There is a long tradition of British superheroes going back to the 1930s. Many of these long forgotten superheroes were created by largely forgotten creators, and published by small, and now largely forgotten publishers. Much of my research over the last several years has been concerned with investigating these characters, comics, creators and publishers. The main research output from this project was my book, The British Superhero (2017), published by the University Press of Mississippi, but I have also attempted to shine a light on this dimly lit corner of British comics history through various articles and presentations at conferences, conventions, and other events. Part of the work has taken the form of practice research - working with several very talented comics artists to create stories about British superheroes. One of the main strategies has been the creation of a fictional British superhero, Alpha, and a supporting cast that includes Alpha Girl and the villainous Doc Oculus!

The first half of this comic takes the form of a visual essay, with art by Gary Welsh. It presents a handful of British superheroes (there are so many more!). The aim is to give a sense of the types of British superheroes that have emerged over the years. It does not pretend to be comprehensive, but is intended to be indicative. There are also references to comics that have engaged with this history, from Alan Moore and Alan Davis’s Captain Britain and Moore and O’Neill’s The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen, to Grant Morrison and Steve Yeowell’s Zenith, and Jack Staff by Paul Grist. More recently Rebellion have been reprinting classic British superheroes in their Treasury of British Comics series, and offering contemporary reinterpretations through their mini series, The Vigilant.

The second half of the comic features Alpha, this time in a story set in 1960s Dundee, and involves another largely forgotten aspect of pop culture (groan), Pola Cola, a fizzy drink produced in Dundee by Robertson’s Fruit Products Ltd. This story was drawn by Nick Johnson. The comic concludes with two public information style advertisements, responding to the Covid-19 pandemic, but influenced by health campaigns seen in British comics in the 1980s, such as the campaign against young people smoking, which saw Superman battling Nick O’Teen!

I hope you enjoy the comic and perhaps learn something about the wonderful world of British superheroes! If you would like to learn more please consult the research project’s section on the Scottish Centre for Comics Studies website: scottishcomicstudies.com/british-superheroes

Be seeing you,
Superheroes are American.

After all, they fight for truth, justice, and the American way, right?

Well, not entirely. Superheroes have emerged all around the world, and there have been a great number of British superheroes over the years.

These range from early prototype superheroes, like Dicky the Bird-Man by Jack B. Yeats (comic cuts, AP, 1900), to costumed flying adventurers like Scarlet Bat—the winged avenger (Chiln Flin, AP, 1929).

There were actually more supervillains than superheroes in the Penny Bloods and Dredgules of the 19th century and the boys’ papers of the early 20th century. These included The Black Sapper (Rover, DCT, 1929).

Some characters, like Pansy Potter the Strongman’s Daughter (The Beano, DCT, 1938), were modeled on American characters like Popeye.

Everything changed when Superman appeared in America in 1938, and the following year his origin (taken from the newspaper strips) was reprinted in the British comic Triumph (AP), with a cover by Jack McCaa.

The Amazing Mr X appeared in the Dandy (DCT) for in instalments between 1944 and 1945 (though I suspect it was created much earlier, in response to Superman appearing in Triumph). The artwork was by long-time DCT artist Jack Glass.
THE BRITISH COMICS MARKET WAS BOOMING IN THE POST-WAR PERIOD, ALTHOUGH THERE WAS AN IMPORT BAN ON AMERICAN COMICS, WHICH WERE CONSIDERED MUCH MORE GLAMOROUS THAN TRADITIONAL BRITISH COMICS.

SMALLER BRITISH PUBLISHERS, SUCH AS CARDILL, PARET, GERALD SWAIN, SCHOEN, FOLDES, MILLER AND SON, AND CARTOON ARTS PRODUCTIONS, FILLED THE GAP IN THE MARKET WITH DOZENS OF HOME-BRED SUPERHEROES.

A KEY CONTRIBUTOR TO AMERICAN STYLE COMICS IN BRITAIN WAS DENIS GIFFORD, A COMICS ARTIST, WRITER, COLLECTOR, AND POP-CULTURE HISTORIAN.

GIFFORD CREATED HIS OWN CHARACTERS, SUCH AS MR MUSCLE, "BRITAIN'S SUPERMAN" (DYNAMIC COMICS INTERNATIONAL COMICS, 1945), MIXING SUPERHERO ACTION WITH A CARTOON-LIKE, HUMOROUS STYLE.

