

## Object Number 40

### Introduction

Lily Barnes is a curator working for OnFife. She is currently working on a project called *Flooring the World*, which explores the history of the Fife linoleum industry. The team are delighted that Lily has accepted our invitation to author Object 40 – the final segment in our linoleum trilogy.

Lily grew up in an un-picturesque part of Essex, but has lived in Scotland for (most of) the past 11 years. She has always had an interest in museums, built on a childhood rich in picture books of Greek myths, repeat viewings of *Jurassic Park*, and tales of heads chopped off in days gone by.

In 2012, Lily began studying History of Art at the University of St Andrews. In her free time, she worked as waitress and tour guide, alongside volunteering in museums and galleries.

After graduating Lily got her first 'behind-the-scenes' museum job at the Oxford University Museum of Natural History. She then returned north of the border to work first at Dundee's McManus Museum, and later for the National Trust for Scotland, both on documentation projects, before joining the St Andrew's University Museum team in 2021. She began her current post at OnFife at the beginning of 2022.

For this month's article, Lily will share some of the achievements made during the *Flooring the World* project, and talk about plans for her forthcoming exhibition, which will open at Kirkcaldy Galleries on 15 November 2023.

### Flooring the World 2022 – 2024



### Object Number 40

There are lots of things I like about this object. I like that it's colourful in a way that rewards close looking – a scrap of deep blue or fiery orange might not be visible on a first glance, but once you see it, you won't be able to believe you ever missed it. I like that you can see exactly how it was made, with its uneven sediment-like layers, but still can't quite tell what it is. On a very selfish

level, I like that it's small, robust and can stand up by itself, all of which mean it extremely easy to slot into a display case. I like its story, and how it came to OnFife's collections, because it's a great place to begin telling you about what I've been working on.

Since February 2022, I've been working as a curator at OnFife on a project called Flooring the World (I wish I could take credit for the name, but my colleague Gavin Grant came up with that one before I started). The overall aim of this project has been to improve our understanding of the Fife linoleum industry by developing our linoleum collections, and to connect as many people as possible with those collections through events, digital outreach and physical displays. In this article, I'll be sharing some of the things we've achieved over the past eighteen months, and giving you an idea of what to expect from the forthcoming exhibition.

### Oral Histories

One of the big themes of the project was to engage with people who worked (or who still work) with linoleum. To do this, we decided to carry out a series of oral history interviews with anyone who was interested in sharing their memories.

The purpose of these interviews has not been necessarily to get facts, dates and figures, but instead to ensure that the lived experiences of the people who worked in the Fife linoleum industry are preserved alongside our physical collections.

When I first started this project, I was immediately struck by how personal the history of linoleum is to so many people. Whenever I talk about my work to someone who lives in Edinburgh, or Dundee, or London, I usually need to repeat myself several times. (Did I really say the history of lino? The stuff that goes on the floor? And what does that have to do with museums?). In Fife, the response is universally one of enthusiasm; people want to tell me about their Granny's floor, that they still remember all of *The Boy on the Train* from their school days, and whether they come from a 'Barry's family' or a 'Nairn's family'.

This is precisely why carrying out oral history interviews is so important. Preserving objects, documents and photographs is a huge part of what museums do – but one of the main reasons we do this is to connect people to their pasts. It's far easier to make those connections when we can recognise a clear and tangible link between now and then. Take for example, the pieces of linoleum in our collection. As you'd expect, there are lots of these, but the ones where we know the time and place they were laid are my favourites. Even though they may not – with their boot prints and patches of wear – be as pretty as a piece fresh from the factory, there is something about them that feels more immediate. When I look at them, I'm not just thinking about how they would look in a space; I'm thinking about the people who walked on them.



This printed linoleum was removed from the upstairs landing of a house on St Brycedale Avenue, Kirkcaldy, c.1990 - 2000. Though linoleum is quite hard to date, this piece was probably manufactured in the first few decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, surviving decades of wear.

Oral histories do the same thing. A perfect, step by step guide to doing a particular job is one thing, but hearing directly from someone who did it is entirely another. As I'm the one who gets to sit down and do these interviews, I can tell you how wonderful it is to be able to hear first-hand from somebody whose memories illustrate this important piece of Fife's history.

