[Kyle Granite continues her A—Z of Scottish History]

O is for OIL

The North Sea oil has provided Scotland with an abundance of revenue for half a century, since it was discovered for the first time in September 1969.
Brendan McKeown, superintendent of the Seaquest drilling rig, jumped in a helicopter as soon as it was radioed that oil had been struck and famously collected the first spills of oil in a pickle jar.

On return to Amoco's Great Yarmouth office, he poured it out onto an ashtray and set it alight. As the shiny liquid quickly went up in flames, McKeown's boss, Mitch Watt, confidently declared; "That's it. It's oil.". Fifty years and around 45 billion barrels of oil later, the North Sea basin is in decline and Scotland's dependency on it is beginning to dwindle. With growing pressure for governments to move away from fossil fuels towards more sustainable energy sources such as solar, wind and hydro power, it is likely that Scotland's relationship with the black gold will be relegated to her history and fail to be a prominent feature in her future. This month's A-Z feature will explore the impact that the oil industry has had in Scotland in the past five decades.

In 1964 the Continental Shelf Act was introduced and outlined the provision for the exploration and exploitation of oil and gas on the continental shelf around the British Isles and subsequently allowing for large scale commercial operations and the birth of a thriving oil industry in the northern Scottish city, Aberdeen.

In 1970, British Petroleum (now BP) announced oil had been struck 110 miles north of Aberdeen from the Paleocene Forties Formation sandstones over an area of 90 km^2, making it a "giant oil field". A large reservoir at a depth of 7,000ft was revealed, marking the Forties Oil Field as the first and largest major oil field discovery for the United Kingdom in the North Sea.

The following year, the giant Brent oilfield was discovered by Shell Expro in the northern North Sea east of Shetland. Scotland's oil industry has often been considered the saviour of Northern Scotland, which had experienced decades of depopulation and unemployment before oil was discovered.

Following the 1973 oil crisis, offshore oil production became more economical as the world oil price quadrupled. This was followed by the 1979 oil crisis which saw a further tripling of oil prices. However, oil extraction is a costly process, by the 1980s pressure to develop new methods and technologies to make the process more efficient and safe were mounting and far exceeded NASA's budget to land a man on the moon.

The Scottish National Party (SNP) famously used the slogan "It's Scotland's Oil" to justify the economic case for Scottish independence in the 1970s, with the argument that Scotland would only truly benefit from the discovery in the North Sea if she were independent from the rest of the United Kingdom. In 2014, during the Scottish Independence Referendum, the SNP again used the North Sea oil to justify the economic viability of an independent Scotland. Former Deputy Leader of the SNP, Jim Sillars, said

during the campaign that "[Scotland] will be the masters of the oil fields, not BP or any other of the majors".

Since 2014, the ever-present threat of climate change has been a key focus for governments, with more pressure on Scotland as the host for COP26 in November 2021. Now the big question is; can we continue to extract oil from the North Sea and still hit our targets of net zero by 2045? If the answer is no, what does this mean for Scottish independence?
And what about the huge number of Scots employed by the oil industry or those who depend on the industry to make a living? Of course, no one is expecting the tap to be turned off overnight, however campaigners argue that it is better to loosen our dependency now and begin to embrace the possibility of a fossil fuel free future, investing money to retrain those in the industry with skills for the renewable sectors.