

Viewpoint

The Illustrator and the Archive

*Lucy Roscoe*¹

I grew up around museums and galleries, and was most at home in a library, but an encounter with an archive is something that had not come up before. When the development officer for the East Lothian Council archives got in touch and invited me to undertake a residency, the answer was a resounding yes. Romantic ideas quickly came to mind of old boxes and shelves overflowing with bundles of handwritten letters, sepia photographs and an archivist with an olive-green knitted cardigan. What I found was a host of criminal characters from the nineteenth century, a bank robber and some highly dedicated fishwives.

The brief was broad: to find ways to engage audiences with the archive materials using my skills as an illustrator. Traditionally the domain of the researcher or historian, the task was to bring to life the items in boxes to the public, so they might realise better what an archive is, and how it might be relevant for them; essentially to arouse some curiosity and give the public permission to explore. Over the course of six months working part-time with the John Gray Centre I designed two major projects and delivered a number of workshops, all of which sent my illustration practice sloping off in a new direction.

The biggest challenge that arose was where to begin. Shortly before the start of the project the East Lothian Council archives had recently moved into the John Gray Centre, a brand new centre in the heart of Haddington housing the museum, library and council archives. The modern archive presents itself as a long, temperature-controlled room. White shelves are stacked with neat brown boxes. Some have tidy pencil-written inventories indicating the contents of the box. Others are encrypted, tagged in a secret language understandable only to an archivist. This is the sanctuary the public is not allowed to enter. As a project artist I was allowed to go beyond the search room and given rare access to this privileged place.

To kick things off, the archivists showed me some of the ‘celebrities’ in the collection, such as the Haddington Criminal Register documenting the 1890s and a Haddington banknote dating from 1811–21. The criminal register is a large leather-bound ledger that documents crimes in Haddington between 1894 and 1901. It is big. Plate 1 shows me poring over the beautiful handwritten script

¹ For further information about Lucy Roscoe’s work, see <http://www.lucyroscoe.co.uk>.

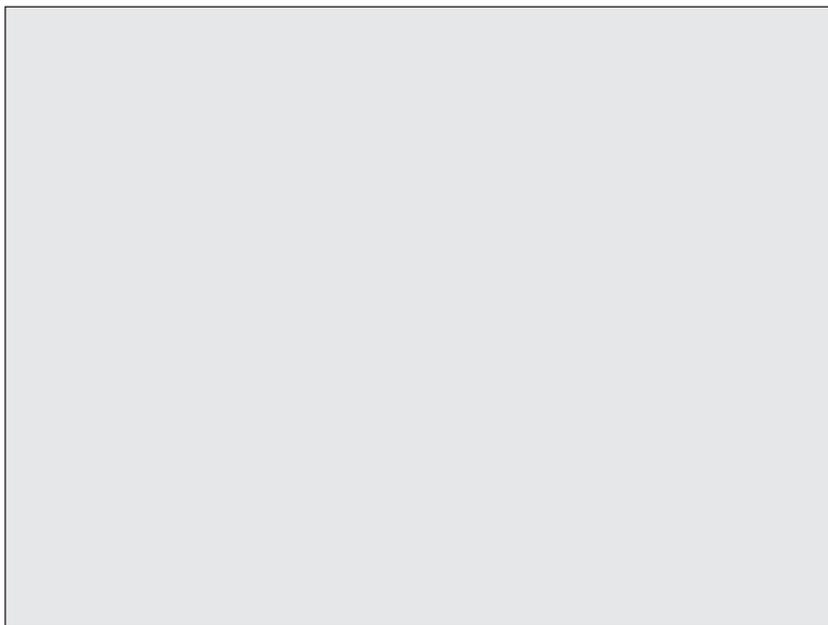


Plate 1 Photograph of the illustrator studying archive material in the search room at the John Gray Centre, 2013. © Lucy Roscoe.

