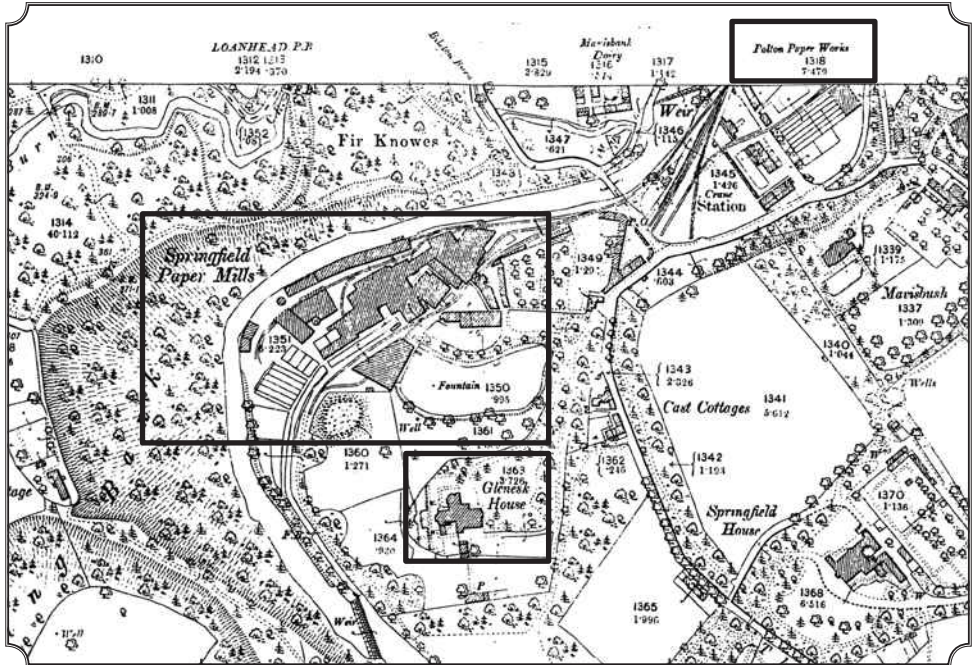


Mill workers then known locally as the Black Squad, circa early 1900's



Polton Mill Truck

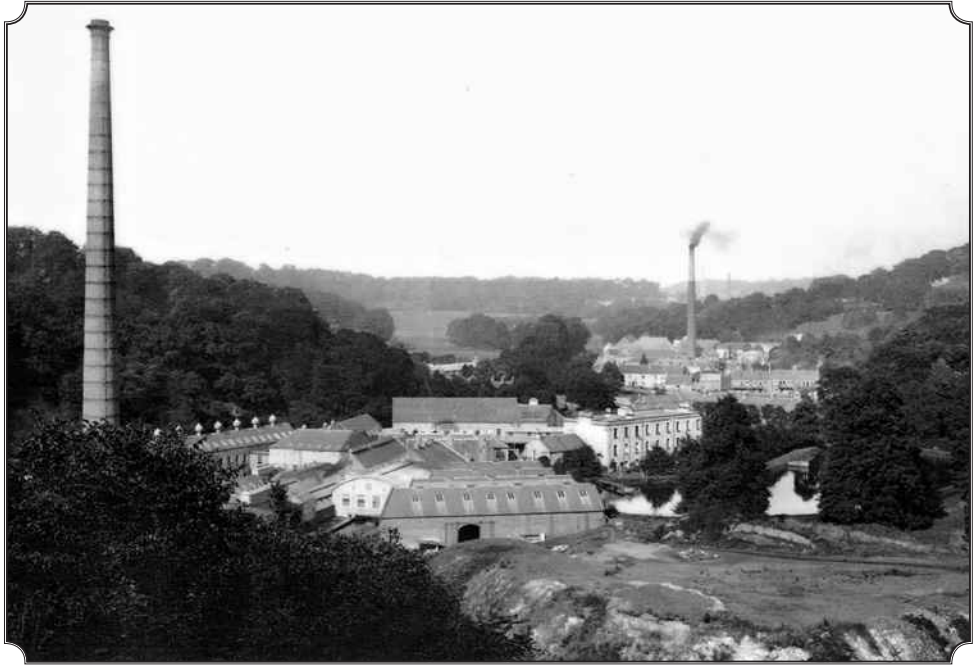
Site map of Springfield and Polton Mill



Description 1862.

