

In the Beginning – There was Floorcloth

We are delighted to have this month's object authored by good friends of our project. It is very easy to claim that a particular individual is the person best suited to produce a narrative but, this month, it is a factually accurate statement – Gavin Grant is the man.

If Adam Smith is recognised as the most synonymous individual linked to Kirkcaldy then, in terms of the town's industrial heritage, linoleum stands head and shoulders above the rest – immortalised by Mary C. Smith's legendary poem – *The Boy in the Train*.

Linoleum and Kirkcaldy are irrevocably welded together and even today, in the shape of Forbo, Kirkcaldy is the last bastion of the industry still manufacturing in the United Kingdom. The story of Kirkcaldy and linoleum is best told in the safe and accomplished hands of Gavin.

Linoleum is a massive story and one impossible to tell in a single episode. The team have taken advantage of a two year project which has just been launched by OnFife. This is an exciting new social and industrial history project; - *Flooring the World – Exploring the Fife Linoleum Industry*. The object of the project is to engage people with OnFife's amazing linoleum collection.

The project will, in the main, be driven by the *Engagement Curator*, Lily Barnes, along with Gavin, the possessor of a truly

outstanding knowledge of the industry. It therefore seemed both sensible and ideal to approach Lily and Gavin to ask if they would consider being our guest authors on Kirkcaldy and linoleum.

We were delighted that, without hesitation, they agreed, so it will be Lily and Gavin who walk us through the mammoth history of linoleum. The intention is that it will be broken down into three manageable episodes.

The story of floorcloth, the precursor of linoleum, will be told below and later in the year its transformation into linoleum will be recounted.

Finally, at the end of the project, Lily and Gavin will write on the value of their project, what and who it has unearthed, along with their future plans and hopes for the promotion of their outstanding and hopefully enhanced collection.

As we now move into the story of floorcloth, we begin with an introduction to Gavin and Lily who will be our guides:-

Gavin is a native of Milngavie and currently living in Linlithgow. His present position is *Collections Team Leader* with *Fife Cultural Trust*. Gavin started working with the Fife Museum Services in 1990 which developed into OnFife/Fife Cultural Trust in 2012.

Gavin secured a B.A. in Modern History at the University of Strathclyde and, while studying, acted as a volunteer at the

Glasgow Transport Museum which is now sited by the River Clyde.

On leaving University he decided against a career in teaching history and took up a post with *Summerlee – The Museum of Scottish Industrial Life*. The museum is located on the site of the 19th century Summerlee Ironworks.

After 12 months with the museum, Gavin took a year out to attend the University of Leicester where he gained a postgraduate M.A. in Museum Studies before returning to *Summerlee* as an Assistant Curator.

A year later he saw an advertisement in the *Museum's Journal* for the post of *Assistant Curator* in Kirkcaldy which he applied for and secured. It was an exciting time as the museum had just been revamped, Café Wemyss had opened, and a major linoleum exhibition was about to be planned and executed.

The exhibition *The Queer like Smell* was highly successful with Gavin being involved, along with two colleagues, in writing the accompanying programme for the event. It was from this exhibition that Gavin's interest and knowledge of linoleum grew and developed.

Gavin has made three appearances on television in relation to his work. He featured in *The Town that Floored the World* – speaking not unnaturally about linoleum, and has also spoken about the same subject on the *Antiques Road Trip* (with Natasha Ruskin Sharp). Another episode of the same

programme saw Gavin speaking on Adam Smith (with Anita Manning).

Away from work Gavin is a keen hillwalker, with Glen Feshie, a beautiful and wild glen in the Cairngorms - his favourite spot. He is also an avid birdwatcher – where cuckoos are a favourite – although, he tends to hear more than he sees!

Lily has only recently joined the Trust to be involved in and co-ordinate the two year project. Lily is still finding her feet but she has a skillset which will clearly add value to the project.

