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FLOORCLOTH MANUFACTURE IN KNIGHTSBRIDGE

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Floorcloth originated in England in the first quarter of the eighteenth century, possibly evolving from the oiled groundsheets used in canvas tents by the army. For much of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, it served as an inexpensive, long-lasting floor covering, and was to be found in homes throughout the British Isles and North America.

The foundation of a floorcloth was a broad width of canvas, thickly coated with oil paint on both sides. On the upper side a pattern was then impressed by wooden blocks. Before being printed, it was rubbed down with pumice to form a smooth flat surface. The paint was then laid on with a trowel, the painter working in a similar way to a plasterer. Several coats were required before the topside was once again pumiced and finally hand-painted with a brush. When made by a skilful manufacturer floorcloths could be both fashionable and artistic: a trade card of Morley's manufactory in Chelsea dating from 1797 proudly boasted of 'floorcloths in imitation of the mosaic pavements discovered at Woodchester'.¹ Indeed, a rare surviving floorcloth from Calke Abbey has a mosaic pattern.²

But its popularity ultimately was based on practicality; an asset still appreciated in the mid-nineteenth century, when floorcloth was praised for being hard-wearing, easily cleaned, for preventing draughts and, most prosaically, for being a material that 'no insects will long continue in the vicinity of'.³ Not until the 1860s, with the invention of linoleum and its subsequent domination of the

mass-market, did floorcloth vanish from the British home.

In the early days floorcloths were small in size, usually measuring two or three feet square, and it was therefore possible to paint and stencil them on large benches in almost any artisan's workshop. Although not a highly skilled trade, some degree of specialisation had evidently taken place by 1747, when *The London Tradesman* stated that 'floorcloths painted in oil colours . . . 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 other branches of Painting'.⁴ By 1761, when Rolt stated that floorcloths 'are generally sold in the Turners Shops' he also drew attention to the 'considerable manufactory of floor-cloths at Knightsbridge'.⁵ But as late as 1809, Edward Edlin, a turner of 34 New Bond Street, continued the earlier tradition, selling 'every article in the Turning Line including Floorcloths and walling'.⁶

The first purpose-built manufactory in the country was established in Knightsbridge by Nathan Smith about 1754.⁷ He was credited with two major innovations which were to alter the design of floorcloth manufactories and lead to the construction of a fascinating but little-known industrial building type, which today has almost vanished. During the later eighteenth century floorcloths had become larger due to the widening of the canvas and the sewing together of several lengths in such a way as to appear seamless and thus not distort the pattern.⁸ Trade cards of the eighteenth century made much



Figure 1. Letterhead of Robert Main, showing his manufactory in Southwark. British Museum.

of the 'seamless' nature of the floorcloths produced. Nathan Smith went further; by consulting the Scottish manufacturers of the canvas used for the base of the floorcloth, he was able to purchase woven canvas of sufficient width to allow huge cloths to be produced. His second innovation was to abandon stencilled patterns, and to substitute block-printed designs, using blocks most frequently carved from pear wood. This gave sharper outlines and allowed more complex designs to be devised. The printing table measured about 30ft long and 4ft wide.⁹ Both of these improvements necessitated alterations in the premises where floorcloths were produced.

The new production processes demanded more spacious working and drying areas, and Smith recognised that a 'business whose elements were a roomy ground plot' could with the extension and alteration of a simple building 'with a little ingenuity be made to assume regular architectural forms'.¹⁰ Thus floorcloth manufactories were often sited in the less densely populated areas of the capital.

