

Section H: Floorcoverings

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H.1: Introduction

John Betjeman, when in a facetious mood, used to like to tease his future mother-in-law Lady Chetwode when she introduced him to one of her guests by adding the socially unforgiveable: "I am in linoleum."¹

Linoleum, like its predecessor floorcloth, has become a by-word for the mundane and the down-market. Its wide distribution during a large part of the twentieth century through cheap mass-market production has made it particularly associated with the lower end of the market. This was not always the case. Linoleum arrived in the working-class home only after it had enjoyed several decades of high-fashion appeal in the late nineteenth century. Even later, it continued to be used more or less universally, although its status in the upper end of the market was reliant more on its practical than its aesthetic and fashionable qualities, and it became associated primarily with bathrooms and kitchens.

This report investigates the fragments of floor coverings found at the Hagg Cottages, Alderley Sandhills, near Manchester², placing them in the context of the oil-cloth and linoleum industry as a whole amongst the working classes in the period roughly between 1860 when linoleum was invented and 1935, the approximate date for the most recent fragment discovered at Alderley Sandhills.

The fragments include two, possibly three types of oil-covered floor coverings, and are therefore particularly interesting, since they provide examples from the whole spectrum of the industry. It can be established with certainty that there are examples of linoleum and what is termed *congoleum*.

One fragment may also be floorcloth. A short introduction to the history of these and related materials will form the first section, followed by a section devoted to the retailing, distribution and advertising methods which finally targeted even the poorer homes, where linoleum became a new comfort contributing to the increasing, albeit still modest standard of living amongst working class people towards the end of the nineteenth century. The emphasis will be on the two companies of Nairns of Kirkcaldy, and Jas. Williamsons of Lancaster, who both have special significance for this report, and whose goods were represented in the stores in and around Manchester.

The final section will focus on the fragments themselves. Three different patterns have been detected among the fragments, and these have been re-constructed for easier stylistic analysis. The patterns will be discussed with reference to frequently found, well-established aesthetic trends in oil-coated floor coverings, and also the continuing contemporary design debates.

Attempts to discover the provenance of the fragments have taken the route of identifying relevant firms of linoleum manufacturers represented in the Manchester area through consulting Kelly's and Slater's Manchester Trade Directories for

¹ Carpenter 1989, *The Brideshead Generation*, p.262.

² The cottages were built during the 1740s, and inhabited by employees of the local mining company.

retailers, wholesalers and manufacturers of oil-cloth and linoleum. These firms have then been sought in the indexes of the Board of Trade Design Registers at the National Archives, Kew, in order to see if any designs were registered by the relevant firms. In that way many patterns offered for sale in and around Manchester between 1860 and 1908 have been discovered. After 1908 the linoleum and floorcloth submissions to the registers ceased, but through consulting linoleum trade catalogues from the Victoria and Albert Museum, as well as the substantial design archives of the Silver Studio, housed at MODA (Museum of Domestic Design and Architecture), Middlesex University, subsequent material relevant to the fragments has been traced.

Amongst the written source material on the oil-cloth and linoleum industry two publications need particular mention: one is a rare book, one of the only copies of which is housed at the Science Museum Library: M.W. Jones' 'The History and Manufacture of Floorcloth and Linoleum', a paper read before the Bristol section of Chemical Industry at the University, Bristol, 21 November 1918; a thorough examination of the oil-cloth and linoleum industry seen from contemporary eyes.

More recently a very thorough and scholarly account of the linoleum industry is provided by Philip J. Gooderson's *Lord Linoleum: Lord Ashton, Lancaster and the Rise of the British Oilcloth and Linoleum Industry*, (Keele University Press 1996), of particular relevance to this report since it surveys the lower end of the market through the Lancaster company of Jas. Williamson and Co., whose success was accomplished through intense price competition, making Williamsons the largest manufacturer of linoleum in Britain by 1900, and most probably the manufacturer of two of the Alderley Sandhills fragments.

H.2: Overview of the History of Oil-Coated Floor Coverings

Frederick Walton was granted a patent for the invention of linoleum in 1860.³ It was at first named 'linoxyn': its name alluding to the method of its manufacture: linseed oil reduced by oxidisation, and mixed with ground cork, resin and pigment, pressed onto a backing of canvas. Walton did not regard his invention as an entirely new product, but rather as an improved version of its ancestor the oil-cloth, and in 1863, having perfected his method, he was granted a new patent⁴ for 'improvement of the manufacture of Wax cloth for floors'.

Oil-cloth is the generic term for a whole range of products ranging from tarpaulins, waterproof clothing and wrapping to floor and table coverings made water and draught-proof by the application of various substances including oils, (mostly linseed), wax, and resins mixed with pigments and chalks. Such materials have a long history, possibly dating back to antiquity.⁵ As a floor-covering the use of oil-cloth dates back to the early eighteenth century, and used in this sense, the word is synonymous with *floorcloth*, and indeed the less common *wax cloth* in Walton's specification. The floorcloth was made by the coating of canvas – mostly linen – with several layers of paint made from linseed oil and ground pigment, smoothed with pumice stone between each application, requiring a long drying or 'seasoning' period,

³ British Patent no 290, 1860.

⁴ British Patent no 3210, 1863

⁵ Sarin 2004, chapter two.

and resulting in a smooth surface with the appearance of linoleum, and possessing the same attributes of easy cleaning, draught and water proofing as well as a surface suitable for decoration. Robert Barnes, a prominent nineteenth century London floorcloth manufacturer left an invaluable manuscript with reminiscences about the floorcloth industry to the Victoria and Albert Museum, in which he summarised the enduring appeal of these floorings:

“... the floorcloth will not spoil by dust or neglect, is easy to clean; it covers joints, stops draughts and insects, hides a bad floor, gives a finished appearance to a room and is available in a variety of styles and figures.”⁶

In the first part of the eighteenth century, floorcloths were of modest size, circa 3x4 feet. They were often painted and stencilled on a workbench in the combined retail outlets and workshops of the turners or the upholsterers. By 1747 floorcloth painting was established enough as a trade to have engendered a specialised branch of journeymen painters, although R. Campbell, in *The London Tradesman* did not rate their skill very highly: “In the Turner’s shop we generally meet with Floorcloths, painted in oil colours which is performed by a class of painters who do little else. It requires no great ingenuity, and the wages of journeymen is the same as in other branches of painting”.⁷ Figure H.1 shows one of the simple patterns stencilled in these workshops.

