
Introduction: finding Shakespeare's New Place

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In March 2010, the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust started to lift the turf on the site of Shakespeare's family home. New Place had been a present-absence on the corner of Chapel Street and Chapel Lane, Stratford-upon-Avon, for 250 years: one reason why it has played too scant a role in Shakespearian biography. Over the next five years, a team of archaeologists (now based at the Centre for Archaeology, Staffordshire University), augmented by around 120 volunteers, would be in quest of Shakespeare's lost house.

The archaeology was complex because of the layers of renovations and remodelling that New Place had undergone, and because of a previous excavation in the 1860s, led and supervised by James Halliwell (who later became known as the great Shakespeare scholar James Halliwell-Phillipps). Archaeology then was still in its infancy. There were two main iterations of the house. The first was the original New Place built by Hugh Clopton (sometimes wrongly referred to as 'Sir Hugh') in the 1480s, which was later renovated and partly remodelled by Shakespeare from 1597. Towards the turn of the eighteenth century, the New Place that Shakespeare had owned (which still included significant parts of Clopton's fifteenth-century house) was demolished and an entirely new house (the second iteration of New Place) was built on the site (by direct descendants of Hugh Clopton). That house was itself demolished in 1759. Halliwell's excavations discovered walls from Shakespeare's time and earlier, and he also uncovered the remains of the later Clopton house.

Our task was made even more fascinating in its revealing of the evidence of Halliwell's earlier excavation. His backfill – a rich melange of what he considered detritus – contained within it a treasure-trove to the modern archaeological eye, and there was part of the site he had left unexcavated (where there stood a mulberry tree). But in applying for planning permission to re-present the site in time for the

Shakespeare quatercentenary in 2016, the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust was able to remove the tree (which had been planted in 1946, and was in a poor state), in order to reveal crucial evidence that has led to the fullest – albeit fragmentary – picture of what Shakespeare's New Place was like.

Shakespeare knew he was buying the largest house in the borough. He had just turned thirty-three and he wanted to live there with his family. His work commitments called him to London, but probably never for very long: New Place was too large and socially significant a house, and his entire family was based there. At least, that is the picture that our archaeological investigations have led us to consider. That is why we have subtitled this book 'An archaeological biography': our excavations have had a palpable impact on how we have come to understand Shakespeare's life, and to retell his story. Shakespeare did not 'retire back' to Stratford-upon-Avon after years of absence; he never really left, because New Place, and all it represented, was too significant a home for him.

He was a writer first and foremost, and New Place was his writer's base, as well as his gentleman's family home. The assumption that the leading playwright of one of the most successful theatre companies of the day was away on tour whenever the theatres were closed is too exhausting a thought to be likely. It is worth noting that the Lord Chamberlain's Men and, later, the King's Men seem not to have toured at all from the latter part of 1597 through to 1602–03 (Gurr, 1996: 303–4). Shakespeare would almost certainly have been present, though, for the Christmas seasons at Court; performing before the Queen, as the Lord Chamberlain's Men, and before the King, as the King's Men, was the primary function of both companies in which Shakespeare owned shares and for which he wrote. Shakespeare needed time and focused energy to write. He was only ever a lodger in London. Life at New Place was also the way Shakespeare positioned himself in relation to the Stratford-upon-Avon community in which he had grown up, and from where he spent conspicuously large amounts of money on major investments in the town and surrounding area.

Ever since Hugh Clopton had acquired the burgage plot in the 1480s and built the first New Place, the house had played a significant part in the economy and culture of the town. The site was chosen with care: close to the White Cross where a regular market met; opposite the Guild Chapel; and close to the schoolroom, the Guildhall and the almshouses. The archaeology suggests that, in its first fifteenth-century construction, New Place probably had a row of shops along its Chapel Street frontage. It was the first and only courtyard-fronted house in Stratford-upon-Avon, and looked therefore dramatically different from every other home, with its main family dwelling set back from the bustle of the main street. It was Hugh Clopton's original house that Shakespeare bought in 1597, by which time it was in need of repair and improvement. Shakespeare himself remodelled the front range and added a long gallery. After his granddaughter, his last direct descendant, had died in 1670, New Place returned to the Clopton family, who demolished the house Shakespeare had known and rebuilt a new one more in keeping with the architectural taste of their own period. As a result, we know more about the Cloptons' eighteenth-century house than we do about the building Shakespeare himself knew.