Indeed, the interiors had much in common with theatres; not only their size, but also their smell of paint, the huge printed canvases reminiscent of back-drops, and the structures like fly-towers where the floorcloths dried. Apart from church towers, floorcloth manufactories were often the tallest buildings in an area, and as late as 1824 were declared to be on a 'large scale and to challenge curiosity'.¹¹

Floorcloth production flourished throughout the capital: in 1788 nine floorcloth manufacturers were listed in the *London Directory*, and by 1822 at least 29 companies were manufacturing floorcloth in London (see *Appendix*).¹² Some companies such as Richard Longford (Charing Cross and Deptford) and Henry Buckley (The Strand and Bridge Road, Lambeth) sold from central London addresses, while manufacturing in the suburbs. Others (John Hare and Smith and Baber) combined showroom and manufactory in fashionable locations, while two carpet and floorcloth warehouses were simply retail outlets.¹³ At the end of the eighteenth century, the

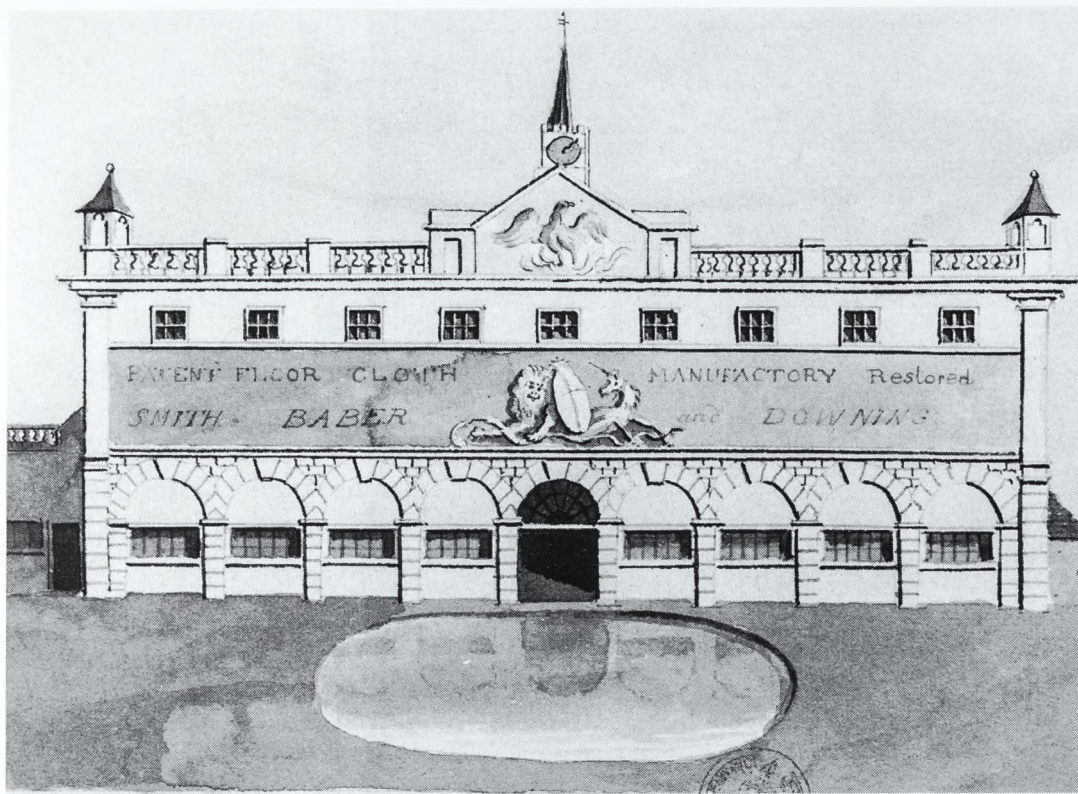


Figure 2. Smith, Baber and Downing's floorcloth manufactory, as rebuilt after 1795. Guildhall Library.

public visited the showrooms within the floorcloth manufactories in the suburbs, rather than visiting a warehouse or shop in the centre of town, as they did later. The stately and beautiful buildings erected by floorcloth manufacturers 'by which the metropolis was soon adorned' could be justified as magnets to draw clientèle to a particular firm (Fig. 1).¹⁴