The prominent London floorcloth manufacturer Nathan Smith is credited with adapting the pear-wood block used in wall-paper production for the printing of floorcloths, sometimes between the years of 1766 and 1773⁸. He was also the first in the industry to exploit the possibilities of Kay’s ‘Flying Shuttle’, invented in 1733, when he built the first custom-made floor-cloth factory in Knightsbridge in 1763, in order to accommodate the much larger widths of canvas made possible by the new technology. The floorcloth industry subsequently became associated with the ship-building centres of Bristol, Dundee and later the ports of Kirkcaldy and Lancaster, where sailcloth was woven in widths up to 9 yards, and also used for floorcloths, enabling the manufacture of ‘floorcloths without seam’, a feature proudly advertised on many late eighteenth- and early nineteenth century trade cards (Figure H.2).

In 1816 a visitor to the eminent floorcloth manufacturers Hares of Bristol⁹ described the considerable scale of the operations:

The manufactory of oil-cloth is also very well worth seeing. We went first into the weaving room. The length through which the shuttle passed is so great, as to require two men, one at each end. We next passed through a lofty building in which hung immense pieces of primed cloth, (from their light and even appearance they must have been stretched on rollers). At the end we ascended a tremendous flight of narrow circular steps: on reaching the top saw a man and a boy employed in stamping patterns. A stamp, made of pear wood is pressed on a stone, on which was evenly

⁶ Barnes 1857-1861

⁷ R. Campbell, *The London Tradesman* London 1747, p.245.

⁸ Barnes, Robert, 1857-1861.

⁹ Hare’s was one of the most important manufacturers of floorcloth in Britain from the late eighteenth to the middle of the twentieth century when their production comprised almost entirely of linoleum.

laid the colour, it is then pressed, and hammered on the oil-cloth, which had been previously prepared with a trowel. When it is finished breath ways with one colour, it is stamped with another, between the pattern of the former, until completed. When a portion is finished it is let down and the operation recommenced on another.¹⁰

In the course of the nineteenth century the floorcloth industry was the subject of an intense experimental activity evidenced through the many patents granted, all purporting to improve the composition of the floorcloth, sometimes through somewhat outlandish concoctions, often involving an ad-mixture of animal matter, such as the patent granted to Thomas Winter in 1801 for “a certain new manufacture for covering the floors of rooms. This fabric is composed of waste tan, shreds, &c. of leather, short hair of animals, and a small quantity of refuse tow or wadding.”¹¹

Similarly, but more successfully, a patent was granted in 1864 for a floor covering called *Boulinicon*,¹² which in its specification listed “Buffalo Hides, soaked in water slightly acidulated with hydrochlorid acid (1 in 100) for two days at 80° Fahrenheit, reducing to a fibrous mass in a rag engine, then incorporating with rag pulp and hair, and collecting on the wire of a paper making machine.” M.W. Jones, in his 1918 lecture at Bristol University, noted: “the fabric so obtained was coated with varnish or oil paint. This was put on the market and enjoyed a ready sale until the manufactory was burnt out. Its wearing properties are highly spoken of by those who remember it.”¹³

As late as in 1875 a patent was granted for a floor covering involving similar materials: ‘Tissues and intestines of animals freed from oleaginous matters and ground to pulp, mixed with ground cork.’¹⁴

A substance listed in the specifications for many patents in the course of the nineteenth century was gutta-percha or ‘India rubber.’ One of these produced the first real alternative to the established floorcloth in the patent granted 1844 to Elijah Galloway, for his *Kamptulicon*,¹⁵ a mixture of pulverised cork and unvulcanised rubber. This invention was successful enough to be used in the new Houses of Parliament, and the cork content in its composition is credited with giving it sound – reducing attributes, no doubt the reason it was also chosen to cover the floors in the British Library. A report in the *Journal of the Society of Arts* (April 1862) describes its attractions in the following terms:

... its qualities are noiselessness when trod on, rendering it admirably suited for churches, banks nurseries, billiard roms or any other place where quietness is desirable. It’s resistance to wear and damp makes it much more durable than floorcloth.¹⁶

¹⁰ Diary of Ellen Sharples *Bristol Record Office* Hare papers.

¹¹ British Patent no. 2491, 1801.

¹² British Patent no 197, 1864

¹³ Jones 1918, pp 26-32 gives a survey of the most important inventions relating to the industry.

¹⁴ British Patent no 4031, 1875.

¹⁵ British Patent no 10054, 1844.

¹⁶ *Journal of the Society of Arts* (4 April 1862), p. 327. Quoted in Edwards 1996, p. 154

It was not until Walton's invention, with its use of pulverised cork built on the achievements of Galloway's kamptulicon, that the supremacy of the floorcloth was threatened. Walton subsequently coined his invention *Linoleum*, from the Latin for linseed *linum* and oil *oleum*.

In 1871 an adaption of the linoleum manufacture was patented which became quite successful: *Corticine*¹⁷ also called cork carpet. Its material make-up was identical to linoleum, but the manufacture differed in that the cork was not so finely ground and the linseed oil not so highly oxidised.¹⁸ This resulted in a more porous and softer surface, which like kamptulicon, had a sound-reducing quality. Linoleum, on the other hand had a smoother surface than corticine, rendering it more 'hygienic' a quality in growing demand in the latter half of the nineteenth century.