Lily has lived in Scotland for 10 years, beginning with studying at St. Andrew's University to gain a degree in Art History. Lily also possesses a PG Certificate in Antiques Trafficking and Art Crime. As Lily admits “not hugely relevant to linoleum, but was a bit of fun”.

In terms of her career, Lily has gained experience in working at the McManus Gallery in Dundee, with the National Trust for Scotland, and most recently with the University of St. Andrews.

She was initially employed in the University's Special Collections Unit, but most recently as Exhibitions Officer in the University's Museum Services. Her last exhibition, prior to leaving St Andrews, was entitled *Dive In*, which featured some of the University's natural history collection.

Therefore, it can be seen that we are in safe hands as we start to examine one of Kirkcaldy's foundation industries and we

look forward to enjoying the trilogy over the coming months. Please bear in mind that Gavin and Lily are keen to hear from anyone who works, or has worked, in the linoleum industry. This also applies to those who perhaps had a family member involved in the enterprise. Your memories can add to the value of the project.

So over to Gavin and Lily for – *Floorcloth*:-

The Kirkcaldy Floorcloth Industry

Kirkcaldy is, of course, famous for being the world centre of linoleum production for many years. What is less well known is that it was also a great centre of manufacture of a similar floorcovering, called floorcloth, which was a forerunner of linoleum. Floorcloth was made in Kirkcaldy from the late 1840s and continued to be made into the 1930s. Linoleum was invented in the 1860s and made in Kirkcaldy from the late 1870s and is still made today in the town by Forbo.

Floorcloth banners

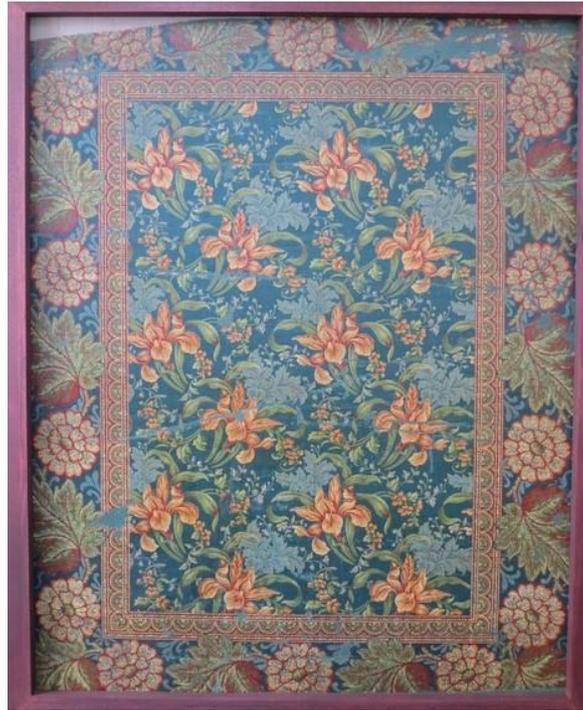
The collections held by Fife Cultural Trust can help tell the story of floorcloth. One of the most striking objects on display in Kirkcaldy Galleries is a large banner mounted in a frame. It's in the linoleum section of the 'Moments in Time' display on the ground floor of the building. Painted onto the canvas banner is the Michael Nairn & Company thistle logo with the words: SCOTLAND FOR EVER/1847 FIRST IN THE FIELD THE MERIT STAR WE GAIN/1907 STILL IN THE FRONT THE STAR WE AYE RETAIN.



Front of floorcloth banner

The date 1847 referred to the building of Scotland's first floorcloth factory in Kirkcaldy by Michael Nairn. The banner also proudly publicised the town's pre-eminent success in making floorcoverings in the following decades.

This is one of five banners made of floorcloth held in the collection, the only ones known to still exist out of hundreds made and carried by Nairn workers in Kirkcaldy in the later 19th and early 20th centuries. Workers used sheets of floorcloth made by the company and painted images and words on what was the back of the floorcovering. Here you can see an image of what is now the back of the banner (the side now facing the wall in the Galleries) - it's a printed floral pattern, made to imitate a carpet.