Over the course of the project I've travelled up to Brechin, down to Gullane, and done several trips back and forth across Fife to record fifteen oral histories with linoleum workers. The majority of these interviews have been with people who worked for Nairn's in Kirkcaldy from the 1960s to present day. However, I've also been lucky enough to speak with two designers who worked in Newburgh, and a block-cutter who began his career as an apprentice at the St John's Works in Falkland.

I am hoping to make it an even twenty before the end of the project. I am especially keen to speak to people who currently work at Forbo, or who have memories of linoleum in Falkland, though I'd love to hear from anybody who worked in any aspect of the industry. If this applies to you or someone you know, please do get in touch!



The Scottish Wholesale Co-operative Society floorcloth from 1919, and linoleum between 1933 and 1963. Despite this long history, we have just a handful of objects related to Falkland linoleum in our collections.

Alongside this, we were also able to intervene to better preserve an additional fifteen recordings. Over the summer, my colleague Owen Harrison (Collections Support Assistant in the Archive and Local Studies Team) kindly digitised a series of oral history interviews which were already in our collection. These were created in the early 1990s, around the time of the *Queer-Like Smell* exhibition in 1992. The majority of these interviews are with people who worked in the Kirkcaldy industry for Nairn's or Barry's. However, as they were recorded over thirty years ago, the stories shared date back far earlier.

As these were on cassette, we were eager to transfer them to a digital format to protect them, as the tape degrades over time. As it was, quite a lot of 'noise' had accumulated on them already, but fortunately we were able to clean up the audio to make the voices on them much clearer.

All of these – both old and new – are now stored on our collections management system, which also means we can connect them to relevant objects and records within our collections. This means that, for example, any member of our Museums Team looking for more information about this gorgeous, hand-painted linoleum design doesn't have to rely on just the object record: they can listen to the designer.



[Click here](#) to listen to linoleum pattern designer Danny Ferguson. Danny was a designer at the Tayside Floorcloth Company, Newburgh between 1953-1969. In this clip, he talks about the unusual source of inspiration behind one of his most popular designs.

To add to our growing linoleum sound library, we also received a donation of objects relating to Barry's Band conductor John Faulds. Included in the donation were five records and a cassette containing recordings of the band made in the mid-twentieth century. Though attempts to digitise the records have so far been unsuccessful, we have managed to digitise the cassette.



[Click here](#) to listen to a recording of the Barry's Band playing *Flower of Scotland*. This recording was made c.1955 - 1965. This photograph shows the Barry's band in 1943. The conductor, John Faulds, sits at the centre. John is interviewed on the cassette we've digitised, and so it is likely that some of the musicians featured on the recording are also present in this image.

## Improving Existing Collections

In the last section, I briefly mentioned our existing linoleum collections, and now I want to give some more detail about the ways in which we've developed these during the Flooring the World project.

Prior to 2022, OnFife's linoleum collection consisted of just over 3000 objects. The majority of these are kept at our museum store in Bankhead, Glenrothes. This is a temperature and humidity controlled storage space, where we maintain the environment in order to best preserve the wide range of objects, documents and photographs in our care.

However, there are still lots of things we need to do to look after our collections. These are the not-so glamorous aspects of museums work which often go overlooked, but they are essential to properly preserving the objects in our care. We could talk forever about everything that needs to happen behind the scenes, but here I'm going to focus on digitisation and documentation.

By reducing handling, we can reduce the risk of an object being accidentally damaged, and lessen the impact of repeated movement or usage. One of the most effective ways to do this is to digitise our collections, so that we can see them without unpacking, moving and handling them. This also allows us to more easily circulate these images within our team, use them in displays, and share them with interested members of the public.

In particular, during the Flooring the World project we focussed our attention on the photographs. We have around a thousand photographs in our collection, which document the Fife linoleum industry in Kirkcaldy, Newburgh and Falkland from the late 1800s to the present day.

This includes some really brilliant series of photographs, which capture a particular context across a set of images. Some of my favourites come from a batch of photographs taken at factories operated by Barry, Ostlere and Shepherd Ltd., in Kirkcaldy in the 1920s. Each photograph shows a different team of workers, who appear to have taken a brief break from their daily work to have their picture taken. As they depict teams across the firm, these images allow us to get an idea of the sheer range of jobs which went into making linoleum, and to compare the demographics of different roles.

