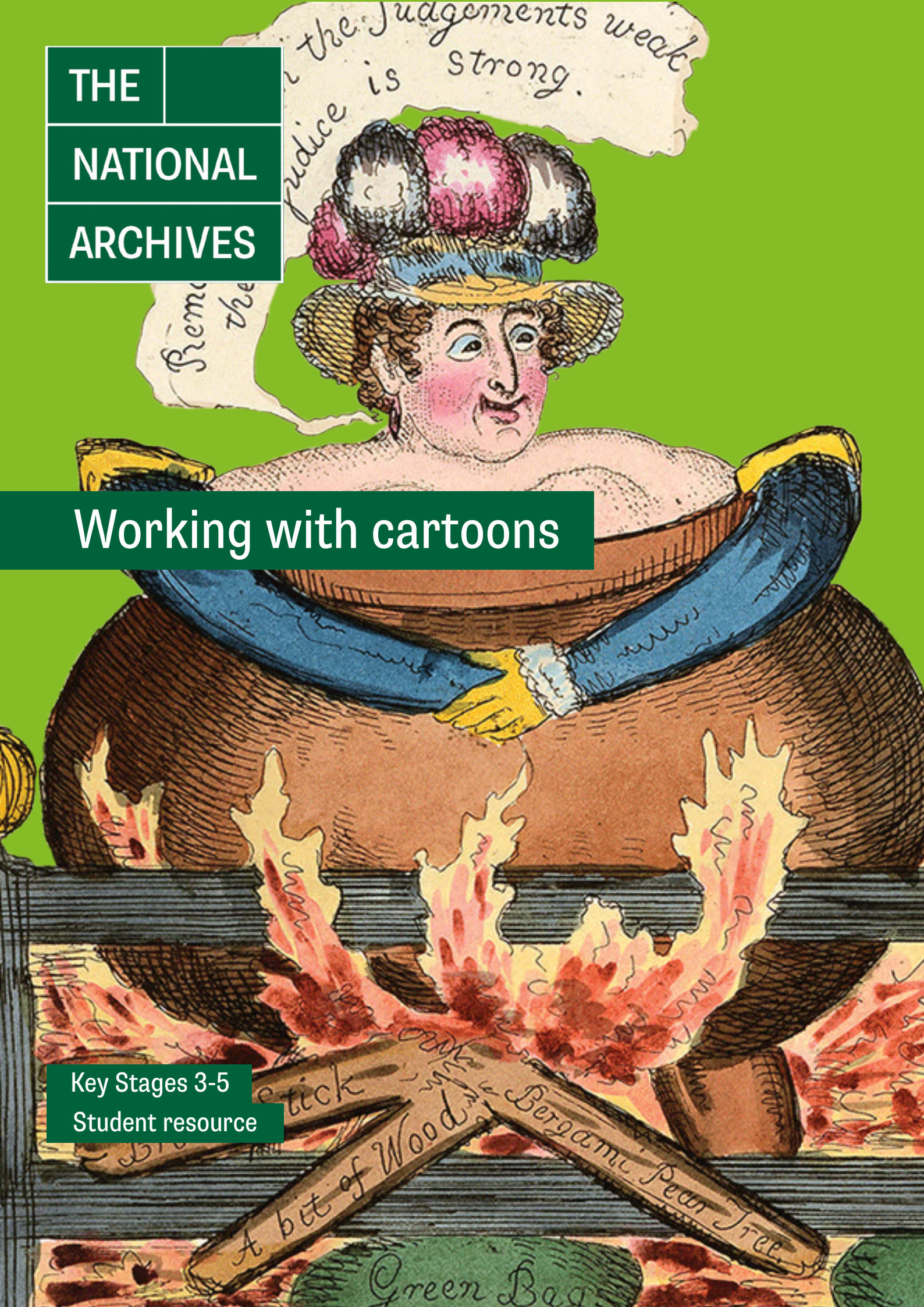
THE NATIONAL ARCHIVES




# Working with cartoons

Key Stages 3-5
Student resource

# Working with cartoons

There are certain things you need to watch out for when using cartoons as sources. Just like written documents, treat them with caution.

Use the resources here to help develop your skills when using cartoons as sources.

## Suitable for:

KS 3 - 5

## Connections to the Curriculum:

Working with historical primary sources

## Contents

# Introduction

## Using and interpreting cartoon sources

Political cartoons can be found in the pages of nearly every newspaper in the world. Cartoons that have a message, cartoons that make people think and cartoons that make people laugh. They can give us a unique perspective on a particular event and throw light on public attitudes and values. Therefore, to understand a cartoon, we need to know its historical context:

- What was happening at the time?
- Who are the main people in the cartoon?
- Why are those people important/whom do they represent?
- What are the artist's intentions?