When the business failed in 1862, it was put up for sale and described in some detail by the Bill of Sale - Dowell & Lyons of George Street Edinburgh, as...

It had been producing 20 tons of 'Fine writing & printing paper weekly'. There were two artesian wells on the grounds and fine springs in the neighbourhood.



Two water wheels (18ft & 12ft) are referred to, as are 3 steam boilers, 5 high pressure engines, paper machines, paper cutters, breaking in and washing engines, glazing calender, steam poachers, bleaching chests, sizing & drying machines and rag steam boilers.

19 cottages are on site for the workers, plus a Manager's house. Glenesk House (still an occupied house today) is included in the sale, comprising 'pleasure grounds of 8 acres tastefully laid out' plus a productive garden, green & hot houses and a gardener's house.

Leisure Time

“Beyond the village, space to play; the woods, the Cast, the waterside. The bings, the green, the cornfield sheaves ...and mair beside.”

In 1924 there were 32 families and 11 children living in Polton. An age when electronic home entertainment was unknown, the residents of both Springfield and Polton relied largely on local pursuits in their leisure time.

With the woods and river in close proximity the children were never short of games to play. Paddling in the Bilston Burn, climbing trees and picnics in the woods were popular pursuits. The Mill's 5 o'clock klaxon marked the end of the day and was a signal for children to head home for tea.

Guides and Brownies met in the Springfield Hall, which also housed the Sunday school.

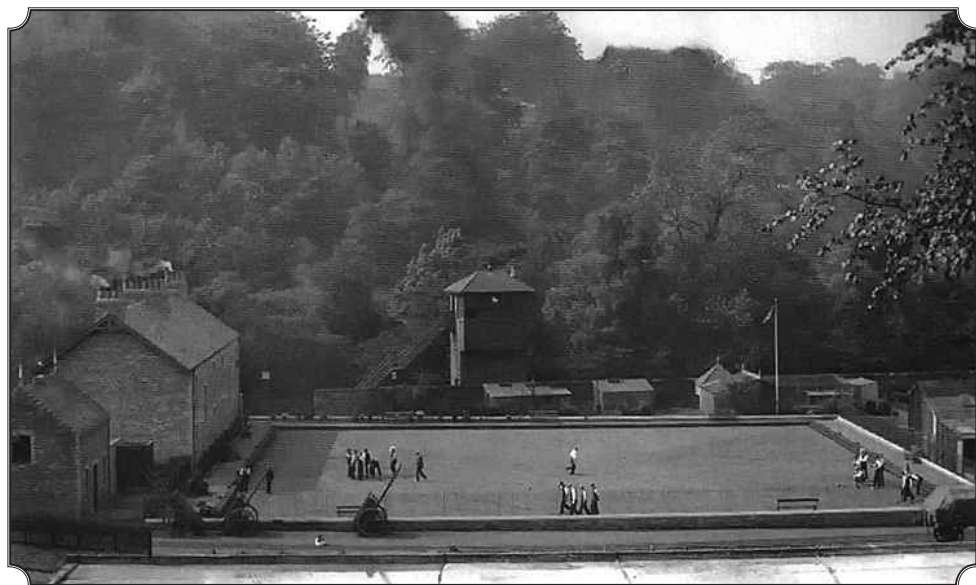
The children played the usual outdoor games: football, skipping, 'peevers', 'kick the can' and sledging in winter. All 'weapons' like 'gutties' (catapults), bow and arrows were home-made, but 'girds and cleeks' (hoops and guiders), morse code tappers, sledges and model aeroplanes needed some help from the mill tradesmen.

