

The Shakespeare Club of Stratford-upon-Avon

The Shakespeare Club's 952nd meeting was held on 14 February 2023 when Roger Pringle, former Director of the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust, spoke on *Thomas Hardy, Stratford-upon-Avon and Shakespeare*. The meeting was chaired by Karolyn Brookes.

The famous novelist Thomas Hardy visited Stratford-upon-Avon for ten days in August 1896. The visit came at an important time of his life, after *Jude the Obscure* had been poorly-received. Biographers of Hardy rarely make more than a glancing reference to this event, but Roger Pringle has spent several years studying Hardy's published letters, following up his contacts and correspondents, his writings and even failed projects.

Hardy and his wife Emma stayed in lodgings in Church Street away from the busy hotels. He visited sites associated with Shakespeare, signing the visitors' books at Shakespeare's Birthplace, Anne Hathaway's Cottage, New Place and Holy Trinity Church. He also spent time re-reading Shakespeare's *King Lear*, and bought a copy of *Hamlet* from the stationer Edward Fox in High Street. This little book was bought by the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust in 2004. Hardy also used his time to write.

Roger Pringle speculated that Hardy's thoughts turned to his future as a writer. His latest novel had been heavily criticised. Significantly, just two months later Hardy let it be known that he was dedicating himself to poetry. Did this visit help to set him on the path of being a full-time poet?

Twenty years later, during World War 1, Hardy was commissioned to write a poem *To Shakespeare, After Three Hundred Years*, published in Israel Gollancz's *A Book of Homage to Shakespeare*, consisting of 160 international contributions. Hardy was by this time the greatest living writer in Britain, and his poem is the first in the book.

In the poem Hardy characterises Shakespeare as a "strange bright bird", an unknowable visitor who then leaves forever, without explanation. In the poem, the Avon continues to flow by and the curfew bell tolls as it did in Shakespeare's time. He contrasts the "life of commonplace", lived among townsmen who barely knew him, and the brilliance of his artistry.

Hardy saw parallels between Shakespeare's life and his own. Both came from humble beginnings, were not university educated, and once successful, lived in substantial, prominent houses. He was a man of contradictions who denied there was any link between an author's writing and his life, but who tried to understand Shakespeare by visiting sites with which he was associated.

Hardy's Stratford visit affected him throughout his life. Not only did he choose to recall it in 1916, but the poem was later reproduced in the programme for the appeal to rebuild the Memorial Theatre in 1926.

Roger Pringle's thoroughly-researched talk confirmed that Thomas Hardy's modest, little-known visit to Stratford was indeed a turning point in the life of the man who was to become known as "The Shakespeare of his generation".