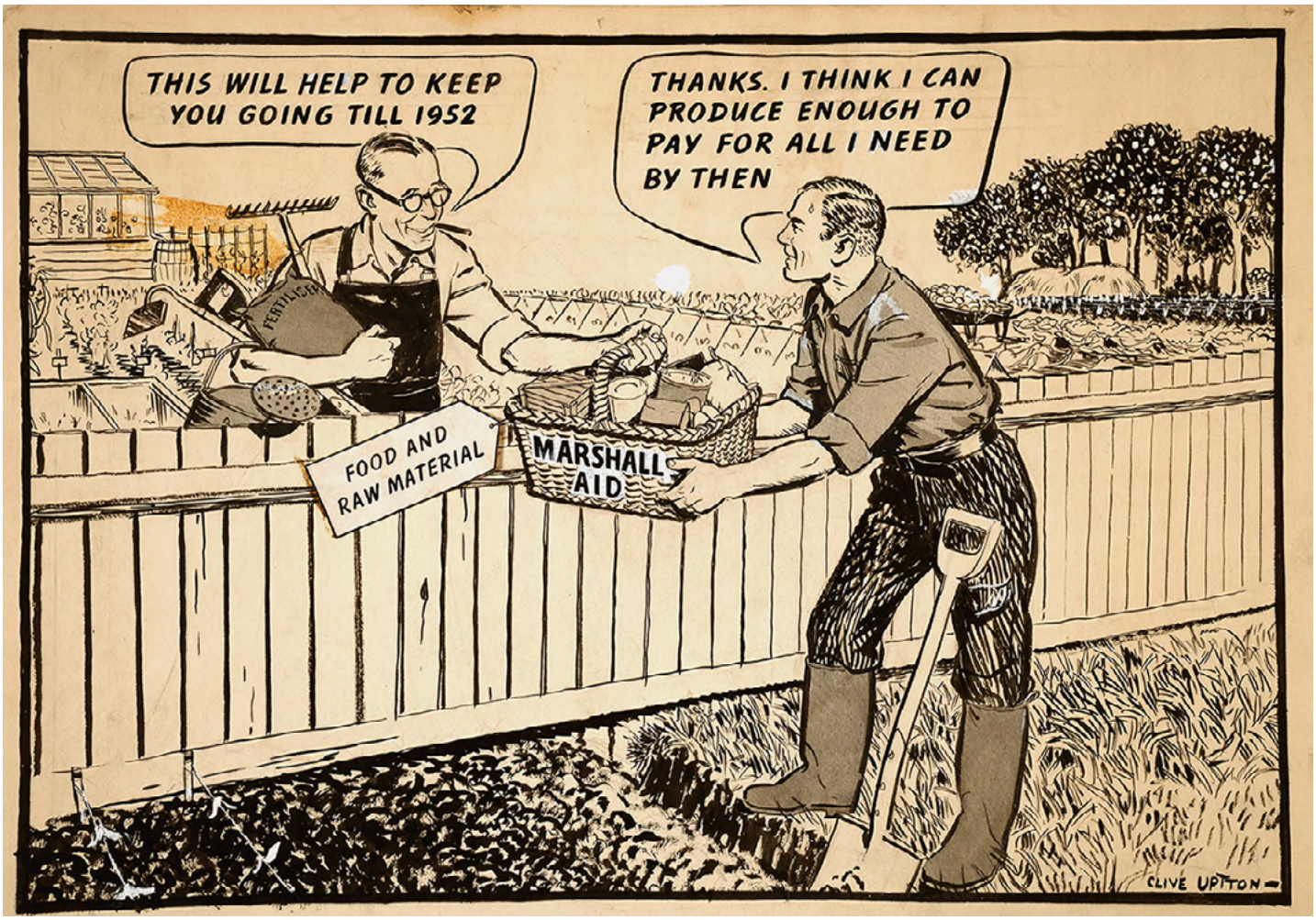



Image caption: A political cartoon about the introduction of Marshall Aid by Clive Uptton. Catalogue ref: INF 3/1295. President Truman signed the Economic Recovery Act of 1948. It was named the Marshall Plan, after Secretary of State George Marshall, who in 1947 proposed that the United States provide economic assistance to restore the economic infrastructure of post-war Europe.

# Introduction

Cartoonists use a range of techniques which we need to learn to read. For example, the cartoonist might compare people or events in their cartoon to 'symbols' that no longer exist or make sense today. Symbols are pictures and images that are used to represent countries, people, events, and qualities. As well as 'John Bull', there are other symbols for Britain. Britain has been represented as a lion or by the figure of Britannia, a woman with a trident and dressed in Roman clothes. Symbols can be seen as shorthand for other things too. For example, a cart horse for the trade union movement or doves or lilies used to represent the idea of peace.


Image caption: Cartoon by Leonard Raven-Hill from Punch Magazine, or The London Charivari. 13 December 1911. Title 'As between friends.' [Wikimedia Commons] Transcript: As Between Friends: British Lion (to Russian Bear): 'If we hadn't such a thorough understanding I might almost be tempted to ask what you're doing with our little playfellow'.

The figure of 'Uncle Sam', with top hat and clothing made up from the American flag has been used to represent USA. The bald eagle is also used as a symbol for the continent. The Democrat party has often been shown as a donkey or the Republican party as an elephant.

Famous people can also be recognised from a symbol. A cartoonist may exaggerate of one of their most prominent features or characteristics and turn it into a symbol for that person. A cartoonist in the Second World War just had to draw a toothbrush moustache and everyone would instantly know that it was meant to be Hitler. When people saw a fat cigar or the 'V' for Victory sign they automatically thought of Winston Churchill.

# Introduction

Cartoons also give us other visual clues. The way the cartoonist has chosen to draw important people infers what he/she thought about them. The situation shown or what appears in the background also gives us clues.

A cartoon usually consists of two elements, a drawing that pokes fun at an individual or event and something that is not real. Their subject is shown in this 'made up' situation enabling the cartoonist to make their point.

Politicians might be made to look ridiculous, or events and situations exaggerated to amuse. Cartoons can also shock. They might suggest things that people might be reluctant to say. Historical political cartoons rarely make us laugh loud as we are not viewing them as people of the time. What was considered witty twenty or hundred years ago may seem like a stale joke or completely lost on us today.