that documents the name, origin, crime and punishment received in each case, but also offers a physical description, necessary as no mug shots were available then, but peculiar to us in a technological age. Plates 2 and 3 show how many of the crimes were petty and at times humorous, such as the theft of a cabbage or theft of sausages, and as I read the descriptions of tall men with long noses and brown hair, or blue eyes, with a long face and whiskers, the characters began to come to life. This inspired a set of weekly cartoons produced during the residency and published on the John Gray Centre website.²

The cartoons themselves became a fascinating kind of social commentary or anthropological exploration of Haddington society at that time. The long-buried historian in me rose to the surface and questions emerged such as why were so many criminals of Irish origin, why were there so many drunk and incapable housewives (shown in Plate 4), and why such bad teeth? All of the characters illustrated were true historical figures and this in itself added a poignant reflection. Over time I felt like I got to know the community, piecing together the different stories and suggesting overlaps in the narratives. I felt

² Details of the Archives and Local History library material held by the John Gray Centre can be found at <http://www.johngraycentre.org>.

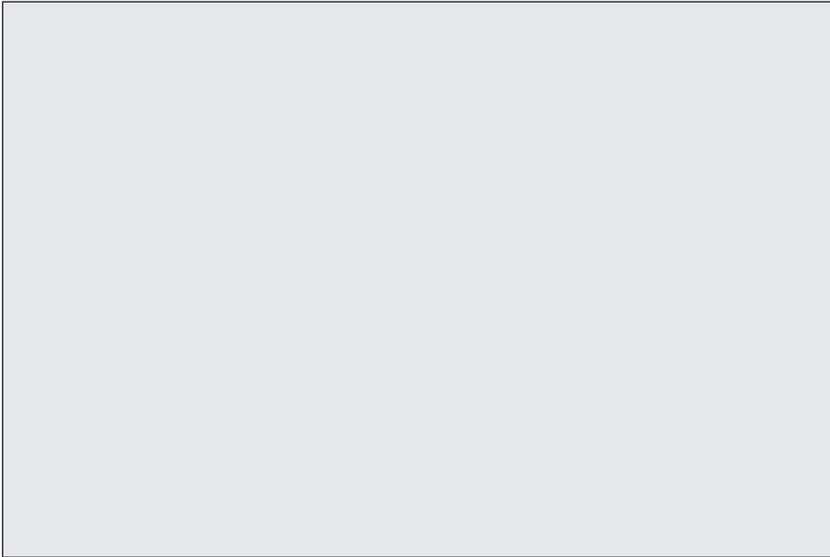


Plate 2 Illustration by Lucy Roscoe of the theft of a cabbage, based on evidence in the Haddington Criminal Register 1894–1901, 2013. © Lucy Roscoe.

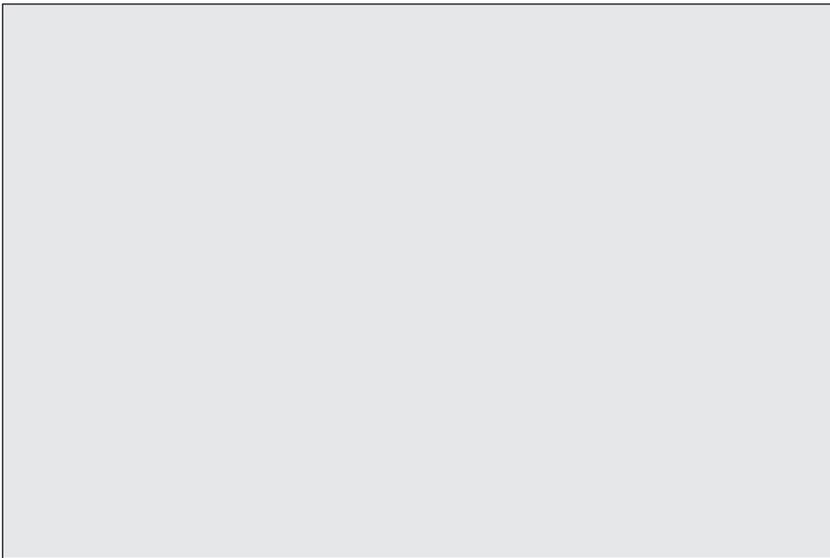


Plate 3 Illustration by Lucy Roscoe of the theft of sausages, based on evidence in the Haddington Criminal Register 1894–1901, 2013. © Lucy Roscoe.

