

ONE BRITISH ARCHIVE

One British Archive: Creating an Edible Archive

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Abstract

Edible goods are not usually considered suitable for archiving. This short article introduces an unconventional archive of images relating to design, book, costume, and performance history. Each image in this archive depicts an intricately decorated biscuit (cookie) set inspired by historical artifacts or styles. I began making these biscuits during the pandemic as a way of engaging with material culture while traditional archives and museums were closed, and I now perform this work as a form of close reading. I also collaborate with heritage organizations to make biscuit sets that share collection items with online audiences. This work has contributed to my own research process while celebrating the collections of a broad range of British archives.

Edible goods are not usually considered suitable for archiving. With the exception of certain historically significant bakes that have survived against the odds—a slice of Queen Victoria's wedding cake,¹ crackers from Captain Scott's ill-fated 1911 expedition to the South Pole²—foodstuffs rarely feature in the catalogues of British archives.

During the Covid-19 pandemic, when archives and museums were closed to researchers, I stumbled across a new way of exploring the texts, textiles, and artifacts that I could no longer access in person. I began making sets of iced biscuits (or cookies, as they are known in the US) inspired by collection items and then sharing photographs of the finished products online. I spent my evenings in lockdown trawling archive catalogues for inspiration, and my weekends baking dough, piping royal icing, painting ancient designs using food coloring gels, and experimenting with distressing techniques to make freshly made biscuits look like centuries-old objects.

The resulting collection of photographs has come to form its own archive of sorts. Gathered on a dedicated website³ are snapshots of the different collections and design movements that I have sought to capture in biscuit form over the years. Ancient Greek pottery sherds from the University of Oxford's Ashmolean Museum feature alongside examples of historic books, Tiffany glass, Elizabethan fabric swatches, the celebrated Arts and Crafts patterns of William Morris and John Henry Dearle, and more.

Creating edible facsimiles of individual artifacts has proven surprisingly effective as a form of close reading. I am a Shakespeare specialist by academic discipline, but it was not

¹ Queen Victoria's wedding cake, 10 February 1840, RCIN 52574, Royal Collection Trust, London.

² Captain Scott's biscuits, 1911, REDMG: 1997.162.39, Reading Museum, Reading.

³ ellahawkins.com



Figure 1. A biscuit set inspired by early modern books in the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust and Folger Shakespeare Library collections. The biscuit inspired by Folger First Folio 16 is located at the lower-left corner of the set. All photographs by the author.

until reproducing intricate details from the First Folio that I became able to offer any significant insights about the history of this exceptionally famous book. First came a realization about a specific copy: Folger First Folio 16, also known as the Thomas Hanmer First Folio (so named due to one of its early owners being the Shakespeare editor Sir Thomas Hanmer) (see [Figure 1](#)).⁴ As part of a set themed around early modern books, I produced a biscuit that was intended to replicate this copy's brown suede calfskin binding. An odd shape imprinted in gold near the top of the spine puzzled me—it looked like an underlined 'X' with an uneven circle at its center.

Further investigative work revealed the little-known fact that early modern books like Shakespeare's First Folio were initially kept unfolded and unbound by booksellers, so that customers could select their own binding materials and decoration.⁵ Folger First Folio 16 was customized with the family crest of the Bunbury family (a leopard's face pierced by two crossed swords). Hanmer's sister married a Bunbury, and this copy of Shakespeare's First Folio passed to Hanmer's nephew and stayed within the Bunbury family following

⁴ "Folger First Folio 16," Folger Shakespeare Library. <https://www.folger.edu/explore/collection-highlights/folger-first-folio-16/>.

⁵ Ben Higgins, *Shakespeare's Syndicate: The First Folio, its Publishers, and the Early Modern Book Trade* (Oxford University Press, 2022), 16.

the editor's death in 1746. What began for me as a simple act of reproduction resulted in the knowledge that this book's binding cannot be original to its 1623 publication date, and that a great deal can ultimately be learned from looking intently at the material, decorative details of historic texts.