## Why are cartoons useful as sources?

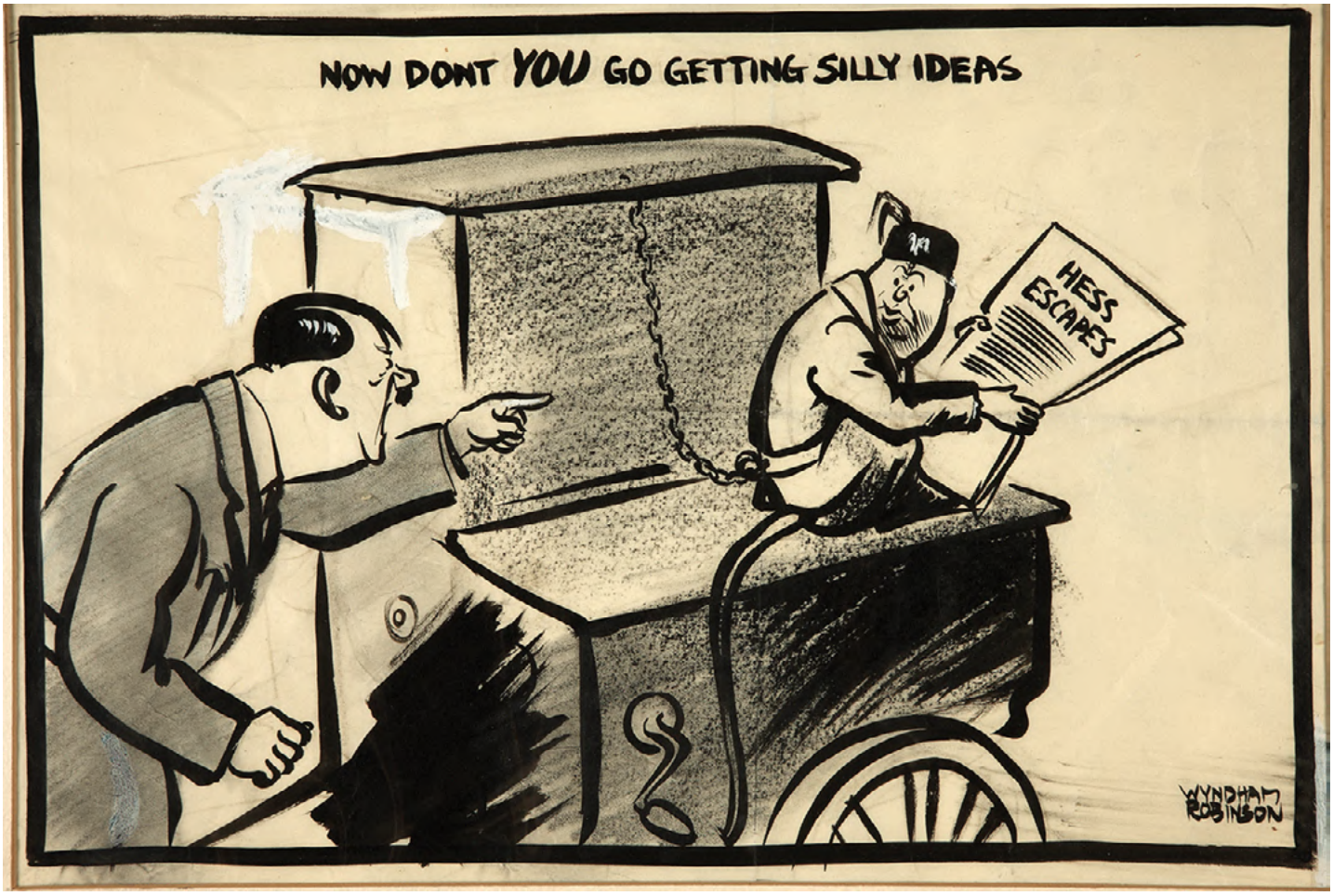



Image caption: Cartoon for 'Ditty Box' magazine : Hitler appears as the organ-grinder and Mussolini the monkey , 1939-1946, Artist: Wyndham Robinson, Catalogue ref: INF 3/ 791R. The cartoon refers to Rudolf Hess, who was Hitler's deputy from 1933. In 1941 he secretly flew to Britain on a mission to negotiate a peace between Britain and Germany. It is also critical of the wartime relationship between Germany and Italy. The term an 'organ grinder's monkey' means that a person is doing what a powerful person wants them to do and have no real power themselves. Street organ grinders historically used monkeys to perform tricks and attract interest and money.

# Introduction

## Value of cartoon sources

- They provide first-hand opinions of events and people, offering unique perspectives that can enrich our understanding of these concerns. They may show someone stronger or weaker to communicate a viewpoint. They often use satire and humour as part of their commentary.
- Cartoons are often created for a wide audience and mass consumption. Arguably they can reflect public opinion or specific political or social groups.
- They can also reveal different opinions about complicated issues, events or people in a more accessible way.
- They are helpful to use together with written sources to build a comprehensive interpretation of historical event.
- Cartoons often use visual imagery, symbols, and caricatures to convey messages. These visual elements can also capture the sense of an era and communicate ideas that might not be as effectively conveyed through other types of historical records.
- Some cartoons too, may be evidence of a government's efforts to influence people in a particular way and could be seen as instruments of propaganda.
- Historians must be able to tell the difference between fact and opinion. Therefore, we must always try and place the cartoon in context. This means understanding the historical situation it is commenting upon, so we can evaluate its reliability as evidence.
- Historical cartoons can help to develop your visual literacy skills which is important for understanding today's newspapers, magazines and webpages.
- Cartoons can help develop your critical and creative thinking.

## Questions for cartoons

**Looking**

- Is there an original caption or title?
- What is happening in the picture?
- Can you identify the people/place/circumstances that the cartoon relates to?
- What techniques has the cartoonist used to make the cartoon persuasive? Has he/she succeeded?
- Do you have evidence in image of the date/period?
- Can you identify the cartoonist and research their work?

**Understanding**

- What is this cartoon about?
- Does this fit with your knowledge of the context of the cartoon?
- Can we detect the cartoonist's point of view?
- Is the cartoon from a publication that has a particular political view?
- What could be another angle on the same issue?
- What other sources would help to understand this cartoon?
- Does this cartoon give us a perspective on a historical event that written documents may not?

# Introduction

## Activity

Look at all the cartoons in this introduction. Try and answer the questions. Remember you may need to research the historical context if you are unfamiliar with it.

# Printable worksheets

## Cartoon recording sheet

- Download cartoon recording sheet[1] – Word document
- Download example cartoon recording sheet (filled in)[2] – Word document
- Download cartoon recording sheet[3] – PDF

## Cartoons suggested activities

- Download cartoons suggested activities[4] – Word document
- Download cartoons suggested activities[5] – PDF

[1] https://cdn.nationalarchives.gov.uk/documents/education/download-blank-cartoon-recording-sheet.docx

