

## **Elspeth Russell King (1949–2025)**

### ***Curator, Writer, Social Historian — Champion of Scotland's People and Their Stories***

Born in Lochore, Fife, in 1949, Elspeth King grew up in a mining family and carried the values of community, fairness, and cultural pride throughout her life. Educated at Beath High School, she went on to study Medieval History at the University of St Andrews, graduating with First Class Honours, before completing Museum Studies at the University of Leicester. These foundations shaped a career that transformed how Scotland understands and presents its social history.

### **Reinventing the People's Palace**

In 1974, King joined the People's Palace Museum in Glasgow, beginning sixteen years of groundbreaking work. She believed museums should tell the stories of ordinary people — their humour, struggles, creativity, and resilience. Under her influence, the museum embraced objects that traditional curators might have dismissed.

One of her most famous additions was Billy Connolly's Banana Boots, first worn in 1975. King defended their place in the museum, arguing they captured Glasgow's irreverent spirit. They became one of the Palace's most beloved exhibits.

During her tenure, the People's Palace achieved major recognition:

- European Museum of the Year (1981)
- British Museum of the Year (1983)

Her exhibitions — including *Scotland Sober and Free* and displays on stained glass, working-class culture, and women's history — drew record audiences. Even her cat, Smudge, became a local celebrity.

### **Controversy and New Directions**

In 1990, King was controversially passed over for the post of Keeper of Social History, sparking public debate and a formal grievance process. She soon left Glasgow to become Director of the Dunfermline Heritage Trust, where she helped restore Abbot House, the town's oldest secular building, as a heritage centre.

### **Transforming the Stirling Smith**

In 1994, King became the first Director of the Stirling Smith Art Gallery and Museum, a role she held for 24 years. She guided the museum through challenges, including a threatened closure in 2018. A public petition with over 7,000 signatures secured its survival — a testament to the community's trust in her leadership.

King retired in August 2018, leaving behind a revitalised institution rooted in local pride and national significance.

## **Scholarship and Advocacy**

Elspeth King was a prolific writer whose work reshaped understanding of Scottish social and women's history. Her publications include:

- *The Scottish Women's Suffrage Movement* (1978)
- *Scotland Sober and Free* (1979)
- *The Hidden History of Glasgow's Women* (1993)
- *Introducing William Wallace* (1997)
- *A History of Stirling in 100 Objects* (2011)

Her research on the Scottish women's suffrage movement remains foundational, and she played a key role in preserving and interpreting the stories of working-class women, activists, and overlooked communities.

In 2005, the University of Stirling awarded her an Honorary Doctorate for her outstanding contribution to Scottish museums and cultural heritage.

## **Legacy**

Elspeth King died on 1 November 2025, aged 76. She is remembered as one of Scotland's most influential museum professionals — a curator who insisted that the lives of ordinary people mattered, and that their stories deserved to be preserved with dignity, humour, and honesty.

Her legacy lives on in the museums she shaped, the histories she uncovered, and the generations of curators and historians she inspired.

## **Reference.**

Wikipedia. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Elspeth\\_King](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Elspeth_King)