Back of floorcloth banner

What was floorcloth?

Floorcloth was basically canvas, painted with thick layers of paint, which then had a pattern either hand painted or printed. At times it has also been called waxcloth or oilcloth. In some ways floorcloth was similar to an actual painting. Indeed, this banner was recently conserved with treatment (thanks to funding from the Friends of Kirkcaldy Galleries) by oil painting conservators.

The vast majority of floorcloth produced was of course not made into banners, it was made to be laid on floors! Floorcloth was developed in England in the 18th century and was a very common floorcovering in the 18th and 19th centuries. Charles Dickens mentioned it in a number of his novels and even invented a new verb when he referred to a drawing room being 'floor-clothed all over' in *Martin Chuzzlewit*.

Many companies were located in the south of England, such as John Hare & Company of Bristol and Smith & Baber of London. It was to the English market that a canvas manufacturer called Michael Nairn (1804-58) sent products from his small canvas-weaving factory in Coal Wynd in Kirkcaldy. There were about three dozen floorcloth companies in England, two thirds of which were supplied by Nairn. The growth of the floorcloth business encouraged Nairn to make it himself, rather than just supply it elsewhere.



Michael Nairn (1804-58)

'Nairn's Folly'

Nairn decided to set up his own floorcloth works in Kirkcaldy in the late 1840s in what he called 'my great enterprise'. The huge factory was located looking down on Pathhead Sands and was called the Scottish Floor-Cloth Manufactory. He had to borrow money towards the £4,000 cost of the construction and it was time-consuming to make the product. No quick return on his investment made it a risk for Nairn. This has given rise to the story that sceptics dubbed the building 'Nairn's Folly'.



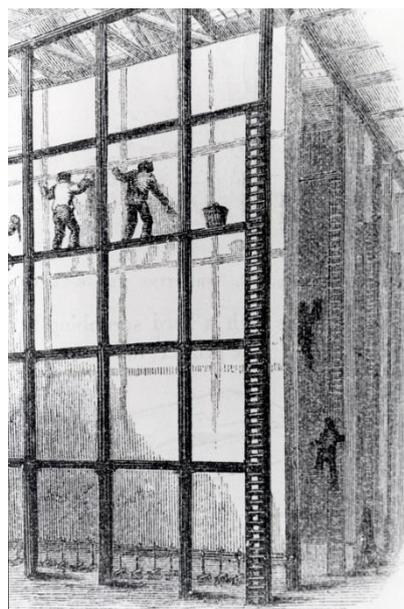
Floorcloth banner, around 1900

No evidence so far has been found though to prove that locals in the 1840s and 50s called it 'Nairn's Folly' and it would be interesting to discover when the term was first used.

How was floorcloth made?

How then was floorcloth made in the mid 19th century? A fascinating report in Chambers Edinburgh Journal in 1849 described a visit to Nairn's newly opened factory, 'by far the largest pile of masonry in the district, forming a conspicuous object from a distance, both the traveller by railway and the voyager by sea'. The fabric was a 'coarse flaxen cloth...worked by two men in broad looms'. Cuts of this canvas were then hoisted up inside what was called the frame room. Various layers of thick paint were laid onto the canvas using brushes and trowels. Rubbing with pumice stones between coats ensured a smooth surface. Visitors in the mid 19th century remarked on the relative absence of noise in sections of floorcloth factories compared with other manufactures.

After a number of months the canvas was then taken to be printed using wooden printed blocks. Finally, the cloth was hung in 'the immense drying room' formed with pillars made from 'entire pines, such are used for masts, imported direct from Russia'. In 1849 drying was done through ventilation from 15 windows arranged in 4 tiers. The cloth was 'about ten months in the factory before it is fit to be sent into the market'.