At the same time, the manufacturing techniques of floorcloth itself were also the subject of improvements. After the Great Exhibition of 1851, the old-fashioned methods of floorcloth production, and the rather crude appearance of the patterns on offer had been under attack. The printing technique for floorcloth had remained more or less unchanged since it was first adopted by Nathan Smith nearly a century earlier:

Floorcloth was made by printing or stamping a number of small dots, arranged in patterns in various colours, upon a neutral ground. Thus, not above two-thirds of the printed surface were actually covered with the paint of the patterns; and consequently floorcloth painting, unless seen from some distance, was at best but a rough affair...

as the *Art Journal* put it.¹⁹ Figure H.3 shows the appearance of mid-nineteenth century floorcloth by Nathan Smith's company Smith and Baber, with its characteristic dots.

By the International Exhibition of 1862, the leading floorcloth manufacturers Michael Nairn and Co of Kirkcaldy had taken up the challenge and introduced an improved printing method which eliminated the dot-effect by employing much more finely cut blocks and ending the printing process by the application of what was called a 'mash-block', which unified the colours. The *Art Journal* enthused that

... the new floor-cloth presents a solid surface of colour, in actual contact, which *entirely covers*, and therefore completely conceals, the ground painting; thus at one and the same time affording facilities for the production of a much higher class of designs, and affording a greatly superior and much more durable surface to the wearer.²⁰

Despite the efforts of the floorcloth industry to rejuvenate itself, linoleum's superior qualities, particularly its durability, gradually established the product and by 1888 there were some twenty linoleum manufacturers in Britain.²¹

¹⁷ British Patent no 1738, 1871.

¹⁸ Jones 1918, p.35.

¹⁹ *Art Journal*, 'Notabilia of the International Exhibition', 1862.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ Edwards 1996, p. 156.

Michael Nairn was shrewd enough to begin to manufacture linoleum himself in 1877, as soon as Walton's patent ran out. He was immediately sued by Walton, who claimed trade mark infringement, but the courts ruled that since the word *linoleum* had not figured in Walton's specification, it had become public property.²² Walton argued – to no avail – that he had spent £10 000 on advertising and had therefore brought the word to the general knowledge. Indeed he describes in his memoirs the signs he put up through W.H.Smith, measuring 6 feet long bearing the slogan: "Linoleum, warm, soft and durable '... these I had fixed at all the London railway stations in the best position to catch the eye of the public'".²³

Linoleum, like floorcloth, suffered from the wear of its surface-printed patterns. Walton had continued experimentation in an effort to improve his product in this respect and in 1882 he was granted the first in a series of patents²⁴ which developed a form of inlaid linoleum, first called mosaic floorcloth, since its manufacture was very similar to the making of mosaic: small pieces were cut out of single colours of linoleum, then fitted together like pieces of tesserae to form a pattern and finally, by applying heat and pressure, making these units combine onto the canvas backing.²⁵ Walton set up the Greenwich Inlaid Company in 1894, and granted the Scottish rights to Barry, Ostlere and Co., no doubt in order to get back at Michael Nairn, who, in the capacity of the most prominent Kirkcaldy manufacturer, should have been the natural choice. Inlaid linoleum was a product with a much higher quality of wear. It was expensive and aimed at the top-end of the market, "the aristocrat of linoleum products" as Gooderson put it. Figure H.4 shows an inlaid design from 1901. The marbled effect was achieved through the mixing of the pigments into the linoleum before the inlay process, rather than by printing.

Towards the end of the nineteenth century the lower end of the market was also finally targeted by Jas. Williamson & Son of Lancaster. This company had a highly developed engineering department, and although Williamsons did not patent their inventions, they were the first to adopt a drum machine for the printing of floorcloth and linoleum. The oldest machine dates from about 1880. It was designed in-house and supplied by the company Mather and Platt. At first the machine could only produce a simple wood-grain pattern, but by 1914 these rotary machines were capable of printing sixteen colours.²⁶

Williamsons were able to produce their products much faster and cheaper than other manufacturers. Gooderson comments: "Jas. Williamson and Son became as important to the nation as Lever, Cadbury and Wills as practitioners of aggressive pricing policy".²⁷ Williamsons reduced the price of linoleum several times in the last decades of the nineteenth century. Michael Nairn had at first followed suit in 1879, dropping the price of his plain variety by four-pence per square yard, a reduction made possible by the fact that prices of linseed were falling in that period.²⁸ Subsequent price reductions by Williamsons were ignored by Michael Nairn, who said he did not want to be associated with goods of inferior quality. He galvanised the other oil-cloth manufacturers into action, and in an effort to regulate the price-cutting,

²² Simpson 1999, p. 19

²³ Walton 1925, p. 32.

²⁴ British Patent no. 6039, 1882.

²⁵ Jones, 1918, pp. 40-41.

²⁶ Gooderson 1996, p. 36.

²⁷ Ibid. p.26.

²⁸ Muir 1956, p.74.

agreements were signed at first in York on 11th August 1906, and in London in March 1907, when the FLMA (Floorcloth and Linoleum Manufacturers' Association) was founded. The only manufacturers who remained outside the agreement were Williamson and Walton²⁹ -- possibly still smarting from his earlier encounter with Nairns.