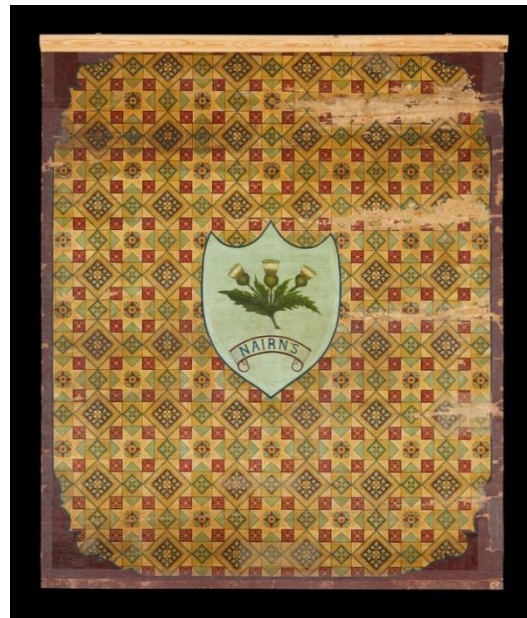
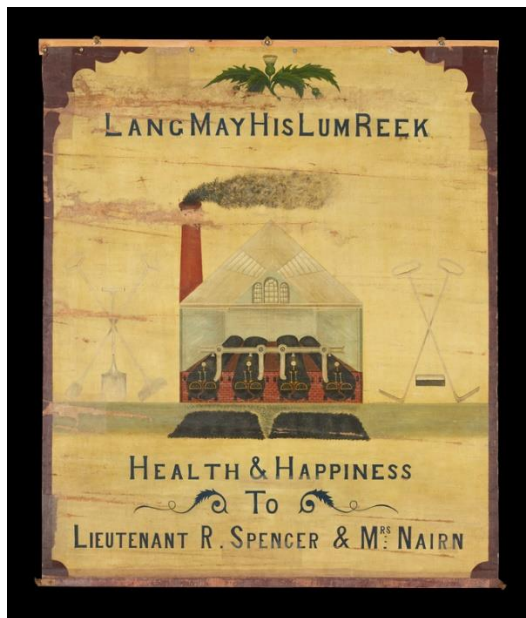




Above, the Melville Brodie printing machine workers and below, the Machine Trimming and Despatch department, both Barry, Ostlere and Shepherd Ltd., Kirkcaldy, c.1920 – 1929. Though many roles were segregated by gender (I've not found any records of a woman block-cutter, for example) women did work in many aspects of the Fife linoleum industry. This is in contrast to some of the English factories, such as Staines in Middlesex, where the vast majority of employees were men.

Over the course of the Flooring the World project, my colleagues Kaye Springham (usually of St Andrews Museum) and Susan Goodfellow (Collections Support Assistant) have digitised over 500 images from our linoleum collections. We've been able to share these via social media and in blog posts. These high-resolution images can also be exhibited as reproductions. Whereas we would try to limit the frequency and length of time that original prints were on display, these images can be displayed as often as needed, meaning that we can share them with even more people

Due in part to additional funding from the Friends of Kirkcaldy Galleries, we've also been able to commission professional photographers to work on some of the more complicated objects in our collections. This includes our collection of floorcloth banners which – due to their large size and shiny surfaces – require the skills of an expert to be photographed looking their best.



The front and back of one of our floorcloth banners. This was conserved in 1992, and photographed in 2022.

Documentation is a little bit harder to define than digitisation – in part because it's even less visible. Whereas digitised images and audio can be easily shared with members of the public, improvements to documentation are mainly noticed by people working with the collections themselves.

In short, documentation covers any physical and digital records we keep or create, all of which tell us something about the objects in our care. On a basic level, this means that every object has a number which it is marked with, and that it also has a digital record which we can look up using that number. We use this record to store information about the object's provenance – where it came from, who made it, when and where – its condition, and anything else that might be important or relevant.

The process of documentation is relatively straightforward – we collect information, and we add it to the records. However, both of these aspects take time, and can quickly get complicated – particularly when you come across interesting stories which you'd like to spend more time on!





[Striking workers at a linoleum factory in France. You can learn more about this object by reading my blogpost on OnFife's website.](#)

For example, this photograph shows workers on strike at a linoleum factory in France. Other than that, we didn't know much about it. By looking into French newspaper archives, I was able to find evidence of a strike in 1923 in a French factory operated by Barry, Ostlere and Shepherd. This was brilliant, because we now knew when and where the image was created, and how it was connected to our collections.