The frame room or trowelling house, 1852



A floorcloth troweller, 1852

In the years after 1849, technological improvements included the use of steam power, both to dry the cloth and also for grinding materials to make paint. Improved methods of hand printing were also introduced. These speeded up the process and also allowed for greater range of patterns to be made.

By 1862 the *Art Journal* noted that great improvements to printing and design had been made by Nairn's. At first their designs had been printed with small dots in a fairly basic manner. The Museum collection has two rare pattern books from that period which show this. In the 1850s the *Art Journal* stated that 'a most important fundamental change has been introduced and matured by the enterprising and able Scottish firm of Michael Nairn & Co. of Kirkcaldy; and now floorcloth, having got over the long-established condition of dot printing has demonstrated that it may be produced with all the richness, the minuteness, and the finish of velvet-pile carpet'.



Scottish Floor-Cloth Manufactory, 1860s

The original Nairn's factory was extended down to the beach area. At the top of the factory was the printing loft, where hand-printers used lever presses to place the square wooden printing blocks onto the cloth. Great accuracy was required. You can see examples of the wooden printing blocks inlaid with pieces of metal, as well as a hand printing press, on display in Kirkcaldy Galleries. Printers were assisted by young apprentices known as 'tier-boys'. 'Tier' is a Scots verb which means to spread or plaster, for it was the job of the boys to spread paint onto pads. The boys and the printers were often covered by paint.



Nairn's printing loft, late 19th century

Among the many fascinating objects from the Forbo archive currently being catalogued into the Museum collection by Lily Barnes, the Engagement Curator who is working on the *Flooring the World* project, is a small block of layers of paint. This was discovered years ago under the floorboards of a former Nairn's printing loft. It's a unique and rather odd 'geological' record of time spent working with paint when printing – the paint would have dripped at times between the cracks in the wooden floor to leave this record below.



Layers of dried paint from below the floor of a printing loft

The Floorcloth Boom

After the death of Michael Nairn in 1858 the company continued to expand due to technical improvements and increasing demand. His widow Catherine, son Robert and manager James Shepherd, who had started as a clerk with the firm, formed a partnership. In 1861 they were joined by another son, Michael Barker Nairn.

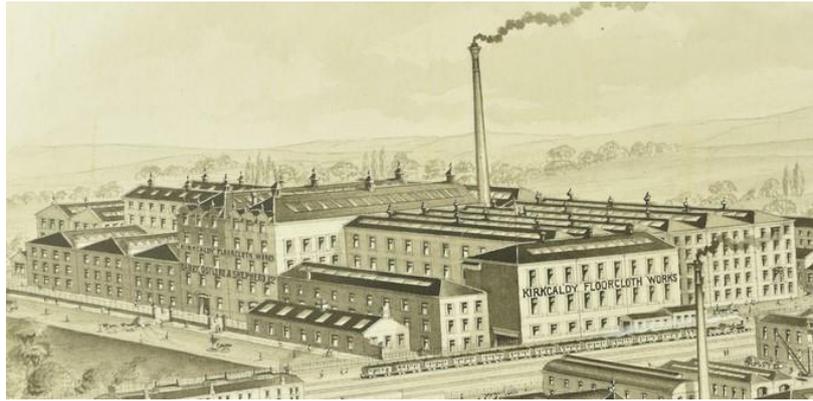


Portrait of Catherine Nairn

In his 1869 book *The Industries of Scotland: Their Rise, Progress and Present Condition*, David Bremner wrote that Michael Nairn & Company operated the largest floorcloth factory in the world 'and the proprietors of it have done more to perfect and extend the manufacture than all the other British firms put together'. By this stage the success of Nairn's was encouraging other floorcloth companies to be formed in Kirkcaldy.

Good transport links by sea and rail assisted the development of the industry in the town. The Kirkcaldy linen industry also acted as a springboard for the floorcoverings trade, not just with the example of Michael Nairn himself but also with some of his new competitors who set up floorcloth factories locally. It could also be said that Kirkcaldy gained a vital competitive advantage of being the first Scottish town to make the product.

