

Legacies of Catalogue Descriptions and Curatorial Voice: Opportunities for Digital Scholarship
A collaboration between the [Sussex Humanities Lab](#), [British Library](#) and [Yale University Library](#) funded by the
Arts and Humanities Research Council (project reference [AH/T013036/1](#))

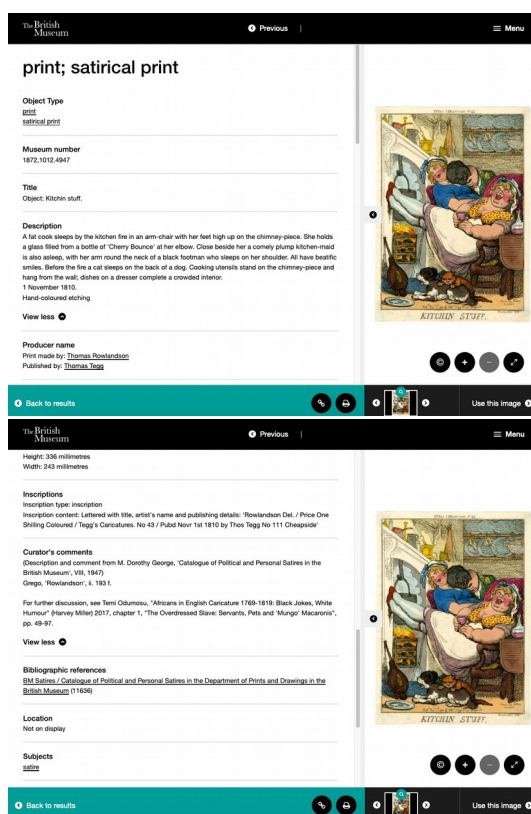
Presenting Legacy Descriptions – a provocation

James Baker, February 2021

In the funding application for the ‘[Legacies](#)’ project, we discussed the potential for misunderstanding and harm as the result of legacy descriptions appearing in web descriptions for items without sufficient understanding of the context in which those legacy descriptions were produced. To approach this problem, our application said we would develop “proofs-of-concept for presenting and reusing legacy catalogue descriptions”. Ideas would be generated as part of our workshop activities and published in the form of a pamphlet that provided a pathway to implementation (e.g. through a toolkit of points to consider).

Because of the pandemic and the impact on project workshop activities, this work could not have happened as planned. This document is an attempt to expand on the core idea described in the application, as a starting point for figuring out how the project team and our collaborators might test our ideas and develop something of use. It will be circulated to attendees at the July 2021 workshop, from which a public document – hopefully co-produced with attendees – will be published.

The document is slightly stream of conscience. It uses the new British Museum ‘explore the collection’ interface <https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection> as a starting point.



This is the web entry for Rowlandson's 1810 etching [Kitchen Stuff](#). The print was catalogued by Mary Dorothy George as No. 11636 and first published in 1954.

Thinking about how the print is presented, we note that the description is prominent. The about the description itself we note that it is 'of' the contents of the print rather than 'about' the print.¹ And thinking about the provenance of the description, we note that it comes from George, but there is no accompanying citation in the 'Description' field. To find this information, we must navigate to the 'Curator's comment' and 'Bibliographic References' fields. As displayed, these are nine and ten fields down respectively.

If we follow that citation to the printed source, we note that the 'Description' field is *based on* George rather than directly from her catalogue: for example, she did not describe the footman as 'black'. The revision of archaic language notwithstanding, the description is still the product of George's worldview.²

- 1 Sara Shatford, 'Analyzing the Subject of a Picture: A Theoretical Approach', *Cataloging & Classification Quarterly* 6, no. 3 (10 March 1986): 39–62, https://doi.org/10.1300/J104v06n03_04.
- 2 James Baker and Andrew Salway, 'Curatorial Labour, Voice and Legacy: Mary Dorothy George and the Catalogue of Political and Personal Satires, 1930–54*', *Historical Research*, no. htaa026 (4 December 2020), <https://doi.org/10.1093/hisres/htaa026>.

