

The SCWS Soapworks, Grangemouth

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In the 1890s there was an embargo placed upon the sales of soap to the Co-operative movement throughout Britain by the leading manufacturers such as Leverhulme. The industries accused the co-operatives of undercutting other retailers by offering a dividend and in turn the Co-operative accused the industry of price-fixing. Early in 1896 the directors of the Scottish Co-operative Wholesale Society decided to enter into the field of soapmaking and secured land in South Lumley Street in Grangemouth for this purpose. The location meant that the bulky raw materials could be brought in through the growing port or by rail and from the beginning the works had its own siding. £11,000 was set aside for the project and the production of soap began in October 1897.

Illus: 2nd ed OS map showing that construction work had begun with what became the glycerine room and the railway siding. The map also illustrates just how close the works was to the burgh boundary.

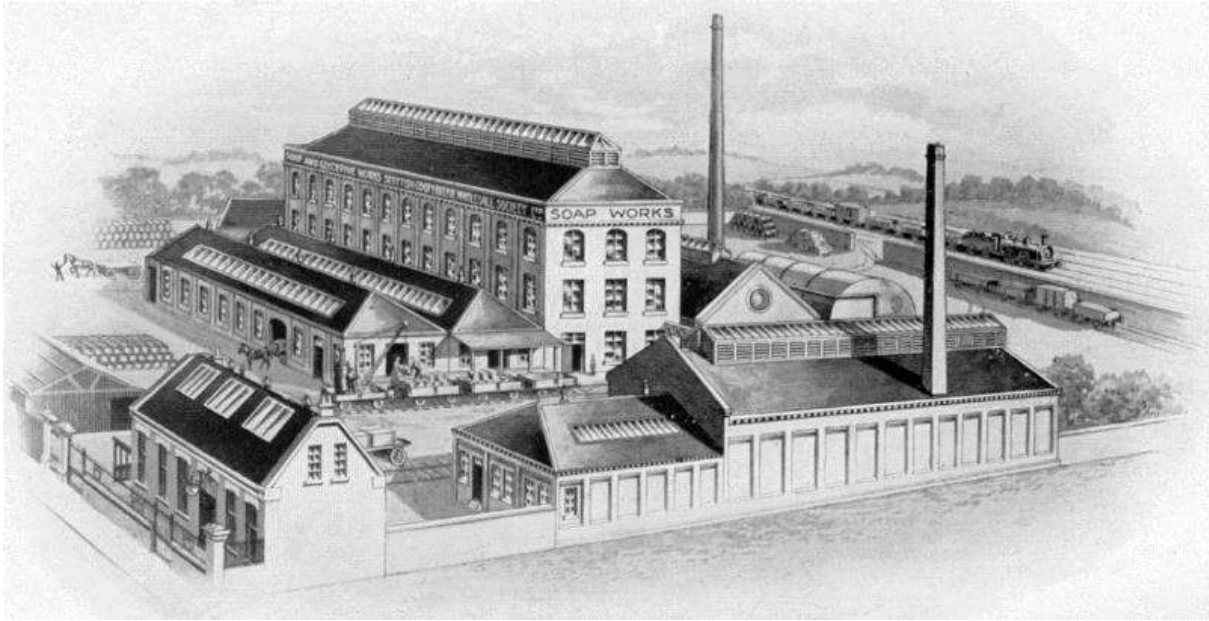


Illus: Barrels of tallow and rendered fat in the yard just off Lumley Street with part of the large workforce. c1918.

At first sales were slow and the plant was working well below capacity. Part of the problem was the unfamiliarity of the products to the consumer and the great advertising campaigns of their

main rivals. Rumours circulated about the SCWs soap which were not true, but which the press was slow to contradict in fear of losing advertising revenue.

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Illus: Grangemouth Soapworks 1915 with barrels in a similar location.