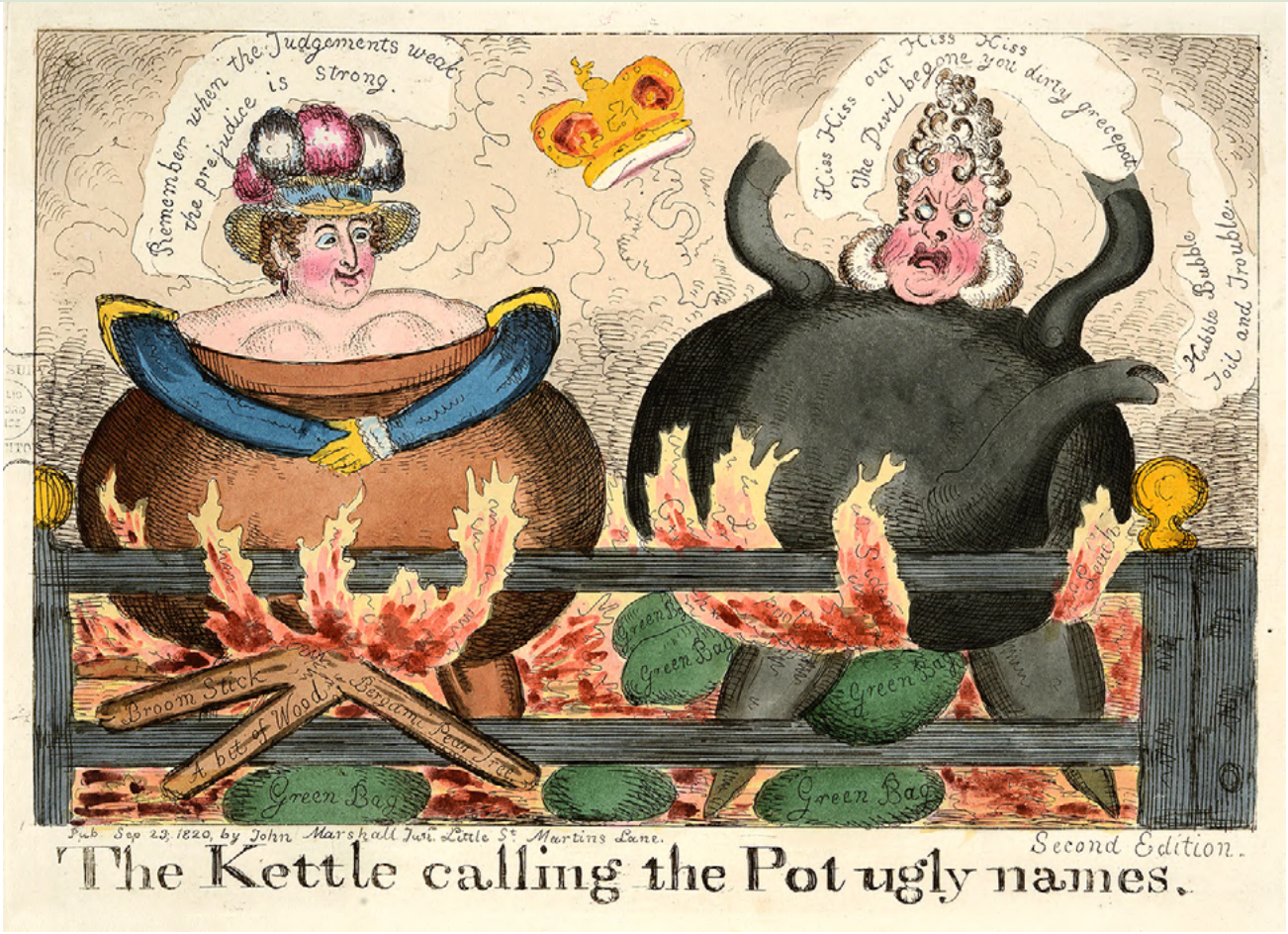
[2] https://cdn.nationalarchives.gov.uk/documents/education/download-example-completed-recording-sheet.docx

[3] https://cdn.nationalarchives.gov.uk/documents/education/cartoon-recording-sheet.pdf

[4] https://cdn.nationalarchives.gov.uk/documents/education/activities-and-practice-for-cartoons.doc

[5] https://cdn.nationalarchives.gov.uk/documents/education/cartoon-activities.pdf

# Learn more about cover image




This is one of 91 coloured engravings by George Cruikshank in a volume held in the records of the government's treasury solicitor relating to the royal divorce,  22 September 1820. Catalogue ref: TS 11/115 (60).

The cartoon is called 'The kettle calling the pot ugly names' and supported Queen Caroline over her divorce from King George IV. The expression: 'the pot calling the kettle black' is suggested by the cartoon which means that someone is criticizing another for the same faults they have. It refers to the build-up of soot from heating a cast iron kettle on the fire – the same soot would have formed on the pot after heat from the fire. Cruikshank's satirical cartoon plays with this expression.

The kettle is used to represent George IV insulting his wife, Caroline of Brunswick, the 'pot'.  In 1820 a huge scandal erupted at the royal court. George IV tried to divorce his wife Caroline, because she had an affair with an Italian ex-soldier,Bartolomeo Pergami. The bags in the cartoon represent the papers sealed in green bags gathered as evidence against her. The pieces of wood being burnt in the fire say 'Broomstick' and a 'A bit of wood, Bergami's pear tree.' The Queen is compared to a witch by the King. Cruikshank prompts the viewer to think of  Shakespeare's witches in 'Macbeth' as the King's kettle says, 'Hubble Bubble Toil and Pot.' The cartoonist's support for the Queen is clear when we read her speech bubble.

King George IV, and as Prince Regent, was often satirised for his extravagance and womanising by George Cruikshank.

# A brief history of cartoons in Britain

As a style of drawing, caricature, or the exaggeration of a person's physical features for comic effect, has been used more frequently to make a political point, leading to the development of the sort of cartoons we are now familiar with.  Caricature was first was used in Italy early in the seventeenth century. It was introduced into England in the eighteenth century by those returning from the Grand Tour, an extended cultural trip around Europe for wealthy young men to finish their education.

## The Eighteenth Century

George Townshend, later Marquis Townshend (1724-1807), was among the first to use caricature as a means of political satire in the 1760s. He produced comic portraits which were used in the London Magazine, the Political Register, and the Town and Country Magazine. Here is one of his cartoons from 1757 entitled 'The Triumph of Caesar'.