The trade in oil-cloth products (mainly floorcloth and linoleum, but also the oil-cloth product for tables, called table-baize) increased manifold in the last decades of the nineteenth century. Jones mentions that in 1874 the total quantity exported was 3,989,000 square yards, valued at £267,000. In 1913 the figures for floorcloth and linoleum only was 32,566,000 square yards, valued at £1,800,118.³⁰ These figures are particularly impressive if one takes into account that they include a 29 per cent drop in British exports between 1906 and 1912, brought about by the increasing foreign competition, mainly from Germany and America, where there were at least five firms manufacturing linoleum by the early twentieth century.³¹ The US imposed a 25% import tariff on oil-cloth and 20-30% on linoleum and similar tariffs were imposed by Germany.³²

The manufacture of floorcloth continued alongside that of linoleum, often by the same manufacturers, until the middle of the twentieth century, the floorcloth steadily losing ground not only to linoleum, but also to a certain new invention called *Congoleum*, or *Felt-Base*. An American product developed around 1911, it consisted of felt paper, saturated with bitumen, coated and printed. Figure H.5 shows the characteristic black colour of congoleum's backing. This new material was cheap to produce, and finally provided Nairns with a means of reaching the large lower end of the market without having to compromise their trademark – high standards of design and manufacture. The American subsidiary of Nairns merged with the Congoleum Co. Inc. of Philadelphia in 1924 and in 1928 Nairns began to manufacture congoleum in Kirkcaldy, having secured the licence for the manufacture and sale of congoleum in the U.K., the empire and Europe. Congoleum was printed on a flat-bed, as opposed to the competing felt base product that Williamsons developed in the 1930s, called *Lancastrium* which was rotary-printed, a cheaper process which once more put Williamsons in a position to undercut Nairns, who in their turn retaliated with their version of Rotary printed cheap felt base, called *Bruno Felt*, which they manufactured from 1950-1965.³³

In 1933 felt base held 32% of the UK Linoleum and Oil-cloth sales, with 58% for linoleum, while floorcloth still held on to 10% of the sales. By 1937 felt base had increased to 43%, while linoleum saw a decrease to 52% and floorcloth sales were reduced to 5% of the market share.³⁴ Nairns continued to produce felt base and linoleum into the 1970s, until the market became dominated by vinyl products in the latter half of the twentieth century. Forbo-Nairns Ltd. remains an important producer of floor-coverings, still based in Kirkcaldy, and have recently experienced an upsurge

²⁹ Gooderson 1996, p. 108.

³⁰ Jones 1918, p. 42.

³¹ Simpson 1999, p. 20.

³² Gooderson 1996, p.113.

³³ Information kindly supplied by Roger Strugnell, archivist at Forbo-Nairn Ltd., Kirkcaldy.

³⁴ Report on UK Linoleum and Oil-cloth sales, Board of Trade, Working Party Report, Linoleum and Felt Base (HMSO, 1946), quoted in Edwards, 1996, p.157.

in the demand for linoleum, seen as an environmentally friendly product, and now marketed under the trade-name of *Marmoleum*.

H.3: The Arrival and Establishment of Floor Coverings in the Working-Class Domestic Interior

Floor coverings were known in rare aristocratic settings in Britain in the form of oriental carpets since the time of the Crusades. Various forms of matting were also used, and these had a wider social distribution. Most floors were left bare however. Floor coverings did not see any increase in consumption until the beginning of the eighteenth century, when they began to make their appearance gradually, and then at first mainly in the form of floorcloths. Although no early examples survive, we know of their existence from the numerous inventories and other records which survive in many country houses³⁵, as well as from trade cards of floorcloth manufacturers, the earliest dating from about 1730. Recent research in the form of a survey of eighteenth century probate inventories³⁶ has brought to light evidence that the floorcloth was not only adopted in the homes of the elite, but that its use was much more widespread than previously thought, encompassing a wider social range, mainly drawn from the new middle classes. Indeed, the first mention of a floorcloth is found in 1715 in the home of a draper, whose overall household valuation was well below the average.³⁷ From a relative luxury, encountered in 20% of the inventories of 1700, floor coverings became established as a feature of the domestic interior in the course of the eighteenth century, appearing in over 80% of inventories by 1800. Although carpets made up a significant proportion of these, the major share was still held by the floorcloth.

It is unlikely that the lowest classes, the wage-earners and labourers covered their floors in the eighteenth century. Unfortunately the poor are not represented in the survey since their household goods at the time of death would very rarely reach the statutory £5 minimum valuation below which a probate inventory, drawn up for the benefit of the surviving heirs, was deemed unnecessary, and indeed too expensive. The lifestyle of the working classes was precarious, accommodation was often make-shift and temporary. In the latter part of the nineteenth century a piece of linoleum was indeed one of the first 'luxuries' which was feasible in such an unsettled situation. Nevertheless, it is possible that even in the eighteenth century, in one of the thriving second-hand markets such as the one by Moorfields in London which catered for the working classes, off-cuts and second-hand floorcloths were for sale for a modest enough sum to adorn the floors of some urban working class families.

In rural areas cottage floors before 1800 had consisted of beaten earth, replaced gradually in the course of the nineteenth century with brick, quarry tiles, or stone flags,³⁸ rather like those in the Hagg Cottages, upon which the fragments were found.

³⁵ Gilbert, C., Lomax, J, Wells-Cole, A., *Country House Floors 1660-1850*, Leeds: Temple Newsam Country House Studies No 3, 1987, give a thorough guide to these sources.

³⁶ Sarin 2004, forthcoming article in *Journal of Design History*, based on chapter three of thesis: a survey of 225 London inventories between 1700-1800 from the Prerogatory Court of Canterbury, *National Archives*.

³⁷ Ibid. The draper Edward Simpson had a valuation of £ 76. The median household valuation in 1700 was £111. *National Archives, P.R.O. PROB32/60/84*

³⁸ E.Gauldie, *Cruel Habitations*, (London 1974, pp. 22-4, in Gooderson, p. 41.