This account of Shakespeare's New Place is a hybrid of genres – part biography, part archaeological report – and offers a wider historical perspective on the site than ever before (with an intense focus on the years 1564–1616). In uncovering the past, we found it stretching back a long way. Shakespeare's ancestral inhabitants first started to live on the site 6,000 years ago. Their soil and what it tells us lays the foundation for Shakespearian explorations, all too appropriate for the home of a poet who wrote about the past and the ghosts that haunt our present. For Stratford-upon-Avon, the site of New Place provided the fullest opportunity yet to investigate, in the context of a large-scale excavation, the remains of a prehistoric settlement anywhere in the town.

What did we find? When asked this question by a casually interested visitor, we came to realise that the most desired answer was probably 'a Shakespearian manuscript preserved in peat', 'the nib of a quill from the early seventeenth century' or even something as theatrical as 'a sword'. When considered by archaeologists, that same question is enriched by the many artefactual answers that the excavations have yielded to us: foodstuffs of many periods (and signifying a high-status diet in Shakespeare's own time), evidence of the Shakespeare family's games and pastimes (Shakespeare, it seems, probably enjoyed a game that involved scoring pegs), their household stuff, and the remains of their cottage industries. Crucially, Dig for Shakespeare (as the project was known) has enabled us to form a compelling understanding of what New Place was like in Shakespeare's time, its size and its layout. Philip Watson's specially commissioned drawings, painstakingly based on archaeological and comparative architectural evidence, help to convey the excitement of what we have learned. They represent the best rendering of what Shakespeare's family home looked like – for the time being. Kevin Sturdy's drawing enables us to understand what the site was like in its earliest times.

Bringing together a range of different expertise means that this book has been co-authored across its chapters, and sometimes within the chapters themselves. Chapter 1, 'Ancient beginnings', covers the first 6,000 years of the site, from its prehistoric beginnings through its development into a plot within the economic context of early medieval Stratford-upon-Avon, and the construction of the first timber-framed building. Chapter 2, 'The origins of New Place', describes the construction and distinctive features of Hugh Clopton's brick-and-timber house, the first New Place, and provides a detailed account of it. Chapter 3, 'Shakespeare and Stratford-upon-Avon, 1564–96', provides a cultural, religious and economic context for Shakespeare's upbringing; education; work; marriage; and early investments up to his son, Hamnet's death, and his father, John Shakespeare, being made a gentleman. Chapter 4 discusses the importance of New Place to Shakespeare and his family during the nineteen years he owned it and spent time there. The chapter takes us to just beyond the death of Shakespeare's granddaughter, Elizabeth, Lady Bernard, the last direct descendant of Shakespeare to live in the house. Chapter 5 considers what Shakespeare's New Place was like, its appearance and layout, and describes artefacts and objects that relate to the Shakespeare family's time there. Chapter 6 describes the house that, by 1702, had replaced the one that Shakespeare knew. Chapter 7 gives an account of James Halliwell's acquisition of the site, his archaeology and how New Place has become an important focus for the local community, not least during the 'Dig for Shakespeare'.

Our project deliberately turned archaeology on its head. The discipline is normally used in order to uncover truths about entire peoples, cities and civilisations. We used archaeology as a tool in an ambitious attempt to find out more about the life of William Shakespeare. The discovery of the body of Richard III under a Leicester car-park, has demonstrated what archaeology can teach us about individuals. By uncovering the remains of New Place, its features and artefacts, we can begin to learn more about its inevitable importance to Shakespeare.

It is our hope that we have played our part in rebuilding the house and home Shakespeare knew – in imagining it – and that we have helped to return New Place to its rightful place in history and Shakespearian biography.

References

Gurr, A. (1996). *The Shakespearian Playing Companies* (Oxford: Clarendon Press).