GIFFORD ALSO CREATED STREAMLINE (CARDILL, 1947) WITH HIS CHILDHOOD FRIEND, BOB MONKHOURSE (LATER TO FIND FAME AS A COMEDIAN AND TV PERSONALITY). MONKHOURSE CREATED THE TORNADO, WHO FIRST APPEARED IN CH BOY COMICS (PARET, 1948).

DENNIS M. READER CREATED POWERMAN (SUPER-DUPER COMICS, CARTOON ARTS, 1947), WHICH SHOWCASED HIS AMERICAN ART STYLE TO GREAT EFFECT. READER ALSO CREATED ELECTRIC GIRL AND PHANTOM MAID. THESE WERE COMICS THAT WERE NOT TRYING TO PARODY AMERICAN SUPERHEROES, BUT TO MATCH THEM.

ANOTHER BRITISH ARTIST WORKING IN THE AMERICAN STYLE WAS CRIME DAVIS, WHO CREATED DANE JERUS, AGENT ONE OF THE INTERPLANETARY SOLAR FORCE, AND CAPTAIN MAGNET. BOTH APPEARED IN SUPER-DUPER COMICS (CARTOON ARTS, 1948).

WONDERMAN – THE ATOMIC MARVEL, AKA CAPTAIN JUSTICE, WAS CREATED BY MICK ANSLO (PARET, 1948) AND OFTEN FEATURED STRAIGHT LIFTS FROM SUPERMAN COMICS.

CAPTAIN MIGHT (PROF ALAN ENGLISH), THE NEMESIS OF CRIME, APPEARED IN AMAZING COMICS (MODERN FICTION LTD, 1943). BY DENIS GIFFORD, LIKE STREAMLINE, THERE WAS A CLEAR "INFLUENCE" FROM JOE SIMON AND JACK KIRBY’S CAPTAIN AMERICA.
ACE HART first appeared in 1948 (Goldie), a mix between a superhero and a science fiction adventurer like Flash Gordon.

Masterman comic (1952, Streamline), with art by Joe Colquhoun, saw another overt Captain Marvel homage. Captain Universe #1 (Arnold Book Company, 1953) by Anglo followed this trend too. Miracleman (1953) was designed by Anglo as an American style superhero for the Spanish market but was also reprinted in Britain.

Thunderbolt Jaxon (AP, 1949), written by T. Pencombe and drawn by Hugh McNeill and intended for the Australian market, was closely modelled on Fawcett's Captain Marvel, which was being reprinted in Britain by Miller to great success.

Electroman was published in 1955 by Soon and, again, was closely modelled on Captain Marvel.

Marvelman, 1954–63 (Milled), by Anglo, perhaps the best remembered British superhero of this time, famously copied Captain Marvel – again!

Miller had been reprinting Captain Marvel in Britain until the lawsuit brought by Superman publisher DC Comics effectively put Fawcett out of the superhero comic business.

Rather than lose the readership Miller asked Anglo to produce a character closely modelled on Captain Marvel... everyone else seemed to be doing it!

Superstooge, by Harry Banger (Gerald Swan, 1956), combined superheroes with slapstick comedy, demonstrating a common theme in British superheroes – parody.

British creators often seemed unwilling or unable to replicate the patriotic tone of American superhero comics, and instead undermined the genre, delivering an implicit political critique of America. Britain was an empire in decline while America was the world’s first atomic superpower. The superhero was a symbol of shifting global power dynamics.
Olivia Hicks is the first academic to write on Starr of Wonderland, who she discusses alongside Valda in her PhD, Of Gods and Girls: The Teen Superheroine in British and American Girls' Comics from 1940-1984. I am indebted to her insightful work on British superheroines.

Several super-powered types, such as Adam Eterno and the Steel Claw, appeared in Fleetway’s Lion (1952) and Valiant (1952), which were notable for featuring a mix of stories by British and European artists.

Jerry Siegel, even worked for British comics, writing the Spider for Lion (1965), turning this mysterious villain into a crime-fighter. Artwork on the Spider was by Reg Bunn.

Siegel also worked on Gadgetman and Bimack-Kid, drawn by Renato Polisse, which appeared in Lion in 1966, and was clearly influenced by Jack Kirby. Here was an Italian artist echoing the style of American superhero comics in a British comic in a story written by the American creator of Superman, and inspired by the Batmania sparked by the 1960s American Batman TV series then showing on UK screens! Holy transnational comic cultures!