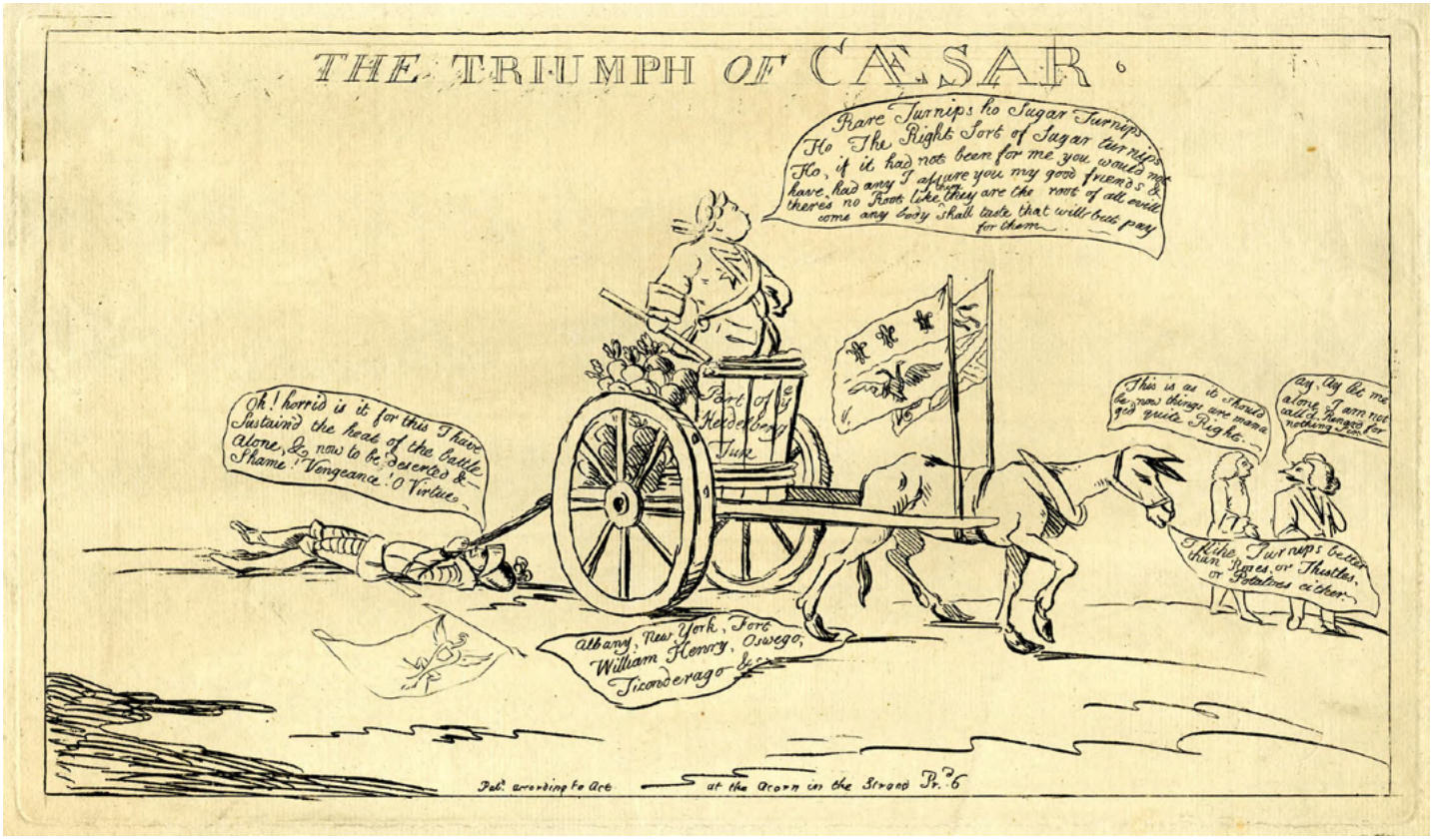



Image caption: © The Trustees of the British Museum: Wikimedia commons public domain

The cartoon shows the Duke of Cumberland, Prince William driving a farm cart containing turnips. The cartoon is critical of William's focus on the alliance with Prussia during the Seven Year's War in Europe at the neglect of British colonial interests in North America (shown listed on a paper on the ground.) There are also politicians in the cartoon:  Henry Fox, (Lord Holland) and Thomas Pelham-Holles, (Duke of Newcastle) with the King of Prussia, Frederick the Great, nephew of George II, shown as a soldier lying down next to a Prussian flag). The royal house of Hanover was German in origin and symbolised in the cartoon by the reference to turnips grown in Hanover.

# A brief history of cartoons in Britain

From the eighteenth century, the political cartoon became a recognised form of social and political commentary, taking serious issues or figures of the day and presenting them accessible way designed to affect the viewer's opinion.

In Britain, James Gillray (1757-1815) and Thomas Rowlandson (1756-1827) made fun of political figures and issues. Unlike today's cartoonists, Gillray was unable to publish his work in the newspapers. He displayed it in his publisher's shop window in New Bond Street, London. Customers could buy a copy for a few shillings or even rent the pictures for a dinner-party to amuse their friends.

'The plumb-pudding in danger' is one of Gillray's most famous cartoons. It shows British Prime Minister William Pitt and Napoleon Bonaparte dining together. Pitt wears a regimental uniform and hat and both men use huge swords to carve up a large plum pudding in the appearance of the globe. The men help themselves, one taking the land, the other the sea, as if by right. They are both very thin, hence their 'insatiable' appetites, according to the caption. Clearly, they need to be fed. This explains why the world or 'the plumb pudding' is 'in danger'. Napoleon Bonaparte and William Pitt are both intent on their task. Pitt appears calm, careful, and controlled, spearing the pudding with a trident fork, a symbol of Britain's superior navy. He claims the oceans and the West Indies. His 'slice' is much larger than Napoleon's. Pitt is shown as the more powerful figure with Napoleon, his inferior, trying to get what he can. Bonaparte is drawn smaller; his hat too large and standing at the table rather than sitting. His greedy eyes are fixed on the prize of Europe as he cuts his slice of the 'pudding'.