Weather was an important factor because most of the leisure time was spent outdoors, but the streets were vitually free of traffic and therefore safe. Children were banned from playing football in the yard and on the esparto grass,

round the channels of dyed water or in the polluted waters of the river.

During school times, if the rain was heavy, the children got a half-day and coming home the rest of the day was spent outside in the 'dubs' (puddles) and wet grass! They were well equipped with wellingtons and tackety boots, the latter soled by the dads. Sledging in winter was a delight, down both braes, up the Heather Hill and down the Green.

Living during the war years meant the black-out, but this did not deter some of the children from going to Scouts and Cubs and music practice at Loanhead, unaccompanied by parents.



Early days at Polton Bowling Club

In 1957 numbers had fallen to 13 adults and 9 children. However Polton retained its sense of identity. A contemporary newspaper (*The Bulletin*³) featured it as '*The villages that refuse to die*'. In the article, Mrs Calder aged 72 described it as a '*happy community*' with a silver band and a football team. New Year was a happy event where the adults were able to celebrate as a community.

Sundays were the days when some adults would gather together to play cards at a halfpenny a game. Children would keep a look out in case any clergy or Sunday school teachers were about. Some men with motorcycles were independent and could travel, with sidecars, to destinations by the coast or further inland to Penicuik or Peebles. The steep Cast was an ideal 'trials' course. The only car was owned by the Tods, the mill owners.

There was a cricket pavilion over the river at Mavisbank and the Bowling Green in Polton. When visiting teams came, usually by train, children would offer to run 'messages' to the shop, hoping the bowlers would forget to ask for their change.

For special treats there was the cinema in Loanhead. Tuppence bought you a seat and if your parents gave you an extra penny you were considered well off. 1d would allow the purchase of a poke of sweets, or chips or an ice cream cone.

Ribald humour had its moments and it was recalled that when the reels were changed the wife of the cinema manager, who wasn't noted for her musical talent, played the piano. On one occasion a voice from the audience shouted, "*Tell that bugger to shut up*". The manager leapt to his wife's defence and asked, "*Who called the pianist a bugger?*" to which the reply was, "*Who called the bugger a pianist?*"

Trips further afield would be made by train, also known as 'the Polton Pig'. En route there was Lasswade, Bonnyrigg, Eskbank (Dalkeith), Millerhill, Portobello and Edinburgh Waverley. Portobello open-air pool and the speedway at Meadowbank were favourite summer destinations. The train service to Polton was a key part to the way of life of the village; it provided a fairly frequent service with the last return train journey from Edinburgh at about 10.45pm.

Mrs Calder reckoned that the 'life blood' of the community was drained when the passenger service ceased in 1951, as the last bus was as early as 7.30pm (*The Bulletin, Nov 1957*).

Home

“The hooses werenae a’ that posh; a bedroom, livin’ room wi’ sink a bed settee and polished range... a lavvy shared. It made you think!”

In Springfield the houses consisted of two rooms: a kitchen/sitting room and a bedroom. In the kitchen there was a black coal-fired range that served for hot water and an oven that was excellent for scones and slow cooked casseroles. There was no hall and letters delivered through the letterbox landed in the middle of the sitting room floor. New tenants soon learned that when morning rolls were delivered through the letterbox a plate was required to catch them!



Polton Railway Station

Each house within ‘the square’ had a coal cellar. Two cellars were converted into a washhouse situated across the green with the washing line in the middle and a pulley in the kitchen was used in wet weather. The copper had to be

boiled in the morning by the first washer and stoked for the next one. The last person to use the boiler left the fire set for the next day. To wash you transferred the hot water into a sink with a wringer attached.

There were no schools except for Sunday School in Polton. Children had to climb up the brae to attend the one at Loanhead, or up the Cast to the Catholic school at Rosewell. Those attending the school at Lasswade walked alongside the North Esk river.