Sometimes homemade rugs or mats were used, originally made from plaited straw or bent grass, but towards the latter half of the nineteenth century also made from rags. E.A.M. Roberts, in his *Working Class Barrow and Lancaster 1890-1930* (Lancaster 1976) mentions how in garrison towns such as Lancaster “old red uniforms did much to cheer up the ‘peg’ or ‘tab’ rug.”³⁹ J. Bullock, in *Bowers Row* (London 1967) gives a picturesque account of the practise of rug-making: “this practise of punching short lengths of old clothing through hessian or sacking became universal. The whole family took part, and the rugs were often moved around the cottage until bonfire night when the oldest was burnt”⁴⁰ Floorcloths may also have been home made. They certainly were in America, where many instructions for the making of home-made floorcloths survive, including one as early as 1793 from *The Golden Cabinet*. (Philadelphia):

The canvas being stretched on a frame, give it a layer of size of paste water, then go over it with a pumice stone to smoothe off the knots. By means of the size the little threads and hairs are all laid close on the cloth, and the little holes filled up, so that no color can pass through. When the cloth is dry lay on okre in oil which may be mixed with white lead to make it dry sooner. When dry go over again with pumice stone to make smoothe.... On this first draw the picture with a coal then lay on the colors. The use of a little honey mixed with the size will prevent cracking, peeling, and breaking out.⁴¹

There is no direct evidence of home-painted floorcloths in Britain, however. The more likely possibility is instead that the floorcloth entered the English working class interiors as second or even third-hand cast-offs from high quality manufacturers such as Nairns of Kirkcaldy. The makers of floorcloth to the middle classes such as Nairns would therefore have been well-known to the working classes even before the product was within reach of their pocket through firms such as Williamsons, catering directly for the working-class market. Fashions are often believed to migrate from the elite downwards by degrees to arrive, finally, in the plebeian classes, in what is known as the ‘trickle-down’ effect. While the arrival of the floorcloth in the middle class domestic interior in the previous century does not appear to have been handed down from the aristocracy but seems to have been a middle class invention, in the case of its arrival in the working class home it is correct to talk of the ‘trickle-down effect’, indeed quite literally. The *Morning Chronicle* of 22nd October 1849 may well have been referring to one such handed-down floorcloth in an article on working-class Hulme, close to Manchester, describing a “piece of faded and battered oil cloth in the passage,”⁴² alongside prints, glass and china ornaments, furniture and wall-paper. Certainly towards the middle of the nineteenth century some working class homes contained a modicum of comfort, often including a floorcloth. The parlour in the humble working-class cottage described by Mrs Gaskell in *Mary Barton* (1848) is brightened by “a gay-coloured piece of oil-cloth”.⁴³

J.C. Loudon, one of the first of the many nineteenth – century advisors on matters of taste and propriety in decoration approved of the use of floorcloth in cottages already in 1842, but at the same time he voiced some concerns:

³⁹ pp.30-1, quoted in Gooderson, p.41.

⁴⁰ p.13. Quoted in Gooderson p. 41.

⁴¹ Fletcher Little 1967, p 23.

⁴² Quoted in P.E. Razzell and R.W. Wainwright (eds), *The Victorian Working Class*, (London 1967), p. 12

⁴³ Quoted in Steedman 1998, p. 260.

Painted floorcloths may sometimes be used in lobbies and the passages of cottages, but they are not economical articles where there is much going out and coming in of persons generally employed in the open air, and of course wearing strong shoes with nails in the soles.⁴⁴

Mid-nineteenth century consumption of floorcloth in the working-class interior was by no means universal, but a substantial gain in wages amongst the working classes between 1881 and 1896⁴⁵ made spending possible in the many new department stores and Co-Ops which transformed retailing and contributed to the increasing, albeit still modest standard of living enjoyed by the working people. At the same time, the late Victorian and Edwardian pre-occupation with hygiene began to 'trickle down' to the lower classes hand in hand with an increased expectation of a minimum of comfort and visual pleasure. A piece of bright-coloured linoleum, easily-cleaned and cheaply acquired, second-hand perhaps, fulfilled both of these demands.

Shopping for floorcloths and linoleum in and around Manchester

A shopping expedition to Manchester, even as late as the 1920s, was a rare occurrence, since Molly Barber remembers only one such occasion from her childhood at Alderley Sandhills. Should the inhabitants of the Hagg cottages have ventured into Manchester, Market Street would have been one destination for shopping, then as well as in 1887, when *Tomlinson's Guide to Manchester and Salford* described the scene in the following terms:

Market Street is the heart of the city, and a very crowded, congested one too at all times, but especially on market days... and on Saturdays. On these days there is a great influx of visitors from the neighbouring towns and villages; the men presumably on business cares intent; the wives and daughter bent upon shopping or upon displaying all the bravery of attire resulting from former visits of a like nature.⁴⁶

These shoppers may have visited Rylands & Sons, a large Manchester store, which provided a large choice of linoleum and floorcloth, some of which they contracted Williamsons to manufacture on their behalf, although they also manufactured their own merchandise, mainly textiles, in their works at Chorley.⁴⁷

They may also have paid a visit to Thomas Briggs and Co Ltd. in Major Street, where they would have come across the colourful design shown in Figure H.6, registered by Thomas Briggs in 1883. This company was one of the only manufacturers of floorcloth and linoleum in Manchester. Briggs had originally been tarpaulin manufacturers in the first half of the nineteenth century before they diversified into floorcloths, and the company can be found already in 1858 with a design in the B.T. Design Registers.

⁴⁴ Loudon 1842, p.346.

⁴⁵ P. Mathias: *Retailing Revolution*, London 1967, pp 13-15. Quoted in Gooderson, p.17

⁴⁶ Tomlinson, Walter, *John Heywood's Illustrated Gossiping Guide to Manchester and Salford*, Manchester: John Heywood, 1887. P. 31 Quoted in Kelley, 1995, p. 91.

⁴⁷ Fig. 14 shows one of Williamsons many designs for Rylands. BT 50/104 , Design no 104416, 1889.

