

Polkemmet Country Park - Past and Present

History

The Baillie family connection with Polkemmet stems from 1620, when they purchased land from a Mr Andrew Shaw. The family originally came from Lanarkshire, and according to 'Burke's Peerage, Baronetage and Knightage', they were descended from the Baillies of Jervistoune, who were cadets of the Baillies of Lamingtoun. There is also a suggestion that the name derives from Balliol, and if so, could provide a link to the Scottish King, John Balliol (1292-1296).

The estate during the 19th Century seemed to be flourishing and the 1871 census shows that Polkemmet house was a substantial building of 39 rooms, with a total of 11 domestic servants 'living in', either in the house itself or in the adjacent buildings.

During the early part of the 20th Century, there was a gradual estrangement from the family home. In 1947, with the death of Sir Adrain Baillie and his interment in the family mausoleum, which stands in a prominent position in the grounds of the estate, the family connection with Polkemmet seems to have been severed.



Today

During the Second World War, the house and estate were utilised for the war effort, with an army camp being built in the grounds. After the war, the mansion house was used as a home for the Trefoil school. This organisation was largely part of the Girl Guide movement and its function was to provide a residential country school for physically handicapped children. The then Princess Elizabeth opened the school in September 1945.

In 1951 the Trefoil School moved to a new location and the house and grounds became the home for the Scottish Police College. In 1960, the Police College moved to Tullieallan Castle in Kincardine and, once again, Polkemmet was left without a role.

By this time, the owner of the estate was the National Coal Board and it seems clear that the Board's main interest was in the coal seams which lay beneath the estate and not in the house and grounds. During the 1960's the mansion was demolished and sadly no trace now remains.

The estate had suffered from many years of neglect and had lost much of its former glory, before being taken over by Lothian District Council in 1978, with assistance from the Countryside Commission for Scotland, who gave a grant of 75% of the purchase price.

Given the circumstances, West Lothian District Council decided to embark upon an ambitious programme of site development and rehabilitation, to try and restore some of the former glory. Much of the work was carried out by young people on YOP and STEP schemes, funded by the Manpower Services Commission.

The remaining buildings to the West of the mansion house site, had been offices, staff accommodation and other facilities such as stables, tack room, horse-driven mill, fodder store and a space to keep carriages covered. It was decided to convert these to a modern Visitor Centre and on 26th June 1981, Polkemmet Country Park was officially opened by Councillor Bert Gamble, J.P.

River Almond

The River Almond is the lifeblood of Polkemmet Country Park. Running through the entire length of the Park, it is a stunning focal point and attraction, as well as providing a superb wildlife habitat. A recommended vantage point is the old mausoleum, where you can see the large boulders in the water, placed there during the end of the last ice age. You might be lucky enough to see a heron, kingfisher or otter too!

The Almond is 28 miles (45 km) long, rising in the nearby Cant hills, North Lanarkshire (beside the TV transmitters) and running through the middle of West Lothian. It drains into the Firth of Forth at Cramond near Edinburgh.

The river is fairly narrow in the Park as it is still quite young. On its way downhill to Livingston and Almondell & Calderwood Country Park, it picks up a lot more water to grow to 3 or 4 times its existing size! The Almond is prone to big changes in its water level and can go from a trickle to a torrent in a few hours after heavy rain. Sometimes the river will have a reddish/orange tint to it, which is just the presence of iron in the water. This mineral iron is exposed to water underground during mining and, over a period of years, can make its way up and out to the surface. Exposure to the air turns it orange.

The industrial heritage of central Scotland can be observed along the length of the river with numerous weirs, remains of mills and other riverside industries of the past.

The Almond eventually finds its way down to Cramond on the Forth estuary and out into the North Sea.

The horn - M8 Art Project

Installed in 1997, 'The Horn' is a 24 metre-high tubular stainless steel structure that is situated on the west bound carriageway of the M8 motorway, approximately halfway between Glasgow and Edinburgh. It was designed by Scottish artists Matthew Dalziel and Louise Scullion, and originally commissioned to act as landmark between the two cities. Pointing towards the motorway, the horn used to periodically 'speak' with poetry, sounds and music, although this function has since stopped.

This was a significant feat of engineering and has involved some of the country's foremost experts in this field. The Horn has attracts people from near and far, and is one of many art-works along the M8 corridor, including the big heids, the stag and the red sheep.