In the context of a project undertaking computational, critical, and curatorial analysis of collection catalogues, presentation of [Kitchin Stuff](#) on the British Museum website raises a number of questions. What do we – the reader, the ‘user’ – need to be told about Mary Dorothy George? How are we to understand her role as an interlocutor between us and [Kitchin Stuff](#)? How prominent should this category of information be? How much detail should be included? Which aspects of George’s labour, style, and worldview are most important? It is when she was writing? Who she was? Or why her labour happened at all? Alternatively, is a prompt that merely conveys legacy character of the description sufficient to, in turn, prompt the reader to use it with caution?

**Commonwealth
immigration**


Amelia Gentleman
@amelia Gentleman
Tue 17 Apr 2018 14:20 BST

6,860

● This article is more than 2 years old

Home Office destroyed Windrush landing cards, says ex-staffer

Exclusive: Evidence of UK arrivals discarded despite case worker protests, says former employee



▲ Who are the Windrush generation? – video explainer

The Home Office destroyed thousands of landing card slips recording Windrush immigrants’ arrival dates in the UK, despite staff warnings that the move would make it harder to check the records of older Caribbean-born residents experiencing residency difficulties.

Newspapers offer a useful model for how we might proceed.

Take for example this snapshot an article on the Windrush Scandal that was [published on the Guardian website in 2018](#).

Note the use of a prominent yellow banner as means of guiding the reader towards a critical reading of the article.

The banner has a number of features:

- It tells the reader what it is referring to: the article and when it was published.
- It uses ‘more than X years’ as a unit of time and precision.
- It does not make any judgements or use any judgemental language. For example, ‘old’ does not here imply that the article is of bad or untrustworthy.
- It is designed to grab the attention of the reader without overwhelming their experience of the article.
- It prompts the reader to consider that the age of the article is something they need to know about in order to properly understand the article as a whole.

In the context of online collection catalogues that contain ‘legacy’ descriptions might usefully – if speculatively – reapply this model to British Museum entry for [Kitchin Stuff](#). Were our aim to make the legacy character of a given description more known and knowable, following this model could achieve the following:

- A banner could be used to flag important information about text in a given ‘Description’ field, and to flag that this information is something the reader needs to know in order to properly understand with the entry as a whole.
- A banner of this nature would make the ‘Description’ field the clear point of focus for this intervention in the user experience.

- o That is, even if there is a bibliography field, we assert that this is not sufficient to draw a reader's attention to the legacy character of a description. Note that the *Guardian* article does contain the date the article was published, and yet the use of the banner indicates that the date field is insufficient to alert the reader to the historic character of the article.
 - o That is, it is not correct to use a banner to flag the whole record because it is not the whole record that is being flagged as containing legacy content, rather a specific element of it.
- A banner could be used to convey to a reader that the content of the 'Description' field is both based on a legacy source and (as it is a webpage that draws on a working database/catalogue) is likely to have deviated from that legacy source over time.
 - o In the case of legacy cataloguing, this is important because indirect influence (e.g. on the structure of language or the focus of the description) is important to flag, even when individual archaic words have been removed by subsequent cataloguers.
- Assuming that an annual refresh of 'more than X years' is unworkable, and that contextual dating of banner (e.g. noting that cataloguing took place before a particular controversy relating to an item or collection) is too labour intensive, it could be prudent to use a fixed reference point after which a web based description is deemed worth of flagging: two generations or 50 years seems sensible in context.
- A banner could be used and at the same time avoid suggesting to readers that the record is bad or untrustworthy. For example, a banner would using the term 'legacy' because this (potentially) has negative linguistic connotations. The purpose of the banner is to increase knowledge of the historic nature of a given description, rather than to offer judgement on the quality of that description.
 - o There remains, however, a risk that the mere presence of banners could be interpreted as shaming the cataloguer/curator who produced the legacy description and/or the institution hosting the description. Whilst the newspaper model suggests readers may be familiar with banners offering guidance on how to understand web content, readers may be unfamiliar with the fact that catalogue data is not always up to date (as a result, in most cases, of insufficient funding and staffing), and may downgrade their opinion of an institution using such banners. Alternatively, the banner could be used to draw the attention of the reader to the historical and systemic underfunding and understaffing of cultural heritage institutions.
- A banner should be implemented in such a way that enables the readers to understand the banner system. From the banner, the reader should be able to find out more about the rationale behind implementing a banner system, how long it has been in place, and information about the specific description at hand (e.g. a link to a page on major historic cataloguing projects). In short, elements of the present of document, a document that records the rationale behind implementing a banner system, should be available to readers.
- In implementing the model, we should accept that ideal colouring and positioning may be technically unfeasible within a given Content Management System (CMS). However by complementing partial implementation with Proofs-of-Concept that fully realise the ambitions of a banner system, the designs could to feed into future web and CMS design.