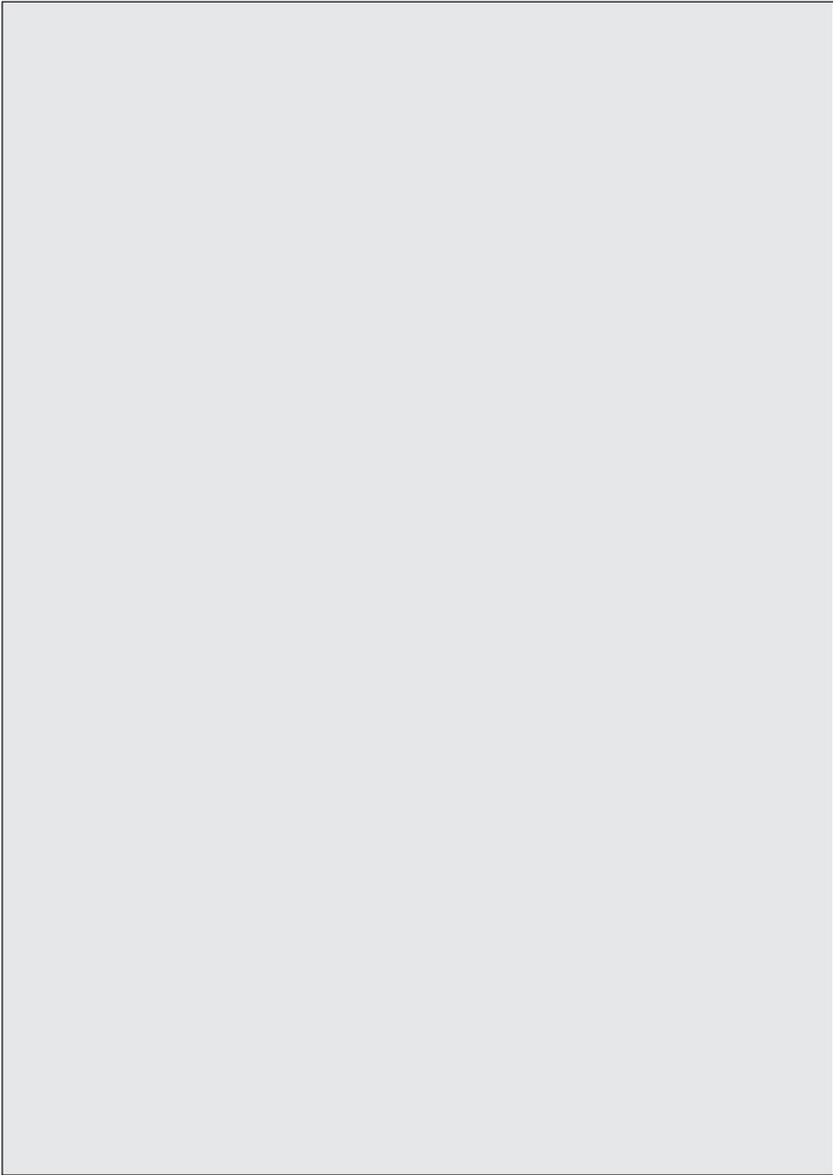


Plate 4 Illustration of a drunk and incapable housewife by Lucy Roscoe, based on evidence in the Haddington Criminal Register 1894–1901, 2013. © Lucy Roscoe.