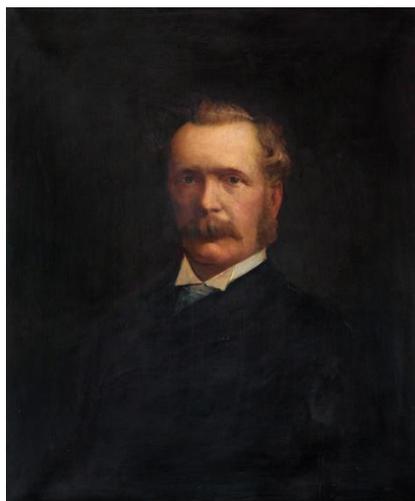
In 1864 the second company in the town, **Shepherd and Beveridge**, was formed. Their Kirkcaldy Floorcloth Works was also built in the Pathhead area and was operated by James Shepherd (1830-1906) and Michael Beveridge (1836-1890). James Shepherd was a native of Elgin who later lived at Rossend Castle in Burntisland. Michael Beveridge became Provost of Kirkcaldy in 1886 and his name is forever linked to the Adam Smith Theatre and Beveridge Halls, as well as Beveridge Park in the town.



The Kirkcaldy Floorcloth Works, depicted around 1905

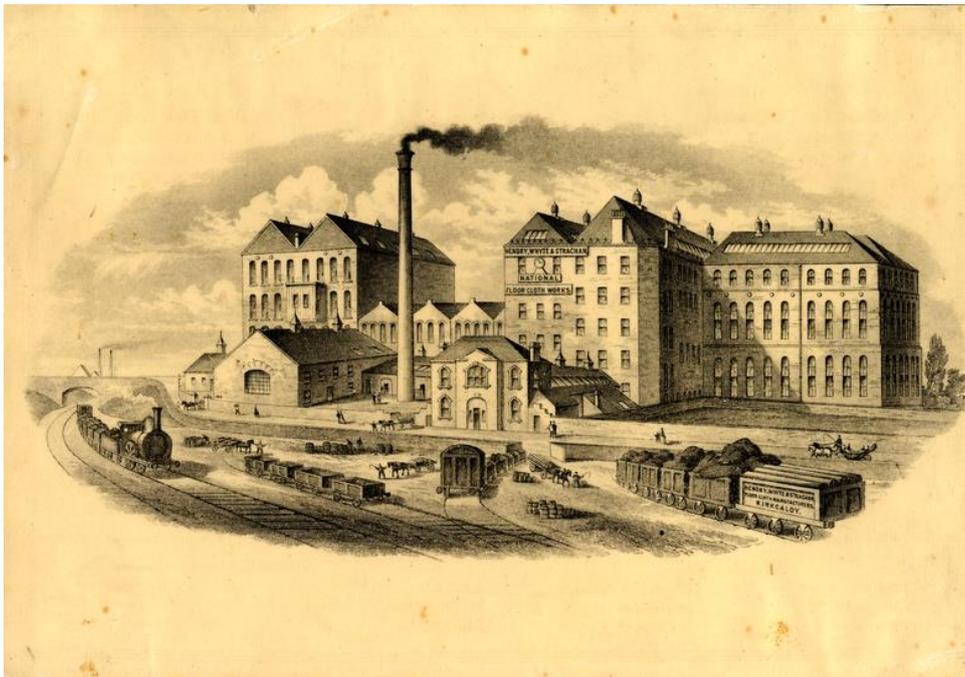


Shepherd and Beveridge workers, 1886



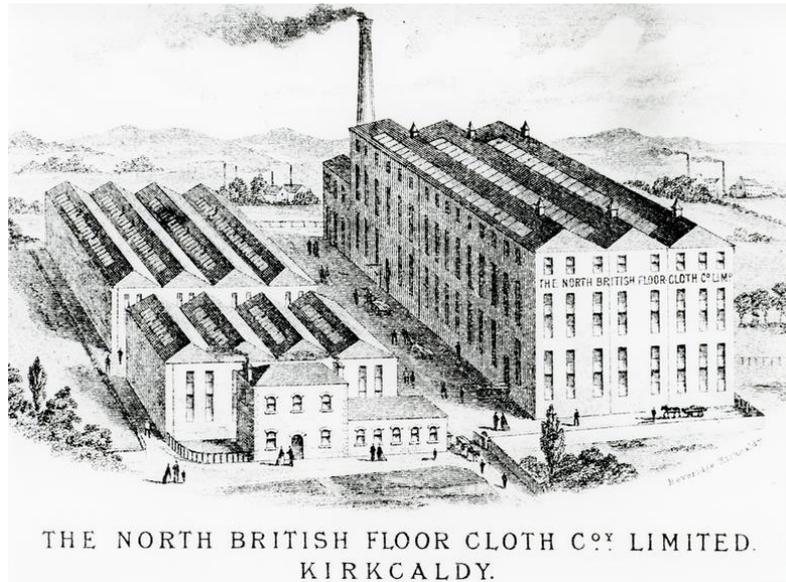
One of two portraits of Michael Beveridge in the Museum collection

The third floorcloth company built its factory in a totally different part of the town, near the railway station. This signified the first of a number of floorcovering factories located in that part of Kirkcaldy. **Hendry, Whyte and Strachan** formed a company in 1869 to build the National Works. Hendry, a town bailie, had been in the flax-spinning trade, George Whyte had a hand-loom weaving business and John Strachan was another local merchant. The *Fifeshire Advertiser* reported that 'surely floor-cloth is a glorious business when so many are rushing into it'.



Hendry, Whyte and Strachan's National Works