The Co-operative movement stressed customer loyalty and the real quality of the soap, but progress was slow and in the first few years losses were marked up. In 1905 two things happened, the Daily Mail exposed a price-fixing scheme by the other producers and HC Green was appointed manager at Grangemouth. The public reacted badly to trans-Atlantic meddling and favoured home produced products. Green was an experienced industrial chemist and he upgraded the working practices at Grangemouth, improving costs and quality. The works never made a loss again. Five years later he was followed by his assistant JA Penny who consolidated the position over many decades. In the first full year of production the works had produced £31,981 worth of soap. By 1929 this had increased to £358,277 and the number of employees was 240.

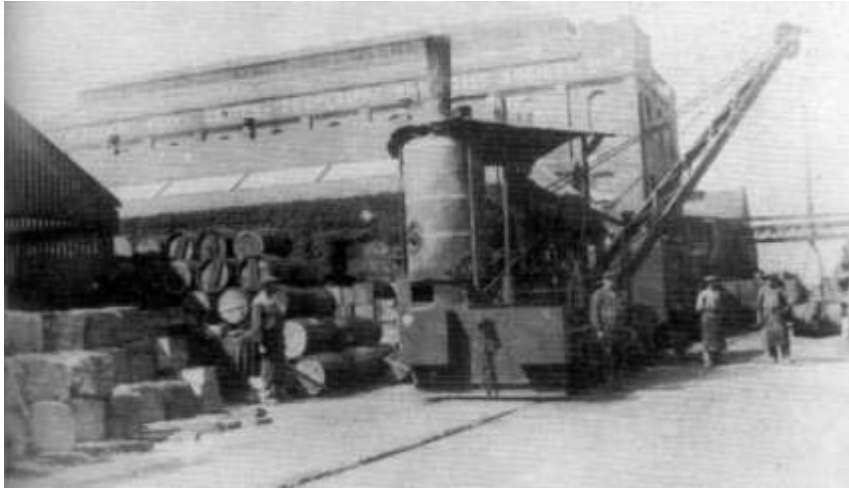


The site lay just outside the Grangemouth Burgh Boundary and so it did not receive the same beneficial water rate as property within it. This was overcome by extracting water for steam and cooling straight from the Grange Burn.

Illus: 3rd ed OS map, c1923, showing the original concept for the works with the buildings laid out to either side of the railway siding. Since 1898 Eastend Farm has been demolished and Lumley Street extended southwards

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During the First World War the SCWS Soapworks at Grangemouth became a controlled establishment because glycerine that was produced as a by-product was essential for the explosives industry. In 1924 additional equipment was installed to refine the glycerine and increase sales. The making of candles was commenced in 1927.



Illus: Steam crane for moving the barrels, c1910. The crane can also be seen on both of the prints.

In 1918 the SCWS described the soapmaking process thus:

"The operations at Grangemouth may be briefly described. The chief purpose of soap is to cleanse, and the chief cleansing substance is soda, which dissolves dirt. Soda when used alone would have an irritating effect upon the skin and a harmful effect upon articles of clothing or furnishing, and so it has to be combined with fats or oils of an emollient quality, which counteract the caustic effects of the soda. The essential ingredients in good soap therefore are caustic soda and either vegetable oils or animal fats; and the function of the soapworks is to combine these ingredients so as to produce a variety of soaps adapted for different purposes. Materials for use in the works are drawn from all parts of the globe. The Society has its own sources in West Africa; but it acts in close co-operation with the English CWS in obtaining supplies of fats, oils, and chemical deposits. Between the two Wholesale societies, in 1918, there were between 700 and 800 tons of soap produced weekly, and this demanded such quantities of raw materials that the production of them had been a pressing need for some time. The need is being attended to...

