

The Shakespeare Club of Stratford-upon-Avon

The 929th meeting of the Shakespeare Club of Stratford-upon-Avon took place on Tuesday 10 December, when Dr Chris Laoutaris, from the Shakespeare Institute, spoke on the subject "Shakespeare and the Countess". The meeting was chaired by Sandra MacDonald.

The talk was based on Dr Laoutaris's book of the same name, the result of ten years' research. The Countess was the formidable Elizabeth Russell. Her involvement in Shakespeare's life began when in 1596 James Burbage purchased the rooms which were to become the Blackfriars Theatre in London. Unable to continue to perform at The Theatre, Shoreditch, he spent a fortune on creating an intimate year-round theatre in which Shakespeare's new plays would be performed.

Elizabeth Russell lived almost next door. She was well-educated and ferocious in defending her interests. Over the years she had used imprisonment, bribery and physical assault to get her way. She was also a staunch Puritan, and was outraged at the prospect of having a public playhouse nearby that would bring noise, crowds and the possible spread of plague. Before the theatre had even opened she led a campaign to ban it, raising a petition signed by influential people including the patron of Shakespeare's Company, Lord Hunsdon, and Shakespeare's printer Richard Field.

Dr Laoutaris has been able to show that it was Russell who led this petition by investigating her connections to many of those who signed it. She was able to exert pressure on Richard Field for instance, through his landlord. Her anti-theatrical crusade was part of a bigger battle between the residents and those who officially governed the district.

It may have been the experience with the Blackfriars that determined Shakespeare's Company to build a theatre where they controlled not only what was performed but also how it was run. For the first time the members of the company, including Shakespeare, held shares in the building, giving them an interest in its success. It was not until 1609, after Elizabeth Russell's death, that the King's Men were able to take over the Blackfriars Theatre.

After many questions from the audience the meeting closed at 9.05 pm.