Superman creator Jerry Siegel even worked for British comics, writing the Spider for Lion (1965), turning this mysterious villain into a crime-fighter. Artwork on the Spider was by Reg Bunn.


Starr of Wonderland by Spanish artist Emilio Freijo wears an advanced flying suit and protects her father’s amusement park (Diana, 1966, DCT).

Valda, by artist Dudley Wynn, appeared in Mandy in 1968 (DCT), and was magically empowered with mysterious powers and eternal youth.

British superheroes were diversifying and European artists were making inroads into both the American and British comics industries.

*Olivia Hicks is the first academic to write on Starr of Wonderland, who she discusses alongside Valda in her PhD, Of Gods and Girls: The Teen Superheroine in British and American Girls’ Comics from 1940-1984. I am indebted to her insightful work on British superheroines.
The late 1960s and early 1970s saw the emergence of numerous super-powered types in DC Thomson comics, with King Cobra appearing in Hotspur in 1976, with artwork by Ron Smith, and future comics superstar Dave Gibbons drawing Spring-Heeled Jackson (1977), also for Hotspur.

Billy the Cat and Katie, created by David Sutherland, were a couple of catsuit-wearing crime-fighting kids who appeared in the Beano from 1967.

Leopard of Lime Street was another young catsuit-clad crime-fighter, and a regular series in Buster (Fleetway) from 1976, with artwork by Mike Western and Eric Bradbury. The story had numerous similarities to Spider-Man.

In 1978 British superheroes entered the Marvel universe with the creation of Captain Britain. Produced in the New York offices of Marvel by Chris Claremont and Herb Trimpe, the character was designed as a cornerstone of the new Marvel UK imprint, but the character struggled to resonate with British readers.

Captain Britain fared better when written by David Thorpe, then Alan Moore, and later Jamie Delano, and drawn by Alan Davis. Moore’s stories in particular offered a gothic deconstruction of the superhero, incorporating mythology and dystopian themes.
**WARiOR** featured *MARvELMAN* (QUALITY, 1982) by Moore and Barry Leach, reworking the 1950s character created by Angio. This went much further than CAPTAIN BRiTAIN in its violent, deconstructive take on the superhero.

**WATCHMEN** (1986), by Moore and Dave Gibbons was perhaps the definitive work on the desirability of the superhero ideal, and one of the high points of the comics medium in terms of narrative potential.

Brendan McCarthy and Peter Milligan’s *PARADAY* (STRANGE DAYS, ECLiPSE, 1994) was a pop art masterpiece, mixing superheroes, the sensibility of independent comics, and a head trip of art school surrealism.

Grant Morrison and Steve Yeowell’s *ZENITH* (2000AD, 1987) perfectly captured the irreverence of a previous generation of British superhero comics creators towards the supposed ideals and politics of the genre, with a parodic homage to over four decades of British superheroes.
**Banaman** is one of the longest-running British superhero characters, first appearing in Nutty in 1980 (DCT). He now features in The Beano, and is one of the few reminders still in print of the irreverent approach of generations of British comics creators towards the superhero genre.


In the early 1990s Chris Ryan produced Brit Force, inspired by Marvel's X-Men. A number of other titles followed, but the 90's comics boom soon turned to bust, taking out Ryan's line of comics.

Also inspired by the X-Men was Martin Eden's small press queer superhero soap-opera, The O Men (1997), and Spandex (2008), which features an LGBT superhero team based in Brighton.

At the turn of the millennium Paul Grist presented Jack Staff, a re-working of Captain Britain and Union Jack, with several nods to UK comics history, albeit in a more affectionate way than Zenith!

In 2018 Alan Moore and Kevin O'Neill's launched the last volume of their League of Extraordinary Gentlemen series entitled The Tempest (Gnomon). The story brought back a host of British superheroes, shaking off the irreverence of Zenith and the nostalgia of Jack Staff. Here, in the full light of day, were British superheroes, not as parody or satire, but with their hidden history revealed and celebrated.

The history of British superheroes is a long and rich one. These characters were often a parodic and satirical response to their American counterparts, but they can tell us a lot about the relationship between the two countries, and between these two distinct but linked comics cultures.
Since 2015 I have worked with many talented comics artists to create stories featuring an imaginary British superhero – Alpha!

This character is inspired by the long history of British superheroes. The idea was that Alpha was as popular in Britain as Superman had been in the USA. I wrote stories that suggested an extended continuity for the character.

POW!