The two shops were the places to catch up on all the gossip. There was a Post Office in the Station and a shop at the gates of Springfield Mill run by the Loanhead Co-operative Store. When the 'Store' gave up the shop, the business was taken over by Henny, a spinster from Musselburgh, and when she retired Mrs Stewart, who had the sweetie shop in Polton, took over. She ran both the Polton and Springfield shops.

There were also two vegetable vans, two butchers and two bakers that visited Polton. One of the bakers vans was a horse drawn cart.

“The birds and bees’ was strict taboo, from father and from mother; The facts of life and their delights were learned from one another.”

Babies were all born at home with midwife, Nurse Davis, on hand. The local doctors were Dr. Sommerville and Dr Robertson. You had to pay for their services prior to the introduction of the National Health Service in 1948.

Whooping Cough, Chickenpox, Mumps, Measles and Rubella were the main childhood diseases. In times of need the local community rallied round and offered support.

A case in point was when Chrissie and Jimmy Rankin were born prematurely. At that time their mother was debilitated with ‘white leg’ which meant that they were taken on the difficult journey to Balerno to be looked after by their grandmother and they were fed on full creamed milk from a ‘*braw coo*’ called Daisy.

Despite this seemingly gruesome list of ailments, the teachers at Loanhead, maintained that the children from Springfield and Polton were judged to be the healthiest and most hardy, attending school in all weathers. This was all the more remarkable when bearing in mind that as part and parcel of daily life, the children played in and around the river.

The chemical discharge from the five paper mills from the river source caused heavy pollution. This would not be allowed in present-day circumstances.

The Dalkeith Advertiser contained an article on 30th December 1880 from someone signing himself as ‘The Doctor’ who travelled to Polton to see ‘*The heinous presence of the paper mills*’ Recognising that effluence from the mills caused considerable pollution he states ...

“Rivers are the natural and only drains of the country and ought to be allowed to perform their proper function instead of being turned into provident supplies of dividends to water companies and fish to landlords”.

He goes on to ask...*"Why do people go to live near factories if they object to them"* (obviously forgetting that factories need people living near to them in 1880 to provide the labour) ... *"or allow them to be built if they are not already there?"*.

It is, therefore, a matter of conjecture to wonder what 'The Doctor' would have made of the actions of Springfield Mill Action Group (SMAG) over a hundred years later, to restore the Springfield Mill area to its present wildlife site and would he ever have thought that local people, young and old, would again appreciate and value the Springfield Mill haven for the peace and tranquillity it now provides?

Postscript

From the time of the mill closure there were a number of various uses for the remaining buildings ranging from the Coal Board, a garage company, Midlothian Council vehicle storage and a coach hire firm to name but a few...



Acknowledgement to *The Scotsman publication Ltd/SCRAN*

By the mid 1990s, all the buildings were derelict, and nature had started to reclaim the site. For a time it then appeared housing would be built over a large part, but a group of residents decided to fight to restore it as a wildlife site and for the enjoyment of the local community.

After two public planning inquiries and much perseverance in fundraising and planning, Springfield Mill Action Group, SMAG, in a joint project with Midlothian council, finally saw the wildlife area as it is today open to the public in September 2009.

Springfield Mill attracts a wide range of visitors, from toddlers to grandparents. It comes under the care of Midlothian Council Ranger service, and has already benefitted from the help of volunteers to maintain it, and been the location for schools's outdoor teaching sessions.

Long may it remain this way.

