

The Shakespeare Club of Stratford-upon-Avon

The 890th meeting of the Shakespeare Club took place at Mason Croft on Tuesday 9 December 2014. Mr John Cunnington chaired and introduced the speaker Professor Carol Chillington Rutter, whose subject was 'England's Honest Dissembler: Henry Wotton, Ambassador in Venice 1604-1610'.

Wotton himself wrote that 'An ambassador is a man of virtue sent to lie abroad for his country' and Professor Rutter proceeded to tell the story of Wotton's life and adventures as representative of James I, based on her research in the Venetian and English archives. Born in 1568 Wotton was educated at Oxford University where he was a good friend of John Donne and, in his early 20s, he travelled in Europe visiting Rome, Florence, Venice and Geneva. His correspondence documents key historical events: in November 1605 he reports on the recent explosive events; in July 1613 about seeing Shakespeare's *All Is True* on the day the Globe theatre caught fire. Wotton served the Earl of Essex as Secretary in Spain and Ireland and during the 1601 rebellion -- when he was conveniently out of the country. Three years later Wotton was appointed James's ambassador to Venice, the first in fifty years after relations were broken off as a result of the excommunication of Elizabeth I.

Professor Rutter painted a lively picture of the places, people and processes that the Ambassador inhabited in Venice, pointing out that the political and administrative structure of the City required all business to be written down. Working in the Venetian archives over a number of years she now recognised Wotton's voice and understood how he 'performed his embassy'. As well as letters, he wrote about architecture and sent back to England textiles, glass and food. Interested in documents as material objects that tell stories, Professor Rutter confessed herself 'consumed by archive fever'. She was preparing a digital diplomatic bag which would interleave transcripts and translations of the Italian letters with Wotton's letters to Lord Cecil in London and she was on the way to writing a full biography of this fascinating and cultured man of Shakespeare's time

After questions from the audience, the meeting finished at 9pm and members adjourned for refreshments.