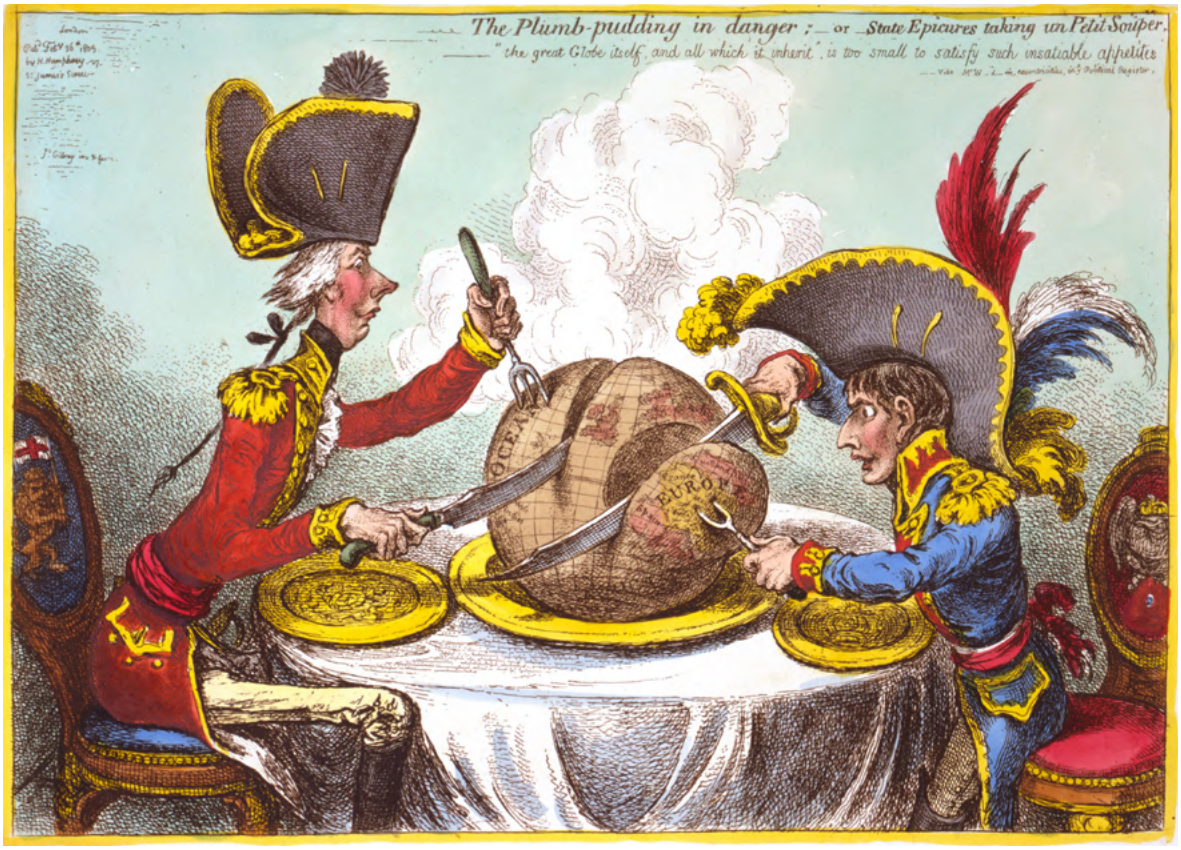



Image caption: Wikipedia Commons Public domain. Transcript: 'The plumb-pudding in danger: – or – State epicures [a person dedicated to good food and drink] taking un [a] Petit Souper [small dinner]. The great globe itself and all which it inherit is too small to satisfy such insatiable appetites"

# A brief history of cartoons in Britain

In another cartoon entitled The Cow-pock-or-the wonderful effects of the new inoculation' James Gillray caricatured a scene at the Smallpox and Inoculation Hospital at St. Pancras. He shows us, probably Edward Jenner, the inventor of vaccination, giving the cowpox vaccine to a frightened woman. Cows are drawn sprouting from the bodies of those who have been vaccinated.


Image caption: The cow-pock – or – the wonderful effects of the new inoculation / Js. Gillray, del. & ft. Abstract/medium: 1 print : engraving, color., 1802. Gillray, James, 1756-1815, artist. Courtesy of U.S. Library of Congress

The cartoon reflects the controversy over inoculation against smallpox and was rumored to cause cow-like growths on the body. A boy holds a container of the vaccine (taken from cowpox blisters as it gave immunity to smallpox) and in his pocket is a paper on the 'Benefits of the Vaccine'. Cowpox was a mild infection often caught by those who worked with cows. We can also see a tub on the desk called 'Opening mixture'. A bottle next to the tub is labeled 'vomit'. These suggest there may be other side effects to the vaccine. Finally, a painting on the wall shows 'Worshippers of the Golden Calf', to reflect supporters of vaccination.

Another caricaturist, Thomas Rowlandson (1756-1827), did not hold back when making fun of political figures and issues either. Rowlandson created many images of life in Georgian London

# A brief history of cartoons in Britain

as a social and political observer. In this cartoon 'A visit to the doctor' he satirized the medical profession.

In the cartoon there is a bust of Gallen on the mantelpiece. This is important as Claudius Gallen c.130 AD-c.210 AD was one of the most important doctors within the Roman Empire who developed the idea of the experimental method in medical investigation. The cartoon criticised the medical profession for unnecessary expensive treatments. It suggests that treatments can also cause harm to the health of the patient. His work included the creation of a character called John Bull to represent the British common man from about 1790, a character developed by James Gillray and George Cruikshank.


Image caption: 'A visit to the doctor', circa 1809 (Courtesy of the Lewis Walpole Library, Yale University). Man: Do you see Doctor my Dame and I come to [ask] your advice- we both of us eat well and drink well and sleep well- yet still we be somehow queerish [unwell]. Doctor: You eat well- you drink well and you sleep well- very good. You are perfectly right in coming to me, for depend upon it I will give you something that shall do away all these things.

George Cruikshank (1792-1878) led the next generation of British cartoonists. Cruikshank's series of political caricatures for The Scourge (1816) established him as the leading political cartoonist of his generation, and he continued to satirize the policies of the Tories and Whigs in political cartoons

# A brief history of cartoons in Britain

until 1825. He produced a series of savagely satirical cartoons which opened the public discussion on the matter of the 'Queen Caroline Affair'. You can examine one of his cartoons in the Starter 1 activity for this resource[1].

The example concerns the marriage of George Prince Regent and his wife Caroline of Brunswick. George was about to be crowned king, on the death of his father. He wanted a divorce and, exclude Caroline from the coronation. The 'Pain and Penalties Bill was introduced into Parliament to deprive her of her position and grant the divorce. In the 1830s Cruikshank also produced book illustrations, notably for Charles Dickens's Sketches by Boz (1836) and Oliver Twist (1838). In later life he embraced the cause of temperance (for moderation or abstinence in drinking) with his series *The Bottle* (1847) and *The Drunkard's Children* (1848).