Information like this can also come from within our collections – sometimes its just a matter of spending time with an object to properly look for and note down dates and details. Luckily, this aligned with another of project's collections care aims: rehousing.

This relates to how we store our collections, and the interventions we can make to improve that. With regards to our linoleum collections, we wanted to know whether objects were packed and stored according to best practice, and if we were making good use of the space we had. This meant a lot of going through drawers and boxes, making sure each object had enough space, enough cushioning (usually acid free tissue paper), and that each piece was in a logical place in our stores. This meant that – even where we did not have high-resolution photographs of an image – we were able to do a proper inventory of what we had and where it was, and to update those details on our database.

It might not sound as interesting as some of the other things we've been working on but this work really is essential. A project like Flooring the World is the perfect opportunity to do work like this, which means we can learn more from our collections, and are in a better position to share them with you, too.

### Conservation

On top of these everyday interventions to better preserve our collections, there are some objects which require external conservation. Over the course of the Flooring the World project, we've been able to undertake four conservation projects.

The first involved two of the more unusual objects in our collections: two elephant sculptures produced by marketing firm Douglas Maxwell Ltd in 1973. Nairn's had commissioned the firm to create a promotional campaign that would position their products as contemporary, fashionable, and cutting-edge. In particular, they wanted to appeal to architects, who they hoped would place large, repeat orders for linoleum to be used in their designs.

Inspired by elephant bookends which were popular at the time, Douglas Maxwell decided that – instead of a photographic coffee table book, as was originally suggested – they should produce elephant-shaped boxes to hold brochures advertising Nairn linoleum. The firm reached out to Scottish pop artist Eduardo Paolozzi, who designed the boxes in his distinctive, geometric style.

Three thousand elephants were manufactured, and were sent out to architects around the world. As such, we've lost track of most of the herd, but we know that there is one in the V&A in London, and one in the Metropolitan Museum in New York. As of 2022, OnFife has two.



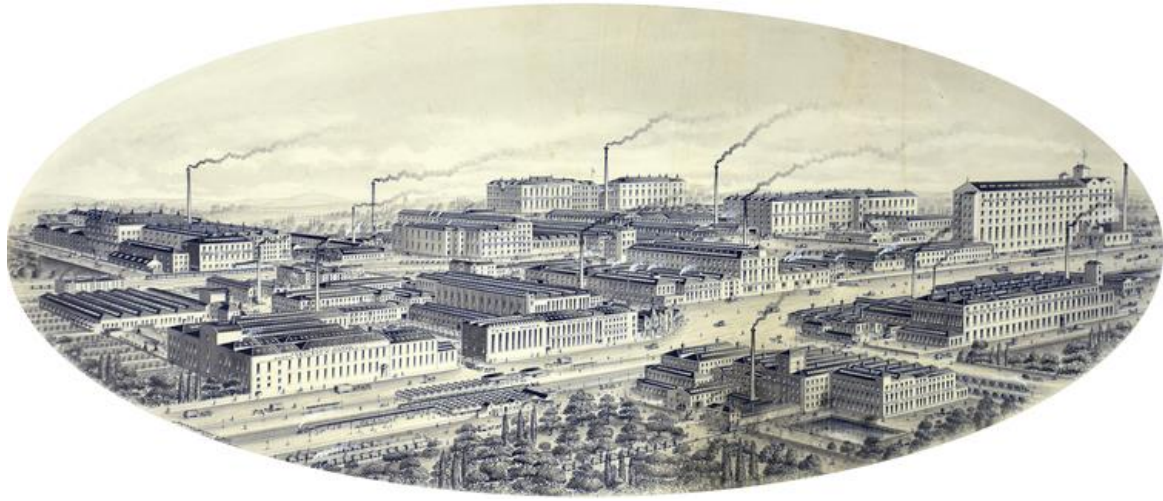
One of our elephants, pictured prior to conservation. You can see the horizontal crack across its trunk, which had by 2022 become fully detached. The second one we acquired is not part of the original herd of 3000 – it is not marked with a series number – but is instead probably a prototype which was given to Nairn’s at some point during the Maxwell/Paolozzi project.

