

The 956th meeting of the Shakespeare Club of Stratford-upon-Avon took place on 10 October 2023 when Rev Dr Paul Edmondson gave a talk entitled *The Great Variety of Readers: 400 years of the First Folio*, based on the current exhibition at New Place. The meeting was chaired by Janet Anslow. As Head of Research for the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust Dr Edmondson was one of the main planners of the exhibition which aims to mark the Folio's Quatercentenary by looking at Stratford's connection to the book, and to its first reader.

In the Exhibition the Folio is described as "The Labour of Love". It was a costly and time-consuming exercise, with many earlier versions of the plays, both printed and manuscript, used to produce it. There are, for instance, 900 variants between the Quarto of *Troilus and Cressida* and the Folio version suggesting that at least one other version existed. The copy of the Folio in the exhibition is the Ashburnham copy, bought in 1889 by SBT and one of the finest copies still in existence. Although there is no record of any member of Shakespeare's family owning a copy, Dr Edmondson suggested that as Shakespeare owned New Place from 1597 it is very likely that he researched and wrote his later plays there, away from the bustle of London.

The little volume, called "Evidence of the First Shakespeare Geek", was identified on the BBC's Antiques Roadshow several years ago. It is tiny, just a few centimetres tall and contains 48 pages on which 12,500 words loosely quoting the First Folio are written in tiny script. Its history is unknown as it was discovered among the papers of the mother of the current owner. It is possible that there is a link thorough the owner's family with Thomas Bodley, founder of the Bodleian library, or it may have been acquired by the father of the owner who was a book dealer. There is no clue to the author, but as it also includes some lecture notes and other quotations it is likely that he was a student at Oxford in the 1630s or 1640s. His admiration for Shakespeare is obvious but this seems to be based solely on the plays as published, not performed. Much work is to be done on this book.

The third item is "The Ring of Genius": the 21 carat gold seal ring engraved "WS", discovered in a field in Stratford in 1810. Although it has been known for many years, recent academic studies have concluded that it is likely to have belonged to Shakespeare.

Dr Edmondson continued to discuss recent work that links Shakespeare and his works to Stratford. It is not known where the texts for plays came from: only half had ever been printed. It is possible that some manuscripts were destroyed in the 1613 fire at the Globe Theatre. Several First Folio texts (*The Comedy of Errors*, *Twelfth Night* and *Antony and Cleopatra*) give the appearance of being incomplete, and he speculated that at least one of them, *Antony and Cleopatra*, may have been taken from Shakespeare's own manuscript. Was it possible, he wondered, if on the occasion of the King's Men's visit in 1622 they retrieved this from Shakespeare's widow, then at New Place?

He also noted that new discoveries are being made regarding links to local people: Two writers of dedications in the First Folio, Leonard Digges and James Mabbe, have been shown to have local connections, and John Hemmings, one of the book's editors and a long-term colleague of Shakespeare, was from Droitwich. "To the Great Variety of Readers", by Hemmings and Condell, is a tribute to both a valued colleague and a much-loved friend.

After many questions and lively discussion the meeting closed at 8.45pm.