# The British Cartoon Archive and the Researcher – New Perspectives

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## Why the project was happening

The University of Kent's British Cartoon Archive is one of the largest collections of political cartoons in the UK. It contains over 200,000 images (with more coming in weekly) from 300 different artists. There is also an extensive library of books related to cartooning on almost every subject imaginable.

The British Cartoon Archive sits alongside over 150 other collections as part of the University of Kent's Special Collections & Archives (SC&A) department. Kent's archives are broad and include many collections relating to Victorian and Edwardian theatre, the British Stand-Up Comedy Archive, a lot of windmill photographs and books on the history of science – to name but a few.

The challenge for researchers is that with so much material present at Kent, finding relevant material can be an overwhelming process: there are several different finding aids and websites, and up until 2012 the British Cartoon Archive was managed separately to the other collections. Additionally, some collections were stored offsite until October 2017 due to basement storage areas being refurbished – which meant a delay in getting access to material.

## What we did

We aimed to help highlight the broad nature of Kent's collections by integrating the British Cartoon Archive into our existing outreach programme:

### DR575 – Victorian and Edwardian Theatre
DR575 is a second year undergraduate module for drama students which introduces them to using archives as a method of exploring theatre history. The module is co-run by Dr Helen Brooks in the School of Drama and by Special Collections & Archives. It is taught weekly in Special Collections & Archives' Reading Room using material from the collections. 50% of the students' assessment is to design, curate, and launch an exhibition around an aspect of historical theatre using archival material.

In 2017, SC&A worked with Dr Brooks to refresh the module and integrate the British Cartoon Archive into the course. One seminar session was redesigned around a 'Balloon Debate': students had to choose a historical figure, research their importance in theatre history, and come back to justify why their character shouldn't be thrown out of a (metaphorical) rapidly sinking balloon. The twist? All the theatre figures were picked from a selection of recently catalogued cartoons, some of whom featured in our other collections.

### Shakespeare and Early Modern Drama
One of the most popular seminars in SC&A is the Shakespeare and Early Modern Drama module. This second year course for undergraduates is so popular at Kent that it runs every semester, and it's incredible for us to see how many students returning in third year have taken it. The students visit SC&A to explore how Shakespeare has been represented through the years – by examining not only contemporary works and facsimile folios, but also Victorian playbills and theatrical material.

In 2016, we found a surprising link in the British Cartoon Archive: a graphic novel version of Macbeth (and some of Shakespeare's other works), which claims to be 'The complete first folio' in picture form. By displaying this material alongside textual variants and theatrical adaptations, students gain a deeper understanding of how Shakespeare's works have been interpreted across generations in addition to provoking debates about textual authenticity.

**Punch, meet Punch**
Another way in which we've used the British Cartoon Archive is to promote cross-collection discovery with our online resources. The University of Kent subscribes to the Punch Historical Archive, which contains every issue of the satirical journal from its 19th century origins onwards. The British Cartoon Archive holds many issues of Punch, but not a complete run; using the Punch Historical Archive, we can demonstrate to students how to search for specific articles and then get out the relevant physical volume if we hold it. As Punch contains a lot of commentary on theatre-land and Victorian society, it's a brilliant resource to use alongside our other archival collections.

**Music in the Archives**
Another surprising collaboration came from the realms of social media, when Kent's Music Department saw our tweets on their #SummerMusicWeek hashtag. Each year, the Music department hosts a week of concerts across a wide range of genres and we had found some musical-themed items in our collections. As it turns out, we have a lot of musical material: pantomime scores, books in the John Crow Ballad and Song collection, metrical psalms in early modern Bibles and of course many cartoons in the British Cartoon Archive. This year, we hosted an open doors event during Summer Music Week to highlight the range of material in our archives, which led to us being actively used by some MA students who were previously unaware we held items that could be valuable to their research.

**Pantomime**
It wouldn't be Christmas without a pantomime, and in November 2017 Special Collections & Archives launched two exhibitions to explore this most festive of performances. We worked with The Beaney Museum of Art and Knowledge in Canterbury to produce an exhibition celebrating the arrival of the David Drummond Pantomime Collection, which is one of the largest collections of pantomime material in the country. At the same time, we designed an exhibition in our Templeman Library Gallery to highlight the existing wealth of pantomime material in our other collections. We focused on material from the Melville family archive and the Pettingell collection of playscripts, but we also included several cartoons by W.K. Haselden from the British Cartoon Archive. Haselden drew for Punch and the Daily Mirror in the early 20th century, and although he is most famous for his cartoons during the First World War he also commented extensively on changing Edwardian society – which, of course, included the gentrification of the theatre, music and pantomime.

# What's next?

**Accessing Archives**
The integration of the British Cartoon Archive into SC&A outreach highlighted the various ways students approach collections. Many 'traditional' materials found in special collections, such as rare books and manuscripts, can be intimidating to those who are exploring archives for the first time: they require a certain degree of palaeography skills (and even 20th century handwriting can seem scary to those raised in the digital age) and often there's a certain amount of context needed to understand the item's full value and potential. Some students can be nervous about handling older items for the first time, too, for fear they will cause damage.

One solution to this issue can be to use cartoons. The material held in the British Cartoon Archive is often flat; there is little or no handling required to use the item. The visual nature of cartoons means researchers don't need existing palaeography experience, and also appeals to international visitors who may not have the language skills needed to understand early modern printed material. The majority of images in the British Cartoon Archive have been digitised and can be viewed for free

online at home, increasing access potential. Additionally, the cartoons provoke laughter in the archives and can generate debates about why it's important to hold on to items within the archive.

SC&A is currently working with the Library's Equality and Diversity Group to increase awareness and access to our collections, as well as highlighting how our material can support Kent-wide events such as Disability History Month.

**Onward: The British Cartoon Archive Toolkit, more outreach, collection development policies and the future**
SC&A staff have also been working with our brilliant Academic Liaison Librarians to develop a toolkit for academics about the British Cartoon Archive. We've taken presentations into Library Reps meetings to talk about our collections, the potential creative uses for them in teaching and research and then asked attendees to feed back any questions they have and how they'd like information to be provided to them.

The British Cartoon Archive will continue to be used extensively alongside existing SC&A collections, and so far it's having a positive impact. In 2017, we welcomed 946 visitors through our Reading Room doors across 85 different sessions; this is a big leap from 2016, where we had 651 visitors across 85 sessions.

As part of our ongoing work to unify the BCA's policies with SC&A's documents, we've been working on developing collection management tools and shared reprographics charges to make everything clearer for researchers. This has paid off, with SC&A being awarded Archives Accreditation from The National Archives in November 2017! Our collections also moved into their new basement store in October, which means that everything is being held in one place again.


## Lessons learned

The key thing SC&A have learned from this project is that staff creativity is absolutely key to making collections more accessible to researchers. We spent some time plotting different, innovative ways that cartoons could be used alongside existing material and it paid off, with new seminars and new academics engaging with us. Of course to do this well, knowledge of your collections is key – and this does take time to build up, but it's absolutely worth the effort.  We've also found that planning outreach by theme rather than collection has helped us plan events more holistically – topics like music, humour, performance and politics cover all our collections and allow a wider range of material to be used.