

House of Books and Friends

The House of Books & Friends is a thriving community hub in central Manchester. As well as a wide selection of literature, this impeccably designed venue offers good coffee and conversation in its mission to combat loneliness. The inventive use of various Expona Commercial PUR products brought the original features of this Grade II listed building to life.

Location: Manchester, UK

Products Used: Expona Commercial PUR

Sector: Leisure & Hospitality

The story of the House of Books & Friends began as the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic took its toll.

Darryl Cooke, Chair of the gunnercooke Foundation, had the initial idea in 2021, having witnessed how events had a detrimental effect on society.

Lockdown highlighted the stark reality that loneliness affects anyone, irrespective of age or background, when they experience personal loss or change.

Post-pandemic reports highlighted that 45% of UK residents experience loneliness, equating to 25 million people, with 5% experiencing severe loneliness. Cooke opted to tackle this typically silent problem with the power of literature.

The combined bookshop and café run as a Community Interest Company (CIC) with a simple mission: bringing people together. It is home to a knowledgeable bookselling team who enjoys chatting with like-minded book lovers.

For those outside of Manchester, virtual book clubs and subscription services are available online. Meanwhile, social media channels are brimming with recommendations, polls and event details.

“It is well documented that loneliness is a pernicious issue in society,” confirms Cooke. “One hundred per cent of our profits go back into the organisation, so every purchase someone makes - and every amazing event they attend - means we can make a difference.”

The House of Books & Friends, located on King Street in the heart of Manchester, opened its doors to everyone in early 2023 with a simple message: When We Read, We Are Not Alone.

Laura Jones was project director for the gunnercooke Foundation, whilst Sian Astley - best known for her TV presenting and makeitmorgeous social media accounts - led interior design duties.

The Grade II listed building is the former home of the Liberal Party Reform Club. In its repurposed state, the venue offers visitors an attractive front-of-house area which leads into the bookshop, complete with a café, rear events space and customer toilets.

The original brief was to ensure that the newly renovated interior complemented the surrounding historic architecture with ‘vintage classic style’.

Jones led with a clear vision for antique furniture and quirky vintage displays. Therefore, Astley had to ensure that the flooring colour scheme, pattern and material specifications showcased this treasure trove of decorative items whilst withstanding a daily footfall from visitors seeking literature, hot drinks and good conversation.





Regarding the flooring design, Astley had three key considerations whilst choosing the perfect products:

- It needed to be sympathetic to such a beautiful building
- It needed to offer an intricate and eye-catching design aesthetic
- It needed to showcase colour-matching formats when creating flowing zones across the interior

Astley opted for Polyflor's Expona Commercial PUR range of LVT, selecting a combination of tiles and planks across each area.

Her choices were as follows:

- Front of House/Bookshop/Café - Sherwood Oak Parquet (4123), Sherwood Oak Versailles (4124) and Sherwood Oak (4099)
- Rear Events Space - Rusted Metal (5098)
- Bathroom With Stalls - Granite Mosaic (5095)
- Adapted Bathroom - Sherwood Oak Parquet (4123)

The project encountered three key challenges when selecting the right flooring, all of which were overcome thanks to the Expona Commercial PUR range.

1. Durability & ease of cleaning within a high-traffic area

The LVT options utilised across the floorspace offered much-needed durability within its city centre location. Furthermore, its specifications offered easy cleaning and scuff resistance, ensuring its maintenance was manageable for team members.

2. Suitable for use in an adapted toilet

Whilst the Sherwood Oak Parquet within the adapted toilet did not differ in specification from the other shades used, it provided a continuation of wheelchair-friendly, hard-wearing and attractive flooring in all areas, allowing Astley to maintain her interior design flow throughout the building.

3. Two different moods when moving between the front of house area and rear events space

The trio of Sherwood Oak formats simultaneously met the design brief whilst allowing Astley to be creative.

She enjoyed experimenting with the flooring patterns, creating a vinyl 'rug' of French weave patterns for the café seating areas that complemented the adjacent planks used within the café area (despite their contrasting design).

This lighter mood welcoming visitors into the premises became noticeably darker and increasingly atmospheric as they walked into the magnificent events room beyond the café and bookshop.

Whilst Astley has delighted with the result, the unusual coffered ceiling of the events room - complete with metallic infills and original carved timber lined walls - made the floor challenging to specify.

She acknowledged that finding a flooring option which complemented this particular space was difficult but that the warm, metallic tones of Rusted Metal provided the ideal solution.

Its attractive colouring reflected the ceiling, whilst the large format tiles were the perfect size for the room.

In addition, the practical features of this Polyflor range meant that high footfall and spillages at events did not cause concern.

The final result was an inclusive, friendly bookshop and café, which goes from strength to strength in its charitable aim to help combat loneliness.

Furthermore, thanks to artistic direction from Jones and Astley, its interior backdrop of colourful bookshelves showcases character at every turn.

“ Each space has its own personality, from the large main room - with zoning for its café, seating and thoroughfares - to the splendid events room.

Even the WCs 'pack a punch'. Great designs, hard-wearing surfaces, and good sustainability credentials. What's not to love?

Sian Astley, TV presenter and owner of Make It Morgeous