Three years later, in 1872, yet another company joined the trade. The **North British Floorcloth Company's** substantial works were said to contain 'perhaps the largest printing loft in the United Kingdom', with 32 printers' tables each for printing cloths 8 yards wide. according to the *Furniture Gazette*. The factory, it was claimed, was capable to producing one million square yards of floorcloth annually. It was headed by John Aytoun, flax spinner, along other Kirkcaldy merchants and manufacturers - James Jamieson, Alexander Balfour, Robert Jamieson and James Pye.



The fifth and sixth floorcloth companies were, like the National Works, located near the railway station. The **Patent Floorcloth Company** was run by John Wright, a former manager at Nairn's, Robert Douglas of the engineering firm Douglas & Grant and also a group of Ayrshire shipowners. **Tait, Chorley and Company (later Tait, Cairns and Company)** opened their Caledonian Floorcloth Works in 1874 nearby. This firm had started making floorcloth at a smaller factory in Leslie before setting up in Kirkcaldy.

Floorcloth products

A huge range of floorcloth patterns were made by the Kirkcaldy floorcloth factories. The success of the product (and later linoleum) owed much to the fact that it could imitate other floorings, such as carpets, wooden parquet and tiles. Mainly made for people's homes it was also laid in public buildings and ships. Currently on loan from Fife Cultural Trust to the Design Gallery in the V&A Dundee is a sample of floorcloth made for what was then called the National Hospital for the Paralysed and Epileptic (National Hospital for P&E) in London.