Manchester's city centre as described in *Tomlinson's Guide* of 1887 catered perhaps mostly for the prosperous middle-classes. The guide book also described the market for the poor, Salford's Flat Iron Market, with a somewhat callous and cynical attitude towards the often grim realities of poverty:

... all sorts of things are sold there, from a second-hand shirt or a box of pills down to a pennyworth of toffee, and there is a certain horrid unfashionable picturesqueness [sic] about it all which is not without its charm.⁴⁸

The poorest classes would have made almost all purchases locally rather than in the city centre. In the case of the residents of the Hagg Cottages, the Broadbent store would have supplied most of their domestic requirements, including floorcloth and linoleum, which were displayed in rolls by the entrance. Broadbent undoubtedly procured their linoleum, as well as floorcloth, from the Manchester wholesalers, of which there were 20 listed in the trade directory of 1915.⁴⁹ If a retailer was able to order more than fifty rolls he could buy direct from the manufacturers, certainly from Williamsons by 1920.⁵⁰ The Manchester wholesalers, although listed as 'Floorcloth Manufacturers' in the trade directory were mainly agents and warehouses representing the large floorcloth manufacturers of Bristol, Kirkcaldy, Lancaster and London charging a 2.5% commission. Michael Nairn and Co. were represented as well as Barry, Ostlere & Shepherd, Jas. Williamson & Son and Nathan Smith & Co, the venerable Knightsbridge company whose founder built the first floorcloth factory in 1763. Therefore, floorcloth and linoleum had a wide distribution network and the choice available, probably even at shops such as Broadbents, would have been large from the late nineteenth century onwards.

Broadbent, like most such stores, would have held sales annually. Gooderson interviewed several people who remembered their childhood around Lancaster in the first years of the twentieth century, where conditions would have been similar to those around Manchester. Mrs Evelyn Smith recollected that "many people bought their first linoleum at winter sales which the bigger drapers held annually – usually just after Christmas. A down-payment at a carpet shop, followed by weekly instalments collected by a man who called from house to house, was an equally popular means of acquiring both table baize and floorings."⁵¹

Mrs L. Bentley of Radcliffe, born 1900, remembered that "floorcloths could also be bought at local markets. Rolls of oil-cloth were available at Bury market, and a housewife might tip a boy a shilling to carry it home for her."⁵² Such floorcloths and linoleum probably took the form of remnants or seconds, and there was a brisk trade in 'lino bunches', 'fents or 'half-ends'.

⁴⁸ Ibid, p. 93.

⁴⁹ *Slater's Trade Directory for Manchester and Salford Suburbs*, 1915, Part 2, p. 1990.

⁵⁰ Gooderson 1996, p.44.

⁵¹ Ibid, p. 44.

⁵² Gooderson 1996, p. 45.

The late Miss M. Bruce of Cambridge, born 1889, remembered that “dealers would sell at fairs, such as the Midsummer Fair at Cambridge. At the end of the event, fairmen would take remnants from door to door.”⁵³

Most early advertising, apart from Walton’s early example of direct marketing in London railway stations, was directed towards the wholesalers and retail stores, rather than the consumers. Towards 1920 the first direct advertising campaigns began to appear, the Americans leading the way with advertisements for congoleum and linoleum appearing in magazines such as the *Ladies Home Journal*. Figure H.7 shows one of these, which appears to be directed to the middle to lower end of the market, since the housewife is mopping her own floor without the help of a maid, while pondering happily on the qualities of her congoleum: “It is so easy to keep my Congoleum Rugs clean and sanitary”. The advertisement also emphasises the low cost of the material: “They cost so little, too”.

Armstrong’s Linoleum, another American Company, appealed both to the aesthetic and the practical sensibilities of the consumer in their 1929 campaign, with “artist designed” linoleum which possessed “the warmth, the absence of draughty cracks, the quietness and springy comfort so soothing to tired bodies”.⁵⁴ Ten years later Congoleum-Nairn targeted the concerns of motherhood, again through the *Ladies Home Journal* with the slogan “I want a safer place for baby to play”.

H.4: Aesthetics: Floor Coverings and Design, Analysis of the Fragments

A.W.N. Pugin (1812-1852) and Owen Jones (1809-1874) were the first and the most vociferous of the nineteenth century design reformers, whose efforts to raise the standard of design gathered momentum after the decorative excesses displayed at the Great Exhibition of 1851. Their aesthetic theories, later upheld by other influential figures such as Edward Godwin (1833-1886) and Christopher Dresser (1834-1904) became canonical at least for the following half-century. The floorcloth, and later also linoleum, offended the sensibilities of the design reformers on two counts, both of vital importance to their theories:

Firstly, the design reformers disapproved of imitation. The floorcloth had, from its very beginning, been imitative of other materials. It had at first imitated the geometric marble patterns of the entrance halls of the wealthy, and at the same time, floorcloths in ‘matt pattern’ had also been popular. The mosaics from the many Roman floors discovered in Britain during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries provided further motifs for imitation. Figure H.8 shows a mosaic design by Nairns from 1883. Imitation of wood and parquet had been a continuing motif from the eighteenth century onwards, and Figure H.9 illustrates the continuing popularity of wood patterns in a piece of inlaid linoleum from the Silver Studio collection from the early 1930s.⁵⁵ Figure H.10 shows a design by Hares of Bristol from 1850, illustrating another favourite motif of imitation: a carpet pattern. The architect Charles Eastlake protested over such practices in 1868:

⁵³ Ibid, p. 46.

⁵⁴ Edwards 1996, p. 168.

⁵⁵ The Evening Standard of May 20th, 1930 with the headline: ‘First Picture of Miss Johnson’s flight’ was found beneath the linoleum. Layers of newspaper were often used to provide a smoother surface.

... a floorcloth like every other article of manufacture... should seem to be what it really is and not affect the appearance of a richer material. There are endless varieties of geometrical diaper which could be used for floorcloth without resorting to the foolish expedient of copying knots and veins of wood and marble.⁵⁶

In 1876 Edward Godwin, joined the chorus of dissent in similar terms:

We may now hope to have seen the end of this childish appropriation of the designs, construction, and texture of other materials to a fabric which, by the very nature of its manufacture should have been marked from the first to last by special designs fit and suitable to the materials used and the household purposes to which it is adapted.⁵⁷

The problem was of course, that unlike wood or marble, floorcloth and linoleum was not a natural raw material. It had no distinct identity outside imitation.