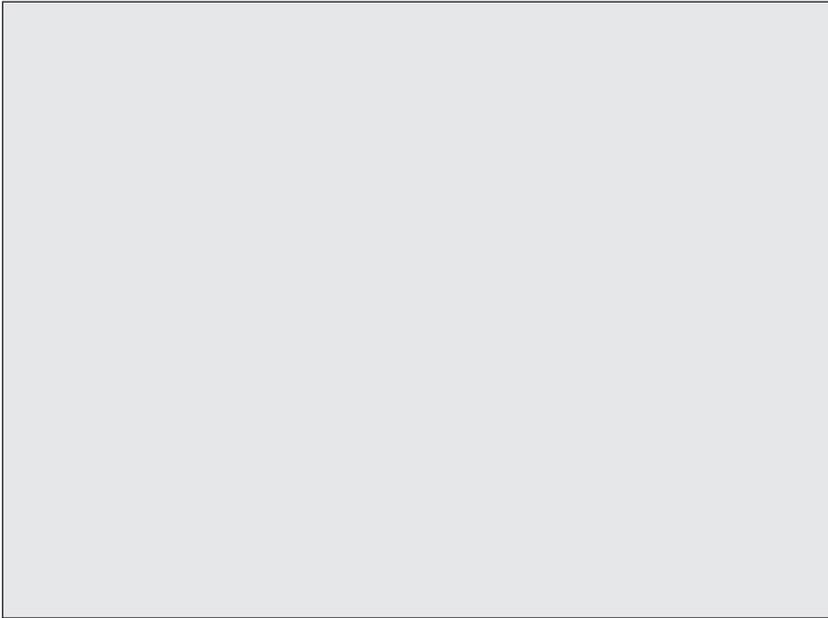


Plate 5 Illustration of Fisherrow fishwives, based on descriptions found in the Local History Library collections, 2013. © Lucy Roscoe.

empathy for the housewives in the criminal register and complete admiration for the Fisherrow fishwives (Plate 5), who worked tirelessly and selflessly. The cartoons were eventually published as a printed newspaper and offer a particularly useful resource for school groups visiting the archives, an immediate insight into the materials being shown.

‘I need a juicy story.’ This was the challenge brought to the collection of archivists gathered in the search room as I began to plan a children’s workshop. William Borthwick was the immediate reply, the Haddington bank robber. It is difficult to imagine such a drama in the sedate market town at the heart of East Lothian, which made it the perfect subject matter. Over the course of the residency I realised very quickly the importance of archivists to archives. It seems an obvious comment to make in a way: however, an archive is a vast collection, with no real beginning or end. The archivists offer an invaluable map, almost like a human search engine. If I suggested a subject such as sport, they would quickly compile a collection of references and stories.

With a lot more time I could have begun to navigate the archive myself; however, I would not have been able to make the connections and the links between the materials in the way that the archivists could; they had the big picture. Ruth MacLennan found a similar experience working with the Archives Division of the London School of Economics between 2001 and 2002. This

project was also the first of its kind and it was assumed that the *archives* would be the inspiration, but in fact the *archivists* became the subject. Maclennan's final work was a film entitled 'The Archives Project: The Gatekeepers'. Archivists are 'The Gatekeepers' in Maclennan's film.³ It is important to reflect that this relationship works both ways: in Heather Barnett's experience working with LSE's Department of Social Psychology, she challenged archivists to reflect on their own role and what it meant beyond protecting and conserving the collection. She recreated part of the archive in an exhibition space to give audiences the experience of digging through materials.

'The Illustrated Archive' project at the John Gray Centre was an experiment. It was the first residency held by the centre, and my first extended residency as a practitioner. The role of an illustrator is to respond to a brief set usually by an art director or designer. The illustrator continually collaborates with client and designer to provide images that tell the right story and hit the intended audiences. However, there is more to this vocation than simply answering the question. Every task is a problem-solving exercise. To illustrate means to illuminate or cast light upon a text or subject. This idea equips the illustrator well to handle the brief set by the John Gray Centre. I was an outsider at the archive. The arts practitioner comes from a different background and therefore has a different perspective, notices different things and feeds off the enthusiasm of those who are familiar with the artefacts. In a way I also represented the public as, like them, I came in with no previous knowledge or experience and this made it easy to put myself in their shoes.