At Knightsbridge Nathan Smith saw that to promote his business and to attract large numbers of people to the showroom, he should develop the simple and coarse wooden buildings on his spacious plot which lay on the south side of Kensington Road into an impressive emporium with some architectural merit. He was able to do this when the first manufactory burnt down in 1794. *The Times* described the 'dreadful fire' which broke out about 10 o'clock at night; the building 'despite the attentions of the fire brigade was in a short time entirely consumed', as were the stables of Mr Harris, the proprietor of Covent Garden Theatre, who lived next door. The fire raged 'furiously for upwards of three hours . . . The great variety of oil, turpentine, and paint of various kinds, as well as the Combustible

nature of the other materials made use of in the manufactory rendered every effort to extinguish the flames fruitless until the whole was burned down'.¹⁵

The building was not insured and it was estimated that stock and materials worth at least £20,000 were destroyed. Three-quarters of the goods manufactured (presumably tents) were intended for the cavalry, many of whom occupied the barracks erected opposite in 1792.¹⁶

Nathan Smith rebuilt the manufactory in 1795, possibly to the designs of W.S. Newman, who gave his address as 'At Mr Smith's, Knightsbridge' in 1792, and exhibited at the Royal Academy a 'Design for the floor cloth manufactory building at Knightsbridge' in 1794 (Fig. 2).¹⁷ It stood back from the road, with a grassy plot in front 'in the midst of which was a pond supplied with gold and silver fish, and ornamented with a figure of old Time holding his scythe and hour glass'.¹⁸

In 1824 James Baber (who by this date had taken over the running of the business from his father-in-law, Nathan Smith) obtained a new 98 year lease from Viscount Dungannon, the ground landlord