Based on these reflections, three potential banner designs are proposed.

First

⌘ This description is based on cataloguing that is more than **50 years old**

Second

⌘ This description contains information that is more than **50 years old**

Third

⌘ This description is based on cataloguing that is more than **50 years old**
[Find out more](#)

In the pages that follow, these proposals are mocked up against the British Museums' web entry for Rowlandson's 1810 etching [Kitchin Stuff](#).

British Museum Option 1: head banner, small

The British
Museum

Previous |

Menu

print; satirical print

Object Type

[print](#)

[satirical print](#)

Museum number

1872,1012.4947

Title

Object: Kitchen stuff.

Description

This description is based on cataloguing that is more than 50 years old

A fat cook sleeps by the kitchen fire in an arm-chair with her feet high up on the chimney-piece. She holds a glass filled from a bottle of 'Cherry Bounce' at her elbow. Close beside her a comely plump kitchen-maid is also asleep, with her arm round the neck of a black footman who sleeps on her shoulder. All have beatific smiles. Before the fire a cat sleeps on the back of a dog. Cooking utensils stand on the chimney-piece and hang from the wall; dishes on a dresser complete a crowded interior.

1 November 1810.

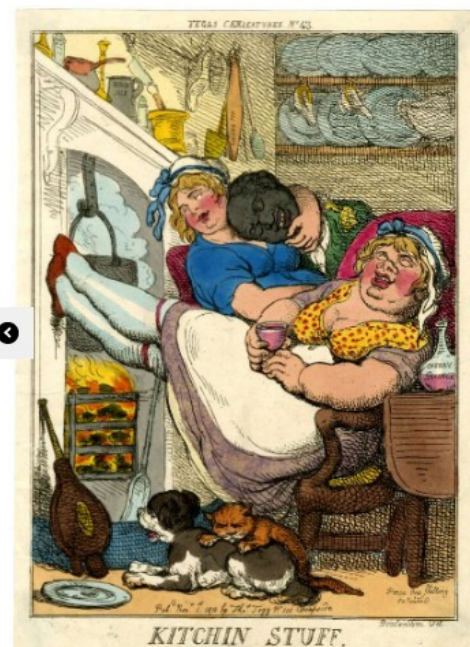
Hand-coloured etching

View less ^

Producer name

Print made by: [Thomas Rowlandson](#)

Published by: [Thomas Tegg](#)



Back to results



Use this image

British Museum Option 2: head banner, large

The British
Museum

Previous

Menu

print; satirical print

Object Type

[print](#)

[satirical print](#)

Museum number

1872,1012.4947

Title

Object: Kitchen stuff.

Description

This description is based on cataloguing that is more than 50 years old

A fat cook sleeps by the kitchen fire in an arm-chair with her feet high up on the chimney-piece. She holds a glass filled from a bottle of 'Cherry Bounce' at her elbow. Close beside her a comely plump kitchen-maid is also asleep, with her arm round the neck of a black footman who sleeps on her shoulder. All have beatific smiles. Before the fire a cat sleeps on the back of a dog. Cooking utensils stand on the chimney-piece and hang from the wall; dishes on a dresser complete a crowded interior.