## The later nineteenth century

In Britain, the weekly humour and satirical magazine Punch started in 1841 and featured the work of men like John Leech (1817-1864) whose drawings were the first to be called cartoons. Prints ceased to be published as single sheets and became part of newspaper and periodical illustration.

John Tenniel (1820-1914) was another cartoonist to emerge. He was who was very influential, especially for his use of symbols such as Britannia, John Bull, Uncle Sam, the British Lion, and the Russian Bear. At the start of the twentieth century, the production of daily newspapers grew, and the political cartoon became a regular and established feature of journalism.

## Twentieth Century

The two world wars and the subsequent peace treaties provided fertile ground for cartoonists such as Low, Dyson, Strube, Vicky and Illingworth. David Low's work was highly influential, with his creation of 'types' which were reminiscent of Gillray and Cruikshank's 'John Bull.'

During wartime, the political cartoon was a powerful weapon, used to boost morale and use as propaganda. In Britain, the Ministry of Information made extensive use of them.

The use of cartoons continued to grow after the Second World war. The Times adopted a daily cartoon in 1966. In any newspaper today and you can see the latest offering from this profession. The work of Ronald Searle (1920–2011), Gerald Scarfe (1936–), and Ralph Steadman (1936–) captured some of the brutality of Gillray and Rowlandson. This continues with an anti-establishment position which can be seen in the cartoons of 'Private Eye' magazine (founded in 1961).

In the age of television, Peter Fluck and Roger Law, produced three-dimensional caricatures of a savagery reminiscent of Gillray for the ITV series 'Spitting Image' (1984–96).

[1] https://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/education/resources/working-with-cartoons/starter-1-queen-caroline/

# A brief history of cartoons in Britain

Image caption: Margaret Thatcher: ‘Spitting Image’ puppet: Wikimedia Commons

# Starter 1: Queen Caroline

Here is another cartoon by George Cruikshank which featured Caroline of Brunswick and George IV. [See the cover image[1] for another example.]

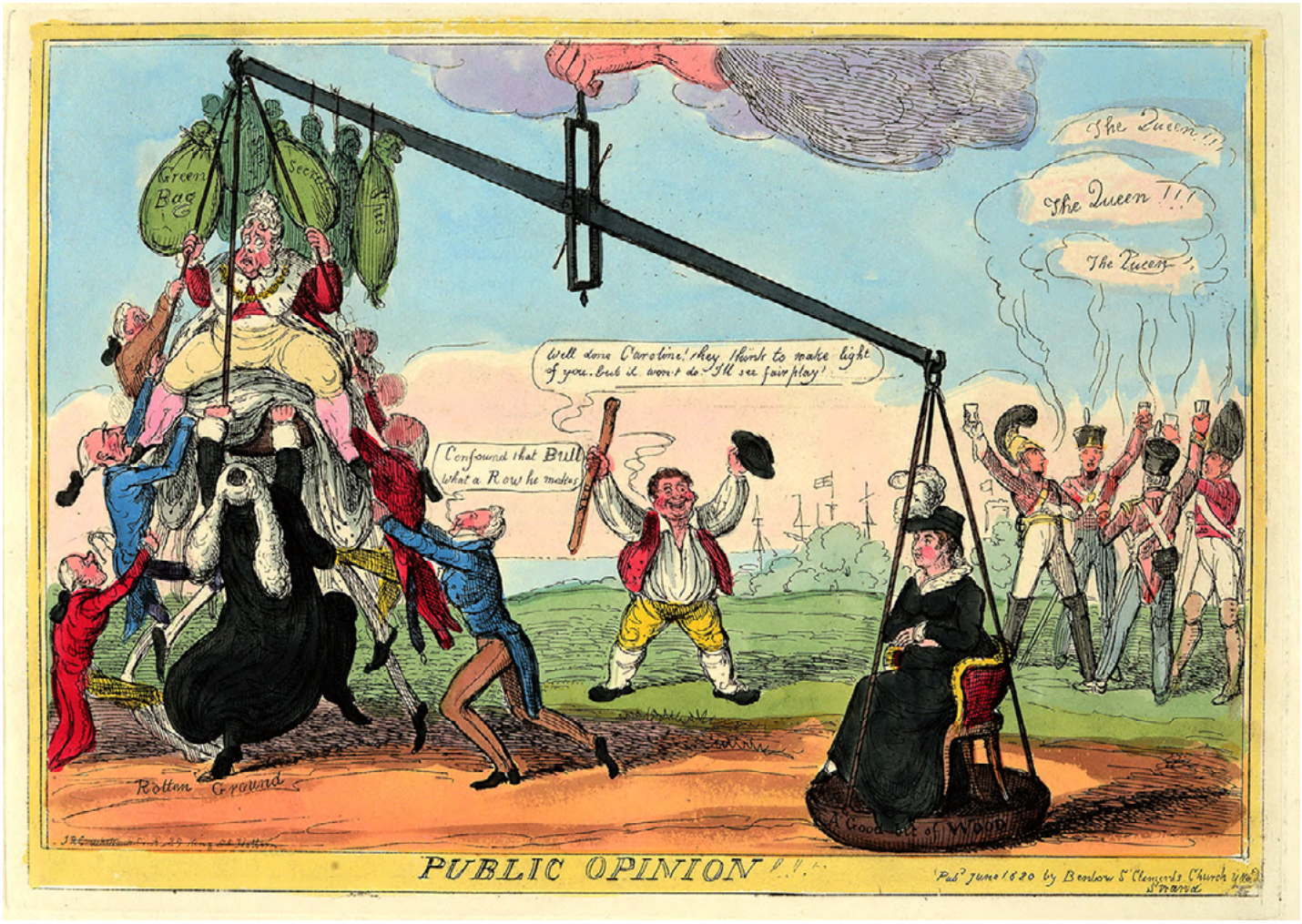



Image caption: Cartoon entitled 'Public Opinion' by George Cruikshank published June 1820 by John Fairburn, Broadway Ludgate Hill, London. This is one of 91 coloured engravings in a volume held in the records of the government's treasury solicitor Catalogue ref: TS 11/115/326 (28)

The cartoon concerns the royal divorce in 1820 between Caroline of Brunswick and George IV. Evidence for the divorce trial was gathered in green bags. The 'Pain and Penalties Bill was introduced into Parliament to deprive Queen Caroline of her position and grant a divorce. The Bill was eventually defeated in Parliament. The cartoon reveals Caroline's popularity with the British public. She was, nevertheless, barred from George IV's coronation and died shortly afterwards.