The works produce bars, tablets, flakes, powders, soft soap, toilet soap, shaving sticks and glycerine. Before these forms are reached, there is a common process. The caustic soda is put with the fats, or oils, into large boiling pans, each of which has a capacity for about thirty tons of soap. The boiling takes several days. Glycerine, which is a by-product, is liberated in this process. This now valuable substance, formerly used for medicinal purposes, has been in enormous demand during the war for the production of explosives. The melted soap is run from the pans into large, iron boxes to cool and harden; and, when ready, the sides of the boxes are removed, leaving a solid cube of soap which is cut into flat slabs by steel wires, and the slabs are then cut into bars which are put into stacks to dry thoroughly. There we have ordinary bar soap made and ready for sale. Soft soap is the crudest of all soaps. The tablet soaps sold by the SCWS and the soap powders have been chiefly in competition with the soaps for which prizes

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have been offered by other makers to the collectors of wrappers. Nonetheless, in eight years, after the advent of Mr Penny, the Wholesale has increased the trade in its own soap powders by about 500%; and the net increase over the whole output was about 100%. The tablets are prepared in the same fashion as the bar soap; but the soap is moulded into the familiar tablet or twin-tablet form. Flake soap is made in the same fashion before being reduced to the flakes.

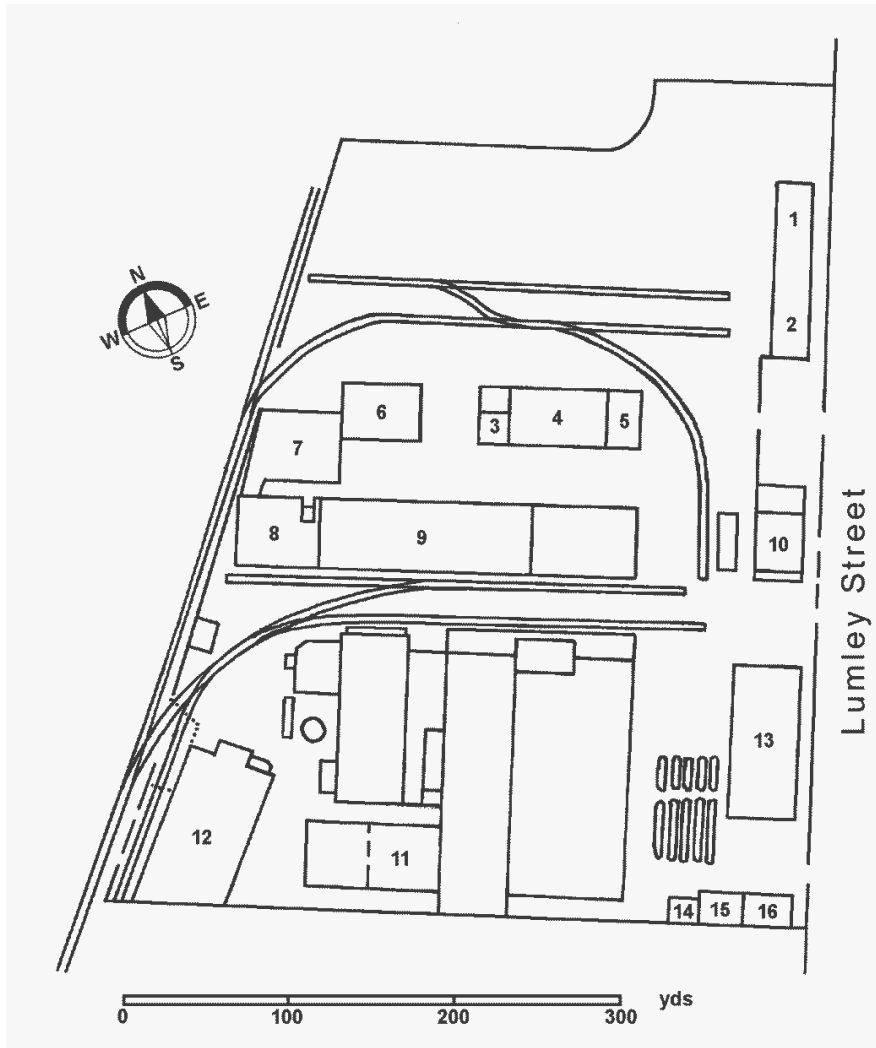


Illus: Grangemouth Soapworks 1929.