Secondly, and possibly most importantly, the design reformers were united in their belief that three-dimensional designs must not be employed on a two-dimensional surface such as a wall or a floor, i.e. all representational patterns, such as florals must be drawn *flat*, rather than illusionistically, with shadows. Godwin went further, and also prescribed a specific symmetry of direction:

The design, however naturalistic, should always be perfectly flat. Again, there should be no tops nor bottoms nor sides, but the patterns should be readable, so to speak, in whatever direction we may be walking on it, like a daisy-covered mead.⁵⁸

He also stressed that “to apply these remedies an *Artist*, not a draughtsman, is needed.”

Both Michael Nairn and Frederick Walton took such advice to heart. Nairn employed Owen Jones to design their entry for the 1867 international exhibition in Paris, and Walton commissioned Christopher Dresser in the late 1880s to the early 1890s. Both companies also commissioned the celebrated London Silver Studios for designs. Unfortunately very little remains of the undoubtedly high quality of this work.

H.5: The ASP Fragments

An attempt to date these fragments from the evidence presented by their patterns is fraught with difficulties for two reasons. Firstly the floor coverings may already have been old when they were installed in the Hagg Cottages. They could have been remnants of lines sold off cheaply, having been stored in warehouses for long periods. Secondly the fashions of floorcloth and linoleum have never changed very rapidly. The floor, more than any other area in the home, is covered by the most conservative designs, both for reasons of economy – the linoleum has to look ‘right’ even a few years down the line – as well as from a sense of propriety: the wall-space and furnishing fabrics have tended to receive more decorative attention, while the

⁵⁶ Eastlake 1868, p. 45.

⁵⁷ Godwin 1876, p.128.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

floor has been covered with certain generic patterns which have changed relatively little in the course of the last three hundred years, perhaps reflecting a subconscious need for stability and to provide an 'anchor' for gravity. Having said that, the designs on the fragment are of a fairly decorative nature.

Design 1: Figure H.11

It is not possible to establish beyond doubt that this is a floorcloth rather than a piece of linoleum but there is a reasonable likelihood that this is the case. Both materials have a canvas backing, although that for linoleum is finer than that used for floorcloth. Figure H.12 compares our fragment with a piece of linoleum from the Silver Studio Collection, which has been folded over to show both the backing and the attractive, Morris-inspired pattern. It is clear that in the case of this linoleum, the backing is rather fine, and it has been separated from the linoleum, which is the sturdier of the two components. In the case of our fragment, however, the opposite is the case. A layer of sturdy canvas appears to have remained, while the paint has flaked off. This form of deterioration would seem to indicate that it is a floorcloth.

The fragments were found separate from the other two, and are probably the oldest. They are undoubtedly less vibrant in colour than they would originally have been. It has been possible to reconstruct the pattern using the fragments, and the finished pattern reveals an encaustic tile imitation with a Greek key. (Figures H.13 and H.14). Floorcloth and linoleum, as we have seen, had always taken the route of imitating natural materials, and other floor coverings. Encaustic tiles, cheap to produce and highly decorative, became a serious competitor to the floorcloth industry from the middle of the nineteenth century. They also became models to imitate, since they attracted the attention of the fashionable architects and designers of the day. Pugin, Owen Jones Godwin, and William Morris and all designed encaustic tiles and pavement designs. These tiles gave them an opportunity to demonstrate the importance of their theories of flatness of design on a two-dimensional object. Our pattern shows the influence of Pugin's highly ornamented neo-gothic revival designs, shown in Figures H.15 and H.16. Owen Jones, in his *Grammar of Ornament*, (1856) opined that medieval ornamentation (used as models by Pugin) declined in the fourteenth century and "gradually led to an over-elaboration of detail, from which the general effect considerably suffers."⁵⁹ Jones himself came to favour adaption of Greek and Oriental motifs.

It is unlikely that Pugin would have used a classical motif such as the Greek key, and this detail makes our Design 1 stylistically a hybrid. The two ornamental floorcloth patterns produced by Williamson's in the late 1880s (Figure H.17 – sold in Ryland's in Manchester – and Figure H.18) bear some similarities to Design 1, and both make use of a Greek key. Williamsons had an in-house design team and produced a high turnover of designs in order to cater for an increasing demand for novelty. Stylistic purity would not have been a highly regarded priority. It is interesting to contrast these with the two ornamental tile designs, equally influenced by gothic revival patterns, from Nairns of Kirkcaldy in 1881 shown in Figures H.19 and H.20. The quality of design and of printing is markedly higher, a fact which was also reflected in their prices.

⁵⁹ Jones 1856, p. 105.

The date for our pattern number one is the most difficult to ascertain. Certain styles for floorcloth and linoleum enjoyed long periods of popularity. Stylistically, the fragment could date from the early 1870s, when the floorcloths submitted to the Board of Trade Design Registers began to show a marked change of direction, from the earlier carpet imitations (Figure H.10) to the new, fashionable 'flat' designs, often imitating encaustic tiles.

Design 2: Figure H.21.

This is the most interesting pattern. Figure H.22 shows a fragment found with fragments of Design 3 glued on top. It can therefore be dated earlier with certainty. Figure H.23 shows an approximation of what it may have looked like. It is made from congoleum, and its provenance is almost certainly Nairns of Kirkcaldy, since as we have seen, this company started manufacturing congoleum, also called felt-base, in Kirkcaldy in 1928, having secured the licence to manufacture this material in Britain, Europe and the empire. This fragment may therefore date from the late 1920s to early 1930s, and its design seems to corroborate this theory. Congoleum was Nairns' answer to Williamsons' continuing price-cutting policies. It was cheap to produce and finally provided Nairns with a range of floor coverings which could be aimed at the lower end of the market. At the same time Nairns would not have compromised the trademark which had made their company famous: excellence of design. The fragment is a highly decorative floral pattern in a loose illustrative style, well drawn. It is most probable that this congoleum design was commissioned by Nairns from the eminent London design practise Silver Studios. This claim rests on two important facts. Firstly, Silver Studio archives actually contain a piece of congoleum. (Figure H.5), and it is therefore almost certain that the company designed for Nairns.⁶⁰ Secondly, the style of Design 2 is reminiscent of the French decorative style for interior furnishings of the 1920s and early 1930s (Figure H.24), which the Silver Studio adopted successfully for many of their commissions (Figure H.25 and H.26).