The benefits of a project of this kind for the illustrator are rooted in having a block of dedicated time and unfamiliar material to fuel new ideas. An illustrator works on many short briefs, with fresh subject matter perhaps weekly, with a clear brief and specific audience. The project in East Lothian gave the opportunity to focus on one subject. In the book *A Mark in Time*,⁴ the second major work for the residency, inspiration and ideas came from the location itself. East Lothian is a beautiful corner of Scotland, nearly but not quite England. Fruits and vegetables grow well there and it's a county which has a long and elegant coast made up of beaches and harbours. Research for the book began with observational drawings at a variety of locations around the county. At the request of the development officer I visited both the glamorous Victorian seafronts but also the less well-known industrial centres, the production at the heart of East Lothian economic history. I was taken back in time by the Local History Library collection: the stories told here were a stark contrast to the present, but often the ghosts were still present, like the marks left in the pavement by the Fisherrow wives' stalls.

³ S. Donnelly, 'Art in the Archives: An Artist's Residency in the Archives of the London School of Economics', *Tate Papers*, 9 (Spring 2008), <http://www.tate.org.uk/research/publications/tate-papers/art-archives-artists-residency-archives-london-school-economics>.

⁴ L. Roscoe, *A Mark in Time: An Illustrated Journey Through East Lothian* (Edinburgh, 2013).

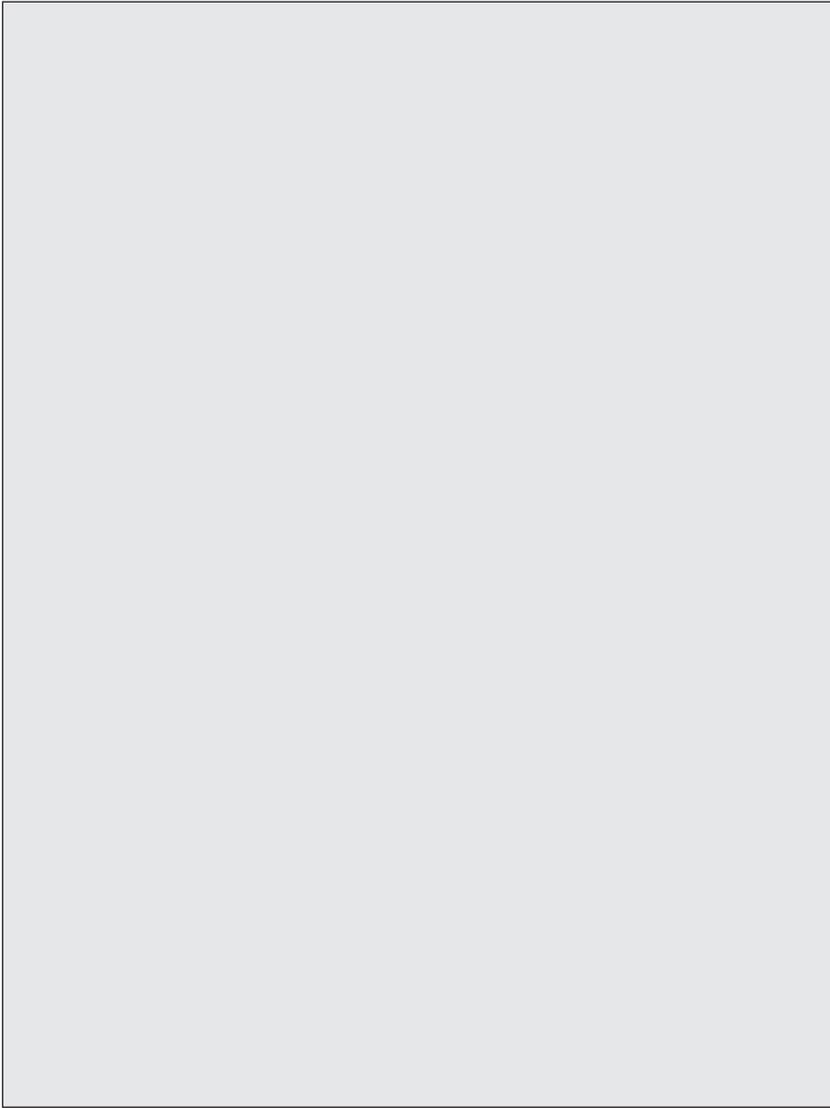


Plate 6 Exhibition introductory panel by Lucy Roscoe inspired by pop-up books in the National Library of Scotland collections, 2013. © Lucy Roscoe.