[1] https://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/education/students/working-with-cartoons/introduction/learn-more-about-menu-image/

# Starter 1: Queen Caroline

## Transcript

John Bull figure [holding a hat and stick] says: 'Well done Caroline! They think to make light of you, but it won't do. I'll see fair play.'

'Confound that Bull, what a row he makes.'

A group of soldiers raising their glasses are toasting the Queen saying: 'The Queen, the Queen, the Queen.'

The some of the green bags are labelled: 'Green bag'; 'Secrets'; 'Spies'.

## Questions

1. What is the title of this cartoon?
2. How has the cartoonist portrayed Caroline of Brunswick in a favourable way?
3. Why has the artist chosen to show both George and Caroline sitting on a pair of scales?
4. What does the title 'Public Opinion', written below the scales, suggest about the king's position compared to Caroline's?
5. What does the hand descending from a cloud holding the scales suggest?
6. How and why has George IV been drawn in this way?
7. Who does the character of John Bull (holding a hat and stick) in this cartoon represent?
8. Which group of people are trying to help the king?
9. Do they appear to have confidence in him according to the cartoon?
10. What else is the king using to try and swing public opinion in his favour?
11. How useful is this cartoon as of evidence on the royal divorce?
12. How different are this cartoon's techniques/methods from the one called 'The kettle calling the pot ugly names' on the resource homepage?

# Starter 2: Cartoons and their captions

Cartoons usually have a caption which helps to sum up its viewpoint, provide a title or give a snappy punch line. As with photographs, if the caption is changed, its meaning can change. Captions can also strengthen a cartoon's message.


Image caption: This cartoon by Leslie Illingworth shows Winston Churchill as 'John Bull' holding a bayonet, standing against a wall which Commonwealth troops are clambering over. There is no caption, although the original artwork was called 'Back to the wall', 1939-46, Catalogue ref: INF 3/1325

- Can you explain what makes the original title 'Back to the wall' (not added to cartoon) effective?
- Why is Churchill shown as 'John Bull'?
- How has Churchill been portrayed as this character?
- How does the cartoonist infer that the men on the wall are Commonwealth troops?
- Why do you think this cartoon was produced during the Second World War?
- What is the message of the cartoon?
- Write your own caption for this cartoon.
- Does your caption make the message powerful than 'Back to the wall'?
- Compare your ideas with a partner.

# Starter 2: Cartoons and their captions

## Changing the caption

Both of the below cartoons were produced by the government department, the Ministry of Information responsible for creating publicity and propaganda during the Second World War. Both show Australia (part of the former British Empire) and Britain attacking a Japanese soldier. Japan had declared war on the USA and the former British Empire on 8 December 1941. Japan attacked the United States naval base at Pearl Harbor and British forces in Malaya, Singapore, and Hong Kong.

### Cartoon A: The caption reads: 'Together for Victory.'


Image caption: Catalogue ref: INF 3/1350

- Can you identify the kangaroo, uniformed soldier, and dog in the cartoon?
- Which countries do the flags represent?
- What is the message of this cartoon?
- How has the cartoonist tried to put over his message? Refer to specific techniques of persuasion [Use cartoon analysis sheet to help.]
- How is this government cartoon trying to influence public opinion?
- How does knowing the Second World War context help us to understand the cartoon?

# Starter 2: Cartoons and their captions

## Cartoon B: The caption reads: ‘Together to Victory.’


Image caption: Catalogue ref: INF 3/1353

- How different is this to the previous cartoon?
- To you think the differences make the message more/less effective?
- Can you explain why/why not?

# Video: What can a cartoon tell us?

In this activity, we'll guide you through the kinds of questions you could ask to explore a cartoon in depth. Our example cartoon is this one drawn for the Ministry of Information in 1944 by Reginald Mount, a British cartoonist.


Image caption: Catalogue ref: INF 3/1321

View video here[1]

In the video we take you through the potential answers to useful questions to ask about a cartoon. Here are some questions, try answering them yourself before watching the video!

1. What type of source is this?
2. Who produced it?
3. When was it produced?
4. What can we infer from this cartoon?
5. How does the cartoon relate to a historical situation?
6. What techniques of persuasion does the cartoon use to give its message?
7. Are there any clues about the audience of the cartoon?
8. How reliable is the cartoon? Does it have any limitations?
9. How does it relate to other sources from this period? Does it share the same ideas or attitudes?



[1] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oyHOfGBTNsE

# Cartoon mini quiz!

## Test your knowledge – take the quiz![1]

Tip: Before you start, look at these resources:

Introduction: Using and interpreting cartoons[2]
Background: Brief cartoon history[3]

[1] https://natarchives.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_b94W3bmMMfY1IQS

[2] https://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/education/resources/working-with-cartoons/introduction/

[3] https://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/education/resources/working-with-cartoons/a-brief-history-of-cartoons-in-

## Why do our hyperlinks come with footnotes?

Our resources are designed to be printed and used in classrooms, which means hyperlinks aren't always accessible digitally. We include the full link at the bottom of the page so that you can type in the address without distracting from the main text of the lesson materials.

## Did you know?

The National Archives Education Service also offers free workshops onsite in Kew and online in your classroom.

Our Onsite Workshops are available for free here at The National Archives and allow students to experience genuine original documents reflecting over 1000 years of history. From Elizabeth I's signature to the telegrams of the sinking Titanic, students love the wow-factor of being able to see real history on the desk in front of them.

Our Online Workshops allow our Education Officers to teach through your projector, leading discussions and guiding students through activities based around original documents. All you need is a computer with a projector, webcam and microphone. We'll arrange a test call before your session to check the tech is working.

---

## Find out more:

nationalarchives.gov.uk/education
education@nationalarchives.gov.uk
facebook.com/TheNationalArchivesEducationService
twitter.com/UKNatArcEdu