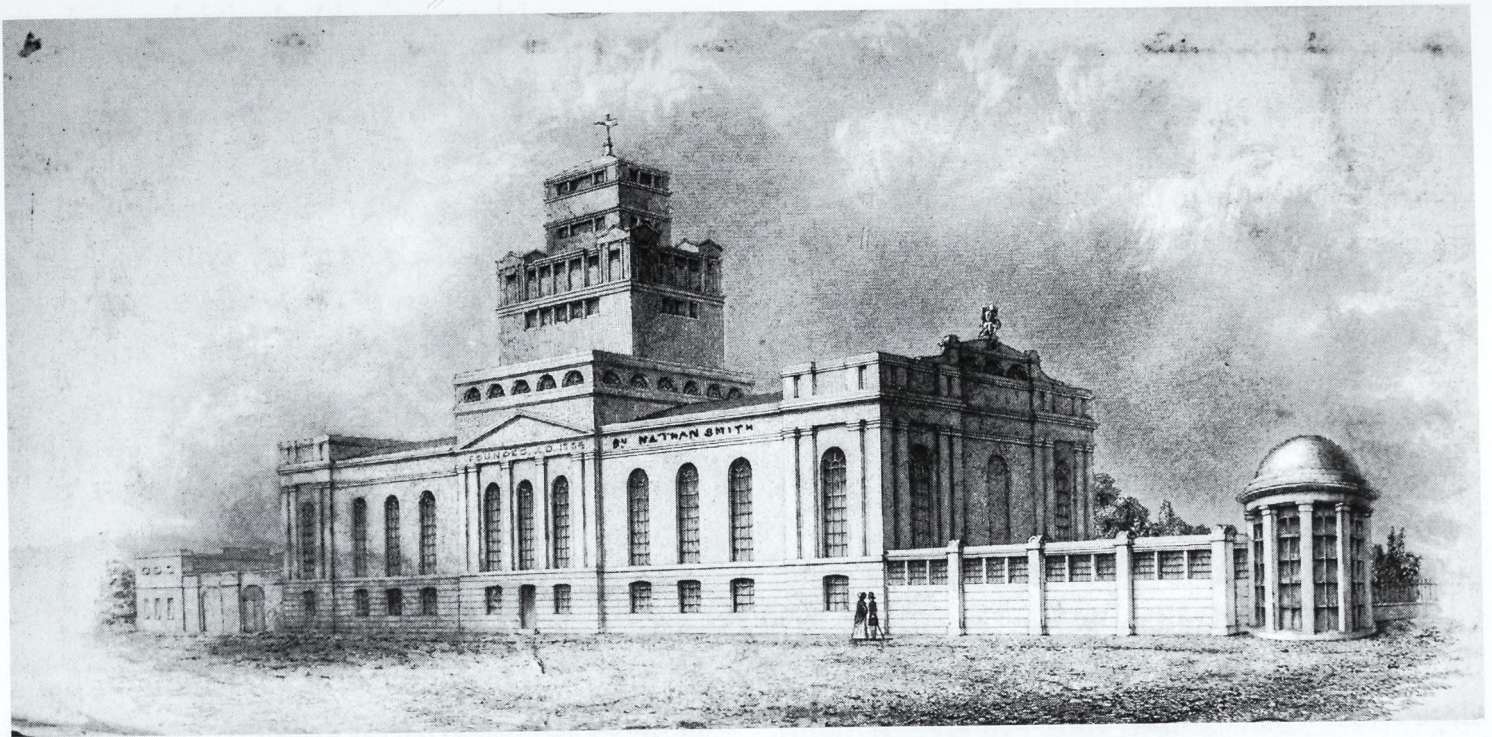


Figure 3. William Fuller Pocock's design for Smith and Baber's Floorcloth Manufactory, Knightsbridge, 1824. RIBA.

of the Trevor Estate, of 'two messuages . . . and all that large brick building or manufactory used as a floorcloth manufactory lately erected', at a yearly rent of £180.¹⁹ The premises were rebuilt in that year to the designs of William Fuller Pocock (1779–1849), architect and surveyor to the Trevor Estate, but here working in a private capacity (Fig. 3).²⁰

His design for Smith and Baber was later said to 'form a prominent and well-known feature in the neighbourhood. The building is of considerable height and extent, and is not destitute of a certain amount of merit as regards its outward architectural design'.²¹ The classical nature of the building was somewhat reminiscent of some of Pocock's unexecuted designs for churches and chapels, and was considered by his son to be 'evidence of his skill'.²²

The entrance to the manufactory was through an elegant rotunda, which acted as a circular showroom: 'hanging on the walls of which are various patterns of floor-cloth, and ranged on either side of which are other similar patterns in rolls as large round as the mainmast of a frigate'.²³

From the rotunda there was access to the different parts of the factory, which extended for over 250ft southwards towards Montpelier Square, presenting an eastern façade described by George Dodd as 'more decorative than is often seen in factories of the kind'.²⁴ Adjacent to the showroom was the largest room in the manufactory, the drying room, 70ft wide and 130ft long, the place where the floorcloths were exhibited when complete. From end to end, the room was hung with floorcloths in every state of finish. As turpentine was not used in the paint due to the fire risk, the painted floorcloths required a long drying time, often between four and six months. Above the drying room was the central tower, which dominated the skyline of Knightsbridge. Dodd states that at the summit of the tower was a small, square room; a belvedere with windows on all four sides affording a magnificent view in all directions. This was a private apartment of the owners of the floorcloth manufactory, and was not connected with the manufacturing process.

Behind the drying room lay the colour room, which had at its very centre a horse-powered cog-wheel, where the pigments used in the paints were ground. In the yard behind were vats of linseed oil connected by pipes to the colour room, where the various paints were mixed.²⁵ At the southern end of the site were the stables.

Another very large, high room was required to stretch the canvases before they were printed; this was known as the straining-frame room. Here the canvases were stretched on vertical wooden frames, measuring between 60ft and 70ft long and 24ft and 30ft high. On occasion they could be 90ft long. Other parts of the building were taken up with the painting and printing process. The painted floorcloth remained hanging in the painting shop until dry (two to three months) before being taken to the printing room to have the elaborate designs block printed in different colours on the painted surface. The printing room was situated within the tower, and when the roll of painted canvas was carried there, 'the ends of the roller are put in iron sockets, so that the canvas can be unrolled and placed on the table to be printed; and as each yard receives the

impressions of the printing blocks, it is lowered through a slit in the floor over rollers and horizontal poles into the drying-room below, where it remains till it is perfectly seasoned and ready for sale'.²⁶

The square tower, like a theatre fly-tower, was also used to hang particularly long pieces of floorcloth.

