

THE SHAKESPEARE CLUB OF STRATFORD UPON AVON

The 858th meeting of the Shakespeare Club, chaired by Dr Susan Brock and held at Mason Croft in December 2010, welcomed Mairi Macdonald, formerly head of Local Collections at the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust, who tackled the controversial topic of Shakespeare's Will, warning members that she would deal with the facts and problems but would, almost certainly, not offer any conclusions. Disappointingly Shakespeare's will did not differ markedly in form and content from those of his contemporaries, but what gave cause for so much speculation was the existence of the original will with its many emendations. If only the register or fair copy had survived, none of these would have been apparent. Ms Macdonald covered the change in the date of the will, the lack of a monetary bequest to his wife, the omission of one of Shakespeare's nephew's Christian names, the cancellation of lines on the second page, the lack of charitable bequests to the poor of the London parishes where he had lived and the afterthought of bequests to his theatre colleagues (both of which may indicate how much the Stratford man Shakespeare was in his last years) as well as changes in the bequests to local friends and neighbours and family members. Shakespeare's major pre-occupation in his will was the settlement of his estates as a single entity to his male heirs. In fact Shakespeare had no male heirs, his direct line dying out with his granddaughter, Elizabeth Hall in 1670.

Ms Macdonald addressed the vexed question of the second-best bed and Shakespeare's relationship with his wife and warned against drawing conclusions from the absence of words and phrases. She conjectured that the writer of the will was local lawyer Francis Collins or his clerk, certainly not Shakespeare himself. The missing piece of the jigsaw might have been the inventory of New Place, destroyed in the Great Fire of London with many other London documents, which would have listed the contents of Shakespeare's home, his books and personal possessions. Ms Macdonald finished with an admonition from West's *Symbolography*, a legal handbook of Shakespeare's time: 'much better it is that wills be perspicuous of themselves than to be enlightened by the expositions and allowance of others'.

After many questions the meeting closed at 9pm and was followed by wine and mince pies.