Toilet soaps are of a higher quality than the ordinary cleansers. The most carefully selected materials only are used. When this fine soap is being made, it is subjected to special treatment to get rid of all free alkali. When it is cooled, it is cut into shavings which are almost completely dried in heated chambers. Colours and perfumes are then added, and the soap is then run repeatedly between granite rollers to secure uniformity in texture, colour, and perfume. It is then formed into bars, which are cut into pieces, and stamped by powerful presses into the daintily scented tablets displayed in the store window in their fancy boxes." (Flanigan 1919, 419-421).

Joe Penny was a local councillor for many years, eventually becoming the provost. He made the works a centrepiece of the town, personally conducted many tours of various guilds and societies. It was a fascinating place to visit. The workforce continued to be well looked after and had very active cricket, football and other teams. In 1924 more extensive dining and recreation rooms were added.

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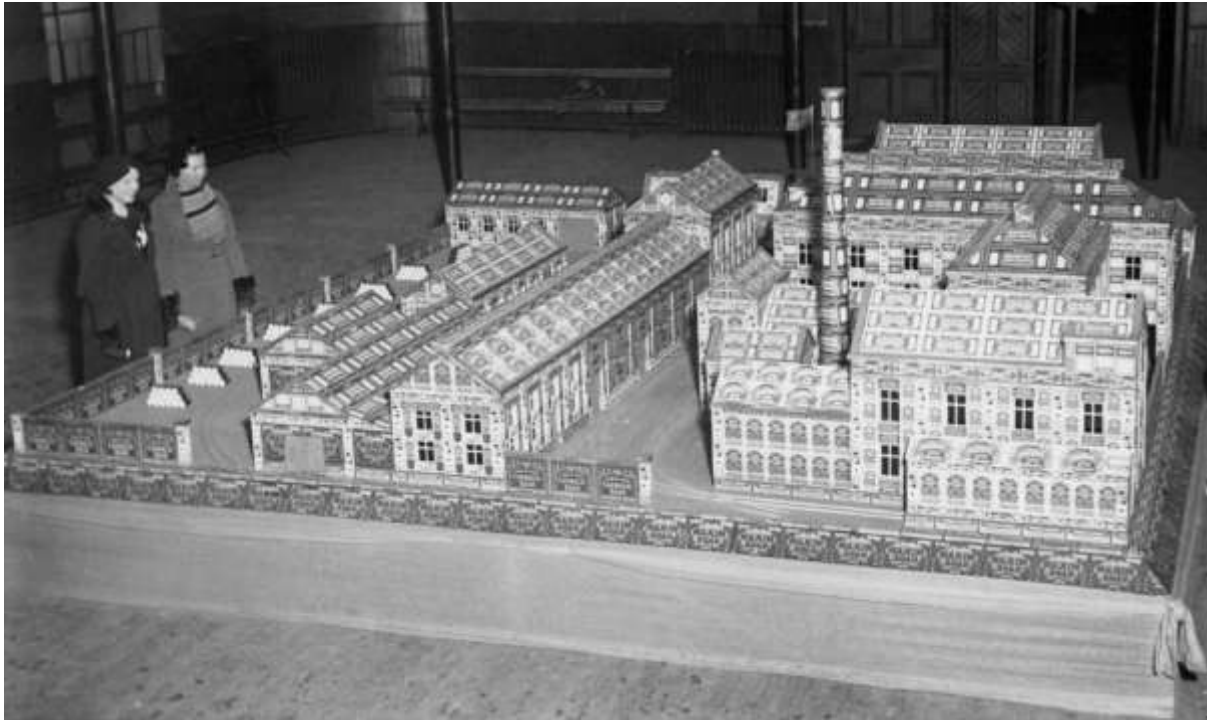
Illus: Plan of the Soapworks, c1926.

- 1 - dining room**
- 2 - garage**
- 3 - smithy store**
- 4 - engineer's workshop**
- 5 - joiner's workshop**
- 6 - smithy**
- 7 - case shed**
- 8 - dry soap dept**
- 9 - glycerine room**
- 10 - office & laboratory**
- 11 - toilet soap dept**
- 12 - warehouse with loading bay**
- 13 - timber shed**
- 14 - lorry shed**
- 15 - hay shed**
- 16 - stable**



Illus: The soapworks seen over the high wall that bordered Lumley Street.