Its stylistic antecedents can also be traced to the style of the Omega Workshops (1913-1919), the design practise run by Roger Fry, Duncan Grant and Vanessa Bell, whose distinctive loose, painterly style was influential in the early decades of the twentieth century (Figure H.27).

Design 3: Figure H.28

The fragments of linoleum bearing this design are the most recent, since they were found resting on the floral congoleum pattern. Just like Design 1, this design belongs to the group of patterns the ancestry of which can be traced down through the decades to the mid-nineteenth century design debates. Unlike the ornate nature of Design 1, however, its relative simplicity made it a perennial favourite, and it returned relatively unchanged during the whole period under investigation. In the late 1880s to the early 1990s Christopher Dresser designed a catalogue of linoleum designs for Walton's Linoleum Manufacturing Company Limited, Staines, Middlesex. Christopher Dresser was a disciple of Owen and Pugin, and was designing linoleum already in 1874, according to Nikolaus Pevsner.⁶¹ Stuart Durant notes "Dresser's approach to designing linoleum is wholly consistent with the Puginian and Jonesian belief that

⁶⁰ The linoleum and congoleum samples at the Silver Studio are awaiting accessioning, and the curator at MODA was not able to provide any information about the pieces.

⁶¹ Nikolaus Pevsner, 'Christopher Dresser, Industrial Designer', *Architectural Review*, vol. 81, 1937, pp. 183-6, quoted in Durant 1993 p.

floor coverings should not be decorated with representations of three-dimensional forms".⁶² Some of Dresser's designs for Walton bear a marked resemblance to Design 3 (Figure H.30). This style of pattern continued to be seen in various forms towards the turn of the century, sold by Rylands in Manchester and made by Williamsons of Lancaster in 1889 (Figure H.31), and still, as late as 1930-31, the Dundee Linoleum Company showed very similar designs in their catalogue, designed by Silver Studios (Figure H.32). It is therefore wholly consistent with the popularity of this pattern that it should also be our last, dating from approximately the mid- to late 1930s.

H.6: Conclusion

The fragments of floor coverings excavated at Alderley Sandhills most probably contain three forms of oil-coated materials for floors: floorcloth, linoleum and congoeum. Therefore they present a rare collection of the major types of these floor coverings, which have been of a great importance to the domestic interior since the early part of the eighteenth century. The fact that they have been discovered in the same location gives them additional interest.

The importance of these materials has been largely overlooked, since their functions have always rested somewhat uneasily between the utilitarian and the decorative. For this reason they have not been collected by museums of decorative art, such as the Victoria and Albert Museum, which contains only two small fragments of floorcloth and a small number of linoleum samples, including one designed by William Morris. The Americans have always regarded oil-cloth with much greater interest, and many fragments are preserved and catalogued with care in museums, particularly in Wintherthur and colonial Williamsburg, where a couple of rare eighteenth century examples are preserved in situ. Floorcloths enjoyed a higher status in America, probably since they were first imported from England into the colonial interior, and importation took on a certain snob value, which continued throughout the nineteenth century, even when the domestic manufacture of floorcloth and linoleum was well established.

Attitudes towards artefacts such as these have started to change in Britain, too, largely due to a change in emphasis in academic scholarship since the 1970's. The domestic interior with its every-day objects has for the first time been the subject of academic study, as opposed to the art-historical study of artefacts of artistic merit within the interior. A belief that the material objects with which we surround ourselves have a historical significance in explaining our past, regardless of their aesthetic merits has led to the domestic context taking on a greater significance, and with it the ordinary objects found within it. Design historians have therefore espoused new methodologies, and indeed archaeology is one of them.

Unfortunately, in the case of the floorcloth, it has taken too long. Very few examples survive, even in fragmentary form. This neglected object was the first, and by far the most important floor covering of the early modern interior, adopted by a large spectrum of the social classes. It has nevertheless been allowed to slip, more or less unnoticed, into oblivion.

⁶² Durant 1993, p.

In the case of its descendants, linoleum and related materials, it is not too late. The general use of these materials is still within living memory. Many fragments and whole floors are still being discovered in restoration of houses everywhere, but at the same time these are discarded by builders in the same manner as the floorcloth was throughout the twentieth century.

The Alderley Sandhills Project, and the seriousness with which these fragments are being treated are therefore most encouraging, as well as most timely. Museums and curators, as well as bodies such as English Heritage now have a responsibility to alert the public about the importance of these materials, in order to prevent their disappearance. This could be done in several ways:

1. Museum displays

As soon as linoleum is displayed in museums, either in the form of reproductions in historical context, or in fragmentary display, in both cases supported with informative and visually stimulating factual material, its status will be raised. Therefore, first of all awareness of its significance needs to be raised amongst museum curators in Britain.

2. Appeals

Appeals to architects, builders and the public could be made through articles or notices in appropriate journals to present any linoleum pieces found in restoration work to their nearest museum for inspection, possible collection and further specialist assessment as to the importance of the artefact.

3. Publications

In addition, a scholarly, well illustrated 'history of linoleum', in a form digestible for the general public should be commissioned. Such a book already exists about the German linoleum industry: the handsome and informative volume *Linoleum: History Design Architecture 1882-2000*, edited by Gerhard Kaldewei, (Ostfildern-Ruit: Hatje Cantz Publishers, 2000). Such a publication could contain several articles relating to the history, manufacture, consumption, aesthetic and social significance of these materials.