Instead of linoleum, these objects are made of plastic. This makes them quite difficult to conserve. Plastics are difficult to tell apart, and all react differently to the passage of time: some shrink, others swell, some flake, others become stiff. Adhesives used to mend plastics therefore need to be carefully selected to ensure that they will not further damage the material as it ages. Despite research into our elephants’ origins, conservator Will Murray was unable to discover which kind of plastic was used to create them. For this reason, some of the cracks across their surfaces were left untreated.

However, both elephants received a surface clean, and one was reunited with its lost trunk. Since then, they have been on display at Kirkcaldy Galleries.

Next, we turned our attention to some of the works on paper in our collections, and selected two objects relating to Kirkcaldy firm Barry, Ostlere and Shepherd Ltd.

The first was this framed image showing a view of Kirkcaldy. The drawing shows all the Kirkcaldy factories operated by Barry’s in 1906. The scene is partly based on reality: the east coast mainline runs horizontally through the centre of the image, and you can see the corner of a garden reaching up towards this which marks the current site of Kirkcaldy Galleries. However, although all the factories shown are real buildings, they have been relocated so that they can all be seen from a single viewpoint.



We have several print versions of this scene in our collections, but the one we conserved is an original artwork. In this version, the tiny puffs of smoke coming from the chimneys are added in white paint on top of a pen and ink drawing.

The artwork shows Barry's in a boom period. This imagined view was created just seven years after the firm was formed – an amalgamation of several of Kirkcaldy's smaller firms which was now finally big enough to take on Nairn's. However, it entered our collection in the mid-1960s when the linoleum industry was in turmoil; Barry's had ceased production in Kirkcaldy, leading to the loss of approximately 1500 jobs.

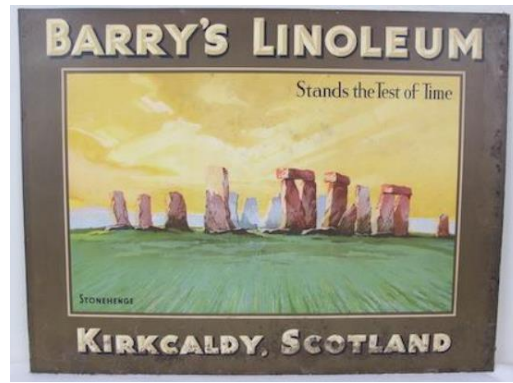
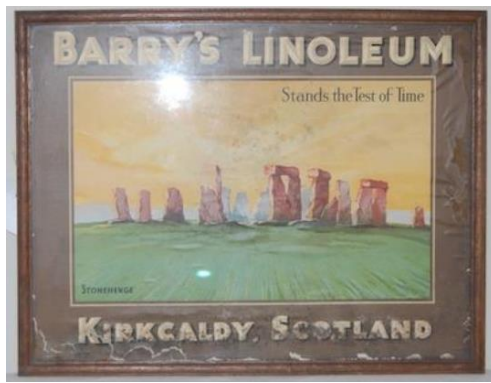
At some point in the nearly 120 years since it was created, the artwork had undergone some trials of its own. Water damage had led to the paper becoming discoloured, which was worsened by the presence of mould.



The first image shows the artwork prior to conservation – you can clearly see the damage extending up from the bottom edge and obscuring part of the view. The second image shows the wonderful progress which was made during conservation.

Alongside this, we also wanted to conserve a promotional poster advertising Barry's linoleum. Throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Barry's adverts paired illustrations of historic monuments with their slogan 'Stands the test of time'. The implication was that their floorcoverings were similarly long-lasting, a wise investment for potential customers.

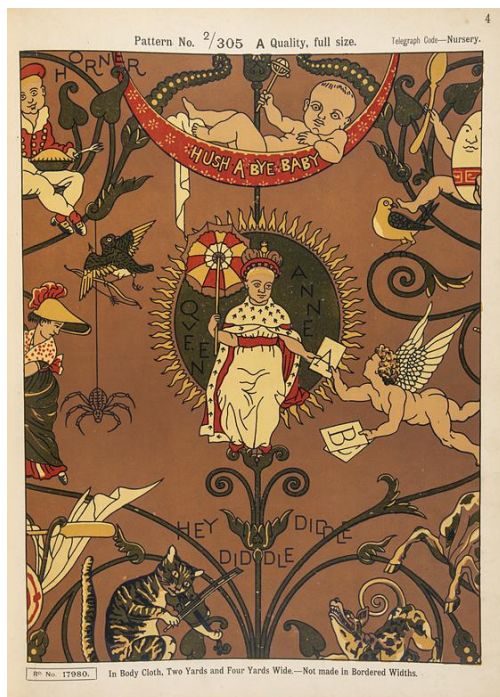
Unfortunately, time had not been especially kind to this particular poster. As with the factory artwork, it had at some point become water damaged, and received similar treatment. However, in this instance the surface of the paper had become stuck to its glass frame, and had to be carefully removed.