1 November 1810.

Hand-coloured etching

View less

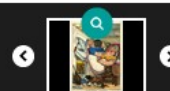
Producer name

Print made by: [Thomas Rowlandson](#)

Published by: [Thomas Tegg](#)



Back to results



Use this image

print; satirical print

Object Type

[print](#)

[satirical print](#)

Museum number

1872,1012.4947

Title

Object: Kitchen stuff.

Description

A fat cook sleeps by the kitchen fire in an arm-chair with her feet high up on the chimney-piece. She holds a glass filled from a bottle of 'Cherry Bounce' at her elbow. Close beside her a comely plump kitchen-maid is also asleep, with her arm round the neck of a black footman who sleeps on her shoulder. All have beatific smiles. Before the fire a cat sleeps on the back of a dog. Cooking utensils stand on the chimney-piece and hang from the wall; dishes on a dresser complete a crowded interior.

1 November 1810.

Hand-coloured etching

View less ^

This description is based on cataloguing that is more than 50 years old
[Find out more](#)

Producer name

Print made by: [Thomas Rowlandson](#)

Published by: [Thomas Tegg](#)



Back to results



Use this image

British Museum Option 3: foot banner, with link

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How might this work with other catalogues?

A copy of the same print is held at our project partner the Lewis Walpole Library, a [web entry for which](#) is published as part of Yale University Library Digital Collections.

The 'Abstract' field is an inheritance from Mary Dorothy George. Indeed, it is closer to the original source, meaning that it was copied from the British Museum's website before the British Museum identified and removed archaic language from their corresponding entry. It is worth noting that the archaic version was present on the British Museum website as late as 2018.³

It is worth noting that in the case of the Lewis Walpole Library we are dealing with a library catalogue as opposed to a museum catalogue. This has two consequences. First, the space for presentational elements is diminished. And second, in a library catalogue the notion of a 'description' field is more problematic, such that in this case the 'Abstract' field corresponds to data entered in the [MARC 520 'Summary' field](#).

Yale UNIVERSITY LIBRARY

Login Ask Yale Library Terms Governing Use


Digital Collections

All Fields Search... Full-text (What's this?)

Kitchin stuff [graphic] / Rowlandson del.

Published/Created: [London]
[Thomas Tegg]
[not before 1 November 1810]
Copyright Date: [not before 1 November 1810]
Physical Description: 1 print : etching on wove paper, hand-colored ; plate mark 34.6 x 24.5 cm, on sheet 37 x 25 cm
Notes: Title etched below image.
Reissue; imprint has been completely burnished from plate.
Publication information inferred from earlier state with the imprint "Pubd. Novr. 1st, 1810, by Thos. Tegg, No. 111 Cheapside." Cf. No. 11636 in the Catalogue of prints and drawings in the British Museum, Division I, political and personal satires, v. 8.
Plate from: Woodward, G.M. Caricature magazine, or Hudibrastic mirror. London : Thomas Tegg, [1808?], v. 1.
Also issued separately.
"Price one shilling coloured."
Sheet trimmed to plate mark leaving thread margins.
Cf. Grego, J. Rowlandson the caricaturist, v. 2, pages 193-4.
Temporary local subject terms: Bellows -- Cooking utensils -- Fireplace.
Leverhulme-Auchincloss, vol. xiv, p. 75.
Abstract: "A fat cook sleeps by the kitchen fire in an arm-chair with her feet high up on the chimney-piece. She holds a glass filled from a bottle of 'Cherry Bounce' at her elbow. Close beside her a comely plump kitchen-maid is also asleep, with her arm round the neck of a negro footman who sleeps on her shoulder. All have beatific smiles. Before the fire a cat sleeps on the back of a dog. Cooking utensils stand on the chimney-piece and hang from the wall; dishes on a dresser complete a crowded interior."--British Museum online catalogue, description of an earlier state.
Variant Titles: Kitchen stuff
Teggs caricatures : no. 43
Associated Names: Rowlandson, Thomas, 1756-1827 [Printmaker]
Tegg, Thomas, 1776-1845 [Publisher]
Topics: Auchincloss, Hugh Dudley
Harvey, Francis
Johnstone, Henry Arthur
Riviere & Son
Language: English
Genre: Etchings -- England -- London -- 1810
Satires (Visual works) -- England -- 1810
Format: Image
Content Type: Prints & Photographs
Rights: These images are provided for study purposes only. For publication or other use of images from the Library's collection, please contact the Lewis Walpole Library at walpole@yale.edu. Further details on the Library's photoduplication policy are available at http://www.library.yale.edu/walpole/html/research/rights_reproductions.html
Source Title: Caricature magazine, or, Hudibrastic mirror
Call Number: 810.11.01.01+
Orbis Record: 9159490
Yale Collection: Lewis Walpole Library
Digital Collection: Lewis Walpole Library
Local Record Number: lwlpr10240
Volume/Enumeration: Digital version
OID: 15813542
PID: digicoll:2782619