A remarkable variety of designs for floorcloths was produced, especially during the eighteenth century. Charles Eastlake, writing in the 1860s, was somewhat scathing: 'its design began with an imitation of marble pavements and parquetry floors; I have even seen a pattern which was intended to represent the spots on a leopard's skin'. He added that he felt 'these conceits were thoroughly false in principle'.²⁷ Those purchasing floorcloths during the eighteenth century were evidently more adventurous than the Victorians.

Floorcloths were used in country houses, especially in those areas subjected to hard wear, such as entrance halls, passages and stairways. A price list of designs produced by Smith and Baber in 1821 included Yellow Mat, Claremont and Hampton at 5s.6d per sq yard; Palmyra Marble and Octagon Marble at 6s.3d and Tessellated Marble and Fancy



Figure 4. Early nineteenth-century trade card for Morley's Manufactory. *British Museum.*



Figure 5. Smith and Baber's floorcloth manufactory just before demolition in the 1970s. *London Metropolitan Archives*.

Flower at 6s.6d. More expensive designs were Oak Leaf, Foliage, Imperial and Turkey at 7s.10d, with the most costly being Persian at 7s.3d per sq yard. A plain red cloth was available at 5s and old floorcloths could be repainted at a cost of 2s.6d per sq yard.²⁸

As well as floorcloths, the manufactories of Georgian London produced other goods, including awnings and tents (Fig. 4). In 1808 Smith, Baber and Downing in Knightsbridge were making portable rooms and awnings.²⁹ In 1790 S. Roberts' warehouse at 91 Fleet Market sold the floorcloths, varnished table covers and heraldry painting carried out at his manufactory in Blackfriars Road. John Samuel Hayward of Newington Causeway and Leadenhall Street also specialised in 'Pavilions and Temples', a speciality no doubt useful in his role as 'Floor cloth maker to Her Royal Highness the Princess of Wales'.³⁰

In August 1788 Nathan Smith was invited to the Isle of Wight to holiday with John Wilkes, and to design and prepare plans for a series of canvas rooms for Sandham Cottage, or, as Wilkes liked to call it, his 'villakin'. In November of the following year Wilkes's builder explained further 'I shall have the canvas from Mr Smith some time this week . . . we shall have nothing more to do than put it up

which will take us I think about 3 weeks as I think of being particularly nice in so elegant a room as your Tuscan Room, will be'.³¹ The room measured 23ft 4ins by 13ft 8ins and over 1,300 prints were to be found on the walls.³² Other canvas rooms prepared at Knightsbridge for Sandham cottage included dressing-rooms, bedrooms and a room known as the Pavilion.³³

Today very few examples of floorcloths survive and even fewer manufactories. The Knightsbridge manufactory of Smith and Baber (Fig. 5) stopped production in 1888, but the building survived in a variety of guises until the early 1970s.³⁴ At different times it was a skating rink, exhibition hall, car-hire garage and car park. One rare survival is to be found in Essex Road, Islington. Ridley's Floorcloth Factory opened in 1819, an engraving of 1830 showing the original elaborate façade (Fig. 6). Today the building, although altered, retains some of its Palladian elegance; rising to four storeys, it is pedimented and balustraded above an Ionic pilastered front. Originally there were no window openings above the ground floor, but when altered by Islington Housing Department in the 1970s, Georgian-style windows were inserted at first- and second-floor level (Fig. 7).