Before and after conservation. While the damage is still partially visible, the object is now in a significantly better condition.

Fortunately in both cases, paper conservators Helen Creasy and Anna Trist were more than up to task, and both these objects are now stabilised and ready to display

Next up, we wanted to give some attention to our pattern books. Pattern books are essentially brochures which were produced by linoleum companies for potential buyers before mass produced catalogues. For the most part, they are hard-back, bound books which are usually larger than A4 in size, with full colour illustrations of each design in each available colourway. There are over a hundred linoleum pattern books in OnFife's collections, ranging from the late nineteenth century to the mid-2010s.



Two designs from a pattern book produced by the Kirkcaldy Linoleum Company, Kirkcaldy, c.1880 – 1890. The pattern on the left is based on a wallpaper design by illustrator Walter Crane; the design on the right was probably created by in-house designers working in Kirkcaldy.

As they have been stored closed and not exposed to light, the illustrations in these books are incredibly vibrant. However, years of use coupled with their old age meant that many were in fragile condition, with torn or flaking pages, damaged spines and delicate binding.

I picked a handful of books to be assessed by book conservator Caroline Scharfenberg. All of these were older examples from our collection, dating to the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. We then decided to have

three books conserved – the example pictured above, and two produced by Michael Nairn and Co., Kirkcaldy. Once they have been conserved, these books will be stable enough to safely handle and display – one will be making its debut appearance at Kirkcaldy Galleries this November.

The fourth and final project was funded by an additional grant from the Gordon Fraser Charitable Trust, and concerned two more pattern books. These differ slightly from the others in our collections. They are smaller – each around the size of a modern paperback book, whereas most pattern books are somewhere between A4 and A3 size.

Also, though most of the pattern books in our collection relate to linoleum, these two contain designs for floorcloth. Due to their estimated age – we believe they were produced around 1850 – it is fairly safe to assume that both of these were manufactured by Nairn's in the days before linoleum, when they were the only floorcovering firm in Scotland.

Both needed to be stabilised, and some pages needed to be repaired. One book had also been repaired in the past (probably when it was still in use), and had two large nails driven through its spine which had to be removed.



One of the floorcloth pattern books prior to conservation, with the brass nails visible through the spine.

Both books were treated by Anna Trist at the Scottish Conservation Studio, and are now ready to be displayed. As part of the treatment, we also had high resolution images created of one of the books had these printed and bound to create a simple replica. This means that we can still handle a version of the book without putting excessive stress on the original.



One of the high-resolution images used to create the replica book. Each page was photographed while the binding of the original book was being repaired, so that the designs were fully visible.

## Collecting

As well as developing OnFife's existing collections, we've also been actively acquiring new objects throughout the course of the project. As of the beginning of October 2023, our linoleum collections currently contain over 5000 objects, meaning we have added around 2000 in the past 18 months.

Some of these objects have come from individual donors, such as this wonderful linoleum mosaic of the RMS Queen Elizabeth. This was the first object I acquired as part of the Flooring the World project, and one which I always like to show visitors on tours of our collection stores.



The Queen Elizabeth was a passenger and postal ship which shuttled between the UK and the USA. We believe that this artwork was probably created around the time of the ship's launch in 1938, or its maiden voyage in 1946.

For most of its life, this grand old ship hung in the Britannia Bar on South Street, St Andrews (now called The Saint). We don't know who made it, but as it seems to have spent most (if not all) of its life in Fife, we can assume that it was produced here, probably by someone who worked in the linoleum industry. The skills needed to create this artwork would have been similar to those needed to install linoleum floors, and to create hand-cut inlaid designs. The design itself is probably based on a collectible postcard or cigarette card.

