

THE SHAKESPEARE CLUB OF STRATFORD-UPON-AVON

The 877th meeting of the Shakespeare Club took place at Mason Croft on Tuesday 12 March 2013. The meeting was chaired by Lady Deb Follett who introduced Dr Tara Hamling. The title of Dr Hamling's talk was Interior Decoration, Status and Identity in Provincial England 1560-1640, and it focussed on Shakespeare at home.

What did Shakespeare's last home at New Place look like? What design choices were available to him? While biographers have been concerned with what influences the playwright might have absorbed at court, Dr Hamling was more interested in what he might have seen in middle class houses in the country. In purchasing, extending and refurbishing New Place Shakespeare was following the trend of the middle classes to in the late sixteenth century, a movement called the Great Rebuilding. In the absence of the inventory made at his death Dr Hamling examined George Vertue's 1757 drawing of the house and speculated on what it might have looked like in Shakespeare's time.

Following the example of the nobility in their palaces like other members of the gentry of the period, Shakespeare may have built a gallery over the gatehouse. Paintings were often used to decorate such spaces and, referring to the example of Shakespeare's contemporary in the theatre Edward Alleyn, whose collection can be seen at Dulwich College, Dr Hamling suggested these might have been portraits of the Kings and Queens of England which could be bought as ready-made sets.

She also proposed that Shakespeare might have had decorative plasterwork in his house, for example a coat of arms, the height of fashion for the upwardly mobile and revealed a new discovery: a plaster panel depicting the battle between David and Goliath which might have been on a chimney breast in the house now known as Shakespeare's Birthplace. Following leads from Samuel Ireland's account of Stratford in 1795, via a photo in *The Graphic* of 1893, and some plasterwork commissioned by Lewis Hickox who had lived in the house 1601-1627, Dr Hamling argued that Shakespeare had chosen this decorative feature for his home. In conclusion Dr Hamling showed that the Shakespeare, like other householders in Stratford, had access to the latest fashions in interior decoration and used them to assert his status and identity.

Following questions the meeting closed at 9.00pm.