Bookmark



For more information about this resource, contact:
The Lewis Walpole Library
P.O. Box 1408
Farmington, CT 06034
(860) 677-2140
walpole@yale.edu
<https://walpole.library.yale.edu/>

Link to this resource
<http://hdl.handle.net/10079/digicoll/2782619>

View all items from this collection

3 James Baker and Andrew Salway, *Creation of the BMSatire Descriptions Corpus* (Zenodo, 2019), <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.3245037>.

8

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Lewis Walpole Library Option 1: foot banner

Yale University Library

Log in Ask Yale Library

tions

All Fields Search... Full-text (What's this?)

Kitchin stuff [graphic] / Rowlandson del.

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[Thomas Tegg]
[not before 1 November 1810]

Copyright Date: [not before 1 November 1810]

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Plate from: Woodward, G.M. Caricature magazine, or Hudibrastic mirror. London : Thomas Tegg, [1808?], v. 1.
Also issued separately.
"Price one shilling coloured."
Sheet trimmed to plate mark leaving thread margins.
Cf. Grego, J. Rowlandson the caricaturist, v. 2, pages 193-4.
Temporary local subject terms: Bellows -- Cooking utensils -- Fireplace.
Leverhulme-Auchincloss, vol. xiv, p. 75.

Abstract: "A fat cook sleeps by the kitchen fire in an arm-chair with her feet high up on the chimney-piece. She holds a glass filled from a bottle of 'Cherry Bounce' at her elbow. Close beside her a comely plump kitchen-maid is also asleep, with her arm round the neck of a negro footman who sleeps on her shoulder. All have beatific smiles. Before the fire a cat sleeps on the back of a dog. Cooking utensils stand on the chimney-piece and hang from the wall; dishes on a dresser complete a crowded interior."--British Museum online catalogue, description of an earlier state.

This description is based on cataloguing that is more than 50 years old

Variant Titles: Kitchen stuff
Teggs caricatures ; no. 43

Associated Names: Rowlandson, Thomas, 1756-1827 [Printmaker]
Tegg, Thomas, 1776-1845 [Publisher]

Bookmark



For more information about this resource, contact:

The Lewis Walpole Library
P.O. Box 1408
Farmington, CT 06034
(860) 677-2140
walpole@yale.edu

Lewis Walpole Library Option 2: foot banner, with link

Yale University Library

LoginAsk Yale Library

All FieldsSearch...Full-text (What's this?)

Kitchin stuff [graphic] / Rowlandson del.

Published/Created: [London]
[Thomas Tegg]
[not before 1 November 1810]

Copyright Date: [not before 1 November 1810]

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Plate from: Woodward, G.M. Caricature magazine, or Hudibrastic mirror. London : Thomas Tegg, [1808?], v. 1.
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[Find out more](#)

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Comparable prints catalogued by Mary Dorothy George are not catalogued in detail at the British Library, another of our project partners. However, the Library's photography collections – discoverable as part of the Library's Explore Archives and Manuscripts Catalogue (often referred to as IAMS) – present similar dynamics: free-text descriptions 'of' and/or 'about' visual materials where the legacy character of those descriptions is either unclear or unavailable.