Does an illustrator approach an archive differently from a fine artist? It was a design problem: bring the archive material to life and make it accessible to an audience (while obviously keeping the artefacts safe within their very inaccessible brown boxes). The biggest problem I identified that was getting in the way of engagement was the fact that people did not know they were allowed, even encouraged, to use the archive. Secondly, that when they did arrive, they didn't know what was there to find. Perhaps an illustrator, approaching a design problem, produces work that is more accessible than fine art. The work produced could be more tangible than the abstract, the brief after all asked me to bring the archive to life and to place some signposts for the public. What I found in the archive were countless stories of local lives; these were stories that the public could easily connect with, the archive materials becoming the props for storytelling.

The digitisation of archives is a subject that sparked my curiosity during the residency at the John Gray Centre. After deciding to create a series of cartoons we used the library, museum and archive website to publish a cartoon on a weekly basis. The aim of this was to highlight the archives to those visitors who were already aware of the library and museum services, and provoke some interest in the collection. It was hoped that the weekly instalment would tempt visitors back again and again. Social media was also an easy way to entice outsiders. Monthly blogs allowed me to share the materials I had discovered and reveal a little of my creative process.

The success of this type of digital promotion or marketing can be measured through surveys and statistics. However, it was the idea of a catalogue of artefacts that interested me more, in particular whether it was a digital substitute to the archive itself, or a supportive tool. A digital database allows visitors to easily find items, either before they visit or instead of a visit. They ensure that fewer hands are needed to handle objects and work towards their preservation. However, the letters, books, newspapers and pamphlets struck me as much for their smell, fragility of touch and weight as they did for their visual appearance. Their content was important for the subjects and storytelling. Nonetheless, what has lingered in my memory was the indelible experience of holding a piece of paper from 200 years ago. There is certainly a place for the digitisation of archives, but my experience was that they cannot be a replacement for a moment spent with the real thing.

The Illustrated Archive led on to work with other collections. Although the pop-up book collection of the National Library of Scotland is perhaps not strictly definable as an archive, the brief was to produce a one-off artwork taking this as a starting point. I went further, as shown in Plate 6, and made direct reference to *The International Circus* by Meggendorfer, a major figure in the history of pop-up books. A later project working with the National Museum of Scotland offered another occasion to use a collection as inspiration for a series of works, with the double intention of engaging new audiences and highlighting what was on offer. The Big Craft Giveaway created an opportunity to design a paper bicycle, telephone box and jukebox based on those artefacts

in the Art and Technology galleries. As someone who grew up with museums and feels very much at home there, in both projects it was enlightening to work with groups of visitors who do not have that kind of familiarity – running workshops that introduced audiences to both craft and the collections, and hopefully giving permission to engage with them in the same way I do.

The legacy of the residency in East Lothian was more than simply portfolio examples and contacts for further work. It offered an opportunity for a period of reflection on my practice as a creative and where I sat within the broader discipline of design. The collaborations with archivists of different sorts not only showed them the archive through my eyes, it showed me my own work through the eyes of others, revealing potential and renewing an interest in both the idea of place and in historical subject matter.

As with any experiment there were some limitations, the main one being that the collaboration threw up so many ideas that the six months were never going to be enough. Both the centre and myself were ambitious in what we wanted to achieve; the result was the project ran longer than intended. However, the outcomes were exceptional and the project not only fuelled further work in East Lothian, but also challenged other archives to look at new ways of collaborating to open up their collections. I eventually found my handwritten bundles of tea-coloured papers in the archive and they were scanned and incorporated into many of the illustrations, placing the old materials at the heart of new artefacts. I am, however, still looking for the green knitted cardigan.