The vast majority of our new acquisitions, however, came from a single source: the Forbo factory archive. Forbo is a European floorcovering manufacturer, who acquired Nairn's in 1985. Since then, they have produced linoleum at Den Road, Kirkcaldy. This is now the only place that linoleum is manufactured in the UK. As it covers the whole of Nairn's history, the Forbo archive contains objects, documents and photographs relating to the entirety of the Fife linoleum industry, reaching back to its floorcloth prehistory in 1847.



This brings me back to my choice for Object 40 which, of course, I still haven't properly introduced.

This block came to us from the Forbo factory archive. It was found during the demolition of one of Nairn's Kirkcaldy factories, beneath the floor of the printing loft. Over the decades, spilt paint had dripped beneath the floorboards, building up in layers as time went on. When the building was demolished, our block was cut away from the hardened puddle to preserve this strange object.

The fact that it exists at all is an accident, dependent on unsteady hands,

overflowing measures, leaky containers, and other tiny unpredictabilities. Like the rings in a tree, or geological layers of rock, its colourful stripes act as a kind of timeline of Kirkcaldy linoleum.

I chose this object to represent the history of Kirkcaldy because I thought it perfectly symbolised the impression the industry has had on the town. Though so many of the physical reminders of the hey-day of Fife linoleum are gone – most of Kirkcaldy's factories were demolished between 1969 and 2014 – the memories of that time are still very much present. Individually, each small memory or object might seem as insignificant as a drop of paint spilt on a factory floor. But seen together, they form a colourful, complicated and comprehensive record of this aspect of Fife's history. This is also the way I see the work we've done during the project – lots of small pieces coming together to form a cohesive whole.

### Exhibition and Displays

Throughout the Flooring the World project, we've been working to share this history through temporary displays in the Moments in Time gallery in Kirkcaldy Galleries.

At the start of the project, I set myself the goal of updating this display once every three months to share the research I was doing behind the scenes. As a result, the case has been through five iterations since spring 2022. Displays have covered the recent acquisitions, [the plight of Kirkcaldy linoleum in the 1960s](#), [factory fire brigades](#), and Kirkcaldy's lost linoleum architecture. Some of these were also accompanied by blog posts, which you can read by clicking the links above.



Workers at Michael Nairn and Co. Ltd. Making fuel tanks for Halifax bombers. Both Barry's and Nairn's manufactured goods for the war effort in WWI and WWII.

[The current display](#) focusses on Kirkcaldy's linoleum companies during, between and after the two World Wars. In particular, I was interested in how the conflicts changed the roles that women played in the industry. You can see this display until the end of the month.

For most of 2023, however, I've been focussed on developing the Flooring the World exhibition. As the culmination of almost two years of work, this has been a suitably mammoth task – one that feels especially so as the opening day is fast approaching!

The exhibition is based on the research which has been carried out during the project, and will showcase many of the outcomes discussed in this article. It is also an opportunity for us to share some of the fantastic objects from our linoleum collections, including many which have never been on display before. You'll be able to see almost all the objects discussed in this article, including our strange and wonderful paint block.

Flooring the World will be on display at Kirkcaldy Galleries from Wednesday 15 November 2023 – Sunday 25 February 2024. Admission is free, and you can visit any time during the Galleries' regular opening hours. We'll also be working to produce lots of digital content for those who are unable to attend the exhibition in person. We'll be adding [new blog posts on the OnFife website](#), and [new sound clips to our SoundCloud](#).

If you would like to speak to me about the Flooring the World project, you can reach me at [lino@onfife.com](mailto:lino@onfife.com). If you are interested in visiting our Collections Store in Glenrothes, learning more about our collections, listening to an oral history recording, please get in touch by e-mailing [museums.enquiries@onfife.com](mailto:museums.enquiries@onfife.com)



The above paragraph concludes the superb trilogy of objects which have showcased the industry with which Kirkcaldy is most associated. Gavin Grant took us from floorcloth to linoleum itself, and now Lily has pulled all the strands together vividly describing the work she has undertaken over the last 18 months, in locating fresh stories, objects and other material. Her efforts and energy have significantly added to the OnFife collections. Lily's work has not been restricted to the new but also the conserving of items already in the collections.

It is not an exaggeration to say that we could not have found any individuals better equipped to relate the story of linoleum than Gavin and Lily. They have our sincere thanks.

*Flooring the World* is a two-year project exploring the history of the Fife linoleum industry. It is funded by the Esmée Fairbairn Collections Fund, which is run by the Museums Association.



Esmée Fairbairn  
Collections Fund