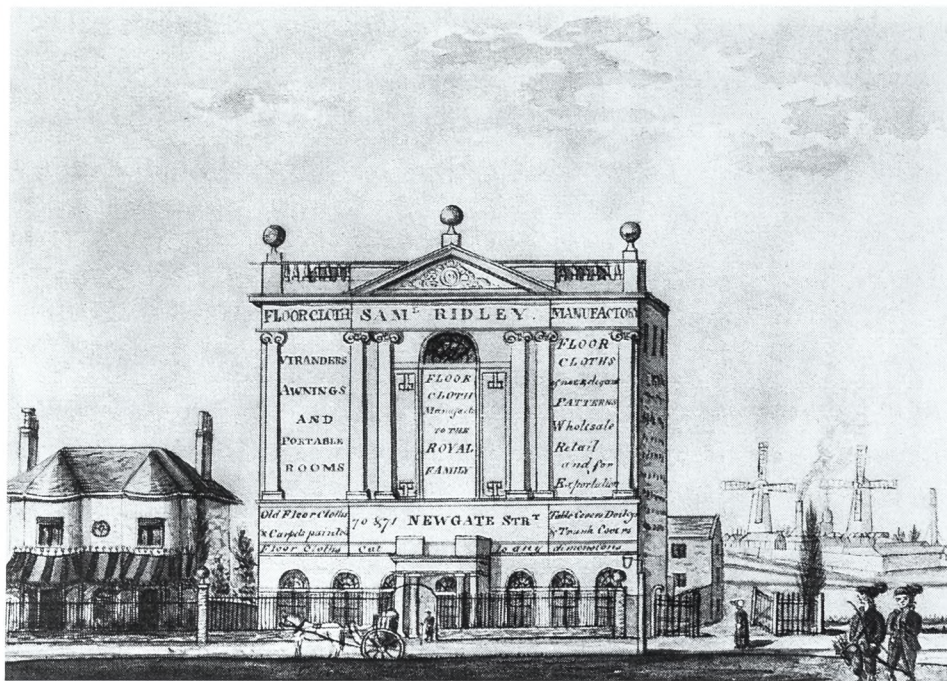


Figure 6. Ridley's floorcloth manufactory, Essex Road, c.1830. *Islington Central Library*.



Figure 7. The former Ridley's floorcloth manufactory, Essex Road. *Ann Robey*.

I thank my colleagues within RCHME for comments on this text, particularly the General Editor of the *Survey of London* for permission to publish extracts which will appear in Volume 45.

NOTES

- 1 London, British Museum (hereafter BM), Banks
Collection, 30.10.
- 2 C. Gilbert, J. Lomax, A. Wells-Cole, *Country House
Floors 1660–1850* (Temple Newsam Country House
Studies 3), Leeds, 1987, 104–5.
- 3 London, National Art Library (hereafter NAL), II RC
H10, Robert Barnes, *Papers in connection with the
Early Floor Cloth Manufacture*, 1857, 19.
- 4 R. Campbell, *The London Tradesman* . . ., London,
1747, 245.
- 5 R. Rolt, *New Dictionary of Trade*, London, 1761, unpag.
6 BM, Banks Collection, 30.7.
- 7 Nathan Smith claimed that the manufactory at
Knightsbridge had been established in 1754; in fact
when the new manufactory was built in 1824 that
date was engraved on the building. However, the
rate books indicate that it was not established until
1764. It was, however, the oldest purpose-built
manufactory in London.
- 8 Barnes, *op. cit.*, 15. Floorcloth widths varied between
7–9 yards at Smith and Baber’s Knightsbridge manu-
factory.
- 9 W.T. Brande (ed.), *A Dictionary of Science,
Literature and Art*, London, 1842, 457: ‘In the year