For example, there are cases where a reader may infer that the description provided (in the 'Contents' field) is an artefact of an archaic catalogue entry, but where the catalogue entry provides insufficient information to alert the reader to that fact. [Mss Eur F191/332\(1107\)](#) is a photograph taken in 1933 by Arnold Adriaan Bake. It is part of the collections "Papers of Arnold and Cornelia Bake, indologists, scholars and performers of Indian music (1910-1979)" (Mss Eur F191) that was acquired by the library between 1980 and 1991 (see the [finding aid for the collection](#)). As we can see below, the 'Title' field for the photograph indicates that the title recorded in IAMS is, in part, transcribed from 'a separate description' that this photograph appears 'with'.

 [Advanced Search](#)

From Santiniketan; 35 numbered photographs, with a separate description: A girl of that tribe; the children look very negroid. Photographer: Bake, Arnold Adriaan
Mss Eur F191/332(1107) : Dec 1933

[Details](#) [I want this](#) [Browse this collection](#) 

Actions ▾

Title: From Santiniketan; 35 numbered photographs, with a separate description: A girl of that tribe; the children look very negroid. Photographer: Bake, Arnold Adriaan

Collection Area: Visual Arts

Reference: Mss Eur F191/332(1107)

Creation Date: Dec 1933

Extent and Access:
Extent:
1 item

Conditions of Use: Restrictions to access apply please consult Asian and African Studies Print Room staff

Language: Not applicable

Contents and Scope:
Contents:

Genre: Portrait Photography

Group portrait; a girl of that tribe [Pulliyan]; the children look very negroid.

Physical characteristics:

Dimensions: 55 mm x 81 mm

Format: Loose

Secondary Support: None

Technique: Photograph; Photographic Print; Gelatin Silver Print

Former Identifiers: I.O.320 (13)

Related persons, etc: Bake, Arnold Adriaan, Unspecified

Related subjects: Ethnic groups
South Asian Ethnic Groups

Links

> Is part of Mss Eur F191 Papers of Arnold and Cornelia Bake, indologists, scholars and performers of Indian music 1910-1979

> Is part of Mss Eur F191/330-335 Arnold and Cornelia Bake, indologists: postcards and photographs Unspecified

> Is part of Mss Eur F191/332 Box containing copies of photographs in the Arnold Bake Collection... Unspecified

> Photographer: Bake, Arnold Adriaan, Unspecified

> Topic: Ethnic groups

> Topic: South Asian Ethnic Groups

Based therefore on the available catalogue records, a reader might reasonably infer that the description ‘with’ the photograph was created before 1980 and that ‘very n__oid’ is not the curatorial voice of a British Library curator or cataloguer. Nevertheless, the decision to include this archaic description when cataloguing the photograph was a choice situated in personal, local, intellectual, and socially prescribed labour contexts. For the reader to parse this catalogue record, and in turn what information about the photograph the catalogue record is likely to amplify and suppress, they might welcome more guidance on the historic character of the catalogue record: first, a flag that it contains legacy material (the ‘with’ description’), and, second, information on the cataloguing process that enabled this legacy material to so prominently stand in for the object in the form of its catalogue record.

On the first point a banner could, again, usefully direct the reader.

On the second, a feature of archival structure and documentation not available in museum and library contexts could be of use. The ‘Browse’ view for [Mss Eur F191/332\(1107\)](#) clearly situates the photograph as one part of a larger collection, the purpose of which is to encourage the reader to consider the context in which the object was produced and has been arranged. Part of this archival contextualisation is the aforementioned [finding aid for the collection](#), in which is recorded ‘Key Details’ about the collection (its place in the archival structure, its extent, its scope, et al) and the ‘Provenance’ of the collection (its legal status, its acquisition). To take better account of the multiple curatorial voices in the catalogue records for objects in this collection, a new section that describes when the collection was catalogued, by which department(s), and – notwithstanding professional unease at disaggregating the individual cataloguer from the work of an institution – by whom could be added.