Two years later, I returned to the First Folio to make a biscuit based on the first page of *The Tempest* as it appears in one of the British Library's five copies. The ornaments that appear throughout this first collected edition of Shakespeare's plays are some of the book's most aesthetically interesting features. Each play is headed by one of four different decorative banner designs and ends with the same triangular woodcut. The closer I looked at *The Tempest's* decorative banner, the more questions I had about the imagery featured within it. At its center is a cross-legged, bare-chested figure wearing a headdress and holding an exotic bird in each hand. The torsos of two archers emerge from large flowers at either end of the design, flanked by baskets of fruits and mythical creatures (see Figure 2). *The Tempest* is the only play in the First Folio that is headed with this intriguing ornamental banner. The other three banner designs—none of which include figures or animals—are divided roughly evenly between the remaining thirty-five plays included in the edition. Why? What does *The Tempest's* banner represent, and who made the decision to associate it with this particular play? Moreover, why have the ornaments in this book received next to no attention in the mass of academic writing on the First Folio?



Figure 2. A biscuit depicting the decorative banner on the title page of *The Tempest* in Shakespeare's First Folio. This biscuit was made as part of a collaboration with the British Library in 2023.

As a researcher and a maker, the primary benefit to me of biscuit design is the process of learning more about the objects I recreate. However, for those who see photographs of the finished biscuit sets online, this work instead serves as a window to collections that they might not otherwise encounter. In some cases, the biscuits make visible an archive that is relatively unknown outside of specialist circles. For example, David Parr House is a heritage site in Cambridge, England, that first opened to the public in 2019. It preserves the work of David Parr, a working-class decorative artist who was responsible for painting the designs of Arts and Crafts masters onto the walls of grand houses and churches. Over a forty-year period, between 1886 and 1927, Parr decorated the walls of his own modest terraced house with a dazzling array of designs.

In 2022, I was invited by David Parr House to create a biscuit set that would capture the house's astonishing combinations of pattern, color, and texture (see [Figure 3](#)). Each biscuit was inspired by a room in Parr's home. One showcased the painted walls and dado rails of the drawing room, while another combined the stained-glass window and floral wall design from the kitchen. Online responses to this biscuit set suggested that it had performed useful work in encouraging people to visit the site and to appreciate its unique display of Victorian material culture. Several social media users commented that they had not previously heard of David Parr but had booked tickets to David Parr House after learning about the artist's story.

Other biscuit sets represent an attempt to distill an unfathomably large collection of objects into a single digestible image. Several years ago, archaeologists discovered around thirty thousand fragments of stained glass in the triforium of Westminster Abbey (see [Figure 4](#)). I recreated just sixteen of them as biscuits, selecting a representative spread of shards to indicate the variety of designs featuring in the entire collection. Similarly, I have tried to showcase in concise edible form the enormous assortments of medieval tiles at the British Museum, of Delftware ceramics at the Victoria and Albert Museum, and of Anglo-Saxon metalwork weaponry cared for by the Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery. The challenge of these projects is a curatorial one: which objects, displayed together, best reflect the totality of an archival collection?



Figure 3. A biscuit set inspired by David Parr House, a heritage site in Cambridge, England, that opened in 2019. This biscuit set was created as part of a collaboration with David Parr House in 2022.



Figure 4. A biscuit set recreating some of the thirty thousand stained-glass fragments discovered by archaeologists in the triforium of Westminster Abbey.

In essence, this unusual archive of images offers access points to many other British archives. Its intended purpose is to capture and celebrate the material culture of the past, drawing attention to the labor of craftspeople, restorers, and curators through time. But this work also raises more fundamental questions about the relationship between academic research and creativity. Is this collection of images simply a form of public engagement, communicating the results of my own or other researchers' investigations into design history, or can it be considered a meaningful form of research in its own right? Engaging in biscuit design has certainly changed how I understand my subject and its broader place in history. I hope to continue exploring the potential of this unlikely—and delicious—approach to academic inquiry.

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