Floorcloth used at a London hospital

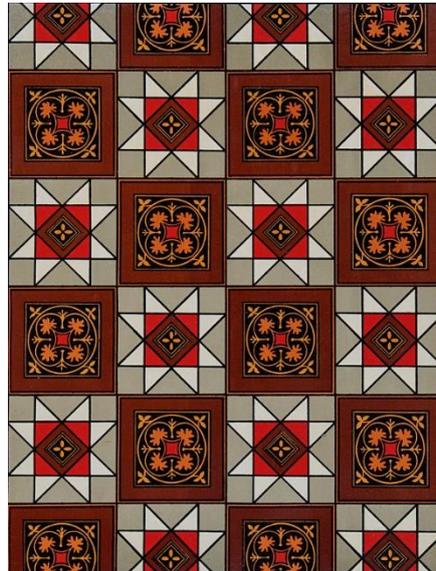
It was also publicised in 1880 that Kirkcaldy-made floorcloth was laid on the new Russian imperial yacht, the *Livadia*. This vessel for Tsar Alexander II was built in Govan on the Clyde. Reports in the Kirkcaldy newspapers in 1880 recorded that floorcloth for the yacht was made by three of the Kirkcaldy companies.

By the 1860s and 70s Kirkcaldy companies were being awarded medals for the quality of their floorcloth designs at industrial exhibitions. In the Museum collection there are a number of these medals including ones awarded to Nairn's for the quality of its floorcloth in Paris in 1867 and in Philadelphia for the Centennial Exhibition in 1876. At the latter exhibition the *Fife Free Press* reported that two floorcloths, each 36 by 24 feet, were displayed - 'In regard to design, beauty and colouring, and perfection of workmanship, it is difficult to imagine they will ever be surpassed. We have no hesitation in saying that in America they will not, in any sense, meet with their equal.'



Medal awarded for floorcloth made by Michael Nairn & Company,
Philadelphia, 1876

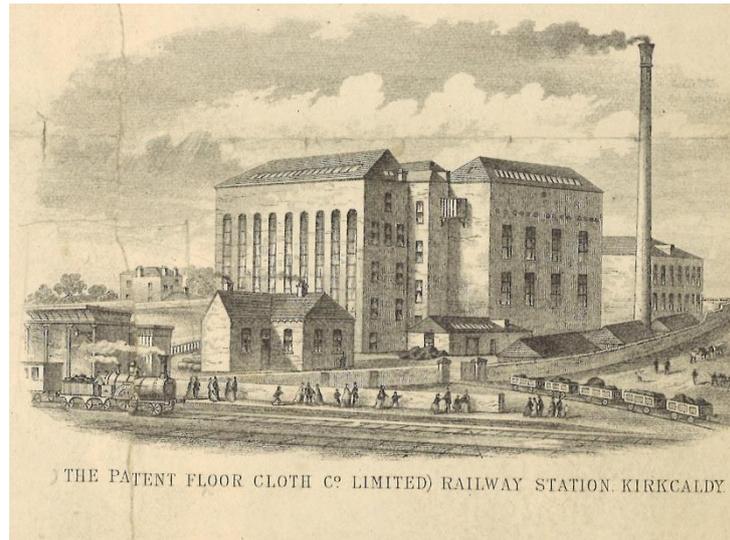
The top end of the floorcloth design market can be seen in a pattern book of floorcloth designs from the 1880s recently donated from the Forbo archive in Kirkcaldy to the Museum collection. This book was presented to Michael Barker Nairn (one of the sons of the founder of the company) by floorcloth printers. High quality designs feature throughout the book, including tiled patterns.



Floorcloth pattern from the 1880s

Fire and Floorcloth

One of the greatest dangers in making floorcloth was fire. The raw materials used for floorcloth (and linoleum) made this an ever-present danger. In September 1879, for example, the *Fife Free Press* reported on a 'Destructive Fire at Messrs Nairn's Floorcloth Factory' which caused considerable damage. Just a few months later, in January 1880, the scene at an even worse fire at the Patent Floorcloth Works was described as 'awe inspiring, grand and terrible'. As the building went up in flames 'the whole of the valuable cloths, amounting in value to many thousands of pounds (were) consumed in less than an hour by the devouring element.' The Patent Floorcloth Company was forced out of business and had to sell what remained of the factory and its products.



Floorcloth strike of 1872

In the 1870s and 80s it was reported in the local press that the tier-boys went on short strikes on at least four occasions. In 1871 they were said to have 'marched through the streets hurraing and singing'.