- 1780 Mr Smith introduced the great improvement of block-printing, by which the colours are more correctly laid on, and in greater body and variety’.
- 10 Barnes, *op. cit.*, 19.
- 11 J. Britton, *The Original Picture of London*, London, 1824, 76.
- 12 *Kent's Original London Directory*, London, 1822.
- 13 The area around the Strand, Covent Garden and High Holborn, all central shopping streets in eighteenth century London, seem to have been popular locations for the showrooms of floorcloth manufacturers.
- 14 Barnes, *op. cit.*, 19–20.
- 15 Kensington Public Library, cuttings collection, Feb. 11, 1794.
- 16 *The World*, 14 February 1794, 4.
- 17 Howard Colvin, *Biographical Dictionary of British Architects, 1600–1840*, New Haven and London, 1995, 701.
- 18 London, Royal Institute of British Architects (hereafter RIBA), Pocock Family Papers 1/3, pp.2–3; ‘The A to Z of Regency London’, *London Topographical Society*, CXXXI, 1985, 21.
- 19 London, Greater London Record Office, MDR 1824/8/761.
- 20 RIBA, Pocock Family Papers, 1/2, p.227.
- 21 *The Builder*, xvi, 16 January 1858, 35.
- 22 RIBA, Pocock Family Papers 1/3, 4.
- 23 ‘A visit to Messrs. Smith and Babers’ Floorcloth Manufactory’, undated cutting from *The Illustrated Exhibitor and Magazine of Art*, 374, in Kensington and Chelsea Central Library, Local Studies Section, 45364.
- 24 G. Dodd, *Days at the Factories*, London, 1843, 283.
- 25 Dodd, *op. cit.*, 284.
- 26 ‘A visit to Messrs. Smith and Babers’ Floorcloth Manufactory’, *cit.*.
- 27 Charles Eastlake, *Hints on Household Taste*, London, 1869, 45.
- 28 Barnes, *op. cit.*, 42.
- 29 BM, Banks Collection, 30.
- 30 BM, Heals Collection, 30.12.
- 31 London, British Library (hereafter BL), Add. MS 30873, 198.
- 32 BL, Add. MS 30866, 137.
- 33 Lindsey Boynton, ‘The Marine Villa’, in Dana Arnold (ed.), *The Georgian Villa*, London, 1996, 122.
- 34 *Post Office Directories*, 1887–1958, *passim*.

APPENDIX

Floorcloth Manufacturers in London in 1822
(from Kent's Directory).

<i>Company & opening date</i>	<i>Type</i>	<i>Address</i>
<i>Barnes, Robert</i> (1787)	M	10 City Rd
<i>Bates, W.G.</i>	M	Church Row, Bethnal Green
<i>Buckley, Henry</i> (1772)	M	161 Strand & Bridge Rd, Lambeth
<i>Bulmer, Frederick</i>	M	283 Strand
<i>Downing & Co.</i> (1797)	M	Knightsbridge
<i>Elliot, Samuel</i>	M	22 Friday St
<i>Harden & Co.</i>	M	12 High Holborn
<i>Hare, John</i>	M	96 High Holborn
<i>Harvey & Knight</i> (1797)	M	57 Broad St, Bloomsbury
<i>Hayes, C.D.</i> (1787)	M	166 Fenchurch St
<i>Hayward, Gillman & Co.</i>	M	195 Whitechapel Rd
<i>Hayward & Turney</i>	M	18 Change Alley & 160 & 194 Whitechapel Rd
<i>Hayward, J.S.</i> (1777)	M	37 Newington Causeway
<i>Hopperton, & Co.</i>	M	Deptford Bridge
<i>Irons, John</i>	M	11 Prince's St, Leicester Sq
<i>Ives & Co.</i>	M	4 Little Queen St, Holborn
<i>Kilpin, W.B. & J.</i>	M	2 Queen St, Cheapside
<i>Knight, G.</i>	M/C	111 Blackman St
<i>Langford, Richard</i>	M	31 Charing Cross & Deptford
<i>Main, Robert</i> (1817)	M/A	8 Pickett St
<i>Roberts, S.</i>	M	91 Fleet Mkt & Gt Surrey St
<i>Rolls & Goulston</i>	M	New Road Bermondsey
<i>Smith, Baber & Co.</i> (c.1754)	M	Knightsbridge
<i>Southgate, C.W.</i> (1797)	M	88 Fleet St
<i>Thompson, Richard</i>	M	50 Skinner St
<i>Tillerton, George</i>	M	96 High Holborn
<i>Weaver, Thomas</i>	M	118 Long Acre
<i>Wentworth, Edward</i>	M	27 Lombard St
<i>Wright, W. & J.</i>	M	City Rd & Hackney Rd
<i>Mills, W.</i>	W	10 Gt Queen St
<i>Piggott, John</i>	W	46 Judd St, Brunswick Sq

KEY

M = Floorcloth manufacturer

M/C = Floorcloth/Carpet Manufacturer

M/A = Floorcloth Manufacturer/Army painter

W = Floorcloth & Carpet Warehouse