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Illus: A model of the soapworks made from plywood covered with soap labels on display in Grangemouth Town Hall, October 1934. The event was used to raise money for the local Nursing Association.

One production problem was the variability in the demand for steam with peak demand being considerably greater than the normal operating background. A steam accumulator was built for the works in Glasgow and in February 1929 this monster made its way to Grangemouth by road. It was capable of holding 10,500lbs and its workings are well described by Wilson Kerr in his article.

Occasionally the townsfolk would complain of the smells associated with the manufacture of soap and so around 1920 the use of whale or fish oil was stopped. Fishy bad odours continued in the town centre, but not from the soapworks. However, in January 1934 the SCWS sought planning permission for a Fat Melting and Rendering Business just to the west of Christie's sleeper works at the Docks. This was classified as an Offensive Business because of the smell and, despite the distance, when the wind was in the wrong direction it pervaded the town. 1934 also saw an addition to the glycerine factory in the form of a brick building with a steel roof, 27ft long by 42ft wide and 27ft high.

In 1934 a large piece of ground with extensive storage accommodation was leased from the LMS Railway in Grangemouth Docks for the process of fat rendering and the production of meat and bone meals for gardening.

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This list from 1936 shows the range of material produced.

SPECIAL

Maxim Soap, Unitas Soap, Peerless Cleanser, Economic Cleanser, U-Need-It.

CARBOLIC

Finest Pink Carbolic, Sure Shield Carbolic, Household Carbolic; Carbolic Cleanser, Protective Special Carbolic. [First Aid]



TABLETS



Naptha, Grangemouth Cleanser, White Windsor, Golden Windsor, Zetland Washer, Superfine Paraffin, Cold Water.

BAR SOAPS

Diamond Pale, First Pale, Golden Windsor, Empire, Best Extra, XXX Pale, XX Pale, Fine Pale, Prime Pale, Queen's Pale, Blue Mottled, Trades Special Pale.

SPECIALITIES

SCWS Diamond Soap Flakes, SCWS Lavender Scented Flakes, SCWS Rose Scented Flakes, SCWS Finest Soft Soap, SCWS No. 1 Soap Powder, SCWS Concentrated Extract of Soap, SCWS Naptha Soap Powder, SCWS Ammonia Soap Powder, SCWS Aidall, SCWS Dinna-fret, SCWS Sprinkle, SCWS Rubit of Polishing Powder. [Peerless Soap Powder, Rubitof, Uzme].



TOILET SOAPS

Lavender, Palm and olive, milk of Sulphur, Bath Toilet



Soaps, Cold Cream, Brown of Pink Carbolic, Eucalyptus.

Specialities – Savon-de-Fleur, SCWS Lovely, Triple Bouquet, Fruit Soaps, Beauty, Brown Windsor, Buttermilk, Carnation, Cold Cream and Glycerine, Hyacinth, Moss Rose, Oatmeal, Parma Violet,

Sure Shield, Sweet Violet, White Rose and Cucumber.



SHAVING SOAPS

Sticks (Bakelite cases) – No. 1, Elite. Tubes – SCWS Shaving Cream.

[SOFT SOAPS]

Honeysuckle – in a variety of containers.

Grangemouth Soapworks

CANDLES

SCWS Superfine Wax Candles.

Detergents, disinfectant fluids, liquid soaps, and dustless floor sweeping compounds are also manufactured.



The entire product of Grangemouth went to co-operatives in Scotland and England. It was sold in the many co-operative branches up and down the country, and also extensively used in their extensive laundries. However, as these declined so too did the soapworks. It closed in October 1966, a victim of



modern trends in washing processes. While the soapworks had the capacity and the skills to produce modern detergents, it has a single outlet. It lacked the economics of scale that benefited the multi-nationals and it certainly was no match for their advertising power.

Illus: Extruded bars of soap being cut into tablets and hand stacked for air cooling before being packed.

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