The largest strike of floorcloth workers in Kirkcaldy took place the following year, in 1872, when the workers tried to reduce their long working hours from 57 to 51 per week. Company owners brought workers by train from the north of Scotland to help break the strike. They were greeted at the railway station 'with a perfect storm of hisses, howls and groans' from floorcloth workers, according to the *Fife Free Press*. On arrival at the Kirkcaldy Floorcloth Works 'Mr Shepherd, who seemed most unpopular among the factory girls, had to run the gauntlet through them, amid a perfect storm of hisses and yells'.

During the month-long dispute 'the men and boys on strike, headed by three pipers, and followed by nearly all the factory girls in the district, marched with flying banners through the town'. A compromise of 54 hours a week ended the strike.

Reports in the local press in the 19th century also frequently noted accidents, sometimes fatal, involving floorcloth workers. These were usually caused by moving machinery as well as falls from height or materials falling onto workers. One of the worst accidents related to the industry took place in April 1872, the same year as the strike, when five builders were killed and four severely injured. The accident happened

when they were building a wall which then collapsed, at a new floorcloth factory for Nairn's that was in the process of construction.

The search for a more durable and flexible floorcovering...

The great leap forward in floorcloth production and design in the 19th century did not stop the search for even better floorcoverings. Floorcloth did have limitations and there were attempts to find a better quality, warmer and more durable type of floorcovering. A number of new products were introduced in the mid 19th century in order to overcome these shortcomings, but each had its own limitations. Kamptulicon – patented by Elijah Galloway in 1843 – was praised for its supple, leather-like feel and warm touch but, as it was made using natural rubber, it proved too expensive as the costs of raw materials rose.

However, in the 1860s another floorcovering with an unusual name – linoleum – was invented by Frederick Walton. Nairn's and some of the other Kirkcaldy companies moved into making linoleum from the late 1870s. It proved to be a more flexible and longer lasting floorcovering, capable of being made in a greater range of thickness. The story of the subsequent decades of linoleum though will need to wait for another article in a few months' time.

It should be noted though that there remained a market for floorcloth for many more decades. The great Kirkcaldy companies, Michael Nairn & Company and Barry, Ostlere and Shepherd (formed with the merger of some of the other companies) continued to make floorcloth along with linoleum until the 1930s.



Barry, Ostlere and Shepherd floorcloth pattern book, 1930-31

What can you see of floorcloth now?

Sadly, all the original 19th century floorcloth factories are now gone. Many were demolished in the 1960s and 70s, especially after the demise of Barry's in the early 1960s. However, there is now preserved a rich resource about floorcloth – in the form of samples, pattern books, tools, photographs and archives, as well as the banners that featured at the start of this article – held by Fife Cultural Trust. This collection will hopefully mean that future generations will be able to find out about and research this important aspect of social and industrial history.

Fife Cultural Trust has recently launched a two-year project to engage people with the floorcloth and linoleum collection. *Flooring the World – Exploring the Fife Linoleum Industry* is funded by the Esmée Fairbairn Collections Fund, which is run by the Museums Association. Please email lino@onfife.com to find out more about the project and how you can get involved.

All that remains to be done is to thank Gavin and Lily for this comprehensive, interesting and informative, article on the product which ultimately led the way to the introduction of linoleum itself.

The quality of the information given, combined with interesting photographs and an exceptional writing style, show that the correct decision was made in entrusting this particular object to the safe hands of Gavin and Lily. Both deserve the team's sincere and appreciative thanks.

We look forward to the publication of episode two of the trilogy – *the Transformation into Linoleum* – which we hope to publish towards the end of this year.

If you have recollections of the industry or of those who worked in it – please get in touch with Gavin or Lily via the e-mail address in their article. If computer access is not available to you we have Lily's permission to provide her telephone number which is 07548777008. She will be delighted to hear from you.