

Flooring the World – the Fife Linoleum Industry



Flooring the World is an exciting new project for OnFife, made possible thanks to a grant of £114,896 from the Esmée Fairbairn Collections Fund, which is run by the Museums Association, funding projects that develop collections to achieve social impact. The two-year project will see a new Curator (Engagement) working with people in a variety of ways to enhance our linoleum collection and make it more accessible.

The Curator will review our internationally significant linoleum collection, develop it by working with communities in Fife and use it to engage, involve and inspire people. We want to reveal the major role the linoleum industry has played in the industrial and social history of the UK and in the collective memory of Fife's people.

The Curator will join the Cultural Heritage & Wellbeing team at OnFife at an exciting time as we implement a new staffing structure – the organisational chart will be available at induction. They will work closely with colleagues in this team which includes adult libraries, local studies, archives, museums, galleries and heritage as well as with teams across the organisation. The postholder will be supervised by Gavin Grant, the Collections Team Leader.

The main focus of the post is to engage with linoleum workers (former and current employees), people with linoleum memories as well as organisations across the globe with linoleum collections.

Why linoleum?

Kirkcaldy was the leading centre of linoleum production in the world for around 100 years. Huge linoleum factories dominated the town's skyline and the strong and distinctive smell from the production process was something that residents couldn't avoid ... and visitors remarked upon. A poem called *The Boy in the Train* was written about the smell in 1913 and is impressed into a linoleum wall-hanging in the town's railway station. In recent decades Billy Connolly has featured the subject of the smell in his stand-up routine on many occasions.

The town of Kirkcaldy became synonymous with linoleum, in a similar way to Stoke and its potteries or Northampton with footwear. Many of the town's institutions and buildings were funded by linoleum manufacturers. Indeed, Kirkcaldy Museum & Art Gallery was formed almost 100 years ago, in 1925, thanks to funding from John Nairn, a linoleum company owner. In 2021 the town has the only remaining linoleum factory in the UK, now operated by Forbo. The industry remains a source of local pride and there is great potential to capture and make more accessible this knowledge of the industry amongst people in Fife.

We want to work on the linoleum collection held by OnFife in its Museum, Archive and Local Studies collections. This has been built up over many years at Kirkcaldy Galleries and in our other venues. The collection we look after is the most comprehensive held anywhere. It is a rich resource for research and interpretation, consisting of 6,000 items including archives, banners, costume, paintings, pattern books, photographs, sculpture and tools. The huge variety of floorcovering samples even includes a piece from Paul McCartney's former home! Most of the collection comes from Kirkcaldy companies, but also included are items from the linoleum factories in Falkland and Newburgh in Fife. Further afield, there are objects from linoleum production in Lancaster, Greenwich, France and the USA. The collection dates from the 1840s to the present.



What do we plan to do?

The three project outcomes are:

1. A wide range of people are engaged with our linoleum collection and feel it is relevant to them.
2. The linoleum collection is preserved to high standards of collections care for future generations to enjoy.
3. The Fife linoleum collection is recognised and promoted across the world.

To achieve these outcomes the Curator (Engagement) will work with OnFife teams and members of the public on activities such as:

- Working with people to enable them to contribute to the project
- Reviewing the linoleum collection.
- Developing the collection through new acquisitions (such as items from the Forbo collection)
- Recording linoleum memories
- Training and supervising volunteers
- Enhancing collections care in the Collections Centre (Glenrothes)
- Organising remedial conservation
- Improving documentation (on our management system, EMU)
- Making links and connections with cultural venues across the world
- Making the collection accessible through displays, events and online
- Applying to the MGS Recognition Scheme
- Seeking any additional external funding
- Reviewing and reporting on the project