Time line

Date	Event
1742	Production started, using rags as raw material (2nd oldest in Scotland).
1756	Business transferred to Robert Fleming & John Hutton (Merchant).
1776	Business failed. Managed by Frances Strachan W.S. Trustee for the Creditors.
1787	Mill business bought by Fances Strachan.
1791	Robert Cameron becomes Partner.
1794	Mutual Help Society formed. Involving 5 local Mills. Employees paid weekly with contribution matched by Employers. This provided sick pay for workers though 'No person under the implication of any crime could receive help from the fund'.
1803	Frances Strachan dies. Robert Cameron assumes full control.
1821	Mill now managed by George Bertram. Mechanical pulp maker patented by Robert Cameron.
1828	Robert Cameron dies. Younger son John becomes the new owner.
1832-36	George Bertram initiates a series of technical improvements primarily related to the drying process.
1842	Air drying machine installed which allowed the paper to be sized and thus take ink by a continuous process (The first in Scotland). (The air drying technology devised and implimented by Bertram assured the future success of Bertrams the Printers, based in Edinburgh).
C.1850	(Exact date unknown) Rotary screen invented. Still in use in papermills today.
1856	Business failed. Now owned by Bank of Scotland.
1858	The Mill leased to James Durham & Sons.
1862	Business failed, despite contempoary reference to '20 tons of fine paper produced weekly'.
1866	The buildings lay empty until acquired by William Tod who also owned St Leonard's Mill in Lasswade.
1867	Production restarted. Raw material changed from rags to Esparto grass. First paper made was for 'The Scotsman Newspaper'.
1895	Financial reconconstruction. Springfield & St Leonard's run as separate businesses.
1898	Firm formed into a Limited Company.

- 1914-18 Limited production, only one machine operating on a single shift 1923 Experiment to develop a type of plastic (referred to as either 'Ligurite' or Indurite', depending on reference). It was to be used as electrical insulation material and for production of ashtrays, buttons etc. Diversification attempt failed due to cheaper products serving the same purpose elsewhere, possibly 'Bakalite'.
- 1937 Finishing Mill rebuilt.
- 1939 William Tod dies. Succeeded by his son A K Tod.
- 1949-50 Esparto Plant modernised.
- 1952 Limited production. August 14th - Mill closed for 1 week due to lack of orders 1957 Financial reconstruction. Shares of A K Tod acquired by James Brown & Co. (Implication that the Mill was closed or on short time working - ref, 'The Bulletin, 1st November 1957 quoting "a renewed effort" by J Brown & Co. to get the Mill open and working full time).
- 1965 Management restructure. Directors of James Brown & Co. become Directors of William Tod Junior & Co.
- 1967 The Mill finally closes down. Main buildings of the Mill were demolished in May 1970. Ancillary buildings were left to be used by various small businesses. Note. The production process 'latterly' used predominately home produced straw and wood pulp, not Esparto grass. The date is unclarified relative to 'latterly'.
- 1969 The Mill goes into liquidation. James White Properties appointed liquidator by Royal Bank of Scotland for William Tod Jnr. & Co.
- 1969/70/73 Areas of land within the Mill site, including buildings, sold to Midlothian Council.
- 1973 Land and buildings sold to Ambassador Coaches.
- 1978 Land and buildings sold to Lothian Regional Council & South of Scotland Electricity Board.
- 1980 The last family leaves housing at Springfield Mill.
- 1980's Industrial use continued with various occupations being carried out by tenants who leased buildings from one of aforementioned principal owners.
- 1999 Spring Field Mill Action Group is formed to ensure this area of great landscape value was maintained as a wildlife area.

Acknowledgements ---

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We thank the Bonnyrigg and Lasswade Local History Society for the photos and the staff at the local library.

Finally the staff at the local studies centre in Loanhead library for information retrieve, photographs and future archiving of information gleaned for this project.

References

1. Newsletter No9 Pioneers in Paper (1965) '*A History of Springfield to 1990*' original excerpts from '*The Paper Makers Monthly Journal*' August 1881.
2. The Franks Report on child labour - 1842.
3. The Bulletin - 1st November 1957...'*The Villages that Refuse to Die*'.
4. The Dalkeith Advertiser - 30-12-1880 on pollution of the River Esk at Polton, on *page 3*.