Alpha will return!
Superhero Who's Who

1. Mr. Muscle
2. Streamline
3. The Tornado
4. Ace Hart
5. Thunderbolt
6. Electroman
7. Powerman
8. Wonderman
9. Masterman
10. Captain Universe
11. Electrogirl
12. Phantom Maid
13. Dane Jerrus
14. Captain Might
15. Miracleman
16. Marvelman
17. Superstooge

1. The Steel Claw
2. Gimmick-Kid
3. Gadgetman
4. Johnny Future
5. Starr of Wonderland
6. Valda
7. The Spider
8. King Cobra
9. Billy the Cat
10. Springheeled Jackson
11. Leopard of Lime Street
12. Original Captain Britain
13. Captain Britain
DUNDEE, THE COMICOPOLIS.

WHAT ABOUT THIS POLA COLA THEN?

BRAH!

ALPHA! IT’S THE POLICE!

THAT BAHUMNDO OCULUS IS UP TO HIS TRICKS AGAIN!

HOME OF JUTE, JAM AND... POLA COLA.

WHAT’S THE STORY?

ACH, OCULUS AND HIS CRONIES HAVE MADE OFF WI’ A’ THE JUICE!

I’LL GIE’ YA A SKIFFY.

WE MUST BE CLOSE!

IF ONLY WE HAD A CLUE TO WHERE THEY WENT...

WAIK!

WON, LET’S FIND THOSE GREEDY @NNEITS!
MUHAHAHA! PHASE ONE OF OPERATION QUENCH IS COMPLETE!

WITH THE WHOLE SUPPLY OF POLA COLA IN OUR CLUTCHES IT IS JUST A MATTER OF TIME BEFORE THE CITY GRINDS TO A HALT!

SURE BOSS, BUT WHAT ABOUT...

KRKKK

WUMP

HAHAHA

FFSSSSSS

PLOOSH

DUN

HUUU!

THAT!
YOU’VE SAVED THE CITY, AGAIN!

How about a pop and another bottle of Pola-Cola?

Mmm... it's delicious!

Drink POLA COLA, kids...

...it's the best!

written by Chris Murray  
art and letters by Nick Johnson
Take it from ALPHA

SOCIAL DISTANCE, STAY HOME! THE NHS ARE THE REAL HEROES.

Remember Alpha won’t be there when you wash your hands!!!
HELP ME CRUSH THE EVIL COVID NINE 'TEEN!
SELF-ISOLATE, PRACTICE SOCIAL DISTANCING
STAY HOME & STAY SAFE!

JOIN ALPHA'S CAMPAIGN.
SEE THE COUPON BELOW TO SHOW YOUR SUPPORT FOR THE NHS!
Please send me a free support pack including rainbow colour poster, 8-page comic, certificate, badge and details of how to make your own facemask!

NAME ____________________________________________
ADDRESS ________________________________________
AGE ____________ BLOCK LETTERS PLEASE

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Contributor Bios

Professor Chris Murray is Chair of Comics Studies and Associate Dean International, Knowledge Exchange and Impact at the School of Humanities, University of Dundee. He is Director of the Scottish Centre for Comics Studies and Dundee Comics Creative Space. He teaches several undergraduate courses on comics and the Comics & Graphic Novels MLitt/MDes. He also supervises several PhD students undertaking research on comics. His research focuses on British and American Comics.

Gary Welsh is a freelance story artist based in Motherwell. In recent years he has completed an honours degree in Animation and masters degree in Comics and Graphic Novels at Dundee University. He has been passionate about comics and visual narrative all his life and is currently working on a number of freelance comic projects.

Nick Johnson was born and raised in Calgary Alberta and currently resides in Edinburgh Scotland as he finishes his Masters in Comics and Graphic Novels at the University of Dundee. He has worked in e-learning, children's books, film, comic books and as a writer/director in animation. He has developed and hosted interactive comic workshops for kids and adults, acted as an artist-in-residence in schools, and returned to his undergrad school AUArts as an instructor for two years to teach narrative and conceptual illustration. www.nickj.ca

Phillip Vaughan has credits on published work such as Braveheart, Jim Henson’s Farscape, Star Trek, Wallace and Gromit, Teletubbies, Tom & Jerry, Commando and Superman, as well various original IP’s.

Rebecca Horner is a cartoonist and colourist who is constantly working on several projects at once. She is Workshop Coordinator and Production Lead at Dundee Comics Creative Space, and has done production on many books, including this one! rebeccahorner.com

The Special Relationship

Art by Elliot Balson

The Special Relationship is strong and stable